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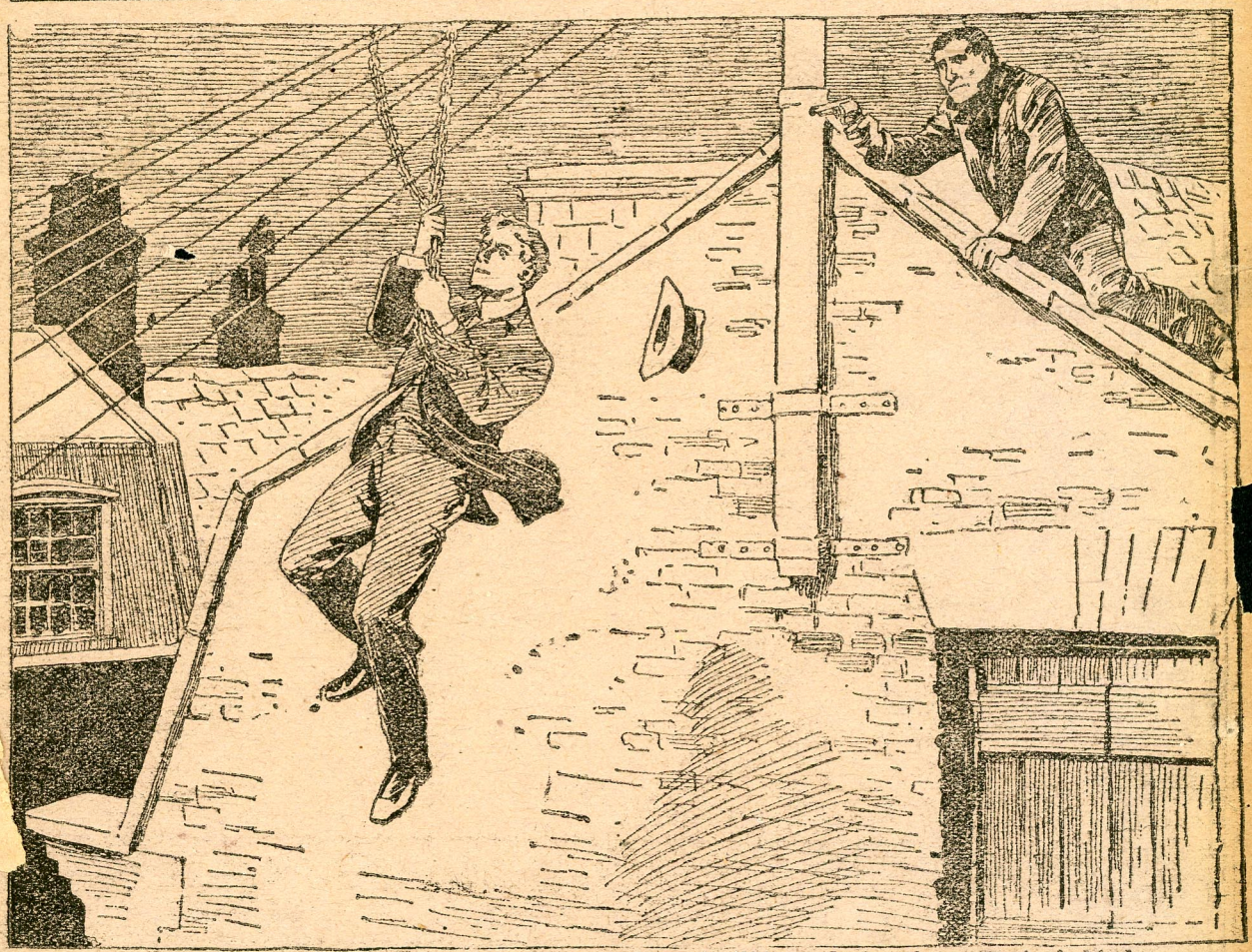
THE THIRD MAN.



Under the bright moonlight, Blake presented a splendid mark for the assassin behind.

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THE THIRD MAN

A DETECTIVE STORY.

By W. SHAW RAE.

CHAPTER 1.

A RUNAWAY MOTOR—BLAKE TO THE RESCUE—BLACKMAIL?

On a fine spring morning, Sexton Blake, the great detective, left his quarters at Norfolk House, Strand, and, descending the hill, entered the Embankment for an early constitutional.

Bright and gay was "London's only boulevard" at that fairest hour of the day. The sun shone brilliantly, the crisp, cool wind blew refreshingly, the dew sparkled with sheeny lustre on trees and shrubs. On such a morning it was really good to live.

Turning along by the gardens, Blake strolled Blackfriars Bridge way, humming softly to himself in his joyous light-heartedness.

Then his quick ear caught another sound—a curious, continuous "pur-r-r"; and, turning hastily, he saw a motor-car coming up behind him.

The carriage was in the form of a waggonette, stout and solid. It was driven by an oil-engine, the somewhat cumbrous machinery being stowed in boxes under the body. A big, lumbering thing it looked, though it slipped along easily enough.

It had only two occupants—both young men, fashionably dressed, sitting on the box. One was driving; the other, seemingly a passenger.

On came the motor, the machinery behaving itself as superbly as a respectable cab-horse; but, when just opposite Blake, it suddenly took a fractious turn, getting out of hand as quickly as a startled steed.

Wheeling sharply, the car faced Blake, and seemed about to charge him; and he, to save himself, slipped through a gate into the gardens.

A little way it came; then the wayward thing, altering its mind, began to hark across the road towards the river. More quickly it moved, still in the same direction; and, despite the objurgations of its passenger and the frantic workings of the driver, reached the gutter, sprang on to the side-walk, and, crossing the pavement, crashed against the heavy stone parapet.

Instantly gathered the usual London crowd, springing from nowhere—from everywhere.

"Blow me! Cholly, 'e thinks e's a bloomin' postman. There's a rat-tat at the door for you," shouted one gamin.

"Garn! e' wants a bathe. Thinks the floatin' swimmin'-baths is on the other side of the wall," responded his chum. And chaff of like nature freely flew about.

But it was no joke to the occupants of the carriage. The motor was completely beyond control. It seemed like a mad bull, and kept butting viciously against the balustrade—thumping at the heavy stonework like a battering-ram.

Its two occupants grew intensely excited; but nothing they could do served to bring the machine under subjection. Nay, their efforts seemed but to excite the frantic thing to fresh frenzy. It kept pounding away at the balustrade, delivering crashing blows with its rear, doing more damage indeed to its own body than to the massive stonework; but still producing some effect on the masonry.

Shrill shrieks and whistles issued from its works, hot breaths of vapour were emitted, and it became enveloped in a cloud of steam; while the more cautious spectators retreated to a safer distance, fearing an explosion.

Blake had been keenly watchful of the whole affair, as much interested as any, save perhaps the helpless occupants of the car, who had quite lost their wits—the one shouting inanely: "Give her her head, Slipton! Nip her under the flank! Lash her, man! Lash her!" as though he imagined a horse in the shafts; the other tugging and wrestling with various levers and handles; but only rendering the confusion worse confounded—the perverse fury of the machine more intense.

For Blake—that "up-to-date man"—had lately been studying and practising the new method of locomotion. Here was a chance for further experience. Something must be done to avert the terrible, probably fatal, calamity impending; and, dashing across the road, the investigator sprang into the car.

Now Blake's recent study proved supremely useful.

A hitch at this lever, a turn at that handle, an easing of a screw here, a bolt there, and the machine owned the master

Sexton Blake hurled the bulky knave against the intruder.

hand, and came under control. Slowly at first—sullenly it seemed—the car withdrew from the damaged parapet. With many a protesting grunt and groan it glided across the pavement, took to the road; then, obeying the steering-lever, circled round, and bounded off towards Blackfriars Bridge.

"So! That's better," exclaimed the amateur engineer. "'Twas only a little fouling of the gear; one of the valves got reversed. It's all right now. Will do for a bit, at least——"

Crack! Whiz! The congratulation was premature. They were not yet out of the mess. The floor of the carriage heaved and quaked; then split n a yawning rent right across. The vehicle came to a dead stop, and lumped down with a jolting shock in the rear; and with a rumbling rush volumes of steam gushed out on either side, enveloping the car and occupants in a dense, stifling cloud.

"Jump for it! Spring clear!" shouted Blake. The two youths did so, and their mentor followed a few seconds later.

"Whiew! A complete burst up!" remarked Blake, wiping his face. "Lucky are we not to be blown sky-high. There is no danger of explosion now, however, as I have opened the valves and let off steam. Your carriage is ruined for the time, though. Better hire a horse, and haul it home. Sorry I could not do better for you, gentlemen."

"Better!" cried the man who had appeared as passenger. "Why, sir, we have to thank you that we are now standing on our legs on the firm road. But for you, we might have been blown as high as St. Paul's."

"Let me thank you for my life, sir. I don't know your name, but mine is Harold Fenfield."

"And mine," replied Blake, handing his card in return.

"Sexton Blake!" cried the other, in surprise. "Sexton Blake, the private detective!"

"Now that reminds me; I have a matter I should like to put before you. Come on! I want to talk to you."

"But what of the motor? You can't leave the car in the middle of the road," remarked the detective.

"Pouf! It has nothing to do with me. Belongs to Slipton Bale, there. Let him look after his property if he likes. Sorry I ever saw the beastly thing. Won't catch me on the like again. I'm going off, Slipton," he called to his companion. "Shall I send you a cab back, to tow it home? And that's the broken-winded concern you proposed to match against my 'Black Sam?' Go along, Slipton, and cut your wisdom teeth! See you at the club to-night. Ta-ta."

"Better come to my rooms; they are close handy," suggested Blake.

"Right you are," agreed the other, who seemed to be a frank, jovial young fellow, wearing a shade of "horsiness" in his morning costume.

Sexton Blake knew the name "Harold Fenfield" very well; recognised in the youth by his side a scion of an ancient house who had lately come into a fortune, which he was now spending recklessly as a "man about town."

Not that anything was hinted against the honour of the youth. Far from it; he was more a pigeon amongst the hawks; and, all unconsciously, Harold had arrived at a crisis which would make or mar his life for weal or woe. He was as heedless as a butterfly, with no thought beyond his present amusement; and even now the net was threatening him.

But the youth was about to be married to one of the belles of London society—Ethel Challoner. It was hoped the union would steady him; yet time alone could tell.

Blake also know the other man by report—Slipton Bale; but his reputation was by no means lustrous. Of good family, only a few years older than Harold Fenfield, his name had more than once been mixed up in decidedly dubious transactions. He had also been a suitor for the hand of Miss Challoner, ere that young lady had said "yes" to Fenfield; but Slipton showed no jealousy of his successful rival, making Harold his chosen friend. So much the worse for the latter, mused some knowing ones.

"What a jolly old ass Slipton Bale is!" cried Fenfield, across the well-spread breakfast-table, Blake having easily induced his unexpected guest to join him in the meal. "Only fancy; he wanted to back his 'puffing billy' motor-car against my American trotter, 'Black Sam,' for a ten-mile spin at a hundred a side. Shoo! my horse would trot him out of sight in five minutes; but I would not now degrade the noble beast by such a contest!"

"Just so. But you wanted to consult me about something?" suggested Blake.

"Ah, yes! I clean forgot. You see, Mr. Blake, I have so many things to think of just now. For instance, as you probably know, I own 'Spinaway,' the favourite for the Fenfield Stakes. The race comes off in about a fortnight, and I must win it. I dare not lose! By Jove! I'm in to the tune of more than thirty thousand pounds."

"Sorry to hear it, Mr. Fenfield; and if I were you, I would not be so candid about the position of my 'book.' But that was not what you wanted to consult me about, either." returned the detective drily.

"Eh! How do you know? Yet—by Jove you're right. I can manage my betting-book myself—none better. But here's a thing that puzzles me. Ah! where is it? It's a letter I got just before leaving the stables this morning. Hope I haven't lost it. No; there it is." And the volatile youth threw on the white tablecloth a dirty envelope without address.

Opening the soiled missive, Blake read, from a villainous pencil-scrawl:

"Black-Jack Alley, Shoreditch.

"Hon'd Sir,—If so as yer would save yer di'munds, you must buy my noose. The price is fifty quid. Bring the shiners to-night at pub.-closing-time, and you'll get the office. Come alone! You'll lose your sparklers else. SAM SHISE."

"Who gave you this?" queried the detective, laying down the filthy scrawl.

"Shoved into my hand as I was leaving stables this morning, I tell you," replied Fenfield carelessly. "At first I judged it some hoax, and was about to throw it away; but on second thoughts, I kept it."

"Quite right. Now, what are the diamonds referred to? Tell me all you know or suspect."

"Oh! That's clear enough," replied the youth lightly. "Ever heard of the Fenfield diamonds?"

"A cluster of diamonds, with double flanking rows, all of purest water, set in the form of a tiara. A family heirloom, valued at thirty thousand pounds," replied Blake readily.

"Spoken like a book—a catalogue," answered Fenfield. "Well, that's the lot, make no doubt."

"Perhaps you are aware I am to be married next month, Mr. Blake. Well, my fiancée wished to see the jewels, so I took them from the bank and showed them to her. Now, as the bride has to wear them at the wedding, it was not worth while returning them to the bank strong-room, so I locked up the case in my safe at Fenfield Abbey; and there it is now. It is as secure there as in the bank vaults. I defy anyone to get at it. Still, its unpleasant to think there are rogues smelling about after it."

"Seems to me you regard your position and possessions very lightly," remarked Blake. "Almost on the eve of your wedding, you engage in bets on a horse-race to the amount of thirty thousand pounds; then you leave a family heirloom worth as much more in your country house, while you disport yourself in town, undeterred by the fact that robbers are after the diamonds. The thought of one of these events would be enough to make most men anxious. I envy your cheeriness, Mr. Fenfield, whatever I may think of your discretion."

"Oh! I always trust to luck. I take things as they come, and always come out smiling," returned the youth flippantly.

The detective shook his head; then inquired:

"And what do you wish me to do?"

"Why, to see to the security of the diamonds, of course," replied Fenfield. "You look after the tiara, and I will attend to my betting-book. I know my way about; and if you do your work as well as I do mine, I'll come out swimmingly.

"That's it, Mr. Sexton Blake. You see to the safety of the diamonds. I give you carte-blanche—do what you like, only don't bother me about them. Of course, you will name your own fee. That is a mere detail. What's the time? By Jove, I must be off to Tattersall's; promised to meet a man there, early."

CHAPTER 2.

PUMPING THE INFORMER—AN ANCIENT ENEMY WITH A DEATH FEUD—A DESPERATE CHASE—A RECKLESS FLIGHT.

As the clocks were striking midnight, Sexton Blake made his way down Shoreditch, to keep the appointment offered by the unknown Sam Shise to young Harold Fenfield.

Blake had never heard of this mysterious Sam Shise, but from the dirty missive the character of the writer was clear. Either this was an attempt at blackmail, or, in a conspiracy to steal the diamonds, the rogues had fallen out amongst themselves, and one of them was ready to sell his accomplices for fifty pounds.

The detective had not brought the money with him, as directed. He desired first to learn whether the information was worth the amount; and, in entering into bad, or even dubious, company, it is generally easier to carry cash in than to fetch it away.

Blake had quite decided to do all he could to help young Fenfield. That careless, light-hearted young fellow was in a perilous position; and Sexton Blake's heart warmed to the frank, outspoken youth, whose greatest faults were due to inexperience—to imagining all others as honest and honourable as himself.

The detective resolved to do his utmost to keep the tiara safe—the matter of the horse-race must probably be left to chance. Were these two events successfully accomplished, and Harold Fenfield wedded to a clever, quick-witted girl (and

Miss Ethel Challoner bore that reputation), all would doubtless go merry as the proverbial marriage-bell.

