

The THRILLER

THE PAPER WITH A THOUSAND THRILLS 2!



The CROUCHER

GRIPPING
BOOK-LENGTH
MYSTERY STORY

BY GWYN EVANS

THE CROUCHER



A SENSATIONAL LONG COMPLETE STORY OF THE C.I.D.

Chapter 1.

THE CROUCHER STRIKES.

SIR RICHARD GILBERT, the Chief Commissioner, sat at his desk in the austere furnished room at Scotland Yard and gazed absently through the window at the efforts of a fussy tug to negotiate Westminster Bridge.

He was a slim, wiry man, with a greying imperial beard and grizzled hair, an almost dandified figure with his braided morning coat and faultlessly creased trousers. He toyed with a pair of gold-rimmed pince-nez that dangled from a silken cord about his cravat, and sighed a little.

It would be a wrench to leave this familiar room and to relinquish the duty of controlling the greatest police organisation in the world. But the dice had been cast, and in a few hours he would have to

welcome his successor to the post of commissioner.

A tap sounded at the door, and a uniformed policeman entered.

"The morning papers, sir," he said, depositing a bundle on the desk.

"Thank you, Bowers," said Sir Richard, in his dry, impersonal tones. He smiled wryly as the door closed.

No need to look at the newspapers to see what they contained. He had handed in his resignation to the Home Secretary the previous night. The banner head of the "Daily Clarion" seemed to smite him like a blow between the eyes:

SCOTLAND YARD COMMISSIONER TO RESIGN!

It was the sensational climax to a sensational Press campaign which had had its repercussions in Parliament itself.

Sir Richard pursed his lips as he read the thinly veiled triumph in the "Daily Clarion's" leading article at the news, and the eulogy of his successor, General Sir Martin Dale: "Oh, well," the commissioner shrugged, if the public wanted a scapegoat, his shoulders were wide enough to bear the blame even of the Croucher's misdeeds. For, of course, it was the activities of that elusive criminal that originated the whole affair.

It was not until the tragic and untimely death of Lady Pamela Howard that the storm had burst, and the name of that enigmatic crook, the Croucher, achieved the fearsome notoriety of Jack the Ripper himself.

True, at Scotland Yard, they had long known of the Croucher's existence—and that was about all even the argus-eyed C.I.D. knew of the man responsible for the

by GWYN EVANS



Suddenly the door opened and Dorothy Somerville was led into the room by a masked man. The girl's face was wan and pale. She had endured a terrible ordeal.

alarming increase of the cocaine traffic, not only in the West End but throughout the country.

Through the "Noses' Gate," a discreet, little portal which admitted shabby, furtive men into police H.Q. when daylight waned, meagre information trickled about The Man Higher Up, as the Croucher was first known in the underworld. But the information was very vague and unreliable, and when sifted and tabulated would scarcely have covered the surface of a postage stamp.

Not even "Sheeny MacGuire," most knowledgeable of "noses," had been able to sniff out the slightest clue to the Croucher's identity.

It was Lady Pamela's death from an overdose of cocaine that brought matters to a climax, for, in addition to being an earl's daughter, she had been a member of the "Daily Clarion" staff. She had a clever, mordant pen, and her bright paragraphs of Society gossip were a popular feature of that go-ahead newspaper.

Her sudden end came near to shocking that most unshockable of thoroughfares—Fleet Street. Young Maynard, "The Clarion's" star crime reporter, started the wave of indignation which was to sweep the country by a bitter attack on Scotland Yard. He had been a friend of the dead girl. He could write brilliantly, and had his own peculiar methods of learning what went on in the underworld independently of the police. He exposed the

alarming growth of the dope traffic, the gradual but unmistakable increase in the number of unsolved crimes, and mercilessly criticised the C.I.D. It was he who nicknamed the hidden figure behind the cocaine smugglers the Croucher, and pointed out that the dope sniffer was as familiar a figure in Mayfair Society as in the dingy all-night cafes of the Tottenham Court Road and Chinatown.

Backed by the vast resources of the "Daily Clarion," the campaign grew. The public became uneasy as that newspaper, with damning effect, printed daily a list of unsolved crimes side by side with trivial cases which failed because of the policeman's uncorroborated evidence.

The clamour grew for a general tightening up at Scotland Yard.

Questions were asked in Parliament, and after an interview with the Home Secretary, Sir Richard Gilbert handed in his resignation.

He had spent his life in the service of his country. For many years he had

served with distinction abroad in India before being appointed head of the C.I.D. He was by no means a popular man, but he was respected. At Scotland Yard the general attitude of his staff can be summarised in the schoolboy's definition of his headmaster:

"He's a beast—but he's a just beast!"

"And now, I suppose," he murmured half-aloud as he folded the "Daily Clarion," "the Press is satisfied until they get some other stunt."

He pressed the ivory bell-push on his desk, and a few moments later a tall, well-built young man entered.

He had a frank almost ingenuous expression on his smooth, pink face that was oddly boyish, his blue eyes had a twinkle of humour, but his chin was resolute and his lips betrayed firmness and decision behind his mask of flippancy.

"Ah, New!" said Sir Richard. "Are there any further developments in the Whitechapel area?"

Detective Inspector Nicholas New shook his head.

"Nothing further, sir. Berry pulled in Larry Lennox. Found about half a kilo of dope on him; but where he got it and how, the Squidge only knows!"

"The what!" snapped Sir Richard irritably.

"The Squidge, sir. An engaging creature of my own invention. It is closely related to other strange beasts who made their appearance during the war. Maybe you've heard of the Wowsler, sir?"

EDGAR WALLACE

AGAIN

NEXT WEEK.

The Squidge is a sort of second cousin, twice removed."

"Are you mad, New?" gasped the scandalised commissioner. "What the deuce d'ye mean by quoting nonsensical gibberish to me?"

"You asked me what a Squidge was, sir," said Nicholas New patiently. "I—er—endured to explain."

"Don't talk nonsense," snapped the other irritably. "You are far too facetious, New. I wish you would—"

He broke off suddenly as a tap sounded on the door, then said crisply "Come in!" A bronzed, soldierly-looking man with a close clipped grey moustache and clad in an inconspicuous lounge suit, entered, and bowed rather formally.

The retiring commissioner rose to his feet.

"Ah! Good-morning, general! Pray come in!" he added cordially. "This will be your kingdom." He made a gesture that embraced the austere-furnished room that overlooked the Thames. It was an airy, workmanlike place with a roll-top desk, half a dozen comfortable chairs, a telephone, and a three-valve wireless set near the bookcase.

"Inspector New. This is your new commissioner, General Sir Martin Dale."

Nicholas New's eyes twinkled mischievously.

"Hallo, Uncle Bimbo!" he said. "Two coppers in the family—eh? Aunt Araminta'll have galloping hysterics!"

"New!" thundered the scandalised Sir Richard. "How dare you have the infernal impudence to—"

"It's only Nick's nonsense," broke in General Dale, with a chuckle. "I—er—them—have the misfortune to—this uncle. My sister's boy," he explained.

"God bless my soul!" gasped Sir Richard. "How long have you been in the force, New?"

"Since the Armistice, sir," replied Nick. "I'm afraid the family have never quite forgiven me for becoming a policeman. They'll blame me now for having a bad influence on Uncle Bin, I suppose," he added.

"But this is astonishing," said Sir Richard. "I know your promotion has been rapid and well deserved, but—"

He flung up his hands in a helpless gesture.

Inspector New winked at his uncle, who turned to Sir Richard.

"I understand from the Home Secretary that your—er—resignation does not take effect till the end of the month, and you have suggested you will be pleased to remain and show me the ropes."

"That is so," said Sir Richard rather stiffly. "In the circumstances, as I pointed out to the Home Secretary, it would hardly be fair to you, general, to expect you to take over immediately."

"It is exceedingly kind of you," said General Dale. "I am a soldier, and there are bound to be very many points in connection with my new job on which only you could advise me."

Sir Richard bowed.

"I shall be most happy to co-operate," he remarked cordially, and Inspector New saw that the two men, being gentlemen, had tactfully avoided that rather awkward problem of their future relationship.

"Perhaps, as a preliminary," said Sir Richard briskly, "I had better show you round the building and introduce—"

"There was a knock at the door, and a policeman entered with a letter.

"By express messenger, sir," he announced, handing it to the retiring commissioner.

With a murmured apology, Sir Edward

toro open the envelope and scanned its contents through his pince-nez.

"Er—no reply, Bowers, he said to the hovering policeman.

As soon as the door had closed, he turned to Nick with a perplexed expression.

"What the deuce d'ye make of that—eh?" he demanded.

Nick took the document. It was neatly typed on a sheet of yellow notepaper, and ran as follows:

"Commissions, commissioner, but resignation, like patriotism, is not enough. Scotland Yard is getting uncomfortably warm. I must remove a few of the more middle-class ones to discourage the others. I never warn twice.

"Sheney MacGuire died very suddenly at 3 a.m. this morning you will be sorry to learn. He knew too much. You and others are on my list."

"THE CROUCHER."



At the corner of the sheet was a roughly-drawn picture of a crouching man with a dagger upraised to strike.

Nicholas New whistled softly.

"It's certainly a remarkable document, sir," he announced. "May I examine it further?"

"You don't think it can be genuine, New?" asked Sir Richard. "It sounds absurdly melodramatic to me. What do you say, general?"

"Egad!" said the general. "I'm dashed hazy about the whole business. The Press have been screeching about the Croucher for weeks, but—"

"B-bring!" The phone bell tinkled sharply, and Sir Richard raised the receiver. He listened for a few moments, then his face became very grave.

"Very good, Berry. I'll send New along at once," he said. He turned to Nick.

"That was Berry, of E Division, speaking," he announced. "The man MacGuire was found stabbed to the heart twenty minutes ago in Stonewall Street, Piccadilly."



THE SINISTER MR. SHEN.

"I'm afraid Sheney

was an unpleasant fellow and got what was coming to him," remarked Nicholas New to his charming companion later in the day.

"I dislike noses"—except when they are set on a fair feminine countenance," he added gallantly.

"Don't be personal, Mr. New," said Miss Dorothy Somerville, hurriedly opening her vanity case, and dabbing a powder puff on her delightfully audacious nose.

She took a half-coquettish glance at her reflection in the little oval mirror, and

pushed back a rebellious curl beneath the brim of her tight-fitting cloche hat. Her tailored suit, though simple and of an inconspicuous black, had a subtle effect of enhancing the gracefulness of her slim figure. She was, Nick considered judiciously, far too pretty to have anything to do with the police, and yet this shingled, sophisticated young woman had held a secretarial post at Scotland Yard for two years.

She came, daily into contact with the seamy side of London life and still maintained not only a sense of humour, but a demure innocence of outlook that was a source of continual surprise to the C.I.D. man.

They were dining now—an alfresco meal at a small Spanish cafe in Soho. There was no orchestra, the clientele, like the menu, was pleasantly varied, and the alcove in which their table was set was discreetly, but not too discreetly, screened from the rest of the diners.

"Scotland Yard seems to be getting it in the neck," announced Dorothy. "That horrid young man on the 'Daily Clarion' ought to be ashamed of himself."

"Who, Billy Maynard?" asked Nicholas. "Not he. He's hard-boiled, Miss Somerville. Detectives and newspaper men were born without a sense of shame."

"Don't talk nonsense," said Dorothy.

"But I always do," pleaded Nicholas. "Do you know that the longer I live in this wicked world, the more I realise that nonsense is the greatest thing in life."

"Precisely what do you mean?" she asked, with an adorable pout. "I know you're always quoting absurd limericks and inventing all sorts of preposterous animals, like that silly Oogle you mentioned this morning."

"Ah!—The Oogle!" said Nicholas solemnly. "A well meaning, but rather ineffectual beast. I am afraid."

He began to quote solemnly:

"The Oogle does abhor a Snark, and often when the nights are dark—"

"Oh, stop, do!" pleaded the girl. "I really think you're quite crazy at times, Mr. New."

"My dear girl, I'm perfectly serious. Nonsense is the one thing to keep me sane in this sordid profession of mine. I like to talk nonsense sometimes. For instance, it's all nonsense that a delightful girl like you should be earning your living in the dull and sordid surroundings of Scotland Yard, when you ought—"

"Please don't!" she broke in hurriedly. "I love the work, the hours are short, the salary is adequate, and I—er—have compensations."

She glanced through her very long eyelashes at Nick, and that peculiar young man felt oddly embarrassed.

Nicholas New's strange personality was an enigma to his friends. No one quite knew whether to take him seriously or not.

When, after the Armistice, he had been demobbed, a mere strapping twenty, after two years war service in the R.A.F., he announced to his scandalised family that he intended to join the police force.

"But that's all nonsense!" said his mother, Lady New, widow of that distinguished diplomat, Sir Brian New.

"Precisely," Nicholas had agreed blandly. "That's why I'm doing it."

He served two years as a uniformed constable on his beat, and the smart capture of Wally the Dip and his satellites attracted the attention of his superiors, who transferred him to the plain clothes branch of the C.I.D.

His promotion was rapid. His methods were terribly unorthodox—but he got away with it.

It was at the 99 Club that Nicholas New first heard of the Croucher. That engaging con. man, "Gold Brick" Brady, let fall a few casual remarks that a big noise was "spreading the snow" thick and heavy. From him it was Nick gleaned that all the little "snowmen" of Limehouse and the Tottenham Court Road, mainly comprising Chinks and half-breed waiters, had suddenly become affluent—and not only affluent, but cocksure.

Even when the Flying Squad pulled in a dozen or more of such old hands at the game of dope peddling as Limehouse Lil, "Shanty" Harris, and "Snitcher" Marks, they gleaned little of the source from which they obtained the deadly white drug. Nick also learned that the "Blackers" were growing active again—active and aggressive, and that was a bad sign, for the blackmailing gangs of the West End are the most difficult of all criminals to round up. Despite the repeated assurances of the Press and police that the victims' names would not be disclosed in open court, scores of highly-placed people hesitated to come forward and give evidence, and preferred to pay hush money to the Blackers. Some were driven to the coward's way out of their troubles as the demands of the blackmailers became intolerable, and the increasing number of suicides supported the "Clarion's" theory that a colossus of crime had entered the lists in the never ending battle between the police and the underworld.

Inspector New, in his own whimsical fashion, made discreet and strictly illegal inquiries among his crook friends, but not even the friendliest informer could be prevailed upon to "come across" with any information against the Croucher.

And now Sheeny MacGuire, that most reliable and best hated of noses was dead—murdered, undoubtedly, because he knew, or suspected, the Croucher's identity. There was no clue. His body had been found by a policeman behind an advertisement hoarding on a plot of waste ground in Pimlico. He had been stabbed to the heart. There was no trace of a weapon. Not a scrap of paper or a coin in the dead man's pockets.

Sheeny MacGuire had not been a particularly pleasant person in life. In death, Nick recalled with a slight shiver, he was repellent. He had seen dead rats that reminded him of Sheeny as he saw him last on the mortuary slab.

"Don't look round!" whispered Dorothy Somerville. "Somebody seems to be watching you very closely. A Chinaman."

Nick New proffered his cigarette-case. The girl took one, and as he held a match to its tip, he slowly swivelled round. His action was perfectly natural, and for a fleeting moment his eyes rested on the occupant of the next table.

