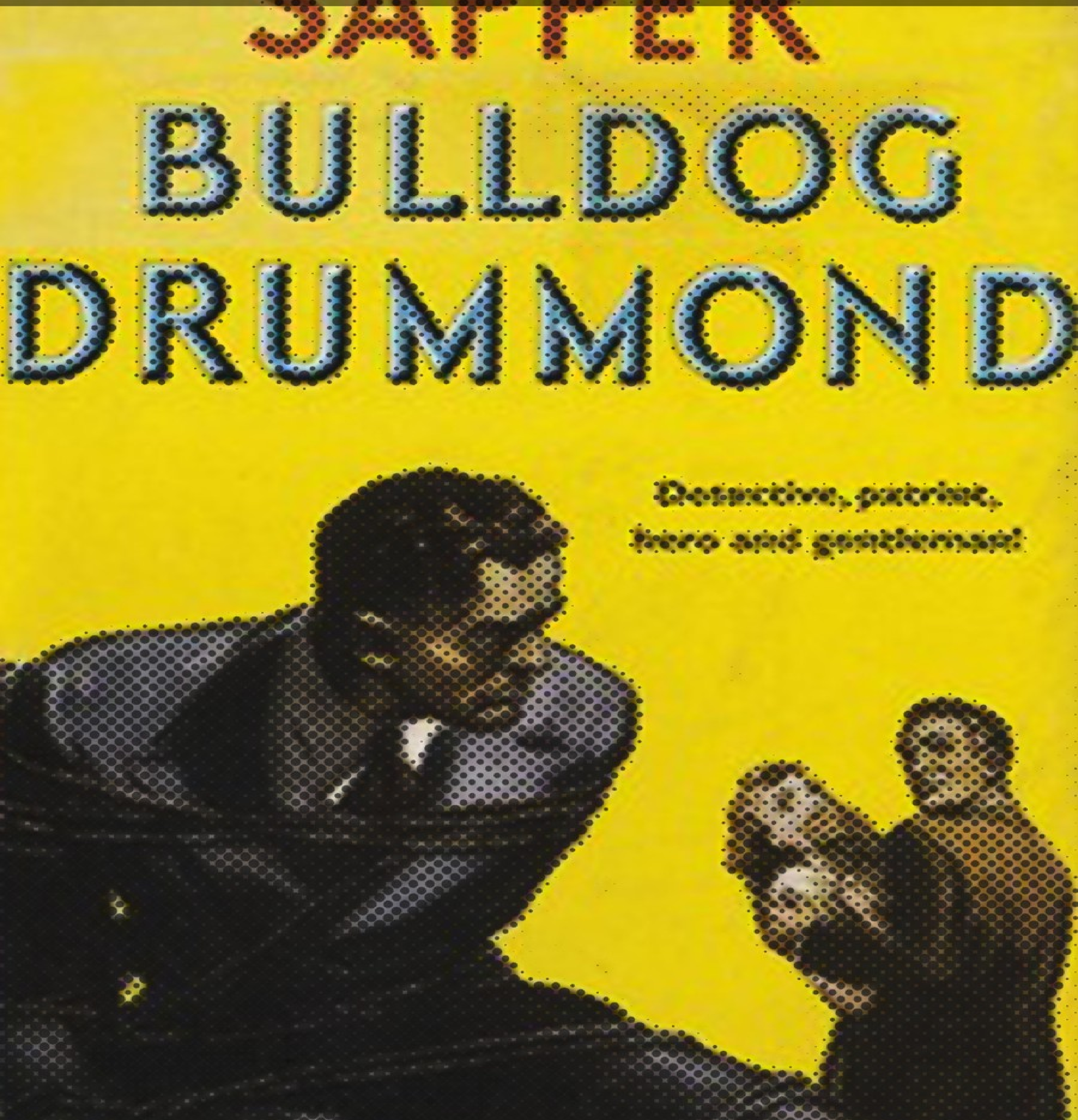
Sapper



The Final Count

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INTRODUCTION

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In endeavouring to put before the public for the first time the truth concerning the amazing happenings of the summer of 1927, I feel myself to be at a disadvantage. In the first place I am no storyteller: so maybe my presentation of the facts will fail to carry conviction. Nay, further: it is more than likely that what I am about to write down will be regarded as a tissue of preposterous lies. And yet to those who condemn me offhand I would say one thing. Take the facts as you know them, and as they appeared in the newspapers, and try to account for them in any other way. You may say that in order to write a book—gain, perhaps, a little cheap notoriety—I have taken the ravings of a madman around which to build a fantastic and ridiculous story. You are welcome to your opinion. I can do no more than tell you what I know: I cannot make you believe me.

