

Edgar Wallace



The Joker

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THE END

CHAPTER 1

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MR STRATFORD HARLOW was a gentleman with no particular call to hurry. By every standard he was a member of the leisured classes, and to his opportunities for lingering, he added the desire of one who was pertinently curious.

The most commonplace phenomena interested Mr Harlow. He had all the requisite qualities of an observer; his enjoyment was without the handicap of sentimentality, a weakness which is fatal to accurate judgement.

Leonardo da Vinci could stand by the scaffold using the dreadful floor as his desk; and sketch the agonies of malefactors given to the torture. Mr Harlow, no great lover of painters, thought well of Leonardo. He too could stop to look at sights which sent the average man shuddering and hurrying past; he could stop (even when he was really in a hurry) to analyse the colour scheme in an autumn sunset, not to rhapsodise poetically, but to mark down for his own information the quantities of beauty.

He was a large man of forty-eight, fair and slightly bald. His clean-shaven face was unlined, his skin without blemish. Pale blue eyes are not accounted beautiful and the pallor of Mr Harlow's eyes was such that, seeing him for the first time, many sensitive people experienced a shock, thinking he was sightless. His nose was big and long, and of the same width from forehead to tip. He had very red, thick lips that seemed to be pouting even when they were in repose. A rounded chin with a dimple in the centre and unusually small ears, completes the description.

His powerful car was drawn up by the side of the road, its two rear wheels on the green verge, and Mr Harlow sat, one hand on the wheel, watching the marshalling of the men in a field. In such moments of contemplative reveries as these, splendid ideas were born in Stratford Harlow's mind, great schemes loomed out of the nowhere which is beyond vision. And, curiously enough, prisons invariably had this inspirational effect.

They were trudging now across the field, led by a lank warder, cheerful, sunburnt men in prison uniform.

Tramp! Tramp! Tramp!

The convicts had reached the hard road and were coming towards him. The leading warder glanced suspiciously at the well-dressed stranger, but the gang were neither abashed nor distressed by this witness of their shame. Rather, they carried themselves with a new perkiness as though conscious of their value as an unusual spectacle. The first two files glanced sideways and grinned in a friendly manner, half the third file followed suit, but the second man looked neither left nor right. He had a scowl on his face, a sneer on his thin lips and he lifted one shoulder in a shrug of contemptuous defiance, delivered, as the watcher realised, not so much towards the curious sightseer, but the world of free men which Mr Harlow represented.

Twisting round in his seat, he watched the little column filing through the Arch of Despair and out of sight through the gun-metal gates which he could not see.

The motorist stepped on the starter and brought the car round in a half-circle. Patiently he manoeuvred the long chassis until it headed back towards Princetown. Tavistock

and Ellenbury could wait a day—a week if necessary. For here was a great thought to be shaped and exploited.

His car stopped noiselessly before the Duchy Hotel, and the porter came running down the steps.

'Anything wrong, sir?'

'No. I thought I'd stay another day. Can I have the suite? If not, any room will do.'

The suite was not let, he learnt, and he had his case carried upstairs.

It was then that he decided that Ellenbury, being within driving distance, might come across the moor and save him the tedium of a day spent in Tavistock. He picked up the telephone and in minutes Ellenbury's anxious voice answered him.

'Come over to Princetown. I'm staying at the Duchy. Don't let people see that you know me. We will get acquainted in the smoke-room after lunch.'

Mr Harlow was eating his frugal lunch at a table overlooking the untidy square in front of the Duchy, when he saw Ellenbury arrive: a small, thin, nervous man, with white hair. Soon after the visitor came down to the big dining-room, gazed quickly round, located Mr Harlow with a start, and sat himself at the nearest table.

The dining-room was sparsely occupied. Two parties that had driven up from Torquay ate talkatively in opposite corners of the room. An elderly man and his stout wife sat at another table, and at a fourth, conveying a curious sense of aloofness, a girl. Women interested Mr Harlow only in so far as they were factors in a problem or the elements of an experiment; but since he must classify all things he saw, he

noticed, in his cold-blooded fashion, that she was pretty and therefore unusual; for to him the bulk of humanity bore a marked resemblance to the cheap little suburban streets in which they lived, and the drab centres of commerce where they found their livelihood.

