FRANK L. PACKARD

THE FOUR STRAGGLERS

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Table of Contents

BOOK I: SHADOW VARNE

CHAPTER

BOOK II: THE ISLE OF PREY

BOOK III: THE PENALTY

PROLOGUE: THE FOUR OF THEM

Table of Contents

THE FOUR STRAGGLERS

Table of Contents

PROLOGUE

Table of Contents

THE FOUR OF THEM

The crash of guns. A flare across the heavens. Battle. Dismay. Death. A night of chaos.

And four men in a thicket.

One of them spoke:

"A bloody Hun prison, that's us! My Gawd! Where are we?"

Another answered caustically:

"Monsieur, we are lost—and very tired."

A third man laughed. The laugh was short.

"A Frenchman! Where in hell did you come from?"

"Where you and the rest of us came from." The Frenchman's voice was polished; his English faultless. "We come from the tickling of the German bayonets."

The first man elaborated the statement gratuitously:

"I don't know about you 'uns; but our crowd was done in good and proper two days ago. Gawd! ain't there no end to 'em? Millions! And us running! What I says is let 'em have the blinking channel ports, and lets us clear out. I wasn't noways in favour of mussing up in this when the bleeding parliament says up and at 'em in the beginning, leastways nothing except the navy."

"Drafted, I take it?" observed the third man coolly.

There was no answer.

The fourth man said nothing.

There was a whir in the air ... closer ... *closer*; a roar that surged at the ear drums; a terrific crash near at hand; a tremble of the earth like a shuddering sob.

The first man echoed the sob:

"Carry on! Carry on! I *can't* carry on. Not for hours. I've been running for two days. I can't even sleep. My Gawd!"

"No good of carrying on for a bit," snapped the third man. "There's no place to carry on *to*. They seem to be all around

us."

"That's the first one that's come near us," said the Frenchman. "Maybe it's only—what do you call it?—a straggler."

"Like us," said the third man.

A flare, afar off, hung and dropped. Nebulous, ghostlike, a faint shimmer lay upon the thicket. It endured for but a moment. Three men, huddled against the tree trunks, torn, ragged and dishevelled men, stared into each others' faces. A fourth man lay outstretched, motionless, at full length upon the ground, as though he were asleep or dead; his face was hidden because it was pillowed on the earth.

"Well, I'm damned!" said the third man, and whistled softly under his breath.

"Monsieur means by that?" inquired the Frenchman politely.

"Means?" repeated the third man. "Oh, yes! I mean it's queer. Half an hour ago we were each a separate bit of driftwood tossed about out there, and now here we are blown together from the four winds and linked up as close to each other by a common stake—our lives—as ever men could be. I say it's queer."

He lifted his rifle, and, feeling out, prodded once or twice with the butt. It made a dull, thudding sound.

"What are you doing?" asked the Frenchman.

"Giving first aid to Number Four," said the third man grimly. "He's done in, I fancy. I'm not sure but he's the luckiest one of the lot."

"You're bloody well right, he is!" gulped the first man. "I wouldn't mind being dead, if it was all over, and I was dead.

It's the dying and the thinking about it I can't stick."

"I can't see anything queer about it." The Frenchman was judicial; he reverted to the third man's remark as though no interruption had occurred in his train of thought. "We all knew it was coming, this last big—what do you call it?—push of the Boche. It has come. It is gigantic. It is tremendous. A tidal wave. Everything has gone down before it; units all broken up, mingled one with another, a mêlée. It has been *sauve qui peut* for thousands like us who never saw each other before, who did not even know each other existed. I see nothing queer in it that some of us, though knowing nothing of each other, yet having the same single purpose, rest if only for a moment, shelter if only for a moment, should have come together here. To me it is not queer."

"Well, perhaps, you're right," said the third man. "Perhaps adventitious would have been better than queer."

"Nor adventitious," dissented the Frenchman. "Since we have been nothing to each other in the past, and since our meeting now offers us collectively no better chance of safety or escape than we individually had before, there is nothing adventitious about it."

"Perhaps again I am wrong." There was a curious drawl in the third man's voice now. "In fact, I will admit it. It is neither queer nor adventitious. It is quite—oh, quite!—beyond that. It can only be due to the considered machinations of the devil on his throne in the pit of hell having his bit of a fling at us—and a laugh!"

