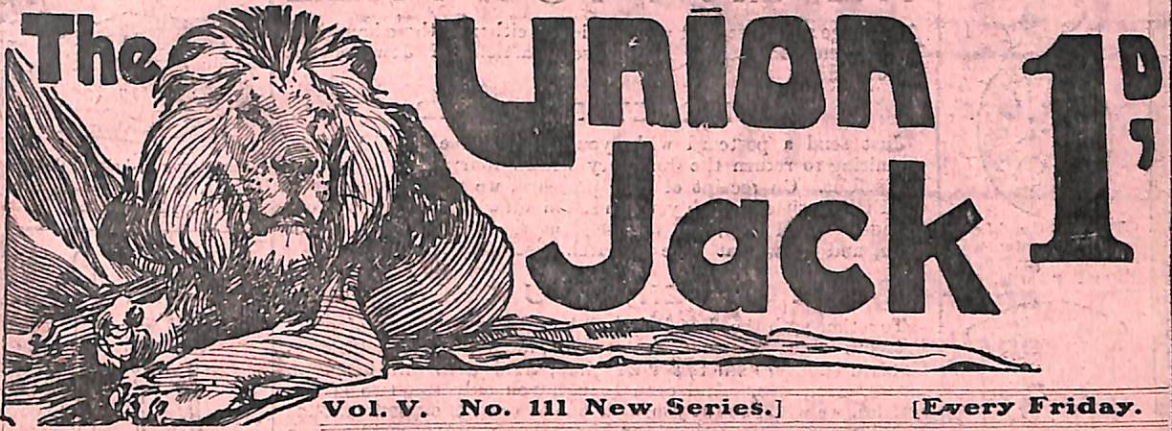
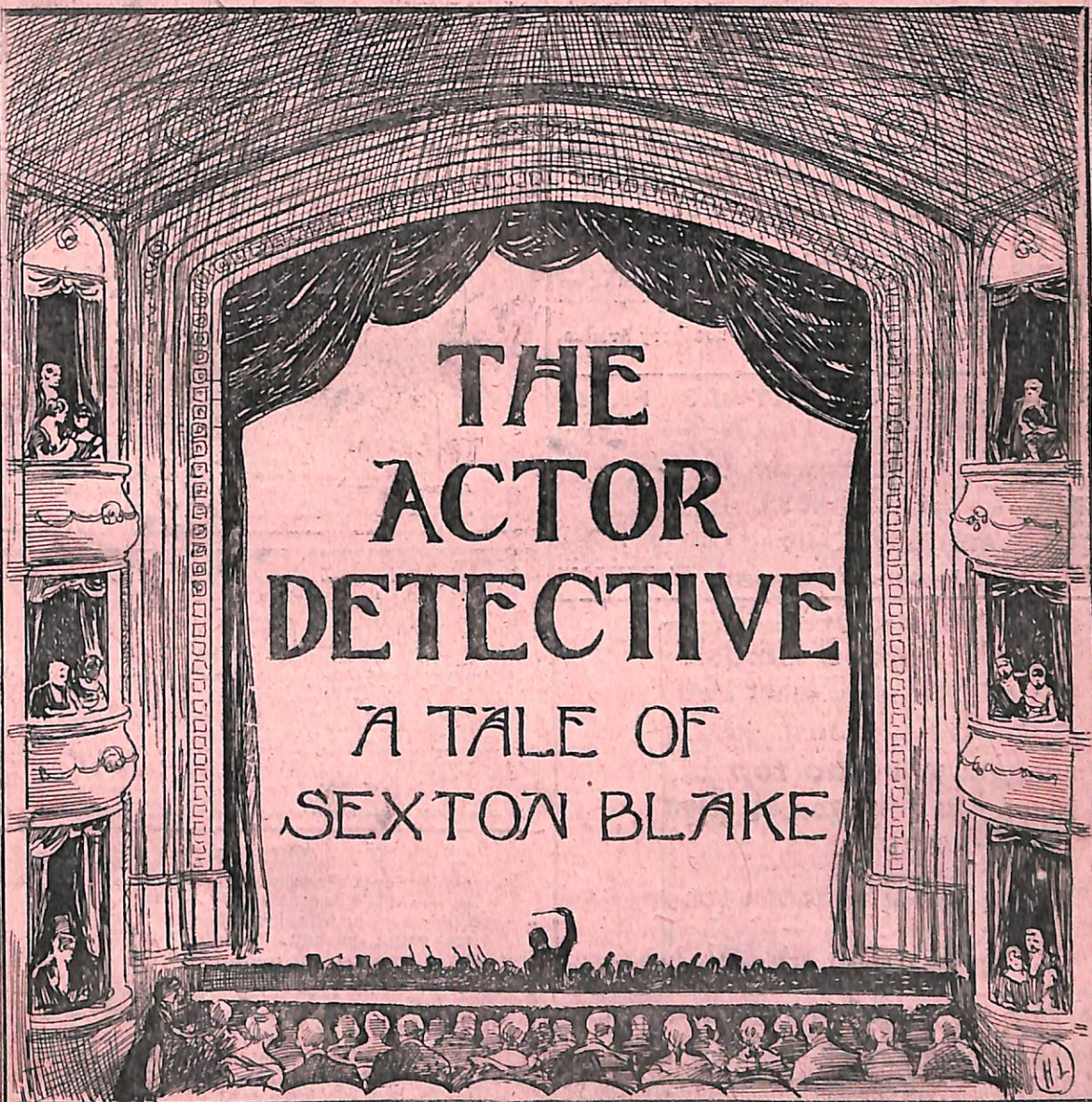


SEXTON BLAKE-ACTOR



Vol. V. No. 111 New Series.]

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THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Death at the Theatre—Tinker Warns Sexton Blake—The Marquis on the War-Path—The Wooden Match.

THE rehearsal of the new play, "The Love Light," was just over. The actors and actresses gathered up their brown-paper-covered books containing their parts, and hurried away home, or in search of a well-earned meal.

Sexton Blake rose from his chair in the prompt entrance, and walked to the centre of the stage to congratulate his old friend Aston Revelle, the author.

"You've got a winner here, I think, Revelle," he said. "That last act is prime!"

"Thanks, Blake," replied Revelle, a handsome, middle-aged man. "Come along up to the club and have some lunch."

The two friends picked their way through the pile of scenery, and were soon at the stage door.

"Have a cigarette?" asked Revelle, holding out his case.

"No, thanks, old man," answered Blake. "I don't smoke before lunch."

"Well, I'll just have a whiff."

Revelle put a cigarette in his mouth and felt in his pocket.

As he pulled out a cheap wooden box of German matches Blake grinned.

"Not a very extravagant box for a prosperous author," he said.

"I suppose I picked them up somewhere, and shoved them into my pocket," answered Revelle. "Anyway, if they'll light they'll do."

He struck a match and applied it to his cigarette.

He had barely inhaled a mouthful of smoke when he staggered and clutched at the detective's arm.

"What is it, old man?" asked Blake, supporting him. "Do you feel bad?"

"I feel as if I would——"

Revelle never completed the sentence. He sank into Blake's arms, his head dropped on to his shoulder, and with a sigh and a groan he slipped to the ground.

Blake tried to lift him up, but the dead weight told him that it was useless.

Quickly he undid the prostrate man's collar and shirt, and felt his heart. Then, with a white face, he stooped and put his ear to the bared chest. In a second he looked up gravely at the little crowd which had quickly gathered, and shook his head.

Aston Revelle was dead!



In a second Blake was on his hands and knees, striking matches like mad, and groping on the ground.

EVERY ISSUE OF THIS BOOK CONTAINS A 3/6 NOVEL.

"What's the matter? Whatever's up?" said a short, fat, clean-shaved man of about forty, pushing his way to the front.

Blake looked up.

"Send for a doctor, Mr. Merrivale, will you?" he asked. He's gone, poor chap! Help me to carry him inside."

Max Merrivale, the principal comedian of the Monument Theatre, despatched a messenger, and then, with Blake, superintended the removal of the body to the green-room.

As he helped to lift poor Revelle, Blake, with a quick deft movement, swept his hand over the pavement and transferred something to his pocket.

The doctor was quickly on the scene, and at once pronounced that life was extinct.

"Terrible—terrible, isn't it?" said Merrivale, the tears standing in his eyes. "Poor Revelle! He was such a good fellow, too! A pal of mine for years, and to think he's gone like this! What does the doctor think, Mr. Blake?"

"Heart," replied Blake. "See you at the inquest, I suppose, Mr. Merrivale?"

"Yes, yes," said the comedian. "Poor old Revelle! It is hard luck!"

And, with a last look at their dead friend, they left the room.

When Blake reached his rooms in Baker Street, he found a small and very dirty boy seated on the doorstep.

With his head bowed in thought, the detective nearly fell over the little chap, and spoke rather hastily:

"You must get away from here, my lad, please!"

The boy looked up, and spoke pleadingly:

"I ain't doing any harm, sir."

"Come on; off you go!" said Blake, taking him by the collar.

"All right, sir, I'm a-going. Look out," he added, in a low voice; "the Marquis is upstairs, and I think he means mischief. He had a bulge in his back pocket. I thought I'd better stop and warn you."

Sexton Blake was never taken aback, and while the boy was whispering he kept on urging him to the edge of the pavement.

"Now mind," went on the detective, in a loud voice, "if I catch you loitering round here again I'll lock you up—mind that! Well, there's a sixpence for you, and come up in half an hour's time, Tinker," he answered in a whisper.

The boy shuffled off, and Blake went up to his rooms. In a chair in front of the fire was seated an immaculately dressed, clean-shaved man, with an almost square face, and a thin, rat-trap of a mouth. As Blake entered he rose and smiled, showing an even set of dazzling white teeth.

"Sit down, Marquis, sit down," said Blake. "There's no need of ceremony between old friends."

"Ah, Mr. Blake!" replied the other. "Always cool, always on the spot."

"Never mind about compliments. What do you want, Marquis? Quick, I'm busy!"

"Are we speaking straight, and without prejudice, as the lawyers say?"

"Not at all," said Blake, taking the opposite chair. "Whatever you tell me I shall endeavour to make use of."

"Wonderful man—wonderful man!" said the Marquis, in tones of admiration. "Can't get over him anyhow. But look here, Mr. Blake," he went on, with an air of unconcern, "let bygones be bygones. You got me five years once, and as it was all in the way of your business I suppose I ought not to grumble. But now, look here"—he drew his chair up closer. "I'm on a big thing—so big that you wouldn't believe me if I told you who was in it. Name your price to leave me alone—not to know me whenever you see me. If it rises to thousands you can have it, and you can have the money to-night. Come, what do you say to ten, fifteen, twenty—"

Blake gave a little laugh, and threw a cushion playfully at the Marquis.

"Go away with you, Marquis," he said. "What have you been drinking, to come to me with a tale like that? I thought there was something; you've been so deuced quiet lately. Much obliged for the tip, though,

Marquis. I'll keep my eye on you now. Run away, there's a good fellow, unless you'll have a whisky-and-soda first."

He turned to the sideboard, which was just at the back. As he filled up the whisky with the soda, he looked in the mirror which hung on the wall. Quick as lightning he flung the contents of the glass over his shoulder, right into the Marquis's face. Then, with a twist and a bound, he leaped round, and, with a grip of steel, pinned the man's wrists with one hand, while with the other he secured a small revolver which had been dropped when the whisky-and-soda took effect.

"Stupid of you, Marquis," said Blake. "I should never turn my back to you unless I could see what you were doing. Trying to shoot your old friend, too!"

The Marquis tried to wink the whisky-and-soda out of his eyes, and spoke grimly.

"Let me go now, Sexton Blake," he said, "unless you'll give me in charge."

"Not me," replied Blake, slipping the revolver in his pocket. "There is that little scheme of yours that promises to be worth looking after."

"By Heaven, don't you touch it, Blake," said the Marquis, "or you'll find yourself up against something too big even for you. Better take the fifteen—"

"Out of it," snapped Blake, "or I may change my mind, and have you locked up."

The Marquis went to the door and made a final effort. "I could even spring twenty-five thousand—"

Blake took two strides, and gripped the Marquis by the collar, led him to the door, and gently pushed him into the street.

"You needn't call again, Marquis, thank you! What is it boy—got a message for me? All right; come upstairs."

As the Marquis walked hastily away, Blake returned to the room, followed by a district messenger boy.

"Very good, Tinker!" said the detective, when they were safely inside. "You are doing well. I think, by the way, that you saved my life this afternoon, and we don't forget these things."

Tinker's eyes glistened.

"It's a treat to be able to do something for you, sir."

"Well, the boot's on the other leg this time. Now report."

Tinker made his report. With his various disguises he had watched a well-known criminal, who was supposed to be responsible for the theft of the Great Mysore Diamond.

"That's all right, then," said Blake. "He's got it, that's clear. Scotland Yard can have that little picking. They'll only have to make the arrest, and the credit's theirs. Now, Tinker, just look up the Marquis, will you, and see if he was ever on the stage."

Tinker went to the safe, and took out a large, leather-bound book. Turning to a leaf, he read out: "Alistair Rortrey, alias Jem Smithers, alias the Marquis. Educated Eton; Trinity College, Cambridge. First went Army 1886. King of the gentlemanly 'crooks,' ever since—"

"Never mind about that," interrupted Blake. "I'll fill in details."

"Yes, here we are," said Tinker. "'Was on the stage for two years, from 1890. Good actor, but never made much money at it.'"

"That'll do, Tinker; we know all the rest. I think we are in for a very big thing. You can get off that uniform now, and be sure and take it back to old Lazarus. I expect he'll want it in a day or two."

When Tinker had changed into his ordinary clothes, Blake told him to sit down and listen.

He then related the fact of the death of Aston Revelle.

"And now, Tinker," he said, "this is where I take up my duty in all sincerity. Poor Revelle was one of the greatest friends I had in the world, and I have sworn to track his murderer. I accept no commission till my task is done. Are you with me, Tinker?"

"Through thick and thin, sir! And what have you got to start on?"

Sexton Blake opened his hand, and displayed a cigarette, which had hardly been lit, and a charred, wooden match.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Tinker Drives a Cab—The Poison Test—Behind the Scenes—The Iron Rod.

SEXTON BLAKE was called as a witness two days later at the inquest on Aston Revelle. By means of his experience with the coroner, his full name and profession were not disclosed. In fact, no one, not even the members of the theatrical company, knew that he was the celebrated detective. When he stepped down, after stating briefly and clearly what he had seen, Max Merrivale stepped into the witness-box.

The comedian quite broke down when he was giving his evidence. He stated, with tears in his eyes, that the author had been a great friend of his for the last twenty years, and that he had once or twice complained to him of a weak heart.

That proved the doctor, who gave it as his authoritative opinion that heart disease was the cause of death, and a verdict was rendered accordingly.

Sexton Blake knitted his brows and compressed his lips when the jury gave their verdict, and walked slowly out of the court.

"Mr. Blake—Mr. Blake!" said Merrivale, hurrying after him. "Won't you come up and see me at the theatre to-night? I would like to have a chat with you about our poor friend Revelle."

"Certainly!" replied Blake. "Where are you to be found?"

"I shall be up at the theatre. We are still rehearsing, though I don't suppose the play will be produced for another fortnight. We must honour the poor chap's memory."

With a promise to call, Blake made his way to the corner of the street. Lifting his stick, he hailed a cab driven by a young-looking driver.

"No. 96, Rider Street, Portman Square," he said.

The cab clattered off, and when they had reached a quiet street Blake pushed up the trap.

"Any news, Tinker?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said Tinker, who was the driver, speaking down. "I picked up the Marquis in Piccadilly, and drove him to Waterloo at half-past nine. He had a foreign-looking man with him."

"All right; drive on."

At that moment a newsboy rushed across the street, and, as it seemed, deliberately flapped the contents bill in the horse's face.

The startled animal tried to rear, and was brought down with a smart cut from Tinker's whip. Then it took the bit between its teeth and tore down the Strand.

Sexton Blake sat inside, grimly waiting to be pitched out. But Tinker wound the reins twice round his wrist, and by wonderful luck and skill guided the horse through the traffic, and finally cooled him down just outside Charing Cross Station.

In a few minutes they were safely at 96, Rider Street.

Blake jumped out, and appeared to argue with his cabman.

"Got any change, cabby? Get back to Baker Street, Tinker. That was one of the Marquis's boys; I saw his face. Why, the fare's only a shilling, I know. Take care how you go; there's danger. Well, there's eighteenpence, and not a penny more. There's a cab behind. You lose it."

He handed up eighteenpence and walked off, while Tinker, grumbling, drove away, pursued by the cab which had been loitering at the corner of the street.

Blake knocked at the door of 96, Rider Street, and it was opened by a stout, middle-aged woman.

"Well, Mr. Blake!" she cried.

"All right, Mrs. Medicott," said Mr. Blake; "the old game. Anyone in the dining-room?"

"Not a soul, sir."

Blake looked in the dining-room and dropped to the floor.

"Quick, Mrs. Medicott," he added, "stand at the window and pretend to be reading a paper."

The woman did as she was told, and Blake crept up

and cautiously peeped out of the window, with his head just on the level of the sill.

"See that hawker over there, Mrs. Medicott," he asked. "What's he doing?"

"Keeping his eye on the house, sir."

"All right; you can come away now."

As Mrs. Medicott turned away Blake stood up and showed himself at the window. As he did this the hawker moved off quickly.

"Now, then, Mrs. Medicott," went on the detective, "I know your pluck of old. It's going to be tried still more to-night. In about half an hour I shouldn't be surprised if a gentleman calls and asks for a bed-room. Give him one on the second floor, and if he asks who has the next, describe me exactly, and say that my name's Bland; then telephone to Tinker at Baker Street, and wait up till I come."

"Very good, sir," said Mrs. Medicott, who was the widow of an ex-policeman, and had been in Sexton Blake's secret service for years.

Blake meanwhile slipped into the adjoining room, where he remained for about five minutes. Then there appeared a well-set-up, military looking man, with an iron-grey moustache and a slight limp.

He opened the street door, and as he hobbled down the steps the hawker hurried back and took up his stand opposite the house again.

Blake limped down the road, bought a box of matches, and then walked slowly down the square. He stopped at a large house and knocked.

"Professor Alwyn at home?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied the servant; "but he can't see anyone, I know."

"Will you kindly say that Major Bee has called, and it's on urgent business."

The servant returned in a few minutes to say that the professor could spare five minutes.

As Blake entered a study on the ground floor a middle-aged man stood up and bowed stiffly.

"I am not in the habit of seeing strangers in the afternoon," he said politely, "but the servant told me it was urgent."

Blake looked to see if the door was closed, and then strode up to the professor.

"It's Blake, old man," he whispered. "Can't stop long. I'm on a big thing—I don't know how big it is yet—and I have my own private affairs, too. Analyse these for me, there's a good fellow, as quick as you can!"

He handed over the cigarette and the match as he spoke, and sank into a chair.

"There's no knowing where you'll pop up from, Blake," said the professor. "But why keep up that military voice? You're safe here."

"Not so sure," said Blake. "The Marquis is on the warpath, and there's no knowing where his people are. I have had one narrow squeak to-day."

While Blake was telling of his adventure in the cab the professor, with acids and testing tubes, was busy with the cigarette.

Finally he threw it over to Blake.

"Simply an Egyptian cigarette," he said; "nothing wrong about that."

"Mind trying the match?" asked Blake.

As the professor applied the test tube his face grew grave. At length he put down the pipes and turned to his shelf. Taking down a book, he read eagerly, and then tested the match again.

"Where did you get this from?" he asked.

Blake briefly explained.

"Then," said the professor, "if ever a man was murdered Aston Revelle was. This match has been steeped in a deadly Indian poison, hardly known in England. There, smell it!"

The professor lit the match very carefully, and held it for one brief second under Blake's nose. It had a peculiar and pungent flavour which was unmistakably unique.

"One whiff of this drawn into the cigarette goes straight to the heart, and death will inevitably result. It killed your poor friend immediately. Now, can you find the murderer?"

Blake sat silent for a few seconds, in deep thought.

"No," he said, "no; not yet. But I will. Keep the match, professor. It wouldn't be safe with me."

Outside the house, Blake hailed a cab and drove to the Criterion. There he paid off the man, and as he walked through the building he whipped off the moustache and wig and emerged without the trace of a limp. Turning into a public call office he rang up Tinker at Baker Street.

"That you, Tinker. Get home all right?"

"Yes, thank you, sir."

"Good! No knowing when I may be home. If anybody rings up, say that I am stopping at a friend's for the night—No. 96, Rider Street. Don't forget to give the number. Good-bye!"

Blake rang off, and, after lunch, spent the afternoon quietly playing chess—his favourite recreation—at Simpson's in the Strand.

Toward evening he walked up to the Monument Theatre, where poor Revelle had met with his death.

Asking for Mr. Merrivale, he sent in his card, and the comedian soon hurried out.

"So glad to see you, Mr. Blake!" he said. "We're just in the middle of an act; but I'll be through directly, and then we'll have a chat."

Blake passed through to the stage. To the uninitiated there is always an interest in the world behind the scenes.

The footlights were full on, but the rest of the house was almost in darkness. In the stalls sat the manager and a few friends, and instead of the full orchestra there was only one sickly looking man at the piano.

There was no scenery yet, and the stage looked bare and uninviting, as the performers went through their parts somewhat listlessly.

"Take a seat at the side, will you, Mr. Blake?" said Merrivale. "Joyce," he called to the prompter, "this is my friend, Mr. Sheldon Blake. Look after him, will you?"

(Sheldon Blake was the name the detective assumed when not on business.)

The prompter pushed a chair forward, and Blake was just about to sit down.

Almost by instinct, it seemed to him afterwards, Blake hesitated for a second.

Something passed before his face, and fell with a heavy thud and bang on the stage.

Blake stooped and looked. It was a heavy rod of iron, known as a "stay," used in the support of scenery. Had the detective been seated the rod would have fallen on his head, and in all probability have killed him.

Everyone looked round, and the prompter was furious. "Hi, you, Rogers, up there! What the deuce are you doing? Come down here at once."

Rogers, a morose-looking man, slowly climbed down the ladder from the flies and stood looking rather foolish.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said. "I 'opec the gentleman ain't 'urt."

"No, that's all right," said Blake, looking intently at the man. "Perhaps he didn't know I was underneath."

"Very careless of you, Rogers," growled the prompter. "See that it doesn't happen again."

"By the way," asked Blake, when the man had gone, "do you usually keep these things up in the flies, as I think you call the upper regions?"

"Certainly not," announced the prompter, "and I can't think what on earth Rogers was doing with it up there."

Blake smiled grimly to himself, and turned to watch the rehearsal.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Max Merrivale—The Midnight Thief—The Marquis's Spy—Tinker on the Trail.

THE second act was well under way. Max Merrivale was stage-managing as well as playing a comedy part, and was here, there, and everywhere.

"Going well, isn't it?" he asked Blake in an interval. "How poor, dear old Revelle would have enjoyed this!"

"Yes, poor fellow!" said Blake. "But I think you are taking his place very well, Mr. Merrivale."

"Ah," sighed Merrivale, "I would like to make the dear boy's last play a success! Now then, ladies and gentlemen, the last act, please!"

The third act was begun, and then there was a sudden pause.

"Where's St. John?" cried Merrivale.

Call-boy, prompter—everyone shrieked and hunted for St. John, but in vain.

"That's annoying!" said Merrivale. "I wonder where the deuce he can be? I say, Mr. Blake, I wonder whether you would mind taking the book and reading the part. The other characters can then get on with theirs, and we shall know what we are doing."

Blake readily assented, and took the book. The part that would have been played by the missing St. John was an important one. There were several long speeches to deliver, and a touch of pathos was necessary.

"Just run through the lines, that's all," said Merrivale. "It'll help us along."

Blake felt a queer little sensation when he started to read the lines written by his dead friend; but as he entered into the spirit of the part he forgot everything, and rattled off the stirring, words with a vigour and dash that surprised the professional members of the company.

"You ought to have been on the stage, Mr. Blake," said a pretty girl when the rehearsal was over.

"You almost tempt me," said Mr. Blake, with a bow. "Now then, come into my room and have a jaw," said Merrivale cheerily, taking Blake by the arm, and leading him into a little room, half office and half dressing-room.

The table was covered with a clean white cloth, on which were scattered paints, powder-puff, and all the appliances of an actor's profession. A full-length mirror was let into the wall, and over the table hung a full-length portrait of Revelle.