He had once stood at the corner of a busy street in the Midlands and had taken a twelve-hour census of beauty. In that period, though thousands upon thousands hurried past, he had seen one passably pretty girl and two that were not ill-favoured. It was unusual that this girl, who sat sidefaced to him, should be pretty; but she was unusually pretty.

Though he could not see her eyes, her visible features were perfect and her complexion was without flaw. Her hair was a gleaming chestnut and he liked the way she used her hands. He believed in the test of hands as a revelation of the mind. Her figure—what was the word? Mr Harlow pursed his lips. His was a cold and exact vocabulary, lacking in floweriness. 'Gracious,' perhaps. He pursed his lips again. Yes, gracious—though why it should be gracious...He found himself wandering down into the roots of language, and even as he speculated she raised her head slightly and looked at him. In profile she was pleasing enough, but now—

'She is beautiful,' agreed Stratford Harlow with himself, 'but in all probability she has a voice that would drive a man insane.'

Nevertheless, he determined to risk disillusionment. His interest in her was impersonal. Two women, one young, one old, had played important parts in his life; but he could think of women unprejudiced by his experience. He neither liked nor disliked them, any more than he liked or disliked the

Farnese vase, which could be admired but had no special utility.

Presently the waiter came to take away his plate. 'Miss Rivers,' said the waiter in a low voice, in answer to his query. 'The young lady came this morning and she's going back to Plymouth by the last train. She's here to see somebody.' He glanced significantly at Mr Harlow, who raised his bushy eyebrows.

'Inside?' he asked, in a low voice.

The waiter nodded. 'Her uncle—Arthur Ingle, the actor chap.'

Mr Harlow nodded. The name was dimly familiar. Ingle?...Nosegay with a flower drooping out...and a judge with a cold in his head.

He began to reconstruct from his association of ideas.

He had been in court at the Old Bailey and seen the nosegay which every judge carries—a practice which had its beginning in olden times, when a bunch of herbs was supposed to shield his lordship from the taint of Newgate fever. As the judge had laid the nosegay on the ledge three little pimpurnels in the centre had fallen on to the head of the clerk. Now he remembered! Ingle! An ascetic face distorted with fury. Ingle, the actor, who had forged and swindled, and had at last been caught. Mr Stratford Harlow laughed softly; he not only remembered the name but the man, and he had seen him that morning, scowling, and shrugging one shoulder as he slouched past in the field gang So that was Ingle! And he was an actor.

Mr Harlow had come back especially to Princetown to find out who he was. As he looked up he saw the girl

walking quickly from the room and, rising, he strolled out after her, to find the lounge empty. Selecting the most secluded corner, he rang for his coffee and lit a cigar.

Presently Ellenbury came in, but for the moment Mr Harlow had other interests. Through the window he saw Miss Rivers walking across the square in the direction of the post office and, rising, he strolled out of the hotel and followed. She was buying stamps when he entered, and it was pleasing to discover that her voice had all the qualities he could desire.

Forty-eight has certain privileges; and can find the openings which would lead to twenty-eight's eternal confusion.

'Good morning, young lady. You're a fellow guest of ours, aren't you?'

He said this with a smile which could be construed as fatherly. She shot a glance at him and her lips twitched. She was too ready to smile, he thought, for this visitation of hers to be wholly sorrowful.

'I lunched at the Duchy, yes, but I'm not staying here. It is a dreadful little town!'

'It has its beauty,' protested Mr Harlow.

He dropped sixpence on the counter, took up a local time-table, waited while the girl's change was counted and fell in beside her as they came out of the office.

'And romance,' he added. 'Take the Feathers Inn. There's a building put up by the labour of French prisoners of war.'

From where they stood only the top of one of the high chimneys of the prison was visible.

She saw him glance in that direction and shake his head.

'The other place, of course, is dreadful-dreadful! I've been trying to work up my courage to go inside, but somehow I can't.'

'Have you—' She did not finish the question.

'A friend—yes. A very dear friend he was, many years ago, but the poor fellow couldn't go straight. I half promised to visit him, but I dreaded the experience.'

Mr Harlow had no friend in any prison.

She looked at him thoughtfully.

'It isn't really so dreadful. I've been before,' she said, without the slightest embarrassment. 'My uncle is there.'

'Really?' His voice had just the right quantity of sympathy and understanding.

'This is my second visit in four years. I hate it, of course, and I'll be glad when it's over. It is usually rather—trying.'

They were pacing slowly towards the hotel now.