Leaving the main thoroughfare ere the church was reached, the investigator plunged into the wilderness of side-streets, and it required all his experience of London slums to guide him through the labyrinth. However, Blake had refreshed his memory ere starting by a study of the map in Kelly's Directory, and shortly before the time of meeting—half-past twelve—reached the spot appointed.

"Black-Jack Alley" was a narrow, tortuous, unsavoury-smelling court, dark and gloomy, manifestly of a very doubtful reputation. No number had been given on the letter, and to find one particular rogue amongst hundreds of "shady" characters might be as difficult as to discover the proverbial needle in the bundle of hay; and in such cases casual inquiry always breeds suspicion, and usually defeats itself.

As Blake paused in indecision at the alley mouth, his attention was directed towards a "larrikin," who had been lurking in the shade.

A slouching, shambling youth of about seventeen came shuffling forward, performing a little dance all by himself—a sort of ambling polka-step—that carried him across the mouth of the court, he supplying the music by a low, crooning strain, with the continuous refrain "Sam-my-shise! Sam-my-shise!"

As the fellow pranced by, Blake said, in low, cautious tones: "Ha! you're the lad for me. Take me to Sam Shise!"

With a finishing flourish, the larrikin finished his grotesque dance, and, sidling up to the speaker, said:

"Yus. So you wants ter see Sam. What for, cully?"

"That's his business, and mine. I have an appointment with him," replied Blake.

"Jest so. Then, maybe as you'll 'ave a bit of a token, sir?" was the suspicious query.

"Yes. There is his own letter," answered Blake, showing the missive.

"All serene and O. K.!" was the reassured reply. "Come along o' me, guv'nor. 'E's waitin' fur you. Follow me close, and say nothin' to nobody. 'The boys' are out to-night!"

Then the lad plunged into the alley, Blake accepting the advice and "following close." He was obliged to, otherwise he would have lost his guide in the gloom, and in the sombre depths he remarked little groups of skulking, shrinking figures, doubtless those of "the boys," closer acquaintance with whom was undesirable.

Black-Jack Alley was longer than it looked. Oft seeming to end, it always twisted round, and continued for a further space. The houses were mostly tumbledown structures, ready for the "house-breaker." They were mostly of a single storey, few of more than two; but at length Blake's guide arrived at an edifice taller than any, and, halting, muttered:

"Sam's 'ouse. Foller close. Take no notice o' nothink!"

With a shrill, jerky whistle that resounded through the building, the larrikin crossed the threshold, closely attended by Blake. Then, finding a candle-end somewhere, he struck a light, and led the way through a narrow hall, cumbered with débris, and up a frail, dilapidated staircase that creaked and protested loudly at every step.

Up and up, the first and second floors were gained and left behind, their only occupants apparently being rats and other vermin; but, half-way up the next flight, a light shone on the higher landing, on which the guide stopped, blew out his candle, and hoarsely whispered:

"That's Sam's den. Go right in. Got the price of a wet about yer?"

Blake passed a sixpence to his guide, whereupon the lad vanished like a gnome, doubtless to spend the coin, as, no doubt, he knew where to barter it, though then "past closing-time."

Ascending the remainder of the steps, Blake knocked at the half-open door. A rough voice bade him "Come in," and he entered "Sam's den."

A bare, dreary place it was—as unattractive as a wild beast's lair.

It was a fairly large room, with a single window (the unbroken panes black with dust).

Besides the door of entrance, another door, partly open, appeared on the further side. It looked like the entrance to a cupboard; and the sole furniture consisted of a rough, beer-stained table in the middle of the floor, with a couple of crazy chairs by it. On the table stood a bottle of gin, with a footless wineglass, upturned, by it, the squalid apartment being illuminated by a guttering candle stuck in a beer-bottle beside it.

Sam Shise himself—a big, burly ruffian, heavy jawed, unkempt and unshorn—sat on one of the chairs, smoking a short clay-pipe; but, on the entrance of his visitor, he started up, glared savagely, and growled:

"Jemini! Wot's this? Who are you? By thunder! you are not Mr. Harold Fenfield, Eskvire! Wot d'ye want? Speak out, or it will be the wuss for you!"

"It's all right, Sam," replied Blake coolly. "No, I am not Mr. Fenfield; but I come to represent him. I know all about it, and am fully empowered to act for him."

"Brought the shiners?" inquired the ruffian eagerly.

"That's as it may be," was the guarded reply. "They don't come on the board yet. You must earn them, Sammy. Must prove your information worth the money!"

For a while Shise demurred to these terms, wanting the money first; but Blake argued the matter, and, like a skilful advocate, contrived to elicit considerable information out of the wrangle.

The keen-witted detective learned that there actually was a scheme afoot for the robbery of the Fenfield diamonds. That the plotters were three in number, one of them a skilful and notorious "cracksman," while the director of the whole was a "man about town," not unknown in fashionable society circles. Sam Shise was but a "serving man" in the conspiracy, and, being dissatisfied with his promised remuneration, was disposed to "sell" his mates for a higher consideration—to "blow the gaff for a couple o' ponies," as the rascal phrased it. The gang knew the present position of the spoil, and all details connected with the Fenfield Abbey household, and Blake was assured that if the dodge was not "blown upon," the diamonds were as good as gone.

The two men were seated by the table, conversing amicably enough, if in somewhat heated tones; and Blake was considering the advisability of using this tool—ay, and paying him at the proper time, when both sprang to their feet, startled by a harsh, grating voice, sounding from the outer doorway.

"Sexton Blake! By thunder!"

On the threshold stood a man of middle age, his features scarred and lined by crime and suffering—a wicked, saturnine countenance, bearing the unmistakeable stamp of the gaol-bird.

Blake had not seen that face for many years, but he knew it at once, instantly recognising the evil features as those of Egbert Trewolf, a wretch whom, in his early career—his first case, indeed—the detective had hunted down. The villain had been sentenced to death, but his punishment had been commuted to penal servitude for life.* Now he had obtained a further remission, and, by mistaken clemency, was again let loose to prey upon society.

"Sexton Blake!" repeated the ex-convict, drawing in his breath with a sucking, satisfied sound as he whipped a revolver from his pocket. "Sexton Blake! Sneak and spy! Traitor and informer! Now for my revenge! Take that!"

"That" was a revolver-shot, aimed full at the detective; but, wary as a skilful fencer, Blake saw the direction in the murderer's eye, and, springing swiftly aside, avoided the bullet.

Then, as the assassin leaped into the room to mend his abortive shot, Blake seized the astounded Sam Shise, and, exerting all his strength, hurled that bulky knave against the intruder so violently that both fell crash upon the floor at the doorway.

How now? The two men lay struggling in a heap, Trewolf undermost; but not long might that position continue. The ex-convict would soon be up again; his revolver doubtless yet contained several chambers charged; Blake had seen the glint of murder in the man's eye. The outer door was barred by the two bodies. The inner one then? There it stood ajar. The place might be only a cupboard; but, on the other hand, it might lead somewhere.

Like a hunted criminal, Blake sprang across, and threw the door wide open. It was neither press nor cupboard, but showed a short passage, terminating at the foot of a winding wooden staircase. In darted the fugitive, up the creaking steps, three at a bound, and found himself in an attic chamber.

The new-risen moon filled the room with a dim lustre. No exit. Stay! What was that in the corner? An open ladder led to a trapdoor in the roof.

Up sprang the hunted man, but found the trap fast—secured by a stout steel chain, fastened by a hook to a ring in the floor.

A swaying jerk dislodged the hook; then, setting his shoulder to the flap, Blake heaved upward with all his might.

The door was old and rotten; under the strain it cracked and rent, then burst into fragments, leaving a square hole, through which burst the waiting moonlight.

Out clambered Blake, still mechanically clutching the steel chain, which now was loose, a fragment of the shattered trap-door adhering to the end.

Now he was on the roof. Could he go further? Alas, no! The house towered above its neighbours; there was no escape from thence.

Yet, something must be done. His quick ear caught the panting breath and hurrying tread of his vengeful pursuer,

* Note.—See "How Blake won his spurs." Vol. V. No. 125 of this paper.—ED.

following hot-foot. Trewolf was already on the ladder; a couple of seconds, and he must reach the aperture. Then Blake would be shot down, like a cat upon the tiles.

But the steel chain he still carried might make an effective weapon. The top of the hole would give him vantage ground. He might there make a stand.

Then, as he gazed wildly around, another object caught his eye, and a desperate chance of escape darted through his excited brain.

On the cope of the gable stood a short, stout telegraph-pole, upholding six sets of wires.

The sweep to the next support was not great, only about forty yards, the adjoining pole being erected on a house a storey lower than the present one.

There stretched lines of escape. Escape for what? For a bird possibly; but for a grown man! Who ever heard of such a thing?

That thin wire could never support a man's weight. Even so, no human hands could ever clamber along; the fingers would be cut through ere a third of the way was traversed.

But Sexton Blake, ever a man of resource, met these objections as he thought of them. One wire could not uphold a man, but six might; and six there were between these two points. The wires would slice his fingers. Bah! He would not touch them with his hands at all. What of the steel chain? That certainly was strong enough to bear his weight, and long enough to encircle all the wires. The lines lay on an angle, descending to the lower building. A push from this gable, and he would slip down the slope without further effort of his own, other than to maintain his grip of the ends of the chain.

'Twas a hazardous attempt, truly; but 'twas his only chance. Certain death lay behind, possible escape in front, and ere the plucky fellow had well considered the peril, his determination was fixed to dare it.

Had Blake required any spur, he would now have received it. Working his way along the roof-ridge, with the tail of his eye he caught sight of the head of his implacable pursuer protruded through the open trap. A shot rang out; a tile was chipped from under the fingers of the fugitive; but the brave man never paused, never faltered till he gained the pole on the gable.

Then, standing erect, supporting himself by the post, he flung one end of the chain around the wires on the further side —threw it as quickly and as deftly as a stockman launches his lasso on the Mexican Plains. The steel flew fast and fair, the end dangled within reach, the wires were all enclosed. Now for it!

Under the bright moonlight, Blake presented a splendid mark for the assassin behind. Trewolf could easily have planted a bullet in the broad back of his ancient enemy, so clearly outlined against the starry heavens; but the very desperation of the deed awed the murderer. He saw there one more wildly reckless than himself, paused in amazement, and his chance was gone. Like a sparrow from the housetop Sexton Blake flew away.

CHAPTER 3.

FLIGHT BY TELEGRAPH—A FEARSOME SWOOP AND DESPERATE LANDING—IN THE THIEVES' DEN—BLAKE'S STRATAGEM.

Readers must often have seen a game of somewhat similar nature played at fairs and fêtes, where the merrymakers, climbing a platform to the higher end of a rope stretched at an incline, slide down the slope by means of a pulley, bumping against a cushioned sack at the bottom.

A very different matter was it, however, to dart down a telegraph-wire stretched over the house-tops. Yet the hazard had to be dared, there was no other way out of the danger behind, and Blake paused no longer than was necessary to complete his arrangements.

A pull at the chain, to make sure that it hung clear, and would slide freely; a careful measurement to bring the ends level; then, gripping them firmly, after a long, deep breath, as of one who knew not when he might draw another, the intrepid man launched himself into space.

At first the motion was smooth and gentle, as of a railway-carriage at starting; but all too quickly it increased, till it assumed bewildering rapidity. In a couple of seconds the man was flying fast as an electric spark. The roaring hum of the wires sounded in his ears, loud as the murmur of a million Æolian harps, to the shrill accompaniment of the whistling wind. The friction of the steel created a great blaze of light, that streamed behind, as from the chimney of a locomotive.

So Blake darted down the swaying, roaring wires with maddened, intoxicating rush, his passage occupying but a few seconds, though it seemed to stretch over hours. The pliant wires withstood the strain; the steel chain held bravely; all went gloriously well, till—crash!

In the mad excitement of the moment, Blake had overlooked one matter, and that a vital one.

In sliding down the rope, at fair or fête, the reveller has a soft cushion to break his fall, also an attendant is waiting, ready to grip and steady him after his whirling plunge. Here were none of these; only an ordinary pole fixed in the peak of the gable of the house, a storey lower at the end of the forty yards' sweep.

Blindly the swinging, darting man dashed against the support. He was doubled round the pole; but, struggling hard, managed to wriggle his body round and disentagle his limbs.

Yet no time had the aerial voyager to secure himself in his new position. Away he rolled down the sloping roof, vainly clutching at the greasy tiles, which afforded no points for grip. Down he went, rolling like a bundle. Had he but escaped death by a bullet, death by the wires, to meet his fate by a fall from a house-top?

But now, clawing and clutching as he rolled and slid, his fingers fastened on something more stable than the elusive tiles. It was the edge of an attic window, jutting out through the roof. His fingers closed on the corner with desperate clutch. That stayed his flight, but the momentum swung his body round with giddy whirl. Like a trapeze athlete, performing the "giant's swing," his body and legs wheeled round; he described half a circle; then came crashing against the window front, smashing in the casement, his legs shooting into a room.

Thus he lay motionless for a second, half in, half out of the window—a touch would turn the balance either way. Then, clutching his dancing wits, rallying his reeling senses, Blake made one more effort, and, with a convulsive struggle, managed to wriggle his body into the room.

Dazed by the plunge and shock, dizzied by the frantic whirl, Sexton Blake stood swaying by the broken window, scarce knowing where he was. The scene swam before his straining eyes. He felt as one in a dream—a horrible nightmare, rather.

Yet, need had he to steady his dancing brain, and steel his quivering muscles. He had but escaped one danger to enter upon peril—peril was upon peril piled. Was ever hard-pressed man so continuously pressed as he?

This attic—a large one—was lighted by a flaring candle stuck in the usual beer-bottle, placed upon a square deal table; and around it were heaped glittering packets of watches and jewellery, purses and trinkets, with various other valuables.

A miscellaneous collection of plunder. Blake had suddenly landed amidst a band of thieves engaged in the division of their spoil.

The men numbered about a dozen, some of the sneaking variety, others of the burglar type, with a sprinkling of well-dressed rogues amongst them, like paste jewels in a brass setting.

For a moment the rascals were paralysed by the sudden entrance of the intruder; then some of the bolder spirits rallied.

"A spy! A sneak! On him, boys, and stop his jaw! Gouge his eyes out ere he grabs our sparklers! Slit his gizzard ere he hollers to his mates!" with other savage cries and horrid oaths resounded, as the villains gathered for a rush.

With a vigorous effort the detective pulled himself together; his peril was as great as ever, and only on himself could he rely. One against twelve, and that dozen lawless ruffians, fearful to lose their ill-gotten gains. Blake knew not even the street he was in, but the company was all sufficient; no honest man might there remain.

Yet how escape? The open window offered no retreat, the only door in the apartment lay on the further side, that snarling, crouching crew between.

Ever resourceful, Blake at once hit upon a plan.

Seizing a fragment of the broken sash, he hurled it upon the table, overturning the bottle, and extinguishing the light, leaving the chamber all in darkness, save for the shimmer of moonlight filtering through the broken window. Besides extinguishing the light, the missile, plunging into the piles, scattered the spoil, and a wealth of plunder flew clattering about the room.

In their amazement, some of the thieves imagined that the intruder had made a dash at the table, and was now pocketing the plunder, so, like starved curs, they also closed in, eager for a share.

This left some clear space by the walls, and, slipping from his place by the window, Blake silently glided round, till he reached a position close by the door (the bearings of which he had taken ere the light went out), and in the rear of the thievish crew.

Now he might possibly escape; yet retreat would be difficult and dangerous. He knew not the fastenings of the door—knew not even which way it opened—and was equally ignorant of what lay beyond, and how to effect egress from the house.

The bolder course was the better, the safer. He would get one or more of the rogues themselves to act as guide.