It was a Chinese. The man's smooth, hairless face was as yellow as a lemon, the slanting side-eyes watched Nicholas and the girl impassively. He was dressed in a perfectly-fitting dress-suit. Nick noted that the cigarette he held between his thin, saffron fingers was black. It was an odd, incongruous detail that appealed to his love of the bizarre.

"Queer!" he murmured, pouring out a glass of wine. "He may, or may not be, interested in us. One is always inclined to think that all Chinese are inscrutable and sinister. Ways that are dark and tricks that are vain, and all that! But that's nonsense, and so I'm inclined to believe it," he added.

"You're incorrigible, Mr. New," said

Dorothy. "Tell me, do you really think that the Croucher exists, or is he simply a product of the fertile imagination of the 'Clarion' reporter?"

"Of course he exists," said Nick seriously. "If we only had Sheeny's murder to go on, I might be inclined to doubt it. A nark endeavours to make the best of two possible worlds—the Under and the Over, and generally ends in the next," he added dryly. "A score of people might have stabbed Sheeny, but that letter this morning shows that the Croucher is getting nervous or vain. Both



"Look! Look! That ghastly face," he cried, pointing a shaky finger at the dirty window pane.

attributes are dangerous in a criminal. But don't let's talk shop, my dear." He glanced at his watch. It was 9.45.

"What about a spot of dancing? The Eclair Club is handy."

She shook her head and glanced at her neat tailor-made suit.

"I don't think so. I have a busy day to-morrow," she reminded him. "Sir Richard wants me to type out those divisional reports for your uncle. Besides," she added, with a smile, "it's very bad for discipline. Mr. New, for a detective inspector to be seen dancing in a night club with his typist."

She drew on her small suede gloves with an air of finality.

Nick knew it was hopeless to argue with her. Miss Somerville had a will of her own. He called for the bill, and noticed, with the tail of his eye, that the Chinaman was also leaving.

"Thank you for a very charming evening," she said. "A little nonsense now and then is relished by the er—wisest woman," she misquoted gaily.

"One of these days," threatened Nick, "we'll celebrate in earnest—"

"Celebrate?" she echoed, puzzled.

"The Croucher's capture," said Nick, as he donned his overcoat.

The Chinaman brushed past him with a murmur of apology, while Nick dealt with the hovering waiter.

"Shall I get you a taxi?" he asked.

"Thanks, no. The bus goes right by my door," she said.

Nick escorted her to the corner and watched her board it.

She waved to him gaily, and was swarvelled up in the maelstrom of traffic. Nick thrust his hands in his overcoat pocket, a disappointed man. An hour or two's dancing at the Eclair would have topped off the evening nicely, but beyond dining with him on one or two occasions, the independent Miss Somerville did not encourage a more intimate relationship.

"A pity," mused Nick. She was an extraordinarily capable and attractive girl.

There was a curious reserve about her, however, at times that intrigued him.

He glimpsed a wiry, ferret-faced little man hovering uncertainly at the tail of the crowd boarding a West-bound bus, and his blue eyes hardened.

"Well! Well!" he murmured pleasantly, as his muscular hand shot out and grasped the little man's arm. "Fancy meeting you here! And only just out of the 'Ville, too! Dear, dear, how indelicate!"

"Shifty" Lee, one of the cleverest dips who ever worked the bus queues, turned with a snarl.

"Leggo my arm, you big stiff! I tell you—"

"Tut! Tut!" said Nicholas gently. He signalled to a burly red-faced man, who strolled over from the shadow of a theatre canopy.

"A present for you, Willis," he said, handing over the squirming little pick-pocket. "Pull him in."

He began to hum softly a chorus tune from the latest revue, but broke off suddenly as his fingers encountered an envelope in his pocket. He drew it out, and saw that it was addressed to himself in typescript. With a puzzled frown he tore open the envelope, and read the brief, laconic message. It contained three words: "You are next!" and it was signed the Croucher.

Nick whistled. He was certain the message was not in his overcoat pocket when he entered the restaurant. That meant that he was being tailed, and the envelope must have been slipped there during the past eight minutes.

Suddenly he recalled the Chinaman who had gossiped him in the restaurant.

"My god!" said Nicholas New. "I wonder?"

He thrust the note into his breast pocket, and stood for a moment or two irresolutely on the kerb, watching the stream of traffic at the corner of Piccadilly Circus, the centre of the world. Ablaze with light, its sky signs shot heavenwards cascades

done. I don't bear any personal animosity towards any of you at the Yard—it's your methods I condemn." "Cut the cackle," said Nick. "Let's see the other note." He took the unsavoury looking sheet of paper. It was grimy and dog-eared, and the following message was scrawled in pencil:

Dear Sir,

I no somethink about the Crowcher, but darsen't be sene comin to your ofis or the Yard. If you call tomorow nite at No. 4 Bakewell St Shadwell at midnite I can tell you somethink. Ask for Larry. One Who Nose.

"H'm!" said the detective, examining the envelope. "Posted last night in Commercial Road, written by a man. Not very illuminating, is it?"

From the tonneau of the car two vicious tongues of flame spat out. Bill Maynard clutched convulsively at his chest, then slumped down the wall.



The newspaper man shrugged. "It's worth trying, anyhow. Like to come? I've got the old bus outside." "Of course, I'm coming," said Nicholas New. "It's probably a trap of some sort—but we'll risk that."

Together they entered Maynard's weather-beaten roadster and headed eastward. It was nearly midnight, and the traffic roar had died down a little as they bowled along through Aldgate and Commercial Road.

"Got your gat?" Nicholas jerked out as they neared the malodorous dockside of Shadwell.

Maynard grinned. "Yes. Do you want to see the licence?" he said cynically. "Bakewell St.'s somewhere round here, I believe. Old Heng Lee used to have a chop suey joint at the corner of it, I believe, before it was raided for puck-a-poo and chandu."

They found it at last, a narrow, gloomy street of such depressing uniformity that it

looked like the dreary corridor of a gaol. They parked the car in the shadow of a ramshackle warehouse. A lanky looking dock labourer, with a bristly chin and a coarse, drink-sodden face glanced at them suspiciously from an open doorway. "Keep an eye on yer car for yer, mister?" he asked, expectorating into the garbage-strewn gutter.

"Keep exactly where you are, my friend!" said Nicholas significantly. The other quailed beneath the steely glitter in the detective's eyes.

"What about it, Maynard?" he added. "Which of us'll tackle the 'One Who Knows'? One of us ought to stay outside, I reckon—in case," he added significantly.

"Toss for it," laughed the newspaper man. "Heads, I go." He spun a coin and a tail showed uppermost in his palm.

"Right-oh. I'll stroll around. If you're

grotesquely from the walls, one piece flapped like a large and lonesome bat in the current of the night breeze.

Beyond loomed a pair of dingy purple curtains, and to the right wound a carpetless stair.

"Queer," murmured the Yard man. He glanced at his watch. It was a little after midnight. Was this a trap? His fingers closed on the butt of his automatic and he advanced cautiously along the hallway.

Suddenly from behind the curtains came a feeble groan, hollow and sepulchral, followed by a fit of coughing.

"Hallo, there!" snapped the Yard man, striding forward. "What's the trouble?"

There was no reply save for a long shuddering sigh.

Gripping his gun, Nick wrenched back the curtains. The rays of his torch revealed a frowsy bed-roci, neatly furnished with a bed in the corner, on which lay the limp body of a man.

He lay face upward on the dingy bed-clothes, his face was contorted with agony, and from the rent in his torn jacket there welled a crimson stream of blood.

"Heavens!" gasped Nicholas New, striding over to the bed. "He's done for!"

He propped his arms under the man's shoulders and gently lifted his head from the pillow.

not out in ten minutes," said Maynard, "I'll do the needful."

Nick's face was very grim and purposeful as he strolled down Bakewell Street. One or two lights glimmered in the windows, but mostly the street was shrouded in darkness. A dark mist was rising from the river, and the hoot of a steamer's siren floated mournfully through the fog. The detective halted before the paint-blistered door of No. 4, behind the fanlight of which flickered a gas-jet.

He knocked gently, for loud rat-tats are apt to scare the inhabitants of Shadwell's salubrious neighbourhood.

Not a sound came from the dark, dilapidated house. Nick scratched his chin and knocked a second time—somewhat louder. The door swung soundlessly open and his hand sprang to his hip. Every nerve in his body was tense as he peered ahead into the gloom of the corridor. He flashed on his electric torch. Save for a rickety chair the hallway was deserted. Wallpaper peeled

The man's swarthy face was wet with sweat; he seemed to be a half-breed, and he gasped painfully, fighting for breath.

"Are you Larry?" demanded Nick. "Brace up, man, tell me what's happened." The man opened his lids and turned two glazing eyes towards the detective.

"I'm Larry. Larry the Wop," he croaked hoarsely. "He got me, the cuss, got me—"

A terrible fit of coughing tore from his emaciated chest and the crimson stream widened.

"Quick!" snapped Nicholas New. "Who is the Crowcher? Tell me. Don't be afraid!"

"The Crowcher," gasped the dying man painfully. "The Crowcher is—"

A bubbling scream of horror welled from his ashen lips as his gaze turned towards the window.

"Look! Look! That face, that ghastly —" he shrielled, pointing a shaky finger at the dirty window-pane.

Nick swung round. From the swelling mists of fog he glimpsed a smooth, hairless face, mocking, sardonic.

It was the face of the mysterious Mr. Sin.

He raced across the room, and, with an effort, flung open the sash.

Crack! Crack! His automatic spoke twice. A low, mocking laugh seemed to float from the depths of the dark river mist.

Larry the Wop, mouthing painfully, strove to speak. Nick bent low to hear his whispered words:

"The Croucher is—" he gasped, and suddenly a convulsive shudder ran through his limbs, and the death rattle sounded hideously in his scrawny throat. The One Who Knew had carried his secret to the grave.

For a moment or two, Nick gazed down at the body. He felt slightly sick with the suddenness of it all, but his first reaction was one of rage against that bland and smiling Celestial who called himself Li Sin.

He clambered over the window-sill and dropped, lithe as a cat, into the garbage-strewn, asphalted courtyard, and flashed his torch through the murk. There was no sign of the Chipman, but a door, creaking wheezily on its hinges, gave access to a narrow alley-way, down which the detective sped. It debouched on the dilapidated warehouse where Maynard had parked his car. Gasping painfully for breath, Nicholas New was just in time to see a high-powered limousine driven at frantic haste through the fog, its yellow headlights glaring like monstrous cat's eyes. Then from the tonneau of the car two vicious tongues of flame spat out, and the next instant Bill Maynard, pacing the opposite pavement, clutched convulsively at his chest, then slumped head forward to the ground without a cry.

Nick ground out an oath between tight-clenched teeth. Lungs almost bursting, he raced after the death car, but it was a hopeless task. From his pocket he drew out a police whistle and blew three long, urgent blasts, then turned back to where, on the pavement, sprawled the limp, lifeless body of the newspaperman.

Reverently, Nick turned over Maynard's body. One quick, cursory glance showed that he had been shot through the heart. In the rays of the detective's torch, the dead man's face held a faint, surprised expression. His death must have been practically instantaneous, thought Nick, as he lowered the body to the dank pavement. Then, suddenly, a gust of fury seized Nicholas New, stark, berserker rage that shook him as a mighty wind shakes a sapling. He forgot his years of training to repress emotion in times of crisis. A fierce, insensate fury against the foul and cowardly murderer who had shot down his friend Maynard in cold blood suffused his being.

"By —" he swore. "I'll get the Croucher if it's the last thing I do in this world! Bill, old man," he added, and his voice was husky, "I'll see you are avenged!"

From the gloom ahead came the sound of heavy, running footsteps, and a moment later two uniformed policemen emerged from the fog.

"What's all this?" demanded one, a grizzled sergeant, suspiciously.

"Murder!" rasped Nicholas New. "Quick, one of you, get the ambulance! There are two more victims to be added to the Croucher's list!"

"The Croucher?" whispered the sergeant, then, suddenly recognising Nick, saluted smartly.

"Where's the other chap, sir?"

"Round the corner," answered the detective curtly. "Chap named Larry the Wop. Know him at all?"

"Phew!" whistled the sergeant. "So Larry's got it. It was coming to him a long time. He's one of Brilliant Ling's runners."

"He was," corrected Nick significantly. "His running days are over now, poor chap!"

THE CLIENTS OF MR. AMBROSE ERTZ.

MISS DOROTHY SOMERVILLE came down the steps of her quiet, little flat in the quiet, little street off the King's Road, Chelsea, at exactly 8.30 a.m., and, following her invariable custom, bought a copy of the "Daily Clarion" at the bus stop opposite the Town Hall.

Save for a subtle air of refinement about



With an oath, Mr. Ertz swung round and found himself gazing at the bland, unruined figure of Professor Li Sin.

her carriage and the quiet distinction of her neat dove-grey costume, there was little to distinguish her from a score of other City-bound girl clerks and typists who boarded the No. 11 bus.

She opened her paper cursorily enough, and suddenly a blaze of headlines met her gaze:

"'CLARION' REPORTER MURDERED! £5,000 REWARD FOR CAPTURE OF THE CROUCHER!"

Dorothy gasped as she read the news of the dastardly crime in Shadwell the previous night. Hitherto she had been inclined to think that the Croucher was a partly mythical that the Croucher was a partly mythical the fertile imagination of the "Clarion's" reporter, but now as she read the stark account of the murder of Bill Maynard, a little tremor of fear seized her. It was only too horribly true. The report in the newspaper was meagre enough, but she thrilled a little as she read the significant sentence:

"Detective Inspector Nicholas New, who is in charge of the case, and was actually

present when the dastardly crime was committed, is in possession of a valuable clue to the identity of this master criminal, who is evidently bent on inaugurating a reign of terror against Society."

It was with rising impatience that she continued the journey from Victoria to Westminster, and at Parliament Square she alighted eagerly and hurried through the drab courtyard of Scotland Yard with a good deal of suppressed excitement.

Nick was already at his desk when she arrived. He looked up wearily as she entered, and a queer little pang shot through her as she noticed how careworn and haggard his usually cheerful face appeared.

He flashed her a little smile of greeting.

"Well, Miss Somerville. The Croucher's sprung at last with a vengeance!" he remarked. "Two in one night, and if I hadn't been lucky I'd have been a third!"

"Oh, don't!" said she ghastly to think of it, Mr. New? It's Dorothy, taking off her coat and hat, and seating herself at her desk. "And to think I spoke so horribly about poor Mr. Maynard last night. Is— is there any clue at all to the Croucher?"

Nick shrugged.

"A dozen, but they have all to be sifted and sorted," he announced.

"Bowles is working on the notes for finger-prints. Leeson's got the drag-net out for all cars, I'm covering the dyes. We'll get him, never fear. I wish you'd type these depositions as soon as possible, Miss Somerville," he added.

"I've got to report to the commissioner. Tough luck on my poor uncle taking over at this time; fortunately, Sir Richard's there to help him."

He rose to his feet and laid a mass of closely written reports on her desk. She noticed the tired strain in his eyes and the grimaces about his lips. This was a different Nicholas from the gay, inconsequential quoter of nonsense of last evening's little dinner-party.

Nick tapped at the door of the commissioner's room. His uncle was pacing restlessly up and down the rug, hands clasped behind his back, while Sir Richard was giving instructions to Inspector Myers of the Flying Squad.

"Pull them all in if they can give no satisfactory account of themselves," he was saying.