"Poor fellow!" said Merrivale, mixing a couple of whiskies-and-sodas. "We shall never look upon his like again!"

"No, he was a good friend indeed," replied Blake.

"Twenty years I knew him," went on Merrivale, "and never a cross word did we have. And what do you think? He made his will only two days before he died, and left me his interest in the play. If it's a success I may draw anything from ten to twenty thousand pounds as my share."

"Generosity indeed!" murmured Blake, looking up at the photograph.

The two men sat silent for a moment, as if thinking of their dead friend.

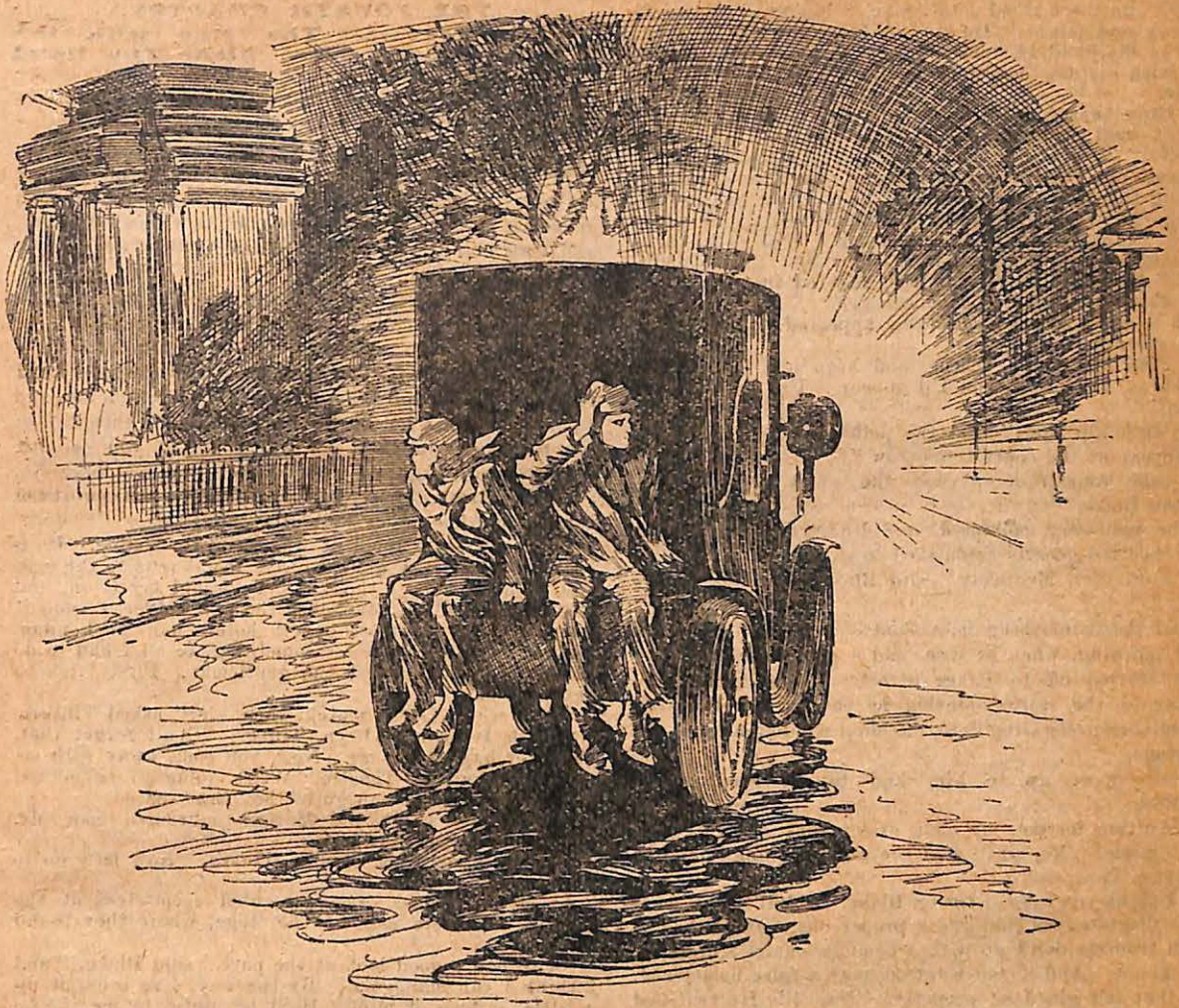
Merrivale was the first to speak.

"Have you ever been on the stage, Mr. Blake?" he asked.

"Me? No. Why?"

"Well, I have been thinking—that ass St. John has forfeited his engagement by leaving the theatre before the rehearsal is over, and I believe really that you would play the part better than he would. Would you care to take it home and look over the other two acts, and rehearse them to-morrow? If you fancy it, I'll put you up to the tricks of the trade. You are just the height and build, too. And wouldn't old Revelle have liked you to be in it, too! We'll give you ten pounds a week if you take it on."

Mr. Blake held out his hand.



"Now, Tinker!" hissed Blake. And stepping out, he jumped on the crossbar behind the brougham as it sped past.

"Give me the part," he said. "I'll play it."
 "Good! Now I'll give you a few tips."

Blake sat, and while Merrivale told him how to pitch his voice, and where to make the emphasis and where to leave it out, and the many little things that go to make the successful reading of a part, as it is professionally termed.

"Well," said Blake, when he rose to go, "you'll make an actor out of me, after all, I believe."

"Sure of it," said Merrivale. "You've got the face, you've got the will, and you've got the intelligence. Good-night! Rehearsal at eleven to-morrow."

It was about twelve o'clock when Blake returned to Rider Street. As he opened the door, Mrs. Medicott came into the hall.

"Good-evening, sir!" she said cheerily. "You're home early."

And the good lady actually winked.

"Yes. Beastly night, isn't it? Any supper?"

"In the dining-room, sir."

Mrs. Medicott bustled in and out, and each time she delivered some information in a whisper. Her conversation ran something like this, while she attended to the table:

"About four o'clock. A tall, good-looking man—wanted a bed-room for a week. Gave him one on the second floor next to yours. Asked if the house was quiet. Let him pump me as to who slept next to him. Got me to describe you fully. That's him at the door, I think—"

"If there's any noise about two o'clock, don't be alarmed, Mrs. Medicott. Now you get off!"

Blake heard Mrs. Medicott say good-night to someone in the hall; then masculine feet ascended the stairs, and the house was as quiet as the grave.

Blake finished a cigarette, and then, in his turn, went up to bed.

On the second floor he smiled as he passed the door next to his own, and then, turning into his, lit the gas.

He took off his boots noisily, and made every preparation for bed.

Putting on his pyjamas, he turned down the bed, and placed his coat and vest inside, so that they looked as if someone were sleeping there. Then he unlocked his little travelling-bag, took out a couple of articles, and slipped inside a big cupboard in the wall.

As he crouched and waited he heard the clocks strike quarter after quarter, hour after hour. In his cramped and strained position, it seemed as if eternity were passing.

At length he heard two o'clock strike.

He shifted his position ever so slightly, and applied his ear to a crack in the cupboard.

Creak! creak! went the door of his room.

Hardly daring to breathe, lest he might betray himself, Blake heard the faint shuffle, shuffle of stockinged feet across the floor. In a second the cupboard door was open, and a brilliant light illuminated the room.

Blake stood erect, with a revolver in one hand and an electric torch in the other.

Opposite there stood a tall man, a ludicrous picture of dismay and fright. He was in his trousers and shirt, and in his hand he held a handkerchief. As he looked up, with his mouth half open, Blake could not repress a smile.

"Drop that handkerchief," he said—"chloroform, I expect—and sit down on the bed!"

"No," he went on, "I have not got that match in my possession. I'm afraid you won't have a chance of telling the Marquis as much, as I am going to give you in charge. I should have thought the Marquis would have known I was not quite such a fool as to carry valuable property about with me. Now, Mrs. Medlicott," he added, as the landlady entered the room, "do you think you can find a policeman?"

In a few minutes a constable appeared, and the man was given into custody.

"Take him away, officer, and keep him back for a couple of days, and then I'll appear. I'm too busy till then."

"Can't 'elp that," said the policeman. "You'll 'ave to appear at the court to-morrow."

"Take your orders," was the quiet reply. "I'm Sexton Blake."

The policeman collapsed, and led away his prisoner, who was too greatly astonished to say a word.

"Now, Mrs. Medlicott," said Blake, "I think I'll go to bed."

And the astonishing man slept soundly till eight the next morning, when he rose, had a good breakfast, and then started off to Baker Street. As he turned the corner of the railway-station he saw a smart-looking commissioner gazing into the shop window next to his lodgings.

Blake went up to him and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Waiting for me, my man, aren't you?" he asked.

"Me, sir? No, sir!" said the man, turning round in surprise.

"I think you are," went on Blake. "But if you must wear disguise, see that it's a proper one. Black broad-cloth trousers don't go with a commissioner's uniform, you know. And if you want to wear a false moustache, see that it's glued on properly. There!" He twitched at the man's moustache, and it came off in his hand. "Take that back to the Marquis with my compliments, and tell him that I got back home quite safe, and sha'n't lose anything—not even a match!"

The man grumbled out an oath, and strode away.

Blake watched him with a smile, which faded away as he muttered to himself:

"The Marquis means business. I must keep my eyes skinned."

Upstairs he found Tinker, heavy-eyed and drowsy for the want of sleep.

"Good gracious, my lad," exclaimed Blake, "you surely haven't been here all night!"

"Yes, sir," replied Tinker cheerily. "I thought perhaps you might ring me up."

"Good lad! But don't overdo the work, or I shall have you laid up. Anything happened?"

"No, sir—nothing. I got home safely, and took the hansom back to the yard without any further trouble. Someone rang up at about ten at night and asked me where you were. I told them Rider Street, as you said."

"You've done well, Tinker," said Blake. "And now, directly, I shall want you to go to the office of the 'Era,' the theatrical paper, you know, and hunt up the file till you find out where the Marquis appeared on the stage, and who was in the company with him."

"Very good, sir. I'll find out all about him, if I have to go back to the year 1!"

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Tinker Rehearses—The Man with the Knife—Tinker Saves Blake—The Hotel Mystery.

BLAKE told Tinker all about his adventure of the night before.

"Now be careful in everything that you do, Tinker," he said "The Marquis means to have me out of the way, and I mean to have him in gaol. What his game is, I don't know, but he's worth fighting, and I am going to get to the bottom of this, whatever it is."

"But, sir," asked Tinker, "how ever did you know he would put one of his men on you at Rider Street?"

"I didn't know, Tinker," answered Blake, with a smile. "I guessed. I gambled on the chance, for I reckoned the Marquis knew I had that match on me, and wanted it. First he tried to upset the cab; then two of his men were in that cab which I told you to lose. Another one, disguised as a hawker, was watching No. 96, Rider Street. Therefore, anyone with a pennyworth of brain would know they were after me."

"The bed-room incident was absurdly simple. It is such an old thieves' game to take rooms next to the man you want to rob. I thought they would try it on, and when Mrs. Medlicott described the new lodger, I knew it was Pordyce, the most expert hotel thief in London. He was evidently there for something, so all I had to do was to wait and arrest the gentleman. First trick to Sexton Blake!"

"And where is the match, then, sir?" asked Tinker.

"With Professor Alwyn, Tinker. Don't forget that, whatever happens to me. Now, you come away with me to the Monument Theatre. We're going to be actors, and afterwards you can go to the 'Era' office."

"Guess you think the Marquis murdered poor Mr. Revelle, sir, with that match."

"You'll know soon enough, Tinker. Now let's go to the show."

At eleven o'clock they presented themselves at the theatre, and were soon on the stage, where they found Merrivale.

"I've had a good look at the part," said Blake, "and I think I can manage it. By the way, I've brought up a little protege of mine. He'll be useful to me in the dressing-room, I dare say, if you don't mind."

"Certainly—certainly! Ever been on the stage, my boy?"

"No, sir—no, sir," replied Tinker; "but I've often thought I'd like to."

"He seems a smart lad," said Merrivale, turning to Blake. "I think he could play that little cockney messenger in the last act. We'll try him, if you like."

The rehearsal started, and Blake astonished everyone by the ease with which he trod the stage for the first time in his life.

If they had known the different parts he had played on the stage of life they would not have been quite so astonished.

His sonorous, clear voice rang out over the theatre, and the beautiful words gained in intensity and feeling by his delivery.

At last it came to Tinker's turn. He was given a little brown-paper-covered book, and told to read the lines when it came to his cue.

A cue, it should be explained, is the last word spoken by one character, and means that it is now the turn for someone else to speak.

Tinker listened attentively to what the others did, and when it came to his turn, he ran on the stage and read his lines in the cockney accent that they demanded.

The part was not a long one—that of a cheeky messenger boy; but it required to be played in a light and jolly way.

Merrivale was delighted with Tinker.

"He's a find, that boy of yours," he said to Blake. "He will play that part admirably, and he shall have a couple of pounds a week for doing it."

Tinker was secretly elated, for he had always had a

great ambition for the stage, possibly owing to the disguises which at times he assumed in the service of Sexton Blake.

The first act was gone through again, and as Tinker had nothing to do in the early part of the play, he wandered across the stage, examining everything with interest. The ingenious arrangements for the lighting, the scenery, and the thousand and one wonders of the world behind the scenes attracted him with a strange fascination.

As he walked down the left-hand side of the stage, or, as it is theatrically termed the prompt side, he noticed several overcoats and hats which had been flung to the side by the actors.

Tinker picked them up, and placed them on a chair. Then, noticing Blake's coat he put that by itself, so that there should be no confusion when the rehearsal was over.

"Ere, 'ere, where are you putting that coat?" asked a rough voice. "That chair'll be wanted directly."

Tinker turned round, and saw a sullen-looking man in his shirtsleeves.

"Ere, put it up behind 'ere; there's a nail. Mr. Blake's coat, ain't it?"

"Yes," said Tinker, curiously wondering why the man wanted to know if it was Blake's coat. Then he hung it on the nail, and walked away.

In a few minutes he returned, and, walking on tiptoe, saw the man in shirtsleeves busy rifling the pockets of Blake's coat.

With a bound, Tinker was on the man, and seized him by the wrist.

"Ere, 'ere, what's up?" said the man, trying to release his hand. But Tinker had him fast, and dragged him to the centre of the stage.

"I found this man with his hand in Mr. Blake's pocket," he explained to Merrivale.

The man flustered and blustered, but it was no use, and Merrivale finally pronounced judgment.

"You'll have to go, Rogers," he said. "We can't have this sort of thing in the theatre. Get your money at the office and go."

Rogers muttered and growled, and then slunk off, casting evil glances at Tinker.

"Good boy, Tinker!" said Blake, when rehearsal was over. "Now, you pop off to the 'Era' office and look up the Marquis's career, and I'll get back to Baker Street."

As they walked down the little side street which led from the stage door, Blake suddenly pulled Tinker up with a jerk.

Phit! Something buried itself in the wall at their side.

"I thought so," said Blake, examining the mark on the plaster. "It's one of those new German air-guns. Look out for another, Tinker. Look out, lad! There it is!"

Phit! The same thud as before, and Blake looked up to the third floor of a dirty house, let out in tenements.

"Third floor front," he muttered. "And the sun shone on something bright. Are you with me, Tinker?"

"Like a bird, sir."

The general door of the house was open, and they ran up the stairs till they reached the third floor. Blake knocked at the door. There was no answer, and the detective produced from his pocket an exquisitely made little jemmy of aluminium—light, and yet hard as rock.

Blake winked at Tinker, and whispered:

"The gentle art of housebreaking, Tinker. Watch!"

He placed the jemmy in the door just below the lock, and seemed to give a gentle twist with his finger. Crack! The lock dropped on the floor, and Blake and Tinker walked into the room.

Crouched below the window-sill was Rogers, the discharged scene-shifter; in his hand he had a long, shining air-gun. In his surprise at the unexpected entrance he seemed speechless and unable to move.

Blake walked over, and twisted the gun out of his hand.

"I thought so," he said. "One of those German inventions; deadly, too, at short range."

"Look out, sir! For Heaven's sake, look out!" shrieked Tinker, as another man, with a knife in his

hand, leapt from behind a chest of drawers and flung himself on Blake.

Blake half turned, and in another minute he would have been stabbed in the back, when Tinker jumped like an athlete and caught the man's hand as it was descending.

Blake put out his foot, dashed his fist in the man's face, and sent him spinning across the room, while his knife clattered to the floor.

"Thanks, Tinker," said Blake. "Keep the knife as a memento, and I'll take the gun. I don't know this other gentleman, but I know that Rogers. Mr. Rogers tried to kill me last night by dropping a heavy iron bar on my head, and now he's tried it again. My regards to the Marquis, and tell him he's clumsy—deuced clumsy! Good afternoon, gentleman! Come along, Tinker!"

When they were outside, Blake took the knife from Tinker.

"I'll take this home with me," he said, "and you get off to the 'Era' and hunt up the Marquis, and then come back to me. And take care of yourself, there's a good boy!"

Tinker hurried away to the newspaper office, and Blake jumped into a cab. As he drove across the Strand he saw the newsboys excitedly running with huge bundles of papers, which were being bought up as fast as they could sell them. He stopped the cab and bought one. A bold headline caught his eye:

"MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF DAN SELLARS.

AMERICAN MILLIONAIRE DISAPPEARS FROM THE MAMMOTH HOTEL. FOUL PLAY SUSPECTED."

Blake folded up the paper and remained in deep thought till the cab stopped at Baker Street.

When he was safely in his sitting-room, he opened the paper and read intently:

"Dan Sellars, an American millionaire, known as the Cotton King, had for some weeks been staying at the Mammoth Hotel. The previous night he had entertained a few friends at dinner, and retired to his bed-room early. When his servant went to call him the next morning the room was in a state of disorder, as if there had been a struggle, and the millionaire had disappeared. No trace could be found of him, and the matter is now in the hands of the police."

Such was the bald statement in the newspaper.

Sexton Blake took down a book of reference, hunted up the career of the missing man, and then stretching himself on the sofa, thought long and earnestly till the return of Tinker.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

The First Night—The Deadly Wine—Tinker Scores a Success—Dan Sellars.

IN about an hour's time Tinker returned.

"Well," said Blake, "what luck?"

"Found out all about him, sir," panted Tinker excitedly. "I turned up the volume for 1890, and found this paragraph: 'Mr. Alistair Rortrey, who has just completed an engagement at the Albert Theatre, will go on tour with the entertainment party known as the Eastern Mysteries. Mr. Rortrey will be stage-manager, and the company will include the celebrated Ram Chowder.'"

"Good—good!" said Blake, sitting up on the sofa. "Anything else?"

"Yes, sir. Six months later there was this paragraph: 'Mr. Alistair Rortrey, who has just concluded a successful engagement with the Eastern Mysteries, has decided to leave the stage, and return to commercial life.' There were two or three other references to him, and I copied them all, but I don't think they are important. In one

engagement I see he played in a piece by Aston Revelle, and Mr. Merrivale was the stage-manager."

"That's a coincidence, Tinker," said Blake. "And, now, let's have a look at our parts."

The rest of the day they spent learning the words of their parts for the last week's rehearsal.

Both Blake and Tinker earned golden opinions by the way they spoke their lines, and got inside the skin of their respective characters.

Merrivale professed himself delighted with them, and prophesied an enormous success for the new piece.

From the theatre wardrobe Tinker was provided with a messenger suit—a costume to which he was not unaccustomed—and Blake provided himself with some new and fashionably cut clothes for his part.

"The Marquis is quiet, Tinker," he said, as they drove to the theatre on the first night; "but I dare say we shall hear from him before long."

"Any clue to the murderer yet, sir?" asked Tinker.

"I have a bundle of clues, Tinker; but as yet they are tangled. But you shall be in at the death, my lad. I promise you that. Now, just jump out and get that paper they're crying."

Tinker hopped out, and returned with the paper.

Blake threw open the sheet, and looked casually down the columns.

"I can't see anything to make a fuss about, Tinker. But what's this, by Jove!"

He read, aloud:

"RETURN OF MR. DAN SELLARS.

"The American millionaire, about whom there were sensational reports last week, returned to the hotel this morning. To a representative he stated laughingly that he was much flattered by the interest taken in his movements, but he had only been away for a few days, and he was sorry he had left his room in such a mess; but he was certain he hadn't been kidnapped. Mr. Sellars expressed himself as being perfectly well, and announced his intention of being present at the first performance of the "Love Light," at the Monument this evening."

"Capital!" said Blake, when he had finished. "I should like to see Mr. Sellars."

The crowd had for long been standing outside the pit and gallery entrance, and many curious glances were cast at Blake and Tinker as they walked up the narrow passage.

"Who's that little chap?" asked one.

"I don't know his name," replied another, "but I hear he's very good. A friend of mine was at the dress rehearsal, and says he'll make a hit."

Tinker heard, and walked on, feeling as if he had come into a fortune.

"Now, then, Tinker," said Blake, in the dressing-room. "I'll just put myself right, and then I'll attend to you."

Blake was no stranger, of course, to the mysteries of making-up, and when he had transformed himself into a handsome, middle-aged man, he turned to Tinker, who was already in his messenger's uniform.

"Now, then, Tinker, smear a little vaseline over your face, so that the paint will run easily."

When Tinker had followed out the instructions, Blake first of all rubbed a pale paint on the boy's face, which he smoothed well in with his fingers.

"That's the groundwork," said Blake; "now for the red." He applied the red to give a natural and healthy look to the face, painted in black lines under the eyes and on the upper lids to make them look brilliant, and gave an upward curl to the corners of the lips and nose, slipped a red, curly wig on Tinker's head, and then told him to look at himself in the glass.

Tinker gave a cry of delight, for he looked the merriest, cheekiest messenger boy that ever handled a message.

"Wonderful what a bit of paint will do, isn't it?" said Blake. "Now come up on the stage."

The first scene was already set on the stage, and Tinker thought how cheerful everything looked at night, compared with the daylight rehearsals. The curtain was down, and the orchestra could be heard faintly tuning up their instruments.

"Come and have a look at the house," said Merrivale.

He led them to the curtain, and showed them a little peep-hole, through which they looked.

It was a brilliant sight.

The well-lighted house, the fashionably dressed audience, the jewels that glittered—all made up a sight which dazzled Tinker.

"See," whispered Blake, "up in that box is Dan Sellars—that fat man."

Mr. Sellars was a heavily built, fat man, with a red face and a white moustache. He was leaning out of the box, and Tinker had a good view of him.

"Now, then, clear the stage, please!" cried Merrivale, bustling round. "Just going to begin."

In a few minutes the curtain rose, and the play began.

It all seemed so strange to Tinker, as he stood at the side of the stage. Instead of watching the play from the front of the house, here he was, standing at the side, and as a member of the company.

He eagerly watched Blake make his first appearance. The detective walked on with all the ease and grace of the professional actor, and made a decidedly favourable impression on the audience.

At the end of the first act, everyone concerned was called before the curtain, and Blake was specially summoned with a round of cheers.

"There," said Blake, as he threw himself into a chair; "I've got over the worst, and I don't mind telling you, Tinker, I felt decidedly nervous."

"I feel all of a shiver, sir," said Tinker uneasily.

"Yes, I dare say you do. It isn't all honey facing a lot of people for the first time as an actor. But keep up your pluck, Tinker; you'll be all right."

While the second act was being played Tinker sat quietly in the dressing-room, and read up his part for the last time, so as to be perfect.

"It's a great go, Tinker," said Blake, when he came down from the stage. "If only poor old Revelle were here!"

"Are you there, Blake?" said Merrivale, popping his head in the dressing-room. "I just want to congratulate you on your performance. It's great! That's all there is to say about it. You'll make the hit of the evening. By the way, old Sellars, the Cotton King, is in front. He's mad on the theatre, and has sent round a case of champagne for the company. I'll send you in a bottle."

In a few minutes an attendant appeared, and placed a bottle of champagne and a couple of glasses on the table.

"Open it, Tinker," said Blake. "I just want to look up my part for the last act."

Tinker opened the bottle and poured out a glass.

"Go on, my boy," said Blake, looking up; "you can have a glass, too. I don't approve of boys drinking, as a rule, but this is a special occasion. And throw over the cork. I like to know what brand I am drinking."