"The police! The police! The bobbies are on us! Save yourselves, lads!" shouted Blake.

The uproar in the attic had waxed outrageous; the confusion was complete. In the dusk the thieves fought and worried over the scattered spoil, mistaking friend for foe. It seemed to those rascals that quite a number of men had entered by that open window, and when Blake's cry (which they supposed to come from one of themselves) arose in the rear, they were quite prepared to receive the news, and follow the advice given.

"The police!" The words acted on that coward crew like the bright ray of a bull's-eye lantern upon a colony of rats at midnight. There was an affrighted flutter; nervous fear gripped each heart; every man for himself was the general feeling. Those nearest the door groped and felt for the fastening, threw open the portal, and, like a burst reservoir, the head of the crowd poured out.

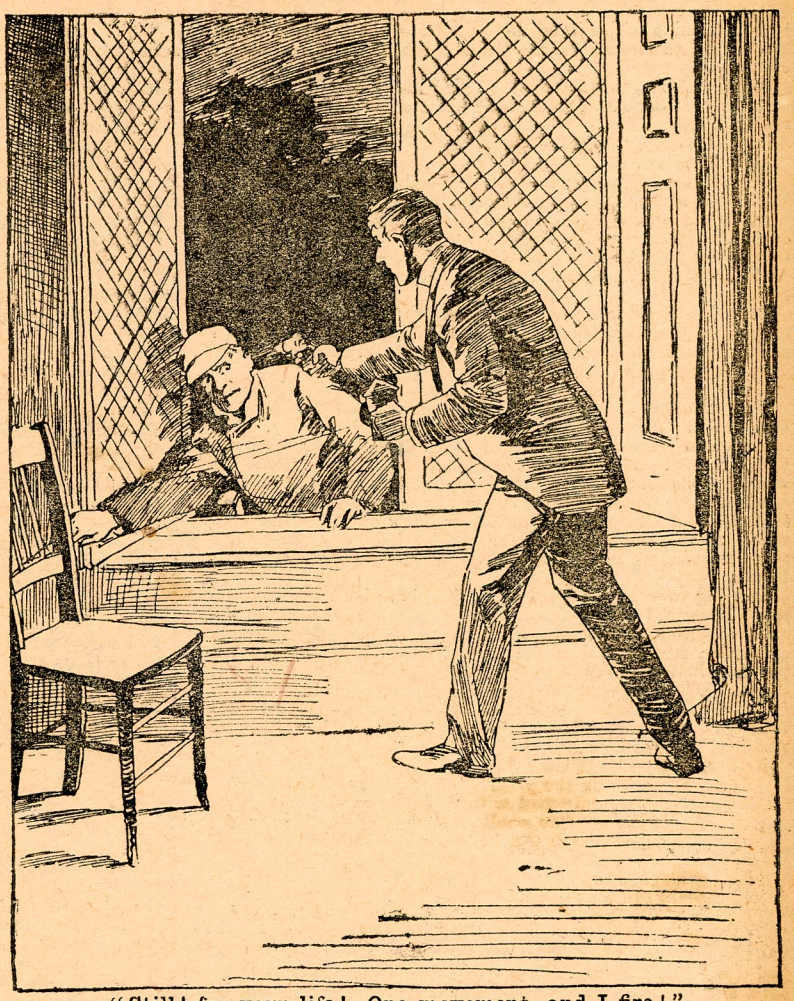
Avoiding the first rush, Blake followed on its slackening, out to the landing, down stair after stair, guided by the frenzied leaders.

Consternation spread. Other occupants of the building who had reason to fear a visit from the police joined in the flight; and when the author of the alarm gained the open street-door, quite a little stream of frantic fugitives had rushed out; others were following fast.

Despite the hurried flight, the detective paused to note the number of the house—the knowledge of such a den might be useful in the future—then, wheeling into the street, he sped away, seemingly as scared as any of the others.

Notwithstanding the untimely hour, there still were loafers about the street. Dark, evil figures started from shadowy recesses, with hurried inquiries of the cause of the disturbance; but a word from the leaders sent those nighthawks darting back to their foul nests.

Well was it for the detective that it was so. Had his real character been suspected, he never would have issued from that alley alive; but, unmolested, he sped on, protected by his presumed villainy.



"Still! for your life! One movement, and I fire!"

But, as it ran, the little stream gradually dwindled away, like water spilled upon sand; and, presently moderating his pace, Blake ultimately emerged, unquestioned, into the comparative safety of the High Street of Shoreditch.

Now he could breathe afresh, review the whirling past, and consider the unknown future.

So far, he had learned little about his proposed case; but that little might lead to much.

Sam Shise was no mere blackmailer. There really was a conspiracy afoot to steal the famous Fenfield diamonds. In that conspiracy was not only a noted "cracksman," but also a man moving in good society; the latter probably the chief villain of the gang.

Blake had taken a certain liking for the frank, too free, young squire. He determined to aid him, if he could, by retaining the tiara, the family heirloom. Possibly he might help him in another direction.

"Yes, I'll enter for the Fenfield Stakes," decided the detective, as he returned to his chambers at cock-crow.

Of his recent encounter with Egbert Trewolf, Blake thought but little. True, he now knew that in that man he had a deadly foe. The ex-convict had shown that he would not scruple to take the life of the man who had been instrumental in "putting him away." With the liberated criminal it was a case of "shoot on sight"; but such risks must ever attend the guardians of the law; and now, forewarned, the detective felt himself fully armed.

Blake's resolution to take up the Fenfield case was clinched by the following note, received at breakfast-time:

"Dear sir,—Mr. Harold Fenfield has told me all about his interview with you. I do hope you will consent to aid him. He is so careless, and sadly needs guidance. The tiara must not be lost on any account, or Harold's honour goes with it.

"Pray watch over all for the next month, Mr. Blake, and you will infinitely oblige. ETHEL CHALLONER.

"P.S.—Pray beware of Mr. Slipton Bale. I don't trust that man, and feel sure he is trying to lead Harold astray.

"I write this in confidence, trusting to you as a man and a gentleman to hold it so."

In the early forenoon, Sexton Blake repaired to the rooms of Harold Fenfield, and delighted that youth by putting his services at his disposal for a month—which period would cover the Fenfield race meeting, and run to the wedding-day of the Master of the Abbey.

Blake found his new client lounging in his dressing-gown, the victim of a severe headache—the fruits of "a rattling night spent with Slipton Bale. Made the beggar pay forfeit for his absurd motor-car bet, don't you know.'

Ere Blake left his careless client, the detective had arranged his plan of campaign. He carried a letter of introduction to Mrs. Harford, housekeeper at Fenfield Abbey, bidding that worthy dame pay every attention to this early guest.

The Abbey was without visitors at present; but it would be pretty full presently for the races, over which Blake was to stay as an ordinary guest (his professional duties being known only to the master—and, of course, to his fiancée).

"You mind the diamonds, Blake, and I'll look after my betting-book!" said the sanguine youth; "and between we two, with 'Spinaway' to help, we'll 'spoil the Egyptians,' bravely."

CHAPTER 4.

THE BOARD SPREAD — THE GAME OPENED — DANGEROUS OPPONENTS — FIRST TRICK TO WE-WEE.

By a mid-day train Sexton Blake travelled down to Fenfield, accompanied by his servant, the Chinese boy We-Wee; but he left the little beagle at the principal hotel in the town, while he himself drove on to the Abbey, some three miles distant, passing on his way the race-course, at present almost deserted, but soon

to be swarming with life on the occasion of the "Spring Meeting," of which the race for the Fenfield Stakes was the principal event.

Fenfield Abbey was a large and lordly structure, big enough for a barracks, standing in an extensive domain; and the housekeeper, Mrs. Harford, received the early guest with the old-fashioned courtesy, delighted at the advent of the first swallow of the coming summer.

On Blake's expressing interest in the historical old Abbey, Mrs. Harford took him over the inhabited portions of the buildings, showing with as much pride as though they had been her own pictures of ancestors of the Fenfield family, dating back to the Saxon rule before the Norman conquest, with many ancient weapons and other curiosities, seemingly as old as the flood.

But while showing a polite interest in these ancient relics and heirlooms, the detective was more concerned with the modern portion of the Abbey; and an astute remark led to the bedroom of the young squire.

Here, then, reposed the diamond tiara, the thirty thousand pounds trinket—the object of conspiracy—and Blake had no difficulty in "spotting" the safe in which the jewels lay. The room was a large one, lighted by two lofty, latticed windows, which opened on hinges, like a double door. Their fastening was of the most primitive kind, top and bottom bolts holding one sash shut, the other being secured by a small swinging catch that dropped into a slot in the other half. Such slender bars would not detain a professional burglar half a minute. The room was on the first-floor, and might easily be reached by a ladder.

Crossing over to the strong-box, the detective examined the safe. It seemed secure enough—partly built into a recess in the wall, the front guarded by a massive door. It offered ample protection from fire, but was no defence against the modern burglar—its lock being of the most ordinary description. "Bill Sykes," with his scientific appliances, could easily force it. How culpably careless was it of the young squire—Harold Fenfield—to leave his valuable family heirlooms in such an insecure position? It was almost inviting their loss.

And, hallo! "Bill Sykes" had been here already. Someone had been reconnoitring the ground. A blur round the keyhole on the metal plate glistened with a greasy mark, and closer examination disclosed some small fragments of plastic-wax adhering to the finger-plate. An impression of the lock had been taken, and that recently. The plot was thickening.

"Any strangers been here lately, Mrs. Harford?" Blake inquired casually, turning aside.

"No, sir! We have been very quiet for some time," was the housekeeper's reply. "We do not usually show this room even to callers desiring to view the house. But that reminds me; we had one gentleman only this morning. He came with the usual card, and I showed him over the Abbey. He wanted to see the modern rooms also; so I showed him in here, as well as over the reception-rooms. He was a most courteous, affable gentleman, middle-aged, grey-haired, and sensible; but I could tell from his face he had seen sore trouble. But he was a perfect gentleman, sir. Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Oh, no, Mrs. Harford! I think not! Was he alone for any time in this room?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Blake! At least, hardly. It is true I had to go to the next room to fetch a portrait he wanted; but I wasn't away half a minute; and that don't count."

Blake could learn no further particular regarding this man, save that he signed the visitors'-book "Reginald Pomfret." He appeared to be but an ordinary, sight-seeing tourist, and had gone away after visiting the place.

Ere leaving these quarters, Blake arranged with the housekeeper to let him have the bedroom adjoining the squire's, which Mrs. Harford agreed to willingly, at least temporarily. That bedroom would be wanted during the race week for Sir George and Lady Halsham; but the early guest could have it till the company arrived. So the game was arranged—plot and counter-plot.

That evening, by appointment, Sexton Blake met his beagle in the Abbey grounds.

"Any news, We-Wee? Many folk stopping at the hotel?"

"Only myself and another gen'l'man, master," replied the Celestial. "One 'slap-shot' man. He carry 'Kodak,' and take pictures like winking. Friend of mine, master. He took my likeness."

"Did he, though? He must have an interesting gallery, my boy."

"Yes," continued the lad, not noticing the sarcasm; "there was also another gent there, name of Reginald Pomfret——"

"Eh! What name, We-Wee?"

"Reginald Pomfret, master. At least, so he call himself; but he leave this day before we got here. Went back to London, master. Boots saw him off.

"He terribly curious about the Abbey, master. Ask lots of questions about it from everybody. He went over this morning."

"Ah! Pity you did not see him, boy. He left before we arrived, you say?"

"Oh yes, master; but I got his portrait—begged it from my friend the 'slap-shot' man. Thought you might want um. Here it is!" and the boy took a "Kodak" print from his pocket.

The likeness was that of Egbert Trewolf, the ex-convict—the man who had tried to murder Sexton Blake in Shoreditch.

Carefully the detective reviewed the startling development as he returned to the Abbey; while the scout scudded back to his outpost at the hotel.

The game was opening, indeed. Blake could now recognise his opponents, and conjecture their lines of attack.

According to Sam Shise, the conspirators were three in number—himself a subordinate one. Now it appeared Trewolf was a member of the gang. Was the ex-convict the skilful "cracksman," or the "man about town"? Certainly not the latter. Trewolf's day was past for that, and he had not yet had time to re-establish himself in any society, save amongst criminals. Then who was the "man about town"? Blake covered his mouth with his hand, afraid even to breathe the name that rose to his lips. Even the woods might have ears.

But he knew at least two out of the three. That was enough to start with. Pomfret, alias Trewolf, had gone up to town that forenoon, carrying with him an impression of the lock of the safe in Fenfield Abbey that contained the diamonds. His reason was as plain as though he had proclaimed it from the housetops. He meant to procure a key to fit.

Further, the attempt upon the safe would doubtless be made by the three plotters in company—criminals do not trust each other. And, again, such action would probably be taken as soon as possible—before the company arrived to render the Abbey busy and bustling.

But a key could not be obtained in an hour; and Trewolf must have time to perfect his plans. The attempt would probably be made under cover of darkness. Blake fixed upon the second night from now as the critical period.

It was no good warning the careless owner. Harold Fenfield was, at the moment, more interested in his betting-book than in his diamond heirloom. Blake resolved to play the game single-handed, as he had often done successfully before.

That evening the Abbey household retired early to rest; and, when all was quiet, Blake stole into the chamber of the master, and, with the safe full in view, resolved to spend the night on a couch.

He did not anticipate any attempt so soon; but it is a true saying, "nothing is so certain as the unexpected," and it is well to be prepared for any developments.

Blake might have claimed others to share his vigil. There were three menservants in the house; but to call their aid meant to show his own hand and expose his true character, which was not to be thought of. Further, the butler was a portly old fellow, with his whole soul in his wine-cellar; while the two footmen, though big and burly, appeared to have lost their courage in developing their calves.

The night passed uneventfully, and at dawn the watcher slipped back, unobserved, to his own chamber.

In the course of the following day, Blake paid a visit to the training stables—a modern establishment, erected a considerable distance from the Abbey, but within the private grounds.

Here he met the trainer, a man who had spent a lifetime in the service of the Fenfield family, and who was more eager to win the stakes than Harold Fenfield himself; but for a different reason—the honour of his stable and the credit of the horse he had bred.

After some natural hesitation, Mr. Trotter afforded the Abbey guest a view of the coming hero—Spinaway—a long, low, blood-like bay, with white stockings and a raking stride.

"'E's as right as ninepence, and as fit as a fiddle," declared the enthusiastic trainer, as Spinaway was treated to a "breather." There's nothing on the card to touch him, sir. The race is all over bar the shouting."

"I hope so, indeed," replied Blake sincerely. He certainly trusted the favourite would win, if only for the sake of its "plunging" master; but he felt by no means so sanguine as Mr. Trotter. Blake had an idea that the conspiracy embraced more than the robbery of the diamonds; but in any case, the turf matter was out of his hands, and must be left to Spinaway and those who were looing after him.

Another interview with We-wee revealed nothing fresh; and when night came, Blake resumed his vigil over the safe in Harold Fenfield's bedroom.

During the previous night Blake had allowed himself an occasional doze; but now he lay vigilant and alert. The crisis might come at any moment; no time now for the sentry to nod.

Within the chamber rested the silence of the grave; but from without came the sound of moaning wind, swiftly rising, till soon a gale was blowing.

All within was dark and silent, the position of the latticed window faintly outlined; but Blake had lighted and closed a

bull's-eye lantern, which, with a loaded revolver, formed his weapons of defence.

Drearily the time slipped by, and the watcher had to stir and pinch his limbs to keep himself awake; but, shortly after midnight, came a sound that aroused him to keenest attention.

'Twas only a muffled "pat-pat" on the window-ledge without; but instantly the watcher slipped softly from his couch, and, with closed lantern in one hand, self-cocking revolver in the other, stole stealthily to the casement.

