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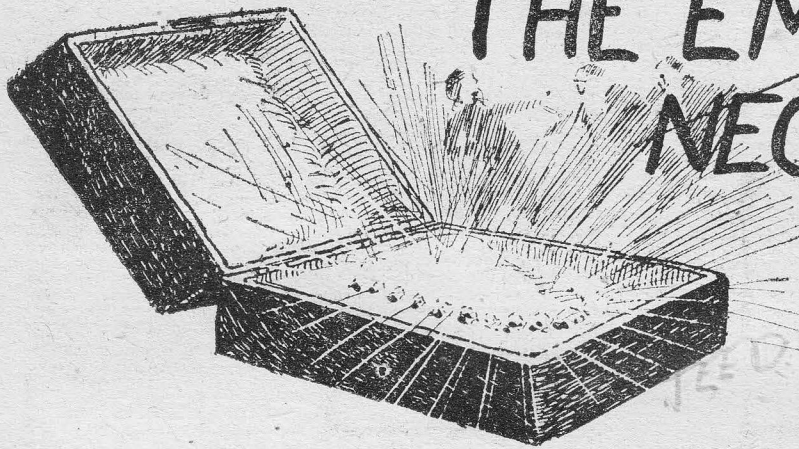


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Or, "A MARKED MAN."

A Magnificent Detective
Drama of the Footlights,
from the Pen of the Author
of "The Crimson Pearl," etc.



THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Voices from the Past—Dawson Congreve's Dilemma.

DAWSON CONGREVE, whom the London theatrical world looked upon as a coming dramatist, turned from his work with a frown of irritation on his face as the elderly woman who looked after his flat in Jermy Street entered his study and announced the fact that three gentlemen had called.

"But I thought I had told you, Mrs. Thompson," said Dawson Congreve irritably, "that during my hours of work I was never at home to anyone."

"I know that, sir," replied the housekeeper. "But these gentlemen won't take no for an answer. They said they'd wait until you came home."

"Did they give you their cards?" asked Congreve.

"No, sir. They said they wanted to see you on urgent and private business."

Congreve, who had been arranging tiny figures on a miniature stage, pushed the paraphernalia away from him and sighed.

"Very well, Mrs. Thompson," he said. "Show them in!"

The housekeeper departed, and a few seconds later the door opened again. Into the study walked three men, at whom Congreve gazed, first with surprise, then with ill-concealed consternation. While all three were dressed in the height of fashion, the touch of flashiness about their garments pronounced them to be not quite gentlemen.

The man in the lead was tall and thin, with a sallow skin, dark, piercing eyes, and a black moustache. The second man was short and fat, with a rubicund countenance and childlike eyes. The third was of medium height, and of a distinctly Jewish type.

As they filed into the room the housekeeper closed the door after them. Then the lips of the man in front twisted into a queer smile as he gazed at the dumbfounded Congreve.

"Well, Congreve," he said, "you don't seem exactly to welcome your old friends with open arms. Does he, boys?" he chuckled, turning to the two behind him. "He doesn't even rise to greet us. He doesn't even offer us a chair!"

Dawson Congreve, who had been silent through sheer amazement, now straightened up in his chair, and said curtly:

"What are you three doing in London? And what do you want of me? You were always the boss of the gang, Wheeler. Tell me what it means."

The tall man in front smiled his twisted smile again.

"Not so fast, Congreve, my boy—not so fast! Let us say that we, being three old friends, happen to be in London and look you up."

As he spoke he coolly drew up a chair and sat down, lighting a cigarette as he did so. His two companions followed suit. Then all three eyed Congreve in silence.

Finally, the man whom Congreve had addressed as Wheeler spoke again.

"No, Congreve," he went on, "I really can't see that you have received us with open arms."

Congreve, who had recovered his self-possession, tapped the arm of his chair irritably.

"Cut out that talk!" he said. "You three haven't looked me up without some definite reason. You never do things without a purpose, Wheeler. Five years ago I broke with you in New York, and came to London. Now you appear on the scene, telling my housekeeper that you wish to see me on urgent and private business. I don't want anything to do with you, and I won't have anything to do with you. My association with you finished in New York five years ago. So I say to you again: Say what you've got to say, and then get out, for I'm busy!"

Congreve lit a cigarette as he finished speaking, and leaned back in his chair. Wheeler's companions—the one of the rubicund countenance was known as Gus Packard, and the other as Fritz Bode—stared at Congreve without the faintest glimmer of intelligence in their eyes. They were leaving the talking to Wheeler. He had heard Congreve out in silence, and now he bent forward.

"You're pretty cocky, aren't you, Congreve?" he snarled. "You want to know why we have called to see you? All right. I'll tell you, and you'll do well to listen. You thought, five years ago in New York, that you had given us the slip. But you didn't, Congreve—you didn't! We knew you had come to London, and we kept track of your movements. You were never out of our minds, Congreve. We were just waiting for the time to come when you would pay for what you did five years ago. That time has arrived, Congreve, and that's why we're here to-day. We know all about your life in London. We've heard more than a little about the rising young dramatist, 'Dawson Congreve.'

"The first three years you were in London we didn't bother you. You were a nonentity then, and there was nothing to be gained by striking at that time. But as soon as you got your first play produced, Congreve, we watched you closely, and the swing of Fate has brought you right into our hands. But it was when we heard about you and Cicely Grafton we knew our time had come."

At the mention of the name of Cicely Grafton, an actress who had taken London by storm, Dawson Congreve flared up.

"You can leave her name out of it, Wheeler!" he rapped. "Whatever happened five years ago, and whatever is your purpose in coming here to-day, it can have nothing to do with her."

"Can't it?" sneered Wheeler. "You're

going to find out mighty soon that it has a whole lot to do with her."

Congreve bent forward.

"What do you mean?" he asked tensely.

"Ah, so you really want to know, do you?" said Wheeler. "That touches you on a sore spot, does it? I fancy you would not care to have the lady know what happened in New York."

"You devil! Say what you mean, and get it done with!" panted Congreve.

Suddenly Wheeler dropped his jeering tone, and placed an emphatic hand on the arm of his chair.

"You'll get it, and get it now!" he snapped. "Listen! Five years ago, Congreve, you gave us the slip in New York, and came to London. I have already told you that I had never forgotten that. I have also told you that during your first three years here we let you alone. We didn't bother you during the next two years, but we watched you closely. We know that then you began to get your feet on the ladder, and we know, too, that you have had a couple of plays produced—that one is running now at the Peep's Theatre, and that Cicely Grafton has the leading part.