"You're bloody well right!" mumbled the first man.

"Damn!" said the Frenchman with asperity. "I don't understand you at all."

The third man laughed softly.

"Well, I don't know how else to explain it, then," he said. "The last time we—"

"The *last* time!" interrupted the Frenchman. "I did not get a very good look at you when that flare went up, I'll admit; but enough so that I would swear I had never seen you before."

"Quite so!" acknowledged the third man.

"Gawd!" whimpered the first man. "Look at that! Listen to that!"

A light, lurid, intense for miles around opened the darkness—and died out. An explosion rocked the earth.

"Ammunition dump!" said the Frenchman. "I'm sure of it now. I've never seen any of you before."

The third man now sat with his rifle across his knees.

The fourth man had not moved from his original position.

"I thought you were officers, blimy if I didn't, from the way you talked," said the first man. "Just a blinking Tommy and a blinking *Poilu*!"

"Monsieur," said the Frenchman, and there was a challenge in his voice, "I never forget a face."

"Nor I," said the third man quietly. "Nor other things; things that happened a bit back—after they put the draft into England, but before they called up the older classes. I don't know just how they worked it over here—that is, how some of them kept out of it as long as they did."

"Godam!" snarled the Frenchman. "Monsieur, you go too far! And—monsieur appears to have a sense of humour peculiarly his own—perhaps monsieur will be good enough to explain what he is laughing at?"

"With pleasure," said the third man calmly. "I was laughing at the recollection of a night, not like this one, though there's a certain analogy to it for all that, when an attack was made on—a strong box in a West End residence in London. Lord Seeton's, to be precise."

The first man stirred. He seemed to be groping around him where he sat.

"Foolish days! Perverted patriotism!" said the third man. "The family jewels, the hereditary treasures, gathered together to be offered on the altar of England's need! Fancy! But it was being done, you know. Rather! Only in this case the papers got hold of it and played it up a bit as a wonderful example, and that's how three men, none of whom had anything to do with the others, got hold of it too—no, I'm wrong there. Lord Seeton's valet naturally had inside information."

"Blimy!" rasped the first man suddenly. "A copper in khaki! That's what! A bloody, sneaking swine!"

It was inky black in the thicket. The third man's voice cut through the blackness like a knife.

"You put that gun down! I'll do all the gun handling there's going to be done. Drop it!"

A snarl answered him—a snarl, and the rattle of an object falling to the ground.

"There were three of them," said the third man composedly. "The valet, who hadn't reached his class in the draft; a Frenchman, who spoke marvellous English, which is perhaps after all the reason why he had not yet, at that time, served in France; and—and some one else."

"Monsieur," said the Frenchman silkily, "you become interesting."

"The curious part of it is," said the third man, "that each of them in turn got the swag, and each of them could have got away with it with hardly any doing at all, if it hadn't been that in turn each one chivied the other. The Frenchman took it from the valet, as the valet, stuffed like a pouter pigeon with diamonds and brooches and pendants and little odds and ends like that, was on his way to a certain pinch-faced fence named Konitsky in a slimy bit of neighbourhood in the East End; the Frenchman, who was an *Englishman* in France, took the swag to a strange little place in a strange little street, not far from the bank of the Seine, the place of one Père Mouche, a place that in times of great stress also became the shelter and home of this same Frenchman, who—shall I say?—I believe is outstandingly entitled to the honour of having raised his profession to a degree of art unapproached by any of his confreres in France to-day."

"*Sacré nom*!" said the Frenchman with a gasp. "There is only one Englishman who knew that, and I thought he was dead. An Englishman beside whom the Frenchman you speak of is not to be compared. You are—"

"*I* haven't mentioned any names," said the third man smoothly. "Why should you?"

"You are right," said the Frenchman. "Perhaps we have already said too much. There is a fourth here."

"No," said the third man. "I had not forgotten him." He toyed with the rifle on his knee. "But I had thought perhaps you would have recognised the valet's face."

"Strike me pink!" muttered the first man. "So Frenchy's the blighter that did me in, was he!"

"It is the uniform, and the dirt perhaps, and the very poor light," said the Frenchman apologetically.

