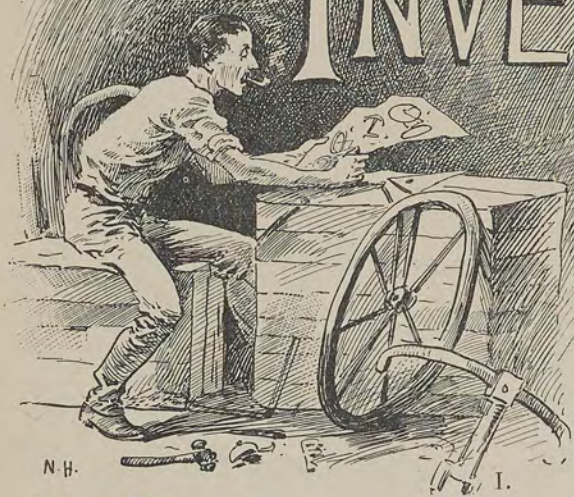


THE INVENTOR

BY

CUTCLIFFE

HYNE



WELL, of course, it's your palaver," said Captain Image, "but I tell you plainly that you're a fool if you do get off the old *M'poso* here. The clearing round this Malla-Malla factory is the most fever-ridden spot in the whole of the lower Congo. It always costs me at least four men down in the doctor's hands every time I come here; and if it wasn't that cargo's cargo, and one has to be jolly sharp to nip it up nowadays, I'd never want to see this creek again. Lift up your nose and catch the smell: there's sickness in the air all the time."

I looked over the white rail at the beer-coloured river swilling past the steamer's flank. The smell of crushed marigolds which came up from it, was at times strong enough to make me cough. The palmetto thatch of the bamboo-walled factory in

the clearing was burnt a silver-grey by the sun; and on the tangle of the tropical vegetation beyond, unhealthiness was written eveywhere in letters of vivid greenery.

"You'd only get knocked over yourself," Captain Image went on, "and you'd not do a little dam' bit of good. I've known Wedderburn ever since I've been in this West Coast trade, and I can figure out the value of his constitution to half-an-hour. He's got the best collection of drugs of any man in the Congo Free State; he's got one room of the factory yonder ram-jam full of bottles which he keeps on tap; and he's got that hardened, he can take a cigarette-paper full of quinine every two hours and not lose his head for work. But he's invoiced past all the drugs in Africa this time; he's got no insides left for them to catch grip on; and if he doesn't peg out before we've finished working his

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cargo, I'd bet a bottle of fizz he's not alive by the time we've steamed up to Boma. No, Mr. Tollemarche, poor Jimmy Wedderburn's got to go and toe the line in the other place, and all the King's horses and all the King's men cannot pull Jimmy round again. It's a dam' sad thing, and I suppose we shall see those snuff-and-butter kids of his loafing about the factory till they're old enough to go off stealing on their own hook. I wonder what'll become of his wife though. She's a nice little piece for a Bangala, and if she goes up past the Falls to her own people, they're bound to knock her on the head and chop her. They're all cannibals 'way up there, and she'll be far too rich for them to let alone. Jimmy's been very good to her, and dashed her any amount beyond her regular pay. Why I suppose that woman, in cloth and nickel bangles, and one thing and another, must be worth quite her twenty pound note."

"She never went near the factory when I was ashore just now. She was across at her own house under the nut palm yonder, yawning over the piccanninies. It would have looked better if she had been sitting with Wedderburn."

"Oh Jimmy's very sick," said Captain Image, "and when men are like him, close on the peg-out, they don't want that sort pawing round. They get to thinking about home, and the people there, and they wish every nigger woman they've ever touched was in hell, fathoms deep. Not that I mean to say there's anything wrong with this Bangala girl of his; she has her bath twice a day, and she's sweet, as niggers go; she's not bad-looking; she doesn't steal more than's to be expected; and she can lick a new cook-boy into shape better than any woman I've seen. You should just taste ground-nut soup in Malla-Malla factory, and then you'd know. But then all the chop there is plenty-much-fine since she's been in charge, and she

can swizzle up a cocktail as good as you want to drink. No, I will say she's made Jimmy a dam' good wife. And he's quite satisfied with her too. I know he's had lots of offers for her, but he'd never part. Why only the other day a Portugee from the Dutch factory down at Banana—Well Balgarnie, me lad, what is it?"