On peering through the window, the muffled ends of a ladder could be seen resting against the sill; a minute more, and a man's head and shoulders appeared at the ladder top.

No time was wasted; all had been carefully planned. Kneeling on the sill, the burglar felt the casement over. A slight scratching and grinding and a lozenge pane was abstracted—the pane immediately in front of the revolving catch. A hand inserted in the aperture, the fastening was pushed back, and the sash thrown open. Then the fellow prepared to enter the room.

But now, like a lightning flash on a summer's eve, Blake's lantern was turned on, the dazzling glow within a foot of the rascal's face. More drastic still, the cold muzzle of the revolver was pressed against his temple, and a low, stern voice breathed the words:

"Still! for your life! One movement, and I fire!"

The lantern blaze revealed the features of Sam Shise. A startled sob burst from his lips, his jaw dropped in dismay; but he obeyed the injunction for quietude, save that his affrighted eyes volleyed a score of questions.

So they stood, grim and silent, while one might count ten; and, glancing downwards, Blake remarked two other dark figures clinging to the ladder.

Then, suddenly the ladder itself began to vibrate, and, continuing his downward gaze, Blake distinguished a small, sprite-like form at the ladder-foot.

To prevent their sinking in the soft ground, the ends had been placed on two pieces of wood; and now this impish figure was jerking and tugging, struggling to draw the ladder away. It trembled, tottered, slipped back from its supports, and was on the point of falling aslant, when Sam Shise lost his hold, slid downwards, brushed away the two men underneath, toppled them over like playing-cards set on end, and, in a confused mass, the three fell crashing to the ground.

At the same time, a shrill "Ki! ki!" followed by a weird chuckle, arose from the author of the overthrow—a call which Blake recognised at once.

CHAPTER 5.

TRIP FOLLOWS TRIUMPH—IN THE HANDS OF THE FOE—WE-WEE HANGED!

Leaning out of his window, Sexton Blake eagerly watched the downfall.

On the ground the three fallen men lay in a confused, struggling heap—one body it seemed, with sundry wriggling limbs radiating. It resembled a huge octopus, while from its centre was wafted a chorus of curses and vituperation.

Then the units of that evil company parted, the three men rolled asunder, and each sprang to his feet. Yet, even as they arose, a gust of wind caught the toppling ladder, sweeping it from the wall, and in its fall it hit one of the band on the shoulder, sending the fellow staggering into his companions, under a further torrent of malediction.

That completed the discomfiture of the burglars. With united consent they hurried away, disappearing like evil spirits into the darkness, their flight being hailed with another "Ki! ki!" and a further impish chuckle for a clump of rhododendrons hard by.

"You there, We-wee?" breathed Blake softly from his window.

"Yes, master, here I be," sounded from the rhododendron cluster. And the little Chinaman wriggled out to the open.

"Can you come up here, boy? I want to speak with you privately. See whether you can raise that ladder."

"Don't want ladder, master. Here one ready fixed, plenty good." And, kicking off his boots, the imp grasped a rain-pipe that passed close by the window, and, running up like a monkey, joined his master in a trice.

"Now, boy, tell me what has happened, as shortly as you can."

We-wee's recital was a model of brevity.

Reginald Pomfret had returned from London by the last train that night, bringing with him a companion—a London rough. We-wee knew the breed well.

The two had ordered a double-bedded room—one on the ground floor if possible. This they obtained, and, retiring thence, the little beagle watched its windows vigilantly.

Shortly after the hotel people had retired to rest, the window was quietly opened, and the two men stole stealthily away, followed by We-wee, quite as silently.

Outside the town they were joined by another man.

"Did you see him plainly, boy? Should you know him again?" interrupted Blake eagerly.

"No, master; I no' have cat's eyes. The night very dark. And, besides, he wrapped in one long ulster, with hood over 'un head. See nothing but cloak. Heard no talk. But I know 'un again. He marked by ladder—wollop——"

"Um! Never mind. Go on."

But the boy had little more to tell.

The marauding trio had broken into the demain through a gap in the hedge; had picked up a ladder (evidently noted beforehand), had raised it against the window, partially ascended; then Blake himself had appeared on the scene.

"My! How they run? What fright they got? Three big men from one small boy!" chuckled the imp in conclusion.

"H'm'm!" mused the master. "I almost wish you had not interfered so soon, but left me to deal with them. I would give much to know the identity of that third man. The other two I know, of course. Your 'Reginald Pomfret' is Egbert Trewolf, the ex-convict; his companion is Sam Shise; but the third—ah! there's the rub. Whoever he is, he is the head of the conspiracy!

"Never mind, We-wee. Perhaps it was all for the best that you scared them away. I might have found three reckless ruffians too much for me.

"Now, boy, get back to the hotel as soon as you can, and watch there for any further developments.

"Mind how you go. Be careful you do not stumble upon these fellows on your way back. They are desperate characters, and, maddened by their repulse, will make short work of you should they catch you. Take care of yourself, my boy."

"All loighettee! They no catch We-wee easier than one weasel!" answered the boy confidently. And, stepping on the window-sill, he grasped the rain-spout, and slid deftly to the ground; then, resuming his boots, scudded off like a hare.

Away went We-wee, chuckling gleefully as he ran.

However, not infrequently, a trip follows a triumph. The boy would have done well to have acted on his master's advice, and proceeded warily; but, carried away by his recent success, he thought himself invincible.

Avoiding the main gate, with its watchful dogs at the lodge, the little Chinaman made for the break in the hedge by which he had entered—through which he had been led, rather; but ere reaching that point, in passing through the thickest of the wood, he was suddenly pounced upon, and held in over-mastering grip, while a hoarse voice grated in his ear:

"Whoa, Emma! 'Old up, and let's 'ave a look at yer. Where away so fast, my kiddy?"

It was Sam Shise; Egbert Trewolf stood by his side, and a few paces distant was the third; the unknown man, still hooded and muffled in his ulster.

After their rout, the three had halted for consultation, and poor We-wee had unfortunately blundered into their midst.

"Why," continued Sam, after dragging the boy to a less obscure place, "if it ain't that infernal kid that upset our apple-cart just now. It's the bloomin' nipper that was spying on us at the hotel, too. Oh, I knows him!"

"And I know him also, although I never saw him before to-night," cried Trewolf. "I heard a lot about the imp when I was living in—ah! retirement. I tell you he is Sexton Blake's boy. He has helped to 'put away' as many good men as Blake himself."

"Oh! Blake's boy? That explains a lot!" said Shise. "I was too close to the pistol-barrel of the old 'un just now to be exactly pleasant. Blake's boy? Wot shall we do with him?"

"Hold him tight. Now give me your rope, and I'll show you," was the fierce reply.

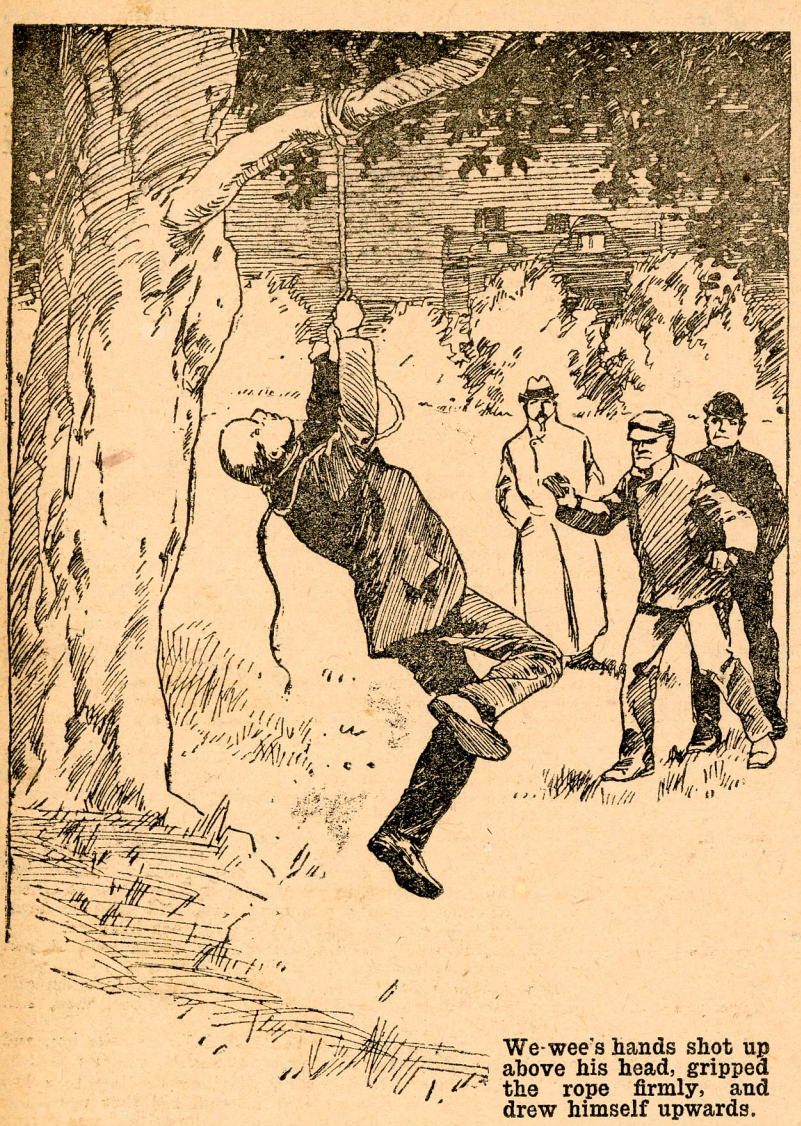
Then, taking the little coil handed him—it was a stout cord, about seven feet long—Trewolf threw one end over a lateral bough overhead, tied it in a slip-knot, then tightened it, leaving the bulk of the rope dangling from the branch.

"What are you going to do?" interposed the third man, coming forward.

"Hang him!" was the curt reply.

"Not literally? Why, man, that would be murder! No, no, I can't be party to that!" cried the other, in horrified amazement.

"And what if it be?" was the callous reply. "Have not he and his accursed master consigned scores of better men to a living death? Did not Sexton Blake bring myself to the felon's dock, and draw upon my head the terrible death sentence? Never, should I live to the age of Methuselah, will these awful words cease to ring in my ears—'to be hanged by the neck till you are dead!' I am but executing upon the servant the doom brought upon me by the master. This is but the foretaste of my vengeance upon Sexton Blake.



We-wee's hands shot up above his head, gripped the rope firmly, and drew himself upwards.

"And, if it need any thought to quiet you, remember it is necessary for your own safety. If we still not the supple tongue of the servant, the fierce fingers of the master will soon be at our own throats.

"But, in any case, I bid you stand aside. You need take no hand in this game. I play my own hand, and play it I will to a finish. Now, hoist him up, Sam. Raise him, so he may swing clear!"

While the desperate ruffian was speaking, he had been knotting a noose on the loose end of the cord. It dangled now, fully six feet from the ground, and the craven unknown, seeing the futility of further protest, retired a short distance, to dissociate himself from the evil deed.

The boy made no struggle, uttered no cry for help or mercy. Help he knew there was none within hearing; mercy he recognised was unknown to his butchers. And he had another reason for his passiveness. A wild thought, a flickering chance of ultimate escape shot across his cunning brain, a desperate hazard, but still a hope; but the time was not yet to put his scheme to the test.

Sam Shise suffered from no such scruples as the unknown. He was prepared to obey orders, as callous as any hangman's assistant.

He raised the resistless lad in his arms, heaved high the passive head, and held his burden aloft while Trewolf slipped on the noose, and drew it tight. Then he let the victim swing, and the ruthless wretches stood aside to gloat over the dying agonies of the boy.

Alas! poor We-wee!

But the clever little Celestial was not yet at the end of his resources. Even while still in the hands of his all-powerful captor, a plan of escape had suggested itself.

When a man is legally hanged, his arms and legs are pinioned. Wee-wee's limbs were unfettered; and it was to avoid inviting attention to this fact that he had abstained from struggling.

Now he swung clear, and his murderers stepped further back to afford him space to die.

For some seconds the boy "played 'possum"—hung as inert as though life had already fled. 'Twas hard to remain thus, even for a moment. The rope closed around his throat; his weight tightening its stifling grip. The thrill of the strands as the pleats slipped over each other permeated his whole being. The rasping rope bruised and frayed his skin. His windpipe was crushed in and sealed. Slow torture—death by asphyxia—grasped him in its fatal grip.

Not long might mortal frame sustain such torment; but no long time was passive suffering required. His murderers were several paces distant now, to leave room for the convulsive struggles of their victim; and their satanic faces, which had clouded at the boy's inertia, cleared again as they saw the arms wave, fancying the death-grapple about to begin.

But the boy's arms did more than wave. Wee-wee's hands shot up above his head, gripped the rope firmly, he drew himself upwards; then, with but a momentary pause, as the strain on his throat was relaxed, swarmed up the rope like a squirrel, threw his leg over the bough, cleared his neck from the noose—taking care not to let the rope dangle—then, with a shrill, triumphant "Ki! Ki!" disappeared amongst the luxuriant foliage of the spreading elm.

For some minutes the murderers underneath stood spellbound—too amazed even for speech; far too astounded to act. Then a mocking laugh from high aloft roused them; and, with frantic, thoughtless rage, they burned to grip the fugitive again.

The bulky Shise tried to climb the tree, but its massive girth repulsed all effort; while, as the trunk was branchless at the base, it afforded no aid to ascent. The smaller, slighter Trewolf endeavoured, by springing up, to grasp the branch or rope; but the former grew beyond his reach, and the latter, thanks to the lad's forethought, hung no lower.

Next, in their spiteful fury, the two picked up sticks, stones, turf—anything to serve as missiles—and fired a fusillade into the tree; while if curses could have harmed, the boy had not long survived.

However, the tree was thick, the leafy screen complete; and the unknown dastard returning at length, induced his allies to listen to reason; and all three went away.

When We-wee—warily now—crept back to the hotel, all was silent and dark. The window of his enemies was black; nor had he seen anything of his foes by the way.

A friendly rain-spout, however, enabled the boy to reach his own chamber; and he tumbled into bed—he that, so shorly before appeared to be making ready for his last earthly couch, the grave.

We-wee overslept himself next morning, which was not surprising; and when he issued from his bedroom, he learned that Mr. Reginald Pomfret and his "friend" had left.

With brazen audacity, the two villains had returned to their sleeping-room, entering noiselessly and unnoticed by the way they had issued. The "boots" had been instructed the evening before to call them early; and his discreet tap in the morning was answered by a sleepy hail from within. Presently the two came forth, yawning and stretching themselves, volubly attesting that they both had enjoyed a grand night's sleep. They paid their bill, and departed; but they left an alibi behind. Should they ever be called upon, the landlord and servants were prepared to swear that these two had passed the whole night under the hotel roof.

Of the third man, We-wee could learn nothing. His disappearance was as mysterious as his advent. He had appeared

and vanished like a ghost—a very substantial "spook," however, as evidenced when the ladder struck him.

CHAPTER 6.

DOUBTS — A VISIT TO THE STABLES — THE "NOBBLER"—DUCK HIM!—SOUSE HIM!

When Sexton Blake looked over the ground in the morning, all signs of the struggle on the lawn had disappeared, a deluge of rain having washed away all footprints and other traces. The ladder lay there, just as it had fallen; but the gale was amply sufficient cause for its overthrow.

Blake hunted for, found, and replaced the glass lozenge cut from the casement, and the master's bedroom looked as if it had never been entered by door or window. The detective would have liked to fasten the weak sash more securely; but in his capacity of guest he dare not even make such a suggestion. He was not supposed by the servants to have any interest in the squire's bedroom, and preferred not to divulge his real character. These frail fastenings must remain as they were; at least till Harold Fenfield arrived. All Blake could do in the meantime was to enact the part of an alert watch-dog.

