The Penny Popular

3 Grand Complete Stories.

NUMBER 220.

PETE'S METHOD OF CURING THE BOASTER!

(A Great Scene from the Grand Long Complete Tale of JACK, SAM, and PETE, the Famous Comrades, contained in this issue.)

NUMBER 220.
Week Ending December 23rd, 1916.

THE 1d POPULAR

PUBLISHED EVERY FRIDAY

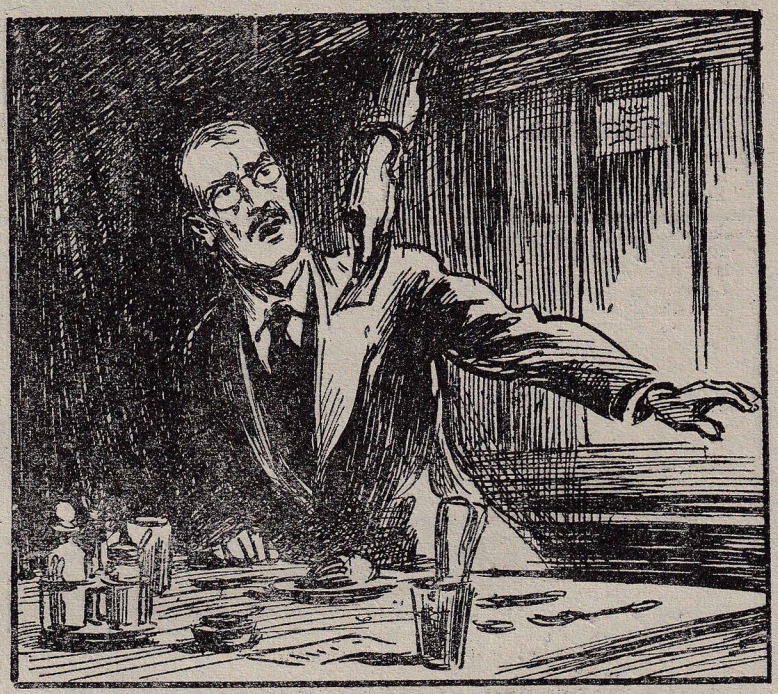
THE PARTNER'S PLOT!

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

SEXTON BLAKE,

the World-Famous

DETECTIVE.



Hardly had Blake been there three minutes when a hand appeared over the high-backed partition behind him, and stretched itself nearly down to his shoulder. Instantly he turned round, but in a moment the hand was withdrawn.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Sexton Blake Attends a Dinner and Hears of an Extraordinary Case.

THE "Old Boys'" dinner was over, and the guests had split up into groups. Sexton Blake walked about, meeting at every step old schoolfellows on whom he had not set eyes for years.

Suddenly he stopped face to face with a spectacled man of early middle-age, whose close-cropped brown beard was just beginning to get flecked with grey.

"Don Quixote, otherwise Jim Darbyshire, by all that's wonderful!" Blake exclaimed. "It's a lifetime since I saw you! Thought you were doctoring out on the Gold Coast. What are you doing these days?"

"Still doctoring," answered Dr. James Darbyshire, "but not on the Gold Coast. I got cured of that by acquiring a most pernicious ague, which periodically lays me low. I'm in practice at Forest Gate."

"So near London, and never been to see me! Too busy making your fortune—eh?"

Dr. Darbyshire laughed.

"It takes me all my time to satisfy my landlord and the rate-collector," he answered. "I'm kept pretty busy, though."

"A general practitioner with a tendency to forget to send his bills in generally is," smiled Blake. "I expect you're one of that sort, Jim. You always had the tenderness of a woman for the suffering and oppressed. You didn't earn your school nickname of Don Quixote for nothing. I'll bet any money you dole out drugs to all and sundry without a thought whether you'll get paid or not."

"Well, you can't help it sometimes," the doctor answered, positively blushing. "I've got a case now which I'd willingly give a thousand pounds to cure if I had it."

"Hallo! A tale to tell—eh?" Blake exclaimed with interest. "Take a cigar, and sit down and tell me about this case. What is it? Something in diseases—eh?"

"No, no! Nothing of that! Merely a case of threatened nervous breakdown. What touches me is the pitiful nature of the circumstances."

Blake nodded. He knew Darbyshire's softness of heart, and he could see that he was suffering acutely at the remembrance of his patient's trouble.

"Tell me," he said sympathetically. "Who's the patient?"

"A clerk named Tom Hathaway. He's cashier in a City office. He's been there over twenty years, and receives the princely salary of thirty-five shillings a week. Now he's actually worrying himself into the grave through the awful fear of losing his job. But I bore you!"

"Indeed you don't, Jim! Go on!"

"The poor fellow is about forty, and has a wife and family, the eldest of whom is nearly eighteen. Just before Christmas last year—that is, nearly twelve months ago—Tom Hathaway sustained a shock. He lost all his savings—sixty pounds or so—in the Dollimore Bank smash. You may have some recollection of it?"

"I have a very vivid recollection of it," Blake answered quietly. "For several months past I have been endeavouring to trace Dollimore, the absconding principal. He seems to have been a rather hazy and mysterious personality, and up to now I have been unsuccessful. So poor Tom lost his money in that, did he? Was that the beginning of his illness?"

"Yes. The ill-luck seems to have shaken his nerve-centres severely. The shock was aggravated by a fall, in which he injured his head."

"How did the fall occur?"

"Well, he tripped over something in his office, but from marks of a blow which I detected at the time, it seemed to me that he must have been struck. However, Tom will never admit that. But since that double shock his nerves have been gradually going to pieces. He has confided in me almost completely, and he tells me that whereas before his accounts were always absolutely accurate, he now invariably finds his petty cash short at the end of the month."

"Is there a thief at work?"

"Oh, no; nothing of the sort. He holds the cash-box keys himself. He tells me that the shortage occurs through his faulty memory; that he forgets to enter up items of expenditure. It is a terrible strain on his financial resources, for he has to make the deficit good out of his own meagre earnings."

"Rather than confess his waning ability to do his work properly?"

"Precisely. But his employers are finding it out all the same. It seems to be a queerish show where he is. Wealthy firm, but run on peculiar lines."

"And the firm's name?" asked Blake.

"Tope & Walderson, of Crutched Friars. Tope owns seven-eighths of the business, Walderson one-eighth. He's really a promoted manager. He has his knife in Tom Hathaway.

Wants to work his own nephew in as cashier. Tom would have been sacked long ago but for Tope's interposing."

"Ah, I see, and that doesn't improve your patient's condition!"

"It does not. He's in a constant state of suspense. He's really not fit to attend the office. I've told him so, and have offered to write and explain to the firm that he must have a rest."

"Why doesn't he accept your offer?"

"Because he fears to lose his job! If he confessed to ill-health, he feels certain that it would be seized on as an excuse to get rid of him altogether."

"And that frightens him?"

"Effectually. He's thoroughly imbued with the 'too old at forty' theory, and has made up his mind that he would never be able to get another job. I hardly know what to do. If he should get the sack, there's nothing but starvation for him and his children. Yet it's awful to see him slowly committing suicide."

"Is it as bad as that?" asked Blake, with a start.

"Yes. The only thing that will save him is three months' rest. If he doesn't have it at once he's liable to a serious breakdown at any time. I have already observed symptoms of incipient paralysis, and——"

Blake started up.

"Look here, Jim! This won't do! This poor fellow must have his three months' rest, if I have to pay for it myself."

The doctor shook his head.

"It's kind of you, Blake—very kind. But you don't know Tom Hathaway, and you don't understand this sort of nervous case. He's too proud to accept charity, and the rest would do him absolutely no good if he thought the sack awaited him at the end of that time. That's the difficulty I'm in—to procure him the necessary rest and to put his mind at ease at the same time. He must stop worrying, for if he goes on much longer I am afraid his mind will give way. But, Blake, why are you looking like that?"

A curious smile was on the detective's face—a smile whose meaning was altogether elusive.

"I was thinking."

"Thinking—what about?"

"Lean across, Jim, and I'll tell you."

The heads of the two old schoolfellows came together, and Blake whispered quickly into the other's ear.

Dr. Darbyshire's face was a study in bewilderment when he raised his head again.

"Of course, my dear Blake, I know the great reputation you have built up. I remember how very wonderful were your powers even at school, and I know that they have been developing ever since. But—you'll excuse me, I know—isn't what you propose a little too hard a nut to crack?"

"Hardness is only a comparative term, and depends upon the teeth," Blake laughed. "Let me get this particular nut between mine, and you'll see."

"It's daring, Blake," said the doctor. "But, by Jingo, if it could be done it would save poor Tom Hathaway!"

"Then don't argue about it any more," the detective said. "For I'm going to do it. I'll stake my reputation on succeeding; but if I fail—why, I'll make myself responsible for the support of Tom Hathaway and his family all their days!"

. . . . . .

"Tinker," Blake said the next morning, "just put on some sort of disguise, will you? I'm going into the City, and I want you to come with me."

"Right-ho, guv'nor! What shall I wear? Shiny silk topper and a pair of spats, and go as a director of a shady mining company, or redden me nose up a bit, and, with a bundle of documents under me arm, pretend I've got some big oil concessions from the Tsar of Russia?"

"Do neither, Tinker. If you'll just wash your face and put on a clean collar, so as to pass for a respectable junior clerk, nobody will ever recognise you."

"Guv'nor," said Tinker severely, "if I was like some fellows, I should give you notice to leave straight away. But as I can see you've got something interesting on, I'll wait till the job's done, and send in me resignation afterwards."

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Tom Hathaway's Job in Jeopardy—The "Generosity" of Mr. Tope—The New Office Boy Makes a Discovery.

ON a certain morning, about a week later, Mr. Jeremiah Tope emerged from the lift upon the second floor, and bustled into his own office. He always "bustled" in, as if he wanted to impress everybody with the idea that he led a very strenuous life, and was as young as ever.

As a matter of fact, he only came to the office about once a fortnight. He had come to-day in response to a pressing note from his partner. He was an old man—nearly seventy, tall and spare, with a face wrinkled like a leaf of curly kale. Deeply graven with lines it was, with heavy corrugations that drew his mouth down, and gave him a hard, distrustful look. He was a money-grubber, and close-fisted, who kept away from his business only because it thrived better with his energetic partner in charge.

"Well, Walderson, what do you want me for?" he asked querulously, as he divested himself of his loose, flowing caped ulster, and removed his old-fashioned, broad-brimmed hat from his scanty grey locks.

"It's about Hathaway," answered the junior partner. "He's getting queerer than ever. Goes mooning about and neglects his work. I think he's going off his head. We really must get rid of him."

"I don't want to do that," returned the old man sharply. "I've told you so before. Hathaway's a good book-keeper; he knows all about the business, and he's cheap. We shouldn't get so good a man at thirty-five shillings a week. We couldn't easily find a man to do his work."

"There's my nephew," insinuated the other gently.

He was very much the junior partner, and always deemed it wise to treat the senior with deference.

"Your nephew? So there is—so there is. But I don't believe in nephews much."

"He's an excellent accountant."

"No doubt—no doubt. But he wears a horseshoe pin."

"He does certainly, Mr. Tope; but I don't see how——"

"Men who wear horseshoe pins don't make good cashiers," broke in the old man shrewdly.

"I don't see——"

"Well, perhaps you will when you're as old as I am."

"If we keep Hathaway on," retorted the junior partner hotly, "I won't be responsible for the accuracy of the accounts!"

Mr. Tope looked a little startled. He only kept Hathaway there because his accounts were always so very accurate, and his—Tope's—interests thoroughly safeguarded in consequence. If the accounts went wrong it might mean——"

He looked up.

"Well, I'll tell you what, Walderson, I'll speak to him myself. I'm going to Egypt for the winter, but before I go I'll warn Hathaway. If he doesn't improve in a month, why, you can get rid of him. Hallo! What's this?"

A junior clerk had tapped at the door, and, entering, handed Mr. Tope a note.

"Why, bless me," cried the old man, reading it, "it's from Ricks, the office boy! He's left us without warning. Gone to another job to better himself, he says. Impudence, I call it—confounded impudence!"

"Don't worry about that," soothed Mr. Walderson. "We can soon fill his place."

"Not another nephew, is it?" snapped the old man. He suffered from his liver, which accounted for his irritability. "We don't want too many of one family."

"We'll advertise for a boy."

"H'm! That'll cost three-and-sixpence. Waste of money, I call it!"

Old Tope was very close-fisted indeed.

He sent round to his bank that afternoon for some bonds and bills deposited there. He wanted to examine them at his leisure, and had them placed in a handbag to take home.

At four o'clock he started off. He lived at Sydenham, near the Crystal Palace. The train started from London Bridge Station.

Old Tope was very rich, but he wasn't the sort of man to spend money on a cab if he could help it.

Bag in hand, he shuffled along Eastcheap, and turned down King William Street. It was beginning to get dusk, and there was a November fog over the river.

Suddenly, as he approached London Bridge, a rough-looking man in an ear-flap cap bumped into him, fixed a vice-like grip upon his wrist, and, wrenching the bag from his hand, was off in a jiffy. In a moment he had vanished down the steps leading to Lower Thames Street.

Old Tope shrieked, and a policeman lurched through the mist to his side.

"My bag—my bag! It's gone, and it's got five thousand

pounds'-worth of documents inside! It's gone! It's been stolen!"

A crowd gathered about him. Through that crowd, two minutes later, a boy elbowed his way. He carried something in his hand.

"Here you are, sir!" said he.

"My bag!" gasped old Tope.

"Yes, sir. I see that bloke snatch it, and I went after him. Hearing me behind him, he dropped the swag and made his escape. Hope you'll find everything intact, sir."

"Thank you! Thank you! Everything's all right. I—I suppose I ought to—to reward you?"

The words came reluctantly enough. Tope hated "parting."

"No, no, sir! Never mind," answered the boy, a trifle unctuously. "Don't trouble. Virtue is its own reward. And, after all, it ain't money I want—it's work."

"Love-a-duck!" exclaimed a man with a red nose and an inverted pipe. "Hear him! Don't want money, but work! Ugh! What's things comin' to?" And he repaired to a neighbouring tavern to think the problem out and to get over the shock.

But old Tope had seized on the idea.

"What was that, boy? You want work, you say?"

"Yes, sir. I'm a-wantin' it desprit. Ain't done a stroke for I don't know how long. If you happened to know anybody as wanted an orfis-boy, sir——"

"Why, bless me, the very thing! I want one myself."

"You do, sir? Oh, what a lucky thing if I happened to suit! I'd try my hardest to give satisfaction, sir, and—and I shouldn't expect very big wages. I'd come willin' for five shillings a week."

"Eh, you would?" cried old Tope eagerly. "Then I think I'll give you a trial."

His meanness was appealed to. Ricks, the ex-office-boy, had received eight shillings a week. This one would come for five, and he seemed brighter and more intelligent than Ricks. Besides, it would save rewarding him for the recovery of the bag, and would, moreover, save the cost of advertising for a boy.

"It's a clear saving of nearly eight pounds a year," he muttered to himself, and did a rapid calculation. "Eight pounds a year represents two hundred pounds at four per cent. Ho, ho, ho! This boy's giving us two hundred pounds for the privilege of working for us! Ho, ho, ho!" And the old man chuckled with satisfaction at his shrewdness.

"Here's my card," he said, turning to the boy. "My office address is on it. Go there to-morrow morning at nine o'clock. I'll write to my partner to-night, telling him that I've engaged you as office-boy."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" the boy said unctuously again.

"That's all," the old man said, as he moved off. "You start, then, to-morrow morning."

The boy touched his cap, and moved off, too. Had anyone chanced to follow him, they might have seen him descend those very steps down which he had chased the thief, and, pursuing his way along Lower Thames Street, presently disappear into Billingsgate Market.

Dodging in and out among the shops and stalls, he presently pulled up face to face with the man in the ear-flap cap—the thief himself!

"Well, Tinker," the "thief"—who was no other than Sexton Blake—asked, "what luck?"

"Spiffin', guv'nor! Your little bag-snatchin' trick worked out just as you said it would. Old gent was much obliged, and he's appointed me office-boy-in-chief to Messrs. Tope & Walderson."

Good! Move one has been successful, then. Now for Move No. 2."

. . . . . .

Tinker—under the name of Tankerton—had been "office-boy-in-chief" for a week. During that time he had proved himself easily the best boy that had ever decanted ink or copied letters for Messrs. Tope & Walderson. He had given everybody satisfaction—even the junior partner himself. He had also won over Norman Joyce by his willingness to fetch cigarettes and do other errands for that young gentleman.

One day, about one o'clock, the boy found himself alone in the office with Joyce. All the others were out for their midday meal. The invoice clerk had been studying the racing columns of a newspaper, and putting pencil ticks against the names of certain horses. Now he glanced at the clock, then at the boy; once more at the clock, then at the boy again.

"Ain't you going out to lunch, Tankerton?" he said at last.

They always call a spade an agricultural implement in office circles. It is always "lunch," even though the meal represents "dinner."

"I've lunched, sir," the boy answered. He always called Joyce "sir," which pleased the latter mightily. "I went out at twelve."

Joyce fidgeted, and looked at the clock again.

"Oh, well," he said, "couldn't you eat another? Here's a penny. Go out and buy a scone or something."

"Couldn't eat another blessed thing, sir! I should bust if I did. You wouldn't like to see me bust, would you, sir?"

"No, no; but can't you? Oh, I know. Just run round to Fenchurch Street Station and ask 'em what time the 6.10 leaves for Westcliff, will you?"

Tinker repressed a smile. He saw that Joyce was confused.

"What time the 6.10 goes?" he repeated. "I believe it goes at ten past six. Come to think of it, I'm sure it does."

"Yes, of course," stammered the other. "I didn't mean that. Ask 'em what time the next train is."

Tinker had stolen a quick glance at the invoice clerk. He saw that Joyce wanted to get rid of him—to be alone.

With a cheery "All right, sir!" he snatched up his cap, and left, as if to go on his errand.

But he didn't go on his errand. All he did was to dodge along the passage, and, opening a door, slip into the partners' room. Mounting a chair, he was just able to apply his eye to a ventilator that gave on to the room where Joyce was.

The invoice clerk had risen, and had sidled over to Tom Hathaway's locked desk. From his pocket he drew a bunch of keys, with one of which he unlocked a drawer.

With his eye to the ventilator, Tinker saw him lift out the cash-box.

"Whew! What's going to happen now?" the boy asked himself, and was soon to see.

For, with another key, and without a second's hesitation, Joyce opened the cash-box, drew something out, closed the box again, and, thrusting it back in its place, locked the desk up. Then he glanced at the clock.

"Confound it!" he exclaimed. "Twenty past one, and the race is timed for 1.30! No time to go round. I'll telephone."

He went across to the corner, and rang up a certain number.

