

## JOHN JASPER—STRANGLER

by Howard Duffield

INTRODUCTORY NOTE.—*The foremost problem in detective fiction—that is what Dickens bequeathed to his readers in the unfinished “Mystery of Edwin Drood”. Mr. Chesterton says: “The only one of Dickens’s novels which he did not finish was the only one that really needed finishing. He never had but one thoroughly good plot to tell; and that he has only told in heaven”.*

*The puzzle of “Edwin Drood” will never be solved. It is, therefore, perfectly futile to some folk; perfectly fascinating to others. From the year of Dickens’s death to the present, continuations and solutions have occupied second-rate novelists and first-rate critics. Plays, and even a film-play, have been founded on the plot. Andrew Lang in England and Harry B. Smith in America each wrote an essay based on the idea of putting Sherlock Holmes on the case. Two great mock-trials have been held in which Jasper was tried for murder. One, in London, was in the hands of authors: Gilbert K. Chesterton was the judge and Bernard Shaw the foreman of the jury. The other, in Philadelphia, was conducted by lawyers, business men and scholars. The chief controversies have raged around two points: did Jasper succeed in committing the murder, or was Drood—as one of the tentative titles for the book suggests—in hiding, after an attempt on his life? The other question is: who was the detective, Datchery?*

*In this article, Dr. Duffield passes by these problems and studies the antecedents of Jasper, Precentor of the Cathedral, and strangest of villains. Mr. Cuming Walters (himself the inventor of an odd theory about Datchery) has compiled “The Complete Edwin Drood”, which is a veritable encyclopedia of the whole controversy. If you look at it, you will see that in this study by Dr. Duffield there is a plausible suggestion which all the other critics have missed. Dr. Duffield, picking up a hint in one place, and a clue in another, has done something which I should have thought impossible. He has contributed to the discussion something really new.—EDMUND PEARSON.*

**A**MONG the unsolved puzzles of literature, few are more intricate and fascinating than *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Interrupted by death when the novel was half written, Dickens left to his readers a riddle which is equally baffling and alluring.

The work was to have been published in twelve monthly instalments. Only three were printed. Three more in manuscript were

upon the author’s desk when he died. The thread was cut when only half the story was told. Edwin Drood was a boyish chap, engaged to be married to a schoolgirl. As their betrothal was a testamentary provision of their parents, their love-making lacked ardor and the young people tugged at the tether. John Jasper, a cathedral choir-master, was Drood’s uncle, and treated him with an ostentatious affection. On Christmas Eve

Edwin and a certain Neville Landless, with whom he had quarrelled, met in Jasper's room to arrange a reconciliation. On Christmas morning Edwin could not be found. The pivot of the story is this mysterious disappearance.

From the outset John Jasper takes the limelight, as a study in criminal psychology, the exponent of an idea which Dickens asserted was "very curious", "very strong", "not communicable" and "difficult to work". It becomes quickly apparent that the clue to the rôle for which Jasper is cast must be sought for in Oriental antecedents. The story is enveloped in Oriental atmosphere. All the impulses which give it movement and direction come out of the East. Sultans, Turkish robbers, cymbals, scimitars, dancing-girls and parading elephants, like the fantastic figures of an Eastern rug, are woven into the web of the narrative by its introductory sentences. The moment the covers are opened a waft of opium is released, and every crisis reeks with opium fumes. The short prefatory chapter, which the author originally designated as the "Prologue", and at the close of which, as he himself says, he "touches the keynote", is wholly concerned with an East Indian opium den near the London docks, that great gateway through which the life of the Orient streams into England.

The occupants of the den are a Chinaman and a Lascar. Its proprietress is a hag who is an opium addict, and who "has opium-smoked herself into a strange likeness of the Chinaman". As he enters, Edwin Drood announces, "I shall go engineering into the East". In her first conversation with her betrothed, Edwin's fiancée drags in allusions to "Arabs, . . . and Fellahs, and people", to "Isises, and Ibises, and Cheopses, and Pharaohses", descants concerning the Pyramids and the Oriental trick of divining the future by gazing at a drop of ink in the palm of the hand. Mr. Sapsea, an auctioneer, pompously refers to "Pekin, Nankin and Canton", and proclaims that he comes in touch

"with Japan, with Egypt, with bamboo and sandalwood from the East Indies". Neville and Helena Landless hail from Ceylon, and the author, after due consideration, endows them with a "mixture of Oriental blood". Sapsea harps on their "un-English" appearance. Edwin opens conversation with Neville by proclaiming that "he was going to wake Egypt a little", and incessantly alludes to that "part of the world in which Neville was brought up". A sneering reference to Oriental manners, intensified by a contemptuous comment on Neville's "dark color", provokes an angry collision between the young men, which is a vital element of the plot. One of the most prominent characters has pinned upon him the grotesque title of "Tartar", a name as redolent of the East as a whiff of hashish.