"But you—pardon, monsieur, I mean the other of the three—I did not see him; and monsieur will perhaps understand that I am deeply interested in the rest of the story."

The third man did not answer. A sort of momentary, weird and breathless silence had settled on the thicket, on all around, on the night, save only for the whining of some oncoming thing through the air. Whine ... whine ... *whine*. The nerves, tautened, loosened, were jangling things. The third man raised his rifle. And somewhere the whining shell burst. And in the thicket a minor crash; a flash, gone on the instant, eye-blinding.

The first man screamed out:

"Christ! What have you done?"

"I think he was done in anyway," said the third man calmly. "It was as well to make sure."

"Gawd!" whimpered the first man.

"Monsieur," said the Frenchman, "I have always heard that you were incomparable. I salute you! As you said, you had not forgotten. We can speak at ease now. The rest of the story—"

The third man laughed.

"Come to me in London—after the war," he said, "and I will tell it to you. And perhaps there will be—other things to talk about."

"I shall be honoured," said the Frenchman. "We three! I begin to understand now. A house should not be divided against itself. Is it not so? We should go far! It is fate to-night that—"

"Or the devil," said the third man.

"My Gawd!" The first man began to laugh—a cracked, jarring laugh. "After the war, the blinking war—after *hell*! There ain't no end, there ain't no—"

And then a flare hung again in the heavens, and in the thicket three men sat huddled against the tree trunks, torn, ragged and dishevelled men, but they were not staring into each others' faces now; they were staring, their eyes magnetically attracted, at a spot on the ground where a man, a man murdered, should be lying.

But the man was not there.

The fourth man was gone.

BOOK I: SHADOW VARNE

—I—

Table of Contents

THREE YEARS LATER

The East End being, as it were, more akin to the technique and the mechanics of the thing, applauded the craftsmanship; the West End, a little grimly on the part of the men, and with a loquacity not wholly free from

nervousness on the part of the women, wondered who would be next.

"The cove as is runnin' that show," said the East End, with its tongue delightedly in its cheek, "knows 'is wye abaht. Wish I was 'im!"

"The police are nincompoops!" said the outraged masculine West End. "Absolutely!"

"Yes, of course! It's quite too impossible for words!" said the female of the West End. "One never knows when one's own—*do* let me give you some tea, dear Lady Wintern..."

From something that had merely been of faint and passing interest, a subject of casual remark, it had grown steadily, insidiously, had become conversationally epidemic. All London talked; the papers talked—virulently. Alone in that great metropolis, New Scotland Yard was silent, due, if the journals were to be believed, to the fact that that world-famous institution was come upon a state of hopeless and atrophied senility.

With foreknowledge obtained in some amazing manner, with ingenuity, with boldness, and invariably with success, a series of crimes, stretching back several years, had been, were being, perpetrated with insistent regularity. These crimes had been confined to the West End of London, save on a few occasions when the perpetrators had gone slightly afield—because certain wealthy West-Enders had for the moment changed their accustomed habitat. The journals at spasmodic intervals printed a summary of the transactions. In jewels, and plate, and cash, the figures had reached an astounding total, not one penny of which had ever been recovered or traced. Secret wall safes, hidden depositories

of valuables opened with obliging celerity and disgorged their contents to some apparition which immediately vanished. There was no clue. It simply happened again and again. Traps had been set with patience and considerable artifice. The traps had never been violated. London was accustomed to crimes, just as any great city was; there were hundreds of crimes committed in London; but these were of a *genre* all their own, these were distinctive, these were not to be confused with other crimes, nor their authors with other criminals.

And so London talked—and waited.

It was raining—a thin drizzle. The night was uninviting without; cosy within the precincts of a certain well-known West End club, the Claremont, to be exact. Two men sat in the lounge, in a little recess by the window. One, a man of perhaps thirty-three, of athletic build, with short-cropped black hair and clean-shaven face, a one-time captain of territorials in the late war, and though once known on the club membership roll as Captain Francis Newcombe was to be found there now as Francis Newcombe, Esquire; the other, a very much older man, with a thin, grey little face and thin, grey hair, would, on recourse to the club roll, have been found to be Sir Harris Greaves, Bart.

The baronet made a gesture with his cigar, indicative of profound disgust.