"That Bullion & Co.? Good! I'm Mr. Norman Joyce. I want a quid on Pickled Pork for the 1.30 steeplechase—— What's that? Can't lay me? The money? Oh, that'll be all right! Say the bet's on, and I'll bring the money round in twenty minutes."

"Whew!" whistled Tinker again to himself, as he dropped noiselessly down from the ventilator. "So Norman Joyce backs horses, does he, and pinches the money to back 'em with from the petty cash-box. Great Chaucer! This is getting interesting!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Cashier's Troubles—An Attempted Suicide—Pedro to the Rescue.

OLD Tom Hathaway certainly was pretty bad. What Dr. Darbyshire had told Sexton Blake about him was in no wise an exaggeration.

Only by a great effort did he maintain his customary cheerfulness before his wife. At other times he was gloomy and depressed. He found himself going off his food; he grew weaker; he found his head in a chronic whirl, so that when he walked he staggered. People noticing that stagger, shook their heads in pious reproof, and declared that Tom drank. As a matter of fact, Tom was nearly a teetotaller.

In short, the cashier found himself tottering on the verge of a bad nervous breakdown. He trembled at the least unexpected sound; he worried about every insignificant detail, and he found it increasingly difficult to concentrate his mind upon his work.

His state had been brought about by worry. Mr. Walderson had made it very plain indeed that he wanted to get rid of him, and had told him in so many words—taking advantage of the senior partner's permission—that if he did not improve in a month he would be sacked.

Poor Tom had brooded over that until his reason fairly tottered under the threat. Time after time he passed his finger down the calendar, and made it out that the sack, if it came, would come just before Christmas, and his heart sank the more at that. Christmas to his old-fashioned soul—oh, yes, fashion has changed, even in souls—had ever been a time of happiness, a season of gladness dominated by the guiding words, "Peace on earth; good will towards men."

And now Christmas was within a few weeks, and he found the Sword of Damocles hanging over his head. Good-bye to peace, farewell to happiness if the glad season arrived to find him out of work.

Despondent as Tom was, he was no coward. He dredged up his resolution, and did his utmost to pull himself together. He worked early and late, so as to give Mr. Walderson no opportunity for fault-finding. But, work as he would, things would not go right. Somehow or other his accounts would persist in going wrong. He found himself frequently and

unaccountably "out" in his petty cash. Sometimes it was ten shillings, now and again a pound.

For these mistakes Tom blamed himself. He ascribed them to his faulty condition, to his declining mastery of figures, to errors of memory—forgetfulness in entering up the petty expenses. To cover these deficiencies he was driven to making the shortage good out of his own pocket. He stinted himself, cut down his personal expenditure to its narrowest limits, even going short of food. But the cash deficits continued, and presently got beyond these slender powers of meeting. For the first time in his life he had secrets from his wife, and took things to the pawnbroker's until his waistcoat pockets began to bulge with pawntickets.

There was nothing to reproach himself for in this. It was all done to preserve his job, to keep a roof over their heads. But it worried Tom tremendously, and daily his health grew worse.

On the evening of the day Tinker discovered Norman Joyce at the cash-box, Tom stayed late, as usual. He took out his expenses sheets, and added them up. Then he emptied the money from the cash-box and counted it. His face blanched. He counted the money again, and moaned.

"A sovereign short! How has that happened? I thought I'd been so careful this time. Oh dear, oh dear, what shall I do?"

He moaned again, and let his face fall into his hands. When he pulled them away again they were wet with tears.

He dashed his handkerchief across his eyes, put on his coat and hat, and made for the station.

"I must tell Mary," he kept on saying to himself all the way home. "The money must be made good in the morning, otherwise I must tell Mary. Poor girl! It'll worry her, but there's no help for it. I must tell her everything."

And he did. He found himself marvelling at the brave way in which she bore the news. As he showed her the pawntickets for his watch, his silver inkstand—a wedding present—his gold sleeve-links—another wedding present—and the rest of his personal belongings, all she did was to throw her arms about his neck and exclaim:

"Oh, Tom, what a dear, good fellow you are to do all this and never say a word about it!"

"What could I say, dear?" he murmured. "I've been ashamed, because it's all my own fault, you know. And now there's another sovereign short. If it isn't made good by the morning I shall be discharged, and—and there's nothing left that I can pawn."

Mary hugged him again at that, and hid her eyes upon his shoulder. Suddenly she jumped up.

"I must go out before the shops close," she said, and without further explanation left the house. When she returned, half an hour later, it was with a beaming face. "All right, Tom," she said. "I've got the money. Look, a sovereign!" And she displayed the gold coin.

"Why, Mary, where ever did you get it?"

"I—I borrowed it."

"From whom?"

"Now, Tom, why do you bother me with questions? I thought the money would ease your mind, and——"

"So it will, dear. But where did you——"

He had seized her hand, her left hand. What he saw there made him catch his breath. The third finger, that for twenty years had borne a plain band of gold, was bare!

"Your ring!" he gasped. "Your wedding-ring! Where is it?"

"Tom, Tom, don't look at me like that, and don't——"

"You have pawned your wedding-ring! Oh, Mary, my poor, darling girl, to think that I have brought you to this!"

He tottered back into a chair, and sobbed like a child. His wife dropped to her knees beside him, placed her arms about him, and laid her face against his. And so, in silence, with soul whispering to soul in mute and tender accents, they remained for a long time.

"Mary dear," Tom said huskily, after a while, "you must get the ring back. We must sell something else—some furniture."

"Yes, Tom—yes, to-morrow. There was no time for that to-night, and it was absolutely necessary you should have the money."

"The sovereign will save me," said Tom, with melting heart.

And the sovereign, covering his deficiency, did save him. But only for a time. What threatened to be a climax was soon to come.

Within a week. And it came like a thunderbolt! On a day when Mr. Tope had been to the office and announced his immediate departure for Southampton, en route for Egypt, where he usually spent the winter, Tom Hathaway was once more making up his cash. The result of his reckoning simply stupefied him. He was five pounds short!

He didn't moan now, nor did he sob. He was past all that. What he did, after locking his cash up in the safe, was to stare dry-eyed before him like a crazy man.

That was what Tom was at this moment—a crazy man. Worry on worry had weakened his will, and this final blow—a last straw an the camel's back—had unhinged his reason.

Reader, to whom five pounds is nothing, don't scoff and cry "Ridiculous!" There are thousands of hard-working clerks and others to whom a sudden deficit of five pounds would spell calamity. Thousands who, had they suffered as poor Tom had done, would have acted just as he did now. Heaven forbid, for your sake, that you should ever be able to put this matter to an actual test.

What Tom Hathaway did was to seize a pen and start to write a letter—two letters.

The letters completed, he pinned them down upon his desk. Then he left the place.

. . . . . .

Now, about an hour before this, office-boy Tankerton, otherwise Tinker, had left the office and had met Blake by appointment in another part of the City.

"I've just come from Waterloo," the detective said. "Mr. Tope's gone. I saw him leave in the Southampton train. How's Tom Hathaway"

"Oh, so-so!" Tinker replied. "He'll be worse than ever to-night."

"Why?"

"Joyce has been at the cash-box again. Guv'nor, it's about time this was put a stop to. I shall tell about Joyce to-morrow."

"Don't be silly. You'd have to tell Walderson. Is it likely he'd believe his own nephew to be a thief—or, anyway, own that he was? Can't you understand that Joyce may be acting on his uncle's instructions, and be taking the money in order to get Tom into trouble?"

"Poor Tom!"

"So I say. But we'll help him all we can, and ultimately pull him through. We'll go back to the office now, and if you find Tom is really short in his cash, you can pretend to find the money under some papers. Here you are, in case!" And Blake handed the boy several pounds.

They got into a cab, Pedro and all—for the dog had been with Blake—and drove to Mark Lane.

Walking into Crutched Friars, Tinker entered the office, obtaining the keys from the ex-policeman, who acted as caretaker. Two minutes later he rushed into the street, with white face and staring eyes. In his hand he carried two sheets of paper.

"Look, look!" he cried hoarsely. "Read that, for Heaven's sake!"

Blake looked at the two letters. One was addressed to the firm, one to Tom's wife.

"Great heavens!" Blake cried. "These are letters of farewell. Tom Hathaway's lost his reason, and has gone to commit suicide!"

"Yes, I know. I read the letters."

"How long is it, I wonder, since he left the office?"

"Only a few minutes, the caretaker says."

"Then we may be in time to save him. Here, Pedro, find the man who wrote these!"

The bloodhound sniffed at the letters thrust down to his nose. Then he sniffed along the pavement, and trotted off.

"Struck the trail at once! Thank Heaven for that! Come on, Tinker!"

Through two or three narrow streets the dog led the way. Across Tower Hill, past the Mint, and along Lower East Smithfield. Presently he turned to the right, skirted a long, high wall bounding the docks, and crossed a swing-bridge spanning a dock-cutting.

"We're in Wapping," whispered Blake, as they hurried along through the darkness.

It was dark for the most part, unusually dark, for these long, curving roads were ill-lighted. Here and there, though, a glare of light would fall athwart the way from some dock or other, where, beneath powerful arc lamps, a ship was being loaded amid the whirl of windlasses and the rattle of chains.

Looked at from an open space, which one of the many bridges afforded, the scene was Rembrandtesque in its weird play of shadow and light, and its movement of human figures at work in the glow.

Fascinated, Blake could not help but pause for a moment to take in the strange, impressive scene. Only for a moment, for then a startled cry from Tinker made him follow the direction of the boy's eyes. Then he cried out ere, recovering himself, he dashed forward.

Forward towards the farther end of the bridge, to where, beyond a curving rail of wrought iron, a broad-faced bastion with its stone base rooted deep in the dock basin stood up like a stout giant to hold back the press of waters. A wide parapet topped it, and on the parapet stood a man—a tall,

thin man, with hunched shoulders and curving chest, silhouetted against the backing light.

Tom Hathaway!

Blake and Tinker both cried out as they recognised him. The cry made the cashier turn half-round. The next instant up flew his arms, and forward lurched his body clear of the parapet.

Splash!

He was amid the waters, which gurgled and gulched like gluttonous fiends as they swallowed him up.

"Pedro, after him!"

At a word the bloodhound cleared the bridge. Plop! echoed from bastion to bastion as his heavy body struck the water.

With hearts beating fast, Blake and Tinker gazed down.

"There are some steps, and a boat!" the detective cried. And raced down.

Even as they unhitched the boat there came a snorting sound from some twenty yards away.

"He's got him!" cried Tinker.

And there was the gallant Pedro tugging at the unconscious Tom Hathaway, and towing him towards them.

Three strokes, and the boat was alongside them. Blake bent over, seized the unconscious man by the shoulders, and lifted him in. A moment after, and Pedro, with Tinker's assistance, was safe in the boat, too.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The House at Wapping—Sexton Blake's Little Scheme—An Eavesdropper.

"A NASTY knock on the head, poor chap! Must have struck something when he pitched into the water. It knocked him out completely. Good job you were on the spot, Blake, or he'd have been drowned for certain."

It was Dr. Darbyshire who spoke. Tom Hathaway had been conveyed to a neighbouring house, and the doctor telephoned for at once. He had arrived post-haste in a motor-car.

"The injuries are rather inconvenient than serious," he went on; "but it'll mean that he must take that three months' rest now."

"Then it won't be altogether a misfortune, after all."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps not; but it'll mean, poor fellow, that he'll lose his job for certain."

"On the contrary," put in Blake quietly, "I believe it will be the means of saving his job."

"Why, how can that be?"

"Jim, you've a short memory. You've forgotten what I told you."

"What, that fantastic plan of yours? No, I haven't. But it's too tricky, even for you. It's impossible."

"Not a bit of it. Part of it has been put into operation already. Friend Tinker here has been installed as boy in Tom's office. I found Ricks, the previous boy, a better job, and then we contrived, by a little trick, for Tinker to be appointed in his place."

"Clever, Blake, upon my word! Still, it's only a small part of the plan."

"Bigger than you think. It's enabled Tinker to learn the ways of the office and the people in it thoroughly. It's paved the way for my next move."

"Which is?"

"That I take Tom's place at the office."

"You hinted as much before," Dr. Darbyshire cried out in amazement. "But, Blake, it is too bold, too daring! I know your wondrous powers of disguise, but I'll never believe you can pass for Tom Hathaway. But I can see you're bent on trying, and though I feel absolutely certain you must fail, I know it's useless trying to dissuade you from it."

"Absolutely useless," Blake smiled.

"Well, well; I must be off. I've two or three patients to see to-night."

"You'll be back?"

"In a couple of hours or so. I don't suppose Tom will recover consciousness just yet, but directly he's sufficiently rested we must get him to his own home. I'll be back here in three hours."

"Very good, Jim. I'll make arrangements for a horse ambulance in the meantime, and send a message to ease Mrs. Hathaway's mind."

"Good-bye for the present, then. Think over that plan of yours again, Blake, and abandon it. You could never succeed in impersonating Tom Hathaway."

"Get thee hence, unbeliever! We shall see!" laughed Blake, as the two parted.

Directly he had gone Blake scribbled on a sheet of paper.

"Tinker," he exclaimed, holding out the paper, "go to Baker Street at once and bring me back all the things I have entered on that list. Bring them along in a taxi, and be as quick as you possibly can."

Tinker was back long before Dr. Darbyshire. When the latter did arrive he found the boy sitting alongside the bed. Upon it lay the patient with his head still bound up, his face still pale, and his narrow chest heaving slightly with his breathing, and his eyes open.

"Hallo, Tom! Better already?" said the doctor. "Thought you would be. Now let me see how we're really getting on!"

He applied his stethoscope to the patient's chest.

"H'm, h'm! Heart and respiration much better! But you're looking pretty drawn and peaky still."

"What has happened, doctor?" asked the man on the bed feebly.

"Oh, we'll tell you all about it later, Tom!" The doctor turned to Tinker, who had his head turned away. "Where's Mr. Blake?"

"He is here!"

Dr. Darbyshire leapt up in astonishment as he heard the words and beheld the man in the bed, whom he had fully believed to be his real patient, rise erect, and, with a swift movement of a towel over his extraordinarily mobile features, disclose the features of Sexton Blake.

"Great Christopher! What does this mean?"

"It means that you wouldn't believe I could impersonate Tom Hathaway, and that I've proved I can."

"You have indeed! I was completely taken in. The make-up was perfect. But—but—your condition? How did you manage to—to make your heart and respiration resemble those of an invalid?"

"This drug," Blake said, taking up a small phial, "the action of which has already worn off."

"Wonderful, Blake! Truly wonderful! Grim sort of joke, though rather, isn't it?"

"Not a joke, Jim," the detective said, in a serious tone. "It has its humorous side, but I did not do it for a joke. I wanted to test my powers of doing what I have mapped out. It is good practice."

"And you've succeeded splendidly. Face, figure, voice—all were perfect. But, Tom, the real patient? How is he, and where is he?"

"In the next room, and doing splendidly. He came to, and I immediately gave him the physic you left. The dose sent him to sleep again. He's sleeping now as soundly as a child."

It was even as Blake said. Tom Hathaway was going on splendidly, but was held in slumber by the drug the detective had administered by the doctor's orders.

"He'll sleep for hours yet," the doctor said. "And while he sleeps we can take him home. How about the ambulance?"

"It can be here in five minutes. Tinker, go for it."

"Blake," said the doctor, "after your astounding deception of me, I begin to think you may succeed in your plan. But there are many difficulties. You know nothing about Tom's office or duties."

"Thanks to Tinker, I know a good deal."

"But your handwriting—that will betray you."

"For the past fortnight I have been sedulously copying Tom's. Here's a specimen. I flatter myself it's a pretty good imitation."

"It's marvellous!" the doctor said, examining two written slips. "By jingo, Blake, what a forger you'd make!"

"No!" laughed Blake. "To be a forger two qualifications are necessary—the power to imitate another person's handwriting, and an absolute unscrupulous character. I may possess the first, but most assuredly I do not possess the second. I was born strictly honest, and have remained so all my life. I know it's a ticklish sort of game I'm playing, but my motive's good, and I believe the result will be good, too."

"There's another thing. When Tom Hathaway gets better he'll want to go back to the office. He'd never consent to letting you do his work; his pride wouldn't let him."

"I know that; but I've thought of a plan to keep him away, and at the same time to make him quite easy in his mind. You'll learn it later."

"You seem to have remembered everything."

"I have tried to remember everything, and to make arrangements accordingly."

. . . . . .

But there was something Blake had forgotten.

He had forgotten that walls have ears; similarly, that ceilings have eyes.

Had he not been so entirely engrossed by what had happened, he might have discovered that the ceiling of the very room in which he had effected his disguise was a bit broken in one place. Had he, knowing this, pursued his investigations further, he might have seen a lodger in the room above lying prone upon the floor, with his eye and ear alternately to a hole which commanded a view and hearing of everything—or nearly everything—going on in the chamber below.

The man was of medium height and build. He had iron

grey hair, small, red-rimmed eyes, a hawk-like nose, reddish at the tip, and a chin and a mouth whose weakness even his greying beard could not conceal. His name was Michael Chesney, his record one that would not bear inspection. With many advantages to start with, this man had elected to follow a criminal career. Various terms of imprisonment had been the record of his misdemeanours. A dangerous man, then, to trust with anything like a secret.

Yet he had seen nearly everything that had taken place in the room below.

"Wonder what it means?" he asked himself, as he rose from the floor and brushed the dust from his threadbare garments. "It's Sexton Blake. I recognised him at a glance, and I owe him a long-standing grudge. He's got some game on. Wonder what it is? I've tried most other things in my life. I think very likely it'll pay me now to try blackmail. I'll see this game through."

When, some little time afterwards, the horse ambulance departed, with Tom Hathaway inside it, and Sexton Blake and the others accompanying it, a weak-eyed, hawk-nosed man followed in the rear. That man was Michael Chesney.

"Confound your impudence!" Joyce cried. "Take that!" His big fist was doubled as he swung round his powerful arm. Had it met Tinker's head, it must have sent him sprawling. But it didn't. Instead it came into contact with the desk.

Like a stealthy spy he followed, dodging into a doorway now and then, and ever keeping himself in shadow as he followed the ambulance to Tom Hathaway's home at Forest Gate.

All unaware that anyone save Dr. Darbyshire and Tinker in any wise shared his secret, Blake went on thinking over his plans.

He rather liked this latest exploit of his. There was no profit in it; but Sexton Blake was a man who often worked for nothing. His unparalleled experience of crime and criminals had not hardened his nature.

He had a soft, sympathetic heart, and it had gone out to Tom Hathaway. He liked to do a good turn to an unfortunate fellow-creature when he could. Tom was unfortunate through no fault of his own. Blake had resolved to do him a good turn. He had made up his mind that the coming Christmas, which threatened to be the most miserable in Tom's life, should be indeed a happy one. It made him happy to contemplate the prospect.