'Naturally it is very dreadful for you. You feel so sorry for the poor fellows—'

She was smiling; he was almost shocked.

'That doesn't distress me very much. I suppose it's a brutal thing to say, but it doesn't. There is no'—she hesitated—'there is no affection between my uncle and myself, but I'm his only relative and I look after his affairs'—again she seemed at a loss as to how she would explain—'and whatever money he has. And he's rather difficult to please.'

Mr Harlow was intensely interested; this was an aspect of the visit which he could not have imagined.

'It would be dreadful if I liked him, or if he was fond of me,' she went on, stopping at the foot of the hotel steps. 'As

it is, we have a business talk and that is all.'

With a friendly nod she passed into the hotel ahead of him. Mr Harlow stood for a long time in the doorway, looking at nothing, his mind very busy, and then he strolled back to his cooling coffee; and presently fell into discussion; about the weather and the crops with the nervous little man who awaited his coming.

They were quite alone now. The car parties had vanished in noisy confusion; the old gentleman and the stout old lady were leaving the hotel on a walking excursion as he had come in.

'Is everything all right, Ellenbury?'

'Yes, Mr Harlow,' said the little man eagerly. 'Everything is in perfect shape and trim. I have settled the action that the French underwriters were bringing against the Rata Company, and—'

Suddenly he was stricken to silence. Following the direction of his staring eyes, Mr Harlow also looked out of the window. Eight convicts were walking down the street in the direction of the railway station; Mr Harlow looked and pointed.

'Not a very pleasant or an agreeable sight,' he said. In his oracular moments his voice was very rich and pleasant. 'Yet one, I think, to which the callous people of Princetown are quite accustomed. These men are being transferred to another prison, I imagine. Do you ever realise what your feelings would be if you had been, say, the leader of that gang, they used to be chained like wild beasts—'

'For God's sake, stop!' said the little man hoarsely. 'Don't talk about it, don't talk about it!' His trembling hands

covered his eyes. 'I had a horror of coming here,' he said, in a voice that was scarcely audible. 'I've never been before...the car passed that terrible archway and I nearly fainted!'

Mr Harlow, one eye on the door, smiled indulgently. 'You have nothing to fear, my dear Ellenbury,' he said in a paternal voice. 'I have in a sense condoned your felony. In a sense,' he emphasised carefully. 'Whether a judge would take the same view, I do not know. You understand the law better than I. This much is certain; you are free, your debts are paid, the money you stole from your clients has been made good and you have, I think, an income which is, shall we say, satisfactory.'

The little man nodded and swallowed something. He was white to the lips, and when he tried to lift a glass of water his hand shook so that he had to put it down again. 'I'm very grateful,' he said. 'Very—very grateful...I'm sorry-it was rather upsetting.'

'Naturally,' murmured Mr Harlow.

He took a notebook from his pocket, opened it with the greatest deliberation and wrote for five minutes, the little lawyer watching him. When he had finished he tore out the sheet and passed it across the table.

'I want to know all about this man Arthur Ingle,' he said. 'When his sentence expires, where he lives in London or elsewhere, his means and especially his grudge against life. I don't know what it is, but I rather suspect that it is a pretty big one. I should also like to know where his niece is employed. Her name you will find on the paper, with a query

mark attached. I want to know who are her friends, what are her amusements, her financial position is very important.'

'I understand.' Ellenbury put the paper carefully in a worn pocket-book. And then, with one of his habitual starts: 'I had forgotten one thing, Mr Harlow,' he said. 'On Monday last I had a visit at my office in Lincoln's Inn Fields from the police.'

He said the last two words apologetically as though he were in some way responsible for the character of his caller. Mr Harlow turned his pale eyes upon his companion, made a long scrutiny of his face before he asked: 'in what connection?'

'I don't know exactly,' said Ellenbury, who had a trick of reproducing at a second's notice all the emotions he described. 'It was rather puzzling.' He screwed up his face into an expression of bewilderment. 'You see, Mr Carlton did not come to any point.'

'Carlton?' demanded Harlow, quickly for him. 'That's the man at the Foreign Office, isn't it?'

Ellenbury nodded.

'It was about the rubber fire. You remember the fire at the United International factory? He wanted to know if Rata had any insurance on the stock that was burnt and of course I told him that as far as I knew, we hadn't.'

'Don't say "we,"' said Mr Harlow gently. 'Say the Rata Syndicate hadn't. You are a lawyer acting for undisclosed principals. Well?'

