

# TREACHERY

by  
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A

LITTLE expert manipulation with a knife blade and the window yielded easily.

"Slippery" Howard dropped softly through and stood on the rich carpet beneath. Seldom in the course of his professional career had a job of burglary presented so few apparent difficulties, but never had he embarked upon an adventure with such feelings of apprehension and premonitions of disaster.

However, "Slippery" was something of a psychologist in his unlettered way and he shrugged his inhibitions aside. There were two reasons why he felt bad about this job, but neither of them was going to stop him.

The first was his quarrel with "Strawberry" Greig, the red-haired queen of that section of Sydney's underworld which acknowledged "Slippery" as one of its leading luminaries. It was partly for her capriciousness that "Slippery" loved her, but that did not mean that he could afford to let her whims interfere with his livelihood.

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But "Strawberry" had told him in the unequivocal manner of their circle that all was over between them. More than that, she had threatened him with the dire consequences of her displeasure, had reminded him of her extensive knowledge of his delinquencies, and had hinted darkly that Goulburn Gaol was an inconvenient place from which to pay court to pretty housemaids.

All of which had left "Slippery" with a vague fear that "Strawberry's" spite might cause her to forget the code of her class and drop a disastrous hint to the authorities.

The other cause of "Slippery's" uneasiness was that only the previous night a particularly vile and atrocious murder had been committed not a block away from Dr. Leverrier's house. The young victim had been maltreated as if by a fiend and the whole city, ably assisted by the morning Press, had shuddered. On his way to this job "Slippery" had walked over the spot where the body had been found and he had seen police hovering about and had been conscious of a general air of watchfulness and suspicion in the neighborhood.

Still, he had fixed this night to burglar Dr. Leverrier's house and he was superstitious enough to believe that procrastination in these matters was inviting failure. So there he stood on the doctor's carpet, having closed the window softly behind him and drawn the blind, listening intently for any suspicious noises within the house.

There was none; only the unhurried ticking of a big clock; so "Slippery" pressed the button of his electric torch and cautiously probed the room with the beam. The pencil of light revealed books, pictures,

of light revealed books, pictures, ornaments, all obviously expensive to "Slippery's" experienced eye. It also swept over medical instruments and other paraphernalia that interested him not at all, as not commanding a ready market. Presently it rested on an old-fashioned iron safe in a cor-

ner of the big room and, with a soft exclamation of satisfaction, the burglar moved silently across the carpet and commenced a close examination of the lock.

And then all his premonitions and fears were suddenly justified by the click of an electric switch and "Slippery" whirled round in a blaze of light and found himself looking down the barrel of an automatic pistol.

The man behind the pistol was tall and thin and old but very purposeful. He was coatless and wearing slippers. From descriptions he had had, "Slippery" knew that it was Dr. Leverrier.

The tall man motioned to a chair: "Sit down."

Completely cowed by the pistol, "Slippery" sat and allowed himself to be searched. He never carried a weapon, anyhow.

The tall man stepped behind him. "Don't move," he said. "I still have you covered." Swiftly he looped a cord round the burglar's body and bound him to the chair. Then, coming round to the front again, he completed the job by binding "Slippery's" wrists to the arms of the chair and his ankles to the legs

## Restless Eyes

It was all done very quickly and expertly and the burglar was too

expertly and the burglar was too stunned to protest. When he was securely trussed, the doctor drew up another chair and sat facing him. He had put away his pistol and "Slippery" for the first time noticed his eyes. They were restless, haunted eyes, full of a vague agony which the simple mind of the burglar could not analyse. They peered closely into "Slippery's" face and then the doctor spoke again:

"Young man," said the doctor, "you are surprised and startled and I owe you an explanation. You shall have it, but I warn you that I am going to tell you something altogether outside ordinary experience and something that you would not hear at all except that you will never be in a position to repeat it. I am going to tell you because I think it is only fair that you should know why I have to do what I am about to do.

"I suppose I look to you to be about 60 years old. As a matter of fact I am just on 600. You think I am mad, but I am not."

