

THE THRILLER

THE PAPER WITH A THOUSAND THRILLS

2^d



*A Book-length
Novel of
Action and
Mystery*

CROOK LAW

by L.C. Douthwaite

CROOK



As, gun in hand, Hilary parted the curtains, he started with a cry of horror. Separated from the helpless girl by a sheet of glass, Mr. Sainter sat at his desk, his hand hovering over the switch which would send Sally to a swift and terrible death.

Chapter 1.

ACQUITTED—BUT—

FOLLOWING two days of confident thrust by the prosecution, hopelessly desperate parry by the defence, and a cold and impartial summing-up by Mr. Justice Farmer, the jury had left the box to consider their verdict. A mere formality this; the result was a foregone conclusion.

For one of the most brutal, cruel, and deliberately-calculated murders in criminal history—that of the wife who, in the long years in which he had built up his fortune, had sacrificed her all to his advancement—most indubitably Sir Marcus Potsinzer would hang.

In the corridor outside, Chief Constable Parrot waited grimly for the jury to set the seal upon his own four months' anxious and intensive work. For while the last clement in the make-up of this gaunt and lazy-eyed officer was vindictiveness, it was his considered belief that the best kind of world for the rest of humanity was one in which Sir Marcus Potsinzer was not.

There was a stir among the officials in the corridor, so Parrot went back into court. On the public benches within was a still more significant stir as the usher demanded silence for the judge to take his seat. There was the tread of heavy, and, in one instance,

faltering feet, on the wooden steps. Escorted by grave-faced warders the prisoner took his place in the dock.

As his pudgy fingers clasped feverishly about the rail, he stood so abjectly there, he presented only a pitiable mockery of the aggressive and loud-mouthed braggart who, until his apprehension, had been so conspicuous in the more expensive hotels and less exclusive night clubs of London's West End. His old sleek polish had gone. The once immaculate morning-coat fell in dishevelled folds about his gross body; his once crimson face was the colour of plumber's lead, with the dry, thick-lipped mouth half-open and trembling.

As he stood he swayed; and those near by could hear the strangulated breathing. When, slowly, the jury filed back, his glazed, terror-filled eyes followed agonisingly their every movement.

The voice of the Clerk of Arraignment, cold and impersonal as freezing water, addressed the jury.

"Have you considered your verdict?"

The foreman, a thin, unwholesome man of late middle-age, with a sharp decision of manner that was badly negated by eyes that were shrinking and uncertain, said in rather too loud a voice:

"We have."

"And are you agreed?"

If the reply came with the same quick confidence as before, it had in it now a trace of uncertainty.

"We are."

As though striving to adjust the steel-proof armour of his detachment, the clerk paused. From the tide of keyed-up emotion in which the court was flooded came neither sound nor movement.

"Do you find the prisoner guilty or not guilty?"

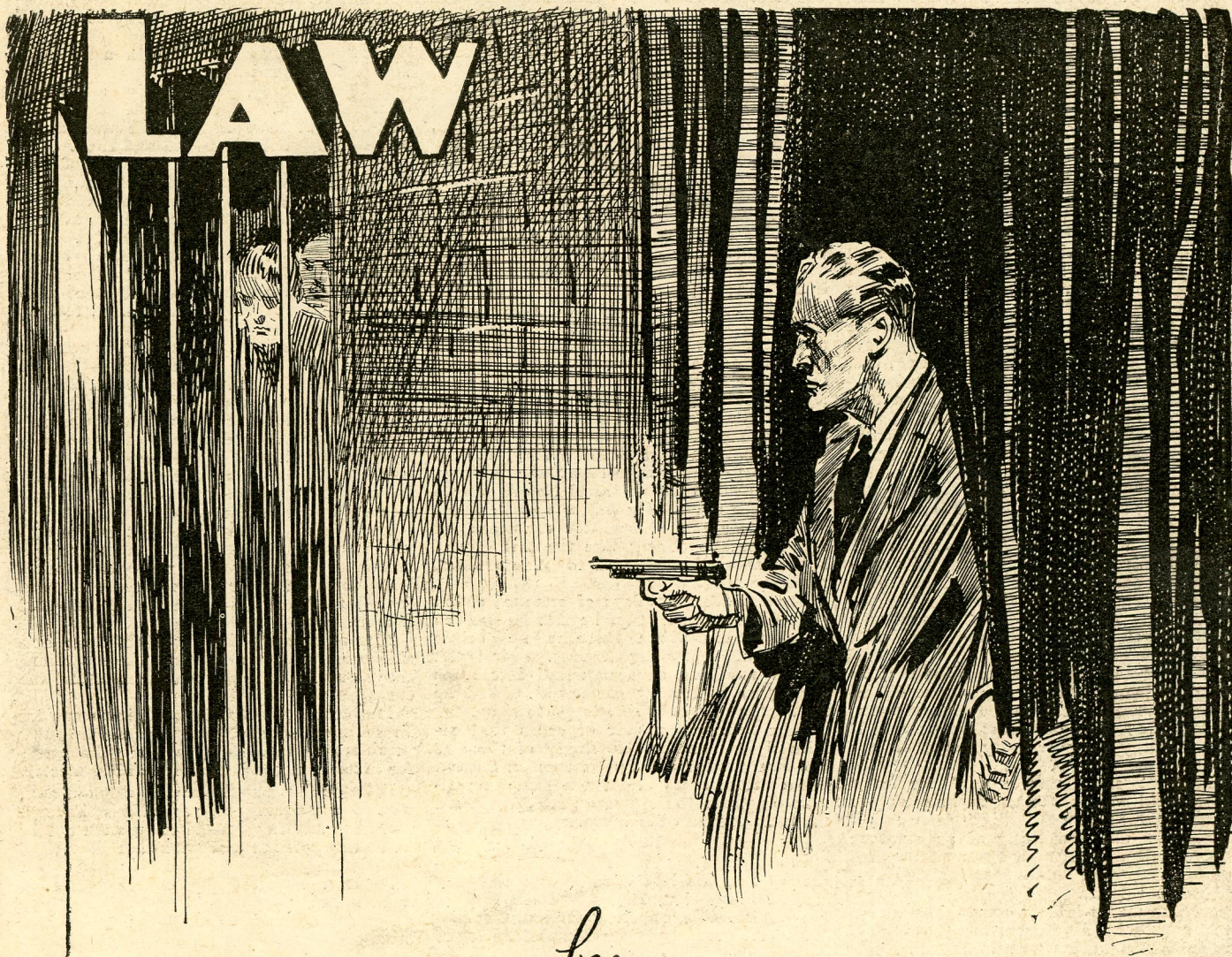
Now, indeed, the pause before that lean foreman spoke was perceptible. Only after inward struggle did he seem able to force the words from between his whitened lips.

Then, hoarsely:

"Not guilty!"

Instantaneously, so shatteringly unexpected was the verdict, it was as though each one present was struck to immobility. An acquittal was the absolute negation of every shred of evidence that throughout the trial had been brought to bear. And beneath this hammer-stroke of surprise not the least interesting phenomenon was the reaction of the prisoner.

After a moment in which he seemed incapable of assimilating the words that would return him to the world on which he



BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL
OF ACTION AND SENSATIONAL MYSTERY.

by
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had battered, the leaden face reverted to something of its old purple. The drooping shoulders straightened; the protruding eyes became once more avid; the thick, dry lips tightened to a moist and exultant smile.

A moment, however, and his face retransformed to something of its former terror. Following that amazing verdict, from the public benches swelled and eddied a murmur that seemed likely to resolve immediately into action against the obese figure that travesty of justice was destined to benefit. Clenched fists upraised, men leapt furiously to their feet; women shrilled hysterical protests.

In vain the usher called for silence. Only the stern rebuke of Mr. Justice Farmer, reinforced by police intent upon action, stilled the clamour.

Teily the judge turned to the trampling figure in the dock.

"You are discharged!" he said. Even

judicial impartiality was powerless to suppress the contempt in his voice.

With a smile that was a mixture of triumph and apprehension, Potsinzer turned and, raked by hostile eyes, half-criinged, half-swaggered below.

Among those who had been present from the opening of the trial was a chubby, rubeund figure of middle age and height, who, in the clamour following upon that preposterous verdict, slipped unobtrusively from his seat. In the crush about the swing-doors to the corridor he was hustled somewhat abruptly against a tall, gaunt man with eyes that, lazy as a rule, were blazing. "Sorry, Mr. Parrot," the little man said apologetically.

"That's all right," the detective replied in a preoccupied fashion. "How do you know my name, anyway?" he asked when they were outside.

The chubby man laughed deprecatingly.

"You don't realise your—er—reputation, Mr. Parrot," he returned courteously. "Your photograph was in the 'Daily Broadcaster' only yesterday."

The Chief Constable nodded gloomily. "That's right," he admitted. "'Readin' from left to right, the accused, an' Chief Constable Parrot, in charge of the investigations.' They had to put that so's people'd know which was which. You're Mr. Oliver, of course, the property-owner who's behind that slum-clearance scheme. Good work, that, Mr. Oliver; I'm all for it."

"One does what one can," the other man replied modestly. "What's your expert opinion of the verdict we've just heard, Mr. Parrot?" he went on to inquire.

The detective shook his head.

"I'm the original parrot who was such a beggar to think," he said, and hesitated. There was something about this mild and

courteous man that rather appealed to him. "Only—he's a lucky feller," he added.

The other nodded, and in his rather bustling fashion, turned away. Perhaps by reason of the slight delay the chat had caused, he seemed in rather a hurry.

"Oh, I don't know," he said over his shoulder, and Parrot wondered what he meant.

Parrot went into the ante-room, where the prisoner would be waiting. The public, now pouring out of court, were not in pleasant mood, and the crowd outside was definitely ugly. Whatever the justice or otherwise of the verdict, however, the man was entitled to protection.

He discovered the millionaire sprawling upon a bench that ran beneath the high barred windows. As his eyes rested on the detective his expression was not engaging.

"Enter the baffled sleuth!" he cried, and Parrot looked at him without enthusiasm.

"Any more from you," he said coldly, "and I'll turn you into the street!"

Potsinzer went pale. So far as concerned his own person he was all for 'safety first.'

"That was only fun!" he said in quick reproach. "What else could it be?"

"Malice!" said Parrot, and meant it. The fat man's eyebrows shot upward.

"Me? What for should I bear malice?" he cried, shocked, "when as much as anything it's through you I've had justice?"

Parrot stared at him. "I wonder you don't choke," he said in a strained voice, but the acquitted man ignored the insult.

"No," he said, in the same silky tone as before, "it was the fairness you used all through that turned the scale in my favour. I'd be guilty of the blackest ingratitude if I didn't pray for you every night of my life."

"I don't mind you prayin' for me," Parrot said unpleasantly, "as long as you don't cook for me!"

Potsinzer was something of an amateur chef, and it was through the medium of a specially prepared *vol-au-vent* that his wife had met her death.

A few minutes later a constable came in with a parcel. There was outspread upon the table the gold watch and chain, diamond ring, pocket-knife, small change, Russian leather wallet, jewelled lighter, and gold cigar-case Potsinzer had carried at the time of his arrest.

He reached an eager hand for this last; with an affluent gesture proffered the case to Parrot, who shook his head.

"Then you don't need a smoke so badly as me," Potsinzer remarked easily.

His bulk propped negligently against the wall, he selected the first cigar of the row; with the golden cutter at the end of his watch-chain snipped the Corona. Then luxuriously he inhaled his first tobacco in six weeks and began to strut backwards and forwards.

And instantaneously, as it seemed, they saw the gross jaw stiffen; the protruding eyes remained suddenly and dreadfully fixed; the whole frame of the man froze to terrible rigidity.

With a stifled exclamation, Parrot started forward.

"What's the matter, man?" he cried, his voice unsteady. "Feelin' ill or something?"

Stiffly the body collapsed sideways, staggered against the bench and pitched over.

AN ASTONISHING DISCOVERY.

FOR three years Hilary John Fortescue had been a wanderer upon the face of the earth. In his last term at Cambridge—where his only academic distinction was an abnormal capacity to give and receive punishment that gained him the inter-University middle-weight championship, and a place as wing three-quarter in

the Fifteen—his father died suddenly and in wholly unexpected poverty that, apart from an expensive wardrobe, left his son as sole possession a small, but heavily-encumbered estate in Sussex.

Since when he had been successively long-shoreman in Brisbane, pearl-fisher in the West Indies, lumberjack in Quebec, prospector in Northern Ontario, and cattle-herder in Wyoming. Then the sea and England called, and he "rode the rails" to New York. There, through the good offices of a steward he had befriended in Yokohama, he smuggled himself on a homeward-bound liner.

It was in a three weeks old "Times" that, during the voyage, he read that his late mother's brother, Fenner Hammersley, had died, and left him sole residuary legatee to an estate that ran into six figures.

Upon the late afternoon when Hilary landed at Waterloo he had exactly sevenpence—fourpence of which he spent at a coffee-stall. Then he walked to the offices of Bentham, Halliday & Crewe, his late uncle's solicitors, in Bedford Row, to find that the premises were closed for the day. And as he had no desire to appear before Prout—the old family butler who now was managing a set of bachelor chambers in Ryder Street—looking like the last day of a jumble-sale, he decided to tramp about until morning.

Besides, after six days of cramped quarters on board ship, he felt he needed exercise—than which there is no better method of promoting hunger. Half-past nine found him, on Hampstead Heath, as hungry as a healthy cormorant. And he rather thought he'd like to go to sleep.

Near him was a pair of gates that reminded him rather startlingly of those of his own much-mortgaged estate in Sussex. From curiosity to see if the same resemblance applied to the house itself, he passed through and into the drive.

Fifty yards, and with the house and gardens in full view, he stopped. Across the lawn to his left stood an old thatched summer-house—and Hilary had slept in far less comfortable quarters than a weather-proof summer-house on a Hampstead lawn. Also, except for the narrow ribbon of light that streamed between the curtains of a bow-window, the house itself, which was large and old-fashioned, was in darkness.

Cautiously he left the drive and made his way across the lawn. Outside the door of the summer-house he stopped, listening intently. No sound came from within. He tried the door. It yielded.

He made no sound as he entered. Nor when, the flame shielded by cupped hands, he lighted a match.

He found himself in a summer-house *de luxe*; Indian matting on the floor, table with magazines, wide deck chairs.

"And very nice, too," murmured Hilary John Fortescue.

An old campaigner, he loosened his shoes and the bedraggled remnants of collar and tie. The next moment he curled up on a deck-chair as snugly as a doormouse in a nest.

It was just as, fighting down his hunger, he was drawing off, that he became aware of a sudden lessening of the darkness about him. He opened his eyes to discover that a faint light had penetrated the window.

He sat up, blinking, and with a curious sense of uneasiness. Odd that; nothing unusual in the switching on of another light from the house. So why should he be seized with this compelling curiosity? Apprehension almost.

He heaved himself from the chair and went to the window. He was wrong about there being a fresh light. What had happened was that someone had drawn the

curtains from the big bow-window across the way. Now he had an uninterrupted view of the interior of the room.

At what he saw he let forth a subdued, but agonised groan.

A dinner-table, beautifully appointed, softly lighted, and, on the sideboard, decanters of wine from which the shaded candles struck tints of gold and ruby.

Though no enthusiast in the cause of Prohibition, at that moment it wasn't the wine that interested him. It was the food; the silver tureen of soup; the cold dishes—chicken and a great surloin of beef, and the golden-brown of perfectly baked bread. Hilary John Fortescue's mouth watered.

There was a servant there; one who most obviously knew his job. A Chink, too, by Ginger!

Two minutes manipulation of the serving-table and the Chink left the room—and all that wonderful food! And there was Hilary, only a few yards away.

Almost without his own volition he opened the door and crossed the lawn. Anything he "won" he'd send a postal-order for after he'd seen his lawyers and had all the money he needed. Easy enough to discover who was the owner of the house.

He reached the window, open to the soft night breeze. Noiselessly he passed through and into the room. Just a couple of those rolls that, on their heavy silver salver, looked so inviting, and a hunk of that Stilton.

Half-way across the room, and from outside came the slurr of feet. Like a lizard into a crevice Hilary darted back behind the curtains.

The door opened and the Chink came in. Preceding him, as Hilary had no difficulty in observing through a peep-hole he made for himself in the curtains, was his master.

Hilary's first impulse was to step out and, with a convincing résumé of his history, declare himself. An old chap with a face like that, so kind and pink and blooming, with such gay and candid eyes and soft, benevolent voice, simply couldn't fail to understand.

For, in spite of his nondescript clothing, Hilary knew himself to look unmistakably what he was. In which, as not invariably is the case, he paid himself no more than his due. Those of discernment could not fail to recognise that broad-shouldered, slim-waisted figure with the cheerfully arrogant carriage of head and body, or, when he spoke, his accent, as anything but Public School and Cambridge.

Later Hilary had cause to marvel at the change in his life engendered by his rejection of that impulse to make his presence known. Only, ragged to the skin as he was, with face and hands unwashed for hours, the strong probability existed that instead of hospitality the old chap'd only show him to the nearest policeman. And his late uncle's solicitors being the only people in London with the least idea of his identity, the idea of his first interview taking place in a cell failed materially to appeal to him.

No. The only thing was to wait until, the room being clear, he'd be able to move without detection, and then make an unostentatious fade-out.

Only, with a foot-wide vacuum inside him, it was going to be more interesting than amusing to watch that old boy tucking into that dinner.

Decent-looking chap he was. Clean, and pink, and chubby. Dinner-jacket cut by an artist, too.

An adequate setting, too, this oaken-panelled room with the perfect appointments of linen and silver, the shining mahogany of the table sublimating the amber and ruby wines to an ever-richer mellowness.

At last as, with a sigh of contentment,

the chubby gentleman sat back in his chair, stretching out to full extent his rather plump but immaculate legs, somehow the unseen watcher conceived the notion that not only was it the excellence of the dinner that brought this obvious sense of well-being. For in that gesture not only was repletion, but a sense of achievement.

At last, and, curiously, for the first time since his entry into the room, the old gentleman spoke. When with delicately manicured hand he poured himself a glass of port in tune with the rest of that engaging personality, his voice was both cultured and courteous.

"With which, to-night, I shall be vandal enough to smoke a cigarette, So Yan," he said in cheery apology, and chose a Sullivan from the tortoiseshell box the servant handed him.

Momentarily the emotionless face of the Chinese softened. Then, quite suddenly, and even though behind it was something, as it were, withheld, his expression became charged with a hint of commiseration.

"Master's nerves need extra sedative to-night," he remarked quietly.

Whereupon ensued a conversation so grotesque, so starkly incredible, that to the silent eavesdropper behind the curtain it was for all the world like one of those worst kind of nightmares when, throughout all the shadowed terrors of his dream, the sleeper realises that he is not awake.

In the act of lighting his Sullivan, the chubby gentleman paused.

"You mean, I'm disturbed on account of—Potsinzer?" he inquired, and to the other's all but imperceptible nod of acquiescence:

"On the contrary, I am in process of realising that to reverse a verdict that in itself constitutes a supreme and unanswerable impeachment of our whole system of criminal jurisprudence, brings an extremely satisfying sense of well-being," he said quietly.

He paused for a moment, smoking thoughtfully. When he resumed, his voice contained the impersonal enthusiasm of a scientist considering an unusually choice specimen of his craft.

Nor, and most emphatically, was the old chap talking for the sake of it. For, as his theme developed, gradually the kind and smiling eyes grew thin and compressed, the cheery sparkle in his eyes flickered and died down, leaving them cold and implacable as chilled steel. To those with experience of the type the expression was unmistakable. This sleek and chubby man was the complete and authentic killer.

"The man Potsinzer was a homicide of a particularly far-seeing type," he proceeded; "a mass-murderer who, with practice, had rendered himself almost immune from discovery—except, if I may say so, from one as fervent in humanitarianism and as expert in criminology as myself. Also, through a paid agent of his own, he had heavily bribed the foreman of the jury who tried him. Thus it became necessary that his punishment should be taken over by—er—private enterprise. And excellent staff work it was, So Yan!"

