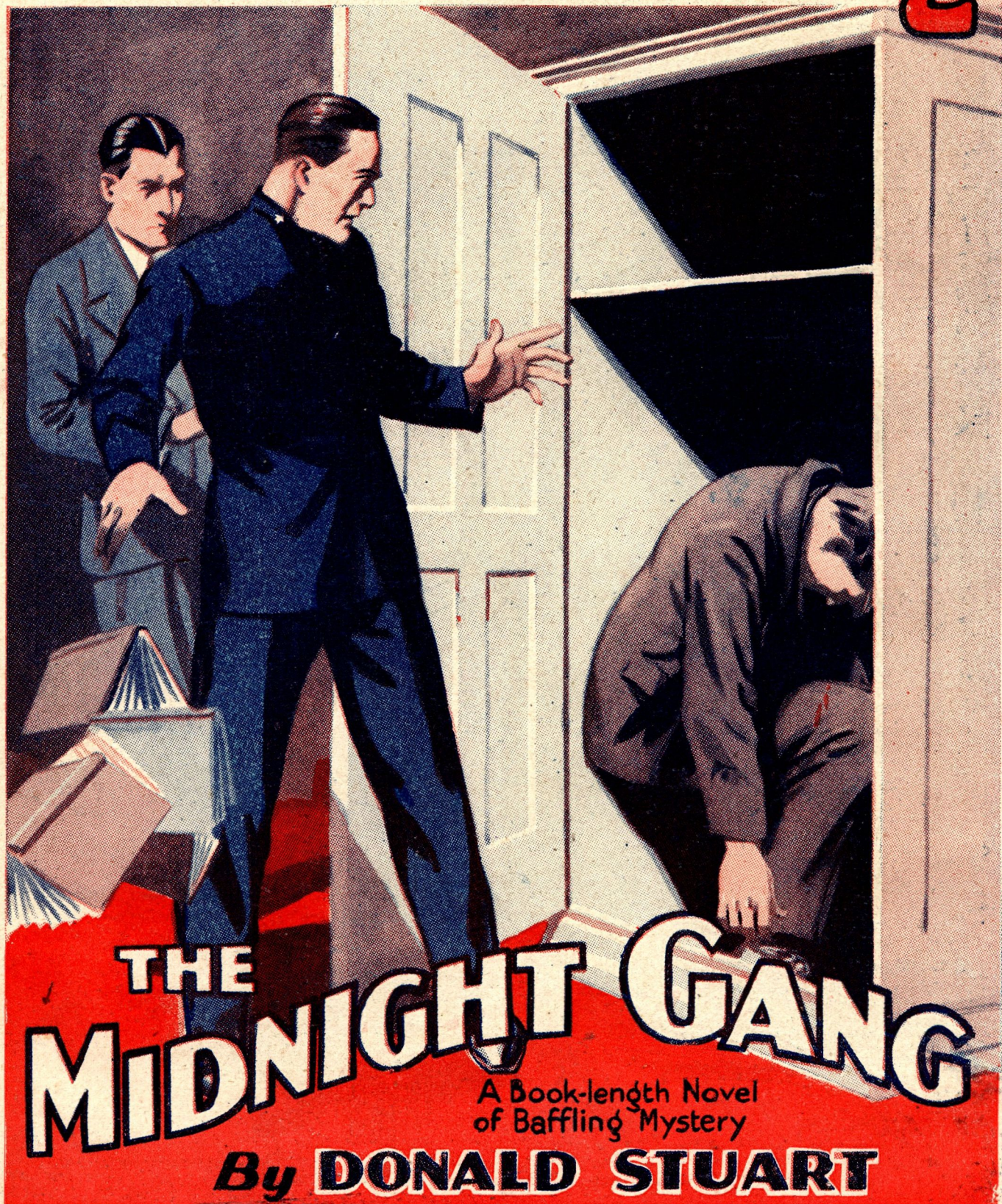


# THE THRILLER

THE PAPER WITH A THOUSAND THRILLS

2<sup>d</sup>



## THE MIDNIGHT GANG

A Book-length Novel  
of Baffling Mystery

By **DONALD STUART**





Even as the masked man seized the terrified girl, Detective-Inspector Street stepped through the heavy curtains with levelled automatic. "Put up your hands, Mr Midnight!" he snapped.



# GANG.

A SENSATIONAL  
MYSTERY NOVEL.

by *Donald Stuart*

## Chapter 1.

### THE CRIME IN THE THEATRE.

THE spacious foyer of the Orpheum Theatre of Varieties was crowded. Groups of smartly-groomed men and resplendent women laughed and chatted among themselves, or passed from one to another exchanging greetings as they recognised friends and acquaintances among the first arrivals.

A seemingly never-ending stream of cars and taxi-cabs was constantly discharging its contents to add to the already dense throng that filled the vestibule.

The Orpheum was world-famous for the quality of its programme, but apart from this the name of Betty Seymour, glittering in electric lights over the fascia, was a sufficient attraction to draw all theatre-loving London. She was a male impersonator, and her clever songs and mimicry had taken the metropolis by storm. Six months earlier she had been unknown; an obscure artiste struggling for existence among the innumerable small halls and picture theatres with which the provinces abound, and then she had been seen by Delman, the variety agent, who, missing his train, and having nothing better to do, had spent the evening at a local music hall. Betty's act was just the type he was looking for, and he had engaged her there and then for a tour of the circuit that he represented.

The girl's success had been phenomenal. She had awakened on the morning following her London debut to find herself famous; the critics without exception were unanimous in declaring that she was a "find."

She had been inundated with offers from nearly every theatrical agent on the night of her first appearance in London, but Delman had been clever and got her tied up on a three years' contract before the curtain rose on her "turn."

The long line of vehicles before the theatre was beginning to thin when a small grey coupé nosed its way slowly among the jamb of traffic and sidled into a private car park almost opposite the theatre.

The young man who descended from the driving-seat and pushed his way through the crowd to the entrance might have been anything from twenty-two to thirty. In reality he was thirty-five, but his smooth, boyish face and clear, twinkling blue eyes gave him a false appearance of extreme youth.

Superintendent Richard Street, known throughout Scotland Yard, from the Chief Commissioner down to the youngest constable as "One-way" Street because of his obstinate nature, had decided to take an evening off and enjoy himself—a rarity since the advent of the Midnight Gang, whose grim exploits had, for the past eight months, occupied his attention to the exclusion of all other matters. Just lately,

however, their activities had subsided, and Dick was taking full advantage of the lull.

How much his sudden decision to attend the Orpheum that evening was due to Betty Seymour's inclusion in the programme he was unwilling to admit even to himself.

Hurrying up the steps to the rapidly-emptying vestibule, for the curtain was on the point of rising, Dick paused and looked about him. Two men who had been standing talking by the box-office saw him and came forward.

The elder—a tall, red-faced man with greying hair and a humorous gleam in his deep-set eyes, extended a hand in greeting.

"You're late," he remarked in a pleasant voice. "We'd almost given you up."

Street smiled an apology as he shook hands.

"From a most prosaic cause," he replied. "I lost my collar-stud."

Frank Tracey, crime reporter on the "Megaphone," chuckled, his round face creasing into innumerable wrinkles.

Then, as a burst of music sounded from inside the theatre, he said: "Well, the overture's started; we may as well go in."

Dick Street had been lucky in securing a box, for he had only made up his mind to go that afternoon, and the Orpheum was usually booked out in advance.

Unwilling to go alone, he had telephoned Frank Tracey and Howard Carfax, and





finding that they had nothing particular to do that evening, had easily persuaded them to join him.

"How did you manage to tear yourself away from work, Dick?" asked Carfax, as they took their seats. "Whenever I've tried to get at you lately, you've always put me off with the excuse of being too busy."

"I am still," answered Street, raising his voice so as to be heard above the blare of the band. "But even a detective must get a little amusement."

"Don't you find the Midnight Gang amusing enough?" asked Frank.

"Regarding them my sense of humour utterly fails me," replied the detective grimly.

"Any further news about them?" Frank continued.

"One-way" Street shook his head. "Nothing," he said shortly.

"They've been very quiet lately, haven't they?" remarked Carfax, examining the end of his cigar. "What's the reason, I wonder?"

"Too quiet!" Dick's smooth brow wrinkled in a frown. "It's a fortnight since they raised Finnigan's, in Regent Street, and got away with close on £100,000 worth of jewellery."

"I wonder if you fellows'll ever catch 'em?" said Frank, crossing his legs and tilting his chair at a more comfortable angle. "They're jolly clever, or they wouldn't have evaded capture for so long."

"It's not *they* who are clever," corrected Street. "It's the man who controls them. The fellow they call 'Mr. Midnight.' He's the clever one, and he's the one I'm after. The others don't count"—he snapped his fingers—"not that!"

"Are you any nearer to discovering who 'he' is?" asked Carfax.

Dick shrugged his shoulders.

"Not more than we were eight months ago," he answered wearily. "He's a name and a brain—and nothing more. Even two members we have caught have never seen him, if we can believe the story they tell. By the way, you're defending them, aren't you?"

Howard Carfax, one of the cleverest K.C.'s of the day, nodded slowly.

"Who retained you?" asked the detective curiously. "I've been going to ask you ever since I heard about it."

"Bockman, of Bockman & Keel," answered Carfax. "They are quite well-known solicitors and thoroughly respectable."

"But they must have received instructions from someone," persisted Street.

"Oh, they did!" The barrister blew out a cloud of smoke. "The money for all fees and typewritten instructions to retain my services were received by letter on the morning following that on which Gunter and Larch were committed for trial. Needless to say, the letter bore neither signature nor address."

Frank Tracey passed his hand carefully over the top of his shiny fair hair. "It came from Mr. Midnight, of course," he said.

"Of course," agreed Dick.

"You know, I've been given carte blanche to 'cover' the Midnight Gang business," Frank continued. "Old 'Stuts' (the news editor of the 'Megaphone' thus irreverently referred to, had a slight impediment in his speech) 'would give his head for an exclusive story about them, so don't forget to let me know if you get a line on Mr. Midnight.'"

"You'll know," answered Dick Street grimly, and turned his attention to the auditorium.

With a final blare of brass and drums, the

orchestra died to silence, the lights dimmed, and the curtain rose on the first turn.

Street watched perfunctorily, his thoughts elsewhere, and it was not until the number went up signalling that Betty Seymour was next that he began to exhibit anything like interest in the proceedings. But as soon as she appeared, he leaned forward, his eyes glued on the stage.

He forgot crime—forgot for the moment that there was even such a place as Scotland Yard while he watched the tall, graceful girl immaculately attired in male evening dress, and listened to the musical cadence of a voice that was never raised yet filled every corner of the vast building.

Dick Street had first met Betty Seymour two months ago.

That had been the beginning of many meetings, and they had drifted into a friendship. Twice he had taken her out to dinner and discovered that she was companionable as well as beautiful.

His real feeling for her he refused to allow himself to analyse, although more than once he had found himself counting the hours to the time when he could reasonably make an excuse to see her again.

Betty Seymour's turn concluded the first part of the programme, and as the curtain fell amidst a thunder of applause, Carfax rose to his feet and stretched himself.

"Let's go and have a drink," he suggested—a suggestion that was eagerly seconded by Frank, who had sat throughout with a somewhat bored expression on his round, good-natured face.



The detective gripped the crook by the arm. "Good-evening, colonel," he said. "What are you doing here?"

As they made their way towards the buffet, Dick suddenly caught sight of a familiar face among the crowd. With a muttered apology to his companions, he slipped after the stout man in evening dress who had attracted his attention.

He swung round as Dick caught him by the arm, and his rather florid face went a shade paler.

"Good-evening, colonel," said "One-way" Street genially. "Enjoying the show?" The other recovered himself, and raised his eyebrows at the familiarity.

"I'm afraid you've made a mistake, sir," he began "I—" But something in Dick's face stopped him completing the remark, and he suddenly relapsed into silence.

"Now, now!" The detective shook his head chidingly. "It won't do—it really won't do!"

"What won't do?"  
"This air of injured innocence. It's no use pretending. I never make mistakes!"

He took the stout man affectionately by the arm. "Poor colonel," he said sympathetically. "It's too bad!"

The colonel sighed heavily.

"See here, Mr. Street, I'm not doing anything," he said in an injured voice. "Surely a fellow can enjoy himself without being interfered with you 'busys'?"

Dick chuckled softly.

"Surely," he agreed. "It all depends upon how you intend to enjoy yourself. It worries me to see a clever crook like you having temptation put in his way."

He glanced at the crowd of bejewelled women moving around them.

The colonel followed the direction of his eyes and shook his head. "You're wrong, Mr. Street," he declared. "I'm running straight now—I am, really."

"Tell me another," suggested Dick.

"It's a fact," returned the other. "At least," he paused cautiously, "I'm not here on business to-night."

"What are you here for, then?" inquired "One-way" Street. "You're not going to make me believe that you've suddenly become a lover of the music hall?"

"No." The colonel shook his head. "If you must know, I'm here out of curiosity."

Dick looked at him in astonishment.

The man was perfectly serious.

"I want to see what's going to happen," he said softly. "Something's going to happen, and I want to know what."

"What do you mean?"

The colonel drew a long breath and looked about him.

"I don't know," he muttered, "and even if I did, I wouldn't tell you—but I've heard things."

"What things?" cried the exasperated detective sharply.

"Just rumours," answered the other evasively. "There's something doing—I can't tell you any more, Mr. Street," he added hastily. "Honestly, I can't, because I don't know."

Dick tried his best to get the man to say more, but he either wouldn't, or couldn't, and eventually he rejoined his companions, and returned to his box with a vague feeling of disquiet.

The second half of the programme had started as they entered softly, but the detective could no longer have said what was going on. His mind was groping to try and find an explanation for the colonel's presence and his cryptic words.

Al Marks, known as the "colonel" on account of his military appearance, was one of the cleverest jewel thieves in London, but he was far too clever to risk a chance haul. What was it, then, that he expected to happen?

Dick gave it up at last, and turned his attention to the stage once more. The curtain had just fallen on a particularly unamusing comedian, and he consulted his programme to see what was to follow.

He found that it was a pair of exhibition dancers, and the lights went down while the band softened into a lilting cadence.

Then it happened—the event that was to set the whole of London talking. With startling distinctness a shot rang out—the sharp, whip-like crack of an automatic—and it was followed by a shrill scream!

The band stopped suddenly, and an excited murmur broke from the huge audience.

"What was that?" Dick heard Frank's breathless question from the gloom close at hand, but before he could reply, the lights in the theatre went on, and a man in evening dress pushed his way hurriedly to the orchestra rail.

"Will everyone please keep their seats!" he cried clearly, raising his voice above the chattering din. "And if there is a doctor



present, I should be glad if he would kindly come forward. The gentleman occupying Box A has been shot!"

Dick Street drew in his breath quickly, and his face went tense as he sprang to his feet.

The colonel's curiosity had been satisfied!

#### "THE MAN WHO WAS KILLED."

FOR nearly half a minute following the manager's words—for Dick recognised the man in evening dress as Quarant, the acting manager of the Orpheum—there was silence—a silence so intense that it could almost be felt, and then suddenly it was broken by a woman's hysterical scream. Almost immediately, as though it were a signal, pandemonium broke out. Men shouted and women sobbed. There was a clatter of raising seats as the vast audience struggled to its feet.

The manager held up his hand and shouted to make himself heard above the din. "There is no cause for alarm," he cried. "The police have already been sent for, and if you will all keep your seats you will be able to leave quietly in a few minutes. The performance will, of course, be discontinued, but if you will present the halves of your tickets at the box office tomorrow, you will receive a fresh ticket for any night you wish, or the value of your ticket returned to you. This applies to all parts of the house. For the moment, will you kindly keep your seats?"

His calm, matter-of-fact voice had a quietening effect, and the roar gradually subsided to a subdued rumble, and the detective saw a short, rather stout man elbow his way through the stalls and approach Quarant. He spoke quickly to the manager, who nodded, and taking him by the arm, led him towards the exit.

"One-way" Street turned and strode to the door of the box.

"I'm going to find out what's happened," he said to his companions. "You can come with me if you like."

Followed by Frank and Carfax, he made his way swiftly along the corridor and down the stairs of the foyer. Standing at the foot of the second staircase that led up to the other row of boxes was a uniformed policeman talking to Quarant and the stout man.

Dick went up to the group, and, explaining who he was, inquired what exactly had occurred.

The manager turned a worried face towards him as he made known his identity. "This is a dreadful business," he exclaimed. "Terrible. The man has been shot in the head."

"Who was he?" demanded the young superintendent.

Quarant shook his grey head.

"I don't know," he replied. "He's a stranger to me."

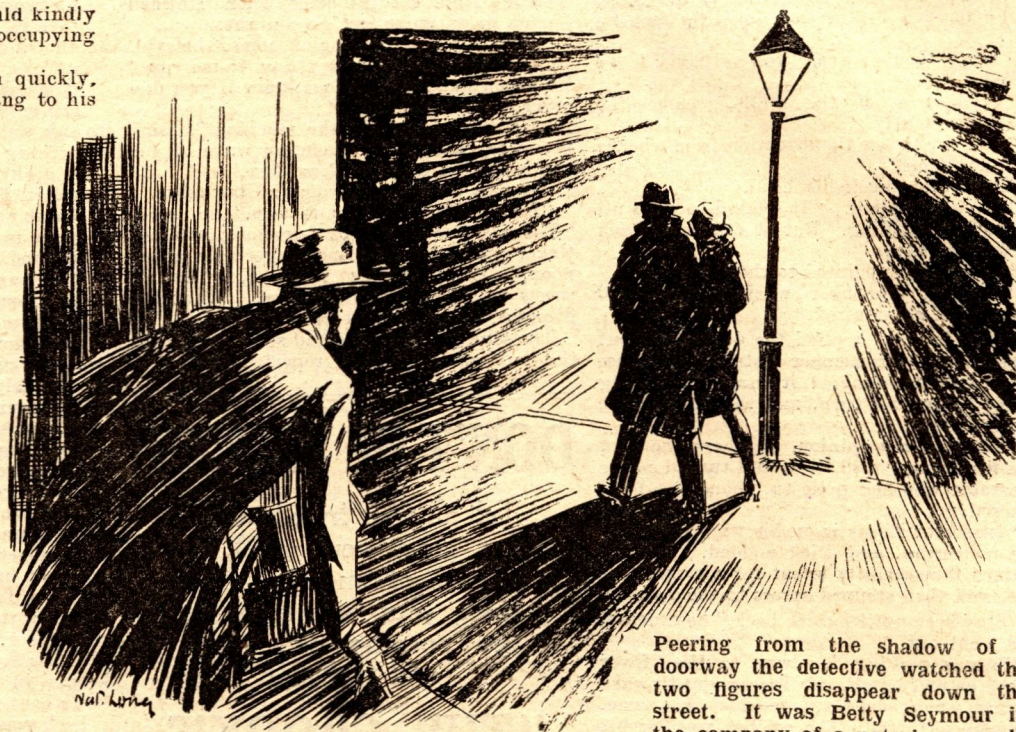
"Have you got the person who did it?" asked Dick, and again the manager shook his head.

"One-way" Street turned to the constable.

"Telephone the Yard," he ordered. "And ask Inspector Lucas to come round here right away." He looked at Quarant.

"Please take me to Box A," he added shortly.

The manager led the way up the stairs, accompanied by "One-way" Street and the



Peering from the shadow of a doorway the detective watched the two figures disappear down the street. It was Betty Seymour in the company of a notorious crook.

stout man whom he introduced as Doctor James. They passed down the corridor and found Box A at the far end. A burly commissioner in the uniform of the theatre was standing outside the closed door, and he stood to one side to let them enter. Dick was the first to cross the threshold, and he stood for a second taking in the scene with one swift, comprehensive glance. The single electric globe hanging from the centre of the ceiling lit up the box brilliantly. The solitary occupant, an elderly Jewish type of man, lay crumpled up on the soft carpet, his white, blood-stained face upturned, the staring, sightless eyes fixed in a horrible glare.

Dr. James dropped on to one knee beside the sprawling figure, but Dick didn't require his verdict to know that the man was dead. The bullet had hit him squarely in the centre of the forehead, and death had come upon him instantaneously.

The possibility of suicide flashed for a moment across the detective's mind, and he looked rapidly round the small chamber for any signs of the weapon, but without finding it.

"Was there anyone with him?" he asked.

"No," replied the manager. "He was alone."

The young superintendent nodded shortly.

"Then the murderer must be among the audience!" he snapped. "Listen! No one is to leave the building until my men arrive. You'd better see to that!"

"I'll do my best," answered Quarant, and left them. A few seconds later Street heard him addressing the audience once more. He turned his attention to the body and began to make an examination of the man's pocket. A gold cigarette-case, a thin watch of the same precious metal, a handful of silver, a bunch of keys, and a fat leather note-case was all he found. The man had evidently been smoking a cigar at the time he was shot, for the smouldering half of it had burnt a hole in the carpet beside his chair.