"Slippery" was quite sure that he was mad, but he could offer no comment on account of the gag.

"I will tell you the whole of my story," continued the tall man, "because it does me good to talk to somebody about it and I seldom have the chance.

"I was a youth in Avignon in the days of the Black Death. Those were terrible times, young man, and the world has never suffered like that since. My father, mother, brothers, sisters were stricken down one after the other and I fled the town. The roads were strewn with corpses and the whole countryside stank of putrefaction. It was a nightmare

journey. Strange lights danced in the

journey. Strange lights danced in the sky and the air was sodden and dead.

"In those days there was much talk of witchcraft and sorcery and I have seen many things happen which you would not believe."

"Slippery" wriggled in his bonds and made protesting noises behind his gag. He was more than ever convinced that he had been captured by a madman, but his knots had been too thoroughly tied to give him any hope of escape.

Dr Leverrier's blazing eyes came closer: "You can't get away; I need you. Listen. You—all you moderns—do not believe in witchcraft, but I tell you that the people who burned witches were not wrong. The day I fled from Avignon I met a witch. She was beautiful and I was young and, in those days, strong and good to look at. She took me to her cottage in the woods on the outskirts of the town and for a while I forgot the plague.

"But afterwards the fear returned and I told her I did not want to die. At that she laughed and laughed and said, 'Beloved, you shall not die, for I will mix you a broth that will make you immortal.'

"After a while she brought me the broth," continued Dr. Leverrier, "and I drank it without asking any questions. But in the bottom of the bowl I found a long, red hair. She laughed again then and said, 'So long as you drink that broth you will never die except by the treachery of a red-haired woman.'

His eyes blazed with a terrible mirth, and "Slippery" struggled frantically against the cords that bound him to the chair. That the man was mad he was sure, but there was something in this reference to the treachery of a red-haired woman that did not tend to decrease his

the treachery of a red-haired woman that did not tend to decrease his discomfort.

Memories of "Strawberry's" threats crowded back on him. Had she proved treacherous, he wondered, and warned this lunatic of his intended visit?

Dr. Leverrier pushed back his chair and began to pace the room. "A terrible suspicion flooded over me and I seized her and held her against the wall of her hut and demanded to know what I had drunk.

"She laughed in my face again and told me. It was horrible but I had to believe her. The broth was made from a young human body.

"Do not start. Modern medicine recognises gland extracts and from the very dawn of the human race men have guessed dimly that it might be possible to capture the vital spirit of another, to absorb it and retain it. Hence the ceremonial cannibalism that is a common trait in wild races.

"They eat parts of their enemy's body and think that thereby they take to themselves his vital spirit.

"They are nearly right. It is only because their methods are not perfect that they fail. I know the secret. I learnt it that day from my beautiful witch. She told me exactly how to brew the broth. She told me that I would need it at intervals and that a sign would be given to me when I should prepare and drink it.

"I swore I would not. I was frantic with horror, but she just laughed and laughed until I took her white throat between my hands and strangled her.

"When she was dead I fled from the woods and took the road again, though I did not know then how long that road was going to be."

The doctor sat down again facing his captive. There were beads of sweat on his forehead and his mouth

his captive. There were beads of sweat on his forehead and his mouth was working strangely. "Slippery," limp with fear, gazed at him with wide eyes.

"I still do not know how long it will be," continued the doctor in a quieter voice, "for I dare not die. I must live. Whenever I need the oath I must have it.

"I wandered from Avignon through the world—through the centuries. The things I have seen would amaze you. I saw Joan of Arc at Compiègne. She had just recovered from an arrow wound in the shoulder and she looked more like a spirit than a human being. Nothing feminine about her like the silly pictures you see. She was like a white-faced boy angel.

"I was in Seville when Columbus passed through from Palos to Barcelona with the news of his discovery. The people were frantic with excitement. The Indians, the strange animals, the gold! The only unsurprised person was the navigator himself. He was perfectly calm. You see, he had always known he would do it.