Silently the Chinese nodded.

His master made a gesture of satisfaction. "That transaction completed," he went on, "what of those others—Theodore Brand, for instance?"

Before the butler could reply, however, the master continued. His cheerful mouth drawn to an expression of almost fanatical purpose, his face was that of a visionary—but a visionary of homicidal tendencies.

"Nor, in his infamy, is Brand alone," he said quietly. "Everywhere is the tiger, the snake, and the shark."

He paused, and, watching him intently

with veiled eyes, the Chinaman said nothing.

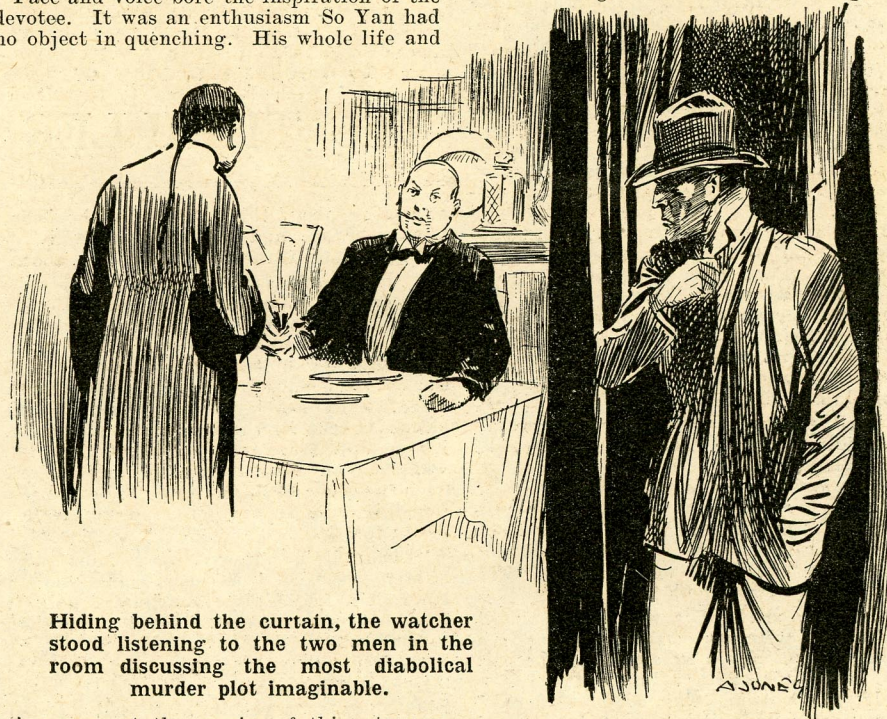
"You and I, So Yan," his master continued, his voice vibrant with enthusiasm, "are getting on in years. A few more or less—what matter? We have money—more than we need. In the past, subtly, swiftly, humanely, we have dealt with some sixteen of those without whose presence the world is a sweeter, cleaner place—cheats, exploiters of the poor, preys upon the weak and defenceless—carrion whom the law could not, or would not, touch. Do you find any reason why we should cease our activities?" His voice lowered to a strange and awful tenseness. "That we should stop at an associate of Potsinzer, for instance, who has been too self-inflated to heed our warning?"

Face and voice bore the inspiration of the devotee. It was an enthusiasm So Yan had no object in quenching. His whole life and

with something of a shock that he, who was not of the windy type, was more closely approximating to the condition known as "breeze up" than was altogether good for his soul. And though it was a condition to which he was not accustomed, there had been something about that smooth and chubby man.

Obviously the only thing to be done—and at once—was take the story to Scotland Yard.

Even had he not been so absorbed it is doubtful if he would have heard that soft padding of feet behind him, so that the blow came with shattering surprise. One moment, quite calmly he was considering the situation; the next, his brain dissolved into a searing red flame that, bursting into



Hiding behind the curtain, the watcher stood listening to the two men in the room discussing the most diabolical murder plot imaginable.

being were at the service of this strange man.

"As master wills," he said gently, and the other's face lighted to an intenser purpose still. The cigarette smouldering in his fingers, he rose to his feet.

"In my study," he said, "I have data—collected since first I began to explore—possibilities. Come—"

The closing of the door left Hilary stunned and momentarily impotent—wondering blankly what in the name of fortune he was to do about it.

One thing was certain to Hilary. He could not now spend the night in the summer-house. He must get away—quickly. And now that he knew the character of the house, he had no compunction in helping himself to a spot of food.

Soft-footed, he tiptoed to the serving-table; swiftly purloined the leg of a chicken and a couple of rolls.

It was as he was stuffing his prize into his pocket that from the corridor outside came the soft shuffle of feet. So soft, indeed, and so close to the door, that they could not be more than a dozen feet away. Actually the door was swinging open as the bedraggled figure of Hilary John Fortescue shot through the open window. As he sped down the drive, in fear of pursuit, he glanced more than once over his shoulder. None came. Obviously, then, his presence in the room had not been detected.

And as, munching his stolen provender, he plodded down the road, it came to him

a fountain of sparks, lurid and agonising, glowed for a moment excruciatingly white-hot. Then, as if suddenly a shutter had descended to cut off all unconsciousness, he knew only a blank and numbing darkness.

His knees turned to water. Soundlessly he pitched face forward to the road.

THE THOUGHTFUL MR. SAINTER.

CONSCIOUSNESS returned by very slow stages. The pain in his head was like a jagged saw in his brain, making all about him hazy and uncertain.

Because the slightest movement was agony, he lay for a little while motionless. Gradually, however, the pain wore down, and he found himself able to move.

At last, with returning animation, recollection flooded. He remembered his surreptitious landing from the Sceptic, the train journey from Southampton, his long tramp through London and across Hampstead Heath, his claiming the summer-house for his night's lodging, his sneaking into that luxurious room in search of food.

And then he remembered, and only too vividly, the conversation that, cowering behind the window curtains, he had overheard; the manner in which the genial and friendly eyes of the chubby man at the table had changed slowly to a cold and malignant hatred; the Chinese servant who, in his blank inscrutability, appeared only a little less dreadful than his master, that awful, appalling discussion.

Opening his eyes, he discovered himself in bed in a room that was bright but old-fashioned; heavy mahogany furniture; thick carpet, four-poster bed, flowered wallpaper. Where in the name of fortune was he? And what in the name of fortune had happened to him?

The door opened. As, painfully, he turned to see who it was, his pain left him—instantly, as though it had never been. In all his life he had not seen anyone so lovely as this girl with the lustrous brown hair and eyes and utmost perfection of teeth and figure. What was more—or at least an integral and indissoluble part of that loveliness, was the wholly unself-conscious charm that, like an aura, invested her. There was in the quiet grace of her movements and the peeping imp of humour that lurked in the depths of her eyes and at the corners of her tender lips, something that seemed immeasurably both to stimulate and soothe him.

And yet, as their eyes held, something he was able to read in hers caused his heart distressingly to quicken. Resolutely fought down as quite obviously it was, superimposed above that gay and gallant spirit was fear—fear ever-present and all-embracing.

There was a man with her. They approached the bed. Looking down upon him:

"So you've come to, have you?" the girl said, and her voice was golden.

Hilary grinned dubiously.

"I was just wondering if I were still dreaming—or dead and—rewarded," he replied, and she coloured.

"Well, you must wake up now, anyway," she said. Adding: "Because I've brought a doctor."

The examination was soon over.

"A pretty bad bump," the doctor pronounced. "Fortunately your head's thick enough for two. Keep quiet for a day or two, and you'll forget all about it. The bump, I mean, not the head."

"Good enough!" Hilary said, and almost before they were out of the room was in a healthy sleep. When he awakened the girl was beside him with a breakfast-tray.

"If that's what the doctor ordered," Hilary exclaimed, sitting up, "it is a good prescription. By the way, I should simply hate to be inquisitive, but do you mind confiding exactly what happened to me?"

She looked at him for a moment. Had he but realised it she was trying to reconcile those deplorable clothes of his with a Public school accent and a *savoir-faire* she found rather stimulating.

"I was driving home from a dance," she told him. "At what awful hour of the morning I'd be ashamed to say. Anyway, it was quite light, and I saw something in the middle of the road ahead. I pulled up, and it was you. Apparently you'd been hit on the head with something large and knobby. Fortunately there's very little traffic about there, otherwise you'd certainly have been run over."

He stared at her incredulously. With clothes like the discard of a rag-and-bone merchant, exactly threepence in his pocket, and not a soul with the slightest idea he was in England, what possible motive could anyone outside a lunatic asylum have for putting him out of business?

He said fervently:

"I'm not sorry about that absence of traffic. One of the few things I've never really desired to experience with any enthusiasm is to be thoroughly run over. And then what did you do?" he asked, after a pause in which the imps of mischief that lurked in her eyes danced very near the surface. She told herself there was

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something about this youth with the keen, unshaven face and poverty-stricken wardrobe that she rather liked.

"What would you expect me to do?" she said simply. "Jump on your face and drive on? There was only one thing to do—lug you into the car—and mighty heavy you were, too!—and bring you home. One of the servants helped me to get you upstairs. Then, when he'd got you out of your clothes, I sent for the doctor. Incidentally, my name's Moreland, Sarah of that ilk, whatever an ilk may be. Sally to my friends," she added, and was glad when his breeding rose superior to the unintended invitation.

"Then all I can say, Miss Moreland," Hilary returned, "is just—thank you. I know it's frightfully inadequate, only it happens to mean rather a lot more than it sounds."

The sound of feet in the corridor outside interrupted her reply; it was a quiet, confident step that yet in some odd fashion succeeded in suggesting benevolence and good will. A moment and, very quietly, the door opened.

"And how is the patient?" a gentle and cultured voice inquired softly.

But it was a moment before Hilary could bring himself to reply.

Before, on the previous night, the shattering darkness closed in upon him, Hilary's most poignant recollection was of those same eyes that now beamed with such lively concern for his well-being. Although then they had shone with the flame of cold, implacable purpose, most unmistakably the owner of this pink and chubby face was the master of the house wherein he had overheard such hitherto unimagined things. By some ironic gesture of the gods he had been taken back to the very house from which only a short while before he had escaped!

He pulled himself together. He had seen that face sufficiently, as it were, in the raw—without its self-defensive mask of benevolence—to realise how extremely unwise it would be to arouse suspicion.

"Thanks to a skull of solid ivory and a constitution of reinforced concrete, quite merry and bright again, thank you, sir," he replied quietly.

As if reassured by good tidings, his host's smile widened.

"Not quite all right as yet, I'm afraid," he said. There was genuine kindness in the tone as, with a bird-like jerk of the

head, he turned to the girl. "And so, my dear," he added, "now that in great measure our anxiety is allayed, perhaps it would be as well to allow Nature to complete, in quiet, the work of restoration."

Though the tone was that of a father addressing an idolised daughter, Hilary observed with surprise that the girl's reply was lacking in warmth.

"Probably you're right," she said, nodded in careless, friendly fashion to Hilary, and without another word went out of the room. But in opening the door, for an infinitesimal moment her eyes met Hilary's. And amazingly, in that momentary glance, he read something of warning.

The name of his host, it appeared, was Mr. Septimus Sainter. In response Hilary gave just sufficient account of himself as he considered necessary.

"Dear! Dear!" murmured Mr. Sainter sympathetically at last. "Am I to take it, then, Mr. Fortescue, that you're quite alone in the world? Or at least in this country? No relatives or friends to—er—extend the glad hand of welcome to the returned wanderer?"

"Not a soul who knows even that I'm back in England," Hilary replied, and as soon as he'd spoken regretted the admission.

Both the voice and expression of his host radiated only kindly interest as he said quietly:

"Not even your—er—solicitors?"

Hilary shook his head.

"I didn't know my uncle was dead until, crossing from America, I read in 'The Times' that the trustees were advertising for me," he admitted. "When I arrived in London yesterday I went straight to the solicitors, but their office was closed."

Obviously intrigued by the romance of the situation, Mr. Sainter ascertained further, not only the name and address of those solicitors, but that, having neither notepaper nor stamps, Hilary had been unable to advise them of his arrival.

"Well, well, well!" Mr. Sainter exclaimed cheerfully, for one of his years sliding with surprising agility from the bed upon which he had been seated. "We can soon put that right. Suppose you drop Mr. Crewe a line? He happens to be a personal friend of mine, and the only active partner still in the business." He thought for a moment. "And as, after your unfortunate experience of last night it is so essential you should recuperate, perhaps you'd better make the appointment for to-morrow afternoon," he went on to suggest. "So, if you'll allow me, I'll bring pen and paper."

Hilary wrote the note only with difficulty; his head still confused and his brain uncertain. When it was finished he handed it over to the solicitous Mr. Sainter, who, with rather obvious good breeding, refrained from glancing at the contents before carefully folding the sheet and placing it in the envelope.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed cheerfully, and slipped the letter into his pocket. "Something accomplished, something done, has, it is fervently to be hoped, earned you a—er—long repose."

The last word in kindly solicitude as with this speech, there was an intonation of the voice, subtle and undefinable, that Hilary found vaguely disturbing.

"I don't know about 'long' repose," he said. "I want to be up and about in a couple of hours' time, anyway. After all, I can't trespass on your hospitality indefinitely."

Mr. Sainter coughed gently.

"I promise you," he said, "that you will not be allowed to outwear your welcome."

And with a friendly smile he slid noiselessly from the room.

Curiously, for all the silence of the house, Hilary was unable to sleep. Usually, even in the best-ordered establishments, there are the little sounds of cheerful everyday life—passing footsteps, the rattle of china, the subdued tinkle of a bell, maids sweeping. But here, in Yangtse Lodge—this name had headed the notepaper he had just used—the silence was utter and complete.

And as he lay back among his pillows he discovered, stealing over him, a strange sense of unease. It may have been that, apart entirely from the amazing conversation he had overheard the previous night, Mr. Sainter struck him as just a shade too good to be true.

He felt that, on the whole, the sooner he was out of the house and treading the open road to London, the better.

And yet—

RETREAT.

GRADUALLY and amazingly it came to him that, despite this urgency, there was at least one element that made him reluctant to leave. When he came to analyse the source of that doubt it was to discover it founded upon the presence of the girl who, in all good faith, had brought him there.

Who was she, anyway? In the ordinary way, of course, he would have taken it for granted that the chubby man was her father. Yet, looking back on the brief conversation between them, Hilary had difficulty in accepting this relationship. There had been that look of fear at the back of her eyes; in addressing the chubby Mr. Sainter, a cold aloofness of voice and manner. Hilary determined that before saying good-bye to Yangtse Lodge he was going to have a little talk with that girl. A private one, if possible.

Then he went to sleep, and when he awakened it was night.

Lying with his back to the door, Hilary was conscious of a subdued *click*—followed by a second. Instantaneously before, with the second of those sounds, the room flooded to light, he knew not only that no longer was he alone, but that whoever his visitor was had locked the door.

He jerked into a sitting position, to find himself staring into the inscrutable eyes of a Chinaman, and never in his life had Hilary looked upon a face so utterly devoid of animation. From any impulse or human emotion to be gathered from his expression, this creature with the yellow, flattened face and veiled, shallow eyes might have been a body without a soul.

Nor did it require any sixth sense to inform him of danger—danger deadly and urgent. For in a flash of intuition he knew that this slab-sided Chink who, the previous night had waited upon the benign Mr. Sainter, was that same assailant who, with muffled feet, had trailed him down the road, savagely and expertly “coshed” him, and left him for dead.

He understood Oriental character sufficiently not to be surprised that, while betraying no knowledge of the presence of an intruder, the Chink should have taken precaution against the stranger disclosing any dark secrets he might have overheard. And here to hand was proof that, those precautions having been ineffectual, the job was forthwith to be completed.

Hilary tensed his muscles—and his fighting spirit. He'd never shown funk before a Chink yet, and, weak as a half-drowned kitten though he felt, he wasn't going to show it now.

“Hallo! What do you want?” he inquired in just the correct tone between guest and

servant. And if, his pulse quickening, he read the answer in the sheer blankness of the other's eyes, he was careful not to betray that knowledge.

Then, as that deadly inscrutable figure made no reply, artlessly stifling a synthetic yawn: “Well, whatever it is, get about it quickly. I need sleep, and plenty of it,” he said irritably.

He stretched luxuriously, and, as though to relapse once more to his pillows, feigned to turn sideways—a position he judged to be what the Chinaman needed for his purpose—and with a frantic call upon his muscles and the fraction of a split-second in hand, shot himself feet foremost to the floor.

With a single reservation the move was admirable tactics. Not only did it transfer the element of surprise to the opposition, but actually put the bed between them. What he had failed to consider was the effect of such sudden movement on that damaged head of his.

For a moment after his feet touched the floor he thought it impossible to retain the upright. With his own swaying form as axle, the bed revolved like a merry-go-round, the walls swung wildly in the opposite direction, and he stood helpless and impotent, awaiting the inevitable.

He had not long to wait.

Silently as a panther, with one incredibly lithe movement, the Chinese vaulted the bed. As his list-covered feet met the floor, he clutched Hilary in a ju-jitsu grip that bore him shatteringly backwards. His head struck the carpet almost on the exact spot where, the previous night, the Chinaman's cosh had landed. A flash of light, blinding and crimson, leapt within his brain as the garrotter's hands fastened about his throat like a band of steel. Then he plunged into intense and ultimate darkness.

It seemed an incredible time before, with the sudden relaxation of that pressure, the darkness faded gradually to uncertain luminous grey, and from grey to a quivering haze.

A moment, however, and he was able to read that as well as the withdrawal of that cold band about his throat, the weight upon his body had lifted, so that he was able to breathe with comparative freedom.

Uncertainly, from somewhere invisible, a

voice that miraculously had power to penetrate the mists of his brain, said:

“And now, So Yan, you'll lift him up. Gently, because if you happened to be rough I'd so quiver with indignation it's likely the tremor would spread to my trigger-finger—”

A second voice, sibilant, unemotional, said:

“As missy wills!”

Arms, thin but teak-hard, were thrust beneath Hilary's body; with neither strain nor jar he was raised to a sitting position. With the movement, the pain of white-hot arrows shooting through his head, he swayed so uncertainly that it was a moment before the supporting arms were withdrawn.

In a few moments, however, the attack passed; the uncertainty dissolved, leaving all clear about him. It took him a moment to realise that this was not another fantastic illusion; that actually, a darker flush on her face than had been there in the morning, the cold light of battle in her eyes, and a quite steady hand and automatic directed undeviatingly at the Chinaman's mid-section, it was The Girl who stood there.

Blinking uncertainly, he watched her in sheer amazement. She sensed rather than saw his glance.

“Sorry I can't look at you when I speak,” she said quietly. “Only, in dealing with friend So Yan, it doesn't do to let your eyes wander. He moves too quickly and too suddenly. Incidentally, I call him ‘friend’ because I think he needs one. There's some cord on the bed. If you're good at knots and lashings, perhaps you wouldn't mind —”

Dazed, under the protection of her pistol, Hilary complied with the suggestion. Absolutely inert, So Yan submitted without protest or demur. Then, with a little sigh of weariness and satisfaction, the girl subsided into a big basket-chair.

“And that's that!” she exclaimed. Adding: “And now, what?”

The query came as something of a starter.

“Me to get out of here one-time!” Hilary



As the girl covered So Yan with her automatic, Hilary leapt forward and firmly lashed the Chinaman's wrists together.

answered. "The air's not healthy for the young and innocent." A thought struck him. "What about you?" he asked quickly, and she looked at him very directly.

"I'm not very old, either," she said quietly.

More staggering still, this. If, of course, he'd properly understood. His heart beat more rapidly at the possibility.

"Does that mean that—er—objection—will be taken to your treatment of the Yellow Peril here?" he inquired, indicating the prostrate So Yan, and saw with what weariness she shrugged her shoulders.