Dick opened the leather wallet and glanced through the contents. There was twenty pound in notes, half a dozen visiting cards,

and a letter. "One-way" Street looked at the cards first, and as he read the name engraved on them his breath hissed through his suddenly clenched teeth. "Alfred Raeburn." Dick knew the name well for that of a rather shady financier whose money-lending business the police had long suspected served as a cloak to hide the more profitable one of a "fence." But if the dead man's identity had given him a shock, the letter which he next examined was to give him a greater one.

It was typewritten, and began without the preliminary of either date or address:

"For a long time you have been appropriating for your own use money which should belong to me—a sum amounting to over seventy-five thousand pounds. Unless this amount reaches me by twelve o'clock tomorrow, you will pay the penalty which all traitors receive.—MR. MIDNIGHT."

Dick read the letter twice, and his mouth set in a grim line. The Midnight Gang, after a period of quiescence, had struck again, and in their usual spectacular manner.

The motive for the murder was obvious: Raeburn had apparently been a member of the gang, and had acted for them in his capacity of a "fence." Instead of handing over the money that had accrued from this dealing, he had kept it for his own use, and had evidently ignored the warning sent him by Mr. Midnight.

Dick Street glanced down at the still, lifeless form at his feet. Where had the shot come from? Certainly not from the stalls, or the people sitting near the man who had fired would have been aware of the fact.

Dick raised his eyes and, pondering over the problem, looked mechanically across to the opposite side of the theatre. Facing him was the other tier of boxes, and the one in direct line with that in which he was standing was empty. He could see into it clearly, for the light was on. A sudden thought struck him, and he turned to Dr. James,



who, after his brief inspection of the body, had remained by the door silently looking on.

"Whereabouts were you sitting?" he asked.

"Fifth row of the stalls," came the answer promptly.

"Did you notice the direction from whence the shot came?"

The doctor shook his head.

"No," he replied. "It seemed to echo all round the building. But it was fired from somewhere above."

The detective pointed to the empty box.

"Do you remember whether that was occupied?" he inquired.

"Yes, it was," replied the doctor without hesitation. "I remember distinctly, because the man who occupied it came in during Betty Seymour's turn, and the disturbance annoyed me."

"That, in my opinion, is where the shot was fired from," said Dick, and turned as the constable who had gone to 'phone the Yard entered.

"Inspector Lucas is on his way, sir," said the policeman, and Dick nodded. He remained thoughtfully silent for a moment or two, and then stepped across to the door.

"Stay here until I come back," he ordered, and went out.

He was making his way to the foyer where he had left Frank Tracey and Howard Carfax when somebody touched his arm. He looked round. The colonel was by his elbow.

"Well," asked the jewel thief, "what do you think of it?"

"I'll tell you presently," replied "One-way" Street. "I shall want to hear quite a lot from you."

Al Marks looked pained.

"I know nothing about it," he protested. "You surely don't think it had anything to do with me, do you? I wouldn't do anything like that."

"I'm sure you wouldn't," retorted "One-way" Street sarcastically, and hurried off to the vestibule.

He found on his arrival that the message to the Yard had taken effect. A police tender was drawn up outside the theatre, and a tall, thin, melancholy-looking man detached himself from a group of others and approached Dick as he made his appearance.

"Murder, isn't it?" he said.

Street nodded, and told him what had happened.

"Clever!" Inspector Lucas remarked when the young superintendent finished. "And original, too!" He shook his head slowly, as though it scarcely met with his approval. "Don't think I've ever heard of a murder in a theatre before."

At that moment Quarant came up, and said that the audience were getting restless, and wanted to leave.

"Let 'em go," said Street, and then added: "Who occupied the box on the same level opposite Box A?"

"I don't know," replied the manager. "I'll see if I can find out."

He went over to the box-office, and Dick once more addressed the tall inspector.

"Send a man up to that box, and tell him to see if he can find anything," he ordered. "And also have Al Marks detained."

Lucas looked surprised.

"Is he here?" he said softly.

The younger man nodded.

"I don't think he had anything to do with it," he said, "but he knows something, and we may be able to make him talk."

Lucas turned away and began to issue instructions to the men he had brought with him.

Dick was waiting for the return of

Quarant from the box-office when Howard Carfax came up to say good-night.

"I think I'll be getting off home," he said. "I've got rather a heavy day to-morrow." He shook hands. "Let me know if you discover anything further."

"I'll ring you up in the morning," Dick promised, and, with a cheery wave of his hand, Carfax took his departure.

Quarant came back from the box-office.

"Can't tell you who it was," he said.

"The box was booked by telephone, and the ticket called for by a messenger this afternoon." He wiped his forehead. "It all seems to me like a nightmare. What the directors'll say I don't know."

The man whom Lucas had sent to examine the box came up and reported that he'd

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## "THE CROOK'S GAME!"

commencing in this issue.

found an empty cartridge-shell on the floor. Dick took the little brass cylinder, and looked at it frowningly.

"Thirty-two calibre," he muttered. "That's conclusive proof where the shot was fired from."

"How in the world was he able to aim?" asked Quarant. "The theatre was in darkness."

"That's the easiest of the lot to answer," replied Dick. "Raeburn was smoking when he was killed. He fired at the cigar."

"And left the theatre immediately—during the confusion," put in the doleful voice of Inspector Lucas from behind them. "He drove away in a closed car—several people saw it drive off."

"Number?" snapped Street.

Lucas shook his head.

"Nobody knows," he replied bitterly. "There was a whole string of cars outside. It was only one among many."

"Have you got on to Raeburn's house?" asked Dick, and the inspector shook his head again.

"No, not yet," he said.

"Do," said Street, "and find out who sent him the theatre ticket."

Lucas looked at him for a moment in wonder, then his face slipped into a watery smile.

"I get you," he murmured. "Of course, they would want to make sure of his coming to the theatre to-night, so that they could lay their plans beforehand. What beats me is why they didn't get him outside. It would have been much easier."

"But not so spectacular," said the young superintendent. "Mr. Midnight wanted this murder to be talked about. It was a lesson for the other members of the gang. None of them will try any double-crossing after this."

A sergeant came up and saluted.

"We've detained Al Marks, sir," he said to the superintendent. "Do you want to see him?"

Street nodded.

The only thing they could get the colonel to say was that he had heard rumours that something was to happen at the Orpheum that night, but where, or from whom he had heard it, he refused to divulge.

Street gave it up at length in despair.

"It's impossible to make him talk," he whispered to Lucas.

"We can detain him as a suspect and try again to-morrow?" suggested the inspector.

But Street shook his head quickly.

"No, don't do that," he said. "Let him go, and set a man to watch him. We're more likely to learn something that way."

The hour was getting late, and Dick, who was almost dropping with weariness, was considering going home, since there was little more that could be done, when he suddenly remembered Betty, and decided to call round at the back and see her.

He found Frank Tracey outside as he descended the steps of the entrance, on the point of hurrying off to the "Megaphone" offices to turn in an account of the affair.

Street then made his way round to the stage door.

"Miss Seymour?" repeated the stage-door-keeper in answer to Dick's inquiry. "She left about an hour ago."

Dick was disappointed, but not surprised. Some time had elapsed since the murder, and he had hardly expected to find the girl still there.

He made up his mind to call round and see her during the following morning, and went back to the front to find Inspector Lucas and say "good-night." That official, looking more depressed than ever, was standing on the steps of the main entrance staring at the pavement.

He glanced up as Street approached.

"I've been on the 'phone to Raeburn's private house speaking to his wife."

"I didn't know he was married," said Dick in surprise.

"Neither did I," said the inspector. "Anyway, she said she was Mrs. Raeburn. The ticket arrived yesterday morning—just stuck in an envelope without any letter or anything. She was coming, too, only she had a headache. Thought a friend had sent it—the ticket, I mean, not the headache."

"I see," Dick smiled grimly. "They didn't leave anything to chance."

He chatted for a few minutes longer, and presently left, leaving Lucas still staring at the pavement as if he expected to find inspiration in the stone.

Dick lived in a little flat in a quiet thoroughfare off Oxford Street, and because his head ached and his eyes felt hot and prickly, he decided to leave his car at a garage in Wardour Street, and walk the remaining short distance home. It was at that hour when London is at its quietest. When the street cleaners are out swilling down the roads, and the air was sweet and cool to his throbbing temple.

Swinging out of Wardour Street, Dick was in the act of crossing the road when he saw two people—a man and a girl—coming towards him engaged in earnest conversation. Something in the girl's appearance attracted his attention. It seemed familiar.

He drew back in the shadow of a shop doorway and waited for them to pass. They came on slowly, and as they drew almost level with him, the light from a street standard fell full upon their faces. Dick choked back the startled exclamation that rose to his lips.

For the girl was Betty Seymour, and the



man she was talking to so earnestly was Al Marks, alias the colonel!

#### THE PHOTOGRAPH.

It seemed to Richard Street that he had been asleep for about ten minutes when Jennings, his servant, woke him and brought his cup of tea.

The events of the preceding night came crowding thick and fast into his brain, and foremost amongst them was his chance discovery of the intimacy that apparently existed between Betty Seymour and Al Marks. The more he thought about it the more puzzled he became. What could a girl like Betty have in common with a man of the colonel's character—a known jewel thief who had served more than one sentence, and whose record took up a considerable space in a certain index at Scotland Yard.

He pondered over the matter all through his breakfast, but reached no satisfactory conclusion except a determination to question Betty about it at the first opportunity.

Having reached this decision, and also the end of his meal, Dick turned his attention to the morning papers.

Dick's mouth set grimly when he caught sight of the leader page and the article it contained.

It was a virulent attack upon the methods of the police, and a demand for an inquiry concerning what it termed: "The apparent hopeless incompetence of Scotland Yard to deal with this dangerous gang of desperadoes who are a menace to the lives and prosperity of the people. 'Now is the time,' the article concluded, 'for the Home Secretary to prove that he is the right man in the right place. It is over eight months since the Midnight Gang first came into existence, and nothing has been done to check their nefarious progress. Let Sir Robert Mallet take the matter in hand, and, if necessary, insist upon the infusion of new blood at headquarters. It is badly wanted.'"

The rest of the papers were all in the same strain, though not quite so vitriolic as the "Megaphone," and Dick Street set off for the "Yard" with a feeling of acute depression.

The message that awaited him from the assistant commissioner on his arrival at his office did nothing to dissipate this feeling, for it was terse and to the point. Dick walked down the long corridor towards the great man's room with a heavy heart.

"Come in, Street," said Colonel Allen, looking up from a big table littered with papers, when he tapped and entered. "I suppose you've seen the papers this morning?"

The young detective assented, and sat down on the other side of the desk.

"Something will have to be done," went on the assistant commissioner gravely, helping himself to a cigarette. "You've been in charge of this matter for over seven months, and up to the present you've failed. You've fallen down badly on this case. Something had got to be done—and done soon."

"I hope to be able to supply some definite information in the course of the next few days," said Dick. "Don't think I'm trying to excuse myself. I'm not. I'm stating a fact. There was a message this morning from Sergeant Collins."

Colonel Allen looked interested.

"Oh! What does he say?" he inquired.

"Well, if there is any truth in his note," Dick replied, "he's on the track of Mr. Midnight. That's the man we want to get, sir. I'm sure that if we can get him, the rest of the gang don't count. They'd go to pieces in a week without the brains behind."

The assistant commissioner removed his cigarette from his lips before speaking.

"Why do you say 'him'?" he asked slowly. "What makes you so certain that Mr. Midnight is a man?"

"One-way" Street was so surprised that for a moment he was incapable of speech.

"I don't quite understand, sir," he stammered at last.

"There is no evidence to show that the leader of the Midnight Gang isn't a woman!" The colonel leaned slightly forward as he spoke. "It's only a suggestion of mine, but think it over!"

He nodded a dismissal, and Street returned to his own office, his mind in a whirl. The interview had not been as bad as he had anticipated, but the assistant commissioner's concluding remarks had given him a considerable amount to think about.

Inspector Lucas was waiting for him, and his greeting was sympathetic.

"Had a bad time?" he asked, and when Dick replied in the negative: "I'm glad. Thought you would have. You've seen the papers, of course. I'd like to put 'em in our shoes and see what they'd do. By the way"—he went off at a tangent—"they came for that cupboard this morning, and about time, too. It was a disgrace to a Government office."

Dick Street looked at the blank place against one wall which had been occupied by a dilapidated cupboard, the contents of which were neatly stacked on the floor.

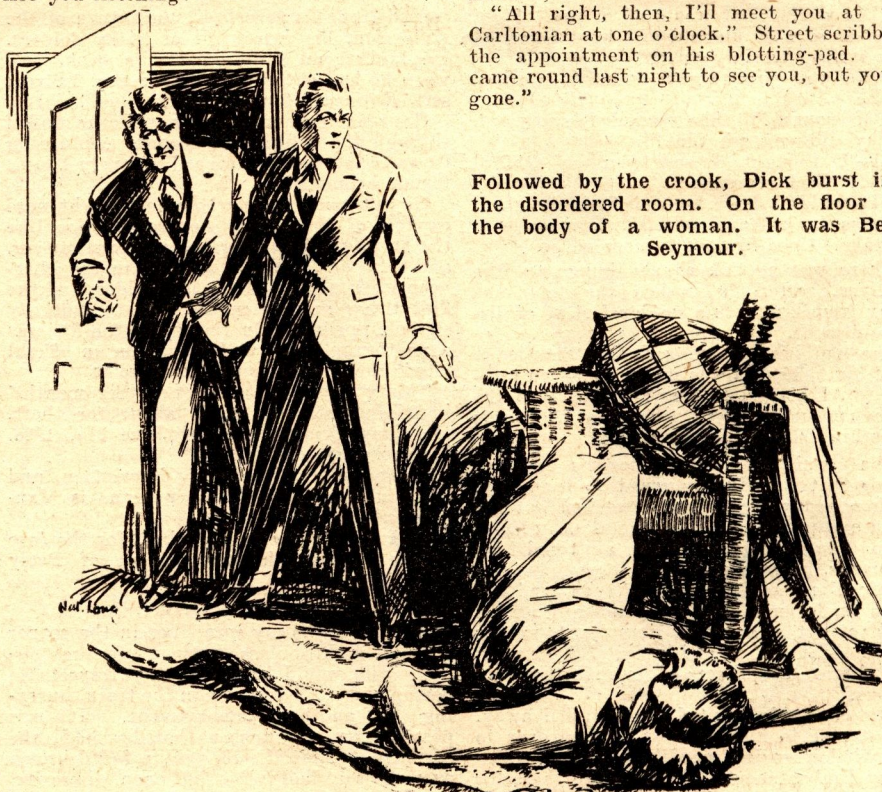
"We shall have to have something to put those things in," he murmured mechanically, his mind elsewhere.

"They're bringing a new one to-morrow," said Lucas. He turned to the desk. "The reports have come in about last night's murder."

"Anything fresh?" Street forced his mind to take an interest in what the inspector was saying.

Lucas shook his head.

"No. Did you expect anything?" he replied dubiously. "I didn't. Al Marks gave the man who was tracking him the slip at Piccadilly Circus. I've given the fellow who was following him a roasting. Are you listening?"



The reference to Al Marks had switched Dick's thoughts back to the incident in Oxford Street, and subconsciously he coupled it with the assistant commissioner's astounding suggestion. Could Colonel Allen have been referring to Betty Seymour when—

"It's impossible!" Street made the remark aloud. Inspector Lucas regarded him curiously.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "But I quite agree with you. It's all impossible. There was a fellow once who said that nothing was impossible, wasn't there? He'd never heard of the Midnight Gang."

He sighed.

"They're the most impossible thing that ever happened, and the more you think of them the more impossible they become."

Lucas took his departure soon after to follow up an inquiry concerning the car in which the man who had been seen to leave the theatre hurriedly had driven off, and as soon as he was left alone Street drew the telephone towards him, and gave a Victoria number.

In a few minutes he was connected, and presently heard the low voice of Betty from the other end of the wire.

"Who is that?"

"Dick—Dick Street," he replied, and his heart beat a trifle faster at the sound of her voice. "I thought I'd ring and see how you were after last night."

"Wasn't it dreadful?" He thought her voice trembled slightly, but put it down to his imagination.

"Are you playing to-night?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. Mr. Delman says that the show couldn't have had a better advertisement."

"There are a lot of people who won't agree with Mr. Delman," said Street, a trifle grimly. "What are you doing this afternoon? Would you care to meet me for tea somewhere?"

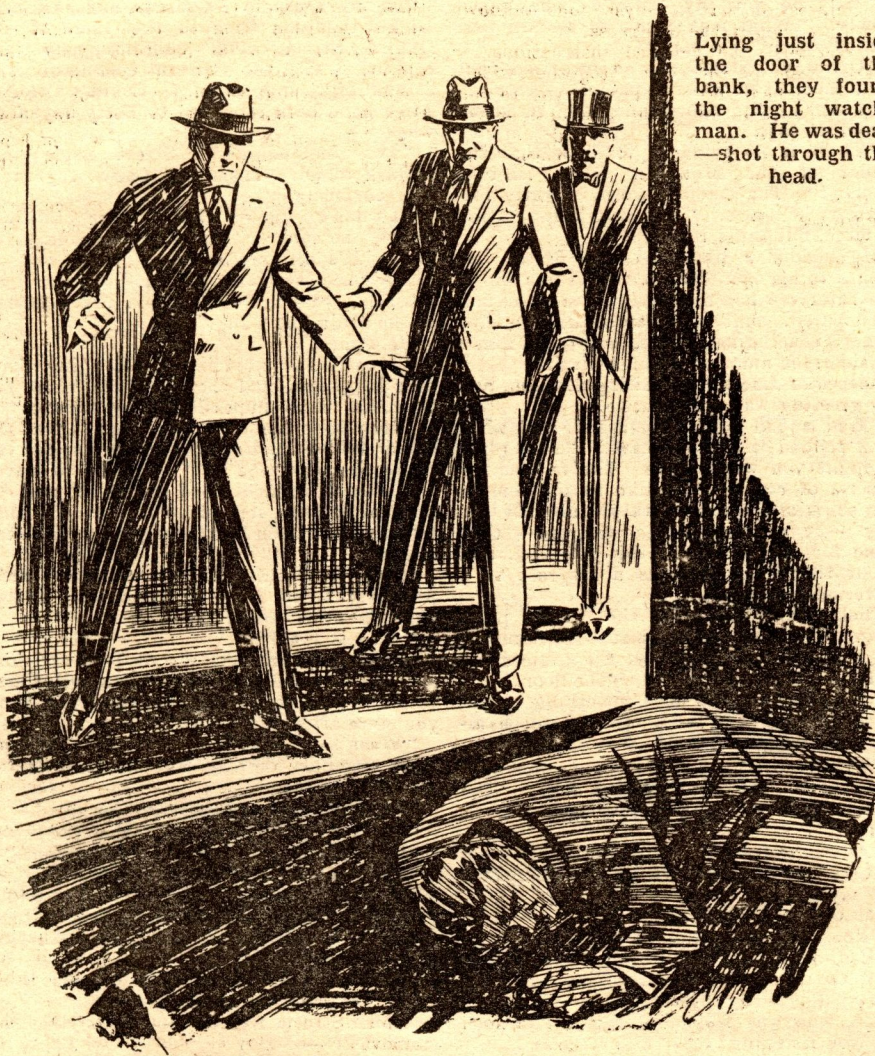
"I should love to, but I've already promised to have tea with a friend." She hesitated. "I'm free at lunch this time to-morrow, if—"

"All right, then, I'll meet you at the Carltonian at one o'clock." Street scribbled the appointment on his blotting-pad. "I came round last night to see you, but you'd gone."

Followed by the crook, Dick burst into the disordered room. On the floor lay the body of a woman. It was Betty Seymour.



Lying just inside the door of the bank, they found the night watchman. He was dead—shot through the head.



"Did you? That was kind of you. I got away as soon as I could and went home. I was feeling terribly upset."

"Did you go straight home?" inquired Dick.

"Of course!" She sounded surprised. "Why did you ask that?"

"I—I thought I saw you in—Oxford Street," Dick stammered.

"It couldn't have been me," she laughed, "I was in bed and asleep. You made a mistake. Good-bye till to-morrow."

There was a click as she hung up the receiver, and Dick pushed the telephone away from him with a sudden feeling of disappointment.

She had been lying, and the knowledge hurt him. That it was she he had seen talking to Al Marks, he was certain. And the fact that she had lied proved that there was something she wished to conceal.

The assistant commissioner's curious words that morning returned to him, and, with a heavy sigh, Dick stretched out his hand and pressed a bell on his desk.

To the constable who answered his summons, he gave an order:

"Go along to Records, Smithson, and ask them to let me have all the information they've got concerning important women criminals at present at liberty. I don't want the little shoplifters—I want the big crooks."

The constable saluted and hurried away. Street rose to his feet and strolled over to the window gazing moodily out on the rain-swept Embankment. He remained there for some time lost in thought until he was

roused from his reverie by the return of the policemen, his arms full of bulky folders. He laid them down on Dick's desk, and when he had withdrawn, "One-way" Street settled himself down to work.

