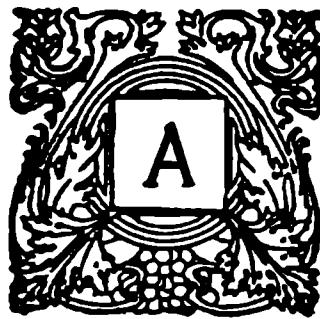


THE DEATH-TRAP

BY

GEORGE DAULTON

Illustrations by Sigurd Schou



CAB had not been to my fancy that night. As I left the club I really had nothing to complain of, for I had not been unsuccessful; but I felt sick with something akin to remorse. The game had been of the right sort, among men who were close friends and all able to pay a good sum for a night's amusement; there had been high stakes, but no ugly action in the bets, though the cards ran snappy and full of surprises; a lounging, friendly game, with no litter of discarded packs on the floor, for we all liked a seasoned deck when the cards began to run naturally into flushes and fulls. My remorse was perhaps a reaction from a surfeit of pleasure, and a longing to turn myself to something more satisfying than killing time. I decided to walk home, though it was two o'clock; I needed the thirty minutes' sharp exercise to pump the fumes of smoke and wine out of me in the invigorating lake air.

But my depression was not relieved, when, having passed the open front of the city's heart, the stately wall of granite buildings stopped, and Michigan Avenue, without electricity, plunged on between grimy wholesale houses in a black sweep dimly defined by a few gaslights.

Hesitating there under the gigantic lamps of the library, the loneliness of the gloomy streets made me think better of a cab. I remembered the hold-ups so common in Chicago during the late fall, and a number of mysterious disappearances that had kept the whole city in dread of the unfrequented business districts at night. There were no cab lamps in sight up Randolph Street, and none nearer down Michigan than those I had passed at the Athletic Club. So I went on into the gloom, not wishing to appear daunted even to myself, though I knew it was not safe at that hour for a man alone and in evening

dress to cross the river through that deserted street.

But the black dog was on my shoulder. My sense of folly became a dread and helpless loneliness, at once so great that I greeted the odors of sugar, coffee and tobacco that issued from the black solitudes of the great business houses as pleasant and safe company that stood for the comfortable human affairs of the broad, honest day. The empty chasm of the narrowed street echoed to my nervous footfalls; otherwise it was so silent that the sleepless growl of the surrounding streets made its loneliness all the more pronounced.

I am almost ashamed to tell—even now that I know that I must have experienced one of those strange premonitions of danger that sometimes forewarn us—how I rushed away from my fear more than from that which I feared.

When I had but a block more to go before reaching the Rush Street drawbridge, a small, thick-set man lurched out of Water Street from the direction of Randolph Station. I saw him pass under the corner lamp as plainly as I ever saw anything under similar conditions—I was alert for just such an encounter. The man had fallen into himself and was weaving his way over a good breadth of the pavement, and added to his drunken reel I thought I saw the sailor in the swaying of his shoulders.

We met on the corner, or rather, he stopped before the inlet of the sewer, while I was on the curb above him. I was so close to him I saw a look in his blood-shot eyes challenging the very idea that he was drunk.

I had no time to feel relieved. I saw the glance, *I saw it*; but with it on the instant came a black, lightning-like flicker out of the granite pavement on which we stood, as though the tongue of a monstrous serpent gave one devilish, wavering lick that encircled the man and dashed him down the mouth of the sewer—a clot of thin mud spattered

my cheek—and the drunken sailor had vanished.

The shock of it made me leap and tremble, and horror struck me cold in the pit of the stomach, while waves of it rolled out over my body like the rings on smitten water—I must have been demented for the moment, else I should have fled my own immediate danger. There had been no sound of breaking bones upon the stony jaws of the sewer; but at that instant some sudden up-starting of night traffic had barked loudly round the corner of a by-street and may have drowned the thud. To the eye it had been as though the man had been blown away by an explosion—one instant there, bestial in his human bulk, the next scuttled, annihilated.

I do not know what I did just after the shock. It seems to me, in recalling my distraught fancies, that I heard the "whimper" of that passing soul and saw it curl upward in a thin mist, like the breath from a foul maw. When I came to I was crouching on the stones looking down the black gullet of the drain. There was nothing to be seen in its capacious mouth; but the brown, greasy sweat of traffic that glistened everywhere upon the paving was plainly wiped from the granite lips of the sewer, and with this as evidence of the reality of what I had seen I awoke to the hideous peril of that death-trap. I sprang up and backed away, then turned and fled up the street.