The purser had come up, and drew Captain Image aside to talk business, and so I was spared any more gossip about the current Mrs. Wedderburn. But I had quite made up my mind what to do. So I mopped my face with a very wet pocket handkerchief, and went below and put three suits of pyjamas into a portmanteau, and left the rest of my kit to be cared for by the steward. Then I went on deck again and waited till the surf boat, then at the bottom of the ladder, should be emptied of its load of kernels and be again paddled across to the beach.

The baking air was full of noise. The steamer was anchored in the smooth, deep river water, a bare hundred yards from the ferns on the bank. The number one winch chain had been sent down, and a manilla rope rove through the derrick sheave in its place, with the cam-hooks bent on to the end. These were dragged ashore by a crew of yelling factory boys managed by the third mate, who tickled them with a chiquot. The portly white-washed puncheons of palm oil were rolled down into the water; the hooks were clipped on to the chines of the casks; the gangway krooboy yelled, and number one winch clattered under a full head of steam. The casks swirled through the yellow water to the pluck of the manilla, hit the *M'poso's* side and climbed it, and were swung in-board, and had been sent below by the crane-chain, and stowed, before the cam-hooks were once more hauled clattering on to the beach. The mates sweated and cursed, the krooboy and the factory boys yelled and toiled, and the brazen

torrent of sunshine which poured down on the scene was enough to make one sick with its violence.

Captain Image came up again, and ran a finger round inside the collar of his white drill coat. "Well, me lad, you are going one-time I see, in spite of what I've said. I still say you're a fool, but I don't think any the worse of you for it. Jimmy and I have been good friends, and he's always had some cargo for me when I've called, and I've always dashed him a turkey or a roast of fresh beef out of the refrigerator by way of remembrance. Well, this is the last time, and grub's no use to him. He couldn't keep down the liver-wing of an angel with his stomach in the state it is now. And it would be just the same with the best drink that ever filled a man up, or the best cigars a fellow could buy in Grand Canary. No, poor Jimmy's got his charter-party made out, with the sixpenny stamp on it all complete, and I know what's the thing he'll want now, and I'm the man that'll do it. He'll have lots of spears and carved tusks, and odds and ends knocking about, and he'll think—'if the people at home could have these curios to jam up above the looking-glass in the best room, they'd have something to remember me by,' and then he wouldn't feel so dam' lonely. Foolish you'll say, Tolle-marche, me lad, but that's the way these hard cases are when they peg out; and I ought to know; I've seen some hundreds of them in my time. Now, you say to

Jimmy that Captain Image will take home all he puts out, free of charge (if he'll have them done up in a piece of sacking) and will land them in Liverpool, and put them on the rail for where they're addressed. You tell Jimmy that, me lad, and you'll see he'll give his orders, and have the things sewn up, and then just peg out smiling. I know the ways of the Coast. I've seen fifteen of them put over the side between here and Sarry Leone, and not one but what felt all the comfortabler for knowing he'd fixed things so's his people couldn't forget him."

"You're very kind," I said.

"Not at all," said Captain Image, "I'd do as much for you or anybody I liked. Well, good-bye, me lad, and take three of those pills I gave you every morning, and a rousing dose of Eno on top, and I shouldn't wonder but what you'll pull through. Now be off with you; there's the boat empty and waiting; and try and send me word up to Boma or Matadi as to how you are getting along."

One of the krooboys sang "Ta-ra-boom-de-ay" as they paddled me ashore, and the sunbeams fell on my pith helmet with such force I could almost feel them hit. One of the great casks had got stoved as it was being trundled down into the water, and the bay of the river, and the third mate, and the working negroes, were all daubed by the orange-coloured oil. But above it all the marigold-smell of the great river came up stronger than ever.

II.

"Do you mean you've actually come ashore to this ghastly hole to stay with me?" said Wedderburn from the other side of his mosquito bar. "Well, I do call this good of you. You won't get any fishing, of course, and the shooting's more to talk about than find, unless you care to

go potting crocodiles in the lagoon at the back. But you wait till I get on my pins again; I'll be through with this dose of fever in a day or two; and then I'll show you round myself, and we'll have a fine time. I wonder if N'gala has remembered to get any whiskey off the steamer. I

know we're nearly out." He clapped his hands and called "Boy!" He was so weak that the sound scarcely travelled through the gauze of the net which kept the flies from his bed.

