THE THRILLER

THE PAPER WITH A THOUSAND THRILLS

2d.

The SCARLET SCARAB

A Long Complete Mystery Novel

By L. C. DOUTHWAITE

No. 28. Vol. 1. EVERY SATURDAY. AUGUST 17th, 1929.

The Scarlet

"Sign," snarled the Scarlet Scarab, thrusting forward his gun. Then, even as Trevor wrote, there came the sounds of shots and a furious scuffle at the door.

Chapter 1.
CONDEMNED TO DEATH.

At a steady forty m.p.h., the road broad and clear ahead, Johnny Travers, with a sharp intake of breath, pointed to something which, silhouetted blackly against the grey stormy sky, swung dreadfully from the branch of the bedraggled tree that overhung the road.

"For the love of Pete!" he gasped in a voice which not all his self-control could make completely steady. "*What's that?*"

Ginger Jackson, that imperturbable ex-pugilist, whose attention for the last few hundred yards had been directed to just that same phenomenon, said calmly:

"Looks to me like a corpse, sir."

Steadied by the other's coolness, Johnny slowed, and, as the car drew up to that sinister pendant, stepped into the road, followed by Ginger.

"If you're not a good guesser, Ginger," he said quietly, "we've run into the beastliest practical joke that was ever played." He stared keenly for a moment, his face tense. "But somehow I think it's pretty grim earnest," he added.

He was right; if that which swayed with such awesome detachment above them had been suspended from but a few inches further along the branch, the heels would have struck the face of any passing car-driver not especially alert for danger.

Standing as they were, except that the feet were strapped together, in that dim uncertain light, they could distinguish little more than when, from the car, the dangling thing had first attracted their attention.

"Can you reach to cut 'im down, sir?" Ginger demanded.

Knife in hand, and stretched to his utmost extent, Johnny failed to reach the rope. But as his hands descended, the burnt tan of his face had faded to something grey and damp and fearful.

"It's no joke, believe me, Ginger," he said shortly.

Scarab

A Gripping Book-Length Mystery Novel.

By L. C. Douthwaite

He manœuvred the car to a convenient position. Then, knife in hand, he stood up in the driving-seat.

The rope was toughly-fibred, but he sawed through at last. The hanged man bent grotesquely and horribly from the middle as Ginger staggered beneath the drooping weight. Johnny jumped from the driving-seat and helped him lay the body on to the roadside border.

"Professional job, by the look of it," Ginger remarked, and pointed to the hands, which were strapped firmly behind the back, to the ankles, similarly confined, and to the head, which was encased in a white hood that was fastened with a slip-knot about the neck.

Without a word, Johnny turned to the car for his torch; switched its light upon the lifeless heap at his feet. And when, after a long moment, he turned to Ginger, there was in his face a stark and terrible bewilderment.

"But—but—you're right, Ginger!" he said unsteadily. "It *is* an expert's job. They're all Government issues—the regular things—the straps and the white cap!"

Ginger did not speak for a moment. At that time he did not realise his companion spoke from expert knowledge.

"I 'aven't 'eard no talk about making executions public, sir," he said. "Old-caster's the place they 'old the neck-tie parties in these parts, not out in the open." He paused, and as Johnny did not speak: "But hadn't we best make sure he *is* dead, sir?" he suggested.

Johnny gestured towards the white-capped head, which lolled at a grotesque angle from the shoulders.

"Haven't I told you it's an expert's job?" he said shortly. "He's not choked, as would have been the case if he'd just been swung; he's been hanged in the regulation way—through a drop. That's why the neck's broken."

He handed the torch to Ginger, and kneeling, cut the cord that kept the white bag in place; drew it over the head to expose the face, while with a steady hand Ginger shone the light.

The face of a hanged man is never an

attractive sight, but the countenance revealed by that white searching gleam was of a horror indescribable. A middle-aged face, gross and flabby, the lips full and pouting above a multiplicity of chins; pouches beneath the little grey-blue bulging eyes; the bulbous nose with innumerable purple veins like rivers marked upon a man; the forehead narrow and the big square head.

"Well-to-do bloke, by the look of him," Ginger pronounced, and Johnny nodded. Accustomed as he was to emergency, his first horror had become submerged into an almost professional detachment.

"Can you drive a car, Ginger?" he asked shortly.

"I don't know, sir; I've never tried," the other said promptly, and Johnny smiled, in spite of the grim situation.

"Then stick around while I shoot back to Torcoombe," Johnny instructed, and climbed into the car.

The sergeant on duty at the Coombeshire village, a portly, well-fed man of fifty, was at first inclined to incredulity.

"Trying to pull my leg or something?" he said sourly.

Johnny pointed to his sodden clothing.

"When I want to be really humorous," he said, "it doesn't need a ten-mile drive through weather like this to make me laugh."

The sergeant rose ponderously.

"I'll come," he said under protest. Adding: "But heaven help yer if you're tryin' to be funny."

His truculence disappeared, however, when with Ginger doing sentry-go through the rain, Johnny drew the car to a standstill at that stiffened figure on the roadside grass.

"Have you made an examination?" he demanded tersely, and as Johnny shook his head, turned inquiringly to Ginger.

"That isn't my job," the latter said decisively. "Oo knows 'ow many cloos I might put on the blink through buttin' in—me not knowin' a cloo when I see one?"

The sergeant went down on his knees beside the body, Johnny shining a torch. After a rather shrinking inspection of the lolling countenance he unfastened the closely-buttoned coat. One glance, and with a loud staccato exclamation, he fell back on to his heels.

"Look!" he shouted. "Look at this here!"

Pinned to the immaculate waistcoat of the dead man was a card, official-looking and formal, one that was headed by an embossed symbol—that of a beetle, a flaming blood-red in colour, and of a reproduction of such repulsively startling fidelity that it was as if, imbued with the dawning of life, it was upon the point of crawling obesely across the sheet.

Hard fingers closed about Johnny's forearm; the sergeant's face was as that of a man whose world is shaking.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, and the tiny pasteboard trembled between his fingers. "It's Sir Julian Dore." If he had mentioned the patron saint of England his voice could not have rung more horror-stricken.

"And who," Johnny inquired, "is—or rather was—Sir Julian Dore?"

"Lord Lieutenant of the County," the numbed sergeant explained. "One of the richest men in England."

Johnny took the card from the man's outstretched hand, and by the aid of the torch, read aloud:

"This is to certify that the sentence of death passed upon Sir Julian Marius Dore, Kt., at a Special Assembly of the Council of the Scarlet Scarab held on September 30th, 1928, has been duly and expeditiously executed in accordance with the sentence passed upon him by our Society."

Scrawled across a line provided at the foot of the card was the signature:

"SCARABÆIDES."

It was Ginger who broke the silence.

"Isn't that something like what they post outside prisons after a 'anging?" he demanded in a hushed voice.

"Pretty much, I reckon," the sergeant assented, speaking in a shocked and far-away voice.

The glow of headlights appeared above the crest of the rise ahead. The car contained two constables instructed by the sergeant before he set out from Torcoombe. These, after lifting the dead knight into Johnny's car, the sergeant left on guard.

"Not that it'll do any good," he said pessimistically. "Rain like this'd wash out the track of an elephant, leave alone an ordinary clue."

It would be necessary, Johnny was told, for himself and Ginger to remain in the neighbourhood until the inquest. They took rooms at the Torcoombe Priory Hotel.

"And keep yourselves clear of reporters," the sergeant warned them. "The only person you're to open out to is whoever's put in charge of the investigation. It's in the chief constable's hands now, of course, but whether he'll do the job himself or turn it over to Scotland Yard's for him to decide."

OATES, OF SCOTLAND YARD.

It was about ten the next morning when a visitor was shown in to Travers and his companion.

An alert square-set man this, with a wide tightly-lipped slit of a mouth, and shrewd, penetrating grey eyes and grey, closely-cropped hair; a man of five feet ten of sheer bone and muscle.

"Come right in," Johnny said, and the visitor advanced into the room.

"My name is Oates," he announced. "Detective-inspector Oates, of Scotland Yard."

Johnny nodded pleasantly.

"I thought they'd decide to call in the Yard," he said. "Take a chair and have a drink."

"I'll have coffee," said the inspector, "if it's all the same to you."

When the waiter had served the order, the Scotland Yard man turned to Johnny:

"You know, of course, what I've come about?" he said shortly, and Johnny nodded.

"Yes," he said. "The chap we found last night. I guess you're on the case."

"The chief constable of Coombeshire telephoned the Yard late last night," stated the detective. "The chief-superintendent put me in charge, and I was lucky enough to catch a train within the hour. This morning I've seen Sergeant Barnes, who's told me the story as he knows it. Also I've examined the body."

As if expectant that Johnny would break in with a question, he paused, but Johnny did not immediately respond.

"You haven't wasted much time," he said at last. "Have you found anything worth while?"

The detective ignored this. His manner was not so much hostile as of one who, before opening out, requires to be sure of his ground.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I'd like to hear something about yourself."

Momentarily Johnny's eyes narrowed. The tone was not one he particularly appreciated.

"Just what about us," he asked, "do you want to know?"

Oates made a rather impatient gesture, as of one brushing aside irrelevancies. Unobtrusively but unmistakably he had been taking stock of his hosts, and Johnny knew that there was not a detail in the appearance or manner either of himself or Ginger the detective could not minutely have described. What was less certain, however, was the impression registered. In matters that concerned his job the man had the ideal poker-face.

"I landed from Canada only yesterday morning," Johnny said, "after six years' absence. I wired to town for Jackson, here, to meet me. He was with my battalion in France. We are sticking together for a bit for old times' sake."

"In what part of Canada were you?" the inspector asked. "And what were you doing there?"

If there was any hesitation in the reply, it was so slight as almost to be unnoticeable.

"West and north—mainly, as a sergeant in His Majesty's North-West Mounted Police," said Johnny. "Now I am—a—a—gentleman at large."

The detective, eyeing him directly, jerked out:

"What brought you to England?"

"I came into some money and had to come back to look after it," said Johnny. "Do you know a lawyer named Raymond, of Bedford Row?"

For a split second an expression flashed across the face of the detective which, trained observer as he was, intrigued Johnny considerably—a razor-edge alertness that was gone instantaneously with its coming.

"I've heard of him," he said. "Few people in London haven't. He's one of the best-known solicitors practising. Why—do you know him?"

"Never seen him in my life," Johnny responded. "Nevertheless, anything you want to know about me he'll tell you," he added.

The detective let this pass by turning directly to Ginger.

"And you?" he said curtly, and the red-headed one flushed.

"Ask at the National Sportin' Club," he said, "an' they'll tell you that ten years ago, before 'is 'ands went on the blink, Ginger Jackson was welterweight champion of Europe."

The detective looked at him steadily.

"What are you doing now—in this part of the country?" he asked.

"A couple of nights ago I seconded Larry Dod of 'Oxton against Charlie Parkin of Exeter. It was the mornin' after the scrap I was sent for by Mr. Travers 'ere," Ginger explained.

He glared truculently at the detective, and for the first time the latter's expression lightened. Something like a smile crossed his face.

Then, rather to Johnny's surprise, Oates went on to question him about his legacy; a subtle examination which, however casual and desultory on the surface, was one which covered the subject with a thoroughness that seemed beyond reason.

Something of this must have appeared on his face, for, after a quick, searching look at him, the inspector once more broke into a smile.

"You understand, I hope," he said, "that it's necessary I should have these particulars? It's not that I'm doubting you at all—either of you. It's just that to question you happens to be part of my job."

"Don't apologise, inspector," Johnny said easily. "I guess we didn't go out of our way to make things easy for you, anyway."

Apparently satisfied as to their personal *bona-fides*, the detective inquired then as to the circumstances in which the body of Sir Julian Dore had been discovered, but they could tell him nothing which quite obviously he didn't know already. It was only a few moments later that, with a cheery refusal of Johnny's invitation to lunch, he left them.

When the latter came back after seeing their visitor out, it was to discover Jackson with a rather puzzled look on his freckled and good-humoured face.

"What's the trouble, Ginger?" Johnny asked, and for a moment the ex-pugilist did not reply.

"Funny sort of bloke, that, for a 'busy,' sir," he said dubiously at last, and Johnny stiffened. The same thought had occurred to him.

"How do you mean, funny?" he asked quickly.

"Seemed to me," Ginger said slowly, "he was a blamed sight more interested in you, sir, and in the money you've bin left by that there dead uncle of yours, than 'e was in the poor feller who was 'anged."

There was an insight in this that told Johnny how little the years had robbed the other of his old acumen, and for this he was glad. He did not know from where the impression came, or even when it first occurred to him, but somehow and from somewhere he was possessed by an odd conviction—compelling, insistent—of being drawn, irresistibly and by forces entirely outside his own control, into something incredibly dark and sinister. In some curious but wholly gripping fashion, he was aware, lurking in the background of the previous night's discovery, of some controlling influence—malignant, ruthless, designedly omnipotent. Yet, whatever might come, whatever trouble lay in store for him, he would have asked from Fate no stauncher comrade than Ginger Jackson.

For the moment, however, he decided to allow the other to perceive nothing of this. Time enough to unpack the gloves when the ring was cleared, he thought.

"The natural curiosity of the profession," he said lightly, in reply to the other's comment. "You know their methods, Watson. Come in!"

This last remark was in reply to a knock at the door, not loud, but somehow peremptory.

The handle turned, and a man came in whom Johnny greeted in mild surprise.

"Hallo!" he said. "Back again?"

On the threshold the visitor paused.

"How do you mean—back again?" he said, and Johnny raised his eyebrows.

"Well, you've been gone only five mi——" he began, and then, in the violence of his amazement, stopped, eyes staring, mouth open.

"My sacred aunt!" he breathed, and turned quickly to Ginger, whom he found staring at him with undisguised astonishment.

"Who's this, Ginger?" he demanded sharply, and the surprise so manifest in the other's face did not slacken.

"Why, Inspector Oates, of course, sir," he protested.

Johnny shook his head.

"Have another look," he said tersely.

Dazedly the ex-boxer turned once more to the intruder, who, his keen eyes travelling in quick succession from one to the other, was still standing in the doorway. Then, following a tense, palpitating silence, as one who has witnessed the impossible, Ginger turned once more to Johnny.

"Lumme, sir!" he whispered hoarsely. "It isn't the same bloke!"

For he had seen, in the man before him, an exact replica of the square-set, alert five-feet-ten of that wire-bound strength; the same short-clipped greying hair; the same square-cut blue serge suit and highly-polished square-toed boots, as in their visitor who so recently had gone. Even, on the little finger of the sinewy left hand, was the fellow of a flat-topped monogram signet ring which he had noticed on the corresponding finger of their recent visitor.

And then, gradually, and though it was so subtle and minute, he saw the difference.

For though the mouths of both principal and replica were wide and tight-lipped, in the one who had gone had been nothing to redeem it from brutality, whereas in that of the newcomer was an infinitesimal tilt at the corners that sublimated it to humanity; and while the grey eyes of their departed guest were cold and implacable, those of the stranger, if equally keen, yet shone with a warmer light.

Quietly, but with deliberation, the visitor closed the door and advanced into the room.

"What's the big idea, Mr. Travers?" he asked in a strong Yorkshire accent. Involuntarily, though his heart was beating with an increase of that unformulated apprehension with which he had been seized, Johnny smiled.

"I'll bet you're Inspector Oates, of the C.I.D.!" he said confidently, and the visitor looked at him keenly.

"That's right," he said. "How did you know?"

"Your twin-brother Alf's just left us," Johnny explained.

The newcomer stared harder still. Then, uninvited, he took the chair so recently vacated by his double..

"Tell me," he instructed laconically.

Johnny hesitated.

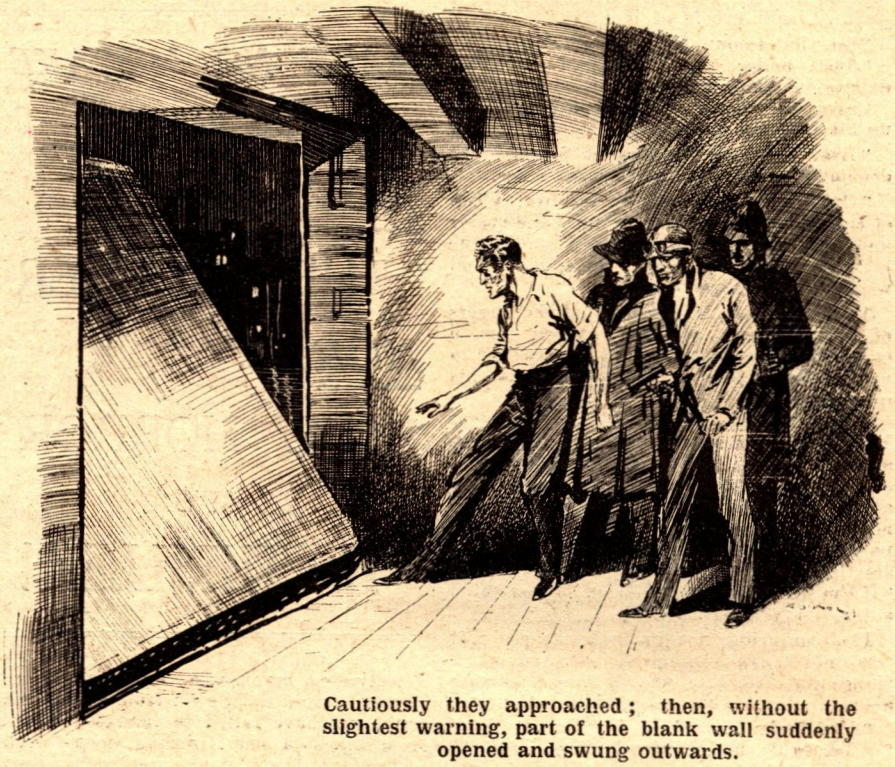
"Before reciting my little piece all over again," he said, "I'd like to know for certain which is the *real* McKie—you or the other chap."

For answer the detective withdrew from his pocket the warrant card, which was official guarantee of his status.

"And now," he said, as Johnny handed it back, "tell me all about it."

Intent, but unmoved, he listened to the tale of Johnny's career and prospects, of his relations with Ginger, their discovery of the previous night, and, finally, of their recent interview with the counterfeit detective. Nor, except occasionally to interject a question, did Oates make any comment until the tale was at an end, and by then his grim slit of a mouth was very grim indeed.

"Who the deuce was this other bloke?" queried Ginger.



Cautiously they approached; then, without the slightest warning, part of the blank wall suddenly opened and swung outwards.

"Can't say——" began Oates, as he rose to leave.

He was actually at the door when the sound came—a low, whirring throb. Instantly he dashed to the window, which overlooked a vast sweep of open country. From over the detective's shoulder Johnny saw, soaring above the tree-tops a quarter of a mile away, a tiny single-seater 'plane. A split second later Oates was streaking down the stairs.

A quarter of an hour, and he was back again, disconsolate.

"Clever!" he said with grudging admiration. "Came last night. Said he was an Air Force officer, then—the same build, of course, but different face and hair. Marvellous disguise it must have been, but the same man undoubtedly. Apologised for a forced landing in the grounds of Arbour Lodge; tinkered with his engine for a spell to prove the necessity.

"Just now he rushed back—as *me* this time, mark you—and handed over some sort of fake documentary evidence to prove it. said that 'Flight-Commander Floodyer' had given him leave to use the 'plane to fly back to London with an urgent report for Scotland Yard." The inspector's mouth drooped.