Hour after hour went by while he waded through the voluminous records containing items of information regarding every known female criminal.

He put aside those whom he thought were capable of controlling an organisation like the Midnight Gang for future investigation, and they were few. It was late in the afternoon when he opened the last folder, and the first thing he saw caused him to suddenly sit bolt upright. On the top of the file was a photograph, and underneath on an official blank the description relating to it:

"Mary Drew," read Dick. "Six months' imprisonment with hard labour for theft, Holloway Prison; released June 8th, 1926. Five previous convictions."

There followed a long description, and then in red ink: "This woman is dangerous."

Dick went white as he looked, for the face in the photograph was the face of Betty Seymour!

#### MR. MIDNIGHT.

THE man who lay sprawling in the corner of a third-class carriage was the type who would have sent any respectable person looking for a seat in the train, hurrying to another compartment. It was possibly for this reason that he had the carriage to himself. He wore a faded brown overcoat that had fallen half open, disclosing the disreputable suit beneath, the mud-spat-

tered trousers of which ended in a ragged fringe over the patched and broken boots.

It must have been at least three days since his face had seen a razor, for his chin was covered by a stubbly beard which was scarcely discernible through the grime that engrained his skin. An unlit cigarette drooped from the corner of the loose mouth, and a shapeless cap was pulled down over the ferrety and bloodshot eyes.

He remained hunched up in the corner until the train drew out of the station, and then glancing quickly about him to assure himself that there was no danger of a possible eavesdropper—a matter of habit, for no one could possibly have overlooked him, he took from the pocket of his overcoat an automatic pistol. Jerking back the jacket he examined it carefully, and presently returned it to his pocket with a little nod of satisfaction.

Searching among the rags that constituted his clothing, he presently found a box of matches, lighted the cigarette, and blowing out a cloud of smoke, contentedly settled back once more in the corner.

The train ran on through the night, the rain rattling against the windows in intermittent bursts, for the coming of darkness had brought with it a steady downpour. In a short while it slowed and drew up at Clapham Junction. The man in the corner leaned forward, rubbed a frayed cuff over the glass and peered out through the blurred pane. His searching eyes found the clock he was seeking, and with difficulty he made out the time—five minutes to eleven.

The hour mentioned in the letter that reposed in his jacket pocket was 11.30. He would be a trifle early, but that was all the better. After a short interval, with a banging of doors, the train moved on again, and he heaved a sigh of relief to find that he still had the carriage to himself, for he wanted to think.

From the expression of satisfaction that now and then flitted across his face, his thoughts appeared to be pleasant ones, and, indeed, to a certain extent they were, for the object that had occupied his mind for the past four months had at last been attained. It had taken him weeks to gain the attention of the Midnight Gang, but in the end he had been successful, and at that very moment was on his way to make the acquaintance of the mysterious leader of the gang, Mr. Midnight.

He took from his pocket a soiled envelope, and for the hundredth time read the crumpled sheet of paper it contained. It was typewritten, and began without preliminary of any kind:

"It has come to my knowledge that you are desirous of joining the organisation which I control. If this is true, take the 10.50 train from Waterloo on Wednesday night and get out at Amley Halt. It is due there at 11.30. On the down platform you will find a small waiting-room. Go in and remain there until I come. The enclosed will more than cover your expenses."

The letter was signed in capitals, "Mr. Midnight," and the enclosure referred to had been a five-pound note. The tramp folded the sheet and stowed it carefully away, experiencing a little thrill of excitement.

The letter had arrived the day before yesterday at his dingy lodgings in Flanders Lane, Deptford, and the tramp had spent his time ever since its arrival by speculating as to the identity of the sender.

Among the denizens of the crime-infested district that lies in the vicinity of Deptford Broadway, the Midnight Gang and its unknown and mysterious leader were a fre-



quent topic of conversation, and the tramp had more than once voiced a keen desire to become a member of the group of crooks that, under the brilliant direction of Mr. Midnight, succeeded again and again in pulling off coups in spite of all the efforts of the police to check their activities. Now, when he had almost given up hope, his oft-expressed wish had been granted. In a few minutes he would be face to face with Mr. Midnight.

At last, after stopping at every station on the way, the train came to a standstill at Amley Halt, and the tramp got out. He was the only passenger to alight, and he walked up the little platform glancing keenly about him. It was a dreary place enough, and eminently suitable for the interview that lay ahead.

Two dim and smoky oil lamps that flickered in the gusty wind were the sole means of illumination, for Amley Halt was not of sufficient importance to warrant the installation of gas.

The station was built upon an embankment, and beyond the microscopic shelter that covered but a small portion of the platform, lay a waste of rain-swept country, glimpsed occasionally in the light of a watery moon which appeared at infrequent intervals from behind the scurrying wrack of clouds that passed continuously across its bleary face.

Altogether a depressing spot, thought the solitary passenger, as he surveyed the scene and waited for the train to move on. It did so, having discharged two empty milk-cans; and the single station official, who seemed to combine porter, ticket-collector, and station-master, disappeared through the barrier to some unknown region below.

As soon as he was left alone, the tramp made his way along the deserted platform in search of the waiting-room. It was, he discovered, a small wooden building at the extreme end, and he walked quickly towards it. The light from the lamps did not extend as far as this, and the place was shrouded in deep gloom. His heart beat slightly above the normal as he approached the doorway.

The interior was in intense blackness, and he paused on the threshold, hesitating before entering. A musty, unused smell, like old paper, greeted his nostrils, and then out of the darkness came a voice—a husky, high-pitched whisper:

"Is that Grant?"

The tramp replied in the affirmative.

"Come inside," the voice continued, and the ragged man advanced, striving to pierce the Stygian gloom, but without result.

"Not feeling nervous, are you?" There was a suspicion of a sneer in the tone.

"Not in the least," replied the tramp coolly.

"Good! A nervous man is no use to me," said Mr. Midnight. "Now listen! I have some work for you. If you carry it out successfully, there's a big reward. Do you know Richard Street?"

The tramp started. The suddenness of the question took him by surprise.

"I—I have heard of him," he muttered.

"He is becoming a nuisance," continued the high-pitched voice, "and therefore must be removed. I have decided to put the matter in your hands. Every fresh recruit to the Midnight Gang is expected to do something to prove himself worthy. This is your test. Are you willing to undertake the job?"

"Yes," answered the man without hesitation.

"Very well, then," said the other, "hold out your hand."

The tramp extended his hand, and felt an envelope thrust into it. It almost conveyed

the impression that the mysterious unknown could see even in the blackness.

"You will find detailed instructions in there," went on the voice, "together with a sum of money that will enable you to buy some decent clothes. The instructions you will follow to the letter. In addition, you will go every day to a little tobacco kiosk in the entrance to South Lambeth Tube Station, and buy a packet of 'Stardust' cigarettes. Don't forget the name. Your number is 34, and when you ask for the cigarettes you will mention that number. The detailed plan for dealing with Street is in that envelope." The speaker paused. "A last word. There is only one penalty for disobedience, and that is death. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

The tramp had located the direction of the voice now, and, growing accustomed to the darkness, guessed rather than saw the bulk of the shadowy figure.

"Then go," went on Mr. Midnight. "Pass out through the barrier and give up your ticket in the usual way, making some excuse for the delay. When you reach the road turn to the right. Two miles further on is another station. You can get a train from there to take you back."

The tramp slowly drew out the automatic from his pocket and thumbed down the safety catch, at the same time his left hand closed round an electric torch.

"I'd like to know who I'm dealing with," he said suddenly, and, whipping out the torch, pressed the button.

Even as the brilliant light flashed out it was struck from his hand.

For a second there was dead silence, then the tramp felt his pistol-wrist seized by a soft hand. The grip was not a strong one, but an agonising pain shot through his arm and the automatic dropped from his tingling fingers. He struck out with his other hand, but the blow fell on empty air.

In desperation he closed with his adversary, and in so doing his face came in contact with a fleecy coat. Was it a smell of violets that wafted to his nostrils? A sudden suspicion flashed through his mind. Was Mr. Midnight a man or— A searing pain in his back caused him to release his hold.

He staggered back through the door and across the deserted platform, his hands groping blindly. Again came the pain—a red-hot, excruciating agony—something warm welled up in his throat. He felt an indescribable sensation of choking, and tried to breathe. A myriad of lights danced before his eyes, and toppling over on his face, he lay still.

#### SERGEANT COLLINS COMES BACK.

BETTY SEYMOUR finished dressing with a pleasurable sense of anticipation. She was meeting Dick Street in a little over a quarter of an hour.

The tall, good-looking superintendent had been occupying a good deal of her waking thoughts lately, a state of affairs that filled her with dismay. She would have dismissed this circumstance if she could, for

there was a secret in her life—a secret kept closely guarded—that rendered anything of that nature, with its inevitable conclusion, utterly impossible. At the same time, she never attempted to disguise from herself that she was looking forward to seeing him.

She slipped on her coat and was picking up her gloves when her maid entered with a letter.

Betty took the envelope, and at the sight of the writing her face whitened. She looked so ill that the maid was alarmed.

"What's the matter, miss?" she asked anxiously.

"Nothing." Betty found a chair and sat down. "You might phone for a taxi, please."

She waited until she was alone, and then with trembling fingers ripped open the flap of the envelope and extracted the contents, and as she saw the scrawled lines an expression of despair crossed her face.

She read the note twice, and then crumpling it up in her hand, sat staring at the floor in front of her, pale to the lips. A grisly ghost had arisen out of the past, and it was destined to cause Betty Seymour many hours of mental anguish, and "One-way" Street no little loss of sleep before it was finally laid.

Her maid announced the arrival of the taxi. Betty roused herself, and forcing her shaking limbs to take her down the stairs to the cab.

Street was waiting in the lounge when she arrived at the Carlton, and rose to meet her. She noted the dark circles under his eyes and the lines about his mouth, and wondered at the cause. Her wildest imagination, however, did not supply her with the true reason. How could she guess that the cause was a certain photograph now locked in a drawer of his desk.

After a few commonplace remarks he led her into the big grill-room, and an obsequious head-waiter found them a table by the window.

Dick Street watched the girl as she removed her gloves, and wondered. It seemed impossible that the dainty figure before him could ever have been a criminal. And yet the photograph was irrefutable evidence. The girl was known to the police, and however incredible it appeared had



Across the theatre rang the staccato crack of an automatic, and the man in the box opposite slumped back into the darkness.



been labelled a dangerous woman. Dick sighed involuntarily.

Betty looked up from a refractory button, and met his eyes.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "You seem depressed."

"I am rather," he admitted, picking up the menu.

"Why?" And then as he made no reply: "Is it the affair at the theatre that's worrying you?"

"Partly." He tried hard to prevent himself becoming monosyllabic, but failed.

"It was a dreadful affair, wasn't it?" She leaned forward, one slim hand resting on the table. "I suppose you haven't found out who the identity of those people responsible?"

Street shook his head.

"Beyond knowing it was the work of the Midnight Gang, no," he answered.

"And haven't you any idea who they are?" she asked.

"Not the slightest," he replied. "I'd give a lot to find out, or rather, I'd give a lot to find out who their leader is."

"Their leader?" She looked interested.

"Yes; the person who's known as Mr. Midnight." The detective paused as a waiter came up to take their order and was silent until after the man had gone. Then he continued:

"Mr. Midnight is the brain behind. The motive force. Destroy that and the rest automatically destroys itself."

"And you've no idea who it is?" she inquired. "Haven't you any clue to his identity?"

"No. Sometimes I begin to wonder if we ever shall."

She lapsed into silence, and Dick noticing her pre-occupation wondered what it was that had so suddenly made her so thoughtful.

The girl with the flawless features and soft

voice whom he had met but half a dozen times in his life meant more to him than he cared to admit. There must be some explanation for that photograph in the record department other than appeared on the surface. Knowing her, it was impossible to believe for a moment that she could ever have been a thief.

But as well as the photograph there was the indisputable fact that on the night of the murder at the Orpheum Theatre she had met Al Marks. There was no mistake about that. He had seen her in the strong light of the electric standard with his own eyes, and was certain she was on terms of intimate friendship with the colonel, a notorious crook, and she had lied on the telephone when Dick had mentioned about her being in Oxford Street.

It was his duty to question her about that, and he cast round in his mind for an opening. It was Betty herself who supplied him with one.

"What made you think I was in Oxford Street the other night?" She raised her eyes, and meeting Dick's steady gaze, blushed and looked down again.

"I thought I saw you"—he tried to speak casually—"on my way home from the theatre."

"What time was it when you—when you thought you saw me?" Her voice was low, and he thought he detected a faint note of embarrassment in the tone.

"Nearly three o'clock—probably a little later," he replied.

"It couldn't have been me. I was home and in bed before twelve." She smiled, but her eyes avoided his.

Street was silent for a moment, then leaning forward he laid his hand gently on hers. Her fingers quivered beneath his touch, but she made no effort to draw her hand away.

"Betty, I'm going to ask you a straight question. Please don't be annoyed." He paused. "Do you know Al Marks?"

He saw the start she gave; saw her face pale.

"Al Marks?" She repeated the name in a husky whisper.

"More generally known as the 'Colonel,'" said Dick, "a jewel thief."

"What makes you think that I should know him?" Her voice was almost inaudible.

"Because you were talking to him when I saw you in Oxford Street."

A hint of defiance crept into her blue eyes.

"I've already told you that I was not in Oxford Street that night," she said coldly.

"You made a mistake."

"I made no mistake." He looked at her steadily. "Betty, why don't you tell me the truth? You may have gone straight home from the theatre, but you went out again—to meet Al Marks."

"I—I—" She stopped and made a gesture of despair. "Why do you question me? Why won't you believe me?"

Before Dick could reply the waiter arrived with the soup.

"Is there anything else I can get you, sir?" he asked deferentially, as he set the plates before them.

"You can come and order a wreath for yourself!" said a lugubrious voice. "I want you, my lad!"

Dick looked up startled, and saw the thin form of Inspector Lucas standing at his elbow.

The waiter was staring at him with dropped jaw, his eyes bulging. Lucas tapped him on the arm.

"I'll come with you while you get your coat," he said. "You're going a little walk with me, and don't try any tricks. I've got a pistol in my pocket."

"What is it, Lucas?" asked Street. "What's the idea?"

"The idea was a good one," said Inspector Lucas, tightening his grip on the waiter's arm. "Luckily, it hasn't come off. If I'd been a minute or two later you'd have been a dead man by now, Mr. Street. That soup's poisoned."

"Poisoned!" Betty breathed the ominous word, horror in her eyes.

"Yes, miss, or it ought to be unless I've made a bloomer." The inspector regarded his captive sternly.

"What was it you put in that soup?" he asked.

The trembling waiter was white and silent.

"Whatever it was, the bottle's still in your pocket," said Lucas. "I saw you put it back there."

The head-waiter, attracted by the scene, came up to inquire what was the matter.

His eyes opened in horrified amazement when Dick explained.

"Good heavens, this is terrible!" he ejaculated.

Street nodded.

"It is," he agreed, "but it might have been worse. How long has this man been employed here?"

"He isn't employed here," answered the head-waiter. "I've never seen him until this morning, and he came with a note from one of our regular waiters saying that he was ill and that this man would take his place."

"One-way" Street surveyed the prisoner thoughtfully.

"Who put you up to this?" he inquired.

The man showed his teeth in an unpleasant smile.

"I'm not talking," he muttered.

Betty was white-faced and trembling, and Street, who saw that the affair had given her a terrible shock, insisted on putting her into a taxi and sending her home. He waited until the cab drove off, and then returned to the grill-room.

Had he remained a moment longer he would have seen a man who had been lounging outside the Carlton take a second taxi and follow in the wake of the one containing the girl.

Dick accompanied Lucas to Cannon Row Police Station and saw his prisoner locked in a cell, and then walked back with the inspector to Scotland Yard. A search of the man's pockets had revealed a small phial labelled

## THE EDITOR GREET'S YOU!



### THE CROOK'S GAME.

I EXPECT by the time you turn to this brief chat of mine, you will have read the opening instalment of our great new serial, "The Crook's Game," by George Dilnot. I was right, was I not, in my prophecy of last week that you would soon discover what possibilities there are in this fine tale, what thrills there are in store for you.

Seeing that this fine yarn is essentially a detective story, showing the thrills of the trail and the workings of a really astute detective in the seemingly everlasting warfare against the scheming and cunning crooks who in their way are just as cute as the brightest brains of Scotland Yard, it might be interesting to see what the detectives' code really is.

From the scene of the crime, from the moment that the first clue to the identity of the crook is found, the most essential, the most important thing, is immediate action and the utilising of every means available to head-off the criminal from escape, to get in advance of him both in thought and movement.

It is seldom that the crook's line of escape is obvious to the detective, and it is up to him first to discover in which direction he has fled before he himself can follow. Every possible route of exit must be blocked as far as possible, and the detective must exercise his foresight and quickness of thought to their fullest extent, and it is here that he must resort to the most important line in crime deduction—that is to put himself in the criminal's place. If he had committed the crime, how would he escape? How would he set about avoiding capture and turn his crime into profit instead of loss in the form of a prison sentence—or worse? From this method, the detective will get his ideas, and at once he must take immediate measures to circumvent every possible step.

That is the general policy of what is known as "The Police Code," and you will be interested to follow its methods throughout the gripping chapters of Mr. Dilnot's greatest story.

How many of you have discovered "The Thriller Man" with his Free Gifts? He is to be found at most of the seaside resorts, and those who have not yet met him should keep open a wary eye and advance their THRILLER into a more prominent position where he will be sure to see it.

Yours sincerely,

*The Editor*

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



"Poison," and a sniff at the contents left no shadow of doubt as to his murderous intention, for it contained hydrocyanic acid. Dick had carefully preserved a portion of the soup, and when they reached headquarters he sent it along to the research department to be analysed.

"I was expecting something of the sort to happen," said the melancholy inspector a few minutes later seated in Richard Street's office. "Had a kind of hunch—I do have them at times—and when they tried to get me twice this morning, I wondered how soon it would be before they turned their attention to you."

Street looked at him in amazement.

"Tried to get you twice?" he repeated.

Lucas nodded.

"Yes," he answered. "Just as I was leaving my lodgings, a car passed me and somebody fired from the inside." He pulled up the sleeve of his coat and showed a long, red weal on his forearm. "That's the bullet mark. I got the number of the car—XY 1032, but it was a fake. They're not taking any chances, these Midnight people. Something's sent 'em into a panic; probably they think we know more than we do. They tried again in Whitehall. I was waiting to cross the road when somebody lurched into me, and sent me sprawling into a bus. The driver was clever and had good brakes, otherwise the papers 'ud have been full of another street accident. I came along to the Carltonian to tell you about it and warn you."

"How did you know I was there?" asked Dick.

"Saw the note you'd made on your blotting-pad," said Lucas.

"I wonder how they knew I was going to be at the Carltonian?" said Street thoughtfully. "They must have known, or they wouldn't have made such elaborate plans."

"Ask me!" Lucas shrugged his shoulders. "Did you tell anyone?"

The detective shook his head.

"No," he answered. "I made the appointment yesterday by 'phoning from this office."

"Perhaps Miss Seymour told somebody."

"Who could she have told connected with the Midnight Gang?" Street stopped suddenly and was silent. He remembered that it had practically been Betty's own suggestion that they should lunch together.

He felt a coldness round his heart at the obvious conclusion to which his thoughts were leading him. Betty Seymour was the only person besides himself who knew that he would be lunching at the Carltonian that day. Had it been she who had passed the information on to the Midnight Gang, or, alternatively, had she been responsible for planning the whole diabolical scheme?

He shrank from believing it, and yet common sense pointed out that it was a possible solution.

And he loved her—he no longer tried to disguise the real state of his feelings for her, and the knowledge made him feel sick and miserable.

"I see they haven't sent the new cupboard yet." The voice of Inspector Lucas broke in on his thoughts. "Dilatory, that's what I call it. Procrastination—I think that's the right word—is the curse of the working classes. When I was a boy at school, there was a motto—"

A tap on the door interrupted the inspector's reminiscences to Street's relief, and a constable entered.

"There's a gentleman wants to see you, sir," he said.

"Who is it?" asked Dick.

"Mr. Tracey," replied the policeman.

"Send him up," said the detective shortly.

"Now I wonder what he wants?" ruminated Lucas. "Probably after copy for the 'Megaphone,' or maybe he's come on behalf of the editor-in-chief to offer apologies for that article."

Frank Tracey had come on neither errand as they shortly found out, when he hurriedly entered the office.

"Lord!" he exclaimed, rushing across to Dick and shaking the astonished superintendent vigorously by the hand. "I'm jolly glad to find it isn't true!"



As the police were taking their prisoner into Scotland Yard, they suddenly felt him go limp between them. "Here, what's the matter?" one exclaimed as Hurgon slid from their grasp.

"What isn't true?" asked Dick in amazement.

"We had a message this morning at the 'Megaphone' to say you were dead," said Tracey. "I was out when it came through, and they sent me round to verify it directly I got back. Phew!"