Coming out of that accursed and forsaken strip of the avenue was like escaping from a den of murderers to the shelter of a friendly home. The great bridge was rumbling on its cogs and sweeping majestically through arc-lit volumes of smoke and steam to let some sluggish freighter of the lakes trail by. I ran over the slippery pavement of the approach and leaped upon the last yard of the bridge as it swung out over the river.

I felt the unspeakable relief of escape, but I did not stop until I had crossed over the two roadways, though the bridge was still moving. How kindly powerful and humanly helpful the huge truss seemed as it widened the gulf between me and the South Side abutment, where I fancied the flickering phantom was licking over the water toward me! How good it was to hear the business-like breath of the tug, the sob of the steam imprisoned in the passing monster! The firm command and sensible response of bells and obedient feet upon the decks—all the worthiness of the grimy labor of honest men I joyfully

greeted with noble comparisons, while the prosy tug and stupid barge seemed to sweep by me as stately as a classic chorus.

The bridge was beginning slowly to follow the retreating stern of the vessel when I became aware that I was not alone on the footway. Perhaps the smoke and steam had at first concealed the man, or in my excitement I had overlooked him; at any rate he was at my elbow before I knew it, giving my overwrought nerves such a shock that my first impulse was to fly at him like a savage dog. But the changing shadows of the bridge just then allowed the white light of an arc-lamp to fall upon his face, which was strangely sad and refined and certainly friendly.

"Sir," said the man, with quaint politeness and solemnity, "I see you are ill. Will you accept a restorative? A Special Reserve that I can recommend."

With a grace that at once gave me confidence he proffered a flask handsome enough for the traveling companion of a king.

"You have had a shock," he observed, as I thanked him, "a shock that might prostrate any man. I saw you fly panic-stricken out of the mouth of Michigan Avenue, and caught the change of relief that came over you as you gained the draw and your white face was swept away from the glare of the shore lamp. Nevertheless I believe I knew you from that glance. 'Now here is a man to depend on,' thought I; 'one to face and fight to the last, when the dread mystery that has sent him into a panic becomes a reality that may be reached.' Such was my own case, and—since I am persuaded that we have been brought together for death or life—you will see that I shall not flinch when the test comes."

I searched the man's face. Had fate played that night with my life and reason only to finish me on the bridge with a madman? He seemed to read my thought, and denied it with a sad smile which added charm to the grace that had given me confidence.

"Why, you yourself will say to-morrow," he pursued with renewed assurance, "'Is it not passing strange that we two men of all Chicago should have met?' But I believe there is no chance. What we call chance only seems so, and I mean no irreverence when I say that the Almighty, playing this great solemn game of solitaire through the ages, intended that we should rid the world of that dreadful thing that flickers out of the pavements at night and makes a death-trap of the sewer."

"That black flicker of death out of the sewer!" I cried, starting up from the bridge rail. "What do you mean, sir—merciful heaven! what do you mean? Have you, too, seen it?"

"I have seen it, too," he returned with intense feeling, and I thought the light of relief that he had made no mistake shone in his eyes. "Now, is it not strange that we should have met? I ran out of that street one night myself, more unmanned with terror, I doubt not, than you; I, too, had seen a human being, a life perhaps more worthy than my own, scooped down the gutter sewer like a truss of hay drawn through a mow door."



The stranger paused and with apologetic courtesy drew my attention to a clot of thin mud staining my shirt front, which to me seemed as gruesome as a gout of blood.

"Chicago streets gleamed underfoot just as they do tonight," he mused. "Down here in these granite gulches nature's sweet dew is befouled by the young giant wallowing in the madness of his toil, and with some of this oily smear of the streets the black deed bespattered my face, too, and my clothing. Since that night I have been fascinated by the incredible horror of what I saw, and I have haunted the streets that I might find it; tempting the fiend, if possible, to an attack and a fight to the death. But now you have

seen it—I beg of you, tell me what you saw!"