"It was my uncle's last desire you should leave here—alive," she said, schooling herself. "I overheard his definite instructions. Apparently, in some way, you know too much."

He would have spoken, but she gestured him to silence.

"Listen," she urged. "If we're to get away without trouble of the worst kind, we must get a move on. My uncle went out, leaving So Yan to—deal with you."

Hilary nodded understanding. "On the principle that it's no use keeping a dog and doing your own biting?" he suggested. "The gentle art of passing the buck reduced to the Nth degree. And very nice, too, from the point of view of your amiable relative. Only I'm rather interested to know what's likely to happen when he discovers the whole thing's a merry wash-out. Also—and what's of greater importance—what'll be his reaction towards yourself—who not only introduced the danger into the house, but actually turned it loose again to run wild?"

She shrugged delicate shoulders. "He can send me a letter about it," she said. "I shan't be here." She glanced with hurried fearfulness through the window. "At least, I *hope* I shan't. Only if we're to make our getaway we must be moving."

"We?" he said, his heart accelerating. She nodded decisively. "Yes. This is where I pull out for the wide spaces. And the wider any space is that separates me from Septimus B. Sainter the better I'll like it."

"Missy!" The interruption came from So Yan. Propped helplessly in his corner, he was gazing at her with eyes from which, for the

first time in her experience, the veil had lifted. Now, the pupils dilated, they were filled with uncontrollable fear.

"What is it, So Yan?" she demanded shortly.

"Missie—not going?" The question came in a high-pitched wail.

"Watch me!" she said decisively, and turned to the door. There she paused.

"Please get into your clothes," she instructed Hilary, "while I put a few things together."

THE CLASH ON THE COMMON.

By the time she was back with her suitcase, he was ready, and together they slipped out of the back door to the garage, the door of which was ajar. But when they came to start the car it was locked.

"I should have thought of that," Sally said. "Uncle never leaves the car, even for five minutes, without taking that precaution. He keeps the key on his chain for the purpose."

Hilary's mouth set grimly. "Following a sloop that would have put among the permanent discards anyone whose head wasn't solid ivory from the teeth upwards, a tramp to London carrying a heavy suitcase doesn't appeal to me," he said quietly. "Wait here while I persuade your relative to part with the doin's."

He passed out of the garage and into the drive. Half a dozen paces, however, and, like a lizard in a hole, he darted back; pressed her sharply behind the half-opened door.

"Look!" he whispered, and as she obeyed caught the quick catch of her breath and saw the blood recede from her cheeks. For, passing through the drive-gates from the road, were three men. Even at this distance their character was obvious.

One—the middle of the trio—was, without exception, the biggest man Hilary had ever seen; six-feet-six, if an inch, and with a colossal breadth of shoulder and gorilla-like length of arms and huge tree-trunks of legs. As they drew nearer he saw that the countenance of the man was at one with the body; a hugely-broad, high cheek-boned face with the faintly transparent blue tinge of the quarter-bred Oriental. A Pathan half-breed, probably—or Anglo-Sikh, he thought.

In the other two was no suggestion of "seventy-five annas to the rupee." They were pure-bred Chink, and, for that race, unusually massive specimens. Indeed, had it not been that they were so overshadowed by their companion, they would have been accounted plug-uglies of an extremely formidable type. Veritable Jack Johnsons of men, each a good six-feet-two.

Hilary felt a small hand clutch desperately at his sleeve, and that the hand was trembling.

"Chimp Fargus," she breathed fearfully, and shrank further into the shadows. "If we get away now we shall be lucky."

"I certainly don't like his face," Hilary said, far more carelessly than he felt.

"I know which is his face, too, because it's just under his hat," he added, and slowly drew the automatic from his pocket. "And, speaking about luck," he went on quietly, "if he attempts to interfere with us now that's just what he won't have any of, because I'm in what's known as a nasty mood, and me trigger-finger's all of a doo-dah."

Perhaps because the open garage was not an unaccustomed sight, the three passed the door with only a casual glance. The angle of the drive sloped backward there, and the direct line to the house-entrance was shut off by a high box-hedge. And the instant the trio passed out of sight, those fingers about Hilary's arm urged him forward.

"Not a sound!" she whispered tensely, and because he would not risk her safety, Hilary followed.

For about twenty yards they stole down the grass that bordered the drive. Then, like one possessed, Sally broke into a run and, though he had represented Cambridge in the inter-University steeplechase, Hilary was forced almost all out to keep pace.

The drive-entrance faced one of the wilder and less frequented parts of the Heath. It was down one of the paths that here and there intersected it that Sally turned.

A quarter of a mile away, parallel to the road they had left, was a broad-lit path backed on the further side by trees and breast-high shrubs, and for this cover she made. Within a hundred yards of sanctuary she tripped over a loose stone, and, with a low moan, sank helplessly to the ground. In the vivid sheen of the moonlight Hilary could see the pallor of her pain-racked face.

"My ankle!" she gasped through twisted lips. "Sprained all out of shape."

From behind came the blare of a horn as the big car turned out of the drive of Yangtse Lodge.

Hilary watched the car pull up immediately opposite the path down which they hurried; saw them climb out—the whole five of them—Sainter, So Yan, Chimp, and the two Chinamen. And, against the white glare of the moon, he knew that their own figures stood out sharply as silhouettes on paper.

Hurriedly, but tenderly, he raised Sally to the upright, only as he did so to realise the hopelessness of their position. For immediately her injured foot touched ground, she winced in agony from the pressure.

Without a word, he slid his hand beneath her knees, lifted her in his arms, and streaked desperately for the trees at the further side of the road ahead. With his unique gift for silent movement, once he could reach their cover, it would take cleverer men than he judged his pursuers to trace him.

It was when they had reached within a hundred yards of his objective, but with the pursuit gaining rapidly, that a sharp detonation crashed into the stillness; the high-pitched drone of the bullet passed within a couple of inches of his ear.

Adjusting Sally's position so that at least his own body would cover her, he stumbled frantically forward. Now he could hear the heavy pound of feet behind. A hurried glance over his shoulder confirmed his impression that this leader was the enormous Chimp, and in the giant's hand was a long-barrelled automatic which, even at that moment, he had checked himself to level.

It was his instinctive lightning swerve that saved Hilary's life; even as it was the bullet swept a sliver of cloth from his shoulder.

Diagonally, and from far down the road ahead, two faint lights appeared. Even in the almost subconscious glance he gave them

Closely pressed by the gangsters, Hilary stumbled frantically on. They drew nearer. Next moment came a shot and a bullet whistled viciously past his head.



it seemed that their speed increased. Push-bikes, it struck him, or the twin dim lamps of a horse-drawn vehicle.

He stumbled forward. It was his only chance. By the time he could set down Sally and grope for his own automatic, the giant would be upon them. Even in the more than doubtful event of being able to cope with that colossal man, the others would be upon him.

Then, within an inch of his ear, came a detonation that both deafened and caused him to stumble in his stride.

A voice said, quivering with excitement: "Missed! But—he's not coming on quite so fast, anyway!"

A second shot cracked against his ear; another bullet whined past in reply.

"For the love of Pete," Hilary breathed, "if you haven't pinched my automatic!"

"Snatched it out of your pocket," gasped Sally. "It's checked him, anyway. I guess he doesn't like bullets any more than we do."

From the tail of his eye Hilary saw that the twin lights had drawn perceptibly closer, and that they travelled one behind the other.

"Keep your head down!" he gasped, and because the bullet that crashed into his shoulder pitched him face forward, never completed the warning.

He had a nightmare impression of huge pounding feet surging from behind; of other feet, swifter but less heavy, coming from the opposite direction; of a colossal form stooping near by where, in his fall, Sally had been thrown; of hoarse shouting; struggling, straining bodies; of a further shot; another; of the slump of a second body beside his own; of heavy feet retreating.

Then everything went suddenly grey about him, as if irresistibly the whole world was being swept away. Then, suddenly, the grey rolled back, to be replaced by a sable-black pall that closed down upon him, enveloped him, shut out all consciousness of time and space and life itself.

When he came to himself it was to find his head supported by two hard projections that, when he turned to discover their origin, he found enclosed in blue uniform cloth. Above was a brass-buttoned tunic, and over that the face and helmet of the policeman by whose knees he was supported. Bending over him, a rather strained look about the eyes, was another face, lean and keen, that belonged to a man approximately of his own age, who was clad in most immaculate and vivid plus-fours.

Still dazed from his wound, the crashing head blow of the previous night, the equally devastating fall in his bed-room, and the exertions of the day, it was a moment before Hilary's memory functioned. Then, eagerly, he craned his head.

He did not find what he sought.

"Miss Moreland—the lady who was with me?" he gasped faintly, and there was a pause before the reply.

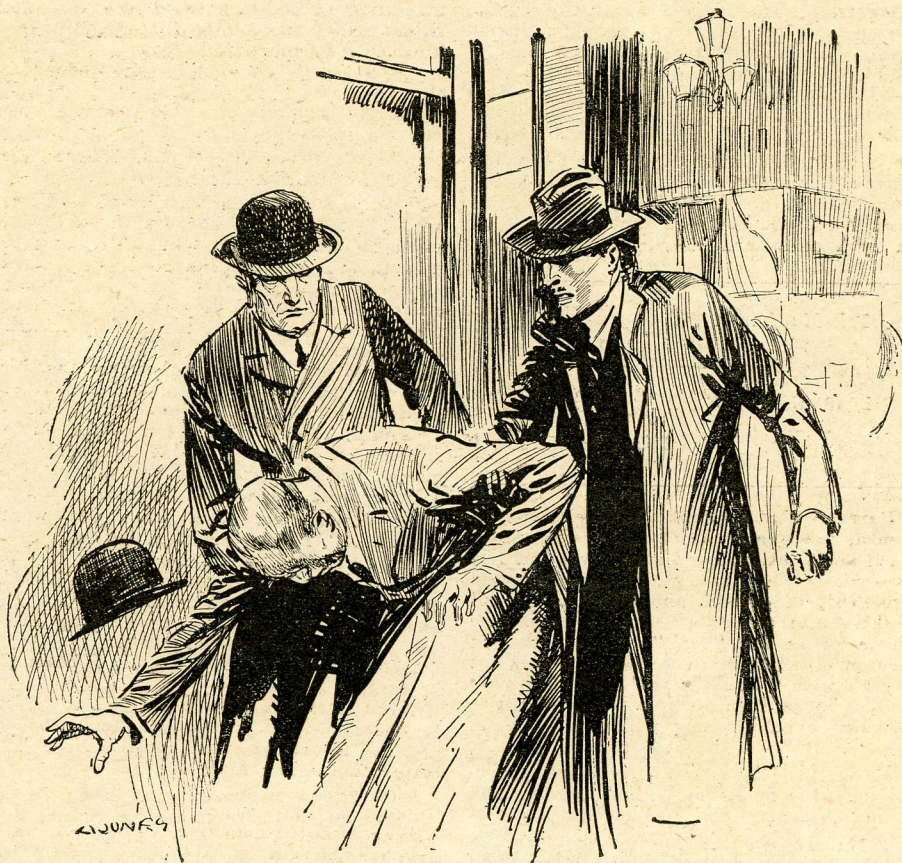
Then:

"I'm sorry to say she's gorn, mate," the policeman said.

With a jerk that racked his shoulder in a white-hot stab of pain, Hilary sat up.

"D'ye mean they've got her?" he cried; and when the large hand of the policeman would have forced him back to his old position, thrust it aside and staggered to his feet. And it was not to the officer, but to that other in the plus-fours to whom he turned.

"Tell me about it," he said shortly; and despite his scarecrow clothing, the patch of blood on his shoulder, and that he swayed dizzily as he stood, there was that in his voice which caused the other to obey. A tribute this, for that other was less



Before the detectives could do anything, their charge suddenly gave a low, whimpering cry, staggered, and crumpled limply to the pavement.

accustomed to receive orders than to give them.

"I was cycling along the road here," he said. "An archaic pastime, I know, but one that helps to keep me fit, and just as I caught up with our friend here there was the sound of ordnance by night. Sherlock junior pricked up his ears so high they lifted his helmet. 'What's that?' said he. I replied 'I hear the sound of guns.'"

"Uncertainly, because we were some distance away," he continued, "we could see running figures and more flashes and crashes. 'I'm a bit inquisitive myself,' I said, and we bent to the pedals. Just as we pulled up on the road, opposite to and about a hundred and fifty yards from the tumult and the shouting, we saw somebody fall. I guess that was you. Then some feller who looked like Goliath's big brother Alf broke ahead from his two pals, rushed forward, and gathered someone—the lady you're inquiring after, I presume—into his arms, and, escorted by said pals, started haring back for all he was worth in the direction he'd come from."

As though assembling his narrative into correct sequence, the stranger paused.

"Get on, man! Get on!" Hilary cried, and after a quick scrutinising glance the other obeyed.

"We gave chase, but, bless your sweet life, Little Snowdrop ahead could run faster carrying the lady than we could unencumbered; the two others weren't slow movers, either. When they reached the car that was waiting, with engines running, they just piled in and were over the hills and far away before we could get even within speaking distance."

This time as he paused, in spite of the calculated lightness of his tone, his eyes were searching.

"So what do we do now?" he demanded.

"After, of course we've taken you to hospital, I mean."

Something ice-cold and sickening seemed to close like long-dead fingers about Hilary's heart. Nothing that had happened hitherto possessed one-half the knock-out qualities of this, the most devastating blow that could have fallen. Sally had gone, recaptured by the half-crazy fanatic from whose awful clutches he had rescued her.

"Hospital nothing!" he said from between set teeth, and then everything went black; the whole world rocked and swayed dizzily beneath him; he seemed to be falling through illimitable space.

P.-c. Apps, gazing down at the prostrate form, said doubtfully:

"Well, this is a do, m'lord. Maybe you'd allow me to use your 'phone to call the ambulance an' get the poor bloke to 'ospital."

It was a moment before the other replied. Instinct for adventure urged that here was something which penetrated far more deeply than, at the moment, he was able to follow. Besides, the poor chap had made it so desperately clear that hospital was the last place he wanted.

He produced his wallet; extracted from it a note.

"Find a home for this," he said, and P.-c. Apps obeyed instructions.

"Listen, officer," the stranger said quietly; "instead of a hospital, what about taking him to my own house? It's only a hundred yards away, as you know, and the doctor only a quarter of a mile down the road."

P.-c. Apps looked officially doubtful. "You'll be responsible for 'im, m'lord?" he inquired. "See he's there to answer questions, an' all that?"

The stranger stooped to Hilary's feet.

"Take his head, officer, and don't jolt or jabber more than you can help," he said.

SUDDEN DEATH.

CONFIRMATION of his conviction that in the unceasing war against crime there was being brought to bear a new, unofficial and, from the police point of view, extremely unwelcome force came to Chief Constable Parrot in his office at New Scotland Yard with the card that was brought in by a uniformed messenger.

Tel. Mayfair 00122.

MR. THEODORE BRAND.

1,110, Bruton St., W.

Bohemian Club.

Parrot, that gaunt and sleepy-eyed sleuth, made a characteristic but unrefined noise intimating that he was not impressed. The quality of the card was excellent, of course, and the address all right—quite a number of those whom he spoke of as the "real" people lived in Bruton Street. Only the Bohemian was not a club with which the real "real" people would be so keen to identify themselves. Nothing exactly wrong with the place, of course. But—

It was just that, with a membership consisting indiscriminately of peers and jockeys, actors and bookmakers, stock-brokers and other varieties, the establishment conformed a little too closely with its name. Also, apart from the club, the gaunt inspector had considerable knowledge of the man who was so keen to advertise his membership. Part at least of that knowledge was that Theodore Brand—to em-

ploy the pre-war spelling—was a share-pusher of the most unconscionable type.

"Show him up!" he growled.
In the ordinary way, a beaming man this Mr. Brand, with a vehemently optimistic voice and wide and expansive gestures. The kind you trusted instinctively—until you looked into his eyes and read all he hoped was buried there.

For those eyes were small and shallow, with too little space between them, except when he remembered that to look your man in the face inspires confidence, when they were rather too obviously ingenuous; on the rare occasions he returned your glance they were rather too quickly turned away again.

He was not ingenuous, however, as, his face mottled and sweat-ridden, he dashed headlong into the chief constable's office.

"You're the gentleman for protection to appeal to, ain't it?" he gasped. In moments of excitement he was apt to lapse a little from the well of pure English.

"It depends on from what you want protection," Parrot grunted, his lazy eyes taking in every line of the man.

For a moment, except that his breath came gustily, Brand was silent. He seemed deliberately to be steadying himself. Then he sprang a surprise.

"You remember my friend Schumm," he said, "who—who—"

When Mr. Brand was obliged to refer to death he always tried to find another and less attractive name for it. Now that inspiration failed him, the guttural voice trailed off.

Parrot helped him out. Isidore Schumm, whom in connection with a series of long-firm frauds that had put into bankruptcy a number of struggling manufacturers only the lack of the last link of evidence had saved from appearing at the Old Bailey, had not been one of his favourites.

"I remember a whole lot about him,"

he said slowly. "Includin' that when, about three weeks ago, he handed in his dinner-pail, neither Mayfair nor White-chapel went into mournin'."

Expelling a long-withheld breath, Brand nodded a head that had too little back to it.

When Parrot spoke again his eyes were more closely veiled than usual.

"Died of heart failure, I believe?" he remarked carelessly, and saw Brand's narrow forehead bespangled suddenly with sweat.

"Heart failure nothing!" he cried, and his voice was loud and uncertain.

"What do you mean—heart failure nothin'?" Parrot demanded quietly.

Brand wiped his dampened brow with a movement that was almost epileptic in its suddenness.

"Schumm was murdered!" he jerked at last.

Parrot half-closed his deceptively lazy eyes. There were certain features in the passing of the dead swindler that had aroused his professional interest. Actually it was only following upon consultation with Sir Redvers Conquest, the Chief Commissioner, that it had been decided no action should be taken. Parrot had consoled himself with the thought that Schumm was better dead, anyway, and let it go at that.

"What makes you say he was murdered, Mr. Brand?" he asked. "Any definite grounds, or just plain guesswork, and a desire to butt in?"

"Butt in!" Brand had a habit of registering protest by repetition. "No, sir, I never butt into anything that has to do with death." His gross lips trembled. "What's worrying me is that it looks like butting into me."

Parrot thrust his gaunt frame more comfortably into his chair.

"I'm a busy man, Mr. Brand," he said, "and your mouth's too full of words."

The fat man continued to breathe heavily.

"Maybe you'll be a bit more interested in a minute," he replied. "What would you say if I was to tell you that a fortnight before they found him—Schumm had a letter threatening to kill him—on the very day he—he died?"

The detective reached for his short and blackened pipe.

"I'd say," he quoted "that 'I'm from Missouri; you gatter show me.'"

Brand's thick lips drew back into a sneer. "You needn't worry about that," he said.

"I'll show you all right. Because, soon's he got that letter Schumm came to me—"

He broke off, his face suddenly grey. It is not uncommon for men in the grip of fear to say more than they intended.

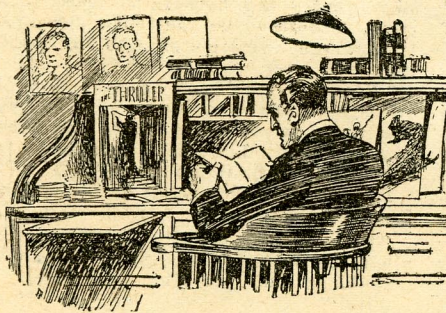
"No need to be coy," Parrot said encouragingly. "I know you were together in that swindle all right. I can't prove it, of course; not legally, anyway. But that doesn't stop me from knowin'."

Brand's face became a little less putty-coloured. Parrot heard his quick sigh of relief.