"Someone's bound to know the Croucher's haunts. He cannot possibly work without accomplices. This reward the 'Clarion's' offering will help, of course — Ah, New," he added, turning to Nick. "Find anything further about this man, Larry the Wop?"

"I did, sir. He's been in twice for dope peddling—years back. Used to work for that Chink, Brilliant Ling, was deported. I wouldn't be surprised if Ling's not slipped into the country again, and is backed by a cleverer rogue than himself."

"It's feasible, of course," said Sir Richard, tugging at his imperial. "Poor Maynard's murder will raise a cyclone of criticism against us now, of course, so we'll have to strain every nerve to get the Croucher. This is particularly unfortunate for you, general," he added, "to have to deal with two spectacular murders on your very first day of office."

"Confound it, yes!" fumed the general. "Fortunately, I have your valuable advice, but I almost wish I hadn't allowed the Home Secretary to persuade me to take on the post. Dammé, sir!" he added explosively. "Judging by what I've seen of

Scotland Yard's inner organisation, this Croucher chappie hasn't a snowball's chance in Hades. The public simply don't know—they're misled by cheap newspaper criticism of the finest police force in the world. Just because we don't catch a criminal red-handed, or in a few hours, they seem to think the whole organisation ought to be scrapped—and staffed, I suppose, by a lot of Fleet Street pen pushers!" he added bitterly.

Nick smiled.
"I'm following up the Brilliant Ling lead, sir," he announced. "There was very little indeed to go on in Larry's bed-room. He had only inhabited the place a week. The divisional surgeon reports that he must have been stabbed half an hour before my arrival. May I have a free hand?"

"Of course," said Sir Richard. "And by the way, Myers"—he turned to the Flying Squad chief—"it'd be as well to raid the Tottenham Court Road clubs in addition to the East End joints."

man, Hynes, was out shopping, but my study and dining-room are completely wrecked."

Nick felt sorry for his old chief; the stern martinet he had known had suddenly become strangely old and feeble.

"Egad, Gilbert!" snapped the general. "This—is this damnable! The murderous villain must have an organised gang. I suppose I'm the next on his list!"

Sir Richard rose to his feet, slightly more composed now.

"Myers. I'll come with you in a tender to see the extent of the damage," he announced. "He'll try again, of course," he added. "Please, Heaven, that'll be his undoing. Criminals nearly always over-reach themselves in the end!"

Bedford Row, that eminently respectable thoroughfare off the Gray's Inn Road, housed a no more respectable-looking tenant than Mr. Ambrose Ertz, whose neat brass plate outside the door of his mellow

roundings. His greying hair was brushed smoothly back from the forehead, and his plump, well-kept fingers drummed a tattoo on the desk before him. He affected a monocle with a tortoiseshell rim, and this he screwed into his eye ere scanning an afternoon edition of the "Evening News."

He clucked his tongue in disapproval as he read.

"Dear me! How shocking!" he murmured. "What will the Croucher do next? Bombing the Scotland Yard Commissioner's house indeed. Dreadful! Dreadful!"

Something in the account of the Croucher's latest outrage seemed to amuse Mr. Ertz, for his eyes twinkled as he pushed the ivory bell-push on his desk.

A thin, stoop-shouldered man well past middle age entered the room. He was dressed in rusty black, his cadaverous face was as yellow as the parchment he ornamented with his beautiful copper plate. He looked exactly what he wasn't, a studious, rather dull lawyer's clerk.

In the aperture appeared a black garbed figure, his face completely hidden by a mask. "The Croucher!" gasped Ertz.



"Very good, sir. I'll instruct Winslow in the matter," replied Myers. "I was wondering if—"

The phone bell shrilled sharply, and Sir Richard lifted the receiver. As he listened his face contorted with rage.

"What's that?" he snapped. "A bomb! Good gad! The murderous scoundrel will stop at nothing! Of course I'll be along at once."

He turned to the others, and his voice shook a little.

"A bomb exploded in my flat ten minutes ago, gentlemen," he said quietly. "If I hadn't left half an hour earlier than usual this morning, the Croucher would have fulfilled his threat!"

He sank into a chair, and his face was pale and twitching.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Nicholas New. "Are there any casualties, sir?"

"None, fortunately, according to the sergeant on duty," replied the other. "My

Georgian house bore simply his name and nothing more.

Yet there was a distinctly legal atmosphere about the tall-fronted house, through the windows of which one glimpsed neat, japanned desk boxes, ledgers, high, old-fashioned desks at which two seedy but also very respectable-looking old gentlemen sat industriously copying deeds on parchment in writing rivalling exquisite copper plate.

A severely lawyer-like street, disdaining change and ostentation is Bedford Row, and one that appealed strongly to the quiet, unassuming nature of Mr. Ambrose Ertz.

He sat at the desk of his modestly furnished inner office, a middle-aged man inclined to embonpoint. He was dressed in a rather old-fashioned frock coat, and wore a black cravat with his pointed linen collar that gave him a faintly Georgian appearance that harmonised with his sur-

"Ah, Stephens!" said Mr. Ertz, with a smile. "Have you finished that letter?"

"I have," said Stephens. "And a darn good job I made of it, chief, if you ask me."

The geniality vanished from the eyes of Mr. Ertz.

"I didn't ask you!" he snapped. "And drop that tone during business hours. Let's see the note."

Stephens pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Mr. Ertz, who scanned it narrowly through his monocle.

"You won't find any fault with that if you was to use a microscope," said Stephens, baring his yellow teeth in a grin. "That'll get Mr. Nosey New and—"

"That'll do, you fool!" snarled Ertz, and his face twisted into an ugly grimace. "Do you want to toe the T piece at eight on a chilly morning?"

A flicker of fear shone for a moment in the sunken eyes of Mr. "Phoney" Stephens, ex-engraver, and now one of the cleverest forgers in Europe. He stood in awe of his employer, the enigmatic Mr. Ertz, who knew so much of his dubious past.

"Sorry, chief," he mumbled. "By the way, Hanlon's waiting to see you."

"Send him in!" snapped Ertz. Stephens shuffled out of the room, and Mr. Ertz's ill-humour vanished as suddenly as it appeared. He gazed round the austere lawyer-like office and surveyed the dusty Japanese brief boxes on the shelves with approval.

Scotland Yard would have given a good deal to know the contents of those boxes. Mr. Ertz had inhabited that quiet house in Bedford Row for many years—his neighbours, both dry-as-dust solicitors, whenever they bothered their heads about anything other than torts, deeds and conveyances, thought Mr. Ertz a very sound, dependable member of the legal profession. In a sense they were right. The criminal confraternity found Mr. Ertz very sound and dependable—as a fence.

His clientele was not extensive, but it was peculiar, very peculiar, as the newcomer, who now entered, attested. He was a sharp-nosed, ferret-eyed man with reddish hair and a snub freckled nose.

"Come in, Hanlon," said Mr. Ertz. "Have you fixed it with Brilliant?"

"Sure, chief," said Red Hanlon, with the peculiar lip movement of the old lag. "Everything's fixed. But, lumme, ain't the Croucher puttin' it over; he's put the fear o' death into—"

"Shut up, hang you!" snarled Ertz. "What the devil's the Croucher to you? Remember what happened to the last man who talked too much."

Mr. Ertz closed his soft hand in a slow, relentless gesture, and Hanlon's face paled suddenly. He changed the subject hurriedly. "Brilliant has the room all set," he announced. "The darn buses and batties are coming out every joint in Limehouse, boss—they've pulled in Mike the Whizz an'—"

"Police activities do not worry me, Hanlon," said Mr. Ertz coldly. "Remember—at midnight, the girl's room must be ready at the house of Brilliant Ling."

"Midnight is it, chief," said Red Hanlon, and his loose lips curled into a lascivious leer.

"Give this to Stephens as you go out," snapped Ertz. "Tell him to have it delivered on the stroke of six p.m."

He handed the folded note to the red-haired crook and dismissed him with an airy wave of his plump hand. For a few moments he gazed into vacancy. There was a peculiar expression in his cold, strangely light eyes, a reptilian glitter that was not pleasant to contemplate. Then, as if impelled by a sudden decision, he lifted a small house telephone that stood on his desk and murmured a few words into the receiver.

"Pardon me, my dear Ertz," cooed a soft voice at his elbow. "It is quite unnecessary to inform me. I rely as much on telepathy as telephony."

With an oath Mr. Ertz swung round in his swivel chair, and found himself gazing

at the bland, unruffled figure of Professor Li Sin.

The Chinaman was dressed in his usual impeccable fashion, between his lemon-hued fingers he held a black, rice-paper cigarette.

"Gosh! You—you startled me," gasped Ertz. "I—I was just going to let you know that all's set for the big kill."

"I know," said Mr. Sin blandly. "It is work of sheer superogation on your part, my dear Ertz. I, however, appreciate your zeal, while deprecating your impetuosity. It was surely an error to tell the rather obvious Mr. Hanlon to call. He is dangerous—he drinks too much."

Mr. Ertz, who inspired so much terror in others, found great difficulty in controlling



"'Ere, brace up, Louie," urged the pick-pocket. "You've got a touch of the 'orrors."

his trembling fingers, and winced beneath the cold reproof of the man from Pekin.

THE MAN IN BLACK.

NICK NEW had a comfortable bachelor flat just off Trafalgar Square. He found it central and convenient for Scotland Yard, and shortly after two o'clock in the afternoon he restored a little of his customary serenity of outlook with a long, luxurious soak in his tub and a light but appetising lunch.

He had been on his feet for nearly thirty-six hours, and, after accompanying the commissioner to the scene of the damage at his place in Elmsmere Square, and helping Myers restore a little order out of the chaos of the wrecked rooms, Nick felt entitled to an hour or two's rest.

The Croucher's latest outrage might have had serious consequences had the bomb exploded earlier. Both Sir Richard's study and dining-room had been completely wrecked by the force of the explosion. Amidst the debris of splintered furniture, gaping walls and shattered windows, Myers had found pieces of twisted steel and an enamel dial, which indicated that a time-bomb of some kind had been hidden somewhere within the house.

Sir Richard's man had been rigorously cross-examined, but he could supply little or no information. Indeed his one reiterated statement was one of joy that he was out shopping when the sanguinary bomb went off. The commissioner himself, in a towering rage, had decamped for his club,

a funeral building in Piccadilly, leaving, as Nick misquoted to Miss Somerville, "the world to darkness and to me."

The Flying Squad had excelled itself, however. Into its all-embracing net had been dragged the queer fish the infest the polluted streams of the underworld. But one and all, from pickpocket to con man, stoutly denied all knowledge of the Croucher.

Meanwhile, Fleet Street was in a ferment. Great half-hour special editions of the every national dailies appeared, each with its own garbled and fantastic account of the latest developments. It was with a sigh of genuine relief that Nick reached the sanctuary of his flat, there to ponder on the baffling problem.

He lit his after-luncheon pipe and considered every aspect of the case, since he had received that laconic warning, "You're Next," the previous night.

Maynard had been murdered obviously because the Croucher feared that the newspaper man knew too much. Sheehy MacGuire and Larry the Wop shared his fate for the same reason. There remained only Sir Richard and himself to be accounted for. If the commissioner had followed his usual habit of leaving his house at 9.30 a.m. he would certainly have perished in the explosion.

Again and again in Nick's mind rose the memory of that saffron-tinted incorruptible, Mr. Li Sin, of Pekin. Who was he? Why had he warned him against the Croucher? Was it sheer bravado on the man's part that visit to Scotland Yard?

Nick was frankly out of his depth. The uncanny reticence of even the most loquacious mark was attributable either to the fact that they did not know anything at all about the Croucher, or that they were scared to death of his vengeance. In any case, it seemed hopeless to expect any results from that angle unless the "Clarion's" offer of £5,000 would result in avarice overcoming fear.

Nick recalled the Gutteridge case in that connection, and it gave him a few crumbs of comfort. If only one of the crooks caught in the Flying Squad drag-net could be induced to speak.

The 'phone bell tinkled sharply and interrupted his reverie. He lifted the receiver and stiffened suddenly as he recognised the suave, cool voice of Professor Li Sin.

"Is that you, Mr. New?" purred the Chinaman.

"It is," snapped Nick. "What the deuce do you want. I want you very badly, incidentally."

"Come and find me, my dear sir," was the mocking reply. "I'm—er—sorry I missed you last night," he added.

Nick swore softly under his breath, but he managed to control his voice.

"The regret is mutual, I assure you," he replied. "What do you want?"

"I want you to take great care of yourself, Mr. New, and incidentally of your commissioner. The Croucher does not fail twice, you know. Unless the Flying Squad ceases its rather strenuous activities, I shall be compelled to—er—take very drastic measures indeed. They are seriously embarrassing me. That is all."

There was a faint click. The Chinaman had rung off. Feverishly Nick called up the exchange and found, as he suspected, that

the call was from a public call-box in Piccadilly.

He swore roundly and seized his hat—then abandoning his first impulse, strode into his dressing-room. Feeling off his dressing-gown he surveyed himself critically in the mirror, then opened a drawer of his dressing-table and produced various items necessary to the art of disguise.

"Limehouse Louie's the only hope," said Detective-Inspector Nicholas New cryptically. "If I can't get wise to the Croucher that way—nobody on earth can."

"Where the deuce is New?" snapped Sir Richard Gilbert irritably, as Miss Dorothy Somerville entered the big, airy room in Scotland Yard shortly after five p.m.

"I told him to report to me by four o'clock. Myers has discovered a very promising lead from the Yellow Harlequin Cafe."

"I could not say, Sir Richard," replied the girl quietly. "I believe he went home to change at two; he hasn't communicated since." She placed a heap of neatly typed depositions on the desk, and stood rather hesitantly beneath her chief's scrutiny.

Sir Richard's eye rested in frank approval on the girl's trim figure. She coloured faintly under his gaze, and, clearing his throat, Sir Richard pulled irritably at his greying beard. He was nervous and restless. The Croucher affair was getting on his nerves. Usually coldly practical, Dorothy saw that that bomb outrage that morning had shaken him considerably.

She was not very keen on Sir Richard, but she thought that the Press attacks on his regime were uncalculated for. After all, he had spent years at Scotland Yard, and received little credit for the many reforms he had instituted. She remembered little acts of kindnesses on his part to her, when raw and inexperienced, she had first joined the staff at Police H.Q., but she disliked his disconcerting fashion of gazing at her in that peculiar speculative fashion.

"Is—there any further news of the Croucher, sir?" she ventured. "That horrible affair this morning seems to show he's terribly in earnest."

Sir Richard's eyes lightened a little. "Bless my soul," he remarked. "Are you worrying about me? I have a personal bodyguard of plain-clothes men, my dear young lady—and as for this scoundrel, the Croucher, I have every hope of pulling him in within the next twenty-four hours. Myers has a splendid clue that he is following up. Er—send Inspector New to me immediately he arrives."

Dorothy nodded and withdrew quietly.

"Egad, my nephew's chosen a darned pretty secretary," chuckled the general, who was deep in a bewildering maze of traffic returns.

Sir Richard nodded absently. He was distinctly jealous of Inspector New.

"Your nephew is a remarkable young man, general, but I do wish his methods were a trifle more orthodox. It's very bad for discipline the way he mixes so intimately with the criminal fraternity. A little fraternisation is, of course, essential, but I am afraid he overdoes it."