'That was all,' said Ellenbury. 'He was very vague.'

'He always is vague,' interrupted Harlow with a faint smile, 'and he's always unscrupulous—remember that,

Ellenbury. Sub-Inspector James Carlton is the most unscrupulous man that Scotland Yard has ever employed. Some day he will be irretrievably ruined or irretrievably promoted. I have a great admiration for him. I know of no man in the world I rate higher in point of intelligence, acumen and—unscrupulousness! He has a theory which is both admirable and baffling. Which means that he has the right theory. For rectitude is the most baffling of all human qualities, because you never know, if a man is doing right, what he will do next. I think that is almost an epigram, Ellenbury: you had best jot it down, so that if ever you are called upon to write my biography you may have material to lighten its pages.' He looked at his watch. 'I shall be at Park Lane at eleven o'clock on Friday night, and I can give you ten minutes,' he said.

Ellenbury twiddled his fingers unhappily.

'Isn't there a risk—to you, I mean?' he blurted. 'Perhaps I'm stupid, but I can't see why you do...well, why you take chances. With all your money—'

Mr Harlow leaned back in the cushioned seat, amusement faintly visible in his pale eyes.

'If you had millions what would you do? Retire, of course. Build or buy a beautiful house—and then?'

'I don't know,' said the older man vaguely. 'One could travel...'

'The English people have two ideas of happiness: one comes from travel, one from staying still! Rushing or rusting! I might marry but I don't wish to marry. I might have a great stable of race-horses, but I detest racing. I might yacht—I loathe the sea. Suppose I want a thrill? I do! The art

of living is the art of victory. Make a note of that. Where is happiness in cards, horses, golf, women—anything you like? I'll tell you: in beating the best man to it! That's An Americanism. Where is the joy of mountain climbing, of exploration, of scientific discovery? To do better than somebody else—to go farther, to put your foot on the head of the next best.'

He blew a cloud of smoke through the open window and waited until the breeze had torn the misty gossamer into shreds and nothingness.

'When you're a millionaire you either get inside yourself and become a beast, or get outside of yourself and become a nuisance to your fellows. If you're a Napoleon you will play the game of power, if you're a Leonardo you'll play for knowledge—the stakes hardly matter; it's the game that counts. Accomplishment has its thrill, whether it is hitting a golf ball farther than the next fellow, or strewing the battle fields with the bodies of your enemies. My thrill is harder to get than most people's. I'm a millionaire. Sterling and dollars are my soldiers—I am entitled to frame my own rules of war, conduct my forays in my own way. Don't ask any further questions!'

He waved his hand towards the door and Mr Ellenbury was dismissed; and shortly afterwards his hired car rattled loudly up the hill and past the gates of the jail. Mr Ellenbury studiously turned his face in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER 2

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SOME EIGHT months later there was an accident on the Thames Embankment. The girl in the yellow raincoat and the man in the black beret were of one accord—they were anxious, for different reasons, to cross the most dangerous stretch of the Embankment in the quickest possible space of time. There was a slight fog which gave promise of being just plain fog before the evening was far advanced. And through the fog percolated an unpleasant drizzle which turned the polished surface of the road into an insurance risk which no self-respecting company would have accepted.

The mudguard of the ancient Ford caught Aileen Rivers just below the left elbow, and she found herself performing a series of unrehearsed pirouettes. Then her nose struck a shining button and she slid romantically to her knees at the feet of a resentful policeman. He lifted her, looked at her, put her aside with great firmness and crossed to where the radiator of the car was staring pathetically up a bent lamp-post.

'What's the idea?' he asked sternly, and groped for his notebook.

The young man in the beret wiped his soiled face with the back of his hand, a gesture which resulted in the further spread of his griminess.

'Was the girl hurt?' he asked quickly.

'Never mind about the girl; let's have a look at your licence.'

Unheeding his authoritative demand, the young man stalked across to where Aileen, embarrassed by the crowd which gathered, was assuring several old ladies that she wasn't hurt. She was standing on her two feet to prove it.

'Waggle your toes about,' suggested a hoarse-voiced woman. 'If they won't move, your back's broke!'

The experiment was not made, for at that moment the tall young man pushed his way to the centre of the curious throng.

'Not hurt, are you?' he asked anxiously. 'I'm awfully sorry—really! Didn't see you till the car was right on top of you.'

A voice from the crowd offered advice and admonition.