"We have discovered the extent of your relations with her, and we know that gossip says an engagement is imminent. You may remember, Congreve, that a few months ago Cicely Grafton was in New York, playing there; it's a thing you are not likely to forget. You know, and all the world knows, that while she was there she bought a certain famous emerald necklace. I suppose you have seen it often since her return, have you? Well, I failed, for the simple reason that Cicely Grafton returned to London before I was ready to put my plans into effect. It was not until then, Congreve, that I heard all about you and her. What I did hear gave me an idea—an idea, Congreve, that is going to enable me to kill two birds with one stone. It is going to secure for me that necklace, and at the same time exact payment from you for what you did five years ago.

"Now, I'm going to tell you briefly what I require you to do, and the price you are going to pay if you don't do it. On the other hand, if you obey my orders, we'll consider old scores wiped out, and I'll guarantee never to bother you again. Now listen.

"You are on intimate terms with Cicely Grafton; you see her more frequently than anyone else, and it will be possible for you to do what I require without much difficulty. In New York I had a copy made of the necklace which Cicely Grafton bought, and had

she not left for London so soon, I should have found some means of making substitution there. As it is, I have brought the copy to London, and you are going to act as my agent in the matter.

"Your work will be to take this copy and to substitute it for the genuine necklace. If you work carefully, there is no reason why your suspicion should fall upon you. But that is your look-out, not mine. I am simply telling you what you have got to do. When you have made the substitution you are to hand the necklaces to me, and then we'll call old scores wiped out."

"And supposing I refuse?" asked Dawson Congreve, as he licked his dry lips.

Chris Wheeler shrugged his shoulders. "I don't think you will," he said. "But if you should be so foolish, I shall then write to Cicely Grafton, and give her a brief—though, I assure you, detailed—history of your life in New York, and I guess that will put the lid on any chance you ever had with her. At the same time we'll get the necklace, anyway; for if you warn her, I'll write to her just the same. So if you refuse you lose her, and she loses the necklace. You can take your choice. But if you are wise you will decide to do as I tell you."

As he finished speaking Wheeler thrust his hand in his pocket, and drew out a small leather case, which he laid on the desk.

"The copy of the necklace is in that case," he said. "This is Tuesday afternoon. We'll give you until Thursday night to make the change. If you haven't done it then you know what will happen, and you know me well enough, Congreve, to realise that I never make a threat I don't carry out."

He signed to his two companions, rose, and, disregarding Congreve's effort to speak, passed out of the study without another word.

As the door closed after them Dawson Congreve sat staring straight ahead of him with a look of utter hopelessness in his eyes. The visit of Wheeler and his two companions had come upon him as a bolt from the blue. He knew exactly how deadly was the weapon which Wheeler held over his head. His life in New York had been something to hide, and he would pay almost any price to keep the facts from Cicely Grafton.

Seven years before, when Dawson Congreve had come down from Oxford, he had come into possession of a small inheritance. During the next six months he had squandered a good deal of his capital on racing, and then had joined a party going to New York.

In New York he had fallen in with Chris Wheeler, a man who seemed to know everybody worth knowing. Wheeler passed as a Wall Street man, and on several occasions Congreve had visited his offices for a flutter on the market. Then how it had happened he scarcely knew, but a little later he had found himself in partnership with Wheeler, Packard, and Bode.

It was not long, however, before he discovered the real truth about the office in Wall Street. It was nothing but a "bucket shop," run on a gigantic scale, and catering more particularly for small speculators in the country districts.

Instead of severing his connection with the firm, Congreve had remained. And, although his instincts protested against the colossal game of robbery which Wheeler and his partners were playing, still he stuck to it and shared the spoils.

A bucket shop, he it known, is very much unlike an ordinary brokerage house. They are establishments run in the neighbourhood of the great Stock Exchanges, and on the same principle that the racing tout operates. Once in the clutches of the bucket-shop sharks, one has very little chance of escaping, for they trade exclusively on margins, and on such a small ratio that the smallest turn of the market will wipe out the margin which has been sent to them.

Nine times out of ten they do not even trouble to purchase the stocks they are supposed to purchase, but simply wait for a rise or fall in the stock, as the case might be, and then announce to the unfortunate speculator that his money is gone. A letter of profound regret follows, with glowing statements about the prospects of some other stock, and usually the sucker sends on still more money in the hope of getting back what he has lost.

Dawson Congreve had been drifting deeper and deeper into the mire, and bade fair to develop into a moral replica of Wheeler himself, when one day he was brought up with a round turn.

For some weeks things had been going badly with Wheeler & Co. Their advice to

their clients had, unfortunately for them, proved correct in a good many cases, and, in order to keep operating, Wheeler & Co. had been forced to pay out of their own funds. Then, too, Wheeler, Packard, Bode, and Congreve had been spending money like water, and on the day in question it needed only a few more losses to put the firm completely out of business.

Dawson Congreve had got to the office particularly early that morning, and as he passed through the outer office he noticed a shabbily-dressed old lady speaking to one of the clerks, and at the same time crying quietly. He paused long enough to hear what was being said, then, turning, he invited her to come into his private office. There he wormed out of her the whole story.

It appeared that for over six months she had been sending money to Wheeler & Co. in the hope of turning it into more. Believing every word they told her, and trusting them implicitly, she still continued to send to them, even though the losses occurred with chilling regularity.

Now it was all gone, and a few questions from Congreve elicited the amount. It was eight thousand dollars—all she had in the world—and as Congreve realised she was the type of person upon whom he as well as Wheeler had been fattening, his conscience smote him hard.

Telling her to wait, he went into the outer office and opened the safe. In it he found a trifle over four thousand dollars, which he took, giving the cashier a slip for it. Then he returned to his own room, and wrote out his own personal cheque for a sum sufficient to make the amount up to eight thousand dollars.

Then he talked frankly to the old lady, telling her exactly what sort of a game the bucket shops ran, and advising her to leave it alone in future.

His next action was to take possession of all the letters which had come that morning, and to return the money-orders and cheques to those who had sent them, with a note of advice warning them that they only stood to lose.

He posted the letters with his own hands, and after that wrote a note to Wheeler informing him of what he had done, telling him his reasons for doing so, and winding up by resigning his membership in the firm.