But Michael Chesney lurking behind! What was his game? Would he, in the unscrupulousness of his nature, find the power to frustrate Blake's good intentions?

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.
Uncle and Nephew—In the Chop House—The Marked Sovereign.

WHEN in former days Mr. Alexander Walderson had been merely a clerk in the business, he had lived in a small house at Leytonstone, not far from Tom Hathaway's.

Later, as manager, he had migrated to a somewhat larger house at Snaresbrook. Later still, when his aggressive services were rewarded by a partnership, he had penetrated further into the neighbouring Epping Forest, and had taken a "desirable" residence in the district of Loughton.

On the particular night referred to in the last chapter, he was seated in his "study." In an armchair on the other side of the fireplace, smoking cigarette after cigarette, sprawled his nephew, Norman Joyce.

Uncle and nephew had been talking, they were talking still.

"And so you think that Hathaway is wrong in his cash?" Walderson said.

"Sure of it. There's been a shortage several times lately, but, fearing detection, Hathaway has made it good at the last minute. This time, however, I don't think he'll be able to make up the amount."

"What reason have you for supposing so?"

"Well, as I've said, he's been dipping into the firm's cash-box for his own benefit several times lately. He's only filched small sums up to now; but to-day I saw him pocket five pounds."

Walderson looked straight at his nephew.

"You saw Hathaway take money from the cash-box and put it into his own pocket?" he asked, in a curious tone.

"Yes; I've told you so already, uncle."

"You really did see him do it?"

Norman Joyce made an irritable gesture.

"Of course I did. Why do you keep asking?"

"Because I wish to know exactly what's taking place."

"Look here, uncle, I don't quite understand that remark."

"Don't you, nephew? Well, well, you needn't display your virtuous indignation. I am only telling you that I want to make sure."

"Sure of what?"

"Sure that you are not making an egregious ass of yourself!"

Norman Joyce shifted about in his seat.

"I wish you'd explain what you're driving at," said he.

"No, you don't wish that," the other answered drily. "After all, it's better perhaps not to go too closely into details. Only remember this, Norman, I'm playing for a pretty big stake. My aim, as you know, is to get hold of a bigger share in the business—to get hold of the whole of the business if I possibly can. That's my ambition, and by Jingo! I'm going to attain it. When I do, it will be to your advantage as well; and that's why I don't want you to spoil things by making a fool of yourself. It is necessary, of course, to get rid of Hathaway, but we must find some means of doing that without running the risk of getting you implicated."

"I tell you, uncle, I've no idea what you're driving at."

"Well, I hope you haven't. But I've gathered that you've gone in for gambling and other extravagant tastes lately. Now, to indulge such tastes requires money, and you don't make a great deal in the way of salary. What I want to

warn you against is trying to augment that salary in any way that may spoil my plans. You might possibly mean well by it—that is, you might look upon it as a means of getting Hathaway into trouble. But your little plan might miscarry; Tope might discover the shortage and the real cause of it; and then, instead of Hathaway going, out you'd go, and that might seriously handicap me. But enough of that now. You assure me that Hathaway really has been helping himself to the firm's money to the tune of several pounds, eh?"

"Yes, I do," said the nephew boldly, though he coloured up under his uncle's keen glance.

"Very good, then. I'll try first thing to-morrow morning to bowl the fellow out. If things are as you say, I shall take the responsibility into my own hands and bundle Hathaway out neck and crop."

From which conversation it will be seen that the following morning promised to be a very lively one at the offices of Messrs. Tope and Walderson.

And this was to be the very morning on which Sexton Blake was going to begin his impersonation of the sick cashier.

Even at the best the role he was about to essay would be a difficult one; but the circumstances under which it was about to begin looked like making it a veritable ordeal. Blake, however, was not the kind of man to flinch from that. He had, moreover, already anticipated that something of the kind threatened might take place.

Tinker, arriving at the office first thing in the morning, awaited the entrance of Blake with considerable anxiety. Every time the door opened he looked up, expecting to see his master. But the detective did not appear, and meanwhile the other clerks came in one by one.

Presently, with Blake still absent, Mr. Walderson himself appeared. He glanced round the outer office as he entered.

"Where's Hathaway?" he demanded sharply.

Nobody answered. The junior partner had to repeat his query.

"I'm afraid he hasn't arrived yet, sir," answered Ellis, the correspondence clerk, with some reluctance, as Mr. Walderson fixed his glance upon him.

"Then why didn't you say so before?" snapped the junior partner. "Why is he late, I wonder? Seems to me he's beginning to add unpunctuality to his other faults. Send him in to me the moment he does arrive."

Walderson passed into his own room, slamming the door after him.

Two minutes later and the door of the outer office opened. Into the office came a familiar tall, bent figure, with rounded shoulders and that suggestion of a hump between them.

He tottered, rather than walked, to the pegs beside his desk, where he divested himself of his threadbare topcoat and muffler. His face was pale and drawn; his eyes looked faded and weary. It was Tom Hathaway to the life!

"Hallo, Tinker!" he whispered. "How goes it?"

"So, so, guv'nor," was the reply. "But you've made a bright start, I don't think! Call this bein' punctual? There's a row about you already. You've got to go on the carpet and——"

Another voice broke in here to interrupt their whispered talk. It was that of Norman Joyce.

Sexton Blake, acting his part to perfection, turned round nervously.

"Go in to Mr. Walderson!"

"Does—does he want me?" Blake's voice was meekness itself; his humility was even greater, if possible, than that usually displayed by nerve-broken Tom Hathaway.

"I shouldn't tell you to go in if he didn't want you!" snapped Joyce, in a bullying tone. "Go in at once!"

Really, Blake played the part wonderfully well. Even Tinker could scarcely believe that it was not the genuine Tom Hathaway who now tottered across the office and tremblingly knocked at the inner door.

"You are late, Hathaway," was Walderson's greeting. "What d'you mean by it, eh?"

"I—I am very sorry, sir, but—but I'm not feeling at all well this morning."

"Not well!" thundered the junior partner. "If you're not well enough to do your work, it's time you made room for somebody who is. This is a business office—not a convalescent home."

"I—I'm feeling better now, sir, I think," returned Blake, trembling violently.

"Oh, are you? Well, then, let me see your cash-box and petty accounts. I want to see how you stand."

If the cashier, as represented by Blake, had been really guilty of filching money for his own benefit, he could not have looked more startled or guilty than he did now. Walderson, noting his sudden intensified pallor and the scared look that came into his eyes, made up his mind at once that the man was guilty.

"I'll bowl him out now," he chuckled to himself, as, rising, he followed the other into the outer office, and with elbow on the high desk, leant forward insolently by the supposed cashier's side. "Now, then," he said aloud, "how does your petty expenses account stand?"

Blake produced a sheet of figures.

"I've paid away £17 5s. 10d. since the last balance, sir."

"And I see you started with £40 8s. 6d. in hand. The balance now should therefore be"—Walderson was figuring rapidly on a blotting-pad—"should be £23 2s. 8d. How much cash have you in hand?"

Slowly, and still trembling violently, Blake emptied the box on to his desk.

Walderson himself counted the money.

"There's £18 2s. 8d. here," he said sharply. "You are five pounds short! What's the meaning of that?"

"Er—er here's some you haven't counted, sir," and, as he spoke, Blake shifted the cash-box.

There upon the desk lay five golden sovereigns!

Mr. Walderson gave a gasp of annoyance. Another equally startled gasp came from Norman Joyce, who was standing expectantly behind. Nobody had seen the transference of five pounds—swift as the action of a conjuror—from Blake's own pocket to the place where the money now lay.

However, there was the balance of cash perfectly in order, and no ground for complaint on the part of anybody.

With a half-muffled snarl, Walderson turned on his heel and re-entered his room, followed by Joyce.

"The cash is right, after all," he said irritably.

"Yes, I see it is. I can't understand it at all."

"You haven't been making a fool of me, have you, Norman?"

"Of course not, uncle. Why should I do that? I distinctly saw the fellow take several pounds from the cash-box yesterday."

Walderson kicked savagely at the hearthrug.

"It strikes me," he said, with no attempt to conceal his ill-humour, "that there's something wrong with your vision. The next time you see a hand in the firm's cash-box I want you to make perfectly sure that it isn't—your own!"

Norman Joyce went red and white by turns.

"Look here, uncle," he blustered. "If you think I'm a—a thief——"

"Get back to your work!" growled Walderson. "It isn't a matter that requires thinking about. Get back to your work, I say, and be more cautious in future, or you'll upset my plans altogether."

Norman Joyce fumed inwardly all the morning. He had no wish to offend his uncle, on whom his whole future depended. He was wrathful at having roused the junior partner's anger; he was still more wrathful with the cashier, whom he looked upon as the cause of it all.

He vented his spite on the luckless Tom Hathaway—as he thought him—for the rest of the morning. This, however, was only in accordance with his usual programme. Blake, well knowing how the real Tom Hathaway would have behaved, refrained from anything like retaliation. He bore all his petty persecution meekly enough.

Chagrined by his failure to rouse the cashier, Norman Joyce redoubled his efforts at annoyance. Lunch-time came, and most of the clerks went out for their midday meal. In the outer office Norman Joyce found himself alone with the pseudo-cashier and Tankerton—otherwise Tinker—the office-boy.

"Ain't you going out to your dinner, Hathaway?" he demanded.

"I—I'm not hungry," stammered Blake.

"You ain't hungry, eh? Too mingy to spend money on a meal, I expect! You oughtn't to be, either, considering what your perquisites amount to."

"I—beg your pardon—my what, Mr. Joyce?"

"Your perquisites—perks! Don't you understand? The money you filch out of the firm's cash-box, you know."

The cashier went white again.

"I—I don't filch money, Mr. Joyce."

"Don't you? Then how is it you are five pounds short to-day?"

"That isn't so, Mr. Joyce, I wasn't short. The money was quite correct when Mr. Walderson counted it."

"Oh, yes, I know all about that!" sneered the other. "But you were five pounds short last night."

Blake wheeled slowly round. His legs were still trembling, and his face looked scared. But his eyes had in them a strange steadiness as he fixed them upon his accuser.

"Excuse me, Mr. Joyce," said he, "but how did you know I was five pounds short last night?"

"How did I—why—well!" Joyce coloured up in his sudden confusion. "Well, you were short, anyway, and you know perfectly well that you've only made the cash right at the last minute, because you were afraid of being bowled out in your little peculatory game."

"How did you know I was five pounds short?" persisted Blake quietly.

Norman Joyce tried to meet the steady gaze that was fixed upon him, and attempted to cover his confusion by a display of bluster.

"What the blazes do you mean by questioning me?" he thundered. "I'm not here to be cross-examined by a thief."

The cashier's hands gave a convulsive clutch, but he conquered his rising temper in a moment.

"You have no right to call me that, Mr. Joyce," he said meekly. "I am not a thief, you know."

"Yes you are, you canting hypocrite! Look at you now—trembling like I don't know what! Get out of this office! Be off to your dinner! I want to be here alone. Out of it, I tell you!"

Norman Joyce had advanced threateningly towards the cashier. Still the latter made no move. The big, hulking bully could restrain himself no longer. With one hand fixed upon the cashier's collar, he jerked him backwards a yard.

"Out of it!" he cried, shaking him. "Out of it, or I'll——"

He didn't say any more. How it happened Norman Joyce never quite knew. But, somehow or other—it must have been by sheer accident, of course—the cashier's foot got twisted behind his own. Somehow or other, too—similarly by "accident," of course—he found his grip on the other's collar loosening, his arm doubled back, and, in a twinkling he found himself spinning round, and, impelled as it seemed by his own weight, sent staggering backwards a couple of yards against the copying-press standing near the wall.

There for two or three seconds he remained, gasping for the breath that had been knocked out of him by the impact.

"Hooray!" yelled the delighted Tinker, half-forgetting himself. "Fust knock-down blow to Fightin' Tom of Forest Gate! Seconds out o' the ring! Time for round two!"

But by this time Norman Joyce had recovered his wind, though by no means his temper. Purple with rage his face was, as, with grinding teeth, he made a dash at the boy.

"Confound your impudence!" he cried. "Take that!"

His big fist was doubled as he swung round his powerful arm. Had it met Tinker's head, it must have sent him sprawling. But it didn't. Instead, it came into contact with the edge of the high desk.

With a yell and a rueful look at his barked knuckles, Norman Joyce stamped and danced about with pain.

Tinker promptly put on his cap, and went out to dinner. A few minutes later Blake, having apparently found an appetite, followed suit.

Sexton Blake went into Eastcheap. He knew of an old-established chop-house there that he had not been to for years. Entering it, he seated himself in one of the old-fashioned boxes.

Hardly had he been there three minutes than a hand appeared over the high-backed partition behind him, and stretched itself nearly down to his shoulder. Instantly he turned round, but in a moment the hand was withdrawn.

Blake craned his neck round the end of the box—just in time to see the tails of a shabby frock-coat whisk out of the chop-house door.

"Madman, I wonder?" murmured Blake. "Or thief, or what? Hallo, he's left something behind him."

For the first time the detective's eyes fell upon a somewhat grubby-looking sealed envelope which had been dropped on to the table before him.

He turned it over, starting as he read the superscription. No wonder! It was addressed to "Sexton Blake, Esq."

Blake was not a man to be easily surprised, but for the life of him now he could not control a quiver of his mouth and a lifting of his eyebrows. He had flattered himself that his disguise was perfect, had felt so certain that he had effectually deceived all the people at Tope & Walderson's, and that they believed him to be Tom Hathaway, the man he was impersonating.

Yet here before him was a note addressed to him in his actual character—delivered by that long, lean hand that had been thrust so mysteriously over the partition!

Whose was that hand? Who was the man that had penetrated his disguise?

"Pshaw! I'm like a woman!" Blake exclaimed to himself. "Here I'm wasting time by speculating as to who the letter is from when simply by opening it I can find out at once."

He cut the flap open carefully with a knife, and took out a half-sheet of notepaper. It contained but few lines, and shed no very definite light upon the sender. This is all it said:

"The writer is in possession of valuable knowledge affecting Mr. Sexton Blake. If Mr. S. B. is desirous of learning what this knowledge is, let him be at the northern end of the Tower Bridge to-night at eight o'clock.

"As the writer has incurred some expense in obtaining the knowledge in question, he will expect compensation."

"Well I'm hanged!" muttered Blake, after examining the letter and envelope for some time. "This is a bit strange. It is also a bit of a nuisance. If one person has succeeded in penetrating my disguise, others may do the same. That might spoil my plans and come hard on poor Tom Hathaway. Darbyshire warned me that this business was a difficult one, and I'm beginning to think he was right. Awkward—confoundedly awkward! I shall have to see the man who wrote this note, and find a way of making him hold his tongue."

The first thing Blake did on arriving back at the office after lunch was to once more check the amount of money in the cash-box. This he had carefully locked and placed in his desk. Having counted the contents, a curious smile came over his face.

"Anything wrong?" Tinker inquired in a whisper.

"One pound short! Our friend the enemy has been moderate this time. By the way, where does Norman Joyce usually get his lunch?"

"At the Reindeer, guv'nor. I've seen him through the glass doors a-chuckin' his weight about and mashin' the bar-maid."

"Well, just run out and see if he's at the Reindeer now. Don't let him see you, though."

Tinker was out and back again in ten minutes.

"He's there right enough, guv'nor—drinkin' whisky and soda and smokin' a cigar nearly as big as one o' them there dirigible balloons."

"Good! Now, not a word about this, of course."

"'Tain't likely, guv'nor. But what's the game?"

"You may see later."

Tinker did see later. A visit Blake paid to the Reindeer Restaurant that afternoon, and a chat with the proprietor, yielded a result that seemed to be highly satisfactory to the detective.

More than once, as he made his way home to Baker Street, he drew one particular sovereign from his purse. Upon the milled edge of that coin were certain marks the sight of which caused Blake to chuckle.

Tinker looked at him inquiringly.

"What are you laughing at, guv'nor?" he asked. "Just seen the point of one of my last month's jokes, or what?"

Blake held up the sovereign between his finger and thumb.

"I've made a small discovery, my boy—but an important one all the same. This sovereign is the one that was taken from the cash-box to-day, while I was out at lunch. It was changed by our friend Mr. Norman Joyce at the Reindeer Restaurant this afternoon."

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Blackmail!—Michael Chesney, alias "Mike the Scribbler!"

At a few minutes to eight on that same evening Sexton Blake—undisguised now—stood with his back to the line of big warehouses that flanked the north-eastern end of the Tower Bridge.

From behind one of the towers there came into sight a very old-looking man, leaning heavily on a stout stick. He was bent in figure, as if with age, and he wore a white beard of unusual thickness and length.

Slowly he advanced along the broad pavement, pausing now and then as if for breath, but really in order to look about him.

Catching sight of the detective standing there, he shuffled along towards him.

"Good-evening, Mr. Sexton Blake!" he greeted, in a low, croaking voice.

The detective eyed him keenly in the misty light.

"Are you the writer of a note I received to-day?" he asked.

"That's as may be, Mr. Sexton Blake."

"But I want to know. Who are you?"

"Never mind who I am. You are here, Mr. Sexton Blake—so that's all right, and we can get to business."

"What is your business? What's this knowledge you wish to impart to me?"

A low chuckle gurgled in the man's throat.

"The knowledge?" he repeated. "Well, I thought you might like to know what somebody had discovered the little game you are playing."

"Game! What do you mean?"

"You surely know that better than anybody else, Mr. Sexton Blake. You are taking the place of a man who occupies a position in a certain highly respectable City office."

Blake bit his lip. It was quite plain that the game he was playing had been discovered. For his own sake this would not have mattered, but for Tom Hathaway's——

He concealed his annoyance, however, and in a half-bantering tone said:

"Supposing, my friend, that your guess is correct—what about it?"

"That is precisely my question to you, Mr. Sexton Blake—

what about it? You didn't assume the character of another man without some reason, and when the other man happens to be a cashier, with command of his firm's money, the reason might be—well, Mr. Sexton Blake, you know what the reason might look like in the eyes of the law."

The detective gave a low laugh.

"Oh, I see your meaning now!" he said. "You assume that if a man happened to impersonate a cashier, he would do so with the object of misappropriating money. Is that it—eh?"

"That's just it, Mr. Sexton Blake—that's the one and only interpretation which a judge and jury would place upon such an action. And as I chance to know that you are impersonating such a man, why——"

"Your duty is plain—eh? You are going to expose my villainy straight away. Well, there's a constable standing yonder; call him over and give me in charge."

The old man's brows came together. Blake's suggestion had startled him a bit. He kept cool, though, and chuckled again.

"I know a game worth two of that!" he said. "If I gave you in charge, where should I come in? I should have to give evidence against you. That would mean a waste of time. I can't afford to waste time. I'm a poor man, Mr. Sexton Blake, and I thought——"

"Thought you'd like to turn a dishonest penny—eh?"

"Don't label things with names."