Tinker threw over the cork, and poured himself out a glass. Blake took the cork, and held it close to his eyes. As he did so his eyes glittered. Then, like a flash, his hand flew to the table; he took up a hair-brush and threw it sharply in the direction of Tinker, who was just raising the glass to his lips.

The brush knocked the glass out of his hand. It splintered into bits, and fell to the floor.

"I've changed my mind, Tinker," said Blake. "I don't think champagne would do you any good before you go on. You look bilious, so I thought I'd better stop you before it was too late."

"Beginners for the third act, please!" shouted the call-boy, outside the door.

"Well, you are quite a beginner, in more senses than one. Now, run along, and don't forget to speak up; that's all you've got to remember, beside the words."

When Tinker had left the room, Blake placed a chair against the door, and took up the cork.

"The cowardly villain!" he muttered. "It's the same smell—the same poison. If I hadn't spotted it in time, I should have gone under, and that poor lad as well. What an infernal shame! Well, it's another link in the chain." And, slipping the cork into his pocket, he went on the stage, where Tinker was waiting to go on, with his heart in his boots.

As he listened eagerly for his cue, he began to wish almost that he had never taken the engagement, and that he was miles away. Then came the dreaded cue, and with a fluttering heart and trembling knees, Tinker walked on to the stage. At first the dazzling light, the hundreds of white faces staring over the footlights almost stunned

him. But he pulled himself together, and managed to stammer out his opening lines.

The sound of his own voice speaking to all these people startled him at first, and then encouraged him. He gradually warmed to his work, and as the lines were funny and he spoke them well and distinctly, he was rewarded with plenty of laughs.

At length the scene was over, and when a burst of applause followed his exit, Tinker began to wish that he had more to do.

"Capital, my boy," said Merrivale, patting him on the shoulder. "Don't run away; I expect there'll be a call for you to go on at the end of the act."

When the curtain fell to a pronounced success, the company all had a call before the curtain, and then the pit and gallery gave a unanimous shout for "Tinker! Tinker!" as he had been put down in the programme.

Tinker took his call, and then, bubbling over with joy, rushed down to the dressing-room.

"Good boy, Tinker!" said Blake, who was washing off the paint. "You've knocked them. You'll be in all the papers to-morrow. Yes, come in, whoever you are."

"Sha'n't be in the way, I hope, Blake," said Merrivale; "but there's a gentleman here would like to be introduced to the hit of the evening."

"Send him in," said Blake.

Merrivale held open the door.

"Blake and Tinker," he said, "let me introduce to you Mr. Dan Sellars, of America."

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

The Marquis Again—The Press Notices—The Actor-Manager—A Strange Invitation.

MR. SELLARS, in evening-dress, with an enormous diamond blazing in his shirt-front, walked into the dressing-room, and held out a friendly hand.

"Say," he drawled, in a nasal American twang, "I guess I've seen the finest show and the finest acting I've ever struck! Boys, I congratulate you! Guess you were both great!"

"Thanks, very much," replied Blake. "Glad you weren't kidnapped, Mr. Sellars."

"Waal, I should smile, it'd take a darned cute man to kidnap me!"

"I believe it would, Mr. Sellars," said Blake. "I suppose you won't have a glass of your own champagne? I am afraid it's flat by now."

"Thanks, I ain't drinkin' jest now, and reckon I must git! So long, you boys; glad to have seen you!"

When the American had left the room, Blake dropped into his chair and laughed silently.

"Heavens, what fools some men are!" he said. "Come on home, Tinker; and don't talk in the cab—I want to think."

As they crossed the stage, Merrivale called to them: "Rehearsal to-morrow, eleven sharp. Sha'n't keep you long."

"Right you are," replied Blake. "Think we've got a success?"

"Certain; everyone delighted. Look out for the papers to-morrow."

Blake didn't speak a word on the way, and Tinker knew better than to disturb his reverie. When they were in the sitting-room Blake turned to Tinker.

"Promise me not to jump out of your skin if I tell you something."

Tinker grinned, and waited.

"You saw that fat gentleman in the dressing-room to-night?"

Tinker nodded.

"And you thought he was Mr. Dan Sellars, didn't you?"

"Of course I did, sir," said Tinker. "Wasn't he?"

Blake laid his hand on the boy's shoulder and spoke slowly:

"That fat man who was introduced to me as Mr. Dan

Sellars was no other than than—don't jump—our old friend the Marquis!"

Notwithstanding his promise, Tinker did jump.

"But how, sir," he gasped—"why, how did you know?"

"I had my doubts from something that happened earlier in the evening. Never mind what, Tinker; but when I saw the man I was nearly deceived. But he gave himself away when he stroked his moustache. I saw a triangular cut on his little finger, just under the nail. Now, I gave the Marquis a wound just like that when I arrested him on the Stafford House affair. I looked closer, and recognised the diamond in the shirt-front. It was reset, but not recut, and was the identical blue stone which could never be found, and which the Marquis was always suspected of having sold abroad."

"Do you mean the Stafford diamond, sir?"

"The very one, Tinker! But what a make-up! If I may say so, I couldn't have done it better myself! Face, voice, figure, wonderful—really wonderful! And what a nerve the man must have, too, to bluff it off at the hotel and everywhere else! Now, the question is—where is the real Mr. Dan Sellars?"

"The Marquis has got him, sir," replied Tinker promptly.

"Good for you, Tinker!" was the approving remark. "But we must find out where and why. I think this must be the big thing the Marquis was gassing about. Now, then, Tinker, give me the evening papers, and you pop off to bed. You look tired, and I dare say you are."

"Can't I stop up and help you, sir?" pleaded Tinker. "I know what it means when you've got that look on you."

"No, my lad," said the detective affectionately. "I want you to be fresh in the morning, for I shall have some work for you after rehearsal."

With a cheery "good-night!" Tinker went off to bed, and left Blake alone.

The detective looked thoughtfully into the fire for a few moments, and then, rising, he took the cork from his pocket and locked it up in the safe.

"No good telling the lad about this yet," he said. "I'll keep him on the other job at present."

Then, sitting down, he took up a bundle of evening papers, and studied the financial columns for hours.

At length, with a sigh of relief, when the dawn was creeping through the window, he threw himself on the sofa and snatched an hour's sleep. When he woke, it was to find Tinker standing over him with a cup of tea.

"You haven't been to bed again, sir," was the reproach.

"That you, Tinker?" yawned Blake. "A cup of tea, too! Why, bless me, what ever should I do without you? Now, I'll just have a bath, and then I'll be ready for breakfast. Have a look at the papers, and see what they say about last night's performance."

Tinker rapidly scanned the papers, which all prophesied a long run for the play, and were enthusiastic over the performance of two actors hitherto unknown to London.

"Mr. Sheldon Blake," said one paper, "is decidedly an acquisition to the ranks of London actors. His performance of the injured husband was manly, forcible, and convincing, and thoroughly carried out the author's idea of the character. Another new-comer—curiously named on the programme as Tinker—also scored a distinct hit as a cheeky messenger-boy. In gesture, action, and voice he was the London boy to the life, and a brilliant career may safely be predicted for him."

"There you are, Tinker," said Blake; "there's glory for you! But don't let us forget our real business in life. Now, listen!"

"Yes, sir," said Tinker promptly, putting down the paper. "I'm ready, whatever it is."

"Very well, then, after rehearsal I want you to go round to old Lazarus and get rigged up as an Eton boy. Silk hat, trousers turned up at the bottom, light waistcoat, and a thick gold watchchain, well displayed. You know the rig-out."

"Yes, sir; seen dozens of them at the Eton and Harrow match."

"Good! Keep your eyes open—that's the way! Then

go to Waterloo Station, and hang around the bookstall, where you'll very likely see a nice-looking, fat old clergyman. That is Mr. Eli Laverton, a luggage-thief and an awful old scamp. He is generally there in the mornings, and knows me well—in fact, he owes me a turn. You go up and ask him which 'bus will take you to Madame Tussaud's. He will be very fatherly and friendly, and will try to annex your watchchain. Oh, I know the old gentleman!"

"Shall I let him, sir?" laughed Tinker.

"When you feel his hand on your waistcoat—as you will do, if I am not mistaken in you—just look up into his face, and say, 'Sexton Blake sent me.' That will be quite enough, and the old gentleman will be like wax in your hands. Can you remember all this?"

"Like a book, sir."

"When the old boy has got over his surprise, ask him if he saw the Marquis that morning you drove him to Waterloo, and if he knows where he is living. I can't go near the station myself to-day, as I expect to be at the theatre for some time. But Eli will do, and he hates the Marquis, and will do anything for me. Tell him if he doesn't know he must find out. Now we'll be off to the theatre."

After a first performance there is always a rehearsal the next morning to run through any scene that may have hung fire the previous night, and to make any alterations that may be necessary.

When Blake and Tinker appeared at the stage door they were assailed with congratulations on every hand.

"I am so pleased," said Merrivale, "that you have made a hit, Blake! Poor old Revelle would have liked to see it! And your little friend here, too—he's got the makings of a fine comedian in him, unless I'm mistaken! By the way, Tinker, you needn't stop—your scene is perfect; but the first and second act want a bit of putting together, so we shall want you, Blake."

Blake winked at Tinker, who hurried away to Lazarus, an old costumier whom Blake had under his thumb, and found very useful.

"Now, then, come along!" cried Merrivale. "First act, please!"

Then there commenced the wearisome business of rehearsing what everyone thought perfect. But no play is really at its best on the first night, and an experienced stage-manager will always detect flaws where others would see none.

Blake, with that thoroughness which always distinguished everything he did, flung himself heart and soul into the rehearsal.

"Capital, Blake—capital!" cried Merrivale. "Almost better than last night, if possible! Hallo, Mervyn! What is it you want?"

"I've come to steal one of your actors, if I may," answered a deep, musical voice.

Blake looked round, and saw Mervyn Hallows, a well-known actor-manager, who was running the Piccadilly Theatre.

"Introduce me to Mr. Blake, will you, Merrivale?" he went on.

When the introduction was effected, Hallows astonished Blake with the warmth of his congratulations.

"Capital performance—capital!" he said. "I expect you are in for a long run here; but I want you to remember, Mr. Blake, that I shall always be pleased to find room for you in my company when you want an engagement. Good-bye! I thought I would catch you at rehearsal; and now I must be off to my own."

Blake chuckled to himself as he thought of his success in his profession.

"Still," he whispered to himself, "I'll remember Mr. Hallows and his offer; it may be useful."

It was nearly three when the rehearsal was over, and Blake congratulated himself that he had sent Tinker to Waterloo, and so wasted no time. As he was leaving the theatre, Merrivale hurried after him with a telegram in his hand.

"Doing anything after the show to-night, Blake?" he asked.

"Nothing particular. Why?"

"Well, here's a telegram from old Sellars. He wants all the men of the crowd to have supper with him at the

Etccetera Club. I believe he does the thing very well—champagne in buckets, you know."

"I don't mind," said Blake. "But why is Mr. Dan Sellars so anxious to entertain the company to supper?"

"Oh, the old chap's mad on the theatre, and likes entertaining actors! You'll come, then?"

"Like a bird," said Blake.

And as he walked on his way, he thought:

"This is a most stupendous piece of luck! But I wonder whether it is the real Sellars this time?"

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Tinker in Disguise—The Attack in St. Martin's Lane—The Club Concert—Which Mr. Sellars?

AS Tinker, in silk hat and correct Eton get-up, walked up the approach to Waterloo Station, a small and dirty boy of about his own size looked up at him impudently.

"Where did yer git that 'at, gov'nor?" he said. "A shillin' more, and you could 'ave 'ad one to fit yer!"

Tinker took no notice, but walked on.

The dirty boy, emboldened, followed behind with insulting remarks.

"Goin' to meet yer girl, ain't yer? Mind yer don't lose 'er."

Still Tinker walked on, for though he was getting cross, he remembered that he was out on Blake's business, and ought to avoid a scene. But at last the boy behind took up a stone, and caught Tinker in the middle of the back.

Tinker turned as on a pivot. With one movement he caught the boy by the collar, and with another he gave him a twist, and dropped him neatly into the gutter, where he became dirtier—and wiser.

Then, without a word, Tinker walked on, feeling that Blake surely would have approved of his conduct.

In the station he hovered round the bookstall, bought a paper, and kept a sharp look-out for an elderly clergyman. In a few minutes he saw a stout, elderly man in clerical dress, with snow-white hair, and the most benevolent expression, wander in from the street.

As he put up a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles, and examined the time-table on the wall, Tinker went up and spoke to him.

"Excuse me, sir, but could you tell me which 'bus I ought to take for Madame Tussaud's?"

The old gentleman looked down with a fatherly smile, and Tinker almost felt his eyes rest on the watchchain.

"The right 'bus, my boy, certainly!" he said.

He led the way out of the station and pointed.

"Not that one," he said, "but the one with the red stripe."

Tinker's hand went up to his waistcoat and clutched the fat fingers.

"Sexton Blake sent me," he said quietly. "That 'bus? Thank you!"

The old man's hand dropped, and he went on in an even voice:

"Sexton Blake. Yes, very well; I'm afraid there's not another 'bus for some time yet. Better come and have some lemonade, my boy."

He led the way to the refreshment-room, and had lemonade and coffee brought to a quiet corner.

"Now, then," he went on, "what can I do for Blake?"

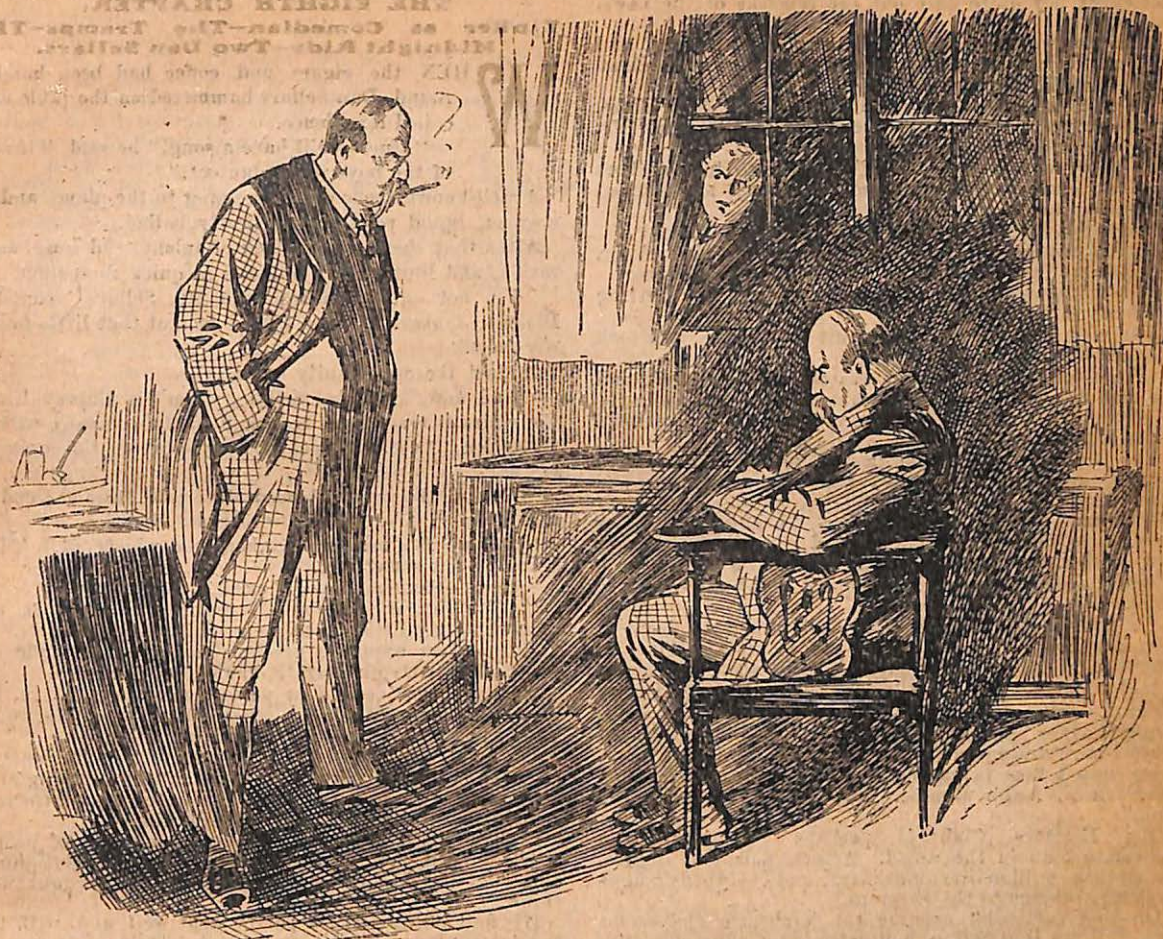
Tinker rapidly told him what was wanted, and the old man's eyes glittered, and he frowned in a very unclerical manner.

"The Marquis—yes, yes, I know. I saw him go off the other morning. Now, tell Mr. Blake I don't know for certain where the Marquis is living, but he went off in a Surbiton train, and years ago he had a house there—The Firs, Grange Road. That ought to be clue enough for Mr. Blake. And how is my friend, the gallant Sexton?"

"Oh, he's splendid!"

"Ah! A good fellow that. Put me in gaol, and kept my wife all the time I was there. And who are you?"

"I sometimes help him in little things," said Tinker modestly.



Blake held Tinker's arm with one hand, and then ever so cautiously raised his head and peeped into the window. In the room there were two men, and they were both of them Dan Sellars.

"Well, you've done this little job very nicely, and that's a compliment from old Eli. Tell Mr. Blake there seems no chance of making a living at the station nowadays. People seem to have no luggage, or look after it too well. Poor old Eli will have to turn honest, after all!"

"Many thanks for the information; and now I must go," said Tinker, jumping up.

"Must you really, my boy?" said Eli. "Well, I'll show you the 'bus. Can't be too careful," he whispered, as they went out. "I believe the nasty station people are actually beginning to suspect poor old Eli. Scandalous, isn't it?"

Tinker choked down a laugh, and jumped inside a 'bus. There was no other passenger, and the old man poked his head inside.

"Tell Mr. Blake," he said, "that I had the satisfaction of lifting one of the Marquis's bags the other morning, and there was nothing in it but dirty shirts! It'll make the gallant Blake smile."

And the 'bus moved off, leaving the old scoundrel waving a fat hand, and looking the picture of virtue.

Tinker went back to the costumiers and changed, and then returned to Baker Street.

When Blake arrived later, Tinker gave him a faithful account of what Eli had told him.

"Surbiton—eh?" mused Blake. "Tinker we may have to ride a long way out of town before morning, and we may have to walk back. Put some of those special beef lozenges of ours in your pocket, and remind me to take my revolver."

The beef lozenges, one of which would support a man half a day, were packed away in Tinker's waistcoat pocket, and Blake took his revolver to the theatre.

At the stage door, Tinker found a card, bearing on it

the name of a well-known newspaper, and a line scratched on it, asking for the favour of an interview.

"That's fame, my lad," said Blake. "You'll find the newsboys selling your full life and career to-morrow morning."

Tinker received the reporter in the dressing-room, and discreetly answered his questions, leaving out, of course, any reference to his connection with the celebrated detective.

"Thanks, very much!" said the reporter, closing his note-book. "That'll make a capital interview, and, personally, apart from my newspaper, I must say that I laughed at you last night till I was sore."

When the reporter had gone, Tinker began to wonder whether the stage was not as exciting as the detective business.

"Anyway," he thought, "I'm combining the two, so nobody can say I am idle."

"Three calls to-night, Tinker," said Blake, coming off, panting. "By Jove, the stage fever is getting hold of me! But what glorious practice for our own business—eh? My voice is getting more flexible, and though I thought I knew something about disguise, I seem to have plenty to learn. Now, my boy, make yourself up to-night. It'll be good practice for you."

Rather nervously, Tinker applied the paint himself, and was surprised to find what an effect a few careful lines will have.

"Excellent!" cried Blake, when he had finished. "Now, don't forget that twist of the mouth; it gives you a comic look. Excellent! That's it!"

Tinker looked at himself in the glass with justifiable pride, and then went up to the stage for his scene.

As on the previous night, every joke told, and the little

messenger boy quite bore out the remarks of the newspapers.

Tinker now began to feel at home on the stage, and with all his nervous feelings gone began to understand the fascination of the drama.

"You'll be a great comedian yet, Tinker," said Blake. "And now we'll be off to the Etcetera Club, for Mr. Dan Sellars's supper-party."

As they turned up St. Martin's Lane to take a short cut, two men shuffled out from a doorway, and whined something to Blake.

"What is it? What do you want?" asked Blake.

One of the men repeated something, and shuffled closer.

"Hungry; no bed, signor," said the man, advancing.

"Poor fellows, wait a minute," said Blake, putting his hand in his pocket.

The man said a few words to his companion, and took another step forward.

Like a flash, Blake's hand was out of his pocket, and the man dropped like a log, with a broken nose, while the other found himself smelling the muzzle of a revolver held in Blake's left hand.

The detective rattled off a few words in a foreign tongue, and the men pulled themselves together and shuffled off.

"Italians, Tinker," said Blake. "I knew what they were up to when they came up, and I heard one of them say, 'Quick, now, the knife!' Look, here's a tip for you."

He held out his hand, and showed half-a-crown in the palm.

"I waited till I got hold of that, and then let out. You can always hit harder when you've got something in your fist. I think I've frightened those good gentlemen. I told them I knew their names, and where they live, which I don't. Tinker, my lad"—he stopped and spoke impressively—"you know how I hate to be questioned when I am working out anything; but I'll tell you this—every step I take brings me nearer the murderer of my dear friend, Aston Revelle. Now, let's get on to the club."

The Etcetera Club is perhaps the best-known Bohemian club in the world. Actors, painters, singers, racing-men, millionaires, musicians, and everybody who is anybody, belongs to the Etcetera.

On this particular evening the handsome club-rooms were full, as Dan Sellars had extended a general invitation to everyone to meet the members of the Monument Theatre at supper.

Blake and Tinker were introduced to a crowd by Merrivale, and quickly made welcome, with that good nature which distinguishes the dramatic profession.

"Come and sit by me, Tinker?" said one of the Monument men.

"Not a bit of it," put in Blake. "You'll give him champagne, which isn't good for youngsters. I may want you Tinker," he whispered. "Sit close."

Down the length of the magnificent dining-room ran the supper-table, loaded with delicacies and decorated with costly flowers.

At that moment there was a stir at the upper end of the room, and some festive spirits struck up, "For he's a jolly good fellow."

"Gentlemen," shouted a nasal voice, "take your seats, and guess we'll wade in."

Laughing and chatting, everyone scrambled into his chair, and Blake looked intently at the figure at the head of the table.

"Look, Tinker!" he whispered. "There's nerve for you. Fancy that man being able to bluff all this company—all, except you and me! By Jove, this is better than any play!"

"Gentlemen," rang out the nasal voice, "I give you the old toast—luck, astonishing luck, and all that you wish yourselves."

The toast was drank with enthusiasm, and the clatter and the laughter began afresh.

Blake turned to Tinker with the strange light in his eyes, which only came when he was excited.

"Tinker," he whispered, "he's not wearing the diamond, and when he lifted his left hand there was no scar on the little finger. My eyes are like gimlets, and there was no scar, I'll swear. Now, my boy, think out which Mr. Sellars it is this time."

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

Tinker as Comedian—The Tramps—The Midnight Ride—Two Dan Sellars.

WHEN the cigars and coffee had been handed round, Dan Sellars hammered on the table and called for silence.

"Guess we'll have a song," he said, "if any of the boys will volunteer."

A well-known tenor quickly sprang to the piano, and in a sweet, liquid voice sang a pretty ballad.

After that there was no lack of talent, and song, recitation, and funny story followed in quick succession.

"I'm not quite satisfied with Mr. Sellars," confided Blake to Tinker. "I can't get a look at that little finger somehow."

At last the opportunity came.

"And now," drawled Sellars, when Sir Harvey King, the eminent tragedian, had thrilled the company with a recitation, "will any of the guests of the evening oblige?"

"You, Blake, go on!" cried Merrivale, from the end of the table. "Give us a show of some kind."

"Fill up five minutes, Tinker," he whispered. "I'm thinking out something."

"Blake—Sheldon Blake!" cried the company.

"All right, in a minute," replied Blake. "In the meantime, my little friend here will oblige."

A round of applause greeted Tinker as he made his way to the little platform at the end of the room.