Meanwhile, Mr. Ambrose Ertz, that eminently respectable tenant of Bedford Row, was filled with a pleasurable feeling of anticipation as he glanced at the ornate clock on his desk. In a few minutes the note to which Mr. "Phony" Stephens had devoted so much time and skill would be delivered at Scotland Yard, and Mr. Ertz awaited developments with keen interest. There was absolutely no risk, of course. Nothing that the versatile Mr. Ertz tackled

ever had a risky element, at least, to himself. To others maybe—but no dossier of misdeeds, no hint of suspicion concerning himself were extant at police headquarters. Very few people indeed knew Mr. Ertz's real profession—those who did were silent, for the shadow of the gallows is a great deterrent to the squeaker.

He pressed a bell on his desk and the cadaverous Stephens entered.

"You and Martin stay until the girl has arrived, then vanish," he said. "Understand?"

Stephens grinned evilly. "Sure, chief. And does New get his?"

"Mind your own business," snarled Ertz.

Stephens rubbed his bristly chin, and his shifty eyes shot a look of hatred at his employer.

"I see there's five thousand quid out for info' about the Croucher, chief," he said quietly. "It's a big sum for a tiny scrap of—"

He broke off, appalled at the sudden look of tigerish ferocity in the other's face and backed away hastily.

"What's that?" snarled Ertz.

Gone was his snavity, gone his respectability. He was brute beast. His eyes glowed with an unholy light, and his lips writhed back from his too-white teeth in a wolfish snarl. "You think you can squeal on the Croucher, eh?" he demanded, and his voice was shrill with passion. "You—you—sewer-rat! Let me tell you that no man alive has ever hinted that he'd squeal on the Croucher—and lived. You've signed your death warrant, Stephens."

"No—no—chief!" gasped the terror-stricken crook. "For heaven's sake. I—I didn't mean it; I—I couldn't squeal if I wanted to. As Heaven's my witness, I don't even know who the Croucher is."

Ertz stared at the cowed wretch and

laughed softly. His rage passed with almost startling suddenness.

"Your ignorance is indeed bliss, Stephens. Knowledge would mean a particularly unpleasant death, my friend. Go!"

He pointed towards the door, and the trembling crook slunk out like a whipped cur.

"A letter for you, Miss Somerville."

Dorothy looked up from her typewriter as a young constable entered the room, an envelope gripped in his ham-like hand. She smiled her thanks charmingly, causing a distinct flutter in the constabulary breast, and glanced at the superscription. She recognised the handwriting, and flushed a little, then, woman-like, felt oddly resentful that the sight of that familiar scrawl should react so strangely upon her.

The note had evidently been delivered by District Messenger, and was addressed from Bedford Row. The message was brief, but explicit:

"Dear Miss Somerville," it ran, "Please bring copies of depositions A and B to the above address by 6.30 p.m. I believe I am at last on the Croucher's trail—curiously enough, through a woman not even remotely connected with the underworld."

"She will not speak, however, except in the presence of her solicitor, Mr. Ertz, and must be very tactfully handled. You being the embodiment of that virtue, your presence is both desirable and essential. Sincerely,

"NICHOLAS NEW."

Dorothy smiled at the odd mixture of formality and friendship in the note which was typical of the relationship between her

"Listen, Kemmy," rasped New, gripping the "fence" by the throat. "I'll choke the life out of you if you don't come across."



and Nicholas New. She glanced at her wrist watch. It was five minutes past six. She generally finished work at six p.m. except on special occasions. It was quite evident that Nicholas needed her presence urgently at the lawyer's office. It was not the first occasion she had been present when the police in the course of their duties had to question a female witness.

She felt a queer thrill of excitement at the thought that at long last Nick had found a clue to the Croucher's identity, and wondered who the woman was that was not even connected with crime. It was certainly an intriguing situation, she mused, as she snapped the lock of her little attache case and added a few deft touches to her toilet.

Dorothy hesitated for a moment, wondering whether she should leave word indicating her movements. This precaution appeared to her rather unnecessary, as she was acting on the direct instructions of Inspector New, who she would meet in so short a time.

She hailed a taxi in Whitehall, down which leather-lunged newsmen ran bawling "Croucher Latest," and felt a pleasurable sense of superiority at being admitted behind the scenes of this sensational drama.

The taxi turned into Grays Inn Road and deposited her outside No. 7a, Bedford Row. She noted its atmosphere of aloof respectability and lawyer-like mustiness. She dismissed the cab and entered the outer office. An ancient clerk in shabby black, who looked as if he had stepped out of Dickens, shuffled towards her, quill pen behind his ear.

"Miss Somerville?" he ventured, with an old-world bow.

Dorothy nodded.

"Mr. New is waiting for me, I believe," she remarked.

"He is in with Mr. Ertz and his client," said Stephens. "Won't you step this way?"

He lifted the flap of the counter and led the way towards a green baize door and knocked.

"Come in!" called Mr. Ambrose Ertz.

"Miss Somerville," announced Stephens, as he held open the door.

Dorothy entered, and found herself in

a cosy, workmanlike room and facing a rather portly, pink-faced gentleman clad in clothes of rather old-fashioned cut.

Mr. Ertz rose to his feet and smiled. Subconsciously, Dorothy noted his teeth were rather too large and too white.

"Ah! The—er—young lady from Scotland Yard," said Mr. Ertz. "Won't you sit down? Inspector New and my client are expected at any moment."

He waved his hand towards a leather-backed chair, and surveyed Dorothy appraisingly through his monocle.

"Pray pardon my presumption," he purred. "But you are a most attractive young lady to be connected with the police force."

Dorothy stiffened. Her first impression of Mr. Ertz had not been exactly favourable, but now she felt she thoroughly disliked the man. He was too suave, too smooth. She checked the retort that rose to her lips, and hurriedly changed the subject.

"I understood from Inspector New that he was waiting for me here," she said coldly.

Mr. Ertz nodded and gave an oily chuckle.

"Quite right. That's what I meant you to understand, my dear Miss Somerville."

Dorothy felt her heart thumping uncomfortably, but she kept her head and tried to still the feeling of alarm that started her.

"I—I fail to understand what you mean, sir," she said. "I had a letter from Inspector New—"

"You did not, my dear little police lady," broke in Ertz, and his eyes narrowed. "You had a letter purporting to come from dear Nicholas—a different matter."

Dorothy leapt to her feet. Panic gripped her.

"You—you mean it was a forgery?"

"Precisely," was the reply. "But do not blame yourself unduly, that letter was forged by the greatest expert since the late lamented Jim the Penman."

"Then—then this is a trap!" gasped Dorothy, glancing round wildly.

Ambrose Ertz rose to his feet, and the expression on his face was ugly.

"Now, my dear girl, be sensible!" he said. "I wanted you here for a particular reason."

With a panther-like step he strode towards her.

"Let me go at once!" hissed the girl.

"If you touch me, you beast, I'll—"

She screamed as she felt his soft, pudgy hands close on her arms.

"Scream away, young lady," cried Ertz. "This office is soundproof. Beyond that door are plates of steel. You have no possibility of escape. The very taxi that brought you here was fake."

Dorothy felt a sickly wave of nausea sweep over her as she struggled in his grip. His hot breath fanned her cheeks, his curiously light eyes were ablaze with passion.

She wrenched one arm desperately from his clammy clutch, and struck with all her might at his pink, fleshy face.

He staggered back and spat out an oath.

"By— You little spitfire! I'll make you pay for that! I'll—"

"Keep back, you beast!" she cried, and her fingers closed on a heavy leaden paper-weight on the desk. A wild surge of exultation flooded her veins as she raised the



Intent upon the elucidation of the mystery, Inspector New failed to notice the dim, shadowy figures converging upon him.

misses. She wanted to pound that flabby face.

Ertz saw the look in her eyes, and cowered back, but it was only for a moment or so. Suddenly he sprang forward with surprising agility for one of his bulk.

Crash!

The heavy paper-weight missed his temple by a fraction of an inch, and smashed a framed photograph on the wall. He laughed exultantly, and, sick with horror, Dorothy felt the grasp of his strong hands as his arms closed around her.

She was trembling in every limb, and a prayer rose from her aching lips.

"Don't! Don't!" she screamed.

"Scream away, my pretty one!" he mocked. "There is no one to hear. No one to come to your rescue—"

Clang!

Even as he spoke a steel shutter opened in the wall at the rear of his desk, and framed in the aperture was a black-garbed figure, his face completely hidden by a mask, in his hand a blue-nosed automatic.

"Ooh!" sobbed Ertz, and his face was the colour of death.

"The Croucher!"

"Exactly!" said a soft, silken voice.

"Mr. Ambrose Ertz, you seem to have exceeded your instructions. You will at once beg this young lady's pardon on your knees!"

Dorothy stared at that sinister, crouching figure in the aperture. He was completely covered by a black velvet cloak, and through the slits in his mask his eyes glittered balefully, and the hand that held the gun was like a yellow claw.

That much she saw, and suddenly a queer red mist swam before her eyes, and she slumped forward to the floor into blank and blessed unconsciousness.

A SHOOK FOR SHIFTY LEE.

MR. "SHIFTY" LEE, that resourceful dip, had a grievance which he loudly and luridly aired through the grille of his cell to the quite unresponsive back of the phlegmatic turnkey at Bovine Street Police Court. In the first place the unsympathetic magistrate had remanded him in custody "under the act" simply on the uncorroborated word of Detective Willis, despite Shifty's almost passionate plea that he was simply waiting for a bus for Swiss Cottage the previous night in order to get home to his sick aunt.

Shifty's record, however, was far too well known to the police, and they passed polite but sceptical remarks even about the existence of the little pickpocket's ailing relative. But Shifty's chief grievance was against Detective Inspector Nicholas New. "Nosy" New as he was called in crook-dom.

Nick's action in arresting him the previous night meant not only that he would forfeit the three months remission he had earned—for he was just out of Pentonville on ticket of leave—but, what was worse, earn him an additional half stretch for "loitering with intent."

Shifty's heart was sore at the injustice of it all, and what made matters worse was that this had been the one occasion in his life he had stood near a bus queue, not to pick pockets, but to do exactly the reverse.

He sat down on the hard, wooden bench of his cell and groaned. For some reason or other Bovine Street Station was extraordinarily full, and the Black Maria to convey him to Brixton was long overdue. As an old campaigner, Shifty infinitely preferred the cell amenities of a real "jug" to the stark discomfort of a police station "cooler."

He tugged at his scrubby moustache, then bounded towards the grille of his cell door.

"Hi, Beefy!" he bawled down the corridor. "Wot 'abart my mouthpiece? S'welp me if I don't 'ire Curtis Bennett and 'ave this case taken to the 'Ouse o' Lords."

There was a shuffling sound from the far end of the corridor, the jingle of keys, and there he was Shifty's restricted view the burly figure of Warden Higgins grasping by the arm a tattered-looking derelict of repellent aspect.

"Shut up, Shifty! 'Ere's a little playmate for you till Maria comes," reproved the warden, unlocking the cell door.

"In you get, Louie. If you want to see a doctor wait till you go to Brixton."

The newcomer, an unwholesome, pasty-faced-looking specimen of humanity, clad in a suit of nondescript garments that were green with age, slumped on to the bench, and held his head in his filthy, talon-like hand.

He was quivering and shaking from head to foot, and Shifty turned truculently to the warden.

"'Ere! Wotcher mean? Puttin' me in with a dope job? I'm a 'igh-class dip...I am, Beefy! I'll write to the 'Omo Secretary about it. I'll—"

Clang!

The cell door successfully cut short his harangue, and Shifty eyed his cell mate

NEXT WEEK'S ISSUE

will contain another gripping book-length story by

EDGAR WALLACE

especially written for
"The THRILLER."

with acute disfavour. The other lifted up his head and stared with lack lustre eyes at the little pickpocket. His twitching lips and rapidly dilating nostrils were the tell-tale marks of the cocaine sniffer, and Shifty gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Crikey! If it ain't Limehouse Louie!" he remarked. "'Ere, Lou', doncher remember me at 'Ginger' Martin's joint 'bout six munce back? You was all lit up and standin' drinks all round."

"'Eh?" said the other, in a dazed fashion. "I seem to know your dial, mate. What's your monniker?"

"I'm Shifty Lee," said the pickpocket, with an odd assumption of pride. "Gosh! But you ain't 'arf got the willies, Louie! What they run yer for—snow? It's a blame silly game now the Yard's all out for the Croucher."

It was significant that even in the privacy of the cell the little crook lowered his voice to a whisper as he mentioned the master crook's name.

"'Sh!" gasped the other. "The blighted Flying Squad's cleared us all up. Ginger's raided; they pulled in Wong Foo. They got me 'arf an hour back, the devils—got me afore I'd time to sniff a shot to steady me nerves."

"'Oo pulled yer?" demanded Shifty, with professional interest.

"Nosy New. May his eyes rot and his tongue wither!" snarled the other venomously. "I'll be a full stretch this time.

Shifty, an' no error," he added, passing a shaking hand over his bristly chin.

"'E knocked me 'arf, too, the 'big stiff!' growled the pickpocket. "'Knocked me 'arf for dipping. Think of it! The only night I wasn't workin', Nosy pinches me! An' fer what?" he asked dramatically.

"Spite," spat out Louie laconically.

"Lemme tell you," said Shifty, full of his grievance. "Ever 'ear of Red 'Anlon? 'E's a peter buster, one of the 'igh ups. Well, Red comes to me an' tells me to tail Nosy. We was at Luigi's cafe, in Soho, and Red sees 'ow Nosy New was dining with a skirt in the Spanish Restaurant. "'You're the best dip in London'—them were Red's exac words to me. 'There's a tanner for yer if yer slips this envelope into Nosy's pocket inside ten minutes.'"

Shifty paused dramatically, and his companion showed his yellow teeth in a mirthless grin.

"Well, wot 'appened?" he demanded.

"Why, it was as easy as falling off a log," replied Shifty. "I tailed Nosy New. Saw 'im see 'is gal to a bus, and slipped the envelope in 'is pocket. Red paid me five quid dahn, and I was to get the other 'arf later. That's where I was a fool. Feeling bucked like, I sorter 'ustled an old geezer that looked as if 'e 'ad a nice gold kettle on 'im, when Nosy spots me, an' in that sarky way 'e 'as arsts me wot I'm 'a-doin' of. There's a flattie 'andy—and 'ere I am," concluded Shifty lugubriously.

"'Strewh!" said the other. "Wot's Red's game?"

"Blowed if I know. They say 'e's mixed up in the Croucher lay; but me, I lay off that stuff. Ain't you with the Croucher crowd, Louie? Someone tole me as you was?"

"The Croucher?" echoed Limehouse Louie. "Blimey, no! Whist I was! 'E pays 'is runners well. I reckon old Wong Foo's one of 'is agents; but 'e's such a wily cuss nobody kin tell. 'Sides, look at the bloomin' Croucher, nobody knows 'oo 'e is. Some say 'e's a Chink. I 'eard old Brilliant Ling's slipped back from China, and 'e's the Croucher; but nobody's sure, not even Mr. Know-All Nosy. 'Oo's Red 'Anlon's 'is face now—old Kemmy Marks?" he added inconsequently.

"Kemmy!" echoed Shifty, with a short laugh. "'Stow it! I tell you Red's on the up and up; none of old Mark's prices for 'im. 'E's got a crook mouthpiece 'e was tellin' me; 'e was a bit lit up last night, and swankin'. Queer name it was. Not one of the reglers. Sounded like a sneeze or a dawg growlin'. Grchr or Bertz or somethin'. Anyway," added the little crook bitterly, "Mr. Bloomin' Red 'Anlon owes me a fiver, and I kin see a stretch at the bloomin' 'Vile a-staring me in the fice just for carryin' bloomin' love letters from 'im to Nosy New!"