"But I like to, my friend. Your game is blackmail. You think you know something about me, and you are demanding hush-money. Well, since you say that your time is valuable to you, I will waste no more of it. I tell you straight out that you will not get a penny from me."

"What! You won't pay up?"

"Not a penny!"

"But I can blow the gaff on you."

"Not a penny!"

The man's face twisted with annoyance, and his eyes flashed menacingly.

"You will give me twenty pounds, Mr. Sexton Blake."

"I shall do nothing of the sort."

"Ten pounds, then?"

"I have told you already, not a penny!"

"Then, confound you, Sexton Blake—confound you! I swore to get even with you years ago. Now I take another oath that I'll do it before long!"

"You can do as you like—Michael Chesney."

The words were spoken quietly, but their effect upon the other was startling. His face turned to a greenish hue, while into his eyes came a scared expression.

"Why—why do you call me that?" he demanded harshly.

"Because it is one of the names I remember you by. I might have called you 'Mike the Scribbler' or——"

"Confound you! Confound you!" broke in the man. "Oh, I'll get even with you yet, Mr. Sexton Blake—I'll get even with you!"

And with gnashing teeth he hurried away, leaving Blake to gaze after him, until he had disappeared in the fog which was coming up from the river.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Blake to himself. "So it's Michael Chesney—'Mike the Scribbler'—one of the cleverest forgers of his day. Come down in the world, evidently. It's an extraordinary thing that a man of his type should imagine that he could conceal his identity by merely disguising his face. His eyes and voice gave him away in a second.

"But it's confoundedly awkward that he should have discovered my impersonation of Tom Hathaway. Still, he's not likely to try his blackmailing tricks on with me again. The only danger is that he may go to somebody at—well, I must keep my eye on him, that's all."

THE END.

(What will Michael Chesney do with the knowledge he possesses? Will he still allow Sexton Blake to carry on his impersonation of the cashier? What he actually decides to do, and the clever manner in which Blake checkmates his scheme, will be found in next week's story, entitled "Sexton Blake, Cashier!" which forms an exciting sequel to this yarn. Don't miss this great story, and make sure of securing your copy of next Friday's PENNY POPULAR *by ordering in advance.)*

BETWEEN OURSELVES

A Weekly Chat between The Editor and His Readers.

A WORD OF WARNING!

I want this week to utter a word of warning to every one of my loyal readers. As you all know, the issue of the PENNY POPULAR dated January 6th, 1917—that is, the issue after the next—will contain the first of our grand new series of stories dealing with the adventures of Harry Wharton & Co., and the title will be

"THE MAKING OF HARRY WHARTON!"

This is, of course, a splendid attraction in itself; but, apart from this, with every issue of the PENNY POPULAR dated January 6th I am giving a present absolutely free of all charge—

A MAGNIFICENT PLATE

of the Greyfriars chums. This plate is really a handsome thing, and you will be able to frame it, and hang it up in your drawing-room.

Now, there is going to be an extraordinary demand for this particular issue of the PENNY POPULAR. Some of you, therefore, may have great difficulty in obtaining your copies, unless you instruct your newsagent to reserve you a copy.

Don't lose any time, therefore, in taking this really necessary precaution. You may have had no difficulty in obtaining your copies in the past, but on January 5th, only those readers who have ordered in advance will be sure of securing a copy.

Remember, therefore, my chums, that

YOU MUST BOOK YOUR COPY

of this magnificent issue in advance, and the earlier you book the better.

FOR NEXT FRIDAY!

There are some splendid stories in store for you next Friday. The first is that dealing with the amazing adventures of the famous detective, Sexton Blake, and it is entitled

"SEXTON BLAKE, CASHIER!"

and you will find many thrilling scenes to interest you in this fine yarn.

The tale dealing with the adventures of Tom Merry & Co. of St. Jim's is entitled

"THE GREAT MISUNDERSTANDING!"

The great misunderstanding occurs between Figgins and Redfern, his rival of the New House. The trouble is caused through Mr. Ratcliff. There are lively scenes between Figgy and Reddy, ending in a stand-up fight. What the result of the fistic encounter is, and what eventually happens, you will learn next Friday.

The story of Jack, Sam, and Pete, the famous comrades, is one you will all like. It is entitled

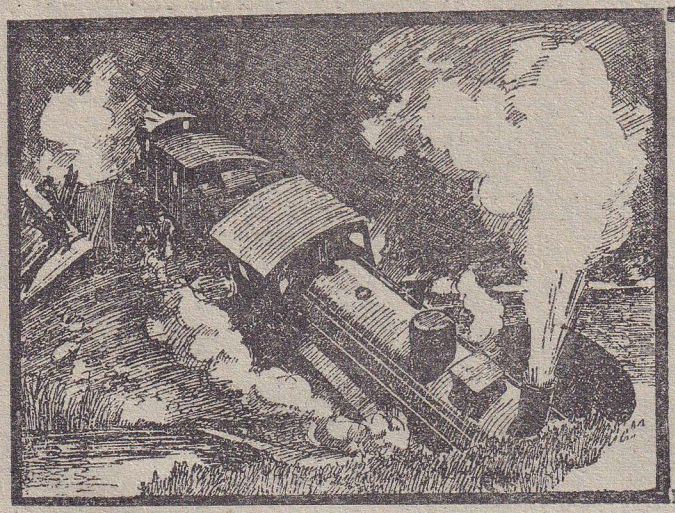
"DOWN ON THEIR LUCK!"

Misfortune seems to dog the steps of the comrades, for, after a perilous journey to England, in which Jack and Sam fall very ill, they reach the shores of England, to discover that someone has drawn all their money out of the bank. They are stranded, and have to think about earning their living. How they do this you will learn in future stories.

Make sure of securing next Friday's issue by ordering in advance.

YOUR EDITOR.

FIGGINS' DARING ESCAPADE!



A Magnificent Long Complete School Tale, dealing with the Early Adventures of TOM MERRY & Co. of St. Jim's.

— — BY — —

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Unwelcome News.

"WOTTEN!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, was not usually emphatic. Emphasis did not agree with that repose of manner which Arthur Augustus cultivated with so much success.

But to err is human, and for once Arthur Augustus D'Arcy allowed himself to be emphatic.

"Wotten!" he repeated. "Simply wotten! I don't like it. Wats!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was standing in the hall of the School House at St. Jim's, with an open letter in his hand. As the letter was from his Cousin Ethel, several other fellows had gathered round to hear the news. For Ethel was one of the best chums that Tom Merry & Co. of St. Jim's had. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther stood looking expectant. Blake and Digby, of the Fourth, waited with more or less patience to hear the news in the letter. Even Herries, who had been going out to feed his bulldog, paused in the passage till he should hear whether there was any news from Cousin Ethel.

"Well?" said half a dozen voices at once.

"Wotten!"

"Isn't that letter from Cousin Ethel?", demanded Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Then what do you mean by saying rotten?"

"He didn't say rotten; he said wotten," said Monty Lowther, with a grin.

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Is there any news?" demanded Blake.

"Yaas."

"Is Cousin Ethel coming down here?"

"Yaas," said D'Arcy. "It's wotten!"

The juniors stared at him.

"What did you say?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Wotten!"

"Gentlemen," said Tom Merry, glancing round the group of juniors. "I suggest bumping Gussy, for saying that a lady's visit is rotten. He ought to be in the seventh heaven about it, if not in the eighth or ninth; and he says it's rotten. I'm disgusted with Gussy."

"You ass!" yelled D'Arcy. "I meant it's wotten because Ethel is coming to say good-bye."

"What?"

"Ethel's goin' away, and she's comin' to say good-bye. That's what is wotten, you silly asses!" gasped D'Arcy. "This lettah is to say that she's goin' abwoad for a year, and she's comin' down to St. Jim's on Wednesday to say good-bye to us all."

"Oh!"

"But I've got an ideah, you fellahs—a weally wippin' ideah! We'll get permission to go to London to see Cousin Ethel off."

"Hurrah!"

"They will be startin' fwom Chawing Cwoss Station, you know," said D'Arcy, "to catch the boat at Folkestone. I wathah think that the Head will see the necessity of lettin' us have a day off on an occasion like this."

"Hurrah!"

"Go and ask him!" said Tom Merry, laughing.

"You fellows come with me. Don't talk, you know—you are bound to say somethin' to put your foot in it. Leave the talkin' to me; but you can come along and back me up, you know."

"Oh, we'll come!" said Jack Blake. "I fancy the Head isn't very likely to let us go to London to see Cousin Ethel off, though."

"I shall point out to him that it is my duty, as Ethel's cousin, to see her off," said D'Arcy stiffly. "I have no doubt that Dr. Holmes will listen to weason. He is a wathah sensible old boy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come on, deah boys!"

The juniors followed Arthur Augustus, nothing loth. Arthur Augustus tapped at the door of Dr. Holmes' study.

"Come in!" said the voice of the Head.

The juniors opened the door and marched in, half a dozen of them.

The Head was not alone.

Figgins of the New House stood before the Head's desk, evidently in a state of some agitation.

Dr. Holmes made a gesture to the new-comers.

"Wait a few moments," he said. "Figgins has come to speak to me. Now, what is it you wish to say, Figgins?"

Figgins turned crimson as he looked at the juniors. He had been hesitating before, but now he began to stammer as well.

"If—if you please, sir——"

"Yes, Figgins?" said the Head kindly enough, as he saw that the New House junior had something weighty on his mind.

"If—if you please——"

"Well?"

"I—I should like to ask a favour, sir."

"Go on, Figgins."

"I want a day off from lessons, sir——"

"Indeed, Figgins!" said the Head, in surprise.

"I—I want to go to London, sir," said Figgins.

"My hat!"

It was Tom Merry who uttered that exclamation. He had guessed Figgy's motive. Figgy had been brought to the study by the same errand as the School House juniors. Dr. Holmes' glance turned upon the hero of the Shell, and Tom Merry's face became crimson.

"You may go on, Figgins," he said. "What do you want to go to London for?"

"To see a—a—a friend off, sir."

"To see a friend off?" said the Head, puzzled. "Do you mean to say that a friend of yours is going on a journey, and you want a day away from school to see him off?"

"Oh, no, sir!"

"What, then?"

"'Her' off, sir," stammered Figgins. "It's a 'her'—I—I mean, it's a girl, sir."

Dr. Holmes fixed a very severe look upon Figgins' flaming face.

"Figgins," he said, in measured tones, "I am surprised."

"Bai Jove, yaas, wathah!" broke out D'Arcy indignantly. "I am surpwised, too. I wegard this as a piece of feahful cheek on Figgins' part! If anybody goes to London to see my cousin off, I'm the pwopah person!"

"It's—it's Cousin Ethel, sir," Figgins stammered. "She's going to Paris for a whole year, sir, and—and I want to see her off, if I may, sir. I think perhaps she would like me to, sir."

"Like your feahful cheek to suppose anythin' of the sort, Figgins!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy warmly. "It stands to weason that if Ethel would like anybody to see her off, it must be me. Anybody would think, to hear you talk, that Ethel was your cousin, and not mine."

"Dry up, Gussy!" murmured Blake, as a smile floated over the grave face of the doctor.

"I wefuse to dwy up! If you please, sir, we have come to ask your permish to go to London to see my cousin off, sir. I twust you will give us permish. It doesn't mattah about Figgins. He's only a New House chap, sir, and my cousin hardly knows him."

"Cheese it, you ass!" whispered Tom Merry.

"I wefuse to cheese it!" said D'Arcy. "If anybody goes to London to see Ethel off, I insist upon my wights as her cousin—to say nothin' of the fact that Ethel, of course, would pwefer to have me. On such occasions a girl wequires the attention of a fellow of tact and judgment."

Dr. Holmes looked from one to another of the juniors.

"Have you all come to ask permission to take a day away from school?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," came a sort of chorus in reply.

"Well, it is impossible! I never heard of anything so absurd," said Dr. Holmes. "If leave of absence was granted for such frivolous reasons, there would be an end of all school work, I imagine. In the case of D'Arcy, as he is Miss Cleveland's cousin, I might make an exception."

"Thank you vewy much, sir."

Figgins looked very miserable.

"Vewy well, sir," he said quietly.

And he quitted the study.

"I have your permish to go back to London with Cousin Ethel to-morrow, sir?" asked Arthur Augustus, with great satisfaction.

"Yes, D'Arcy," said the Head. "I think I can consent to that, if your cousin is indeed going away for a whole year."

"Yaas, wathah, sir! May I take a fwiend, sir? It will be wathah lonely comin' back all the way fwom London alone."

Dr. Holmes pursed his lips for a moment.

"Very well, D'Arcy," he said, after a pause. "You may choose a friend to take with you, certainly. I shall expect your return by the afternoon train."

"Thank you vewy much, sir."

"Now you may go."

The juniors quitted the study, Arthur Augustus, at least, in a state of great satisfaction.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

A Chance for Figgins.

COUSIN ETHEL came to St. Jim's the next day.

She was warmly greeted by the juniors, and she had a kind smile for all. She was graver than usual; she felt the parting from her old friends as much as they did.

Figgins had a most lugubrious face as he shook hands with the girl. Figgins wasn't an adept at hiding his feelings, and he was feeling utterly miserable.

Ethel smiled as she shook hands with Figgins. She understood the feelings expressed in Figgins' miserable face, and her own heart was a little heavy.

"It's awfully rotten about your going away, Cousin Ethel!" said Blake.

"I wish we could all come to see you off," said Tom Merry. "Gussy has got permission to come, and to bring a friend. We all want to come."

"Yaas, wathah! I'm sowwy I can't take all the youngstahs," said D'Arcy, with a fatherly air that made his friends long to bump him on the spot, "but it's imposs."

"Tea's ready!" said Monty Lowther.

Figgins managed to get along with D'Arcy as the juniors went into the School House, Cousin Ethel escorted by Blake and Tom Merry.

"Gussy, old man——" began Figgins.

D'Arcy turned his eyeglass upon him.

"Well, Figgay?"

"I should like to go to London with you to see Cousin Ethel off."

"Imposs, deah boy!"

"But—but I say, Gussy——"

"I'm bound to take a School House chap, you know. That's only playin' the game. And weally, Figgins, I don't think I should take you, anyway. You don't seem to me to have a pwopah wegard for the wights of pwoperty."

"What?"

"You seem to wegard Ethel as if she were your cousin instead of mine," said D'Arcy severely.

"Oh! You see——"

"Yaas; I see that it is a gweat cheek on your part, Figgay. I don't like fellows to monopolise my welations, you know."

"I—I——"

"Come on!" called out Fatty Wynn from the study doorway. "Tea's ready, and the eggs are simply prime! And the steak and kidneys——"

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy!"

Figgins followed D'Arcy into the study, looking very gloomy. Tom Merry's study was looking newly swept and garnished. Bright crockery and clean cloth gleamed upon the table, and there was an unusual number of sound chairs and whole cups.

The study was a little crowded with so many guests, certainly; but the juniors were used to a crowd. Plenty of room was made for Cousin Ethel, and the rest did the best they could.

"It's jolly good of you to come and say good-bye to us!" said Blake, as he passed a cup of tea to Cousin Ethel. "I wish we could all come and see you off. But the Head don't understand. These headmasters never do understand things, you know."

"Wathah not!"

"Howevah, I am goin' to see Ethel off," said Arthur Augustus, "so that will be all wight. And I'm takin' one of you chaps—I don't know which. I weally think, upon the whole, that you had bettah toss up for it—unless Ethel can make a suggestion."

Figgins turned his eyes upon Ethel, and then dropped them. What he wanted was very clear, but he would not make Ethel appear to be selecting him. A thoughtful shade came over the girl's face.

"I should like you all to come," she said. "That would be pleasantest. But if only one can come with Arthur, perhaps it would be fairer to choose a boy belonging to the New House, as Arthur is a School House boy."

"Bai Jove!"

"Then both Houses would be seeing me off," said Cousin Ethel sweetly.

"Good egg!" said Blake heroically, with great self-sacrifice. "Cousin Ethel is right."

"Quite right," said Tom Merry, with an effort.

"Ya-a-a-as, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, more slowly.

Monty Lowther winked solemnly at the ceiling.

"Then it's up to you three New House chaps to decide who goes with Gussy," said Lowther, looking at Figgins & Co.

"Well, I'd like to go," said Fatty Wynn. "Besides the pleasure of seing Cousin Ethel off, I could see that she had a decent lunch-basket to take in the train. You can't be too careful when you're starting on a journey. And I say—— Yaro-o-o-oh!"

Fatty Wynn had not meant to say that. It came out suddenly and unexpectedly. Arthur Augustus put his monocle into his eye, and gazed at Fatty Wynn with great astonishment.

"What do you say yawo-oh for?" he asked.

"Ow! Some silly ass jammed his boot on my toe!" groaned Fatty Wynn. "Was it you, Kerr, you silly ass?"

Kerr was the victim of a strange facial contortion at that moment. He was trying to smile with the side of his face turned towards Cousin Ethel, and to glare with the side towards Fatty Wynn. The result was so alarming that Fatty Wynn half rose, thinking that Kerr was having a fit.

"Kerr, old man, are you ill?" he gasped.

"No," said Kerr. "I'm all right."

"But you looked——"

"Please pass the pickles, Fatty," said Tom Merry.

"Here you are! Kerr looked——"

"And the salt," said Monty Lowther.

"All right!" said Fatty Wynn. "What are you winking at me for, Blake?"

Blake turned crimson.

"I—I think there's something in my eye," he faltered.

"About going to London with Gussy," resumed Fatty Wynn. "And then the concentrated gaze of half a dozen juniors suddenly enlightened him, and he understood. "About going to London," he repeated, "I think that Figgy ought to go, as chief of the Co."

"Just what I was going to say," said Kerr.

Figgins' eyes sparkled.

"Weally——" began Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"I should be jolly glad to go!" said Figgins. "It's jolly decent of you fellows to vote for me! Is it all right, Gussy?"

"Of course it is!" said Blake. "Gussy has agreed."

"Weally, Blake——"

"I propose a health to Cousin Ethel, and a prosperous voyage!" said Tom Merry, rising to his feet, with a glass full of lemonade in his hand.

And bon voyage was drunk with enthusiasm. And if Arthur Augustus had any private opinions to express about the propriety of Figgins accompanying him to London, he did not have any opportunity of expressing them, and they remained unuttered.

The juniors turned out in great force to see Cousin Ethel and Figgins and D'Arcy to the station.

As Figgins and D'Arcy were staying the night in London at Lord Eastwood's house, in order to see Ethel off in the morning, it was necessary to take some things with them.

Figgins took a little bag, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy took a large one—so large that he might really have been going to Paris himself instead of to Charing Cross Station.