"Of course, I've done what I could by 'phone," he added lugubriously, "but there isn't an earthly of catching him. He'll come to ground somewhere about a thousand miles from anywhere, lay doggo until dark, and then make for his usual hangar."

"Hard luck!" Johnny murmured sympathetically; he, too, would have appreciated a few moments alone with the pseudo "Oates."

The detective, however, was paying no attention.

"That fortune you were telling me about," he said abruptly. "Am I to understand it's in actual cash?"

Surprised at the query, Johnny nodded.

"The next best thing, anyway," he said, "so far as easy negotiation's concerned. It's in United States Bearer Bonds, all waiting for me to pick up the moment I produce legal proofs of identity."

"To what amount?" Oates asked sharply.

"Just under three hundred thousand dollars," Johnny told him.

Oates was silent. When at last he looked up his face was granite hard.

"Ever heard of the Scarlet Scarab?" he demanded with apparent inconsequence.

"Only," said Johnny, handing over a box of cigarettes, "from that Drury Lane poster announcement that was pinned on to the body we found last night," he said. "And what's a scarab, anyway?"

To his surprise, he noticed that the fingers of the detective, as they groped for a cigarette, were unsteady. It seemed, too, a long time before a reply came to his question.

"The Sacred Beetle of the ancient Egyptians," Oates said at last. "Here the symbol has been adopted as the sign-manual of the gang who not only are going to be all out for that money of yours, but who, in addition, hanged Sir Julian Dore." He paused, looking very directly into Johnny's startled eyes. "And who," he added quietly, "if I'm not mistaken, will soon have selected a tree for yourself."

If Johnny did not immediately reply it was only that stark amazement, and something that felt like an icy hand closing about his throat, had taken his breath away.

"*Me?*" he repeated dazedly at last. "What in Sam Hill would they want to hang *me* for?"

"Money," Oates said quietly. "They'll get that first, and, as they have a constitutional objection to the continued existence of any person who is in a position to cause them inconvenience, hang you afterwards. In the same way," said Oates, ticking off the names on his fingers, "they robbed and hanged James Appleton, the carpet millionaire of Kidderminster; Francis Jenner, the Admiralty contractor; Martin Goodenough, who'd just drawn first prize-money in a foreign State lottery; Gordon Lopez, the retired moneylender; and, finally, Sir Julian Dore."

As if seized with an uncontrollable impulse, the Yorkshireman jumped to his feet, eyes blazing, hands working convulsively.

"I'd give ten years of my life just for one little minute to have the Scarlet Scarab *here*," he said, and his fingers clenched with a force that squeezed the knuckles white as paper.

Designedly, Johnny spoke calmly.

"Nasty piece of work, is he?" he suggested.

The detective, with a strong effort, controlled himself, and sat down.

"Listen, Mr. Travers," he said quietly. "I've had twenty years in the Force. In that time I've dealt with every kind of crook, every type of criminal—thieves, blackmailers, fire-bugs, murderers. In every case but one there's been *some* point—the saturation point in wickedness, if you like to put it that way—beyond which they wouldn't go; there was in each some spark, however dim and flickering, of elementary decency."

He paused, his face strained and tense, in the grip of an overwhelming emotion.

"And the exception?" Johnny inquired, and, in his seat by the window, Ginger leaned forward for the answer.

"The—*devil*—who calls himself the Scarlet Scarab," said Oates, "is the only criminal in my experience who, in essence, is the very negation of good; loving evil as much for its own sake as because it brings him profit."

There was a depth of feeling in the detective's manner—a deep-seated, consuming hatred that, even from a weak man, could not have failed to impress. Coming from Oates—a man among men—strong, self-reliant, brave, it was doubly impressive.

"And what, precisely, is the Scarlet Scarab's particular sphere of activity?" Johnny inquired.

"Organised theft, followed by even more highly organised murder," said Oates. "The victim is selected from among those who the gang have learnt are in possession either of large sums in cash or easily negotiable securities." He paused to light his pipe, pressing down the tobacco with a contemplative finger.

"Once their victim is selected," he continued, his voice vibrant, "and he's cut off as suddenly and remorselessly as if by plague. One day in the midst of his customary activities, the next—gone, *Spurlos Versunken*. Sunk without trace. Then, only a few days later, their bodies are found, trussed as if by a professional hangman, dangling from a wayside tree—sometimes a hundred miles from the scene of their original capture. And always with the same notice and the same signature—that devilish Red Scarab."

When Oates ceased speaking there was a silence in which, while he appeared to be engaged in a visible effort to master his emotion, Johnny strived helplessly to assimilate the revelation that had been made. To him, fresh from an active, healthful life in the Canadian wilds, it seemed incredible, wholly unbelievable, that in a society so highly organised as in Great Britain, policed by a force that is the world's admiration, such a state of affairs could go unchecked.

"How long has this been going on?" he looked up to ask.

"Two years," Oates said with curt brevity.

"And you—Scotland Yard, I mean," Johnny demanded, "are all up in the air?"

The inspector flushed, and a shade pinched about the nostrils, made a savage gesture.

"Not a thing have we learnt about either him or his gang," he said as curtly as before. "For eighteen months, under myself, we've had a whole squad of men engaged, day and night, month after month, on nothing but that one case, and we're as far from even beginning to trace him now as we were before we started. We don't know *who* he is, *where* he is, or anything about him."

He ceased speaking, and in the silence which followed there came to Johnny Travers the germ of an idea—an idea which was the conviction that in the as yet unformulated scheme, lay all that deadly peril the atmosphere of which from early morning had encompassed him.

He felt almost rewarded in advance by the strength and sincerity of the detective's hand-clasp at parting.

"It's very irregular, Mr. Travers," the inspector said gravely, and Johnny smiled.

"You should worry," he pointed out, "after your eighteen months of orthodox methods!"

"And"—the detective's voice was a warning in itself—"I hardly need point out—dangerous."

Johnny raised his eyebrows.

"For me?" he questioned.

"For both of you," Oates confirmed gravely.

Johnny glanced at Ginger, who grunted.

"If it's going to be dangerous for Mr. Travers an' me," that fiery-haired warrior remarked with fervour, "I'd just 'ate to tell you what it's going to be for that Scarlet Arab bloke. I never did like foreigners, anyway."

THE NEXT VICTIM.

In spite of the development of mechanical transport, there remain to-day, and within comparatively short distances of London, certain areas which, on account of natural barrenness, entire lack either of sport or beauty, and almost inaccessible roads, are as isolated and unnoticed as they stood a hundred or more years ago.

Strange, uncanny spots many of these, which not infrequently see and hear sights and sounds even stranger and more uncanny than themselves.

Not so very many miles from Purfleet on the Essex coast, is a stretch of marshland so utterly dreary and inhospitable that the curlew's dismal note seems the only apparent sound to break the brooding silence; the only sign of life within that desolation.

At the eastern centre of this oozing waste, set like the hub of a half-wheel, the spokes representing various uncertain and hardly defined paths to the road half a mile away, stood what once was a house of size and comparative importance.

Rumour had it that the builder was a Kentish smuggler who, finding the Romney Marshes unhealthy for his personal safety, had invested his savings in the erection of this new headquarters. It was also said that in the architecture of that dismal

edifice were many subtleties, and while this strange house was backed by the sea, it was defended on all other sides by an almost impenetrable marsh.

Then, one dark winter night, the old man's own lieutenant had sold the pass and led the hated Revenue men down a path as treacherous as himself. The old smuggler was too game to allow himself to be taken without showing fight, and because of the casualties in the subsequent resistance, he was very promptly and efficiently "turned-off" from Tyburn Tree.

So grim a reputation had this dark house begotten from those days, that now, within an area of ten square miles, there were not six people who would have braved those tortuous paths to approach within a mile of it.

Nor did this gaunt old pile stand alone in its inglorious past. Some two hundred yards from it, as in a small oasis of its own, stood a small and utterly abandoned cottage. Now, forlorn and dejected, it was said that once it had been a kind of supplementary store-room for the smugglers.

Silence, grim and ominous, seemed to brood over the whole place, and nowhere would it be thought possible to find a more entirely rejected and deserted habitation.

Yet not so deserted was it. Unseen, unknown, were many from beyond that superstitious area who, though no soul but themselves were aware of it, could and did approach that rotting front-door both in confidence and in darkness.

* * * * *

It was upon a night of intense blackness when, in a room which, in spite of the marsh, was well below ground-floor level, the Crimson Scarab faced his assembled Council of Twenty—the inner administrative force of that terrible freemasonry of infamy.

The apartment was long and narrow, as was the table about which they sat. The walls were of a blackness so intense that it was as though the room had been burnt out of living wood. Apart from the table, itself as black as bog-oak could make it, and the chairs, of the same dead wood, the only appointments were the three lights, which hung equidistant over the table. So sombrely did these burn through their smoked-glass bulbs set beneath coal-black shades, that the illumination was in itself only an accentuation of the prevailing gloom.

Upon each side of the table sat, motionless as shrouded statues, nine figures, and over the head of each was drawn a hood, blank except for the slits cut into it for eyes and mouth.

At the bottom of the table sat, bolt upright, and yet, in spite of the concealing robe, somehow dominant, another figure similarly attired. There was that in his attitude and, when he spoke, in his voice, an air of authority which, however, did not convey the impression of being quite of his own force, but only, as it were, in support of the small, hunched figure who, from his position at the head of the table, dominated and held in subjection that whole grotesque assembly.

And yet, if the English was somewhat clipped and stilted, the voice of this hunched figure when he spoke was strangely soft and sibilant. Never once was his power shown by a harsh note or threatening movement; no more than would a ring-master find it necessary to threaten a troupe of performing dogs, did he insist upon his own dominion. And yet, surrounding him was an atmosphere of such force, such intense magnetism, that it was as if those others were sitting at his feet; subdued, humble. And the lesson that he taught was of evil untellable.

Upon the breast of his black cloak was sewn, in deep blood-red, the figure 1—the sole touch of colour in the room. Upon the cloak of the man at the bottom of the table, was the figure 2. And, beginning at his right hand, each of those shrouded figures bore, progressively, numbers which ran, until his left hand was reached, from 3 to 20.

By the velvet pall-like curtains, which obscured the entrance, stood the only other present. Strangely though, he, too, was concealed by the prevailing disguise, and apart from the Scarlet Scarab himself, it was he who disseminated the most evil of them all in his squatness and jerky, almost epileptic, movements.

It was Number 2 who first broke the silence which had prevailed since the Scarlet Scarab and his lieutenant had spoken.

"I have to report," he said in a voice which, though low-pitched, was harsh and vibrant, "that the Sentence passed upon Sir Julian Marius Dore at a Special Assembly of this our Council of the Scarlet Scarab, was duly and expeditiously carried out."

He broke off, and with a sharp movement of the hand, turned towards the door.

"'Expeditious' is right!" The thin, jubilant voice came from the doorkeeper who, facing them, was leaning against a fold of the velvet curtains. Of all those in that bizarre apartment he it was who seemed least in fear of the Scarlet Scarab.

"Long practice, gentlemen!" he added in the same tone of exulting self-approval as before, and there was a movement beneath the black robe, as though, arms across chest, he hugged himself from sheer delight. "From Jack Ketch to the last 'party' at Pentonville, there's never been one with such pride an' pleasure in his craft as me!"

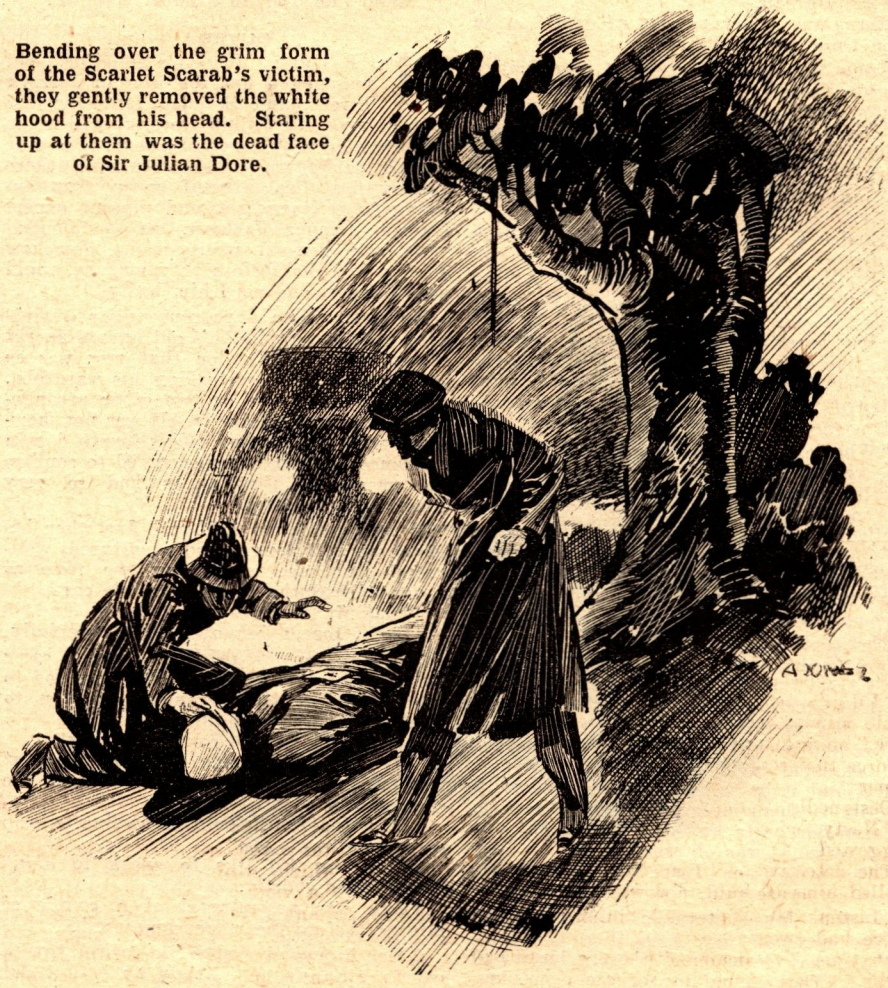
Number 2, with a savage gesture, would have quelled him, but the Scarlet Scarab's gentle voice broke in:

"We appreciate your services, Brother Nought," he said, "at their true worth. We know you, too, to be a true and devoted servant to our Society."

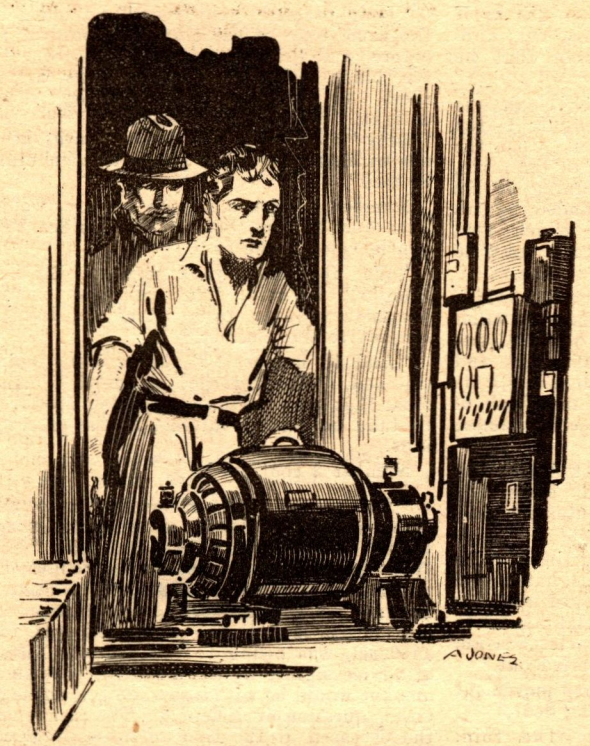
"And to my craft!" the cackling voice rejoined. "Don't forget my craft." And from that moment the door-keeper appeared to take no further interest in the proceedings.

Number 2 continued:

"The proceeds of our enterprise in the case under discussion were satisfactory, though not excessive," he announced. "The War Loan Script, negotiated through the usual source, realised £8,350. The cheque drawn upon the deceased's deposit account, and which it will be recollected was for £100,000, was owing to the previous letter of advice signed by the depositor that such amount would be withdrawn, cashed without either question or difficulty. The cash upon the deceased at the time of his—apprehension—was the relatively small amount of £315. The sale of his personal effects realised a further £110. A total of £108,775. After deduction of the usual percentage for working expenses, the remainder will be



Bending over the grim form of the Scarlet Scarab's victim, they gently removed the white hood from his head. Staring up at them was the dead face of Sir Julian Dore.



Down in the cellar of the crook's house they discovered the motor which operated the mysterious secret panels.

distributed in the agreed proportions. The envelopes await your collection at the Central Bureau."

There was a low rumble of gratification from those about the table.

Came the sibilant voice of the Scarlet Scarab himself. He was lounging negligently back in his big chair, one delicately fashioned hand, of a curious sulphur-yellow, protruding through the folds of his cloak.

"And our future plans?" he inquired softly.

Number 2, who had reseated himself, rose once more to his feet.

"I am pleased to report that a further and distinctly promising prospect arose from the case already dealt with," he said in his harsh businesslike tones, "when, following our usual custom, I was in the neighbourhood to keep an eye upon what followed the discovery of—the unfortunate but necessary result of our—er—enterprise."

"Who exactly was responsible for that discovery?" the detached voice of the Scarlet Scarab broke in to inquire. There was a moment's pause before Number 2 replied.

"Our prospective—er—benefactor—himself," he said. "A Canadian by the name of Travers, who has come to England to realise a considerable legacy."

The hooded head looked up to the burly figure facing him.

"I trust," his soft voice broke in with a sibilant sweetness that, to a gathering other than this, would have brought a slowing of pulses and a chill of sheer horror, "he will be successful in his mission."

"Would it be indiscreet," he went on to inquire in the same gentle voice, "how the information as to his—and I trust our own good fortune—was obtained?"

"By myself—as Inspector Oates," the standing figure said, not without pride.

A little laugh, terrible in its softness, broke in.

"Ah, that clever one!" the Scarlet Scarab said. "That hound-dog of the deep, loud bark and the terrible fangs that close so viciously upon nothing at all!"

It did not seem, however, as though this amused contempt was shared to quite the same extent by Number 2.

"A blundering hound, true," he said harshly; "but there comes a day when even the most obtuse dog of all chances upon the right scent. Our friend is of the type who, once he strikes the trail, will never leave it while he has life."

"Then, obviously," the purring voice replied, "it is to the interests of our Society that that life is not inconveniently prolonged."

Number 2 nodded slowly.

"That," he said contemplatively, "probably will come up for our consideration in the not far distant future." There was a further uneasy pause. "I have a feeling about that official," Number 2 said at last, "that, while difficult either to account for or to explain, is not quite a happy one."

A cackling voice from the door called out gloatingly:

"Hand him over to Number Nought!"

OUTED!

MR. RAYMOND, Johnny's solicitor, had engaged a flat for him in Jermyn Street, and the day following the inquest upon Sir Julian Dore, at which the usual verdict of "Murder by some person or persons unknown," was returned, there Johnny installed himself with that ex-champion welterweight and present expert trainer, Ginger Jackson, as confidential valet and general utility-man. Somehow Johnny felt that before very long he would need Ginger, and need him badly.

He spent three days renewing acquaintance with as many of his old haunts as yet remained in the London that now was so strange to him, in restocking his wardrobe, and in making one or two other arrangements not quite so simple. It was not, however, until the evening of his fourth day in residence that anything occurred to confirm the suspicions that Oates had so very definitely inculcated.