Limehouse Louie's pasty face began to twitch alarmingly, queer, gurgling sounds came from his throat. He clutched Shifty's arm with his claw-like hands and gasped painfully.

"'Oh, gosh! They're coming, Shifty!" His teeth chattered violently, and his frame was racked by convulsive shudders.

"'Ere, brace up, Louie!" gasped the pickpocket. "You've got a touch of the 'orrs, that's what!"

"'For —'s sake fetch the doc," shrieked the other. "I must 'ave a shot. Me nerves are raw, they're burnin' me alive —"

Flecks of foam appeared round his writhing lips, and Shifty, who knew a little of the fiendish agony endured by the dope fiend suddenly deprived of the drug his

tortured system craves, leapt for the bell push.

"Hi, Beefy!" he roared through the grille. "This chap's going bats!" Quick, fetch the doc, you fat blighter!"

The burly warder quickened his pace and unlocked the cell door. He cast one glance at the writhing figure on the bench, then rapped out sternly:

"Stow it! Stop that screamin', d'y'ear."

"Fetch the doc for the lava Heaven!" moaned the quivering, pitiful figure clinging convulsively to the turnkey's sleeve. Warder Higgins grasped the writhing Louie in his arms as though he had been a child. Another warder appeared on the scene, much to Shifty's disgust, for that wily crook had edged near the open door.

"Come on now, Louie! Pull yourself together!" mumbled the warder. "You're better alone, I reckon. I'll send for the doc."

He half-dragged, half-carried him out of the cell, and the last glimpse Shifty had of Limehouse Louie was kicking and struggling in the warder's arms down the dreary cell corridor.

The warder flung open the inspector's room and saluted.

"Louie seems in a deuce of a bad way, sir," he announced. "Better let the doc see him."

"Right, Higgins!" said the inspector sharply, with a glance of disgust at the shivering derelict. "Leave him here for a moment, and I'll get Murgatroyd to examine him."

"Very good, sir!"

Higgins saluted and withdrew, and when the door had closed Shifty's late cell companion shook himself like a dog, sat up straight, and grinned at Inspector Rawlins.

"Good-morning, Rawlins," he remarked casually. "I'm sorry to have to play tricks on my comrades of the force. Could you spare me a cigarette?"

Rawlins frowned, stared hard at his captive, then grinned his appreciation of the splendid make-up.

"By heck, New, you're playing a dangerous game! You'll get it in the neck one of these days. You know it's strictly illegal—"

"Rot!" said Detective Inspector Nicholas New, blandly waving aside the objection. "It isn't the first or the last time I've assumed the identity of Limehouse Louie. Besides, the commissioner's given me a free hand. All's fair when one is up against the Croucher. I had a hunch and it came off—By the way," he added, "when Shifty comes up again on Thursday, don't press the charge. Indirectly he's given me a lead to the Croucher, but he's safer here until I've pulled in that murderous brute."

"Good goah! Does Shifty know who the Croucher is?" gasped the astounded Rawlins.

"He hasn't the vaguest idea," laughed Nick. "That's the nonsensical part of it! Knowing nothing, himself he's put me wise to a good deal."

THE HOUSE OF BRILLIANT LING.

DOROTHY SOMERVILLE'S first sensation on regaining consciousness was one of deadly nausea. Her temples throbbed dully, her mouth was parched and dry, and she felt she had not even the physical energy to open her eyelids.

She lay for a few moments quite still, striving to collect her scattered senses into some coherency. She had, she remembered, called at Bedford Row in re-

sponse to an urgent letter from Nicholas New, and after that—

She shivered involuntarily.

Was it all a nightmare? Ertz with his white, flashing teeth that reminded her of tombstones. That dark, sinister figure who had appeared so dramatically seemingly from nowhere. Surely it was all a dream!

She opened her eyes and gasped with incredulous amazement at her surroundings.

She found herself lying on a long, low divan of orange silk, her head resting on soft swansdown cushions, but it was the exotic luxury of the room itself that bewildered her.

Each wall of the room from floor to ceiling was curtained with silken black hangings, embroidered with writhing dragons of gold brocade. From the ceiling hung a pendant bowl of some transparent rose-coloured stone, shedding a diffused and soft light on the beautifully lacquered red and black Chinese furniture.

At her side, on an exquisitely wrought table of bronze and silver, reposed a gold-topped carafe and a bowl of fruit—purple grapes, peaches, apricots, and near by a silver filigree cigarette-box.

She struggled into a sitting posture, and clasped her throbbing temples.

"Where am I?" she gasped painfully.

"I—I seem to remember fainting in that awful man's office in Bedford Row, and then—"

"Pray do not be alarmed, my dear young lady," cooed a soft, mellifluous voice from seemingly mid-air. "I assure you that the obnoxious Mr. Ertz has—er—been drastically dealt with. You are doubtless feeling rather bewildered at the moment, but in due course you shall be enlightened."

Dorothy leapt to her feet.

"Who are you?" she gasped. "By what right do you hold me here? Let me go at once."

She stamped a small and imperious foot. The calm suavity of that disembodied voice maddened her.

She looked round wildly. There was no sign of a human being within sight. She dashed at the curtains and drew them aside, to be met by a blank black wall.

"You coward!" she said contemptuously. "You dare not show your face! Come out of your hiding-place!"

"At the appointed time, my dear Miss Somerville," said the mocking voice. "May I, however, assure you that escape is quite impossible. There is only one exit to this room, and that is guarded night and day. Also in case you imagine that you are still at Bedford Row, let me hasten to correct that misapprehension. You are miles from that eminently respectable neighbourhood, and you were in fact conveyed from Mr. Ertz's office in a state of coma induced by the judicious use of a hypodermic needle—hence doubtless the slight touch of nausea you are experiencing—"

"You cowardly brute!" broke in Dorothy vehemently. "Do you really imagine you'll get away with it? Why, Scotland Yard already know that I left for Bedford Row, and once Inspector New gets busy—"

"A brave bluff, my dear," chuckled the unseen. "Unfortunately, it won't work. As for the egregious Mr. New, he will shortly be solving the greatest of all mysteries—what happens after death?"

The diabolic chuckle which followed chilled the blood in Dorothy's veins. Her head reeled at the horror of it all. She was alone, helpless, at the mercy of that utterly ruthless criminal, the Croucher.

She sank down on the divan, weak and trembling in every limb, then suddenly she lifted her determined little chin. She would not allow this mocking, invisible scoundrel to gloat or to see that she was afraid.

She helped herself to a cigarette from the filigree box and lit it, controlling the tremor in her slim fingers by an effort of will.

"That's right, young lady. Take it philosophically," laughed the unseen watcher. "I give you my word that nothing on that table has been tampered with, and you may eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow New dies!"

There was a faint click. It seemed to come from above the red lacquer cabinet, then silence—chill with the menace of death.



The underworld was ablaze with rumours that grew and spread like a forest fire, from the dingy, little, foreign clubs and drinking dens of Soho, from the gaily-lit haunts of the con. men in the West End to the frowny joints of Shadwell and Limehouse, the news of the devastating raids made by the Flying Squad spread panic among the various crook gangs.

Yet one man alone was quite unperturbed about the tidings of the wholesale round up of many notorious dens, both in the East and West End of the metropolis. That man was the Croucher, whose brilliant brain had organised one of the most dangerous and ruthless criminal confederations that had ever menaced society. Only three men in London knew the real identity of the man responsible for the wave of crime that had recently swept over the metropolis—and those three men lived in 'deadly fear of their leader. They themselves were murderers and expert crooks, each was an accomplished gang organiser, and not one had ever been in the hands of the police, yet compared to the Croucher himself they were mere tyros in crime.

It was a significant fact that, despite every effort made by the Flying Squad, not one single member of the inner circle of the Croucher's organisation had been caught, a fact which the master crook took pains to impress upon his lieutenants at their bizarre headquarters the night following Bill Maynard's murder.

It was a queer assembly, in a queer rendezvous. In the maze of streets beyond Blackfriars Bridge, narrow, evil-smelling, hemmed in by gaunt and gigantic ware-

houses that make the Surrey side of the river hideous, the Croucher's headquarters lay unseen and unsuspected.

It had the double advantage of having at least ten different means of ingress, including one cunningly hidden between the piles of a crumbling jetty, long since abandoned by the owners of the derelict grain warehouse that frowned desolately down on the Thames.

Not even the River Rats, as the Thames Police are known at Scotland Yard and the

With a rolling jolt the police boat drew alongside. There was a rapid exchange of shots. Simultaneously a porthole was smashed and a woman's terrified scream rent the air.



underworld alike, suspected that the boarded and shuttered building standing so forlornly cheek by jowl with a busy contractor's yard and an abandoned and crumbling church, was the H.Q. of the Croucher's organisation. It was here that Brilliant Ling returned secretly after his deportation to China and plied again his evil trade of smuggling that soul-destroying drug—cocaine. Few people ever penetrated the house of Brilliant Ling save those who knew the password. Fewer people knew the river exit. Some who passed through came back strangely altered, some who went through never came back. The warehouse was honey-combed with passages, and it is typical of the Croucher's thoroughness that the seemingly busy contractor's yard abutting the derelict building was his property, and the

workmen had nearly all gleaned their building experience on the grim break-water at Portland and the grimmer quarries of Dartmoor.

Six men in evening dress sat round a horseshoe-shaped table in a bare, vaulted room within the skeleton shell of the warehouse. Each one was masked, each one was a murderer, but only three knew the Croucher's identity. The rest was content not to know, for knowledge might have meant death.

"You're jumpy to-night, Ertz," drawled a bullet-headed man with a strong American accent. "What's bitten you?"

Mr. Ambrose Ertz shrugged his shoulders.

"Nothing. Touch of nerves I reckon." From his waistcoat pocket he pulled out a small oval gold case rather like a

woman's vanity box. He carefully emptied a few crystals of white powder on the back of his hand, and inhaled it gratefully. His eyes glittered feverishly behind the slits of his mask.

"Stevens needs fixing," he announced significantly. "That five thousand's ranking."

"What of it?" laughed the American. "Phony's too darned scared of his hide to try anything for five grand. What do you say, Duval?"

The man addressed, a grey-haired Frenchman, and, incidentally, proprietor of one of the most popular restaurants in the West End, smiled beneath the rim of his mask.

"Leave him to the Croucher!" he said quietly.

"Yes. Leave everything to me," laughed a voice from the doorway, and the velvet-garbed figure of the Croucher, his face completely covered by the folds of his sable mask, strode into the room. "My friends," he said, seating himself at the head of the table, "very soon we will have London at our mercy, and we can proceed with the plans I outlined to you. The police are already demoralised. The removal of that gaffdy, Maynard, has given the Press something to think about. To-night, Sir Richard Gilbert and Mr. Nicholas New will also be removed, and then—"

"Very slowly he closed his claw-like hand.

"The Croucher squeezes, and all London is his orange."

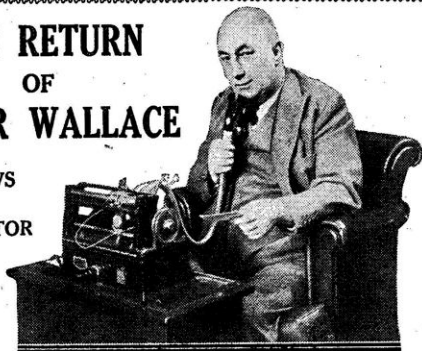
"Eh bien!" drawled Duval. "And meanwhile?"

"Meanwhile," said the Croucher, and his baleful eyes turned full upon Ambrose Ertz, "a little disciplinary action must be taken against friend Ertz here. I am afraid he forgot the respect due to a lady in whom I am—very—interested."

The last three words were slowly emphasised, and Ertz shivered with fear as he read death in the eyes that glittered so evilly behind the Croucher's mask.

THE RETURN OF EDGAR WALLACE

GOOD NEWS
FROM
YOUR EDITOR



So rapidly does the fertile brain of Mr. Wallace cope with the complexities of his mystery stories that a dictaphone is the only type of "stenographer" able to keep pace with him.

A WORD in haste! I have just stopped the machines which were printing this issue of *THE THRILLER* in order to announce the return of EDGAR WALLACE to our pages. Another remarkable story from the *Master of Mystery* will appear NEXT WEEK. Spread the good news! Tell your friends! Warn your newsgang to increase his supply and reserve you a copy.

Mr. Wallace asks me to excuse him to my readers for a little delay in the delivery of this yarn. It was to have been in your hands ere now. However, he has stoned for his sin by giving us a story we might well describe as a super-thriller—one that will make the red blood tingle in our veins and hold us breathless with interest from start to finish.

I am delighted to be able to make this announcement, because I am aware how eagerly many of you have looked forward to another adventure in company with J. G. Reeder, the world's most remarkable detective. Mr. Wallace tells me that amongst the multitude of characters he has created none appeal to him as does J. G. Reeder. Presumably that is why Edgar Wallace always scintillates in a "Reeder" story. He enjoys writing them as much as we revel in their perusal.

"The stories in the early issues of *THE THRILLER* were so excellent," states a Birmingham reader, "that I doubted if you could maintain the standard."

I am well aware that our friend in the Midlands has voiced the thought of thousands of thriller-story lovers in all parts of the land. It was not realised that authors could be found to make possible the offer

of stories of such high quality at a cost to the reader of only twopenny weekly. My readers have been both surprised and delighted.

Naturally, I am proud of our achievement. It has meant many months of hard work and diligent search. Authors of quality do not grow on gooseberry-bushes. They have to be found, guided, encouraged and aided by every means known to a highly-trained editorial staff.

Actually, the stories you read week by week in *THE THRILLER* are those picked for you by experts from amongst hundreds that are rejected. That is where the reader of such a periodical as ours scores doubly over those who choose their own books from the array on a bookstall or in a library. In *THE THRILLER* the choice is made by those who have been born and bred in the world of fiction, and unworthy work is weeded out no matter how famous the name of its author.

We set off on this grand adventure into the world of thriller-fiction, realising that success or failure depended entirely on our ability to maintain one hundred per cent good stories. There is so much on the market that is inferior. The amazing success of our new periodical is full proof that we have achieved our object.

Undoubtedly next week's issue will break all records. We shall greatly increase our printing order to meet the demand, but do not take a risk. Order your copy and make sure of Edgar Wallace's latest and best novel.

Yours sincerely,

THE EDITOR.

KEMMY, THE FENCE.

"IT'S all nonsense, of course, but because it's nonsense I believe it!"

Nick New, seated at his desk at Scotland Yard, stared sombrely at three strips of metal that lay on the blotting-pad before him.

It was nearly 9 p.m.

Six hours had elapsed since he had discarded the unsavory role of Limehouse Louie—a role he had often assumed when in the East End during the preliminary skirmish of Scotland Yard's warfare against the Croucher before that arch crook had actually come into the limelight. Nick had spent a strenuous afternoon. His methods of procedure, as the commissioner had remarked, were appallingly unorthodox, but Nick cared little so long as they worked. It was an axiom of his, and he had proved it on countless occasions, that life was infinitely ahead of fiction in providing bizarre problems. The old proverb that "truth is stranger than fiction," Nick amplified—truth is harder to believe than fiction, for fiction is a product of the human mind, and therefore congenial to it, whereas life is always incalculable.