Concerning the background of John Jasper, who occupies the center of the stage, Dickens intentionally left the reader in ignorance. A solitary remark as to personal appearance suggests an Oriental origin: "He is a dark man with thick, lustrous, well-arranged black hair and whiskers, and he looks older than he is, as dark men often do". Incidentally, he is shown to be familiar with the languages of the East for, when he listens to the mutterings of the opium-drenched Chinaman and the Lascar, he recognizes them as "unintelligible gibberish".

The revealing clue as to Jasper's personality is furnished by Dickens himself. With sedulous care he kept out of the story everything which might disclose its central secret, but in a confidential conversation with Luke Fildes, the illustrator of the novel, he made a statement which unveils Jasper with startling clearness. In a letter to the *London Times* of November 3rd, 1905, Fildes wrote that he had requested Dickens to explain a matter which he did not comprehend, and without an understanding of which he was unable properly to prepare his drawings. "I instanced," he writes, "the printer's rough proof, where he (Dickens) particularly de-

scribed John Jasper as wearing a neckcloth of such dimensions as to go twice around his neck. I called his attention to the fact that I had previously sketched Jasper as wearing a little black tie around the neck, and I asked him if he had any special reason for the alteration of Jasper's attire; and if so,—I submitted to him,—I ought to know. He (Dickens) appeared for the moment to be disconcerted by my remark, and said something, meaning he was afraid he was 'getting on too fast' and revealing more than he meant to at that early stage. After a short silence, cogitating, he suddenly said, 'Can you keep a secret?' I assured him he could rely upon me. He then said, 'I must have the double tie. It is necessary, for Jasper strangles Edwin Drood with it.'

That this ample "neckcloth" was central to Dickens's thought is cried aloud by Fildes's letter. The insisted substitution of that long black scarf, for the "little black tie"; his anxiety, lest he might let into the open the very idea which he was so strenuously concealing; his brooding silence; his deliberate weighing of the situation; his exaction of a pledge of absolute secrecy; his stressing the pivotal relation to the narrative, of Jasper's neck-gear—"I *must* have the double tie. It is *necessary*"—his explanation that Jasper is to *strangle* Drood with it, form a combination of circumstances which proclaim with cumulative emphasis that Fildes's inquiry went, like a probe, close to the heart of the "Mystery".

To anyone familiar with the habits and history of the East, the discovery that in a novel saturated with Orientalisms the chief character was to figure as "A Strangler" is electrifying. During two-thirds of the nineteenth century, the period spanned by the life of Charles Dickens, the outstanding feature of English rule in India was the effort to suppress the Phansigars, popularly known as "Thugs", whose victims were invariably strangled. Read in the light of this illuminating fact, the pages of the Drood fragment

are found to be bristling with intimations that when Dickens told Fildes that a long black neckcloth *must* be in the picture, because it was *necessary* for a *strangling*, he made known what he had so earnestly striven to hide, that in the lore of this Oriental cult of death was to be found the major clue to the mystery which he was weaving.

The history of the Stranglers is a weird and gruesome chapter in the annals of crime. The bare conception of such a guild of murderers is so abhorrent and appalling that until the most convincing evidence had been secured the English Government refused to admit its existence, and it was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that its presence as a cancerous factor in the social life of India became definitely acknowledged. In 1829 the Supreme Government of India established a Special Police Department, known as "Thuggee and Dacoity", to ferret out and suppress this savage brotherhood. Annual reports were made to the British Parliament until 1904, when it was believed that Thuggee had been finally wiped off the map.

The basal fact of the Drood story is a mysterious disappearance, and it was the frequency of "mysterious disappearances" (to quote the Police Reports) which first arrested the attention of the Government. Murder by a Thug was invariably a "mysterious disappearance". Travellers who set out upon a journey never reached their journey's end. Neighbors vanished. Soldiers on furlough failed to return to the ranks. Nothing was ever known concerning a Strangler's victim, except that he was gone. The whole story of a Strangler's crime is contained in Dickens's repeated words, "No trace of Edwin Drood revisited the light of the sun".

