

Close to the entrance a flight of dangerous steps led into a long, low cellar, which passed beneath the entire house. Here was the common room, the dormitory, wash-house, gambling saloon, and council chamber of the nameless. A couple of hanging lamps supplied the place with a bleared light; the inevitable box-stove roared in the centre; broken benches and bulging paillasses occupied the remainder of the floor. This cellar was alluded to by the initiated as the Pit.

On a nebulous night in April the usual crowd of vagabonds was assembled round the stove, engaged in a primitive form of gambling. One man would extend a sulphur match and issue a challenge. When he was taken, the stakes were named, and the two would simultaneously jab their matches, heads down, upon the roof of the stove, removing their hands immediately. The sulphur spluttered, the wood caught fire, and the two matches flared away, remaining at the perpendicular until some time after there was nothing left but two little sticks of carbon, which would presently topple over into ruin. The gambler whose match stood the longest won the stake. The cellar reeked from end to end with sulphurous fumes. Blasphemy and brutality accompanied the game, and undoubtedly the most foul-mouthed blackguard of the gang was he who rejoiced in the name of Krum. The gentleman of the cellar, though it must be owned he tried his hardest to conceal the fact, was the ticket-of-leave man, Munro. The latter so obviously repeated the blasphemies of his companion—presumably because he lacked the imagination to originate his own—that his fellow lodgers had conferred upon him the nickname of Parrot.