

GRAND SEXTON BLAKE STORY INSIDE!

The Penny Popular

3 Grand Complete Stories.

NUMBER 212



ARTHUR AUGUSTUS' PERILOUS POSITION!

(A Great Scene from the Grand Long Complete Tale of TOM MERRY & Co. contained in this issue.)

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A Magnificent Long, Complete
Story Dealing with the Further
Amazing Adventures of

SEXTON BLAKE,

the World-Famous

DETECTIVE.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

At Gibson's Great Stores—Sexton Blake
Explains the Origin of a Great Business—The Missing Bag of Gold—A
New Case.

"COME along, Tinker, we'll take a walk to Crompton Road!" said Sexton Blake, with a smile at his young assistant. "Put away your Euclid. The business we've now in hand is much more interesting than the old geometrician's problems."

Tinker shut up the book instantly and placed it on a shelf.

"I thought you said you hadn't got a case in hand, gov'nor," he exclaimed, with a mystified expression.

"Neither have I," replied the detective; "at any rate, of the kind you mean. Still, I think you will find the business interesting. Chilly October weather makes one think of overcoats. I thought of replenishing our stock by a visit to Gibson's Great Stores."

"Oh!" said Tinker, dropping his jaw.

His disappointment was so apparent that the detective smiled. It very seldom happened that Sexton Blake was without a single case on his books. Usually he had to turn clients away.

It was a bleak Wednesday afternoon. The lamps were already lighted. The sky was overhung with leaden clouds that drifted before a piercing east wind.

They soon reached Crompton Road, and came at length to Gibson's Great Stores. Some twenty huge and handsome shops, and as many departments, with massive plate-glass windows, and behind them the choicest goods of their kind in the whole of London, and stretching for nearly a hundred yards along the Crompton Road, comprised the famous stores. Doorkeepers and pages in smart uniforms stood by the swing glass doors ready to admit customers. Before the kerb, outside the various departments, stood motor-cars, taxicabs, and not a few carriages with arms painted upon their panels, and liveried footmen waiting by their doors.

Gibson's Great Stores had become the fashionable shopping centre of all England. There you could purchase anything from a packet of pins to a newly-trapped tiger from a West African jungle.

Sexton Blake and his assistant sauntered amongst the well-dressed crowd that hovered about the great windows. Tinker was soon marvelling at the magnificence displayed.

"Why, there's a fortune in every window, gov'nor!" he cried surprisedly. "I've been by here scores of times, but I've never realised it before. Only millionaires could run a business like this!"

Sexton Blake smiled at the lad's emphasis.

"Certainly, only millionaires could place such stock in the THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 212.



John Snyder rushed at Jerry like a mad bull. In an instant the table was overturned, and the candle extinguished.

windows!" he corrected. "But only a business genius, with the organising brain of a field-marshal, and the intuitive foresight of a prophet, could make a success of such a huge concern."

"And I expect old Gibson, who runs the show, is a bald-headed, shrivelled-up old frump who doesn't look worth sixpence?" asked Tinker, thinking of some millionaire financiers he had met in the course of his experience.

"You're wrong again, my boy!" laughed the detective. "The genius who runs Gibson's Great Stores is but a few years older than yourself. To be precise, he is twenty-three years of age."

Tinker was amazed—even sceptical.

"But I thought the stores belonged to a public company," he quibbled, "and was run on shareholders' money. See," he added triumphantly, pointing to the facade, "Gibson's Great Stores, Limited. How's that, umpire?"

"It doesn't alter the facts one bit!" exclaimed Sexton Blake. "It has only been a limited company for a year, and that since the stores were developed into the huge success they are to-day. Seven years ago, in place of this handsome row of shops, there was but one small grocery store at the extreme corner. I remember it quite well. I was even amongst the crowd who witnessed the total destruction of the premises by fire. I saw the Gibsons, father and son, spring from their bed-room window into the blankets held for them. That was seven years ago. You would have marvelled still greater, my boy, if you had known the little shop in those days, and compared it with the gigantic and wonderful collection of departments that are now before you."

"It sounds like a miracle," murmured Tinker, abashed. "And the genius responsible for it all, you say, is young Gibson. I should like to have a squint at him, gov'nor!"

They turned in through the doors of the clothiers' department.

"When we've done our business," returned Sexton Blake, "we'll take a stroll through the various departments. I

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will point him out to you if I get the opportunity. Yes, Jim Gibson is a wonderful young fellow, and he deserves every bit of his success. He is the living example of how a business can be built up and run successfully, even on huge lines, by straight, honest methods."

A shopwalker, faultlessly attired, escorted them over the carpeted floor to a counter where an attendant stood in readiness to receive them.

Their business was quickly carried through, and they passed on to explore the various departments.

The magnificence of the interior of the store became more apparent as they walked. Brilliantly lighted, beautifully decorated, luxuriously furnished, the great stores were the last word in comfort for customers. An air of warmth and happiness and wealth seem to pervade the rooms through which they passed.

Here and there fashionably-dressed men and women sat on the sumptuous lounges in conversation, or eyeing the brilliant throng who moved leisurely to and fro. From some of the rooms, where teas were provided, or where men could while away the time in smoking whilst their wives or sweet-hearts made their purchases, came the strains of a talented orchestral band.

It was a scene of magnificence that stirred even the stolid Tinker into admiration.

"My word!" he murmured. "It's as swaggar in here as in Rotten Row on a morning during the height of the season."

Sexton Blake turned to reply to his young assistant, when suddenly he swung round, and an alertness darted into his keen face. Tinker wheeled round, too. There had been a sound unmistakably like a sob from the caged-in cashiers' desk by which they were passing.

The cashiers' desk, of which there were several in every department, was a semi-circular apartment, with a narrow counter, over which customers paid their bills, and above this was a "grille," or surrounding of protective brass rails.

Through this grille a girl could be seen crying, with a handkerchief to her face. A shopwalker bustled by Sexton Blake and Tinker and thrust himself before the girl.

"Now, then, Miss O'Shea!" he cried, bitterly polite. "What is the latest trouble you've managed to unearth?"

The girl hurriedly withdrew her handkerchief, and the detective caught a glimpse of her face. In his experience Sexton Blake had met many beautiful women, but he thought, as he looked at the girl behind the grille, that he had seen none lovelier.

Kathleen O'Shea was indeed beautiful. White as a magnolia blossom now was her face, exquisitely carved like a cameo, with a red, flowerlike mouth, lips that trembled, and starry eyes that were clouded with tears.

"I—I can't understand it, Mr. Wimble," faltered the girl. "The bag containing the gold I've taken to-day has—disappeared!"

"Is that all?" sneered the shopwalker, frowning fiercely. "That's a mere detail. How much of the company's money do you consider has disappeared?"

Sexton Blake and Tinker passed by the desk. A small crowd gathered round. The shopwalker's tone irritated the detective.

"There was nearly a hundred pounds—ninety-seven pounds ten shillings in all," said Kathleen O'Shea tearfully. "I had been making out the accounts of my takings of the day in readiness for Mr. Thomas Gibson and the chief accountant. When I had counted out the gold, I placed it in an ordinary canvas bag and stood it beside the other bags in which I had put the copper and silver. A few moments ago I discovered that the gold had gone."

The sweet voice trembled as she spoke. It was with difficulty the girl kept a grip on herself under the head shopwalker's sneering stare.

"A very thin story!" snapped Mr. Wimble. "You surely don't expect me to believe that? Perhaps you have forgotten to tell me that you handed the money through the grille to some confederate?"

A sharp hiss came from the lips of the crowd at the cruel insinuation.

"How dare you say such a thing?" sobbed the cashier. "I demand to see Mr. James Gibson at once! It is a vile insinuation!"

"You shall see Mr. James, since you wish it so much; but I doubt whether you'll get any more sympathy from him than you've got from me," was the brutal reply. "Mr. Brown," he went on, calling to an assistant, "ask Mr. James if he'll step down here for a moment on a matter of some urgency. I left him in his office a few moments back."

He turned to Kathleen O'Shea, and began to cross-examine her in a manner that set the teeth of his listeners on edge.

Sexton Blake listened with interest and sympathy for the girl as she answered the man's insolently-put questions. In

his calling the detective had acquired an intuition in reading a person's character from the face.

But in the girl's sweet face there was not one sign of guilt. Her attitude as well as her appearance was one of mystification and distress. The cleverest actress alive couldn't have stood unmoved before that cruel cross-examination, but Kathleen O'Shea's blue eyes, filled with tears though they were, never once shrank from the shopwalker's fierce gaze.

In that impassioned dialogue the detective learned what was the custom in collecting the takings of each day. The customer handed two bills with his money across the counter. One bill was placed on a file, the other was stamped with an inscription, "Received with thanks," giving the date, and was passed back to the customer. The cashier entered the amount of the purchase in a ledger, and in her intervals of leisure totalled up the takings.

Towards the close of the day the various coins in the till were separated, placed in their respective bags, with the amount written upon the label. It was Mr. Thomas Gibson's duty to call at every cashier's desk, and to record in his book the amount of the takings, so that he could prepare the vouchers for the bank. The money itself and the files of bills were taken possession of by the chief accountant just before the close of the day's business.

On this occasion only Mr. Thomas Gibson had been on his rounds. And as Mr. Wimble, the shopwalker, remarked, it was preposterous to suppose that a gentleman who was a director of the company had taken a bag of gold.

"I do not say that Mr. Thomas Gibson has taken the money," sobbed Kathleen O'Shea. "It is cruel and wicked of you to saddle the words on me. I don't know where the money has gone!"

It was against human nature to stand the lash of such a cutting tongue for long, and the girl broke down and began to cry broken-heartedly.

"Tears are a woman's weapon when she's in a corner!" sneered the head shopwalker. "But you'll find, Miss O'Shea, that you'll want something stronger than tears to extricate you from the mess in which you have plunged yourself. This matter will have to be thrashed out in a police-court."

There was a stir amongst the crowd, and a tall, good-looking young man pushed his way to the side of the shopwalker.

"Police-court!" he repeated. "What is the reason for these harsh words, Wimble? What matter will have to be thrashed out in a police-court?"

The head shopwalker wheeled round with a face that had suddenly turned scarlet.

"Oh, there you are, Mr. James!" he cried, in a voice that had lost its acerbity. "Miss O'Shea has just been reporting to me the mysterious loss of nearly a hundred pounds from her desk. She can only say it has gone—where, she has not the faintest idea."

James Gibson, the youthful managing-director of Gibson's Great Stores, turned from the shopwalker to the girl.

"You are quite sure, Miss O'Shea," he asked, in a kindly tone, "that the money has not by any chance got hidden behind your ledgers, or fallen to the ground?"

The girl raised her tear-stained face to gaze frankly into that of the young managing-director; and as Sexton Blake looked he saw a wave of sympathy and admiration pass into James Gibson's features that revealed a great secret to him. James Gibson was in love with the pretty cashier!

"No, Mr. James," answered the girl. "I have made a thorough search everywhere. I have even sent to ask Mr. Thomas, in case he should have unconsciously taken the money, but he knows nothing about it. It is a perfect mystery to me where the money has gone! Surely you don't think that I have passed the money through the grille to a confederate?"

"Who dares to say such a thing?" cried the managing-director hotly, whipping round to face Wimble. "It is a scandalous charge!"

"I said it unthinkingly," explained the shopwalker, cringing. "It was the first thing that came to my—"

"You had no right to say it!" thundered James Gibson. "I have had reason to complain before of your use of indiscreet language towards members of the staff, Wimble. To my mind, you owe Miss O'Shea an apology."

He swung round to the cashier's desk amidst a little murmur of applause.

"Miss O'Shea," he went on, "I should like you to understand that I have not the slightest suspicion against you. Don't distress yourself. Please go on with your duties as if nothing had occurred. No doubt, what now appears to be a mystery, will have a simple explanation."

The girl's tender eyes showed the gratitude she felt more than the murmur of thanks that came from her lips. The crowd began to melt away, and with them Sexton Blake and Tinker, when suddenly the detective felt his arm gripped from behind.

"Hallo, Mr. Blake!" cried James Gibson. "You surely weren't going to pass me by without a word?"

The detective gripped the extended hand. "Well, under the circumstances, I thought it best," replied Sexton Blake, with a smile. "I can assure you, though, that your cashier is quite innocent. She really has no knowledge where the missing money has gone!"

"I'm glad—very glad to hear you say that, Mr. Blake!" exclaimed the young managing-director. "I'd rather anything had happened than that suspicion should be thrown upon Miss O'Shea. Will you oblige me, Mr. Blake? Will you take up this case?"

James Gibson was very earnest. The detective smiled. "It's a simple case, and only wants delicate handling," he replied. "It seems hardly necessary for me to—"

"It may seem simple to you, Mr. Blake," pleaded the young man; "but it means more than you imagine to me. Do take it up!"

"I know to what you refer," said Sexton Blake, smiling. "You are in love with Miss O'Shea! Ah, you blush! You admit it. All right, Mr. Gibson. I'll look into the matter. I can start now, if you wish."

James Gibson breathed a sigh of relief. "Do, by all means," he replied. "Will you follow me upstairs? It will be better to talk matters over in my private room." He turned round to Tinker, and handed the lad his card. "If you care to take that along to the tea-room whilst Mr. Blake is upstairs with me," he said, "they will give you whatever refreshment you may care to ask for."

And Tinker stared from the small piece of pasteboard in his hand after the retreating figures of his master and the young business genius who had raised Gibson's Great Stores out of the ashes of a small grocer's shop.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

A Confession of Love—Miss Kirby's Story—Tinker Draws a Face—John Snyder is Rebuffed.

JAMES GIBSON led the way into a room that looked out on to the main Crompton Road. It was simply but adequately furnished.

"Since you have guessed my secret with that marvellous instinct you possess, Mr. Blake," said the young managing-director, "I may as well confess it. I am in love with Kathleen O'Shea, though I have not as yet said a word to her on the subject, nor given her any sign whatever of the admiration I feel for her. I thought it was a secret locked only in my own breast. It is for this reason, more than any other, that I desire to have her name freed from the slightest breath of suspicion."

Sexton Blake nodded. "It is inconceivable for a girl, with an angel's face like Miss O'Shea, to be guilty of such a barefaced theft!" he said. "But this is a strange world. One never knows. It will be necessary to inquire into the girl's history and movements."

"I want you to make the fullest investigation," said James Gibson. "I will get the manageress of the girls' staff. She will tell you all she knows about Kathleen O'Shea."

He pressed a buzzer-key on a switchboard beside his desk, and in less than two minutes Miss Kirby, a magnificently-proportioned woman of about thirty-five years of age, sailed into the room. Like the rest of the staff, she was extremely well dressed.

The rumour was current amongst the girls in the stores that Miss Kirby had set her mind upon becoming Mrs. James Gibson; but the rumour had no justification, so far as the young managing-director was concerned.

"Miss Kirby," said James Gibson courteously, "this is Mr. Sexton Blake, the famous detective. He wishes to ask you a few questions about Miss O'Shea."

"Oh, yes, I've heard about the affair!" exclaimed the manageress, giving the tail of her gown a swish round before seating herself. "Some money is missing from Miss O'Shea's desk, I understand? Poor girl, she's had nothing but trouble lately!"

"Indeed!" said Sexton Blake, watching the woman through eyes that looked sleepy. "Will you be good enough to tell me all you know about her?"

James Gibson leaned back in his chair with a pale face. He knew no more about Kathleen O'Shea's home life than the detective.

"As it happens," began the manageress, "I can tell you a good deal about Miss O'Shea, for her mother and mine were close friends as girls; and, indeed, I am responsible for introducing Kathleen to the firm. If there is any question of her dishonesty, I am in a way to blame."

"No accusation is made against Miss O'Shea," interrupted James Gibson.

"I am glad to hear it. Now I can talk with freedom. Kathleen lives with her mother in a small house in Harrogate Street, just off the lower end of Crompton Road. Mr. O'Shea has been dead for several years, and Kathleen is the sole support of her mother, who has always been a delicate woman, and unable to leave the house save in a bath-chair. Of late, however, Mrs. O'Shea has been confined to her bed, and a doctor has been in daily attendance upon her."

"All of which is a very expensive burden upon the girl's pocket," suggested Sexton Blake.

"Yes, poor girl! It has always been a mystery to me how she manages it upon her salary!"

"Has she any brothers or any friends who might give her a little monetary assistance?" asked the detective.

"None that I am aware of," answered Miss Kirby. "But let me proceed. On Monday last a specialist came to see Mrs. O'Shea from Harley Street. He told Kathleen that unless she could get her mother away to some Continental spa, to take the waters and certain baths, that she would not live another year."

"Ah, that's bad—very bad!" murmured Sexton Blake, shaking his head dubiously.

James Gibson leant forward with a white, set face, and was about to speak, but the detective raised a finger in warning.

"I hope you won't think that I am in any way throwing suspicion upon poor Kathleen?" hurriedly interposed the manageress. "You see, all these doctors' fees must run away with a lot of money; but then Kathleen is a very careful girl, and may have had a considerable sum put by her. I only mention the facts as I know them. It would deeply grieve me to think that any words of mine had injured poor, pretty Kathleen!"

"Quite so, Miss Kirby," agreed the detective, adopting the manageress' semi-confidential style. "It is possible, for instance, to have doctors to the house, and yet not to pay their bills until they send them in on quarter day. And, to the best of your knowledge, Miss O'Shea has no extravagances or even friends?"

"No; I—"

"Thank you, Miss Kirby! That is all I wish to ask you." The manageress got up from her seat, feeling just a little nettled in the manner in which she had been dismissed.

James Gibson leapt to his feet the moment the door had closed.

"What does it mean, Mr. Blake?" he asked hoarsely. "The girl surely hasn't been tempted to steal the—"

"My dear fellow," said the detective soothingly, "haven't you heard the old saying 'Save me from my friends'?" After my little chat with Miss Kirby, I'm more strongly convinced than ever in Miss O'Shea's innocence. Your manageress has no doubt stated the truth, but she framed her statements purposely to mislead us. You have never paid Miss Kirby any marked attention, I suppose?"

"I? Certainly not! What ever do you mean?"

"I'd rather not explain now," replied Sexton Blake. "I should like to see your father, Mr. James, if I may?"

Without a word the young managing-director went to the switchboard and pressed one of the buzzer keys. A clerk appeared.

"Find Mr. Thomas, will you, Robson, and bring him to this room!" commanded James Gibson.

"Mr. Thomas went home a few minutes ago, sir," replied the clerk. "He complained of feeling unwell, I believe."

"My father unwell!" exclaimed the managing-director. "He seemed perfectly well when I saw him half an hour ago! Still, he's been looking rather pale lately. Why did he not come to say good-bye to me?"