He had never recited or performed by himself in his life, and he was wondering what sort of a fool he would look, when an idea passed through his mind.

He had often amused his friends with imitations of animals and street cries, and, in default of anything else, he would try them here. As he mounted the platform a sudden thrill of terror went through him.

It is no light thing to entertain a number of people single-handed, and when those people are all professional actors of the highest standard, the boldest might well think.

His first imitation of a parrot went well, and, with the cordial applause ringing in his ears, Tinker felt encouraged, and warmed to the task.

One after the other his imitations of animals and street cries rang out clearly and distinctly in his flexible, easy voice, and with each successive effort the applause redoubled. He concluded with rather a daring piece of work, which was nothing less than an imitation of Dan Sellars.

The raucous voice, the nasal twang, were hit off to perfection, and as Tinker stepped off the platform, the room rang with laughter and cheers.

"Excellent—excellent!" said the deep voice of Sir Harvey King.

And Tinker felt that a compliment from England's greatest actor was worth all the rest.

"Now I call on Mr. Sheldon Blake!" cried Sellars.

Blake rose with a peculiar smile, and walked to the platform.

"Gentlemen," he said, "as a change from song and story, I will endeavour to show you a few experiments in thought-reading."

He commenced with the familiar experiment of finding a hidden pin while blindfolded, and followed up with a few other tricks which are by no means difficult.

"Now," he finally said, "for my last experiment I would like the assistance of the chairman. I ask you, Mr. Sellars, particularly, so that there may be no thought of collusion. Have you a five-pound note in your pocket, Mr. Sellars?"

"Yes, I think I have," slowly replied Mr. Sellars.

"Then may I ask you to carefully get the number in your memory, and I will tell you what it is."

A hum of expectation went up as Sellars opened his pocket-book, took out a note, looked at it earnestly for a few seconds, and then put it away again.

"Guess I have got that fixed in my mind now," he said.

"Very well, then," went on Blake. "I think the

company may take your word and mine that I have never seen that note before."

"Of course that's so."

"Then will you kindly put your left hand on my forehead, and think hard of the number?"

Sellars did as he was asked, and, amid a dead silence, Blake called out some numbers rapidly, one after the other, which were taken down by Merrivale.

"There," said Blake, dropping Sellars's hand, and wiping the perspiration from his forehead. "Now will you compare the numbers."

Sellars rapidly compared his note with Blake's numbers, and announced in a loud voice that they tallied exactly.

"Guess that's the cutest thing I ever struck," said Sellars, when the applause had subsided. "And now we'll have the next song."

When Blake, appearing exhausted from the thought-reading—which invariably is the case—sat down, he whispered to Tinker, under cover of the song:

"I'm going to be ill directly, Tinker, and when I go out you come along too."

Blake's face grew gradually whiter, and at length he turned to Merrivale, who had drawn up his chair.

"I am not feeling very well, old man," said the detective. "That thought-reading always takes it out of me. I think I'll slip off on the quiet. Don't make any fuss."

"I'm awfully sorry!" replied Merrivale. "Can I do anything for you?"

"Nothing, thanks. Tinker here will see me into a cab."

The two slipped out unperceived, and when they were outside the club, Blake struck the right up Regent Street.

"Don't hurry, Tinker," said Blake. "We're going back that way directly. Half-past one. The club closes at two. We've got plenty of time. Come into this doorway."

Blake produced a little box of paints, which he always carried with him, and in a few minutes made up his own and Tinker's face. Then, taking out his penknife, he ripped away at coats and trousers till they were both in rags.

"Now, then, yours, Tinker."

Tinker's garments were served in the same way, and when Blake took a couple of handfuls of dirt, and rubbed them all over him, telling Tinker to do the same, Regent Street had a couple of the most disreputable night-birds in London.

"Tinker," said Blake, as they shuffled along the pavement, "you're a good boy, and don't ask foolish questions, therefore you shall have your reward. I'm going to take you with me to-night, and there may be a row."

"Nothing I should like better, sir," promptly replied Tinker. "Is it the Marquis?"

"It is our old friend, Tinker. He'd actually painted his finger to hide the scar, but I felt the ridge when he put his hand on my forehead. There's no getting away from a scar, Tinker; you can always feel it. And the dear fellow thinks he's bluffing me! Poor Marquis!"

"And did you really read the number of the note, sir?"

"Of course I did; thought-reading is easy enough when you know how. And that not happened to be one of the lot stolen from the City Bank last week. You know my memory, Tinker, and I spotted the number in a second. That'll keep; but I'm afraid the Marquis is up against a lot of trouble."

By this time it was nearly two o'clock, and they were within a few doors of the club.

"Straight on, and keep under the portico, Tinker. Follow me, whatever happens; they're just coming out now."

From the Etcetera Club came the actors, chatting and laughing, and from their hiding-place Blake and Tinker saw the fictitious Dan Sellars walk down the steps and get into his electric brougham.

After a hearty farewell by the crowd, the brougham turned and glided across Piccadilly in front of the doorway.

"Now, Tinker!" hissed Blake.

And, stepping out, he jumped on the crossbar behind the brougham as it sped past.

Tinker followed, and, with Blake giving him a hand, he found himself perched somewhat insecurely on the bar.

"Hold tight!" said Blake. "And let us hope the police are all asleep, or we shall be dished."

By great good fortune they were unperceived, and as they got well out of Piccadilly the pace increased.

It was not a comfortable seat, and the stones and dirt flew up and hit Tinker in the face; but he clung on, determined to show that he was worth the confidence reposed in him.

"I believe we're going to Surbiton," said Blake, as they rattled through Kensington and down the Hammer-smith Road. "Yes, we are. That's good! And I think the Marquis's little game will soon be up!"

But the brougham accelerated its speed, and conversation became impossible.

Soon they reached Surbiton, and, rapidly mounting the hill, they turned into a dark road.

"Grange Road," said Blake. "We ought to be at the Firs, then. Tumble off when I give the word, Tinker."

In a few minutes they turned into the open gate and up a long drive.

"Now!" said Blake.

He jumped off, followed by Tinker, and, quickly picking themselves up, they scrambled into the bushes which lined the path.

"The house is sure to be at the end of the drive," whispered Blake. "We'll give them half an hour, and then we'll go up."

Crouching in the bushes, that half-hour seemed interminable to Tinker. But he had long learnt that patience should be part of the stock-in-trade of a detective. Then Blake gave the word to go.

Cautiously they crept up the drive, without a twig cracking under their feet, till at length they came upon a large lawn.

At the far-end indistinctly could be seen the house, with a light in a lower window.

Blake took out his revolver and examined it carefully.

"It's about a hundred yards across the lawn," he whispered, "and we shall have to crawl it. If anyone sees us, it's all up. Now, Tinker, honest injun, if you're afraid, go back; there's time for that!"

Tinker answered by dropping to his hands and knees and starting to crawl across the lawn. Blake smiled, and followed suit.

Black scouts could not have wormed their way across that dangerous space more cautiously than did Blake and Tinker. It was hard work, but, with the spice of danger to give it a zest, Tinker felt the thrill that only comes to those who stalk the greatest of all animals—man!

Across the lawn and then the gravel-track they crawled, until they stopped directly beneath the window from which shone the light.

Blake held Tinker's arm with one hand, and then ever so cautiously raised his head and peeped into the window. He was down again in a second.

"What I expected," he breathed in Tinker's ear.

"Have a look—carefully!"

Tinker raised his head, and nearly cried out with surprise.

In the room there were two men.

And they were both of them Dan Sellars!

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

The Swindle of the Century—Trapped—The Escape—Tinker Vanishes.

THEY, in opposite chairs, sat two Dan Sellars. They might have been twins, so marvellous was the likeness. In figure, face, and limb, there was not a pin's difference to choose between them.

They were evidently talking, and, save that one of them seemed more animated than the other, a stranger might have thought he was labouring under an optical illusion.

As they talked, Blake gripped Tinker's arm with an

intensity that almost hurt, while they watched the strange scene within.

Suddenly one of them rose and urged the other to a little side-table, on which was a small machine with shining brass fittings.

"You're watching the biggest swindle of the century," whispered Blake. "What a man—what a man!"

The new Dan Sellars sat down somewhat unwillingly at the table, and fingered the machine, while the other read to him from a slip of paper.

Up and down moved the fingers of the man at the machine.

"We'll just have to—" whispered Blake, half rising. The sentence was never completed, as something rough and hairy was drawn over Blake's face, and he was born backward to the ground, while Tinker was served in a similar manner.

Strong arms grasped them and bore them off. They felt themselves thrown down heavily, and, as the sacks which had been thrown over them were cautiously removed, a cloth gag was stuffed into their mouths, and their limbs securely bound. When they looked up they saw four men, evidently servants, gazing down at them by the light of a lantern which one of them held.

"Got 'em safe," said one of the men. "Better leave them here for the gov'nor to see!"

Taking the lantern with them, they went out, and left Blake and Tinker lying side by side on the rough floor.

Blake rolled over close to Tinker.

"I can slip my gag when I like," he said in a cautious voice. "The fools don't half know their business! Lie still; there's someone coming!"

"Got 'em safe, have you?" drawled a nasal voice outside. "That's great!"

One of the Sellars' entered, and shone a lantern on the prisoners.

"Hobos—tramps," he said. "Well, I guess you're not dangerous, but you'll have to stop here for a while before I send you to the jug. So long! Sleep well, boys!"

And, with a grin, he took up the lantern and left.

Blake waited a few minutes, and then spoke in Tinker's ear:

"I've got my gag out. Give us your hands."

And Blake gnawed at the bonds till he had unravelled the knot.

"Now," he said, "undo your arms; then put your hand in my pocket and find a knife."

In a second or two Tinker had the knife out, cut Blake's bonds and his own, and they stood erect and stretched themselves.

"We'll wait till those chuckle-heads have had time to go back to bed, and then we'll clear. The Marquis didn't recognise us, and those men are real servants, none of the gang."

For twenty minutes they waited, scarcely daring to breathe, and then they crept out of the stable, across the lawn, down the drive, and were once more in safety.

Blake caught hold of Tinker's arm, and ran him along for a mile; but they stopped, panting, outside a big house standing in its own grounds.

"Come along," said Blake; "we're all right here."

He threw a pebble up to a bedroom window, and, after a brief interval, a grizzled head appeared behind the blind. The owner then threw up the window.

"Who the deuce are you?" he asked crossly.

"Sexton Blake," was the answer.

"I might have guessed it. And what do you want?"

"The loan of your motor-car."

"Go on; take the house if you want it. Look out; here's the key of the motor-house."

A key dropped on the path, and the window was banged to.

Blake laughed.

"An old pal of mine, and one of the best, but a bit short tempered. Now, let's have the car out, and give me a couple of lozenges and take some yourself. They'll keep us up till we get home."

In a few minutes the car was out in the road, and Blake and Tinker were driving rapidly back to town.

They arrived at Baker Street just after five, and the proprietor of a day-and-night garage was considerably astonished to see a couple of disreputable tramps leave a handsome motor-car in his charge.

A whispered word from Blake soon put matters right, and they were quickly in the familiar old sitting-room once more.

"Now, then, Tinker," said Blake, "wash and brush up, and I'll tell you all about it."

When they had settled themselves in front of the fire, Blake lit his pipe and talked.

"The man at the machine," he said, "was the real Dan Sellars. The other, of course, was our friend the Marquis. And the machine, Tinker, was a private telegraph. Beginning to see it?"

"I think so, sir. The Marquis kidnapped Dan Sellars."

"Exactly; and—by drugs, I think—has practically stupefied the original Dan, and is making him work the American stock-market as he thinks fit. Wait a bit though."

Blake got up and walked about.

"A man cannot work the telegraph-machine under the influence of drugs. I've got it—it's mesmerism. The Marquis has been at that game before. Give me that reference-book, Tinker."

Blake turned to a page, and read:

"Dan Sellars, Cotton King. Worth twenty millions. Yes, here we are. 'His hobby is telegraphy.' That's it; the Marquis is making him cable to America, and taking the profit himself. By Jove, what a game! No wonder the Marquis could offer me twenty-five thousand! But we'll stop it, Tinker—yes, we'll stop it! I thought there was something fishy in the money-market. Here's the half-past seven post, Tinker. Fetch up the letters."

There was the usual heavy correspondence for Blake, and, in addition, a small white, paper-covered box.

"Hullo! who's sending me wedding-cake?" laughed Blake.

He was about to cut the string, when Tinker snatched the box out of his hand, and, rushing into the bed-room, plunged it into the water-jug.

"If I am wrong, sir, I'll apologise," said the boy, as he returned with a white face; "but I believe there's something wrong with that box. I don't know why I should think so, but I heard something click as you cut the first string."

With a grave face, Blake walked into the bed-room, and picked the box out of the jug.

He opened and examined it carefully.

"You were right, my boy," he said, laying his hand on Tinker's shoulder. "See!"

Inside the box was a delicate watch-spring, which acted on a cap, now wet and harmless, which in its turn would have acted on a little patchy, grey substance, lying at the bottom of the box.

"That, Tinker," said Blake gravely, "is ellanite, the new explosive just discovered by the Germans. I had a case about it for their Government a month ago. If that spring had touched the cap, half Baker Street would have been blown up, and us with it. I can only say 'Thank you, my boy! Put it in the safe.'"

"Do you think the Marquis sent it, sir?"

"As sure as I am here, the Marquis had nothing to do with it, Tinker. I could put my hand now on the man who sent it; but I'll wait, and then poor Revelle will be avenged. Don't throw the typewritten address away, Tinker. Put it with the rest."

As Tinker placed all the evidence in the safe, he felt that he would have given his right hand to know the perpetrator. But he reflected that Blake always kept his own counsel till he was ready to pounce, and then he came down on his prey like a hawk.

"I trust you, Tinker," he had said more than once; "but I prefer to have my orders carried out unquestioned. It's my way, that's all."

Blake, who was made of steel, insisted on Tinker going to bed till it was time for the matinee, while he made himself up as an old German.

Then, touching a spring in the wall, a panel sprung back, disclosing a small spiral staircase.

Down this he walked till he was in the cellar of a piano shop two doors away from his lodgings.

Rapping on the trapdoor three times and then once, he waited till it was opened, and the face of an elderly man appeared at the opening.

"That you, Mr. Blake?" was the cautious whisper.

"Yes, quick! Anyone in the shop?"

"Not a soul. Come up."

Blake took a ladder from the corner, and soon emerged into the shop behind the shelter of a grand-piano.

The proprietor, who traded as Brockbank & Co., was one of Blake's few confidants, and the secret passage was only used in case of great emergency.

"No," said Blake, in a pronounced German accent, lest anyone should hear, "I tink I no settle on de piano today. I see mein vife first. Goot-tay, and tank you!"

As he walked out of the shop, he saw a flower-girl outside his lodging, standing on the kerb, as if waiting for custom.

"Very likely," muttered Blake, as he climbed to the top of the 'bus; "but the Marquis should have chosen someone not quite so well-known to me as Flash Poll to watch my goings and comings. I'm afraid the Marquis is falling off."

Blake journeyed as far the General Post Office, where he learnt, in an interview with one of the head officials, that a private line had been fixed at the Firs at the order of Mr. Dan Sellars.

"Thank you," said Blake, in his own voice. "That's all I wanted to know."

The official bowed out the great detective, and went back to his desk to wonder what was in the wind now.

As Blake got off the 'bus at the corner of Baker Street he noticed that the flower-girl had disappeared. But, risking nothing, he entered the piano-shop, and returned to his room by the secret passage.

"Now, then, Tinker, my lad," he called, "we'll have to get ready for the theatre now."

There was no answer, so Blake went into the bed-room. The bed was turned down and the room was in disorder.

But Tinker had vanished.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

A Cowardly Act—Rogers & Co.—Blake Receives a Cheque.

BLAKE rushed out of the bed-room, and looked round the sitting-room.

There, on the floor near the sofa, lay Tinker, with a gash on his forehead, from which the blood was oozing.

Blake hurriedly picked him up and laid him on the bed, and, dipping a towel in water, succeeded in staunching the blood.

Tinker slowly opened his eyes and looked up.

"It's all right, sir," he said. "They didn't get anything." Then his eyes closed, and he swooned off again.

With the aid of his wide experience, Blake applied the proper remedies, and Tinker soon recovered, and was sitting up again.

"Now, my lad," said the detective, "take your time, and when you feel like it tell me what happened."

In a feeble voice Tinker told his story.

"I was sitting near the fire, sir, trying to think out some new imitations, when the housekeeper came in and said that two gentlemen from Scotland Yard wanted to see you on important business. The men followed close behind her, and as soon as they came in I saw they weren't Scotland Yard men at all. One of them, dressed as an inspector, had the wrong band round his cap."

"Good boy!" nodded Blake. "Observation—that's the game. Go on."

"The other one, in plain clothes, was Rogers, the scene-shifter, with his beard shaved off. I recognised him by his left ear—half the lobe missing. 'Mr. Blake not in?' said the inspector. 'No, sir; gone to Norway,' I answered."

Blake smiled.

"No lip, youngster!" went on the inspector. "Stand by the door, Ted. Now, then, where's that match that Blake is keeping so safe and sound? Come on; we mean to have it!" I told him I didn't know what he meant, and then I just saw him lift his hand, with something in it. I felt a blow, and remembered nothing else. And that's all, sir."

"Poor boy—poor boy!" said Blake. "They might have left you alone. Now, let's have a look at the safe."

Blake carefully examined the safe with a microscope, and grunted with satisfaction, as he picked a tiny strand of cloth off the edge.

"Every time," he murmured—"every time they give themselves away."

"So you think you feel up to the matinee, Tinker," he asked, as he unlocked the safe, and put the little piece of cloth away."

"Yes, sir," answered Tinker bravely. "My head aches a bit, but I shall be all right when it comes to my scene."

As they left the house, Blake walked up to a flower-girl at the other side of the street and bought a rose.

"Why not go home, Flash Poll?" he said. "I'm just off to the theatre, if your friend wants to know where I am."

The girl laughed musically, and spoke in an educated voice.

"I haven't forgotten how you saved my kiddie from the workhouse, when I was put away, Mr. Blake, and I've come to warn you."

She leant over and whispered:

"They mean to have that match; the evidence is too deadly to be in your hands."

"When you mention the kiddie, I know you speak the truth. 'I know what they're after; but thanks all the same, Poll. Take care of yourself.'"

"Well brought up, that girl," said Blake presently to Tinker. "Shop-lifting first, then anything, and finally she married our friend Mr. Rogers. She's good at bottom, though, is Poll."

When the matinee was half over, Max Merrivale came down to the dressing-room.

"I've got a cheque for you, Blake," he said. "Poor old Revelle left you a hundred pounds to buy any little remembrance. I'm winding up his estate, so I may as well give you a cheque now."

"Thanks, very much! You have my address, do you mind posting it on. I hate carrying an amount of money with me. And how's the play going—financially, I mean?"

"Capitally! I think we shall run the piece a month longer, and then take it on tour. I drew seventy pounds this week as my share."

"You'll be a millionaire directly!" laughed Blake.

"Yes; but when I draw the money I can't help wishing that poor Revelle was here, and drawing it instead of me. By the way, Tinker, would you like to give those imitations of yours before the play? I think they'll go well, and it would mean an extra fiver a week for you."

"If you think it all right," answered Tinker, "I should be very pleased."

"All right; start on Monday, then, 8.15 sharp."

"Get all the experience you can, Tinker," said Blake, when Merrivale had left. "Something might happen to me at any time, and then you would have a profession at your fingers' ends. Besides, it's capital practice for your voice, and will teach you how to disguise it when necessary."

The next morning, Blake went off to the police-station, and appeared in support of the charge against Fordyce, who was committed to the sessions on the charge of entering a room at Rider Street.

"That's one out of the way," said Blake. "And now, then, Tinker, out with the bicycles, and we'll go and have a look at Surbiton."

When they arrived at the pretty little suburb, Blake walked into a house-agents', and asked if they had any house to let—something quiet, and not too near the station.

"Well," said the agent, "there's the Firs. Mr. Sellars, the American, had that, but he was suddenly called away to America, and moved his furniture only this morning. You might have a look at it."

"Thanks; I think I will."

"Really, Tinker," said Blake, as they walked up the familiar drive, marked with the wheels of heavy vans, "this is about the sweetest little job I think I've ever been on. That excellent Marquis forgets there are such things as newspapers. There's a big boom of cotton on at Liverpool, and of course he's gone there, and taken the



Then Sexton Blake let go of the spout and sprang into space. He clutched quickly, and, with the skill of a gymnast, drew himself on to the balcony.

unfortunate Sellars with him. It's so simple, that the only thing that puzzles me is how much he is making out of the deal. Now, we'll just walk in and see what he left behind. Quick! Behind those bushes, Tinker; there's someone in the dining-room."

They slipped behind the bushes, and then cautiously, as on the previous night, wormed their way to the house.

From the shelter of the bushes, Blake spied into the room with a miniature, but powerful, pair of glasses, made to fit his waistcoat pocket.

"They've got their backs to the window, Tinker," he said. "Now, on tiptoe to the front door, and then follow me."

When they reached the front door Blake slipped his hand in his hip-pocket, walked stealthily across the hall,

followed by Tinker, and quietly opened the dining-room door.

Two men, with their backs turned, were bending over a table.

"Hands up, gentlemen," said Blake, in a cool voice, levelling a revolver.

The men turned round, with terror written deep on their faces.

"Excellent!" said Blake. "There is Mr. Rogers, and do you recognise the other, Tinker?"

"Yes, the inspector from Scotland Yard."

"You cowardly dog," said Blake, in the same even voice, "to strike down a poor boy who was only doing his duty. You'll be out of mischief for a little time. See what they've got, Tinker, while I keep them covered."

Tinker found they had packed up the telegraph machine in a hand-bag, while Rogers had dropped a silver match-box when he saw the revolver threatening him.

"Larceny and house-breaking," said Blake. "That'll be a job for the Post Office and the house agent. Now, you gentlemen will please walk in front of me to the police-station, and if you try to run I'll shoot you like the dogs you are. Tinker, empty that match-box on the table and see if there are any wooden matches."

"No, sir; only wax," replied Tinker, after an examination.

"Any monogram?"

"D.S."

"All right; now proceed, Mr. Rogers & Co."

The two men were delivered at the police-station, and when Blake had given information to the house agent, and promised to appear as a witness, he and Tinker cycled slowly back to town.

"That's three out of the way," said Blake, when they stopped for a rest. "They'll all be remanded to the sessions, so we shall have a little peace. I think I'll rope in those two Italians as well, and then have the Marquis; and then, poor Revelle, my dear friend, you shall be avenged."

They reached town shortly after five, and as they turned out of Oxford Street, Blake jumped off his machine, and bought an evening paper.

"What I thought, Tinker," he said, pointing to the money column. "Scenes at the Cotton Exchange. Dan Sellars at work. That's the Marquis. What a time the man's having! Seems almost a shame to stop him."

When Blake looked over his correspondence at home, he found a typewritten envelope addressed to him.

"What the deuce is this?" he said, as he opened it. "Oh, I know; it's that cheque from Merrivale. There, put it in the safe, Tinker. I'll pay it in to-morrow."

When they reached the theatre that evening, they noticed a subdued air of excitement about everybody.

"What's up, Merrivale?" asked Blake.

"Most infernal hard luck!" answered the stage-manager. "The management's put up a fortnight's notice."

"What on earth for?"

"Oh, they say the piece is not paying; but I know better, and I think they've got an offer to buy the theatre or let it at a higher rental. Anyway, we're out of it in a fortnight's time, and that's all there is about it."

"That's just what I wanted, Tinker," said Blake. "I'll give the Marquis another fortnight at Liverpool. The boom will last that time, and then we'll go up ourselves."