"Democracy!" he ejaculated. "The world safe for democracy! I am nauseated with that phrase. What does it mean? What did it ever mean? We have had three years

now since the war which was to work that marvel, and I have seen no signs of it yet. So far as I—"

Captain Francis Newcombe laughed.

"And yet," he said, "I embody in my person one of those signs. You can hardly deny that, Sir Harris. Certainly I would never have had, shall I call it the distinction, of being admitted to this club had it not been for the democratic leaven working through the war. You remember, of course? An officer and a gentleman! We of England were certainly consistent in that respect. While one was an officer one was a gentleman. The clubs were all pretty generally thrown open to officers during the war. Some of them came from the Lord knows where. T.G.'s they were called, you remember—Temporary Gentlemen. Afterward—but of course that's another story so far as most of them were concerned. Take my own case. I enlisted in the ranks, and toward the latter end of the war I obtained my commission—I became a T.G. And as such I enjoyed the privileges of this club. I was eventually, however, one of the fortunate ones. At the close of the war the club took me on its permanent strength and, ergo, I became a—Permanent Gentleman. Democracy! Private Francis Newcombe—Captain Francis Newcombe—Francis Newcombe, Esquire."

"A rather thin case!" smiled the baronet. "What I was about to say when you interrupted me was that, so far as I can see, all that the world has been made safe for by the war is the active expression of the predatory instinct in man. I refer to the big interests, the trusts; to the radical outcroppings of certain labour elements; to—yes!"—he tapped the newspaper that lay on the table beside him

—"the Simon-pure criminal such as this mysterious gang of desperadoes that has London at its wits' ends, and those of us who have anything to lose in a state of constant apoplexy."

Captain Francis Newcombe shook his head.

"I think you're wrong, sir," he said judicially. "It isn't the aftermath of the war, or the result of the war. It is *the* war, of which the recent struggle was only a phase. It's been going on since the days of the cave man. You've only to reduce the nation to the terms of the individual, and you have it. A nation lusts after something which does not belong to it. It proceeds to take it by force. If it fails it is punished. That is war. The criminal lusts after something. He flings down his challenge. If he is caught he is punished. That is war. What is the difference?"

The baronet sipped at his Scotch and soda.

"H'm! Which brings us?" he suggested.

"Nowhere!" said Captain Francis Newcombe promptly. "It's been going on for ages; it'll go on for all time. Always the individual predatory; inevitably in cycles, the cumulative individual running amuck as a nation. Why, you, sir, yourself, a little while ago when somebody here in the room made a remark to the effect that he believed this particular series of crimes was directly attributable to the war because it would seem that some one of ourselves, some one who has the entrée everywhere, who, through being contaminated by the filth out there, had lost poise and was probably the guilty one, meaning, I take it, that the chap finding himself in a hole wasn't so nice or particular in his choice of the way out of it as he would have been but for

the war—you, Sir Harris, denied this quite emphatically. It—er—wouldn't you say, rather bears me out?"

The old baronet smiled grimly.

"Quite possibly!" he said. "But if so, I must confess that my conclusion was based on a very different premise from yours. In fact, for the moment, I was denying the theory that the criminal in question was one of ourselves, quite apart from any bearing the war might have had upon the matter."

The ex-captain of territorials selected a cigarette with care from his case.

"Yes?" he inquired politely.

The old baronet cleared his throat. He glanced a little whimsically at his companion.

"It's been a hobby, of course, purely a hobby; but in an amateurish sort of way as a criminologist I have spent a great deal of time and money in—"

"By Jove! Really!" exclaimed Captain Newcombe. "I didn't know, Sir Harris, that you—" He paused suddenly in confusion. "That's anything but a compliment to your reputation though, I'm afraid, isn't it? A bit raw of me! I—I'm sorry, sir."

"Not at all!" said the old baronet pleasantly; and then, with a wry smile: "You need not feel badly. In certain quarters much more intimate with the subject than you could be supposed to be, I am equally unrecognised."

"It's very good of you to let me down so easily," said the ex-captain of territorials contritely. "Will you go on, sir? You were saying that you did not believe these crimes were being perpetrated by one in the same sphere of life as those

who were being victimised. Why is that, sir? The theory seemed rather logical."

"Because," said the old baronet quietly, "I believe I know the man who is guilty."