In one respect, however, I feel that I am in a strong position: my own part was a comparatively small one. And it is therefore from no reason of self-aggrandisement that I write. To one man, and one man only, is praise and honour due, and that is the man who led us—Hugh Drummond. But if unbelievers should go to him for confirmation, it is more than probable they will be disappointed. He will burble at them genially, knock them senseless with a blow of greeting on the back, and then resuscitate them with a large tankard of ale. And the doubter may well be pardoned for continuing to doubt: I, myself, when I first met Drummond was frankly incredulous as to his capabilities of being anything but a

vast and good-natured fool. I disbelieved, politely, the stories his friends told me about him: to be candid, his friends were of very much the same type as himself. There were four of them whom I got to know intimately: Algy Longworth, a tall young man with a slight drawl and an eyeglass; Peter Darrell, who usually came home with the milk each morning, but often turned out to play cricket for Middlesex; Ted Jerningham, who fell in love with a different girl daily; and finally Toby Sinclair, who was responsible for introducing me into the circle.

Finally, there was Drummond himself of whom a few words of description may not be amiss. He stood just six feet in his socks, and turned the scales at over fourteen stone. And of that fourteen stone not one ounce was made up of superfluous fat. He was hard muscle and bone clean through, and the most powerful man I have ever met in my life. He was a magnificent boxer, a lightning and deadly shot with a revolver, and utterly lovable. Other characteristics I discovered later: his complete absence of fear (though that seemed common to all of them); his cool resourcefulness in danger; and his marvellous gift of silent movement, especially in the dark.

But those traits, as I say, I only found out later: just at first he seemed to me to be a jovial, brainless creature who was married to an adorable wife.

It was his face and his boxing abilities that had caused him to be nicknamed Bulldog. His mouth was big, and his nose was small, and he would not have won a prize at a beauty show. In fact, it was only his eyes—clear and steady

with a permanent glint of lazy humour in them—that redeemed his face from positive ugliness.

So much, then, for Hugh Drummond, D.S.O., M.C., who was destined to play the leading part in the events of that summer, and to meet again, and for the last time, the devil in human form who was our arch-enemy. And though it is not quite in chronological order, yet I am tempted to say a few words here concerning that monstrous criminal. Often in the earlier stages of our investigations did I hear Drummond mention his name—a name which conveyed nothing to me, but which required no explanation to the others or to his wife. And one day I asked him point blank what he meant.

He smiled slightly, and a dreamy look came into his eyes.

'What do I mean, by saying that I seem to trace the hand of Carl Peterson? I'll tell you. There is a man alive in this world today—at least he's alive as far as I know—who might have risen to any height of greatness. He is possessed of a stupendous brain, unshakable nerve, and unlimited ambition. There is a kink, however, in his brain, which has turned him into an utterly unscrupulous criminal. To him murder means no more than the squashing of a wasp means to you.'

He looked at me quietly.

'Understand me: that remark is the literal truth. Three times in the past have he and I met: I'm just wondering if this will prove to be the fourth; if, way back, at the foundation of this ghastly affair, there sits Carl Peterson, or Edward Blackton, or the Comte de Guy, or whatever he calls himself, directing, controlling, organising everything. I

haven't seen him now or heard of him for three years, and as I say—I wonder.'

At the time, of course, it was Greek to me; but now that the thing is over and the terror is finished, it may be of interest to those who read to know before I start what we did not know at the time: to know that fighting against us with every force at his command was that implacable devil whom I will call Carl Peterson.

I say, we did not *know* it, but I feel that I must mitigate that statement somewhat. Looking back now I think—and Drummond himself admits it—that deep down in his mind there was a feeling almost of certainty that he was up against Peterson. He had no proof: he says that it was just a guess without much foundation—but he was convinced that it was so. And it was that conviction that kept him at it during those weary weeks in London, when all traces seemed to be lost. For if he had relaxed then, as we others did: if he had grown bored, thinking that all was over, a thing would have occurred unparalleled in the annals of crime.

But enough of this introduction: I will begin my story. And in telling it I shall omit nothing: even at the risk of boring my readers I shall give in their proper place extracts from the newspapers of the day which dealt with that part of the affair which is already known to the public. If there is to be a record, let it be a complete one.