"I think you were engaged, sir," answered the clerk, looking at the detective.

James Gibson dismissed the young man, and turned to Sexton Blake with a worried face.

"This is a very strange proceeding on my father's part!" he cried. "He must be seriously unwell to go off without seeing me." He pulled out a gold watch. "If you've no further need of me, Mr. Blake, I should like to hurry home."

"I was about to suggest that I left you, Mr. Gibson," said the detective. "The inquiries I meant to put to your father can, of course, wait until a more convenient time. In the meantime, I will carry out my investigations, and let you know immediately anything of importance comes to light."



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They shook hands, the managing-director to hurry downstairs to the motor-car which he had summoned, Blake to seek out Tinker in the tea-room.

His assistant was neither imbibing the cup that cheers nor listening to the music. The detective found him at last, not far from Kathleen O'Shea's desk, reclining on a luxurious lounge, and surreptitiously copying faces on his shirt-cuff.

Sexton Blake pushed back the boy's sleeve. There were six different profiles on the cuff, and each was a type.

"A study in physogs, guv'nor," grinned Tinker. "More exciting than punching holes in buns and swilling tea."

"Evidently," said Sexton Blake. "How came you to draw the face of Dutch Joe?"

"Dutch who?" asked the boy. "Bar Israel Mechineff, the old fence, I haven't recognised a soul all the time we've been here. Which of 'em do you call the Dutchy?"

"That's the head of Dutch Joe, unless I'm very much mistaken," said the detective, pointing to a big-jawed, brutal-looking face. "He's held the middle-weight boxing championship in his time, been in business as bookmaker, oilman, and greengrocer, served several terms of imprisonment, and yet manages to promenade the West End in linen and fine raiment without any apparent source of income."

"My word!" grinned Tinker. "I've been making the acquaintance of a celebrity, and I didn't know it. Where do we jump to next?"

Sexton Blake glanced at the big clock. It wanted but a couple of minutes to seven, and seven was the stores' closing time. Already most of the fashionable crowd had disappeared.

"We'll take a walk along the Crompton Road for a bit," said the detective thoughtfully. "I have a little business matter to attend to before we return to Baker Street."

They glanced at Kathleen O'Shea as they passed by her desk. The beautiful girl still looked distressed, but her tender eyes were dry now, and the little rosebud mouth was firm and resolute.

In a few brief words Sexton Blake explained the case he had undertaken that afternoon. Tinker nodded, as if he were quite prepared to hear the news.

"I'll bet that serpent-faced chap, Wimble, the shopwalker, knows something about that missing money," he said. "That's why he was so down on the girl."

"It seems an obvious conclusion, since it is human nature to sympathise with such a lovely girl as Miss O'Shea, when oppressed by such a petty tyrant as Wimble; but as you must know, Tinker, obvious conclusions are invariably misleading ones. Personally, I think Wimble's bitterness to the girl was due to an entirely different cause, an affair which has nothing whatever to do with the missing money."

Tinker did not dare to ask his master for fuller particulars. Nor, indeed, was there time.

"Here's Miss O'Shea!" whispered Sexton Blake, gripping the lad's arm. "I must follow her to her home. Keep well behind."

They were standing some way from the end door of the stores, from which the detective knew the assistants invariably left. Quite a crowd of them were now flocking out, and in the midst of them was Kathleen O'Shea. Some of the assistants paused to chat for a few moments upon the pavement, but the pretty cashier stepped quickly out, and, with head held a little proudly, at once walked sharply past the detective and Tinker.

Cautiously Blake and the boy followed her. The girl moved briskly along till she was quite a hundred yards past the stores; then, to Blake's amazement, a young man in an overcoat hurried to meet her with a sweep of his silk hat. Kathleen O'Shea stopped dead, and as the detective and the boy paused by a shop window, they could hear her talking eagerly, though indistinctly to them, as she faced the young man.

"John Snyder!" muttered Sexton Blake. "How you can be deceived in girls! Fancy her knowing that young sharp! Here is probably a solution to the mystery of the missing money."

Tinker had not understood the murmur that had left the

detective's lips. He followed his master to the shop front almost opposite to where the couple stood. Here the voices were plainly distinguishable.

"It is useless your coming to meet me," Kathleen O'Shea was protesting. "As I have told you so many times already, Mr. Snyder, I do not wish for your acquaintance. If you are a gentleman you will take 'No' for an answer, and cease to annoy me."

"Do you infer by that remark that I'm not a gentleman?" said the young man, with blazing eyes, gripping the girl's arm.

"Let go my arm," was the girl's reply. "You have no right to molest me in the street. I cannot believe that you care for me so greedily to annoy me in this way. You're hurting me with your strong fingers. I will call for assistance if you—"

Swiftly Sexton Blake moved across the pavement. Nipping the nape of John Snyder's neck with fingers that were like a vice, he twisted the fellow round and pitched him headlong in the gutter. He turned to the girl.

"Don't be alarmed, Miss O'Shea, I'll see you safely home," said the detective quietly.

Minus his hat, John Snyder came with a rush at Sexton Blake. His face was livid with rage, and his fists were clenched ready to strike. He was about to throw himself upon his aggressor, when he caught sight of the detective's face in the glare of the shop-light. His arms fell limp to his side. He reeled as if drunk.

"Sexton Blake!" he muttered hoarsely.

The detective nodded grimly.

"The last time I saw you was in the dock at Bow Street," he said quietly. "Your accomplice got five years, but the magistrate chose to regard you as the dupe of fools, and you were allowed your liberty. This lady is quite right in refusing the acquaintanceship of the accomplice of felons."

Kathleen O'Shea went ghastly pale. Her lips trembled, but her tongue remained silent.

"I can't help loving her," stammered John Snyder. "My passion for her got the better of me."

"Rubbish!" cried Sexton Blake sharply. "Look here, Miss O'Shea, if this man ever annoys you again, give information at once to the nearest police-station. Mention my name if you like. And you, Snyder, take yourself off, before I'm tempted to give you the thrashing you richly deserve."

Like the cur that he was, John Snyder slunk off, leaving his silk hat behind him in the gutter to which it had rolled.

If there was anything that Sexton Blake absolutely detested it was any sense of gratitude to himself. There were tears already in Kathleen O'Shea's eyes—tears that told of the overflowing joy in her heart—as she pressed his hand; and, before the words prompted by a flood of emotion could rise to her lips, the detective and his assistant had moved away.

At the top of the street there was a long stretch of blank wall, the rear portion of a big steam laundry. Three men were leaning their backs against this as Blake and the boy approached. The detective did not give them a thought. His brain was busy working out the next step in the complex case.

The men did not stir till the detective and Tinker were almost before them; then, with incredible swiftness, they flung themselves upon the unsuspecting pair.

Thud!

Before Sexton Blake realised it a heavy stick descended upon his bowler hat, cutting through the crown and sending him reeling.

Thud!

A clenched fist was driven hard against Tinker's ribs, and the lad was laid a-sprawl in the gutter.

Then Blake got to work. It was a dark night. He could not see the faces of his assailants, though one's figure looked suspiciously like that of John Snyder.

Sexton Blake's only weapons were his fists. They shot out like piston-rods now, and in quick time, as two men attacked him on either side, he got in a smashing blow on the apex

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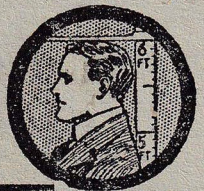
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of the jaw of the ruffian with the stick, and lifted the other clean off the pavement with a left upper-cut.

His assistant, however, was not faring so well. Bruised and half senseless, Tinker crawled to his feet, and, with the third scoundrel clinging to him, lurched against the wall where Blake stood.

Blake got in a drive on the fellow's back between the kidneys, making him yelp and release the boy.

"Get my police-whistle out of my right overcoat-pocket," commanded Blake quietly of Tinker, as he dragged him beside him.

The next moment, whilst Tinker struggled to obey the behest, the detective, with his back against the wall, caught at the wrist of the rogue who had returned to aim a blow at his head with the stick.

It was one of the pluckiest fights the detective had ever put up. Their assailants, one of whom was a bull-necked fellow who could use his fists skilfully, and whom Blake suspected was Dutch Joe, uttered no words as they fought.

The stick missed Blake's head, but caught him nastily upon the shoulder. The ruffian rushed in to follow up his advantage. Like lightning the detective shot out his arm and caught the lapel of the man's coat. He gave a quick pull. The ruffian lost his balance, spun round, and dived forward. There was a resounding thud as his head crashed into the face of the bull-necked scoundrel, who spat out an oath and a couple of front teeth from his mouth.

And then the police-whistle shrilled out.

The scuffle had already attracted attention, for a crowd was rushing up from all directions.

A constable came sprinting along the pavement. One of the scoundrels, dashing away, ran straight into the officer's arms. Both men went down with a crash, where they struggled on the ground for several seconds before the rogue wrenched himself free, sprang to his feet, and darted away like the wind.

The other two—the man with the stick, and the bull-necked man—had also succeeded in making their escape, though Blake went some distance in chase of them.

The constable was flicking the mud from his uniform when Sexton Blake returned. Tinker was still breathing hard, but was otherwise without damage. Blake himself had a sore shoulder, and, as he ruefully admitted, a ruined bowler.

"What's the meaning of this affair?" began the constable, moving towards Blake. "What's the charge? You'll lay information, I suppose?"

"It's all right, Jeffries!" said Sexton Blake. "You can leave it to me to square up matters. All I want to know is—whether you recognised any of those gentry?"

"Great Scott, it's Mr. Blake!" panted the officer in astonishment. "I wish I'd collared that hound who downed me! I only saw him; but I'd swear to him anywhere. It was Jerry Greggs, who's on ticket-of-leave."

"Um! Jerry Greggs. He's a new acquaintance. They'll have his address at your station, I suppose?"

"Yes. He's been reporting there," was the reply.

"Thanks, Jeffries!" said Sexton Blake, pressing a coin into the officer's hand. "There's no need to report this affair unless your uniform is in any way damaged. Feeling all right, Tinker? Very well! We'll call at the station after I've bought a new bowler, and then we'll pay Mr. Greggs a surprise visit."

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Blake Interviews Jerry Greggs—Blackmail—The Banknote Discovery—James Gibson's Agitation—Father and Son—The Thief.

AS a ticket-of-leave man, Jerry Greggs had to report himself periodically at a police-station. The divisional superintendent at once turned over the pages of the register when the detective appeared before him and made his request.

"Here you are, Mr. Blake," he cried. "Jerry Greggs, complicity in housebreaking, Harrow. Last sentence eighteen months. Wormwood, Scrubbs, Age, twenty-seven; fair, well-built, slight cast in left eye. Now lives No. 99, Wroxon Mews, Kensington. Is that your man?"

"I have good reason to believe so," replied Sexton Blake; and, thanking the officer, passed out to where Tinker waited for him.

Blake knew Wroxon Mews quite well. It was situated in the heart of fashionable Kensington, and was, indeed, at the back of the famous square. One side of it was given up to stables and garages, and the other to tiny houses, where coachman, stable and garage hands lived.

A quarter of an hour's sharp walk brought them to the thoroughfare.

"I thought Wroxon Mews was too respectable a place to have any crooks as tenants," said Tinker, as they turned into

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a wide, badly-lighted passage; "but it's no more remarkable, I suppose, than finding a maggot in the best-looking apple."

Sexton Blake smiled at the simile, and they hurried by a group of clean-shaven coachmen chatting beneath a gas-lamp.

They came to No. 99. Through the window of the ground floor room a woman could be seen ironing.

"You'd better wait outside, my boy," said the detective. "It may be that our man has not yet come home. We don't want to put his womenfolk on their guard."

"Right you are, gov'nor!" answered Tinker cheerfully. "I won't interfere unless I think you want a hand."

Sexton Blake crept silently in through the partly open door. The woman in the front room kept on with her work. A fire was burning in the room at the rear, and its blaze enabled him to see into it distinctly. It was a small kitchen, but its chairs were empty.

The next instant the detective had stealthily climbed to the landing above. From the back room, immediately opposite the staircase, there came sounds of someone moving.

Sexton Blake applied his eye to the keyhole. Before a table, on which stood a lighted candle, was a man in his shirt-sleeves, wiping the mud from his coat with a piece of rag. He had his back to the door.

Noiselessly the detective turned the handle and thrust open the door. The man did not turn, not even when Blake gently swung it back into its place and stood inside the room with his back against it.

For quite three minutes the man rubbed away at the mud-stained cloth, whilst Sexton Blake watched him, with an amused interest.

It was a tiny room, just big enough to hold a bed, a chair, and a table.

"Confound it!" muttered the man. "This mud won't come out. I shall have to dry it thoroughly before the fire downstairs."

He turned, and took a step towards the door. Then he saw the detective.

As if suddenly petrified he stood still, with a wide-open mouth and staring eyes.

Sexton Blake did not speak, nor move.

"Great Joseph, it's Sexton Blake!"

The words came in an awed whisper from the man's throat as if they were pumped out of him. The coat fell to his feet, and he staggered back, clutching nervously at the tablecloth.

"Ah, I thought you'd condemn yourself if I only gave you time," said the detective, stepping forward. "I've come to have a little chat with you, Jerry Greggs; and if you're a wise man you'll answer my questions truthfully. So far, you've only been convicted for complicity in a burglary at Harrow. You don't want to appear in the dock, I suppose, on a charge of attempted murder?"

The man shuddered, and shrank back to the further wall of the room.

"What do you want?" he gasped.

"Take that chair and sit down," commanded Sexton Blake.

"I'll sit on your bed, if you don't mind. And now I want you to tell me the names of your gentle companions who attacked me and my lad to-night."

The light from the candle seemed to make the craven's face still paler. The nostrils of the thin nose quivered, and the weak mouth had dropped, showing the rogue's smoke-stained teeth.

"I daren't!" he muttered. "They'd—they'd half-kill me! I—I—"

"Do you refuse?" said the detective threateningly.

"I—I— Give me time to think. I'll tell you. You won't let 'em murder me? They were the Spider and Dutch Joe," he added, with a jerk.

"Ah, I thought so!" said Sexton Blake. "Otherwise John Snyder and Joe Garlan. And what was the object for which these amiable gentlemen waylaid me in Harrogate Street?"

"I don't know—straight, I don't!" cried the rascal emphatically. "I was asked to come along and help lay out a man and a boy—that's all. I didn't know it was you, even, or I might—"

"Or you might have thought that a miserable cur like you would be certain to get a sound thrashing," concluded Sexton Blake, as Jerry Greggs paused lugubriously. "I'll take it that you didn't understand. Now, tell me what you know as to the manner in which Snyder and Garlan get a living. No fancy tales, mind! I want the truth."

Jerry Greggs gasped like a cod-fish. His terror of Sexton Blake excited no pity, but only a deep contempt, in the detective's mind.

"If I split they'll kill me!" he spluttered. "They'll—"

"It's no concern of mine what they do with you," cut in Blake quickly. "Don't waste my time! Do you—"

"You're a hard man, Mr. Blake! They—they've been living on blackmail lately—been getting pots of cash by it. It's Snyder that does the business. He gets to know the young swells with plenty of tin; he leads 'em on; gets 'em

mixed up in shady business, and then plucks 'em. That's why they call him the Spider. Dutch Joe only comes in, 'cause he's a scrapper, when Snyder wants him to threaten anyone."

"By Jove!" murmured Sexton Blake. "They're a sweet pair! And do they work only amongst West End fools?"

"No. When they've drawn the swells dry, they turn them over to some East End crooks they're in league with. But—but you won't let the Spider know I've told you this?"

Jerry Greggs' voice rose to an appealing wail. It was far from warm in that fireless room, but the perspiration was pouring from his face. He got up and extended his hands towards the detective.

"Sit down, and don't be a fool!" commanded Sexton Blake. "Is it likely that I will share my confidences with the men who made a brutal attack on me to-night. Now, about this hush-money. Who pays it?"

"Someone of Gibson's Great Stores," answered Jerry, flopping down on his chair more reassured.

Sexton Blake sprang to his feet so suddenly that the rogue shrank back terrified.

"It's the truth—it's the truth! I swear it!" he shrieked out.

The detective fixed his keen eyes on the craven's face. It was a bigger surprise than he had ever expected.

"Who is this someone at the stores, and for what is the money paid?" he asked.

"I don't know," replied Jerry Greggs—"on my oath, I don't! All I know is that he must have tons of tin, for the Spider and Dutch Joe have had cash from him for months and months past. Why, only this very afternoon Snyder managed to squeeze a pile out of him. I saw a hat full of gold and notes in Snyder's own parlour—what's more, I've got some of it. They gave me a fiver to help 'em lay you and the kid out!"

"You're refreshingly frank, my friend," said Sexton Blake, with a quiet smile. "That fiver was cheaply earned, seeing that the work for which it was paid was not accomplished. Just let me see it."

"It's mine!" gurgled the rogue. "They've given it to me! You won't take it!"

"I'll give you five sovereigns for it," said the detective—"that is, if it's a good one. Get it out!"

Jerry Greggs took down an old book from a shelf. From between the leaves he produced the banknote, which he passed with a trembling hand to Sexton Blake. A mere glance assured the detective that it was genuine, and he folded it carefully and placed it in his pocket-book. Then he took out a sovereign-purse, and laid six coins on the table.

"That's one over for the information you've given me," he said curtly. "If it turns out to be false you'll get the interest—compound interest—at a later time. You've got some conscience left, and the instincts of a man. Why don't you start to lead a new life, Jerry?"

"I was thinking of doing so," replied Jerry Greggs, with a downcast face. "Snyder calls me the Jellyfish, and perhaps he's right. I wish I could go straight, but my only chance is somewhere abroad. I know too many wrong 'uns over here."

"Well, have a shot at it, Greggs, and let me know how you're getting on," said Sexton Blake. "Perhaps I may be able to help you. Now, for the last time, you're sure you



Swiftly Sexton Blake moved across the pavement. Nipping the nape of John Snyder's neck with fingers that were like a vice, he twisted the fellow round and pitched him headlong in the gutter.

don't know who at the stores is giving money to Snyder, or for what reason?"

"Straight, I don't know, Mr. Blake!" gulped Jerry Greggs. "And Heaven bless you for your kind words!"

As noiselessly as he had entered, Sexton Blake hurried down the staircase into the mews. Tinker came out of the shelter of a doorway to meet him.

"You look a bit thoughtful, gov'nor," remarked the boy, glancing into the detective's face as they passed a lamp. "Everything all serene?"

The detective nodded. His brain was busily turning over the statements Greggs had made to him, and arranging them in sequence. If there was any truth in Greggs' story, it was easy to understand that the person who was paying the blackmail money was some director or well-paid official at the stores.