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

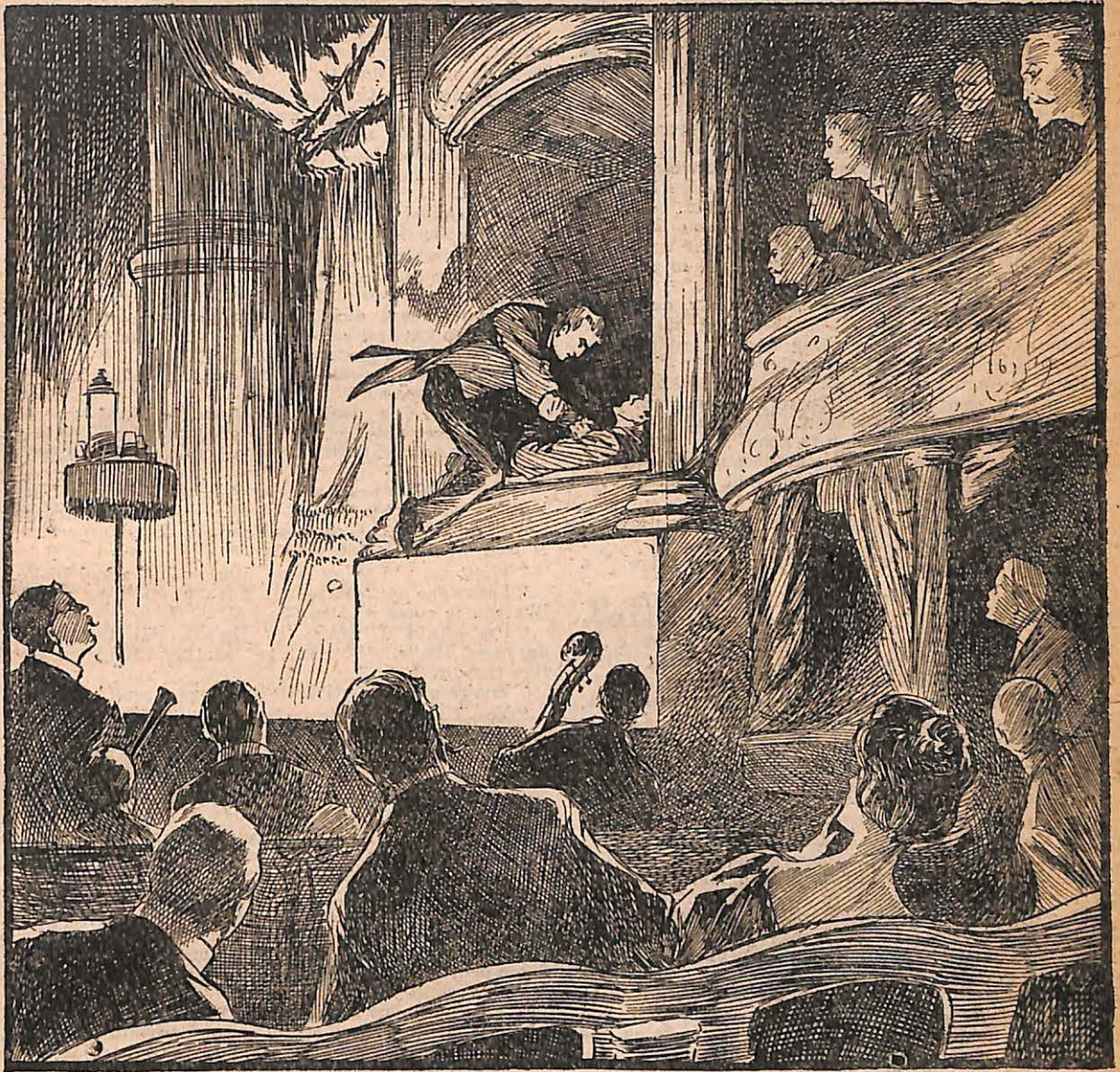
Tinker as Mimic—The Arrest at the Restaurant—Meredith from the Yard—A Wooden Match.

FOR the next few days it must be owned that Tinker's thoughts dwelt rather upon his appearance as an entertainer than upon other matters.

When Monday evening came Sexton Blake rigged him up in a well-cut dress-suit, and superintended his make-up.

"Just a touch of rouge, Tinker—eh," he said, "and no funny lines on your face? You're just giving an entertainment, you know, and not acting a part."

In his well-fitting clothes and with his eyes sparkling



Blake took the match. Then suddenly he clutched it in his fingers, slipped it into his waistcoat pocket, and with one bound leapt into the box and seized the old gentleman by the throat.

with excitement, Tinker stood waiting to go on, with his heart in a flutter.

As a rule a short play is put on before the drama, but in this case the entertainment was novel, and the critics and the audience were seated in good time ready to pass judgment. The orchestra finished the overture, there was a pause of a few seconds; and then Tinker, with his knees knocking together, stepped in front of the curtain.

He made a polite bow and a little speech.

"Ladies and gentlemen, with your permission, I will endeavour to give you a few imitations of the animal and other wild fowl we hear in the streets of London."

A quiet burst of laughter and a round of applause greeted his words, and he commenced his entertainment.

Cats, dogs, parrots, and all kinds of animals he imitated with startling fidelity, and then he plunged into the street cries.

These met with an even greater success, and as an encore, he gave, what afterwards became quite famous, a quarrelling scene between a coster and a cabman.

When he came off, panting with perspiration and the

applause ringing in his ears, Sexton Blake clapped him on the shoulder.

"Capital, my boy!" he said. "I knew you had it in you, and I'm glad to see you bring it out. Now take your call, they want you on again!"

Tinker was called before the curtain three times, but smilingly shook his head when an encore was requested. To tell the truth, the boy was exhausted; for it is no light thing for a youngster to hold the stage by himself for twenty minutes.

Everybody in the theatre was enthusiastic in his praise, and the papers next morning devoted considerable space to the Boy Mimic, as they christened him.

"When you're tired of me, Tinker," said Sexton Blake, "you can make your fortune as an entertainer."

"Well, that'll never happen, then, sir," answered Tinker gratefully.

The next few days Sexton Blake spent using his considerable influence with the authorities so that the three men he had arrested should be only formally charged and then committed until the sessions.

"This gives us a free hand, Tinker," he explained.

"I don't want to waste all my days round the police-court, I have other fish to fry. This boom is still on at Liverpool, and Sellars, alias the Marquis, holds the market. I'll give him to the end of the fortnight and then we must get up to Liverpool."

"There are still the Italians, sir," hinted Tinker.

"We'll have them in a day or two as well. I shall have quite a nice little collection directly. When I think of the villainy of it all it staggers me, my boy."

Tinker's entertainment was a pronounced success, and he spent most of his days thinking out fresh items and improving on those he had already presented.

Sexton Blake, meanwhile, stopped at home watching the money market eagerly; and sometimes he was hours at a stretch gazing into the fire, immersed in a brown study.

"I've got them all there!" he said gravely, one afternoon to Tinker. "There's"—he held out his hand—"there's only just one more thing wanting, and then—my word, someone will feel an earthquake!"

"What about the Italians, sir?" asked Tinker.

"Well, now you mention it, Tinker, I think we'll wrap them nice and tidy this afternoon. Come on!"

Sexton Blake led the way up to Soho, and turned into a little dingy restaurant where a number of disreputable-looking men were playing dominoes and smoking evil-smelling cigars.

"Come on, Tinker," he said. "Our gentlemen are not here; someone I want is."

One of the men jumped up and sprang forward with a knife in his hand.

Sexton Blake stepped to one side and caught the up-lifted wrist, and the knife clattered to the floor; and then he, in his own language, spoke rapidly to the Italian.

"It's no good resisting, I've all my men outside. Tell your mates to drop that noise."

With a sullen face the man addressed his companions. They sank back and scowled as Sexton Blake fitted a pair of handcuffs to the prisoner's wrists.

"Take the knife, Tinker," said Blake; and the three walked out of the restaurant.

"Now then," said Blake, "we'll have a cab."

"Scotland Yard!" he called, in a loud voice. "And stop at Charing Cross!" he added, in lower tones.

When he got his man in the four-wheeler, Blake slapped him on the knee and spoke in English to Tinker's amazement.

"You did that very well, Meredith; I really believe that in you the Yard have got a man of brains."

"Get those handcuffs off, Blake, they hurt," said the man.

"When we get to Charing Cross, my son, there may be one of your ruffians after us. Here we are, Tinker, pop out and see if there are any Italian gentlemen in the immediate neighbourhood."

"None, sir," replied Tinker, almost immediately.

Blake clicked the handcuffs and stepped out of the cab.

"Now, then," went on Blake, "you don't look too disreputable for Gatti's, so we'll go and have a cup of coffee. Just slip off that moustache, and you'll do."

Meredith ran his hand over his face, pulled off the moustache, and the three entered the restaurant.

"Now," said Blake, "do you want those two anarchists?"

"Want 'em!" sighed Meredith. "I am simply yearning for them!"

"Well, I think I can put you on with 'em. They tried to knife me the other night, but I gave them a lick on the head, and sent them howling. I frightened the life out of them too, by mentioning their own names. That's why they haven't been to your pet restaurant evidently. They thought someone had given them away."

"And I've been poisoning myself at that beastly hole for two days!" sighed Meredith.

"Yes, it is rough on you, Meredith, I admit, and my conscience smote me for spoiling your game, that's why I ferreted you out. Now, these two gentlemen have, in their fright, taken to organ-grinding. They generally pitch here about this time, so you can nab them, pop them off to Bow Street, and behold! great glory is yours."

At that moment a barrel-organ struck up a lively tune outside.

"There are your friends, Meredith," said Blake, rising. "They are delivered into your hands; and, I say, don't be in too much of a hurry over the proceedings at Bow Street. Get them remanded, will you? Now, Tinker, we'll go and see how the police do things."

They stood at the door and watched Meredith walk over to the organ. There was a flash of something bright, a brief struggle, and two surprised and angry Italians were handcuffed together, popped into a cab, and half-way to Bow Street before they quite realised what had happened.

Blake smiled as a policeman wheeled away the organ amid the cheers of the crowd.

"We've managed very well," said the detective. That makes five out of the way, and we don't appear in the matter—yet. Fordyce for burglary, Rogers & Co. for larceny, and the two Italians for anarchy, and we don't appear as prosecutors once. That's decidedly good. Now we'll go to the theatre."

"Who's Mr. Meredith, sir?" asked Tinker later, in the dressing-room.

"Meredith is a good fellow from the Yard, and I'm glad I've been able to do him a good turn. His make-up was really excellent, and he played up well—I've hopes of Meredith."

"Two nights more, you fellows," said Merrivale, bursting into the dressing-room. "It will seem like breaking up a family. All pals of poor Revelle's, and all separating. It makes me feel quite gloomy."

"What are you going to do, Merrivale?" asked Blake.

"I take the piece on tour in a few weeks' time, and I'd like you to come with me."

"I'm afraid I can't; so thanks, all the same," answered Blake. "I must get another engagement before then, if I can."

"You're going to stick to the stage, then?"

"Yes, I think so. It seems to pay well, and I've had losses lately."

"You ought to do well, Blake, I will say that. Will you come along with me, Tinker? You can have the part you're playing now and give your show as well—eight pounds a week for the two."

"Thanks very much," replied Tinker; "but I'll stick to Mr. Blake."

"Good boy," said Blake, when Merrivale had gone.

"I want you with me, Tinker. No good giving one's plan away to everyone; but I want to be at Liverpool on the quiet."

Merrivale took an affectionate leave of them at the stage door.

"Now don't forget," he said, "that if there's ever anything I can do for either of you I shall only be too pleased. Both of you are jolly good performers, and a word from me will go a good way in the profession."

"That's awfully good of you," said Blake, "and I sha'n't forget all you've done! Good-bye! We shall run across each other, perhaps, some day."

Tinker had made many friends by his unassuming manners, no less than by his clever little performance, and was kept busy saying good-bye.

As he left the stage door, the leading lady stopped him, and handed him a silver cigarette-case.

"There you are; that's for a clever boy," she said.

"I don't know whether your big friend lets you smoke, but I've popped a few cigarettes inside. Good-bye, my boy! Many engagements and big salaries to you!"

"Smoke if you like, Tinker," said Blake; "though I don't advise it at your age."

"Very well, sir, I won't then. But you'll try one, won't you?"

Blake took a cigarette, more to please Tinker than anything, though he felt it would be hard not to let the boy smoke.

"I've got a match, sir," said Tinker, as Blake handled the cigarette.

He lit the match and held it out. Sexton Blake bent over, and was about to take a light. Suddenly he dropped the cigarette, blew out the match, and carefully and quickly took it in his own hand.

"Tinker," he said, in a voice vibrating with emotion, "where did you get that match?"

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER.

Poison Again—Tinker Meets the Professor—
—The Special Train—The Marquis Tracked.

TINKER was puzzled, and waited for a few minutes before he spoke.

"I know, sir," he said at length. "I was tidying up your dressing-table when we were packing up, and I saw the match-box lying under the gas-bracket. I suppose I slipped it in my pocket."

"Give me the box," said Blake.

"He held it carefully in his hand till they reached Baker Street. When they were in the sitting-room, Blake emptied the matches out of the box into his hand, and lit them one by one. Each one he smelt carefully, and then threw them into the fireplace.

When the box was empty, he took the match which Tinker had handed him, and lit that also, and held it under his nose cautiously.

"It's the same kind of match that killed poor Revelle," he said.

Tinker turned white, and spoke anxiously.

"Then it might have killed you, sir."

"More than possible, Tinker. See here"—he took up one of the matches from the fireplace—"these matches which I have lit are all harmless, and you will notice all are of the same size, and also belong to this box. Now the poisoned one is slightly bigger. It's a thousand to one that this is the first anyone would take out of the box—the biggest always comes to the fingers first, you know, by natural selection. The villain who put the match in the box gambled with death, and nearly won his wager. It was meant for me, but it might have been you, my boy."

"I am so thankful you escaped, sir," said Tinker. "I would never have forgiven myself."

"That's all right; it's not the first time I've carried my life in my hand. And after all, I'm glad it happened. It's another link; one more, and then I pounce."

Sexton Blake extended his long, lean hand, and in imagination Tinker saw him squeezing the poisoner's throat.

"Now, then, put it in the safe, Tinker, and up early to-morrow morning; there's work to be done, my lad."

Next morning the bells were ringing pleasantly for church, when Sexton Blake, dressed in the Sunday suit of a working man, with a tuft of red whiskers under his chin, gave his final instructions to Tinker.

"Best clothes on, Tinker," he said. "Put the match in your waistcoat pocket, and go to service at St. George's, Russell Square. Perhaps the murderer is listening to those bells as well as we are, but little does he think that the rope is already round his neck. I'd go with you, my lad—church is good for us all—but I have the fever of vengeance on me, and there's work to do."

In a few minutes Tinker was dressed in his best, and, with the match in his waistcoat pocket, waited for further instructions.

"Now, here is a photo of Professor Alwyn. He goes to St. George's, I know. After service, get into conversation with him, slip the match quietly, and say it's from Major Bee, to be taken great care of; that's all."

Tinker looked puzzled.

"I know what you think," said Blake, with his wonderful intuition. "Why not post it? Leave nothing to chance in this business. Registered letters have been lost, and that match is enough to hang a man. And if you or I were seen going to the house of Professor Alwyn, the great poison expert, all my plans would fail. Off with you, my lad, and remember what you carry. You may be followed, but I don't think you will be. I think I've put nearly all the gang away."

From a hole in the blind, Blake watched Tinker step jauntily down the road, and disappear round the corner.

"Good!" he muttered. "Not followed; the game goes well! Now for my share!"

Blake slipped out the back way, and, turning east, hurried by bus and train to the docks.

Before Tinker entered the church he gave one last look round to see that he was not followed.

There were no suspicious characters in sight, so he was able to attend to the service with proper reverence, and when it was over he loitered in the street outside, and waited to see if Professor Alwyn came out.

At length he saw the original of the photo—a tall, thin man—walk out, and turn to the right. Tinker followed discreetly, until he reached a comparatively quiet street. Then he took the match out of his pocket, where it had been secreted in a slip of paper, placed it in the hollow of his hand, and increased his speed.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, stepping up to the professor's side, and raising his hat. "I don't suppose you know me, but do you mind acting as if you did, and letting me walk by your side to the corner of the street."

The professor looked down under his thick, bushy eyebrows.

"If this is a new confidence trick," he said, "I'll see it through."

"Major Bee sent me with something he wished you to keep," went on Tinker. Then, as two men approached he raised his voice. "No; the wet spoilt the cricket, and I only got a couple of runs. Will you shake hands at the end of the street, and I'll pass it to you, sir? It's only a match, but I couldn't give it any other way."

The professor, with his keen brain, of course grasped the situation in a minute, and took his share of the conversation. At the corner he stopped, and held out his hand.

"Well, good-bye!" he said. Remember me at home, and tell the Major to take care of himself; and let me know when you've another match. I'd like to see it."

The passers-by overheard the last few words, and walked on, thinking that a benevolent old gentleman was talking to a young friend about the school cricket.

Little did they think they were witnessing the forging of one of the links of the chain that was surely dragging a murderer to justice.

When Tinker shook hands, he felt the professor clutch the paper containing the match, and he knew that his mission was accomplished. When he returned to Baker Street he found Blake in his ordinary costume, sitting before the fire, with a pipe and the "Referee."

"All right, Tinker?" he asked.

Tinker related what he had done.

"Very good, my boy," said Blake. "I thought I'd let you work it out. It will give you confidence in yourself for future little jobs. Now we'll have a nice quiet afternoon at home, and thirt' how we're going to get to Liverpool on the quiet. Disguise is no good, as I want to get at Mr. Dan Sellars, alias the Marquis, in my own proper self."

"Pity we couldn't get an engagement to go there, sir," hinted Tinker.

"Wait a bit—wait a bit," said Sexton Blake; "let me think. Mervyn Hallows said he'd always give me an engagement whenever I wanted one. The 'Era,' Quick, Tinker!"

Blake hastily turned to the theatrical gossip where he soon found the name of the eminent actor. "Mr. Mervyn Hallows," ran the paragraph, "will play a special week at Liverpool for the races, which commence on the ninth. Mr. Hallows and company will leave Euston by special train on the eighth at four p.m."

"That's to-day," said Sexton Blake. "If I'd only known, he might have given me a shop for the week. Leave at four! It's half-past three now. We'll chance it, and I'll make him take us somehow. Come on, Tinker; we'll be in Liverpool to-night!"

Driving at breakneck speed, they reached Euston a few minutes before four.

"Where for, sir?" shouted an official, as they rushed on to the platform.

"Liverpool!" shouted back Blake. And he hunted for the actors' special train.

"No train till five, sir!"

"Confound you! Where's Mervyn Hallows's train? We're members of the company!"

"Right you are, then! This way! Hurry up, the train's moving."

Blake almost threw Tinker in at the door, gave a mighty jump himself, and as the train glided out of the station, the astonished actors looked in wonder at the two

strangers who had thus unceremoniously entered their special train.

"What's all this about?" said Mervyn Hallows angrily, coming up from the other end of the saloon. "Who are these people?"

"Come aboard, sir," said Blake humorously, touching his hat.

Mervyn Hallows took a step forward.

"It's Mr. Sheldon Blake, isn't it?" he said. "I remember you well, Mr. Blake; but isn't there some little explanation due to me for entering my special train in this way?"

"Of course there is," said Sexton Blake. "Can I have a word in private?"

The two stepped to one side out of earshot.

"Your name's not Hallows at all," said Blake quietly; "but you are the youngest son of the Earl of Melborough."

"Great heavens! how do you know?" gasped Hallows, in surprise.

"Do you remember a certain English tourist who got you out of a scrape in Russia many years ago—long before you went on the stage?"

"Rather; and I often wanted to thank him."

"Well, here he is."

"But you—I thought you were——" said Hallows.

"I'm Sexton Blake," was the quiet answer.

"The great detective! Why——"

"Never mind, you can do me a turn now. I want to be in Liverpool ostensibly as an actor, but really on my own business. Can you give me an engagement and keep this a secret for Auld Lang Syne?"

"I'll see what I can do," answered Hallows. "But all parts are fixed, and you've got a friend with you."

"Yes, a clever little chap; gives imitations and things."

"I know; that boy who made such a hit at the Monument. Well, he's easily fixed. I thought of playing a first piece, but he can give his show instead. But where can I put you?"

"I'll do anything—walk on, carry a banner—but I must be an actor for this week, at any rate."

"I know," said Hallows, after a moment's thought; "you can play the servant in the second act. I generally get a local man to do that. And you can understudy me as well. I'll fall conveniently ill one night so as to keep up the illusion."

"Capital!" said Blake. "If I'm only on in the second act that will give me time to look after my own business. And now you'd better introduce us to the company, or they'll think there's something fishy."

Hallows introduced Blake and Tinker to the company, with the explanation that he had engaged them at the last moment, and that they had mistaken the time of the train, which accounted for their unceremonious appearance.

Any other tale would have done as well, as all the company were so engrossed in studying their parts that they had little time to interest themselves in other matters.

"You show to-morrow night, Tinker," explained Blake. "And mind you do your best; we're actors again."

"All right, sir," replied Tinker. "It's all in the way of business. But how about clothes?"

"Are there not shops, and have I not money? Here we are in Liverpool."

When Blake had received a few whispered instructions from Hallows, he took Tinker by the arm and walked him out of the station.

"Now we'll try and have a look at Mr. Dan Sellars," he said.

Tinker wondered, but as usual held his tongue.

Through brilliantly lighted streets they walked till Blake stopped in front of a large hotel.

"You wait a minute, Tinker," he said; "I'll go in by myself."

Under the shade of a friendly doorway he put on a false moustache, which he always carried with him in case of emergency, slipped a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles on to his nose, and sunk his head on to his shoulders till he looked as if he were hunchbacked. Then, leaving Tinker, he walked boldly into the hall.

"I should like to book a bed-room and sitting-room for the 29th," he said, in an assumed voice; "one of the best you have."

"Sorry, sir, but the best has gone for the next three weeks," said the clerk.

"I suppose one of those wretched American millionaires has got it?" grumbled Blake.

"Well, to tell the truth, sir," replied the clerk, rather proudly, "Mr. Dan Sellars, the cotton king, and a friend have got the whole of the second floor."

"Have they! Well, then I'll try somewhere else."

And, with an injured air, Blake strode out of the hotel.

"As I thought, Tinker," he said, slipping off his moustache and straightening himself up. "The Marquis is in the hotel. All the millionaires stop here, so there wasn't much doubt about it. Now then, we'll find some lodgings."

Blake looked up at the hotel for a second, and then walked to a street at the back.

"Best rooms of the hotel will be at the back," he muttered. "I want to keep an eye on the gentleman."

In this street there were plenty of apartments to let, and Sexton Blake selected one house of which the bedroom looked across to the hotel.

"Two bed-rooms and a sitting-room," he told the landlady; "and we'll have something to eat at once."

After dinner he took Tinker into the bed-room, turned out the gas, and with his powerful glasses glued to his eyes, seated himself near the window.

In a few minutes he handed the glasses to Tinker with a gratified sigh.

"Here you are, Tinker, third window to the left. Seated at a desk you will see Mr. Sellars, alias the Marquis. Focus the glasses on his finger and you'll see the scar."

Tinker took the glasses, and plainly saw the Marquis in his wonderful make-up as Mr. Sellars.

Suddenly Tinker lowered the glasses with a little gasp, and turned to Blake.

"There's another man in the room now, sir! He's fat, tall, and clean-shaved, and looks as if he were half-blind!"

THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER.

Tinker's Imitations—Blake as a Reporter—The Original Sellars—Blake Smiles.

BLAKE snatched the glasses, and looked carefully and intently.

"The man's hypnotised!" he said. "I wonder—by Jove! I've got it! That's the real Dan Sellars, and the Marquis has made him shave so as to pass as his friend! That won't save you, Marquis!"

The lights in the hotel room were suddenly extinguished, so Blake and Tinker went to bed.

In the morning Blake watched from behind the curtain and saw the Marquis and "friend" enter a carriage and drive away.

"He's off to the Cotton Exchange," said Sexton Blake; "and we'll be off to the theatre for rehearsal."

The "call," or a summons for rehearsal, was at eleven, and the company were assembled in full force on the stage.

A rehearsal is a dull business at the best of times. There is none of that life and excitement which stimulates the actor at night, and the theatre looks gloomy and depressing.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," said Hallows. "Glad you have managed to be in time this morning."

A laugh went up as the crowd thought this was a hit at Blake and Tinker for nearly missing the train at Euston.

Blake winked unperceived at Hallows, and was pleased to see that he was keeping up the deception.

"Now, then," went on Hallows, "we'll just run through the imitations, Mr. Tinker, please."

Tinker's heart fell as he looked at the gloomy theatre and the little knot of strangers waiting to hear him perform.

"Now, then, please, hurry up!" said Mervyn Hallows, with managerial authority.