"It's a damned nuisance," he said, "but my voice has gone. Bilious fever always gets me this way, and I'm on with a sharpish attack just now. Peter's my house boy's name, and he'll be gossiping down by the surf boats. You might sing out for him and get him to fetch N'gala and see about the whiskey. It won't do to be left dry with nothing but trade gin in the place."

I went to the verandah and howled "Peter," and presently the savage who bore that name came trotting up. "You go see Missa," I said, "and you ask her, whiskey lib? If whiskey no lib, you tell her she send for case from dem steamah, one-time."

Peter nodded and trotted off to the little house under the nut-palm, vanished inside, and presently re-appeared to go and discuss again the politics of the day on the white beach where the oil-casks were being shipped. A minute or so afterwards N'gala herself came out and walked across the clearing towards me. She was rigged out in a smart blue-and-white check cloth, and had her head shaved in garden plots after the custom of her people.

"Well, have you got that whiskey in the factory?" I asked her.

"Whiskey no lib."

"Have you sent for it then?"

"Money no lib. Massa Purser say, no get money, no let whiskey come. Feteesh (shop) empty. Massa Purser know it. So he won't let anything come ashore from steamah."

So poor Wedderburn was stone-broke as well as dying. I had not known that. However I scribbled a note to Balgarnie asking him to send the whiskey and a hamper full of general necessaries, and

debit me with the cost. Then I told N'gala to get the note sent off, and went back again to the factory.

Wedderburn was asleep, and when I first looked at him through the filmy curtain, upon my soul I thought he was dead. Poor beggar! there was nothing of him but parchment and bone, and the pink pyjamas hung about his limbs in shapeless folds. He had had this bilious fever hanging about him for over a month; his stomach was in such a state that he could never keep anything down for ten minutes at a time; and, in un-medical terms, he was dying of sheer starvation. But I could not understand how it was that he should be out of money. He must have been making a good thing out of the factory, and he lived in no sort of style whatever. The whole of his buildings about the place had open-work bamboo walls that the breezes could blow through; they were thatched with herbage; they were floored with mother earth. Even in the two semi-dark rooms in which he lived, one trod upon hard mud, and supped at a packing-case table. The two beds were of sacking, stretched upon four posts driven into the ground. The only items of luxury were a couple of battered Madeira chairs, each well fished with barrel staves, and crackled by the sun, unless, indeed, one could count in a grey parrot which clawed at a perch under the verandah, and was profane in four languages.

The *ménage* too was carried on at no expense, for even N'gala was not, economically speaking, a luxury. Her official position was that of housekeeper, and she resented anyone attempting to rob Wedderburn except herself. And the distance of Malla-Malla from any of the larger settlements rendered outlay in food no easy matter. In spite of Image's laudation, I knew that Wedderburn's table seldom saw any flesh except local chickens,

which were nasty, and local fish, which were a precious sight worse. He lived for the most part upon yams, bananas, and ground-nuts, and when he did "kill a tin," and riot on the dishes of Europe (very much at second-hand), it distinctly marked a red-letter day.

Presently, however, he opened his eyes again and bid me smoke. "You'll find a tin of 'bacca in that corner yonder, and cigarette papers with it. I'm not well enough to join you myself to-day, but the smell will be cheering. So puff up, and now tell me what's going on at home. Did the Queen run the last Drawing-Room herself, do you recollect?"

I told him the Princess of Wales had presided over the function, so far as my memory served me, and wondered what on earth State Drawing-Rooms in London had got to do with him. I suppose something of this must have shown itself in my face, for presently he chuckled and said:

"I've got a young sister coming out next year, that's why I asked, and I'd rather have liked her to make her first kow-tow to Mrs. Great Britain herself if it could have been managed. I've worked pretty hard to that end."

"Oh, she's going to be presented is she?" I said rather feebly.

"Of course. All our women folk always have been, and when the old governor pegged out, and she and I were the only two left, and I'd got her to look after, and bring up, I wasn't going to let her miss her turn, you bet. That's why I came out here to the Coast. But it's been the devil of a hard pinch at times. It isn't half so prosperous when you're actually bossing a factory here on the spot, as what it looks from a distance."

"I can understand that."

"And besides, being ambitious, one has expenses."

I concluded he was referring to N'gala, and said nothing.

"Old Image seemed to think I was pretty sick," he went on.

"He hinted that he'd seen healthier men," I said, for it seemed to me that as the poor fellow might easily die within the hour, it was only right he should have some knowledge of his state.