I. — IN WHICH I HEAR A CRY IN THE NIGHT

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It was on a warm evening towards the end of April 1927 that the first act took place, though it is safe to say that there has never been any connection in the public mind up till this day between it and what came after. I was dining at Prince's with Robin Gaunt, a young and extremely brilliant scientist, and a very dear friend of mine. We had been at school together and at Cambridge; and though we had lost sight of one another during the war, the threads of friendship had been picked up again quite easily at the conclusion of that foolish performance. I had joined the Gunners, whilst he, somewhat naturally, had gravitated towards the Royal Engineers. For a year or two, doubtless bearing in mind his really extraordinary gifts, the powers that be ordained that he should make roads, a form of entertainment of which he knew less than nothing. And Robin smiled thoughtfully and made roads. At least he did so officially: in reality he did other things, whilst a sergeant with a penchant for rum superintended the steam roller. And then one day came a peremptory order from G.H.Q. that Lieutenant Robin Gaunt, R. E., should cease making roads, and should report himself at the seats of the mighty at once. And Robin, still smiling thoughtfully, reported himself. As I have said, he had been doing other things during that eighteen months, and the fruits of his labours, sent direct and not through the usual official channels, lay on the table in front of the man to whom he reported.

From then on Robin became a mysterious and shadowy figure. I met him once on the leave boat going home, but he was singularly uncommunicative. He was always a silent sort of fellow, though on the rare occasions when he chose to talk he could be brilliant. But during that crossing he was positively taciturn.

He looked ill and I told him so.

'Eighteen hours a day, old John, for eleven months on end. That's what I've been doing, and I'm tired.'

He lit a cigarette and stared over the water.

'Can you take it easy now?' I asked him.

He gave a weary little smile.

'If you mean by that, have I finished, then I can—more or less. But if you mean, can I take it easy from a mental point of view, God knows. I'll not have to work eighteen hours a day any more, but there are worse things than physical exhaustion.'

And suddenly he laid his hand on my arm.

'I know they're Huns,' he said tensely: 'I know it's just one's bounden duty to use every gift one has been given to beat 'em. But, damn it, John—they're men too. They go back to their women-kind, just as all these fellows on this boat are going back to theirs.'

He paused, and I thought he was going to say something more. But he didn't: he just gave a short laugh and led the way through the crowd to the bar.

'A drink, John, and forget what I've been saying.'

That was in July '18, and I didn't see him again till after the Armistice. We met in London, and at lunch I started pulling his leg over his eighteen hours' work a day. He

listened with a faint smile, and for a long while refused to be drawn. And it was only when the waiter went off to get change for the bill that he made a remark which for many months stuck in my mind.

'There are a few things in my life that I'm thankful for, John,' he said quietly. 'And the one that I'm most thankful for is that the Boches broke when they did. For if they hadn't...'

'Well—if they hadn't?'

'There wouldn't have been any Boches left to break.'

'And a damned good thing too,' I exclaimed.

He shrugged his shoulders.

'They're men too, as I said before. However, in Parliamentary parlance the situation does not arise. Wherefore, since it's Tuesday today and Wednesday tomorrow, we might have another brandy.'

And with that the conversation closed. Periodically during the next few months that remark of his came back to my mind.

'There wouldn't have been any Boches left to break.'

An exaggeration, of course: a figure of speech, and yet Robin Gaunt was not given to the use of vain phrases. Years of scientific training had made him meticulously accurate in his use of words; and, certainly, if one-tenth of the wild rumours that circulated round the military Hush-Hush department was true, there might be some justification for his remark. But after a time I forgot all about it, and when Robin alluded to the matter at dinner on that evening in April I had to rack my brains to remember what he was talking about.

I'd suggested a play, but he had shaken his head.

'I've an appointment, old man, tonight which I can't break. Remember my eighteen hours' work a day that you were so rude about?'

It took me a second or two to get the allusion.

'Great Scott!' I laughed, 'that was the war to end war, my boy. To make the world safe for heroes to live in, with further slush ad nauseam. You don't mean to say that you are still dabbling in horrors?'

'Not exactly, John,' he said gravely. 'When the war was over I put the whole of that part of my life behind me. I hoped, as most of us did, that a new era had dawned: now I realise, as all of us realise, that we've merely gone back a few centuries. You know as well as I do that it is merely a question of time before the hatred of Germany for France boils up and cannot be restrained. Any thinking German will tell you so. Don't let's worry about whose fault it is: we're concerned more with effects than causes. But when it does happen, there will be a war which for unparalleled ferocity has never before been thought of. Don't let's worry as to whether we go in, or on whose side we go in: those are problems that don't concern us. Let us merely realise that primitive passions are boiling and seething in Europe, backed by inventions which are the last word in science. Force is the sole arbiter today: force and blazing hate, covered for diplomacy's sake with a pitifully thin veneer of honeyed phrases. I tell you, John, I've just come back from Germany and I was staggered, simply staggered. The French desire for revanche in 1870 compared to German feeling today is as a tallow dip to the light of the sun.'