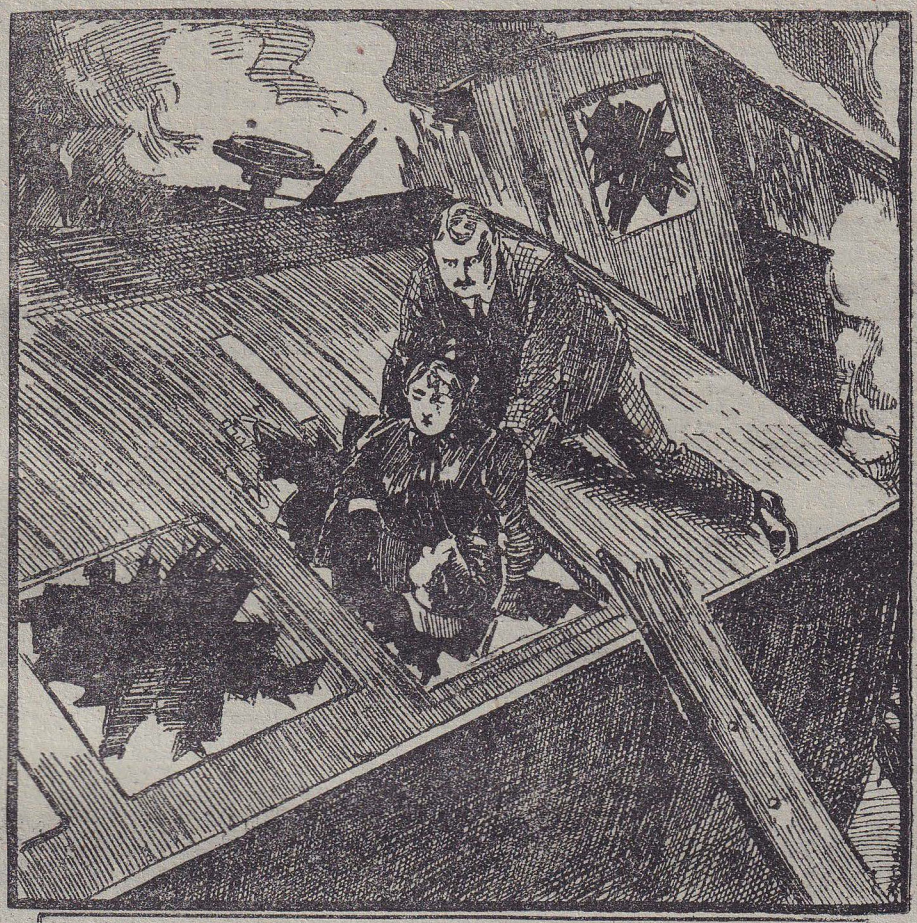
The Terrible Three, and the chums of Study No. 6, and Kerr and Fatty Wynn, and Redfern & Co. of the New House, and Skimpole and Kangaroo and Dane and Glyn, and Reilly and Brooks and Thomson, and several other fellows, walked down to the station, and crowded on the platform to say good-bye and wave their hands.

Figgins found an empty carriage, and put Ethel in a corner seat, and himself next to her, and the juniors stood round the carriage till the train started.

They had hosts of things to say, and they all said them at once, and Cousin Ethel smiled as cheerfully as she could, though her heart was not light at going so far away from her friends for so long a time.

The train whistled, and the juniors had to stand back.

In a few seconds the train was lost to view round a bend in the line, and the juniors tramped back to St. Jim's.



"Hand her up!" said Mr. Harris, leaning over the wrecked carriage-door to receive the fainting lady. The exhausted Figgins made a desperate effort, and lifted her up for the sporting gentleman to grasp. Mr. Harris seized her in his fat hands, and drew her into safety at last!

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Figgins, Too!

CHARING CROSS STATION presented its usual appearance of bustle and animation on the following morning, prior to the departure of the Continental express. A motor-car deposited four travellers at the station entrance. Figgins and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy took charge of wraps and rugs and bags.

"Nevah mind about the luggage," said Arthur Augustus; "I have given John instwuctions about wegistewin' it to Pawis. Would you mind lookin' aftah Ethel, Figgay, while I look aftah Aunt Adelina?"

"Pleasure!" said Figgins.

Arthur Augustus was distinguished for his politeness to ladies of uncertain years. Mrs. Quayle was probably quite as well able to take care of herself as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was; but D'Arcy considered it his duty to look after her, and he did it nobly.

Cousin Ethel, as a lesser responsibility, he relinquished to Figgins. Figgins seemed quite equal to the task imposed upon him. He piloted Cousin Ethel to the platform where the Continental express was waiting, and found the carriage where the two corner seats were reserved, and disposed Ethel in one of them, long before D'Arcy and his aunt arrived on the scene. Figgins was trying to look cheerful, in order not to depress Miss Cleveland on her departure from England. But his efforts were somewhat pathetic. Cousin Ethel was very grave and quiet.

Figgins disposed wraps and rugs round Cousin Ethel as if she was going on a Polar expedition. There were ten minutes yet before the train started. Figgins stood dumb for five minutes, longing to say things, till D'Arcy arrived with Aunt Adelina.

"Bai Jove, you got heah first!" said D'Arcy.

"Did we?" said Figgins.

"Yaas. I thought you were lost. It would have been howwibly wotten if you had put Cousin Ethel in the wong twain."

"No fear of that!"

"I am sure Figgins is very careful," said Mrs. Quayle. "Where is my wrap, Arthur?"

"Bai Jove, it's wound Ethel!"

"And my rug?"

"It's wound Ethel, too. Do you want two waps and two wugs, Ethel?"

"No," said Ethel, laughing; "I didn't notice I had two."

"Well, you are an ass, Figgay," said D'Arcy, under his breath, as he relieved Cousin Ethel of half her encumbrances, and arranged them round Aunt Adelina. "Is that all wight, auntie?"

"Yes, thank you, Arthur!"

"By your leave, sir!"

An excited porter closed the carriage door. Only one minute now! It seemed impossible to Figgins that in sixty short seconds Cousin Ethel would have vanished from his sight. What had he done that Fate should be so cruel to him? It seemed to the unfortunate junior that black clouds were about to descend upon the earth and engulf him, and that the light of day was going.

D'Arcy pulled down the glass of the window, and they shook hands for the last time through the aperture.

Figgins held Cousin Ethel's hand unconsciously.

"You—you'll take care of yourself, Ethel?" he said. "I—I feel frightfully nervous about your going away like this, you know—just—just as much as if you were my own cousin, you know."

"It's all right, Figgins."

"I—I wish I were coming."

"Stand back, please!"

There was a shriek from the engine.

Arthur Augustus raised his silk hat.

"Good-bye, Ethel, deah gal! Good-bye, auntie!"

"Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" gasped Figgins. "I——"

The train began to move.

Figgins unconsciously made a movement towards the gliding carriage, and Arthur Augustus pulled him back by the arm.

"It's too late, Figgay! Besides, you've said good-bye! What's the mattah with you, old chap?"

Figgy did not reply. He could not. Sky and station, and train and crowd, seemed to be spinning round Figgins at that moment. Cousin Ethel's sweet face, and the little gloved hand waving, looked at him as from a mist. Figgins came to himself with a start, and realised that the train was gliding out of the station, and that Cousin Ethel was going from him—would be gone in a flash.

The guard was jumping into his carriage, nearly abreast of where Figgins stood. How Figgins came to act as he did he hardly knew—he never explained. Perhaps it was a sudden impulse he did not stop to reason with; certainly he had small time for thought. But in that moment of anguish one thing stood out clear to his mind—it was quite impossible for him to let Cousin Ethel vanish from him. He made one spring, and landed in the guard's van after the guard, and that astonished official gasped, and slammed the door, with Figgins inside.

Arthur Augustus stood upon the platform alone, gazing at the vanishing train like a fellow in a dream.

"Figgins!" he gasped.

Figgins was gone. He had gone in the train. Arthur Augustus stood like a statue, with his silk hat raised, dumbfounded.

"Bai Jove!"

The train rushed out of the station. The crowd cleared off. Arthur Augustus settled his silk hat on his head in utter amazement. Cousin Ethel and Aunt Adelina were gone—and Figgins was gone, too!

"Gweat Scott!" murmured Arthur Augustus, in bewilderment. "Figgins must be off his wockah—wight off his wockah, bai Jove! Gweat Scott!"

And, still in a state of amazed bewilderment, the swell of St. Jim's made his way from the station, wondering how he should explain to the Head of St. Jim's. And the express thundered off towards the coast, bearing away Cousin Ethel, and Figgins, too.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Across the Channel.

"WELL, here's a go!" ejaculated the guard.

Figgins picked himself up.

He was quite as astonished as the guard.

"Nearly lost it, sir!" said the guard.

"Ye-es," stammered Figgins.

"Got your ticket?"

"Ticket? No!"

"Oh, you're travelling without a ticket, are you?" said the man.

Figgins flushed.

"I—I didn't get a ticket!" he stammered. "I've got the money to pay for one, though. That's all right!"

That was all right. But the other matters were not quite all right. Figgins wondered why he had done it, and what would happen next. What would Cousin Ethel say when she learned that he was on the train? He would have to get off at the first station, of course, and go back by the next train. His wild escapade could not be carried any further than that. As it was, he would be late returning to St. Jim's, and there would be trouble with the Head. How was he to explain to the Head?

It would not be easy to explain. And the thought came into Figgins' mind that he might as well, according to the old saying, be hung for a sheep as a lamb. He had to face the music at St. Jim's, anyway. Why not go right on to Folkestone, and see Cousin Ethel into the boat.

The desire to see her again was very strong upon Figgins. He would be able to satisfy Aunt Adelina. Ethel would be surprised, but—but would she be displeased? Figgins wondered.

Figgins had not in the least made up his mind what he should do when the train stopped at a station. He hesitated, and alighted. He felt that he ought to return to St. Jim's. The folly of what he had done was clear enough to him. He could not go to Paris with Cousin Ethel; or, if he went, he could not stay there. What was the use of prolonging the pain of parting in this way? He stood on the platform, dubitating. Then the thought that Cousin Ethel might look out of the window and see him, smote him with sudden fear, and he made a dive for the train. He took a seat in a second-class compartment. His funds were limited, and he did not know how far he might go. So little did he really, at the bottom of his heart, intend to return to St. Jim's.

The train rushed on through the smiling fields of Kent.

Figgins sat thinking it out.

He thought the matter out in all its bearings as the afternoon wore away, and by the time the train ran into Folkestone he had arrived exactly at the point where he had started thinking—that he did not know what he would do.

A great crowd alighted from the train and swarmed down towards the boat.

Figgins walked with the rest.

He caught sight of Mrs. Quayle and Cousin Ethel, and dodged out of sight behind a portly, elderly gentleman till they had passed.

He did not want to meet them just then. Explanations would be too awkward.

Which showed that Figgins, whether he realised it or not, meant to go on the boat.

He went on with the last of the passengers.

He could see Cousin Ethel and Mrs. Quayle aft, and he skulked out of sight behind the engines till the boat had started.

The Channel steamer moved at last.

Figgins remained by himself, his hands plunged deep into his pockets, till he was asked to show his ticket. Then he purchased one—as far as Boulogne. He had not yet made up his mind about Paris.

He looked at the ticket in amazement. What was he doing there on a Channel steamer, with a ticket to Boulogne in his hand, instead of speeding back with Arthur Augustus to St. Jim's?

He had run away from school!

That was what it amounted to.

A feeling of recklessness took possession of Figgins. Well, supposing he had run away from school? He could take his punishment afterwards without complaining. For the present, he would see the adventure through. He would see Cousin Ethel as far as Boulogne, if not as far as Paris. Then he would return and take his licking like a man. They would not be anxious about him at St. Jim's, because D'Arcy would explain that he had gone in the train with Ethel.

Figgins was amazed at himself—but he was quite cool now.

Having decided to go the whole hog, as he put it to himself, he made his way along the crowded deck towards where Cousin Ethel sat with her aunt.

Ethel did not see him coming.

She was very busy. For the steamer was now fairly out in the chops of the Channel, and Mrs. Quayle was feeling the effects.

The poor lady had turned very pale, and then slightly green, and she asked, in a fainting voice, for her smelling-salts.

But the salts did not seem to revive her very much.

An obliging steward brought a large basin, the sight of which completed the poor lady's discomfiture.

She was very ill. Cousin Ethel, who hardly felt the sea, attended her with tender kindness. Figgins saw that he could be useful now.

"Shall I get some water?" he exclaimed, dashing up.

Ethel gave a little cry.

"Figgins!" she exclaimed, in amazement.

Figgins coloured. He had forgotten for the moment that Ethel did not know that he was upon the boat.

"Figgins!" repeated Ethel blankly.

"Ye-es," stammered Figgins feebly; "it—it's me." In his agitation he forgot even to be grammatical.

"I—I don't understand!" murmured Ethel. "How did you come here?"

Poor Mrs. Quayle was too ill to notice Figgins; she would not have been capable of feeling surprised if the whole Fourth Form of St. Jim's had turned up and paraded on the deck before her eyes.

"I—I'll explain afterwards," stammered Figgins. "I—I came, you know. Let me look after Mrs. Quayle."

He rushed away for a glass of water.

Mrs. Quayle sipped it, and was a little revived.

"Thank you!" she murmured.

"Let me help her," said Figgins. "Lean on my arm, ma'am. This won't last long; we're past the middle now."

"Oh, dear!" murmured Mrs. Quayle.

She leaned upon Figgins' shoulder. She was a good weight, but Figgins supported her manfully and tenderly. He was very sorry for her sufferings, and very kind and gentle. Ethel looked at him over Mrs. Quayle's bowed head.

The boat rolled on. There was wind on the sea, and the water was a little rough. Sounds of woe were heard from various parts of the deck. Figgins felt one or two slight tremors within, but he crushed them down.

"Figgins!" murmured Ethel.

Figgins met her eyes guiltily.

"I—I came," he said lamely.

It was obvious that he had come, and Ethel smiled a little.

"But—but I did not see you in the train, Figgins."

"I jumped in just as it was going."

"You might have been hurt."

"I—I didn't think of that."

"Where is Arthur?"

"I left him on the station. I suppose he's gone back to school. He will tell them."

Ethel looked very grave.

"There will be trouble over this, Figgins," she said.

Figgins nodded.

"You don't care?"

"No!" said Figgins.

"But why did you do it?"

"I—I—I couldn't let you go."

"It was a very wild and reckless thing to do, Figgins," said the girl. "I—I think I ought to be angry with you."

Figgins looked alarmed.

"Oh, I wish I hadn't done it!" he said, so miserably that Cousin Ethel could not help relenting, and she gave him a kind smile.

"I—I felt nervous about your going abroad, you know," said Figgins. "And—and there's Mrs. Quayle, too."

"Mrs. Quayle?"

"Yes. She—she's a bad sailor, and—and I can help look after her."

"Were you thinking of that when you jumped into the train, Figgins?"

"Well, no."

"I am afraid Dr. Holmes won't take it as an excuse, that Mrs. Quayle is a bad sailor, for your running away from school, Figgins."

"I don't mind a licking, Ethel."

"Some water!" said Aunt Adelina faintly.

Figgins had it ready in an instant.

"Thank you, my dear boy! Oh, I—I feel very ill!"

"I'm so sorry," said Figgins gently. "We shall be in soon. Rest on my shoulder."

"It—it seems a very long passage," murmured Aunt Adelina.

"It's nearly over."

There was a silence.

"What are you going to do in Boulogne, Figgins?" asked Ethel slowly.

"See you off to Paris," said Figgins.

"And then?"

"Take the evening boat back, I suppose," said Figgins miserably.

Cousin Ethel nodded.

"That is the best thing you can do. Figgins, I am sorry you have done this."

"You—you don't want me along?"

"I don't want you to get into trouble on my account."

"Oh, that's all right! I don't mind the trouble."

"But I mind—for you," said Ethel softly.

Ethel's hand, caressing Mrs. Quayle's bowed head, came in contact with Figgins', as he supported the old lady. Figgins' big brown fingers closed unconsciously upon the little white ones.

"But—if I had permission to come—you'd be glad to have me along with you?" said Figgins, his rugged face lighting up.

"Yes, indeed!"

"I—I shall get a licking, anyway," Figgins said thoughtfully. "That's nothing. But—it won't be any worse if I come on to Paris."

Ethel tried not to smile.

"You mustn't!" she said.

"But it won't make it any the worse for me at St. Jim's."

Mrs. Quayle raised her head, and their hands parted. The poor lady was looking very white and weak.

"I—I wish we could come to land!" she murmured.

Figgins pointed.

"There it is," he said. "There's the quay—you can see the people on it. That building at the back is the Casino. We sha'n't be long now."

And the Channel steamer bumped on into the French harbour.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

In the Paris Express.

FIGGINS certainly had no right to be in Boulogne-sur-Mer instead of in the Fourth Form-room at St. Jim's; but as he was there, he was very useful to the travellers. He was the right fellow in the wrong place, so to put it. His strong arm helped Mrs. Quayle ashore, and guided her to the train.

Cousin Ethel walked firmly on the other side of Figgins, carrying the salts, and the wraps, and the rugs, and the various paraphernalia without which ladies find it impossible to travel. Mrs. Quayle leaned heavily upon the strong arm of the Fourth-Former of St. Jim's. It was Figgins who declared to the officials in the douane that the travellers had nothing to declare, and Figgins who found a first-class carriage and placed Mrs. Quayle and her niece in it. The luggage, being registered to Paris, did not require attention, fortunately.

Mrs. Quayle recovered somewhat now that she was on dry land, and she began to be surprised at Figgins' presence on French soil. But Figgins did not give her time to ask questions. He attended to getting the famous lunch-basket open, and then he rushed off to order tea. Meanwhile, he left a newspaper on the seat next to Ethel, to show that that seat was taken. Which was a very queer proceeding on Figgins' part, as he had not yet decided to go to Paris. But all Figgins' proceedings that day were queer.

The tea, hot and fragrant, if not strong, had a wonderful effect upon Mrs. Quayle. To get it strong, as Figgins explained, was impossible now that the Channel was passed. He was doubtful whether Napoleon, at the height of his power, could have had a cup of really good strong tea if he had wanted it. Figgins attended to the wants of the two tired travellers as if he had been a born waiter, and did not seem to feel at all tired himself. Indeed, he was not tired; a railway journey and a Channel crossing did not amount to much to a fellow who would feel fit after a slogging game of footer, or a whole day's cricket match.

"But what are you doing here, Figgins?" Mrs. Quayle asked at last.

"Just going to settle with the garcon," said Figgins, pretending to misunderstand.

And he rushed off and did so; and at the same time bought a ticket to Paris, which made a very serious inroad into the money he had left. Figgins was not a rich fellow, but he had had several good tips from kind uncles lately, and he had put all the money he possessed into his pocket the day before, when he came to London. It was as if he had had a premonition of what he was going to do, though certainly he had laid no plans. But his money was at a very low ebb now.