It was just after half-past five when his telephone bell rang. And a cultured, well-modulated voice came over the wire as Johnny lifted the receiver to his ear.

"That Mr. Travers?"

"Right here," Johnny replied cheerfully.

"Mr. Raymond's office speaking," came the answer. "Mr. Raymond wishes me to ask if it will be convenient for you to receive him at seven this evening?"

Johnny did a little quick thinking.

"Mr. Raymond there?" he inquired at last, and there was a hiatus before the answer came.

"He is just on the point of leaving to keep an appointment, sir."

"Tell him I'd like to speak to him," Johnny said shortly.

There was an interval of a couple of minutes before the voice came again.

"Mr. Raymond wishes me to ask you to excuse him, sir, as already he is late for his appointment," it said courteously but with decision.

"Tell him," Johnny said thoughtfully, "that I'll be in at seven," and rang off.

* * * * * *

Barely had the last stroke of that hour died away from the little silver clock on the mantel when there came the whir of the bell from his front door.

"I will answer it, Ginger," Johnny instructed. And then he added definitely: "Now you make yourself scarce as a frog's tail-feathers."

The plump, medium-sized man who, a moment later, was ushered in by Johnny, had the assured and kindly bearing of the London professional man of undisputed standing; morning-coated, platinum watch-chained, clipped-moustached, with brown, examining eyes and fresh complexion, and the hand he held out in greeting was white and adequately manicured. In clothes and bearing he was as impeccably correct as he was in voice and gesture.

"As the mountain, as represented by you, Mr. Travers," he said pleasantly, "has not so far come to Mohammed, myself as an unworthy representative has seized gladly upon the excuse to visit the mountain—even though the time selected may perhaps, be a little inconveniently near to dinner."

"Glad to see you, sir," Johnny assured him. "I don't dine until eight, anyway. But, while we're on the subject, what about a cocktail?"

The solicitor's good-natured face lightened.

"My answer is what, at this hour, I make a practice of replying to such a suggestion," he said, his eyes twinkling. "I shall be delighted."

While Johnny, who rather fancied himself at the art, shook a couple of "Bronxs," his visitor's kindly gaze travelled about the room.

"You live here alone, Mr. Travers?" he inquired in mild surprise.

"There's a woman comes to clean in the early morning," Johnny replied above the rattle of ice in the shaker, and the other raised carefully-tended eyebrows.

"But surely she's not your sole staff?" he suggested.

"I've a man, of course," Johnny said, carefully measuring the drinks into glasses he had fetched from the kitchenette himself.

"Out, I presume?" said his visitor.

"For the evening," Johnny confirmed, handing over the brimming glass, the contents of which the other sipped gratefully.

"And now, Mr. Travers," he remarked briskly, waving aside Johnny's silent suggestion of a re-fill, "to business!"

"Good enough!" said Johnny warmly.

"Your respected grand-uncle, Mr.——"

"Brent," said Johnny, as the other became afflicted with one of those unaccountable lapses of recollection to which every one is liable.

"Brent," went on the solicitor, "appeared to be most anxious that, when his benefaction became yours, you should be able to enter into possession with the least possible delay or formality. Thus—and if I may be allowed to say so—due in some small measure to the legal spade-work I myself have been able to accomplish pending your arrival in this country, all that remains to be completed before I am legally justified in passing those very valuable bearer bonds into your possession, is the production by yourself of legal proof of identity."

Johnny, who had listened intently to this lucid and gracefully delivered exposition, nodded quietly.

"I have 'em all," he remarked easily, and went over to a small Sheraton bureau in the window. "Right here," he confirmed, taking a bundle of papers from a drawer.

The solicitor held out his hand.

"May I see, please?" he suggested, and without hesitation Johnny handed them over.

Humming cheerfully to himself, the solicitor examined carefully each document in turn. Then, from the same pocket as which, after folding them severally into their original creases, he placed them, he produced a paper of his own, stamped, closely-printed, and typed, and with a space left at the foot for signature.

"Just sign on the dotted line, Mr. Travers, please," he cried gaily; "and then——"

"And then?" Johnny said, his face inscrutable.

With a glance from beneath lowered lids the other spread his hands benevolently.

"Why then," he explained, in the same cheery voice as before, "everything will be all in order."

"In order for whom?" Johnny inquired, and met his visitor's eyes four-square.

And as their glances locked, slowly at first, but, a split-second later, as swiftly as a breeze disturbs the placidity of a lake surface, the other's expression changed. All the *bonhomie* and frankness drained from it, leaving it hard and implacable.

"What exactly do you mean?" he demanded, and his voice rang with a curious metallic coldness.

Johnny's eyes did not flinch. Nor did he attempt to evade the issue.

"In order for whom?" he repeated clearly. And then more slowly still: "For myself, or—the Scarlet Scarab?"

Not infrequently in recent years half a split-second's advantage in pulling a gun had been the exact margin between Johnny's continued existence and an abrupt exit to eternity, so that he had come to consider himself something of an expert. In comparison with the immaculate figure who faced him across the table now, however, he discovered himself a slothful amateur. One moment the man's hand was empty; an infinitesimal fraction of a heartbeat later it held a small, but extremely efficient automatic.

"Put 'em *right* up, Mr. Travers," the other said conversationally, and Johnny, to whom experience had taught exact knowledge as to when an opponent meant business, raised his hands above his head.

"I wonder," he said meditatively as he did so, "to which particular member of your gang of sneak-thieves and plug-uglies has been assigned the rôle of impersonating me at Mr. Raymond's office?"

Not much, he had thought, would have power to disturb the hard-boiled criminality of the man, and it was the other's reception of this that first brought home the unparalleled strength of the hold the Scarlet Scarab had attained over his followers.

The crook's eyes glinted with the light of fanaticism; momentarily the slim white forefinger trembled on the trigger of the automatic.

"But for what immediately faces you," he began thickly, "I'd——"

He broke off, pushed the paper across to Johnny's side of the table, backed a few paces, and with the automatic pointed directly at Johnny, said harshly:

"*Sign!*"

Johnny looked at him curiously.

"Strange how a man's early training stays with him!" he remarked pleasantly. "Which was *your* counter? Before you gave up shop-walking for theft, I mean. Ribbons or baby-linen?"

The other looked at him acidly.

"Are you going to sign?" he said slowly, and Johnny nodded.

"I am," he said, and, as he lowered his hand to take up the pen, saw how his visitor's eyes lighted, as if from within, "*not!*" Johnny added, jabbed the uninked pen into the paper, drew it savagely across the page, leaving a jagged tear on the sheet. "And that's that," he supplemented.

The man smiled, exposing teeth as white and pointed as those of a wolf. Then he nodded:

"That, as you say, is that," he confirmed pleasantly, and pressed the trigger of his pistol.

But it was no swift, merciful bullet that issued from that vicious blue rim of steel—a bullet would have been easy and merciful in comparison. Instead, there jetted forth a thin, incredibly compressed rod of vapour, luminously white, which, impinging against Johnny's face, burst immediately into a cloud which, with the first sharply indrawn breath of astonishment, seized his throat with the sensation of Herculean fingers equipped with white-hot spikes; a cloud which dived deeply into his lungs, bursting and consuming them; shot upward to his brain, jagged and tore it.

The roof fell down, the walls closed in, the floor rose up.

He was in icy black darkness, through which vivid lightning stabbed spears of crimson flame.

He knew no more.

. . . .

Peering cautiously from the main entrance to the flats, Ginger saw, twenty yards down the street, a high-power car drawn up against the kerb. The driver, high collar drawn up and wide-brimmed hat pressed down, was slumping over the wheel so that, to those on the pavement, no portion of his face was visible.

Ginger turned and, crossing the vestibule, disappeared through a small door that communicated with those dim back premises which, to the average flat-dweller, remain ever an unexplored mystery. So far from the normal, however, was the ex-welter-weight champion, that he had not been resident twenty-four hours beneath his master's roof before knowing every door and outlet of those rear rooms as he knew "the palm of me 'and." Among other facts he had gathered was that, across the tiny yard, a door led to a lane which, at right-angles, communicated with Jermyn Street.

When at last he emerged it was well to the rear of the car, and by that time it was in the stained and faded overalls, and carrying the tool-bag of a motor-mechanic. At this dinner-hour Jermyn Street was unusually clear of traffic, and as he quietly approached the car, concealed in Ginger's right hand was a freshly-sharpened knife. Two minutes later, one of the studs of the new back tyre, severed cleanly, was in his hand, and he was crossing the road.

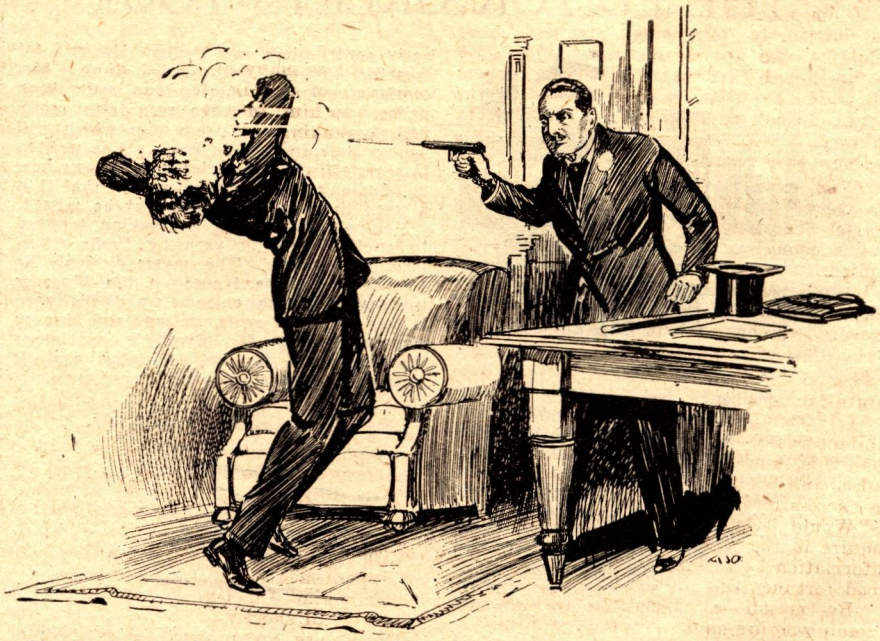
A few yards to the left of the flat entrance ran a narrow passage between two shops, and from this concealment, standing with his motor-cycle, which he had hidden there, Ginger watched. If, as he had admitted to Johnny, he knew nothing of driving a car, about a motor-cycle he had nothing to learn.

Quite suddenly the blind of Johnny's sitting-room window was lowered. A moment later the car crawled slowly to the door; a man climbed down and disappeared.

Five minutes later, with no attempt at concealment, two men emerged from the entrance, making loud and valedictory comments upon the weight and general unwieldliness of the large feather mattress which, between them, they bundled roughly into the tonneau. Then, while one of them made off on foot, the better-dressed of the two climbed beside the chauffeur, and the car drove off.

"The dirty dogs!" Ginger muttered savagely, and before the retreating car had covered thirty yards, was astride his cycle and following.

Through all the clutter of traffic of the Haymarket, Trafalgar Square, and the Strand, he contrived to keep in touch. In Fleet Street, however, the congestion cleared, and through the City the roads were comparatively free.



Slowly the crook pressed the trigger, but the bullet Trevor expected never came. Instead, a cloud of vapour enveloped his nead and gasping he staggered back and collapsed.

THE MOVING WALL.

JOHNNY came to himself, slowly, painfully, and without the least idea where he was or what had happened to him.

All of which, for the first few moments of consciousness, he was aware, was that he was lying on a mattress in the corner of an extremely unclean, empty room that was lighted by a single almost burnt-out bulb suspended from the ceiling.

For the reason that the slightest movement brought a stab of pain, like the thrust of a red-hot dagger, through his brain, he lay for a few moments motionless, attempting to assemble his shattered wits to some sort of coherence.

Gradually the scene in his flat came back to him. Dimly at first, but, as the minutes sped, with more clarity. After what he judged to be about half an hour, his recollection was complete of all that had happened to the moment when that searing, choking jet of vapour struck his face. Following that, of course, all was blank.

Cautiously, inch by inch, every movement an agony, he raised himself to a sitting position. There he was obliged to remain motionless for the thick black cloud that swirled and eddied before his pain-racked eyes. Gradually, however, this dispersed, until he found himself able to move freely and without more than an occasional stab of pain.

He struggled at last to his feet.

Once at the upright, again that cloud of agony descended, and, leaning heavily against the wall, he was forced to remain quiescent. But this in turn passed, until at last, his only discomfort was a racking, consuming thirst that ate into his throat like air super-charged with heat, so that he was left dry and yearning as a sponge on sun-drenched rock. He could not have thought it possible for such thirst to exist.

Even now that he was on his feet, except that the movement had dispelled the more active of his pain, it did not seem that he was any better off.

Two minutes' exploration showed the uselessness of any attempt to escape; the door was stout, with a double-lock. The only window, high up and out of reach, was iron-barred at that. Examination of his pockets showed that everything he possessed—revolver, money, cigarettes—all had been taken from him. Of the times, which were not few, that he had pitted his own wit and courage against the forces of crime and disorder, never had he been so utterly and hopelessly worsted.

He could have kicked himself for the ineptitude that had led him to enter into a fight against such a force so ill-equipped with any weapon that really mattered. From the moment of that suave crook's entrance into his flat he—Johnny Travers—with the reputation of being able to meet cunning with cunning second to none in the whole Canadian Mounted Police, had been out-bluffed and out-manœuvred.

There was the sound of footsteps outside, the rasp of withdrawn bolts. The door swung open.

Despite that from head to foot it was swathed in a long black gown in which only slits were cut for eyes and mouth, and that upon the breast, in blood-red characters, was worked "Number 1," in itself there was nothing either particularly imposing or awe-inspiring in the figure that stood so motionless upon the threshold while three other similarly-clad figures lined up behind him. Johnny judged, indeed, that, once relieved of that melodramatic make-up, the man would be small and insignificant.

But there was about him, as he stood there, a tenseness that seemed as penetrating as a steel drill, implacable as a cobra, and as free from all humanity. With his presence the whole atmosphere of the room seemed to have become super-charged with evil.

Hands folded beneath his gown, eyes boring into Johnny's face in cold dominion, the hooded head nodded slowly.

"And here," he said, in a silken, sibilant whisper, "we have the g-g-reat Sergeant John Philip Trever-r-r-r."

Johnny did not immediately reply. He was in the very thick of the hardest struggle of his life, a fight in which, because of the strange weakness that had seized upon him, and that obtained firmer hold because of the exhaustion left by his recent experience, the odds were all against him.

What he strove against, what threatened him with the inexorable purpose of some natural, unchangeable law, was that his whole moral strength and individuality must yield itself and become submerged into the dominance of that awful stunted figure who confronted him. And he knew with a certainty that was like a clarion call to his spirit, that be the toll upon him what it might, he must not falter. Beaten in that deadly, implacable fight, there would be neither compunction shown nor quarter given. No longer would he belong to himself.

Then gradually, the sweat streaming down his pallor-stricken face, his hands clasped in a grip that brought the blood to the palms and stretched the skin tight across the knuckles, he saw with a lessening of the tension that was like a clean, cool wind to his spirit, that the light in the other's eyes was gradually fading, and that with the fading the intensity of their magnetism was lessening.

Each passing instant he became more his own man, more predominantly captain of his soul. And with the quenching of that light passed, too, by far the greatest of his trepidation. Henceforward the contest would be between man and man, and in a straight fight with weapon, fist, or brain, he had yet to meet the man he feared.

"You can cut out that mesmeric bunk right now," he said, after the silent contest had lasted what seemed an eternity. "You're on a loser; I don't—and shan't—fall for it." He concentrated his own glance. "Besides, it only weakens you, anyway," he added.

There was reason for this last. The fight at an end, the loser was obviously suffering from the discharge of a Force for which he had received nothing in exchange. The luminous sheen that had been his eyes had filmed over an odd sullen grey, like ashes on a burnt-out fire; one hand, delicately fashioned, but of a dull sulphur-yellow in colour, had stolen from beneath his gown to support him against the lintel of the door. When he spoke all the life had left the vibrant softness of his voice.

"That bravery I spoke of," he whispered. "A pity—that it will not avail you. But"—he shrugged, and failed in his intention to make the gesture one of contempt—"where one Force fails, how easy to reinforce it with another."

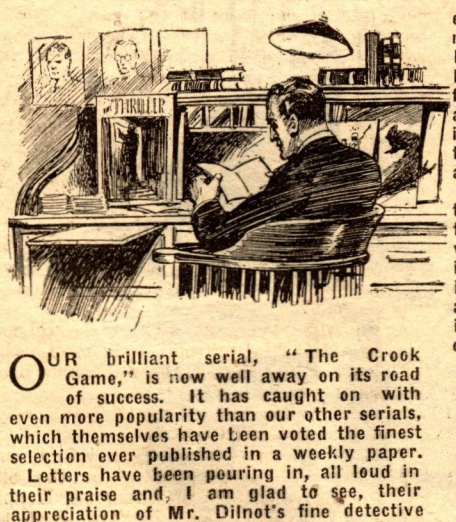
Then, suddenly and unexpected, Johnny saw red. The man was unclean—repellant. Propelled by an irresistible impulse of loathing, he shot forward—and the hooded figure stepped quietly back, the three behind opened their rank to shelter him, and Johnny found himself covered by that same number of pistols, and as he had had one taste of what those weapons might contain, he stepped as quickly back.

The rank opened, and once more his tormentor stepped forward. At a gesture two other figures appeared, carrying a small light table, upon which were papers and writing materials. A quick glance informed Johnny that the topmost document was a copy of the one that previously he had been required to sign. The hooded figure dipped the pen in the ink, held it invitingly before him.

"Sign, please," he said, and his voice was penetrating.

"What, *another* shopwalker!" Johnny said interestedly. "How the trade does cling together!"

THE EDITOR GREETS YOU!



OUR brilliant serial, "The Crook Game," is now well away on its road of success. It has caught on with even more popularity than our other serials, which themselves have been voted the finest selection ever published in a weekly paper.

Letters have been pouring in, all loud in their praise and, I am glad to see, their appreciation of Mr. Dilnot's fine detective technique. There are few people who have a better knowledge of Scotland Yard and its methods and the artifice of the criminal than Mr. Dilnot.

Last week I gave you some idea of the splendid programme in store for you, and among the famous authors I mentioned as early contributors was Sydney Horler. All mystery fiction enthusiasts know Mr. Horler's gripping stories and enthralling books, and now I have secured a really first-class "thriller" from him which will appear in a fortnight's time. It is written in a style that Mr. Horler alone knows how to handle, and I can promise you that it is a yarn that must certainly not be missed.

You will, of course, be looking forward to another brilliant yarn by Leslie Charteris next week. The mystery that he weaves round the House on the Moor is intriguing in the extreme, and the yarn is full of the swift action and breezy atmosphere that Mr. Charteris specialises in. Don't fail to read the latest exploits of Simon Templar and his merry men.

Yours sincerely,

The Editor

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

The gibe passed unnoticed; in spite of his smallness of stature his tormentor was a bigger man than the pseudo-solicitor.

"Here—*you!*" he exclaimed loudly, and the three hooded figures, with those terrible pistols, stepped forward. The Scarlet Scarab indicated those weapons with a gesture.

"You have had a taste of—that?" he questioned, and again his voice was of a silken softness.

"You wouldn't have been able to bring me here, otherwise," Johnny said contemptuously.

The other shook his head.

"One must use what weapons are conveniently to hand," he said, and glanced at the wrist which protruded from his gown. "You have just three-e-e minutes in which to make up your mind," he added.