He had, in his old fashion, rejected, for no earthly reason except that it was plausible, his first theory that the enigmatic Li Sin had slipped the Croucher's ominous warning in his pocket.

That left two persons excluding the waiter of the restaurant who might have done it. Dorothy Somerville—or Shifty Lee.

On the face of it each alternative was

Nick pounded the steel door with his pistol, but only the echo of his blows replied.



nonsensical; but Nick took a chance, and by taking it immediately obtained a different orientation towards the case. Red Hanlon was in touch with the Croucher somehow. From that point Nick's whimsical brain was attracted to the man whose name sounded like a sneeze. The nonsensical element in that fact appealed to him, and he spent a pleasant, but unprofitable half-hour with a telephone directory searching for a lawyer whose cognomen might apply. He tried a dozen with little result, and in disgust joined Meadows, who was making a detailed report of the outrage at the commissioner's flat.

Sir Richard himself had long since departed for his very exclusive club, and General Dale was dining with a member of the Government—so Nick's hands were untrammelled.

The actual notes on the yellow paper which the Croucher affected yielded very little information in the way of fingerprints. Not even that expert, Inspector Barlow, could identify the half-dozen smudged whorls which the camera revealed. Beyond the fact that the warnings were all typed on an Underwood portable machine, and that the paper was of German origin, and supplied in large quantities to the leading stationers, Barlow could say nothing with certitude.

Nick himself had interviewed the assistant at the District Messenger office in Southampton Row, but he failed to recall the appearance of the person who paid for the message.

The tangible clues in the detective's possession were pitifully meagre—the number—untraced—of Li Sin's motor-car; the fact that Red Hanlon was in some way, unspecified, connected with the Croucher; and the three strips of bent metal which he had discovered among the debris of Sir Richard's flat after the bomb outrage.

Nick picked them up from his blotting-pad, and his eyes narrowed. Fantastic and improbable though his theory was, there was that streak of oddity in his character that impelled him to reject the obvious and concentrate on the subtle.

For a moment or two he examined the strips through a magnifying-glass, then his lips set in a firm, decisive line as he swept them into the drawer of his desk and locked it.

"And now for Mr. Red Hanlon," he murmured, patting his hip pocket, where his automatic bulged comfortably.

The phone bell tinkled as he donned his grey felt hat, and with a frown of annoyance he lifted the receiver.

"Is that Inspector New?" demanded a suave voice—one that Nick had heard before. A vein throbbled dully in his forehead as he recognised it, but his tone was quite impersonal as he answered:

"Sure! What can I do for you?"

"Your activities, my dear New," drawled the voice, "are causing me serious embarrassment. I must ask you to refrain from these wholesale panic measures which the Flying Squad are conducting, otherwise the consequences will be very serious."

"Indeed?" laughed Nick. "So you are feeling the draught—er—Professor Ei Sin?"

He sensed rather than heard the sudden gasp of astonishment at the other end of the wire.

"Your crude methods must cease, Mr. New, otherwise the very charming Miss Somerville will undergo a very unpleasant ordeal."

"What! You yellow hound!" snarled Nick. "If any harm comes to that young lady, by heaven, I'll kill you with my own hands!"

"How very interesting," mocked Li Sin. "At the moment Miss Somerville is quite safe in my care, but—"

He paused significantly, and a gust of rage swept over Nicholas New. Dorothy in the hands of this scheming yellow scoundrel. It was unthinkable. The man was bluffing. With difficulty he controlled himself.

"Listen, Li Sin," he hissed into the receiver, "I'm going to get you, if I have to tear London to tatters to find you. As for Miss Somerville, I'll have a treble guard put over her night and day—"

A dry, mocking laugh twanged in the telephone.

"You have an English proverb, I believe, which runs: 'It is useless to lock the stable door after the horse has bolted.' Miss Somerville is very well guarded, indeed—by me. She has been a prisoner since six p.m. That, my dear sir, is for your information and necessary action, as the Civil Service so felicitously phrase it."

For a moment or two Nicholas New was quite speechless. He was stunned by the appalling fact. Dorothy in the hands of the Croucher!

His face was white and strained as he mechanically clicked the receiver to recall exchange, and found, as he expected, that the call had come through from a public call-box in the Blackfriars district.

He pressed a bell-push on his desk and gave curt orders to his sergeant.

"I'm off to Kemmy Marks to trace Red Hanlon," he announced. "The Croucher's got Miss Somerville."

"What?" gasped the astounded sergeant, then fell back hastily at the blazing fury in

his superior's eyes as he strode out of the room.

"Even 'elp Red—and the Croucher!' he muttered piously.

Nick hailed a taxi at the corner of Westminster Bridge. His brain was chaotic. The one fact that hammered incessantly was that Dorothy was in deadly danger. It came over him with a suddenness that was startling, that he loved her. It was the first time he had ever put the thought into words, and to Nicholas, who had always treated the opposite sex with a kind of gay camaraderie, this sudden revelation was disturbing. He acted to help the girl in his arms, to smash through all the barriers that kept her from him. A fierce primeval passion possessed him; he lusted to fight and pound his way through to her side and claim her as his mate by right of conquest.

He laughed discordantly. "Love is the greatest nonsense in the world," he muttered as the taxi bowled along the Embankment, the lights gleaming in the darkness like a necklace of amber beads.

It was significant that the phone call had come through from Blackfriars, for in that district, just beyond the King, was the hang-out of Kemmy Marks, who was ostensibly a marine store dealer, but in reality a fence and receiver of stolen property. According to Shifty, Red Hanlon had dispensed with Kemmy's services in favour of the lawyer whose name was like a sneeze, but that, Nick argued, was no reason why Kemmy couldn't put him wise to Red's new hang-out. The more he considered the matter the more promising it seemed. If Red had quarrelled with the old Jew, Kemmy might quite conceivably open up.

He dismissed the taxi at the entrance of the Boxing Ring and plunged into a rabbit warren of alleyways. The houses, mean, brick-built slums, were in the last stages of squalor and dilapidation. Some of the passages were as dark as tunnels, and at the end of one court that rejoiced in the name of O'Shea's Rents, Nick New halted.

Ramshackle houses, unlit by any comforting gleam of yellow, were huddled together, like evil hags; from a nearby court came the shrill chatter of guttersnipes at play and the strident voice of some nagging harriidan.

His hand sneaked stealthily to his hip as he crossed over towards a frowny-looking shop. The windows were so grimed with filth that it was impossible to see into the interior.

Over the lintel, in faded yellow lettering, was the name "K. Marks," and in the transom a sickly gas jet flickered.

The Yard man rapped sharply on the rusty knocker, and was rewarded by the sound of shuffling footsteps.

"Whos there?" quavered a voice through the slit in the letter-box. "Go away. Bithneth ith over for the Jay."

"Open up, Kemmy?" rapped Nick sternly.

"It's me. You'd better open quickly, or I'll smash the door in!"

Two beary eyes surveyed him through the slit; then, as if reassured, Kemmy threw a wincing sigh.

"Oh, Mister New! 'Ow you frightened me!" he mumbled. "There was a rattie of chains, the squeak of a protesting bolt, and Kemmy revealed himself 'is all his hideousness."

He was a belt, incredibly dirty old man, with a ragged, matted beard, a nose like a predatory beak, and red-rimmed, beary eyes, which now blinked suspiciously at Nick.

"Come on inside!" snapped the detective brusquely, leading the way to the filthy little living-room behind the shop. "It depends on how you answer, Kemmy, how I'm going to treat you."

"Vy, vot do you mean, Mithter New?" demanded Kemmy Marks, with a feigned innocence that was ludicrous in the circumstances.

Nick New wasted no time on formalities. "When did you quarrel with Red Hanlon?" he snapped.

"Red Hanlon?" echoed the fence. "I'm afraid I don't know vot you're talking about, Mr. New."

Nick's hand shot out, and his fingers gripped the other's scrawny throat in a throttling grip.

"Listen, Kemmy," he rasped. "I'll choke the life out of your filthy carcass if you don't come across. The verdict'll be justifiable insecticide," he added with grim humour.

"Oh, merthy—merthy!" gasped the wretched Kemmy. "I—I'll tell you anything you want to know within reason, Mithter New."

Nick released his grip, and Kemmy collapsed into a rickety chair. The detective dusted his fingers delicately with his handkerchief and rapped out sharply.

"Where does Red Hanlon hang out?"

"Kemmy licked his lips furtively, his red-rimmed eyes dropped beneath Nick's steady stare.

"I ain't seen him for three months, honest, I ain't," he whined. "The dirty type let me down over a deal an—"

"Never mind that. Who's Red working with now?"

Kemmy glanced suspiciously over his shoulder, then lowered his voice to a whisper.

"They say he's running with the Croucher," he announced. "Don't atik me who he ith, Mithter New, because I don't know—nobody knows."

"H'm," said Nick thoughtfully. "Has Red pulled any jobs lately? Don't be squeamish, Kemmy," he added. "You've squeaked enough in your time!"

The fence leaned forward, his mean little eyes malevolent with hatred.

"Red's running around with a girl—she's straight—a barmaid at the Goat's Head down Frame Road way. That's all I know—and that's the whole truth, Mithter New, she help me!"

"Ah!" said Nick, and a triumphant glint came into his eyes. "Red's got a girl, has he? I know the Goat's Head. Doesn't Bruiser Patterson keep the place?"

Kemmy Marks nodded eagerly as the detective rose to his feet.

"For the love of Mike, don't tell Red you've seen me, Mithter New," he pleaded, laying a skinny claw on Nick's sleeve.

The detective shook him off with a gesture of disgust.

"Watch your step, Kemmy," he said significantly. "I'll be round this way again very soon. No, you needn't bother to see me to the door—I can find my way out!"

Kemmy Marks cursed in his matted beard as the door closed behind his unwelcome visitor.

"Nothy beath!" he snarled. "I hope the Croucher get him!"

Meanwhile Nick had quickened his pace. The fact that Red was keen on a girl—and a straight girl at that, if Kemmy was to be believed—was at least a tangible link to his whereabouts. His nose wrinkled in disgust as he plunged into the malodorous squalor of the streets that fronted the river-side.

The Goat's Head at Frame Street was a public-house of some reputation among the dockers and water-front men, in that its license was an ex-welter-weight champion—none Bruiser Patterson. The police had little complaint to make about the place, for the burly landlord ruled his tough customers by

the strength of his strong right arm, and we betide anyone who started any funny business at the Goat's Head.

Frame Street was about ten minutes' walk away from Kemmy's shop, and it was nearly quarter to ten when the detective reached the blazing lights of the tawdry-looking gin palace at the corner.

He walked quickly into the four ale bar with his hands in his pockets. It was crowded, and a babble of voices rose from every corner of the room. The marble counter was sloping with unwiped beer-stains. A pert-looking barmaid with bobbed, peroxidized hair, and a shrill, cantankerous voice dispensed tankards to a crowd of seedy bar loungers.

From the saloon came the raucous strains of an electric piano blaring a Tin Pan Alley tune. Nick ordered a whisky and soda, and manoeuvred his way to a seat in the corner, where he glanced covertly at the bar occupants.

The clientele of the Goat's Head was like Nick's whisky, badly mixed. Hulking dock labourers, weedy wharf rats, one or two lascars from docked vessels, and, in the corner, a slant-eyed celestial placidly eating potato crisps. From behind the bar the gigantic torso of Bruiser Patterson loomed threateningly as he roared to a hilarious group of sailors in the corner, "Nah, then! Less noise there, you lot!"

Suddenly Nick's keen eyes narrowed, and his nerves tingled with excitement. At the other end of the long bar counter, screened by a pot of ferns, was a red-haired, ferret-faced man deep in conversation with a plump and rather good-looking barmaid.

It was Red! Hanlon! Nick glanced at the clock. It wanted a few minutes to closing time, and hastily he formed a plan of action. On the table beside him someone had left a copy of the "Evening News." He opened it, and pretended to be immersed in its contents, though one eye watched Red's movements like a hawk.

"Nah, then, Milly!" roared the landlord. "Stop that chin-waggin', there's customers waitin' to be served!"

Nick noticed Hanlon swear under his breath and hastily gulp down his drink. The barmaid flashed him an apologetic smile, showing the glint of a gold tooth. Hanlon muttered a curt "Good-night," and slouched out of the bar.

Unobtrusive as a shadow, Nick followed in his wake. He had two courses open to him. One was to tackle Red point-blank—in which case it would undoubtedly mean a fight—the other was to shadow the crook in the hope that he would glean some information about Dorothy. While there were many points in favour of the first course—and it would have given Nick, in his present mood, an unholly joy to pound Red Hanlon's face into a pulp—it by no means followed that Red would give him any information.

Accordingly, Nick, with a skill born of long practice as a shadower, tailed the unsuspecting crook through the maze of criss-cross streets that led to a fairly rapid pace.

Red slouched along at a fairly rapid pace. He was not drunk, but his gait was unsteady. Once or twice he tripped and swore luridly as he neared the house of Brilliant Ling.

Nick was frankly puzzled about the man's objective as he plunged deeper into the narrow alleyways, so puzzled that he did not notice a dark figure detach itself from the shadows of a neighbouring timber yard and signal with a peculiar motion of his hands to the other side of the alley street.

Nick, still intent on his quarry, failed to notice half a dozen dim, shadowy forms converging upon him, until an incautions

movement behind him caused him to wheel round suddenly. He glimpsed a yellow, hairless face, a clenched hand that held something bright and glittering, and, quick as the dart of a snake, Nick's fist shot straight for the other's jaw. *Crack!*

Like the sound of mallet on wood, his bunched knuckles slammed home. He laughed exultantly as he heard the other's howl of pain, but his triumph was short-lived. Even as he turned to square up to his attackers, his legs were suddenly jerked from under him, and then it came without hint or warning—a sudden staggering, numbing blow full on his temple that paralysed his limbs instantly.

Nick's senses reeled beneath the impact. It sent a great blinding whiteness shooting across his eyes. He was conscious of being almost smothered by sweaty, glistening bodies—there seemed to be myriads of them pressing the life out of him. He groaned and tried to lash out, but found he hadn't the strength.

He felt himself sinking into a deep pit of darkness—then consciousness left him, as if one had snapped out a switch.



THE SECRET OF L. I. N.

Nick came to with a crackling headache an hour later, though he had lost all sense of time when the first glimmer of consciousness came. He felt as though his head was tied tightly by strands of red-hot wire, and for some seconds he did not move. He found himself in complete and oppressive darkness, and put out a shaking hand that seemed constricted somehow, to touch a cold, slimy wall.

From afar off he could hear a faint drip, drip, and to his hypersensitive nerves it sounded like the drip of blood.

Gradually his brain started to function. He found himself lying on what seemed to be a filthy straw palissade. Something squeaked in the darkness, and two jewelled eyes watched him unwinkingly. He shuddered as his hand came into contact with something warm, lathsome, and wriggling.

Rats. The collar was full of them. Desperately he struggled to his feet—only to realise that his legs were pinioned, and he laughed discordantly as something jingled at his wrists. He had been handcuffed with his own bracelets!

Suddenly he heard the sound of footsteps that seemed to be descending a stone stairway. Whoever it was, he was approaching cautiously, a step at a time. The footsteps grew louder, and a little later there was a rasp of a key in the lock and the door began to open slowly.