The ex-captain of territorials stared.

"Good Lord, sir!" he gasped out. "You—you can't mean that?"

"Just that!" A grim brusqueness had crept into the old baronet's voice. "And one of these days I propose to prove it!"

"But, sir"—the ex-captain of territorials in his amazement was still apparently groping out for his bearings—"in that case, the authorities—surely you—"

"They were very polite at Scotland Yard—*very*!" The old baronet smiled drily again. "That was the quarter to which I referred. Socially and criminologically—if I may be permitted the word—I fear that the Yard regards me from widely divergent angles. But damme, sir"—he became suddenly irascible—"they're too self-sufficient! I am a doddering and interfering old idiot! But nevertheless I am firmly convinced that I am right, and they haven't heard the end of the matter—if I have to devote every penny I've got to substantiating my theory and bringing the guilty man to justice!"

Captain Francis Newcombe coughed in an embarrassed way.

The old baronet reached for his tumbler, and drank generously. It appeared to soothe his feelings.

"Tut, tut!" he said self-chidingly. "I mean every word of that—that is, as to my determination to pursue my own

investigations to the end; but perhaps I have not been wholly fair to the Yard. So far, I lack proof; I have only theory. And the Yard too has its theory. It is a very common disease. The theory of the Yard is that the man I believe to be guilty of these crimes of to-day died somewhere around the middle stages of the war."

"By Jove!" Captain Francis Newcombe leaned sharply forward on the arms of his chair. "You don't say!"

The old baronet wrinkled his brows, and was silent for a moment.

"It's quite extraordinary!" he said at last, with a puzzled smile. "I can't for the life of me understand how I got on this subject, for I think we were discussing democracy—but you appear to be interested."

"That is expressing it mildly," said the ex-captain of territorials earnestly. "You can't in common decency refuse me the rest of the story now, Sir Harris."

"There is no reason that I know of why I should," said the old baronet. "Did you ever hear of a man called Shadow Varne?"

Captain Francis Newcombe shook his head.

"No," he said.

"Possibly, then," said the old baronet, "you may remember the robbery at Lord Seeton's place? It was during the war."

"No," said the other thoughtfully. "I can't say I do. I don't think I ever heard of it."

"Well, perhaps you wouldn't," nodded the old baronet. "It happened at a time when, from what you've said, I would imagine you were in the ranks, and—however, it doesn't

matter. The point is that the robbery at Lord Seeton's is amazingly like, I could almost say, each and every one of this series of robberies that is taking place to-day. The same exact foreknowledge, the hidden wall safe, or hiding place, or repository, or whatever it might be, that was supposedly known only to the family; the utter absence of any clue; the complete disappearance of—shall we call it?—the loot itself. There is only one difference. In the case of Lord Seeton, the jewels—it was principally a jewel robbery—were eventually recovered. They were found in Paris in the possession of Shadow Varne. But"—the old baronet smiled a little grimly again—"the police were not to blame for that."

Sir Harris Greaves, amateur criminologist, reverted to his tumbler of Scotch and soda.

Captain Francis Newcombe knocked the ash from his cigarette with little taps of his forefinger.

"Yes?" he said.

"It's a bit of a story," resumed the old baronet slowly. "Yes, quite a bit of a story. I do not know how Shadow Varne got to Paris; I simply know that, had he not taken sick, neither he nor the jewels would ever have been found. But perhaps I am getting a little too far ahead. I think I ought to say that Shadow Varne, though he had never actually up to this time been known in a *physical* sense to the police, had established for himself a widespread and international reputation. His name here, for instance, amongst the criminal element of our own East End was a sort of talisman, something to conjure with, as it were, though no one could ever be found who had seen or could describe the man. I suppose that is how he got the name of Shadow. Some must

have known him, of course, but they were tight-lipped; and even these, I am inclined to believe, would never have been able to lay fingers on him, even had they dared. He was at once an inscrutable and diabolical character. I would say, and in this at least Scotland Yard will agree with me, he seemed like some evil, unembodied spirit upon whom one could never come in a tangible sense, but that hovered always in the background, dominating, permeating with his personality the criminal world."

"But if this is so, if no one knew him, or had ever seen him," said the ex-captain of territorials in a puzzled way, "how was he recognised as Shadow Varne in Paris?"