"And if I refuse?" Johnny questioned.

"Then will arise," the other said softly, "the—unfortunate—necessity of applying pressure to at least one of those triggers. A deplorable contretemps it is sincerely to be hoped may be avoided. Particularly," he added with silken significance, "as the mixture they contain is slightly more potent than that which you were so unfortunate as to experience in your own flat. And even while I have been speaking time has not stood still. *One* minute."

Johnny hesitated—which was outside his habit. The idea of consent under duress was unpleasant—but not so unpleasant as a further experience of that choking, gripping gas, the effects of which were still apparent in the swift waves of giddiness and nausea which from time to time seized him, and a certain vagueness of thought and action. A second application, and of increased strength, would just about finish him.

"*Two minutes!*" The soft sibilance of the voice was inexorable.

Johnny took a step forward.

"Give me a further sixty seconds to read what I'm to sign," he said shortly, and, mockingly, the slight hooded figure bowed.

"Gladly," he said, and thrust the paper across the table. And, glancing quickly through the typewritten lines, Johnny discovered it to be a full discharge, to his solicitor, Mr. Raymond, in return for his handing over the Bearer Bonds that were his legacy.

"A document," the Scarlet Scarab explained pleasantly, "which, for their own protection, is insisted upon by every lawyer when handing over the proceeds of an estate to a legatee, and without which we should be—er—seriously handicapped."

It was as he laid aside the pen after having scrawled his signature, that interruption came. There was a shout from outside, the sudden scuffling of feet; a cry, followed by a shot, and still another cry.

One of the hooded figures dashed to the door, flung it open, and as quickly closed it. With the opening the sounds of battle increased to a fury of thuds and hoarse cries, in the latter of which, with a quick throb of exultation, Johnny was able to recognise the growling joy of Ginger in battle. Johnny thought, also, that he could distinguish the colder but not less businesslike accents of Detective-inspector Oates.

For a fractional second the Scarlet Scarab stood as one transfixed—and even in that incredibly brief period before the room was plunged in darkness, Johnny was aware in the attitude less of fear than of expectancy. Simultaneously with that sudden extinction of the light, came, from the side of the room, a dull, hollow crash. There was a rush of cold air; Johnny felt a spatter of rain upon his cheeks.

The door burst open with a crash. The room seemed filled with figures, but whether friends or foes for a moment he was unable to determine. Then Ginger's voice, breathless and anxious:

"You there, Mr. Travers, sir?"

"Right here, Ginger," Johnny said reassuringly. There was the scrape of a match, which instantly the damp breeze that swept through the room extinguished. A torch flashed, the beam flickered round.

It disclosed only Johnny; there was no sign of the Scarlet Scarab!

"No one else here?" Oates' voice came anxiously.

"There *were* several," Johnny said in a mystified voice, "but I'm blamed if I know where they've gone." He advanced gropingly towards the window side of the room.

"Look *out*, sir!" yelled Ginger, and Johnny pulled up. If that step had been completed he would have fallen thirty feet into the Thames.

Cosh in hand, the crook stood there gazing down at the figure of his victim huddled on the pavement.

The torches enabled him to see from what he had escaped. Like the lid of a suspended box, one part of the wall, some six feet square, had flapped down and outward. From the ceiling, and through the opening thus left, dangled a heavy knotted rope. Craning downward, Johnny was aware of water lapping against the side of the house; listening intently, he heard the throb of a retreating motor-boat. A glance at the table told him that the paper had disappeared.

"Who is that?" Oates gasped anxiously, as they listened to the fast-fading sound of the engine.

"The Scarlet Scarab," Johnny said regretfully, and Oates cursed quietly to himself.

"The first time in two years I've been within distance, and the blighter gets away," he said angrily, and started back with a cry as, without warning, but with a noise like the slamming of an enormous door, the flap swung suddenly back, closing the wall as tightly as if no opening had ever been. Simultaneously the light went up.

Johnny had sunk faintly down upon the mattress. At the moment he was concerned only with the miracle of his own escape. Apart from that, he had had about all that even his steel-wire constitution could stand.

"How did you get here, anyway?" he asked uncertainly, and Oates gestured towards Ginger.

"He trailed them on his motor-cycle," he said laconically, "and when he'd run them to ground, 'phoned the Yard."

"We'd have been 'ere before," Ginger said regretfully, "if 'alf way down Limehouse Causeway, my engine hadn't gone back on me."

The detective turned to him in surprise.

"*Then* how did you trace them?" he demanded quickly.

"Outside the flat, sir, I'd cut a stud out of their back tyre. That 'elped me to track 'em through the mud of the road," Ginger said modestly. "Easy enough with no other traffic, and the surface like paste."

A knock at the door, and the sergeant came in.

"Another roped in, sir," he reported. "A chap in the cellar, tinkering with the electric-light switch."

Oates thought for a moment.

"Stay right here, sergeant, and report what happens," he said, and, followed by Johnny and Ginger, clattered down the hollow-sounding stairs. In the passage at the bottom, lined up against the wall, in their grotesque cloaks, hoods thrust back from their faces, were half a dozen scowling hand-cuffed members of the gang. Ignoring these, Oates traversed the full length of the passage, and clattered down the cellar stairs. In a small alcove at the bottom was installed an electric plant; modern, elaborate, and meticulously maintained. To the right of this was a switch.

"I'll bet that's what the chap was monkeying with," Oates said confidently, pressed down the lever, waited a few moments, and pulled it up again.

"Now let's go upstairs," he said, and they followed him to the top floor.

"Anything happened?" he inquired of the sergeant.

"The light went out, sir, and so did half the wall," the latter replied unemotionally. "Then, a minute later, the wall came back, and so did the light."

TROUBLE.

THE private office of Mr. Hilary Raymond, sole surviving partner in the old-established firm of Raymond, Hepplewhite & Raymond, was exactly what the room of a family solicitor should be. Large and airy, mellowed polished mahogany furniture, thick Turkey carpet, steel engravings, deep leather chairs and, upon a shelf which ran along three of the walls, deed-boxes, the names upon which had figured largely in British history.

Tall, and of middle age, with slightly silvered hair and steady kindly eyes, the lawyer, an excellent specimen of the family solicitor of standing, was this morning, seated at his desk.

He cast a quick, comprehensive glance at a photograph which lay beside him before rising to greet the visitor who, at that moment, was announced by his clerk.

A personable figure enough, this caller; tall and bronzed, with clothes of a slightly Canadian cut. When he spoke his accent, too, was Canadian.

"I sure am pleased to meet you, Mr. Raymond," he said heartily, "though I guess I can't shake hands in proof of it," and, holding out his right hand, showed that it was heavily bandaged. "Got it trapped in a coach door on your Underground," he explained ruefully.

The visitor took the big chair Mr. Raymond indicated, and for a few moments they chatted of Canada and Johnny's experiences there, and of the changes in London since, four years previously, the younger man had sailed for the Dominion.

It was Mr. Raymond who switched the conversation at last, and when he did so his expression was more acute and his eyes less smiling.

"And now to get down to business, Mr. Travers," he said quietly, and glanced at the photograph again. "Not much chance of a mistake, of course, considering the speaking likeness you were good enough to post from Winnipeg."

"I had that likeness taken especially, so as to be right up-to-date," the young man explained complacently.

"A very wise provision, Mr. Travers," the lawyer said with approval. "And now—a mere formality, of course—but the legal profession is made up of formalities—I'm sure you won't mind telling me something of your early history; birth, parentage, and so on."

The recital, brief enough not to be tedious, but with detail sufficient for conviction, occupied only a few moments.

"Splendid!" the solicitor said approvingly when it was ended. "And now," he added, "it remains only for you to produce the documents in support of the particulars you have been kind enough to give, to enable me, with a clear conscience, to relieve myself of the responsibility of your estate."

The younger man's face lightened.

"And they told me," he said appreciatively, "that Old Countrymen were slow. I guess we couldn't have got through quicker even in Canada." His hand dived into his breast pocket. "Right here I've everything you'll need to convince you I'm the real genuine Johnny Travers," he said, and handed over the packet. "Just cast your eye over these, and when you've given them your O.K. hand over the Bonds and any odd cash there is after the deduction of your charges, and then—why, I guess I needn't take up any more of your time," he said.

Without unfolding the packet, the lawyer paused for a moment. If his expression was no less friendly, his eyes were shrewd.

"In view of your unfortunate accident, I'm afraid there must be some further formality before that can be acomplished," he said regretfully, and the legatee looked up sharply.

"What's that?" he jerked.

"Your signature in acknowledgment and full discharge," the lawyer said quietly. "Of course, if your injury were permanent it would be sufficient for you to make your mark before witnesses. But as I take it you are not in immediate want of funds, the few days' delay before you will be able to use a pen will not be very material."

His visitor's face cleared.

"No need even to wait that long," he said brightly. "I've got that discharge with me right now. It was prepared," he explained, "by O'Hagan & Rice, your Winnipeg agents, who advised me of poor grand-uncle's death."

Mr. Raymond returned his smile with one not less friendly.

"In the circumstances, a wise—if somewhat unusual—provision," he said quietly, and, leaning back in his chair, glanced at the first of the documents in his hand. And as he did so his eyes hardened. Quickly, then, he turned from one to the other of them, scanning each closely and intently.

"Just a moment," he said at last, laid the documents on the desk, and pressed the bell at his side. There must have been something unusual in his manner for, with a muttered exclamation, his visitor sprang to his feet.

"What are you pressing that bell for?" he asked, and his voice rung harshly.

"What, but to send my clerk for the Bonds?" the lawyer said, regarding him with mild surprise.

With a little sigh of relief, the visitor sank once more into his chair—only to spring up again when, in answer to that ring, the door opened to disclose—Inspector Oates.

For a long moment the two regarded each other in silence, Oates smiling grimly, the visitor white-faced and tense. Then, in a flash, his hand dived for his arm-pit, and had it not been for that encumbering bandage, he might have fought his way to the street. As it was, in face of the automatic that menaced him, he ceased fumbling for the trigger-guard with a finger too tightly bound to reach it, and dropped the weapon to the floor.

"Arthur, the Actor!" Oates said in wonderment. "Well, well, well! And who'd have thought of Arthur being mixed up with the Scarlet Scarab!"

Without removing his eyes from the crook, he called:

"Come right in, Mr. Travers, and take a look at your twin-brother!"

Johnny came into the room and ranged himself beside the crook, and only then was Mr. Raymond able to realise the exact finish that Arthur had put into his performance. Clothes, hair, features—reproduced with breath-taking similarity. Both might have been poured from the same mould.

"Aren't you the little artist, Arthur?" Oates observed admiringly. "In make-up, anyway, if not in the conduct of your business," he qualified. "Whatever made you mix yourself up with the Scarlet Scarab? Surely you were doing well enough on your own? Than Arthur, the Actor, the con. game has no more distinguished exponent, so why change your methods—and your associates?"

The crook, his eyes suspicious, shrugged his shoulders.

"Stop your kiddin', Mr. Oates," he said sullenly, "I know nothing about any Scarlet Scarab, and well you know it. I work solo. Always have, and always will. It's safer."

Oates stepped forward and slipped on the handcuffs. Then he motioned his prisoner to a chair.

"Tell me, Arthur," he said, "just how you happened to get into this, and I'll do what I can for you." His face hardened, his mouth grim as a trap. "But if you don't come clean, you're for it."

"No reason why I shouldn't come clean," the crook said truculently. "It was this way. I was in the bar at the Carlton Hotel when——"

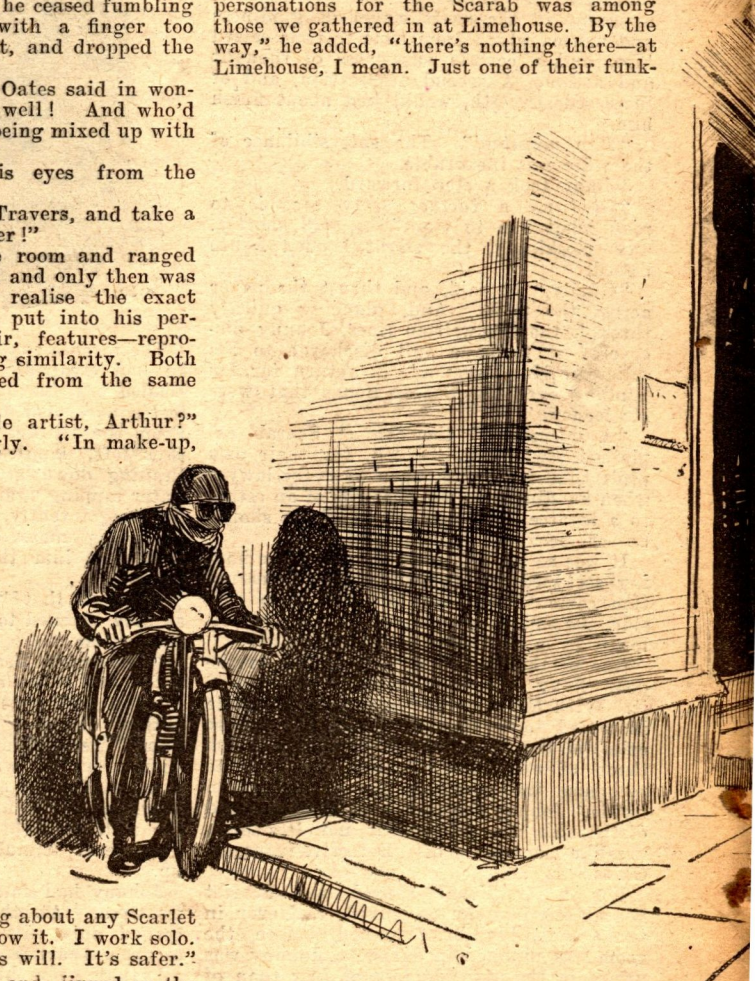
A look of surprise overspread his features, and with that surprise a tiny red-blue mark came to the middle of his forehead. Then, suddenly, he slumped in his chair like something suddenly deflated. His hands hung limply; he gave a little gurgling sigh, and after that did not move.

"By heaven!"

Oates sprang to his feet, and so did Johnny. But while the latter tended the shot man, Oates dashed to the window. From the attic of the empty house opposite a tiny feather of smoke was curling.

Two seconds later Oates was bounding down the stairs; was across the road. The door of the house was closely fastened, and there was another few moments delay before he could climb the railings that separated the street from the ground floor windows. Once in the empty front room, he knew he was beaten, for the door into the passage was locked, too. Impotently standing there, he heard footsteps pass along the passage and out of the door at the back.

"Not but what it wasn't a clever move," he said when, once more in Mr. Raymond's office, he had attended to the removal of the murdered man. "With Johnny free, there was always the big chance we'd be watching this office. Besides, the one who did the impersonations for the Scarab was among those we gathered in at Limehouse. By the way," he added, "there's nothing there—at Limehouse, I mean. Just one of their funk-



Astride his motor-bike, Ginger waited. Suddenly he started as two men came from Trevor's house struggling beneath the weight of a large feather mattress.

holes. The headquarters I'm after are somewhere else."

Mr. Raymond handed over the papers the dead crook had left.

"I'm afraid if I'd known what the end would be," he said gravely to Johnny, "I should not have been so ready to prepare these bogus documents. I'm getting a little old for tragedy, or even to act as a detective. But to come to something more pleasant, why not call here to-morrow with the originals and get your own affairs settled up?"

"Make it the day after," Johnny said, for he felt that he would like to hold the next day free for anything the detective might require of him. Actually, however, beyond making a written statement at Scotland Yard, there was nothing.

It was at eleven o'clock of the day following that once more he presented himself at Bedford Row. Goodwin, the chief clerk, met him in the outer office, his face troubled.

"I'm afraid Mr. Raymond is not in, sir," he said rather uncertainly, and something in his tone caused Johnny to prick up his ears.

"But I have an appointment," he said quickly.

"I'm sorry, sir," said Goodwin, "but Mr. Raymond is not here."

"When will he be here?" Johnny demanded, and the old clerk looked at him, he thought, a trifle strangely.

"I don't know, sir," he said, and now, quite definitely, there was a quaver in his voice.

Johnny looked at him intently. There was something here that needed explanation, and that explanation he intended to have, and at once.

"Mr. Goodwin," he said gravely, "it doesn't need anything more than your manner to tell me you're worried to death, and I want you to come right through with what's troubling you."

He felt genuine sympathy for the old man's distress, and quite a lot of that showed in his tone. That the old man was touched was evident; that the professional reticence of a lifetime was proof against his urge to unburden himself was more apparent still.

"I think, sir," he said slowly at last, "the best thing you can do is to apply at his house. Number 362, Lancaster Place, is the address, sir. I'm quite sure Miss Raymond will see you."

"You bet your sweet life she will," Johnny said, and was out in the street and, three minutes later, in Holborn, hailing a taxi.

His ring was answered by a butler of the old school, who gazed at him with an anticipation which reverted to disappointment as he realised the caller was a stranger.

"Miss Raymond can see no one, sir," he said firmly.

"Hold hard a minute," Johnny said quickly, as the door was about to close, and involuntarily the butler hesitated. Johnny took a card from his case, and upon it scribbled a few words.

"Give that to your mistress, please," he said.

When, through huge horn-rimmed spectacles, the butler had read what the card contained, his manner changed instantly to a deeper respect, and he opened the door wide.

"Step into the morning-room, sir," he said quietly, ushered Johnny into a small, cosy apartment that ran off from the hall, closed the door quietly behind him, and disappeared.

Five minutes later the door opened and the girl came in. And:

"Gosh!" said Johnny silently to his immortal soul. And again: "Gosh!"

Her figure was of such perfection he found it difficult to judge as to her exact height; all he knew was that it was just right to the rest of her. Her hair, of the colour of a newly-minted penny, had stolen the sunlight with which fr him the day was crowned. Her eyes, wide-set and deep-sea blue looked, now, with deepest anxiety from between jet-fringed lashes that were in exquisite contrast with the unaccustomed pallor of a face that curved in lovely line from broad white brow to rounded chin.

Her mouth was generous and sweet, drooping a little now, though with a tiny tilt to the corners which spoke, normally, of a sense of humour. Her nose was small and straight, with the finely-chiselled nostrils of the thoroughbred. There was grace in her every line and movement, and in nothing so much was this displayed as in the self-command she had established over her anxiety.

"You have news of my father" she asked with a little catch in her golden voice.

He looked at her gravely, heart contracting, but pulse leaping.

"No," he said gravely, "I've come for news of him."

"How did you know?" she asked quickly.

"I don't," he said. "I only know there's something wrong, not what it is." She seemed to hesitate to confide in this stranger, and he said: "He may have mentioned to you what happened in his office the other day," and with his words her face went paler yet.

For a long moment her blue, troubled eyes searched his own; appraising him, analysing. Then, quite suddenly, she seemed to make her decision.

"My father has disappeared," she said quietly, but the break in her voice more obvious.

"Disappeared!" he repeated blankly, and paused, his thoughts racing. "When was that?" he demanded quickly. "And in what circumstances?"

She pointed to a chair.

"Won't you sit down," she said. "I—I think I should like to talk to you."

Amazingly, and with a swift clutching at his heart, he realised that she was glad to have him there; that she was alone and needed counsel.

"It was last night," she said. "He was to dine with a friend of his, Sir Walter Bankes, in Bruton Street. He ordered the car at eight. It came, he got into it, and—disappeared."

"Before or after he arrived at Bruton Street?" Johnny questioned.