"I had an unnatural and overpowering sense of depression and foreboding as I came up the avenue," I responded, as if that was an inseparable part of what I had seen. My companion acknowledged it with a nod of understanding, and verified each horrid detail of my story as I told it to him.

"God alone knows how many have gone that way," said the stranger solemnly when I had finished. "Unseen and unfriended, how should they be reported? But the city rang with the one I saw. Water Street, you say? Mine was at Lake, but a block away. They are never far from the river, which at night gives an unfrequented district for the murderer's work."

"Why didn't you report this to the police!" I exclaimed. "We must lose no more time in this way, but do it at once."

"No; by no means," objected my companion, "consider the



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consider the incredible story we have to tell. Do you want to be listened to with insolent indulgence for a swell that has taken a bit too much? Very likely you would be received with cold doubt, or even suspicion; I have known men to be clapped into the sweat-box who brought their information to the authorities as innocently as you would. Your introduction at the sergeant's desk would be like an arraignment, and perhaps

for weeks you would be kept under a mild surveillance. Do you want to be the tool of Pinkerton, when you can be a free lance? Do you want the thousand and one questions and comments of friends, the common notoriety of the papers, the interviews and headlines and pictures, when you can quietly perform this sacred duty as a gentleman and at the same time, even in this most modern city, have an adventure prodigious as those of the sagas?"

"What is the hazard that you have in mind?" I demanded, and, strange to say, I felt my nerves refresh as the world-old thirst of men for the chancing life against great odds in a dangerous mystery, tempted me. "This business is too wild and dangerous for a man of affairs to undertake upon a chance meeting and its premonitions."

The strange man stopped me with his lifted hand.

"My dear sir," he said with quiet decision, "though I did say I thought we had been brought together for a determined purpose, I haven't asked you to go—nor to take any risks."

"But I want to!" I flung out. The words came almost against my will.

"Ah, well, if you want to, that is another thing," responded my companion with satisfaction, and with that his manner changed. He was still quaint and fanciful, but something of reserve power became apparent, his whole being knit itself together and somehow I felt myself included in the effect. The spirit of the hunt took possession of him.

"But what more foolhardy thing could a man do than to go into the sewer after this murderer?—for that is what we shall have to do," I exclaimed, with some irritation at my own determination to do it. "Perhaps that is the reason it lures me; at any rate I am going to follow you, taking your integrity for granted."

"I took you from the first, as you have accepted me," returned my comrade, and, if I may say it, even there, in the gloom of the bridge, I felt the gentlemanliness of the man flow over me, and yet I can mention nothing more of it than the endearing confidence of his smile. Then our hands gripped, and it was done—each knew without saying that the word passed for life or death.

"My family name," he resumed, "is known round the world; but until this business is transacted I hope you will be satisfied to call me 'Hood.' Most men of my station,

who wish to be men in spite of their wealth, plunge into money-getting, or enter politics; they explore Africa or the Amazon; they lose themselves in Tibet or the South Seas, or even take to mountain climbing.

"Now I seek to be the exponent of the dark and terrible in human passion, the apologist of the degenerate and gruesome. I pondered one day upon the moral condition of the slaughterer with a knife, as I stood on the Halsted Street bridge and heard the dying screams of the swine, and saw their limp carcasses continuously passing before the upper windows of a packing house. The following week I became a pig-sticker at the Stock Yards, and read my subject to a conclusion. To-night you find me an embalmer."

I am glad to say, unnatural as it may seem, that it was not because the hag-ridden night could add no more of horror that I did not fly from him in fear and loathing; but truly the charm of the man's gentleness seemed heightened by his strange confession, and, more convincing still, he gave me the feeling that he put his soul in my place and in the same fullness admitted mine to the motives of his own, as I have never known any other human being to do. I cleaved to him then, as I have ever since, in the most perfect friendship a man ever had.

"There are some who would say that such gruesome affairs have tempted me to my ruin, as drink or drugs do many men," he mused sadly. "I cannot deny that I have made it too much the book and the lamp in my life; I love it and loathe it as the drunkard does the drink; but while I am in it I am not of it."

He broke off with a sudden start and, gripping my wrist, leaned over the rail, pointing down to the water. Down in the gloomy city-built gully through which the river flows I caught the disappearing dive of some black waving object, then there was a quiet eddy of the water, and further on a series of V-shaped ripples came to the surface and shot toward the South Side wharves; again a long, dark, indefinite thing lifted from the river and waved glistening wet one instant under an arc-lamp and then disappeared, as though it plunged under the stone-walled embankment of the street.