"But I'm nervous!" said Tinker.

"Can't help your troubles! Get on, please!"

Tinker timidly stepped to the front of the stage, and his heart sank as he looked round the great building. There was not a soul in front of the house, and the vast array of empty stalls would have chilled an iceberg.

"Pluck up, Tinker!" said Blake encouragingly.

And Tinker plunged into his imitations with the critical audience listening behind. He heard a titter after the first, and as he went on there was the sound of faint applause from the little group.

When he found that he wasn't making quite a failure, he plucked up, and his confidence returned.

"Capital!" cried Mervyn Hallows. "Now give us just enough for ten minutes more, and that'll do."

Tinker plunged into the rest of his entertainment, and finished up with the quarrelling scene between the coster and the cabman.

"Lor' lumme, that's just like my old man!" cried a voice from the dress circle.

A roar of laughter went up from the actors, and Tinker looked up and saw an elderly charwoman leaning over the balcony.

"That's just 'ow he carries on!" she said. "Give us something else, young man!"

"No; that'll do, Tinker," broke in Mervyn Hallows. "If you can please our lady friend, I think you'll satisfy the audience. Now, then, first act, please."

Tinker was the recipient of many congratulations, and the actors assured him that it was always a good sign to be nervous, and he was sure to be a success.

Blake was put through his facings as the servant, and handed a book containing Mervyn Hallows's part which he was to play if necessary.

When rehearsal was over, Blake and Tinker went shopping, and bought what was necessary for their stay, including a new dress-suit for Tinker.

After a lunch at one of the restaurants, away from the centre of the town, they took a tram to the park, where, in a secluded spot, Blake studied hard at his part.

"I think Mervyn Hallows will be ill next Thursday, Tinker," he said, "so I must be prepared. And remember this, don't ever go back to the lodgings till after dark, as I don't want the festive Marquis to spot us."

When it grew dark they sneaked back to their lodgings, and for an hour or more watched the Marquis as closely as if they were sitting at his elbow.

He was immersed in papers, and at frequent intervals telegraph and messenger boys entered with envelopes.

At intervals the Marquis turned to the clean-shaven man who was seated by the fire, and ordered him to the desk, where apparently he affixed his signature to a document.

"I wonder where the Marquis is thinking of living when he's through with this gigantic swindle?" said Blake, with a grim smile, as he rose to go to the theatre. "Spain, I expect; but I fancy it will be the sunny slopes of Portland. Come on, Tinker!"

When Tinker had dressed at the theatre he ran up to the stage to have a look at the house through the little peephole in the curtain. He gave one look, and then walked back to the dressing-room.

"The Marquis is in front, sir," he gasped, "in a box on the left-hand side."



Crouched below the window-sill was Rogers, the discharged scene-shifter; in his hand he had a long, shining air-gun.

(When Tinker was a little more experienced in the ways of the stage, he understood that the left-hand side is always called the prompt side).

"Is he, by Jove?" said Blake. "I reckon he'll be surprised when he sees me as the servant. Now go on, Tinker, and make a hit, or I'll discharge you."

Tinker went on and did make a hit. To put it briefly, his London success was repeated. Perhaps it was even greater, as, with his experience at the Monument Theatre, his style had improved, and his voice was more under control. The quarrelling scene was loudly encored, and his first congratulations were from Mervyn Hallows, who watched his performance from the side of the stage.

"I don't know what your arrangements are with Sexton Blake," he said in an undertone; "but you can always get a good living on the stage, my boy."

"Thanks, very much," replied Tinker gratefully; "but wherever Sexton Blake goes I go."

When Tinker went into the dressing-room he found Blake made up for his part as the servant.

He was in footman's livery, and, with the exception of slightly whitened hair, he was the Sexton Blake of every-day life.

"I want the Marquis to see me," he explained. "We may come across him, as the original Sellars is devoted to the theatre, and my being here as an actor will explain itself. Otherwise he might smell a rat if he saw Sexton Blake walking about Liverpool."

Tinker stood at the side of the stage when Blake made his appearance as the footman.

From his corner Tinker noticed the Marquis start and look at the programme when Blake appeared. Then he put up his opera-glasses and stared hard at the stage.

"Spotted me, of course," said Blake, when Tinker told

him what he had noticed. "Now, then, home as fast as we can."

From his dressing-table Blake took a piece of crepe hair—the material that is used for making false beards and moustaches—and quickly made a goatee, or chin-piece, such as is worn by Americans; then he slipped a little bottle of spirit-gum into his pocket, and left the theatre.

Blake chose the darkest streets, and as they walked along he fixed the goatee on his chin.

"Not so good as my own trick things, but it'll serve," he said. "Now, here we are, and don't go after my hat if it comes off."

As they turned the corner he gave a backward tilt to his hat, and it blew off into the traffic, as though the wind had caught it.

"Tarnation take the thing!" he said, in a loud voice with an American twang. "Guess I'll have to buy another. Say, wait here!"

He went into a hatter's which was just closing and bought a soft, wideawake hat. When he came out he looked the typical American.

"Leave nothing to chance, Tinker," he said. "It wouldn't do to buy a hat and change it in the street. It's a thousand to one the Marquis wouldn't be anywhere about, but I bet on a certainty when possible. Now, you pop indoors. I'm going into the hotel."

"Oh, sir, mayn't I come too?" pleaded Tinker.

"No, my boy. It'll mean guns if the Marquis came back, and I don't want to bring you into that sort of trouble."

Blake walked into the hotel and stepped up to the desk.

"Say, is Mr. Sellars in?" he drawled.

"No, sir," answered the clerk. "He's gone to the theatre."

"Waal, is his friend in?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Good! Guess I'll go up and see him. I know the room; don't you worry."

Blake ran up to the second floor, which, as he knew, had been reserved for Mr. Sellars.

He knocked at the sitting-room door, and a feeble voice told him to enter. Huddled over the fire was a tall, clean-shaved, stout man. As he turned his pale face to the door, Blake saw at once that it was the original Sellars, shaved, his hair cut very short, and a dull, dazed sort of look in his eyes.

"Mesmerised. I thought so," ran through Blake's mind as he spoke.

"Say, is Mr. Sellars in?" he asked.

"No," answered the real Sellars, in a dull, far-away voice. "He's gone to the theatre, and won't be back till late. Is there any message?"

"Thanks, I guess not. I'm the special correspondent of the 'New York Globe,' and would have liked to interview him about that spurt he's making in cotton. But guess I'll go now. I didn't catch your name."

"Rortrey is my name—Alistair Rortrey; and Mr. Sellars will not be interviewed, I know."

"Sorry I've troubled you. Good-evening!"

And Blake left the room, nodded to the clerk in the hall, and was soon in his lodgings.

"He's hypnotised the poor wretch, Tinker," he said, "and made him use his own name, Alistair Rortrey; and the poor chap is quite under the influence! Oh, it's a great game, but we'll spoil it! Eat a good supper, Tinker; I shall want you by-and-by."

They sat up till after the noise of the traffic had died away, and then Sexton Blake rose with the grim smile that Tinker knew so well.

THE FOURTEENTH CHAPTER.

The Telephone—On the Balcony—The Marquis's Plans—A Million and a Half.

"COME upstairs," said Blake.

In the bed-room he unlocked the neat little bag which he had bought in the town, and produced two metal discs about the size and shape of the corks which fit the lids of large-mouthed pickle-bottles.

They were hollow, and round the outside of each was bound a quantity of thin string.

"This is a new kind of telephone," explained Blake. "I thought it might be useful when I saw it down at Lewis's this afternoon. All you have to do is to fix it anywhere near a voice, and it catches up the sound and transmits it to the other receiver across this electrically treated string. Twig?"

"I think so, sir. And what's going to happen?"

"We're going to listen to the Marquis, I think. Take the glasses and see if he's in his room."

"Yes, sir," said Tinker, when he had looked. "He's there with the other man. Bother! he's just pulled the curtains to!"

"Couldn't be better. Now, outside that room there's a balcony, and underneath the balcony there's a water-spout. I'm going to climb up that waterspout, pop on to the balcony, and fit up the telephone in the window. Can you catch, Tinker?"

"I've played a good deal of cricket, sir."

"Then look here!"

Blake turned down the gas, and rubbed something on one of the discs till it shone like a ball of fire.

"That's luminous paste. When I've fixed my end up I'll chuck this across to you, and mind you catch. Then I'll come back, and we can listen to the wicked conversation of the Marquis in safety. I've measured the string; it's plenty long enough, so we won't have any bother with it tripping people up."

"If anybody's driving, will it clear their heads, sir?"

"Room and to spare. Now, did you tell the landlady to leave out some treacle before she went to bed?"

"Yes, sir. I told her it was to make a posset for your cold, as you said," answered Tinker, wondering what was going to happen.

In the sitting-room Blake took a stiff piece of brown paper, and smeared it all over one side with treacle, and then, folding it up, put it gingerly in his pocket.

"I just cut a round hole in the window-pane with my diamond, and press on my treacle plaster. The glass gives way and sticks to the treacle, so there's no danger of falling pieces. Then I put in the telephone, throw you the other end, and in a quarter of an hour we'll be upstairs listening to the Marquis. Simple, isn't it?"

"Wonderful, sir. But mind you don't get caught."

"That'll be all right. The Marquis won't catch me, and I can soon put the police right. Now upstairs, and watch from the bed-room window. Lean well out, and when you see a ball of fire coming to you grab it for dear life. If anyone sees it they will write to the papers to ask what the new comet is."

With a smile on his lips, as always when there was danger, Blake let himself out of the house quietly, while Tinker went upstairs to the bed-room.

It was now nearly half-past one. The traffic had died away, and the streets were deserted, as Blake walked across the road, and looked up at the balcony. The water-spout ran close under the wall, and would have afforded a foothold for few, but Blake had muscles of steel, and could climb like a monkey.

After a swift glance round, he caught hold of the spout with his fingers, and digging his toes into the crevices of the wall was soon up a good many feet.

Up he climbed, till he felt his head touch the bottom of the balcony.

Clinging precariously with one hand, he felt with the other till he touched the edge.

"I can just do it," he thought to himself.

And, with a stretch that made his muscles crack, he got a good hold with one hand.

Then he let go of the spout and sprung into space. He clutched quickly with the other hand, and, with the skill of a gymnast, drew himself on to the balcony, where, for a few seconds, he lay panting for breath.

"Near thing," he thought; "but the hotel must be a very paradise for burglars. Now, then!"

Cautiously he crept along till he reached the third window. Then he stood up, and, taking out his diamond set in a rule, cut a little round rim in the window pane.

Then he applied the treacle plaster, and in a few seconds there was a neat little round hole in the pane.

Then he fitted one of the telephone discs to the hole,

keeping it in position with little pieces of blotting-paper, which he damped in his mouth. Suddenly he dropped down, and breathed a sigh of relief when a policeman paused underneath, without looking up. Standing up once more, he untied the string for it to run free, and breathing a fervent hope that Tinker was on the lookout, hurled the disc across the street. It was a wonderful throw, and no one but Sexton Blake would have ever attempted it.

The street lamps were half down, and there was only the knowledge of the exact position of the bed-room to guide him. But he risked it, and across the street sped the tiny ball of light, looking like a falling star.

Blake listened intently to hear the tinkle of the metal on the pavement in case he had missed. So much hung on his aim and the waiting Tinker. If he had missed, the dangling string would surely attract somebody's attention, and then he would be in an awkward position, indeed.

He waited and heard no sound, so he knew that Tinker had caught the dice.

"Just in time, too, by Jove!" he thought, as a noisy party of revellers passed along, making the street hideous with their shout. If Tinker hadn't caught it, these gentlemen would have found it, and then—what-ho!

It was a wonderful catch, too; none but a boy skilled in cricket could ever have held it, and Tinker waited, hugging the little disc with justifiable feelings of pride.

Blake found the climbing off the balcony harder than the climbing on; but his muscles stood him in good stead, and in a few minutes he was back in the bed-room, congratulating Tinker.

"Splendid catch, Tinker," he said. "Now, we'll do a little eavesdropping."

He took another disc from his bag, connected it up with the string and handed it to Tinker.

"You always think of me as well, sir," said Tinker gratefully, feeling touched by the foresight which prompted the purchase of the third disc.

"We hang together, you know, Tinker," said Blake. "Now, listen."

Tinker gave a start of surprise when he held the disc to his ear. The well-remembered voice of the Marquis, now speaking in his natural tone, was as clear and distinct as if he were in the same room.

"Now, what do you advise to-morrow," he said. Then came the nasal tone of the real Sellars repeating languidly a list of instructions to be followed on the Exchange.

This was all Greek to Tinker, but Blake understood.

"He's telling him what to do, and how simple—how gorgeously simple! Sellars advises, the Marquis acts, and, of course, collars the profit. Hush!"

"How much have we made, up to date?" went on the Marquis.

"A million and a half," drawled Sellars.

"And when shall we have made two millions?"

"By Saturday, if the market holds."

"Then make out all securities open, and payable to Alistair Rortrey at sight. How soon can they be realised?"

"At once."

Sign these papers, then."

There was a pause, and Blake whispered to Tinker:

"See what he's doing, Tinker? He's making the unfortunate Sellars sign over all that money, as he can't imitate the handwriting. Then the Marquis cashes everything in his own name of Alistair Rortrey, and there can be no trouble, or even hints of forgery afterwards. Oh, it's a beautiful scheme. I wonder what he intends to do with the wretched Sellars. Listen, they're at it again!"

"Now, don't forget," went on the Marquis, "when you come to, you will know you've made a profit, but you won't ever try to find out where it has gone to. And you never heard of the name of Alistair Rortrey. Repeat that now."

"I shall know I have made a profit, but I don't ever want to know where it has gone to, and I have never heard of the name of Alistair Rortrey."

"But until you come to you are to pass as Alistair Rortrey. Now you go to bed, and I'm coming too."

"See the plan?" said Blake. "The unfortunate man has no chance of telling anyone he's Sellars, and when he

is allowed to wake up from the hypnotic sleep he'll have forgotten all about the Marquis. By Jove, it's so clever that it's almost a pity to spoil it! Wait a bit, and let's see if there's anything else."

They listened for some minutes, but there was perfect silence.

"They've gone to bed," said Blake, "so we'll pop over and recover the telephone."

"Let me go this time, sir?" asked Tinker. "You're having all the danger."

"No, no, my boy," said Blake; "this is my own affair, and I doubt whether I ought to have brought you into it at all. You have done wonders for me, as it is. Now, keep your end of the disc, and when you feel a tug, pull the string. I'll cut my end so that they'll be no wiser."

Blake slipped out of the house, and in a few minutes was once more on the balcony. Quietly he removed the telephone, gave the line a tug, after cutting it, and felt it rapidly slip through his fingers.

"Now, then, Tinker," he said, when he was back in the bed-room, "away with you to bed. You've had some late nights, and I don't want you to break down in that little entertainment of yours."

THE FIFTEENTH CHAPTER.

Blake as Actor-Merrivale Reappears—Sellars in the Dressing-room—The Third Match.

WHEN Blake and Tinker were breakfasting, the next morning, an excited messenger appeared from Hallows's hotel to say that the actor-manager was suddenly taken ill, and would Mr. Blake play his part to-night—rehearsal at eleven?

"Just hear me in the part, Tinker, will you?" said Blake.

He ran through the lines quickly with Tinker, and at eleven they presented themselves at the theatre. The rehearsal was quickly got through, and Blake delighted everyone by the way in which he spoke the stirring lines.

The part was very similar to the one he played in the "Love Light," and as it was a modern piece there was no difficulty about clothes.

When they came out of the theatre, Blake bought a second edition of the local paper, and after looking through it, placed his finger on a paragraph, and passed it to Tinker.

"ATTEMPTED BURGLARY AT THE ALBERT HOTEL."

It described how a hole had been found out in one of the windows of a suite occupied by Mr. Dan Sellars. It added that the police had a clue, and an arrest was hourly expected.

"We know these clues, don't we, Tinker?" smiled Blake. "Now, I'm going home to have a final study at this part, and you'd better have a walk round the town and get some fresh air."

By a roundabout way Sexton Blake returned home, and slipped into the house by the back door.

For a hour or so, Tinker walked about the town, admiring the noble buildings, and keenly observant of everything as he went, with a view to introducing some local colour into his entertainment.

"Always keep your eyes open," an old entertainer had told him, "and then you will never be at a loss for material."

As Tinker was listening to a street singer in Market Place, and trying to fix his peculiar voice in his memory, a hand tapped him on the shoulder.

He turned round and saw Max Merrivale.

"I thought it was Tinker," he said. "And where's Blake?"

"At home, studying Hallows's part. He plays it to-night."

"Does he, by Jove! I saw your names on the bill at the theatre, and meant to look you up."

"Are you playing here, Mr. Merrivale?" asked Tinker.

"No. I have just run up to see Mr. Sellars. I want to try and get him to finance a theatre for a revival of the "Love Light." I'm sure there's a pot of money still in it. It was taken off too soon by those greedy brutes at the Monument in London. Remember me to Blake, and tell him I hope to see him."

Tinker remembered Blake's suggestion, and did not return home till after dark.

"I met Merrivale in the town, sir," he said. "He's come up to see Mr. Sellars, he says, to try and get him to finance a theatre."

Blake looked up quickly.

"I should think that interview would be interesting. Did Merrivale say how long he was going to stop?"

"No, sir. He only said that he hoped to see you soon."

"Oh, I dare say he'll turn up at the theatre! Now, then, just let's see if I've got everything I want. Do you know, Tinker, this acting is getting into my head. If I hadn't other business, I think I would turn actor altogether."

"It isn't half bad fun, sir, is it?" replied Tinker, as he helped to pack the bag.

A notice had been posted up outside the theatre stating that Mr. Sheldon Blake would play the part instead of Mr. Mervyn Hallows, who was indisposed.

"A pity we can't send an invitation to the Marquis," said Blake. "But I shouldn't be a bit surprised if he had seen the notice, and came in to have a look at his old friend Sexton Blake make a fool of himself!"

Blake made up and dressed with extra care, and as Tinker looked at the handsome, clean-cut face, and well-set-up figure, he thought it was well for Mervyn Hallows that his illness was only temporary. When Blake stepped on the stage the audience expected the usual perfunctory performance of the understudy.

But when the clear, well-modulated voice rang out they sat up and listened eagerly.

Tinker was almost astonished at the fire and vigour which Blake put into the part, and the curtain fell to loud applause.

In the interval Blake carefully touched up his face where the perspiration had run into the paint, and then turned to Tinker.

"I'm going to put in all I know in the next act," he said. "The Marquis is in the stalls, and Max Merrivale is with him. I want to show them that I can act better than they think I can."

Blake's performance in the second act was a revelation. He simply took the house by storm, and when the curtain fell it seemed as if they would like to encore the entire act.

"By Jove, but it's exciting!" said Blake. "And now I'm going to let myself go in this scene!"

The audience, worked up by the magnificent acting of the previous scenes, waited impatiently for Blake's entrance, and when he appeared gave him a reception which is accorded to few.

Like the true artist, however, Sexton Blake took no notice, but went on with his part, and brought the play to a triumphant conclusion.

The audience called him before the curtain again and again, and at length he had to make a little speech of thanks before the lights could be lowered.

"It's you who ought to have a theatre, sir, and not Merrivale," said Tinker, in the dressing-room. "There's a knock at the door. Shall I see who's there?"

Tinker opened the door.

"May I come in?" said Merrivale's voice. "I've brought an old friend of yours as well, Mr. Sellars."

Merrivale entered, followed by the Marquis, disguised of course as Sellars.

"I reckon we are old friends, Mr. Blake," he drawled. "I've never forgotten how you read the numbers on my note—and our young friend here, too. May I smoke?"

"Certainly, Mr. Sellars. Glad to see you again! Sit down. Have a cigarette—do!"

"Thanks," said Sellars. "Say, I reckon your acting's improved a lot. Now, Merrivale wants me to run a theatre for him. Would you come in for an engagement?"

"Oh, I think so!" replied Sexton Blake. "But we can't talk business here. Have a brandy-and-soda?"

"Guess I will; but you're not smoking. Here, try one of these cigarettes; I have 'em made for me."

Blake stuck a cigarette in his mouth, and looked round for a match.

"Want a light?" said Sellars. "Here you are!"

He pulled a box of cheap wooden matches from his pocket, and, striking one, handed it to Sexton Blake.

Tinker felt like springing forward and snatching the match.

Blake, however, held the match for a second under his nose, and then lit the cigarette.

"Darned cheap matches!" said Sellars, smiling.

"Guess I must have shoved them in my pocket at the hotel. Where are you living, Mr. Blake? Can I drive you home? I can't ask you to supper, as I have a sick friend."

"I'm living near Sefton Park," said Blake, naming an opposite direction to the one where they were living. "And we are both going to see how Hallows is, thanks all the same."

By this time they were all outside the stage door, and Merrivale, who had been talking to Tinker, stepped forward.

"Come on, Sellars; we shall keep Blake up half the night!"

"Right, boy! Is the brougham there? Guess I'll light up another cigarette, and then we'll trot."

He struck a match from the wooden box, and was about to light the cigarette, when Blake stumbled against him, and the match fell to the ground.

"A thousand pardons!" he said. "Allow me!"

And after he had given the Marquis a light from his own box they all said good-night, and the brougham moved off.

In a second Blake was on his hands and knees, striking matches like mad, and groping on the ground.

At last, with a cry of triumph, he pounced on something and rose to his feet.

"Now, then, Tinker, we'll go to Hallows's hotel, and tell him all about the show and how I got on."

Hallows, with an assumed long face, was in his private sitting-room, and spoke to Blake with an air of injured pride.

"I hear you've been simply knocking them! A fine thing that is! When I go back they won't have me! But, joking apart, old man, I'm awfully glad you did well! The landlord has just been in, and, allowing for my feelings, has given me a glowing description of your performance!"

"Well, I don't think the piece suffered," said Blake modestly.

"Go on with you!" laughed Hallows. "But, if it's any good to you, you can play the part the rest of the week."

"No, thanks, old man. It served my purpose very well, and you can wear the crown again to-morrow night. I have work to do by Saturday."

After a chat they left Hallows to take a brandy-and-soda—just one, by the doctor's orders—and said good-night.

"Now, then, Tinker," said Blake, "the roundabout way home, in case we are followed."

They reached home safely just after one, and Blake threw himself into a chair and was silent, while Tinker ate his supper. At last Blake looked up.

"Get out the telephone, Tinker," he said. "The Marquis has nearly run his course, and we will have him by Saturday. In the meantime, we'll just hear what he's doing."

When Tinker returned with the telephone, he found Blake staring intently at something in the palm of his hand.

He held up a charred wooden match, and spoke impressively:

"You saw me fall against the Marquis. Another second and he would have been as dead as poor Aston Revelle! This is the third poisoned match. The net is gradually tightening, and when I am offered the fourth then I, too, shall have the murderer! Now for the telephone!"

THE SIXTEENTH CHAPTER.

Meredith's Mistake—The Advertisement—The Coach Drive—Arrest of Sexton Blake.

WITH the telephone in his pocket, Blake stepped out into the street, and looked cautiously up at the balcony. As he put his hand on the waterspout a strong pair of arms gripped him from behind and pulled him back.

Blake twisted back his leg under the assailant's knee, touched a muscle on the wrist that was round his neck, and the man dropped to the ground.

Like lightning Blake was on him, and had his knee on his chest. As he looked down into the man's face, he released his hold.

"Meredith," he whispered, "I'm awfully sorry, man! Get up and come round the corner."

Meredith rubbed himself as he rose.

"That confounded twist of yours, Blake! It nearly broke my wrist! I didn't know it was you till you spoke."

Blake explained that he was out on business, and that all he wanted was to be left alone.

Meredith, who had been telegraphed for to investigate the mystery of the round hole in the millionaire's window, was quite satisfied, and said he would have the explanation when Blake cared to give it.

"All right, old man; you stop and keep the dogs off while I nip upstairs," said Blake.

Meredith kept guard while Blake again fixed up the telephone without detection.

"Now, don't ask any questions, Meredith, there's a good fellow!" said Blake, when he had climbed down. "Are you keeping those anarchists back for me?"

"Bless you, yes! They won't be up again for another month."

"Then you pop back to town like a good boy, and say there's nothing in the burglary theory, will you? As a matter of fact, I did it myself."

"All right, Blake, I'll take your word; only tell us all about it one of these days. I'll pop back to town tomorrow."