He sat down and mopped his forehead.

"It gave me a bad turn, I can tell you."

Lucas looked up interestedly, or as near interested as he had ever been known to look.

"Who sent the message?" inquired Street curiously.

Frank shook his head.

"Haven't the faintest idea," he replied. "It came by 'phone."

"Humph!" The inspector scratched his chin. "They must have been pretty sure, to have sent the news beforehand. Didn't say anything about me, I s'pose?"

"No, nothing about you," said Frank.

Lucas sighed.

"They wouldn't," he said sadly. "Not sufficiently important. Did the man who 'phoned you give any details?"

"It wasn't a man," was Frank's startling reply. "It was a woman!"

Dick felt a sudden sensation of dizziness, and his heart beat thunderously, but looking across the desk and seeing Lucas' eyes fixed upon him he made a supreme effort to control his emotion.

Even if his ghastly suspicion was true he must do his best to keep it to himself. Much as it went against his professional instinct, Betty Seymour must be saved from being connected with the affair even if she was guilty.

"A woman, eh?" said Lucas softly. "Now, I wonder who she could have been." He looked at Dick steadily. "The assistant commissioner got an idea at the back of his mind that the Midnight Gang might be controlled by a woman. I never took it seriously before, but it looks as if maybe he's right. I wonder?"

"Anyway," said Frank, "it was a woman's voice who supplied the information. She rang up the news editor just before twelve."

Dick was silent. He was trying hard to think of something to say. He felt at the back of his mind that Lucas had read his thoughts.

The fresh arrival of the constable saved him comment, however.

"They've brought the new cupboard, sir," said the constable, in answer to his query.

"Oh, all right, tell them to bring it in!" "One-way" Street welcomed the interruption, for it gave him time to adjust his thoughts.

There was a bumping and banging in the passage, and two men entered struggling under the weight of a heavy wooden cupboard. They set it against the wall, wiped their perspiring foreheads, and handed Street a receipt to initial.

They departed. A few seconds later one of them came back.

"I forgot to give you the key, sir," he said, and laid it on the desk in front of Dick.

When the man had taken his departure, Lucas surveyed the new adornment to the office admiringly.

"Looks good, don't it?" he remarked. "We're getting quite posh. I wonder if they delivered it in a plain van?"

After a pause he went off at a tangent as usual. "Ever heard of Mary Drew?" Dick started, and his eyes strayed to a locked drawer in his desk in which reposed the photograph of Betty Seymour. So Lucas knew! "She was a wonderful woman—or, rather, a girl," the inspector continued thoughtfully. "Pretty—I don't suppose you've ever seen a prettier. Big blue eyes like a summer's sky—I always get poetical when I think of her—and skin like cream. She had the soul of a devil, but that didn't matter—nobody could see that. She looked like an angel in the dock, but that didn't stop her getting time. 'A dangerous woman' the judge called her, but he was an old man, and soured." He paused and looked at the ceiling.

"What's all this in aid of?" snapped Street tersely—his nerves were in shreds.

Lucas took his eyes from the ceiling and gazed at him reproachfully.

"It isn't in aid of anything," he said. "I was just ruminating and wondering. No one knew what became of Mary Drew. She had five convictions, and when she was released after the last spell she disappeared. Funny if she's come back and joined the Midnight Gang, or maybe taken up a new profession."

"If you want to waste your breath," said



Street irritably, "why don't you do something useful and put those things away?" He indicated the pile of books and documents that were stacked against the wall.

Inspector Lucas rose from his chair with a sigh.

"I might as well, I suppose," he agreed. He picked up the key from the desk, and, crossing to the cupboard, inserted it in the lock and flung open the door.

His startled cry brought Dick and Frank to their feet in alarm.

"What is it?" asked "One-way" Street. "Look!" said Lucas, in a husky whisper, and, looking, they shrank away in horror.

Slumped awkwardly in the bottom of the cupboard, his ragged clothes filthy and blood-stained, his head drooping forward on his chest, was the body of a man!

Street stepped forward, and, stooping, raised the limp head. One glance at the white face and he understood. For the man was Sergeant Collins, and he was dead!

#### THE BROADCAST.

"ONE-WAY" STREET was the first to recover. Crossing swiftly to the desk, he pressed the bell, and then, with Lucas' help, proceeded to lift the body from the cupboard. They laid all that remained of poor Collins gently on the floor, and as they did so a sheet of paper dropped from out of the ragged clothing. Lucas picked it up, looked at it, and without a word handed it to the young superintendent.

It was a single sheet of ordinary writing paper of the kind that can be purchased at any stationer's shop, and bore across the soiled surface three lines of typewritten characters:

"This poor fool tried to pit his brains against mine. Others who do the same will suffer in a like manner. Be warned.  
"MR. MIDNIGHT."

Street read the message, and his face set in a grim mask. Suddenly he raised the paper, and held it for a second to his nostrils. It exhaled a faint perfume—the merest trace of violets. "One-way" Street's eyes narrowed suddenly as he smelt it.

"He must have died almost instantly," Lucas, who had been bending over the body, raised his head. "He's been stabbed twice in the back, and from the look of the wounds I should think either would have been fatal."

"See if there's anything in his pockets," ordered Street, in a low voice.

The inspector made a quick but thorough search, and at the end shook his head.

"There's nothing," he said. "You didn't expect anything, did you? They don't make mistakes, these people. Thorough, that's what they are—thorough."

The constable arrived in answer to Dick's summons, and stared in open-mouthed horror at the scene.

"Go and arrange for an ambulance at once," snapped "One-way" Street. "Don't stand there gaping—hurry!"

The dazed constable departed to execute the order, and the detective turned to Frank.

"There mustn't be a word of this in your paper," he said. "At least, not yet. You've got to keep it dark. It'll only demoralise the public and cause them to lose faith in the police, and that's just what Mr. Midnight is playing for. This hasn't been done for the sake of dramatic effect. It's been done with a purpose—to get us in a panic."

He sat down at his desk as he finished sneaking, and pulled the telephone towards him.

"What are you going to do?" asked Frank. "Make a few inquiries," said Dick shortly.

He spoke to the man at the private exchange, and was switched through to the stores department.

"Where was the cupboard for Superintendent Street's office ordered from?" he inquired. "Oh, Cooper's, was it? Thank you. No, it's a very nice cupboard." He waggled the hook of the receiver. "They want to know if there are any complaints. Hallo! Get me Cooper's, will you?"

Lucas stretched out his hand for the matches and lighted a cigar while Dick was waiting for the call.

"Seems to me that we've got to do something, and mighty soon," he remarked dolefully. "This business of poor Collins is going to stir up trouble. The people upstairs"—Lucas always referred to his superiors in those terms—"aren't going to take this easily."

Street made a gesture of despair with his free hand.

"I know that as well as you do. But what more can we do? We've done everything that's humanly possible. We can't do miracles."

"They expect you to do miracles in the police force," growled Lucas as Dick returned to the phone.

After a short conversation he hung up the receiver, and rose to his feet wearily.

"This is getting me down," he said. "Cooper's say that the cupboard is still at their stores, and isn't being sent until tomorrow. What do you make of that?"

Lucas raised his eyebrows.

"I don't make anything of it," he answered.

"What I'd like to know is how the Midnight Gang knew that we were going to have a fresh cupboard. There's a leakage somewhere."

"They know everything," said Dick bitterly. He stood for a moment, his brows knitted in thought. Then suddenly he turned to the inspector. "Go round to Cannon Row and see that waiter who tried to poison me. Threaten him with what you like, but get him, to squeal."

Lucas nodded and crossed to the door.

"I'll make him talk," he said grimly, and went out.

Just after he had gone the ambulance arrived with the divisional surgeon, and when the usual routine had been gone through all that remained of Sergeant Collins was taken away to the mortuary to await the inquest.

Dick Street turned to Frank when they were alone. The reporter was sitting silently by





the window, his hands in his pockets, his usually cheery face the picture of gloom.

"We don't seem to get very far," he remarked. "I had a lot of faith in Collins. For four months he'd been living in Deptford with the object of picking up some chance word that would put him on the track of the Midnight Gang, and now—"

"Poor chap!" said Frank, in a low voice. "The Midnight Gang are devils, Dick. I'm beginning to wonder if you'll ever catch them."

"Are you losing faith in us, too?" Dick smiled without mirth.

"No, no! It isn't that," replied the reporter; "but they're so infernally clever, or, rather, the brain that controls them is."

"We're not getting quite deficient in intelligence at the Yard," Street remonstrated. "We have our share of grey matter."

"So has Mr. Midnight," answered Frank grimly. "More than his share, by the look of things." He leaned forward. "Dick, during the last eight months the Midnight Gang have got away with thousands. Their first crime was the smashing of the Central and Counties Bank and the shooting of the night watchman. Then there was the attack on Ridgway, the secretary of the Consolidated Metal Works, returning from the bank with the week's wages. That was followed by the hold-up of Lady Crowhurst and the robbery of the Crowhurst diamonds—worth a small fortune. Then the big fire that gutted the Cleethorp's Motor Works and sent the shares down to nothing. The Midnight Gang were in that. I've only quoted a few cases, and in not one single instance did they make a mistake."

"You've caught one or two of the smaller members of the gang, but you can't make them talk. They don't know anything, but even if they did, they wouldn't say a word, and I don't blame them. If a quarter that is said about Mr. Midnight is true, they'd never live to speak again."

He paused, and Dick nodded silently. He felt too weary and depressed to talk, and shortly after Frank took his leave.

Left to himself, the young superintendent walked up and down the office, turning over in his mind the events of the past few hours, and foremost in his thoughts was the part that Betty had played in it all.

For over an hour Street walked up and down, trying to shape some coherent pattern from the chaos that filled his brain. He gave it up at last, and feeling worn out and dispirited decided to go home.

Passing out through the archway that leads into Whitehall, the nearest exit for his flat, he mechanically hailed a taxi that was

crawling past, and gave the driver instructions to take him homewards.

He found Howard Carfax waiting for him when he arrived, but immediately the subject of the gang was raised, Street got somewhat ill-tempered.

"Oh, give it a rest!" he exclaimed. "Forget it for a bit."

He rose with a sigh, and, crossing to a cabinet on the opposite side of the room, he opened two small doors in the front.

"I've had enough of the Midnight Gang for to-day," he said. "Let's have a little music."

He turned a switch, and the strains of a string orchestra filled the room playing "Leberstraum."

"Thank goodness the B.B.C. have got something worth listening to," said Dick, returning to his chair.

He pushed a cigar box across to Carfax, and the K.C. took one and lit it.

For some time they smoked in silence.

Then suddenly in the midst of a bar the music ceased. There was a harsh, grating sound and then a voice, high-pitched and squeaky came through the loud-speaker, and at the first words Dick sprang to his feet, his face tense.

"Mr. Midnight calling," said the voice. "To all whom it may concern. At twelve o'clock to-night precisely, the Midnight Gang will clear out the strong-room of the Southern, Union and London Bank!"

There followed a loud clicking, an instant's silence, and then again the strains of the orchestra.

#### THE RAID ON THE BANK!

In two strides Dick Street was across the room, and had picked up the telephone.

He gave a Treasury number, and a second later was talking to Inspector Lucas who luckily was staying late, writing a report.

He listened to Dick's story without comment.

"This is a new one on me," he said at the end. "What do you think their game is? Bluff?"

"Maybe," said Street; "but I don't think so. Anyway, I'm going to take precautions. Call out the Flying Squad and all reserves. Tell them to throw a cordon round the bank. I'll meet you at headquarters in ten minutes." He hung up the receiver and turned to Carfax.

"You can come with me, if you like," he said, crossing to the door.

"I will," answered the K.C. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

Followed by Carfax, Dick hurried down the stairs, and out into the street.

Big Ben was striking half-past ten as they swung through the Whitehall entrance to Scotland Yard.

"I've just been on the phone to Savoy Hill," Lucas said. "One of the announcers has been found unconscious. Clubbed! I don't know any details yet, but I gather one of the artistes, who must have been one of the gang, was responsible. They caught him, of course, but that won't help much."

He looked at some scribbled notes at his side.

A searing pain in his back, the tramp staggered through the doorway of unlit waiting-room and across the platform, his hands groping blindly.

"Two hundred Central office men will be leaving in police tenders for the Southern Union Bank in five minutes, and I've already notified the City police. They are all armed and have received instructions to shoot if necessary. That's all at the moment."

"You seem to have got a lot done in a little time," said Carfax.

Inspector Lucas took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

"We can move quickly enough when there's any cause," he answered slowly. "People get it into their heads that the police are only good for controlling traffic, but they have their other uses as well."

They spent the next few minutes in a council of war, and then Lucas' phone rang shrilly. He listened to a short conversation, barked an order, and turned to Street.

"The first tender has just left," he announced. "I've reserved a fast car for ourselves. I think if you're ready we'd better be going."

He rose to his feet.

"Are you armed?" he inquired.

Street shook his head.

"Then you'd better take one of these."

Lucas unlocked a drawer, and took out two heavy automatic pistols, examined them carefully and handed one to the young superintendent. Street slipped it into his pocket.

"I think that's all," said Dick, looking round before they left the room.

The car, a powerful-looking open tourer, was waiting for them at the Embankment entrance and they got in. The driver had apparently already received orders, for at a nod from Inspector Lucas he drove off.

Lucas was silent during the journey, and sat hunched up beside Dick, his cigar gripped between his teeth, his shaggy brows drawn together in thought.

At Blackfriars a long-bodied car whizzed past them at full speed. It was crowded with men who were jammed into the seats or sat upon one another's knees. A few seconds later another car dashed past similarly loaded, and then, as they neared Lombard Street, they struck a stream of cars and bicycles, motorcycles, single and with sidecars, and all going in the same direction as they.

The traffic was almost as dense as at mid-day, and the pavements were crowded with pedestrians. In a flash, Street grasped the meaning. The broadcast message on behalf of Mr. Midnight had reached millions, and not a few of them were going to satisfy their curiosity.

The car nosed its way among the string of vehicles twisting in and out under the skilful hand of the driver, and eventually drew up outside the Southern Union and London Bank. Dick Street got out and gazed about him. Never in his life had he seen so many people congregated in one street. The pavements, the roadway, every available inch of space was thronged with a sea of moving, pushing, struggling humanity. Special forces of police had been hurried to the spot, and were doing their best to keep the enormous crowd in hand.

Lucas eyed them dolefully before going off to see that his men were properly stationed, and the detective and Carfax stood for a moment surveying the scene.

The police had succeeded in keeping a clear ring round the bank, which occupied a corner site, and, presently, Dick saw a little group pushing their way through the multitude towards the steps of the bank.

They consisted of a tall, soldierly-looking man in evening dress, and a stout, rather red-faced man in a bowler hat. A uniformed inspector was with them, and as they emerged by the entrance Dick Street recognised the tall man. With a word to Carfax he went over and shook hands.

"What do you think of all this, Street?" said Sir William Raynor, the managing director of the bank. "Of course, it's a fake—a hoax. It's impossible to take it seriously."

"One-Way" Street raised his eyebrows.

"I scarcely agree with you," he replied. "I'm inclined to take it very seriously."

"But, my dear fellow," protested the banker, "what can they possibly do—with all these people about and the place surrounded



by detectives? They'd have to work a miracle."

"The man who controls the Midnight Gang does nothing without a reason," said Street. "You can take it from me, Sir William, that everything has been carefully planned down to the last detail. I don't profess to be able to guess what they propose doing, but whatever it is you may be sure they've left nothing to chance."

"Well, if they expect to take anything from the bank," put in the inspector, "they don't stand a hope. I think it would be a good idea if we searched the premises. Have you got the keys?"

"My manager has," replied Sir William, and introduced the stout man.

Lucas came up as they were ascending the steps.

"I've got a cordon of plain police behind them," he said with satisfaction, "and now no one without authority can get through."

The door of the bank was opened by the little manager and they passed inside. In the entrance hall they encountered the night-watchman.

"Everything all right, Stevens?" asked Sir William, and the man nodded.

"Yes, sir."

Dick Street looked at his watch. It was half-past eleven. The Midnight Gang had half an hour before them. He said something to the uniformed inspector and he hurried away.

"I've sent for some help," he remarked in a low voice to Lucas. "If there is anyone on the premises we shall need it."

They waited, and presently the inspector returned with six constables. They made a careful search of the entire building, but found nothing unusual, and came back once more to the vestibule.

"That's that," said Dick. "I think we'll leave you, inspector, and these six men inside with the watchman and the manager. You fellows armed?"

They nodded.

"Right!" Dick Street turned to the inspector. "We'll keep watch from outside. That's where the attempt will come from, if it comes at all."

He paused as they reached the top of the steps, and spoke to the uniformed inspector.

"You're in charge," he snapped. "Tell the watchman to lock up as usual behind us, and station a man at one of the upper windows. At the first sign of an alarm tell him to blow his whistle. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good!"

Street joined the gaunt inspector and Sir William at the foot of the steps, and



ordered the door of the bank to be closed. They heard the bolt shoot as they moved away.

"I don't s'pose anything'll happen," said Lucas. "I don't see how anything can happen. Let's inspect the cordon."

They walked right round. At intervals of six feet a ring of plain-clothes men surrounded the block of buildings, and behind them a second ring of uniformed policemen.

"Unless they can make themselves invisible, they'll never get through that," said Lucas.

Coming back to their starting point, Dick suddenly remembered Carfax, and looked round for the K.C. As he did so he could have sworn that he saw Betty Seymour among the crowd. He looked again at the place

where he thought he had seen her, but if she'd ever been there she'd gone now.

He saw Carfax standing by the side of the bank where he had left him and beckoned him over.

"Well," said Carfax, as he joined them, "anything happened?"

Dick shook his head.

"Not yet," he replied.

They had to raise their voices to make themselves heard above the excited hum of the crowd.

"They'll have to be pretty quick to keep to the time of that message," Carfax looked at his watch. "It's a minute to twelve."

He had scarcely spoken, when a breathless constable came hurrying up.

"Inspector Lucas?" he asked.

"That's me," said Lucas. "What is it?"

"One of your men round the back wants you, sir," the man panted. "They've arrested a man who was trying to break through the cordon."

"All right!" snapped Lucas. "I'll go at once."

He hurried away at a run with the constable following at his heels.

"It almost looks as though something were going to happen after all—" Dick began, but he never completed the sentence. The door of the bank opened suddenly and the inspector who had been in charge inside ran hastily down the steps. He stopped on seeing Dick.

"I wish you'd come inside, sir," he said jerkily, "there's something queer going on."

"Queer? What do you mean?" rapped the detective.

"I don't know, sir. The men say they can't breathe, and I begin to feel funny myself—" He broke off.

Dick was already half-way up the steps, closely followed by Carfax and Sir William.

The vestibule was empty, and Street was hurrying through, when something in one corner attracted his attention. He went over to see what it was, and started back with a cry. It was the night-watchman, and even in the dim light Dick could see that he had been shot through the head. He looked round.

"Where's that inspector?" he asked sharply; but the inspector had disappeared.

Lucas came running up at that moment.

"Anything happened here?" he asked. "There was no man trying to get through the cordon. It was a trick to get me round the back!"

Dick pointed to the body.

"That's what's happened," he said. "We'd better search the bank."

In a corridor leading off the vestibule they found the bodies of two of the six policemen. They had been treated in the same way as the unfortunate watchman. Of the other four there was not a trace; neither could the inspector be found. An inspection of the vaults realised their worst fears. The lock of the strong-room had been scientifically burnt out and over £200,000 in paper currency stolen.

"The Midnight Gang have kept their word," said Street, as he surveyed the wrecked door in company with Sir William Raynor.

"But how on earth did they manage it?" gasped the amazed banker.

"Oh, it was simple enough," replied One-Way Street bitterly. "Every one of them was dressed in the uniform of a Metropolitan policeman, and the inspector who was with them was also one of the gang!"

#### THE NIGHT VISITOR.

It was the evening following the sensational raid on the Southern Union and London Bank when Howard Carfax wearily climbed the stairs—the lift was out of order—leading to his flat, and inserting his key in the lock let himself into his comfortable chambers.

He occupied a flat on the third floor of a block in the Kingsway—a useful locality, since it was within easy distance of the Law

Courts, an advantage to a man of his profession.

Removing his hat and coat in the lobby he walked into his sitting-room and sat down on the chesterfield drawn up in front of the gas fire with a sigh of relief.

He had spent a particularly hard day, and was feeling tired.

For an hour he read and smoked, and it was nearly midnight when he finally turned out the light and went to bed.

He was a light sleeper, and he had not been asleep for longer than an hour before he was wide awake again. Silently he got out of bed, felt in the dark for his slippers, and pulled a dressing-gown around him. He took something from a drawer in his dressing-table, opened the door and crept out softly into the tiny hall.

The slight sound that had disturbed him had ceased. His hand was on the knob of the sitting-room door, and he had turned it when he heard a faint click. Someone had turned the light off within!

With a sudden motion he flung the door wide open, and reached out his hand for the switch.

"Touch that light and you die!" A husky, muffled voice came from the blackness of the room. "And drop your gun—quick!"