'You orter be careful, mister! You might 'a' killed somebody.'

'Tell me your name, won't you?'

He dived into his pocket, found an old envelope and paused.

'Really it isn't necessary, I'm quite unhurt,' she insisted, but he was also insistent.

He jotted down name and address and he had finished writing when the outraged constable melted through the crowd.

'Here!' he said, in a tone in which fierceness and reproach were mingled. 'You can't go running away when I'm talking to you, my friend! Just you stand still and show me that licence of yours.'

'Did you see the blue Rolls?' demanded the young man. 'It was just ahead of me when I hit the lamp-post.'

'Never mind about blue Rolls's,' said the officer in cold exasperation. 'Let me have a look at your licence.'

The young man slipped something out of his pocket and held it in the palm of his hand. It was not unlike a driver's licence and yet it was something else.

'What's the idea?' asked the policeman testily.

He snatched the little canvas-backed booklet and opened it, turning his torch on the written words.

'Humph!' he said. 'Sorry, sir.'

'Not at all,' said Sub-Inspector James Carlton of Scotland Yard. 'I'll send somebody down to clear away the mess. Did you see the Rolls?'

'Yes sir, just in front of you. Petrol tank dented.'

Carlton chuckled. 'Saw that too? I'll remember you, constable. You had better send the girl home in a taxi—no, I'll take her myself.'

Aileen heard the proposal without enthusiasm. 'I much prefer to walk,' she said definitely.

He led her aside from the crowd now being dispersed, authoritatively. And in such privacy as could be obtained momentarily, he revealed himself.

'I am, in fact, a policeman,' he said; and she opened her eyes in wonder.

He did not look like a policeman, even in the fog which plays so many tricks. He had the appearance of a motor mechanic, and not a prosperous one. On his head was a black beret that had seen better days; he wore an old mack reaching to his knees; and the gloves he carried under his arm were black with grease.

'Nevertheless,' he said firmly, as though she had given oral expression to her surprise, 'I am a policeman. But no

ordinary policeman. I am an inspector at Scotland Yard—a sub-inspector, it is true, but I have a position to uphold.'

'Why are you telling me all this?'

'He had already hailed a taxi and now he opened the door. 'You might object to the escort of an ordinary policeman,' he said airily, 'but my rank is so exalted that you do not need a chaperon.'

She entered the cab between laughter and tears, for her elbow really did hurt more than she was ready to confess.

'Rivers—Aileen Rivers,' he mused, as the cab went cautiously along the Embankment. 'I've got you on the tip of my tongue and at the back of my mind, but I can't place you.'

'Perhaps if you look up my record at Scotland Yard?' she suggested, with a certain anger at his impertinence.

'I thought of doing that,' he replied calmly; 'but Aileen Rivers?' He shook his head. 'No, I can't place you.' And of course he had placed her. He knew her as the niece of Arthur Ingle, sometime Shakespearean actor and now serving five years for an ingenious system of fraud and forgery. But then, he was unscrupulous, as Mr Harlow had said. He had a power of invention which carried him far beyond the creative line, but he was not averse to stooping on the way to the most petty deceptions. And this in spite of the fact that he had been well educated and immense sums had been spent on the development of his mind, so that he might distinguish between right and wrong.

'Fotheringay Mansions.' He fingered his grimy chin. 'How positively exclusive!'

She turned on him in sudden anger. 'I've accepted your escort, Mr—' She paused insultingly.

'Carlton,' he murmured; 'half-brother to the hotel but no relation to the club. And this is fame! You were saying?'

'I was going to say that I wished you would not talk. You have done your best to kill me this evening; you might at least let me die in peace.'

He peered through the fog-shrouded windows. 'There's an old woman selling chrysanthemums near Westminster Bridge; we might stop and buy you some flowers.' And then, quickly: 'I'm terribly sorry, I won't ask you any questions at all or make any comments upon your plutocratic residence.'

'I don't live there,' she said in self-defence. 'I go there sometimes to see the place is kept in order. It belongs to a-a-relation of mine who is abroad.'

'Monte Carlo?' he murmured. 'And a jolly nice place too! Rien ne va plus! Faites vos jeux, monsieurs et mesdames! Personally I prefer San Remo. Blue sky, blue sea, green hills, white houses—everything like a railway poster.' And then he went off at a tangent. 'And talking of blueness, you were lucky not to be hit by the blue Rolls; it was going faster than me, but it has better brakes. I rammed his petrol tank in the fog, but even that didn't make him stop.'