Reckoning the cheque which he had given the old lady, he knew that he had less than a thousand dollars—or two hundred pounds—in the bank. Leaving his office, he went to the bank and drew out that amount.

Then Dawson Congreve made a solemn vow that from that moment on he would not handle a penny that was not honestly made. And, cutting the strings of all his old associations in New York, he had left for London to begin life over again.

He had stuck nobly to his decision, and ever since his return to London, five years before, he had worked hard and lived honestly. The first three years had been the most difficult. He had had a shot at a good many things, but had finally drifted into journalism, and then had written a play. With certain changes, it was produced at the Peer's Theatre, and had had a very successful run.

Following that, he had written a second play, which also had been produced at the Peer's Theatre, and in which Cicely Grafton had been given the leading part.

It was during the rehearsals of this play that Congreve had first met Cicely Grafton, and during the past few months a mutual liking had developed into a stronger sentiment—on Congreve's part at least.

Sometimes he hoped that Cicely Grafton might entertain something of the same feeling for him, but he did not yet feel his position secure enough to say anything. He had, however, worked harder than ever, and until the unexpected visit of his old associates that morning he had been basing all his hopes on the new play on which he was even then engaged.

But now the result of five years' hard work seemed to be all gone. His past life in New York, his foolish association there with Wheeler and his gang had risen up at the very moment when his hopes were highest. And look at the matter how he might, he could see not one glimmer of light ahead. He feared desperately what would happen if Cicely Grafton were told of his life in New York.

As he had grown to know her better he had found her a woman of the highest ideals, with a soul as clean as a flame.

In their frequent discussions of the characters which Congreve endeavoured to portray in his work, it was but natural that they should often slip into the discussion of character in general and the psychology of human motives.

Graven on Congreve's memory were the words Cicely Grafton had used on those occasions—words which had bitten into him like fire, and had sent him forth from her presence with a stronger determination than ever to live up to the ideals which she thought the only worthy ones. He had striven desperately for her good opinion, though before her he had never posed. It was impossible for one to pose and look into Cicely Grafton's eyes at the same time.

Fits of depression had seized him frequently. He had analysed his past and his present honestly, and a thousand times had asked himself if he would tell her of his life in New York.

Would she consider that the past five years had proven that he had learned his lesson? Would she say that the future, based on the present, would absolve him from any debt he owed to that previous life? Or would she gaze at him with an expression which would sear him to the roots of his being, causing him to abandon for ever the hopes which he had dared to hold?

That was the deadly fear which gripped him, and Dawson Congreve had not the courage to face such a possibility.

But was ever man placed in a more terrible dilemma? The one thing which he feared most threatened to descend upon him. The man who held the whip-hand over him had issued his orders, and if Dawson Congreve refused to obey the penalty would be the heaviest one he could pay.

Stated baldly, it meant that in order to retain the opinion Cicely Grafton had of him he must steal from her. But could any man whose love was honest do such a thing? What would be the value to him of her love and trust if he gained them under false pretences?

From the moment he did such a thing his peace of mind would be gone for ever. He would be living on the edge of a horrible volcano, which might burst and hurl him to destruction at any moment.

Temptation whispered to him that it would be possible to forget—that conscience could be whipped into obedience. It tortured him with a suggestion that if he won her, then she would forgive him. But against it there rose up the vivid memory of the ideas and ideals which she had so frequently expressed.

In his heart Dawson Congreve knew that Cicely Grafton would never yield to the theory that one might do evil for good to follow. Something told him that hers was not the nature to give love and trust to a man who would rob her in order to possess her.

Human nature is at all times a complex thing, and absolute understanding will never come as to the exact reasons for human motives. Everyone has his own skeleton to guard, and oftentimes, in order to guard it, one is driven to strange lengths. The world sees but the effect, without knowing the cause, and shakes its head in dumb amazement.

Any man of Congreve's temperament, sensitive and finching from scandal, would have been tempted as he was tempted. The threat was so recent, so concrete, and the blow so imminent that something must be decided, and decided quickly.

If he yielded to Wheeler's demands, then he must take the replica of the necklace which Wheeler had brought, and, like the veriest thief, substitute it for the genuine one possessed by the woman he loved.

That he himself would not benefit financially altered not an atom the moral guilt of the thing. If he did it, it was because he, too, had his price—Wheeler's silence. And in that he would be as guilty as Wheeler himself.

Supposing he did yield? Supposing he did substitute the necklace? Then what would follow? If he were not suspected of the deed, then the result would be that Cicely Grafton would lose her necklace, while he would still have hopes of winning her.

But would he be able to hold her? Wheeler said that if he obeyed orders the past would be forgotten. But would it? Not only Wheeler, but Packard and Bode would know of it; and, for all his childlike appearance, Congreve knew that Packard was a moral decadent, while Bode had a nature of the most sinister description. Always he would

be living in dread of their coming. Always he would be in their power.

Was it not better to play the game as he had set himself to play it, even if he had to surrender all his hopes, rather than to undo all the work of the past few years, by sinking back lower even than before? But if he did not do as Wheeler demanded, then not only had Wheeler threatened to expose his past life to Cicely Grafton—and Congreve knew that Wheeler was a man who carried out his threats—but he also announced his intention to get possession of the necklace in any event.

Whichever way he looked at it, Congreve found the situation desperate. If he obeyed Wheeler he placed himself for ever in the gang's power, with the probability that all peace of mind would vanish for ever. On the other hand, if he refused, Cicely Grafton would be told of the past, and he would lose her. As far as Wheeler's intention to get possession of the necklace in any event was concerned, Congreve could warn her of the danger, despite what Wheeler had said on that point.

But was there no other way out? Was there nothing he could do to checkmate Wheeler and at the same time prevent him from disclosing the past to Cicely Grafton?

For five years he had been portraying characters of all descriptions. In his fiction work he had created scores of difficult situations, yet always he had brought his characters triumphantly out of them.

Now he himself had plunged into a situation more tense, more dramatic, more threatening than any he had ever created in his work. Still, was it not possible for him to find a way out? Would he have found a reasonable way out of a similar situation for one of his characters?

In a desperate attempt to find a path out of his dilemma, Dawson Congreve concentrated every particle of the imagination he possessed. He looked upon himself in the abstract—he thought of himself as one of the puppets of his own creation. What would he have done? What would he have done under similar circumstances? It was not easy, for the alternative to obedience to Wheeler meant the loss of all he held dear.