"Schumm was just a friend—socially, not business at all," he protested. "That was why he showed me the letter." He groped in his pocket. "I have it with me."

Parrot took it from the other's spatulate hand. Headed simply "London," it was typed on a machine that had no single peculiarity of lettering, upon paper without distinctive feature or watermark. Dated exactly fourteen days before Schumm's death, it was headed by a list of names, the smaller proportion printed in red. Against each name was set an amount in figures.

A NEW CATCH FOR THE THRILLER



a trail of death, swift and devastating. Who is he? Is he Rick Leroy himself? Intrigue, mystery, adventure! You'll be sorry if you miss this gripping yarn. It's something really special.

Here are one or two brief replies:

William Sanders, Caulfield, Melbourne.—Many thanks for your letter and suggestions. I am afraid the idea of a Crime Club has been suggested before and found to be impracticable. So you have taken The THRILLER from No. 1. That's splendid—keep it up. The Old Paper is getting more and more popular each week.

John Bridgewater, Southsea.—Glad you like L. C. Douthwaite's stories. He's a great favourite, and his stories are in great demand. How do you like this one? Leslie Charteris has been away, but it will not be long before his next yarn appears in The THRILLER. You can be sure I shall put it through as soon as possible. John G. Brandon, Gwyn Evans, whom you admire so much, and other favourites are all hard at work on THRILLER stories. Look out for them.

Yours sincerely,

The Editor

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

HERE'S great news! I've just secured a brilliant new author for The THRILLER. Barry Perowne is a great favourite with the magazine world, and I consider myself very fortunate in getting hold of his latest "thriller" novel for your consumption. He is a powerful and convincing writer, and has the happy knack of making you feel that you are actually standing behind his amazing hero, Rick Leroy, throughout all the astounding adventures which he comes up against. This story is called "The Black Ace," and from the word "go" you are plunged into the thick of an amazing night club raid, an eerie and terrible death duel in the dark passageways above the club, and a succession of thrills which will hold you breathless to the very end. Then there is the Black Ace, that mysterious, shadowy figure whose sinister passing left

Parrot read:

"Within fourteen days from this date you will refund to each of the firms enumerated above the sum set against those names, this being the amount of which you swindled them, together with interest at ten per cent. for one year.

"In connection with the names typed in red, in which you will recognise those who through your defalcations were forced into bankruptcy, you will remit to whomsoever is administering the estate the amount stated, plus five per cent. interest from the date the swindle was perpetrated. In addition you will send to the hospital nearest to the firm concerned a similar amount to that which you have remitted to the Trustees in Bankruptcy.

"In each case, as a fine for dishonesty, and as working expenses for this campaign of retribution, you will pay to the writer a further fifty per cent. of the gross amount in Bank of England notes in the manner according to which, later, you will receive instructions.

"Failure to follow out these demands will result in your sudden and violent death at some period during the fourteenth day from the receipt of this letter.

"FIAT JUSTITIA."

"And how was the money to be paid—to this Fiat feller, I mean?" Parrot inquired.

"Schumm's motor yacht was to sink it, buoyed up in a water-tight case, at a certain time and place in the North Sea," Brand replied. "The blackmailer would be there—at a convenient distance to guard against what he called 'treachery'—in a seaplane."

With professional appreciation for criminal genius, Parrot whistled softly to himself.

"And did he—Schumm—obey?" he asked, and watched Brand's thick lips quiver.

"He laughed at it," he replied; "said it was just a bluff from one or other of the—er—creditor firms. Trying to scare him into giving back—" he checked himself hastily.

"I see; some of the loot." The detective's voice was non-committal. "And on the fourteenth day?" he demanded.

Brand's voice was tremulous.

"Schumm just—died!" he said. "He'd finished dinner and gone to the library. On the point of lighting a cigar he pitched face-forward to the hearthrug. When they picked him up he'd—"

"Handed in his dinner-pail!" broke in Parrot brutally. "And no cause could be found. No external wound of any kind, and the post-mortem showed no sign of poisoning. Only that he had something of a C3 heart."

"It wasn't his heart that—caused it."

The assertion came raspingly from somewhere far back in Brand's throat. His groping hands produced a further letter in the same immaculate type and on paper similar to the one that, a moment previously, Parrot had laid down. It was dated exactly fourteen days previously.

He read:

"If you will examine the cigar-lighter the swindler Schumm was using at the moment of his death, you will ascertain exactly how that retributive end was accomplished. I would suggest that you endeavour to use it also. There is no danger—it was charged only with sufficient poison for the immediate purpose in view. Even should any minute quantity have remained unused, by now it will have evaporated.



Barely had the detectives crossed the threshold than a square of the floor opened beneath them. With a cry of terror, Inspector Brodribb flung up his arms and disappeared into the darkness below.

This letter, then, is at once an explanation, a warning, and—a demonstration.

"If at the expiration of fourteen days from its receipt you have not fulfilled the instructions, for the ignoring of which Schumm was called to his account, the same retribution—though on slightly different lines—will be meted out to yourself.

"Within the next few days you will receive instructions informing you of the method to be employed in handing over my own proportion of the amount.

"FIAT JUSTITIA."

His face expressionless, Parrot laid the letter beside the first.

"I was to leave the cash in notes," supplemented Brand, "at a certain time, on the top of a certain sarsen stone on the Wiltshire Downs." He gave the exact location. "If I advised the police, not only myself, but my wife and daughter would be—dealt with." He hesitated. "I didn't carry out the instructions," he added at last.

Again the detective nodded reluctant admiration.

"I know the spot," he said. "Not an inch of cover and you can see for miles. The money, of course, would have been picked up by someone landing from an aeroplane." He paused. "That cigar-lighter?" he asked at last. "Have you seen it?"

Brand thrust an unsteady hand into his pocket.

"I'm Schumm's trustee," he explained in the same abject tone as before, and produced the gold and diamond-studded trinket from his pocket.

Taking no risks, before handling the lighter Parrot put on a pair of gloves. When he pressed the catch that, releasing the cap, brought the flame into being, he felt, thrust through the protecting chamois, something minute but of an incredibly fine point. When he came to make an examination he found that the glove had been neatly but infinitesimally punctured.

"Lucrezia Borgia stuff, this!" he muttered, and, pressing the catch of the lighter again, but this time with his pen-knife blade, saw, like the tongue-stroke of a tiny snake, the needle shoot out and as instantaneously return.

He laid the lighter carefully upon the desk.

"I'll keep this, mister," he said officially. He looked narrowly at Brand. Obviously, besides being a crook of a particularly abject order, this was one to whom his own personal safety was the only thing that mattered—a combination that in Parrot's extensive and peculiar experience was not uncustomary.

"Why didn't you come to see me before?" he asked curiously, and saw the pulse of sheer terror that, like tiny hammer-strokes, throbbed in the other's forehead.

"It was only this morning I was able to find the lighter," Brand explained. "Until then I thought Schumm's death was only coincidence—that there was nothing at all to those letters."

Parrot's smile was entirely unofficial and without sympathy.

"I accept that, Mr. Brand," he said. "Otherwise you'd have left the law to run round in little circles, and parted with the cash."

Watching him, Brand swallowed hard, fighting for the normal and not attaining it.

"You don't think there's any—any danger, do you, Mr. Parrot?" he stammered. "To me, I mean?"

And because of all types of crook this was the one he most despised, Parrot refused to compromise.

"If I was an insurance company, he replied, 'an' someone asked me to write a policy on your life, I'd do it like a shot,' and watched the quick relief that flooded, like a swift tide, into Brand's gross face; heard, too, the sigh of long-withheld breath. "At ninety-nine and nine-tenths per cent. premium," he added; "and even then I'd re-insure. Do you want protection?"

Brand's face had turned leaden. To support shaking knees he leaned his hands heavily on the desk.

"I'd like one of your men to—to keep me in sight," he stammered.

"Have a couple. You'll need 'em," said Parrot, and detailed two plain-clothes men for the work.

"I'll call on you myself to-night," Parrot promised, as Brand lumbered heavily to the door. "If that feller with the Spanish name means business—which he does—it'll be about that time he'll get down to it. There's no danger till then."

But even a Chief Constable of Scotland Yard cannot invariably be right, and this was one of the times Parrot proved very wrong indeed. For as the three men passed into Whitehall, the middle one of that trio gave a sudden whimpering cry, clapped a hand to his face, and crumpled, an obese and motionless heap, to the pavement.

The passing of a metal-laden lorry drowned the discharge of the silencer-fitted air-pistol. Except that, judging by its position, it must have been from the road, none knew from whence had come the tiny tufted dart that, when they turned the dead man over, they found adhering to his lip.

None, that is, but the pink and gently-smiling man lolling in the back seat of one of the half-dozen taxis that were speeding towards Parliament Street.

A TERRIBLE DEATH.

HAVING made his examination, dispatched the body to the mortuary, and arranged for the post-mortem, Parrot went back to his office in the father and mother of a temper. Even Sir Redvers Conquest, the Chief Commissioner, who was the best and most understanding of his kind, had said a few things at speed about a man who had been granted police protection being murdered within ten minutes of that responsibility being accepted, and on the very portals of Scotland Yard itself. But as the Chief Constable knew that the Commissioner in turn would have to listen to much the same wail from the Home Secretary, he bore his own share with more or less fortitude.

He sat thinking hard, and with no prospect of inspiration. Of course, he'd set in motion the usual machinery, but, however efficient and well-tended, no machine is able to make goods unless fed with the necessary raw material. And of raw material Parrot had not so much as a shred.

Behind the long-drawn-out series of murders, each one instantaneous, without apparent motive, and the victim one of those worst types of criminals who are beyond the law, was an organisation far too brilliant to make one of the stereotyped mistakes by which ninety-nine per cent. of depredators are brought to the dock.

Impossible as, in Parrot's experience it was, in all that chain of dead men, there had been left behind not one shadow or suggestion of clue as to their slayers. Indeed, it was only since his conversation with Brand, the latest victim, and his inspection of the letters, for the ignoring of which the man had come to his death, that he had reason to suspect some half-dozen recent cases of sudden death were murders at all.

There was a knock at the door. Entered his own immediate assistant, Inspector Brodribb, looking puzzled but interested.

"I've a couple of—er—gentlemen here I'd like you to have a word with, sir," he said seriously.

Parrot cocked an eyebrow.

"In regard to—what?" he questioned, and the inspector hesitated.

"I'm not sure, sir, that what they have to say doesn't bear on that Fiat Justitia feller," he replied.

"Optimist!" Parrot said pessimistically. "However, go bring 'em in. They can't know less than I do, anyway, and I'm not even a good guesser."

In one long glance Parrot's deceptively lazy eyes took in the lithe figure of Hilary Fortescue, clad now in clothing belonging to his host of the previous night; the transparent pallor of his face, the dark rings beneath his eyes, the shoulder surgically bandaged.

From Hilary his glance wandered to the man who half-supported him. A more immaculate figure this, of about Hilary's own height and build. Savile Row suited, Burlington Arcade shod, and with linen from Duke Street, Reginald Boulton d'Avington FitzRalph, Eleventh Marquis of Ralph, of Ralph Hooton in the county of Huntingdonshire, and Virginia Lodge, Hampstead, was no more a stranger to Parrot than by sight and repute he was to half the population of the country. For in amateur boxing, polo, and rugger, "Lord Reggie" was as well known as the Bellman.

But Parrot, whose profession it was to penetrate further below the surface of men and circumstances than is given to most, was able to read qualities in this debonair young man that, however necessary to the typical sportsman, as a foundation for character are more valuable still. He read in the grey eyes that looked so steadily into his own a clean and gallant courage that for a cause he made his own would fight to the last ditch and to the ultimate millimetre of strength; from the firm lines of the jaw found a more than average steadfastness of purpose; from the shape of the forehead a by no means inactive brain; from the set of the mouth a gay and irrepressible humour.

Parrot rose and shook hands.

"What's your trouble, Lord Fitz-Ralph?" he asked. "And who's our wounded friend here?"

"A lad that, instead of at Scotland Yard, you should be interviewing in hospital," Lord Ralph said. "However, the bullet passed clean through and out the other side. The wound closed up nicely behind it, so I allowed him to disobey the doctor's instructions in order that you may hear his bed-time story."

Parrot sat back.

"Shoot!" he said.

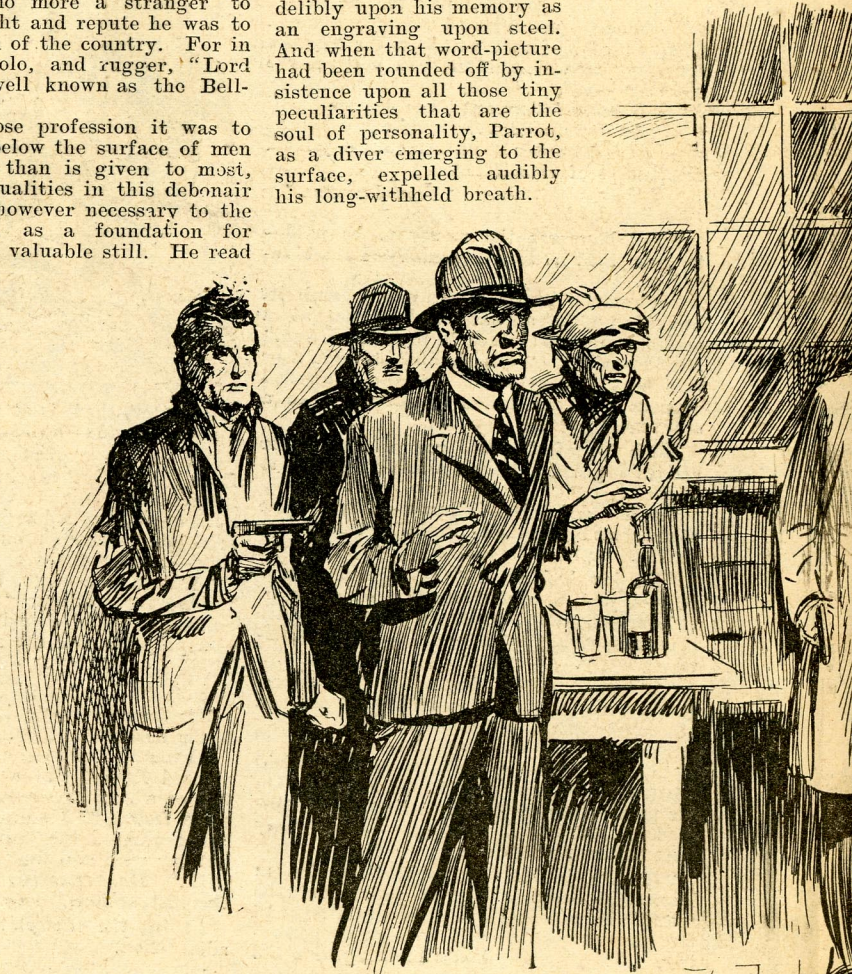
Hilary shot. Categorically, in detail, but without elaboration, he told of all that had happened since his arrival at Waterloo. And though even to himself the story seemed wild and incredible as a dream of delirium, he refused to allow hesitation to creep into his voice. All that counted or mattered was to hammer home the stark necessity of find-

ing the girl, at the thought of whose probable suffering his voice broke and his heart trembled.

And throughout the progress of that story he was conscious, probing into his own, searching, analysing, of the veiled and lazy eyes of Chief Constable Parrot. And as his narrative progressed, he thrilled to the realisation that moment by moment those veils lifted, until the eyes shone clear and cold as polished agates, and that the large and tolerant mouth had become a thin straight line above a chin of steel.

"Let me have the description of the man Sainter again," Parrot said quietly at last. "In detail, as if you knew every hair of his head by its middle name."

Hilary drew acutely upon his recollection, to discover that the personality of Mr. Sainter was stamped as indelibly upon his memory as an engraving upon steel. And when that word-picture had been rounded off by insistence upon all those tiny peculiarities that are the soul of personality, Parrot, as a diver emerging to the surface, expelled audibly his long-withheld breath.



With a sudden movement, the detective pulled the projecting knob and, with scarcely a sound, the whole of the range swung outwards disclosing the secret entrance to the crook's get-away.

"One of these days, mister, I shouldn't wonder but what you'll receive a silver teapot and an illuminated address on vellum," he said slowly. "It'll be from Scotland Yard and countersigned by the Home Secretary, for 'services rendered.'"

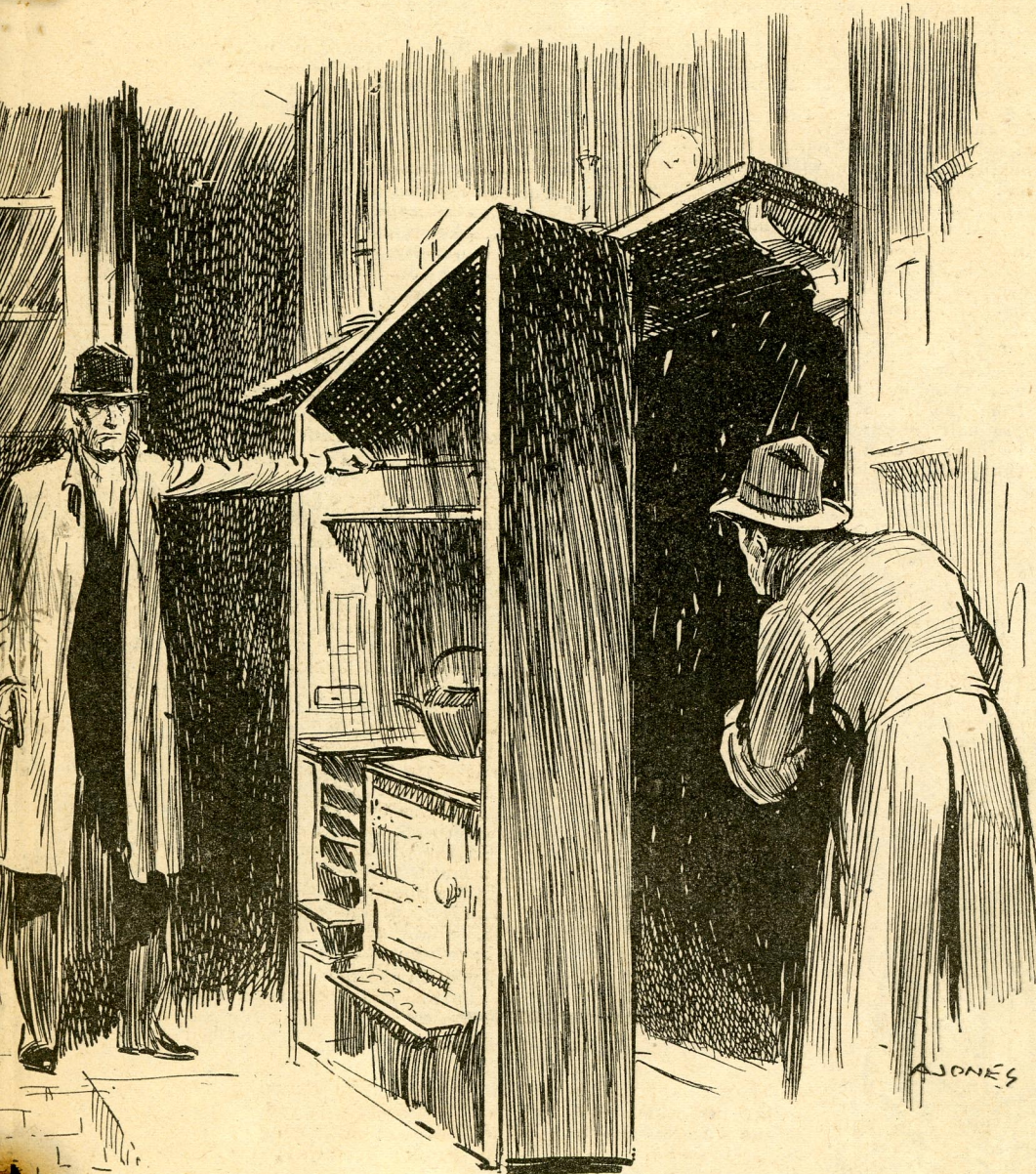
For, in the photographic description to which he had listened, Parrot had recognised the chubby and cheerful gentleman who, at the conclusion of the trial of Sir Marcus Potsinzer, had expressed doubt as to the good fortune of the prisoner at the verdict. And within half an hour Sir Marcus Potsinzer had been a very dead man indeed—

of a pellet of cyanide of potassium introduced into the end of a Corona Corona by a newly-appointed warder who had been put in charge of "Prisoners' Effects," and of whose whereabouts, since five minutes following the return of those belonging to the dead man, there had been no trace.