The roster of these "mysterious disappearances" became so significantly large as to demand explanation, and the curtain lifted upon as repugnant and terrifying a spectacle as has ever been played in the drama of humanity. The Government of India found

itself at close grips with a secret cult of "religious assassins". This craft of murder was sanctified, and its practice hallowed as a sort of ancestral rite. A member of that order would be running true to form if, as Jasper did, he wore a surplice over a murderous heart. A Strangler regarded himself as a votary of Kali, the Goddess of Destruction. Victims were never "murdered", but always "destroyed", as a sacrificial offering to her. The fact that, in the Drood fragment, Dickens has repeatedly used the term "destruction" in a very peculiar and sinister sense, flashes into light the thought that he is picturing Jasper as an adept in this unholy sect. When Jasper registers a vow of vengeance, consecrating his life to the pursuit of the supposed murderer of Drood, Dickens makes him say, "I devote myself to his destruction". This is a very strange and a very significant fancy expression. The natural statement would have been, "I will do all in my power to lead to his discovery, or secure his arrest, or bring him to justice, or insure his punishment". When he couches his determination in the term "I devote myself to his destruction", he is employing keywords in the vocabulary of the Strangers. That Dickens was thoroughly aware of the baleful purpose of this phraseology and used it with set purpose is strikingly indicated by his selection as a heading for that chapter in which he records this incident of Jasper's dedication of himself as missionary of "destruction"—the one word "Devoted". To a Thug, that word could have but a single meaning. The presence of this idea in Dickens's mind is made still more apparent by his description of Jasper as endowed with an uncanny potency of "destruction". Dickens writes that Jasper gazed at young Landless, "as though his eye were at the trigger of a loaded rifle"—"with a sense of destructive power so expressed in his face" that his companion, who was a thick-skinned and stony-hearted bumpkin, shivered.

Not only did Dickens brand the Precentor

of Cloisterham Cathedral with this hallmark of the Oriental Strangers, but he has depicted him as a practitioner of every principle which is laid down in their science of death. The initial requirement of their system was the identification of themselves with the most respectable classes of the community, precisely after the fashion in which Jasper is introduced as having made for himself a place of high regard among the Cloisterham folk. Thugs became traders, farmers, men of business, even members of the learned professions. Commercially, they were trusted. Socially, they were courted. It was of prime importance that they should pose as good citizens and friendly neighbors. English officers testify to having lived on excellent terms with men whose affability and seeming integrity were only a mask for the instincts and practice of Thuggee. The language of the official records as to the favorable impression invariably created by a Strangler is distinctly re-echoed in the detailed stressing of Jasper's social standing:—"so much respected", "enjoying the reputation of having done wonders as a music teacher", "choosing his society and holding such an independent position".

It was a fundamental principle of Thuggee that the prelude to a murder should be the deception of the victim by pretended kindness. So important and imperative was this step, that its practice was assigned to a group specially trained for this purpose, and known as "Inveiglers". It was their treacherous task to insinuate themselves into the intimacy of their unsuspecting prey to the end that they might strike the death-blow behind the shield of a recognized attachment. Dickens has "writ large" such a relationship between Jasper and Edwin Drood. Underscored in the first pages, it is played up persistently and consistently throughout the story. Jasper was over-affectionate to Drood. He deluged him with affection. Cloisterham's name for Edwin was "John Jasper's beloved nephew". The Dean remarks, "I hope Mr. Jasper's heart

may not be too much set upon his nephew". The Minor Canon, when told that a visit from Edwin was expected, says, "He will do you more good than a doctor, Jasper". Time and again Edwin protested against being so perpetually "moddley-coddleyed". The affection with which Jasper overloaded Edwin was ostentatious, almost unctuous. Acts of kindness were superabundant. Terms of endearment were employed with studious and exaggerated frequency. Such behavior would seem to mark him, and would certainly qualify him, as a Sothae, or Inveigler, in any circle of Thugs.