The morning mail-bag brought a letter from Fenfield, that rash youth being still in London, growing hourly more eagerly engrossed over the coming race; and one paragraph of the missive specially invited attention.

"I cannot understand the market in regard to the 'Fenfield Stakes,'" wrote Harold. "One would almost think that my horse was not intended to run. There is a powerful influence against 'Spinaway' in some quarter, but I cannot locate it. Slipton Bale has been laying heavily against 'Spinaway,' I hear; but I don't count much on his judgment, as he always puts his money on the wrong horse—he has lost nearly all his fortune on the turf. I have backed 'Spinaway' for more than I should care to lose, and shall stick by the horse to the end. This is my last flutter, as I have promised to cut the turf altogether after my marriage. Over the Fenfield course Spinaway is bound to win; he can give anything he will meet there five pounds and a beating—that is, if he is fit and well. That he is so at present I have the most explicit assurances from Trotter; and I can trust the trainer to keep him so, for the honour of his stable. If you have nothing to do you might walk over to the stables occasionally and have a look round."

"No, no, Master Harold!" mused the detective, "that was not in our bargain. I was to look after the diamonds, you yourself to attend to your betting affairs. I don't profess to understand turf matters. I prefer to have nothing to do with them. Though my business brings me in contact with rogues and criminals of every shade, the clever rascals on the turf—and their name is legion—are perhaps too smart for me. I prefer to leave them alone, unless specially called in. The novice who attempts to dabble in horse-racing is bound to come a cropper. Wise men stand clear.

"Shouldn't at all wonder if there was a conspiracy afloat to run young Fenfield over this race. The matter of the diamonds may be but another branch of the same affair. If so, who is interested in ruining the lad? Was not Slipton Bale a suitor for the hand of the heiress, Miss Ethel Challoner? This Slipton Bale, I see, is acting against my client now. I wonder—— Yes, I think I'll act on Harold's suggestion to have a look at the stables occasionally. I'll go this very day."

In accordance with this resolution, the investigator set out after breakfast for the training station.

As Blake neared the stables he became conscious of a strange commotion in that usually quiet, well-ordered place, where things generally went with the regularity of clockwork. Yells and shouts resounded; the hue and cry was raised, and hastening up a swelling ridge a strange sight met his gaze.

To the right lay the stable and paddocks, away to the left stretched the downs—the private exercise grounds—through which meandered the sluggish river.

From the houses a stream of grooms and stable-boys, like a pack of hounds just laid on—yelping as loudly—in hot chase after a big, burly, loutish figure that was lumbering away over the downs. And that leading figure?—why, it was Sam Shise.

"Yorricks! Stole away! Hark for'ard!" yelled the boys, laying on the trail like beagles; and Blake noticed that Trotter, the trainer, himself was hounding them on.

It was like a paper-chase. Nay! rather like the pursuit of a detected welsher on a race-course.

Away went Shise, already puffing and blowing, blundering over grass tussocks, splashing through soft places, and tearing through bush and bramble. His bloodshot eyes were staring from their sockets, as ever and anon he shot swift shoulder glances at his ever-nearing pursuers. His breath became more and more laboured, coming and going in gasping sobs; yet still he struggled on.

Such a race, however, could not last long. Tripping over a tangle by the river's brim, the fugitive fell headlong; and ere he could rise again, his pursuers threw themselves upon him, as ravenous as a pack of fox-hounds.

"Duck him! Souse him, lads!" was shouted.

"Ay, ay! he's dirty enough to want a bath!" "Looks 'ot, don't 'e; reckon the water will cool his coppers." "Souse him! Souse him!" and other cries were raised.

Then the stable lads, fixing upon the bulky figure, pounced upon the exhausted Shise, rolled him over and over nearer the stream; then, raising him one and all, pitched the rascal well into the stagnant water.

In plunged Shise with a mighty splash that frightened the water-rats and newts for half a mile away. Over he rolled in the slimy stream; then, gasping and groaning, panting and puffing, slowly crawled to land—a pitiable object, covered with muddy slush, plastered with oozy green slime.

"In with him again! Sure he's not half washed!" roared

Pitched the rascal well into the stagnant water.

the lads; and they would have done it, too, had not they been restrained by their superior.

"No, no, boys! He has had enough for once. Reckon he'll mind the lesson. He won't come smelling round our place again. Hunt him off the chase, lads! Hound him on to the turnpike, and may bad luck go with him," cried Mr. Trotter, interposing. And, willingly enough, the tormentors continued their worry on land, chasing the draggled scarecrow from off the domain.

"What's the row. What's it all about?" inquired Blake of the still excited Trotter.

"Why, sir," snapped the trainer, irritably; "the rascal has been hanging about the place for some time. I warned him off before, as he has no business here, and I won't have him. At first I thought him one of those abominable sneaking touts; now I suspect him of something worse. He was smelling about 'Spinaway's' box. I saw him talking to one of the stable lads. Gave the boy money, he did. That was enough for me. I just turned the others on the skunk, and a fine game they had with him. Reckon he won't shove his dirty nose in my stables again."

"How is 'Spinaway' getting on?" inquired Blake, as the trainer was about to move off towards the station.

"Right as ninepence, sir, and fit as a fiddle, as I told you before," was the firm reply. "At last the Fenfield Stakes comes to the Fenfield stable. The race is all over, Mr. Blake, barring the shoutin'."

"And barring accidents," suggested the detective, significantly."

"There won't be no 'accidents,' sir, so long as Bob Trotter is about," returned the other, dogmatically. "Not but what there might have been one, if that sneaking reptile had been allowed to have his way; but I keep the place clean of all such vermin. Old Bob Trotter knows a thing or two."

"The horse is not very steady in the betting, I understand," remarked Blake.

"So I notice, sir; but that is nothing to me. I have only one bet on the race, if you can call it that. Mr. Harold has laid me a fancy wager of fifty pounds to a stable-bucket against 'Spinaway.' That is, if our horse wins, he makes me a present of fifty quid; should he lose, I pay the stable-bucket. But don't you make any mistake, sir; the bucket won't be wanted. I'll bring 'Spinaway' to the post trained to the hour; fit to run for the crown of England. It's a cert., sir! As sure as eggs is eggs. Now I must hurry back, Mr. Blake. I must shunt that stable-boy who took the rascal's money. I'll sack him on the spot. No harm has been done yet, and I'll take precious good care none follows."

"That's a determined, reliable man," mused Blake, as he walked back to the abbey. "The horse is safe with him, but the rascals of the Turf are smelling about. They would like to 'nobble' the animal, I dare say. Probably that was Sam Shise's object now.

"I wonder who is behind that rogue—who is employing him. Trewolf is not the principal, but only another tool. So they are acting against the horse as well as against the diamonds? Looks certainly as though there was a conspiracy to ruin young Fenfield. Yes, I think my thought a little while back may be correct. Well, between us, I fancy we'll foil them. I will attend to the jewels, Trotter will look after the horse, thus Harold's precious betting-book will turn up trumps. I am glad the foolish young fellow means to cut the whole disreputable business after his marriage, though.

"Horse-racing is, in itself, a noble sport, but it is ruined by the blacklegs who prey upon it."

CHAPTER 7.

A VILLAINOUS PLOT—COLLECTING THE THREADS—"NOBBLING" THE FAVOURITE.

After that the time slipped by uneventfully. Day after day passed, with nothing to break the monotony. No further attempt was made upon the safe, which Blake guarded as jealously as a sentry on duty. Still, he longed for the end of his vigil. So soon as Harold came down, he would induce that heedless youth to have a fresh lock put upon the safe. In its present state it was no security whatever, since the other side held a duplicate key.

At length the weary watch drew to a close, the crucial time drew near. Two days before the opening of the Spring Meeting, Harold Fenfield returned to the abbey, to receive his numerous invited guests bidden for the meet.

At the stables things had proceeded in the same steady fashion. Spinaway took his gallop regularly, his feeds freely. The horse was in tip-top condition, and Mr. Trotter was, if possible, more confident than ever. No further "nobbling" had been attempted; all strangers were strictly excluded from the stables. The race was "a moral" for Spinaway.

On We-wee's hands the time hung heavy—none of 'his friends the enemy' showed at the hotel—and the boy, being vouched for by Sexton Blake, was permitted by Mr. Trotter to have the run of the stables, making friends there with man and beast.

Had the conspirators abandoned their plotting—thrown up the game? It seemed like it; but storms frequently come when least expected.

We-wee, after seeing the young squire arrive by train and set out for the abbey, had returned to the hotel, when, through the open window of the coffee-room, he heard a well-known voice say:

"I tell you, you fool, we are safer here than anywhere else! The boldest course is ever the wisest. We are known here as men of respectable standing. Here we are above suspicion. No; we won't go into the house yet. Come into the garden, and I will give you the details. In the open I can make sure there are no listeners. Come along."

Peering cautiously out, the lad discovered "Mr. Reginald Pomfret," alias Egbert Trewolf, arm-in-arm with Sam Shise. The two former guests had evidently come for a further stay, as each had brought a biggish bag; but, ere entering the house, they passed round to the garden, as if to gratify themselves with a fresh look at the old, familiar scene.

Instantly the little beagle pricked up his ears; at once he was hot on the scent.

The hotel garden was one of those old-fashioned parterres laid out in winding paths, under shady groves, with arbours and summer-houses planted here and there; and, a glance round showing the place deserted, the two men took seat in one of the latter, quite oblivious of the stealthy, rearward approach of the Chinese lad.

"Now comes the time for us to strike, and strike we shall, swift and sure!" Trewolf was saying when We-wee crept within earshot. "It's our last chance. We must make no mistake like you did last time, you bungling fool!"

"Bungling fool yourself!" growled Shise. "I don't see as you has much to boast of. Wot did you make of the attempt on the abbey? I don't like this job, mate. I sha'n't forget in a hurry my last visit to the stables. They chevied me off like a polecat, and soused me in that filthy drain of a river. Faugh! I never was fond o' water. I've taken none, even in my grog, ever since!"

"Serve you right, for blundering, Sam; but this time we shall make no mistake. The thing is as easy as buttering bread!"

"See here. I know the wench who carries the supper-beer to the boys. I shall meet her on her way to the stable with the beer for the boy who watches Spinaway. A snuff of powder will hocuss the liquor, and half an hour after he drinks it, the lad will be as sound asleep as Julius Cæsar!

"Then we will slip into the stable; if the boy stirs, so much the worse for him; but he won't. Then I steal into Spinaway's box, pull down a handful of hay from the rack, dust it with a certain powder I have, and put it in his manger. That's all. As easy as kissing your hand. The stuff is tasteless, odourless, and leaves no trace. In twelve hours the horse will be weak and groggy, sick and feeble. It will seem only a temporary indisposition, you know, such as all racehorses are liable to. In a week he will be as well as ever; but Spinaway won't win the Fenfield Stakes, nor will his owner keep his diamonds; but that's another affair altogether. So I'll have some revenge on Sexton Blake—beat him at his own game—and you and I will net a very tidy reward at the same time!"

"And that's to be done to-night, you say?"

"To-night, of course! The stakes are to be run for the day after to-morrow, so the stuff must have time to work!"

"Does the ——, our principal, you know, go with us to-night?" inquired Shise.

"No," laughed Trewolf. "His shoulder is still a bit sore from that clip with the ladder. But we can manage without him. He will be with us when we make our dash for the diamonds, though. He won't trust us alone; confound him!

"Now, that's enough. See you don't blab, and mind you keep sober. Come along, and we will take up our quarters in the hotel. I wrote to secure them in advance, as the place will be filling up for the races."

When Harold Fenfield returned to the abbey, he was met in the hall by Sexton Blake, and greeted the detective heartily with:

"How do, friend Blake? Still at your post, I see. Diamonds safe, eh?"

"Hush, man! Not so loud. Remember, I am only a guest. Yes, so far as I know, the jewels are all right. The outside of the safe is, and the door has not been opened since I took up guard. But, come along, and see for yourself. I want to make certain also. Let's open the nest and look at the eggs!"

"Oh, bother! There is no such need for hurry, Blake!"

"That is as it may be, Mr. Fenfield. The thing must be seen to now. I want to assure myself I have not all the while been guarding a harried nest. Come along!"

Somewhat reluctantly the young squire adjourned to his bed-

room with Blake. The safe was unlocked, and the diamonds found secure.

The package was about the size of a well-stuffed brief-bag, and consisted of several coverings, the outer one of yellow leather, with the Fenfield arms embossed upon it, being something like an ordinary handbag. Within, and detachable, was a stout, steel casket, with silver facings; within the casket lay a morocco case, holding the tiara.

Fenfield withdrew the ornament, and looked at it carelessly. Blake examined it closely, with the knowledge of an expert. The diadem was a magnificent affair, the centre ornament being composed of massive, flawless diamonds, of wondrous depth and fire, the supporting rows of smaller brilliants diminishing in size, though scarcely in lustre. It was well worth the envy it excited, and the consequent care with which it was guarded. Men would sell their very souls for such a trinket.

Harold, however, regarded it with the nonchalance of assured possession, merely remarking: "How queenly it will appear on the head of my future wife."

When the ornament was restored to its nest again and locked up, Blake related the recent attempt upon it, pointed out that the safe was no security now, and begged his client to have a new lock fixed at once.

"All right. I'll see about it when next I go up to town. There is no one hereabouts to do such a job," was the careless reply. Nor, try as he might, could Blake induce the young fellow to take prompt action; or, indeed, to take much interest in the matter.

"How is Spinaway going in the market now?" inquired Blake, giving up the hopeless task, and reverting to the only subject at present of moment to his young friend.

"Why," cried the plunger, "I understand the betting-ring less than ever. There is a wonderfully strong opposition; but I can't discover its authors. All sorts of stories and rumours are floating about. It is even stated that the horse will not start. Several of my best friends have asked me privately whether I really mean to run Spinaway. 'To run, and win,' is always my emphatic reply; but it don't seem to carry much weight, somehow."

"How is your friend, Slipton Bale, Mr. Fenfield? Is he still laying against you?"

"Oh," replied Harold, with a light laugh, "I have not seen much of him lately. He met with an accident in the hunting-field the other day, I believe—knocked his shoulder out; carries his fin in a sling at present. Yes, he is still backing Sparkheels, the only other horse we have to fear; but, as I told you, that is a good sign. Slipton Bale invariably puts his money on the wrong horse. I expect the Fenfield Stakes will about break him; but that is his own fault. I gave him plenty of tips, and a wealth of warnings; but only wasted my breath. He is coming down for the race, however. You will see him to-morrow, I suppose. Poor chap, I feel sorry for him, though he is such an arrant fool!

"But now I must run over to the stables. I am all eagerness to see Trotter and Spinaway."

"One moment!" interposed Blake, as the youth was hurrying from the room. "I have a favour to ask in that connection."

"My boy We-wee has begged to be allowed to sleep in the stable to-night; or, rather, to spend the night with the lad who watches Spinaway. I don't know his object, but he has some good reason for it. There is an order I have written to Trotter. Kindly sign it."

"Um! I hardly like interfering with Bob Trotter's arrangements," hesitated Fenfield. "Is your boy quite straight, Blake?"

"Straight as a die, and true as steel, Fenfield. I would trust him with my honour—with my life itself. Indeed, I have done so many a time. Believe me, it will be to your interest to let him have his way in this!"

"Oh, all right. There you are, then, since you vouch for him so strongly," replied Harold, tossing over the signed paper.

It is evening in the Fenfield stables. Commandant Bob Trotter has made his rounds of the garrison, and found all in order. In the citadel—the stable in which Spinaway is stalled—two youths sit on guard; one, the regular stable-lad appointed for the duty; the other, We-wee, as a volunteer to keep him company.