"Sainter, you say his name is?" Parrot went on to repeat inquiringly. "It was 'Oliver' when he bought that slum property near Greenwich, turned the tenants out and housed 'em in a block of workmen's model dwellings he put up for the purpose. At that time he was living in Artillery Mansions, Victoria Street."

Inspector Brodribb of the second. Seven plain-clothes detectives accompanied them, and in their journey to Hampstead the speed-limit didn't count. The only circumstance slightly to retard them was that, towards the end of the short journey, the engine of the rear car began rather badly to knock.

Nothing more innocent imaginable than the appearance of Yangtse Lodge, as, having left the cars on the road outside, they turned the angle of the drive to the shallow terrace that fronted the house. The day was sunny, the lawns closely trimmed and shaven, the flower-beds in full bloom.



"Two minutes after I lay hands on him he'll be lucky if he's living anywhere," Hilary said.

Parrot glanced at him reproachfully.

"If you're not a good lad," he said, "I won't take you with me to call on Yangtse Lodge. Not that you'd miss a whole lot of that," he added pessimistically.

"How's that?" Hilary asked quickly.

"Because by this the place'll be as bare of crooks as a billiard-ball of feathers," said Parrot, and reached for the telephone.

Within ten minutes the two cars were waiting. Parrot was in charge of the first,

"Everything in the garden's lovely," Parrot remarked dryly. "I wonder if the same applies inside?"

The state of the building itself was equally immaculate; fine lace curtains in the windows; paint spick and span; meticulously polished door-handle and whitened steps. It was the typical Georgian mansion of the rather more than well-to-do merchant or professional man.

And yet, regarding it, to Hilary it was as though behind that appearance of well-ordered prosperity overshadowing it, transforming its brightness to brooding and its

prosperity to evil, so that to him the whole house was a whited sepulchre, with an air that was wholly sinister. Instead of smiling upon him, the house leered as mockingly as a hyena over a carcass.

Parrot neither knocked nor rang; obviously he did not intend that those who might be within should have time for preparation. Instead he turned the handle of the door.

It yielded and, swinging it wide, he stood aside for the others to enter. As befitted his position, Brodribb was the first to cross the threshold.

Never afterwards was Hilary able with any sense of clarity to reconstruct what instantaneously followed; it was too nightmarish; too unutterably horrible. One second there, at the head of the file, keen, alert, purposeful, was the broad form of Inspector Brodribb. The next instant, like an inexpert diver, the bulk of the man seemed to shoot forward; there was a faltering shuffle of heavy-soled shoes. Then, as though the novice diver had clumsily over-balanced, the sweeping arc of head and shoulders disappeared from sight. Simultaneously, mingling inextricably with the frenzied unearthly scream of the victim, came a hollow reverberating clang as the trap-door that opened beneath the inspector's weight crashed against the foundation wall below.

Hilary never knew how long it was before any one of them moved; did anything; indeed, but stare with numbed horror each into the face of the other. Then, at last, it was Parrot who made the first move, and his voice, hoarse and dry and uncertain, came from lips that were uncertain, too.

"Stand back," he ordered hoarsely, "while I see!"

He produced an electric torch, and, kneeling at the edge of the opening, shone the beam directly below. And as he so knelt, in the bright noon sunshine that streamed through the open door from the garden, as though from a severed artery the blood drained from his face, leaving it grey and sweat-bespangled.

For the collapse of that trap-door had projected Inspector Brodribb a full twenty feet—on to a *chevaux-de-frise* of spikes, each ground and pointed to a razor keenness.

Parrot turned to his men a stricken face. "Dead!" he pronounced hoarsely. "There's nothing else he *can* be. Hand me a rope, someone."

Supported by their full strength, they lowered him through the opening. A detective-constable followed, and gently they released the body from his imprisonment. Mercifully, one of the longer and keener spikes had penetrated the heart, so that Brodribb's very shriek must have been bitten off by death.

They raised the dead man to the hall, and there on a settee reverently placed him.

And as Parrot turned away, he said to Lord FitzRalph and Hilary:

"There's a commission sittin' right here in London to-day on whether to abolish capital punishment. In some cases I'm all against hanging, and this is one of 'em."

He spoke so quietly, and yet with such supremacy of self-command, that for a moment Hilary was deceived.

"What would you substitute?" he asked.

"I'd be ashamed to tell you," the chief constable replied. "Besides, it'd make you sick. What I could think out for the man who did that"—he gestured towards the still figure on the settee—"would make death by dislocation of the vertebrae seem like a day at a fun city!"

BAFFLING MYSTERY.

CAUTIOUSLY, testing each door, each step they took, they continued to explore. And everything about the house was as one left only for an hour or so; clothes still in the wardrobes, food in the larder, wine and spirits in the cellar. Everything in apple-pie order.

There were, indeed, signs of disarrangement in but one apartment, a smaller room on the first floor that had been built out of the east wing as a sort of annexe, and used, obviously, as a study.

A comfortable room this, and a handsome one; the walls panelled in mellow mahogany, with a red pile carpet, open fireplace, carved bookshelves on each side wall, and a huge Jacobean writing-table.

But here were signs of confusion and the flurry of departure. Drawers pulled out and not replaced, the contents tossed carelessly here and there as discarded. Blanks in the bookcases left by abstracted volumes; the door of the bureau filing cabinet swinging open.

From the doorway Parrot silently surveyed the disorder.

It was evident that to gain an exact idea of what this room stood for would take some time, and in investigations of the kind he liked to be alone.

He turned to the sergeant in charge of the constables.

"Take all but Adams and Porter to search the grounds," he instructed; and to those named, who were the motor drivers: "Bring the car into the garage here and give it the once over for the knocking there was all the talk about on the way down."

After the men had left, Parrot continued standing by the door for a moment, taking in every detail of the room. He could not have told why, but he was impressed with the conviction that there was a secret here that was his for the finding. Also, judging by the supreme disorder, and according to his luck, the search might be long or short.

The room, which was long and narrow, was lighted only by skylights let into the roof. The two sides were taken up entirely by ceiling-high bookshelves. At one end was the door; the other end was panelled in mahogany, with at the angle of each square a magnificently-carved Tudor rose.

His inspection was interrupted by Lord FitzRalph.

"If you don't mind I'll scout around on my own for a spell," he said. "There's more in this place than meets the eye, if I'm not mistaken."

"Just as you say," Parrot agreed abstractedly, and bent to stroke the cat which, having made friends with the party outside, had followed them throughout the house. As if satisfied by the attention, the animal stalked over to the hearthrug, curled up, and went to sleep.

Lord FitzRalph left, and Parrot went over to the desk. Commencing from the top right-hand drawer he began conscientiously to go through the contents.

"Why not take a look at the books, Mr. Fortescue?" he suggested to Hilary, who was standing uncertainly by. "Begin from the left of the top shelf and work gradually downward. Examine each volume in turn. It's only a chance you'll find anything worth while, of course, but I've known funny things between the leaves of books."

There was a library ladder propped up in the corner.

As Hilary mounted it, he heard the defective car clug into the yard upon which the room abutted. Two or three minutes later, from immediately behind the mahogany panelling at the end of the room, came the sound of the engine again, footsteps, and the sound of voices.

From the desk Parrot looked up alertly.

"Suffering Saul!" he exclaimed. "That's the garage behind there—just separated from us by that screen." He thought for a moment, his face intent. "Now why in Sam Hill did Oliver, or Sainter, or whatever his crook name is, want to build his garage next to his library?"

There was more than wonder in his tone; a measure of suspicion also, as if he was considering a problem the answer to which lay deeply beneath the surface.

From the ladder, his head within six inches of the angle of the ceiling, systematically Hilary took the books from the shelves, opened each in turn, ran his fingers through the leaves.

A curious collection, this library of Mr. Sainter. All solid stuff, and of the same type; sociology and international philosophy. Karl Marx, Nietzsche,

Tolstoy, Kropotkin, Rousseau, Mrs. Besant; works by Oriental mystics; by Eastern dreamers; by Chinese theorists—many dating back from before the era of Christianity. And each one an indictment of individual wealth and a rebellion against the social order of his time.

A man of curious mentality, this fanatic who at this very moment had in his power the woman whom Hilary loved as he knew that, come what might, he would never love another. A mass murderer, reformer, philosopher, philanthropist; unscrupulous as one possessed of demons; cruel as the Inquisition; cunning as Machiavelli. And even then Hilary did not know *how* cunning.

The library contents showed an attitude of mind he thought it might be as well to bring to the attention of Parrot. As he turned his head to speak, the shock he received was such that only by a wild and instinctive clutch at the shelves was he able to prevent himself from falling.

For Chief Constable Parrot, arms outflung, was slumped face downwards over the desk. And what of his face was visible was of a ghastly leaden hue, the glazed eyes staring unseeingly and fixedly at nothing.

For a moment, stricken to his soul with horror, Hilary stared motionlessly—expecting to see, protruding from face or hands, the deadly tufted dart that had brought death to the crook financier, Theodore Brand. Then, with an inarticulate cry he began to stumble down the ladder.

Two steps, and in a flash of inspiration he paused—in that momentary hiatus caught sight of that which indubitably saved his life. It was the cat—still curled immovably on the hearthrug.

But even in that quick glance he was able to recognise in the attitude that which arrested him; a stiffness, a rigidity, a lacking of that sinuous pliability that in the feline species is the predominant characteristic. And looking more intently, he saw from what that strange impression of immobility was derived.

The cat had ceased to breathe.

Irresistibly he checked himself. There was no tiny tufted dart adhering to Parrot or to the animal. Nor, when he came to think of it, was that surprising. The skylights overhead were closed, as was the door. In the whole room was no cover by which a murderer could be concealed. Besides, in the absorbed stillness of the room, and however adequately equipped with silencer, would not the discharge of the pistol have been audible?

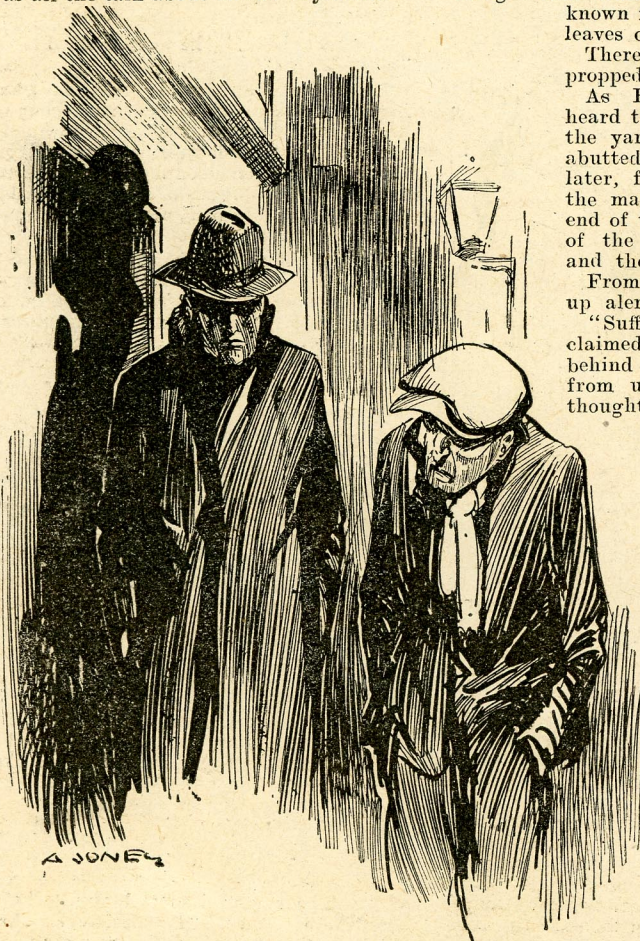
Also, why in the name of sanity, besides killing Parrot, did the murderer want to destroy the cat?

And yet, the stark fact remained—the cat was dead.

Even when he reached this blank wall of speculation some lingering residue of those conclusions remained; pricking him, goading him. It was the one concerned with the detonation caused by the shot that was most persistent. If in this quiet room a pistol had been discharged, he *must* have heard it. Over and over again this conviction hammered at his brain.

Then, suddenly and instantaneously like a lightning stroke flashed solution. He would not have heard because the discharge would have been drowned by the throbbing of the engine at the further side of the screen.

Poised there on the ladder, Hilary listened intently. Only the monotonous throb, throb, throb of the Wellesley-Twelve came to him. No sound of the drivers' voices. It came to him then that



As the tattered, dishevelled figure shambled up, Parrot whispered quickly: "Beat it about twenty yards ahead, and don't look round to see if we're following, because we shall be."

it was a few minutes since he had heard them.

Why were they so silent? It might be, of course, that having finished their repairs they had left the garage and rejoined their comrades.

But that wouldn't do, either. Parrot's instructions had been definite. Once the repairs were finished, the car was to be driven back to the road. Also, since the car entered the garage not for a moment had that throbbing ceased—and you can't repair an engine while it is still running.

Something wrong there evidently. Why, in leaving the garage, had the drivers not switched off the engine? Like a hammer stroke, insistently, the question came again and yet again. He turned his head towards the partition, staring as though his glance could penetrate to the garage beyond.

And as his eyes remained riveted, suddenly his breath caught sharply in his throat, his heart pounding. Over one portion of the panelling was a filmy Indian curtain, and so rhythmically slightly to and fro did the lower portion of that curtain sway, it was as though behind it a pulse was beating.

That tiny circumstance brought solution of the mystery. More, the probability is it saved his own life as, indubitably, it saved the life of Chief Constable Parrot.

Now there was no question of hesitation. With quickly indrawn breath he filled his lungs to bursting-point. Then, removing his feet from the rungs, he slid incontinently down the ladder. Still retaining what was left of that one long inhalation, despite the pain of his wound, he slung the limp form of Parrot across his shoulders, staggered to the door, opened it, hastily lowered the detective to the further side, and slammed the door behind him. Then, and only then, he expelled the used air from his lungs; breathed in gratefully a fresh supply. A moment later he had dragged Parrot down the short corridor and into the open air.

It was while feverishly he was engaged in the work of artificial respiration that behind him a startled voice exclaimed:

"Cesar's knapsack! What's happened to Parrot?"

It was Lord FitzRalph, his voice alive with consternation.

"Gassed!" said Hilary curtly. "Lend a hand!"

It was a good twenty minutes before the chief constable began to show signs of life; a further ten before, dazedly, but with something of the old humour in his eyes, he sat up.

"Except that I've the deuce of a head, what might happen to be the matter with me?" he demanded.

Hilary told him.

"But where in Sam Hill did the gas come from?" Parrot protested, still a little uncertainly.

"If you're able to walk, I'll show you," Hilary said grimly.

"I could walk ten miles," lied Parrot, and assisted by the others stumbled to his feet.

They made their way to the garage where the engine still throbbed. Without hesitation Hilary peered at a point about nine inches from the floor at the rear end of the car. The expression came into his face that comes only to the man who vindicates the accuracy of a long shot theory.

"Look!" he said, and pointed.

Comprehension on his face, Parrot dropped to his haunches. And he saw then that to the exhaust-pipe of the car was attached a length of tubing that, through a hole some inch and a half in diameter,

passed through the panelling and to the library beyond.

For a moment, because his brain was working under forced draught, he was silent. When he spoke they gathered it was not so much the method employed in his attempted murder that exercised him, as how that attempt had been engineered.

"Diverting the carbon monoxide from the exhaust to the library shows pretty good staff-work," he said quietly. "So good that if Mr. Fortescue hadn't been on the ladder—a point to which that unusually heavy gas was unable to rise—it would have accomplished his purpose; because carbon monoxide, being both tasteless and odourless, we should have sunk into unconsciousness without any warning, and a few minutes later have handed in our dinner-pails." He paused, frowning.

"But what I'm more interested in for the moment is to find the bloke who switched on the blinkin' fluence," he continued. "Also, and incidentally, where are those two drivers, Porter and Adams?"

He went to the door and sounded his whistle. Under the direction of the sergeant the search-party returned.

"Have you seen anything of Adams or Porter?" Parrot asked, observing that neither was of the party.

"I've seen nothing of either, sir," the sergeant said promptly.

Parrot turned sharply at a strangled cry that came from Hilary. Stepping on to the footboard of the car to switch off the engine, he had happened to glance into the tonneau. The chief constable turned to find him supporting himself by a grip upon the door with a hand from which the knuckles stood out with the same deathly pallor as the white mask of his face. With his injured hand he pointed mutely to the body of the car.

"Look!" he cried hoarsely. "Look!"

His own face blanched, Parrot stumbled to the car; swung open the door. Within, two crumpled heaps, lay the bodies of the two drivers, and protruding from the cheek of each was a little, tufted dart.

For a long moment Parrot stood frozen to stark rigidity. Then by a supreme call upon his reserves he had himself in hand. But when at last he spoke his face was ice-cold; implacable; relentless.

"First aid, and quick about it!" he snapped. "One of you 'phone for a doctor. Not that it'll be any use—they're dead enough, poor chaps!" He turned to the sergeant. "You saw no trace of strangers—in the grounds or elsewhere?"

The sergeant shook his head.

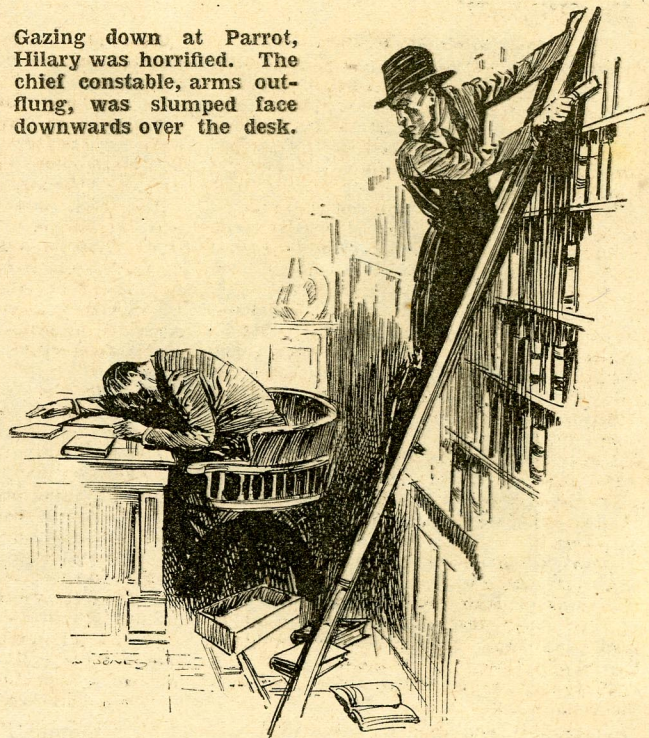
"Not a trace, and we searched the whole place like a hen scratching for corn," he replied convincingly.

Parrot said, savagely:

"They were there or *here!*" He jerked his head in the direction of the victims. "And not so many minutes ago at that," he added. His eyes turned from one to the other of the group. "You're one short," he said suddenly. "Where's Lord FitzRalph?"

"I haven't seen him, sir," the sergeant

Gazing down at Parrot, Hilary was horrified. The chief constable, arms out-flung, was slumped face downwards over the desk.



said promptly, and the others confirmed him.