The "destruction" of a victim by a Strangler was wrought in accordance with a rigid ritual of procedure. Murder was never committed until a burial place had been prepared. Certain members of the band were chosen as a sort of committee on graves. An out-of-the-way spot was carefully selected in which the body could be instantly and secretly hidden. So expert were the Thugs in the concealment of the dead that the places in which the bodies of their victims were buried could seldom be discovered, except by the confession of the slayer. Jasper is represented as an expert in sepulture. Sounding the keys of the vaults, as if they were tuning forks; cultivating Durdles, the tomb-keeper of the Cathedral, as a companion; continually rambling through the domain of the dead; arranging a night-time picnic in the crypt, during which every nook and cranny in which a corpse might be concealed was explored; taking note of a near-by heap of lime in which a body might be disintegrated, Jasper notably performed this cardinal duty of a Thug.

The observance of omens was regarded by a Strangler as absolutely essential, before attempting the "destruction" of his victim. Upon the eve of an assassination, watchers scanned the sky and air and landscape with piercing vigilance, searching for some token from the Goddess of Destruction. An elaborate code of such signs is catalogued in the

governmental records of India. In a recent novel which vividly describes a murder by strangulation, a brace of Anglicized Thugs prefaced their assault by an "unaccountable expedition" across the Scottish countryside. For days their victim had been within reach, but before the attack could be made, the omens must be noted. Jasper, accompanied by the grave-digger Durdles, made just such an unaccountable expedition to the top of the Cathedral Tower which has all the marks of an omen-hunt. It was undertaken at the proper time. The Christmas Eve party, which circumstances had denoted as the moment when Jasper must strike his blow, was at hand. The hour had come when it was necessary to consult the oracle of "destruction", and as he and Durdles made a midnight ascent of the Tower they received one of the most auspicious tokens known to Thuggee. Near the summit, they heard "the chirp of some startled jackdaw or rook". At the next step, as they emerged upon the top, they were greeted with a view of "the river, winding down from the mists of the horizon". The call of a rook in sight of a river, known as "Julkajura", was the most favorable omen which could possibly befall. In the lore of the Phansigar, the Goddess had spoken and had given to whatever plan was in Jasper's heart her frightful benediction. The pair of Strangers in the story referred to above, during their expedition through the fields heard the cawing of a rook as they caught sight of a river. "Sign and river!" cried the one to the other, in a kind of ecstasy. "The sign of signs!" That same occult token came to Jasper in the Tower. What he proposed to do was blessed by Kali.

In the earliest pages of the novel Dickens had called attention to the rooks which were fluttering about the Cathedral Tower, and embroidered the incident with some clever and whimsical notions. What was really in the back of his head when he wrote that paragraph slipped into view as he proceeded to say that onlookers might almost fancy

that the behavior of the rooks was a matter of "some occult importance". Evidently he was so obsessed with the thought that the cawing of a rook in the Tower at the crisis of his story *would* be surcharged with occult importance, that the idea tintured his ink and dripped from the point of his pen. The paragraph is most ingeniously devised to hoodwink the reader, but in its very excess of cunning it seems to whisper "If, by and by, the call of a rook is heard in the Tower, 'stop, look and listen', for that will be a cry of 'occult importance'". Those rooks in the second chapter were really red herrings.

The Strangler was directed by Thuggee ritual to use but a single instrument of death, —a fold of cloth known as the "roomal". This strip of fabric had the sanctity of a relic. It was regarded as a fragment of the gown of Kali. Ordinarily it was white or yellow. Such colored stuffs in Jasper's possession would require explanation, Dickens therefore pictures him, when he went up the postern stair to his rendezvous with fate, as pulling off "a great *black* scarf and hanging it in a loop upon his arm". The hint as to color was given in the Kali mythology, which relates that the gown of the Goddess was black; and that grimly suggested "loop" is also distinctly inventoried in the Thugs' handbook of murder. This strangling cloth was invariably worn as part of one's dress, either as a turban or a girdle. Adapting it to English custom, Jasper wore it as a neckcloth, in the fashion of that old-time stock which Fildes was told he must put into the picture, because it was necessary for a strangling. That necessity was created by the rules of Thuggee. If Edwin was to be done to death by an Oriental Strangler, he "must" be murdered in just that way.

The death rubric of the Stranglers directed that the "destruction" of the victim must be wrought by at least two assailants. Captain Sleeman, Superintendent of the Thug Police, writes, "Two Phansigars are considered indispensable to effect the murder of one man".