A second later Nick was almost blinded by a ray from an electric torch that cut through the darkness like a sword.

"Ah! You have recovered consciousness, Mr. New?" said a voice that Nick had not heard before. "That is excellent."

"Who are you?" snarled Nick. "And where am I?"

"Ah! True to type," said the newcomer. "They call you 'Nosey' affectionately at the Yard, I understand; your thirst for knowledge shall be slaked very soon."

Nick struggled up to a sitting position, and in the rays of the torch made out three figures—each one was garbed in evening dress, and a black domino masked their faces.

"What have you done to Miss Somerville, you—villains!" he demanded wrathfully.

"By heck! If you've harmed a hair of her head, I'll—"

"Miss Somerville is quite safe, my dear sir. She has a charming room, plenty to eat and drink—in fact, everything she wants except liberty, and that, unfortunately, she cannot obtain until—er—certain formalities are completed."

Nick groaned helplessly as he gazed at his manacled wrists. What his immediate fate was to be he did not much care, but he writhed at the thought of Dorothy alone and helpless in the hands of the Croucher.

"I suppose you know that all three of you'll hang!" he said, with an ugly little smile. "You'll take a very short walk at eight o'clock one morning, my friends—and none of you'll ever come back from that walk. A good, clean wild whistling between your feet and the earth—"

"Drop that, dash you!" snarled Ambrose Ertz with a threatening gesture. His nerves were all on edge. It was only the news of Nick's dramatic capture that had saved him from the Croucher's wrath.

Three of the outside guard of Brilliant Ling's house had noticed Nick shadowing the unsuspecting Hanlon, and acted. Although he did not know it, the detective was now actually in a cellar, of the Croucher's headquarters, having been brought there while still unconscious by two of Ling's dope runners through the maze of passages that honeycombed the place.

"Better drag him upstairs, Ertz," said Duval. "The Croucher's keyed up to-night."

"Ah!" said Nick. "So you are the missing link, Ertz. I've searched for you with the painstaking devotion of a Darwin, and rejoice to note you're almost human."

"Funny, aren't you?" snarled Ertz. "You'll laugh the other side of your face when the Croucher's finished with you."

"Ertz—Ertz. It really does sound like a sneeze," said Nick. "Good theme for a nonsense rhyme, too. There's a curious creature called Ertz, who bluffs and bamboozles and blurts—"

SMACK!

Ertz's open hand caught Nick full on the mouth. "Stop that!" he snarled, stung by the detective's maddening coolness.

Nick's eyes blazed, but he kept his temper.

"I'll remember that blow, Ertz," he said quietly, "when I am not hampered by these."

He jingled the steel handcuffs significantly.

"Are you going to come quietly? I believe that is the formula you use," asked Duval, with an exaggerated bow. "The Croucher is very anxious to see you."

"And I also reciprocate," said Nick, with a grim smile. "Please lead the way, gentlemen. My steps are somewhat restricted," he added, with a glance at the rope which barely enabled him to walk.

"It's not far, buddy," drawled the third man, who had hitherto remained silent. Nick noticed the American accent, and his head whirled as he rose to his feet.

What fantastic fate was in store for him? Above all, how and where was Dorothy?

The dank stone stairs were climbed in silence. To Nick's ears came the sound of muffled hammering, and it grew louder as they advanced along a vaulted corridor. Suddenly Ertz paused before a large wooden door and inserted a key in the lock. It swung soundlessly open on well-oiled hinges, and Nick found himself half pushed and half-dragged into a high, vaulted room lit by a sputtering arc-lamp.

The whole room was bare of furniture save for a horseshoe-shaped table at which sat three masked men, immobile as statues. There was something sinister about the very bareness of that vaulted room, and

the harsh light from the arc irradiated the scene with a chill, bluish glare.

Nick hardly knew what to expect the Croucher's headquarters to be like. He was half-prepared for luxury, even for squalor, but this bare, austere room, devoid of all comfort, was like some monstrously enlarged prison-cell.

Suddenly one of the masked figures rose to his feet. Nick noted that he alone was garbed in a black velvet cloak, and his heart quickened its beat.

The Croucher at last!

For fully half a minute no one spoke.

Ertz, Duval, and Rescoe the American sat down in silence. Nick stood, manacled hands in front of him, gazing steadily at the motionless figure of the Croucher.

Then suddenly the tension was broken.

"You have given me a great deal of trouble Mr. New," said the Croucher quietly, in his curiously sibilant voice.

"People who annoy me do not do so for long," he added. "Mr. Maynard of the 'Daily Clarion' annoyed me; he is dead. Sheeny MacGuire might have annoyed me; he also is dead. Larry the Wop, poor fool, thought he could identify me; he also died under that delusion."

"As for you, Mr. Nicholas New—tell me frankly what my fate would be, assuming our present rôles were reversed, and I was your captive."

"You would be hanged by the neck until you were dead," said Nicholas calmly, "and I doubt if the Lord would have mercy on your black soul!"

The Croucher laughed mockingly. "Very well, Mr. New. Such frankness merits a reward. Voila!"

He reached forward and pressed a switch in the wall. Instantly a doorway to the right sprang open, revealing a small room about twelve feet square.

The room was quite devoid of furniture, and Nick saw there was something curiously familiar about the bare, whitewashed walls, the two upright beams spanned by one crossbar, from which dangled a hempen rope. There was a steel lever jutting from the floor.

"My God! The gallows!" he gasped. "Precisely," laughed the Croucher. "An exact replica of the execution-shed at Pentonville. You, my dear New, shall have the honour of being its first victim. There are many more that will follow you in the near future."

With a prodigious effort of will, Nick managed to restrain himself. He had a wild, insensate idea of hurling himself, manacled as he was, and battering the life out of the suave, cold-blooded villain, but realised that the struggle would be worse than useless.

"Then literally as well as metaphorically

She fought like a wild cat to escape from the Croucher's embrace. "Help, Nick! Help!" she screamed.



you live in the shadow of the gallows," he remarked flippantly.

"Do you seriously imagine that you are going to hang me—as you yourself will be hanged one day?" He turned to the Croucher.

"Do not imagine," was the reply. "I know. Ten minutes from now, Nicholas New, the quicklime will be searing the flesh from your bones. Have you any message you would like to convey to Miss Somerville? She is within call and quite comfortable, so do not worry on her behalf."

"You darned scoundrel!" Nicholas' pent-up rage burst out. He hurled himself forward, bound as he was, but Ertz and Duval seized him ere he could reach the master-crook. Quivering with passion, Nick turned to the Croucher and said thickly:

"It's—it's—usual to grant one boon to the condemned. May I see her for two minutes? I—I have something I particularly want to tell her before— He broke off hastily as his eye fell on the sinister, dangling noose.

"It is a reasonable request," said the Croucher slowly. "You may certainly speak to her—and see her, but in my presence."

So saying, he signalled to one of the masked men and whispered a few words, too low for Nick to catch.

"Of course, Mr. New," he resumed when the man had gone, "you have only yourself to blame for this distressing finish to a very promising career. You know too much. You cannot say you have not been warned to cease your activities against my organisation."

"I am afraid it is now too late to proceed with the plan I first contemplated—namely, to ask you to join us."

"Join you?" said Nicholas, and his voice was icy with contempt. "I'd sooner hang there."

He pointed to the dangling noose. "Quite," said the Croucher dryly. "You shall. Meanwhile, of course, I may say I have a very great regard for Miss Somerville."

He broke off suddenly as the door opened and Dorothy, accompanied by the masked man, entered the room. The girl's face was wan and pale, dark circles showed beneath her eyes, and she gave an involuntary cry as she recognised Nick.

He made a half-step towards her, but was checked by the Croucher.

"Oh, Nick! They've got you, too!" she gasped huskily.

His pulses thrilled at her use of his Christian name. How desperately she longed for her, and how ironic the situation! Even in his present plight the sense of the bizarre influenced him.

"Keep a stiff upper lip, dear," he said quietly. "It—it'll work out right in the end, you know," he added lamely.

"You—you—wanted to tell me something particularly," said Dorothy quietly.

"She ignored the others completely. It was as if they did not exist."

Nick read the message in her eyes, which were wet with tears, and, reading it, felt that death somehow would be easier now he knew.

"And I, too, Dorothy," he said very quietly.

The Croucher chuckled satirically. "Very affecting indeed! It's a pity young Maynard isn't here to chronicle the latest romance of Scotland Yard—but one of very short duration," he added with a sneer.

"You always were fond of melodrama, my dear Croucher," broke in a cool voice. "Perhaps this will appeal to you. Put 'em up. They both spit death!"

Nick's jaw gaped open. As if by magic, two squat, vicious-looking automatons had

appeared in the hands of the masked man who had brought down Dorothy from the Laequer Room. And the hands were yellow!

One gun pointed at the Croucher's heart; the other covered his dumfounded accomplices. For a second or two no one spoke, then a strangled snarl tore from the Croucher's throat.

"Li Sin! You yellow scum! Have you gone mad?" he demanded harshly.

"On the contrary, I am perfectly sane. If you don't elevate your hands before I count three, I shoot to kill," he said, with slow, sibilant emphasis.

"You cursed double-crossing Chink!" broke out Ertz, with a vile oath. "I'll—"

CRASH!
Calmly, imperturbably, Li Sin fired as the maddened man rushed towards him. With a squeal of agony Ertz cowered back, holding a shattered wrist.

"Back, you dogs!" rasped the Chinaman. "Miss Somerville, if you will kindly slip your hand into my waistcoat pocket you will find the key to Inspector New's small automatic."

Like one in a daze, he stared at the speaker. Her brain was reeling at the suddenness of this unexpected denouement. Nick's urgent voice impelled her forward, however.

"Hurry, darling!" he pleaded. Fervently she groped in the Chinaman's pocket. He stood there, calm, imperturbable as a statue, while the chill menace of his guns cowed the others into immobility. Her fingers fumbled nervously as she tried to insert the key into the handcuffs. Nick smiled reassuringly at her, there was a slight click, and his hands were free.

She thrust a small nickel-plated gun into his hand, and Nick's heart leapt exultantly. "And now, you murderous fiend," he ejaculated, turning to face the masked master-crook. "Let's see your ugly mug!"

Hampered as he was by his still pinioned legs, Nick approached the Croucher, who backed away hastily, arms upraised from the menacing purpose in the detective's face.

"Keep back, curse you!" snarled the Croucher. "Ertz, Duval, you spineless fools, why don't you rush 'em?"

"They have too wholesome a regard for their own skins," chuckled the imperturbable Li Sin.

Nick's left hand shot out like a darting snake, straight for the Croucher's face. He tore off the sinister black domino. A scream rose involuntarily from Dorothy Somerville's lips. She recognised in the spluttering glare of the mercury lamp the hate-distorted features of Sir Richard Gilbert, the retiring Commissioner for Scotland Yard!

For one split second she saw it, and then suddenly there was a loud explosion, followed by the crash of breaking glass, then a holocaust of roaring darkness.

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THE RATS OF THE RIVER.



THE next few minutes were like a glimpse of inferno to the girl. Vicious tongues of flame spat through the darkness, followed by the staccato crack of automatics. She heard the clang of an iron shutter, the sound of men struggling furiously, their breath coming in frenzied gasps. She stumbled blindly to keep out of the way of the scuffling figures that blundered against her, and shuddered as she heard the sickening sound of a revolver butt smashing against a skull.

"Nick! Oh, Nick!" she gasped. "Where are you?"

"This way, darling. Stay by me," said a voice from the gloom, and a firm, strong arm circled her waist. Her body seemed to grow suddenly limp. She was hardly conscious, and allowed herself to be half-dragged, half-carried away from the struggling melée in the centre of that vast and vault-like room.

"Lights! Curse you! Where are the lights?" she heard a hoarse voice below.

CRASH!
Someone had blundered into the horse-shoe table, and a man crouched loudly. Something whistled unpleasantly close to Dorothy, who gasped as she felt the impact of the wall just above her head.

"Don't worry, dear," said a voice soothingly. "I've got you safe—at last!"

She struggled violently as she felt the man's arm tighten around her.

"You're not Nick!" she screamed.

"Help, Nick! Help!"
She sickened as she felt the hot breath of the man fanning her cheek and fought like a wild-cat to escape from his embrace. Her nails scored his bearded face in a vicious scratch that drew blood, but the Croucher laughed exultantly.

"In here, my little spitfire!" he said hoarsely. "The gallows can be an exit to life, as well as death!"

She was powerless. Struggle as she might, she realised that her strength was ebbing away, ebbing away. Dimly she realised that the sound of the fight in the vaulted room had grown fainter. Hope died, and with it consciousness.

Faintly from behind the steel door of the execution-room came the hoarse voice of Nicholas New calling the girl by name. The Croucher's sensual lips parted in a vulpine snarl as he gently lowered the girl on to the gallows some distance away from the fatal trap. His strange eyes glowed in the darkness like those of a beast of prey as he fumbled for the lever.

He pressed hard upon it, and the hinged doors fell soundlessly on well-oiled hinges. From below came the sluggish, oily lap of the river. The Croucher groped in his pocket for a torch, and snapped it on. Hastily but methodically he uncoiled the ominous noose that dangled from the cross-bar of the gallows and bound it round the girl's waist.

He placed two fingers to his lips and blew a soft, peculiar whistle.

From the murky depths below it was answered, and he bared his teeth into a mirthless grin. Evidently the outer guard on the rotting jetty that fronted the river were not aware of the melée upstairs. It was all to the good.

"Pietro!" he called softly. "Pietro! Quick, the launch!"

Far below he heard the sudden scurry of footsteps, and into the circle of his torch a squat, evil-visaged figure shambled. It was Pietro, the outer guard. The riverside exit of the house of Brilliant Ling. Only

Detective New's fist shot out viciously, and the Croucher crashed to the cabin floor.



in cases of grave emergency had the Croucher ever used that exit so cunningly hidden from the keen eyes of the Thames Police.

"Quick—the launch!" he hissed. "Hurry, you fool! Tell Mathers to stand by for an extra passenger—a woman!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" croaked the other hoarsely. "There's bad trouble in Lych Street. The Flying Squad is—"

"Curse the Flying Squad!" snarled the Croucher. "Stand by for the girl!"

Gently he lowered Dorothy's unconscious body through the dark aperture above the river. A ladder led from the jetty below to the foot of the improvised gallows. Pietro, accompanied by another man, lifted their still inanimate burden, and the Croucher heaved a sigh of relief as he heard the subdued chug-chug of the motor launch.

He was just about to descend the ladder when there came a thunderous knocking at the steel shutter that separated the room of death from the vaulted chamber.

"Knock away, you fool!" grinned the Croucher. "It'll take you half an hour to batter down that door."

Hand over hand he lowered himself down until he reached the improvised jetty built right beneath the gaunt and apparently derelict warehouse. He stood in the shadows, an oval, satanic figure, with his long black cloak flapping about him like the wings of a monstrous bat, while Pietro and Mathers carried Dorothy into the waiting launch.

It was characteristic of the man that, even when the closely guarded secret of his amazing double life had been so dramatically revealed, and the hounds of the law were hot on his heels, his actions were calm and unfurried. He issued orders curtly to his henchmen, and it was proof of his utter callousness and ruthlessness that spared no thought to his five lieutenants, nor cared whether they were alive or dead.