"I sent you to search the grounds—not play blind man's buff," Parrot said unpleasantly. "Get a move on—put every blade of grass through a fine tooth-comb. And have your guns ready," he jerked.

From the house to the wall that abutted the road they subjected the whole grounds to the minutest possible search; flower and kitchen-gardens, orchards, summer and glasshouses, outbuildings, shrubberies. By the time they were back at their starting-point no square inch remained unexamined. But neither of Lord FitzRalph nor of any intruder had they found trace.

Parrot's chin projected and his eyes were agate-hard. His men were his father and his mother and his children; harm to any one of them was a direct attack upon himself. And since he had passed through the lodge gates a little less than an hour ago no less than three of them had been done to death.

"Guard every door and window," he instructed curtly, and with Hilary at his heels, re-entered the house.

Systematically, room by room, corridor by corridor, they searched it to discover—nothing. Nor, though expertly he tested walls and flooring, was there any sign of secret room or passage. All of moment they discovered, indeed, was in the library—now clear of the deadly poison-gas that so nearly had succeeded in its mission of murder. One of the Tudor Roses of the panelling was lying on the floor, and through the space thus left projected the exhaust-pipe of the car.

In the open-air again, Parrot detailed the sergeant and two constables to remain in the house. Two of the remaining constables he detailed to drive the defective car. He himself, and a constable who happened to be an expert driver, were to use the car that had been left outside the gate.

But when at last they reached the place where it had been, Chief Constable Parrot, trained to a rigid self-suppression, needed all the self-command there was going. For a full minute he stood, staring goggle-eyed at a road as blank as his own amazement.

The car had gone.



Gripping their guns, the three men paused for a moment, then, with Parrot in the lead, they plunged into the darkness of the secret passage.

But when at last slowly he turned to Hilary, he had himself in hand again.

"I'd give a couple of months' pay to know which of 'em swiped my car," he said quietly.

Hilary, no less surprised, said:

"Which two do you mean?"

"The one who murdered my officers—or Lord FitzWhoppit," Parrot answered irreverently.

The second car came through the gates and they climbed aboard.

"Stop at the nearest call-office," Parrot instructed, and from there gave certain instructions.

And, like all that had been done that day, these proved useless. On the Finchley Road, with a muffled exclamation more excusable than printable, Hilary seized the Chief Constable's arm.

"Look!" he shouted, pointing.

Pulled in neatly to the kerb was the missing police-car—empty.

Parrot ordered his driver to stop; got out. The abandoned car was perfectly in order—the self-starter responded at once. Thoughtfully he climbed into the driving-seat.

"I think I'd better take the wheel myself," he explained. "After my 'phone call just now every officer in London is on the *qui vive* for just this very car—"

Between Finchley Road and Whitehall he was, indeed, stopped not less than half a dozen times.

A CAPTURE.

BACK in Parrot's room at Scotland Yard Hilary gave way to something closely approximating despair. At the thought of what, even at that moment, might be happening to Sally, he felt the call upon his endurance was beyond reasonable limit.

And then, when depression was at its height, Parrot's telephone buzzed. The receiver pressed to his ear, the detective became suddenly alert. He was listening to a monologue in which he spoke only to jerk out some curt question or other.

"We'll be with you straight away," he said quietly at last. "Until then, do precisely nothing."

He replaced the receiver and turned to Hilary.

"This is where we get busy, my lad," he said, a gleam in his eye. At the telephone once more he gave practical evidence to that effect. Then, as he replaced the receiver:

"The one who murdered my two drivers and tried to gas us off the earth was a Chink."

"So Yan," Hilary gasped.

"I shouldn't wonder a bit," Parrot replied a cridly. "Anyway, Lord Mac-Waffles saw him sneak out of a summer-house in the far corner of Yangtse Lodge garden—the one against the boundary wall, but farthest from the gates," he explained. "His first impulse was to put it across him straight away. Then, like a sensible bloke, he thought better of it.

As by a stroke of luck the Chink hadn't seen him, it struck his lordship that if he could follow unobserved, probably the Chink would lead him to the new headquarters."

Hilary, some part at least of the dead weight of impotence lifted from his heart, beamed appreciation.

"Stout feller!" he cried. "And then?"

"On the farther side of the wall So Yan had a motor-cycle cached," Parrot continued. "The only thing, then, was to follow in our car, that, fortunately, was out of sight around the curve of the wall. Also it's a standard make with nothing to distinguish it—at any rate outwardly—from thousands of others."

Hilary interrupted.

"Then why in Sam Hill did Lord FitzRalph abandon it?" he demanded quickly, and Parrot smiled.

"Because once or twice So Yan had looked round rather suspiciously," he explained.

"Lord FitzDoodah waited until he came to a cab-rank where he knew every driver by his middle name—bit of a lad, his lordship, in a quiet way, let me tell you! By a stroke of luck the one at the head of the queue happened to be a partic'lar pal of his—Lord FitzCoughdrop had paid for his wife to go to the sea when she was sick or somethin'. I don't know how he explained, but in about ten seconds he'd collared the driver's cap and badge, taken his seat in the taxi, and was on the road again."

The Chief Constable paused. Apparently their new acquaintance was a man after his own heart.

"I tell you, Mr. Fortescue," he went on, "that feller may be a member of our effete aristocracy, but in brain he's outsize, and he's owner of seven different varieties of guts."

For the moment Hilary was not interested in character delineation. What he wanted was action, and plenty of it.

"What became of the Chink?" he demanded, but poring over a map of London outspread on his desk, Parrot did not immediately reply. And as the point of his pencil came to rest at the end of the route that had been given him through the tele-

phone, his expression was that of one confronted by a problem the solution of which lies maddeningly an inch beyond his grasp.

"He turned into a house between the New Cross Road and Griffin Street, Greenwich," Parrot said slowly.

"Then, for the love of Mike, let's go and get him," Hilary cried.

Parrot held up a large, but soothing hand.

"One more word from you and I shall say something original, like 'More haste, less speed,' or 'Look before you leap,' or something," he warned, and for a moment was silent. Then his face lighted, and he brought his fist to the desk with a bang that almost upset the inkpot.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed.

"Got what?" Hilary questioned eagerly.

"What was lurkin' around what in moments of enthusiasm I like to think of as my brain," Parrot replied. His pencil touched a point on the map. "Here's where the Chink went to earth, and here"—the pencil-point moved a fractional quarter-inch—"is Oliver's Model Dwellings—on the same side of the road in the same street."

He brooded for a moment, eyes and face intent.

"And what I'd like to know," he said at last, "is why—after to all outward appearances the dwellings were completed—it was a couple of months before a single tenant was accepted. And why, in the interval, Oliver—who is, of course, your old college friend Sainter—should have imported a squad of artisans from Albania to work on the interior of the building, and, immediately the job was finished, shipped 'em off home again. And why, while they were here, they were housed in the dwellings and never allowed outside?"

Hilary sat up more alertly still. Parrot's manner was both singular and impressive.

"What work were they doing there?" Hilary demanded, and reaching a large hand for the telephone, Parrot gave his instructions.

"And that," he said, "is precisely what I propose to find out."

This time he made his selection with the extremity of care. As second-in-command, on whom he could rely in any emergency, a protégé of his own, Detective-inspector Oakes filled the bill; the rank and file were the pick of the plain-clothes men of London.

It was dark by the time the two cars pulled up at the corner of High Street and Douglas Street—which is on that drab borderland between Deptford and Greenwich—and the crews trickled from them with the minimum of ostentation.

Parrot had drawn a rough sketch of what he called "the area of occupation," and already each man had his own specified post and duties.

"In dealin' with a feller that keeps a tame assassin like that Chink," he said, "it don't pay to take chances. An' when I say that at the first hint of trouble you're to shoot, an' go on shootin', I mean just that. Because if I have to make this another Sidney Street affair I'm goin' to put Sainter and that Chink where the dogs won't bite. It's no use tryin' to destroy a wasp's nest with warm milk an' lovin' words."

A man lounged up to them—a scrubby man with unclean face and hands and dishevelled hair—a man whose cap was like an oil-rag, with what was left of his boots open at the toes, and his rags but the greasy relic of a suit. And until he spoke Hilary's astonishment that Parrot accepted his advent without comment was considerable.

"Beat it about twenty yards ahead," the Chief Constable instructed the tatterdemalion stranger, "an' don't look round to see if we're followin', because we shall be."

"That'll be splendid," Lord FitzRalph

replied, and cast a complacent look down his appalling person. "As a matter of fact I came up less for instruction than admiration."

"Where d'ye get the Savile Row outfit?" Parrot growled.

"Immediately before I telephoned to you I put a call through to my own man at Virginia Lodge," Lord FitzRalph explained. "He got here one time, and I changed in the car. To enable me," he explained, "to make a call upon our Celestial friend."

"And I bet six to four you found no one at home," Parrot said with confidence, though Hilary observed how eagerly he awaited the reply.

The tatterdemalion peer raised soiled eyebrows.

"Your deduction is masterly, Mr. Holmes," he said. "My knock at the door was wholly disregarded."

"What was there to prevent the Chink or anyone else leaving the house while you were away gettin' into fancy dress?" Parrot asked.

The peer retained his cheerfulness.

"Nothing," he admitted, "except that the moment I reached the car I sent Jelks, my man, to watch until I joined him. And that whoever was in the house didn't leave in the interval I assured myself by the simple expedient of tying a thread of black silk across both the front door and the back entrance. Up to five minutes ago both were unbroken."

Parrot looked at him grimly, but at the back of the lazy eyes was a new respect.

"There are times, m'lord," he observed quietly, "when you appear to be threatened with intelligence. So, if you feel like comin' in with us, well—just keep your eyes skinned."

The dejected figure of the peer shuffled off. When he was about fifty yards ahead Parrot, Hilary, and a young detective-sergeant named Bird, strolled casually after him. The rest of the squad Parrot posted according to the method previously arranged.

From the incredibly squalid and unsavoury street, at the corner of which Lord FitzRalph had accosted them, and that was bordered on the one side by the high brick wall of a railway goods yard, ran three other narrow and reeking lanes, designated respectively—and ironically—Garden Street, Floral Street, and Arbour Street. In each of these festering by-ways of slumdom leant crazily the one against the other, four-roomed tenements of the back-to-back order; crumbling, unclean, insanitary, unsafe, and unfit for human habitation; brickwork crumbling, woodwork either disintegrated or pilfered for fuel; plaster rotted by time and damp; veritable decayed corpses of dwelling-places.

It was down the first of these—Garden Street—that they were led by the bedraggled peer.

At the corner Parrot stopped.

"Sainter bought the whole of this property," he told Hilary. "The houses, to use a laughable expression, were then inhabited. Sainter turned out all the tenants and put them at less rent elsewhere. Then, when the Albanians had breezed back to wherever they came from, he transferred the tenants—there."

He pointed to the end of the row on the left. Cheek by jowl with the last of those crazy hovels, plainly distinguishable by the high electric standard that fronted the entrance, was a six-storey block of tenements; clean, airy, and a little more than weather-proof. There were lights in the various windows; over the rails of the fire-escapes hung wisps of washing. Sometimes a shadow passed across a blind.

"If Sainter never did another good thing

in his life," Parrot stated, "at least he's got that to his credit."

"Once let me lay hands on him, and he'll have something to his debit," Hilary growled.

"All I need from you—and everyone here," Parrot said acidly, "is silence."

Having reached the sixth door on the left, Lord FitzRalph paused; then, ghost-like, he shuffled to one side. Noiselessly the others, keeping within the shadow of the crazy building, joined him before the door. And though in that uncertain light that door looked crazy and unsubstantial, running his hand over the surface Hilary discovered that the appearance was deceptive; it was both solid and immovable.

Without comment Parrot took from his pocket a small oilcan and a skeleton key. From the one he squirted lubricant into the interior of the lock; with the other noiselessly turned the catch; followed by the others as silently passed into the house.

The door opened directly into the main room. Parrot swept the beam of his torch comprehensively around; he discovered that in the apartment was some semblance of furniture—an uncovered deal table of the kitchen variety, three or four elm chairs and, on the high mantelpiece, candles in greasy candlesticks. The room was not as dirty as might have been expected.

The door closed and locked behind them, they stood for a moment, noiseless as wraiths, listening intently. No sound came to break the complete and utter silence.

"Wait!"

The word was formed by Parrot's lips rather than whispered. He glided through into the room beyond, and in view of the

danger to the girl who was the one woman either to count or matter in his life, to Hilary the calm deliberation of his methods was sheerly maddening.

Not until later was he able to realise that without consideration of each phase of the game as it arose, the outcome would have been inevitable disaster. Of all Parrot's professional principles the one which forbade a leap in the dark was the most deeply founded.

"No cellars," the latter whispered, returning to the others. "I'm going upstairs. Alone—so if there's a rough house you can act as rescue-party."

A strong arm deterred him.

"No—me!" whispered Hilary, and before the detective could protest, pistol at the ready, and in swift and utter silence, was four treads up the flight.

At the top was a tiny landing, with doors on either hand. From below the one to the left streamed a ribbon of light.

His ear at the keyhole, Hilary listened.

From within came the sound of voices and the occasional clink of glasses. And though he waited for what seemed an unconscionable time, not once in those growling exchanges could he distinguish either the smooth tones of Mr. Sainter or the sibilant clack of the Chinese.

With incredible suddenness he burst open the door.

At a table upon which were whisky and glasses, three men were seated. One, unquestionably, was "Chimp," the leader of the three who, on the previous night, had retrieved Sally Moreland for Mr. Sainter—a fact that did not contribute to Hilary's good will towards him. The other two, of slightly lesser girth, and, he suspected,

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His pistol at the ready, Hilary pressed his ear against the door of the crook's private room and listened cautiously.

ruffianism, obviously were the giant's companions in that raid.

The surprise was complete.

As the dishevelled apparition who, blood-encrusted, wild-eyed and wild-haired, long-barrelled revolver poised, thus staggeringly confronted them, their jaws dropped and their eyes boggled.

"Keep quite still," Hilary said, his voice shudderingly pleasant, "until I say the word. Because every little movement will have a meaning of its own, and I shall say it with bullets. Got that?"

From their expressions it was evident they had.

Hilary nodded satisfaction.

"Good!" he said, speaking as a sergeant-instructor on the parade ground. "Now, all together, taking your time from the right: Ha-a-a-nds—up!"

The arms of the two smaller ruffians ascended; with a lightning dive the hand of the giant shot forward to an automatic that lay just beyond his grasp.

It was destined to remain outside his grasp; the bullet from Hilary's pistol that, after carrying away the tip of his sausage-like finger, crashed through the table, deterred him from any extension of reach. With a bellow of mingled rage and agony the huge arms shot upwards.

"I'll—I'll—" he spluttered, but at what he read in Hilary's eye broke off abruptly.

"If you're wise—and you'll have to be very wise indeed—you'll do just exactly

what you're told—and quickly!" Hilary said, and even when, stung into action by the sound of the automatic's discharge, Parrot and Lord FitzRalph joined him, never for an instant took his eyes from his victims.

IN THE UNDERGROUND CELLAR.

"AND very nice, too!" Parrot remarked complacently, and stepped into the room. At sight of the trio at the table his brows shot upwards. "Why—who have we here? Chimpy Fargus, Tuppy Wang, and Dido Foo—heads of the Corner Boys Gang." He regarded the giant reproachfully. "I'm surprised at you, Chimp," he observed. "Never knew you do anythin' more reprehensible than 'knock off' an odd car or two before—a thing anyone might do just on the spur of the moment—absent-minded like—" Suddenly his voice changed; there was something steel-like and implacable in it.

"But now, m'lard, you're in for trouble. Trouble with a big T, all wool and a yard wide!"

Fargus, a veritable Colossus of a man with a huge, high-checked face and tiny, vindictive eyes, scowled ferociously.

"You've nothin' on me, Mr. Parrot," he growled.

"Only these—for the moment," the detective said, and slipped handcuffs about the upraised wrists. "The same to you, Tuppy," he added, "and to you, Dido," and performed a similar rite upon them. "Cord, sergeant," he instructed, and neatly

and efficiently his subordinate bound the ankles of the two last-named.

Almost inarticulate with rage, the giant shouted:

"What you got on us, Parrot? Where's your warrant?"

"I don't need a warrant to pull in a quadruple murderer," Parrot said in a deep voice, and, finger and thumb closing vice-like about the giant's colossal ear, jerked him to his feet.

And, standing, the giant was abject and trembling, his face ashen.

"Murder?" he repeated huskily. "I done no murder, Mr. Parrot. Other things, mebbe; but I'm no killer!"

Parrot regarded him sourly. Hilary knew there was something he wanted from the big man.

"Accessory after the fact," Parrot said. "That's about fifteen years—with your record." He paused. "Unless," he began doubtfully, and stopped again.

The giant snapped at the tentative hope held out.

"Unless what, Mr. Parrot?" he cried eagerly.

"Unless," the detective said, "you help us to prevent another. Murder, I mean. That'd count in your favour, I shouldn't wonder."

The giant's gross face shone with eagerness.

"Just tell us what we can do, Mr. Parrot," he said fervently.

"You can show us how to reach Sainter from here," Parrot said quietly, and seeing the terror return to the huge face, pressed home his point. "And you needn't be afraid to open out, either," he added, "because once we lay hands on that bird he'll be put in a place where he can't harm anybody."

The argument told. Safety first for the giant every time.

"Pull out the damper above the kitchen oven," he said.

Parrot turned purposefully to the plain-clothes man.

"Tie his feet," he instructed.

Downstairs he made directly for the huge, old-fashioned range. On the left of it was the hot-water boiler. The middle was the fireplace itself; to the right, the oven. And a foot above the oven was the damper.

Parrot's hands closed about the knob.

"Stand back!" he said, pulled, and jerked sharply aside to avoid the sweep of the whole range as it swung outwards.

Parrot flashed his torch down the steps disclosed by the opening.

His face alive with the relief that gripped him, Hilary would have dashed headlong down the flight, but Parrot's large hand checked him.

"In a minute, mister," he said soothingly, tiptoed to the door, unlocked it, and peered into the reeking alleyway that was Garden Street. Like a substantial shadow Sergeant Oakes detached himself from the gloom.

Parrot propelled him noiselessly into the room; showed him the opening.

"Telephone particulars of this to the Yard," he said. "If you hear nothing of us in half an hour bring your men and see what's doing. If you bump against any of the gang, treat 'em rough."

Oakes saluted and left.

His pistol poised and ready, Parrot disappeared through the opening. On a hair-trigger of expectancy Hilary followed. Lord FitzRalph and Sergeant Bird took up the rear.

The shaft was sixteen or eighteen feet deep. At the bottom a passage ran to the right. And the first thing Hilary observed

was that while the walls were damp and loose, underfoot was pressed hard with continued use. Except that from the further end came a faint and intermittent glimmer which, but that it came from the wall, was suggestive rather of standing water, they were in darkness. It was this faint guide that enabled them to grope forward without the aid of torches.

To Hilary it was an eerie experience. The drip, drip of the damp from the walls, the uncertain forms ahead looming only a shade darker than the surrounding gloom, and, above all, the sense of something impending that from the moment they entered the crazy tenement above had closed upon him; insistent, compelling; a spiritual warning from some inner sixth sense.

But to rescue Sally from the demoniacal maltreatment of Sainter he would have faced a battalion of fiends.

And as so often is the case, the prelude to climax came prosaically. The medium was a loose stone against which he stubbed his toe and lurched him stumblingly forward so that, unable by reason of his injured arm to save himself, he fell. By the time he had picked himself up he was half a dozen paces behind the party.

Actually, it was just as he had regained the upright that the sound came—a low swoosh from above and perhaps sixty feet ahead.

Instantly the others checked in their stride—startled and speculative. He had hurried forward to join them when, from immediately overhead, that sound again, but louder. Dull, but somehow high-pitched and whining.

And then it was that instinct clamoured a warning. A split second of pause, and as one possessed he flung himself not forward, but backward.