But Figgins did not care for that. He did not care for anything very much just now. The joy of seeing Cousin Ethel as far as Paris, and making sure that she was quite safe before he left her, was enough for Figgins. And perhaps there was some wild scheme working in Figgins' mind to stay in Paris; or else to induce Mrs. Quayle and her niece not to stay there. Certain it is, that Figgins had by no means made up his mind to part with Cousin Ethel, and it was equally certain that the journey to Paris would not last for ever—although on Continental railways journeys do seem to last almost for ever.

"Just going," said Figgins, stepping into the carriage. "You've got your 'Daily Mail,' Ethel?"

"Yes, thank you!"

"But how did you get here, Figgins?" said Aunt Adelaide.

"Crossed in the boat from Folkestone, ma'am."

"Yes, yes, I know that; but I mean, how is it you are not at school?"

"Well, you see—— By Jove, we're off!"

Figgins drew the carriage door shut, as an elderly foreign gentleman came along and turned his eyes upon it.

There was no one in the carriage as yet, excepting the three English travellers, and Figgins did not want any foreigners in it.

But that was hardly reasonable; and the elderly foreign gentleman was quite within his rights in trying to open the carriage door.

Figgins did not want anybody in the carriage just then, and this particular foreigner was especially offensive in Figgins' sight.

For Figgins had seen him cast his eye upon Cousin Ethel, and that was an offence in Figgins' sight which was unpardonable.

An elderly French gentleman might have cast an admiring eye upon a fresh, pretty English girl without any great harm done, but to Figgins' mind Cousin Ethel was a sacred object which must not be even looked at.

So he held the door of the carriage fast from inside.

The elderly gentleman looked in at him through the window, with a gleam in his watery, greenish-grey eyes that was very unpleasant.

"Ouvrez—ouvrez!" he exclaimed angrily.

Figgins shook his head, whether to indicate that he did not speak French, or that he would not open the door, we cannot say.

"Ouvrez!" repeated the French gentleman angrily. "Je demande——"

"The refreshment-room is down the platform," said Figgins.

"Hein! Vous avez dit——"

"Passez down le platform pour le buffet," said Figgins.

"Ciel! Ouvrez la porte!"

"About a dozen steps from here," said Figgins, persisting that the elderly French gentleman was asking him for directions to the station buffet.

"Ah, you are English!" said the Frenchman. "I speak, too, your tongue. Open zen ze door of zis carriage, so I shall enter. I go to Paris."

"Just off," said Figgins.

"My dear Figgins——" said Mrs. Quayle.

Figgins turned round as she spoke, still keeping his grip on the handle of the door, glad of an excuse for turning his back on the importunate French gentleman.

"Yes, ma'am. What did you say? We're just off."

The French gentleman gave another wrench at the door, and, finding that he could not open it, he uttered a word in French, which it was fortunate the ladies did not understand, and he hurried down the train and jumped in at the next carriage.

Figgins grinned triumphantly.

"But you had no right to keep him out, Figgins," said Mrs. Quayle remonstratingly.

"There are a lot of other carriages here," Figgins explained. "It will be much nicer for him to travel with French people."

"But really——"

"We don't want any blessed foreigners in here, do we?" Mrs. Quayle smiled.

"But we are the foreigners here," she said.

"Well, yes. Still, it's better not to have any blessed Froggies buzzing about," said Figgins, "and I don't like that chap."

The train started.

"Too late for him now," said Figgins, with a grin.

But Figgins grinned too soon.

He had forgotten that it was a corridor train, and before the express had been in motion two minutes, the elderly gentleman came down the corridor, and looked into the carriage from the other side.

There was a slight grin upon his face.

He deposited a little leather bag upon a seat, with a graceful bow to the occupants of the compartment.

"La place est libre?" he asked.

"I don't speak French," said Figgins gruffly.

"Zis place is free?"

"Yes," muttered Figgins.

"Zen I take him."

And the French gentleman took "him," and sat down.

Figgins grunted.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.
In Deadly Danger.

THE Paris express glided on through the dull, uninteresting landscape of Northern France. Perhaps it was because the landscape was uninteresting that the occupants of that particular carriage devoted all their attention to one another.

Figgins had placed Cousin Ethel in a corner seat, and Mrs. Quayle in the other corner seat facing her. He had seated himself beside Cousin Ethel. By this means he prevented any blessed foreigner from sitting beside Cousin Ethel or opposite to her. But the elderly French gentleman sat beside Mrs. Quayle, and so he was opposite Figgins, and was quite as well able to look at Cousin Ethel as if he had been directly opposite. And he appeared to have selected that occupation as his sole amusement for the journey to Paris.

Perhaps he was annoyed, as he had a right to be, by Figgins' efforts to keep him out of the carriage. Perhaps he was exasperated by Figgins' ill-concealed distrust and dislike for a perfect stranger. And perhaps in return it amused him to make the boy angry and uneasy.

Certainly he acted as if that were the case.

Figgins looked him over several times. To the healthy, sturdy British boy, the elderly French gentleman was an eye-sorrow. He was certainly elderly. His hair, which was very scarce, was carefully brushed to conceal the fact that he was partially bald, and the attempt to conceal the partial baldness only drew attention to it. To make up for the want of hair on the top of his head, he had a great deal on the lower part. He wore a thick moustache, carefully waxed to two points which curled almost to his eyes. He had a beard which was so black that anybody could have seen that it was dyed, and it was trained with the utmost care to a point. That a man old enough to be the father of a big family should take such minute care of his personal appearance offended Figgins' notion of the fitness of things.

Figgins did not have any further opportunity of inspecting the Frenchman, for at that moment a big fat man came along the corridor and opened a conversation with him.

"Travelling alone?" asked the man, with a curious look at the troubled, bareheaded boy.

Figgins flushed.

"No," he said awkwardly.

"I'm goin' on to Paree," said the stranger, through a cloud of strong-smelling smoke. "But we shall be late in arriving there. Man waiting for me at the Gare du Nord, too, on business. Pah! They're picking up speed; but when a French train tries to pick up speed, something generally happens. Was stuck up for two hours once on this same blooming route. Fellers got out of the train and gathered flowers, you believe me. Fancy that on a Henglish railway! Not even on the South-Eastern! What?"

And Mr. Fred Harris—for that was his name—blew out a volume of black smoke, which almost suffocated Figgins, and made him beat a hasty retreat.

The train was certainly picking up speed. It was bumping and bumping on through the gathering shadows with something like the pace expected of an express train. The landscape was blotted out now. Only dim forms of trees loomed occasionally through the dusk.

Figgins stood in the corridor and pondered. They would be in Paris soon. The train would not be more than half an hour late at the Gare du Nord—perhaps only a quarter, considering how fast she was going now. What was he to do when the train stopped at the North Station in Paris?

Suddenly, as Figgins thought and thought it over till his brain seemed spinning, there came a sudden terrific bump, and the speed of the train was checked, and a wild yell rang from every carriage.

Crash! Crash!

And Figgins, deafened and dazed, found himself lying on

his back on a grassy bank, looking dizzily up at the stars, and wondering what had happened, while yell after yell, and shriek after shriek rang out upon the air of the night.

. . . . . .

What had happened?

Cousin Ethel started to her feet as the crashing came, and the train whirled and rocked and swayed like a ship in a storm.

Was it an accident?

There was not a doubt about that. A cry left Cousin Ethel's lips as she sprang up. Mrs. Quayle fell back in her seat, fainting with terror.

"Help—help!" shrieked Cousin Ethel.

But no one heard.

The carriage was rocking and swaying, the glass crashed, and the lamp was extinguished. Wild shouts and shrieks rang along the train, the floor trembled, screams for help rang in three or four languages.

The train had heeled over on the steep embankment. From the darkness of the night came a sudden glance of dancing flame. Two of the foremost carriages were on fire. The engine had left the line, and, fortunately breaking free, had rolled down the steep bank by itself.

The train was curling up upon itself, with crashing and rending and tearing, amid dreadful shrieks and cries. Ethel's carriage was on its side, and she clung to her aunt and cried wildly for help.

"Help! Oh, help! Figgins—Figgins! Oh, Figgins!"

That was the name that rose to her lips.

And her cry was not unheard.

Figgins had lain for some seconds, half stunned, upon the grassy bank. He had been tossed there like a ball from a racket, but the thick grass and the slope had broken his fall. He had staggered to his feet, to find the train a sprawling wreck, and steam hissing madly from the overturned engine, and two carriages on fire, and dreadful cries ringing out from the smashed carriages.

Ethel!

That was his only thought. He did not care whether he was hurt or not himself. He did not even know that the blood was running down his forehead in a red stream. Ethel! Where was Ethel? Oh, what a madman, what a villain he had been to leave her side for a moment! Ethel! Where was Ethel?

From the darkness and the wreck came her cry:

"Figgins! Help! Figgins!"

Thank Heaven she was living yet—even if hurt! Figgins plunged madly towards the wreck of the train. Partly on the line, partly hanging over the steep embankment, the broken express seemed poised by a miracle, ready to plunge down the steep slope at a touch. It would go—it must go! And if the passengers were not clear of it when it went, they were dead men. For there were a hundred feet to be rolled to the bottom of the slope—whither the engine had already gone—and the train and its occupants would be smashed when the bottom was reached. The passengers were swarming out of the reeling carriages on the safe side wherever they could, and crowding upon the down line; but there were many imprisoned by jamming doors, who could not get out. And that wild cry told Figgins that Cousin Ethel was one of them.

The boy clambered up the embankment again, and plunged into the wreck. The train had fallen upon the side of the corridor, and the windows of the other side were high in the air. Groans came from the unfortunates pinned under broken seats and baggage displaced from the racks. Where was Ethel?

"Ethel—Ethel! I'm here! Where are you?"

"Figgins! Help!"

Figgins clambered upon the slanting side of the carriage. The windows were smashed, the apertures jagged with broken glass. Figgins's hands were cut as he climbed, but he never noticed it. His fingers dripped red as he held on and looked into the carriage from the upper side.

On the far side of the carriage, below him, two huddled figures lay—Mrs. Quayle and Cousin Ethel. They had been thrown down there as the train whirled over. There was no one else in the carriage.

"Ethel!" said Figgins hoarsely. "Ethel, my darling!" He did not know what he was saying. "Oh, Ethel, are you hurt?"

"No—no! But my aunt is hurt. She has fainted," came back a strangled voice. "I—I cannot lift her."

"I'm coming in!"

Ethel shrieked.

"Don't! The train will roll down! You will be killed!"

Figgins knew that that was likely enough. But he did not reply. He plunged head and shoulders through the window, tearing his clothes, tearing his skin upon the jagged edges of the glass.

He came head downwards into the carriage, and there was a shout from the crowd of passengers who had seen the brave action. But there was only one of them who had the presence of mind to help him. In the lurid glare cast by the burning carriages further on, Mr. Fred Harris leaped towards the train. With his black cigar clenched between his teeth, and his rakish silk hat on the back of his head, Mr. Harris clambered on the train to help Figgins.

"I'm here, cocky!" he shouted. "I'm here to lend a 'and!"

And his voice was glad enough music to Figgins' ears. For he needed help sorely.

He clambered down into the slanting carriage, and got a footing upon the door that gave on the smashed corridor. Mrs. Quayle lay insensible there, and Ethel was clinging to her and to one of the almost perpendicular seats.

"You first, Ethel!" muttered Figgins.

"No—no! Help her——"

"Yes, after; but you can help yourself, and you must go first. You've got to squeeze through that window—there's a man outside to help you."

Figgins caught Cousin Ethel round the waist—there was no time for ceremony—and lifted her up by main strength to the broken windows above.

"Mind you don't cut your hands!" he gasped.

Ethel put her hands up through the broken window. Mr. Harris, outside the side of the carriage, which was now in the position of a roof, caught her hands and pulled her up, and the slim girl passed through the broken window more easily than Higgins had been able to pass.

Mr. Harris lowered her from the train to the clear line, two or three passengers rushing forward to take her from his hands.

Inside the carriage, Figgins was struggling with the weight of the fainting Mrs. Quayle. The unfortunate lady was quite unconscious, and there was blood upon her face. Figgins did not know how seriously she might be hurt; but she was still living, he knew that. She was no light weight, but Figgins seemed to have the strength of a giant just then. He dragged her up, and supported her, so that Mr. Harris could reach down through the broken window and grasp her arms.

The sporting gentleman gave a low whistle of dismay.

"She won't come through this 'ere," he muttered.

Figgins set his teeth.

It was only too true. The door was jammed, and could not be opened, and there was no room for Mrs. Quayle to pass through the window as the slim young girl had passed. She was imprisoned in the overturned carriage—on the edge of the slope down which the whole wreck might go plunging at any moment.

"Get out, kid!" whispered Mr. Harris.

Figgins shook his head.

"Get an axe, or something," he panted. "Smash in the door—for mercy's sake be quick!"

"You'll go together if you stay there——"

"Get an axe!"

"I'll do my best," said Mr. Harris. "My 'at, but you're a good plucked 'un!"

He scrambled off the carriage.

It seemed ages before Mr. Harris returned with an axe, but it was only a couple of minutes. The work of rescue was going on all along the train; passenger after passenger was being brought out and laid in safety on the grass. Men had already dashed away for help, and to signal the accident along the line. Mr. Fred Harris clambered on the train again, to the ruin of his sporty coat and trousers. His silk topper was gone now, but the cigar was still clenched between his teeth.

Crash! Crash!

Mr. Harris was a hero in these moments—one of the old bulldog breed, in spite of his glaring waistcoat and his impossible tie. He wielded the axe as Thor might have wielded his hammer, careless of the fact that every crashing blow might have helped to send the carriage toppling over, to carry its occupants and himself into sudden eternity.

Crash! Crash!

Within the carriage, Figgins, white as death, but cool as ice, held the unconscious lady in his arms. Sprawling on the carriage outside, Mr. Harris hacked and hewed like a giant.

Crash! Crash!

THE GREYFRIARS CHUMS WILL SOON BE HERE! SEE PAGE 10.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.
Good Old Figgins!

COUSIN ETHEL stood and watched.

At moments her heart throbbed and throbbed, and at moments it almost ceased to beat.

Two who were very dear to her were in the wreck there—one unconscious of danger, the other risking his life every second in the cause of duty.

"Oh, if Figgins were killed——"

The pain of that grinding anxiety was more than she could bear. The girl moaned aloud as she stood and watched, helpless to aid, only able to suffer.

Crash! Crash!

Splinters flew fast under Mr. Harris' doughty blows. Two or three of them tore his own purple face as they flew.

Crash! Crash!

Would the door never yield? How long was this to last? Ethel passed through an eternity of suffering in those dreadful minutes.

Crash!

"It's coming!" yelled Mr. Harris.

He dropped the axe and wrenched the carriage-door open.

Figgins gave a gasp of relief.

"'And her up!" said Mr. Harris.

He hung over the door to receive her. Figgins made a big effort, and lifted the fainting lady up for the sporting gentleman to grasp.

Mr. Harris seized her in his fat hands, and drew her from the carriage, and many hands were held out to receive her from him. Mrs. Quayle, still unconscious, was laid in the grass under the stars, the lurid light from the burning carriages shedding strange gleams upon her colourless face.

"Now, out you come, young 'un!" said Mr. Harris, reaching a hand down to Figgins.

And he helped the St. Jim's junior to clamber out.

They jumped clear of the train.

"Ethel!"

"Oh!"

Ethel caught both his hands, and pressed them to her lips.

"Ethel! Dearest!" whispered Figgins.

Then a bright colour flooded into the girl's face, and she hurried to where Mrs. Quayle lay in the grass. Figgins would have given worlds to follow her; but the rescue work was still going on, and every strong and brave hand was wanted.

There was a sudden yell down the train.

"Prenez garde!"

"Voila! Il tombe!"

"Stand clear!" yelled Fred Harris. "She's going!"

Crash! Rumble! Crash!

One of the carriages went plunging over the edge. The couplings held, and the weight of the falling car dragged the rest of the train over.

With horrid crash on crash, the express went rolling down the bank.

Fortunately, the passengers were all clear now. Injured and uninjured, dead or disabled, all of them were on the safe side of the line. Mr. Harris grasped Figgins' arm, and his voice was a husky whisper as he muttered:

"If you'd been still in there, young 'un!"

Figgins shuddered.

He turned towards where the injured lay, sick at heart. His narrow escape came home to his mind, and it made him almost sick. Ethel was kneeling beside her aunt, supporting her head, and crying softly.

"Is she much hurt?" whispered Figgins.

Ethel looked up at him through her tears.

"No!" she whispered. "They say it is only a cut. You saved her life, Figgins."

"Thank goodness I had the chance!"

"Oh! And you might—you might——"

"Don't think of that, Ethel! It might have been worse for all of us," said Figgins, with a shudder.

* * * * * * * * *

When help came the injured passengers were taken to the nearest village to be cared for. The telegraph flashed the news of the accident to all corners of the Continent, and they flashed the news to England that Ethel and Figgins were safe, and Mrs. Quayle only slightly injured, and recovering. The news made a sensation at St. Jim's.

For the papers told in full of the heroic conduct of the British boy—Mr. Fred Harris had given all details to the reporters, though Figgins himself would not say a word. The hero of the hour was the British boy who had risked his life to save a fainting lady and a girl—and that British boy was Figgins of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's—Figgins of the New House!

No wonder the New House fellows strutted in the old quad with lofty pride.

All St. Jim's was looking forward to the return of Figgins. Dr. Holmes, who had been intending to give Figgins the thrashing of his life for his wild escapade, was now looking forward to his return so that he could shake him by the hand, and congratulate him before the school—an ordeal to which Figgins would probably have preferred the caning he had escaped.

But it was some days before Figgins returned. He had obtained permission by wire to remain with Cousin Ethel and Mrs. Quayle until the latter lady was quite recovered and able to travel; and St. Jim's learned with satisfaction that the accident had made it necessary for her to return to her friends for their care, and that Cousin Ethel was returning with her. New arrangements would have to be made before Cousin Ethel was placed in Paris, and perhaps they never would be made.

It was a great day for St. Jim's when Figgins came back.

He arrived by the afternoon train, and Dr. Holmes, in the fulness of his heart, gave the whole school a half-holiday on the great occasion. Half St. Jim's met Figgins at the station, and the moment the train came in there was a rush for his carriage. Tom Merry & Co. struggled for the honour of lifting him out, and carrying him on their shoulders out of the station.

"Chuck it!" roared Figgins, struggling out of their grasp. "Don't play the giddy goat, you know! Chuck it!"

"Hurrah!" roared Kerr.

"Huwwah!" yelled Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, tossing his silk hat into the air, careless of whether it ever came down or not. "Hip, hip, huwwah!"

And in the midst of a wild and enthusiastic crowd Figgins was marched to the school. And on the School House steps Dr. Holmes and the masters stood ready to receive him in state. Figgins would gladly have dodged into the New House and escaped, but there was no help for it. The cheering crowd brought him up shoulder-high to where the Head of St. Jim's stood, and Dr. Holmes shook hands with Figgins in sight of the whole cheering school.