For Jasper to undertake to strangle Edwin single-handed was contrary to the accepted practice, and the futility of his endeavor is definitely foreshadowed. In the first conversation between Edwin and his betrothed, Dickens represents Rosa as interpolating a far-fetched dissertation on Belzoni, the Oriental traveller, into their badinage. "There was Belzoni, or somebody," she said, "dragged out by the legs, *half choked* with bats and dust. All the girls say, they wish he had been *quite choked*. . . . But how can his legs and his chokes concern you?" Nothing in the story, as told to us, makes this prattle about "chokes" anything more than the whimsy of a schoolgirl. But when thirty-five years later Fildes announces that Dickens had confidentially advised him that a pivotal feature of the plot was an attempt by Jasper to strangle Drood, those apparently offhand sentences wear another look, and begin to shine with a strange light. Those "chokes" did concern Edwin, much more than Belzoni, and were not due to the "bats and dust" which, with such careful carelessness, are thrust upon the reader's attention. Those "half chokes", and that "not quite choked", carry one far deeper into Mr. Dickens's confidence than Luke Fildes ever penetrated.

"Half choked" victims were sufficiently frequent to have embalmed themselves in the Thug vocabulary. To quote from their dictionary of evil, "bisul purna" meant "to be awkwardly handled in strangling; to have the roomal round the face or head instead of the neck". "Bisul" is defined as "a person intended to be killed, on whom the roomal falls untowardly, either on his head or face". "Jywaloo" describes a person left for dead, but afterwards found to have life in him. This singular reference to Belzoni shows that Dickens had clearly in mind the intention of representing Jasper as only "half choking" Edwin in his unassisted assault upon him, an idea for which there is abundant authority both in history and in the court records; and it may be fairly claimed that he had laid

the ground for such a frustrated attack by selecting the only kind of an attempt at murder which permitted it. A thrust with a dagger, a shot from a pistol, a pinch of poison in a wine glass—these would have meant certain death.

Had Dickens lived to relate what happened on the night of Edwin's mysterious disappearance, the tale would in all likelihood be a replica of much that is inscribed on the police blotters of the "Thuggee and Dacoity" Department. To quote a single entry: "The Stranglers contrive to keep company with their victim, and watch for an opportunity to destroy him. This they sometimes create by persuading him to quit his lodging place, a little after midnight, pretending it is near daybreak; or by detaching him from his companions, lead him under various pretences to some solitary spot. In the destruction of their victims they first use some deleterious substance, which they contrive to administer in food or drink. As soon as the poison begins to take effect by inducing a stupor or langour, they strangle him to prevent his crying out. . . . The deed is completed on the brink of a well, into which they plunge the body". To those familiar with the Drood story, such a memorandum reads like a scenario for the Cloisterham affair. But it is actually a paragraph from "General Orders by Major General St. Leger, Commanding the Forces, Headquarters, Cawnpore, 28 April, 1810". It is printed in full in Captain Sleeman's book, *The Thugs*, which was widely circulated in England, and could not have escaped the attention of any writer interested in the subject of strangling.

A Phansigar motif would be peculiarly alluring to Dickens. The mystery which cloaked the very existence of this murder guild, the weird psychology of its members, the uncanny dexterity with which they wrought at their fiendish craft, would strongly appeal to one so temperamentally attracted by the melodramatic elements of human expression and who was such a keen

and constant observer of their expression in criminality. During Dickens's entire lifetime, Thuggee was a topic which was more or less constantly in the air. The reports of Captain Sleeman, Superintendent of the force organized for the suppression of the Phansigars, were embodied in a volume which stirred and startled all England about 1835. The *Edinburgh Review* devoted a leading article to the subject in 1837. A little later Meadows Taylor, a high police official in personal touch with all the facts, presented them in the guise of a novel, entitled *The Confessions of a Thug*. This book had an immense vogue. De Quincey mentions it in his essays. Its composition was suggested by Bulwer-Lytton, Dickens's literary comrade, who declared that ignorance of the subject alone prevented him from devoting his own pen to its treatment.