He lit a cigar thoughtfully.

'However, all that is neither here nor there. Concentrate on that one idea, that force is the only thing that counts today: concentrate also on the idea that frightfulness in war is inevitable. I've come round to that way of thinking, you know. The more the thing drags on, the more suffering and sorrow to the larger number. Wherefore, pursuing the argument to a logical conclusion, it seems to me that it might be possible to arm a nation with a weapon so frightful, that by its very frightfulness war would be impossible because no other country would dare to fight.'

'Frightfulness only breeds frightfulness,' I remarked. 'You'll always get counter-measures.'

'Not always,' he said slowly. 'Not always.'

'But what's your idea, Robin? What nation would you put in possession of such a weapon—granting for the moment that the weapon is there?'

He looked at me surprised. It was a silly remark, but I was thinking of France and Germany.

'My dear old man—our own, of course. Who else? The policeman of the world. Perhaps America too: the English-speaking peoples. Put them in such a position, John, that they can say, should the necessity arise—"You shall not fight. You shall not again blacken the world with the hideous suffering of 1914. And since we can't prevent you fighting by words, we'll do it by force."'

His eyes were gleaming, and I stared at him curiously. That he was in dead earnest was obvious, but the whole thing seemed to me to be preposterous.

'You can't demonstrate the frightfulness of any weapon, my dear fellow,' I objected, 'unless you go to war yourself.

So what the devil is the good of it anyway?'

'Then, if necessary, go to war. Go to war for one day—against both of them. And at the end of that day say to them—"Now will you stop? If you don't, the same thing will happen to you tomorrow, and the next day, and the next, until you do!"'

'But what will happen to them?' I cried.

'Universal, instantaneous death over as large or as small an area as is desired.'

I think it was at that moment that I first began to entertain doubts as to Robin's sanity. Not that people dining near would have noticed anything amiss with him: his voice was low-pitched and quiet. But the whole idea was so utterly far-fetched and fantastic that I couldn't help wondering if his brilliant brain hadn't crossed that tiny bridge which separates genius from insanity. I knew the hideous loathing he had always felt for war: was it possible that continual brooding on the idea had unhinged him?

'It was ready at Armistice time,' he continued, 'but not in its present form. Today it is perfected.'

'But, damn it all, Robin,' I said, a little irritably, 'what is this IT?'

He smiled and shook his head.

'Not even to you, old man, will I tell that. If I could I would keep it entirely to myself, but I realise that that is impossible. At the moment there is only one other being in this world who knows my secret—the great-hearted pacifist who has financed me. He is an Australian who lost both his sons in Gallipoli, and for the last two years he has given me ceaseless encouragement. Tonight I am meeting him again

—I haven't seen him for three months—to tell him that I've succeeded. And tomorrow I've arranged to give a secret demonstration before the Army Council.'

He glanced at his watch and stood up.

'I must be off, John. Coming my way?'

Not wanting to go back so early I declined, and I watched his tall spare figure threading its way between the tables. Little did I dream of the circumstances in which I was next to meet him: a knowledge of the future has mercifully been withheld from mortal man. My thoughts as I sat on idly at the table finishing my cigar were confined to what he had been saying. Could it be possible that he had indeed made some stupendous discovery? And if he had, was it conceivable that it could be used in the way he intended and achieve the result he desired? Reason answered in the negative, and yet reason didn't seem quite conclusive.

'Universal, instantaneous death.'

Rot and rubbish: it was like the wild figment of a sensational novelist's brain. And yet—I wasn't satisfied.

'Hullo, Stockton! how goes it? Has she left you all alone?'

I glanced up to see Toby Sinclair grinning at me from the other side of the table.

'Sit down and have a spot, old man,' I said. 'And it wasn't a she, but a he.'

For a while we sat on talking, and it was only when the early supper people began to arrive that we left. We both had rooms in Clarges Street, and for some reason or other—I forget why—Sinclair came into mine for a few minutes before going on to his own. I mention it specially, because on that simple little point there hung tremendous issues.

Had he not come in—and I think it was the first time he had ever done so: had he not been with me when the telephone rang on my desk, the whole course of events during the next few months would have been changed. But he did come in, so there is no good speculating on what might have happened if he hadn't.