Carfax dropped the pistol which he had taken from the dressing-room drawer, and it fell with a thud at his feet.

"Now come inside, and step lively," went on the voice.

He strained his eyes to pierce the gloom, and saw the figure dimly. It was standing by his desk.

"Never met me?" The voice was a high squeak. "I don't suppose you have. Ever heard of Mr. Midnight?"

"Mr. Midnight!" Carfax repeated the words. "Yes." The unknown paused. "I want the key of your desk."

"I haven't the key here," said Carfax. "It's in the bed-room."

"Don't move!" warned the voice.

Carfax swiftly kicked off a slipper and felt about on the floor with his bare toes, for the pistol he had dropped. Presently he found it, and gradually drew it towards him.

"What do you want?" he asked, to gain time.

"I want to see your papers—all of them."

"There is nothing here of any value," said Carfax.

The pistol was now at his feet. He kept his toes upon the butt ready to drop the instant an opportunity presented itself.

"Come nearer," said the unknown, "and hold out your hands."

He made a movement as though to obey, but dropped suddenly to his knees. Grabbing the pistol he fired. He heard a cry, saw in the flash a dark figure, and then something struck him—

He regained consciousness to find the light on and the room empty!

His desk was open, and the floor was strewn with papers it had contained. Shakily he crossed to it and examined the lock. It had been forced. His head was aching badly, and, going into the bath-room, he bathed his temples, and gingerly felt the bump on the side of his forehead. Improvising a rough bandage, he returned to the disordered sitting-room. The blind was flapping in the draught, for the window opening on to the back and overlooking an iron fire-escape, was open.

Carfax looked round grimly and picked up the telephone.

Lucas was in his office even at that late (or early) hour, for he was preparing a report of the bank raid. When the call came through he listened attentively while Carfax explained what had happened.

"I'll come along at once—don't touch anything," he said.

By the time he had arrived Carfax was dressed.

"He didn't treat you any too lightly," he remarked, eyeing the bandage, "but it might have been worse."

"I expected him to shoot," said Carfax; "he must have struck at me as I fired."

"You say it was Mr. Midnight himself!"



Lucas frowned. "If it was, it's the first time he's appeared in person."

"I'm sure it was," said the K.C. "Look at this."

He picked up a square of paper and handed it to the inspector. Lucas took it and read, scowled across the surface:

"This is your first warning. Take heed."

It was signed "Mr. Midnight."

The detective twisted the paper about in his fingers.

"Humph!" he said, after a moment's silence. "Have you any idea what the meaning of this is?"

"Not the least," answered Carfax, shrugging his shoulders.

Lucas surveyed the disordered desk, and the litter of papers on the floor with a critical eye.

"He seems to have been searching for something," he remarked.

"Have you missed anything?"

"I haven't looked yet," said Carfax.

"I wish you'd make sure."

Lucas commenced a brief but thorough examination of the room while the K.C. set to work sorting the papers on the desk.

It was obvious to see the way the night visitor had got in. The iron fire-escape led down into a little back yard, and the catch of the window showed a long scratch on the metal where it had been forced back.

Caught in a fold of the curtains Lucas found a slip of paper. It contained one line of typewritten characters:

"47—report usual place Wednesday. M."

Lucas turned.

"Is this yours?" he asked.

Carfax came over from the desk and looked at it.

"No," he said, shaking his head.

The inspector put it away in his pocket-book.

"It's evidently an instruction from Mr. Midnight to one of the gang," he said.

"I'd like to know who 47 is, and what he means by the usual place. You didn't see the man."

"I caught a glimpse of him as I fired. He was masked, I think."

Lucas nodded, and continued his search of the room.

The K.C. had got his scattered papers into something like order by the time Lucas had completed his investigations.

"There's nothing missing," he declared.

Lucas scratched his stubby chin thoughtfully.

"What in the world did he come for?" he muttered perplexedly.

"Ask me another!" answered Carfax.

"I'm as much puzzled as you."

The inspector left soon after, and turned the matter over in his mind on the way back to his lodgings, but he arrived at no satisfactory conclusion.

In spite of the fact that he didn't go to bed until the early hours of the morning, Lucas was up betimes, and was already seated in his office when Dick Street put in an appearance. The young superintendent looked hollow-eyed and pale, for he had had but little sleep since the affair at the bank.

"Any news?" he inquired, and Lucas told him of Carfax's adventure of the night.

Dick puckered his forehead.

"I wonder what his object was?" he said unconsciously paraphrasing the inspector's own comment of a few hours before.

"He had an object, you can bet your life on that," answered Lucas, "an' a pretty good one, too, it must have been, or he wouldn't have taken the risk himself—he'd have allotted the job to one of the gang."

"Let me see that slip of paper you found," said Dick.

The inspector rose, unlocked his safe and produced it.

"Here."

"It's always puzzled me," said Dick, carrying the slip over to the window, "how Mr. Midnight communicates with the members of the organisation. He must do so to issue his instructions, and yet, none of them have ever seen him."

"I've wondered about that, too," Lucas nodded slowly.

"These are obviously instructions to someone," Street went on. "I should think the number 47 referred to the person it was intended for." He stood for some time lost in thought.

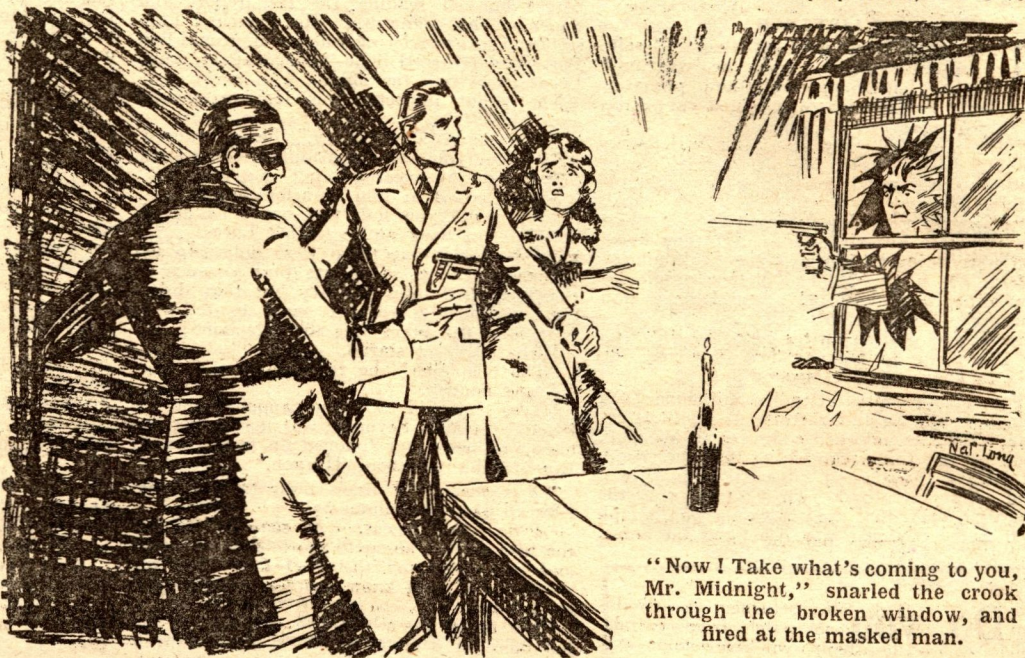
"Lucas," he said suddenly, turning round, "set men to watch all known criminals at present in London. Tell them to report everything they do—whom they see—everything. Quite a few of them must be members of the Midnight Gang, and if we can discover

inspector to attach himself to Sir William Raynor, because we couldn't be expected to know, among so many, that he was not the genuine article; and it was a simple matter for him to pick out his own men when he went out to fetch the guard."

The commissioner shook his head slowly.

"We are dealing with clever brains," he said. "The broadcast was, of course, done with the intention of getting as large a crowd round the bank as possible. With so many police about it was utterly impossible to expect anyone to tell the genuine from the imposters."

"That may be," broke in a grey-haired chief-constable, "but the fact remains that during the past week, to say nothing of what has occurred previously, two audacious robberies have been perpetrated, and a very



"Now I Take what's coming to you, Mr. Midnight," snarled the crook through the broken window, and fired at the masked man.

how they receive their instructions it may give us a clue to Mr. Midnight."

"I should think it was very unlikely," said Lucas despondently, "but it's worth trying." He walked over to the telephone and issued some orders.

"What time's this inquiry?" he asked, when he had finished.

He referred to an urgent summons received from the chief commissioner calling them to be present at an inquiry on the bank raid.

"Ten-thirty," answered Dick. "We'd better get along."

In the big room where all the important conferences are held at Scotland Yard they found every commissioner and chief-constable awaiting them, seated round the long table.

"In ordinary circumstances," said the chief commissioner gravely, when he had read Street's report, "the robbery of the bank would be a matter calling for the severest measures to be taken against those responsible. It was carried out under the very eyes of the police after they had been warned that it would take place. But with an organisation of the description of the Midnight Gang we are prepared for very unexpected developments, and I really cannot see how, in fairness, anyone can be blamed."

Dick smiled to himself at Lucas' audible sigh of relief.

"Every possible precaution was taken," continued the chief commissioner, "as far as I can see to prevent the affair." He looked across at Dick Street. "You say the men who robbed the bank escaped by the back entrance?"

"Yes, sir," replied the young superintendent, "and as they were dressed in policemen's uniforms they were, of course, allowed to pass the cordon without challenge. It was easy for the man who played the part of the

able police-officer murdered without any of the persons responsible being arrested or any clue furnished as to the identity of the leader of this gang of desperadoes. It's bad, superintendent, it's bad!"

"I know it sounds so, sir," said Street. "But you must exercise the greatest patience, and allow me a latitude beyond the ordinary."

For over an hour they questioned him as to the methods he had used in dealing with the Midnight Gang, and Dick Street talked and argued. At the end, just before the meeting broke up, the chief commissioner turned to him.

"Well, then, Street," he said, "the best I can do is this. I'll give you another week. If before then you can show some results, all well and good. If not, I shall have to put the case in charge of someone else. I hate saying this, but I can't help myself."

Dick accompanied Inspector Lucas back to his office, and they neither of them spoke until they had reached the seclusion of that apartment. Then Lucas drew a long breath.

"That was pretty hot while it lasted," he said.

The telephone rang shrilly, and he stretched out his arm for the instrument. After a moment's conversation he hung up the receiver and turned to Dick with a look of satisfaction, rubbing his thin hands.

"That was Cannon Row calling," he said cheerfully, and with the nearest approach to a smile that anyone had seen on his long face. "Hurgon has decided to tell all he knows." Dick looked puzzled for a second, then his face cleared.

"Hurgon? You mean the waiter who tried to poison me?" he asked.

Lucas nodded.

"Yes; his name's Hurgon," he replied. "I've been trying to make him talk ever



since we arrested him—promised him we'd let him off lightly and get him a free passage to America. I think that's what did the trick. If he'd thought he was staying in London he'd have remained as dumb as an oyster."

With a feeling of expectancy they awaited the coming of the informer, but they waited in vain.

In the company of two constables he was taken from his cell, and with one on either side marched round to Scotland Yard. He looked nervous and apprehensive, and his apprehension was justified. Turning in at the Whitehall entrance his captors suddenly felt their prisoner go limp between them.

"Here, what's the matter?" exclaimed one constable, as Hurgan slid gently to the pavement. A second later they both knew. Hurgan was dead! Someone had shot him.

#### THE LISTENER!

"THEY must have used a silencer," said Inspector Lucas, when he was told what had happened, "and probably fired from the interior of a closed car—same as they did at me."

"But how did they know he was being brought here?" asked Street. He'd only made up his mind to talk a few minutes before."

"How do they know anything?" replied the inspector bitterly. "How did they know you were going to lunch at the Carltonian?"

Dick was silent. He had his own suspicions regarding that, but Betty could have had nothing to do with this affair.

Lucas was putting on his coat.

"I'm going to make a few inquiries," he said in answer to Dick's question.

For some minutes after he had gone Dick remained staring thoughtfully at his blotting-pad. Then he unlocked a drawer in his desk, took out the folder containing the photograph of "Mary Drew," and subjected it to a long and close scrutiny. There was not the slightest doubt that the girl in the photograph and Betty Seymour were one and the same.

## Do you understand your receiver?

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The features were identical. Presently he seemed to arrive at some kind of decision, for he locked the picture away again, and picking up the telephone called Betty's number.

Her maid answered, and informed him in reply to his inquiry that her mistress was out, but that she expected her back to tea. Dick said he would ring up again, and turned his attention to a pile of documents and reports that required seeing to.

He would see Betty at the first opportunity and learn from her own lips the story concerning the photograph and the reason for her lapse into crime. That she had ever become a criminal of her own free-will Dick refused to believe. Somebody had a hold over her—somebody who had forced her to do their bidding against her own inclination.

The afternoon was half over when Dick Street finished reading the last report and appended his signature. He stretched himself, and was wondering whether he would find Betty had returned if he 'phoned again, when Lucas came into the office.

The gaunt inspector was looking pleased with himself.

"I've made a discovery," he announced. "I've found out how the Midnight Gang knew that Hurgan was coming to put up a 'squeak.'"

Street looked at him in astonishment.

"When did you find this out?" he asked.

"Half an hour ago," replied Lucas. "It seemed to me that there were only two explanations for it. One was that someone in the force had been got at; but that didn't seem reasonable when I came to think it over, and the other was the telephone!"

Richard Street stared.

"The telephone!" he repeated.

Lucas nodded.

"Yes," he said. "Your appointment for lunch with Miss Seymour was made over the telephone, and they 'phoned up from Cannon Row telling us about Hurgan."

"You mean the line's been tapped?" exclaimed Dick incredulously.

"I do," said Lucas. "As soon as I'd got the idea I went along to the telephone people and told them my theory—I don't like the word, but I don't know another that fits—and we got busy."

"We found the whole bag of tricks in the top office of a building not a stone's throw away. The lines pass straight over the roof, and I tell you, Mr. Street, that there's not a word spoken over the telephone from Scotland Yard that hasn't been listened into and reported to the Midnight Gang!"

"You got the operator?" asked the young superintendent.

"You bet I did!" replied Lucas, "and he's safely locked up in a cell in Cannon Row with a double guard, and there he's going to stop," he added grimly. "If there's anything to be got out of him we'll get it out of him there. I'm taking no more chances."

"So that's how they knew so much," murmured Dick softly, and a weight rolled from his heart, for the discovery exonerated Betty from being concerned in the attempt on his life.

"We ought to stand a better chance now," said Lucas. "It won't be such a one-sided game with all the cards in the hands of the other people. We may be able to keep a few aces up our own sleeves."

"What fools we were not to have thought of it before," said Dick. "It was so obvious."

"People never think of the obvious," replied the inspector. "I expect Mr. Midnight's obvious, only we can't think of him. By the way, I saw your friend, Miss Seymour, in the park. I never knew she was married!"

"Married!" Dick almost shouted the word in his startled surprise.

Lucas looked at him quickly.

"Didn't you know?" he asked. "She never told you, I s'pose. Women are funny like that—some of 'em, especially stage people."

"How do you know she's married?" Dick's voice sounded strained and harsh.

"She was walking with a fellow, and as I passed I heard her say, 'I can't. I'm going to meet my husband.' Women don't say that as a rule unless they're married." He scratched his chin. "I ought to have warned her about

the chap she was with," he said. "He's one of the biggest 'con' men in London."

Dick Street was silent. Betty Seymour married! He wondered why she hadn't told him. There was a mystery about the girl that seemed to deepen every day.

With a stifled sigh, he rose to his feet. His whole body ached with weariness, and his eyes felt hot and tired. He had slept very little during the past few days, and his very soul called for rest.

"I'm going home," he said, putting on his coat. "If you want me, you can give me a ring."

Walking up Piccadilly, he suddenly remembered that he had promised to ring Betty up again and turned into a call office. The girl was still out, and coming out of the shop in which he'd gone to 'phone, Street almost ran into Al Marks. The "Colonel" was looking extremely pleased with himself, and nodded genially. He was immaculately dressed, and wore a flower in his buttonhole.

"How do you do, Mr. Street?" he greeted. "This is an unexpected pleasure!"

"Then it's all on your side," said Dick shortly. "What's the game? You look dressed to kill!"

Al Marks looked at him reproachfully.

"Don't be vulgar!" he remonstrated gently.

"There's no game. Can't a gentleman take a little stroll—"

"Listen, Marks!" broke in Dick rudely. "What were you doing in Oxford Street after the theatre murder?"

The colonel's smile faded.

"In Oxford Street?" he shook his head.

Al Marks saw it was useless denying it.

"I was there to meet my wife!" he said hastily, and, leaving Dick dumb with amazement, he turned on his heel and hurried away.

#### MURDER!

THE colonel walked rapidly along in the direction of Piccadilly Circus, and every now and again he broke into a little chuckle. He had certainly scored off "One-way" Street, and the thought filled him with satisfaction.

After twenty minutes in the West End he decided to go home.

Al Marks possessed a small flat in Maida Vale. It was a tiny place, but it was comfortably, even luxuriously, furnished, and it served his need.

There was no lift—the colonel had chosen this particularly because he wanted privacy and disliked his comings and goings to be under the eye of a porter—and mounting the stairs he opened the door with his latchkey, and stepped into the hall.

The place was in darkness, which rather surprised him, and he felt along the hall for the switch. Pressing it down, he removed his hat and coat and hung them up. The sitting-room door was ajar, and, pushing it open, the colonel flooded the place with light. The next moment he started back with a cry of horror.

Dick Street stared after the rapidly retreating figure of Al Marks, incapable of movement, his mind in a whirl. Betty Seymour was this man's wife! It sounded incredible, and yet, unless it were true, the colonel had had no object in making the statement. Taken in conjunction with what Inspector Lucas had told him there seemed little room for doubt. With a supreme effort the detective pulled his shattered brain together and walked on. He was feeling unutterably miserable. The whole bottom had fallen out of existence, and there seemed to be a leaden weight in his inside.

He moved unconsciously, hardly aware of his surroundings—curiously dead and apathetic. How long he walked about, up one street and down another he never knew, but presently he found himself outside the Orpheum Theatre. A sudden intense desire to see Betty took possession of him. The audience were already going in, and, making his way round to the stage door he inquired for her at the keeper's box.

The man shook his head.

"Miss Seymour's not here to-night, sir," he said. "A deputy's playing. She sent a message to say she was ill."

Dick thanked him and turned away. He had



a vague idea of going along to her flat at Victoria, but gave it up, and eventually decided to go home.

He was feeling thoroughly ill, but he made a pretence of eating the appetising dinner Jennings had prepared, and he had just finished when Frank Tracey arrived.

The stout reporter was full of news.

"The 'Megaphone's' offering a reward of five thousand pounds for any information that will lead to the capture of Mr. 'Midnight,' he announced. 'We're making a splash of it in all the editions to-morrow.'

"I hope somebody'll win it," said Street shortly.

"I'm going to have a shot at it myself," said Frank. "It's a nice handy sum to have about the house. Old 'Stuts' seems to think that it may have the effect of making some of the gang 'squeak.'

"It won't," said Dick decidedly. "Not twice the amount. Money's no good to a dead man, and they know the consequences of talking."

"I suppose you're right," admitted the reporter, "especially after that affair with Hurgon. By Jove, what a nerve they've got!" He chattered on inconsequently, and Dick, who would much rather have been alone, answered in monosyllables, and wished his friend in Jericho. Frank was on the point of going when the telephone rang.

Dick felt so tired that he was half a mind not to answer the call, and then, thinking that it might be from headquarters and something important, he unhooked the receiver.

A hoarse, strained voice came over the wire. "Is that Street? For Heaven's sake, come round to my place at once!"

"Who's speaking?" said Street sharply.

"Marks," was the reply, and so changed was his voice that Dick failed to recognise the slightest resemblance to the colonel's usual tones. "A terrible thing has happened. You will come?"

"Where are you?" asked the superintendent.

"At my flat," said Al Marks. "No. 14, Inverdale Mansions. Don't waste time talking—come!"

"Why—what's happened?"

"Murder!"—the voice choked over the word.

"For the love of Heaven come quickly!"

Street heard the click as the receiver was hung up.

He briefly explained the conversation to Frank and dragged on his overcoat. The reporter accompanied him as far as the street, where he said good-bye. Dick hailed a passing taxi, and in less than twenty minutes was deposited at the entrance to Inverdale Mansions.

Al Marks opened the door himself in response to Dick's summons, and the young superintendent thought he had never seen such a change in a man. The usually florid face was pale, and in some peculiar way seemed to have fallen in. The skin drooped in loose bags beneath the eyes, and round the heavy jaw.

The colonel looked like a man who had received sentence of death.

"It was good of you to come so quickly," said Marks huskily, as Street slipped into the passage, and without further word he led the way across to an open door on the right.

"Look!" he said, and pointed a shaking finger into the room beyond.