"I am coming to that," said the old baronet quietly. "As you know very well, in those days they were always poking into every rat hole in Paris for draft evaders. That is how they stumbled on Shadow Varne. They dug him out of one of those holes, a very filthy hole, like a rat—like a very sick rat. The man was raving in delirium. That is how they knew they had caught Shadow Varne—because in his delirium he disclosed his identity. And that is how they recovered Lord Seeton's jewels."

"My word!" ejaculated Captain Francis Newcombe. "A bit tough, I call that! My sympathies are almost with the accused!"

"I am afraid I have failed to make you understand the inhuman qualities of the man," said the old baronet tersely. "However, Shadow Varne was even then too much for them—at least temporarily. A few nights later he escaped from the hospital; but he was still too sick a man to stand the pace, and they were too close on his heels. He had possibly,

all told, a couple of hours of liberty, running, dodging through the streets of Paris. The chase ended somewhere on the bank of the Seine. He was fired at here as he ran, and though quite a few yards in the lead, he appeared to have been hit, for he was seen to stagger, fall, then recover himself and go on. He refused to halt. They fired and hit him again—or so they believed. He fell to the ground—and rolled over the edge into the water. And that was the last that was ever seen of him."

"My word!" ejaculated the ex-captain of territorials again. "That's a nice end! And I must say, with all due deference to you, Sir Harris, that I can't see anything wrong with Scotland Yard's deduction. I fancy he's dead, fast enough."

"Yes," said the old baronet deliberately, "I imagined you would say so; and I, too, would agree were it not for two reasons. First, had it been any other man than Shadow Varne; and, second, that the body was never recovered."

"But," objected Captain Francis Newcombe, "if, as you believe, the man is still carrying on, having been identified once, he would, wouldn't you say, be recognised again?"

"Not at all!" said the old baronet decidedly. "You must take into account the man's sick and emaciated condition when he was caught, and the subsequent hospital surroundings. Let those who saw him then see the same man to-day, robust, in health, and in an entirely different atmosphere, locality and environment! Recognised? I would lay long odds against it, even leaving out of account the man's known ingenuity for evading recognition."

The ex-captain of territorials nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes," he said, "that is quite possible; but, even granting that he is still alive, I can't see—"

"Why I should believe he is at the bottom of what is going on to-day here in London?" supplied the old baronet quickly. "Perhaps intuition, perhaps the mystery about the man that has interested me from the time I first heard of him in the early years of the war, and which has ever since been a fascinating study with me, has something to do with it. I told you to begin with that my *proof* was theory. But I believe it. I do not say he is alone in this, or was alone in the Lord Seeton affair; but he is certainly the head and front and brains of whatever he was, or is, engaged in. As for the similarity of the cases, I will admit that might be pure coincidence, but we *know* that Shadow Varne did have the Seeton jewels in his possession. The strongest point, however, that I have to offer in a tangible sense, bearing in mind the man himself and his hideously elusive propensities, is the fact there is no absolute proof of his death. Why wasn't his body recovered? You will answer me probably along the same lines that the Paris police argued and that were accepted by Scotland Yard. You will say that it was dark, that the body might not have come to the surface immediately, and under the existing conditions, by the time they procured a boat and began their search, it might easily be missed. Very good! That is quite possible. But why, then, was not the body eventually recovered in two or three days, say—a week, if you like? You will say that this would probably be very far indeed from being the first instance in which a body was never recovered from the Seine. And here, too, you would be quite right. But I do not believe it. I

do not believe it was a dead man, or a man mortally wounded, or a man wounded so badly that he must inevitably drown, who pitched helplessly into the water that night. I believe he did it voluntarily, and with considered cunning, as the only chance he had. Go into the East End. Listen to the stories you will hear about him. The world does not get rid of such as he so easily! The man is not human. The crimes he has committed would turn your blood cold. He is the most despicable, the most wanton thing that I ever heard of. He would kill with no more compunction than you would break in two that match you are holding in your hand. Where he came from God alone knows, and—"

A club attendant had stopped beside the old baronet's chair.

"Yes?" said the old baronet.

"I beg pardon, Sir Harris, but your car is here," announced the man.