Blake said good-bye to Meredith, and in a few minutes was listening with Tinker through the telephone.

"You've made out all those securities to me?" said the Marquis.

"Yes," answered the monotonous voice of Sellars.

"A million and a half in all, are they? And we shall make another half million by Tuesday."

"Yes, the market's going all one way; but after Tuesday I think it will drop."

"Very well, then you'll wake up on Monday, and go on as if nothing had happened. If anyone asks why you shaved, say it was a sudden fancy. Understand, you will forget all about me, and only remember that you have been speculating and made a profit. Now go to bed."

"We must have the Marquis on Tuesday," said Blake; "but how the deuce can we stop in Liverpool without any excuse? If we stop, he may see and suspect. Come on; they've gone to bed. I'll get the telephone back. The old hole did again, and there won't be any more suspicions of burglary."

Blake secured the telephone without being seen, and returned with beaming face.

"Night air is good for me, Tinker," he said. "I've thought out a splendid idea for stopping in Liverpool. Bed, now, my boy, and talk in the morning."

"How would you like to go on the music-hall stage, Tinker?" said Blake, over breakfast.

"How, sir? I don't quite understand."

"Look here."

Sexton Blake unfolded a copy of the "Stage," a professional journal, and pointed to an advertisement.

"Wanted, Monday next, conjuror and entertainer for the Lyric Music Hall, Liverpool." That's yesterday's "Stage," published Thursday, and we'll apply for the engagement to open next Monday. Your entertainment will do, I know, and I used to conjure a bit. See if the landlady's got a pack of cards."

The cards were produced, and with his long, slender

fingers Blake went through a series of wonderful tricks which simply electrified Tinker.

"Pretty fair," said Blake, when he had finished; "but I must have a look at myself." Standing in front of the glass he went through the tricks again and again, until the quickness of his hand deceived his own eye. "That's better! Now for the cigarette trick. That used to be one of my favourites."

Taking a cigarette and holder, he threw them both into the air, and caught the holder in his mouth, and the cigarette in the holder.

"There you are, Tinker," he said. "Now we'll go over to the Lyric."

The manager of the Lyric, a shrewd North countryman, was not inclined to be agreeable.

"Tha' may be very clever," he said, "but I don't like amateurs on ma stage."

"Ever seen this?" said Blake, performing the cigarette trick.

"Coom on the stage," said the manager, "and let's see what else tha' can do."

Blake produced the cards, with which he had provided himself, and went through his tricks.

"And now the little'un!" called the manager from the stalls.

Tinker stepped to the front, and rattled off part of his entertainment, including a few Liverpool peculiarities which he had picked up.

"Tha'll do," said the manager. "Tha' show's good. I'll give thee twelve pounds for the week, and the little'un shall have six. The conjuror at nine-fifteen, and the lad at eight-thirty."

"The luck's going our way, Tinker," said Blake, "and I'm beginning to feel sorry for the Marquis. He won't even so much as smell that money."

At the theatre they found Hallows apparently quite restored to health, and flourishing a bundle of newspapers.

"Here you are, Blake!" he cried. "The Press is at your feet, and I'm going to retire."

The papers contained a glowing account of Blake's success, and assured him that he would always be welcome at Liverpool.

"And now," went on Hallows, "that old American, Dan Sellars, has sent Merrivale to ask us all out to a coach ride and lunch. He is theatre mad, and Merrivale thinks he'll put up some money to run a London theatre; so we may as well keep in with him. Will you go, Blake?"

"Rather; I should think I would?"

At twelve o'clock the Marquis drove up to the theatre, with Merrivale seated on the box.

"What on earth is the Marquis up to?" whispered Blake to Tinker; "but I dare say I'll find out before the day's up. If anything happens to me, Tinker, go to the chief constable and tell him everything."

The drive about seven miles out was most enjoyable, and the Marquis and Blake were the life and soul of the party with joke and story.

To Tinker the experience was amazing. There sat the Marquis, holding the reins, and secure in the belief that he had hoodwinked Sexton Blake, and next to him sat the detective holding the secrets of the hotel, and smiling at the Marquis, as might a cat at a mouse. After luncheon at a pretty little hotel, the party sauntered out into the garden.

"Liverpool was the first place where I met poor Revelle," said Merrivale, as he and Blake chattered together. "It gives me quite the blues to be in the town!"

"Never mind, old chap, cheer up," said Blake; "cheer up!"

And as they drew near the bottom of the garden, which looked down over what might almost be called a cliff, he started telling one of his inimitable stories. Merrivale shrieked with laughter, and the Marquis and the others hurried up to see what was the matter.

"It's only Blake!" gasped Merrivale. "Tell us some more."

Blake told one or two more stories, and kept them roaring with laughter. As he explained afterwards to Tinker, he felt in good spirits, and he wanted the Marquis to have a good laugh for the last time.

As he finished one very funny story, Merrivale nearly

choked with laughter, and fell up against the Marquis, who was standing just on the edge of the cliff.

Blake shot out a long arm and pulled him back. In another second the Marquis would have dropped a sheer five hundred feet over the cliff to the rocks below.

"Thanks, Mr. Blake," he said, with a queer look in his eyes. "I sha'n't forget that. And now I guess we'll be getting back. I've had enough of tea-garden."

"You'd have been safer on the Exchange, Mr. Sellars," laughed Blake.

"Guess I'll give cotton a rest to-day. It's down."

The drive back to Liverpool was undertaken almost in silence. His good spirits seemed to have forsaken the Marquis, and Blake was strangely silent, though Tinker knew by his eyes that he was thinking hard.

The Marquis pulled up at the hotel, and invited all the company to a final glass of champagne.

"Guess I'll be leaving Liverpool after Tuesday, and sha'n't see you good folk again, so drink hearty."

While the champagne was being opened he took Blake on one side.

"Say, Mr. Blake," he said, "I reckon you saved my life. Will you give me the address of your bankers?"

"Thanks, no," replied Blake firmly. "I am not out looking for rewards." And at that the matter dropped, though Merrivale seemed much upset at the accident, and could hardly touch his wine. Soon the party broke up, and Sexton Blake and Tinker walked down town so as to return to their lodgings by a roundabout way.

"The Marquis has his good points," observed Sexton Blake. "I really believe he would have handed over some of his ill-gotten plunder if I'd allowed it. I think he was only keeping up the character of the original Sellars in asking the company out to lunch. Glad I pulled him back, though."

"Well, sir," said Tinker, "if it hadn't been for you he would have been killed."

"Well, you see, Tinker, I didn't want the fruits of victory to escape me, so I snatched him back to enjoy a little penal servitude later on."

When they reached their lodgings two men were waiting on the doorstep.

"Why, here's Meredith!" said Blake. "I thought you had gone back to London."

"So I did," answered Meredith, "and I came back by the afternoon express. Can I come in?"

"Certainly," answered Sexton Blake. "And bring your friend with you. The Yard, I perceive by the—excuse me—by the boots."

When they were in the sitting-room, Meredith turned to Blake with a grave face.

"Take it quietly, won't you, Blake, old man?" he said.

"What do you mean?" asked Blake.

"I've a warrant for your arrest."

"And on what charge, may I ask, Meredith?"

"For the murder of Aston Revelle!"

THE SEVENTEENTH CHAPTER.

The Home Secretary—Blake Loads His Revolver—Arrest of the Marquis—The Real Sellars.

TINKER looked on and gasped, while Blake dropped into a chair with a smile.

"Oh, you Scotland Yard men," he said, "you are funny people. Never mind, Meredith, get the handcuffs ready. Where are you going to take me—back to London?"

"It's not my fault, Blake," said Meredith, looking somewhat abashed. "I'm only doing my duty. I shall have to take you round to the chief police-station here for to-night, and back to town to-morrow."

"All right," said Blake, jumping up; "call a cab, there's a good fellow, and for goodness' sake let nothing get in the papers! Come on, Tinker; I may want you."

They all got in a cab, and were driven to the chief police-station.

"Now, Tinker," said Blake, when they were inside and the detective had the charge read over to him. "You go round to the theatre, and do your work as usual; and tell Hallows that I'm suddenly taken ill—

anyone can play my part—and then come back here for me."

Tinker hurried away, and then Blake turned to Meredith.

"Now, then," he said firmly, "where's the chief? I must see him at once."

Meredith hesitated, but Blake repeated his request with such authority that at last he was taken into a private office, where was seated the Chief Constable of Liverpool.

"You know my name, sir," said Blake.

The chief nodded.

"Then I would like five minutes alone. At least, Meredith can stop."

The other man withdrew.

"Now, may I ask who's laid this charge?" said Blake.

"Information received," answered Meredith.

"Very proper, Meredith," said Blake; "but all the same I know. Now will you release me if I give you my word to surrender inside a week? Sexton Blake never broke his word."

"Sorry, Mr. Blake," answered the chief constable. "I don't believe it's you for a moment; but I can't let you go on a murder charge."

"Quite right—quite right," said Blake. "You can't go beyond your duty. Let me think for a moment; wait a minute. Isn't there a political meeting on at the town hall to-night?"

The chief nodded.

"The Home Secretary's speaking, isn't he?" went on Blake. "Now, if he gave you an order for my release, would you take it?"

"Yes; I think so," answered the chief.

"Very well then; let me write a note, and Meredith shall take it."

Blake rapidly scribbled on a leaf of his notebook, and read it aloud:

"Dear Lord Lancing,—Will you, without wanting to know anything, hand the bearer an order for my release? I am committed on a charge of murder, and will surrender inside a week. I have good reasons for asking, and you know.—SEXTON BLAKE."

Meredith took the note and left Blake with the chief constable.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Blake," said the chief, rather uncomfortably. "Of course, we all know you; but a warrant for murder is a serious thing, and I daren't take any risks."

"Now, don't worry," said Blake cheerfully; "you've got your duty, and I ought to be the last to kick against authority."

Very shortly Meredith returned.

"I saw his lordship just as he was going on the platform, and he sent the note back endorsed."

The chief constable took the note, and read out:

"Release Mr. Sexton Blake at once.—LANCING."

Blake heaved a sigh of relief.

"I don't mind telling you, gentlemen," he said "that's the nearest squeak I've ever had. The Government owe me something, and this is the first time I've ever asked for anything."

"Now we're private citizens, Mr. Blake," said the chief. "Have a cigar? Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Nothing much in the way of business, thanks, as I'm on my own hook; but you can let my little friend in whenever he calls. Yes, there is one thing. You can be ready to receive the real murderer of Aston Revelle next week, I hope. Now I'll have that cigar."

About half-past nine Tinker returned to the police-station, and Blake bade farewell to the chief, and left the station.

"Show all right, Tinker?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Hallows soon got someone to go on as the servant."

"The Marquis in the house?"

"No, sir. Mr. Merrivale looked round behind, and said he was very sorry to hear you were ill."

"Well, he'll be ill to-morrow as well. By the way, Tinker, just write a paragraph and send into the local paper. Say that Mr. Sheldon Blake, who played Mr. Mervyn Hallows's part two nights ago, has been taken

suddenly ill. The Marquis is sure to see it, and it will put him off the track. And to-morrow night we'll nab him, Tinker. It's no good waiting till Tuesday."

"But what about the music-hall, sir? They'll have the bills out with your name on them."

"Oh, I shall be better by Monday. Now, come along in, and get to bed early. We have an exciting day to-morrow."

When Tinker rose the next morning he looked across at the hotel, and wondered what would happen there within the next twelve hours. When he went down to breakfast he found Blake with the old familiar glitter in his eyes, holding a paper in his hand.

"The market's dropping, Tinker," he said, "and the Marquis will shut down to-day and cut with his profits, unless I'm mistaken. So we'll let him have a peaceable dinner, and then we'll call. Now, out with you and get some fresh air, and leave me to finish all my clues."

When Tinker returned in the afternoon he found Blake pinning together a bundle of neatly written papers.

"It's all here, Tinker," he said; "the complete record of the two cases—the Marquis and the murder of poor Aston Revelle. If anything happens to me it's all there for your entertainment. And if nothing does happen we'll write the last chapter together, you and I."

About nine o'clock Blake fastened on the American goatee, carefully loaded his revolver, and put on the slouch-hat and long coat, and told Tinker to come with him over the road. They walked to the hotel.

"Say," he drawled to the clerk. "I represent the 'New York Globe.' I called the other night to see Mr. Sellars. Is he in?"

"Upstairs, second floor," replied the clerk.

"Thanks; guess I know the way."

Followed by Tinker, Blake went up the stairs and softly turned the handle of the sitting-room door.

The Marquis, with his back to them, was seated at a roll-top desk. Blake advanced two steps into the room.

"Take it easy, Marquis, and put your hands up," he said quietly, levelling the revolver.

The Marquis turned round, and his right hand felt into a drawer.

"I said hands up, Marquis!" demanded Blake. "Tinker, take that revolver out of the drawer."

Tinker stepped forward and picked up the revolver, which, as Blake had surmised, was in the drawer.

The Marquis looked up, and not a muscle of his face quivered. Criminal though he was, his blood and breeding showed that he was able to meet a crisis unmoved.

"I deserve it, Sexton Blake," he said quietly, "for thinking that I could bluff you."

Tinker ran his hands over the Marquis, and from his breast-pocket took out a bundle of papers.

"Realisable securities, I expect," said Blake, "made payable to bearer. I suppose you'd have been off on Monday, Marquis?"

"Exactly, dear boy. And a million and a half to the good too. Pretty, wasn't it, Blake? May I smoke?"

"I'd rather you kept your hands where they are. Now, where is your poor friend the original?"

"Lying down, poor fellow. The strain has been too much for him."

"We'll settle up the bill here—I dare say you have the run of the petty cash—and I'll take care of these securities."

Mr. Sellars shall be my guest, and you, Marquis, will come with me to the police-station."

"I suppose it'll mean fifteen years?" said the Marquis.

"Very likely. Now send for your friend, and tell him he's to come and stay with me."

"Save the trouble, there he is," said the Marquis.

A communicating-door opened, and the real Sellars entered the room.

THE EIGHTEENTH CHAPTER.

A Case of Hypnotism—Tinker on the Music-Hall Stage—The Fourth Match—Aston Revelle's Murderer.

BLAKE quietly dropped the revolver in his pocket.

"No larks, Marquis," he said, in a low tone.

"I've got you covered all the same. Now, tell him to come with me."

The Marquis looked at Mr. Sellars straight in the eyes and spoke in a commanding voice.

"You will go with this gentleman, and stay with him as long as he wishes."

"Very well," said Sellars mechanically, who appeared to be quite under control.

The business of paying the bill was soon over, and in a four-wheeler the party drove to an hotel in the neighbourhood of the police-station. Blake engaged rooms and left Sellars in the care of Tinker, while he took the Marquis over to the station.

The Marquis was soon accommodated with a cell, and as Blake left, he said amiably:

"I hope to see you very shortly, Marquis. In the meantime perhaps you'll clear off that make-up and be your own self once more."

Blake returned to the hotel where he had left Sellars and Tinker.

Sellars sat by the fire in a sort of daze, and only answered in monosyllables when spoken to.

"He's completely under the Marquis's influence, Tinker," said Blake aside. "We'll take him out for a walk to-morrow to liven him up, and on Monday we'll put him in charge of a doctor."

They took the unfortunate man out on Sunday, but nothing seemed to wake him up.

"He shall go to the doctor's first thing to-morrow," said Blake. "And now, Tinker, go down to the railway-station and see Hallows off, and tell him we're stopping in Liverpool, and anything else you think necessary."

When Tinker had gone Blake sat down and looked through Sellars's papers, which they had brought from the hotel.

The Marquis had taken every precaution, and the gigantic swindle would have been complete but for Blake's interference.

The papers were sealed and put away, and next morning Sellars was taken to a private hospital.

"A clear case of hypnotism," said the doctor. "But the man who put it on must take it off."

"All right, doctor, I'll bring him up. Until then secrecy, please," answered Blake, whispering his name in the physician's ear.

At eleven they reported themselves at the music-hall to show that they were ready for the evening's performance.

When they emerged into the main thoroughfare they ran full tilt into Merrivale.

"Good gracious, Blake!" he said. "You could have knocked me down with a feather! I thought you were ill!"

"So I was, dear boy," replied Blake; "but I'm all right now. In fact, Tinker and I are giving a show at the Lyric."

"What on earth are you doing there?"

"Conjuring! I'll show you."

Stepping back from the main street Blake performed the cigarette trick with his usual skill.

"Very good," said Merrivale. "But I don't believe you could do it with a lighted cigarette. You would catch the wrong end."

"No I wouldn't; and, as a matter of fact, I do the trick at night with a lighted cigarette. And to show that there is no deception I ask one of the audience for a match, and light it right before their eyes. Going back to town soon?"

"Yes. Old Sellars won't put up any money, so I'm off. Good-bye!"

At half-past eight that evening Tinker stood ready to make his first appearance on the music-hall stage.

The surroundings were so different to those of a theatre that he felt unmistakably nervous. From the side he

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caught a glimpse of the large hall packed from floor to ceiling. A comic singer was singing the last verse of a doleful song, and the audience were inclined to be restive. At last they could stand him no longer, and began to hiss! Eventually, amidst a tumult of derision, the poor fellow was driven off the stage.

"What's yours?" he said to Tinker, with tears of vexation standing in his eyes.

"Imitations," said Tinker.

"Imitations! Lor! They'll kill you!"

A number was slipped into the frame, the orchestra played one long chord, and Tinker stepped on to the stage.

There was a murmur of surprise at his youthful appearance, and then, with the North-country sense of fair play, the audience seated down to listen.

Tinker soon gripped them. His imitations went with loud applause, and when he gave the quarrelling scene the enthusiastic audience yelled for more.

Tinker then gave a few vocal impressions of Liverpool, and when the curtain was lowered he was called in front no less than five times.

"They can stop a month!" said the proprietor, who was watching at the side. "That was a great act!"

"Thanks; we'll talk about it later," answered Tinker, who was uncertain what Blake's plans were.

It was soon the detective's turn to appear.

In simple evening-dress, with a pack of cards in his hand, he stepped on to the stage, and for ten minutes he kept the audience in a state of bewilderment. The cards seemed to live in his hands; and in Tinker's eyes, at least, he seemed inspired. At last he stepped to the footlights, and putting the cards into his pocket produced the cigarette and holder.

"And now," he said, "lest anyone might think this is not a real cigarette, I will ask one of the audience to oblige me with a light."

"Here you are!" said an old gentleman, in a box on a level with the stage.

"Thank you, sir," said Blake, stepping up.

The old gentleman leant over politely, struck a match, and handed it to Blake, as he bent forward with the cigarette in his mouth.

Blake took the match, then suddenly he clutched it in his fingers, slipped it into his waistcoat-pocket, and with one bound leapt into the box and seized the old gentleman by the throat.

"Now I've got you, you murdering dog!" he cried.

Tinker, who had seen the incident from the side, rushed across the stage and flung himself on the old man; but Blake already had the handcuff on him, and then, with a deft movement, stripped off a wig and beard. Tinker released his hold and fell back in surprise.

There before him handcuffed, a prisoner, was Max Merrivale!

The house, of course, was in an uproar, and the proprietor raging, rushed into the box.

"I'm a detective," said Blake curtly, "and I've arrested this man for murder! Make what explanations you like to the audience. My name's Sexton Blake!"

Leaving the proprietor gasping in his astonishment, Blake, followed by Tinker, hurried Merrivale out of the theatre and into a cab.

On the way Sexton Blake sat grim and silent. Once his prisoner ventured a remark.

"Silence, you hound!" said Blake. "I'm thinking of Aston Revelle."

Merrivale shuddered, and with livid face shrunk back into the corner and was silent. When they arrived at the police-station Blake walked straight through into the chief's office, with Merrivale in front of him.

"Put this man in the cells," he said; "and I'll explain."

Merrivale was taken away, and Blake spoke privately to the chief, who nodded at the conclusion, and spoke gravely.

"Of course," he said, "I still hold the Home Secretary's order for your release, Mr. Blake, so that puts us right. In the meantime I'll hold this man till you are ready to appear. Is there anything else?"

"Nothing, thanks, for a day or two. I'll call again."

When Blake returned to their hotel with Tinker, he sank wearily into a chair

"He shall swing, Tinker!" he said. "He shall swing, the dog! and poor Revelle shall be avenged. What a strain this has been; but it's all over. 'Pon my word the Marquis is sweet compared to that dog! There's a knock. See who it is, Tinker."

Tinker opened the door and admitted a telegraph-boy, who handed a telegram to Blake.

"Extraordinary change in patient; come at once!" read Blake. "All right, boy, there's no answer. That's from the doctor, Tinker; come on!"

When they arrived at the private hospital the doctor met them with a puzzled look.

"I can't make the fellow out," he said. "Come and have a look at him."

Sellars was in one of the wards, striding up and down impatiently, his energy and vigour having apparently quite returned.

"Say!" he cried impatiently. "Why am I stuck in thisarnation hole? If there's any fooling round with Mr. Dan Sellars, I guess there'll be trouble. That guy of a man refuses to let me out, and I'm going to break something, and that'll be his head!"

Blake walked up to him and held out his hand.

"I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Sellars," he said "but I'm afraid it's my fault. However, if you will come with me I think I can give you a satisfactory explanation."

"Don't care what you give me so long as you get me out of this. There seems something funny about my head, and I don't quite get the grip of things. Give me something to drink, will you?"

As the doctor mixed a soothing drink, Blake whispered to Tinker.

"The influence has died away, and this is just about the time the Marquis told him he could wake up."

"Now then, sir, are you ready?" asked Sellars.

"Quite. Come along with me," replied Blake. Then, going up to the doctor, he whispered: "I suppose the word of Sexton Blake is good enough to show that we are not playing tricks with a member of the medical profession?"

The doctor opened his eyes in surprise, but bowed slightly.

"Sexton Blake's word is quite sufficient," and with that he opened the door and the party left. When they returned to the hotel Blake watched Sellars intently, and noticed that as time went on he became quieter in his mood and was gradually settling down, though he still appeared to be puzzled.

At last when he caught sight of himself in the glass and noticed the absence of his moustache, he turned to Sexton Blake and spoke firmly.

"Say, stranger," he said, "are you going to tell me what sort of a game this is, or am I to walk out of this hotel and rope in a policeman? I feel pretty weak, and I guess I've been hounded!"

"Sit down, Mr. Sellars," said Blake, "and listen."

He then related the events with which we are already acquainted. When he had finished, Sellars drew a long breath.

"Now I remember!" he said. "I met a decent sort of fellow in the hotel lounge one night, and he said, 'You'll come to me after dinner to-night to—' I forget the address now."

"No. 42, St. George Street, was it?" put in Blake.

"That was it—that was it!"

"Where the Marquis had rooms, Tinker," said Blake.

"I remember going to my room after dinner," went on Sellars, "and I can't seem to remember anything else. And so that crook hypnotised me, and I should have lost a clear million and a half! Well, well, I'll guess I'll go to bed and sleep on it."

"And so will I," said Blake. "Tinker, I feel as if I could sleep the clock round."

When Blake was in bed and settling on his pillow for sleep he was roused by a light shining in his eyes.

Dan Sellars, in his nightshirt, holding a candle, was standing by the bed.

"Say," drawled the American; "I've been thinking about that crook. Don't put him out of my sight yet. I'd like to see him."

THE NINETEENTH CHAPTER.
The Marquis's Brother—The Clues—The Marquis at Liberty.

THE next morning Blake and Tinker went across to the police-station.

"If you don't mind," said Blake to the chief, "I'd like those two men brought up here. Hand-cuff them both, and bring up Merrivale first."

Merrivale, pale and trembling, was brought into the room, and shrunk into the corner away from Blake.

"Turn round and stand with your face to the wall," said Blake. "And now"—he went out to the warden—"bring up the other."

In a few seconds the Marquis, jaunty and affable, with his disguise removed, was brought into the room.

"Ah, there you are, Sexton Blake!" he said. "Come to look at the poor little mouse in the trap? Wonderful man, Sexton Blake! But I bear you no malice; it's all in the way of business."

"I've an old friend of yours here, Marquis," said Blake. "Turn round, prisoner!"

When the Marquis saw Merrivale his bearing changed. His face grew livid. His lip drew back from his teeth in a snarl; then he gathered himself together, and, with his handcuffed hands uplifted, he sprang towards Merrivale.

But Blake stretched out an arm and forced him back, while Merrivale covered in the corner.