He came in and he helped himself to a whisky-and-soda and he sat down to drink it. And it was just as I was following his example that the telephone went. I remember wondering as I took up the receiver who could be ringing me up at that hour, and then came the sudden paralysing shock.

'John! John! Help. My rooms. Oh! my God.'

So much I heard, and then silence. Only a stifled scream, and a strange choking noise came over the wire, but no further words. And the voice had been the voice of Robin Gaunt.

I shouted down the mouthpiece, and Sinclair stared at me in amazement. I feverishly rang exchange, only to be told that the connection was broken and that they could get no reply.

'What the devil is it, man?' cried Sinclair, getting a grip on my arm. 'You'll wake the whole bally house in a moment.'

A little incoherently I told him what I'd heard, and in an instant the whole look of his face changed. How often in the next few weeks did I see just that same change in the expression of all that amazing gang led by Drummond, when something that necessitated action and suggested danger occurred. But at the moment that was future history:

the present concerned that agonised cry for help from the man with whom I had just dined.

'You know his house?' said Sinclair.

'Down in Kensington,' I answered.

'Got a weapon of any sort?'

I rummaged in my desk and produced a Colt revolver—a relic of my Army days.

'Good,' he cried. 'Stuff some ammunition in your pocket, and we'll get a move on.'

'But there's no necessity for you to come,' I expostulated.

'Go to hell,' he remarked tersely, and jammed his top hat on his head. 'This is the sort of thing I love. Old Hugh will turn pea-green with jealousy tomorrow when he hears.'

We were hurtling West in a taxi, and my thoughts were too occupied with what we were going to find at the other end to inquire whom old Hugh might be. There was but little traffic—the after-supper congestion had not begun—and in less than ten minutes we pulled up outside Robin's house.

'Wait here,' said Toby to the taxi-driver. 'And if you hear or see nothing of us within five minutes, drive like blazes and get a policeman.'

'Want any help now, sir?' said the driver excitedly.

'Good lad!' cried Sinclair. 'But I think not. Safer to have someone outside. We'll shout if we do.'

The house was in complete darkness, as were those on each side. The latter fact was not surprising, as a 'To be Sold' notice appeared in front of each of them.

'You know his rooms, don't you?' said Sinclair. 'Right! Then what I propose is this. We'll walk straight in as if we're

coming to look him up. No good hesitating. And for the love of Allah don't use that gun unless it's necessary.'

The front door was not bolted, and for a moment or two we stood listening in the tiny hall. The silence was absolute, and a light from a lamp outside shining through a window showed us the stairs.

'His rooms are on the first floor,' I whispered.

'Then let's go and have a look at 'em,' answered Toby.

With the revolver in my hand I led the way. One or two stairs creaked loudly, and I heard Sinclair cursing under his breath at the noise. But no one appeared, and as we stood outside the door of Robin's sitting-room and laboratory combined, the only sound was our own breathing.

'Come on, old man,' said Toby. 'The longer we leave it the less we'll like it. I'll open the door, and you cover anyone inside with your gun.'

With a quick jerk he flung the door wide open, and we both stood there peering into the room. Darkness again and silence just like the rest of the house. But there was one thing different: a faint, rather bitter smell hung about in the air.

I groped for the switch and found it, and we stood blinking in the sudden light. Then we moved cautiously forward and began an examination.

In the centre of the room stood the desk, littered, as usual, with an untidy array of books and papers. The telephone stood on one corner of it, and I couldn't help thinking of that sudden anguished cry for help that had been shouted down it less than a quarter of an hour before. If only it could speak and tell us what had happened!

'Good Lord! Look at that,' muttered Toby. 'It's blood, man: the place is running in blood.'

It was true. Papers were splashed with it, and a little trickle oozed sluggishly off the desk on to the carpet.

The curtains were drawn, and suddenly Toby picked up a book and hurled it at them.

'One of Drummond's little tricks,' he remarked. 'If there's anyone behind you can spot it at once, and with luck you may hit him in the pit of the stomach.'

'But there was no one there: there was no one in the room at all. 'Where's that door lead to?' he asked.

'Gaunt's bedroom,' I answered, and we repeated the performance.

We looked under the bed, and in the cupboard: not a sign of anybody. The bed was turned down ready for the night, with his pyjamas laid in readiness, and in the basin stood a can of hot water covered with at towel. But of Robin or anyone else there was no trace.

'Damned funny,' said Toby, as we went back into the sitting-room.

'What's that scratching noise?'

It came from behind the desk, and suddenly a little short-tailed, tawny- coloured animal appeared.