"Ah, I know," he said, with a quaint imitation of the skipper's voice. "'Inside's just gone to smash, me lad: all the drugs in Africa couldn't pull him through: bet you a bottle of fizz he pegs out before I'm finished working his cargo, me lad. Any bits of rubbish he wants to send home to his folks, you bring 'em along to me, and I'll carry them to Liverpool free of charge.' Good old Cappie Image, he's a good sort and he's a bit of a judge. But I think he's wrong this time. I've been precious nearly as bad as this once before, and I pulled round all right. Of course I look a fair wreck now," he added faintly, "but then a diet of weak mustard and water isn't stimulating, and my tummy's got to be scoured down to the bare bone till it's fit for service again."

"Will you just try a little soda and Swiss milk?"

"No use. I'll just have a nap by way of a refresher. But I tell you what; you might do me a favour if you would. Just go and seen that the steamer's tally's the same as mine, allowing of course for that cask that got staved. It's quite simple to follow; only oil and kernels; I've no rubber for them this time. But Balgarnie will bear looking after; he always likes to pick up an odd cask or an odd bag or two when he can, so as to square other people's breakages. He's the best purser on the Coast for seeing after the interests of his Company."

I went out of the factory then, and did arithmetic on the beach, to Balgarnie's annoyance. The cargo was nearly all shipped, but the work never



"Wedderburn was asleep I thought he was dead."

slacked. On the contrary, it went on more furiously than ever, and Captain Image was ubiquitous, and urged all concerned with threats, promises, and gin. Navigation by night is forbidden on the Congo; his next place of call was a

bare dozen miles away; and if he could steam there before darkness fell, he could work cargo by electric light, and so save another day. Presently the last of the great white casks was heaved on board, and only two boat-loads of kernels

remained. The mate and the carpenter were both on the fore-deck, and the clacking of the windlass told that the order had been given to "heave short." And presently the last of the kernels were swung up to the derricks, the anchor was broken out of the ground, the propeller sent up the smell of crushed marigolds more keenly than ever into the air, and the *M'poso* was under weigh.

I exchanged helmet-waves with her, and went to the verandah and busied myself with the freightage accounts; and there I was when an hour later the sun, after a final blare from over the tree tops,

slid out of sight, and night came down like the shutting of a box.

The moist stew of heat grew, if anything, more oppressive. The night mists began to crawl in filmy earth-smelling layers from out of the recesses of the trees. And the factory boys either supped in tired silence, or slept on the floor of their shelter with heads wrapped up to keep off the ghosts. But in the little house under the nut-palm a paraffin lamp glowed brightly, and with the two snuff-and-butter-coloured children by her side, N'gala crooned to them what she had picked up of the classic "Ta-ra-ra-boom de-ay."

III.

"Oh, Tollemarche!"

I left the verandah and went inside to the bedroom.

"I saw you," he said, "through the chinks in the bamboos. Had any chop yet?"

"No, it's too hot. The boy came and offered to cook me something just now, but I said I'd wait till it got cooler. Will you have anything?"

"Well, if you put it that way, old man, I will. I'll have an opinion off you. Am I going to pull round or am I going to peg out?"

"Oh," I said rather confusedly, "we'll hope for the best."

"That's skittles! Look here, Tollemarche, I've got my own notions on the subject, and if yours don't agree with mine, I tell you frankly I shan't believe you. It would be too dangerous. It's this way, you see; when a man is sick out here, and gets it into his head he's going to die, he mostly does it. You grasp my way of looking at the matter?"

"Certainly. It's an excellent way."

"Yes, but in two words, what's your candid opinion?"

"Well, if you insist on my being brutal I'm afraid, I'm very much afraid——"

"That'll do, Dick, you needn't go on. You think I'm booked this journey, beyond a doubt. But, as I've warned you, I'm not going to chuck up. I'm going to try on, and try on, and let somebody say I'm dead, when I'm stiff and cold. Oh—my God, Dick, if you only knew how I want to live! It is too damned hard that—after festering in this foul swamp among these savages all these years—I should get bowled over just when I was ready to go home and be able to live again. And then there's Sylvia——" He broke off abruptly, and through the gauze curtain I saw him squirming upon the bed.

I coughed and blew my nose. I seemed to want to just then. "Ahem, er—about your wife, if there is anything I could—I mean I should be awfully pleased if——"

"My wife, man?"

"You said something about Sylvia."