Presently the door opens, and a girl trips in, bearing a covered tray, and, removing the cloth, discloses a most appetising supper—curried rabbit, fragrantly pungent, and a cool flagon of ale.

"That's yer sort!" cried the stable-boy, pouncing on the pewter and indulging in a good swig. "Have a bite wi' me, mate?"

"No. I have had my supper. Don't want any more," replied We-wee.

"'Ave a sup o' beer, then?"

"No, not that, either. I never touch beer or spirits. Th don't suit me."

"Bah!" cried the boy; "that's owing to your funny foreign, froggy ways. I suppose if you wanted to get drunk you would do it on opium? Faugh! Give me good, honest English beer—that's the stuff as makes John Bull!" And when he finished his curry, he inverted the flagon, draining it to the very dregs.

"Whew! That's better. Now I feels jolly comfortable!" remarked the sentry complacently, as he stretched himself upon some sacking, and leaned against a corn-bin. "Whoy, I declare, I feels downright sleepy. Think I'll just have forty winks. You will watch, matey, won't you? Kick me up if so as you hear anything stirring."

"Yes, I will watch," replied We-wee.

Soon the stable-boy was deep in slumber. Time slipped on, the silence broken only by his stentorian snores, and the wakeful, watchful Chinese lad retired to a dark corner on the further side of the corn-bin.

An hour later, the door was again opened—very stealthily this time—and two figures glided in—those of Egbert Trewolf and Sam Shise.

All their movements had been carefully planned. Shise, slipping on tiptoe, approached the drugged boy, and, standing over the sleeper, menaced him with a "knuckle-duster," prepared to knock the lad on the head on the first signs of his awakening.

Drawing from his waistcoat pocket a white packet, and opening it as he went, Trewolf stole equally softly into the box of Spinaway, glided like an evil shadow to the head, pulled down a couple of handfuls of hay from the rack, threw them into the manger, then sprinkled his powder over them.

"There," he whispered, as he tiptoed out again; "I told you it was as easy as buttering bread. The job is done, and none the wiser. 'Spinaway' won't win the Fenfield Stakes this time. We will just wait a second, and see him swallow it——Confusion! What's that?"

With a jangling clatter, a bundle of stable-forks and other implements, that had been placed leaning against the wall, fell to the ground. Startled at the sudden clang amid the dead silence, the evil-doers sprang back; then, fearing discovery, hurried from the stable, thoroughly satisfied that their nefarious work was successfully performed—the favourite was "nobbled."

All passed as swiftly as an evil dream. A nightmare it well might prove to thousands of the British public who followed the fortunes of the Fenfield stable.

Scarce had the miscreants cleared the threshold, than We-wee sprang from his concealment, darted into the horse-box, and carefully gathered up the "doctored" hay, blowing away all dust, and polishing the manger till it shone again, the somnolent "Spinaway" looking drowsily on. Then, going into the next box, the boy placed the physicked hay in the manger of the horse there—an old worn-out veteran, Rupert by name, pensioned for his former prowess.

Ere daybreak the stable-lad woke up, roused to consciousness with a splitting headache and parched throat.

All then was quiet and regular, "Spinaway" delicately nibbling at some hay in his rack. The stable-lad thought his lapse from duty unknown and immaterial; nor did the more wakeful We-wee inform his sluggard companion that anything unusual had occurred.

Next day, however, Harold Fenfield and Sexton Blake looked grave when the Chinese lad, in a private interview, disclosed the events of the preceding night. Still more serious were they when they received Trotter's bulletin:

"Spinaway well and hearty. Old Rupert off his feed, weak, sick, and groggy."

CHAPTER 8.

THE COURSE — ANOTHER CONTRETEMPS — THE RACE — "THE FENFIELD STAKES FOR THE STABLE."

And now came the most eventful day of the spring meeting. The Fenfield Stakes were to be run for at noon, and all the world and his wife would be there to see.

Ere starting for the course, Blake entered the young squire's room, saying:

"Before we go, Fenfield, just take another look at your diamonds, will you?"

"Oh, bother! they're all right," exclaimed Harold pettishly.

"Look at my new hat! Brought it down for the occasion. It will astonish the yokels considerably, you bet."

Here the youth seized a leather hat-box, drew from it a tall, rakish-looking white tile, with a blue veil round the rim, and set it on his head coquettishly.

"Nay! but look at the tiara, please; I have a good reason for asking," persisted Blake.

"Well, you are a jolly old worry," replied the other, in an

aggrieved tone, as he flung the empty hat-case on the top of the safe, opened that receptacle, drew out the jewel-box, opened the interior cases, and exhibited the sparkling contents.

"There; will that satisfy you, you fussy old woman?" he cried; and, leaving the cases open on the table, danced off to admire his headgear in a mirror.

"Yes; that's all right. Now I am ready," said Blake; and Harold, waltzing back, slammed the cases, threw the package into the safe, and banged and locked the door.

The two had arranged to drive over to the course alone, and soon afterwards they started in a dogcart.

"Still certain of winning?" inquired Blake, as they whirled away.

"Cock sure!" was the confident reply. "Nothing can prevent us now. Spinaway is in the pink of condition this morning. Nothing can stop him. Trotter will walk him quietly to the course in time for the saddling bell. Poor old Rupert, however, is in a bad way. As limp as a boiled rag. Jove, Blake! but for that smart boy of yours, it would have been Spinaway. It was a dead set; and some folk thought it had succeeded, as yesterday morning he suddenly dropped twenty points in the betting. He quickly recovered his position, however, and is now first favourite. Hoorah! We'll spoil the Egyptians this journey. What a coup! Pity you don't bet, Blake. You'll never have such another chance."

A tremendous and excited crowd had gathered on the downs when at length the bell rang to clear the course for the great race.

The name of Spinaway was on every lip, the Fenfield horse having again regained the premier position. "The Fenfield Stakes for the Fenfield stable," was the universal tip.

"Three to two on Spinaway! Six to four on the Fenfield horse!" shouted the bookmakers. Then suddenly one "bookie" attracted considerable attention by springing about, waving his hat wildly, and bellowing, "Evens on Sparkheels! Three to two on Sparkheels! Any odds against the favourite!"

"Did you hear that?" cried Harold nervously, gripping Blake's arm. "What does it mean? Our horse is being knocked out again. Oh, if any accident should happen at the last moment!"

"Mr. Trotter wants to speak to you, Mr. Fenfield. You are to come at once, sir!" cried a voice in Harold's ear; and, turning, he saw an old stable hand of his own.

"There! I knew it! I felt it!" cried the nervously excited young fellow. "Come with me, Blake, and learn the worst!"

Elbowing through the press, they squeezed into the saddling-paddock, and soon found Trotter, who was standing by the favourite.

"What's the matter, Trott?" cried Harold. "What of Spinaway? Why, he looks fit and well."

"Oh, the horse is all right, sir," replied the trainer. "It's the jockey the trouble is about. It's like this, Mr. Harold. I said I would bring Spinaway to the post fit and well. Well, there he is; never better in his life. But I did not know that I had to look after the rider as well as the horse.

"I told young Jenks—who was to have had the mount—to drive over in my dogcart. Well, he started right enough, with the Chinese lad; but some unknown villains ambushed him on the road, fired at him from behind a hedge, and hit him, too, worse luck. I believe they tried to murder him; and they have done just as bad—have broken his arm. Jenks can't possibly ride, sir!"

"Whew! What's to be done, Trotter? Can't you get another jock?"

"No, not in time, Mr. Harold! I dare not trust any but my own lads; and none of them, fit for the scale, are here now. I'm fairly puzzled. I don't see how the horse can run."

"Can your boy ride, Blake?" cried Fenfield suddenly, pointing to We-wee, who had brought the news to the trainer, and now stood calmly by, holding the wounded lad's racing-jacket and cap in his hand.

"Yes, by George! He can ride safe enough!" interposed the trainer. "I've often seen him up at the stables. He often used to lead Spinaway in his training gallops. Oh! the lad can ride. He's a born jock! He would draw the weights at the scale, too," he added, running his eye over the boy's figure.

"Can you ride a racehorse, We-wee?" inquired Blake.

"Oh yes, master!" was the quiet, but confident reply.

"Then ride he shall! We'll do the villains yet!" cried Fenfield decisively.

"That's the ticket," cheered Trotter. "Get into your colours, my lad, and prepare to mount! You know Spinaway, and he knows you. All you have to do, is to sit quiet in your saddle. Give him his head, and he can win by himself. Fenfield yet!"

"Do you know the course?" queried Blake.

"Oh yes, master. Walked over it yesterday with Jenks, the jock. He noticed all the posts and curly corners, and showed 'um to me. I know it as well as Norfolk House."

The numbers were hoisted, and a great roar went up when it was seen that Spinaway was included.

The news of the eleventh-hour accident to the jockey had spread like wildfire. 'Twas said the Fenfield horse would not start. Now he came with a rush, and became a firmer favourite than ever. The British public rejoices over an honest horse and an honest stable; and, recognising that underhand trickery had been at work to spoil the chance of the favourite, it was now all the firmer in its support.

Another roar! The candidates are ambling in their preliminary canter, Spinaway leading the string, We-wee sitting as easily as though he had been born in pigskin, the steed as cool and even-tempered as at exercise, Sparkheels following next—rather fractious, four other nondescript animals coming next—merely "out for an airing."

"Hoorah! That's how they'll finish. Any odds on Spinaway!" roared the delighted crowd; while most of the "bookies" looked blue, and a few stealthily prepared to "make tracks."

"Now they are lined up! Now they are off! No, no! Break away! False start!" yelled the multitude, as the fretful Sparkheels dashed off in advance of the pistol.

A number of whirling figures—a pause—a deathless silence! "Now they are off! Bravo! You might cover the lot with a blanket."

The flag fell to an excellent start, the six contestants springing forward in almost unbroken line, like a squadron of charging dragoons. Then one of the competitors "out for an airing" took up the running. A jockey in chocolate and gold dashed to the front, closely followed by one in blue and silver, each desiring to figure prominently in some portion of the race—at the start if not at the finish.

Passing the grand stand for the first time, "chocolate and gold" held half a length lead of "blue and silver"; but both jockeys already were using whip and spur. Sparkheels came next, still slightly fractious, but settling down, Spinaway, a length behind, on the other side, sailing along with long, easy strides, his jockey sitting quiet and passive as at an exercise gallop, the two other horses, out merely for selling purposes, already tailing off—hopelessly out of it.

So they sped away round the course, appearing and vanishing in the swells and hollows, seeming like the end of a rainbow on a summer day.

And now the over-eager leaders are beaten. Slowly "chocolate and gold" and "blue and silver" drop back, still fighting gallantly, and after a brief struggle are passed by both Sparkheels and Spinaway, the former of the pair leading by a length.

There are but two horses in the race—the favourite and his immediate rival.

Up till this point, We-wee had riden like an automaton, merely using the reins for guidance. Now the boy leaned forward, and eagerly whispered to his mount. The horse at once responded; his neck was further outstretched, his springing stride increased its speed. Every hoof-stroke drew him closer to the leader. Up and up crept Spinaway!

Now they approached the corner for the straight run home. Spinaway was on the inside, next the rails, his nose already at his rival's girths. The final tussle was at hand.

Suddenly Sparkheels' jockey caused his mount to swerve. He closed in, jamming Spinaway against the rails. Foul riding? Ay! and it might prove fatal riding. Going at such a pace, collision with any post meant death itself.

Then We-wee showed his horsemanship—exhibited that subtle sympathy between steed and rider. With a violent wrench, Spinaway was checked in his stride; checked only momentarily, but sufficient to avoid collision in that fast-closing gap, then on again with redoubled energy.

Yielding the inside berth, We-wee took the corner wider, and sailed into the straight, half a clear length behind his unsportsmanlike rival.

But now Spinaway's jockey is no automaton; yet he used neither whip nor spur. Lying eagerly forward, he began a continuous, ardent whisper to the gallant horse, and Spinaway heard and appeared to understand. With a further head-stretch, a lengthened stride, he bounded on, straining every nerve. The gap was quickly closed—the pursuer drew alongside. Sparkheels also made his supreme effort, and for six strides the horses raced level. But Sparkheels had shot his bolt, the overpressure could not be maintained. Gamely he struggled, but suddenly he collapsed. Spinaway shot to the front, flashed meteor-like past the grand stand, then, slightly easing, won in a canter.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah! The favourite wins! The Fenfield Stakes for the Fenfield stable!"

CHAPTER 9.

A DASH FOR THE DIAMONDS—THE CONSPIRATORS UNMASKED—DEATH OF TREWOLF—CONCLUSION.

"Congratulate me!" cried Harold, running up to Blake, and almost wringing the latter's arm out of joint in his jubilation. "I have just come from the weighing-box. Your boy passed

the scale all right, Jiminy! I've won a pot of money in this my last flutter; for you know I have promised never to bet again! There goes Slipton Bale. I expect this has about broken him. He is pretty deep in my book, but I sha'n't bother him. Poor chap, I feel sorry for him; but it's his own fault, for being such a fool!

"Hallo! he is off! Who are those fellows with him? Rather shady cards they seem to be. Not bailiffs already, surely? No; he is returning to the abbey. Wants to hide his head, I suppose. By George, I had better follow. If my guests are returning, as their host, I should be there to receive them, eh?"

As Fenfield rattled on, Blake looked at the party referred to, and, to his no small surprise and secret uneasiness, saw Slipton Bale drive off with Egbert Trewolf and Sam Shise, Trewolf handling the ribbons, as Bale's left arm was in a sling.

"Yes, you must return at once!" cried Blake. "I will go with you. Come along to where we put up our dogcart."

But the fortunate owner was besieged by the gay. Hundreds wanted to shake the young squire by the hand and congratulate him on his success; and it was not till after an interval of half an hour that the two took their seats in the cart, and rattled off towards the abbey, Blake handling whip and reins, and putting the horse to topmost speed.

Leaping from the cart at the abbey door, Harold sprang up the front steps, but paused in the hall to remark to his companion:

"Now I must run to my room to wash and dress, and make myself decent. I'm all of a lather. And look at my new hat!" he added, doffing his late vaunted "chimney-pot," now soiled and dinted, its blue veil hanging in tatters. "It's completely spoiled—a cast-off for a nigger minstrel. Never mind, it died in a glorious cause." And, singing merrily, the youth tripped up to his bedroom, Blake following more sedately.

Scarcely had the detective reached the landing ere he was met by his young client, who came rushing wildly from his room, crying:

"Blake! Blake! I have lost the diamonds! The jewel-case is gone! Come, man—come and see for yourself!"

A glance round the apartment on entering showed it to be otherwise empty. A door on the further side, leading to a dressing-room, stood ajar.

That the jewel-case was gone there was, alas! no doubt. The door of the safe was wide open, the shelf where the case had lain was bare.

"There! You see it is gone—gone—gone!" wailed Harold. "Would that I had lost that wretched race instead, then I should only have dropped my money. Now I have lost the honour of my family—the heirloom of my race!"

"Yes," responded Blake quietly. "I see that the case is gone, and I am not very much surprised. Still, though the nest has been stolen, perhaps the eggs may remain behind. Let's look."

Then, seizing the empty hat-case, which still lay on its side on the top of the safe, where Harold had negligently tossed it, he threw back the lid, glanced inside, drew out, and presented to the astounded youth—the diamond tiara.

"Nay, man," cried Blake pleasantly, "don't look so dumbfounded. These are really your diamonds, and there is no conjuring or witchcraft about the matter. The whole explanation is simplicity itself.