'Holy smoke!' cried Toby, 'it's a guinea-pig. And there's another of 'em, Stockton: dead.'

Sure enough a little black one was lying rigid and stretched out close to the desk.

'Better not touch it,' I said warningly. 'Leave everything as it is.' And then a thought struck Toby.

'Look here, Stockton, he can't have been whispering down the 'phone. Isn't there anyone else in the house who would have heard him?'

'There is no other lodger,' I said. 'His landlady is probably down below in the basement, but she's stone deaf. She's so deaf that Gaunt used generally to write things down for her in preference to talking.'

'I think we ought to see the old trout, don't you?' he said, and I went over and rang the bell.

'She may or may not hear it,' I remarked, as we waited. 'Incidentally, what on earth is this strange smell?'

Sinclair shook his head.

'Search me. Though from the look of those bottles and test-tubes and things I assume your pal was a chemist.'

A creaking on the stairs, accompanied by the sounds of heavy breathing, announced that the bell had been heard, and a moment later the landlady appeared. She stared at us suspiciously until she recognised me, which seemed to reassure her somewhat.

'Good-evening,' I roared. 'Have you seen Mr Gaunt tonight?'

'I ain't seen him since yesterday morning,' she announced. 'But that ain't nothing peculiar. Sometimes I don't see 'im for a week at a time.'

'Has he been in the house here since dinner?' I went on.

'I dunno, sir,' she said. 'He comes and he goes, does Mr Gaunt, with 'is own key. And since 'e pays regular, I puts up with 'im in spite of all those 'orrors and chemicals and things. I even puts up with 'is dog, though it does go and cover all the chairs with white 'airs.'

'Dog,' said Toby thoughtfully. 'He'd a dog, had he?'

'A wire-haired terrier called Joe,' I said. 'Topping little beast.'

'Then I wonder where the dickens it is?' he remarked. 'Good Lord! what's all that?'

From the hall below came the sound of many footsteps, and the voice of our taxi-driver.

'This will give the old dame a fit,' said Toby with a grin. 'I'd forgotten all about our instructions to that stout-hearted Jehu.'

There were two policemen and the driver who came crowding into the room amidst the scandalised protests of the landlady.

'Five minutes was up, sir, so I did as you told me,' said the driver.

'Splendid fellow,' cried Toby. 'It's all right, constable: that revolver belongs to my friend.'

The policeman, who had picked it up suspiciously from the desk, transferred his attention to me.

'What's all the trouble, sir?' he said. 'Don't be alarmed, mother: no one's going to hurt you.'

'She's deaf,' I told him, and he bellowed in her ear to reassure her.

And then, briefly, I told the two constables exactly what had happened. I told them what I knew of Gaunt's intentions after he had left me, of the cry for help over the telephone, and of our subsequent movements. The only thing I did not feel it incumbent on me to mention was the object of his meeting with the Australian. I felt that their stolid brains would hardly appreciate the matter, so I left it at business.

'Quarter of an hour you say, sir, before you got here. You're sure it was your friend's voice you-heard?'

'Positive,' I answered. 'Absolutely positive. He had an unmistakable voice, and I knew him very well.'

And at that moment from the window there came a startled exclamation. The second constable had pulled the curtains, and he was standing there staring at the floor.

'Gaw lumme,' he remarked. 'Look at that.'

We looked. Lying on the floor, stone dead, and twisted into a terrible attitude was Robin's terrier. We crowded round staring at the poor little chap, and it seemed to me that the strange smell had become much stronger.

Suddenly there came a yell of pain, and one of the policemen, who had bent forward to touch the dog, started swearing vigorously and rubbing his fingers.

'The little beggar is burning hot,' he cried. 'Like touching a red-hot coal.'

He looked at his finger, and then there occurred one of the most terrible things I have ever seen. Literally before our eyes the fingers with which he had touched the dog twisted themselves into knots: then the hand: then the arm. And a moment later he crashed to the ground as if he'd been pole-axed, and lay still.

I don't know if my face was like the others, but they were all as white as a sheet. It was so utterly unexpected, so stunningly sudden. At one moment he had been standing there before us, a great, big, jovial, red-faced man: the next he was lying on the carpet staring at the ceiling with eyes that would never see again.

'Don't touch him,' said a hoarse voice which I dimly recognised as my own. 'For God's sake, don't touch him. The poor devil is dead anyway.'

The other policeman, who had gone down on his knees beside the body, looked up stupidly. Ordinary accidents, even straightforward murder, would not have shaken him, but this was something outside his ken.