"Merciful heaven!" I cried, "the submerged outlet of a sewer must be there!"

"Yes," said Hood. "It is nearly wide enough to drive through. Now," he said

solemnly, "we shall solve this hideous mystery of the sewers and shall do away with it as sure as there is a God in Heaven!"

His tone of suppressed exultation changed to one of solicitude as he saw that horror was again crawling over my back—for neither of us dared compare the hideous surmises that had taken shape in our minds.

"We would better go," he said; "your nerves have had all they should stand. Ten or twelve hours in bed will make you over."

"Did you notice the length and peculiar motion of that arm?" I whispered.

"I did," he answered, laying his hand upon my shoulder; "perhaps before this time to-morrow morning we shall know."

The clock on the old Inter-Ocean Building had just tolled midnight when I turned into a cross-town street and rang the night bell of the undertaking establishment that Hood had given me as his address.

A handsome, ruddy-cheeked youth admitted me with subdued professional concern that changed to a cheery welcome upon his learning my business was a matter of personal friendship with Mr. Hood. Behind a reception room, I was led through a heavily carpeted and dimly lighted hall, into another room at the foot of which was a huge bronze sarcophagus in a plate-glass case; from behind this Hood came forward to greet and conduct me on through a big, barren work-room, where beneath their sheets lay two rigid and indistinct forms, so awfully withdrawn from life yet so pathetically helpless against intrusion.

Into one of three or four stall-like compartments, partitioned but half-way to the ceiling off this work-room, Hood ushered me, explaining that they were the bedrooms of the employees who must be in constant attendance at the establishment.

"I shall not offer you my one chair," said he, as we both glanced with a smile at the odd and meager furnishings of the room; "it is high time we were down to business. You may open your hunting case here on the cot—that's good: a sweater, a duck coat, hip boots and two 44-caliber sixes—better for our purpose than rifles—a practical lot of stuff. Now I," he went on, "am going to be rather unsportsman-like, if I am driven to it. The vampire has put himself beyond mercy; so, like Puckle, who invented a double-barreled gun, one side firing balls 'for shootinge ye Christians,' and the other square bullets 'for

shootinge ye Turks,' I have a special charge that I shall fire at the fiend—there is enough acid in this big syringe to bring an elephant to his knees."

Hood was also armed with a long, keen knife, which, he said, since his packing-house experience, he trusted more than firearms. For our light he had provided two new electric clubs, like the morocco-covered section of a telescope, which on pressing a button emitted a powerful beam of light through the big lens set in the end.

"Are you ready now?" asked Hood, laying his hand upon my shoulder. "The affair that we are undertaking cannot be long in any case; but on the other hand, are you prepared to risk it should our return be—".

"Indefinitely extended?" I concluded. "Yes, I am ready. The thought that at this moment some one, happy and full of life, may be snatched down to that foul death makes my very soul yearn to hunt this mystery to the end. The papers gave no report of last night's disappearance, and, as you say, God alone knows how many have gone that way for us to avenge."

Hood led the way through the rear ware-room to the alley, and we cautiously crept between iron-shuttered walls of business houses to the middle of the next block without encountering a watchman. Here he knelt on the paving, and after some groping lifted the lid of a manhole, thrusting his electric truncheon down into the black opening. A glare of white light showed a narrow shaft of masonry eight feet deep, connecting with a conduit scarcely large enough to crawl through. A warm, white, malodorous vapor arose from the glowing opening on the keen outer air. The place looked ratty and so confined that I dreaded sticking fast in it; but Hood motioned me to go in, and I filled my lungs with pure air and dropped down into total darkness.

At the bottom my light showed a drain so narrow that I found it better to back in feet first. I had at once the feeling of crushing suffocation, but I crawled away from the manhole to make room for Hood, and I heard his scuffling descent and the iron cover drop into its place. Lying almost upon my face I had little room for movement, but the fury with which I wormed my way through twenty yards of that drain was marvelous. I think Hood himself found the passage irksome, and when we dropped into a feeder of the trunk sewer we were glad enough to stand

ankle-deep in a dark tunnel of sewage and breathe in the freedom of space, if not of purity.