"I was in St. Andero when the Duke of Medina brought back the remains of his Armada. That was a sad day. The people could not realise that such a magnificent fleet could have been smashed so completely. They were stunned. I can remember the tolling of church bells in the dreadful silence.

"Then I was in Magdeburg when Tilly's soldiers butchered the inhabitants. Very few escaped. I was one of them because I was immortal. The world sees little of these horrible things now. Never believe people who say that modern war is terrible, because there is nothing so terrible as men gone mad with murder. The modern aviator, dropping bombs, does

modern aviator, dropping bombs, does not feel that. He is a cold, impersonal destroyer, whose fingers never drip with the blood of his victims.

"I was in Cannes when Napoleon landed from Elba. I never saw him, but I could feel the thrill of his presence. It was like an electric shock through Europe. I remember the news of Waterloo, and after that I went to England. It was in England that I had my last bowl of broth, and 60 years ago I came to Australia."

The doctor rose again and went to a bench, from which he took a long and strangely-shaped knife. "Slippery" commenced to struggle frantically in his bonds, but the rope held him tight, and the chair was a heavy one, so that he could not even stand up. Dr. Leverrier came back and stood over him: "You must die that I may live. I have studied medicine, not for a little life-time, but for hundreds of years, and some day I will put my discoveries on record for the good of the world. In that way I will make some return for the evil I have done. In the meantime, I dare not die. I dare not face my Maker; and I will tell you why.

"Every 50 or 60 years the effect of the broth wears off. It happens quite

suddenly and I go mad. Always on these occasions I commit some dreadful crime. It is the sign that the witch warned me of. It was I who killed that little girl last night."

The doctor's voice had died away to a whisper, but now it rose till it was almost a scream: "So you see why I dare not die. My soul is black with horrors. I must live until I can make some sort of retribution. You are worthless—a criminal. You must be the victim. You must furnish me with my elixir of life."

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He seized "Slippery's" chin with a grip of iron and forced it upwards. The electric light glittered on the knife blade. Just as the burglar fainted he was aware of the shrilling of a door-bell somewhere in the house.

"Slippery" Howard came to himself with a long shudder and opened his eyes. He was stretched on the doctor's couch, and the first thing he saw was the badge of the Police Force shining in a blue cap not a foot from his face. The wearer of the cap, a sergeant, was bending over him. The room seemed full of policemen. Two of them were stooping over a still figure on the floor.

"Slippery" sat up. It was Dr. Leverrier, and it was easy to see that he was dead. There seemed to be a lot of blood on the carpet. One of the policemen was gingerly handling the long knife.

"Now, then," said the sergeant. "Tell us all about it."

"Is he dead?" asked "Slippery" needlessly.

## Told His Tale

"He's dead, all right. Turned round in a hell of a hurry when we opened the door and fell over a chair. Knife went clean through his heart. And there was you, out to it, and tied up like a fowl. Come on, now we want to know the whole story. We know you were trying to burgle the place, so it's no good telling lies."

As fast as he could collect his thoughts, "Slippery" told his tale, and when he had finished the sergeant removed his cap and wiped his brow.

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"Good Lord," he remarked. "I never heard anything like it. Everybody knew old Leverrier was a bit mad, but who would have thought he'd have come at a thing like that. Thought he committed last night's murder, did he? We got that cove an hour ago, confession and everything."

Then, turning again to "Slippery": "Come along, my lad. We'll have to take you down to the station. You'll be wanted for a witness at the inquest even if we don't charge you with anything. And you can thank your lucky stars some dame was rotten enough to tip us off that you were on the job. It saved your life, apparently, even if it cost old Leverrier his. Now, then, off you go."

Walking in a wide arc to avoid the body on the floor, "Slippery" went meekly away between two constables.

"Queer business," said the sergeant, as he turned to superintend the removal of the corpse. "What was that bit in that lad's story about old Leverrier expecting to die through the treachery of a red-haired woman?"