"When we were preparing to go to the course this morning, knowing that the conspirators held a duplicate key of the safe, I suspected they would seize the opportunity, when the house was pretty nigh empty, to purloin the jewels.

"Now, the safest hiding-place for the tiara seemed to me to be the very last place where it would be looked for. There was the empty hat-case lying negligently on the safe-top—no one would dream of it as a receptacle for thirty thousand pounds' worth of jewellery; so, when you were admiring your new chapeau in the glass, I quietly abstracted the tiara from the inner case, and slipped it into the hat-box.

"You closed and fastened the empty jewel-case, locked it up again in the safe. Hey, presto! Here is the result."

At that moment, a low, guttural sound, like a half-smothered execration, issued from the dressing-room.

"Ha!" cried Blake, starting at the noise. "I have preserved the diamonds, perhaps I can recover the case as well. Got a handy weapon? If so, seize it." Then, whipping a revolver from his hip-pocket, he turned towards the dressing-room door.

One forward pace he made, but one only, for at that moment the door was thrown wide open, and a figure sprang out—a man, with features convulsed by demoniac rage, a gleaming knife upraised in his fiercely-clenched right hand—Reginald Pomfret, the ex-convict, Egbert Trewolf.

Blake's old pistol-trick served him in good stead. With a swift elbow-crook the revolver was jerked up, it flashed, then its wielder sprang nimbly aside to avoid a charge. Clear through the air sprang the murderer, hurtled wildly forward, then in headlong rush fell crashing on the floor. A few spasmodic contortions, and he rolled over on his back—stone dead, a small, blue bullet-mark in his forehead attesting the cause.

So died Egbert Trewolf, after a long career of crime. After having his capital sentence commuted, he ultimately met his death under the pistol of the man who originally had hunted him down. Lusting for revenge, he drew down vengeance upon himself.

"Come!" said Blake, after a thrilling pause; "the man is dead. His blood is upon his own head; but the living remain. Come!" And he led the way to the dressing-room.

In one corner of the smaller apartment crouched Sam Shise, his face green with terror; in another stood Slipton Bale, white to the lips, one arm in a sling, the jewel-case clutched in the other.

"Here we have the leader of the gang," said Blake sternly—"the organiser of the whole conspiracy!

"There stands the man from whom emanated the secret influence that has been working against your interests on the betting market. Two attempts he caused to be made upon the horse, one upon the jockey. He strove to cripple you over the race; your ruin was to be completed by the loss of your family heirloom—the diamond tiara. Once before he tried to steal the jewels; this time he has been no more successful. He has secured only the empty case; but, even of that I will relieve him."

Here Blake drew the jewel-case from the nerveless grasp of the detected thief, adding in conclusion:

"To Slipton Bale all the trouble is due. He has been your enemy all along, striving to deprive you of your money, your honour, and your future happiness."

"Yes," said Fenfield gravely, "I understand all now, and blame my blindness in not seeing it before. Do you want that traitor, or will you leave him to me?"

"Against you mainly has he sinned, with you should rest his punishment. Do with him as you like. I make no legal charge against him," replied Blake quietly.

"Then, neither will I," returned Fenfield. And, addressing the craven criminal, he said:

"Slipton Bale, you hound, listen to me. I held you as a friend; you have proved a treacherous foe. I treated you as a man of honour; you have shown yourself a shameless scoundrel! But I do not seek revenge; I scorn to soil my fingers with such as you. Neither will I expose your infamy if you relieve me of your loathsome presence. Begone, and beware how you cross my path again, lest I set my heel upon you, and crush your worthless life out! Begone, I say. Your presence taints the air. Begone from amongst honourable men, and hide your shame amongst the thieves and blacklegs you have chosen as your fittest intimates."

In lofty scorn the young squire pointed dramatically towards the door, and the detected scoundrel sneaked away like a whipped cur. After next settling-day, Slipton Bale was posted as a defaulter at the clubs; nor was he ever again seen amongst respectable, clean-living men.

"And now, look to your diamonds, Fenfield," said Blake, when the dastard had departed. "See, you have dropped the tiara on the floor. Here is the case; restore the jewels. Now, what will you do with it?"

"Faith, I scarcely know!" returned the other, rather sheepishly. "I have proved myself quite incapable of looking after it. Ah! suppose I give it to my fiancée to mind for me?"

"Best thing you could do!" cried Blake. "Go and give it into the charge of Miss Challoner. She may be safely trusted to look after the tiara until it is her own!"

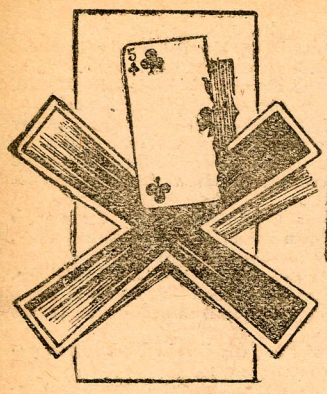
"Yet, one thing more," said Fenfield. "What of that hulking ruffian there? I can't have such a brute in my dressing-room."

"No; leave him to me," answered the detective. "I'll move him. I can't afford to be so generous with him as you were with his employer—Slipton Bale. I must report the affair to the authorities. Probably the coroner will hold an inquest on the body of that dead gaol-bird, and this fellow may be wanted, if only as a witness. I do not anticipate any trouble, though, for you or for myself."

Blake was right. The coroner duly called his court and held his inquiry; but the twelve "good men and true" unhesitatingly returned their verdict, that the deceased, Egbert Trewolf, had met his death in the attempted commission of a felony; and that no blame attached to Sexton Blake, who acted only in self-defence.

On the date appointed, a fashionable wedding was celebrated at St. George's, Hanover Square, when the magnificent diamond tiara worn by the bride was the wonder and envy of many. And thus was brought to a fitting conclusion the story of the Fenfield conspiracy, and how Blake baulked it.

THE END.



THE SIGN OF THE SCARLET CROSS

By CLAUD HEATHCOTE,

Author of "Four British Boys," "Val the Boy Acrobat," "Roy Royal of St. Miriam's," "The Red Light," "Dick Danvers," &c.

CHAPTER 48 (*continued*).

There had been a temporary lull in the storm, but it now rose with renewed fury.

"Yes, it is a fearful night, Mr. Ayres, and I wish I could accommodate you with a bed; but that is impossible, as I have two guests already staying with me."

Two guests! The tramp's face fell. There might be several persons in the house beside the widow.

How was he to get at that drawer in the bureau without being found out?

The keys were in her pocket. Could he get them from her without violence? Or would he have an opportunity of forcing the drawer?

"A bed, mum!" he said. "Don't bother yerself about a bed! That's a luxury I can't always afford. Lord bless you! it don't matter where I roost. I can sleep anywhere. That's one o' the advantages of having an easy conscience. Tom Ayres—that's yer humble servant—has gone through life doing his duty to all men—including the ladies, God bless 'em!—so he can sleep easy anywhere. He could sleep on the top of a precipice without falling over. Ah! it's a great thing to have a easy conscience! That's what I always used to say to Bob. So, if you've no objection, mum, I'll just doss for the night on the hearth-rug there. It won't hurt the hearthrug, and it'll be doing me a real kindness."

"I'm very sorry, but I can't let you do that. I have no kind of accommodation for you in this house."

"Then you mean turning me out into the storm?"

"I must; but—you'll find an inn not very far from here. They will let you have a bed for the night for a shilling or eighteenpence. Take this!"

She put a two-shilling piece in his hand. His fingers closed over it greedily; but he meant having a richer prize than that.

"It's rough on an old man," he said, with a whine. "If you'd lost the sole prop of yer age like I have, mum, you'd have pity on me, yer would. I'm alone in the world—I'm an orphan, I am. I lost my father and mother a long time ago; and now I've lost the last of my boys—Bob, who promised to keep me in beer and bacca all my life. And so he would, if luck hadn't a-been agen him. If I could only find Bob! You don't know what it is to lose the apple o' yer eye!"

"Indeed I do!" said the widow sadly. "I pity you, if ever woman did; for I have lost my own son—my own son Jack. Day and night I pray that he may come back to me; but day and night come and go without Jack."

At the name of Jack the tramp started. He examined the widow curiously from the corners of his drink-inflamed eyes.

"We're both in the same boat, then. What may your name be, mum?"

"Evans."

"Evans!" he cried, starting to his feet. "You the mother of Jack Evans?"

"Yes!" she said in astonishment. "Do you know anything of him?"

"Know anything of him! Come! that's good! Should think I did—no one better."

"You do?" cried the widow, in a voice of intense eagerness, and coming closer to the tramp. "I am glad to have found at last someone who has seen my boy. Where is he? Where is he? Tell me quickly! Tell me, in Heaven's name!"

"Well, now, I'm darned if that ain't one of the rummest things going!" He burst into a loud laugh as he spoke. "We're both a-trying to scent out the same game, mum!"

"The same game!" she wonderingly repeated.

"Yes; for yer see, it's just this way. Jack Evans and Bob Ayres be one and the same person! Ha! ha! Well, if this ain't one of the most extreeordinary coincerdences that I ever heard on in my life! Ha! ha!"

And he dropped down into the chair as though he were completely knocked over by the fun of the situation.

"One and the same person!" repeated the widow, unable as yet to grasp the full horror of all that was implied by the tramp's words, but groping helplessly forward, as it were, to clutch at the unseen dagger that was now baring itself to her unprotected breast. "I—I don't understand you."

"Don't understand me?" he laughed. "Of course not. Then I'll make myself clear. You turned your son Jack out o' this house two or three years ago, just as you want to turn me out. I shouldn't wonder if it was a stormy night, just like it is now; 'cause people allays choose the worst time to give a poor feller a shove down the hill when he's trying to get up it."

"Well, well! quick, man!" she cried, her eyes growing bigger and bigger with fear and horror, for she was just beginning to feel the point of that dagger which lay at her breast. "Go on! What became of Jack after that night?"

"He made his way to a friend of his—Merrick—who was staying along o' me at Portsmouth. I was a father to Jack, I was. I took the place of the man who had kicked him out. He gave up his own name—it had allays been a curse to him, he said—and he took up mine, which was a much better one, and more to his liking. So, you see, instead o' being Jack Evans, we re-christened him Bob Ayres; and Bob Ayres was the name by which he got his berth on board the 'Ajax.'"

"The 'Ajax!'"

The tramp paused in his story. He looked at the woman in consternation.

Her face was bloodless, the eyes were starting from their sockets, her grey hair had fallen over her shoulders; she was laughing hysterically.

"The 'Ajax'!" she cried. "Bob Ayres—ha! ha! ha!"

Her laugh, hardened old sinner though he was, made him shudder.

"Yes; it's funny, ain't it? Funny that we should both be looking after the same youngster, without a-knowing of it?"

"Funny—yes! Ha! ha! Jack and Bob Ayres the same person! Ha! ha!"

Then the laugh died out. Her face was of the awful, implacable sternness of the figure of fate carved from marble. The tramp had never seen a countenance like it. Even his dull eyes noted the terrible change.

Unconsciously he rose from his chair and retreated a pace; but she came swiftly to him, and seized him with both hands. Her nails pierced into his flesh; her grip seemed like that of steel.

"You—you are the man, then, who lured him to his ruin! You are the man who killed him!"

"Killed him!" gasped the tramp. The fingers resting on him were now like steel at a white heat, burning into his flesh. "Killed him! What do you mean?"

"Mean! Don't you know that my boy is dead—that he is in his grave?"

"Good heavens!" he cried. "The woman's mad. A nice thing I've let meself in for. Let go yer hold, will yer? Let go o' my arm!"

"You killed him—killed my boy, as urely as you are standing there. My curse be on you! My curse!"

He was petrified at the woman. She had gone crazy.

He forgot all about the gold in the horror of it.

She imagined that her son was dead—that he had killed him—and she meant (he could see it in her eyes) having his life in return.

How to escape her? She was only a woman, but she seemed at that moment endowed with a man's strength.

"Let go my arms!" he cried, powerless to release himself.

She laughed wildly, and did as he commanded her. She let

go his arms; but, with the swiftness of thought, fastened like a tigress on his throat.

"My God!" he gasped.

He struggled for his life. He tried to throw her from him, without avail.

They whirled round the room together. The veins stood out on his throat like cords.

Beads of perspiration of a scarlet hue were on his forehead.

But suddenly her fingers relaxed. She gave a loud cry:

"Jack! Jack!"

Then she staggered to the inner door, and fell forward insensisible into the arms of a youth who had just descended the stairs.

The tramp waited to see no more. Only too thankful that he had been released from the woman's grasp, he darted to the door, and went through it like a flash into the darkness.

"My God! My God!" he cried, as he rushed through the storm. "Her eyes were awful, but her fingers were a thousand times worse. I shall feel them about my throat for a year to come, so help me! A pretty hornets' nest to drop into, that was! Nearly poisoned in the sarsaparilla, and then almost choked by a mad woman. Just when I thought I was touching the shiners too! That's what I call stoney luck!

"Phew! What a night! But I wouldn't go back to those diggings agen—no, not for a diamond as big as the Koh-i-noor. Sarsaparilla's a bad enough mixture; but sarsaparilla and jim-jams—— Phew! I'd rather have skilly and dry toke for a twelvemonth. But who was the feller in the doorway, I wonder? He wasn't Jack Evans, I'll swear, nor his ghost; but whomsoever he was he saved that she-devil from choking me."

CHAPTER 49.

A TERRIBLE NIGHT—WHAT THE MORNING BROUGHT.

When Harry and Shaggy turned into bed that night, they were soon fast asleep.

Suddenly Harry was awakened by a cry. At first he thought that he had been dreaming. He sat upright in his bed, and listened.

The wind was moaning and howling without, but a death-like silence reigned within.

He must have been mistaken. It must have been the wind which had seemed to him like a human cry.

He again lay down; but no sooner had his head gained the pillow than the cry again rang through the house.

This time there was no mistake. It was no dream; neither was it the wind. It was unmistakably a human cry—the cry of a woman.

And, hark! What was that? The hoarse cry of a man. Someone must have entered the house.

Harry leapt out of bed, thrust on his trousers, and opened the door. Merciful heavens! he could now hear distinctly. A fierce struggle was raging below.

"Harry, what's up?"

When Harry leapt out of bed he woke up Shaggy.

"Heaven only knows! Someone's in the house. Follow me as quickly as you can, Shaggy!"

With these words, Harry quickly descended the stairs and caught the poor, distraught widow in his arms, as we have already seen, just when she was falling.

Harry had recognised the tramp; but the tramp had not, of course, recognised him, because, as will be remembered, he had taken off his disguise when he had made himself known to Mrs. Evans, and had not resumed it.

By the time Harry had gently borne the widow to a couch, Shaggy had descended.

"What—what has happened?" he asked in wonderment.

"I can scarcely tell. Get me some water first, Shaggy! There'll be time enough for questions after. She's fainted!"

Shaggy quickly brought in a tumbler of cold water, with which Harry bathed the burning brow of the widow. Then he gently forced some water between her parched lips.

Slowly the eyes opened. First they rested on Harry, then they wandered round the room.

"Has he gone?" she asked, with a shudder.

"Yes; he's gone," said Harry, knowing at once that she was referring to the tramp. "Think no more about it!"

"But—but where is Jack?" She looked at Harry with wildly staring eyes. "You are not Jack, after all! Where is he? Ah! now I remember—he's dead! He died for you—for you!"

She now pushed him from her, regarding him with horror.

"For you—my poor boy's in the grave, where you ought to be. And I helped you to trick people—I, his mother—by lending you Jack's clothes."

Harry's heart was bleeding for the poor woman. He understood what had happened as clearly as though he had been present at the scene. The rascally tramp had told her all. What Harry dreaded had come to pass sooner than he had anticipated. The widow had discovered in the same startling fashion that he had discovered the death of her son.