An infinitesimal fraction of a second's further delay and he would have been too late. Even as it was he felt the disturbance of air as, swift and smooth as the blade of a guillotine, something brushed past his face, came to ground, and there, motionless, remained.

He had then the sensation of being confronted by some impassable barrier. Gropingly he advanced his hand. His fingers closed round the thin steel bars of the grille that entirely cut him off from his companions.

In that instant was shatteringly revealed from whence had come the intermittent reflection that from time to time had been apparent.

For now no longer was that reflection either dull or intermittent; it shone harshly from the illumination turned upon it, revealed as an arrangement of scientifically adjusted mirrors that enabled those in the passage to see what transpired within the chamber into which, at right angles, the passage turned. It enabled Hilary to see that as well as the grille that cut him off from his companions, they, in turn, were enclosed by a further grille, twenty feet or so in advance of the first.

The scene within the chamber itself, that to Hilary was as clearly reflected as if actually he had been standing within the room where it took place, was one in which all other considerations were swamped in the flood of horror that like a tidal wave engulfed him.

Backed against the high, dark curtains that covered the further wall was a huge glass case, within the right-hand portion of which, feet clamped firmly to the ground, was Sally Moreland. She was gazing in benumbed terror at that which, immediately facing her, was the supreme and ultimate horror.

Even Hilary, who had lived where snakes abound, never had seen a boa-constrictor so huge as that writhing, unclean monster which, its lower extremity curled about an iron column, so obviously was suffering the extreme limits of rage and hunger.

Seated comfortably in an armchair immediately confronting that frightful spectacle, a smile of ineffable pleasure on his pink and chubby face, was Mr. Sainter. In a smaller chair, rigid, emotionless, and detached as a carved Buddha, was the Chinaman, So Yan.

While still Hilary was within that first icy grip of horror, the maniac spoke. Some peculiarity of acoustics in that narrow tunnel-like passage rendered his voice as clear if they had been face to face.

"And so, gentlemen," he was saying, "you have been clever enough to discover my retreat." He half turned his head, so that in the mirror, exuding a horrible benevolence, his face shone three-quarter profile. "Well, gentlemen, I hope you appreciate your welcome."

The only reply came from Sergeant Bird—a burly man with an abnormal fighting spirit. His large hands were clasped about the bars that stood between himself and their quarry; the veins in his forehead like cords with the strain he brought to bear upon the obstruction.

And observing these efforts, Mr. Sainter's smile became more bland, even, than before.

"For your sake, gentlemen, I beg you to refrain from any attempt to force your way forward," he said pleasantly. "For though the barrier itself is strong, the material into which it is set, alas, is more liable to breakdown. Hence, if you care to cast your eyes overhead, you may gain an inkling as to the method I have adopted to provide against that contingency."

Instinctively they cast their eyes upwards. From the top bars of the gates insulated wires ran the length of the passage and into the room beyond, terminating in a switch within reach of Mr. Sainter's hand.

"I'll give you exactly thirty seconds to remove your hands from those bars, Sergeant Bird," Sainter said quietly, and there was that in his voice which led even that fighting spirit to obey.

It was as well he did so. For stretching out a delicate hand, Mr. Sainter pressed the switch, and immediately came the low, ominous hum of the dynamo.

"Over a thousand volts, gentlemen," he said complacently. "Even a single finger upon those bars and, from your point of view at least, the result would be more interesting than pleasant." And he smiled triumphantly as they drew quickly away.

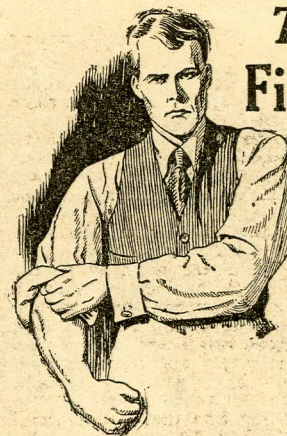
Delicately, almost daintily, Mr. Sainter raised his hand, and between thumb and forefinger was a rubber bulb that, by means of a tube, communicated with what, by slightly changing his position, Hilary perceived to be the pair of glass doors that separated Sally from the serpent.

"A slight demonstration of my methods," Mr. Sainter said, and slightly pressed the bulb.

The result was of a stark, unmitigated horror beyond anything of which hitherto Hilary had heard or dreamed. Where before the two halves of the dividing gate had met so minutely as to render the join almost imperceptible, with that faint pressure they drew the fractional portion of an inch apart.

That sight was the one circumstance necessary to rouse his benumbed brain to action. The moment he had sated himself with cruelty, Sainter's intention was to

(Continued overleaf.)



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widen that breach—so that between Sally and that ravening serpent would be no barrier at all.

HORROR—AND AFTER.

IN a sudden flash to Hilary Fortescue came inspiration.

His plan was the more feasible because, owing to the position in which the others were crowded, it could not be seen from within the room that he had been left outside the grille.

Keeping within the shadow of the wall, Hilary darted swiftly back to the steps. Two minutes later he was in the room where the other prisoners still lay impotent. Without a word, incontinently he removed the gag from the mouth of the giant Chimp Fergus; dug his pistol-barrel a good two inches into his ribs. "I'll give you just two minutes," he said, and there was a note in his voice that brought panic into the eyes into which he glared, "to tell me the other way into that underground room of Sainter's."

With the knowledge conveyed by his own presence and manner, Hilary could realise the struggle in which the other was engaged; knew that the giant was between the devil of Sainter's future vengeance and the deep sea of this more immediate peril. In view of Hilary's frame of mind at the moment, his terror of the plump and smiling Sainter must have been appalling.

"Nothin' doin'," the giant muttered at last. Hilary's reply was to glance at his wrist-watch. Already since he first put the question half a minute had passed. And, in the meanwhile, that dividing gate would be opening—opening—

"On second thoughts, I can't give you two minutes," he snapped; "only thirty seconds. After that, one of two things'll happen. Either you speak or I shoot—"

Though there was fear in his eyes the giant remained mute.

"Time!" Hilary shouted at last, thrust the pistol-muzzle into the muscles of the man's arm, pressed the trigger.

Shot twice within the same hour. Evidently this wasn't Chimp's lucky day.

He screamed—a high-pitched bellow of pain and terror.

Hilary lowered the pistol-muzzle an inch further down the scorched and already blood-stained sleeve.

"Five seconds," he said quietly, "and I shoot again."

"Oliver's Buildings," the giant sobbed. "Cellar. Second peg on left behind the stove. Press it."

Hilary jerked upright.

"Good!" he said, and his voice was more ominous than before. "But if you've sold me a pup, you'd better occupy the interval until I'm back in saying your prayers."

"It's right, guv'nor, what I said, s'welp me!" the man moaned, but already Hilary was half-way down the stairs.

A moment later he was in the street. He cast a quick glance for Oakes, but the detective had not returned from his telephoning.

Beyond the lamp above the entrance, Oliver's Buildings was in darkness, but to his relief the entrance door was open. In the far corner of the vestibule was a further door to the basement, and this, too, yielded. Further relief it was, also, that the steps downward corresponded exactly in number with those from the kitchen to the underground passage.

At the bottom of the steps he struck a match. To his left was a switch, and when he pressed it the electric light functioned.

The cellar was large and cold. Towards the further side was the furnace that provided the building with central heat. The right wall was divided into two bins, one filled with anthracite coal, the other with coke. On the floor was a long iron rake, used apparently for clearing the furnace of ashes and clinkers. Upon the wall immediately to the rear of the furnace was a row of other implements—a sieve, a saw, an axe. Hilary's heart pounded when he saw that of the row of pegs from which these were hanging, the second was vacant.

He went over to it; pushed it violently inward.

As smoothly as a theatre curtain, the whole section of wall slid gently but swiftly upwards. And there, not six feet away, were the heavy dark curtains he knew must be the backing for those dreadful cages, in one of which was imprisoned the woman he loved, in the other the deadliest of all the larger serpents—famished, furious.

And even as he approached, Mr. Sainter's voice, cultured, suave, but with an underlying malevolence that was sheerly demonic, was drawing to an end.

"Thus, while in the early period of my campaign against those robbers and oppressors without the law, it was with the extremity of reluctance I took life, with the passage of time and the accumulation of those—er—reprisals, my distaste for this necessary phase of my activities became cumulatively less. To my surprise, indeed, it was not long before I found myself looking forward to the actual disposal of my victims with even greater satisfaction than to the work of repairing the wrong they had accomplished."

Tensely, palpitatingly Hilary peered between the curtains. A note had crept into the smooth voice that was immeasurably wild and undisciplined. His first glance told him, also, how near crisis was to hand.

For that face, formerly so jolly and smiling, was now a veritable mask of evil; eyes burning redly, lips pale and tight-drawn to the display of white and gleaming teeth.

"Thus," the voice continued, "I found in killing my only joy, a joy that, because the operation had necessarily to be so curtailed and death so swift, never could wholly be sated."

The strained voice paused; into the face of the madman beamed a new and more terrible malignancy.

"Then my niece brought back to my house a man whom inadvertently So Yan had omitted to despatch—the one man living who, through overhearing a conversation, was in possession of my secret. It was but a day later that I discovered her deliberately planning, not only to turn that man loose to disclose my secret to the world, but to accompany him. It was, of course, essential that they should be recaptured."

He laughed, the thin, high-pitched cackle of the demoniac.

"But while our failure to regain possession of the male busybody constitutes the inevitable finish of our activities—for with the information they have in their possession, my own suppression by the police is a foregone conclusion—at least we can stage a dramatic, and to myself, at least, most satisfactory curtain," he said.

He waved a white and trembling hand towards the cage. The gates had separated now by almost two inches; the cold eyes of that swaying head were gazing unblinkingly, avidly, into the deathlike face of Sally Moreland. And then, to his inexpressible relief, Hilary saw that she had fainted.

During the few moments in which Sainter had been speaking, Hilary had been paralysed to inaction. Now, with cold deliberation, he came to his decision. Climax was here. Not for many more moments would that demented man be content merely to gloat upon his victim. At any second the fingers might close about the bulb in his hand.

Steadying himself, Hilary took deliberate aim with his automatic at the coldly hypnotic eyes of the serpent. Then he pressed the trigger—and with the blankness of the ensuing failure thought he would have fainted.

For the cartridge was defective. And when furiously he attempted to clear the breech, the weapon jammed. He was left then with a pistol entirely useless, and with every passing second the barrier between Sally and death opening ever wider.

Frenzy seized him. He himself must fight that menace—divert at any cost that fury from Sally to himself.

Like one crazy, he rushed back into the cellar. Frantically his hands closed about the heavy iron furnace-rake. Bearing it, he rushed frenziedly back to the curtain and flung it aside.

Wounded shoulder forgotten, with a strength derived from some hidden well of energy now for the first time revealed, he swung that heavy

(Continued on page 192.)

THE MYSTERY GANGSTER



Haley Burke, gunman and gang leader, together with his beautiful Eurasian partner, had for years held undisputed sway in the Underworld. Their gang had been the most powerful; their spoils the largest—until the coming of the Black Ace, the mysterious gangster. Suddenly he appeared as out of the blue, his ruthless gangsters swooping down on the Burke gang's preserves, hijacking their loot, carrying out their raids with a ferociousness and disregard for life that appalled even Burke himself. No one had ever seen the Ace. No one knew who he was, and in desperation Burke went to the one man who he believed could help him, a man who till then had been his deadliest enemy. He went with a suggestion, and the outcome of it was destined to lead to amazing adventure. Be sure to read

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EDWARD D. SULLIVAN

FOREWORD.

STARTING as an expert safe-blower, Dion O'Banion was one of Chicago's earliest highjackers and rose to fame under the wing of Johnny Torrio, Al Capone's former boss. But even as a gang-chief, O'Banion's highjacking tendencies got the better of him, and eventually led to his sudden and dramatic demise in his own flower-shop. With O'Banion out of the way, Capone and Torrio held sway in Chicago until Hymie Weiss, O'Banion's lieutenant, set out on a campaign of vengeance. So hot did he make things for Torrio that that gentleman found he had had enough, and decided to clear. He handed over the gang leadership and all that accompanied it to Al Capone, and left post haste for Italy.

It was not long after this that Weiss died—swiftly—his body full of machine-gun slugs.

In 1928 racketeering cost Chicago about one hundred and thirty-six million dollars, and a special court became necessary to deal with it.

Racketeering is the term used for the enforcing of any scheme by threats of violence—usually in connection with the booming of some particular trade or the sale of any special article. Many sudden deaths were the outcome of this new departure and included the notorious gunmen, William Clifford and Michael Reilly, who, after beating up a garage, the proprietor of which had failed to comply with their demands, shot a policeman who interfered. They met their end, however, not at the hands of the authorities, but by gangster bullets.

NINE PRISONS.

NINE prisons, usually loaded to capacity, empty into Chicago. By that I mean that when prisoners are released from these institutions, Chicago is the first big town where they can “make their stake,” and get on their way. Briefly, when they are released from prison with an average of twenty dollars apiece, and have nodded patiently while the warden casually outlines the value of going straight, the first location for their new criminal operations, that

have now become economically necessary, is Chicago.

Prohibition, however unconsciously, has bettered a condition brought about by this proximity of many prisons. Prohibition, also, has materially decreased the number of stick-up men, pay-roll robbers, jewellery thieves, burglars, and safe-blowers resident in Chicago. The great majority of them have gone into booze running. It pays more and the penalties are less severe. The murders and violence committed by these criminals who have gone into bootlegging are now confined almost exclusively to rival gangsters in the booze trade.

As has been explained before, Dion O'Banion was originally a safe-blower. Pete and Frank Gusenberg, slain in the St. Valentine's Day massacre, were pay-roll bandits. Hymie Weiss was known as the “perfume burglar.” Schemer Drucci was a hold-up man. All the better-known leaders had some association with crime before they entered the liquor field.

Crime's death list has eliminated countless leaders in every type of criminality. Other important factors still alive have forsaken the old “graft,” and now are prohibition business men, rendered at least a little less harmful by opportunity.

The man released from prison nowadays and coming to Chicago has usually been informed by prisoners who have tried it that he can get a lift out of Chicago by applying to any of the various gangs. The gangs don't want any upset in their tremendously remunerative occupation. A “crime wave” usually leads to a public demand for a clean-up, and, in most cases, a general shifting around and transfer of police officers. The gangs don't like that, particularly since many of the police officers are useful just where they're located.

As Al Capone has so frequently stated: “We don't want any trouble.”

So the convicts, who, by their desperate situation and their very number, would create intermittent and almost perpetual crime waves in Chicago, as they did for many years, usually pass through Chicago harmlessly, travelling on gang funds.

But in the six months following my

arrival in Chicago, in 1919, there was a terrific wave of crime. One of the first cases I remember was that of a man who was driving at nine o'clock up Sheridan Road in a Rolls-Royce runabout. It was November, and he wore a large fur coat. He was held up four blocks from his home, and, when the bandits got through with him, he ran the four blocks in his under-clothing. The bandits of those days were very thoroughgoing.

They had not only taken the man's car, but his hat, his clothing, money, and other trinkets that Rolls-Royce owners are likely to have. In those days it was nothing uncommon to have two hundred hold-ups reported nightly at the newspaper offices. From twenty to thirty of these would be detailed briefly. The remainder would not even be printed. Some man with a foreign name, for instance, would be robbed of a dollar and a quarter and a silver watch. Perhaps he would sustain a broken nose and a slight bullet wound. It wouldn't be important as news, but the broken nose and the slight bullet wound would, of course, hurt the man with the foreign name just as much as if he were a leading citizen. After describing a couple of hundred hold-ups and throwing away notes on a couple of thousand, I began to feel that it might be a good idea to have a revolver handy when leaving work at about one o'clock each morning, or leaving the Press Club three hours later.

The activities of criminals at that time in direct and indirect ways cost Chicago millions of dollars a month. The vast transient population of the city, staying at the hotels, would within a day or two learn about the numerous hold-ups all over the city. The result would be that cautious visitors from Indiana, Iowa, Nebraska, and states adjacent to Illinois would deposit their valuables and money in the safes of the hotels at which they stopped.

Buying or shopping is largely a matter of impulse, and the shopper who fails to buy a specific article to-day may not think of buying it again for many years. All over Chicago sauntered these potential buyers with insufficient money in their pockets.

The attractive windows of the stores, the vast array of merchandise gathered by the great stores of Chicago, might interest them, but they would lack the necessary funds to make the purchase. Signboards of the theatres and motion picture houses might prove alluring, but, if a trip back to the hotel were required for the necessary money, the patron was usually lost to the Chicago entertainment purveyors.

Prohibition corrected this situation materially. It's one of the few things that it ever helped, and it's one of the few things that was never claimed as a virtue of prohibition.

To alter any such situation in the city is infinitely more difficult than the layman can imagine. People who have had experience with police authority and city government are constantly baffled about what to do in a situation which seems simple to a layman.

I'll demonstrate with a suggestion I made myself to Chief of Police John J. Garrity, following an especially atrocious hold-up and murder in 1920. Two young fellows, university undergraduates, had borrowed a fellow-student's car to take two co-eds for an evening ride.

Along about ten o'clock they had stopped on a dark road in the park, and were frolicking and talking when two bandits appeared. The bandits relieved the young men of their college finances, amounting to about twelve dollars, took some minor jewels from the girls, and finally told them all to get out because they were going to take the car. The student who had borrowed the car, knowing it was worth a couple of thousand dollars, and alarmed at his responsibility for it, protested. He was killed.

I looked up the list of unsolved crimes over a period in Chicago, and, armed with

these and encouraged by one of my editorial superiors, I went over to tell Police Chief John J. Garrity, a most competent and honest official, where he got off. He was decently patient.

There had been several bandit slayings in so-called love lanes throughout the parks and in nearby suburbs, and the city was genuinely aroused. My suggestion, to put it in the briefest possible way, was that automobiles containing two detectives, accompanied by two other detectives dressed as women, should go to these centres of bandit attacks and wait for their opportunity. When the bandits got half way through their speech the detectives would let them have it. It would be a good lesson. It would avoid the nonsense of trial which usually resulted in a vicious bandit slayer going free.

I liked that idea. I was rather glad that I had worked it out personally. I remember that the Chief in his first observation seemed to like it, too. I was not a bit amazed.

"Yes, sir," he said, "that is a great idea. It would be a great lesson. The only objection that I can see to it is that it's been tried before, and resulted in a great mistake."

He then related the story of a police chief in Minnesota, who had for years been effective in keeping general criminals from working in his city. Lots of crooks lived there. But they commuted. They worked elsewhere. He had a whip-hand over known and experienced criminals. He had a big reputation.

But a group of stick-up boys suddenly developed in the town. They were youngsters. They were nervous, and in three stick-ups they killed two people. There was a public outcry. When six hold-ups had been accomplished, all in cafés and road-houses, the Chief decided to put a firing squad of detectives in a café which would be normal "pickings" for hold-up men.

During the nights the detectives were stationed there two other hold-ups occurred. Finally the boys appeared in the doorway of the protected saloon. There were four in the group. Two of them fell where they stood. There was considerable ado immediately and the Chief was the toast of the town.

But only for a day. One of the slain boys had nothing to do with the group. The other had joined them for the first time and was unarmed. It was just one of those things. The Chief was fired.

"Yes, indeed," said my Chief, "it's a good idea. But it's been tried before."

Earlier in this chapter I mentioned the conclusion I slowly developed, in view of the innumerable Chicago hold-ups, that a newspaper man moving about late at night or early in the morning should include a revolver in his equipment.

I got one. It was a big one, and I'll tell you how useless and even dangerous it proved to be.

The station at which I left the "L" had before it a little park, with many trees and a fountain. David Belasco couldn't provide a more perfect setting for a hold-up. From the point of view of the stick-up man, it had everything. After many months of brave indifference, I got the gun, and, when I had it in my possession, I developed all the characteristics of a Chinese hatchet-man. In other words, anyone could tell that I had a revolver. I acted like a man with a weapon. I left my office every night conscious that I was about to commit a murder, even though it would be justified.