The only solution which would serve must be one which would checkmate Wheeler and, at the same time, prevent him from writing to Cicely Grafton. So intently did Congreve concentrate on the problem that almost mechanically he drew a pencil and notebook towards him, and set down the characters in the drama which was developing.

With his imagination working at high pressure, he wrote out the skeleton of a similar situation, plunging one of his characters into the same dilemma in which he found himself.

The afternoon wore on, and still he worked desperately. And then, just when the shadows were growing long, he hit upon the germ of an idea which suggested a possible solution.

As it took form in his mind he wrote feverishly, covering page after page, for so intently had he concentrated his faculties upon the problem that the working out of the idea demanded expression on paper.

Mr. Thompson, his housekeeper, brought in the tea, and set it down, but he was oblivious to both her coming and going, and toiled on in his problem until almost dinner-time. Then he finished, and, gathering up the several sheets which he had covered with writing, he began to read them over carefully.

When he had finished the last one he laid it down with decision, and it might have been seen that his jaw had assumed a fighting angle.

"It is the only chance—and it is a fighting chance!" he muttered. "With a little more planning out of the details it may serve. The most critical moment would be the handling of Wheeler; but if I could win out there I don't see why it shouldn't work. At any rate, I'll try it."

With that he folded up the sheets, and, opening a drawer in the desk, thrust them inside. Before closing the drawer he placed the leather case which Wheeler had brought beside the manuscript. Then he rose to prepare for dinner.

That evening was the first of many on which Dawson Congreve did not go to the Peer's Theatre. He was still intently worked up over the events of the day, and, realising the strain he was under must show in his

manner, he thought it wiser to keep away from Cicely Grafton.

Leaving his flat in Jermyn Street, he walked up to the Venetia, in Piccadilly, where he dined alone. After that he drove to a music-hall, where a box was placed at his disposal, and, sitting far back in the shadow, Congreve endeavoured to control his mental excitement.

As it came time to leave the theatre his footsteps almost unconsciously started towards the Peer's, for it had been a nightly habit lately for him and Cicely Grafton to have supper together. But he caught himself up abruptly, and went to his flat in Jermyn Street.

There he drew out the sheets of the manuscript, and read over once more what he had written, striving to regard his work from every possible point of view of an independent critic. Yet he still thought it might serve. And, with a definitely formed intention to carry it out, he retired.

Early the next morning Dawson Congreve took up the case which Chris Wheeler had left, and opened it. Lying on a bed of white satin was a circle of deep green gems, which at first seemed to sparkle with all the living fire of the genuine stones.

So perfect an imitation was it that for one brief instant Dawson Congreve thought he was looking upon Cicely Grafton's necklace. But on closer examination he was able to distinguish that they were simply magnificent copies. At night it would have been impossible to tell the difference.

Closing the case with a snap, Dawson Congreve thrust it in his pocket, and, donning his hat and coat, walked from Jermyn Street to Bond Street.

He paused before the door of a jewellery establishment there, and entered. It was a place where Congreve was already slightly known, for during the past few months he had purchased several little trifles for Cicely Grafton.

He approached the man with whom he had done business on previous occasions, and, after replying to the clerk's greeting, drew out the leather case which he had brought with him.

"I have here some imitation emeralds," he said, in as casual a tone as he could muster. "I was wondering if you could duplicate them for me."

As he spoke he opened the case, and thrust it towards the clerk. The man lifted up the string of stones, examining it carefully. Then, looking up, he said:

"Oh, yes, Mr. Congreve, we can duplicate it all right! But if you don't mind my saying so, it is rather fine copy-work for use on the stage."

Congreve, seeing that the man thought he wanted it for one of his productions, said nothing to enlighten him, but merely nodded, and asked how much a copy would cost.

"I'll have to ask the manager, Mr. Congreve," replied the clerk. "If you will kindly wait a few minutes, I'll ask him at once."

Congreve idly examined the contents of the showcase in front of him until the man returned.

"The manager says it will cost about thirty pounds to duplicate it, Mr. Congreve. The stones will be easy enough, but this setting is all solid gold, and I presume you want the same?"

"Yes," said Congreve. "I want it copied as closely as possible. Also it is urgent. How long will it take?"

"We can put it in hand at once," responded the clerk. "Will to-morrow afternoon do?"

"Yes, that will do quite well," remarked Congreve. "I will call about four."

Nodding to the clerk, he departed, and, returning to Jermyn Street, literally drove himself to work on his play. He lunched at his flat, and worked on through the afternoon, and after tea despatched a note to Cicely Grafton, saying that he was not very well, and would not see her that night.

She rang him up just before dinner to inquire how he was, and in the course of conversation told him there was to be a gala performance at the Peer's the following evening. They had received notice that certain foreign royalty would visit the Peer's, and the place was being decorated in honour of the occasion.

Congreve promised, without fail, to be there, and arranged to take Cicely Grafton home after the performance. Had he needed anything but the dread which was hanging over him to bolster up his determination, her voice would have served. And when he

finally hung up the receiver, it needed all his will-power to keep from going to the Peer's to see her.

But he resolutely refrained, and plunged once more into his work. He toiled away at the first act of his play until past midnight, then he drank a night-cap, and went to bed.

The following morning he went out to order some flowers for Cicely Grafton to wear that night, and send a short note with them, telling her that he would come to her dressing-room before the performance began.

Then he returned to Jermyn Street, and worked strenuously until the middle of the afternoon. It was just a quarter to four when he walked up Bond Street, and entered the shop where he had left the copy of the necklace. It was all ready, and as he examined the sixty-three stones which had been strung on the setting, comparing it with the one which Wheeler had left, he saw that it was an almost perfect copy.

After expressing his satisfaction with the work, he wrote out a cheque, and, pocketing the two necklaces, walked back to Jermyn Street.

He changed early that evening, and with due regard for the occasion. Then, emerging from his flat, he walked up to the Venetia for dinner. He dined early, and from the restaurant taxied to the Peer's, in Shaftesbury Avenue.

Cicely Grafton was already in her dressing-room when he arrived, and, after chatting for a few moments with the producer of his play, Congreve went along and knocked on the dressing-room door.