"Oh! that's my young sister. She'll be all right. She's living with a cousin who'll see to her being presented, and

all that. Yes, with any decent luck Sylvia can't fail to come through all right. But I did so want to see her. She's pretty, and she's taking, and when I've been trying to sleep out here in the hot nights, I've pictured her to myself when she's just in her prime, with all the young fellows after her, and she with the ball at her feet. And I've promised myself I'd be about in the odd corners to watch it all; and see she didn't get hold of the wrong man; and back her up, like only a brother, who's been through the mill himself, can do. And now——" he broke off again, and twisted his fingers together, "tell me, Dick, don't you think I've got—well, say, a thousand to one chance?"

"I'm no doctor," I said, "I'm only a friend who wishes you well. But you'd be doing no harm if you settled any affairs you have that want looking after, in case——"

"You're right, there;" he said, "right all the way. Peg out or live, I've got something here that musn't be left to the off-chance. You're the only man I've got to trust, Dick, and I'm going to show you what no human being has ever seen before. I've got a thing up my sleeve that'll bring in a fortune. I've spent years working it out; it's cost me nearly every penny that I did not send home to Sylvia; and I've lived the greater part of my time here on native chop so as to have more money for buying the tackle I wanted. It's a miracle; it'll make a blooming revolution and Sylvia's to have the money. I've got to rely on your honour for that."

"Oh, I'm all right," I said gruffly. "I'm not a brute."

"Thanks, old man, I knew you'd help. But you must see it first before we go any further. My workshop's the next room to this. The padlock-combination

417. Get out the machine, and try it in the open; no one will see you."

"Some of the factory boys may be about, if they count?"

"Everybody counts. But I forgot. Ring the bell on the handle, and they'll scuttle to cover like scared rabbits. I've impressed on them that that machine, and everything connected with it, is plenty-much-big *ju-ju*, and that they'll die one-time if ever they catch so much as a glimpse of it. One chap did see it, by accident, once, and by Jove, he pegged out next day, out of sheer funk. Nothing like a profound belief in *ju-ju* for keeping an invention un-tampered with hereabouts."

"Very well," I said. "Now look here, let's make a bargain. You're getting over-excited. Lie back on the pillow again and get another nap, and I'll go out and inspect your apparatus thoroughly, and be here again in an hour to report."

"Ten minutes will be plenty."

"Call it half-an-hour, then. Man, you must rest. Jumping about like that is as good as committing suicide straight off."

We struck a bargain over the matter, and I went out on to the verandah. The Bengala woman was still rehearsing her new classic in the little house beneath the nut palm; a quartette of factory boys were chattering under the long shed; and here and there about the clearing, mist wreaths crawled like blue-grey snakes along the bare, uneven ground. Ever and again a great splash of noiseless heat-lightning blazed out in the black heavens above the great river, and showed the islands, and the forests, and the beer-coloured water, all tinted clear as day.

I went along the verandah and took hold of the padlock, and cursed the niggers' ingenuity in "picking," which, in that part of Africa, has made key

locks impossible to use. I had forgotten the combination. But in a minute the figures came to me again, and with wet hands I waited for a lightning-flash, and turned the cylinders into place. The lock opened, and the door fell back. Inside was a mechanic's shop. Against the end wall was stacked—ye gods—a bicycle!

The lightning went out for a minute, and I stood staring at the inky dark. I must have made a mistake. No, there it was! And such a machine! The most curious, cumbersome bicycle that was probably ever built. But for all that it was a quaint parody on the very latest type of machine which I had seen not a month ago in London parks.

I drew it to the door-way, and the light flashed on a bell at the handle-bar, and brought up a memory. I rang the bell, and the result startled me. From the factory boys' shed came a rustle as of heads being thrust under blankets, and then a silence like death. The song in the little house beneath the nut palm

stopped in the middle of a bar, and the light from the paraffin lamp was shut off in an instant. Only the noises of the forest behind, and the hum of the insects, and the drone of the great river as it swirled along its weary road, were left to people the clearing. I mounted the machine, and rode all round the rim of the jungle. It was heavy, it creaked, and buckled, it was hard to steer, but it carried me with a curious softness. I saw what had happened, and a new pain grew at my heart. This lonely exile had re-invented something that had been making fortunes in the British Islands ever since he had left them.

But as I rode there over that savage ground, beneath the sweltering African night, I thought I saw what was demanded of me, and I made up my mind to lie if it came to the question, as only a man should lie when there is no other way of helping a friend to die in peace.