The matter of reading a paper as I rode towards home in the early morning really meant little. My mind was on the gun. Now and again I would picture the situation

in which it was to be used, and, on more than one occasion, when I murmured "Stick 'em up!" some quiet fellow-reader in the "L" would register amazement, and then apparently become convinced that he had been hearing things.

On leaving the "L" station, I would put the newspaper over my arm with the gun in it. It was really a big gun—too large for the ordinary city shooting.

For a long time the gun was just a nuisance, but finally the moment came. As I walked out of the station at three o'clock on a rainy morning, two young men walked diagonally towards the little park and me.

"Got a match?" growled one.

"Stick 'em up!" I said.

I have never seen four hands go up more quickly.

Now that I had them, I hadn't the slightest idea what to do with them. I thought medium-fast.

"Walk up to that corner," I said, "and keep 'em up."

The young men obeyed.

A block away was Sheridan Road, and two hundred feet north of it was my home.

As we walked along, it occurred to me that anyone in an upper window seeing this parade would be likely to take a shot at me. Furthermore, as I observed the legs walking before me, they seemed altogether too weak and irresolute for banditry.

When we got to the corner I was stumped. First, I was convinced by this time that the trembling young men were not bandits. Second, I had no desire to take them home with me, no matter who they were.

"Cross that street," I said, upon reaching the corner. "And keep 'em up."

They went in one direction and I walked rapidly up to my home. When I got there I looked around and saw the two young men standing on the corner with their hands in their pockets looking after me. I have never felt more foolish.

I sat on a hall chair for about half an hour, expecting that the young men would arrive with reserves to find out what was the matter with me, but apparently they had gone on their way.

It's more than likely they gave up smoking.

DEATH COMES TO AN ASSISTANT STATE'S ATTORNEY.

Most physicians with the proper bedside manner have an emphatic way of saying: "Forget it!" even if it's pretty well established that you have it. Thus Chicago with crime. At regular intervals there developed symptoms and events which indicated that something was very unhealthy in the body politic. Powder burns, crooked joints and alcoholism led to straight, outright murder, but, having called in prohibition doctors, local police, and antiquated legal bandaging, the town did its best to forget it.

In 1926, however, things developed in such flagrant and bombastic fashion that public feeling was aroused which led to drastic political action in 1928.

The two outstanding developments which exposed the criminal and political hook-up in Chicago were the murder of State's Attorney William McSwiggin and the trial and conviction of Alderman Titus A. Haffa and four others charged with the operation of a huge liquor syndicate. These events were coupled with countless definite occurrences pointing in the same direction, and Chicago was at last aroused to action, as will be related subsequently.

On the night of April 27th, 1926, Assistant State's Attorney William H. McSwiggin was mowed down by machine-gun bullets in Cicero, the Capone strong-

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hold. In his company were James Dougherty and John Duffy, two beer-running gangsters. A year before this murder Dougherty had been tried for the murder of Eddie Tancil, of Cicero. He was acquitted. The man who had prosecuted him, unsuccessfully, was State's Attorney William H. McSwiggin, his present companion in death.

Even State's Attorney Crowe, that source of long and gallant statements, could only say, "Well, well!" when he heard of this development. After a period of thought he issued a statement to the effect that McSwiggin had been very active in prosecuting gangsters, and was probably in Cicero on business. But this sat very lightly with the people of Chicago, especially when Al Capone, who had been indicted for the murder, surrendered himself four months later under conditions dictated by himself. When the officers took him into custody at the Indiana line and asked him what he knew about the death of McSwiggin, he made a brief statement. It contained dynamite.

"I am no squawker," he said. "But get this straight. I was no foe of McSwiggin. I knew him in a business way. I paid him—and I paid him plenty."

What a deliberate earful that was for Chicago.

"Ten days before McSwiggin was bumped off," Capone said later, "I met him as usual. I had some of my men with him. If we wanted to bump him, that was the spot. We didn't kill him. We didn't want to kill him, then or later."

"I blew out of this town on the night after that murder because I've been accused of every death except the casualty list of the World War. I didn't want some fat-headed cop to shoot me on sight, just to make a snappy entry on his record."

Capone was free three days after he surrendered.

It is the general consensus of those "in the know" that the slaughter of McSwiggin and his two gangster pals, Dougherty and Duffy, was a mistake only in so far as McSwiggin was concerned. On that April evening they had pulled up in front of Madigan's saloon in Cicero. They were getting out of the car when another closed car drove slowly by and swept the three men to their death in a hail of machine-gun bullets.

Less than a week before this occurrence an attempt had been made on the life of Capone. It was reported that at that time Capone had seen Hymie Weiss, his arch enemy from the North Side, in the automobile from which bullets poured. With him were four men, and Capone is said to have recognised Duffy and Dougherty, whom he had believed loyal to him.

Weiss was capable of any recklessness, as has been shown heretofore, and the theory is that when Duffy and Dougherty came into Cicero with McSwiggin, who looked not unlike Weiss, a car of death went out to meet them.

At any rate, there remained ample public interest as to why McSwiggin was with two gangsters in Cicero. State's Attorney Crowe promptly stated that he was there seeking evidence. But this as promptly became nonsense when early investigation showed that Duffy, a barber and bootlegger, and Dougherty, a beer hustler and thug, had very often visited the Madigan saloon with McSwiggin.

The previous relation between McSwiggin and Dougherty has been explained. Duffy, the barber, was precinct captain for State's Attorney Crowe's organisation in the preceding election.

Five special Grand Juries were used in an effort to find the answer to this mur-

derous, political-crime tangle. But they got exactly nowhere.

Silence sealed the lips of all gangsters—this thing was vital. The conditions are best set forth by the report of one of the grand juries:

"A conspiracy of silence is evident among the gangsters, and intimidation of all witnesses is clearly evident, also. Any one who aids the public officials by giving needed facts is very likely to suffer for it. It is clear to this jury from what we have seen and heard in this court-room during the last five weeks that the prosecutors have a most difficult task before them."

The father of McSwiggin, Sergeant Anthony McSwiggin, of the Chicago Police Department, named as the slayers of his son Al Capone, and the latter's henchmen, Bob McCullough, Frank Reo, and Frank Diamond. He declared that he had positive information, but he did not disclose what this was nor how it had been obtained.

The final word of the last Grand Jury's effort was offered by Judge Charles A. McDonald, who directed a phase of the inquiry. He said:

"I know who killed McSwiggin, but I do not know it legally, and am unable to present it conclusively. Neither Sergeant McSwiggin nor anyone else has at any time given me the name of a witness who would appear before the Grand Jury to identify Al Capone or any other person as the murderer. It has been necessary to keep the name of every witness secret. The moment they are wanted they vanish."

It may charitably be assumed that McSwiggin was innocent in his contact with the murderous company in which he was found; at any rate, the grand juries very definitely and finally stated that his visit to Cicero on the night of his murder had nothing to do with the legitimate functions of his office.

Many another official and judge of Chicago has found it hard, when some crisis developed, to explain the company he has kept.

Jim Colosimo, definitely known to be a leader in Chicago's vice system, was for years on intimate and semi-social terms with city officials and people of social prominence. Diamond Joe Esposito, slain in Chicago's gang tangles, made a particular boast of whom he knew and how well he knew them. He was useful, and though he could not read or write, he moved on occasion in exceedingly important company.

Although Joe was a staunch supporter of almost everything the law forbids, dabbling in booze, labour rackets, and joints, he surrounded himself with ambitious companionship as he smiled and bowed his path through life on the way to his bullet. Senator Charles S. Deneen, Roy O. West, Edward R. Litzinger, and other men of similar status in Illinois politics for years attended the ornate dinners that "Diamond Joe" held to prove something or other.

Within forty hours of his death, he was shot down on March 20th, 1928, he had given a huge dinner to his friends, including some of the best-known men in Cook County, with a liberal representation of judges and officials.

Joe was an amiable old fellow who knew just enough to glide by politically with the aid of a vast and ignorant group of supporters. His boast was that he was always doing something for somebody, and in the general excitement he managed to get a lot done for himself. He was a presidential elector one year, ran for County Commissioner at another time, and as ward committeeman could just about deliver the old "Bloody Nineteenth" Ward any way he wanted.

(Continued on next page.)

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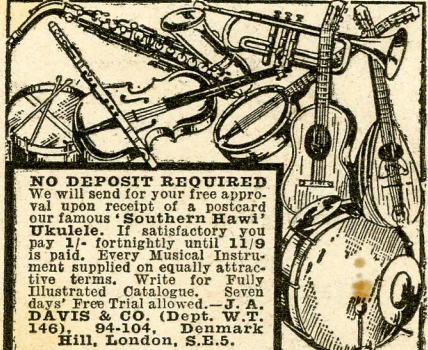



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All applications for Advertisement space in this publication to be addressed to Advertisement Manager, "The THRILLER," The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

"CROOK LAW."

(Continued from page 183.)

iron bar as if it had been a reed; smashed shatteringly through, not only the glass nearest to him, but the pane on the further side. A piece four feet square crashed outward, scattered to a thousand pieces at the feet of Mr. Sainter—who, as one transfixed, raised himself to the upright, took one dazed step towards the cage.

What instantly transpired was too quick for the eye to follow; too sheerly terrible for the brain to assimilate.

To Hilary it seemed that, with the glass falling and crashing about that evilly-swaying head, the serpent, confused, blinded on the one side by a splinter, maddened with the twin goads of pain and hunger, seized instinctively upon that which was nearest at hand. Something like a solid streak of light shot forward; there was a writhing, seething convulsion. A fraction of a split second, and Mr. Septimus Sainter, philanthropist, murderer, and maniac, was fast within those irresistible coils.

Even now there are times when in the night watches, Hilary awakens to those hideous sounds.

And predominant in that confusion, frantic, wailing, was the lithe figure of So Yan. Simultaneously, as it seemed to Hilary, with the poignance of the snake, came the crash of his overturned chair as he, too, leaped forward; the sharp detonations of his pistol as he pumped shot after shot into those ever more closely-contracting coils.

But for any practical use this attempt to save his master, it might not have been made. His hand was unsteady; the bullet neither severed the spinal cord nor entered the brain. And by the time the magazine was empty Mr. Sainter was beyond human aid.

Leaping through the opening at that cage then, Hilary had no difficulty in securing the Chinaman; the man was stricken limp and abject.

This dealt with, Hilary switched off the current that fed the grille, and with the invaluable iron rake smashed down the barrier that confined Parrot and the others. Not until he saw the reinforcements pouring down the passage did he remember that, inadvertently,

in that rush to secure information from the giant, he had not closed the grate door behind him.

He was just in time to release Sally before he, too, fainted.

Thus he did not see Parrot, his hand as steady as at target practice, deliver with his automatic the death-stroke to the already wounded serpent.

It was three days later. Hilary was lying on a chesterfield in the house of that cheery sportsman, Lord FitzRalph, who, following a little sound from behind the door, somewhat abruptly had left him.

Sounds of whispering came. Then the door opened and Sally came in, restored to the vital, vivid girl she had been upon that first morning at Yangtse Lodge.

They talked for a little, but between them was a curious constraint. Suddenly, and with exemplary resolution, Hilary cast that restraint aside. It may have been that he read something in her eyes that encouraged him to do so.

"I want to ask you a question," he said. She met his glance, held it, and the colour came into her face.

"Ask," she said. "Didn't you realise, the first moment I saw you, that I loved you?" he said.

Something new came into her eyes; extended also to her mouth, and it was very, very tender.

"Well," she smiled, "I'll own up it didn't need a gipsy to tell me I was going to have trouble with a dark man."

The door opened; a face, lean, and with deceptively lazy eyes, protruded for a moment into the room. Then hastily the door closed again.

Outside Parrot turned a solemn, expressionless countenance to Lord FitzRalph.

"What's the matter?" demanded his lordship, his face as devoid of expression as that of the detective.

"I guess," Parrot said, "they've been taking lessons from that snake."

(Be sure to read "The Black Ace" by our brilliant new author, Barry Perovne, next week. A swinish mystery, an amazing adventure and thrills. You'll be enthralled all the time. Book your copy of THE THRILLER NOW.)

"LOOK AT CHICAGO."

(Continued from previous page.)

He was studded with diamonds, had money loose in all his pockets, couldn't write, talked with a dialect, didn't know what a joke was, and was about as greasy a neighbour as you ever set eyes upon. Virtually all of his business activities were against the law.

But—at one of the last dinners he gave there was a ceremony of presenting a bust of Mr. Esposito to Senator Charles S. Deneen, and among the speakers who burst out about the bust, and Mr. Esposito were: Judge Hugo M. Friend, Judge Edgar Jonas, Judge V. P. Arnold, former Judges J. T. Lahey, Charles Williams, Charles N. Goodnow, Judge W. F. Helander, Judge Joseph Schulman, Judge John A. Bugee, Judge George A. Curran, Judge William Morgan, Judge H. B. Miller, Judge F. B. Allegretti, Judge William Fetzer, Judge George B. Holmes, and Recorder Joseph Haas.

Among the judges who were nowhere near the bust was Federal Judge Adam C. Cliffe. It was Judge Cliffe who undermined

Diamond Joe Esposito's trick power when he slapped a padlock on Joe's gaudy Bella Napoli Café at 850, South Halsted Street. For years Joe had delighted his inferiors and annoyed his political superiors by his claims of power. There was a legend that all anyone who found himself in any difficulty had to do was to see Joe, who would promptly speak to the President, if necessary.

But Joe got hoarse explaining that padlock. Thirsty Neapolitans couldn't quite get his drift, and finally he stopped all his explanations on the day after his sixtieth birthday, when fifty-eight bullets were lodged in his body, via a Thompson machine-gun.

The associations of Esposito, McSwiggin, Colosimo and lesser figures were not lost upon the people of Chicago. With the underworld organised and with decency futilely puttering around, there was need of some "overt act" to concentrate the indignation of the decent elements of the city. That "overt act"—a pineapple message—came in April, 1928.

(More and more surprises—more astonishing facts and breath-taking excitement. You mustn't miss a word of this astounding serial. Look out for next week's gripping instalment of "Look at Chicago" in THE THRILLER.)

a whirring noise from the further wall. It was the old grandfather's clock, about to strike. The hands stood at midnight—midnight of St. John's Eve!

The first booming note rolled out. Sexton Blake felt the bloodhound stiffen.

Then, with the crack of a gun-shot, the stone of the coffin canted from the wall and crashed down flat.

Like a bullet, Pedro leapt, his eyes blood-red with fury. *In mid-air the spring ended.* The hound hung checked four feet above the floor, as if gripped by invisible hands.

With a throttled gasp Pedro fell, snaked round and, whining feebly, slunk towards the door. His jaws were frothing. By the threshold he gave a frightened whimper, rolled over, and lay still and rigid.

Blake recovered from his astonishment and sprang to him. *Around the bloodhound's throat were the marks of two monstrous hands.*

Blake rose to his feet, an icy sweat on his brow.

St. John's Eve . . . seven centuries . . . Jehane of the Flame . . . walled up.

He stumbled over the coffin-stone. Bones! It had thrown forth scattered bones.

Bewildered, almost panic-stricken, Blake felt his throat contracting with the need for air; for need of the sight of something that was not unearthly.

He dragged himself to the window and flung it wide. As he did so, the night went wild in a riot of sound. Overhead a devil's tattoo beat furiously upon the roof.

**From—
FEAR!**

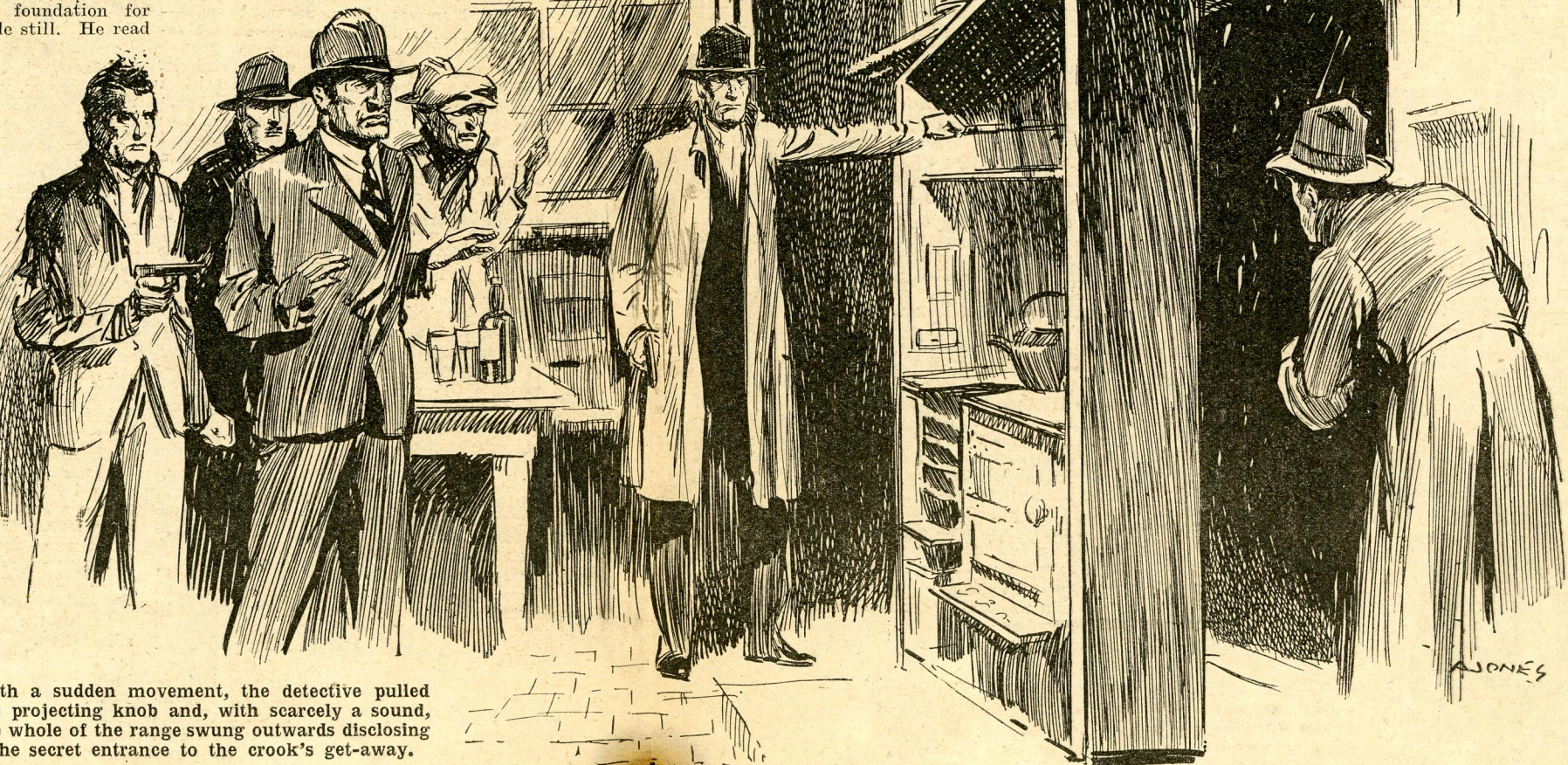
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valuable still. He read

"In detail, as if you knew every hair of his head by its middle name."
Hilary drew acutely upon his recollection, to discover that the personality of Mr. Sainter was stamped as indelibly upon his memory as an engraving upon steel. And when that word-picture had been rounded off by insistence upon all those tiny peculiarities that are the soul of personality, Parrot, as a diver emerging to the surface, expelled audibly his long-withheld breath.



With a sudden movement, the detective pulled the projecting knob and, with scarcely a sound, the whole of the range swung outwards disclosing the secret entrance to the crook's get-away.

ASONES