"Figgins," said the Head, "you did very wrong in going away without leave. But in view of the circumstances, I shall overlook that, but it must never occur again. I am proud to shake you by the hand, my boy—I am proud to have you among my boys at this school. And I am sure that all your schoolfellows are as proud of you as I am!"

And the yell that all St. Jim's gave showed that the Head was quite right.

THE END.

BOWLING OUT THE BOASTER!

A Thrilling Long, Complete Tale, dealing with the Adventures of the Three Famous Comrades,

JACK, SAM, and PETE.

By S. CLARKE HOOK.

Pete shoved the terrified man into the lion's mouth. There was no danger, because the lion had practised the trick before. The man thought there was, however, and his yells caused the comrades to roar with laughter.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Lion—Bob Speaks of Hearn the Hunter—The Steam Man Waltzes Round—Heroic Deeds—A Man of Many Marvels.

WALLABY has grown into quite a big town—at least, big for the West of Africa. It takes a good time for a town to get big there, as a rule, because so many die of yellow fever and sleeping sickness.

The town had sprung up from a few miners' huts. Those miners had struck gold, and there is nothing like that to make a town spring up.

The miners still lived on the outskirts of the place, and almost in the forest was one lonely hut, at which Jack, Sam, and Pete arrived, followed by Pete's dog Rory, and his steam man, who was snorting, as though tired out with his day's journey through the great heat.

On the door of the hut was painted the owner's name:

"BOB."

Beneath it was scrawled:

"BE WAIR OF THE DORG!"

Pete was not afraid of dogs. He opened the door, and then he gave a great gasp.

Bob was a jolly-looking, bearded miner of—say, forty. He was dressed in a red shirt and white trousers, kept up with a leather belt, in which were stuck a couple of revolvers. Bob was seated at supper.

There was nothing about his appearance to make any man gasp; but, standing by his side, with its huge muzzle on the table, was an enormous male lion, and every now and then Bob placed a piece of meat on a tin plate for the benefit of the lion.

"Here," bawled Bob, as Rory began to growl, "you take that dorg away, mate! Do you think I want my lion tore to pieces?"

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared Pete. Bob's was a full-sized lion, and it seemed incongruous that a comparatively small dog like Rory could tear it to pieces. "Should say de lion would conquer de dog, old hoss!"

"Well, I ain't letting 'em try, 'cos I don't want him bit. He ain't a fighting lion."

"Any objection to us coming in, Bob?" inquired Jack.

"No, young fellow; not so long as you don't hurt my lion."

"We sha'n't hurt de old chap, Bob!" exclaimed Pete, stroking the great brute's shaggy head, much to Bob's surprise, because Pete was the first man who had ever stroked Bob's lion. But then, Pete had tamed lions and tigers, too. "What's his name?"

"Leo! I don't like them foreign names, but there was an old chap as doctored him for me when he was a pup, and I asked him the best name to give him. He says Leo. It don't seem quite appropriate, and I don't know why he suggested Leo. However, there it is, and there it has stuck."

"Perhaps it was because Leo means lion," suggested Jack.

"You don't say. I never knew that. I got him in the forest here, years and years ago, before I had made my pile at the mines. They had shot his mother, and shot him, too, poor little beggar! There he was, a-crying by his dead mother's side, and it made me sorry. I hadn't any friends, so I carried him home, and got this old chap to doctor him on credit. He was a sickly pup, was Leo. I've nussed him through no end of illnesses. Sat up with him for three nights once; but I don't like to think of that time, 'cos he was nearly gorn. He grew up, and seemed to be getting stronger, when he was took with smallpox."

"With what?" gasped Jack, who did not think Bob was romancing, because he had such an earnest manner. "Lions don't have that!"

"This one did—least, the doctor I called in said so, and he said he could cure him by vaccination, but that it would cost five pounds, and he made me fork out. I'd made a bit by that time, so five pounds was neither here nor there, and that's jest what the doctor was when he started vaccinating him."

"Yah, yah, yah! Did Leo eat him?" inquired Pete.

"No; but directly he got fumbling about with his instruments Leo gave him a clump over the head with his paw

that knocked him through that doorway. And when he had recovered hisself a bit, and I asked him if he was hurt, he started swearing at me horrid, and I've never seen him since. But sit down, mates, and have a bit of food. I've got plenty more. Always keep a good supply, 'cos Leo has got an amazing appetite."

"Golly!" exclaimed Pete, seating himself beside Leo, and giving him a large piece of meat, which he took as gentle as would a well-trained dog. Jack and Sam were not accustomed to lions, except in the way of sport, but even they stroked the beautiful head, and Leo licked their hands by way of appreciation.

"You hab trained him well, old hoss!" exclaimed Pete, as Bob placed some very good food before them, together with a bottle of light wine.

"That's where you are wrong, mate. I ain't trained him at all," answered Bob. "He's the gentlest creature that ever walked this earth. Of course, if he thought you were going to hurt him, the same as he thought with that doctor, he would let you know it, but he wouldn't bite. If it wasn't for that lion, I'd have all the ruffians in this part in my hut every night. They know I've made my pile, and don't mind spending it on respectable people; but I won't have wastrels about me, and as the few respectable ones fear to come, 'cos of Leo—why, I never get anyone."

"Don't you tink it would be nicer to lib, say, in England?" inquired Pete.

"Couldn't do it, mate. I couldn't take Leo. He likes to roam about the forest; and if I let him roam about England, there would be trouble. Besides, he wouldn't like the sea voyage, and Leo ain't having anything he don't like. I saved his life more than once, and he's done the same by me."

"'Scuse me half a minute, old hoss!" exclaimed Pete, leaving the hut.

There was an open space in front of it, and, steering his steam man so that he would go in a circle, Pete started his arms and legs, and as he marched round in a circle, Pete re-entered the hut.

"It's all right, Bob!" he exclaimed, taking his seat beside Leo, who was looking for more meat, although he was very fat already. "I only went outside to speak to a friend ob mine. You see, you'm been bery kind in inviting us, and we ain't de sort to trespass on your kindness, so I told my friend to walk round till we were ready."

"Ask him in. He's welcome, mate. You see, it cuts both ways. I'm glad of a bit of company at times. He may be hungry, especially if you have travelled far."

"Well, you see, we hab travelled a good distance, on a sort ob hunting expedition."

"For profit?"

"Nunno; for pleasure!"

"You don't say. There's a swell come in these parts, he's been a hunter since he was a child. There ain't a part of this world that he ain't hunted in. His father was a fur trader on the Sushwat-something station. It's in North America. Well, I've heard the old man made his pile, and this son is mad on hunting.

"I've heard he wants to get up a party, only he will have the real thing. None of your chaps who could shoot a bird if it kept still long enough. I never saw the man, but know some as did, and he's really a mighty hunter. Travels all over the world, and takes his trophies with him. He's worth several hundreds of millions of pounds, so they say. Still, suppose you ask your friend in?"

"Don't want to trespass," said Pete. "What's de mighty hunter's name?"

"Hearn. They call him Hearn the Hunter. I don't know why, but——"

"Perhaps for the sake of Ainsworth," suggested Jack.

"Funny thing, but it was Bill Ainsworth as named him Hearn the Hunter. Bill says as his father was a great writer, and used to give new loaves to people suffering from the plague, and cure them that way. Bill is an awful liar, and he may have spoken the truth; but if his father gave loaves to cure the plague, he didn't give much eddification to poor Bill, who don't know B from a bull's foot. Still, about that friend of yourn. Let's be comfortable, and ask him in."

Bob, who was one of the kindest-hearted of men, went to the door of his hut, which Pete had closed. Opening it, he stepped out, and then gazed with blank amazement at the extraordinarily-looking object that was gyrating and gesticulating.

"Bust me!" yelled Bob, bolting into his hut and drawing the bolts on his door, after he had slammed it with a violence that shook the place. "I'm only having respectable people in here, and them as ain't frightened of a lion!"

"I don't tink my friend outside will be frightened ob a lion," observed Pete, who looked perfectly serious.

"Maybe, mate," growled Bob; "but I ain't having my lion frightened by a fiend in human shape. You look safe enough, and if you wasn't, there's Leo to discuss the matter; but that 'ere friend of yourn ain't coming into this place. I've seen men of all sorts, but I never yet set eyes on one like that. If he's human, give me one of the unhuman ones, and you can find plenty of 'em in this part."

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared Pete. "You do make me smile, old hoss!"

"How do you go, mate, when you laugh?" growled Bob, who did not like being laughed at; neither did he like what Pete would have called the personal appearance of his steam man.

"Eh?"

"If you make more noise than when you smile, I should say you would want a world to yourself, where they ain't got no telephones, or things like that. You might upset the currents."

"Suppose you send Leo out to deal wid my friend?" suggested Pete.

"Not me!" growled Bob. "I ain't letting Leo take any risks as I wouldn't take myself!"

"Yah, yah, yah! Dere's no risks wid my friend, unless you happen to get too close to him."

"Neither is there with a raving maniac nor a rattlesnake. Only, don't you see, I don't want to get too close."

"Well, please yourself 'bout dat, old hoss!"

"I'm a-going to. It wouldn't please me at all if I was to get too close to your friend. He don't look human enough for my liking."

"Well, you see, Bob, he's a steam man. He ain't flesh and blood."

"No; and he don't look it. I thought he was a rum-looking cove."

"P'r'aps I had better go and stop him," observed Pete. "Dere's no sense in wasting his oil. I wanted to see what effect he would hab on you."

Pete brought his steam man up to the hut, and Bob seemed to take a great interest in him, although he took particular care not to get too close, in case of accidents.

As soon as the meal was finished they questioned Bob as to where this mighty hunter lived. Sam was very much interested, because he had no doubt that they would be able to make up a party.

"He lives just outside the town, in what he calls his shooting-box, though, to my mind, it's more like a mansion. It belongs to a mine-owner, only he's let it for the season to Hearn. You can't miss the place. Everyone in the town knows him. They like to have him there, 'cos if there was an attack by savages—and we've had many of 'em—they would be sure to attack him first, and he's such a wonderful shot that he would kill about the whole lot of them.

"He's got a regular museum of the wild beasts he's shot. They are all stuffed. He goes back to England occasionally, and writes books on 'em. Bill claims a relationship to him, but I don't think he ever dared do so to his face."

"Very wise, too!" laughed Jack. "It strikes me Bill has got a little mixed over the matter. But suppose we come to interview this mighty hunter. I would rather like to see him."

"You needn't tell him about my lion, 'cos he's such a keen sportsman that he might come and shoot him. If he did, he would get shot hisself—still, we don't want anything like that. Now, I ain't got room for you to sleep here, but there's an hotel in the town, if you've got the pieces to pay; then, again, seeing as you are hunters, it ain't impossible that Hearn the Hunter might invite you to stay there."

"We would rather stay at the hotel," answered Jack. "We are all right for money. I'll say good-bye for the present, Bob; but we will look you up again."

The comrades had no difficulty in finding the hotel; and, having made arrangements to stay there, they went for a walk round the place.

At a little distance from the town they saw a large, substantially built house, which they at once guessed belonged to the great hunter.

The door was opened by an elderly woman, who was Hearn's housekeeper, and when she took their names in, they were requested to follow.

The room was large and well furnished, while all around it were trophies of the chase.

Seated in an easy-chair was a bronzed, handsome man of about thirty. He was a finely-built man, with broad shoulders, and standing well over six feet.

He wore a hunting-shirt and a velvet jacket, and in his leather belt were stuck a brace of revolvers and a bowie-knife. A rifle stood beside his chair.

On the table lay some manuscript, and what looked like author's proofs.

"I hope we are not interrupting you, Mr. Hearn," said Jack, glancing at the writing materials.

"Not at all, my good fellows!" exclaimed Hearn. "Sit down. You will find cigars there. As an old hunter, I prefer a pipe. My good old briar. Many a time have I smoked it round my lonely camp-fire in the Rockies, where a camp-fire is needed when the winter snows are on the ground, and the howling of the wolves warns you that your life lies in your own hands. Ah, those glorious days of daring! Not that this is a bad place for big game. I was stalking a lion last night."

"Did you shoot dis tiger in dis country, old hoss?" inquired Pete, pointing to a skin rug.

"No, you don't get tigers here. I shot that in Asia. Narrow shave I had, too. I had walked over forty miles through the jungle that day, and was tired."

"M'yes! You would be all dat."

"Flinging myself into the long grass, I fell asleep, and was awoke by the tiger's roar. In an instant my rifle was at my shoulder, and the next the bullet was buried in the fierce brute's heart. You may know how close it was to me when I felt its hot breath on my cheek."

"De animal's mouf would get rader in de way ob your aim, wouldn't it, old hoss?"

"Those horns—buffalo horns—came from North America. The night was dark, and my aim was only guided by the glare of the furious brute's eyes, as it charged down on me. Stepping sharply aside, I fired, and the animal fell lifeless at my feet. Those antlers I got under rather peculiar circumstances. A lion was chasing the stag, and I had only a single-barrel rifle, but my aim was true, and I brought the lion down. I have his skin in that corner. Your dog is sniffing at it. Well, slipping a fresh cartridge into my smoking rifle, I fired at the stag with unerring aim. The shot seemed to be an impossible one, yet I brought it down, and, strange to say, the bullet struck it behind the shoulder, the very spot at which I aimed."

"Mighty fine antlers, too!" exclaimed Pete, examining them. Don't you dare to tear dat lion-skin, Rory! I suppose you hab travelled a lot, old hoss, wid all dis magnificent shooting?"

"All over the world, my good fellow. I've shot crocodiles in the Nile, bison in North America, pumas in South America, bears in the Polar regions. Well, thousands of fierce beasts have fallen to my unerring aim. I have never yet met the man who could beat me at shooting. In fact, I won the prize at Wimbledon one year, though that was when I was a boy."

"Ain't dat mighty wonderful, now!" exclaimed Pete. "How did you learn to shoot so well?"

"Why, my father was a magnificent shot. He was supposed to be the finest shot in America; in fact, I believe he was until I beat him. He taught me."

"'To teach his grandson draughts his leisure he'd employ,
Until at last de old man was beaten by de boy,'"

muttered Pete.

"Exactly!" acquiesced Hearn the Hunter. "It was a good match, too, but he had to own himself vanquished. We threw shillings into the air for one another, and hit them each time. Then we tried sixpences. I have one here. This is the one I hit last. We had some difficulty in finding it, but he told me to keep it always as a memento of having vanquished a man who was supposed to be the finest shot in the world."

"Look at dat, now!" exclaimed Pete, examining the battered coin. "Ain't it mighty wonderful! But how did you decide who was de best shot, after all?"

"Well, neither of us missed, so I suggested we should ride on the back of an untrained horse, then throw the sixpences into the air. My father hit the coins twice out of three. I hit a dozen times running. Oh, he freely admitted that I had beaten him. If you come into my den, I will show you some more trophies. I have got some of the wild beasts stuffed."

He had got a stuffed Bengal tiger and an African lion. Then he had a wonderful lot of skins. Pete was most impressed by that tiger.

"Mighty fine animal dis!" he exclaimed. "Did you shoot him?"

"No."

"Eh?"

"It smashed my rifle. I don't like to think of that. Let us speak of something else. Come downstairs and have something to drink. Mind, I believe in a man putting his whole heart in his work, but that was a dirty piece of business, and it nearly cost me my life. I shall carry the scar that tiger gave me to the grave."

"Well, old hoss, I dunno dat dat will matter, so long as you don't hab to carry de tiger to de grave. You see, a dead man couldn't carry a full-sized tiger like dat. But how did it come to smash your rifle?"

"You rascal!" exclaimed the mighty hunter, smiling at Pete. "I see you are determined to have the story. I've got some light wine, or if you prefer port or brandy, or——"

"Nunno, de light wine will suit us!" answered Pete for the rest, because he knew their tastes.

"Wise," said Hearn. "I am always careful of what I drink. Heavy stuff spoils the aim."

He touched the bell, and a footman in livery answered the summons; then, when he had brought up some hock, he silently withdrew.

"Yes, that was rather a dirty action of Lord Lorton. Mind you, we were good chums, and he, being a regular daredevil and a man who knew no fear, offered to come with me. He is keen on photography, and I must say he has taken some very good snapshots. I was writing a book of travels at that time; I'm writing one now, as a matter of fact. No matter.

"We started off on foot, and, to cut a long story short, he was trying to take a snapshot of some vultures, when a tiger leapt on me. I was watching him, and consequently quite unprepared—that is to say, as far as a keen sportsman ever is.

"Well, I had my rifle in my left hand, but my finger was near the trigger.

"To raise it to my shoulder was an impossibility. The tiger had leapt; it was in the air. I fired, and sprang aside. The bullet must have just missed its heart. That's the animal's skin in the corner.

"Well, it bounded on for about a hundred yards, and then fell lifeless. It was a female tiger."

"Look at dat, now!" exclaimed Pete.

"The next instant," continued the mighty hunter, "the male leapt upon me with a mighty roar. My rifle was empty. Quick as thought I grasped the fierce brute by the throat, and plunged my knife three times into its side. That was the tiger you saw upstairs."

"Which side did you plunge de knife, old hoss?" inquired Pete, who required a little corroborative evidence. He did not know his man.

"The left side by the heart."

"'Spect de wounds would show?"

"Well, it is quite possible. You might go and have a look. I don't know whether the fellow who stuffed the brute managed to hide them. Funny thing, I never looked."

Pete went to look, and he found three enormous gashes just where the blade would have pierced the animal's heart.

"M'yes! De wounds show, old hoss," he observed. "But how did his lordship behave badly?"

"Ha, ha! I won't go so far as that. He was a cool customer. 'Hold it like that, old chap!' he cried, and as I

plunged the knife into its heart thrice I heard the click of his instantaneous shutter. The silly rascal was fully armed, and could have shot the brute, for he was a magnificent shot; but all the beggar thought about was his instantaneous photo. I dare say you saw it in the London papers?"

"Indeed we did not!" answered Jack. "We have been away from England for some time, although we are thinking of returning shortly."

"Well, Lorton sent it to one of them, and that is what annoyed me, because I dislike to be thought a hero. I thought I might as well put it in my book of travels; but, of course, that is a different thing. Try one of those cigars."

"Should bery much like to see dat photograph," observed Pete.

"I'm afraid that is impossible," answered Hearn the Hunter, lighting a fresh cigar. "I don't keep copies of my works as a rule."

"Mighty pity dat!"

"There might possibly be one somewhere," observed Hearn, ringing the bell. "Oh, James, do you know if there is a copy of my last work in the house?"

"I believe not, sir," answered the footman, "but I can look. There was some books you ordered me to take to the lumber-room the other day, and I noticed that one of them appeared to be a new one."