IV.

"Well?" said Wedderburn, when I went into the room again, "you've seen the thing? What do you think of the invention?"—His eyes were curiously bright, and they shone out of his pinched face like stars. His voice had grown weak and tremulous—"Won't it make a revolution in cycling?"

"Yes," I said.

"You are not enthusiastic, and the clumsiness of the machine deceives you. But that is only a rough model. I'm a rotten mechanic. The thing you saw is merely to give the general idea. Oh, Lord, Dick, if you only knew how I had toiled at it; if you only could understand how I built up the notion, step by step, and drew plans with the sweat dropping from my

face on to the paper. I've had the idea gurgling in my head for years, and now it's carried out and it's perfect. I don't care what you say, it's perfect. And it's got to be patented and bring in a fortune for me and Sylvia. Dick, I wouldn't take a hundred thousand pounds for that invention."

I could speak with sincerity here: "It's worth all that," I said, "and more."

"I'm not letting figures dazzle me," said Wedderburn.

"Man alive," I cried, "once get these pneumatic tyres on the market, and everybody who uses a machine is bound to have a pair, let them cost what they may."

“‘Pneumatic tyres,’ Dick, that’s a good name, better than the title I’d thought of. I owe you one for that. And is bicycling very popular at home now?”

“They all go in for it.”

“But only the bounders?”

“No, even the decent people. It’s the latest craze.”

“And they submit to having their insides jolted up by the little narrow tyres, same as they used to six years ago?”

I told the lie without a quaver. “Same jolt,” I said.

“It’s marvellous, marvellous. And to think that no one has picked up the idea before, and it’s mine, mine, all my very own. Pneumatic tyres! Yes, that’s a good name for them, and I’m the sole and original inventor: no others need apply. Dick, I believe you’re right after all, and I’m going to peg out. I suppose there’ll be no legal objection to Sylvia taking out the patent in her own name?”

“None whatever.”

“She isn’t of age, of course; she’s just seventeen; her birthday was the day before yesterday; but that could be got over?”

“Oh easily,” I said, “trustees.”

“Of course, yes, trustees. You and

some lawyer man. Pick one who won’t diddle her, Dick.”

“I’ll get the safest in Britain.”

“Had your chop yet, Dick?”

“No, couldn’t eat anything. Too hot.”

“You old fool, you were worrying about me—You’re a good sort Dick—And you and Cappie Image were right—I’m booked through this trip. Everything’s all gone dark, and I can’t half see the lightning when it comes now. But Dick, isn’t it

a fine thing for Sylvia? One hundred blooming thousand pounds at least—and more—you think.”

“Sylvia will be an heiress, with all the men in England running after her.”

“And no one to see after her and throw in an occasional hint. Look here Dick. You’re going home soon?”

“In another six months.”

“Well you must take the bicycle then, and patent it for her, and look after her. I’ll write and

say—no, I can’t now. You write, Dick, and tell her she isn’t to be presented till you come back. Tell her I say so, and then she’ll do it. And tell her I want her to do pretty much as you advise. You will see to her, Dick, won’t you? She’s such a kid. Only just seventeen.”

A quavering hand dived slowly under



“I mounted the machine and rode all round the rim of the jungle.”

the mosquito bar and grasped mine. I took it in my fingers and pressed it gently. I did not feel quite able to speak.

“‘ Good sort, Dick.”

The hand hung listlessly in mine.

“‘ What time is it ?”

“‘ Morning. Three o'clock.”

“‘ That's why it's getting so cold then. Cover yourself up Dick. There's a silk handkerchief—Tie it round your middle or else—you'll get chills in your tummy and invent rheumatic tyres—and cut out Sylvia and the lawyer—Oh what skittles I'm talking—and it—it isn't—I say Dick.”

“‘ Yes, old man.”

“‘ You'll be sure—and see—she gets—that money ?”

“‘ Every penny,” I said loudly. But I do not think he heard. Of a sudden his hand grew curiously heavy in mine, and when I let it go, it fell with a thud against the earthen floor.

I sat back and mopped my face on a sleeve. The lightning had ceased, and the night was at its blackest. The air was almost chill. It was just before the dawn.

From the other side of the clearing, near the river bank, there came a dozen bars of “‘ Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay,” and then once more silence. I think the Bangala woman had been singing in her sleep.