"Before," she said. "He never reached there. About nine o'clock Sir Walter telephoned asking what time I thought he would arrive, as they were waiting dinner. That was the first I heard." Her voice drooped to the last point of trepidation. "There has been no single trace of him since," she added. "I've telephoned all the hospitals, but no accident has been reported in which he could have been involved."

"What about the chauffeur?" Johnny asked.

"He's not been back, either," she said hopelessly. "Of course, I telephoned to his sister, who lives with him, but she's heard nothing either."

"Have you communicated with the police?" Johnny demanded, and she shook her head, though rather dubiously, as if she were not sure she ought not to have done so.

"Father does so *hate* a fuss," she explained. "Quite often he's away for the night, visiting clients who live in the country. It's just conceivable, though I admit it doesn't sound very likely, that one of these may have hailed his car, and they've driven off somewhere on some frightfully important case that's cropped up at a moment's notice."

"But surely he'd have telephoned or wired or something," Johnny protested.

Apparently that was a weak spot none recognised more surely than herself; for her eyes were filled with trouble as she said:

"He's never failed to do so before, of course; in fact, he's most particular about letting me know if he's called away. Only there's just the possibility he may have told somebody else to do so, and they've forgotten. Anyway, I was giving him until twelve noon to-day, then I was going to ring up Scotland Yard." Impulsively she stretched out a small white hand. "Oh, Mr. Travers," she said urgently, "I'm so glad you've come!"

She would have been surprised to know just how that same feeling had seized upon Johnny Travers.

"I wonder if you would mind if I made a few independent inquiries?" he asked, his own voice not quite steady. "I don't think it can do any harm, anyway, and there's just the chance I might be able to find out something?"

Her reply was accompanied by a quick look of gratitude that caused the breath to catch in his throat.

"Do, *please!*" she said fervently. Then, as if seized with sudden resolution, she rose quickly to her feet. "And, if you don't mind, I'll come with you," she added.

In the hall Harris, the butler, was hovering uneasily.

"Tell me," Johnny demanded, "where was Mr. Raymond when the car came last night?"

For a moment it looked as if Harris would resent the curt authority of the tone. If that was so, however, a glance at Johnny's face caused him to change his mind.

"As it drove up, sir, I was helping the master on with his coat," he said in an oddly respectful voice. "By the time it stopped at the kerb, Mr. Raymond was halfway down the steps."

Johnny thought for a moment.

"Didn't the chauffeur open the car door for him?" he asked.

Harris looked rather apologetic.

"I'm afraid Brooks was what you might call a little tardy, sir," he said.

"How do you mean, tardy?" Johnny jerked out, and the butler glanced at him keenly.

"The master was at the car door, sir, while Brooks was still climbing out of his seat," he explained. "The master said, sort of sharp-like, 'All right, Brooks. Straight to Bruton Street.' Then he closed the door behind him and they drove off."

Dimly, but with increasing certainty, the tiny germ of an idea which had taken root in Johnny's mind was beginning to mature.

"Tell me, Harris," he said, and now his tone was almost confidential, "did you happen to catch a glimpse of Brooks' face?"

The butler hesitated.

"I don't know that I actually noticed him feature by feature, sir," he said uncertainly. "I couldn't very well, because his back was to me." Adding, after momentary thought: "Besides, he was all muffled up."

Johnny's eyes narrowed.

"All muffled up, was he?" he said slowly, and fixed Harris with his eye. "I suppose it *was* Mr. Raymond's car?" he demanded.

The butler stared, his mouth half open.

"So far as I could see, it was, sir," he protested; "and as it stood outside the door every day for the last couple of years, I know it, as you might say, like the palm of my 'and."

Johnny went to the door, opened it, and looked out into the street. The space between door and railings was considerable, and the pavement wide.

"Was the light on in the hall when the car arrived?" he questioned over his shoulder, and the butler shook his head.

"No, sir," he said.

"What, not at eight o'clock in the evening?" Johnny demanded in surprise, and Harris broke in.

"The electric system of the whole house went wrong only about a quarter of an hour before," she explained.

"But it's all right now?" Johnny asked.

"Yes, sir. It came on again as suddenly as it failed," said Harris.

"What time did it come on again?" Johnny inquired.

"Just after the master'd gone, sir—about 'a quarter to eight."

It was with purpose in his face that Johnny turned.

"Where is the garage?" he asked.

"Down the first turning from here," the girl said quickly, with a little break in her voice. All the time he had been questioning Harris, Johnny had seen how tensely she had been following.

"Take me there, please," he said quietly.

She nodded, motioned to Harris, who disappeared through a baize door, to reappear a moment later with a key. In the meanwhile she had slipped quickly into coat and hat. As they hurried down the steps, she said anxiously:

"What have you in your mind, Mr. Travers?"

"Trouble," said Johnny, and hurried her along.

The rumble of the garage door along its groove echoed hollowly. Pausing for an instant on the threshold, Johnny thought he detected a muffled sound from within. While he yet hesitated, Terry Raymond pointed dazedly.

"But—but——" she gasped. "There's the car!"

This confirming his suddenly-arrived-at theory, Johnny nodded.

"It's not so much the car I'm thinking of," he said, "as what's likely to be inside it!" And striding across the concrete floor, wrenched open the car door.

For a moment he stood motionless. Then, with a swift dive into the tonneau, he gently lifted out the crumpled-up figure and laid it on the floor. Terry, gazing horror-stricken into the rigid features, cried:

"It's Brooks!"

Johnny was on his knees now, removing the gag that was tied tightly across the lower part of the face. Then his hands went round the neck of the man to encounter, at the base of the skull, a formidable lump.

"Sandbagged," he pronounced. "Delivered by an expert, too. And, to make sure he didn't come round in time to give trouble, they bound and gagged him.

With his penknife he cut the cords about wrists and ankles, while Terry, groping in the car, found a flask. Five minutes later, lugubriously feeling the back of his head, Brooks was sitting up.

"Tell us what happened," Johnny instructed.

"'Appened!" The chauffeur's voice was bitter. "*'Appened!*" he repeated. Then, as if struck by some incredibly painful thought, he glanced quickly to the car, and sighed relief as he saw it still there. "S'truth, I thought it was that they'd come for," he said.

"Tell us exactly what happened," Johnny repeated.

The chauffeur spread his hands.

"Easy," he said. "I was bending over the bonnet and the roof fell on the back of my head. The next I knew I was lyin' 'ere with you bending over me."

"You didn't see anyone at all?" Johnny questioned.

Brooks took another pull from the flask.

"No one," he said. "Only millions of stars and several gas explosions."

They saw him safely to his lodgings close by, and returned to Lancaster Place. On the way:

"What do you make of it?" Terry questioned, her voice desperate with apprehension. "What possibly can have happened?"

Johnny did not know how to reply. He could not tell her that her father had been kidnapped in precisely similar fashion to those others upon whom, subsequently, the Scarlet Scarab had wrecked their lust both for money and immunity. But though he evaded direct reply, he felt his effort was not too convincing.

"And now," he said at last, "I'm going to report the whole affair to Scotland Yard. You can rely upon everything being done that's possible, and quite a few things that aren't. In the meanwhile, try your very hardest not to worry, and, as far as you're able, to rest quietly."

"*Rest!*" she said derisively, but pressed his hand gratefully

He left Terry to the ministrations of the housekeeper, and hurried out to find Oates, whom he ran to ground in his room at Scotland Yard.

TERROR.

"BUT," Oates cried, when Johnny had told him what had happened, "I put on a man especially to shadow Raymond for his protection!" He made a despairing gesture. "If only the lady had reported at once! Now they've got him clean away—and I don't envy him his experience!" he added under his breath.

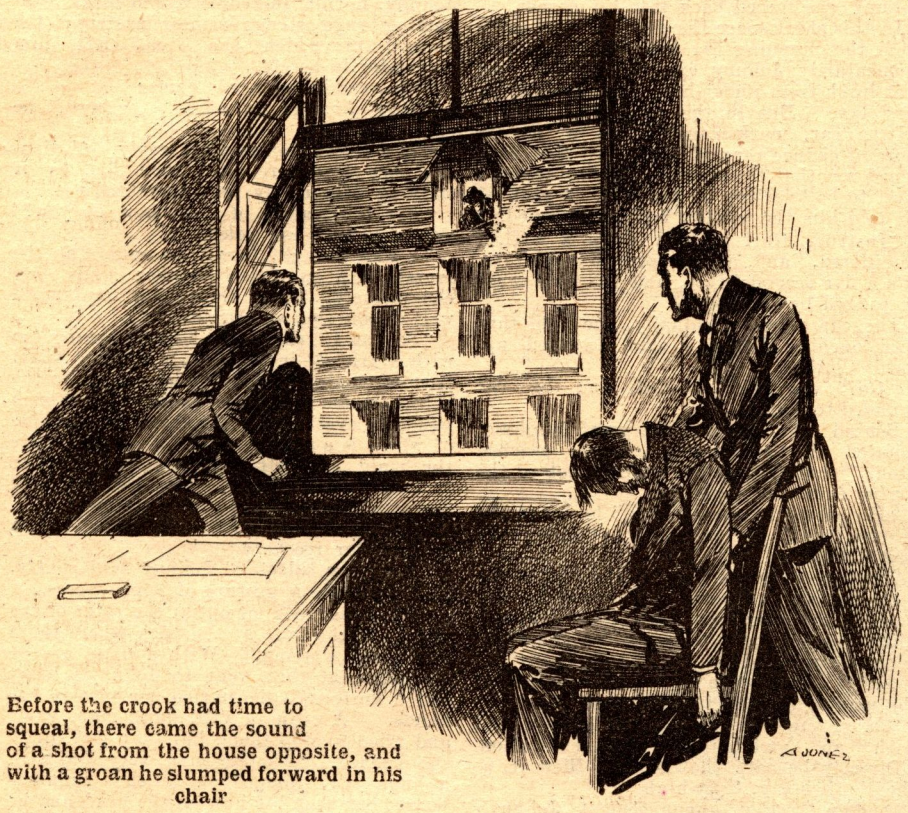
"That man you put on to watch?" Johnny suggested. "There's a chance that he followed when Raymond was abducted, and we shall hear from him later."

Actually, they heard from, or rather of, him, at that moment. The telephone bell rang, and when Oates turned from answering his face was grey.

"Clare, the faithful watcher, came to himself in the middle of Hampstead Heath at seven o'clock this morning, and was

taken straight to hospital," he said wearily. "Says he was outside the house, and a man asked him for a match. While he was groping in his pocket, he was clubbed, and that was that——"

Chin resting on knuckles, he put in a few moments intensive thought. So, incidentally, did Johnny. Then Oates spoke once more through the telephone..



Before the crook had time to squeal, there came the sound of a shot from the house opposite, and with a groan he slumped forward in his chair

"I want Brown and Clancy to report to me at once," he instructed.

The men who a few moments later presented themselves were among the most useful-looking individuals Johnny had seen for some time. Clancy, a quick, dark Irishman, tall and lithe, had the steel-wire frame with the flattened face of the Hibernian fighting-men. Brown, his companion, was a Yorkshireman, with a chest like a barrel, a fist like one of the hammers of his native county, and a jaw like a snow-plough. He conveyed the impression that, if a shade slower in action than the Irishman, by just that small extent would he be more deadly.

To them Oates described both Terry and the house.

"Detail two other men of a similar type of plug-uglies to yourselves as relief," he instructed grimly; "and if anything happens to her a lingering death'll look easy to what's coming to you."

When the men had left, Oates turned once more to Johnny.

"I'm having a description of the car circulated," he said. "That won't be difficult, because, apparently, it was a replica of Mr. Raymond's own. Not that it'll be any good," he supplemented gloomily.

"In the meantime," Johnny said, "what is there for *me* to do?" Oates looked at him hard.

"Nothing for the moment," he said at last, and paused. "If the worst comes to the worst, are you prepared to carry out your original plan?" he demanded curtly. "We'll back you up with every man we've got, of course, but if we happen to fall down on the job it's likely you'll run into pretty serious trouble."

"I realise that, of course," Johnny said soberly. "Nevertheless, I'm ready just as soon as you give the word."

"In the meanwhile, I'll have someone trailing you all the time," Oates promised.

. . . . .

It was two days later that Johnny got word, and in the interval he spent every moment she would allow with Terry, and in her stress and anxiety thought his presence was of some comfort to her. Now, apart from those guarding Terry, not one detective, but two, were always at his own heels, and at night were outside the door of his flat. But on the afternoon of the third day, after a brief talk with Oates, he said to Ginger:

"I'm going to take you a little walk tonight, m'lad. You need exercise."

He watched the setting of Ginger's boot-toe jaw.

"I'll maybe get all of it I want," that veteran of the war and prize-ring said with unusual sobriety.

About eight o'clock they passed down the Strand, crossed the Trafalgar Square end of Charing Cross Road, through to Leicester Square and Wardour Street, where they turned down a side-street to Dean Street and Soho Square—than which at night there are few less frequented areas in London.

"Just half a dozen turns round'll blow the cobwebs away nicely," Johnny said encouragingly.

"So long as they're not blown too far, sir," Ginger assented grimly.

They had made the circuit twice before, turning the south-western corner, the car which had followed them into the Square, passed at a walking-pace, the driver fiddling with his controls. Twenty yards ahead the car drew up and the chauffeur got down.

As they drew level the two checked their stride. The driver looking up, turned:

"Do you happen to know anything about cars, gentlemen?" he called.

"A little," Johnny said, and stepped forward. "What's your trouble?"

"You are," said the driver, and struck.

He missed, but in avoiding the blow, Johnny stepped back into the two who, lurking on the off-side of the car, ran forward. Even with the hot scurry of what immediately followed he saw that, like the driver, they were masked.

As long as it lasted, the pace was brisk and action rapid. Ginger, stepping forward, hit the chauffeur so hard on the point of the jaw that he felt the bone crunch from the impact.

The man, lifted clean off his feet, shot into the roadway, and there lay.

Johnny, equally willing and only a little less expert, had time to wheel before the long, thin man into whom Ginger's victim cannoned, had completely recovered his balance. A beautifully timed straight left prevented him from doing so, and he, too, went to ground. By this time Ginger was ready to give attention to the third of the trio, a formidable broad-chested ruffian armed with eighteen inches of lead-piping.

Wisely, Ginger backed, and as the man lunged forward, Johnny tripped him. As he floundered Ginger's fist shot out, and given bare knuckles and a split second of time to set himself, Ginger never had to hit the same man twice.

Then, calmly and unhurriedly, from the tonneau of the car stepped a figure, and, immediately following, a second one. In the hand of each was a long-barrelled automatic; over their heads black silken hoods. The voice of the first came, soft, sibilent, and, to Johnny, loathsomely familiar.

"Greatly as I deplore this almost photographic resemblance to the films," he said, "I must ask you to raise your hands—right above the head, please. Otherwise"—the pistol-barrel moved ever so slightly.

The two pairs of hands went slowly up. It was apparent that these theatrically-garbed figures meant business.

"Good!" the spokesman murmured. His glance travelled to the man of whom Johnny had disposed, and now was beginning to stir uneasily.

"Get up, *you!*" he ordered, his voice contemptuous.

Blinking, the man shuffled unsteadily to his feet.

"There are handcuffs in the car—and cord," the hooded man said. "Get them—now," he went on in his sibilent voice, turning once more to Johnny, "both of you will lower your arms, but slowly, behind your backs. Thank you!"

First Johnny's hands were secured, and then Ginger's. Thick scarves were wound tightly about their heads, shutting out sight; their legs tightly bound with cords.

Helpless, they were half-carried, half-propelled, into the car. After a brief delay there was a further wedging in of inanimate forms, by which Johnny judged that the two foundered ruffians had been salvaged. An instant later he was conscious of someone climbing to the driving-seat, and of another form wedging beside him. From first to last the whole episode had not occupied three minutes.

The car shot forward, turned sharply an angle of the Square, and then to the left. A few seconds later the roar of traffic proclaimed that they were in New Oxford Street. From the circumstance that they turned to the right he knew they were heading towards Newgate Street and the City.

Bound, gagged, helpless as he was, it was to Johnny as if the deprivation of sight rendered hearing all the more acute. Several times he thought he heard, in the quieter places, the not quite drowned and

A thin rope ladder slithered down the wall, then, peering up through the gloom of their prison, they saw a face at the high barred window.

rather individual throb of another car behind. He hoped from his heart he was not mistaken.

It came to him, too, that this same circumstance was not lost upon his captors. Several times when the beat sounded more distinctly than usual, the man beside him stirred, as if uneasily, in his seat; more than once he felt an arm graze past his own, as if his neighbour had turned to glance from the rear window of the car.

"It's a police-car," his neighbour said at last, and the voice, calm, detached, was that of the Scarlet Scarab.

"Can we out-distance them?" came a voice from the opposite seat.

"No," Johnny's neighbour replied levelly. "It's one of their best cars."

Even as he spoke a harsher staccato note impinged upon the roar of their engine, and Johnny's neighbour turned somewhat hastily in his seat. As he did so came that harsh note again.

"They're shooting at our tyres," he said quickly, and his voice fell. "A pity, because now someone may get hurt. Especially," he added softly, "as I increased the charge."

Johnny felt him lean forward as if groping beneath the seat. What did the man mean anyway, with his "increased charge"? Johnny wondered uneasily.

He heard a box drawn out, and the man straightened himself. Leaning as far sideways as possible, the trained sensitiveness of the fingers of Johnny's manacled hands could follow the curve of his neighbour's arm down to what he held—and—dark as it was, and without the other's knowledge, one touch of that cold, serrated surface and he had literally to bite off the cry that rose to his lips.

It was a Mills' bomb!

Of all the reckless, hopeless enterprises in which Johnny Travers ever engaged, his attempt to snatch at that diabolical instrument of death was the maddest—and the nearest to success. Actually his fingers had more than half closed round it before the one who held it realised what was happening, and, with a desperate plunge forward, levered it away. Inert and helpless, a cold ring of steel boring into his forehead, Johnny was forced back into his corner.

In this short space the detonation of shots from the pursuing car had continued, and momentarily Johnny expected to feel the seat lurch from under him with the collapse of a tyre. But in the dark, and from a jolting car, marksmanship was a matter more of chance than of skill. All that happened was that the man next to him seemed, now, to be kneeling on the seat. A rush of air told him the window had been opened.

"Instruct Karl to slow down a little," he ordered, "and, at my word, to accelerate. It's a five seconds' fuse, and the time must be judged by the speed."

The car slowed gradually, the arm that was touching Johnny's side travelled upwards—jerked.

"*Go!*" the voice shouted, and the car bounded forward.

Behind the obscuring scarf Johnny counted off the seconds. As he reached "four," shatteringly above the throb of the engine came the explosion.

"He passed by some yards," he heard the Scarlet Scarab say judicially. "Slow down again, Karl."

The driver obeyed. Again the jerk of the arm, the sharp command, followed by the quick lurch forward. This time Johnny's count was accurate; the explosion came just when he expected it.

A few short seconds' delay, and he felt the man slide back into his seat.

"Most gratifying!" he said lightly, but with an undercurrent of exultation. "Directly beneath the bonnet. Blew it, as the English say, 'sky-high.'"

And with that announcement Johnny's last hope fled. He had walked into the trap, only to have the door slammed and locked behind him.

After what seemed like an hour, the car drew to a halt, and the prisoners were bundled incontinently into the road. Johnny heard the car drive slowly away as another car came to a halt, and into this they were hustled. The next moment they had taken the road again.