We had gained the underground system that drained the city. A noisome sweat, the dank contamination of humanity, covered the walls; the arch of masonry was mottled with dark stains and straggling patches of a soot-like growth, through which a snow-white vermicular fungus wriggled, fed by the peculiar properties of the seepage above; over the sloping floor the foul flow from the many stories of life in the upper world sneaked

away in the darkness with a loathsome gurgle, as though it would invite us that way to seek the murderer of the sewer.

Following the course of the brown streams for a block or two we entered what proved to be the main artery of the sewers, as spacious as a railway tunnel and as well-built as an ancient wine-cellar. We did not expect to find the outlaw in this thoroughfare, for even in the solitudes of the city's vaults he would find some blind passage more to his purpose; but the trunk sewer was the natural base of our operations, the beginning and termina-



tion of each long excursion to the right or left with which we traced every feeder and cross tunnel in the hunt that followed—traced them of necessity in silence, and as much as possible in darkness, which encouraged the imagination to shrink all the more from fetid moistures and smells and the touch of vermin that we heard scurrying and gliding away from our footsteps.

Hood read the gush of every drain as an archeologist reads the layers of earth that cover a buried city: here was a hotel; there a wholesale chemist's; this sickening spout of offal, he declared, came from the night cleansing of a dissecting-room; this was a livery stable, and that the emptying vats of a dye-house, and there the drain of a milk depot spouting a river of sour milk. Yet Hood never forgot the hunt; each flash of the light was first used to search for traces of the murderer, and at a single glance he saw things that might have escaped my prolonged quest. I fear I was of little use save as a companion in the black, lonely labyrinth, and while I kept myself alert my imagination heard a startled exclamation in every drip, retreating footfalls as our own echoed along the dark vaulting, and a disturbed snarl in the gurgle of the moving offal.

Without acknowledging it to each other, we had purposely avoided the fatal locality under Michigan Avenue, each feeling that it was best to become used to the strange conditions of the hunt before we risked the attempt on the murderer's most probable lurking place. We must have been in the neighborhood of the Masonic Temple; I was about to flash my light into a branch sewer, my body bent against the angle of the wall, my finger ready upon the electric button, when there was a sudden snarl almost in my face and a hoarse voice whispered:

"Whist! Is it the murderin' devil ye're after at last?"

I leaped back, jostling Hood, and our electric clubs shot unsteady beams of white glare into the eyes of an enormous figure, that with a guttural curse cowered and buried his face in his arm.

"Take the light aff me! Take it aff, dom it!"

We poured the intense rays over the man and needed no other weapon to cover him, for he staggered against the wall and turned his back to the light.

"Shut it aff, men, shut it aff!" he wailed; "d'ye want to blind me? I'm Officer Kinde-

lon, on duty, by —, on since Wednesday night, from Harrison Station."

The lights showed a burly shape in brass buttons, the twisted wrack of a mighty man, who leaned forward and sideways in spite of painful effort to straighten up. His face, it seemed, had been florid, but black rings under his eyes made its unnatural pallor all the more noticeable. He was hatless; one arm was bare to the shoulder and bruised black and blue; the remnant of a white glove encircled his wrist in a dirty rag; his coat was ripped up the back, and what had been a smart uniform hung on him in tatters, befouled by the splash of the sewage.

Hood tucked his light under his arm and produced his flask; the big policeman brightened eagerly, but controlled himself like an abused simpleton.

"By the growth on me face it would be three days since I tasted food," grumbled the poor fellow, and gulped the dram Hood poured for him; "three days since I saw the impudent devil himself reach up out of hell, as cool as you please, and drag a poor creature from aff his bones, without by yer leave—bad luck to the size of the sewer-trap that let me follow him, and the devil's own mommickin' up he give me!"

We had half guessed this, but we looked at each other in amazement. Here, then, was a man who had not only seen, but had even dared the death-trap in its hiding-place, and by reason of superhuman strength had brought himself off to tell it.

"Officer Kindelon," said I, with a kindly force that seemed necessary to stir his clouded understanding, "you were a powerful man and you must have met something of tremendous strength to have given you this terrible punishment. We are here to find this demon—where is he and what is he like?"