"Hang him!" shrieked the Marquis, foaming at the mouth. "Hang him as high as an oak-tree, and I'll help to do it! Put me in the witness-box, and I'll help to hang him!"

"Remove the first prisoner!" said Sexton Blake.

The Marquis sank on to a chair when Merrivale had been removed. He looked up, his face streaming with tears.

"I'm glad you've got him, Blake," he said. "I thought he'd slip you. And to think that that brute murdered—"

"Your brother," said Blake gently.

"But how did you know?" asked the Marquis, in wonder.

"The will was proved in his own name of Rortrey, and not in his assumed name of Revelle. That's how I knew, and that gave me part of my clue."

"Ah, I wondered if you were after him, Blake! I hoped you were. If I had had only one definite thing to tell you, I'd have come straight to you and chanced my liberty. But I hadn't; I only had my own suspicions. But you've got him, thank Heaven—you've got him! I shall do my fifteen years in peace now. I knew he had the poison, and suspected him, though I couldn't prove it."

"All right, Marquis," said Blake, almost kindly. "I feel rather sorry for you, and I'll let you down as easy as possible."

When the Marquis had been taken back to the cell, Blake left Tinker outside the station yard.

"Tinker," he said, "in my bag you'll find a document marked 'Docket B., 241.' That contains the full account of the case. You saw me writing the other night. Take it, and read the part marked 'Clues.' It won't do you any harm, and may teach you something."

"And aren't you coming home now, sir?" asked Tinker.

"I'm going to look up Dan Sellars. I think, with his help, I can do the Marquis a turn. I really feel sorry for him, and I believe he's had his lesson."

Tinker went home and found the document.

He turned to the "Clues" and read, with increasing wonder at the cleverness of the marvellous man who was never baffled by a mystery.

We transcribe the more vital part of the document headed "Clues":

THE CASE OF ARTHUR REVELLE.

("This for the information of Tinker if anything happens to me; not to be filed.—S. B.)

"I saw Max Merrivale try to kick away the cigarette and match which Revelle dropped. He turned pale

when he saw my hand on the ground. Suspicious. Motive for murder, Revelle's money. Find that he leaves to Merrivale fifteen thousand pounds, as well as his share in 'The Love Light.' Merrivale only told me of share. Convinced me, but didn't prove, that Merrivale committed murder for the money. Surprised to find that Revelle is the Marquis's brother. (Thought I knew everything. Great mistake. Tinker, don't ever be too cocky.)

"When the Marquis called on me, he said at the door excitedly, 'By heavens, don't you touch it, Sexton Blake!' The voice and the words reminded me of the first play of poor Revelle's years before I knew him. For curiosity, got Tinker to look up the 'Era,' and found that the Marquis had been in the play with Merrivale. Curiosity excited still further. (Mem. for Tinker: Don't neglect the hints of idle curiosity; they may prove useful). Are Merrivale and the Marquis friends? I must find out. The two attempts on my life by Rogers convinces me that Merrivale thinks I have the poisoned match, and is attempting to get it from me.

"But what are Fordyce and the other men of the Marquis's gang doing in it? In the meantime, keep an eye on the Marquis, for he's on a big thing. (Mem. for Tinker: That we have been through together, so I needn't explain).

"Can't think the Marquis would have poisoned his own brother. But where has the poison come from? Has he deceived Merrivale with his make-up, or are they both working together?

"An Indian poison, the professor declares. That gives me an idea. The Marquis was once on tour with an Indian juggler. Could he have got it from him? Clue very slight, but worth looking into. (Mem. for Tinker: The slightest clue often leads to the greatest results).

"Find the Indian has given up juggling, and keeps a menagerie in the East End. I find this out through inquiring at one of the Wellington Street agencies. Case looks very black against the Marquis on paper.

"I go to the East End the Sunday Tinker hunts up the Professor.

"Find the Indian easily, and ask him about the poison. He is in a deadly funk, but, under threats, confesses that for a large price he has sold a bottle to a gentleman introduced to him by the Marquis when they were touring with the Eastern mysteries. According to description, gentleman is Merrivale. That makes it certain he is the murderer. But why are all the Marquis's gang tracking me, and what does Flash Poll know about the poisoned match? Rogers and Fordyce, I know, have been in the Marquis's pay for years.

"I interview Fordyce at the police-court on the day he was charged. He tells me that Merrivale promised each man a hundred pounds if he got the match away from me. Says that Merrivale has been mixed up with the Marquis for years. And I never knew it. (Mem. for Tinker: Again this proves that one doesn't know everything).

"Now I am satisfied that the Marquis has nothing to do with these frequent attempts on my life, and that Merrivale knew me, and will spare no pains to obtain and destroy the evidence of his crime."

When Tinker had read so far, he put down the paper to think over and admire the wonderful ingenuity with which Sexton Blake had pieced the puzzle together.

As he thought over several little ideas which were not quite clear to him, he heard the latch of the door click.

He looked up, and, standing in the room, with a smile on his clean-shaved face, was the Marquis.

THE TWENTIETH CHAPTER.

Tinker Says "No"—Sellars's Offer—Lord Lancing—The Marquis Breaks Down.

IN a moment Tinker's hand flew to a revolver which was on a side-table; but the Marquis only smiled, and shook his head.

"No need for that, my lad," he said, dropping into a chair. "I've only just looked in to see the gallant Blake. Not at home—eh?"

"No; he'll be back almost directly," said Tinker, wondering.

"All right, I'll wait. You're a plucky lad," went on the Marquis. "I suppose you've enjoyed this chase?"

"Rather!" said Tinker.

"Yes, there's no sport like hunting man. Ah, here's the great chap! We meet again, Blake."

Blake threw his hat and gloves on to the table, and looked at the Marquis.

"I suppose they put you in a cell with a window, Marquis?" he said.

"Exactly; and I climbed out and called at your old lodgings, where they gave me your address. I thought I should like to have a final chat on the quiet, Blake. Those thick-headed police officials are always listening when a gentleman has friends to see him. Give me a cigarette, will you? I don't suppose I shall have another for a long time."

Blake threw over a cigarette-case.

"Help yourself, Marquis," he said. "But I shall have to take you back, you know; and I've got my hand on my revolver, and can shoot through my pocket if there's any trouble. Come along, Marquis. I shall have to take you back, or I shall be forgetting my duty and let you go."

"No, no, not those things!" cried the Marquis, shrinking away at the sight of Blake's handcuffs. "Don't put those things on me! I'll go quietly, I give you my word I will!"

"I'm almost sorry for you, Marquis," said Blake. "But there's no help for it. There's no way out of it."

"Waal, I reckon there is if I choose to take it," said a nasal voice at the door.

With a smile on his face, Dan Sellars stood watching the scene.

"I guess this is the crook, Mr. Blake, ain't it?" he said.

Sellars walked up to the Marquis and looked at him closely.

"I reckon you're the smartest man I've ever known," he said. "You're the first man who's ever done Dan Sellars for a penny, let alone half a million. What do you reckon he's fixed up for?" he added, turning to Sexton Blake.

"Fifteen years, at least!"

"And supposing I don't prosecute, what then?" said Sellars, coming forward.

The Marquis bent forward with an eager look.

"The case falls to the ground," said Blake slowly; "unless," he added, "I insist on its being proceeded with."

"And will you?" asked the millionaire.

Sexton Blake walked up and down the room in deep thought. Then he turned suddenly to the millionaire.

"What's your idea?" he asked sharply.

"Waal," drawled Sellars, "I've been thinking, a man like this is too smart to be hidden away. Now, my idea is this. If he'll keep straight I'll take him in with me and find him something to do."

Blake strode over to the Marquis and caught him by the shoulder.

"Marquis," he said. "I loved your brother, and for his sake I'd do a good deal. You've heard what Mr. Sellars said. Can you go straight now?"

The Marquis caught at his throat and spoke with difficulty.

"Give me a chance, Sexton Blake, and you'll see."

"Then," said Blake, "I withdraw from the case, and you're free. And now, Marquis, or, rather, Mr. Rortrey, we'll shake hands and you'll stop to dinner."

"And say," put in Sellars, with a wink; "I guess we'll start business on the Cotton Exchange together."

The Marquis, white and trembling, and for once bereft of his colossal nerve, expressed his deepest gratitude in broken tones, and promised to go straight for the future—a promise, which it is pleasant to add, he kept.

"And now," said Blake, "I must just pop over to the police-station and put things straight with the police."

"Say, young man," said Sellars to Tinker, "reckon you're smart. Would you like to come in with me, and I'll make your fortune in a year?"

"Oh, no, thank you!" cried Tinker hastily. "I can't leave Mr. Blake under any circumstances."

"Guess you'll stop where you are, then, and I kalkilate you're doing the right thing to stop by your friends."

At that moment Blake re-entered the room with a serious face.

"I'm afraid the Marquis will have to go back," he said. "I can't go against the law, and the chief has laid it down hot and strong. I think his vanity is upset because his cell was so easily broken out of. Anyway, the Marquis will have to go back, and if he won't they'll come and fetch him."

The Marquis's face fell, and the millionaire whistled.

"Say," drawled Sellars. "If I offered to buy their darned old police-station, do you think that would square the deal?"

Blake could not help smiling, but he shook his head.

"I can't square it," he said. "And here they are, I expect!"

With a sigh the Marquis rose to his feet as a waiter entered and announced "Lord Lancing."

An elderly, keen-faced gentleman stepped quickly into the room, and walked up to Blake with extended hand.

"So glad to see you, Mr. Sexton Blake," he said. "When can you start for Germany? Just two minutes in private."

He took Sexton Blake on one side and spoke earnestly and emphatically.

"Very well," said Blake, when the conversation was finished, "I'll start in two days' time, and can be back in time for the Sessions. And now, Lord Lancing, I have a favour to ask."

Sexton Blake briefly related the facts, and asked, as a special favour, if the Marquis could surrender and then be released unconditionally on his—Blake's—word?

The Home Secretary considered the matter gravely for a few minutes.

"Well, Blake," he said at length. "We owe you a great deal, and I'll manage it."

"Say, if there's any money wanted, I'll find it," put in Sellars.

Lord Lancing smiled and shook his head.

"I'm doing this for Mr. Sexton Blake," he said; "and I hope the thief—the man whoever he is—will never forget his lesson."

And, accompanied by Blake, the old gentleman left the room.

In a few minutes Blake returned and told the Marquis he would have to appear at ten the next morning and would then be allowed to go free.

"You will never regret it, Blake," said the Marquis. "And you, sir," he added, turning to Sellars, "will always find me a good worker and ever grateful."

"Waal," replied the millionaire, "you've helped me to make a million and a half, let's see if we can't make another."

"And now," said Blake cheerily, "we will have dinner, and Mr. Alistair Rortrey shall choose the champagne."

THE TWENTY-FIRST CHAPTER.

In Front of the Train—Blake to the Rescue—The Last Arrest—Blake's Explanation.

NEXT day, when the affair of the Marquis was settled, Blake and Tinker packed up their belongings in readiness to return to London.

"There you are, Tinker," said Sexton Blake, throwing over a bundle of papers. "There are the Press notices of your first appearance on the music-hall stage. Poor boy! I'm afraid I've cut short a successful career."

"Never mind, sir," replied Tinker; "I dare say we may go on the stage again. It's good fun."

On the journey Tinker asked Blake about several things which had puzzled him.

"About that first match, sir," he said. "How was it Mr. Revelle hit on the right one?"

"For the simple reason, Tinker," replied Blake, "that there was only one in the box. Merrivale doubtless slipped it in the poor fellow's pocket just before he left the stage. And he took his chance with me later."

"And another thing, sir," went on Tinker. "If you were so certain that he had committed the murder, why couldn't you take him at once?"

"Because I hadn't sufficient evidence, my boy. I hadn't found the juggler; and I wanted to catch my gentleman red-handed, too. I knew that, sooner or later, he would offer me a match personally, and then I should have him. Don't you remember I said the man who hands me a match like that is the murderer?"

"Then that was why you showed him the conjuring trick, in the hopes—"

"Exactly, Tinker; and he swallowed the bait like a foolish fish. Anything else you'd like to know before I go to sleep?"

"The last question, sir. Why was it he had been mixed up with the Marquis?"

"For the sake of the plunder, I suppose. You find unscrupulous people ev'rywhere, Tinker, though this is the first and last time I hope I shall ever have to arrest an actor."

When they alighted at Euston, Blake ordered the bags to be sent by messenger, and told Tinker they would walk part of the way. Half-way down the Euston Road Blake paused and turned to Tinker.

"I'm going into a beastly slum here, and I think you'd better stop outside."

"No, sir," said Tinker firmly. "I'll see it through."

Together they walked down the evil-smelling street until Sexton Blake stopped at the door of a squalid-looking house.

"There's a man here I think I want," he said, as he pressed the door with his shoulder.

The house was let out in single rooms, and Sexton Blake, followed by Tinker, mounted up to the second floor.

He went straight to one room and opened the door. In the dim light they could just see a man lying on the bed.

Before he could move, Blake had rushed forward, and Tinker heard the old familiar click of the handcuffs. The man, half awake and asleep, protested loudly that he was innocent, though up to the present no one had accused him of anything.

"All right," said Blake, digging his knee into the man's chest. "If I'm wrong, I'll apologise. Tinker, strike a match."

Blake took the match, and held it in front of his prisoner's face.

"I thought so," he said. "The gentleman so badly disguised as the commissionaire who was watching me at Baker Street. Come on, my friend; you shall join the happy throng!"

"I never would have done nothing if it hadn't been for Mr. Merrivale!" whined the man.

"I suppose not. Anyway, you'll have a chance of seeing Mr. Merrivale later."

Blake took the man to the end of the street, and handed him over to a policeman, after scribbling something on a slip of paper.

"There, give that to your superintendent. It'll explain things."

When they were in the train, Blake turned to Tinker. "That's the last of the gang, and now I can sleep in peace."

"Who was he, sir? I've never seen him before."

"No, you weren't with me, Tinker. He's not one of the old gang, but only a super, so to speak."

Sexton Blake then explained how he had seen the man disguised as a commissionaire.

"And as he was walking away," Sexton Blake added, "I noticed his boots. They were brass-tipped. Now, these brass-tipped boots are only worn by a certain gang of Euston Road hooligans, and I thought our friend must be one of them. At Liverpool I remembered that Mr. Jabez White had some notoriety in Euston Road in hooligan matters; so I thought we'd apply at hooligan headquarters, with the result that Jabez is now in his proper place, which is in prison. Now, here we are at Baker Street again."

As Blake took out his latchkey, a well-dressed old gentleman stepped up to him.

"Mr. Blake, I believe?" he said, in an oily voice.

"Why," cried Blake, "it's our old friend, Mr. Eli Laverton! And what can I do for you, Eli?"

"Well, Mr. Blake," said the old man, "I've come to say good-bye. Those unjust people at Waterloo have

actually requested poor old Eli not to use their premises any more. They say there have been too many bags lost lately. Scandalous, isn't it?"

"And what are you going to do, Eli?" laughed Blake. "Well, I think I shall go and live in the country, and lead the life of a peaceful farmer, Mr. Blake. I've got a little money saved, and I always liked fresh air."

"All right, Levi; only leave the other peoples' chickens alone, there's a good fellow," said Blake.

"Always with your little joke, Mr. Blake! Good-bye, sir—and good-bye, young man! You're in good hands, and don't ever let people suspect you of taking bags from railway platforms. It hurts the feelings. Good-bye, gentlemen!"

Blake laughed, as the old man disappeared, and then went upstairs.

"Got them all now, Tinker," he said, after dinner. "The two Italians—hired, of course, by Merrivale, Rogers, & Co., who were evidently doing a little private burglary on their own account when we caught them—and Fordyce and friend Jabez—they'll all appear with Merrivale, and I've filled my net and avenged poor old Revelle!"

"And when are you going to Germany, sir?" asked Tinker.

"To-morrow; and I suppose that means that you'd like to come too. But how about the stage? Are you going to give that up altogether?"

"I don't know, sir. That depends on you, of course."

"Well, there's a letter from Mervyn St. Albans, in which he offers us both parts in his next play in three months' time. We'll talk about it when we come back from Germany—eh? Now, my lad, you've done well, and I'm proud of you, so off to bed and sleep well!"

When they returned from a successful trip to Germany, Tinker was surprised to receive from Blake a cork tipped with a gold plate, on which was inscribed, "Tinker, from Sexton Blake, in remembrance."

It was the identical cork on which Merrivale had smeared the tiny dose of poison, and which was so nearly the death of Tinker instead of Blake.

Needless to add, the cork is now one of Tinker's most cherished possessions.

The celebrated trial of Max Merrivale is still fresh in the public mind, so no reference need be made to it here, except to say that he went to the scaffold as he lived, unrepentant.

A letter comes to Baker Street from America every mail, and, according to the last, the Marquis is in a fair way to become a millionaire before long.

"P.S.—The chronicler has, perhaps, laid too much stress on what was, after all, perhaps a run of luck. He has, however, omitted to explain my arrest. There is really no explanation, except this. I bluffed the chief constable. The only person whom my arrest would in any way affect was Max Merrivale. I therefore assumed that he had laid the information, and told the chief that I knew. It turned out that I was right, and that he had left a small bottle of the poison on my dressing-table, which the absurd police took as immediate evidence that I was guilty, and started to have the body exhumed.

"I think, after all, they must be a little jealous of me at the Yard. SEXTON BLAKE."

THE END.

(Next week's grand story will be entitled "Sexton Blake in Africa"—a thrilling tale of peril and adventure.)

"DAILY MAIL."

"SEXTON BLAKE IN AFRICA." A Thrilling Detective Adventure Story. NEXT WEEK.

OPENING CHAPTERS.

GRAND NEW SERIAL.

TROOPER and BUSHRANGER;

Or, THE LAST DAYS OF NED KELLY.

By CECIL HAYTER Author of "The Quest of the Ruby Scarab."

Kelly's Escape From Melbourne Gaol.

This is a story of Ned Kelly, the notorious Australian bushranger. It tells how, after being captured and lodged in Melbourne Gaol, he escapes and makes his way to his old haunts. In disguise he steers for the gold diggings. On the train he meets a Government Inspector, a man named Hayes, who cheats Kelly at cards. Kelly turns the tables, and then hands Hayes the money back he has won.

Kelly's Lesson.

"Remember that they are Government property, and that your reputation, such as it is, has been saved. If you tamper with that money again I shall hear of it, and as sure as I'm alive, I'll show you up as the swindler you are. If not, I'll keep my mouth shut; but as I deal with you now, so deal mercifully with any poor beggar brought before you for sentence up yonder in the gold-fields.

"A minute or two back, I'd have let you off with no other punishment, but you want a sharper lesson to remind you not to tackle a man behind his back. Open that door!"

The major rose to his knees again.

"No—no! What do you mean to do—you won't murder me?"

"Murder you, you fool! I wouldn't soil my fingers with such as you! Open that door—sharp, now!"

"I can't—I daren't—I'll be killed!"

"Rubbish! The trackside is soft enough. You'll only get a bruise or two and a sixty mile walk. We're not doing fourteen miles an hour on this up-grade. Jump, or I'll kick you out!"

The bully began to whimper, and made a half turn.

"I'll give you exactly the time it takes me to count three. If you don't jump for it on the word three I promise you you'll leave on the end of my boot.

"One—two—"

The sub-commissioner shuddered, groaned, gave a final despairing look, and leapt outwards and forwards into the dark. He landed asprawl in a thick clump of scrub, breathless and shaken, but unhurt; and the train went rattling by.

Kelly, with a half-disgusted laugh, and a shrug of the shoulders, closed the door again, tore the black mask from his face and the broad-brimmed hat from his head, pitched them out of the opposite window, and resumed his role of the languid, drawing Captain Vyner.

When the train reached Railway Head, in the small hours of the morning, the attendant came to rouse him, and found him fast asleep in his bunk.

A few seconds later there was consternation and uproar, and news flashed along the train that the Britisher Captain Vyner had been robbed during the night of some thousands of pounds, and that Sub-Commissioner Hayes was nowhere on the train. Either he had fallen out, or more probably been thrown out by the perpetrators of the robbery, and search-parties were at once despatched down the line.

Captain Vyner at the Diggings.

Three weeks later the "Britisher," as Captain Vyner was generally spoken of, was already a popular and familiar figure at the diggings, and had won almost universal respect.

At first they had been inclined to chaff him, and resent his slow drawl and his eyeglass; but they soon found that they had a man to deal with, and when he

administered to Gullion Dick, a notorious bully, the soundest thrashing which that worthy had ever received—in the high-street of the camp, at the busiest hour of the day—his reputation was assured.

Sub-Commissioner Hayes—who had arrived in camp in a sorry plight, three days late—had also taken Captain Vyner under his wing; and at the inaugural dinner at the commissioner's house the Britisher had kept the table in a roar with his account of the robbery on the train, whilst the fact that he could laugh over the loss of so large a sum as six or seven thousand pounds made everyone regard him as "a warm man," whose goodwill was desirable.

At the same time, much sympathy was expressed for Hayes, who, according to his version of the affair, had been overcome and half-murdered by the notorious Kelly and three others, after a desperate resistance.

The Britisher also proved himself a worker—as strenuous, if not as skilful, as the oldest miner in the place; and he, with the proverbial new chum's luck, struck it rich from the very first.

Two days after his arrival he was sauntering round, "having a look at things," when a hard-bitten Yankee from Dakota way, who had staked out a good claim, was being hauled up by a policeman for being unable to pay his mining and registration fees—a tall, gaunt, keen-faced man named Jake Simpson, full of ripe experience, who had mined all over the world, and had at last, in his own phraseology, "struck it rich." But the expenses of travelling up-country and food and outfit had reduced him to his last dollars.

He accepted his reverse of fortune philosophically; but there was a stony look of dull despair in his eyes as he walked along quietly beside the policeman, knowing that the next few minutes would see the forfeiture of his claim and a month's hard development work.

Kelly—or, rather, Captain Vyner—had seen him pass, and, accustomed to read men on sight, had tipped the police-sergeant liberally and asked for a few moments' private conversation with the American.

They retired out of earshot, and in five minutes the whole thing was settled, and some notes changed hands.

The fees were paid, and Captain Vyner and Jake Simpson became partners in the Good Hope claim.

In less than a fortnight news leaked out that the Good Hope, which had been discarded some months before as "worked out," had proved itself a regular bonanza. Jake Simpson's experience and the Britisher's money and energy worked wonders. A rich lode was discovered, and within the month the Good Hope was pouring out ounces to other people's pennyweights or less.

There was little grumbling, and the better crowd of miners heartily congratulated them on their success.

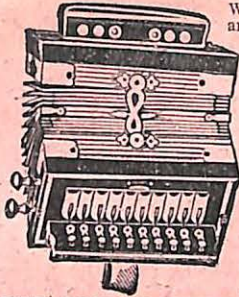
The Britisher and Jake, side by side, clad in clay-stained overalls, were hard at it at sun-up, and when the day's work was finished they repaired to their small tent beside the claim, and ladled the day's takings into the strong-box under Jake's bed.

The American could never do enough for his pard.

"He's a real hustler from way back!" he'd say to an admiring audience. "Yes, sirree, I tell you the goddone truth! He has sand; an' when he starts to wade in he don't grow mouldy neither, and the Good Hope—she's a fair cinch!"

(A special long instalment of this story will appear next week.)

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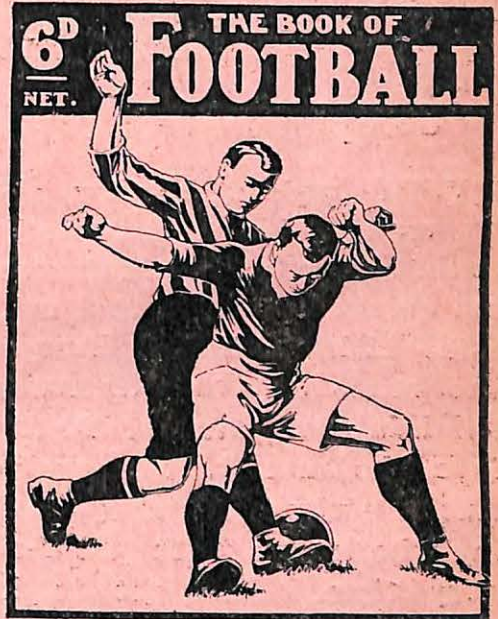
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