But that statement had to be confirmed, and the reason for the payments had to be discovered. What was that valuable secret that Snyder possessed?

Tinker was too well trained to question his master when he saw him in a reasoning mood, but when they turned into the big Kensington square and began to make their way back, as he thought, to Wroxton Mews, he caught Blake by the arm.

"Why, you're walking round the houses, gov'nor!" he exclaimed.

"That's just what I want to do, my boy," was the detective's smiling reply. "I'm going to call on the Gibsons now."

"Oh!" replied Tinker. "I thought you were in one of them brown studies what you have sometimes, and was walking on absent-mindedly."

It was just a coincidence that Greggs should have lodgings in the mews at the back of the big square in which James Gibson, the wizard of the Great Stores, lived with his father. They paused before a big, double-fronted house, and ascended the steps.

A footman answered the detective's knock. "Sorry, sir," replied the footman, "but Mr. James gave

orders as he could see no one to-night on account of the illness of Mr. Thomas."

The detective gave the manservant his card.

"Tell Mr. James I will not keep him more than five minutes," he said.

The managing-director of Gibson's Great Stores hurried into the hall a moment later. His face was drawn and haggard. There was a startling change in his appearance since the detective had left him, scarcely three hours ago.

"Come along to my den at once, Mr. Blake!" he cried. "I told my man to warn off all callers, but I was not expecting you. Since I left you I've had some further fresh worry. My father has come home very ill indeed. He refuses to see a doctor, and won't even allow me to sit with him."

"I'm deeply grieved to hear that," said Sexton Blake, "and I must apologise for calling upon you at this late hour. You're looking quite ill and distressed."

"And that's just how I feel," replied James Gibson. "My father's condition worries me. Immediately I reached home this evening he told me that he had dropped a roll of banknotes to the value of over five hundred pounds from his pocket when on his way to the bank this afternoon."

Sexton Blake shrugged his shoulders a little.

"It is very annoying," he remarked.

"It is very aggravating, for it is not the first time that my father has lost a big wad of notes," said the young managing-director quickly. "It is not so much the loss of the money as the annoyance and the uncomfortable position in which it places everybody upon the accountants' staff. Under the circumstances of my father's illness, I cannot press him for many particulars, and, as a matter of fact, he refuses to discuss the subject until the morning. As soon as I heard about the loss, however, I telephoned to the chief accountant, and got him to make out a list of the numbers of the missing banknotes, and he has just taken a copy of it to Scotland Yard."

"I must commend you on your promptness," said the detective quietly. "Have you a list here handy that I could glance at?"

James Gibson stepped across to a roll-top desk, and took a sheet of paper from a pigeon-hole. He laid it before Blake. The detective ran his finger down the column, and paused half-way down.

"123749," he murmured.

James Gibson gripped the detective's shoulder as he peered from the banknote to the list.

"By George, Mr. Blake," he cried excitedly, "that is one of the very missing banknotes! Where on earth did you find it?"

"A rogue of the name of Jerry Greggs gave it to me less than ten minutes ago," said Sexton Blake quietly. "It was the payment given him to make a murderous attack upon myself and my boy by two worthies who rejoice in the names of the Spider and Dutch Joe."

"I'm afraid I haven't the acquaintance of the celebrities," remarked James Gibson. "Tell me all your adventures, Mr. Blake."

The detective briefly described the attack in Harrogate Street, and told of the discovery that Jerry Greggs was one of their assailants, and of the subsequent interview with the craven rascal in the house in Wroxton Mews.

"These rogues have apparently got some individual at the stores in their power," said Sexton Blake, watching the young managing-director closely. "This individual is either a wealthy man, or he has been extensively, though quietly, robbing your firm for some months past. Have you any reason to suspect any of your officials in a responsible position where large sums of money are handled—in the accountant's or chief buyer's departments, for instance?"

James Gibson began to pace the room restlessly. He shook his head vigorously.

"You don't think so. Now, we'll take the directors. Besides yourself and your father, your board includes four others—Lord Threlton, Sir Peter Lamb, Percy Struthers, Esq., and the Hon. Francis Fairfax. Do any of these have the handling of the firm's money?"

"Sometimes—at board meetings," answered James Gibson wearily, as if speaking with an effort. "No, no; they have nothing to do with this affair! You must look for the solution to this mystery beyond the board of directors. Leave me now, Mr. Blake, I'm—"

The door creaked, and he swung round sharply. On the threshold stood a grey-haired man, ashen-faced, with eyes that burned in their sunken sockets like coals of fire. He was wearing a long grey dressing-gown, and this, reflecting the beams of a hanging electric lamp, gave him quite a ghostlike appearance.

For a second or so, as Sexton Blake and the young man stared at the figure, there was silence in which neither dared to breathe.

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"Father!" gasped James Gibson at last, and stepped towards the door.

Without uttering a sound, the man in the dressing-gown turned swiftly, and darted out of sight along the corridor, and James Gibson ran after him.

Sexton Blake leaned back in the Chesterfield, and fingered his chin thoughtfully. His face was particularly grave. A bell sounded in the lower part of the house, and there was a faint pattering of feet. Presently a footman tapped at the study door, and entered.

"Mr. James begs you to accept his sincere apology for his abrupt departure," said the man, "and regrets that he cannot see you any further to-night."

Sexton Blake rose to his feet.

"Tell Mr. James," he replied, "that I will call here to-morrow morning early to interview him and his father."

He joined Tinker in the hall. Passing out into the square, they turned eventually into the busy High Street, hailed a taxicab, and were driven home to Baker Street.

Not until Mrs. Bardell, the detective's landlady, had left their suppers upon the table did Tinker succeed in extracting any information out of his master about the case.

"Yes, Tinker," said Sexton Blake gravely; "I have solved the mystery, and I know with absolute certainty who is the thief."

"Then why look so glum about it, guv'nor?" cried the boy, with an attempt to be cheerful. "If the rascal only wants nabbing, the case's at an end, and I suppose we're going to join the ranks of the out-o'-works again?"

"The case is not ended by any manner of means, my boy," was the reply. "It is a very delicate case, wants most careful handling, and is a much bigger affair altogether than I thought. Under the surface of this apparently simple robbery there are a multitude of mysterious ramifications. Indeed, it would not surprise me to receive instructions to cease making inquiries, and to throw up the case."

Tinker stared incredulously.

"Go on, guv'nor!" he cried. "You don't really mean it! Then who, in the name of all that's wonderful, is the thief?"

"James Gibson's father!" was the quiet reply

Tinker's knife and fork clattered down on his plate, and his mouth opened wide with astonishment.

At other times the boy's amazement would have brought a smile to the detective's face, but to-night he frowned, and pushed away his untouched plate.

"And now, Tinker, don't ask me any more questions," he said. "You must be content to wait and see what transpires."

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Spider Makes a Discovery—Blake Falls Into a Trap—The Search for the Banknote—Tinker Gets a Knock-out—The Detective Returns.

FOR some time after Sexton Blake left him, Jerry Greggs still sat on his chair in the little bed-room, staring, terrified, before him.

"I was a fool to tell him so much," he kept muttering. "As if he would help the likes of me! Yet I've known of chaps who've been given a honest start by him. Great Joseph, but he has got a way with him! He seems to be able to force the words out of your lips against your will!"

There sounded feet on the stairs. He jumped hurriedly up, seized the lighted candle, and advanced to the door. He was trembling violently. He expected to see a police-constable.

"Ah, there you are, Jerry, my old buck!" cried a voice cheerily. "Why didn't you come round? Joe and I began to think you'd got pinched."

Jerry laid the candlestick on the table, and forced out a nervous laugh.

"I thought you was a copper—straight!" he said. "Come in, John Snyder! Make a seat on the bed."

"What's the matter with you?" cried his visitor. "You're all a-shake, just like what Joe says you are—a jellyfish! Who's been upsetting you?"

He seated himself at the foot of the bed which Sexton Blake had occupied but a few minutes before.

"N-nobody!" stammered Jerry. "W-what do you mean? Didn't I tell you I thought you was a nark?"

"That won't wash with me!" said John Snyder viciously. "Why should a copper come here? You got clean away after we left Blake and the kid. You haven't been letting your tongue wag again, have you?" he added threateningly.

"Is it likely?" said the rogue. "What do you want here?"

"I want that fiver back!" cried John Snyder. "It's too dangerous in your hands! Fork it out! You ain't had time

to change it yet. What are you gaping like that for? You ain't going to lose it. I'll give you the quids for it."

He produced a handful of sovereigns from a trouser-pocket, and flung five of them on the table. But Jerry Greggs never stirred.

"There you are!" exclaimed John Snyder. "Pick 'em up! A fence'd only give you a couple of quid for a missing fiver, but there's five yellow boys of the best. Why don't you freeze on to 'em?"

"I—I've parted with it!" stammered Jerry. "I ain't got it!"

The immaculately-dressed young shark leapt to his feet with a curse.

"What do you mean?" he bellowed. "Who's got it?"

"It weren't my fault!" expostulated Jerry. "That copper that downed me in Harrogate Street must have recognised me. He gave my address to Sexton Blake, and—"

"By heavens, you don't mean to tell me that Sexton Blake's got that fiver!" shouted John Snyder, with a livid face.

"I couldn't help it! I—"

John Snyder rushed at Jerry like a mad bull. In an instant the table was overturned and the candle extinguished. Their arms locked, punching, pulling, and struggling furiously, they swayed round the little room in the darkness.

Jerry Greggs was a more powerful and bigger-built man than his adversary, and, fiercely though Snyder fought, the other, by reason of his strength, bore him back, and began to dash John Snyder's head again and again on the wall.

The noise of the scuffle brought Greggs' coachman-landlord and his wife hurrying up the staircase. As they flung open the door of the little bed-room, thus admitting a light, Snyder made one last great effort to be free.

Flinging back his head violently, he caught Greggs on the chin, and the grip around his throat momentarily relaxed. The next instant he dived away, with the other still holding to him. They shot between the astounded coachman and his wife, and pitched headlong, with breakneck speed, down the staircase on all-fours.

Half-way down, Greggs let out a yell of pain, and released his hold, but Snyder alighted without mishap on the mats in the passage. Before Greggs' landlord could hurry down the stairs to assist the rogue to rise, John Snyder had leapt to his feet, and bolted out of his house.

Jerry Greggs, with a wrenched shoulder, was helped to his feet. The landlord began to grumble at the noise the men had made, but Jerry gave him no answer, and, limping up the stairs to his room, passed into it, and slammed the door.

He lighted the candle, and searched painfully about the floor till he had found the five sovereigns John Snyder had put down.

"That makes me five quid better off, anyway," he reflected, as he sat down again, and began to rub his shoulder thoughtfully. "Strikes me, Jerry, you'd better clear out. This place is getting too hot for you, what with the police, and Sexton Blake, and the Spider's gang! That detective chap's right. I ain't no good at the crooked game. I'll get across to America, and make a clean start there."

And he began to pack up his few belongings there and then, preparatory to settling his bill with the coachman and his wife below, and to wandering off in the direction of the docks.

In the meantime, John Snyder had dashed off, hailed a taxicab, and had given the driver the address of a shady sporting club in Soho, where he knew that he would find Joe Garlan.

Admitted to the club, he found his accomplice and beckoned him to one side. In a few words he told of his adventure in Wroxton Mews.

"The worm has given the fiver to Sexton Blake," he went on, "and it looks as if that lynx-eyed hound had got wind of our game, and is already on our track. Seems to me it's all UP. We'd better put up the shutters and clear off!"

"Don't get excited, Johnnie," murmured the big brute. "Come an' have a brandy. That'll steady your nerves, and help us to think things out. Perhaps it is not so bad."

They hurried downstairs to a bar, where drinks were ordered.

"Now, let me see!" said Joe Garlan, puffing at a cigar. "The old man vill not gif us away. He has gone too deeply. It vill not be vorth his while. Very good! Ve must lay low for a bit, and not vorry the old man."

"But this fiver—that's the chief trouble! Don't you understand, Dutchy?" quibbled Snyder. "Blake's got it from the Jellyfish, who's told him, perhaps, that he had it from us. If that's the case, he must know the old man gave it to us. Blake'll want to know why. He'll ferret out the reason somehow, even if the old man doesn't blow the gaff. Then it'll be marching orders to Portland for both of us!"

"I not think the same vay—no," returned the wily

Dutchman, looking thoughtfully at the red end of his smoke. "This Plake he may pe very clever—they say so—put he do nothings if the old man not speak; and he vill not speak, for his own sake. If ve get pack the fiver, there pe no trouble."

"Yes, yes, of course!" cut in Snyder impatiently. "If Sexton Blake did not have any of the missing banknotes, he'd have no pull over us. But the fact is, Blake has got the note, and could produce it to-morrow in the courts against us if he chose."

"Not if ve take it from him, Johnnie, eh?"

"I don't understand," said the rogue, with a puzzled face. "Steal it from him, I mean, Johnnie!" explained Dutch Joe. "Look here, how think you this plan vork?"

He pulled Snyder to him, and a whispered conversation ensued. Snyder shook his head dubiously when the Dutchman had finished, then he spoke aloud:

"We'll try it!" he exclaimed. "Blake's too fly a bird to be caught that way, but it's about the only move we've got. Come along, Dutchy, we may as well make a start at once."

They hurried along to the telephone-room. Turning over the leaves of the register of subscribers, Snyder quickly found Blake's number.

Almost immediately he got a reply.

"Hallo! Who's that?" came Blake's own voice along the wire.

"This is Acacia House," replied Snyder, altering his voice in imitation of a manservant's. "I am speaking on behalf of my master, Mr. James Gibson. He wants to see you very particular. Could you come at once? He is very sorry, but it is very urgent. You are Mr. Blake, the great detective?"

"Yes, yes!" came the grunt at the other end. "Tell your master I am coming at once."

Snyder hung up the receiver with a chuckle.

"It looks as if he's sucked that bait down!" he grinned. "Now, if we hop about, we ought to have time to do our bit before he returns. He'll be bound to take a taxi at this time of night, and he'll keep the chap waiting to bring him home, so we've need to be slippy."

He looked at his watch. It wanted a quarter to twelve. He calculated that it would take Sexton Blake at least an hour to get to and from the Gibsons' house in Kensington Square and back to Baker Street.

They called up a taxi outside the club, and drove to Baker Street, alighting a hundred yards below Sexton Blake's house. At the back there was a way out, through which Sexton Blake invariably passed when disguised, to avoid the conspicuousness of an exit from the front door into the busy main thoroughfare.

Save for a few belated passengers, Baker Street was now almost deserted. Snyder tried the back door, but it was as firm as a rock. In a twinkling he mounted to Dutch Joe's shoulder, and, leaning over the wall, peered about him.

As it happened, Mrs. Berdell was sitting in the back-kitchen, nodding over the newspaper, with the curtains only partly drawn. Snyder whispered the information to his companion.

"I'll chance it, Dutchy," he continued. "More than likely, as the old woman hasn't yet gone to bed, the back door'll be open. If so, I can get in and open the front door for you."

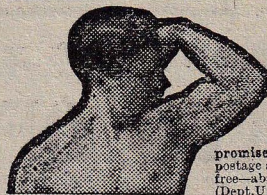
Dutch Joe grunted his approval. And as Snyder clambered silently over the wall, he sauntered carelessly away. In a few moments, whilst he hovered about the gate of the front entrance, the door silently opened, and a hand beckoned him.

"We're in luck, Dutchy!" murmured Snyder. "The door was unbolted, as I thought. The old gal's snoring as lustily as a foghorn. We've only got the kid to settle with."

They paused to strip off their boots, then, with these in their hands, they moved upstairs. The light from the street lamps enabled them to see sufficiently not to disturb the furniture in their wanderings.

Silently they came to the room where Tinker lay asleep. Snyder ventured to strike a safety match. Shielding its fitful glare by the palm of one hand, he peered in.

Almost as if he were conscious in a distant way of the proximity of the interlopers, or perhaps it was mere coinci-



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dence, Tinker turned over on his side, and his breathing became less regular.

Snyde puffed out the light, and, closing the door of Tinker's room gently—which was a foolish thing to do, for the boy always slept with it wide open—they passed into Sexton Blake's consulting-room.

The light-tight blinds were already down. They switched on the electric light. Then they began a hasty but systematic search around the room.

The drawers of Blake's desk were ransacked, the contents of the coats hanging about were tumbled on to the table, books were shook, and cabinets searched. But nothing in any way resembling a banknote was to be seen. A small safe stood in the corner, and at last, in despair, Snyde knelt down before this, and began to play with three pieces of bent wire, which he inserted in the keyhole.

"It's no good!" he muttered to Dutch Joe, who was bending down beside him. "Blake doesn't believe in swank safes (wooden safes painted in imitation of steel ones to give an air of importance to a business room). Nothing but nitro-glycerine will—"

The murmur ended in an imprecation of rage.

The door had softly opened as he spoke, and the frank, fearless face of a boy, in a suit of pyjamas, had peered in.

It was Tinker. Some slight noise had possibly roused him, and the discovery that his door was closed had excited his suspicions. He had remembered leaving it wide open, and he knew that Sexton Blake, who had often laughed at Tinker because of this little idiosyncrasy, would never think of closing it.

Even as Snyde discovered him, Tinker pressed the alarm-bell, just by the door, to warn his master, and then rushed in upon the two men without a weapon of any kind in his hands.

It was reckless courage, but Tinker's object was to keep the men busy until Sexton Blake could arrive. Had the detective been at home, the ruse would doubtless have worked beautifully, but, as it was, the boy put himself at the mercy of the ruffians.

He darted across the room to secure the fireirons. Before he could reach them a blow from Dutch Joe's leg-of-mutton fist sent him reeling against the wall with a sickening thud.

"You curs!" gasped the boy, half-sick with pain. "Guv'nor! Guv'nor!"

His fists got home on the big Dutchman's body, but the next instant another blow caught him between the eyes, and he went hurtling to the floor as senseless and as helpless as a log.

"You haven't killed him?" asked John Snyde, in an awed murmur, as he stared at the huddled-up figure on the hearthrug. "Come, we'd better go! Time's almost up!"

"Kill him! I think not!" grinned the Dutchman. "The boy will haf greater respect for us after this. Yes; I will come. We must try some other plan. Vhat ve must do is to force the old man to keep his mouth shut. You must see him in the morning, Johnnie."

Snyde caught his slow-speaking accomplice, and pulled him out of the room, snapping off the light as he reached the door. Thrusting on their boots in the hall, they passed out through the front door, and quickly vanished in the night.