The man leaped up, and wrestling grotesquely with himself imitated the manner of his defense in the clutch of the death-trap.

"The Old One himself, none less, I tell ye," he answered, drawing us both toward him and looking fearfully down the dark vaulting of the sewer. "He had no science; but he was hell for reach and for strength. D'ye think Kindelon was whipped?—what good is the science of the ring when ye fight the devil in the dark? Come, since ye have lights. I have listened to him wanderin' about and never askin' what's the time of day. I'm dommed if I don't show ye the fight of yer life."

The man beckoned us down the passage, and limping, humped and askew, went ahead in the gloom, turning now and then to grimace us to be cautious. He led us into the trunk sewer and for a block or more down its wide vaulting; then turning to the right we knew, without his pantomime, we were nearing the lair of the murderer of the sewers.

At the next turn Kindelon stopped and motioned us to come on without lights. In total darkness we stood grouped and breathless listening to sounds so suggestive of the devil that they did not need the denunciation of Kindelon. They did not seem human, and yet they were, too; as though some human work was being lazily done, a long-drawn, gliding movement ending in a fleshy thud, then a deep breath of satisfaction followed by a sound as of something bone-like moving on the stone floor.

"Och, ye hellion!" muttered the big policeman, and spat in disgust.

I found that inaction and the presence of that awful mystery in the darkness was more than I could stand. I must have it out, even if it had to come to the repellent thing I had dreaded, a hand-to-hand contest with that foul fiend in the filth of the sewer floor. I whispered to Hood that I would try to cut off the retreat of the monster by slipping by him in the dark. He would have detained me, but Kindelon was working himself into a fury, and I glided away in the darkness while he was trying to control the policeman's fever for revenge.

Foot by foot, nearer and nearer, I drew to the death-trap, feeling my way, no longer daintily, but low down and nearly upon all fours, along the wall, that seemed to draw out like elastic as I crept on. The vaulting became a whispering gallery of those hideous sounds, and they hummed in my ears with the blood that was rushing to my brain. As I came opposite them my lungs seemed to fail and then fill to bursting with the fetid breath of the place, and my heart rebelled with furious pounding at every thought I made to quiet it. I was in the midst of my peril when I stumbled over what I took to be a log; but it instantly arose and I leaped on, though not quickly enough, for a glancing blow across the shoulders sent me staggering down the sewer.