Dick looked, and drew in his breath with a sharp hiss. The room was in the utmost disorder. Drawers had been hurriedly pulled out and their contents tipped in a heap on the floor; even the carpet had been rolled back. The place had been subjected to a thorough search. And then the detective saw something else. On the floor by the fireplace lay the body of a woman!

With a heart that for a second almost stopped beating, Dick walked quickly across the room and bent down. The next moment he started back with a cry of distress.

The woman was Betty Seymour, and the knife that had killed her lay by her side.

#### THE CIGARETTE SHOP.

Dick's face went livid, and the whole room swam beyond his eyes. Betty . . . dead.

He steadied himself by clutching the back

of a chair and for the first time in his life felt almost on the verge of faintness. By a supreme effort of will, however, he managed to pull himself together and turned to the colonel.

"When did this happen?" he asked in a voice that startled him—it was so unlike his own.

"While I was out," said Al Marks in a hushed whisper.

"Great Heaven! How dreadful!" Street forced himself to look again at the dead girl. He remembered the first night at the Orpheum. How sparkling and full of vitality she had been!

"She'll never play again," he muttered aloud, and his eyes were blurred.

"What do you mean?" He heard Al Mark's voice as though from a long way off. "You're making a mistake, aren't you?"

"A mistake?" said Dick vaguely. "No, there's no mistake. I wish to Heaven there were."

"You think that it's Betty Seymour, don't you?" asked the colonel unsteadily. "Well, you're wrong?"

"Wrong!" Street swung round and gripped the man by the arm. "She is Betty Seymour."

The colonel shook his head sadly.

"She isn't," he replied. "I'd give all I possess if she were, but she isn't."

"But—" stammered Dick, and stopped. His throat was so dry that the words wouldn't come.

"She was my wife—Mary Drew—Betty Seymour's twin sister," said Al Marks huskily.

A great light broke suddenly on Dick. Mary Drew—the original of the photograph in the record department at the Yard—Betty's twin sister. He saw it all, and the intense relief almost overwhelmed him. He lowered his shaking limbs into a chair.

"It was Mary Drew I saw you with in Oxford Street," he whispered, and the colonel inclined his head. "I see." He paused, and seeing the bowed head of the other, stretched out his hand impulsively. "I'm terribly sorry, Marks."

Al Marks grasped the extended palm and gripped it.

"Thank you," he said simply.

For some time there was a dead silence.

"Tell me," said Street at last, "do you know who was responsible for this?" He looked in the direction of the hearth.

"I do." The colonel's voice was harsh. "And if it takes me all the rest of my life I'll get him for it."

"Who was it?"

"Mr. 'Midnight!'" Al Marks breathed the name from between set teeth. "I know him! But I'm not going to tell you, Street, so it's no good asking me. You wouldn't believe me if I did, and I've got no proof. He's as clever as the devil. But I'll get him"—his throat worked—"for what he's done to Mary—if I'm still alive!" he ended grimly.

"If you're still alive?" repeated Dick quickly. "Do you believe you're in danger, then?"

"I know I'm in danger," said the colonel, "the greatest possible danger, but I'm taking precautions."

Dick tried to persuade him to say more, but



As the saloon drew to the kerb, a man sprang out. Swiftly something was thrown over the girl's head, and she was dragged backward into the car.

Marks was adamant. He gave it up at last, and turned his attention to the disordered flat. The colonel had had to go out to a call office to ring him up, for the telephone was not working, and Dick discovered the cause when he found the severed lead-in wire. It had been cut close to the front door. There were signs in the passage of a struggle, and it was fairly easy to see how the murderer had gained access to the flat. He had simply rung the bell in the ordinary way, and when Mary Drew had opened the door had forced his way in.

Dick searched the whole place carefully, but without result—as usual, there was not the vestige of a clue.

Al Marks had recovered a little from his first shattering grief by the time he had finished, and Street sent him out to ring up the nearest police-station.

When an inspector and the divisional surgeon arrived, he briefly explained the situation, and putting the man in charge, prepared to take his leave. Al Marks accompanied him to the door, and Dick paused on the threshold.

It was at that moment that Dick saw the button. It was lying by the hall-stand close up against the wall, and he would never have noticed it but for the fact that he was standing in just the right position to catch the reflected light from its shining surface.

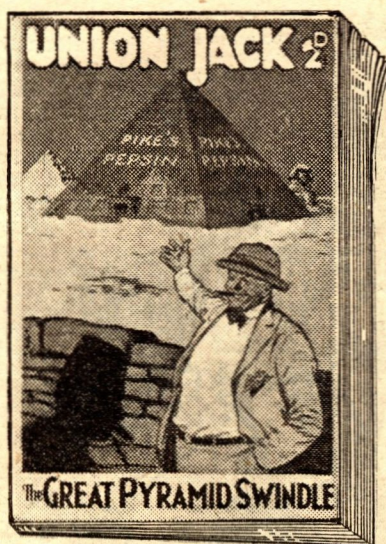
Going back, he stooped quickly and picked it up.

"Is this—" he was beginning, and broke off sharply, for he recognised it!

It was an overcoat button with a peculiar design stamped on the face—a clenched hand—and Dick drew in his breath swiftly as he looked at it. For he knew that button, and the last time he had seen it had been on the overcoat worn by Frank Tracey, the reporter!

Street arrived at his office in Scotland Yard early on the following morning, feeling more relieved than he had done for many days past. The discovery that Betty Seymour had no





## They thought he was mad

They had every reason to. When Silas P. Pike (of Pike's Peerless Pepsin Chewing Gum) paid over one hundred thousand dollars of good money for a square of Egyptian desert where there was certainly no scope for excavating—no treasure, no mummies—they thought him most assuredly a fool. But that's what Silas P. did. Thought it a bargain, too. He didn't expect treasures or mummies; he had other plans, and he bought the desert. And soon afterwards, when Sexton Blake came to hear of it, the thing had developed into the Great Pyramid Swindle. How Blake neatly upset his plans is told in a yarn which, besides having adventure and cute detective work, has a strong current of humour—a yarn that will grip, thrill, entertain.

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# UNION JACK

Thursdays

2d

connection with the photograph and that all his half-formed suspicions were without cause had done much to bring about this more optimistic outlook, and although he couldn't have given a reason, he was convinced at the back of his mind that things were reaching a crisis.

His first action on reaching the Yard was to lock the button in his safe. It was a damning piece of evidence, and if it could be relied on, there was no need to look any further than Frank Tracey for the unknown murderer. Dick sat down at his desk, and gazed thoughtfully at the blotting paper in front of him.

If it had been Tracey who had killed Mary Drew, then he was also Mr. Midnight!

The young superintendent frowned. He couldn't bring himself to believe that the cheery, round-faced reporter was the sinister personality behind the Midnight Gang. And yet the button required a lot of explaining away. That it was Frank's he was certain. The reporter had been wearing the coat from which it had come when he had called just before Marks rang up with the news. Street tried to remember if there had been a button missing, but couldn't. Of course, there was always the possibility that the buttons were duplicated.

He decided to make sure, and drew the telephone towards him. There was a long delay before a sleepy voice answered his call.

"Hallo!" said Frank, and Dick heard him yawn loudly. "Who is it?"

"It's I—Street," replied the detective. "Come round to the Yard. I want to see you."

He rang off and turned to look through some reports that had come in when Lucas arrived. The inspector looked surprised to see him so early, but his surprise turned to amazement when Dick told him about the events of the previous night.

"So Al Marks was married," he said. "Mary Drew, too, eh? Well, well; you live and learn. Some people learn and die," he muttered cryptically.

Street looked at him.

"What do you mean by that remark?" he asked.

"This Mr. Midnight," the inspector went on, without answering. "You say Al Marks knows him."

Dick nodded.

"I wonder if she knew him, too?"

Lucas was walking up and down, his shaggy brows drawn together.

"I see," said Street. "You think he killed her because she knew."

"It seems possible. Maybe you can suggest some other reason. Do you believe in hunches, Mr. Street?" he asked suddenly.

"You mean premonitions?" said Dick. "Yes, sometimes. Why?"

"I've got a hunch that we're going to meet Mr. Midnight—and we're going to meet him soon," said Lucas.

It was an hour later when Frank Tracey was shown into Street's office. His face was glowing, for the morning was cold and the air sharp.

"What's the great idea?" he asked with a grin.

"I thought I'd like to have a chat with you," replied Dick. "Sit down, Frank." He pushed a box of cigarettes across the desk, and the reporter took one. "What were you doing last evening—before you came to see me?"

Frank looked astonished.

"What was I doing? Why, I came straight along from the offices of the 'Megaphone,'" he answered.

He was wearing his overcoat unbuttoned, and Dick noticed, with a little thrill, that the second button was missing!

"Had you been there all the afternoon?" he asked.

"Since round about four," replied Frank. "Why?"

Dick paused, rose to his feet, and, unlocking the safe, took out the button.

"Is this yours?" he inquired, holding it out in his palm.

Tracey leaned forward and peered at it.

"Yes," he said, obviously surprised. "How in the world did you come by it?"

"A woman was murdered last night," said

Dick quietly, "a woman named Mary Drew." He watched Frank keenly. "She was killed in a flat belonging to Al Marks some time between the hours of four-thirty and eight. I found this button in the passage."

The reporter's face went pale.

"Good heavens, Dick!" he exclaimed.

"You surely don't suspect me?"

"It's your button," Street replied meaningfully.

"But I lost it two days ago," protested Frank.

"Then how did it get in Al Mark's flat—have you ever been there?"

"Never in my life," said Dick emphatically. "Besides, I can prove that I had no hand in the affair. If this woman was killed between the hours you say, I couldn't have had anything to do with it. I was at the 'Megaphone' offices from four until after eight. Ring up, old 'Stuts.' He'll tell you."

Dick got through to the "Megaphone," and spoke to the news editor. The conversation was brief, and he hung up the receiver, and turned to Frank.

"He's borne out all you say," he said, with a puzzled frown. "Your alibi's cast iron, and I'm very thankful. But how on earth did the button get there?"

"I suppose you can't remember where you lost it, Mr. Tracey," said Lucas, who had been a silent but interested listener.

Frank shook his head.

"I haven't the least idea," he replied.

"It seems almost too great a coincidence to believe that the person who killed Mary Drew could have been wearing a coat with identical buttons," said Dick thoughtfully.

"It's totally impossible," said Frank.

"When I found I'd lost it I went to the tailor who made the coat, and asked him to put on another. But he said he couldn't match it. It's an American button, and there are no others to be had. He used the last few on my coat." He picked up the button which Dick had laid on his desk, and looked at it. "There's no doubt about it being mine"—he pointed to a big chip in the rim—"I remember that quite well."

Frank left soon after that, and Lucas shortly followed.

As soon as he was alone, Dick rang up Betty. The girl sounded particularly cheerful, and he concluded that she had heard nothing about the death of her sister. He made an appointment to see her that evening before the theatre, and had just said "Good-bye!" when Lucas returned.

"The reports have come in from several of the men you put on to watch the movements of known crooks," he said. "They're rather interesting."

He laid a sheaf of papers in front of Dick. "About ten per cent. of them seem to have developed a habit of getting their cigarettes at a kiosk in Lambeth Tube Station—seems curious."

Street glanced through the reports, and found the inspector was right. Men who lived in Soho, and even further afield, had been followed to Lambeth where they had gone to the tobacco-shop in the station and bought cigarettes—and always apparently the same brand, "Stardust."

"They seem to have become popular among the criminal classes," said Lucas, when Dick commented on this.

"I think we'll take a little journey over to Lambeth, if you've got nothing else to do. I should like to try some of those cigarettes. I've got an idea they'll taste pretty good."

A few seconds later they were walking briskly over Westminster Bridge. As they approached the tube station, Lucas noticed several men lounging near the entrance, and drew the detective's attention to them.

"Detectives," said "One-way" Street laconically. "Thought we might need them."

The little tobacco-shop's kiosk was a replica of those that are to be found at almost every station, and are controlled by one firm. Lucas went up to the tiny counter, and spoke to the bald-headed man in charge.

"I want twenty 'Stardust' cigarettes, please," he said, laying down half-a-crown.

The man looked at him, and hesitated as though waiting for something. Then, handing him the packet and searching in the till, produced the change.



"This brand seems to be getting popular," said Lucas conversationally. "Sell many?" "A fair amount," replied the bald-headed man.

"Must be something about 'em that appeals to people," the inspector went on. "I prefer cigars myself."

"Most people do—if they can afford them," was the retort.

"Yes, there's a lot in that," said Lucas, nodding. "Now this Midnight Gang—you'd think they could afford cigars, wouldn't you?"

The shopkeeper looked at him, a startled expression in his eyes.

"Don't know what you mean," he answered gruffly.

"Never heard of the Midnight Gang, perhaps," said the inspector sadly. "You will! And this fellow they call Mr. Midnight—you don't know him, of course."

The look of alarm in the bald man's eyes deepened.

"It's a funny thing," continued Lucas, "but half the crooks in London seem to buy this cigarette from this stall—all 'Stardust' brand, too. You must keep a large stock."

"I don't know what you're talking about," muttered the tobacconist.

"Don't you?" Lucas suddenly changed his bantering tone. "Then I'll tell you!" he rapped. "I want to see all the 'Stardust' cigarettes you've got—quick!"

The bald man went suddenly white.

"You've no right—" he began, but the inspector cut him short.

"You'll see what right I've got," he said, and ten seconds later the kiosk was in charge of headquarters men, and the keeper under arrest. There were dozens of packets of "Stardust" cigarettes, and every one of them was carefully examined. Twenty-four packets of "Stardust" cigarettes, and every one of them was carefully examined. Twenty-four packets were marked with a different number in pencil, and in each of these they discovered a typewritten message. The first ran:

"14—Street must be settled. He is getting dangerous. Arrange with 20 and 17 to keep constant watch on embankment and White-hall entrances to Scotland Yard. Use trade van and silencer.—M. M."

Another read:

"5—Shadow Al Marks. His address is 14, Inverdale Mansions, Maida Vale. At first opportunity settle and clear.—M. M."

There were many similar messages, all signed with the initials M. M.

"We seem to have struck the general post-office of the Midnight Gang," said Street with satisfaction. "This is how Mr. Midnight communicates with his puppets. The number at the beginning of the message is the same as the pencilled one on the packet that contained it. I suppose each member of the gang is known by a number."

Lucas nodded.

"This will about put paid to them, too," he remarked. "For unless he has got an alternative method, he can't get in touch with any of them."

The man in charge of the kiosk was subjected to a close examination, but maintained a stolid silence, and was taken off to Cannon Row under arrest. Lucas rang up the firm who owned the tobacco shop, and explained what had happened, and, leaving one of his men in charge, accompanied Street back to Scotland Yard.

For the remainder of the day they spent a busy time issuing instructions, and before evening every man who had been tracked to the kiosk in Lambeth Station and bought "Stardust" cigarettes was under arrest and locked in a cell.

There were over forty in all, and Dick turned to Lucas, after he had inspected the prisoners, with elation.

"That must be pretty nearly all the lot," he remarked.

"Yes, I think we've got the small fry," said Lucas. "But we haven't got the big fish," he added dubiously.

"We'll get him," answered Street confidently, and set off to keep his appointment with Betty with a cheerful heart. Had he been able to see into the near future, his

cheerfulness would have turned to despair, for at that moment a scheme was being hatched in the mind of Mr. Midnight that was destined to place the life of Betty Seymour in the deadliest peril!

#### KIDNAPPED.

He had arranged to meet the girl at a little restaurant close to the Orpheum Theatre. She was late, and he had to wait. He occupied his time in trying to think out a way in which he could break the news of her sister's tragic death, and he was still searching in his mind for a good opening when Betty arrived.

One glance at her, and he knew that his thoughts had been in vain. She had already heard. Her face was white and strained-looking, and her eyes showed unmistakable signs of recent tears. She greeted Dick with a wan smile.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said in a low voice. "But I've had rather a terrible shock."

"Yes, I know," he answered gently.

She looked at him in astonishment.

"You know?" she repeated, with wide eyes. He nodded without speaking, and remained silent until they were seated at a secluded table in a corner of the restaurant, which was almost empty, for the hour was early.

"How did you learn—about your sister?" asked Dick, after a pause.

"It was in the papers," she replied. "Oh, it's dreadful! I can scarcely believe that it's true."

"Why didn't you tell me it was your sister, that night in Oxford Street?" he said.

Betty lowered her eyes before his glance, and looked at her plate.

"I don't know," she murmured. "You see, I didn't want anyone—to know I had a sister. She wasn't well—" she broke off.

"It would have saved me a terrible lot of worry, perhaps her life, if you had told me," said Dick. "You see, I saw her photograph at Scotland Yard, and I thought it was you."

She was silent, and Dick Street watched her with admiration in his eyes. She had allowed the cloak she was wearing to slip off, and her simple dress of black charmeuse, innocent of colour, except for a touch of gold at the waist, set off the milky whiteness of her neck and shoulders, and threw into vivid relief the spun gold of her hair. He thought he had never seen such a beautiful picture. Looking up, she caught the expression on his face, and a wave of colour tinged the paleness of her cheeks.

"I hadn't seen Mary for years," she said suddenly, "and then, a few days ago, I had a letter from her, telling me she was in London. It worried me, because I was never quite certain what she was going to do next. We

were so exactly alike that if she had done anything—well, you know what I mean—it would have been embarrassing."

Dick said nothing, but almost subconsciously he stretched out his hand, and it rested sympathetically over hers. She did not attempt to withdraw her own until a waiter came in sight, and then she drew it away so slowly as to suggest reluctance.

"I don't pretend to have been particularly fond of Mary," she said when Dick had given the order. "It's the terrible way she died that has given me such a shock. It was Mr. Midnight who killed her, wasn't it?"

Street nodded.

"It's terrible!" Her large blue eyes held a look of horror in their depths. "Surely something can be done to put a stop to the outrages of these dreadful people?"

"I think we've got most of the gang," said Dick, and told her of the visit to the cigarette shop and the result. It had the effect he had hoped, and took her mind off the other subject, for she listened interestedly. He kept up a running fire of conversation, so that by the time they had reached the coffee stage, Betty was almost her normal self.

"Do you think you will ever catch Mr. Midnight himself?" she asked, sipping her coffee.

"I have the greatest hopes," said Dick; and then, before he had realised what he was saying: "Betty, when that is done, there's something I want to tell you—may I?"

His hand sought hers—under cover of the table.

The colour came and went in her face, and the hand that he held lightly closed so tightly upon his fingers that they were numb when she suddenly released her hold, but she kept her eyes averted.

She did not speak for such a long time that he began to be afraid he had offended her.

"It may be a long time before you find Mr. Midnight," she murmured at last. "Must—must you wait until then before you tell me?"

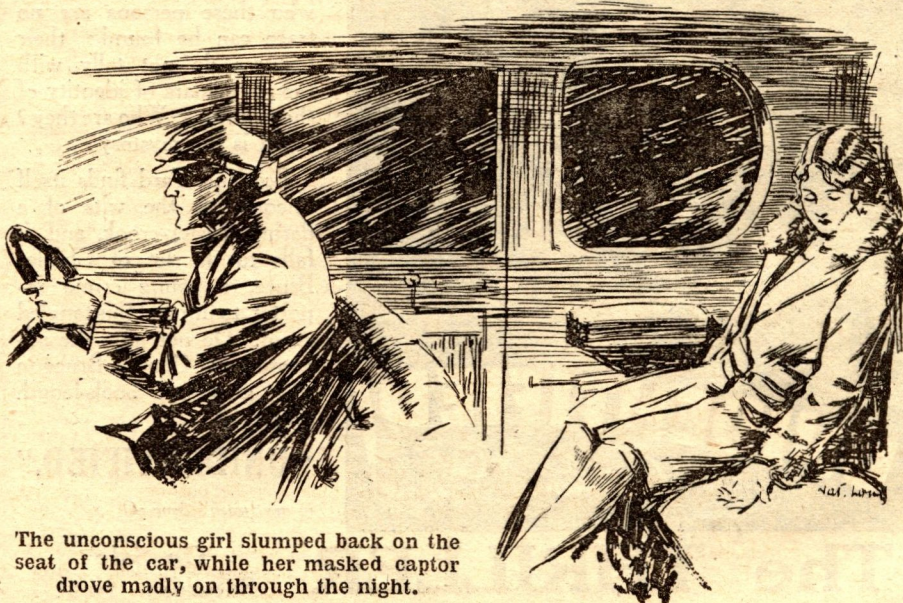
She turned her face to him, and he saw the expression in her eyes.

Dick Street never remembered quite what he said then, but he poured out all that had been pent up in his heart, while the girl listened with shining eyes and glowing cheeks.

The time sped by, and it was with a start of surprise that they both suddenly realised it was time to go, if Betty didn't want to be late for the theatre.

Street walked with her as far as the stage door, and stood talking for a minute or two. At last Betty held out her hand.

"I must go, Dick," she said softly. "I shall be dreadfully late as it is. Ring me up in the morning." She looked hastily round; there was no one in sight, and, bending forward,



The unconscious girl slumped back on the seat of the car, while her masked captor drove madly on through the night.



kissed him. "Good-night, dear," she said, and, waving her hand, disappeared through the narrow doorway.