Five minutes later Sexton Blake hurried up to the door with Pedro. He had been to the Gibsons' house in Kensington Square, taking Pedro with him for a run, for the great bloodhound had not been out for several days, only to find that it was, of course, a false errand. He had been informed that Mr. James was in his room; but as the footman he had seen previously was so emphatic that his master had not sent for him, the detective had decided not to inform the young managing-director of his presence in the house.

Unable to obtain a taxicab, he had hurried back to Baker Street as fast as his legs would carry him, with grim forebodings in his breast.

A turn of the latchkey and he was in the hall. Pedro ran in past him, and leapt up the stairs as his master closed the door. Then, as Blake climbed half-way up the staircase, there came a low growl—half-anger, half-mournful wail—from the bloodhound that stirred the detective's pulses, and sent him flying up the rest of the stairs with all the speed he could muster.

In a flash the light flooded the room. A glance round at its disturbed contents was sufficient to tell him that the room had been ransacked by persons in search of something, and then he was on his knees beside the huddled-up figure of Tinker.

"My poor boy!" muttered Sexton Blake tenderly.

He gently lifted up the limp body, and laid it upon a couch. The marks of Dutch Joe's knuckles stood out scarlet across the bridge of Tinker's nose, and the flesh around one eye was green and yellow.

Pedro, as sympathetic in his dumb way, licked the boy's white, nerveless hand, and gave vent to low growls like the rumble of distant thunder.

A brief examination showed the detective that Tinker also had a bump at the back of his head about the size of a pigeon's egg. With a grunt of satisfaction, he realised that the boy was not seriously hurt. Yet it was not until Sexton Blake had forced a drop of brandy between Tinker's teeth that he opened one eye—the other was too sore for use—and gazed dazedly about him.

"That's right, my boy!" cried Sexton Blake cheerily. "That telephone call was a trick to get me out of the house; but perhaps you were asleep before it came. You've been having a rough time?"

"I've had happier ones, guv'nor," said the boy, with a faint smile, "and that's a fact. I can sympathise now with the chap who gets a knock-out in a boxing championship!"

"There are all sorts of knock-outs, my boy," replied the detective, smiling. "Some only last a second or so. You're was a bad one. How did you get it?"

Tinker explained what had happened. He was just falling off to sleep when the telephone-bell had tinkled, and he had paid no heed. He told how, on waking, he had found his door closed, which had aroused his suspicions, and led to his discovery of the men in the office.

"They were bending down by the safe when I looked in, and one of them was tinkering about with the lock with some bent wire," he went on; "and then, before I could say Charley Robinson, they spotted me. I started the alarm, thinking you'd come along; then one of the brutes gave me a bit between the eyes like a kick from a horse, and down came the curtain."

"They've been looking for a five-pound note which I've been carrying in my pocket about with me all the while," said Sexton Blake. "They were Dutch Joe and the Spider, I suppose?"

Tinker swung himself upright. His head was aching fearfully. It wasn't easy to think coherently under the circumstances.

"They were the chaps who attacked us to-night in Harrogate Street," he said. "I'm sure of that, though I don't know their names. Still, the one that knocked me out had a face I've seen before. I know! I sketched him at the stores while I was waiting for you. You were chin-wagging with young Mr. Gibson at the time. You said he was Dutch Joe, I remember. He's a bull-necked brute as thick as he's broad. If Dutch Joe was the man who wanted to get the five back, it was evidently Dutch Joe who stole the money. There you are, guv'nor, Dutch Joe is the guilty party! Arrest him, and the case is finished!"

Sexton Blake could not suppress a smile as he replied to his zealous assistant.

"It's not finished yet, Tinker, not by a long way. Half the case is certainly cleared up. We know who the accomplices are, but what we have to find out is who was the chief culprit. My own opinion, as you know, is that Mr. Thomas Gibson stole the notes. Why he did so we have to find out. But, of course, I may be wrong in even suspecting him."

THE END.

(Was the detective wrong? You simply must read next week's story, entitled "Fleeced of a Fortune!" which forms a splendid sequel to the above story. In this yarn you will be able to read of the great efforts that the Spider makes to cover up the tracks, and of the clever way Sexton Blake succeeds in discovering the actual thief of the money. Don't miss this exciting sequel, and make sure of securing your copy of next Friday's PENNY POPULAR by ordering in advance.)

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of St. Jim's.

- BY -

**MARTIN
CLIFFORD.**



THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Bad News.

KILDARE, the captain of St. Jim's, was at tea in his study. Kildare, the big, handsome Sixth-Former, looked very well and fit. There were three other seniors with him, all of the Sixth—Darrel and Rushden of the School House, and Monteith, the head prefect of the New House at St. Jim's. The four seniors were talking over the all-engrossing subject just then at St. Jim's—the impending match with Southwood United.

The United match was a "big thing" for St. Jim's First. Kildare, keen and enterprising footballer as he was, was the first to acknowledge that. He would not of his own accord have challenged Southwood. The United team was older than the First Eleven at St. Jim's, and in its ranks it included several professional players.

The United belonged to the county league, and had hopes of being able, at no distant date, to join the English League. Such a team was, in the nature of things, far above any schoolboy eleven, even an eleven picked from the best players in the top Form of a public school.

But they had challenged St. Jim's to a match, and Kildare was not the fellow to refuse a challenge, so long as he had any chance at all. With the First Eleven at its very best, there was no reason why the Saints should not have a chance. Most of St. Jim's backed up Kildare in accepting the challenge.

The United would be able to throw more size and strength into the scale, but the St. Jim's First were famous for their pace and their splendid combination, and they were accustomed to moving like clockwork under the direction of their captain.

As Kildare looked at it, there were even chances of victory and defeat; and if St. Jim's should win, it would be a big feather in their cap. And he could not refuse the challenge without risking an accusation of finking. He had accepted it, and from the moment of accepting it he had worked his hardest to get his team into top-notch form.

Then came ill-luck. Darrel, who was the best man in the team after Kildare, twisted his ankle in practice, and was crooked. It was a severe blow to the eleven. Darrel would not be able to play on Wednesday, that was certain.

There were plenty of good players in the Sixth and Fifth Forms at St. Jim's from whom Kildare could select a reliable substitute, but there was nobody who was anything like Darrel's form. The St. Jim's First Eleven had to make up their minds to meet the enemy with one of their best left out. But Kildare was not in the least inclined to give up hope.



"You are wumplin' my collah, you howwid wuffian!" gasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy as the captain of the school dangled him out of the window.

"It's rotten!" Darrel was saying, as he passed his cup to be refilled. "I'm more sorry than I can say, Kildare!" Kildare nodded.

"It wasn't your fault," he said. "Knox cannoned into you, and you had to go down. It was Knox's fault, if anybody's. But how we're to get a winger like you, old man, is a puzzle I shall have to give up!"

"It's rotten!" said Darrel again. The seniors all agreed that it was rotten; but it could not be helped.

"The team's good as it stands, though," said Kildare thoughtfully. He took a fragment of paper from his pocket, with names pencilled on it, and ran over the list. "Lefevre of the Fifth is going into goal, and he's a steady man. He'll keep the leather out as well as anybody!"

"Good man!" said Monteith. "Dodd and Price are good backs; I don't see how we could improve on them."

"Quite right." "Baker, North, and Jones, they're the half line, and they will hold together well."

"Yes, rather!" "Then Rushden, Darrel, Kildare, Monteith, and Fancourt," said Kildare musingly. "That was the front line. And we've got to get a man to put in your place, Darrel."

"I'm beastly sorry!" "Well, we shall have to manage it," said Kildare cheerfully. "Accidents will happen. Luckily, the rest of us are at the top of our form!"

"That's true," said Monteith; "and we'll take jolly good care to keep ourselves so! If I may make a suggestion, I should say Anderson of the Fifth for inside-right!"

"A good man," said Kildare. "We'll see!" There was a tap at the door, and Knox, the prefect, came in. He nodded to the other seniors, with a slight flush in his cheeks.

"Come in, Knox!" said Kildare. "We were just talking about the eleven—"

"That's what I've come to speak about," said Knox, rather abruptly.

Kildare looked a little surprised.

"Yes?" he said.

Knox's flush deepened.

"You haven't decided yet upon a winger to replace Darrel?" he said.

"Not yet. We're thinking about Anderson of the Fifth."

"I don't see why the Fifth should be chosen when there are Sixth-Formers available," said Knox.

"Oh! You want to suggest somebody in the Sixth?" said Kildare, cordially enough. "Go ahead, old man! I shall be glad of any useful suggestion, I assure you!"

"Well, I've always looked upon myself as a pretty good winger," said Knox, "and inside-right's my favourite place."

"Oh!"

"I don't see why I shouldn't be given a chance," said Knox, rather sharply. "I've played for the First before, and I don't know that I've disgraced the team!"

"Well, no," said Kildare slowly; "but—"

"But there is a 'but!'" said Knox, with a sneer. "I know we don't pull very well together, you and I, Kildare, in school matters. We have different ideas about the duties of a prefect. But I don't think personal disagreements ought to be allowed to interfere with football matters!"

"I shouldn't let it," said Kildare quietly. "I think all the fellows know me too well to imagine that I should let my private likes and dislikes interfere with selecting a footer team. But that's not the point. I'm going to pass you over—"

"Oh, you've settled that, then?" said Knox unpleasantly.

"Yes. I'm going to pass you over because you're not fit, and because you're not reliable enough for a match of this sort. We shall have to strain every nerve to win, and I can't afford to take chances. If we lose, St. Jim's will look a set of duffers for taking up a challenge from such a strong team as the United—at all events, if we lose by a big margin. And we want to win specially, to show that an amateur team can hold its own against professionals. If you were more fit, I'd be glad to play you; but—well, to be quite plain, Knox, you smoke too much to be fit, and I know it!"

"I might have expected you to harp on that old string," said Knox, with a sneer; "but really you might find something new if you must get at me!"

"I don't want to get at you. I'm stating facts. You're a prefect, and I don't interfere with your private habits, though I should care a junior for acting as you do. But you can't expect me to play you!"

"No, I suppose I can't."

"Besides—"

Kildare paused.

"Well," said Knox, with the same sneer upon his thin, unpleasant face—"well? Have you some more reasons to give?"

"Yes, if you like to hear them."

"Oh, pile it on!"

"Well, the way you cannoned Darrel yesterday was denceed clumsy, to say the least of it," said Kildare abruptly. "I couldn't suspect a St. Jim's fellow of being cad enough to crook one of ourselves to get a place in the team, but if you had Darrel's place you might be suspected of having cannoned him on purpose, Knox!"

Knox flushed deeply.

"You mean that you suspect me?" he exclaimed.

"No, I don't. I've said I don't. Only it would look bad, and I may as well tell you that some of the fellows do suspect you."

Knox gritted his teeth.

"I suppose I ought to know better than to expect fair play from you," he said. "We don't get on together, and you're going to leave me out. Well, I can't stop you!"

Kildare coloured.

"If you're going to talk in that strain, the sooner you get out of my study the better," he said quietly.

Knox gave an angry laugh.

"Oh, I'll get out!" he said.

"You're going to keep the match in the hands of your own circle of friends—I know that!"

Kildare half rose, his blue eyes glinting. Knox made a backward

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step towards the door. If the captain of St. Jim's had lost his temper it would have gone hard with the prefect. But Kildare was accustomed to keeping a tight hand on his temper; as captain of the First Eleven and captain of the school he needed to.

He sat down again quietly.

"You'd better go!" he said.

"Oh, I'll go fast enough!"

Knox quitted the study and slammed the door. The four seniors looked at one another uncomfortably.

"Knox takes it rottenly enough," Rushden remarked.

"Pass the ham, Monty."

"You know what I think," said Monteith. "I never saw a cannon so deliberate in my life. Knox bowled Darrel over on purpose."

"Well, I shall try not to think so," said Kildare. "But he doesn't play in the match—that's settled! Hallo! Come in!"

A knock had come at the door. Toby, the page of the School House, entered with a letter in his hand.

"Letter for you, Master Kildare," he said.

Toby was not bound to bring letters to the captain's study; nor did he expect a tip for doing so. But there was no one at St. Jim's who would not have walked a mile to do any little service for Eric Kildare. The handsome Irish lad, with his unflinching good temper and kind ways, was a favourite with everybody at the old school. There was hardly a fellow in his own Form who did not like him, and he was the idol of the juniors; and even Toby was suspected of putting a little extra polish on his boots, and giving an extra rub to the study window when he cleaned it.

"Thank you, Toby!" said Kildare.

He took the letter, and the lad, more pleased with a "Thank you!" from Kildare than he would have been with a half-crown from Knox or Sefton, quitted the study. Kildare glanced at the address on the letter.

"It's from my father," he said. "Will you fellows excuse me?"

"All serene!"

Kildare opened the letter, and glanced over it. The ruddy colour in his healthy, handsome face paled a little. The seniors looked at him.

"Not bad news, I hope?" said Darrel anxiously.

Kildare did not reply for a moment.

"Yes," he said at last.

"I'm sorry, old chap!"

"My mother's ill," said Kildare, in a strained voice. "It's—'it's not serious, I think, but—the pater thinks I'd better know, in case it's necessary for me to go home. He's going to let me have a wire to-morrow if I'm to go."

"My hat!"

"Poor old chap!"

Kildare sat staring at the letter. The other fellows looked at him. They were sorry for Kildare. Some of them had seen Kildare's mother, and they knew the deep bond of affection that existed between the kind Irish lady and her son. But they could not be blamed

if they were thinking as much of the morrow's match as of Kildare. If the telegram came, what of the match with the United?

"Where is your mater now, Kildare?" asked Darrel, after a long pause.

"Staying at Brighton," said Kildare.

"You could get down there pretty soon, then, in case of any need," said Darrel slowly. "I'm sorry for this, Kildare, old chap!"

Kildare nodded. His handsome face was pale and troubled. The seniors exchanged glances, and quietly left the study. They felt that the captain of St. Jim's would prefer to be alone just then.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Not a Warm Reception.

TOM MERRY tapped at the door of Kildare's study.

There was no reply.

"Gone out, I suppose," said Manners.

"Kildare was having tea with some other chaps," said Monty Lowther. "I should hardly think he was finished yet."

"We'll soon see."

Tom Merry tapped again, and opened the door of the study. The chums of the Shell looked in, and

TUCK HAMPERS

FOR
READERS OF

THE BOYS' FRIEND—1d.

WIN ONE ON MONDAY.

the next moment they started back with suppressed exclamations.

Kildare was there. He was alone. There was a letter beside him, and the captain of St. Jim's was leaning forward upon the table, his face buried in his hands.

Kildare did not look up. He had evidently not heard the Shell fellows.

Tom Merry & Co. stood in the doorway, looking at the captain of St. Jim's, and not knowing what to do.

It was clear that they had surprised the captain of the school at an awkward moment. What was the matter with Kildare they could not guess. But he was evidently not himself, and he would certainly not be pleased at being intruded upon just then. But to go without speaking—if he saw them going—

"Better bunk!" whispered Manners.

Tom Merry nodded.

The Shell fellows were just drawing back when Kildare raised his head. He had heard some slight sound. He started to his feet at once, and the juniors could see that his handsome face was very pale.

"Come in!" he exclaimed. "Did you knock?"

"Yes, Kildare."

"I didn't hear you. Do you want anything?"

Tom Merry hesitated.

"Ahem!"

"Please come to the point."

"Certainly, Kildare. Ahem! It's about the football match to-morrow."

Kildare started.

"Look here, Merry—"

"You see, Darrel being crooked, we—we thought we might make a suggestion—"

"That's it," said Manners. "A suggestion, you see."

Kildare stared, and then laughed.

"Oh, you want to suggest somebody for the place?" he asked. "You think you are more likely to make a good selection than the captain of the team?"

Tom Merry's colour deepened to crimson.

"Not exactly that," he stammered. "I don't mean that, Kildare. But—you see—"

"I'm afraid I don't see," said Kildare, a little testily, "and as I have an important letter to write, I wish you would buck up and explain what you mean, if you mean anything."

"Ahem! You see—"

"Well?"

"Darrell being crooked, you'll be selecting a new man—"

"I know that."

"And we—we thought—"

It did not seem quite so easy to say it now that he was face to face with the captain of St. Jim's.

"We thought— Ahem!"

"Well," said Kildare patiently, "what did you think, Merry?"

"We thought it would be a ripping opportunity of doing the fair thing all round," said Tom Merry.

Kildare frowned.

"Does that mean that, in the opinion of the Shell, I don't do the fair thing all round now?" he asked.

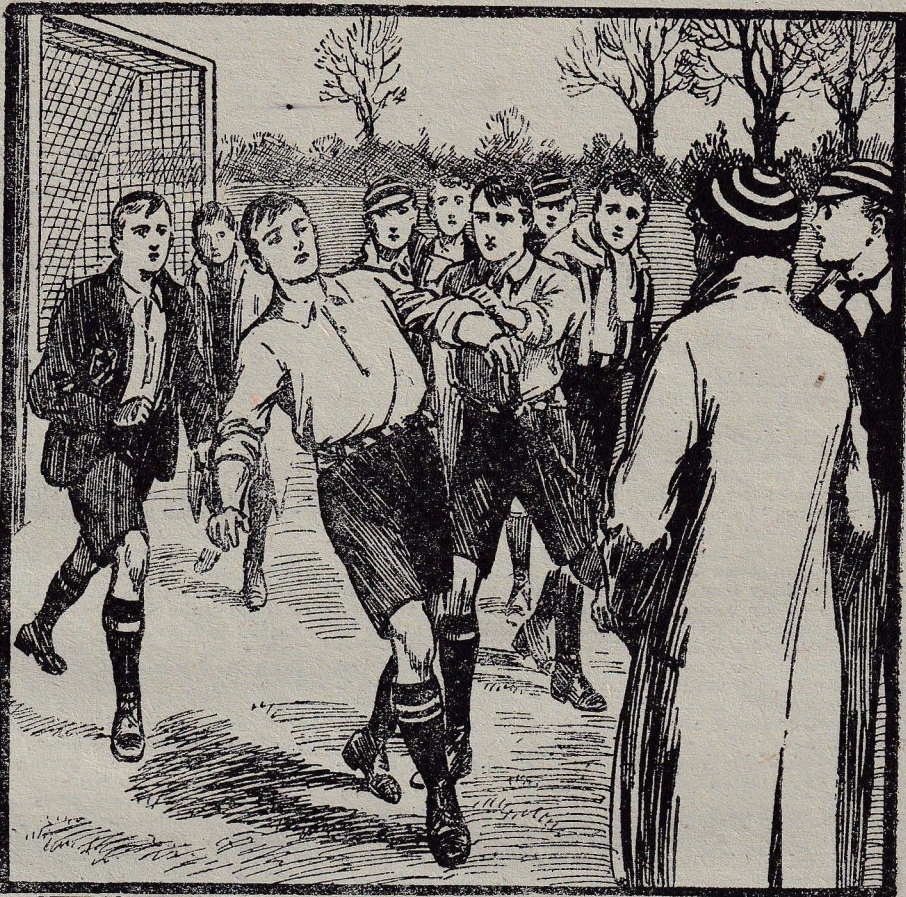
"N-n-n-no! Not at all!"