'I don't understand, sir,' he muttered. 'What killed him?'

'He was killed because he touched that dead dog,' said Sinclair gravely. 'We can none of us tell any more than that, officer. And this gentleman is afraid that if you touch him the same thing may happen to you.'

'But it's devil's work,' cried the constable, getting dazedly to his feet. 'It ain't human.'

For a while we stood there staring at the dead man, while the landlady rocked hysterically in a chair with her apron over her head. Of the four of us only I had the remotest idea as to what must have happened: to the others it must have seemed not human, as the policeman had said. And even to me with my additional knowledge the thing was almost beyond comprehension.

Robin's wonderful invention; the strange smell which seemed to be growing less, or else I was getting accustomed to it; the dead dog, from which the smell obviously came; and finally the dead policeman, were all jumbled together in my mind in hopeless confusion. That Joe had been killed by this damnable thing his master had perfected was fairly obvious; but why in Heaven's name should Robin have killed a dog whom he adored? The guinea-pig I could understand—but not Joe.

'It looks as you say, constable, like devil's work,' I said at length. 'But since we know that that does not happen we can only conclude that the devil in his case is human. And I think the best thing to do is to ring up Scotland Yard and get someone in authority here at once. This has become a little above our form.'

'I agree,' said Sinclair soberly. 'Distinctly above our form.'

The constable went to the telephone, and the taxi-driver stepped forward.

'If it's all the same to you, gents,' he said, 'I think I'll wait in the cab outside. I kind of feel safer in the fresh air.'

'All right, driver,' said Sinclair. 'But don't go away: they'll probably want your evidence as well as ours.'

'Inspector MacIver coming at once, sir,' said the constable, replacing the receiver with a sigh of relief. 'And until he comes I think we might as well wait downstairs. Come along, mother: there ain't no good your carrying on like that.'

He supported the old landlady from the room, and when we had joined him in the passage he shut and locked the door and slipped the key in his pocket. And then, having sent her down to her basement, we three sat down to wait for the Inspector.

'Cigarette, Bobby?' said Sinclair, holding out his case. 'Helps the nerves.'

'Thank you, sir: I don't mind if I do. It's fair shook me, that has. I've seen men killed most ways in my time—burned, drowned, hung—not to say nothing of three years in the war; but I've never seen the like of that before. For 'im just to go and touch that there dead dog, and be dead 'imself.'

He looked at us diffidently. 'Have you got any idea, gentlemen, as to what it is that's done it?'

'It's some ghastly form of poison, constable,' I said. 'Of that I'm pretty certain. But what it is, I know no more than you. Mr Gaunt was a marvellous chemist.'

'A damned sight too marvellous,' said the policeman savagely. 'If it's 'im what's done it I'm thinking he'll find himself in Queer Street when he comes back.'

'I think it's *if* he comes back,' I said. 'There's been foul play here—not only with regard to that dog, but also with regard to Mr Gaunt. He idolised that terrier: nothing will induce me to believe that it was he who killed Joe. Don't forget that cry for help over the telephone. Look at all that blood. It's my firm belief that the clue to the whole mystery lies in the Australian gentleman whom he was going to meet tonight. He left me at Prince's to do so. Find that man, and you'll find the solution.'

'Have you any idea what he looks like?' asked Toby.

'That's the devil of it,' I answered. 'I haven't the slightest. All I can tell you is that he must be a fairly wealthy man who had two sons killed in Gallipoli.'

The policeman nodded his head portentously.

'The Yard has found men with less to go on than that, sir,' he remarked. 'Very likely he'll be putting up at one of the swell hotels.'

'And very likely he won't,' put in Toby. 'If what Mr Stockton thinks is right, and this unknown Australian is at the bottom of it all, stopping at one of the big hotels is just what he wouldn't do. However, there's a taxi, so presumably it's the Inspector.'

The constable hurriedly extinguished his cigarette, and went to the front door to meet MacIver. He was a short, thick-set, powerful man with a pair of shrewd, penetrating eyes. He gave a curt nod to each of us, and listened in silence while I again repeated my story. This time I told it a little more fully, emphasising the fact that Robin Gaunt was at any rate under the impression that he had made a far-reaching discovery which would revolutionise warfare.

'What sort of a discovery?' interrupted MacIver.

'I can't tell you, Inspector,' I said, 'for I don't know. He was employed during the war as a gas expert, and when the Armistice came he had, I believe, invented a particularly deadly form which, of course, was never used. And from what he told me a dinner tonight, this invention was now perfected. He described it to me as causing universal, instantaneous death.'