Street made his way homeward so enveloped in the rosy clouds that had descended on him, that he was unconscious of time or space or direction, and it was purely mechanically that he followed the right route to his flat. It seemed to him that a miracle had happened that evening, and at any moment it was possible he might wake up and discover that the whole thing was a dream.

He was so cheerful when he arrived, that Jennings looked at him suspiciously, under a momentary impression that his master had been drinking.

Having changed, he slipped on his dressing-gown, and, going into the sitting-room, sat down to write to Betty. He told himself reprovingly that it was barely half an hour since he had left her and that he would be seeing her again on the morrow, but he covered ten pages and could easily have written ten more before he realised that there was only five minutes in which to catch the post. He stamped the letter, sent Jennings out with it, and settled down contentedly before the fire.

His contentment was to be short-lived. The servant returned, and, coming into the room, laid a flat package on the table.

"What's that?" asked Street, looking up. Jennings shook his head with a puzzled frown.

"I don't know, sir," he answered. "I found it on the step when I came back from the post. It wasn't there when I went out."

Dick picked it up. "It's addressed to me all right," he said, and began to tear off the wrapping. Inside, packed between two sheets of stout cardboard, was a gramophone record, but there was no indication what the record was; song, orchestral or recital—just a plain record.

"What an extraordinary thing!" said Dick

in amazement. "I suppose we'd better play the thing and see what it's all about."

He possessed a gramophone, a seldom-used portable, and, fetching it from a corner, placed the record in the turn-table and started the motor. A voice, high-pitched and squeaky, started speaking, and at the first words Street's face went livid.

"You have refused to leave me alone," the voice said, "and you have been lucky to have escaped with your life. In future, you can rest in peace, for I shall not attempt to kill you again. I have thought of a better way. I have taken someone who is very dear to you, and if you ever wish to see her again, you will cease all further efforts to track me down. Betty Seymour is in my power. Unless you agree to my terms, she will die. This is no idle threat, so be warned."

The voice stopped, and only the scratching of the needle on the surface of the record broke the silence.

For a moment the detective was stunned, then he rushed to the telephone and rang up the stage door of the Orpheum Theatre.

"Miss Seymour left ten minutes ago," came the reply to his question, and Dick banged the receiver back in despair.

At that precise moment Betty Seymour was lying back unconscious in the interior of a big, luxurious car, and being driven she knew not where by the masked man crouched over the steering-wheel!

#### THE FINDING OF MR. MIDNIGHT.

DICK STREET, grey-faced and drawn, met Inspector Lucas ten minutes later outside the theatre.

"We've got to find her," he said brokenly. "We've got to."

The inspector nodded. He was talking to a big man, hatless and wearing a rough bandage round his head.

## MISSING!

### THE THRILLER

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"I've got a description of the car she was taken in," he said, and Dick looked bewildered. "This is Sergeant Hodgson," Lucas continued, "and he saw the whole thing happen, tried to prevent it as a matter of fact, but was laid out."

"It was a big limousine," said the sergeant. "I was following Miss Seymour—"

"Following her?" broke in Street.

"Yes, sir," said the man. "I've been following her for days—on Inspector Lucas' instructions."

Dick caught Lucas' eye and understood. He also had seen the photograph in Records, and mistaken Betty for Mary Drew.

"She left the theatre after the performance, and was walking down a side street," the sergeant continued, "when the car drew up to the kerb. I'd seen it before, but hadn't taken much notice. A man sprang out, threw a cloak over the young lady's head and dragged her into the car. It was all done in a flash. I ran forward to interfere when I realised what was happening, but before I'd taken three steps something came down on my head, and I don't remember any more."

"We ought to be able to trace the car," said Dick. "There aren't many Spanjes on the road."

He felt desperately ill, but was trying his hardest to keep calm. He knew that the only hope was to force himself to think as clearly as possible. It was only by clear thinking and quick action that he had the ghost of a chance of finding Betty.

Lucas had telephoned to the Yard directly he heard Sergeant Hodgson's story, and a description of the car had been circulated to all police stations with orders to hold and detain the driver and occupants. Considering that barely fifteen minutes had passed since Dick had rung him up with the story of the record, the melancholy inspector had certainly not wasted his time.

Hodgson went off to have his head properly dressed, while Street and Lucas drove to Scotland Yard. Sitting in Dick's office, they waited for news to come through.

"I didn't tell you I'd put anyone on to watch Miss Seymour," said Lucas, breaking a long silence. "I thought you might be annoyed."

"I'm glad you did as it turns out," said Street, rising and starting to pace up and down. "Good Heavens, this waiting's terrible!"

"We can't do anything else," replied Lucas philosophically. "There's no sense in getting in a panic." He fished in an inner pocket, and found one of the inevitable cigars. "I know how you feel about it," he said, as Dick uttered an impatient exclamation. "I don't feel any too good myself. But we've just got to believe that the girl's all right. You daren't think otherwise."

He was right, and Dick knew it. The time went slowly by, and he still paced up and down ceaselessly, staring at the carpet with eyes that saw nothing but the picture of a fair-haired, blue-eyed girl in a filmy dress of black charmeuse. There rose to his senses that faint perfume of violets with which the letter found on Collins' dead body had been impregnated. Good Heavens! Why hadn't he thought of it previously? He knew where he had smelt that peculiar scent before! It suddenly broke on his brain like a bombshell. It was absurd, incredible, but—

He turned to Lucas.

"You stay here and wait for any developments," he said hurriedly. "I'm going to follow a line of inquiry of my own. No, I can't tell you any more," he added, as the inspector opened his mouth to speak. "I may be going on a wild-goose chase, but it's worth taking a chance."

A second or two later he was gone, leaving the astonished Lucas to puzzle his brain futilely as to his chief's behaviour and wait for the reports to come in.

It was nearly two o'clock before the first news came through. The call was from Dorking Police Station. A black car had passed the constable on point duty, going at full speed in the direction of Epsom, and had

(Continued on page 684.)

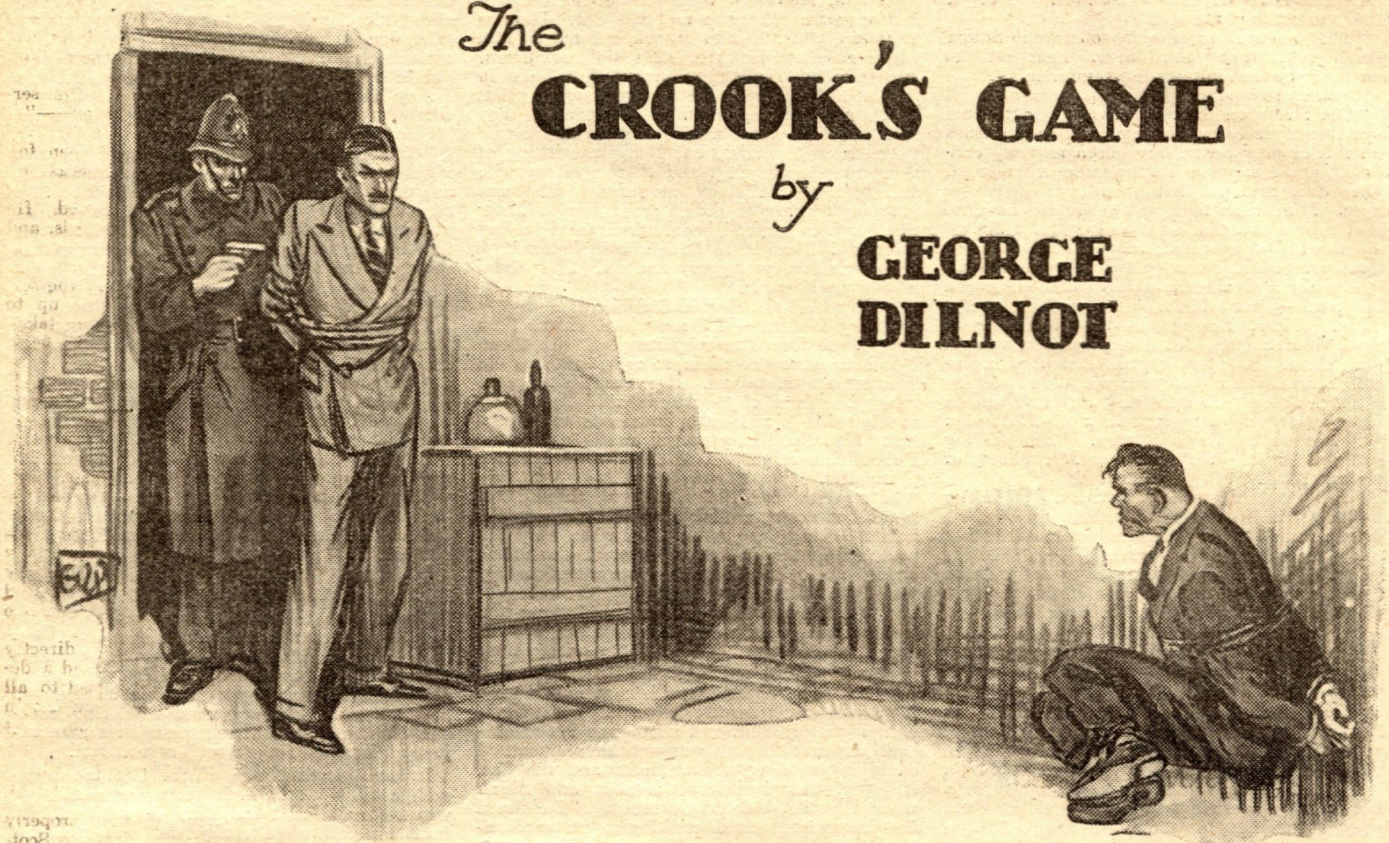


OUR GREAT NEW SERIAL OF CRIME AND DETECTION.

COMMENCING IN THIS ISSUE.

# The CROOK'S GAME

by  
**GEORGE  
DILNOT**



## Chapter 1. RECOGNITION.

THE music swung on. But the Cat clumsily missed a step, and little beads of sweat stood on his forehead. He had not observed the nod of Detective-inspector Strickland, nor had he noticed the wink with which the flame-coloured lady in his arms had taken the greeting to herself. For his mind had suddenly become absorbed with other matters, even more immediately vital to him than a fleeting heart affair, or the interest of a man from Scotland Yard. He regretted that he had not had the forethought to tuck an automatic into the pocket of his dinner jacket.

He picked up the rhythm of the dance again, but his eyes never left the chubby, imperturbable face which had attracted his attention among the group at the side of the room until he was forced to turn by the exigencies of space. Was this coincidence or—There is an even wider gap than miles of sea between a night club off Piccadilly and a penitentiary in Denver; between the slovenly, striped attire of an American convict and impeccable evening dress.

There was nothing sinister about the appearance of the man whose advent had caused the Cat five minutes of concentrated apprehension. That very day a score of successful American business men turned out on the same model might have been found in London's major hotels. A man he was, in the neighbourhood of the fifties, a little on the burly side, his determined mouth half hidden by the semi-circle of a carefully groomed moustache and shrewd, not unhumorous, grey eyes.

He scanned the ranks of the dancers with idle gravity, but without any prolonged attention to the Cat. Presently he thrust a hand deep into a trousers pocket. In a matter of seconds the round of the dance would bring the Cat and his partner within a few yards. Casually he swung his head to measure the distance between himself and the door, and was satisfied that there was a sporting chance of making good his retreat.

Someone pressed close to his side. A hand slid smoothly into position about his wrist, and

a smooth voice remarked, as if carrying on a conversation:

"I shouldn't if I were you. They hang people for murder in this country."

Not a flicker of his face showed that he had been interrupted almost in the act of calculated murder. He scarcely turned his head.

"Say, who in blazes are you?" he asked, the aggression of the words masked by a level urbanity of tone. "What call have you to butt in?"

The other man lifted his shoulders.

"Me? Oh, I'm just what you would call a bull—Detective-inspector Strickland. When I see a man with a bulge in his pocket and a glint in his eye I always butt in. Saves a deuced lot of trouble, Buck—you wouldn't believe." He shook his head gravely. "Cluttering up a night club with corpses isn't done in this country. The management don't like it. It gives the place a bad name."

"You know me?"

"Well, we haven't been formally introduced, but we've got mutual friends at Mulberry Street." He referred to the headquarters of the New York detective service. "They let us know that Buck Shang had been pardoned by the governor of Colorado, and was paying a visit to this country. So when you registered here as Mr. Earl Millard we had a line on you. Come and have a smoke where we can talk things over quietly. The Cat will have a fit in a moment. He's on to you."

"Yes. He's spotted me." Buck Shang was as nonchalant and poised as the detective. "I should worry. I wonder how much you really know?" A grim smile glimmered beneath the curved moustache. "Let up on my wrist now, old son. I know when to pass a pot. I'll be a good little boy. Let's go."

From the corner of his eyes the Cat, with relief that smothered a lurking curiosity, watched them move together out of the club. They sauntered idly towards the smoke-room of the Regal Hotel, each man trying to measure what lay beneath the calm exterior of the other.

"You've got nothing on me," declared Shang, as dispassionately as one commenting upon the weather. "I was railroaded in

Denver. That cream-cheeked, sleek-haired toad knows all about it. Here's the Regal. This is where I stay. Come in, and I'll give you a drink on the strength of the business."

Strickland, whose business it was to notice things, observed that Shang did himself uncommonly well. The Regal is not the least expensive of London hotels, and the charge for the suite of rooms on the first floor which his companion occupied would be something more for a week than the salary of the detective for a couple of months. He accepted a whisky and a cigar.

"Keep 'em for my friends," said Shang. "You like cigars dry and cigarettes green over here. In the States it's the other way about. Now I'll give you the whole works if you want it. I'm over here for a vacation, and don't want my rest spoiled by Scotland Yard men playing tag after me—even if they're as decent birds as you seem to be."

Strickland puffed appreciatively at his cigar. Corona Coronas do not come the way of detective-inspectors every day in the week.

"Don't think that I was hanging round your neck, Buck. I was at that place on another bit of business. Sheer luck that I spotted the Cat getting worked up, and then I recognised you from a portrait sent over by Mulberry Street. If you want to have peace and quiet and stay in this country you'll have to cut out murder."

Shang waved a large hand in deprecation. "Oh, that. The Cat can go to perdition his own way for all of me. I was a bit off my balance just now. Running across him suddenly like that made me see red. I was a fool—I own it freely. I owe you something for jumping in. Mind you, I don't say that some time I won't give him the father and mother of a whaling. He's got that coming to him. No man"—his face grew black—"can do what the Cat has done to me and get away with it."

"What I want to know," said Strickland, "is why I should be sitting down here drinking your whisky and smoking your cigar? From my point of view you're supposed to be a Yankee crook. You've had some pull that's enabled you to get into this country, although



you've never operated here before." His eyes narrowed as he scrutinized his host. "I ought to do something about it."

"The answer to that," observed Shang, placidly, "is that you're here. That satisfies me that you haven't made up your mind."

Strickland sipped at his whisky.

"Don't rely on that. You've got to tell me something pretty convincing. All our prisons are full of people who have been unjustly convicted, and I suppose it's the same in America. The difference is that you have been let loose. More than that, you've got to London, and, believe me, that's not so easy for a known alien with a criminal record and a false moniker. There's money behind you, I see"—he made a significant gesture that embraced the room—"but that doesn't explain everything. Now, I'm not in the confidence of State departments, but I can scent a wangle somewhere. In view of the fact that we've had information about you, you didn't get by our men unless you were very clever, or unless someone very high up put in a word for you. All I want to know is why. I'm talking straight, Buck—or shall I say Mr. Shang or Mr. Millard?"

"You can drop the 'mister,'" Shang settled himself more comfortably in his big divan chair. "You talk straight and I'll talk straight back at you. I guess"—he flicked the ash from his cigar—"that you mean to have it out of me or push me out of the country. Don't mind my feelings, Mr. Strickland, and don't trouble to lie—"

The detective shook his head smilingly.

"I never lie without a reason. You've guessed it. That was in my mind."

"I've been in the pen twice," went on Shang. "Once because I deserved it, once because I was a fool. The first time was in New York somewhere about thirty years ago. Like many another boy, I came up from a farm, got a clerkship in a trust corporation, and hit the high spots. I sure lived swiftly—and there were plenty in the gang I ran to carry me on. They were the wise boys. They knew it all—and some. You'll have guessed part of what happened. I dipped my fingers in the till pretty freely until I had to put it back, or was faced with the prospect of going up the river. One or two of the gang were on to me, and to cut it short, I was roped in as a recruit for a safe-busting trip. One thing led to another. I had nerve, and some aptitude for the game. It looked easy money to me. The main guy took me under his wing and taught me a lot. To cut it short, I threw up my berth and became a professional crook. But I didn't know as much as I thought I did, and within a year I was behind the bars with a five years' sentence in front of me. They say that prison doesn't reform people, Mr. Strickland. I tell you, it cured me."

"When I came out the first thing that I did was to go to the head of the New York Detective Bureau. 'They say you bulls won't let a guy go straight,' I told him. 'I've come to ask if that's so.' 'They say that, do they?' he said, chewing on the end of a pencil. 'Well, what are you going to do about it?' 'I'm a bad-tempered man,' I answered. 'You can take it from me that I've had all that I want. I don't deviate one inch from the straight and narrow hereafter. If any cop tries to put anything across me I'll kill him with these two hands. That goes.'"

"He looked at me and chuckled a little. 'I believe you mean it,' he said. 'What work are you going to do?' 'I don't know,' said I, 'but nobody's going to stop me doing it, whatever it is.' The chief wrote a note and passed it to me. 'You get out of this city,' he said. 'I don't want you getting hasty with any of my young men. There's an introduction to a friend of mine in Denver. He'll give you a job and you'll be away from any of your crook pals. If you let me down I'll make it pretty hot for you. Now get out.' He was a white man, that fellow."

"So I went to Denver. I made good there and married a sweet little woman—I told her everything. I got into the hardware business, branched out on my own and built myself up. I forgot that I'd ever worn the stripes. Then one day at one of the hotels I met a man I'd known in the old days in New York—a slimy

little crook named Moses. He had the Cat with him, and they were prospecting. Up to that moment I'd never met the Cat. He was after my time. Moses introduced me to him with a smirk on his face as Mr. Solomon Stern. It didn't take me long to realize that I was in for it. The saw a better game than that which was in their minds. Of course, they soon knew all about me. I ought to have told them to go to hades, but I was something of a big man in the city, and there was my wife and Shirley—that's my daughter. She was growing up, and I didn't want her to know what her father had been. So I tried to buy them off. I ought to have known better."

Shang's face grew grey and set. He paused in gloomy thought.

"They bled you?" said Strickland.

"They bled me—bled me white. More than that, I was forced to keep company with them. I had to introduce them to my friends as old business acquaintances. Heavens! They were hungry. Tens of thousands of dollars were swallowed up, and each time was to be the last. But they hung on. It came to me that I should never get rid of them while I had a penny left."

"I made a stand. I met them, threw them a wad of notes, and told them that was the finish. They laughed. But when they approached me again I stood firm. I was mixed up in one or two deals, anyway, and money was tight. Stern told me that he'd see I went back to the penitentiary again. I flung him through the glass panels of my office, and he and Moses cringed away, but showing their teeth."

"That same night I was late at my factory. I was the last person to leave. By morning it was a gutter shell, and there was undeniable evidence that the fire was not an accident. I could say nothing about Moses and the Cat. Anyway, they had left the city, and, think what I would, I dared do nothing. I claimed the insurance, but I could give no explanation of why anyone should want to burn down my premises. Then the insurance people, as well as half a dozen prominent men in the town, received an anonymous typewritten screed advising them to look up my record, in the name of Buck Shang, in the archives of the New York police department. It all came out. I could do nothing. I was branded as an ex-convict. I was known to be in a tight corner for cash at the moment—although I had plenty of funds tied up—and I had some personal, business and political enemies who weren't disposed to weep at the chance to kick at me. I had the rawest of deals. I was arrested for arson, tried, convicted and sentenced to ten years in the penitentiary on evidence that would not have hung a dog. The blow killed my wife."

"I fought—naturally I fought. I had good friends as well as bad enemies. They convinced the governor that my conviction was wrong. He pardoned me and I came out—after two years. Some oil property in which I had been interested boomed during my absence, and I found myself with more money than I had ever had before in my life. I collected Shirley, who had been looked after by friends, and decided to travel for a time. I went to Washington, got in touch with one or two politicians whom I had known, and at last got me an interview with the President. I told him the whole story that I have now told you. He believed me, and things were smoothed out for me. That will explain how I got enough backing to get this side of the Atlantic. I don't expect you to take all this as gospel, but if you have any doubts you might apply to the Embassy."

"So you weren't on the warpath after the Cat to-night?" asked Strickland.

Buck Shang finished his whisky at a gulp.

"No. I wasn't looking for the Cat; and it was sheer coincidence that I saw him at the night club. Now is there anything else you want to ask me?"

The detective rose and thrust out a hand.