As he entered, Cicely Grafton's maid was just putting the finishing touches on the gown which her mistress was to wear in the first act. She gave both hands to Congreve as he came in, and he saw that she had chosen two pink buds from the flowers he had sent.

As he gazed upon her he realised more fully than ever just what it would mean to lose her, for, indeed, she was very lovely.

Her hair crowned her like a golden cloud, and her skin was white as alabaster against the soft pink of her gown. Cicely Grafton was one of those rare individuals who needed very little make-up for the stage, and she did not indulge in the unnecessary. Her deep-blue eyes were so heavily lashed that a pencil would have detracted from their beauty. Nature had shaded them sufficiently to withstand the strongest limelight.

She talked with Congreve until the call-boy came. Then he accompanied her to the door, and as she went along through the wings he stood gazing after her with all his soul in his eyes.

When she had disappeared he made his way out to the box which he usually occupied, and, sitting well back in the shadow, allowed his thoughts to run riot during the overture.

Strangely enough, Congreve's play, which was then being produced—a play which he had called "Souls Courageous"—dealt with a problem which, while it did not parallel his own case, at the same time dealt with the question of mental turmoil which was sufficient to bring his own troubles vividly to his mind.

Never before had he realised how perfectly suited Cicely Grafton was to the part. In it she portrayed the character of a woman with clear-cut ideals, which had been wrecked after marriage. The course of the play led up to a climax in the third act, where the husband, in a fury of remorse, begged for forgiveness.

Cicely Grafton, magnificent as the woman who was governed by her ideals, and yet who was suffering deeply as they crashed about her, rose to sublime heights in the fervour of her acting. And finally it was that, though loving and heart-broken, she sent her husband from her.

And somehow, as he watched her through the part, giving intensely of herself to it, Dawson Congreve felt a chill creep up and engulf him, for slowly there crept in upon him the belief that, should such a crisis occur in her own life, Cicely Grafton would cling first to her ideals.

As the curtain went down in the last act the house literally rose to its feet with enthusiasm. Time after time Cicely Grafton was recalled, and a sharp pain shot through Congreve as, just before she retired for the last time, she glanced up at him and smiled.

He hurried from the box then, and went round into the wings. He stood chatting with the producer until she emerged from her dressing-room. Then he went to meet her.

"I am tired, Dawson," she said. "Let us drive home, and have supper there."

Congreve nodded his assent, and as he assisted her into her car he noticed, as her cloak fell a little apart at the throat, that she still wore the magnificent blue emerald necklace which she had put on in honour of the gala performance, and which she had worn during the last act.

Cicely Grafton's flat was in Knightsbridge, and as they drove up Piccadilly Congreve listened while she chattered happily of the performance. When the car drew up before the entrance to the flat she laid her hand on his arm and said:

"Come in and have some supper, Dawson. I want to talk to you about the new play you're writing for me. I have a suggestion to make."

They passed into the building together and up in the lift to the first floor, where Cicely Grafton's flat was located. Compared with Congreve's flat, it was magnificent, and each time he had seen it it had been a spur to him to work harder than ever, for it made him realise just what he was aspiring to.

As they passed into the beautifully-furnished sitting-room he assisted her off with her wrap, and at a motion from her threw it on a chair. She smiled brightly over her shoulder at him, and, reaching up, unsnapped the emerald necklace from round her throat. She dropped it carelessly on a side table, saying, as she did so:

"Make yourself comfortable, Dawson. I'll go and tell Anna to get supper."

Congreve laid his opera-bag on one side, and, slipping off his overcoat, laid it on a chair. Then he turned, and his eyes fell on the emerald necklace, which she had dropped so carelessly and so trustingly on the table.

Slowly, step by step, he approached the table, fascinated, yet at the same time repelled by those glittering stones. At last he was close beside it, and, standing rigid, he listened.

As a sound came from the direction of the kitchen his hand suddenly went to his hip-pocket, and he pulled out the copy which he had had made in Bond Street. Then he picked up Cicely Grafton's necklace, and, dropping the copy on the table where the other had lain, thrust the genuine stones into his pocket.

He had just time to light a cigarette when Cicely Grafton re-entered the room, and as she confidently took his arm to lead him out to supper Dawson Congreve felt a surge of self-contempt sweep over him.

How he got through the next hour he never knew. A glass of wine seemed to have revived Cicely Grafton wonderfully, and by sheer force of will he had to whip himself into attention.

At last, however, he was able to take his leave, and as he walked down the stairs to the street he seemed to feel her hurt and accusing eyes boring into his back.

He got a taxi just outside the flat, and told the man to drive to Jermyn Street. On the way there he was rehearsing over and over the part he had set himself to play during the most critical part of the drama. He knew that Chris Wheeler and his companions would call at Jermyn Street that night, and if Dawson Congreve failed to carry off his part, it meant that the thing which he had driven himself to do that night would, after all, be of no avail.

He counted on having a few minutes to himself before Wheeler and the other pair should arrive. Therefore, as he walked into his sitting-room, and saw the three crooks sitting there, he received a shock which almost succeeded in upsetting his nerve when he needed it most.

By a stern effort of will, however, he gathered himself, and nodding coolly to his visitors, slipped off his coat. Laying it to one side, he turned and faced Wheeler.

Wheeler was regarding him satirically. They eyed each other in silence for a few moments, and it was Wheeler who spoke first.

"Well," he demanded, "have you got it?" Beginning then Dawson Congreve set himself to play a part more difficult than he had ever given to any of his characters.

"No," he lied coolly. "Nor will you ever get it, because someone else has been ahead of you. Cicely Grafton's necklace was stolen to-night."

"You lie!" snarled Wheeler.

"Do I?" said Congreve. "You can think what you will. I am telling you the simple truth, and I repeat it. Cicely Grafton's necklace was stolen to-night."

Wheeler came to his feet, and walked U. J.—No. 763.

across until he was standing close to Congreve.

"Where's the copy I left here?" he demanded.

"I'll get it," said Congreve. "It's in my desk."

"Ah!"

As the expression hissed through Wheeler's teeth Congreve's heart seemed to leap into his throat, and as a slow smile spread over Wheeler's countenance Congreve realised all too late the ghastly mistake—the fatal mistake he had made.

"Hang you, Congreve!" rasped Wheeler. "You are lying! You are trying to put me off by sheer invention. You never intended to get Cicely Grafton's necklace for us, or you would have taken the copy with you to-night!"