Three times was this process of changing cars repeated. And, leaning back in his corner, Johnny marvelled at the simple ingenuity of the device for throwing off pursuit. No wonder the Society of the Scarlet Scarab had gone for so long immune!

At last they turned to the right to a road where their progress was slow and laboured, the wheels sinking deeply into the yielding surface. The car drew to a standstill.

Someone loosened Johnny's straps, a firm grip closed upon his arm.

"Descend, if you please!" the familiar purring voice instructed, and he was guided up shallow steps and across a tiled floor. The steps behind him halted. A heavy door closed, and the smell of damp assailed his nostrils.

On again, down hollow-sounding passages, and up several flights of stairs. A door clanged open, and with it came a sharp, stifled exclamation—wonder, fear, incredulity, which brought the blood thrumming into his ears.

Came a quick click as his handcuffs were removed. While he yet fumbled with the knots of the scarf that confined his eyes, the door clanged hollowly.

The scarf came free. He looked about him confusedly—the light was so dim that, excepting he was in a small, cell-like room, he could distinguish little. But it did not need sight to tell him who, too, was there.

Suddenly, overhead, a lamp glowed into sudden life.

On a truckle-bed in the corner, wide-eyed, pale, fearful, was Terry.

For a moment neither spoke. With Johnny, horror, incredulity, and black, consuming rage struggled for mastery; the danger in which she stood left him momentarily bereft.

Then, suddenly, words came:

"How—*how* do you come to be here?" he gasped.

She did not immediately reply. Motionless, her eyes were fixed upon his, as if striving desperately for understanding.

"For the matter of that, how do you?" she asked in a low voice.

"I was brought here," he said, "at the muzzle of a gun," and saw her hands close convulsively. Then, from some unplumbed well of courage, she smiled.

"So was I," she said. "I was having tea with a friend—in St. John's Wood. Apart from a couple of maids we were alone in the house—in her own small room, with French windows overlooking the lawn, at one side of which is a potting-shed. Suddenly, after the maid had left the room, from out of this shed came two men—covered in black gowns and with hoods over their faces."

She shuddered. After allowing her a moment for recovery:

"Carry on, please!" Johnny said gently, and she made a gesture of hopelessness.

"They just took me out at the point of the pistol—to the lane at the back where there was a car waiting." With a little cry of abandonment that went to Johnny's heart like a knife-stab she buried her face in her hands. "A man—a tall, dark man, came and tried to stop them, but they shot him," she moaned. "Another man, very big, with a huge jaw, jumped on to the running-board, but they hit him on the head and he fell into the road."

"Those would be the detectives detailed for your protection," Johnny said confidently, and to divert her mind, turned to the ex-pugilist.

"This is my friend, Ginger Jackson," he said.

"Proud to meet you, miss," Ginger said admiringly. Not all the peril in which they stood had power to put the breeze up this imperturbable man. "How do you do?" he added as an afterthought.

"Very frightened," said Terry, and to this there did not seem to be adequate reassurance.

The door opened, and two hooded figures with pistols at the alert stood on either side of the door to allow the Scarlet Scarab to pass through. Behind him came two others who carried a large chest, which they deposited in the middle of the room before going silently away again.

The sentries at the door drew aside to permit the entry of two others. Between them, bound and manacled, was a prisoner at whom Johnny gazed speechlessly, breathlessly, unbelievingly.

"My heaven, Terry!" the prisoner gasped, and staggered a little between the men who held him.

With a short, bitter cry, Terry sprang to her feet.

"Father!" she cried, and with a supreme effort the solicitor made a gesture to quieten her agony.

His face, grey and lined, was covered with a stubble of beard; he was collarless and dishevelled, but his dignity held.

Unmoved, the Scarlet Scarab turned to him, indicated Terry.

"You see?" he said quietly.

"That you have added to your infamy?" the solicitor said scornfully.

"But surely that did not need this further demonstration?" the Scarlet Scarab returned with self-satisfied irony.

"You have proved it," Mr. Raymond said quietly, "to the lowest depths of which humanity is capable."

But the Scarlet Scarab, a quiet chuckle, illimitably sinister, coming from beneath his hood, shook his head. "If you continue in your refusal to write that quite harmless but, to me, very necessary letter, and to sign an equally essential authorisation to your bankers, the probability is that you will be furnished with even more convincing proofs of my being without the commonly accepted code," he stated sibilently.

Mr. Raymond turned to Johnny.

"Since you, also, are in the hands of these criminals, Mr. Travers," he said courteously —"a circumstance which, believe me, I most sincerely deplore—you must know that what is referred to by this, the chief and most unconscionable of them all, is an official letter of instruction to my head clerk that, having been called unexpectedly away on business, he is to withdraw your securities from the strong-room of my bankers, and to deliver them to the bearer."

Slowly, significantly, the Scarlet Scarab nodded.

"Most admirably and concisely put," he said with approval. "And if you would act in the best interests of your—er—friends, Mr. Travers, I would most strongly suggest that the conditions imposed should be carried out without delay."

"*No!*" The lawyer's voice was strong and taut as steel wire. "Those bonds are my professional trust, and that trust nothing ever will induce me to betray."

"Nothing?" The Scarlet Scarab's voice was silk-like in its delicacy. "Nothing at all, Mr. Raymond?" he repeated.

"Nothing whatever," the lawyer repeated more definitely even than before.

"We shall see." Still that same smooth texture of tone, but now, underlying it, something of menace that chilled Johnny like an ice-cold shower. "We shall see," the Scarlet Scarab repeated, "exactly how far—er—professional pride is proof against parental affection."

As he had been speaking, other figures had filed silently into the cell, and lined up behind where Johnny and Ginger were standing. Suddenly, without warning, the arms of each were seized, and, thus rendered once more powerless, their hands and feet were manacled.

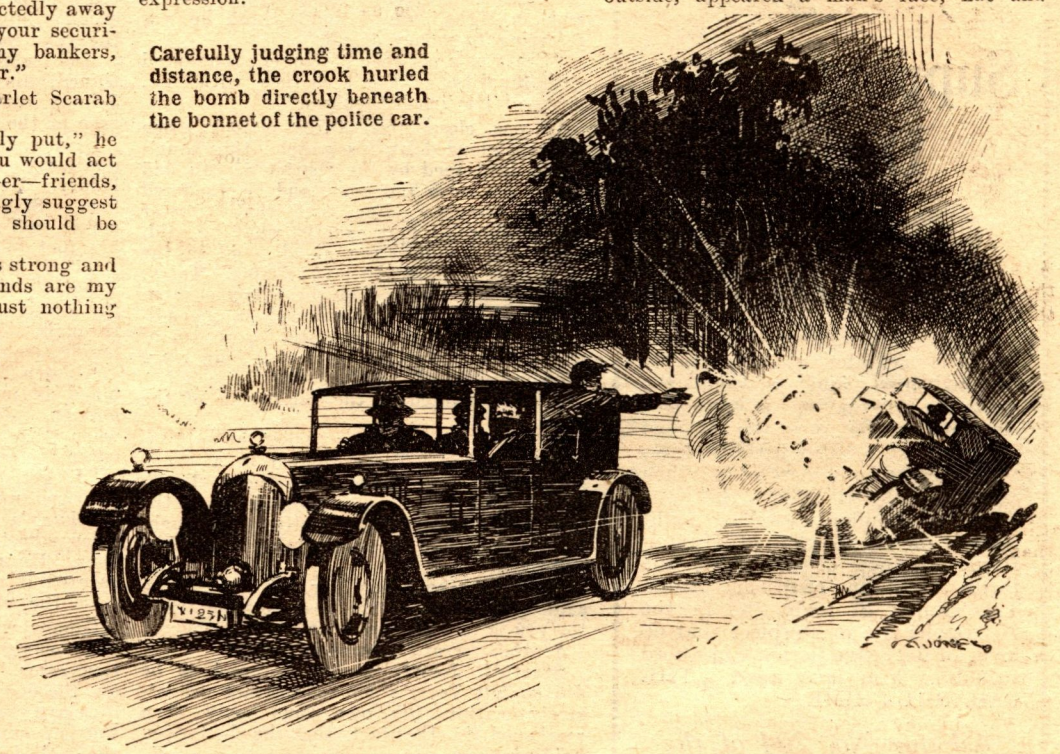
"Purely as a precautionary measure, gentlemen," the silken voice of the Scarlet Scarab explained. "One has always, of course, to allow for the enthusiasm—and chivalry—of youth! With that word "chivalry," again Johnny was conscious of that chill at his heart.

"It would, of course, be easy to check that misplaced enthusiasm by the searing bullet or the—er—nullifying gas," the mocking voice added, "but—as a matter of psychological interest, I confess to a certain curiosity as to your reaction to such a—demonstration as I have in mind."

He made a sign, and one of the hooded figures threw open the box on the floor. In it was something, at the sight of which, to Johnny, it was as though every drop of blood within him froze to ice. Years ago he had attended an exhibition of mediæval instruments of torture, and he recognised in the contraption of boards and wedges now disclosed, the most terrible of all the inventions by which man has wrought agony to his brother—the "Boot," by means of which, slowly, cumulatively, inexorably, the leg of the victim is crushed to unrecognisable pulp.

"For the *moment*," the soft voice of the Scarlet Scarab explained, "I propose merely to give an example of the results which *may* be attained," and even as he spoke Terry was seized. The boards were adjusted to her slender leg, and the extreme edge of the first of the eight wedges placed, ever so lightly, into position. But, even then, though her courage remained steadfast, Johnny, lying there, struggling impotently, saw beads of sheer agony dim the whiteness of her forehead. Then, after only a second or two, the Scarlet Scarab gestured again, the wedge was withdrawn, and the Boot replaced in its chest.

"One hour!" that inhuman, malevolent figure observed calmly to Mr. Raymond, and stopped at the sight of the latter's expression.



Carefully judging time and distance, the crook hurled the bomb directly beneath the bonnet of the police car.

In face of the outrage to the daughter, who was the one hope and object of his existence, no longer was this the solid family lawyer of London City; he was primitive man; eyes glinting with the sheer elemental rage that possessed him; lips drawn back; hands convulsively clenching and unclenching.

"If ever," he said, and the words came hoarsely from his throat, "I have a chance to deal with you——"

But, his first impression of awe quickly faded, the Scarlet Scarab broke lightly in upon his words.

"An idle anticipation, it is to be feared, considering my own intentions as to your ultimate — er — disposal," he said. He glanced at the watch upon his wrist. "In the meanwhile, you have one complete hour for reflection. At the expiration of that time you will be invited to write that letter and to sign that authorisation. If you are the loving and dutiful parent which your —pardon me!—somewhat excited appearance at this moment would lead one to suspect, then you will be wise—and humane —to bow to what, sooner or later, is inevitable."

He scanned the lawyer's face curiously through the slits in his hood, his eyes gleaming with the same green light that once before Johnny had seen there.

"If not," he went on in the same pseudo-pleasant tone as before—"why, then, you will be invited to witness what I am convinced you will regard as a really authentic representation of the—er—more elemental relaxations of our ancestors."

He bowed mockingly. The hooded figures closed about the by-now almost fainting lawyer, who, after a long lingering look at Terry, was hustled to the door.

"Don't give way, my child," he said faintly. "At whatever cost you shall not be allowed to suffer."

"I'm not afraid, father," the girl said proudly, as the door closed behind him.

TO BE HANGED BY THE NECK——

A PANEL of the door slid back; in the space thus left, and shown up quite distinctly by the light in the corridor outside, appeared a man's face, flat and loose, with blue pendulous chin and bristling close-cropped hair. And as the tiny reddened eyes rested upon each of the inmates in turn, the loose-lipped mouth lapsed into a grin.

"*Three!*" he said gleefully. "*Three*—and all good 'uns," and there was something in the tone, gloating, like a starving glutton before a banquet, that struck a note in Johnny that was sheer horror.

The wide face turned directly towards him, the pig-eyes hovered for a moment before transferring to Ginger, stayed a moment upon him, and then travelled appraisingly to the shrinking Terry, who, with a shudder, covered her face.

"Two sixes and a eight!" the giggling voice remarked, and to Johnny it was as if a contractor had made an estimate, checked it, and found it correct. "Right! Two sixes an' a eight."

There was a little high-pitched, gloating laugh, the shutter snapped to, and they were alone.

Terry, her face pressed tightly into her

hands, her body shaking, had collapsed upon the bed. Even Ginger, the iron-nerved, had whitened a little under the strain of it, and was staring unbelievably at the panel.

"'Lumme, sir," he breathed hoarsely, "that bloke ought to 'ire 'imself out to break up evenin' parties." He shook himself like a man clearing himself from a load. "'Orrible 'e was!"

Terry stirred, sat up; beneath the globe her face shone pitifully. Her voice came faint and unsteadily.

"Who was it?" she gasped. "That—that *terrible* face—and voice?"

"I don't know," Johnny said, not altogether truthfully, it is to be feared, for inquiries in a certain direction at Scotland Yard had resulted in his inspection of some half-dozen photographs, not one of which was that of a professional criminal. "Someone not quite right in his head, I expect," he added in attempted comfort.

"'Im with 'is six an' eight," Ginger repeated indignantly. "'Is 'e a blinkin' lawyer, or what?"

"He didn't say 'six and eight,'" Terry corrected fearfully. "He said, 'two sixes and an eight,' and I don't think he was referring to money at all."

"Crazy as a pet coon!" Ginger pronounced with finality. "Don't bother with 'im, miss—or let 'im bother you."

It was close upon three o'clock when Johnny glanced at his watch; the hour's grace mentioned by the Scarlet Scarab had long since come and gone, and he wondered at the respite. For that that sinister criminal had meant exactly what he said, there was no doubting at all, and in the meanwhile the tension was terrible. Terry, in particular, seemed at the extreme pitch of physical and mental exhaustion, a condition that was made no better by reason of the darkness, for the light had long since been switched off from outside.

Johnny pointed to the far corner of the room.

"There's another door there," he said.

"It's locked," Terry replied in a brave attempt to pull herself together. Undeterred, Johnny went over and tried the handle. It yielded quite easily to his touch. He saw beyond a comfortably furnished bed-room.

"Intended, evidently, for you, Terry," he said quietly, "and the best possible thing for you is to make use of it—now, at once."

Scratch—scratch—scratch!

Startled, Johnny looked up, and as he did so felt Terry's hands contract convulsively within his own, and only then awakened to the fact that he had been holding them.

"What is it?" she cried fearfully.

Scratch—scratch—scratch!

"Hush!" he whispered gently, ears and eyes straining into the silence.

The sound seemed to come from the high-barred window which, upon this night of clouds and intermittent rainstorms, admitted no light into the cell. But as he peered upward, he saw that the faint relief it made against the surrounding blackness, had darkened again to the prevailing shade. Then, suddenly, against the wall came the faintest scuffling sound.

Silently, quickly, Johnny tiptoed across the cell and reached the opposite wall.

Against the wall he saw, dangling from overhead, a thin ladder of rope. At his feet gleamed something white. Scrawled across the paper, the one word:

"Sing!"

He stood for a moment uncertain. Was this just a cruel cat-and-mouse jest on the part of his captors? And yet—it couldn't do any harm to obey, anyway.

He went over to Ginger, touched him lightly on the shoulder. Instantly the ex-pugilist was awake.

"*Sing,*" Johnny breathed urgently. "*Sing,* you perisher!"

"Sing, sir?" came the whispered voice, hoarse with astonishment.

"Yes," Johnny said. "Don't argue. *Sing!*"

And, complacent as always, Ginger's voice rang raucously through the darkness. The choice of lyrics was characteristic:

"There was I, waitin' at the church,
Waitin' at the church, waitin' at the church;
She'd gone, an' lef' me in the lurch."

Johnny, conversant with words and music, chimed in, adding to the din. Terry, quick on the uptake, added her quota:

"Oh, how it did upset me!"

Still carolling, Johnny stepped over to her, and felt her hand on his arm, directing him once more to the window.

Standing immediately beneath it, he tugged at the rope-ladder. A series of quick, impatient jerks replied; evidently the time was not yet.

And while that shouting chorus continued, his ear pressed against the wall, Johnny could feel, rather than hear, the rasp of the file overhead.

Only a few moments later, sharply and distinctly, came three sharp tugs to the ladder. He applied pressure, and it held firm. Still singing, he stepped quickly across to Terry, took her hand, and guided her foot to the lowest rung.

"*Up!*" he said urgently.

Quickly she mounted. The opaqueness of the window was blackened by her passage through. A moment, and Johnny was beside Ginger, thrusting him forward.

"Listen!" he said urgently. "Miss Raymond is in your care. That's an order, Ginger. Never mind me—I'll take over when we're outside. In the meanwhile, I'll cover the retreat."

"I get you, sir," said Ginger, and swarmed up the ladder.

Johnny's feet were on the lowest rung when something fell with a clang to the floor. He paused to pick it up, and discovered it to be one of the displaced bars from the window.

Ginger was through; Johnny only some three rungs up the ladder when interruption came. The electric light was turned on, the door panel swung back. There was a sharp exclamation, followed by a still sharper explosion; a shot buried itself in the wall beside him. Even as he dropped came another. From an unpractised hand, evidently, for, like the first, it went high; the marksman had not allowed for the kick of the weapon.

Johnny leaped. The hammer of the revolver fell again—by a thousand-to-one chance, which only could have been the direct dispensation of Providence, the cartridge was a dud. Before the hammer could rise and fall again, the iron bar descended with all Johnny's weight behind it on to the hand that held the pistol. There was a sharp yell of agony; a wheal, like a congested vein, rose across the flesh of the hand, burst into a gout of blood. The revolver dropped with a clang—inside the cell. With a quick throb of relief, he picked it up.

As, quickly, he dashed for the ladder, Johnny heard the quick opening of a door outside, the sound of running feet, and shouts. Evidently they were leaving the caged bird—himself—in favour of the game who were upon the point of escape.

It was upon this assumption that he

climbed the ladder. There was just the chance he might fight his way through. In any case, he had a pretty grim conviction that something sudden and unpleasant was likely to happen to one or two of those who tried to stop him. And he'd rather be shot than hanged, anyway.

He worked his way through the window; groped for the ladder with which to descend the other side. He found it attached securely to the stumps of the bars. Discarding foothold, he slid rapidly down. It was as his feet touched the ground that something descended with devastating force upon his head.

The first glimmerings of dawn were beginning to percolate through the unbarred window when, dimly and gropingly, he returned to consciousness. His head was throbbing with a pain that was like molten fire through his brain. He endeavoured to sit up, but it took a good thirty minutes before, at last, he was able to do so.

He sat, striving desperately to focus the events of the previous night, and as gradually memory returned, he became seized by a great exultation.

The chances were that Terry and Ginger had won through. That, after all, was all that mattered; it was additional satisfaction that the financial reward for Ginger's help had been paid in advance. He'd have hated to have let the man down.

What most nearly concerned him was the identity of the mysterious rescuer. Whoever it was, he concluded, the business had been admirably arranged.

The door opened, and there came into the cell two of the cowled figures. Behind, in a suit of rusty black, waddled the flabby-faced figure who had looked at them through the panel of the door. There was about him an air of gloating which yet contrived to maintain a look of gloom, as one swindled out of some part of his just rights, but exulting in what were left. In his hand he carried straps, for which, with a sudden cold chill, Johnny had no difficulty in recogising the purpose.

Next came the Scarlet Scarab himself, and from the suave refinement of cruelty of a few short hours ago he had relapsed into a cold fury of malignancy which, combined with the grumbling chuckles of the rustily-clad figure, brought into the atmosphere of the cell an element that was pure nightmare—distorted, monstrous.