Meanwhile, Nicholas New, with a gasp in his temple and a cold, smouldering fury in his heart, pounded vainly with the butt of his empty automatic on the steel door of the execution-chamber. Events had happened with such bewildering rapidity in the past five minutes that he scarcely realised what he was doing. Since the sputtering arc-lamp had exploded into a myriad fragments he had been fighting literally and metaphorically in the dark.

It was not until later that he was to

learn that the Croucher had been prepared for every emergency, and that when the master-crook covered back in apparent fear when Nick tore off his mask, it was to reach for the switch in the wall which would automatically blow up the lamp. Hobbled as he was, Nick had been hampered in the general mêlée that followed that abrupt change from dazzling light into complete blackness. He had fallen sprawling over a chair, and gashed his temple against the concrete floor.

When he had regained his breath it was to find pandemonium raging around him. He lashed out indiscriminately with his fists, and felt a fierce joy as his knuckles slammed home into the writhing bodies of his opponents. Dorothy's scream for help turned him into a raving tornado of fury. He kicked and smashed his way in her direction, only to realise with a sob of despair that the Croucher had succeeded in slamming down the steel shutter, and that the girl was gone.

Li Sin, meanwhile, that cool and enigmatic individual, had not been idle. He seemed to have the peculiar feline quality that went with his cat-like gait of being able to see in the dark. As Duval blundered towards him in a mad rush of blind fury he calmly reversed his gun and smashed down the butt on his skull. Duval fell like a log. Ertz, with his crippled arm, moaned feebly in the corner. All the fight had gone out of him. Nick himself had accounted for Roscoe with his first savage onslaught, and the American, blissfully oblivious of everything, sprawled face downward on the floor. Of the fifth man, Brilliant Ling, there was no trace. That wily Oriental had no stomach for a fight at such close range, and had taken a hurried refuge in the passage that led to the Laquer Room in which Dorothy had been kept prisoner.

"CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!"

Nick pounded a hail of blows on the steel doors of the execution-chamber, and yelled to Li Sin to bring a light.

Calmly and imperturbably the Chinaman switched on his electric torch and approached Nick. Not a trace of emotion or excitement appeared on his lemon-hued features.

"I'm afraid it will take some time to batter that down, my dear inspector," he drawled. "In the meantime it would be as well to attend to our prisoners."

"But I tell you the Croucher's got Miss

Somerville," groaned Nick. "Is there any exit this way?"

The Celestial shrugged.

"I believe it leads to the river. As, however, I took the precaution of having a police cordon drawn round the place, I doubt if he'll get very far."

Nick New stared in astonishment at the Oriental.

"In heaven's name, who are you?" he demanded.

"I have already introduced myself once, inspector. Professor Li Sin, one-time chief of police in Pekin—at present attached for special duty at the Home Office."

"Jumping Jehosophat!" ejaculated Nick blankly. "And I once thought you were the Croucher!"

The Chinaman laughed softly. "His eyes were inscrutable."

"Later, I will explain," he remarked. "Meanwhile, I think I hear our friend

Meadows, of the Flying Squad. His arrival is most propitious."

There was a clatter of footsteps in the corridor, and a moment later what seemed like an avalanche of blue-clad figures surged into the vaulted room, headed by the burly, bull-necked Meadows.

Nick smiled wanly at Meadows' blank astonishment when his gaze fell on the scene of the holocaust.

Duval lay spreadeagled at the foot of the table. Near him, Roscoe groaned hollowly, while Ertz whimpered in the corner, holding his splintered wrist.

"Pull 'em all in, Bill!" said Nick. "They're a mixed bag, but I'm sorry the Croucher isn't among 'em."

Meadows whistled.

"Great Mike! It seems to have been a fierce scrap while it lasted," he ejaculated. "Where's the Croucher got to?"

"I don't know," announced Nicholas New grimly. "But I'm not letting up till I've got him—dead or alive."

A hunched, squat figure in glistening oilskins gripped the wheel of the Croucher's speedy motor launch, the Yellow Queen. Heading downstream, her slim nose sheared the waters of the turbid Thames like a knife. The night was pitch dark, black as the belly of a wolf, and like a wolf himself the Croucher sat in the cabin, his smouldering eyes watching the slim figure of the girl on the tiny bunk. A vein throbbled dully in his white, smooth forehead. It was the one sign of emotion he showed—but the strain of the past half-hour was beginning to tell. Ahead of them lay the Pool of London, the Tower Bridge loomed massive in the dark river mist, and beyond, if his luck held, lay the open sea.

The Croucher's slim fingers beat a tattoo on his knee, a devil's tattoo of impatience, —and suspense. None knew better than Sir Richard Gilbert, ex-commissioner of Scotland Yard, how well the London river was patrolled by the Thames Police, known big boats and colleagues alike as the River Eats. If he was to get through at all, he would have to rely upon bluff. His thin lips pursed thoughtfully. Did anyone but Nicholas New and that yellow traitor, Li Sin, know that the commissioner and the Croucher were one and the same person?

He had guarded the secret well, he reflected. Placing that bomb in his own flat had been a masterpiece of ingenuity. The threatening letters, too, had all been part of his scheme to hamper and terrify the police, to confuse the issues, and keep their attention away from himself.

He smiled reminiscently.

The "Daily Clarion's" demand for a clean up at Scotland Yard was certainly justified, but not even the acute Maynard had suggested the real truth, that the chief of the London police was also hand in glove with the chief crooks of the underworld. But now the mask was off! It was bound to happen eventually, of course, he mused. His resignation was a mere prelude to the future he had planned for himself three years ago. Nicholas New had merely accelerated the issue, that was all.

His brooding eyes studied the girl who lay on the bunk, and he stroked his beard complacently.

Once at sea, his yacht, the Spindrift, would carry him to freedom and to luxury in that South American State of Torridor—from which there was no extradition. He had planned well and cunningly. Not for him the beggary pension of a retiring Civil Servant. Well over half a million pounds, the proceeds of blackmail and dope running, lay to his credit under another name in an American bank.

Dorothy Somerville, as if conscious of his brooding gaze, stirred uneasily, and her eyelids fluttered open. For a moment or two she lay there quiescent, then, with a half-strangled scream, she sat up.

"Better, my dear?" said the Croucher, reaching for a silver-topped decanter on the table of his luxuriously-furnished cabin.

Dorothy passed a trembling hand over her throbbing head, and stared at him wide-eyed.

"Sir Richard?" she gasped. "Where am I? What am I doing here?"

The throbbing of the engines, the snort of the Yellow Queen's bow as she cleaved her way through the Pool bewildered her. Then in a flash, she remembered. It was fantastic, incredible, but true! Sir Richard, her chief, was the Croucher!

"We are going on a long voyage, little girl," he said, with a slow, meaning smile. "Far away from the sordid routine of Scotland Yard. I am taking you to a land of lotus eaters and luxury, a land drenched with sunshine, for you were created for love and laughter and life, and not for the soulless routine of the Civil Service."

"Stop!"

Dorothy's eyes blazed. She sprang to her feet, and her little hands clenched until the knuckles shone white in the subdued light of the cabin.

"You are mad!" she breathed. "That is the only explanation. Keep your filthy hands away from me!" she added with a shiver, as he loomed over her. "If you don't give orders to stop this boat, I swear I shall throw myself overboard. I would sooner drown than—than breathe the same air as you, you cold-blooded fiend!"

Sir Richard Gilbert laughed softly.

"Try, my dear. The door of the cabin is locked and bolted. The key is in my pocket. The skipper and mate are my creatures body and soul."

Dorothy dashed herself frenziedly against the door of the cabin, and gave a groan of despair. It was only too terribly true! "Now, don't be a foolish little girl!" he said in a voice that was like a purr. "It would not harm a hair of your head. I love you, Dorothy, have loved you, ever since the day you first brightened the din-

giness of Scotland Yard with your presence. Do you realise what it means to be loved by a man like me?"

A fanatical light blazed in his eyes, a proof of his monomania, and Dorothy shuddered.

"A traitor, a murderer!" she gasped. "Keep away from me, you beast!"

With an abrupt change of manner, the Croucher sat down and pressed the lean tips of his fingers together.

"A genius, my dear, a man with too vast a brain, too soaring an ambition to be content to be a mere glorified policeman. The 'Clarion,' poor fools, berated me for incompetence—they little dreamed that I know more of crime and criminals than any man alive. I was monarch of all I surveyed—both at Scotland Yard and in the underworld. I know the secret of a hundred unsolved mysteries. I have leaved toll on the rich, and on the poor, on the righteous and on the unrighteous. But now I am tired. I want rest—and love. I want you, Dorothy, and by Heaven you shall learn what love can mean. I am not a young, hot-headed stripling, but a man, mature, who can offer you all that a woman craves—"

He broke off suddenly as a thunderous rat-tat-tat sounded at the cabin door. With an exclamation of annoyance he pulled aside a small, latched spy-hole, and saw the cold, grey eyes of Pietro.

"What is it?" he snarled. "Can't you get more speed out of this dashed tub? It will be dawn soon, and we must make the Spindrift by—"

"Police boat overhauling us, chief. The engine's missing badly. Mathers is in a blue funk," grumbled the other.

The Croucher swore below his breath.

"I'll deal with the River Bats. Tell that fool to slow down."

He unlocked the cabin door. A seurry of spray and dark river mist swirled into the cabin.

"Stay there!" he jerked over his shoulder to Dorothy.

He slammed the door-shut and locked it, and went on deck.

The spume from the bow wave dashed coldly into his face. The ugly bulk of a tramp loomed to the starboard, and the chug-chug of a Thames Police boat grew louder as a dark shape overhauled them.

The Croucher's lips set grimly as his keen ears heard the irregular beat of the Yellow Queen's engines.

Hang the luck! He could easily have outstripped the police boat if that fool Mathers had done his job properly.

"Ahoy there!" bawled a voice through a megaphone. "Launch a boy!"

The spume from the engines!" snapped the Croucher. There was only one thing for it. Bluff!

Pietro brought the boat to a rolling halt, and the black, pantherine shape of the T.P. boat creamed alongside.

"What the devil d'you want?" snapped the Croucher. "I am the commissioner of police, and have reason to believe that—"

Crash!

There was a splintering sound of glass, and something fell into the Thames with a loud splash. A second later Dorothy Somerville's voice screamed for help.

The Croucher ripped out an oath. Dash the girl! She must have smashed the porthole with a decanter or something. His eyes blazed with fury.

"The game's up, Croucher!" bawled a voice through the megaphone. "Heave to, or by gosh I'll shoot you where you stand!"

Like lightning the crook's hand darted for his hip. He could make out a dark

figure at the tiller, and, taking careful aim, he fired.

Crack!

The man at the stern collapsed without a cry. Instantly a fusillade of shots rang out from the police boat, and the Croucher darted for cover behind the engine-room just as Pietro fell with a bullet through his lungs.

A black shape hovered for an instant on the gurgale of the police boat, which had nosed imperceptibly nearer the Yellow Queen, then, with an almost soundless splash, slipped into the water. The Croucher, on the port side of the launch, did not see the swimmer approaching. His one thought now was revenge—revenge against the girl who had spoiled his plans. The thin dividing line between reason and madness had snapped, and it was a mad-man lusty to kill that raced down into the cabin and leapt with scurrying fingers for the throat of the white-faced girl.

"Curse you!" he rasped, in a queer high-pitched voice. "I might have known! I'm going to kill you, you vixen. If I cannot have you no one else shall!"

Dorothy screamed as she felt those talon-like hands about her throat, but they dug relentlessly into the soft, white flesh. Flecks of foam appeared at the Croucher's writhing lips. He felt a fierce pleasure in watching the horror and death fear in the girl's beautiful eyes.

"For—all—men—kill—the thing they love!" he panted breathlessly.

"And the thing they hate, too!" snarled a voice from the doorway, and Nicholas New, dripping, but exultant, hurled himself like a tiger on the murderer. So great was his impetus and so sudden his appearance that the Croucher was taken utterly unawares.

Nick's left fist shot out with the shattering force of a battering-ram, and the Croucher's head snickered back with a queer little jerk. His fingers relaxed, and suddenly he collapsed to the floor like a poleaxed ox.

His head moved in a strangely helpless fashion as he crashed like a flower on a broken stalk.

Nick gazed at him for a moment, and his face was white. He was just in time to catch Dorothy as she swayed towards him. She clung to him convulsively, and buried her face against his sodden coat.

"Oh, Nick! My dear, my dear!" she breathed. "I—I knew somehow you'd come!"

Nicholas said nothing. His lips were otherwise engaged.

EPILOGUE.

YOU are old, Uncle Bimbo, the young man averred, But your brain is uncommonly bright.

And yet you incessantly give me the bird. Do you think in the circus, it is right?"

Detective Inspector Nicholas New smiled across the dinner table at his uncle, General Sir Martin Dale, the new Scotland Yard Commissioner, as he misquoted one of his favourite nonsense rhymes.

General Dale's eyes twinkled.

"He's perfectly incorrigible, Miss Somerville," he remarked. "This nonsense stuff will be the death of him."

"It is surely was—once," said Nick, growing indignantly grave. "If it hadn't been for Professor Li Sin here."

Dorothy, a radiant figure in evening dress, smiled shyly at the bland, inscrutable Chinaman, who held one of his eccentric black rice paper cigarettes in his saffron fingers.

A week had elapsed since the Croucher's

end—a week of sensation unparalleled in the history of Fleet Street. A week of hurriedly summoned Cabinet Meetings, of almost hourly conferences at Scotland Yard, since it was announced to an astounded world that the master criminal who had terrorised London was the one-time head of the Metropolitan Police.

Much to Nick's relief little fuss had been made at the inquest on the body of the Croucher. The coroner, by arrangement with the Home Office, brought in a purely formal verdict of "Death by misadventure." Only Nick knew that the blow he had struck that wild night on the Yellow Queen was a blow aimed to kill and rid the world of a monster of iniquity.

The "Daily Clarion," of course, claimed its due share of the credit for exposing the scandal, and General Dale wisely allowed them to have the fullest information about the circumstances, and of his plans for the future.

The dinner to-night at the Hotel Splendide was by way of celebration of the new

regime at police headquarters. Public confidence had been restored by the Home Secretary's frank Statement in the House, and the four people who had been mainly responsible for the round-up of the Croucher's gang, and the smashing of one of the most dangerous organisations that ever menaced society, were now seated in a private room of the hotel overlooking the river on which the grim drama had been played to its close.

Nick, looking very handsome in his evening kit, gazed with frank adoration at Dorothy, while his uncle glanced meaningfully at Li Sin.

"I find, inspector," drawled the Chinaman, "your methods, though unorthodox, have had a singular element of success. I found it absorbingly interesting to compare how you and myself both arrived at the same conclusion."

Nick recalled his eyes from Dorothy's superb profile with a start.

"You certainly fooled me, professor. How

the dickens was I to know that Uncle Bin here had advised the Home Secretary to give you a free hand?"

The Chinaman shrugged.

"In the first place, my dear fellow, it had been obvious for months that the Croucher was no ordinary crook. It was also obvious that some leakage of information came from police headquarters. When young Maynard's Press campaign started, the Cabinet were naturally perturbed, and a successor to Sir Richard Gilbert was looked for. Not, of course, that anyone suspected him of being the Croucher, but simply because they thought a new man at the head might restore public confidence. They sent for your uncle, who, as you know, has had a distinguished career in the Far East as a political officer. He very kindly brought to their notice my unworthy name, as he was convinced that the recrudescence of the dope traffic was of Oriental origin."

(Continued on page 28.)

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