Congreve was too upset to speak. He had planned his scheme, as he thought, in every detail; he had analysed it time and again, and had regarded it from every possible objective, and yet for the most critical moment of the whole thing he had forgotten one of the simplest, one of the most obvious points.

Wheeler had caught him, and Congreve knew that Wheeler had probed his deception to some extent at least. And another thing Congreve had not counted on was the possible effect of Wheeler's anger when he found he had been fooled.

A few tense seconds they stood facing each other, then suddenly Wheeler became galvanised into action.

With a snarl of rage he sprang full for Congreve's throat, and although up till now Packard and Bode had sat like wooden statues, they moved swiftly enough when Wheeler hurled himself upon Congreve.

Packard, with the childlike eyes, jerked out an automatic, and, racing behind Congreve, brought it down on the back of his head.

Wheeler's fingers were already sunk deeply into Congreve's throat, and Bode, doubling up his fist, struck Congreve time and again in the face. Packard's second blow brought Congreve to the floor, and then those three human wolves threw themselves upon him.

They kicked him, they beat him, they pounded him until their anger spent itself. Then, bending over Congreve's unconscious body, Wheeler went rapidly through his pockets. As he drew out the necklace of gleaming stones he and his companions gasped.

"He had the copy with him all the time!" stammered Bode.

"The copy!" snapped Wheeler. "It's the genuine necklace, you fool! He told no lie when he said it had been stolen, for he had stolen it himself!"

Slipping the necklace into his pocket, Wheeler got to his feet and walked across to the desk. Opening the centre drawer, he took out the leather case which reposed there, and, opening it, gazed at the copy, which lay on its bed of white satin. Nodding with satisfaction, he closed the case, and made to put it into his pocket. Then suddenly he paused, and a cunning gleam came into his eyes.

"It may serve to create complications," he muttered, as he dropped it on the floor beside the unconscious Congreve. Then, signing to his companions, he made for the door, and all three fled silently out of the flat.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Sexton Blake is Sent For—Some Queer Evidence.

WHEN Cicely Grafton woke the next morning it was with a sense of sheer happiness at the joy of living.

The previous evening had been a great personal triumph for her, and it made her still happier to know that it was in Dawson Congreve's play she had achieved that triumph.

Cicely Grafton had worked harder than most of her contemporaries, for when she had first broken into the stage as a profession, it had been with the determination to develop her art along certain lines, and from this determination she had never wavered.

During the first years recognition had come slowly. But when once she had been given her chance the genius of her histrionic powers had carried her to the forefront rapidly. Out of half a dozen plays she had picked "Souls Courageous" as the most suit-

able in many ways for her temperament. It had mirrored in a remarkable manner her own ideals and conceptions, and it had been with a sense of keen curiosity that she had gone with her manager to meet the author and discuss rehearsals.

That was when she had first met Dawson Congreve, and during the months which had followed her natural liking for him had developed unconsciously into a depth of regard, which needed but a word on his part to cause it to break forth into a flame. Therefore, as she awoke on the morning after the gala performance, it is not surprising that life looked good to Cicely Grafton.

She was young, she was beautiful, she was successful in her chosen career, and there seemed no reason why Fate should not, in its own good time, permit Love to crown her happiness.

She lay back among the pillows watching while her maid drew the blinds and brought her morning tea, with a great heap of letters and telegrams piled on the tray. While she sipped her tea she opened the telegrams and read them. They were all messages of congratulation, and when she had finished them she turned to her letters. It was not until she had opened and read about half of them that she came to one which bore no post-mark and no stamp.

"This has been left by a messenger," she murmured, as she slit the flap, and drew out the folded sheet of paper it contained. But as she read the contents the light of happiness went from her eyes, and she gazed in stark horror at the words which coarsely and brutally bludgeoned her soul.

With one hand pressed against her breast she read the letter for the second time, trying to believe it was only some monstrously cruel joke, for these were the words which burned like fire into her brain:

"Dear Miss Grafton,—It is because I feel it my duty that I write to enlighten you regarding the past life of a man in whom you seem to be showing a more than ordinary interest. I speak of Dawson Congreve, in whose play you take the leading part.

"I am, of course, unaware if Dawson Congreve has told you the details of his life in New York; but I have reason to feel that he has not done so. In any event, you can easily confirm what I tell you by asking Dawson Congreve himself.

"When Dawson Congreve was in New York he was associated with a firm of 'bucket-shop' operators, and for some time lived on the money secured from ignorant, though trusting, country-folk. He capped his career there by extracting over four thousand dollars from the safe—money belonging to the firm with which he was associated. These statements are capable of proof, and Dawson Congreve will find them impossible of denial.

"The writer takes this step at the present moment, owing to the deep interest with which he has been watching your career, and because he has reason to believe Dawson Congreve has definite designs on the valuable emerald necklace which you purchased in New York.

"The writer warns you most emphatically against this man, and adjures you to guard well your necklace, it, indeed, Dawson Congreve has not already gained possession of it.

(Signed) 'ONE WHO KNOWS.'

Had the letter dealt in generalities Cicely Grafton would have treated it with the contempt which all anonymous communications deserve. But it did not deal in vague statements. It made specific charges against Dawson Congreve—charges which it claimed were capable of proof. Yet, even so, Cicely Grafton could not bring herself to believe that there was something in the life of Dawson Congreve which he should need to hide.

With a more than ordinary interest in him she had studied him closely, and if Dawson Congreve were capable of being crook and thief, then the opinions which he had expressed to her must be the fruit of a tree of lies.

His life, so far as she knew it, was upright and honourable. He was a hard and conscientious worker, and, searching her memory for every tiny incident which had occurred during the last few months, Cicely Grafton could not find a single thing which would indicate any subterfuge or any lack of principle in Dawson Congreve's character.

As the first shock which the letter had caused subsided, and she brought clear reason to bear on the matter, she read the letter once again, seeking to probe it judicially, and as she came to the last para-

graph her little fist struck the bed emphatically.

"I can prove that part a lie," she said; "and I shall do so at once!"

Reaching to the back of her, she pressed the bell which hung down the side of the wall, and when, in reply to the summons, her maid entered the room, she said:

"Anna, have you locked away my necklace?"

"Yes, miss," answered the maid. "I locked it in the safe last night."

"I want you to bring it to me, please," said Cicely Grafton.

The maid left the room, and returned a few minutes later carrying a flat leather case, which she laid on the bed beside her mistress.