"Then what do you mean?"

"I think that perhaps you've overlooked our claims," said Tom Merry cautiously.

Kildare jumped.

"Your claims!"



Kildare tore the envelope open and read the telegram. The next instant he staggered back, with a hoarse cry, "Mother!" Monteith sprang forward and supported the captain of St. Jim's.

"Yes." It was out now, and Tom Merry felt all the better for it. "That's it, Kildare."

"You young ass—"

"Hold on a minute. On an occasion like this, we feel that the juniors ought to be represented, and, Darrel being crooked, there's a jolly good opportunity. You can shove me instead of Darrel—"

"My hat!"

"I'm a jolly good inside-right," said Tom Merry modestly.

"If you wanted a good goalie, there's Fatty Wynn of the New House. But if you want an inside-right—well, here's me!"

"Hear, hear!" said Manners and Lowther heartily.

"What do you say, Kildare?"

Kildare pointed to the door.

"Get out!" he replied.

"But I say—"

"You young duffers!" said Kildare, with a laugh of genuine astonishment. "Do you think I should be likely to play juniors in the First Eleven on the occasion of the most difficult match the school has ever undertaken?"

"Well, you see—"

"We want to strengthen the team—"

"Well, I'm not strengthening the team by leaving out good players and putting in poor ones," said Kildare drily. "You were played in a big match once, Merry, but the present occasion is quite different. Don't be a young ass."

"But you see—"

"I'm afraid I've no more time to spare," Kildare remarked.

"Will you oblige me by getting out of the study?"

The Terrible Three looked at one another.

"Under the circumstances—" commenced Tom Merry.

Kildare rose to his feet. Tom Merry hastily opened the door. Manners and Lowther executed a strategic movement into the passage. Tom Merry lingered in the doorway to make a last attempt to bring the captain of St. Jim's to reason.

"Kildare, old man— Ow!"

The Sixth-Former's strong hand descended upon Tom

Merry's collar, and he was lifted from the floor, swinging clear in the air.

"Ow!" he gurgled. "Groo! Oh!"

Biff!

The hero of the Shell went spinning out into the passage. He crashed into Manners and Lowther, and sent them both spinning. The Terrible Three rolled on the floor, yelling.

Kildare's door shut with a bang.

"Ow!"

"Ow!"

"Yah!"

Tom Merry & Co. picked themselves up ruefully. They were not much hurt, but they were very dusty indeed, and extremely exasperated.

"It's no go!" growled Manners.

Monty Lowther sniffed.

"I said it was a rotten idea from the start!" he growled.

"Oh, rats!"

"Look here, Tom Merry——"

"More rats!"

And thus amiably discoursing, the chagrined and dust-stained heroes of the Shell tramped disconsolately down the passage.

Kildare, in his study, laughed. It was like his old laugh. But as his eyes fell again upon the letter on the table, his face became grave, and a worn look came into his eyes. He picked up the letter, and held it tightly in his hand.

"The mater," he whispered aloud. "If—if I could only go to her! But—but I can't—I can't desert the fellows on the eve of the biggest match of the season!"

The captain of St. Jim's paced the study restlessly. He was not thinking now of the morrow's match—of the stern struggle that lay before St. Jim's First. He was thinking of a kind and loving face, now pale with sickness—a face he had always loved and honoured.

He paused in his hurried pacing of the study, and looked in the glass. It showed him a strange change in his face—the reflection that looked out at him from the mirror was pale, worn, harassed, almost haggard. Kildare clenched his hand hard.

"I must stand by the fellows—they depend on me! But—but— Oh, mother!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER. A Really Kind Offer.

IT seemed that Kildare was doomed to be interrupted that day, for no sooner had Tom Merry & Co. disappeared from the passage, than Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the Fourth, made his appearance outside the captain of St. Jim's study.

He tapped on the door.

"Come in!" sang out Kildare.

Arthur Augustus entered.

"Hallo!" said Kildare. "What do you want?"

"I have come to speak to you about a wathah important mattah, deah boy. I twust you will excuse me for invadin' these sacwed pwecincts——"

"What on earth are you saying, D'Arcy?" said Kildare, not unkindly.

"This is a pwefect's woom, you know, Kildare, and I have no wight here, weally," said Arthur Augustus apologetically.

"Well, D'Arcy?"

"You look quite seedy, deah boy. But I have a pwoposition to make to you, which I have weason to hope will buck you up like anythin', Kildare."

"Oh, I'm all right, thank you, D'Arcy——"

"Excuse me, deah boy, but you don't look it, weally. May I go on? It's about the Southwood United match, you know——"

Kildare turned sharply.

"I thought I had made myself quite clear about that with you chaps," he said.

"Yaas, wathah, Kildare. But the othahs——"

"With all, D'Arcy!"

Arthur Augustus was rather staggered. Not knowing for the moment how to proceed, he took refuge in arranging his monocle. Kildare continued to look steadily through the window.

D'Arcy coughed.

"It's weally vewy decent of you, Kildare, to allow me to talk to you here. Pewwaps I had bettah make a clean breast of it."

"Clean breast of what?" demanded Kildare suddenly.

Arthur Augustus, to use his own picturesque phrase, was if quite a flutter. But he had a duty to perform in his own estimation, and he did it.

"My wepwesentjin' you in the First Eleven, deah boy," he said, with a sufficient calmness. "You are weally too seedy to play, Kildare, and I shall play up like anythin', I assure you."

Kildare looked curiously at the swell of the School House for a moment, then he laughed.

"Thank you very much, D'Arcy——"

"Not at all, deah boy!"

"But it can't be done!" concluded Kildare.

D'Arcy's face fell. He thought Kildare had been going to agree.

"It would be extwemely wotten for St. Jim's to be licked, Kildare," said D'Arcy. "May I make one more appeal to you, deah boy?"

"If you don't go, D'Arcy——"

"Weally, deah boy——"

"Get out!" said Kildare, losing his patience, and pointing to the door.

"You will be sowwy aftahwards that you didn't accept my offah, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, walking leisurely to the door.

"We'll soon see who's sorry!" said Kildare, making a spring towards him.

The swell of the School House did not stop to argue the point, and the door closed behind him with a bang. Kildare walked back to the window. In half a minute he had forgotten all about D'Arcy. But Arthur Augustus was a determined youth. A thing taken up with him was a thing to be carried through at all costs. He knew that if any other prefects came along and caught him outside the prefect's room, they would probably take the law into their own hands, regardless of Kildare.

These considerations Arthur Augustus decided to disdain. He was out to help Kildare, and he meant to do it, whether Kildare would have it or not. Carefully he approached the prefect's door again.

Kildare, still staring through the window, did not see the handle of the door turn. The door opened. A monocle gleamed round the edge of the door. A soft footfall, and Arthur Augustus was in the "lions' den" again. Kildare turned.

"You young beggar!" he exclaimed.

"Weally, you know, Kildare——"

"Out you go!"

"I wefuse! I mean—weally, Kildare, don't you think you had bettah agwee——"

"Get out, I tell you!" said Kildare, making a stride towards Arthur Augustus.

The swell of the School House dodged him nimbly, but only for a moment. There was a scramble for two or three moments, and when it was over Arthur Augustus was considerably disarranged.

"You howwid bwute, Kildare! Welease me at once!"

"I will!" grinned Kildare.

Before D'Arcy could quite realise it, he found himself dangling over the quad outside the window of the prefect's room. Kildare's grip was on the back of his collar, taking in both the collar and the jacket, and Arthur Augustus swung over space with dizzy eyes.

"Now then, you young ass!"

"B-b-b-bai Jove!" gasped D'Arcy. "You—you are chook-chook-choking me, you know! You are—gwoow—wumplin' my collah feahfully, you know! Ow! Welease me at once, you howwid wuffian! I shall uttably wefuse to offah to do you a service again! Ow!"

"You cheeky young duffer!" said Kildare.

"Ow! Welease me, you howwid boundah! Oh!"

"Certainly!" said Kildare.

He released the swell of St. Jim's suddenly. Arthur Augustus dropped with a bump to the ground. The ground was only a couple of yards below, but Arthur Augustus dropped upon it quite suddenly, and he sat down with considerable violence.

"Ow!" he gasped.

"Now buzz off!" said Kildare curtly.

D'Arcy staggered to his feet.

"Kildare, I wegard you as an uttah boundah! I now withdaww my extwemely genewous offah, and I wefuse to captain the school team undah any conditions whatevah!"

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stalked away in high dudgeon, setting his collar straight as he went with one hand, and groping wildly for his eyeglass with the other.

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ANSWERS

The Popular Penny Weekly

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THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
The New Goalkeeper.

I WANT to speak to you, Kildare.”
It was an abrupt and unpleasant voice, and Kildare turned round from the window in his study, to find Knox at his elbow. Kildare's face clouded over. He had never liked Knox, and he liked him less than ever now. The St. Jim's captain was the most unsuspecting of fellows, and he had not been able to suspect Knox of deliberately fouling Darrel to keep the winger out of the match.

But what had happened since had convinced even the unsuspecting Kildare. The captain of the school had just received news that a fight had taken place between Knox and Lefevre of the Fifth. The latter had been badly hurt, and the result was that the Fifth-Former could not keep goal for the First, owing to Knox's brutality. To Kildare the prefect's motive was quite clear. There was an uncompromising frown on Kildare's face as he met the eyes of the prefect. Kildare was very patient and very unsuspecting; but when he was certain that a fellow had been guilty of meanness and foul play, he never took the trouble to conceal his scorn.

“What do you want?” he asked abruptly. “The less I have to say to you, Knox, the better I shall like it.”

Knox sneered.

“It's about the footer match this afternoon.”

“That doesn't concern you.”

“I hope it does,” said Knox. “I hear that Lefevre's name has been scratched.”

“That is correct. And you know the reason?”

“Yes; he is crooked.”

“And you did it,” said Kildare; “and I cannot help thinking that you did it on purpose, to spoil him for the match!”

“You've no right to say so.”

“I say so because I think so.”

“What I was going to say is, who's going to keep goal for the First?”

“I haven't decided yet.”

“You know I'm good in goal.”

“If you were better than the best goalkeeper in a League team, you shouldn't keep goal for the team this afternoon!” said Kildare, with a glint in his eyes. “I'm fed up with you, Knox. You'll never play in a team that I captain. I've tried to stand you, because you're a prefect, and because our people are neighbours in Brighton; but now I've seen what an utter cad you are, I don't want to say a word to you. Is that plain enough?”

Knox gritted his teeth.

“Yes; that's plain enough!” he said savagely. “You are going to leave me out of the eleven then?”

“Most decidedly!”

“Although you know you haven't a goalie so good?”

“There are several just as good, and more honest.”

“Look here, Kildare!”

Kildare pointed to the door.

“You'd better leave me alone,” he said. “I can't stand you, Knox. I feel sure that you fouled Darrel on purpose, and I know you hammered Lefevre to make him unfit for the match. When I think of it, I can hardly keep my hands off you. You'd better leave me alone.”

Knox apparently thought so, too. He turned and quitted the room without another word. But his eyes were glittering with a savage light.

Kildare remained staring out of the window gloomily. He was thinking of the match, and of the goalkeeper that was wanted; but he was thinking, too, of the pale face upon the pillow sat home, and of the mother that would have been glad to see her son. As soon as the match was over, he was going—but—

He resolutely put the matter out of his mind; it was unnerving him. He had the match to think of, and the time was growing very short.

The loud shouts from the direction of the playing-fields came to his ears.

“Bravo, Wynn!”

“Well saved!”

“Hurrah!”

Kildare started a little. He left the prefects' room, and the House, and strolled down in the direction of the football-ground. The crowd was dense around the junior ground, and seniors as well as juniors were there, looking on at the fine display given by Fatty Wynn.

The fat Fourth-Former was warming to his work. Five or six of the best shots in the Lower Forms were pelting him with balls, and Fatty was saving them all. Tom Merry, Blake, Figgins, Kangaroo, and Reilly were sending in shots in turn, and sometimes together, and Fatty Wynn, active and quick as a cat, saved them all. His fat face was very

red, and he was grinning good-humouredly as he tossed out the balls.

Kildare looked on, with a thoughtful expression upon his face.

Three balls came whizzing in together, and there was an exclamation from the crowd. It was certain that Fatty would be “done” this time! But he was not done! One ball he fisted out with his left, and another with his right, and the third he headed back, and the three dropped outside the goal area.

There was a yell.

“Bravo, Fatty!”

“Hurrah!”

Kildare came forward. The juniors made way for the captain of the school, and the shooting practice stopped. Kildare signed to Fatty Wynn to come out of the goal.

“You seem to be in good form, kid,” he remarked.

“Pretty fair,” said Fatty Wynn modestly.

“I wonder if you could stop a ball from me?”

“I don't know. I'll try if you like.”

“Give me the ball, Tom Merry.”

“Here you are!”

Fatty Wynn stepped back between the posts. The crowd looked on breathlessly. Kildare was the best kick at goal that St. Jim's possessed. But Fatty Wynn was a wonderful goalie. If he stopped a ball sent in with Kildare's skill, he would have established his reputation for ever.

“Go it, Fatty!” said Figgins encouragingly. “You can do it!”

Fatty Wynn nodded, but he did not speak. He was watching Kildare like a cat.

Kildare brought the ball down goalward, dribbling it neatly, and made a feint of kicking into the far corner of the net.

“Stop it, Fatty!” yelled Figgins, deceived by the captain's tactics. And he half groaned as Fatty Wynn made no motion.

But Fatty Wynn was right. For even as Figgins shouted, Kildare changed his feet with lightning speed, and sent the ball in with a quick, low shot.

But Fatty Wynn was there.

He threw himself down to the ball, and drove it out with his fat fist, and it whizzed past Kildare's foot like a shot.

There was a terrific yell.

“Well saved, Fatty!”

“Bravo!”

Fatty Wynn rose, and grinned serenely. He had saved a most difficult shot, and Figgins rushed into the goal and slapped him wildly on the back.

Kildare smiled.

“That was well done!” he exclaimed. “Would you like to keep goal for the First Eleven this afternoon, Wynn?”

Fatty Wynn almost staggered.

“Keep goal—First Eleven?” he murmured.

“Yes.”

“You—you—I—you don't mean it!” gasped Fatty Wynn. “Keep goal for the St. Jim's First! Oh, my only Aunt Sempronia!”

“I do mean it,” said Kildare, with a smile. “If you only keep your nerve, you will do splendidly. Would you like to try?”

“Like!” said Fatty Wynn. “Why, I'd jump at a chance like that with both feet! Oh I say, Figgy! Isn't it gorgeous?”

“Hurrah!” roared Figgins.

“Then you'll be ready at two-thirty,” said Kildare.

And the captain of St. Jim's walked away, very well satisfied indeed with his selection of a goalkeeper for the United match.

The juniors looked at one another gleefully. Tom Merry and Blake were as pleased as anybody.

“It's ripping!” said Tom Merry. “It was really my idea, playing a junior in the First Eleven; in fact, I suggested it to Kildare. Only what I thought of was, playing me as a forward instead of Fatty Wynn as a goalie.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“But so long as the Lower School has a man in the team, it's all serene!” said Tom Merry, slapping Fatty Wynn on the shoulder. “Bravo, Fatty!”

“Hurrah, Fatty!”

“Good old porpoise!”

And a crowd of juniors surrounded the Falstaff of the New House, and lifted him on their shoulders, and bore him away in triumph.

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THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

For the Sake of the School.

LONG before the time fixed for the match with the United, the ground was crowded. Nearly all St. Jim's meant to see the match, and all other play at the old school was dropped for the afternoon. Seniors and juniors thronged round the field, and there was a good deal of bustling for favourable places among the School House and New House juniors.

To the junior section of St. Jim's, there was one player on the field that day, and that one was Fatty Wynn. Even the mighty Kildare did not loom so largely in their eyes.

Fatty Wynn rolled over to the edge of the field to chat with the juniors till he was wanted. Figgins slapped him on the shoulder, and Kerr dug him affectionately in the ribs.

"Good old Fatty!" said Figgins. "Feeling all right?"

"Right as rain!" said Fatty cheerfully.

"Mind you don't let them score!" said Kerr.

"Not if I can help it."

"Yaas, wathah! Pway play up, for the honah of the juniahs, you know," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "We shall all have an eye on you, Fatty, deah boy."

"And we'll stand a big feed afterwards, if you don't let them score," said Lowther.

"What-ho!" said Fatty Wynn.

There was a fresh shout.

"The United!"

The visiting team had arrived.

They came in a brake. The crowd watched them, and gave them a cheer as they met Kildare and his men. Tom Merry looked the United over, and he could not help seeing what a big order the First Eleven had taken on in meeting them.

Southwood United were an older and heavier team in every way. Their average age was about twenty, and at least three of the team were professional players. The three pro's were as keen as mustard, and evidently regarded the match with a schoolboy team as somewhat in the light of a joke. Probably the United had taken the match on more in the way of practice than of anything else. On Saturdays they were generally playing matches for which gate-money was charged, but Wednesday was an idle day, and their skipper had filled it up with the fixture with St. Jim's. Wimpole, the United skipper, was not what would be called swanking, but it was easy to see that he regarded the match as practically won already, and the coming play simply as a walk-over.

That was so evident that it put up the backs of the St. Jim's team at once. They were filled with the most intense desire to beat the United, and take them down a peg or two. Hardly a fellow there, in the team or out of it, would not have given half a term's pocket-money to see the visitors licked.

Kildare greeted his visitors politely enough. Wimpole, of Southwood, glanced over the sturdy set of seniors with an approving eye; he saw that the Saints were in good form.

The rival captains tossed for choice of ends. A muttered exclamation from Knox made Sefton look at him sharply. Knox's face was dark with passion.

"What's the matter?" asked Sefton, in wonder.

Knox gritted his teeth.

"Nothing! Hang it! Oh, nothing! Ah!"

Knox's glance had swept round in the direction of the school gates in the distance.

Sefton followed his glance. A boy in uniform was making his way towards the football-ground, and he had a buff-coloured envelope in his hand.

Sefton whistled softly.

"A telegram!" he muttered.

Knox's eyes gleamed.

"Yes; for Kildare."

"You mean, you hope it is," said Sefton, with a grin.

"Yes," said Knox, smiling in a very peculiar way; "he's half expecting one, you know. I hope it is. I've very little doubt of it."