"Well, it doesn't matter much. I may be able to show it to you some other time, Pete."

"Shall I just look, sir?" inquired James.

"Yes, you might. And when you come back bring some more cigars."

In about ten minutes James returned with the precious volume and the cigars.

"Yes, that's the one, James. You can keep that copy if you like, Pete. You will find the photograph I mentioned on the front page."

"Golly!" gasped Pete, gazing at the very picture. There was the tiger, and, lying in the long grass, the broken rifle; and there was Hearn grasping the tiger by the throat, and plunging a long knife into the fierce-looking brute's side.

"How did de rifle get broken?" gasped Pete.

"The tiger struck it with his paw," answered Hearn carelessly. "Yes, I've had many narrow escapes in my life. That little incident is really nothing to some of them. I could tell you——"

"I tink we must be going, old hoss!" gasped Pete.

"Look us up one day at the hotel, Hearn," said Jack.

And Sam said nothing as the mighty hunter accepted the invitation.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Pete's Performance—The Boaster's Peril—Cured.

"NOW," said Pete, when they reached the hotel, "I don't like dat man's boastings. I'm determined to cure him."

"How are you going to cure him, Pete?"

"Publicly!"

"What, flog him, or make him shoot against Sam?"

"De man can't shoot, Jack. I don't believe he has eber fired off a gun. Dere are a good many poor people 'bout dis part. Bery well, I am going to gib dem one ob de funniest performances dey hab eber seen, and dey are going to pay half-a-crown to see it, den all de profits are going to de poor. De performance is to be held in Hearn's grounds, which he is going to kindly lend for de occasion. He's sure to do it, 'cos he likes to get de good opinion ob de public, and I sha'n't tell him all dat's going to happen. If I did, he might refuse to come or to lend his ground. 'Nuff said! I am going to make my arrangements, and you will see notices ob de performance in de course ob a day or so. 'Nuff said! Keep as mum as a maggot in a mushroom masticating mashed meal and munching mightily."

Pete spent the whole of the following day making his arrangements. Jack and Sam found that they could not learn what they were, and so they left him to his own devices, but the next morning, when he took them round the town, they saw notices of "Pete's Performance!" on all sides. There was no information given, only huge posters with those two words on them. Jack and Sam did not know that they were exhibiting two of these notices on their backs, but that was because Pete had not told them he had surreptitiously stuck them there.

"You see, boys," explained Pete, "dese posters excite inquisitiveness. Eberyone will be inquiring ob eberyone else where de great performance is to be. Now, dat information comes gradually. Dis afternoon notices will appear wid de day, which is de day after to-morrow, and de place, which is Hearn's grounds. What I want you two to do is to walk about de town all day."

"Why?"

"Eh?"

"Why do you want us to walk about?" demanded Jack.

"Oh, dere ain't any particular reason, you know! Still, it might help de poor, and——"

"Where's the performance, mate?" demanded a man, approaching Jack.

"I really don't know. You had better ask my friend Pete."

"Thought as you would be the likeliest person to know, seeing as you are advertising it."

"I'm not advertising it."

"Then why have you got that thundering great placard on your back?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Sam, glancing at Jack's back. "I reckon that is some of Pete's work, and——"

"Ha, ha, ha! You are carrying one also!" roared Jack.

"What?"

"Ha, ha, ha! You are a walking advertisement!"

"Did you ever come across such an idiot of a nigger?" growled Sam, pulling off his coat. "He's made my coat all pasty."

"So he has mine. And, what is more, he has made us look utterly ridiculous. I thought people were looking very hard at us."

"Well, I must advertise de performance in a proper manner, else people won't come to it."

"You are not going to advertise it by turning us into unpaid sandwichmen," declared Jack. "Why don't you stick one on your own back?"

"Well, you see, Jack, de paste comes off on de coat, and dat don't improve its personal appearance. Dere's no sense in spoiling free coats, when two was sufficient for de purpose."

"The silly owl takes good care not to spoil his own coat," grumbled Sam.

"Don't you tink, Sammy, I would be much sillier if I did a ting like dat? Still, I hab got Hearn's consent to use his ground, and eberyting will be in readiness for de suspicious occasion. I tink I am satisfied wid de advertising part ob de business. I hab sold a mighty lot ob tickets already, so dat we shall get a nice little sum for de poor, eben if we take no more money at de gates, and we are sure to do dat."

Pete was absent the whole of the following day, and he

did not come in till five o'clock in the morning, while at breakfast he was more mysterious than ever.

When they reached the grounds they found it thronged with the best people in the place. Pete had charged from half-a-guinea downwards, and he had really made an excellent thing of it.

By using Hearn's name as a mighty hunter, he had induced people to go. They all knew Hearn, and considered it a privilege to go to his place; and as the thing was for charity, they all became very virtuous, subscribing most liberally.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" bawled Pete, emerging from a wooden building in a large grass paddock. "De first performance will be de talking rocket. You see, dis is a specially prepared rocket dat Hearn de Hunter came across in China, when he was seal hunting and kangaroo shooting. I don't suppose dat man has eber told you ob de wonderful hunting parties he has taken part in. Still, you will see a few ob de tings he can do now. We put de match to de rocket—so—and den it goes up—so—and——"

"Oh, Pete, Pete! Don't send me so high!" came a woman's voice that sounded far above their heads. Then that voice turned to shrieks of terror. "Catch me as I fail, Pete!"

"You ain't going to fall yet, my dear," said Pete, in his natural voice.

Again the cries of terror arose, and they grew fainter and fainter in the distance, until they died away altogether.

After that Pete gave them some acrobatic work, which pleased them greatly. Then Sam hit some coins which Pete flung into the air, and shot a clay-pipe from between Pete's teeth.

"He is an excellent shot!" exclaimed Hearn to some ladies. "We had a match the other morning, and I had some little difficulty in beating him."

"Could you shoot a pipe out of the negro's mouth like that, Mr. Hearn?"

"With the greatest of ease. I have frequently done it."

"Do show us now!"

Hearn had to have writer's cramp, because he knew perfectly well that Pete would never allow him to try, and that even if he were so foolhardy, Hearn could never hit the pipe.

After that Pete brought his steam man from the shed, and as he marched across the ground the people cheered wildly. They had never seen anything like that before, and Pete made him rush round and round in great circles as far as the adjacent forest; then he made him fling his arms about in a manner that surprised the spectators.

"Now, den, old hoss," exclaimed Pete, stopping him, "you ain't done at all badly, and what you hab got to do for de rest ob de performance is to sit here. Steady now; don't begin playing de fool after acting so well. Yah, yah, yah! Dat's it! Looks as dough he was going to sleep."

Some of the more venturesome among the ladies came forward to inspect the steam man, but when Pete had stopped him, and seated him on the ground, he was perfectly safe.

Hearn did not quite appreciate the amount of interest that was being taken in the comrades, and he gave an exact description of a steam man that he had seen in China; while he had seen even a cleverer one in New York. The ladies, however, took more interest in Pete's real steam man than in the description of Hearn's imaginary ones.

"De next performance, my dears, is how hunters act in times ob danger. I need a brave hunter to help me, and as I don't care to use Jack and Sammy for de purpose, I am going to employ de bravest living hunter, who is also about free times braver dan all de dead ones put togeder. In fact, for downright bravery, de man in question can't be equalled on de face ob dis elongated round earth. Need I say dat's hunter's name is Hearn."

Here Hearne got some cheers that he did not deserve, and he looked as brave as possible. All the same, he did not relish Pete's speech. He would much rather have taken no part in the performance, and hinted as much; but the ladies pressed him to do so, so he could scarcely refuse.

"I wish to tell you, ladies and gentlemen," continued Pete, slightly winking at Jack, "dat dere ain't de slightest danger in de next scene. All you hab got to do is to keep still and refrain from shrieking, and you may be perfectly sure dat we shall let you come to no danger. I wish to point out dat dis is a realistic hunting scene in de tropical forest ob Africa, and dere ain't one among your number, except, ob course, de mighty hunter Hearn, who has eber witnessed such a scene before. Wid dese few slight remarks as to de perfect safety ob de performance—Hearn knows dat, else he would be de last to take part in it—I will now ask you to step back."

"What is the nigger up to?" inquired Sam.

"I haven't the slightest idea," answered Jack; "but I wouldn't be in Hearn's shoes for something. If Pete does not make him look an utter idiot, I shall be greatly surprised."

"We must try to amuse dem somehow, old hoss," said Pete. "Dey all know dat you are desperately brave. Just take dat revolver, and I will hab anoder, den we will pretend to be stalking a lion."

"Pooh! That won't amuse them. It is beneath my dignity as a huntsman to pretend such a foolish thing."

"Well, mind how you fire de pistol, 'cos it would neber do to shoot one ob de ladies. She would make you marry her out ob revenge, or someting like dat. Hark! What's dat?"

It was nothing more alarming than Pete's ventriloquism, but it sounded remarkably like a shriek from the forest. Again and again it rang out. Pete gripped Hearn's arm, and uttered a howl of terror in his natural voice that caused Hearn to leap into the air.

The probabilities are that had Pete released his hold, Hearn would have flung prestige to the winds, and bolted, for now the most frightful howls were coming from the forest, and as they came closer the roar of a lion burst forth.

The next moment Bob dashed into the open space, and Leo came bounding after him.

"Hi! Golly!" bawled Pete, feigning terror remarkably well. "Don't come dis way, old hoss! Stop, and let de lion eat you while I make my excape!"

Hearn did not fire the pistol. It would not have mattered had he done so, because Pete had only loaded it with powder. The mighty hunter was far too terrified to think about firing, and, uttering yell upon yell, he bolted, while Pete ran beside him, keeping a grip on his arm that there was no shaking off.

Now, Leo would follow Bob anywhere, and as Pete ran the terrified and shrieking hunter round in a circle, Bob followed them.

He kept howling as though with terror, but his face gave Jack and Sam the impression that he wanted to laugh.

"Keep de lion off!" roared Pete. "I know de raging inseck will bite me! Oh, Hearn, save me from de lion! Neber mind so much about yourself."

Hearn shoved his revolver over his shoulder, and blazed away at random. Had the weapon been properly loaded, there is not the slightest doubt that some of the spectators would have been shot, for Leo was quite in another direction.

Now, as Pete came round by his steam man he stopped. So did Hearn, for the simple reason that it was impossible for him to go on, but he did not stop howling with terror.

Pete picked him up, and as Leo came forward with distended jaws, Pete shoved the terrified man into the lion's mouth.

Leo had practised the trick with Bob and Pete. There was not really the slightest danger, but Hearn thought there was, and the manner in which he howled caused Jack and Sam to shout with laughter.

This greatly relieved the startled spectators; but it did not relieve the terrified hunter.

At last Leo dropped him; then, as he sat on the ground, shrieking at the top of his voice, Leo kept roaring in his face.

This was too much for Pete. It looked so utterly ridiculous to see a man sitting down shrieking at a lion that was roaring in his face. Leo had got a loud voice, too.

"Golly!" cried Pete. "De man has fainted! Take your lion away, Bob! We shall frighten dat bold hunter out ob his life. I tink de man wants some smelling-salts. I'll see you dis ebening, Bob. Good-bye, Leo, old hoss! You'm de funniest lion on de face ob dis earth."

Then Pete stroked the great, shaggy head, and Leo followed his convulsed master more like a dog than a lion.

They were both out of sight when the valiant hunter recovered from his swoon.

Hearn sat up and gazed around. It was an awkward position for any man, for his conduct, after the manner in which he had been bragging to the company, was, to say the least, cowardly. But Hearn was equal to the occasion.

"Ha, ha, ha! Capital, Pete!" he exclaimed, struggling to his feet. "You are a born actor. I was afraid you would spoil the fun, but you shammed fright very well."

"So did you, old hoss," gasped Pete. The man's unbounded effrontery astounded him.

"Well, you see, I am more accustomed to acting than you are. Did my pretended terror appear real to you?"

"M'yes!"

"Capital, capital! I was afraid I was rather overdoing it with the howling."

"Seemed to me it was most natural."

"I'm pleased."

"M'yes! You look it, old hoss. I neber saw a man more delighted in all my life dan you when you were in de mouf ob de lion. Yah, yah, yah!"

"But you were frigthened, really, were you not, Mr. Hearn?" inquired one young lady.

"My dear young lady," exclaimed Hearn, "I have gone through life so far without knowing the feeling of fear. As Pete has already told you, we wanted to show you some of the perils of hunting wild beasts, and I think you will admit that Pete played his part remarkably well."

"So did you, Mr. Hearn," said the damsel. "I made sure you were frightened, especially when you fainted. Your face is very white now."

"Alice!" exclaimed that too candid young lady's mother.

"Well, mother, I feel sure you thought he was frightened. I don't see how anyone could help thinking so when he shrieked like that."

"It was part of the acting, my dear young lady."

"Then I think, if I were you, I would give up hunting, and take to acting," said Alice, glancing at Jack, in a manner that Pete did not approve of. "Don't you think he felt frightened, Pete?"

"Yah, yah, yah! Dere wasn't much tinking 'bout dat matter, my dear," answered Pete. "Would you like to go frough de performance again, old hoss?"

"There would be no sense in doing that," exclaimed Hearn, glancing round in an anxious manner. "The spectators have already witnessed our performance. Very likely we will give them another one on some future occasion. Now, I want a word with you, Jack and Sam."

Hearn had an idea that his only chance of making the people really believe that he had been acting was to keep friendly with Jack and Sam. He did not care about Pete, because he knew perfectly well that worthy would make fun of him; but he told Jack and Sam that he would be very pleased if they would dine with him that night, and he also informed them that he was going to invite some of the others, both ladies and gentlemen.

"We shall be very pleased to come," said Jack.

"Of course, I couldn't invite a nigger to sit down with ladies, but if he likes to have dinner in another room, I shall be very pleased for him to come also."

Pete said he would like al. that, and as he strolled away—and Hearn saw Alice talking to him, while both were laughing heartily—Hearn felt far from comfortable. Alice was the one above all other ladies whom he would have liked to impress with his bravery, and he found that she was about the most difficult.

Alice and her mother accepted the invitation, so did some of the other ladies.

Hearn was rather a dull host at first, but he soon cheered up, and by the time dinner was ready, he was actually boasting of his prowess in the forest.

The worst of it was he always had some sort of confirmation, and it was generally in the shape of a faked photograph, which always depicted him contending with frightful odds, and looking as cool as compressed air, or a telephone girl being bullied at the other end of the wire.

The dinner was served promptly, and it was also served exceedingly well, for Hearn had made full preparations, and he spared no expense.

He was recounting a terrible struggle he had had with a grizzly bear in the Rocky Mountains, and how the men with him had all fled, while he was left alone to tackle that bear.

Jack and Sara were making efforts to look serious. Alice was glancing at Jack, and there was a laughing light in her pretty eyes. She also kept glancing towards the door, as though expecting something.

Hearn's back was towards it, and not for one moment did he anticipate danger in any shape or form.

Alice's mother, who was no light weight, sat to the left of the mighty hunter. Behind her lay the French windows, which led on the veranda. They were closed, for a wind was blowing from that direction.

"Having fired my last shot at the great brute," continued Hearn, "I drew my knife. The action, perhaps, was somewhat unwise, because I might have fled, and I doubt if the bear would have been able to overtake me along the narrow ledge; but, then, I was very anxious to secure my quarry. Springing forward, I seized the monster by the throat, and, being in perfect training, my grip was such that for a moment held it powerless. Then, raising my long blade, I plunged——"

He did. For, at that exciting moment, a mighty roar burst forth, and, turning, he saw an enormous lion not two feet from his back.

"Woohoowooh!" howled Hearn, dashing round the table, and sending Alice's mother flying into Jack's arms. It was lucky he caught her, or she might have gone through the floor.

As it was, she smashed her chair, and nearly did the same to Jack.

Like a chased cat, Hearn darted across the room, then he dashed through the French window, tearing away glass and framework, and sprawling over the verandah, he dropped into some rose-bushes, where he lay howling for help.

With the exception of Alice's mother, who had had a bad upset, as Jack knew to his cost, all the ladies were nearly hysterical with laughter. The gentlemen did not appear to be quite so brave, but then they were not in the secret.

The lion seated itself in Hearn's empty chair, shoved back its great head with its paws, and revealed the convulsed features of Pete, the negro.

"Yah, yah, yah!" he roared. "Yah, yah, yah! I know I shall laugh directly. Golly, golly! If dat man ain't funny, I dunno who is. I tink I will disconsume his portion ob fowl, 'cos it looks rader nice. Yah, yah, yah! I hab taken de stuffing out ob de lion he shot in Australia, and put a nigger in its place. I'm inclined to tink de man will need a glazier and some sticking-plaster ober dis job. Yah, yah, yah! 'Scuse me laughing, ladies and gentlemen, but he's too funny to lib. He ought to be sent to Madame Tooshoes' library, and be stuffed in de chamber ob horrors, as de greatest hunter dat eber lived. How he's going to account for dis little lot, I dunno. All de same, I'm mighty certain he won't show a snapshot ob it, and I don't believe he will convince you dat he dived frough dat window just for de fun ob de ting. Yah, yah, yah! Here he comes. He looks as dough he had scratched himself!"

Hearn entered the room with lowered head. He did not dare to look at Alice's mother; neither did he dare to look at Pete, and he spoke in a voice tremulous with emotion.

"I am disgraced!" he murmured. "I admit it. I have no defence to make. Pete, you have taught me a lesson, but it has been a very terrible one to me, for I have learnt that lesson too late."

"Neber too late to mend, old hoss," observed Pete. "You know men are much de same. Some may be braver dan oders, and more trooful; but, don't you see, a hunter must hab practice, de same as an acrobat, or a telegraph-clerk. You can't learn tings like dat all ob a sudden, and it ain't de slightest good in saying you know dem if you don't, 'cos someone is sure to bowl you out; besides, it ain't trooful."

"I have nothing to say, except that this will be a lesson to me for the remainder of my life. I only ask you to try not to think too badly of me. My life is wrecked, but I will strive never to err in that respect again."

"Now, see here, old hoss!" exclaimed Pete, scrambling out of his lion's skin. "You ain't got de need to take de matter to heart quite as much as dat. I happen to know dat dere are good points about you, and as we all hab bad ones—why, you ain't any different from de rest ob us. All you hab got to do in de future is not to try to make yourself out mightier dan oder men, except by your works."

"I know it—I know it only too well! You have shown me up, but I have deserved what you have done. I will strive never to lie or boast again."

Whether the boaster kept to his word or not, the comrades never knew, for the next day they left the part, to return to England in search of further adventures.

THE END.

Printed and published weekly by the Proprietors at The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, England. Agents for Australasia: Gordon & Gotch, Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane, and Wellington, N.Z. South Africa: The Central News Agency, Ltd., Cape Town, Johannesburg, and branches. Subscription 7s. per annum. Saturday, December 23rd, 1916. No