"Not a thing," he declared. "I want to beg your pardon, Mr. Millard." He laid a little stress on the name, for he had treated the other with the familiar tolerance that a police officer frequently assumes towards one who has sojourned in the underworld, and he felt

a little guilty about it. Shang nodded in silent understanding. "You won't need to worry about Scotland Yard," Strickland went on. "London is wide open to you so far as we are concerned. But don't deal with the Cat in public, and forget your gun. That's all I ask. I may not be at hand next time. Good-night, sir."

Shang returned his grip.

"Good-night. I like you. Look in some night and have a bite of dinner and make the acquaintance of Shirley. She's the daughter of a crook, if you like, but she's the whitest and straightest kid in the world. We're lonely folk in this burg, and would like someone to show us the town."

Three hours later Strickland was aroused from a dreamless sleep by the fierce ringing of a telephone bell at his bedside.

"We've sent a man with a motor-bike and sidecar to fetch you," said a voice. "There's a murder broken loose on Westminster Bridge."

"What's the matter with the divisional inspector?" queried Strickland with asperity. "Why pick on me?"

"This is a friend of yours," answered the voice. "It's the Cat. He's had half his head shot off."

#### AT SCOTLAND YARD.

THOSE who believe a detective's calling to be a romantic one would have been, perhaps, a little shocked at the remarks passed by first-class Detective-inspector Strickland as he slipped into his clothes and heard a raw February wind blustering without. He had all the resentment of a man unjustly disturbed from a well-earned rest.

It was inconsiderate of the Cat to choose such a time for his exit from the world. It was a scandal that the Yard should haul him from his bed when really the case was one for the divisional detective-inspector. It was a wicked piece of personal spite against him on the part of the unknown murderer. No murder should be allowed to happen between two and three in the morning. There would be difficulty, he knew, in gathering together the men he would want to aid him in the investigation, for detectives, like other honest men, spend the night in bed unless there is some special occasion for them to be up and about.

He rubbed his numbed fingers, and stole downstairs on tiptoe for fear of arousing his landlady as he heard a motor-bicycle stop with engine running outside the door.

The cold night air stirred his clogged faculties, and he forgot his grievances as they sped towards Cannon Row Police Station, which faces Scotland Yard itself. Strange, he reflected, that he should have saved the Cat a few hours before. Was it possible that, after all, Buck Shang had dealt out vengeance in spite of his promise? There were unlikely things. In his twenty years of experience Strickland knew that, contrary to the accepted notion of the novel reader, the obvious solution of a mystery is usually the right one.

"Wish I'd taken his gun away from him," he muttered to himself.

But he also knew that it is dangerous for a detective to make up his mind off-hand. No man was better aware than Strickland that the Cat, alias Solomon Stern, alias half a dozen other names, was one of the best hated man in London. There were many people, men and women, who had good cause to wish him out of the way. For the Cat had earned the nickname conferred upon him as a tribute to his smooth cheeks and ingenuous manners. He was one of the wildest rogues who have ever infested a great city. Strickland, like other detectives on both sides of the Atlantic, had long waited for him to make a mistake. Blackmail, the dirtiest of all criminal professions, is also in many ways the safest, but for such risks as that to which the Cat had even now fallen a victim.

A ruddy, plump, smiling man was at the door of Cannon Row Police Station. It was Drake, the divisional detective-inspector of the A Division, a veteran so close to the pension limit that the advent on his ground of a man



his official superior by a hair's breadth left him philosophic.

"Hallo, Frank?" he said.

"Hallo yourself, you big loafer!" grunted Strickland. "What's the matter with the A Division? Some of you old gentlemen want a dry nurse?"

He disencumbered himself of his heavy coat, and Drake thrust his arm familiarly under his and led him to the rooms of the Criminal Investigation Department.

"You'd ha' been snoring yet for all of me." He pushed Strickland into one of the hard chairs affected by Lorton police stations. "The man on night duty at the Yard rang up the chief and told him that the Cat had been croaked. He said that you'd been camping on that sweet lad's trail, and that you'd better handle it. That's all about it. You've got a chance to do a bit now, instead of swinging the lead over the way." He jerked his head towards the stone and red-brick of Scotland Yard opposite.

Strickland dropped the banter from his tone.

"Well, what's the news, Stiffy?"

The other unrolled a yard long tobacco pouch, and slowly filled his pipe.

"Queer business," he said. "Constable on beat saw a big saloon car draw up at the kerb of Westminster Bridge. Thought it was some mechanical trouble. Next he knew a couple of men had dragged something out of the car and left it on the pavement. Then the car made off. All happened in a matter of seconds. He wouldn't know the men again, couldn't spot the number of the car, didn't even notice what make it was. The thing they'd dragged out was what was left of the Cat. Policeman got help, and carried the body on an ambulance to the mortuary. Divisional surgeon had a look at it. Shot at close quarters with a heavy calibre weapon. Dead a matter of an hour or so. Body was searched." He indicated a little pile of things lying on the desk in front of him. "Decided to wait for you before going through them. That's all."

Strickland was thumbing a telephone directory. He found the number he sought, and, seizing the telephone, breathed a number.

"Hallo, hallo! That the Regal Hotel? Put me through to Mr. Millard. What's that? All right. No, don't worry her. This is Detective-inspector Strickland speaking. Tell the manager I'll be round to see him later on—yes, get him out of bed. It's important. I'll be there within ten minutes or a quarter of an hour."

He put down the telephone and stared at his colleague.

"I shouldn't be surprised if I could put a name to the murderer," he said quietly. "Let's leave things for a while and go round to the Regal. I'll explain while we are on the move."

One of the Flying Squad cars standing ready at Scotland Yard was requisitioned—Strickland had had enough of the motor-bicycle—and as they shot away on the short journey to the Regal the Yard man gave a succinct recital of his encounter with Buck Shang.

"He left the hotel almost on my heels," he said, "and he's not in his bed-room now. Looks odd—deuced odd. May be nothing to do with the murder, but I've got a feeling that the safest thing to do is to get Buck under lock and key as soon as we can."

Drake nodded stolid agreement. This was one of those cases familiar to all detectives, when it was common sense to get a man first, and acquire evidence against him afterwards.

"We'll have to detain him on suspicion," he said. "There's nothing we can charge him with—so far."

Even so important a personage as the manager of a great hotel does not openly resent visits at unearthly hours from police officers. There are many reasons why it is well to keep on terms with the police. The reputation of a fashionable hotel is always susceptible to the breath of slander, and it pays to be civil to the police, who may sometimes keep an awkward episode reasonably quiet.

"Mr. Millard come in yet?" asked Strickland.

The manager, with the sleep scarcely out of his eyes, shook his head.

"No. They told me you had been asking for him. What can I do for you, gentlemen? Miss Millard is in, but the night clerk said you did not wish to speak to her."

"Sorry to have disturbed you, Mr. Fulton," said Strickland suavely. "There are one or two things we wanted to ask Mr. Millard. We may decide to wait for him. By the way, when did he get here?"

A short consultation with the night clerk and the manager was able to answer the question.

"Arrived three days ago, about midday. Came by the boat train from Southampton. Engaged his suite for an indefinite time by wireless." He looked from one detective to the other. "Anything wrong about him?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Strickland guardedly. "There's an acquaintance of his in trouble." He did not deem it worth while at the moment to say what the trouble was. He always acted on the assumption that there was no need to say more than the occasion called for. "Has he had any visitors while he has been here?"

"I can't tell you that," said the manager. "Some of the day staff might answer that."

"Better see the girl, hadn't we?" muttered Drake, and Strickland nodded acquiescence.

With the manager and a chambermaid to escort them, they rang the bell at the outer door of Shang's suite. The summons had to be repeated again and again before a shuffling within told them that they had succeeded in arousing someone. A drowsy maid opened the door an inch or two.

"Miss Millard?" she exclaimed. "But she is in bed—asleep."

"We can't help that." Drake had his foot within the door. "Our business is imperative. You tell her that she must see us at once."

With a shrug the girl disappeared, and they heard a whispered dialogue in one of the inner rooms. Drake pushed open the door, and they walked into the private corridor.

"I don't know that we need bother you any more, Mr. Fulton," said Strickland urbanely, and the manager and the chambermaid taking the hint left the officers to their own devices.

In a few seconds a girl in a scarlet dressing-gown which matched her flushed cheeks was

Owing to the extra length of the complete story, and in order to publish a special long opening instalment of the new serial, it has been found necessary to withhold the "Baffer" feature from this issue. Another of these popular problems will appear next week.

before them. She was not tall, yet somehow she gave the impression of being beyond the average height of a woman. She held herself with poise and dignity. What most impressed Strickland was a pair of clear blue eyes, alert, aggressive and self-possessed, but not without some trace of anxiety. Her chin, too, had a piquant hint of resolution. She was unquestionably a pretty girl, one might almost have said a beautiful girl.

"Who are you? What do you want?" she demanded. Queerly enough, Strickland was struck by the thought that the American accent, spoken by a cultivated voice, could be very captivating.

"Most terribly sorry to disturb you," said Drake. "We want to know where your father is."

She looked icily from one to the other. "This is a little informal, isn't it?" she asked with an inflection of frigid irony. "Two strangers drag me from my bed in the early hours of the morning, and hurl a demand at my head as peremptorily as a hold-up man demanding a purse. Before we go any farther

I want to know who you are, and why my father's whereabouts should concern you?"

This was scarcely the reception that they had expected. Drake, however, grinned a trifle truculently. He was an old married man, and even a prickly American beauty did not daunt him. The younger man found himself admiring the contour of her face, half in shadow from the shaded electric light. For a man who was usually tolerably sure of himself he felt an unwonted and guilty uneasiness. It was ridiculous, of course. They were fully within their rights in questioning her; but somehow he did not like it.

Drake, who had waited momentarily for his colleague to reply, broke an awkward pause.

"We are police officers, Miss Millard. There is my card. This is Detective-inspector Strickland from Scotland Yard."

She took the card and read it. The flush upon her face faded. Her lips set a fraction closer together.

"I was not aware that even British detectives walked into a lady's apartment in this way. Anyhow, I am still unable to understand why you want to see my father."

A swift glance passed between the detectives. Strickland knew well enough what was in his friend's mind; indeed, he found himself drifting to the same conclusion.

The girl was sparring with them. Whether she had any inkling of the object of their visit or not she was playing a calculated part. It was impossible that she could not be aware of her father's early history, since, according to Shang, it was known to every person in and about Denver.

Strickland's chin jutted out a trifle. He was not going to be baulked by any childish nonsense. Time was of importance in any case of this kind. There were other ways of meeting the situation than by polite fencing.

"Listen to me, Miss Millard," he said sternly. "This is no more pleasant for us than for you. We are trying to do our duty as decently as we can, and I'd advise you to adopt a different tone. A very serious thing has happened in which your father may be concerned. If you have his real interests at heart you will answer our questions."

She shrugged her shoulders with an assumption of indifference. "I never interfere with my father's affairs," she countered. "Any questions you wish to ask you must put to him."

This was exasperating. Strickland clenched and unclenched the fingers of his right hand, a trick that he had when he was annoyed.

"Think." His tone was persuasive. "You may be able to help him."

Her lips parted in a contemptuous laugh.

"I have nothing more to say. Do you realise that it is a cold night, and that you are keeping me here shivering? From what I know of my father he would not be likely to approve of any discussion of his personal business with two clumsy police spies. The door is behind you, gentlemen. Good-night."

She turned away abruptly, and her hand was on the handle of her bed-room door. Strickland was stung by the scorn in her words, although his impassive mask of a face showed nothing. He took an impulsive step forward. "One moment, Miss Millard."

Shirley wheeled to confront him, drawing the skirt of her dressing-gown about her as though to preserve it from contact with some loathsome thing.

"We want your formal permission to search this suite. I should hate to use extreme measures, and it will be nicer if you are reasonable. But, with or without your consent, we propose to do so."

"You are making a mistake Mr.—er—Strickland." The anger in her eyes belied the serenity of her tone. A neat and dainty automatic was displayed ostentatiously in her hand. "You will do nothing of the sort."

(What was the result of Miss Millard's hold-up of the police? Do not miss next week's long instalment of this powerful detective story "The Crook's Game," in next week's issue of The THRILLER.)



## "The Midnight Gang."

(Continued from page 680.)

refused to pull up at the policeman's signal. It had been followed by a sports two-seater less than two hundred yards behind. The two-seater's lights were out, but it also had refused to heed the constable's warning.

"Now, how does the two-seater come into the game?" Lucas asked himself musingly.

There was another long wait, and then the telephone tinkled again. This time the news was definite. A black limousine, a Spanje, had been found by a police patrol deserted and empty on the Epsom road.

"That's our car!" cried Lucas to the man who had telephoned the news, and, hanging up the receiver, sprang to his feet and made a dash for the door. Two minutes later he was tearing through the night, bound for the place where the limousine had been found.

The fast car that Lucas had had ready and waiting did the journey in record time, and just under the hour he drew up outside Epsom Police Station. The inspector in charge came out to meet him.

"The car you want is about a mile along the road," he said. "There's a constable guarding it. Would you like me to send a man with you?"

Lucas shook his head.

"No, thanks," he said. "I ought to find it easily."

"It's a straight road," replied the inspector. "You can't miss it."

He drove off again, and presently saw the limousine he was in search of. It was drawn up close to a straggly hedge. A constable who had been sitting on the running-board rose and saluted as Inspector Lucas introduced himself.

"The other car's farther on, sir," he said. "The other car—what other car?" rapped Lucas sharply.

"A two-seater, sir," replied the man, and almost before he had got the words out the inspector went racing off. He found it two hundred yards along the road, so close to the side that the bonnet was buried in the hedge. Across the driving seat lay a heavy coat. Lucas picked it up and felt in the pockets. There was nothing in the outer ones, but in the breast pocket he found a letter. Striking a match, he looked at the name and uttered an exclamation of surprise. For the envelope was addressed to Al Marks!

Betty Seymour recovered consciousness slowly, and her first sensation was one of physical sickness. Her head ached violently, and her throat felt dry and rough.

For some time she was too dazed to take much notice of her surroundings, but presently her head became a little clearer, and she started to look around her.

Her brain was gradually becoming more steady, and she began to remember the events of the night. She had left the theatre with the intention of walking home to her flat in Victoria. What had happened? She recollected taking a short cut down the side street, and then vaguely the car that had driven up beside her. She had glimpsed it for a moment before everything went suddenly black. She must have been drugged, she thought.

Her eyes were getting accustomed to the darkness now, and she could dimly make out through the glass partition the shadowy figure of the driver crouching over the wheel.

Who was the unknown man in front, and where was he taking her? Presently she felt the speed slacken, and then the car slow down and stop. The man in the driving seat got down and opened the door. She shuddered violently as a cold draught of wind blew in.

"Get out!" ordered the Unknown, in a muffled voice. He caught her by the arm and supported her as she descended, then led her up the wide road for a considerable distance, and through a narrow opening in the hedge.

"Wait," said the unknown, stopping suddenly. "Don't try to move or it will be the worse for you." He released his grip on

her arm, and Betty became aware of a building that loomed out of the darkness close beside her. She heard the click of a key and the squeak of rusty hinges. Then the figure of her captor became silhouetted in the doorway as he struck a match and lighted a candle. He set it down on a table, came out again, and, grasping her arm once more, dragged her into the interior, bolting the door behind her.

"How do you like your new home?" asked the man as he turned from barring the door. He was wearing a pair of large mica goggles that concealed his face.

"My new home?" she repeated mechanically. "Yes, you're going to stop here for some time." The man in the goggles paused and surveyed her. "You may stop here for ever. It depends." His meaning was clear, and she shuddered.

"Who are you?" she managed to gasp. "You can call me Mr. Midnight," he answered. "Who I really am, you will never know."

She shrank back in terror. This was the man who had killed her sister, the leader of the Midnight Gang, and she was alone with him miles away from anyone, completely at his mercy!

"You needn't be afraid," he said. "You are quite safe—at present!"

"Quite!" said a familiar voice. "Put up your hands, Mr. Midnight, or whatever you call yourself!"

Betty spun round with a glad cry, as "One-way" Street stepped from behind the long curtains that hung over the windows, the automatic in his hand covering the masked man.

"Dick!" she breathed, and flew to his side. For a second she came between the pistol and Mr. Midnight, and in that second he acted. Taking advantage of the screen her body offered, he took careful aim and shot the automatic from Dick's hand!

"Now," he snarled, "I don't know how you got here, but I can assure you that you won't leave this place alive!"

The last word had barely left his lips when there was a crash of glass, as the tiny window shattered inwards.

"That's where you're wrong!" cried the voice of Al Marks. "Take what's coming to you!"

Street turned, his arm round the frightened girl. Framed in the broken window was the white face of the colonel, his hair hanging in damp wisps over his forehead. In his hand he held an ugly automatic pistol pointed steadily at Mr. Midnight.

"Keep back!" screamed the man in goggles. "You know why I've come!" cried Al Marks, a look in his wild eyes that froze the girl's blood. "You killed Mary—killed her because she knew who you were!"

"Keep back!" cried Mr. Midnight again, raising his automatic.

Two shots rang out almost together, and Betty screamed. Mr. Midnight staggered, gave a little choking cry, and pitched forward on his face.

"Open the door, Street," said the colonel. Dick went swiftly to the door and lifted the heavy bar, and then Al Marks entered.

There was a sound of voices outside, a scraping of feet on the muddy path, and a moment later Inspector Lucas and a constable appeared in the doorway.

The colonel looked round at the inspector as he moved into the room.

"You can take me, Lucas," he said defiantly. "I killed him!"

"Who is it?" asked Lucas. He crossed over and knelt by the still figure, and began to unfasten the goggles concealing the face.

"Mr. Midnight," said Al Marks, and the inspector pulled away the mica glasses.

"Great Caesar!" he breathed softly. The face that stared up at him was the face of Howard Carfax!

### AFTER MIDNIGHT!

It was three hours later, and a little party of people gathered together in Richard Street's flat doing full justice to the substantial breakfast that had been hastily pre-

pared by a sleepy-eyed Jennings. They consisted of Dick himself, Inspector Lucas, Al Marks, Betty Seymour and Frank Tracey.

"And that's the end of the Midnight Gang," said Dick, handing his cup to the girl for some more coffee.

"Fancy old Carfax being Mr. Midnight," said Frank. "It's the biggest surprise I've ever had in my life."

"I ought to have guessed it long ago," Dick leaned back in his chair—"directly I caught the faint odour of violets on that paper we found on poor Collins. Carfax always used a violet-scented hair-dressing, and he was always brushing it over with his hands. I couldn't remember where I'd smelt the same perfume before until it suddenly flashed on me while we were waiting for news of the car."

"But who was the chap who burgled Carfax's flat?" asked Frank. "He said his name was Mr. Midnight, didn't he?"

Dick looked across at Al Marks and smiled. "The colonel can tell you all about that, I think," he answered. "Can't you, Marks?"

Al Marks was for a moment confused. "I rather wanted to look at some papers he had," he confessed, "and there was no other way."

"You suspected him of being Mr. Midnight," broke in Lucas, "and you wanted to make sure. When you found the printed slips of instructions in his desk you were certain. It was a mistake, Marks, to try and blackmail a man like that. You might have known he wouldn't sit quiet while you put the 'black' on him."

"I never expected he'd do what he did," said the colonel huskily. "I'd hidden the proofs I'd discovered at my flat, and while I was waiting to meet him, he went to look for them—and killed Mary."

"Leaving Frank's button behind so that suspicion should fall on him," said Street. "It was lucky he had such a good alibi, otherwise he might have been in an awkward position."

"I wonder where he found the button?" Lucas remarked thoughtfully.

"I may have dropped it at his rooms," said the reporter. "I remember calling round to see him about three days ago."

Street nodded. "What are you going to do about—about—the colonel stopped."

"About killing Carfax?" inquired Dick. Al Marks nodded.

"I don't think we'll do anything," the superintendent replied. "You rendered the world rather a service by ridding it of an unscrupulous scoundrel, and I owe you quite a lot for saving my life. What do you say, Lucas?"

"Let's call it self-defence," suggested the melancholy inspector.

The colonel looked relieved. "Thank you!" he said simply. "I shan't be giving you any more trouble. But how was it you managed to find that cottage so quickly?"

"When I first suspected that Carfax was Mr. Midnight," replied Dick. "I left Lucas and hurried round to his flat. It was empty, which strengthened my suspicion. Then I remembered that he had a cottage just off the Epsom Road, and I decided to take a long shot and go there."

"I got out my sports car and arrived two minutes before he did. I might have been entirely wrong, but as luck had it I was right."

Frank rose to his feet. "I must get along to the 'Megaphone,'" he said. "This is going to be the biggest 'scoop' of my life. See you later." He paused on the threshold of the room. "By the way, Dick," he said, "when can I say the wedding will take place?"

"Just as soon as ever you like," answered "One-way" Street, and smiled across at the blushing girl.

THE END.

(Do not miss next week's magnificent book-length THRILLER story "Unidentified," by Anthony Skene, next week. Order your copy to-day.)