"Kildare—Kildare, wire for you!"

Kildare swung round suddenly, his face going pale. He had just won the toss against Southwood when the telegraph-boy came on the field.

"For Master Kildare!"

Kildare's hand trembled as he took the telegram.

There was a deadly pause. The Southwood players looked surprised; they did not understand. But all the St. Jim's crowd understood very well. The telegram was for Kildare—from Brighton. It meant bad news. Every eye was fixed upon the captain of St. Jim's.

Kildare tore the envelope open, and looked at the message. The telegram fluttered from his hand to the ground, and, with a hoarse cry, the captain of St. Jim's staggered back.

Monteith sprang forward and caught the captain of St. Jim's.

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Kildare, deadly pale, with the perspiration clotting his forehead, staggered unsteadily, and leaned upon the New House prefect.

"Bad news?" asked Monteith anxiously.

He hardly needed to ask the question. It was pretty clear that the telegram contained bad news.

"It's from the pater," murmured Kildare.

"And your mother—"

"Read it!"

Kildare pulled himself together. Monteith picked up the telegram and read it, a dozen fellows reading it over his shoulder. It was brief.

"Kildare, School House, St. James'.—Worse. Come at once.—FATHER."

Monteith clicked his teeth.

There was a dead silence. The Southwood players were waiting to begin. Mr. Railton, the House-master of the School House, who was refereeing the match, had already put his whistle to his lips, but he lowered it again, and came over to Kildare. Monteith showed the House-master the telegram.

Mr. Railton's face became very grave.

"Your mother, Kildare?" he asked.

Kildare nodded without speaking.

"I am sorry! You are going?"

"I—I must!" muttered the St. Jim's captain.

He cast an almost appealing glance round upon the team.

They did not meet his eyes.

There was utter, blank dismay in every face. If Kildare left them now, on the very verge of the match, what would happen? The walk-over the Southwooders so confidently expected would certainly become an accomplished fact. St. Jim's would be beaten—beaten hollow, with a disgraceful margin of goals, and become a laughing-stock. It would not be their fault; it would not be Kildare's fault; it would only be the roughest and cruellest luck. It was rotten—rotten!

"You chaps—what do you say?" muttered Kildare.

There was no reply. The fellows did not like to say what they thought. They wanted Kildare to stay; they wanted him to lead them.

Kildare read it in their faces.

He looked at Mr. Railton. The House-master's face was very grave and anxious. He did not know what to advise the St. Jim's captain to do.

"What shall I do, sir?" muttered Kildare.

"I can hardly say, Kildare." Mr. Railton looked at his watch. "For one thing, there is no train from Rycombe for thirty-five minutes from now. You could at least begin the match, if you liked—if you feel fit."

"I should have to leave in a quarter of an hour. That would really mean playing the match a man short."

"Yes."

Kildare gritted his teeth. What was he to do? To hesitate to fly to his mother, when she asked for him in the hour of sickness—it seemed impossible! But to abandon his comrades, who relied upon him, at the very last moment, when it was far too late to think of any fresh arrangement—to leave them to sickening defeat and humiliation—how was that possible either?

Monteith fixed an almost beseeching look upon Kildare. Time had been when these two were rivals, when the New House prefect would have been glad of any chance, any accident, that would have given him the captaincy in the place of Kildare. And certainly if Kildare went it was Monteith who would take his place. But that time was past; the only thought in Monteith's mind was to save the match for the school. And without Kildare it could not be saved.

"You—you can't go, Kildare," Monteith muttered at last. "After all, it doesn't say there is danger—it's not so bad as that."

"But—"

"There's a train at half-past four, that catches the express at Wayland," said Monteith. "You can catch that immediately after the match. Taggles could have the trap ready. It's a difference of only an hour and a half."

Kildare groaned.

An hour and a half, when his mother was asking for him on her sick-bed! But he had his duty to do.

The more he felt inclined to fly at once to his home the more it was borne in upon his mind that his duty lay with his comrades at St. Jim's.

He must play—for his school's sake!

"You could send a wire to say, 'Coming by the four-thirty,'" Monteith suggested. "Don't—don't let me persuade you. But—but we're done for if you go."

"That's certain," said Rushden.

Kildare set his teeth.

"I shall stay!" he said.

There was a murmur of relief from the footballers.

Kildare took a telegraph-form from the post-office lad, and Mr. Raitton handed him a pencil. He spread out the form on his knee, and wrote quickly:

"Your wire received. Coming by the four-thirty.—Eric."

He handed the form to the lad.

"Send that as quickly as you can, kid."

"Yes, sir!"

Kildare straightened up.

"I'm ready," he said.

"Good for you!" muttered Monteith, in great relief.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

The Great Match.

SOUTHWOOD UNITED followed up the kick-off with hard pressing, making matters "hum," as Monty Lowther expressed it, from the very start. That they under-rated their opponents, and fancied that the task they had in hand was far easier than it really was, was quite evident, and all the St. Jim's crowd fervently hoped that they would soon be undeceived as to the quality of the St. Jim's players.

Excitement rose to fever-height in the crowd.

The fellows yelled and gasped and strained their eyes to see. The St. Jim's forwards were on the move. The Southwood backs were ready. Kildare had the ball. He passed it out to Rushden, and eluded the right back, and dashed on, and Rushden let him have it back just in time with a magnificent centre.

Kick!

Right for the net the ball whizzed, true as a die, and it gave the Southwood goalkeeper no earthly chance.

He threw himself at full length in the net in a futile effort to save; but it was quite futile—the ball escaped his fingertips.

It was in the net!

Then a yell broke forth that might have been heard a mile from St. Jim's:

"Goal!"

"Goal! Hurrah!"

"Good old Kildare!"

"Goal!"

And that was the only goal scored in the first half. The teams crossed over with St. Jim's leading by a goal.

"Now, Kildare, let's have another!" yelled the crowd, as the ball was kicked off.

Wimpole scowled. He knew there was more than a chance of their hopes being realised. But it is an old and true saying that you cannot weigh up form at footer. Just when the chances seemed eminently in favour of another St. Jim's score, the ball seemed to flash out of the ruck and become the sole property of Hooper, of the United. With an ease that made Tom Merry & Co. gasp, the Southwood professional made his way through the St. Jim's men

"Bai Jove!"

"That looks bad for us!" said Tom Merry.

"Great Scott!"

As Monty Lowther spoke, Hooper and Wimpole, having completely beaten the halves, were bearing down on the St. Jim's goal at lightning speed.

A hundred or more fellows, men and boys, who had followed the team from Southwood, were yelling wildly.

"Go it!"

"Put her through!"

"Shove it in, Southwood!"

Whiz!

Fatty Wynn gasped. For once, and only once, he had been found wanting. Right from the toe of the Southwood skipper the ball came, and it found the corner of the net. Fatty Wynn made a desperate attempt to save, but he failed, and the ball was in the net. Then the Southwood supporters shrieked themselves hoarse.

"Goal! Goal!"

"Hurrah! Goal! Hurrah!"

Southwood United had scored. The score was level. But the effort had been desperate, and the Southwood team showed the effects of it as they lined up again. Even the professionals in the team looked pumped. And Southwood had only equalised, and there remained exactly ten minutes to go.

Right from the kick-off Kildare dashed down the field, and passed to Rushden.

The Southwood backs did their best. But the St. Jim's forwards, passing wonderfully, beat them hollow, and Rushden brought the ball well up, and centred to Kildare.

Three of the United were rushing on the captain of St. Jim's, and he had just time to kick. But he was as cool as an iceberg. The goalie was watching him hungrily, ready

for anything, excepting what he got! Kildare feinted, and the goalie sprawled along the goal to stop the threatened low shot—and then the ball hummed into the top of the net.

Like thunder came the roar:

"Goal!"

"Kildare! Kildare!"

"Well kicked!"

"Goal! Goal!"

"St. Jim's wins! Hurrah!"

And St. Jim's had won, for there were but thirty seconds to go. St. Jim's had won—Eric Kildare had saved his side!

The field was blackened with a roaring crowd as soon as the whistle went. Fellows, yelling wildly, surrounded the players, and a crowd seized Kildare to carry him back to the pavilion. Shoulder-high he was borne off the field, amid frenzied hurrahs!

"Bai Jove! We've beaten them!"

"St. Jim's wins!"

"Hurrah! Hurrah!"

Even the Southwood supporters, bitterly disappointed as they were, could scarce forbear a cheer at that last splendid goal. Southwood was beaten—the schoolboy team had won! Southwood United, the semi-professional team with League aspirations, had been beaten by St. Jim's First! No wonder the fellows roared.

Kildare struggled to be set down, and the fellows let him go at last, and the captain of St. Jim's walked off the field with the rest.

Kildare looked little like the victor in a hard-fought and well-won battle. His face was deadly pale, and his eyes dim.

The excitement was over—the reaction had come. He had saved his side—for the sake of his school he had played, and driven every other thought from his mind. But now—now black care was eating his heart—grim anxiety furrowed his boyish brow! What of his mother?

While cheers rang and echoed round him, while his name was on every lip, there was a groan in the brave heart of the St. Jim's captain.

What of his mother?

"Kildare," muttered Monteith anxiously, as he caught sight of the captain's face—"Kildare, old man! You're not well!"

Kildare looked at him dully.

"Look after him!" exclaimed Rushden. "He's ill!"

"I—I'm all right!"

But even as he spoke, Kildare swayed and fell.

The strain had been too much.

"Hold him!"

Monteith's strong arm was round the captain of St. Jim's.

"It's all right! Give him room!"

Gently the fellows carried the fainting lad into the dressing-room. Mr. Raitton hurried to him at once. Kildare opened his eyes, wildly, to find himself lying in the dressing-room, with his head resting on the Housemaster's knee.

"What—what," he muttered—"what has happened?"

"Better, my lad?" said Mr. Raitton, very softly.

"Yes—yes!" Kildare struggled into a sitting posture.

"I—I didn't faint?"

"Yes. It's all right now."

The lad's pale face flushed.

"I—I don't know what made me do it, sir. I'm all right. I—I suppose—"

Darrel came into the dressing-room.

"Kildare? Is he—"

The senior had a telegram in his hand. Kildare saw it at once, and he held out his hand, his face going white.

"For me?" he muttered.

"Yes."

"When did it come?"

"This minute. The lad's just arrived."

Kildare trembled.

"Open it for me," he muttered. "Open it, Darrel, and read it out to me. I—I don't think I could read it myself."

Darrel nodded.

He tore open the telegram, and glanced over it quickly. Then his face brightened up wonderfully. Kildare, who was watching him with haggard eyes, brightened, too.

"Darrel—"

"Hurrah!" shouted Darrel. "Good news, old man!"

"Thank Heaven!"

"Listen!" said Darrel, and he read out the message:

"Don't understand your wire. Have not wired you to-day. Mother much better. No cause anxiety now."

"FATHER."

Kildare staggered.

"What does it mean?" he exclaimed. "He says he has not wired, and I had his wire just before the match, as you all know!"

"There is some mistake," said Mr. Railton quietly. "But the mistake must have been in the first wire. This is in answer to yours, Kildare, and so must evidently be genuine."

"Yes—yes, that is from my father! But the other—"

"The other was evidently not from your father."

"But—but—"

"Good heavens!" burst out Darrel. "Is it possible anybody would be scoundrel enough to play a trick like that, to prevent Kildare from playing?"

Mr. Railton's face was very hard and stern.

"It certainly looks like it," he said.

Kildare sank into a chair and covered his face with his hands. After the terrible strain he had gone through, the relief was almost too much for him.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Rough Justice.

WHO had sent the telegram?

St. Jim's, high and low, puzzled over the question, from Head to the youngest fag—and, indeed, to Toby the page and Taggles the porter.

In the studies and the common-rooms that night, in the masters' rooms in both Houses, the matter was discussed in all its bearings.

"The fellow must have been an uttah wottah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "But there is another point—the telegram was sent from Brighton! How could a St. Jim's fellow have gone to Brighton to send a telegraph without bein' missed?"

"My hat!" said Blake. "I was thinking of Knox. He's cad enough, and he was very wild at being left out of the team. But he was on the ground the whole time—I saw him there."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Kerr.

All eyes were turned on Kerr. The juniors were crowding in Tom Merry's study, to a royal feed in celebration of Fatty Wynn's inclusion in the team, and of the splendid assistance he had given St. Jim's First in beating the enemy.

"What have you thought of, Kerr?" exclaimed Figgins.

Figgins had great confidence in the judgment of his Scottish chum.

"Something about Knox?"

"What is it?"

"His people live at Brighton," said Kerr quietly.

"Bai Jove!"

"Phew!"

"That settles it!" said Tom Merry.

"Yes, rather!" said Blake, with emphasis. "That settles it! Knox has a relation or a friend at Brighton, and they've done this!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors had no further doubt upon the matter. The fellow who had played the trick was an unspeakable cad, and Knox was certainly that. The fellow must have had some connections at Brighton, to be able to get the telegram sent, and Knox had connections at Brighton. The juniors did not want any more evidence.

"But it wouldn't be easy to prove it," Monty Lowther remarked, with a shake of the head.

"It's a mowal certainty, deah boys, and I considah that we should be justified in waggin' Knox!"

"Hear, hear!"

Fatty Wynn did full justice to the celebration. After it was over, the juniors waited for Kildare to come in. Kildare was late. It was almost bedtime when he returned to St. Jim's, and when he came his handsome face was pale with anger.

The juniors glanced after him; he did not go to his own study, but to Knox's. Tom Merry & Co. exchanged glances.

"He knows!" muttered Figgins.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"He guesses, at all events," said Tom Merry. "I shouldn't care to be Knox just now."

"Bai Jove, wathah not!"

Kildare knocked at the prefect's door, and entered. Knox was in the study with Sefton, and both the seniors rose to their feet as Kildare came in. Knox, as it were by accident, moved so that the table was between him and Kildare.

Kildare noted the movement, and his lip curled with scorn.

"I want to speak to you, Knox," he said. "You can let Sefton hear what I have to say, or not, as you choose."

Sefton glanced at his friend.

"Don't go!" said Knox. Knox had no desire to be left alone with Kildare just then. He did not like the look upon the face of the captain of St. Jim's.

"Very well," said Kildare. "I've been home—"

"Indeed?" said Knox, with a yawn.

"Yes. You know I had a telegram this afternoon, a minute or two before the match, telling me that my mother was worse?"

"I heard the fellows speaking about it."

"Is that all you know of it?"

Knox shrugged his shoulders.

"How should I know any more?" he asked.

"You did not send the telegram?"

"I! How could I? I understand that it was sent from Brighton."

"Exactly! Your people live at Brighton. Your young brother is there; I've seen him several times, and I am aware that he is just as mean and cowardly a cad as you are."

Knox flushed.

"This language—"

"You'll get something worse than that soon," said Kildare, between his teeth. "I will tell you what I suspect—what I am sure of, rather. You sent that telegram, through somebody you know at Brighton. You wanted to muck up the United match; you wanted to prevent me from playing. I imagine that you wrote to your brother yesterday, and asked him to do it; that seems to me most likely. My object isn't to show you up to St. Jim's. You deserve it, but you've been too cunning for me; I can't prove it. But you are not going unpunished, Knox."

The prefect sneered.

"What are you going to do, then?" he exclaimed.

"I am going to thrash you!" said Kildare, between his teeth.

Knox made no reply. He clenched his fists hard, and sprang like a tiger at the captain of St. Jim's.

In a moment a desperate fight was in progress. Knox was a powerful fellow, and he either had to fight or to be thrashed, and he chose to fight. Desperation lent him a kind of courage. He fought hard, and he needed to.

But he was no match for the captain of St. Jim's. Indignation seemed to have made a giant of Eric Kildare. He was tired from the hard match and the long journey after it. But Knox had no chance. Crashing blows drove him to right and left. Again and again he was knocked down; and at last, when a terrific upper-cut sent him crashing upon the carpet, the rascally prefect lay still, gasping, unable to rise.

"Hang you!" he gasped. "I'm done! Hang you!"

Kildare looked down upon him scornfully. The prefect lay helpless at his feet, more soundly thrashed than he had ever been in his life before. Kildare's hands unclenched.

"You've had your punishment," he said. "Take care, Knox—take care in the future!"

He opened the study door, and strode out into the passage. Knox lay upon the carpet, groaning. It was several minutes after the captain of St. Jim's was gone before the rascally prefect was able to rise to his feet. Kildare strode down the passage, his face bruised—but he did not feel the bruises—his knuckles barked and red, but he did not know it. But a group of juniors in the passage noticed it, and they grinned with satisfaction.

"Knox has had it!" murmured Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah! And I wathah think that he has had it hot, deah boy."

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was right.

THE END.

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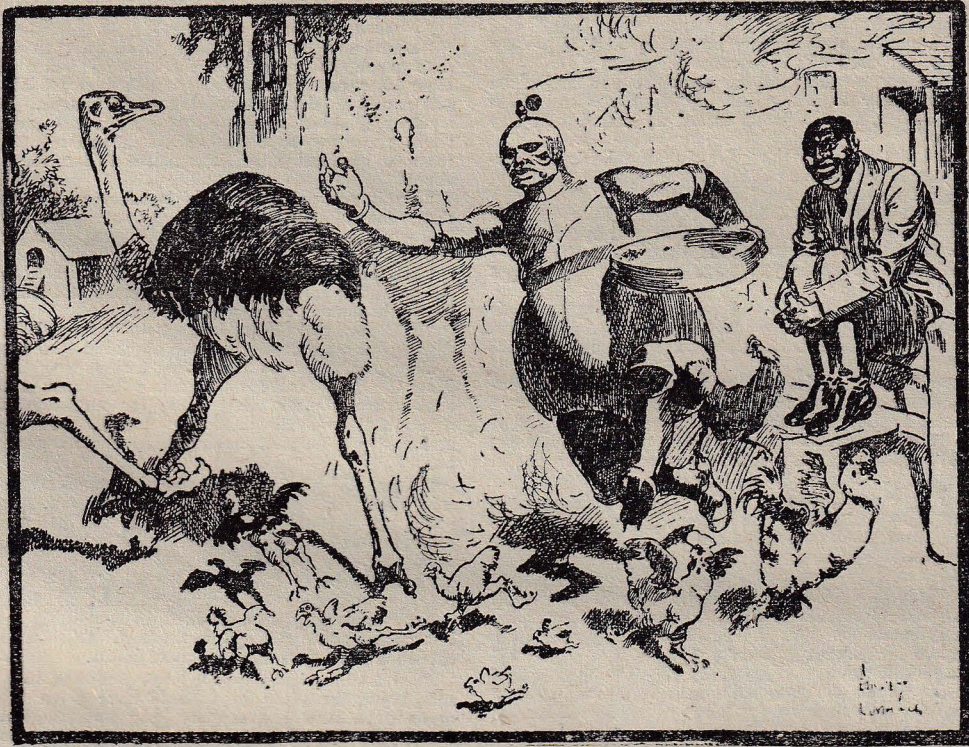
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The steam man was amongst the ostriches before they knew what was happening, and was soon causing tremendous havoc. The ostriches fled for their lives, with the steam man in hot pursuit.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Great Scheme—A Nasty Charge—The Steam Man and the Ostriches—Prempa.