"Very good! Thank you!" The old baronet drained his glass and stood up. "Well, you have heard the story, captain," he said with a dry smile. "I shall not embarrass you by asking you to decide between Scotland Yard and myself, but I shall at least expect you to admit that there is some slight justification for my theory."

The ex-captain of territorials, as he rose in courtesy, shook his head quietly.

"If I felt only that way about it," he said slowly, "I should simply thank you for a very interesting story and your confidence. As it is, there is so much justification I feel impelled to say to you that, if this man is what you describe him to be, is as dangerous as you say he is, I would advise

you, Sir Harris, in all seriousness to leave him—to Scotland Yard."

"What!" exclaimed the old baronet sharply. "And let him go free! No, sir! Not if every effort I can put forth will prevent it! Never, sir—under any circumstances!"

Captain Francis Newcombe smiled gravely, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, at least, I felt I ought to say it," he said. "Good-night, Sir Harris—and thank you so much!"

"Good-night, captain!" replied the old baronet cordially, as he turned away. "Good-night to you, sir!"

Captain Francis Newcombe watched the other leave the room, then he walked over to the window. The drizzle had developed into a downpour with gusts of wind that now pelted the rain viciously at the window panes. He frowned at the streaming glass.

A moment later, as he moved away from the window, he consulted his watch. It was a quarter past eleven. Downstairs he secured his hat and stick, and spoke to the doorman.

"Get a taxi, please, Martin," he requested, "and tell the chap to drive me home."

He lighted a cigarette as he waited, and then under the shelter of the doorman's umbrella entered the taxi.

It was not far. The taxi stopped before a flat in a fashionable neighbourhood that was quite in keeping with the fashionable club Captain Francis Newcombe had just left. His man admitted him.

"It's a filthy night, Runnells," said the ex-captain of territorials.

Runnells slammed the door against a gust of wind.

"You're bloody well right!" said Runnells.

—II—

Table of Contents

AN IRON IN THE FIRE

It was a neighbourhood of alleyways and lanes of ferocious darkness; of ill-lighted, baleful streets, of shadows; and of doorways where no doors existed, black, cavernous and sinister openings to inner chambers of misery, of squalid want, of God-knows-what.

It was the following evening, and still early—barely eight o'clock. Captain Francis Newcombe turned the corner of one of these gloomily lighted streets, and drew instantly back to crouch, as an animal crouches before it springs, in the deep shadows of a wretched tenement building. Light footfalls sounded; came nearer. Two forms, skulking, yet moving swiftly, came into sight around the corner.

Captain Francis Newcombe sprang. His fist crashed with terrific force to the point of an opposing jaw. A queer grunt—and one of the two men sprawled his length on the pavement and lay quite still. Captain Francis Newcombe's movements were incredibly swift. His left hand was at the second man's throat now, and a revolver was shoved into the other's face.

The tableau held for a second.

"A bit of a 'cushing' expedition, was it?" said the ex-captain of territorials calmly. "I looked a likely victim, didn't I? Just the usual bash on the head with a neddy, and then the usual stripping even down to the boots if they were good enough—and mine were good enough, eh? And I might get over that bash on the head, or my skull might be cracked; I might wake up in one of your filthy passageways here, or I might never wake up! What would it matter? It's done every night. You make your living that way. And who's to know who did it?" His grip tightened suddenly on the other's throat. "Your kind are better dead," said Captain Francis Newcombe, and there was something of horrible callousness in his conversational tones. "You lack art; you have no single redeeming feature." It was as though now he were debating in cold precision with himself. "Yes, you are much better dead!"

"Gor' blimy, guv'nor, let me go," half choked, half whined the other. "We wasn't goin' to touch you. No fear! Me an' me mate was just goin' round to the pub for an 'arf-pint—"

"It would make a noise," said Captain Francis Newcombe unemotionally. "That is the trouble. I should have to clear out of here, and be put to the annoyance of waiting a half hour or so before I could come back and attend to my own affairs. That's the only reason I haven't fired this thing off in your face, and I'm not sure that reason's good enough. But it's a bit of a fag to argue it out, so—don't move, you swine, or that'll settle it quicker still!" His fingers, from the other's throat, searched his own waistcoat pocket, and produced a silver coin. "Heads or tails?" he inquired casually. "You call it."