Her lips curled in the darkness. 'A criminal escaping from justice, one thinks? How terribly romantic!'

The young man chuckled.

'One thinks wrong. It was a millionaire on his way to a City banquet. And the only criminal charge I can bring home to him is that he wears large diamond studs in his shirt,

which offence is more against my aesthetic taste than the laws of my country, God bless it!

The cab was slowing, the driver leaning sideways seeking to identify the locality.

'We're here,' said Mr Carlton; opened the door of the taxi while it was still in motion and jumped out.

The machine stopped before the portals of Fotheringay Mansions.

'Thank you very much for bringing me home,' said Aileen primly and politely, and added not without malice: 'I've enjoyed your conversation.'

'You should hear my aunt,' said the young man. 'Her line of talk is sheer poetry!'

He watched her until she was swallowed in the gloom, and returned to the cab.

'Scotland Yard,' he said laconically; 'and take a bit of a risk, O son of Nimshi.'

The cabman took the necessary risk and arrived without hurt at the gloomy entrance of police headquarters. Jim Carlton waved a brotherly greeting to the sergeant at the desk, took the stairs two at a time, and came to his own little room. As a rule he was not particularly interested in his personal appearance, but now, glancing at the small mirror which decorated the upturned top of a washstand, he uttered a groan.

He was busy getting the grease from his face when the melancholy face of Inspector Elk appeared in the doorway.

'Going to a party?' he asked gloomily.

'No,' said Jim through the lather; 'I often wash.'

Elk sniffed, seated himself on the edge of a hard chair, searched his pockets slowly and thoroughly.

'It's in the inside pocket of my jacket,' spluttered Carlton. 'Take one; I've counted 'em.'

Elk sighed heavily as he took out the long leather case, and, selecting a cigar, lit it.

'Seegars are not what they was when I was a boy,' he said, gazing at the weed disparagingly. 'For sixpence you could get a real Havana. Over in New York everybody smokes cigars. But then, they pay the police a livin' wage; they can afford it.'

Mr Carlton looked over his towel. 'I've never known you to buy a cigar in your life,' he said deliberately. 'You can't get them cheaper than for nothing!'

Inspector Elk was not offended. 'I've smoked some good cigars in my time,' he said. 'Over in the Public Prosecutor's office in Mr Gordon's days—he was the fellow that smashed the Frogs—him and me, that is to say,' he corrected himself carefully.

'The Frogs? Oh, yes, I remember. Mr Gordon had good cigars, did he?'

'Pretty good,' said Elk cautiously. 'I wouldn't say yours was worse, but it's not better.' And then, without a change of voice: 'Have you pinched Stratford Harlow?'

Jim Carlton made a grimace of disgust. 'Tell me something I can pinch him for,' he invited.

'He's worth fifteen millions according to accounts,' said Elk. 'No man ever got fifteen million honest.'

Jim Carlton turned a white, wet face to his companion. 'He inherited three from his father, two from one aunt, one

from another. The Harlows have always been a rich family, and in the last decade they've graded down to maiden aunts. He had a brother in America who left him eight million dollars.'

Elk sighed and scratched his thin nose.

'He's in Ratas too,' he said complainingly.

'Of course he's in Ratas!' scoffed Jim. 'Ellenbury hides him, but even if he didn't, there's nothing criminal in Ratas. And supposing he was openly in it, that would be no offence.

'Oh!' said Elk, and by that 'Oh!' indicated his tentative disagreement.

There was nothing furtive or underhand about the Rata Syndicate. It was registered as a public company, and had its offices in Westshire House, Old Broad Street, in the City of London, and its New York office on Wall Street. The Rata Syndicate published a balance sheet and employed a staff of ten clerks, three of whom gained further emoluments by acting as directors of the company, under the chairmanship of a retired colonel of infantry. The capital was a curiously small one, but the resources of the syndicate were enormous. When Rata cornered rubber, cheques amounting to five millions sterling passed outward through its banking accounts; in fact every cent involved in that great transaction appeared in the books except the fifty thousand dollars that somebody paid to Lee Hertz and his two friends.

Lee arrived from New York on a Friday afternoon. On the Sunday morning the United Continental Rubber Company's stores went up in smoke. Nearly eighteen thousand tons of rubber were destroyed in that well-organised conflagration,