"There is a certain apology due to you, Mr. Travers," the Scarlet Scarab said, in a tone he seemed to have difficulty in keeping within his own control. "Hitherto it has been the rule of our society to grant to those from whom they exact The Penalty adequate time for preparation. Now, however"—his voice vibrated with a paroxysm of rage—"we are obliged to depart from that custom. Only twice within the life of our organisation has escape been effected—both within the last six hours. This"—with the imminence of some kind of retribution as sop to his pride, his voice took on something of its old purring—"renders necessary what might appear to be our somewhat indecent haste. Otherwise there maybe—serious interference."

"What you mean," Johnny said shortly, "is that at any moment your murder-gang may be broken up by the police, upon information supplied by Jackson."

The other bowed, and even through the concealing cloak Johnny could see how his whole frame shook as with an ague.

"A misfortune," the Scarlet Scarab said, choking down his rage, "against which already we have provided by the establishment of another headquarters. Nevertheless, the necessity for haste is urgent. For," he added, "unfortunately for yourself, neither the man you refer to, nor your—er—lady companion, are the only—er—departures from our circle."

He made a motion with his head, and the squat man stepped forward, his chagrin replaced by gloating, ghoulish anticipation.

"Just put your 'ands be'ind yer back, please," he said, with fulsome amiability.

"Not for you—Harwood, dismissed executioner," Johnny said, and hit out. Weak as he was, his head one red-hot pain, he intended making a fight for it.

There was no fight. His arm was seized in a lock from which attempt to release himself was torture. In their hands, with that ju-jitsu hold as foundation, he was helpless. Chuckling, the creature strapped his hands behind him.

"Lead on!" the Scarlet Scarab instructed, and turned to follow as Johnny was propelled towards a door which ran from immediatey outside the cell.

Actually the scene had been carried out with a rapidity that left no time for fear, only for amazement that this incredible thing should be happening to him, Johnny Travers, the strong and self-confident. It was not until the outer world was so sharply severed from his vision that, in one split second of realisation, it came to him that this, indeed, was the end of all.

He was conscious then, in one infinitesimal fraction of time, of solid ground swinging clear from beneath his feet, of a sickening lurch downward. . . .

Amazingly, then, he heard the dull clang of the trap-door as it hit heavily against the wall; sub-consciously he had thought the blinding jar would cut off all outward impressions in the swift agony of death.

As the 'plane swooped down upon the house, they heard the rush of the bomb; and the next moment the gang's headquarters went up with a roar.

THE SMASHING OF THE SCARLET SCARAB.

The shed into which this door opened was whitewashed, with a bare wooden floor upon which was a double trap-door on hinges, and, in the exact centre, a chalk-mark. Suspended from a beam immediately overhead, a noosed rope dangled. A lever projected at an angle from the floor.

A voice was chanting the Service for the Burial of the Dead in a hollow voice.

"Six feet it is, as I said," Harwood remarked in a tone of professional pride, with a glance first at the rope and then at Johnny. "Toe the line, Mr. Travers, sir, and, whatever 'appens, don't be down-'earted."

"*Silence!*" the Scarlet Scarab cried sternly.

"Your pardon, gents," Harwood apologised, and strapped Johnny's feet. A hood was drawn over his face and head, and secured at the neck.

The pressure, when it came, was not to the neck at all, but to his legs, which he found in a clutching, frenzied grip which yet, somehow, brought with it a sudden flood of reassurance. Within an inch of the obscuring hood a voice, familiar, warm and encouraging, whispered:

"Steady, sir, and for the love of Mike don't speak!"

A moment later and Johnny's feet touched ground; the bonds about his wrists were cut, an open knife thrust into his hand.

Quickly severing the string that kept the hood in place, Johnny looked about him dazedly. From above the light streamed down to illuminate the platform upon which Ginger and himself were standing. A hand grasping the severed end of rope, the former was jerking it convulsively.

"Cut your legs free, sir," he whispered urgently. "That 'Arwood may look down at any second—loving 'is trade as 'e does."

As Johnny stooped to obey, he saw that between the end of the platform and the further wall was a space some eighteen inches wide. It was only a second before

the straps were severed, and by this time Ginger was at the edge, his legs swinging free.

"Follow me, sir," he said, lowered himself, and dropped. Johnny followed, to land safely on the hard earth below.

In a moment Ginger had produced a torch, and Johnny saw, dug from the earthen wall, an opening some five feet square.

It must have been three hundred yards before a glimmer of light appeared ahead, and as they progressed this strengthened until Johnny saw that the illumination came from overhead, throwing into relief the stone steps with which the passage terminated.

These they scrambled up into a wide panelled room, devoid of furniture. Ginger dashed to the door, and they were on a landing, at the far end of which a broad-silled window overlooked what Johnny discovered later was open country.

They passed down a flight of wide, shallow stairs to a hall in which there were a table and some chairs, and the remains of a fire in the big, open grate.

A heavy door faced them, and this Ginger wrenched open, and they were out in the chill morning air.

"To the right, sir," Ginger panted, and after twenty yards or so scrambled over a low wall.

"Follow me, sir," Ginger cried urgently, and ran confidently down what evidently was a clearly-defined path.

And then, at last, they reached the road. A bulky shape separated itself from the uncertain light.

"Who's that?" a peremptory voice demanded, and there was a glint of a pistol-barrel.

"It's all right, sergeant," Ginger said breathlessly. "'Ere's Mr. Travers, all fine an' dandy."

"That's splendid!" the bulky plain-clothes man replied. He turned to Johnny. "Feel fit enough to be in at the finish, sir?" he asked. "Or maybe you've had all the excitement that's good for you."

"Miss Raymond?" Johnny demanded quickly. "What about her?" And found his heart leaping for the answer.

"On her way back to London, with her father, sir," the sergeant said reassuringly. And, in reply to his look of astonishment: "Oh, yes, sir he got away all right—before she did, as a matter of fact. It was Mr. Raymond, sir, who 'phoned the Yard."

"Then," said Johnny fervently, "I'm with you to the last throw of the hat."

"Chief-Inspector Oates has disposed his forces, as you might say, with extreme strategic skill," the sergeant observed. "The paths through the marsh, sir, radiate from the house like spokes from a wheel, and he's men on each, converging on the building. This one, which he left clear for you, is mine. And if you're ready, sir, we'll start—so's not to be late at the rondy-voo."

"What's on the other side of the house?" Johnny inquired.

"Sea, sir," Ginger broke in to explain. "Soon as Scotland Yard got word they sent a couple of forty-knot speed-boats down the Thames an', as you might say, round the corner. Nothin' won't get past them, sir, believe me," he added fervently. "*What's that?*"

From somewhere behind the building from which Johnny had so miraculously escaped, had come a low, tense humming. Even as they watched there arose against the now fast-lightening sky a black shape, which, ascending in rapid sweeping spirals, higher and higher, soon was engulfed completely in the lowering clouds.

The sergeant, with a hoarse exclamation, stopped dead in his tracks.

"An aeroplane!" he said. "And piloted by the Scarlet Scarab for a million! The only thing," he added despairingly, "we haven't provided against!"

Nevertheless, and at their best speed, they followed that winding path through the marsh. As they drew nearer to the building there came hoarse shouts, one or two straggling shots, and, only a moment later, from one of the upper windows, a spear-point flash. The bullet whined above Johnny's head to lose itself in the distance beyond.

"It looks as if they'd all retreated to the house, sir," the sergeant diagnosed.

The hum of the aeroplane's propeller, which for some moments had been dulled by height and distance, grew suddenly more distinct. Watching, they saw the machine reappear from the concealing clouds, dropping in a graceful sweeping arc until, to their amazed straining eyes, it was immediately above the building. And then, from it, issued a strange *swish-h-h*, which, as it fell, developed cumulatively in violence.

"For the love of——" shoutingly commenced Ginger.

The remainder was blotted out by a deafening, shattering detonation; it was as if the whole world was filled with cataclysmic sound which, even as it faded, echoed from horizon to horizon as though reluctant to leave the havoc it had wrought.

"Bombin' 'is own 'eadquarters!" Ginger said faintly. "'Is *own* blinkin' gang!"

It was true. The flight had been too low, too immediately overhead, for doubt as to what had been the objective; too low, also, for any fear of missing. For, before their eyes, one section of the building had seemed, in an inextricable mingling of leaping, searing flame, smoke, soaring débris, flying brick and stones, and swirling dust, to leap to the sky.

The arc of the descent completed, they saw, dumb with horror and amazement, that not yet was the devilish work completed.

Five times was the process repeated, until that ill-omened house, with all that it contained, stood, but for one wing that yet was only half demolished, a stark and smoking heap of rubble.

Up—up—the arc of light continued, and then for the sixth time the 'plane turned.

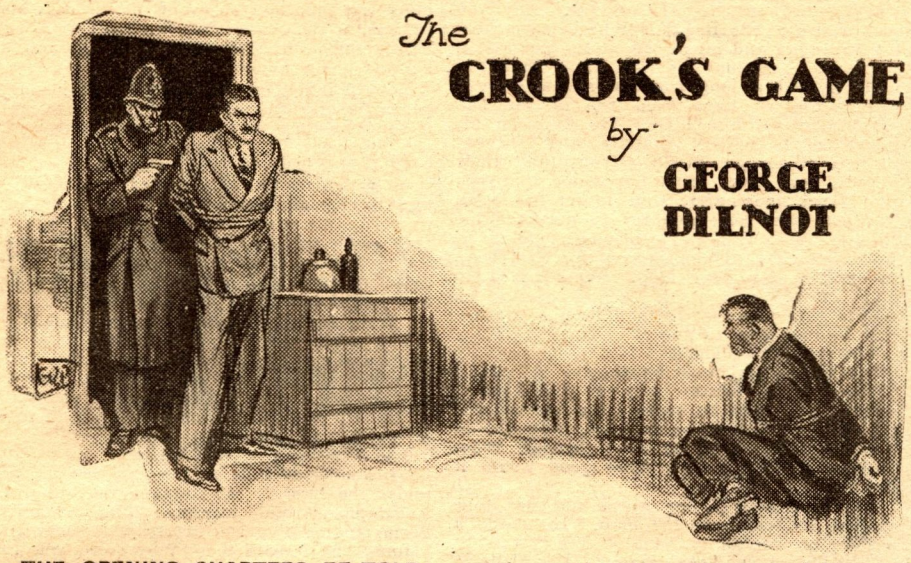
"'E's making a proper job of it, anyway," Ginger muttered in the ears of his dazed companions.

More swiftly still, this last time, the Scarlet Scarab descended. It was at the lowest point, and immediately above that disrupted house, when came the crowning horror of that night of terror.

At the exact instant when should have come the descending bomb, no bomb came. There seemed, indeed, to be a split second of delay. One instant, the curve of its flight beginning infinitesimally to reach upwards, there was that swooping 'plane—the next—a shattering explosion, a leap of flame as if from mid-air, and, but for whirring fragments of débris—not all of which were of wood or metal—nothing left but a black configuration of smoke against

(*Continued on page* 732.)

DO NOT MISS READING THIS GRIPPING SERIAL OF CRIME AND DETECTION.



The CROOK'S GAME

by

GEORGE DILNOT

THE OPENING CHAPTERS RE-TOLD.

WHEN Mr. Earl Millard and his very charming daughter, Shirley, came to London and took a palatial suite of rooms at the Regal Hotel, they presented the encouraging appearance of rich Americans eager to give themselves a good time. It was known only to Scotland Yard that this gentleman had served a term of imprisonment in an American penitentiary.

Millard left prison a reformed character, and succeeded in going straight for a considerable time. At a time when he was doing exceptionally well in America, an old and regenerate friend, Mr. Solomon Stern, otherwise known as "The Cat," discovered the ex-convict, and blackmailed him under the threat of exposure. Unable to endure the attention of The Cat any longer, Millard decided to leave the States and find refuge in London, only to learn that Solomon Stern was at his heels.

Later The Cat is found murdered on Westminster Bridge. Suspicion at once falls on Millard, otherwise known as Buck Shang, but no trace of him can be found.

Detective-inspector Strickland is given charge of the case, and he finds two strange letters among the belongings of the dead man, both of which have finger-prints on them.

Strickland is talking the case over with his chief and Weir Menzies, one of the Big Four, when another message comes through to the effect that the body of The Cat has been stolen from the mortuary.

(*Now continue the story.*)

A VISITOR.

As the day advanced the full resources of Scotland Yard became available. Strickland, guided here and there by a hint from the astute Weir Menzies, who for all his dour exterior could be as enthusiastic as a schoolboy in a case of this kind, flung man after man in a wide cast for some scent that might offer possibilities.

Any person who might conceivably have had association with the Cat was sought in every corner of London and questioned. The cables were filled with inquiries to New York and to Denver, asking for information as to other friends or enemies of his who might be in London. The mortuary keeper was interviewed, and was certain that he had safely locked up the body, and he was confirmed by the constables who had handed it over to him. How the place had come to be unlocked he could not explain.

The girl of the flame-coloured gown whom Strickland had seen dancing with the Cat, was located and brought to headquarters in more sober raiment. She frankly admitted that she had been friendly with the dead man. She had been acquainted with him for about a month, and he had been generous with his money, and promised that he would get her a situation with some of his swell friends if she would hold her tongue and do as she was told. But she knew very little about him. They had had supper together about midnight, and he had left her shortly afterwards on the plea of an urgent appointment. The Finger Print Department had nothing in their records that corresponded with the prints on the unsigned letter found on the Cat. That, however, was a result which Strickland had expected. The records of Scotland Yard are confined to criminals, and it was in the highest degree improbable that the writer was a person who had ever been convicted. After fixing and photographing the prints, the sheet of note-paper had been sent to an analyst to learn if there were any peculiarities in the ink or in the paper itself by which the writer might be traced.

The despatch of the woman's letter to the Criminal Clearing House had resulted in more luck. The Crime Index had been searched, and by the handwriting it had been found possible to identify the woman as one calling herself Lola La Fontaine, whose real name was Green. She had been convicted three years earlier of gaining a situation by false references as maid to a countess, to whose jewels she had helped herself with discrimination. Her last address was given as a back street in Pimlico. Strickland put a man on her, and dismissed her from his mind for the time being. She would be easily picked up sooner or later.

Strickland yawned and stretched his arms above his head. He had scarce begun, and he knew that before the day was out there would be reams of reports and statements to digest and shift. He hated to be tied to a desk. He ached to be up and about with some distinct trail to follow.

"There are people," he announced, "who think that a detective has a soft life. Ugh!"

"Tired, eh?" The ubiquitous Weir Menzies, who was reputed to have once gone without sleep for four days and nights, was at his side, and there was a tinge of irony in his tone. "None of us can lay down on a job like this if we want to keep our scalps. Here's something to wake you up. A lady's asked to see the chief, and she's been passed on to me. Want to see her?"

"Miss Millard. Someone will have been to see her for identification."

"That's the lady. We'd better have a talk with her in my room. It's quieter there."

Shirley was ushered into them. She was very calm, very pale, and looked straight through Strickland as though she had never seen him in her life before. Menzies placed a seat for her where the light would fall upon her face.

"You asked to see the head of the Criminal Investigation Department," he said. "I am not the chief, but I am Superintendent Menzies. This is Inspector Strickland, whom I believe you have seen before. We are in charge of the business which you have probably come about."

"The murder of my father." She permitted herself a wan smile of acknowledgment of Strickland.

"Yes."

"They have told me about it. They want me to make sure that it is he. But I know it is. He never came back last night."

There was a feminine lack of logic about her conclusion which, at another time, might have aroused a smile. But no one of the three was in smiling mood.

"Why should you be certain?" asked Strickland gravely. "There may be a mistake, although I fear that is unlikely. But mistakes have happened. It is possible that it may be someone who resembles your father. You are the only one who can set all doubt at rest."

"I will do so, of course," she said wearily. "But it is only a formality. I know that it is my father."

Menzies tugged at his moustache.

"Are we to understand that you anticipated some calamity of this sort? There is someone who bore ill-will against Mr. Sh—Mr. Millard? Someone you suspect?"

"No. I am stunned. I cannot grasp it yet. I don't believe that he knew anyone in London—least of all anyone who would wish him harm. I have come here to find out what you are doing—what you have done."

When one has had a lifetime of experience in dealing with all manner of people, there is acquired a sort of sixth sense, an almost intuitive perception to which an adequate name cannot be put. Strickland caught Menzies' eye. But the superintendent had an agility of observation and of mind that needed little prompting. This girl had some reason that drew her to Scotland Yard which she had as yet neither expressed nor hinted at. What it was he could not guess. But he knew that if her confidence was to be fully gained it would be more difficult with two men in the room than with one. He had his share of curiosity—but after all this investigation had been put on to Strickland. With a muttered apology he rose and left the room.

"We've scarcely had time to turn round yet," murmured Strickland. "We're hoping to pick up some clue. Perhaps you can help us."

"A clue." She allowed her contempt to become obvious. "The police always talk about clues."

He smiled.

"That's true. It's our trade, you see. May I ask you some questions?" He did not wait for a reply, but taking her assent for granted, went on: "What can you tell me about your father?"

"Not much that will help, I am afraid. He had just retired from business in Denver. We were over here on a vacation trip."

Strickland sat a little more stiffly in his chair, and his brows drew closer together. He had given her an opportunity to speak frankly what she knew. It was odd that she had not availed herself of it. Surely a girl with her seeming intelligence could not imagine that the antecedents of Buck Shang could be kept in the background. She must realise that any attempt to keep things dark would be futile.

"Did you ever hear your father speak of a man called Stern, or of the Cat, or of Moses?" he asked smoothly. He was watching narrowly for any change of expression, any hint that he had penetrated her guard, if she really was on her guard.

It may have been a mere accident, but the girl half averted her face while she deliberately patted a stray wisp of hair back into its place. Then she met his gaze unemotionally.

"I may have done," she said steadily.

He shifted swiftly to another point.

"Who is there who will get any benefit from your father's death?"

She shook her head.

"No one but myself. So far as I know, I am his only relative."

"He was rich?"

"Some millions of dollars, I believe," she returned indifferently. "Say about a million and a half pounds in British money."

"You inherit it all?"

"As far as I know."

His fingers played a fierce tattoo on Menzies' desk, and a pause ensued. In a little he rose and stood over her. There is a subtle advantage in looking down upon the person one is questioning, as he had discovered many years before.

"This is not the only murder that has happened during the last twenty-four hours," he said. "You wouldn't know, of course, that the Cat—Stern—was killed almost within a stone's throw of this place."

"I am interested only in discovering who killed my father," she said. He remarked her self-possession with admiration.

"You didn't know that the Cat had an acquaintance with your father?"

"No."

He wondered how far she would go.

"Nor"—he drawled the question slowly—"that your father tried to kill him not twelve hours ago?"

This time he had roused her. She sprang angrily to her feet.

"That is a lie," she declared.

"Please don't get excited, Miss Millard," he said mildly. "Sit down. Sit down, I tell you." He raised his voice in peremptory command. She hesitated, and then with a gesture of disdain resumed her seat.

"Now what's your game, I wonder," he said, almost as if talking to himself. "Why have you come here with a tissue of lies and evasions to dodge straight questions? For a woman of some common sense you are the most clumsy liar that I ever heard. Suppose we get a little at the truth."

Her face whitened. Her hands gripped tightly on the arms of the chair, but she turned a scornful glance at him.

"Is it the habit of the London police to be offensive? Why should I come here if I wanted to lie, Mr. Strickland?"