PETE was seated in Jonathan Cyrus Cestor's bungalow. The African sun was streaming through the window full upon his head, and, although he sat with his shirt-sleeves turned well up, he looked hot. In one corner of the room stood his steam man, who was hissing away in fine style, filling the room with steam and the perfume of petrol.

In front of Pete lay an enormous ledger, while a huge inkpot was by his side. He had purchased that ledger for six pounds fifteen shillings, and now he was writing in it with a broad-nibbed pen, while, judging by the look of his blotting-paper, he had done a good lot of writing already.

He was just making a large E, at the top of the page, when a howl of laughter caused him to run his pen across it and make a huge blot. Jack and Sam had silently entered the room, and it was their laughter that caused him to start.

"Now, look at de mess you hab made me make on my new book!" exclaimed Pete, smearing it up with the side of his hand. "Still, I'm glad you hab come, 'cos I want you to go into some calculations wid me. Dis great scheme ob Jonathan's don't seem to be making our fortunes as quickly as I should like. Let me see, what was de page ob de expenses? Oh, I know. Number two. Bery well, we turn to number two. Why, dere ain't no number two. It goes from one to free, yet I know dere was number two. M'yes! Two pages stuck togeder. Golly! I must hab forgotten to blot dat one. Look what a mighty mess it has made, too! Well, we can't help dat, so long as de

accounts are correct and clear. What are dese figures, Jack?"

"Ha, ha, ha! You are not the tidiest book-keeper that I have ever come across! Why, they look like £500!"

"M'yes, dat's what I hab spent so far. Now, take a bit ob paper, and tell me how many eggs dere are in five hundred pounds!"

"How much are you going to sell the eggs for?"

"A penny each! Dat's what Jonathan says. How many pence are dere in five hundred pounds?"

"A hundred and twenty thousands."

"Bery well! Jonathan says dat de hen will lay free hundred eggs in de year. How long will it take her to lay dat little lot, 'cos when she's done laying dem we hab got to kill her and send her to market?"

"I reckon she will be rather tough," observed Sam.

"Eh? Well, we can't help dat. How long will it take her to lay dose eggs, Jack?"

"Four hundred years!"

"Eh?"

"Four hundred years!"

"Golly! She will be mighty old by that time, and I don't seem to care to wait all dat time to get my money back."

"Are you only going to keep one hen?"

"Nunno; but I was just reckoning. Golly! Here comes Jonathan."

At that moment Jonathan rushed into the room.

"Look here, Pete," he said, "I am going to take that steam man to pieces. I want to see how it is worked."

"You ain't going to do anything ob de sort," said Pete. "Jack knows how it is worked, 'cos he took it to pieces once

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—at least, I took it to pieces and Jack put him together again. De fact is, Jonathan, you'm jealous ob dat steam man, 'cos you know perfectly well dat you couldn't invent one like it."

Jonathan did know this, for, with all the steam man's faults, no one could help admitting that it was a very clever invention. Had he only been able to walk, it would have been decidedly ingenious; but his inventor had made him move his arms in any direction required; it only meant touching the right lever—a thing that Pete did not always succeed in doing.

"I ain't habing his infernals interfered wid," declared Pete. "De man is in excellent working order now, and I am going to use him on de poultry-farm for feeding purposes and tings like dat."

"I could make a more perfect steam man than that," said Jonathan. "I can improve on any invention, and, if you let me take that to pieces, I will improve it for you."

"You ain't doing anything ob de sort. If you'm jealous ob dat mighty cleber invention, de best t'ing you can do is to make one better, and if you succeed in dat, I will buy him from you."

Jonathan did not care for the offer, because he knew perfectly well that it would puzzle him to succeed.

"The thing is no earthly use," he said. "Dat's all you know about him," retorted Pete. "He's saved our lives on more dan one occasion wid his fighting powers. De fact is, you dunno all de tings he can do."

"Well, look what a mess you have made on my carpet with the ink!"

"Dat's anoder question," said Pete. "De argument is 'bout de steam man, and I maintain dat he can do 'most anything. Jack says dat his infernals are a wonderful piece ob mechanism."

"That is so!" exclaimed Jack, who had taken the wonderful figure to pieces, and knew all about the working of it. "I am not saying that he is of any great use, but I do say that the old chap who invented him was a marvellous mechanic. If such a man turned his attention to more useful things, he would certainly make his fortune."

This praise was really not out of place. There was no one to whom Pete had shown the clever invention who had not admitted that it was really wonderfully clever, and, being rather proud of his steam man, Pete did not like to hear him belittled.

"I'll just gib you an idea ob de cleberness ob de man," said Pete, making him march towards the table. "Now, his strength is enormous, but he can also be as gentle as a kitten. Suppose dat inkpot was an egg, now, and I wanted to make him pick it up widout breaking it—well, all I would hab to do is to touch de right-hand arm lever for de slow movement, and dis little pointer gibs de exact direction in which de arm will move. I can make it move in any direction, fast or slow. I'm going to make it move slowly now."

Jonathan, being a clever mechanic himself, was deeply interested in the operation.

"Directly de palm ob de hand touches de object, de iron fingers close wid a little spring, and de hand won't unclose till you touch anoder little lever."

"It's perfectly simple," declared Jonathan.

"So are you, old hoss, but you can't help dat."

"I'm not saying the thing isn't cleverly made, but what I say is that it is of no use."

"Well, you ain't ob any use. Now, you see, I make de hand move slowly to de inkpot, and, suppose we want to put it on a shelf, say, dere, we touch dis lever, and—Hi, golly! Dat must be de quick lever!"

The steam man gave the inkpot a violent jerk into the air, and slopped about a quarter of a pint of ink all over Jonathan's face. Then the man of steam went waving that pot about as though he had been signalling with a flag.

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared Pete, when he saw what a fearful mess Jonathan had got into. "I wish you wouldn't waste my ink like dat, Jonathan!"

"Oh, you silly scoundrel!" hooted Jonathan, mopping his face with his handkerchief. "Look at the mess you have made me in."

"Dat was de fault ob de steam man. I ain't saying dat he's quite perfect, only dat he's a bery cleber invention, and I'm going to prove to you dat he's useful in several ways. F'rinstance, if you want to frow a bottle ob ink at a man's head, all you hab got to do is to employ de steam man, and if de party objects, you can start de steam man fighting him. De best boxer in de world wouldn't hab a chance against him at boxing. Steady, old hoss, we don't want any more ink just now. Don't you tink you hab better go and wash your face, Jonathan? Yah, yah, yah! Most unlucky dat you got just in de way ob de ink, wasn't it? Well, it ain't no use going on like dat. All you hab got to do is to wash your face, and if dat won't fetch it off

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you might get de foreman Muggles to turn de grindstone while you hold your face against it. Funny ting how soon dat man loses his temper," added Pete, as Jonathan stormed out of the room.

"Where are you going, Pete?" inquired Jack, as he made his steam man march out of the window.

"To show you de ostriches, and I want to let de steam man see dem, too, 'cos I want dose birds to get accustomed to him. You see, I am going to use him for feeding purposes."

"I have heard that ostriches will eat almost anything, but I believe they will draw the line at the steam man."

"Golly! I ain't going to let dem eat him, Jack! He's got to frow der food to dem!"

"Poor, unfortunate ostriches!"

"Den I see no reason why de steam man shouldn't pluck dem when we want deir feathers. I will tink dat matter over later on. You see, we hab had all dis wire netting put round so dat de ostriches can't escape. Dat was rader a costly job, but, as Jonathan says, it will last for eber, and when you come to tink ob it, if de hen has to go on laying for four hundred years, it will hab to last for a mighty long time!"

"Don't you think it would last longer if you stopped your steam man?" said Jack, pointing towards the steam man, who had gone on ahead while Pete was explaining the matter to them.

"Hi, golly! Stop dere!" yelled Pete, making a rush after the prancing form; but it was obvious to Jack and Sam that he would never overtake it in time.

"Ha, ha, ha! Stop him, Pete!" roared Jack. "If you don't your wire won't last for anything like ever."

Pete was going in fine form, but so was the steam man. He gained the surrounding fence, but such a little thing as that was not sufficient to stop the steam man. He went through it as easily as though it had been a spider's web, and the gap he left behind him was an exceedingly large one.

"Now, did you eber see anything much more annoying?" said Pete, shaking his head at the breach. "An elephant could get through there, let alone an ostrich. Still, it is just possible dat dey mayn't discover de opening, and if dat is de case, dey will be all right."

"I don't fancy they will be all right if the steam man gets amongst them. Look there! Ha, ha, ha!"

An ostrich may be a useful bird, especially to the fair sex, but no one could call it a clever bird. On this occasion Pete's ostriches proved themselves utter idiots.

They had certainly never seen a steam man before, and such being the case, they should have given this one a wide berth until they had realised his nature; but instead of doing this, one of the male birds marched up to the advancing steam man, and, taking a huge leap, kicked him in the face.

No living man could have received a kick like that and have remained on his feet—the chances are he would never have stood on his feet again.

On Pete's steam man it had no more effect than it would have had on a stone wall. The ostrich fell backwards, and the steam man pranced over him in a manner that must have been painful, for his shoes were spiked.

The ostrich uttered a roar that would have done credit to an angry lion, and rising minus a good many feathers, it went for the steam man again; and not to be outdone, three other male ostriches joined in the fray.

The female ostriches were far wiser; they merely watched the unequal combat. Perhaps they did not care to have their feathers plucked by steam, or they may have thought that the painful duty of attack pertained to their lords and masters. They only roared, but they took good care to keep out of the way.

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared Pete. "I must say dose birds are mighty brave, but I back my steam man against dem. He ain't got any feelings to hurt."

"I hope your birds won't come and attack us when they get tired of the steam man," said Jack.

"I'm hoping de same ting, Jack," observed Pete. "Dey seem to be determined to kick de heart out ob de steam man. Yah, yah, yah! Look at dat! He's bowled two ob dem ober dis time. Hooroo! He's won de victory now. De enemy is retreating. Dis way, boys! I'm going to catch de steam man and let him feed de ostriches."

"Ha, ha!" roared Jack. "I reckon that's adding insult to injury!"

"Don't you be so silly, Jack," said Pete. "You don't understand. Ostriches soon forget. When dey see de steam man distributing food wholesale, dey will want to frow deir arms round him and kiss him for his kindness."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Jack. "That takes the bun! When did you see an ostrich with arms?"

"Eh?"
 "That's it," said Jack. "Make out you didn't hear."
 "Neider did I, Jack. I— Hallo! Here's my steam man. Come here, old hoss. You'm got to turn ober a new leaf and be friendly to dose ostriches. You'm got to feed dem, and mind you don't stint de birds, like old Jonathan does."

Pete stopped the steam man, and, after putting a tray containing the ostriches' food in his left hand, he set his arm in motion again. The steam man's arm commenced to swing backwards and forwards at a great speed, and soon there was a great quantity of food on the ground.

At the sight of the food the ostriches soon forgot the knocks they had received, and darted towards the steam man. If they had had any brains they would have reasoned that it was unwise to get too near the steam man's swinging arm. However, they did not stop to reason things out, and rushed in a crowd towards the steam man. Some were satisfied with picking the food up from the ground, others, more greedy, made a grab at the tray.

All went well until the legs of the steam man commenced to move. The ostriches did not notice the movement in time. The result was, the steam man was amongst them before they knew what was happening, and was soon causing tremendous havoc. The ostriches tore for their lives, and in their flight many of them received some hard knocks from the steam man's swinging arm. But, profiting by their previous experience, the ostriches did not trouble about seeking vengeance on the man of iron. They simply fled, and in less than five minutes the steam man remained alone. The ostriches had had enough, and were they to be on the verge of starvation, they were hardly likely to run the risk of receiving more hard blows for the sake of appeasing their hunger.

"I should say it's time you locked your steam man up," said Sam. "He's done quite enough damage for one day."

"Why, Sammy," said Pete, "he's only just beginning! I reckon he's going to be ob great assistance to us on dis farm. Dere are a hundred and one things dat he can do. But I tink he's worked quite hard enough for one day, so I'll gib him a rest."

Pete soon had his steam man in captivity, and then, leaving him leaning against the wall of the bungalow, they all entered. Pete was just about to sit down, when he happened to glance through the window.

"Golly!" he exclaimed. "What's all dis coming along?"
 Pete pointed towards a savage of enormous proportions, who was approaching the bungalow.

The man must have stood nearly seven feet in height, and he was proportionately broad, while his form, which was not overburdened with clothing, appeared to be all muscle.

As far as the comrades could see, he carried no weapons, but he walked boldly up, and entered the room.

"I am Prempa," he cried, "and I am the chief of a great nation! Salah is my sister!"

"Golly, golly!" gasped Pete.

"That man there is Pete, and he is Salah's promised husband!"

"Now, look here, Prempa, old hoss," exclaimed Pete, "I ain't de lady's promised husband at all! She belongs to another chief, and—"

"That other chief has given her to you, and—"

"Well, I don't want her. I ain't a marrying man. Buzz off home, and tell Salah dat I ain't habing anything to do wid de bargain. Tell her dat she's a lot too beautiful for an ordinary nigger, and dat she had better marry some beautiful savage, or someone else who won't mind being knocked about a bit!"

"She shall be your wife. You have wealth, and she shall share it—so will I!"

"Now, ain't dis a pretty state ob affairs?" growled Pete. "See here, Prempa, if you tink you'm going to land me wid your sister, you make a great mistake, old hoss. I certainly met Salah before, and she gabe her husband a clump ober de head when he wanted to spear me; den he tried to land me wid his little handful, but I told her de bargain was off, or words to dat effect. Now, just you buzz off before you get kicked out ob de place!"

"Hound of a nigger, do you dare to talk to the great chief like that?"

"I'm inclined to tink, Prempa, dat de best way to settle dis argument will be for you and me to come outside, 'cos we might break furniture if we started to argue here!"

"I have no weapons."

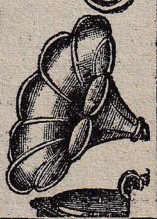
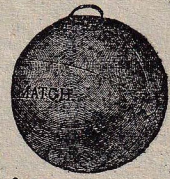
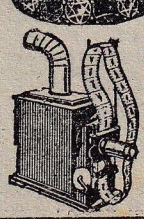
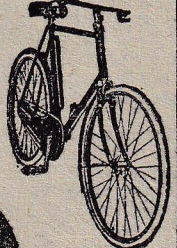
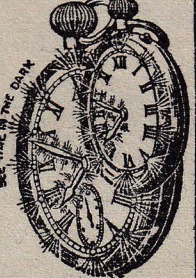
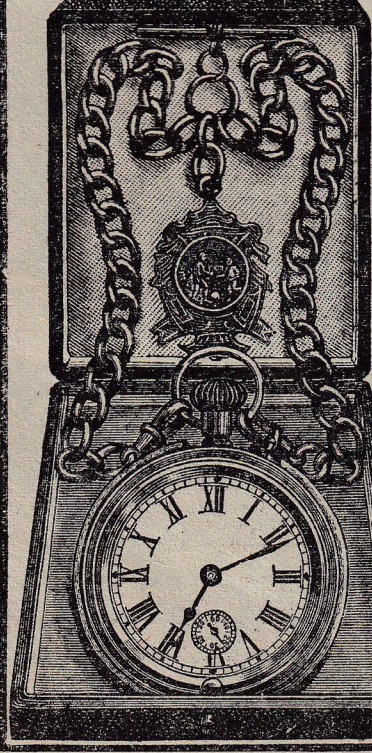
"We sha'n't need weapons, old hoss. Seems to me dat we can hurt each oder enough wid our fists. Just you come dis way, and I will take a few lessons in savage fighting, while you shall take a few in civilised style, and we shall see which sort hurts de most!"

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As Pete spoke he placed his weapons on the table; then, ordering Prempa from the room, followed him.

"You see, old hoss," said Pete, "I prefer to hab you in sight, not because you are so mighty beautiful, but because it might be according to de cistern ob your fighting to attack me in de rear!"

"I will crush you! You shall——"

"Well, dat's all right. I don't want to know all dat you are going to do, 'cos, don't you see, if you tell me exactly what you mean to do, I shall be able to try to stop you. Suppose you make a start, and den I shall see exactly what you mean to do!"

Prempa, relying on his great strength, went in with a rush; then Pete's left shot out, and as he gave a forward spring, his fist landed between the giant's eyes.

The blow was a very heavy one, for Pete knew by the size of his opponent that he would require all his strength to vanquish him; but, severe though that blow was, it appeared to have very little effect on Prempa beyond rousing his passion. Clenching his enormous fists, he rushed in once more, and dealt a round-hand blow at Pete's head.

Pete ducked just in time, and as the blow passed harmlessly over his head, he lashed out again, and this time his fist landed on Prempa's jaw with a force that drove him backwards. Such a blow would have struck most men to the ground, but the savage warrior was possessed of enormous strength, and, although somewhat dazed by the blow, he continued the fight with greater fury than ever.

Had Prempa been a skilled boxer, Pete would have found his task a still more serious one; but most of the blows were round-handed, and Pete had not much difficulty in guarding them.

Finding that he could not touch his agile foe, Prempa made fierce rushes, with a view to closing with him; but Pete retreated, getting in as many blows as he conveniently could.

At last Prempa made a determined rush, and Pete delivered a blow between his eyes with all his strength. Prempa staggered backwards, and before he could recover himself Pete delivered a second blow that stretched his gigantic opponent on the grass.

"Dat's de first knock-down blow to me, old hoss!" exclaimed Pete. "And, judging by your personal appearance, you don't much care for it. Now, seeing dat you want to close and hab a little wrestling, you shall do so, and I will soon show you who is de stronger man. I'm inclined to tink dat you'm going to lose dis fight!"

This was exactly what Prempa wanted. Maddened by the blows he had received, he leapt to his feet, and rushed in once more; but this time Pete closed with him, and a terrible struggle ensued. The savage exerted all his strength in his efforts to throw his opponent, but this he failed to do.

Pete only acted on the defensive, his object being to let his opponent exhaust himself, and Prempa was now in such a state of fury that he was doing exactly what Pete wanted.