The Inspector fidgeted impatiently: imagination was not his strong point, and I admit it sounded a bit fanciful.

'He left me to come and interview an Australian who has helped him financially. His idea was that the appalling power of this discovery of his could be used to prevent warfare in future, if it was in the sole hands of one nation. He thought that no other nation would then dare to go to war. And his intention was to demonstrate before the Army Council tomorrow, with the idea that England might be that one nation. That is what he told me this evening. How far his claims were justified I don't know. What his discovery was I don't know. But two things I do know: first, that Robin Gaunt is a genius, and second, that his claim can be no more

fantastic than what we all of us saw take place before our very eyes half-an-hour ago.'

MacIver grunted and rose from his chair.

'Let's go and have a look.'

The constable led the way, and once again we entered the room upstairs. Everything was just as we had left it: the dead man still stared horribly at the ceiling: the terrier still lay a little twisted heap in the window: the blood still dripped sluggishly off the desk. But the strange smell we had noticed was considerably less powerful, though the Inspector noticed it at once and sniffed. Then with the method born of long practice he commenced his examination of the room. And it was an education in itself to see him work. He never spoke; and at the end of ten minutes not a corner had been overlooked. Every drawer had been opened, every paper examined and discarded, and the net result was—nothing.

'A very extraordinary affair,' he said quietly. 'I take it you knew Mr Gaunt fairly intimately?'

He looked at me and I nodded.

'Very intimately,' I answered. 'We were at school together, and at college, and I've frequently seen him since.'

'And you have no idea, beyond what you have already told me, as to what this discovery of his was?'

'None. But I should imagine, Inspector, in view of his appointment with the Army Council tomorrow, that someone at the War Office may be able to tell you something.'

'It is, of course, possible that he will keep that appointment,' said MacIver. 'Though I admit I'm not hopeful.'

His eyes were fixed on the dead dog.

'That's what beats me particularly,' he remarked. 'Why kill the terrier? A possible hypothesis is that he didn't: that the dog was killed accidentally. Let us, for instance, imagine for a moment that your friend was experimenting with this device of his. The dead guinea-pig bears that out. Then some accident occurred. I make no attempt to say what accident, because we have no idea as to the nature of the device. He lost his head, snatched up the telephone, got through to you—and then realising the urgent danger rushed from the room, forgetting all about the dog. And the dog was killed.'

'But surely,' I objected, 'under those circumstances we should find some trace of apparatus. And there's nothing. And why all that blood?'

'He might have snatched it up when he left, and thrown it away somewhere.'

'He might,' I agreed. 'But I can't help thinking, Inspector, that it is more sinister than that. If I may say so, I believe that what happened is this. The Australian whom he was going to meet was not an Australian at all. He was possibly a German or some foreigner, who was deeply interested in this device, and who had deceived Gaunt completely. He came here tonight, and overpowered Gaunt: then he carried out a test on the dog, and found that it acted. After that he, probably with the help of accomplices, removed Gaunt, either with the intention of murdering him at leisure or of keeping him a prisoner.'

'Another hypothesis,' agreed the Inspector, 'but it presents one very big difficulty, Mr Stockton. Your friend must have suspected foul play when he rang you up on the

telephone. Now you're on a different exchange, and it must have taken, on a conservative estimate, a quarter of a minute to get through. Are we to assume that during those fifteen seconds this Australian, or whatever he is, and his accomplices stood around and looked at Mr Gaunt doing the one thing they didn't want him to do—getting in touch with the outside world?'

It was perfectly true, and I admit the point had not struck me. And yet in the bottom of my mind I still felt convinced that in the Australian lay the clue to everything, and I said as much.

'Find that man, Inspector,' I repeated, 'and you've solved it. There are difficulties. I know, of which not the least is the telephone. Another is the fact that Gaunt is a powerful man: he'd have struggled like a tiger. And except for the blood there's no sign of a struggle.'

'They may have tidied up after,' put in Toby. 'Hullo! what's the matter, constable?'

The policeman, who, unnoticed by us, had left the room was standing in the door, obviously much shaken.

'This affair gets worse and worse, sir,' he said to MacIver. 'Will you just step over the passage here, and have a look in this room?'

We crowded after him into the room opposite—one which belonged to the corresponding suite to Robin's. Instantly the same faint smell became noticeable, but it was not that which riveted our attention. Lying on the floor was a man, and we could see at a glance that he was dead. He was a great big fellow, and his clothes bore witness to the most desperate struggle. His coat was torn, his waistcoat ripped