"I don't know," he confessed. "But I propose to find out. I don't know a lot of things. For instance, I can't say why you took a risk at the Regal Hotel when you held my colleague and myself off at the point of a revolver. You may as well know that last night I had a long conversation with your father—I must have been one of the last persons to see him alive. He told me his story, as I believe, frankly and without reserve. When you said that you didn't know the Cat you lied. It is impossible that you should not know what your father has been. Yet you come here and try to persuade me that he was a respectable business man of an American city. There's something you have to explain, my dear lady. What am I to make of it?"

"He told you that he had been a crook—that he had been in gaol?"

The detective nodded.

She spread her hands hopelessly.

"Can't you realise why I should wish nothing of this to be known? He had suffered enough. Now that he is dead, why should all the muck-raking be gone through again in your British press? What good would it do?"

Somehow neither her words nor her tone carried conviction to the man. He made a gesture of incredulity.

"That's not your real reason, Miss Millard. There's something more."

"You needn't believe me," she flared in sudden passion. "I have been sneered at and flouted and insulted by the people I have known all my life. Me! A crook's daughter—a daughter of the underworld. Do you think that I want to go through that all again? Do you think that he would wish me to? I tell you, Mr. Detective, I would sooner shoot myself." She buried her face in her hands, and broke into a passion of sobs.

THE HAMMERSMITH HOUSE.

After nineteen hours of fierce mental, and some physical, labour, Strickland had to confess himself baffled. He had, so far as he could see, neglected no point, overlooked no avenue through which a gleam of light might be gained. True, there had been discovered four people who might have killed the Cat, but so far there was only the slenderest thread of suspicion against each. No one of these persons knew that they were under surveillance, or that their immediate antecedents were being made the subject of close inquiry. But in his heart Strickland did not believe that any one of them was concerned with the crime. As for the mystery of Buck Shang, that was even more hopeless. Revenge, robbery—theories there were by the score; but theories evolved from the air were perilous things and usually led to blind alleys.

The evening papers were full of the two murders, although they had, so far, not connected them. From the public point of view they were detached crimes. The news had resulted in the usual trickle of letters and visits at Scotland Yard from people who held wild suspicions on trivial grounds of perfectly innocent persons. All these stories had to be dredged in case they held some substratum of truth.

At twelve o'clock that night Weir Menzies came to him.

"Give it a rest, man," he suggested. "Get your second wind. You can't expect all the luck in the first twenty-four hours. No good threshing the air. Go home."

"I believe I will," agreed Strickland. He had had his fair share of success in his profession, and he knew that he was well in line for the next chief inspectorship that should fall vacant. Unless he made some bad break, success or failure in the present case could not affect his ultimate promotion. Men had failed on murder mysteries before, and would do so again. But he had that consuming zeal, which is an asset of the good detective, that drove him to expend every nerve in the pursuit of an object. Besides, the mandarins did not like failure.

He slipped across the way to the Underground station, and then, altering his mind, for he felt a craving for fresh air, resolved to walk to Victoria, and thence take a late train to Balham, where he had his apartments. His mind was busy on the events of the day, and he was in the shadow of Westminster Abbey before some intuitive sense warned him that he was being followed.

Now, it is not an easy thing for an inexpert person to trail another—"keep observation" is the way they phrase it at the Yard—without discovery. Strickland did not turn his head. He had no idea who or what his shadower might be, but he tried certain tricks, known to many crooks and every detective, to verify his suspicion. Satisfied at last, he took a side turning and halted in a dark doorway. A man shambled hurriedly past. The detective, leaning forward, caught his shoulder and jerked him to an abrupt standstill.

"Well, my man? What do you want?"

The other gave an involuntary cry, for Strickland's grasp was not a gentle one. The detective, on the alert for anything, clenched his free hand. But the captive was passive.

"So 'elp me, Mr. Strickland, I wasn't after no harm," he whined.

The detective peered at his face.

"I wonder if I know you, my lad. Come under the light." He dragged the fellow to a lamp-post and inspected him narrowly. "Seems to me I've run across you somewhere before," he remarked. "Why were you following me? Don't stand there gaping like a stuffed fish. What's the funny business?" He emphasised his questions with a shake. "Come on. Out with it."

"Mr. Drake knows me," mumbled the man.

"I've no doubt of that," answered the inspector dryly.

"I was only looking for a chance to have a quiet word with you," went on the other aggrievedly. "I didn't expect to be manhandled. I could tell you something, I could. I've put Mr. Drake on to a thing or two in my time."

Remembrance came to Strickland, and he released his hold.

"I get you now," he said. "You're Blowy Bill."

Detectives do not talk much about informants, but, nevertheless, every plain-clothes officer has his little circle of spies in the camp of the underworld. Some work for pay, some to gratify a natural man-hunting instinct. But, as a class, they are not savoury people, and not infrequently one finds himself caught in the meshes of the law. "Set a thief to catch a thief," is a motto that is—unofficially—fully appreciated by the men of Scotland Yard, although they seldom trust a "nark" farther than the range of their eyesight.

Blowy Bill rubbed his shoulder aggrievedly.

"That's me, guv'nor," he admitted. "You're on this Westminster Bridge business." He looked cautiously round and dropped his voice to a whisper. "I know of a bloke who's in that do. Crooked as a corkscrew. Jacky the Dude, they call him. Footman he used to be at Lord Southdon's place. I know a pal of his—see? They've got a joint Hamersmith way."

Somehow, although Strickland was not a man to place implicit reliance on any story told by so shady a hanger-on of the underworld as Blowy Bill, he had an impression that this was no audacious attempt to wring a few shillings out of him by some cock-and-bull story. Blowy Bill would scarcely dare. Nevertheless, he affected incredulity.

"Try to sell me a gold watch next, eh?"

"I'm giving you the straight griffin, guv'nor," persisted Bill earnestly. "I know the joint. Some of 'em will be there now. I can give you the address. If it ain't the goods you needn't pay me a sou."

So it was that Strickland found himself contemplating a big, gloomy house in a quiet side street in Hammersmith with a little irresolution.

Not a gleam of light came from the house, and over it seemed a deep sense of brooding—mysterious, sinister.

(What will Strickland find in this mysterious house? Is he on the trail of the gang? Don't miss next week's thrilling developments of "The Crook's Game.")

CAN YOU SOLVE THIS SEASIDE MYSTERY?

THE SEAVILLE MURDER PROBLEM

Problem No. 26 of

BAFFLERS!

The Popular Detective Story Game.

"BRENTWOOD," that popular boarding establishment, standing in a commanding position on the front at Seaville, was owned and run with entire success by Mrs. Trent.

Hitherto its record had been unblemished and of the highest repute, therefore it came as a double blow to the good lady when, one sunny morning, she took her favourite lodger, Mr. Bletchington, his morning cup of tea at seven-thirty a.m. and found the gentleman stretched out on his bed, dead, and with a gaping wound in his neck.

Terribly agitated, she called in the police.

Detective-inspector Manning, who was put on the case, questioned her carefully, eliciting the following information.

It appeared that Mr. Bletchington was a bachelor, and had resided at her hotel for two years. He had always seemed content and satisfied until quite recently. She gathered that he had been considerably worried over his nephew, who had run rather loose and was always pestering him for money. Also two men who were staying in the house had seemed to cause him considerable agitation.

The nephew, they learned, was indeed a rotter, was heavily in debt, and had let his uncle down several times. He was a crafty looking fellow, Mrs. Trent said, with slanting eyes and an habitual furtive expression. He had been staying the last three nights at Brentwood, and she had taken an instant dislike to him. Now he was nowhere to be found.

The other two men were Mr. Merton, who, they learned, was by trade a master-builder in a small way, and a young man named Rayner, who ran a prospering hair-dressing establishment. Merton, the detective noticed, had one of his thick-set, work-soiled hands bandaged, but Mrs. Trent said he had cut it some time before.

Detective Manning next examined the scene of the crime. Mr. Bletchington's throat had been cut in jagged slashes, and the detective was surprised to find the weapon, a blood-stained razor, under the bed. He noticed that the rivet securing the blade to the handle, was broken, and the blade was chipped. There were no finger-prints on it, and the handle had the appearance of having been wiped. It was found, however, that it was the property of Rayner, and accordingly the young barber was held, pending investigation, as was also the man Merton.

An examination of the body by the police surgeon showed that the deceased had been dead some four hours. Drawers and the dead man's suit-cases had been ransacked, and a portfolio lay open and empty at the foot of the bed. Yet everything that might have revealed finger-prints had the same streaked appearance of having been wiped. Presently, placing his hand under the pillow of the dead man's bed, the detective brought to light a polished crocodile leather note-case. Eagerly the detective again looked for finger-prints, and to his surprise and relief, noticed a clear mark on a corner of the shiny surface. This was carefully photographed. A further examination of the case brought to light a crumpled letter. "If you do not let me have those papers at once, you will suffer. I will endure your tyranny no longer." The letter was unsigned. The writing was in fine spidery capitals, lightly printed with a pen on a square of plain notepaper.

A search was made everywhere for the papers referred to, and inquiries were made, but not a sign of them could be found. Who had written the letter?

Meanwhile a warrant was issued for the arrest of the nephew for inquiries. He was taken as he left the express train at Victoria Station, which did the sixty miles from Seaville without stopping, and arrived in town at eight-thirty a.m.

It was then found that the prisoner, whose name was John Merrick had a considerable sum of money on him amounting to nearly twenty pounds. Also, when his finger-prints were taken, it was found that they corresponded with those on the note-case. He swore, however, that he knew nothing about the murder.

Mrs. Trent said that the murdered man had always kept his note-case under his pillow, and that he had always kept it well stocked. It was thought that the nephew probably knew this.

Further inquiries were made regarding Mr. Bletchington, and then it came out that the favourite guest of Brentwood was not all that people imagined him to be. Evidence was discovered, not in the house, but from an outside source, which showed that he had lived almost entirely on blackmailing various people, and both Merton and Rayner were found to be two of his victims, although they refused to admit it. When asked why they had come to the hotel, they protested that they were merely on holiday.

A search of their bed-rooms brought one or two interesting facts to light. Their rooms were both on the next floor, immediately above those occupied by the dead man and the nephew. In Rayner's room was found a revolver, but it had not been used. In Merton's room was a thick carpet, and the detective was interested in several dark, dirty smudges on this under the bed and under the mat in front of the washing-stand.

Here the evidence of another guest proved useful. He said that at about two-thirty in the night, he had heard a sound below and, looking from his room, had seen Rayner standing at the top of the stairs, his revolver in his hand. On finding himself observed, Rayner had attempted to hide the gun and had slipped back into his room. A few moments later the guest had heard the soft closing of a door on the floor below, and again had looked from his door, half expecting to see Rayner creep up the stairs, but no one appeared. At the same time as he had opened the door, he had noticed the light go up in Merton's room, and then, as he had stepped into the passage, go out. He had decided that, perhaps it was merely a scare and decided that Merton had also heard a sound downstairs, and then thinking, as he himself thought, that there was probably nothing in it, had returned to bed. Witness then went back into his room.

Rayner, Merton and Bletchington's nephew, the three suspected men, all protested their innocence.

How do you explain the crime? Who killed Mr. Bletchington?

THE RULES.

The rules are simplicity itself. On this page you are given details of Baffler Problem No. 26—there will be another next week. Briefly, you are told the story of a crime and given ALL the clues necessary for its solution. Be your own detective. Read the problem through very carefully, giving consideration to every detail, then try to answer the questions at the end.

Award yourself marks as indicated after comparing your answers with those given on Page 732. These answers are printed upside-down so that they may not catch your eye before you have had a chance to test your skill. Remember, it is the sense of your solution, not its exact wording, that counts.

"The Scarlet Scarab."

(*Continued from page* 728.)

a now-awakened sky. Then, silence, and a sense of supreme tragedy.

On the littered terrace of the smouldering heap a group of figures—quaking, panic-stricken—was being shepherded by half a dozen detectives. From the path down which, in blind terror, they had fled from that disruption, others were being led by policemen. Johnny looked round for Oates.

With two or three other officials he was in the far corner of the terrace, bending over something on the ground. Johnny hurried over to him. Three there were who lay there, two quite dead from explosion or falling débris. The other, upon whom they were concentrating their attention, was alive—as yet.

And, glancing at that rotund, respectable figure and the drawn, gaunt face which somehow had yet contrived to remain rubicund, Johnny, starting back a pace, gave a cry of sheer amazement.

"For the love of heaven!" he breathed. "Harris!"

The dying man, looking up to recognise him, faintly smiled.

"But Number Two as well, sir," he said. "One of the oldest members of the society, sir—second only to the Scarlet Scarab himself." The voice was faint, but clear; it was as though he was dispensing, to the best advantage, the last hoarded remnants of his vitality.

"*You!* Mr. Raymond's butler, second in command of the society?" Johnny gasped, for to him this was the last incredible thing. Again that fleeting smile came to the face of the dying man.

"And a loyal member, too, sir," he said, and paused. "Though not so loyal as to my master and mistress, sir," he added simply. "That is why I could not stand aside and see them, as you might say, sir, interfered with. I felt it my duty to release my master from his confinement."

Johnny could only gasp at the amazing mentality thus displayed. A master-crook and a devoted family servant embraced in one personality! Not even then could he realise the unbelievable twists to which the criminal brain is driven.

"The Scarlet Scarab, sir," the old butler-crook's voice went more faintly on, "was, if I may say so, extremely annoyed at what no doubt he regarded as a liberty, sir. But unknown to the Scarlet Scarab, sir, I'd purchased the Old Dower House some time ago, and I'd discovered a secret passage through which the smugglers used to bring their goods from the sea. I found also, sir, that it ran within ten yards of the pit in which——"

His face contracted with a spasm of pain which may not have been wholly physical.

"I did not always hold with those executions, sir; it seemed to me to be going a little far, as you might say. And so, as soon as they commenced asking questions about Mr. Raymond, sir, I made the little connecting tunnel—just in case.

"The second hole, sir—the one from the roof of the tunnel to just inside the wall of the yard outside where you were confined, sir—I finished only just in time," he faltered. "I regret I was interrupted in my efforts of rescue before you, too, could escape, sir."

His head fell back; a shadow crossed the still face, as the reflection of a cloud across a sun-lit field; a film spread over the eyes.

So died Obed Harris, perfect crook and perfect butler.

. . . . . .

"The only thing I can't understand," Johnny remarked to Oates as they drove back to London, "is how the Scarlet Scarab came to blow himself up. In France I've seen hundreds of aeroplanes come down, but I've never seen one go off like a bomb."

From his hip-pocket the detective produced a note-book. Opening it, he displayed a full page of closely-written shorthand, at the foot of which was scrawled a signature.

"We got this from Harris before you came up," he said. "There wasn't time for longhand; we thought he was going every minute. It seems that the Scarlet Scarab had always said privately that, if the worst came to the worst, and they were raided, he'd see there was no one left to give evidence against him. For a long time the old chap thought he was talking off the top. Then one day he found, in a secret place in the hangar, those bombs—and guessed what they were for. Though you may not think it, old Harris was one of the experts on explosives for the Ministry of Munitions during the war, and he made up his mind, if ever the time came for the gang to go West, the king-pin—the Scarlet Scarab himself—should go with them. So he fixed one of those bombs so that the second it was released from the plane it went off."

They were speeding through the West End now, and Oates turned directly to Johnny.

"Where shall I drop you, Mr. Travers?" he inquired; and Johnny looked at him in mild surprise.

"Where do you think?" he asked.

But it was Ginger, from the back seat, who hazarded the reply.

"At Miss Raymond's, I guess," he said.

"Mind your own business!" said Johnny indignantly.

THE END.

(*Next week's splendid long story will be a further gripping adventure of the Five Kings by the popular Leslie Charteris. Order your copy of* The THRILLER *in advance.*)

The Solution of this week's

'BAFFLER' PROBLEM

(On page 731.)

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

Merrick killed Mr. Bletchington.

Inspector Manning reconstructed the crime and its mystery as follows:

Both Merton and Rayner had come to the hotel with the idea of putting an end to the blackmailing hold that Bletchington had over them. Neither of them knew anything of the nephew, and the nephew knew nothing about them.

The warning note was written by Rayner. This was fairly conclusive by the fact that the writing was delicate and spidery, and not heavy and clumsy as would have been the case had Merton written it with his thick-set hands. Whereas the more artistic writing pointed to Rayner. It is doubtful whether Rayner had thought of killing the blackmailer, but had wished merely to frighten him.

So far as the nephew was concerned, Detective Manning explained the night tragedy in this way:

Merrick was determined to get money. He knew of his uncle's well-stocked note-case, and decided to get hold of it. The sounds which the witness had heard, and which had attracted Rayner, were the movements of Merrick when he entered his uncle's bed-room and robbed him of the twenty pounds from his wallet. The detective reasoned that he could have had nothing to do with the murder, because, apart from the fact that his movements were heard at 2.30, and the man had been dead four hours when found at 7.30, he had left his finger-prints on the case, whereas all the other things had been wiped. If he had troubled to clean the other things, surely he would have thought of the most important of them all—the case. A further point in his favour, so far as the murder was concerned, was the fact that the note was left. Obviously he had only been after money, and also he had taken the trouble to replace the case under the pillow, while the murderer had strewn everything over the floor untidily, including the portfolio, which had apparently contained the missing papers.

It will be remembered that the wounds on the man's neck were of a particularly clumsy and brutal nature; also the blade of the razor which had been used was chipped. Detective Manning argued that a barber, used to razors all his life, would never use it in such a manner, and would never permit it to get so twisted and misused. His well-trained hand would hold it with natural certainty, no matter what condition, and would wield it with accuracy. It had been an easy matter for Merton to slip into Rayner's room during the day, and take the fatal weapon, his idea being to plant the murder on the other.

When the guest had surprised Rayner on the stairs, he had been in the act of going down to try a little burglary of his own to get the papers concerning him, when he saw that he had been observed, he tried to hide the gun and slipped back to his room. Obviously, he would not try again that night, certainly he would not murder the man, when he had already been seen in suspicious circumstances.

The closing of the door below that the witness had also heard had been the departure of Merrick (remember he was no expert crook). At this same time Merton had been preparing himself for his job, quite unaware of what was happening. He had for a moment switched on his light, he had heard a step on the landing outside, and had switched it off, waiting in the dark.

He had waited nearly three-quarters of an hour, and when sure that all was quiet, had slipped downstairs and entered the dead man's room. He had been burning with vengeance for a long time (this is shown by the fact that he had already got hold of the razor, and thought of planting the crime on someone else). Without hesitation, before the other could cry out, he had committed his foul deed brutally and clumsily. He had not thought of touching the pillow, for his main thought was to get hold of the incriminating papers. He had hastily, nervously, ransacked the drawers, and had at last found the portfolio. Seizing all the papers, he had wiped his fingerprints away wherever they might be left, and had made his way upstairs.

Once in his room, he had proceeded to burn the papers. The ashes, Detective Manning deduced, he rubbed with his boot into the thick carpet in the least apparent places. These had left the smudges that he had noticed when he had searched the room.

Merrick was sentenced to a term of imprisonment for theft, while Merton paid the full penalty. So far as Rayner was concerned sufficient evidence to convict him could not be proved.

Printed and published every Saturday by the Proprietors, The Amalgamated Press, Ltd., The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Advertisement Offices: The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Registered for transmission by Canadian Magazine Post. Subscription Rates: Inland and Abroad, 11s. per annum; 5s. 6d. for six months. Sole Agents for South Africa: Central News Agency, Ltd. Sole Agents for Australia and New Zealand: Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Ltd.
August 17th, 1929. N/R