In 1847 Eugène Sue entertained Dickens in Paris at the moment when his recently written *The Wandering Jew* was at its meridian. One of the high lights of that book is a detailed account of Thuggee. Foremost among its characters was a Strangler who practised in Europe the fell craft he had acquired in India. The French author was familiar with Captain Sleeman's reports, for the name of his Phansigar villain is copied from its pages. Dickens could not have been in touch with Sue at just that time without coming to some extent under the spell of the Oriental clan of assassins, any more than a writer of novels at the present day could be the guest of John Galsworthy and remain indifferent to the fortunes of the Forsytes. In 1857, writing of an epidemic of garroting which had broken out in London, Dickens himself refers to the curios in the British Museum which illustrated the art of strangulation as practised by the Thugs. An American novel, called *Cord and Creese*, centered upon a mysterious murder by an Englishman who had become affiliated with the Thugs, and which, in similarity of incident, noticeably parallels the Drood story,

was published and widely read upon both sides of the Atlantic in 1869, the year in which Dickens began to spin the "mystery" of his final plot. In that same year, the novel-reading world was gripped by *The Moonstone*, that masterpiece of Wilkie Collins, Dickens's literary friend, which is a tale of three Hindu devotees, members of an Oriental cult, who went skulking around England on a secret mission which culminated in murder. The literary atmosphere in which *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* was cradled was dense with a kind of germ for which

Dickens's imagination was genial soil, and which would inevitably fructify into a story essentially akin to *The Moonstone*—which novel, it is worth noting, contributed, almost verbatim, at least one crucial paragraph to the Drood narrative. A conspiracy of circumstances seemed to thrust upon Charles Dickens, as a ready-to-hand theme for his final bit of pen-work, the malign activities in England of one whose antecedents in the Far East linked him with the most subtle and abhorrent fraternity of crime known to history.

#### BOOKS CONSULTED FOR THIS ARTICLE

- The Thugs or Phansigars of India; by Sir W. H. Sleeman. CAREY & HART, Philadelphia, 1839.
- Confessions of a Thug; by Meadows Taylor. R. BENTLEY, London, 1839.
- The Wandering Jew, by Eugène Sue. RICHARDS. 1845.
- The Woman in White, by Wilkie Collins. HARPERS, 1860.
- Cord and Creese, by James de Mille. HARPERS, 1869.
- The Moonstone, by Wilkie Collins. HARPERS, 1873.
- Following the Equator, by Mark Twain. HARPERS, 1897.
- At the House of Dree, by Gordon Gardiner. HOUGHTON MIFFLIN, 1928.
- The Bagshot Mystery, by Oscar Gray. MACAULAY, 1929.



## ON THE WORKING HABITS OF AUTHORS

by Dale Warren

I HAVE in mind a picture I once saw of a man and a woman sitting in wicker basket-chairs in a garden. Lilac or jasmine or something of the kind forms a leafy background and a closely clipped lawn stretches out before them. The man is wearing white flannels and a tweed coat. His legs are crossed in an attitude of happy indifference and his freshly lighted cigar gives him the air of one who is comfortably settled for a late afternoon siesta. A setter lies contentedly at his feet. With a pillow at her back, the woman leans slightly forward in her chair. She has a pencil in her hand and holds a notebook in her lap.

The woman in the cool summer dress is Winifred Tolton, and the man in the white flannels is E. Phillips Oppenheim. The scene is somewhere on the Riviera and the occupation in which these two are indulging requires but a slight effort of the imagination. For those who know Mr. Oppenheim have heard him describe his unique method of work, and readers of his novel, *The Mystery Road*, may remember its dedication: "To Winifred Tolton, the most wonderful secretary and dearest friend of my life".

Contrast this picture with the traditional conception of "an author at work". Where are the flat-topped desk and the student lamp, the rickety typewriter and the graying dawn? Where are the piles of discarded manuscript and the nervous fingers that tear the hair? Where the dictionary and the pot of black

coffee, the thesaurus and the bottle of synthetic gin?

For all I know, Mr. Oppenheim started writing in just such a way. I can easily imagine him as a desperate youth in London some forty years ago, striving against odds to gain a foothold with *False Evidence*, *A Monk of Creta*, and other earlier books long ago forgotten. But even so, the lean years are now buried under an avalanche of opulent decades and the key fits securely into the golden lock. The combination works; and there he sits, corpulent and prosperous, in the garden of his French villa, endlessly dictating, turning out three novels a year. Not even after the hundredth was finished did he call a halt, for fear of developing what he calls mental indigestion. The unwritten stories, crowding for space in his mind, could not be dissuaded from effervescing.

The strange thing about Mr. Oppenheim's plots is that he never knows how they will develop. He gets an idea of two main characters—the man (he is the main thing) and the woman (very secondary). These two elements, together with his first chapter, constitute his preparation. Then he lives with his characters for a while, eats with them, walks with them, plays golf with them. Finally they begin to act according to their own wills and at that point he lets them go, to work out their several destinies by themselves. He "simply pulls the strings". He does not work from a synopsis because if he