To and fro they swayed, and Prempa tried to bend his adversary backwards; then Pete's grip tightened, and the savage warrior's face became drawn as the pressure on his ribs increased.

He was panting for breath, whereas Pete appeared to be quite fresh. Suddenly he turned sideways, and, getting the chief over his hip, hurled him headlong to the ground.

"Now, den, old hoss," exclaimed Pete, "I don't want to hurt you, so dat if you hab had enough ob it, you had better say so! You ain't got enough strength to fight wid me!"

"You lie, you black dog! I could crush you!" panted Prempa.

"Den it's a mighty funny ting you don't do it," observed Pete.

"I will do it. I will show your friends what the strength of Prempa is! Amongst all my warriors there is none who can equal me in strength!"

"Well, dat may be," observed Pete, "However, if you ain't had enough, and if you ain't satisfied dat my strength is greater dan yours, all you hab got to do is to continue de fight, and you won't hab de right to blame me if you get hurt!"

Prempa cared nothing about getting hurt. He wanted to have vengeance, and now he fought more like a wild beast than a human being.

Blow after blow he received in the face, but they only seemed to add to his fury. It was very seldom that he struck Pete, and then it was invariably on the top of his head, the blows hurting Prempa's knuckles far more than Pete's head.

At last Pete allowed him to close again, and the grip Pete placed round Prempa's body caused his jaws to gape open.

For several moments Pete held his adversary in the air, and then he flung him heavily to the ground, and Prempa lay where he had fallen.

"Now, den, old hoss," exclaimed Pete, "if you want to win dis fight, it ain't a bit ob good lying dere. I'm most

inclined to tink dat you are beaten, and de best ting for you to do is to own it."

"There is such a thing as vengeance," panted the chief, struggling to his feet, although there could not be a doubt that he had had enough of it.

"Ob course dere is, but I don't see what you hab got to hab vengeance for. You are beaten, and de best ting for you to do is to own it like a man."

"You lie!"

"Well, dat's what you were doing just dis minute, and it is what you will do again, if you don't acknowledge dat you are fairly beaten."

"I will have vengeance! My warriors shall come here! You know the rest!"

Then Prempa turned and strode away, but Pete gripped him by the arm.

"No, you don't, old hoss!" exclaimed Pete. "You hab got to learn a lesson. I ain't letting you go till you acknowledge dat you are fairly beaten. You need not say it till you really feel it is de case, 'cos I can go on beating you as long as you like. It's no sort ob trouble to me."

"I will burn this place down, and no one in it shall live!"

"Well, I suppose you can try to do all dat, but you hab got to remember dat we shall sort ob defend it; and when we start defending a place wid repeating rifles against a lot ob savages, something is going to happen to dose savages."

"Do you think to frighten me, you dog?"

"Well, de chances are we shall do all dat when you start fighting us, but dat ain't de question you hab got to deal wid at de present moment. What I want to know is, do you consider yourself thoroughly beaten, 'cos if you don't you will stay here till you do. So you tink you can escape, do you? Well, I ain't ob de same opinion, and now we shall hab de opportunity ob seeing who is right."

Prempa struggled furiously to escape from Pete's grip; but he had no chance of doing so, and at last he so exhausted himself that he ceased to struggle, and stood glaring at the man who had conquered him.

"I will fight you with weapons!" he panted.

"Bery well! I'm quite willing to oblige you like dat, but you seem to miss de point ob de argument. Do you acknowledge dat you hab been fairly beaten?"

"No!"

"Bery well, we will hab anoder turn, and as I don't want to damage you, I will catch you round de body, so, and bring pressure to bear on de argument."

To the comrades it did not appear that Pete was exerting himself in any way, except that he raised the chief from his feet, holding him thus in his grip, which each moment tightened, until at last Prempa uttered a cry of pain.

"I am beaten!" he gasped. "Release me!"

"Can easy do dat," said Pete, releasing him with a suddenness that caused him to fall to the ground, where he lay gasping for breath, for Pete's grip had been terrible.

"Now, directly you hab recovered from dat little hug, I am going to let you go back to your savages, and den you can tink matters ober, Prempa. You came here unarmed, and so we shall allow you to go away widout any sort ob injury; but you hab got to remember dat if you come here armed, you won't go away so easily. You can attack dis place if you like, but if you do, we shall defend it all de time dat any ob us lib. Our weapons—and we hab a lot ob dem—don't fire once or twice, but a lot ob times, and Sammy dere neber misses his mark. You see dis penny? Well, I'm going to frow it in de air, and Sammy will hit it first time wid his rifle. Dat will gib you some little idea ob how straight he fires, and will convince you dat if you come here to attack us, and you happen to show yourself, you'm bound to go away wid at least one bullet in your body, and you will find dat mighty painful, if Sammy chooses to spare your life. If he decides dat you ain't fit to lib, den it's mighty certain you will hab to die."

Pete glanced at Sam, who nodded; then he threw the coin into the air. Sam levelled his rifle, took a quick aim, and the ball sent the penny flying amongst the bushes.

"You see dat, Prempa? De worst ob it is dat I lose a penny, but I shall put dat into de book ob expenses out ob pocket. Now, buzz off home, and just you consider weder it will be good for your health to come here as a foe. If you like to come as a friend, dat is a different matter, and you can rely on us treating you properly. 'Nuff said!"

The chief glared at Pete for a moment, and then he strode away widout a word.

"I calculate we shall have those friends upon us before we are many days older," said Jonathan.

"Bery well, old hoss," said Pete. "In dat case, we shall drive dem off again."

"How can you drive off five hundred men?"

"I dunno. Ask Sammy dat one."

"They will burn the place down, and slaughter us all."
 "I'm inclined to tink dat you are going ahead too fast, and dat's what you generally do. You always look on de dark side ob tings."

"Your own sense must tell you that we should have no chance against so many foes."

"You mean dat dey would hab no chance against us," said Pete.

"Fool! Can you fight a hundred men?"

"Spect I could fight five thousand, dough weder I conquered dem or not is quite anoder matter. What we hab got to do is to fight dem, supposing dey come here, and we shall do our best to conquer dem."

"I shall have nothing to do with the matter."

"We don't expect a man like you to be ob any use in a fight," retorted Pete. "At de same time, I'm inclined to tink dat you will hab a good deal to do wid de matter if Prempa brings his warriors here, 'cos, don't you see, dey will hab someting to say to you."

"It is no use talking to that mad villain," declared Jonathan. "What do you consider we had better do, Jack?"

"Make preparations for resisting an attack," answered Jack.

"You think there will be one?"

"I would not be at all surprised if there is."

"Well, we had better take precautions," declared Jonathan.

"Bery well, old hoss, you start taking your precautions. P'raps you would like to build a ten-foot wall round de place, or some little work like dat?"

"All the savages want is you; and I think, under all the circumstances, you ought to go, rather than sacrifice the lives of all here."

"Golly! Den I ain't going to do anything ob de sort," growled Pete. "I don't mind fighting de chiefs, but I ain't coming in contact wid dat savage lady if I can help it. She's too mighty awful to contemplate. Now, you just get on wid your invention, 'cos if we'm got to hatch chickens, I'm mighty certain dat incubator ob yours will want some improvement. It may do all right for boiling eggs, but it ain't de slightest use for hatching chickens."

Jonathan was very angry, and he was also very frightened; but as he saw no possible way of escaping the savages, he made the best of it. Probably he would have abandoned the place and made his way to the town; but he knew that savages might be lurking in the forest, and so he determined to stick to the comrades, in the hope that they would be able to drive off their foes.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Night Attack—Pete's Rush Amongst the Foes—How the Steam Man Fought—The Victory—The Chief's Command.

"TELL you what it is, boys!" exclaimed Sam that night, when they had lighted their pipes, after a very substantial supper. "If the savages really intend to make an attack, to-night is just such a one as they would choose for their purpose. We ought to keep a strict watch to-night."

"Suttinly we ought, Sammy! I will keep de first watch, and if any savages come fooling around, I will wake you up!"

"Not if I know it," said Sam. "You can go to sleep and snore. Jack and I will keep watch by turns."

"Why not let the lazy brute of a nigger keep watch?" said Jonathan.

"Because he couldn't," answered Sam. "He would be asleep in about five minutes. You get off to bed, Pete—at least, go when you are tired. You are all right fighting, but for keeping watch you are worse than useless."

"And dat's all de credit I get after years and years ob toil at keeping watch! Should say Jonathan would be de best one to do it, 'cos he would be certain to start yowling at de slightest sign ob danger, and dat would be bound to wake up de rest ob de company. However, seeing dat you particularly want to do de watching, Sammy, I won't be selfish enough to stop you. 'Nuff said! I'm off to bed!"

Jack and Jonathan also turned in, and Sam went to one of the rooms from which he got a good view of the surrounding country.

Here he sat by the open window until far into the night, and then he saw a shadowy form moving amongst the bushes.

At first he thought it might be some wild beast, so stealthily were its movements, but presently he saw another form, and then others, till a large party of savages moved like a black shadow towards the building.

Sam quickly aroused Jack and Pete, neither of whom had undressed, feeling that an attack that night would be very probable.

"We will open fire directly they utter their war-cry," said Jack. "They are almost certain to make a rush, and attempt to fire the place. That is our chief danger. If we can only prevent that, we ought to be able to keep them off."

As Jack spoke the hideous war-cry of the savages rang out, and the next moment they came swarming towards the place.

Then the comrades opened fire, while arrows came whizzing into the room, and hundreds of them struck the building. Notwithstanding the steady fire, the fierce foe continued to advance, and it looked as though they were determined to storm the place at any cost.

The principal attack was at the front of the building, but a few of the savages got round to the back, and lighted torches, with the evident intention of burning the place down. It was Rory's violent barking that gave Pete the warning. He sprang to the back door, and, finding only a few savages were there, he opened the door, and rushed amongst them with his drawn axe.

So sudden and fierce was the attack that the savages fled before his terrible blows, dropping their torches so that the light might not direct the comrades' fire to them.

"Dat's all right, Rory!" exclaimed Pete. "You come back, 'cos we hab won dat battle, and I rader fancy dat I shall be able to gib de rest ob de enemy a slight surprise."

Pete hurried in to his steam man, quickly shoved a lighted torch in either hand, then marching him from the place, he started the steam man's hands waving at full speed.

"Now, den, old hoss!" exclaimed Pete. "You buzz around in circles like so, and see if you can frighten dem away, 'cos we hab had about enough ob dem. Dis way to London!"

Pete fixed the lever so that the steam man would go round in a large circle, and then he started him off at full speed, and the effect was even greater than he had anticipated.

Fanned by the waving arms, the torches flared up, throwing a light on the throng of yelling savages, thereby enabling Jack and Sam to take accurate aim.

The savages were evidently terrified at the weird-looking form, and, although a few of them hurled their spears at the steam man, most of them were only too anxious to get out of his way; but they were so crowded together that this was no easy matter.

A couple of them were knocked down by the great form, and he gave a third one a blow over the head with a torch that must have hurt. Then all the time Jack and Sam were pouring in a galling fire with their repeating-rifles.

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared Pete, hurrying to his comrades' sides. "Ain't dat steam man fighting nicely? He seems determined to set de whole lot ob dem alight, and he don't mind spears and arrows in de least. What do you tink ob him now, Jonathan?"

"I have always said that he is cleverly made, only I could make a much better one."

"Dat may be, old hoss," answered Pete; "only in a fight for life or death, de same as dis one is going to be, I would rader rely on my steam man dan one you made. You remember your incubator didn't hatch eggs as nicely as it ought to hab done. I rader tink dat tall one wid de feathers in his hair is Prempa, Sammy; and if you were to put a bullet frough his leg, or somewhere where it won't hurt him, it might convince him dat it ain't safe to fight us. Golly! He's going to attack de steam man wid his battle-axe. Let's see who gets de best ob it."

For a moment there was a cessation in the combat, for the savages were watching their chief. The steam man came at him with a rush, and as he struck Prempa leapt aside, but he did not leap far enough. The iron hand which held the flaming torch struck him full in the face, and down he went, while the steam man rushed to meet new foes.

Prempa struggled to his feet. The blow had been a very severe one, but it only appeared to have increased his fury, for, waving his battle-axe, he uttered his terrible war-cry, and, followed by scores of his warriors, dashed towards the building.

"Your advice is the only thing to do," said Sam. "While that chief is there to urge them on they will answer to his call. I'll touch him up in the leg. The right one by preference."

As the steam man came rushing round with his torches Sam got a good view of Prempa, and now he fired, while the chief went down with a cry of pain.

"You'm got him first time, Sammy; and it wasn't at all a bad shot, considering de flickering ob de light. Just let me gib him a word ob advice."

The savages had ceased to shout, and they crowded round their fallen chief. Pete's voice was easily heard by all, and no doubt many of them understood his words.

"Now, den, Prempa," he shouted, "you hab got what you

deserve, but you ain't got as much as you will if you continue dis attack! You hab got to remember dat Sammy could hab put dat bullet frough your heart just as easily as he has put it frough your leg; but we don't want to take your life. If you choose to take your men away, and gib an understanding not to attack dis place again, we shall spare your life, and de lives ob your followers; but if you don't gib dat understanding we shall open fire on you, and den you will notice dat dere won't be so many ob you to escape. Now, den, quick, which is it to be? Are we to fire on you and put you out ob your pain? Sammy has got you covered, and he won't miss his aim."

"My warriors cannot fight against evil spirits!" cried Prempa.

"Ob course dey can't—at least, not wid any chance ob success. Do I understand dat you are not going to fight any more?"

"Yes. I cannot fight, for I am wounded."

"You pledge your word dat you won't attack dis place again?"

"Yes."

"Or seek vengeance for de loss ob de battle?"

"That is so. My warriors will make no further attack if you do not fire again."

"Well, we ain't going to fire again, and neber should hab fired on you if you had not attacked us first. If you like to let your warriors carry you in here, we will do the best we can for your wound."

"But you would take my life."

"What's de sense ob talking like dat? If we wanted to take your life we could do so now, widout de slightest difficulty. I tell you dat you will be perfectly safe here, and dat you will hab de very best attention dat can be giben to you. You must tell your warriors to go away, and let, say, six ob dem carry you into de place. Den we will look after you till you get well."

"I trust to your word," said Prempa, after a pause.

Then he shouted out some order, and his warriors, with the exception of half a dozen, disappeared with susprising suddenness.

Prempa was carried in, and Sam examined the wound. The bullet had passed right through the fleshy part of the leg, but it had not touched the bone. Sam bound up the wound tightly, and then they gave the wounded chief some stimulants, for he had lost a quantity of blood, and appeared to be in a half-fainting condition.

"We'm got some extract ob beef here," observed Pete, "and what you hab got to do is to drink some ob it. After dat, if you go to sleep, you will wake up as right as rain."

At first Prempa appeared to be a little doubtful concerning the comrades' treatment. He could not understand men treating a wounded foe in that manner; but he soon regained confidence.

The savages who had brought him there passed the night smoking the comrades' tobacco, and they soon became quite friendly; and when Pete had got his steam man in, he went to bed again, and slept through the remainder of the night.

At break of day he went to look at their patient, and found him wonderfully improved.

"I can go into the forest now," said Prempa.

"Dere ain't de slightest hurry for dat, old hoss," said Pete. "Ob course, you can go as soon as you please, but if you take my advice, you will gib dat leg a few days' rest, and den it will be all right. If you get fooling around wid it now, you may be laid up for weeks."

"I can pay you for the food. I have—"

"Now, see here, Prempa, we don't want any pay. We want you to understand dat we are friends, and not foes. Den, again, we want you to get well as quickly as possible, and we shall do all in our power to make you well. You are welcome to stay here till you get quite right again, and if you will only rest dat leg, it won't take long to heal."

"You are good to your foes!"

"Well, we don't exactly look on you as foes, old hoss. You see, wid bows and spears you ain't got de slightest chance against repeating rifles when we are under cover, 'specially when de steam man joins in de fight. Bery well; if you want to repay us for any kindness on our part, just you tink about de matter de next time an enemy falls into your hands. You won't get any harm by it, and you are bound to make a friend ob him, which is a lot better dan making him an enemy."

"I shall remember."

"Dat's right! And you will stop here till you get well?"

"Yes, if you will let me."

"Den consider dat is settled, and I will buzz off to de town to get all de tings dat you will require."

The result of this was that Prempa had a very good time of it. Under ordinary circumstances, he would have probably used his legs forthwith, but when Sam asked him not to do so he obeyed; in fact, he appeared to be so grateful for their attentions that he obeyed their orders implicitly, and made an excellent patient.

In three days time Sam gave him leave to use his leg.

"Listen to me, my friends!" he exclaimed. "You have spared my life, and I shall not forget it. I shall send Salah back to her husband."

"Tink he will hab her back?" inquired Pete.

Prempa smiled grimly.

"It would not be well with him if he refused," he said. "It would annoy Salah, and she is dangerous when annoyed. Besides, it would annoy me, for I do not wish Salah to live near me. She is better at a distance. Her husband would not dare to annoy me, because I have many warriors. We are friends now, but were he to annoy me we should be foes. He fears me, but he does not fear me so much as he fears Salah."

"Poor, unhappy old hoss!" murmured Pete. "Still, dat ain't got anyting to do wid me; and if you could make it convenient to send Salah back to her husband, it would be some sort ob relief to my mind. All de same, she is a lady who has got a will ob her own, and I'm inclined to tink she won't go."

"She will go if I order it," said Prempa, with conviction, "because my warriors would carry her there; and if her husband dared to let her escape again, he would have to answer to me for it. No, Salah shall go. Ah, here she comes now! We shall see."

Salah came towards them in a very threatening manner, but when her brother told her of his intentions, she seemed to calm down considerably.

"I have now decided that you shall return to your husband," he said.

"I won't! I am going to stop here!"

"You will tell him that he is to treat you properly in future, and you will go this morning. These six warriors will see you to the village, and they will place you in your husband's hands."

"I won't go!" declared Salah again.

"You will never leave him again," continued Prempa, just as though she had never spoken. "If you do it will be bad for you, and far worse for him! Take her away!"

Salah saw that she would have to obey, and so she offered no resistance, while Pete heaved a deep sigh of thankfulness as he saw her huge form disappear in the bushes.

"Now," exclaimed Prempa, "I shall pay a visit to their village, and I shall warn her husband that if he ever dares to interfere with you, or allows Salah to do so, I will make him answer for it. Farewell, my friends! Your lives will always be safe in this part of the forest."

Then the chief followed the party into the forest, and the comrades saw him no more.

But the little bill Pete had to pay Jonathan convinced him that a poultry farm kept on his lines was a far from profitable operation.

THE END.

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