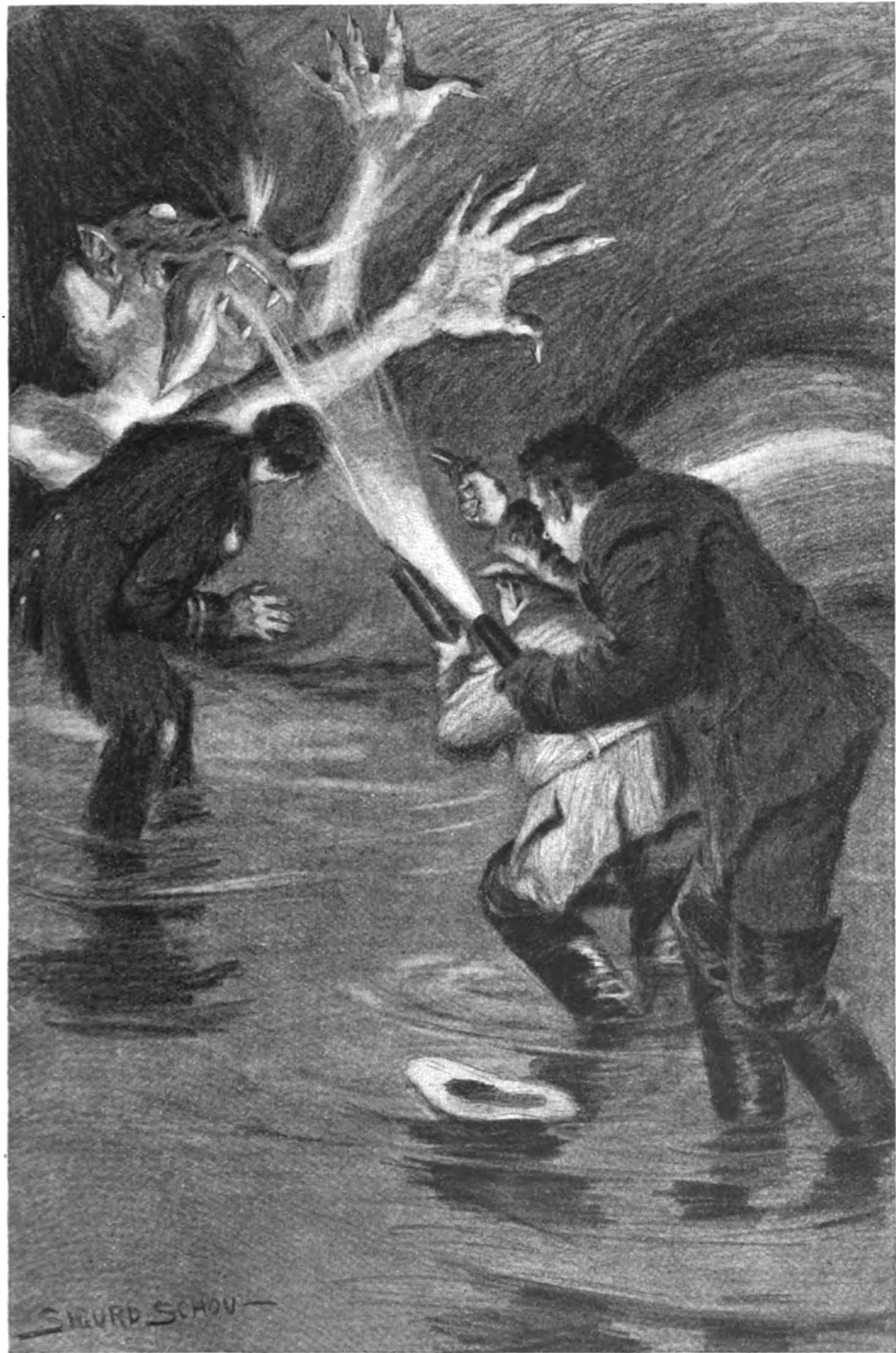
I shot my light and Hood's followed on the instant. For a moment we all stood paralyzed by what we saw. Never since man

began to kill has he brought to bay such a monster.

Gigantic it was, but its horror partook of no one of the familiar forms of this latter world's creatures; it was not of earth, air or water, though it hideously combined the beast, the reptile and the bird; and yet I felt it was not misbegotten, but was perhaps the last survival of some species from the mesozoic era, a disinherited offspring of Mother Earth that had been overlooked in the ruthless management of her family affairs, bred down through the ages in some deep retreat in the receding lake. The thing reared itself at bay, dazzled by the bright shafts of light we poured over it, and still we gazed, fascinated by its hideous loathsomeness.

Then I noticed that the beam of Hood's light was wavering, and out of the tail of my eye I saw Kindelon creeping toward the monster. Hood tried to restrain him, and at the same time manage his light, while he aimed his charge of acid. The stream of liquid fire shot toward the great creature and for an instant played upon its head. Then the stone vaulting of the sewer was full of the writhing of those agile, squid-like arms and their multiplying shadows. I fired in quick succession three shots and then saw the policeman straighten up to his full height and with a roar charge like a bull upon the writhing knot of tentacles. Hood clutched at him; he might as well have tried to stop a rhinoceros. Kindelon threw himself into the midst of the snaky turmoil, and unmindful of the burning fluid that dripped from it throttled the death-trap. Any other than a man of his gigantic strength would have been instantly wrung to death in that vortex; but the policeman fastened his great hands on the warty leathern throat and clung to it while the huge beast tore at him cruelly.

Hood and I hovered about the fight, retreating as we were forced to, closing in as we saw opportunity. Twice Hood flashed his long keen knife and buried it in the monster with an accurate thrust. I shot a dozen times, but I doubt if more than three of the bullets were effective. Suddenly the fury of the fight slackened and Hood, seeing his chance, swung the knife. The death-trap reared and tearing Kindelon from his hold threshed the great body of the policeman like a rag between the walls of the sewer—then it began to waver, and sinking, sinking, sinking, it dropped lifeless, with the dead officer still in its grasp, upon the hideous débris of its lair.



OUT OF THE TAIL OF MY EYE I SAW KINDELON CREEPING TOWARD THE MONSTER