Cicely Grafton did not open the case until the door had closed after the maid. Then, pressing the catch, she held up the string of emeralds which lay inside.

"And that is what the writer of this abominable letter says Dawson desires to possess," she murmured. "I—"

But her words broke off, and she bent forward with a puzzled look in her eyes—a look which slowly changed to one of horror.

"Why—why these—these are not my emeralds!" she gasped. "They—they are imitations!"

Feverishly she held them up to the light, counting them over, and examining them one by one in the wild hope that she should prove mistaken. The number was correct enough, but, try as she would, she could not conceive them to be anything but a clever copy of the original.

In a frantic access of mental suffering she pounded the bed tragically. Her thoughts exploded into chaos. Every bit of solid ground upon which her life had been based seemed to be slipping from beneath her feet.

It was unthinkable that the abominable suggestions of that anonymous letter could be true, and yet—and yet there could be not the slightest doubt but that the necklace which she held in her hand was an imitation.

She pressed both hands against her head and strove to control the panic of her thoughts. Somewhere within her a heavy, dull pain was gathering, and gradually filling her whole being. The sunlight streaming in at the window which had made her so happy a few minutes before now seemed like a ghastly limelight searching out the secrets of her soul, and jeering at her suffering. The letter had hurt her, but the terrible discovery she had just made literally stunned her for the time being.

Cicely Grafton came out of that torturing struggle haggard and dry-eyed. Summoning all her self-control, she laid the necklace before her, and in her mind went back over every incident of the last eighteen hours.

At three o'clock the previous afternoon her own necklace had been brought from the bank by her maid—a woman who was thoroughly trustworthy in every way. It had been locked in the safe until Cicely Grafton had left the theatre, and it had been taken along there by the same maid.

She had not worn it until the third act, and up to the moment when it had been snapped about her white throat it had been in the maid's personal care.

She remembered wearing it back to the flat when she had driven there with Dawson Congreve, and she was certain that up to that moment it was the genuine necklace which she had been wearing.

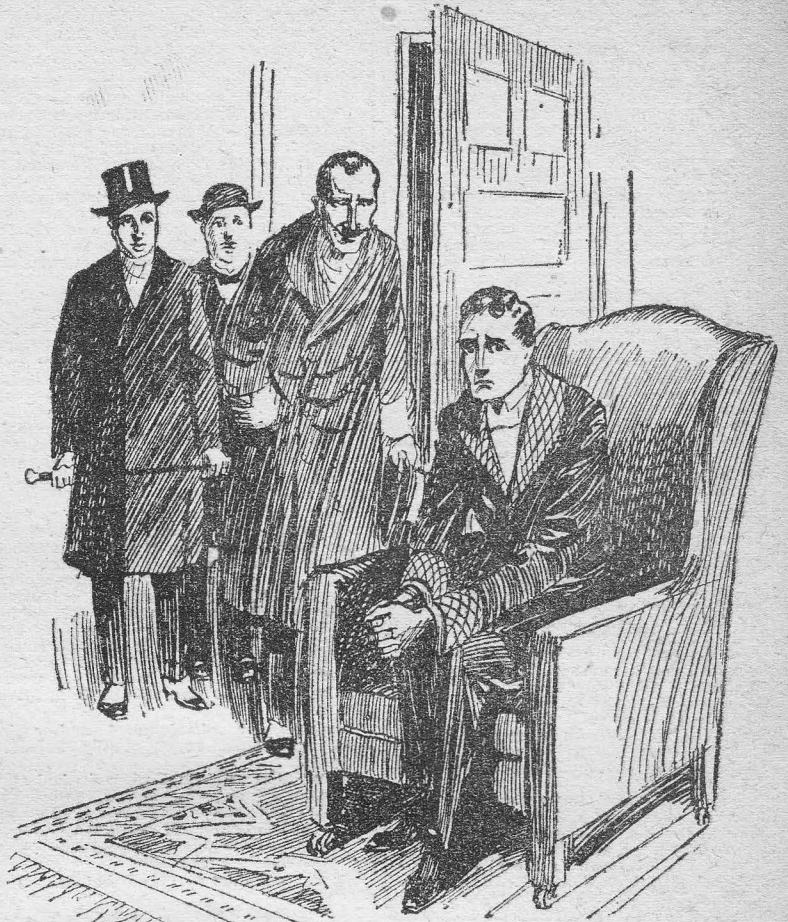
Then she recalled how she had unclasped it, and dropped it on the table while she went to give orders about supper. Then her heart went cold as she remembered that Dawson Congreve had been left alone in the room with the necklace for some minutes.

What could she think? On her return to the flat she was positive the necklace she was wearing was the genuine one, and now she held in her hand an imitation affair, utterly worthless in comparison with the other.

It was impossible to suspect Anna, and, beyond Dawson Congreve, no one else had any opportunity to make the substitution.

Look at it how she might she could not get away from this, and as the realisation was borne in upon her she gave a low moan of pain.

"If he were in need of money why did he not tell me?" she cried out in the silence of the room. "But, no—no—no, it cannot be possible that Dawson would rob me! It cannot be true that lies and deception, vile schemes lay behind his words, his manner, his eyes! Surely no man could be so vile without it being revealed in his face! And I—"



Graven on Congreve's memory were the words Cicely Grafton had used—words that had strengthened his determination to live down the unworthy past. And now all his hopes seemed dashed to the ground at the unexpected appearance of his old associates.

I, Heaven help me, was beginning to love him!"

Mechanically she gathered up the necklace, and dropped it into the case. Then, as her maid appeared to announce that the bath was ready, Cicely Grafton drove herself to face the normal habits of the day.

But when she was dressed and had breakfasted she knew that the matter must be faced and dealt with at once. If Dawson Congreve had robbed her of all her possessions she would have said nothing to create publicity. Her suffering would all be the pain she would feel at the outrage to her love and trust, at the crashing down of her ideals. But it was impossible—it was unthinkable; it was beyond the power of a sensitive nature like hers to go on without knowing the truth, even though it might prove to be the worst.

Her first inclination was to call up Dawson Congreve on the telephone, and ask him to come to her—to hand him the letter and the imitation necklace, and to hear what he had to say.

But supposing he should be innocent? Supposing it should be a vile plot against him? What would be her position then? What would he think—what would he think of her suspicions?