She sat on the couch with her face buried in her hands, the picture of desolation and misery.

"What's to be done, Harry?" whispered Shaggy.

Low as the words were, she heard them.

"Leave me—leave me," she said. "I shall be better presently."

"Come, Shaggy!" whispered Harry.

The two mounted to the bedroom again. It was clear enough that the presence of Harry only served to remind her of her dead son, and our hero almost began to regret his visit. They crept into bed, but some time elapsed before they once more slept.

When they awoke in the morning the force of the storm had nearly spent itself. The wind had lost its shriller note. It moaned like an animal in deep pain. Eastward the sun looked sullenly through the cloud-wrack.

Instantly the boys thought of the scene that had occurred during the night.

"I feel a horrible coward, Shaggy," said Harry. "I would give anything to escape another interview with Mrs. Evans. Naturally enough, she looks upon me as the cause of her son's death."

"Oh, she'll have got over that by this time. She's too good a woman to bear a grudge against anyone. Besides, we needn't stop long. It's past eight. We can just swallow a mouthful of breakfast and then be off."

"But Ben Ford's coming, and the lame boy. I promised Mrs. Evans that I would stay and see them."

"That was before she had heard of her son's death. She won't want you to stop now, you bet!"

The two friends descended the stairs. The house was strangely silent. When they entered the kitchen, there was no sign of the widow, nor any preparation for breakfast.

The two friends looked at each other. Harry knew from previous experience that the widow was usually an early riser. Had the scene with the tramp been too much for her? Was she too ill to rise?

"Let's go out for half an hour," suggested Shaggy. "She's overslept herself—that's all."

But when they passed into the front room they found the door open. It had evidently been open some time, for the rain lay in a little pool inside the doorway.

"She must have gone out," said Shaggy. "Gone into the village, I expect, to get something for breakfast."

Harry did not answer. His heart misgave him. They walked in the direction of the village, but found no trace of the widow.

When half an hour had elapsed, they went back to the house. Still there was no sign of the widow's presence. The same silence reigned as before. There was the same desolation.

The friends looked into each other's eyes, and read there the fear they could not express. Something had happened. What?

"S'posing we knock at the door, Harry?" suggested Shaggy. "There can't be any harm in that."

Harry nodded his head in token of assent. They mounted the stairs to the widow's room, and Harry knocked on the door, at first gently, then loudly.

There was no answer.

"Mrs. Evans—Mrs. Evans!" he cried.

Still no answer.

"What's to be done?" asked Harry huskily. "I shouldn't wonder if she's too queer to speak."

"Let's open the door. It's no use standing on ceremony!" answered Shaggy. "She may be dying!"

Harry opened the bedroom door. It was empty. Furthermore, it was quite evident that it had not been tenanted through the night, for the bedclothes had not been displaced. The bed had not been slept on!

CHAPTER 50.

ARRIVAL OF THE VISITORS—THE CRIPPLE—A STARTLING POSTER—SHAGGY AS AN ITALIAN SCHOLAR.

The bed had not been slept on! It was very evident that the poor distraught woman had gone out into the tempest during the night. Where had she gone? For what purpose?

Harry was in despair. The widow had been so kind to him. And this was his return for her kindness! He had plunged her into the deepest misery; for was he not indirectly responsible for it all?

A fatal curse rested on him—the curse of that fatal cross.

"I bring misery to everyone, Shaggy!" he cried bitterly. "I ought to be shunned, like the plague. It'll be your turn next. Why don't you clear out and leave me while you're yet safe?"

"What? Go back to calling out speshuls and all the gory bits? Not me—not just yet. Why, it ain't half as exciting as being in the running with that Scarlet Cross! The Two

Thousand, the Derby, or the Lincoln Handicap ain't in it. For a real exciting race, the Scarlet Cross knocks 'em into a cocked hat! And don't you worry so, Harry. You may have some close running and one or two fouls on the way, but you're going to win at the finish. So cheer up!"

"It's all very well, Shaggy, to talk about cheering up; but what's to be done? If Mrs. Evans has really disappeared, we ought to give information to the police. Heaven forbid that anything should have happened to her; but if anything has gone wrong we may be suspected of having had a hand in it."

"Yes, I understand all that; but we've had enough to do with the police lately without rushing into their arms unnecessarily again. My advice is—wait till Mr. Ford comes. You say he's an honest, straightfor'ard sort of chap!"

"As honest and straightforward as his sister."

"Very well; then you needn't be afraid of trusting him. We can tell him all that's happened. That'll clear us of responsibility."

Harry saw that the advice of Shaggy was sound; so they awaited, as patiently as circumstances would permit, the arrival of Benjamin Ford.

A couple of hours passed, and at length came an ominous sound on the gravel pathway—the sound of crutches.

"Here we are, Phil!" came the voice of Benjamin Ford. "We've reached it at last. Precious tired you are, too, I'll warrant. But never mind, my boy; you'll have a good rest now!"

Instead of knocking at the door, Ben came along to the window of the cottage, and, tapping on the panes, cried out cheerily:

"Here we are, sister—come at last; and hungry as hunters. Here, Phil, have a peep inside."

He lifted the cripple tenderly in his arms, crying out:

"Here's the young rascal, Lucy. He's been talking about his auntie all the way down."

"Auntie's not in there," said the cripple. "There are two men—that's all."

"Two what?"

But by this time Harry had opened the door.

"Come in, Mr. Ford."

Harry had taken the precaution to resume his disguise, so the carman did not recognise him.

"You seem to know me, young gen'leman; but I don't somehow seem to know you," he said bluffly. "Is Mrs. Evans inside—I'm her brother Ben."

"No, Mrs. Evans isn't inside—at present. She went out this morning, and hasn't yet returned."

"Ah, well, I reckon she'll soon be coming along, for she's expecting me and Phil. P'r'aps she's gone to get a bit o' something for dinner; though it ain't her way to be out when she's expecting visitors. So we'll just step inside and wait!"

When he entered and saw Shaggy and the disordered appearance of the usually neat room, he looked from one to the other of the boys and bluntly asked:

"Who may you be, might I ask?"

Then Harry increased his amazement by telling him who he was, what had happened to him since his supposed death, and the scene that had occurred in the cottage during the night.

"How she must have suffered—how she must have suffered!" cried Ben, quite breaking down when Harry told him of the widow's distraught condition after she had learned the death of her son.

"I hope you do not think I am to blame?" said Harry. "After all she did for me, I would have done anything to have prevented her this suffering!"

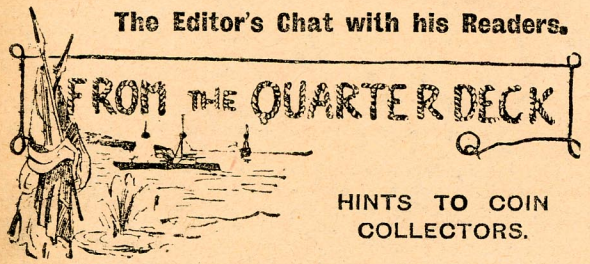
"Blame you? No, no," said the honest carman, his burly frame still shaking with emotion. "It's all that Scarlet Cross—curse it! That cursed thing made a cripple of my boy here. It has now lost me a sister."

The cripple boy had dropped his crutches on seeing the grief of his father; had climbed up into his lap, and wound his thin arms round his neck.

"Don't, father—don't!" he cried, as he tenderly caressed the burly carman.

(To be continued in next Friday's UNION JACK.)

The Editor's Chat with his Readers.



HINTS TO COIN COLLECTORS.

Coin-collecting is really about the most disappointing hobby I know, especially by those who wish or hope to obtain a little money by the sale of specimens. One should always be careful when reading accounts of sales in the newspapers, as the reports are often misleading. Looking over one's collection, one may see a coin identical with a specimen which has just fetched a high price at a sale; but our specimen turns out to be almost worthless on account of a slight technicality unreported in the newspapers.

The above applies to stamp-collecting also, only with stamps one can be more certain. For the benefit of "Jubilee," who writes me this week from Manchester, and for all our readers interested in coin-collecting, I will give a few hints on the subject which may possibly be of some use.

There are certain essentials to be considered in the judging of coins about which the outside public know absolutely nothing. In the first place, "condition" is everything. Even rarity itself ranks second almost to this. Coins that may have but half a dozen duplicates all the world over may only sell for a few pounds if in bad condition.

The commoner the coin, the greater is the importance of its condition. A hole in a coin reduces its value to one-half of what it otherwise would be. On the other hand, all coins in very fine condition have a fair value and ready sale. The scale, when judging the condition of a coin, ranges from "poor" to "very fine"; the three terms, "very fine," "mint," and "brilliant" signifying the same.

In the matter of rarity, there are many details to be considered. Some scarce coins have little value, because no one is interested in their particular class; while others less rare, but of a more popular series, fetch better and more ready prices.

"Error" and "freak" coins are very uncertain in price, as they are outside the ordinary requirements of most collectors. A few, however, make a speciality of them, and give good prices.

Perhaps the commonest mistake is to suppose that because a coin is old it must necessarily be valuable. As a matter of fact, this is almost the least consideration, and coins dating back some two or three thousand years can always be purchased for very little above their metal value.

Then, with old coins, one is always hearing of a fresh hoard being discovered, and thus decreasing the value of former specimens. As an example of this, the pennies of William I. were all very rare until a few years ago a number were discovered at York, and subsequently another hoard of 15,000 in another part of the kingdom.

In consequence of this supply, good specimens may now be procured for four or five shillings each.

In conclusion, I may say I shall always be glad to give an estimate of the value of any coin which may be submitted. Stamps should be enclosed with it, to defray return postage.

The average annual payment to British soldiers as pensions for wounds is only £16,000. You are quite right, "Crimea," it does sound remarkably low, considering our numerous little campaigns.

No, "Seafarer"; Government pays very little indeed for the maintenance of lighthouses. To a great extent they are self-supporting, and this is how it is done. Every ship that passes a lighthouse is taxed according to tonnage at the rate of one farthing per ton. These light dues are ascertained in the following manner: When a ship comes into port she is visited by the officer whose duty it is to collect the light dues. He ascertains from the captain, the ship's papers, and in various other ways the port from which the ship sailed, and the course she has held since leaving that port. He then, with the aid of a chart, finds out how many lighthouses and lightships she has passed, and for every such light the captain has to pay a farthing per ton of his ship's tonnage. For instance, suppose a ship of 1,000 tons has passed five lights, the captain would be mulcted in the sum of £5 4s. 2d.

When we take into consideration the enormous number of ships continually passing and repassing the lights, it will be at once seen that the light dues go a considerable way towards paying the wages of the men employed on the lighthouses and maintaining the lights in an efficient condition.

Printed and Published by the Proprietors at 24, Tudor Street, London, E.C.

A WATCH FOR NOTHING

We are going to give away 1,000 Silver Watches to advertise our Catalogue and our Jewellery. This is no catch, but perfectly genuine. Read our conditions, and then go in and win.

C* *B* *Y'S C*C* *
T* * *L*S V*C* *O*
R* * * * *E*S C*C* *

The words, when filled in, represent the names of three largely advertised articles of food.

DIRECTIONS.

Fill in the missing letters to the above words, and send the answer to us. If correct, we undertake to send you a Solid Silver Watch, a good timekeeper, usually sold by us at £2 2s. Our conditions are that you send us a stamped addressed envelope for us to write and tell you if you are correct; and if you should win the Watch, you purchase one of our Real Silver Chains as per our offer, which we will send you. Write at once, as by delay you may lose the chance.

To convince you of our offer being genuine, we send herewith copies of a few Testimonials which we are daily receiving.

The originals can be seen at our depot on application.

"West End, Honiton,
"October 15th, 1897.

"Gentlemen,—I received the Watch and Albert safely, and am exceedingly pleased with same. I have shown it to my friends, all of whom are astonished to find it such a genuine bargain. One of my friends wishes to know if he could obtain one in the same manner, or has the time expired? With sincere thanks, I remain, yours truly,
MR. CROWE."

"10, Dean Street, Ilkeard,
"November 1st, 1897.

"Dear Sir,—I received the Watch and Chain on Tuesday last, and I am very pleased with them. The Watch is keeping good time.—Yours truly, MISS R. SWEET."

"The Folly, 48, Thornton St., Hertford,
"November 1st, 1897.

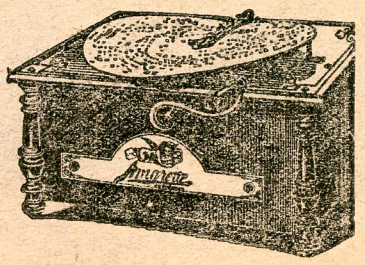
"Dear Sir,—I received your Watch and Chain quite safe, and was very well pleased with them; and many thanks for your kindness for sending me one of your catalogues; and perhaps I will have the pleasure of giving you another order before long. I remain yours truly.—MISS E. GATES."

"New Brancepeth, Durham,
"November 2nd, 1897.

"Dear Sir,—Just a line to say that I received the Watch and Chain which you sent me, and was highly pleased with them. I have shown the Catalogue to many of my friends.—Yours respectfully,
"MISS ADAMSON."

P. GRAHAM & CO.,
Wholesale & Retail Jewellers,
277, STRAND, LONDON, W.C.

PHENOMENAL SUCCESS.



Thousands Sold in a Few Months.

Size, 13in. by 10½in. by 8in.

Weight, 12lb.

To any person who cuts out this advertisement and sends it to us at once, we hereby guarantee to send, carriage paid, for **20s.** only, the

ROYAL AMORETTE

equal in every respect to the four-guinea organs advertised elsewhere. The **ROYAL AMORETTE** is in a handsome black and gold case, has 16 indestructible steel reeds, and will play not dozens, but hundreds of tunes. We sent one to the Editor of "Fashion Novelties" for his inspection, and he replied: "Herewith please find 20s. for the **ROYAL AMORETTE** you sent on approval. I shall purchase several for Christmas presents, and cannot understand how they can be made at the price. It is the best home musical instrument I have ever seen."

The advantage of the **ROYAL AMORETTE** is that it can be played by children of any age. It will play hymns, polkas, and all the popular tunes of the day. We will pay carriage throughout any portion of the British Islands, but for foreign countries postage for twelve pounds' weight must be sent.

The small picture above gives a very small notion of the instrument, which is large, handsome, and melodious. Do not confuse the Royal Amorette with any other advertised instrument. It is the only one of its kind in the world, and if you are disappointed with it we will cheerfully return the 20s. on receipt of the Royal Amorette, if returned at once.

The Royal Amorette, including 6 (six) metal tunes and packed in a strong wooden box, will be sent only to the readers of the UNION JACK who, in addition to forwarding **20s.**, cut out this advertisement. Remit by Postal Order to

THE SAXON TRADING COMPANY,
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Just the thing for the long winter evenings for Dances or Parties. We sell extra Tunes, six for 4s., or 12 for 7s. 6d., Carriage Paid. New list of tunes ready.

NEXT WEDNESDAY

The FIRST of a SENSATIONAL AND THRILLING SERIES of DETECTIVE STORIES will start in the **MARVEL.**

THEY WILL BE TRUE STORIES,

for at last we have secured the copyright of Mr. GORDON GRAY'S adventures—the Greatest Living Detective. These Series will be absolutely unique, and have cost the **MARVEL** a fabulous sum. Get a copy of this week's **MARVEL**, and read fuller particulars of this great triumph.

Tell your friends to buy Next Wednesday's **MARVEL**, and read how a halfpenny weekly paper secured the services of the Greatest Living Detective in the teeth of fierce competition from nearly all the sixpenny monthly magazines.

No. 1 of this thrilling new series will commence in the **MARVEL** on **Wednesday, September 7th.** It is called

THE LEAGUE OF THE CRIMSON STAR.

S/2668