And in the same way that Dawson Congreve had finched from the possibility of her scorn, so did Cicely Grafton fear the result of revealing to him the suspicions which were torturing her.

She realised that the truth must be got at in some other way. It needed a wise head—an older head than hers—to find a way through the mental morass into which she had plunged.

She went over in her mind the names of all those whom she knew most intimately, seeking for one whom she could trust to handle this greatest crisis which had ever entered her life. But, while she could number

friends and acquaintances by the score, she could think of none to whom she dared to tell the bald facts of the case.

Then suddenly she remembered one of the telegrams of congratulations which she had received that morning. And as the name of the sender occurred to her she decided that if anyone could handle such a delicate matter as this must be handled, he was the one to do it.

As she came to this conclusion she rose, and, going across to the telephone, lifted down the receiver. Giving the number she required, she waited until she had been put through; then, as a deep voice came over the wire, she said:

"Is that Mr. Sexton Blake?"

"Yes, this is Sexton Blake speaking," came back the reply. "Who are you, please?"

"This is Cicely Grafton speaking, Mr. Blake," she said. "It was very kind of you to send me a telegram, but I am ringing you up about another matter. I need some advice badly. Do you think you could manage to come and see me this morning?"

"Why, certainly, Miss Grafton," replied Blake. "I can arrange to be there whenever you wish."

"Will you please come as soon as possible, then?" she asked.

And something in the urgency of her tone caused Blake to reply:

"I shall be there within half an hour, Miss Grafton."

She thanked him, and hung up the receiver. Then she paced restlessly up and down the room, watching the hands of the clock impatiently.

Sharp to the minute there came a ring at the outer door of the flat, and a few moments later Sexton Blake was ushered in.

One keen look he gave at Cicely Grafton, then he shook hands and said:

"What is the trouble, Miss Grafton? You U. J.—No. 793.

may consider my assistance promised before you speak."

"Please sit down, Mr. Blake," she said dully. "I will tell you all about it, and, because I need your help so badly, I shall reserve nothing. Before I show you the evidence I will tell you all the details. You know, of course, Mr. Blake, that at present I have the leading part in a play written by Dawson Congreve?"

Blake nodded. "I have seen you in it several times, Miss Grafton, and I was there last night. Your interpretation of the part was wonderful."

"Do you know Dawson Congreve?" she asked, with apparent irrelevance.

"No. I have not had the pleasure of meeting him," replied Blake.

"Do you think a man could express himself in the creation of such characters if he were dishonest, a liar, and a thief?" she asked.

"That is a difficult question to answer, Miss Grafton. Many geniuses—many brilliant men are moral decadents. I should describe them as immoral, rather than immoral. In such cases the particular talent which is theirs seems to have developed at the expense of other parts of the character. I should have to know and study a man at first hand before I could answer such a question. But what inspires these words of yours, Miss Grafton?"

"Mr. Blake," said Cicely Grafton, "when 'Souls Courageous' was secured by the management of the Peer's Theatre I was invited to take the leading part. I read the play, and liked it. I was struck forcibly with the ideals expressed in it, for they coincided remarkably with those—whether foolish or not—which I hold.

"In the preliminary discussions regarding the parts I met the author, Dawson Congreve, for the first time. I will say frankly, Mr. Blake, that I liked him, because, in asking your help, it is essential that I be perfectly frank with you, and, in order to be so, it will be necessary for me to reveal thoughts and feelings which no one else in the world suspects I hold."

"I shall be proud to receive your confidence, Miss Grafton," said Blake simply.

Cicely Grafton was silent for a few moments, then she went on:

"During the rehearsals of the play I saw a good deal of Dawson Congreve. As time went on I grew to like him exceedingly, and I had reason to believe that he felt some attraction towards me."

"It would be impossible not to do so," murmured Blake. "But forgive me for interrupting, Miss Grafton."

"Just before the production of 'Souls Courageous,'" she proceeded, "I went to New York to fill a short contract there. While I was in New York I invested a considerable sum of money in an emerald necklace, which was composed of very choice stones from the Bogota Mines."

"I know of the necklace quite well," said Blake, "and I knew that you had bought it."

Cicely Grafton nodded, and went on:

"I brought that necklace back to London with me, Mr. Blake, and while I have worn it on a few occasions, I have kept it mostly at the bank. Because of the gala performance last night I had it brought from the bank to wear."

"I saw it on you in the last act," remarked Blake.

"That is so," she responded. "I put it on for the last scene. I did not trouble to remove it after the performance, for I was coming straight home. Dawson Congreve had arranged to come along and have some supper, after which we were to discuss some points regarding a new play which he is writing for me."

"On entering the flat we came into this room, Mr. Blake, and I threw off my wrap. Then I unclasped the necklace, and laid it on that table over there. Immediately afterwards I went to see about supper, leaving Dawson Congreve in here."

"I returned in a few minutes, and we went in to supper. He remained about an hour, then he left, and, as I was very tired, I went to my room almost at once. I did not bother about the necklace, but left it for my maid to put away. This morning, when she brought in the post, I read my telegrams first, then began to go through my letters. As I did so I came upon this. Will you please read it?"

As she finished speaking Cicely Grafton took up the anonymous letter which she had received, and handed it across to Blake.

He read it slowly and carefully; then, lifting his head, he looked across at her.

"What else, Miss Grafton?" he asked gravely.

She was silent for a few moments, struggling to regain her self-control. Then, lifting her eyes bravely, she replied:

"This, Mr. Blake. I would not believe it—I could not believe it! I said to myself that I could prove the last paragraph of the letter an abominable lie, so I sent for my maid and asked her about the necklace. She told me she had locked it in the safe last night. I asked her to bring it to me, and she went to the safe and got the case. When I opened it I saw that a necklace was inside, and I felt that if the last paragraph of that letter was a lie, the rest might also be untrue. But then—then, Mr. Blake, I discovered that the necklace I held was not my own, but only an imitation!"

With shaking fingers Cicely Grafton drew the necklace out, and held it across to Blake. "There it is, Mr. Blake," she said. "You can see that—that—"

Then at last her self-control gave way, and, dropping her arms to the table, she rested her head on them and broke out into great sobs.

Sexton Blake examined the necklace only long enough to convince himself that the stones were not genuine. Then he rose, and, walking across to Cicely Grafton, laid a hand on her heaving shoulder.

"Miss Grafton," he said earnestly, "you must not lose your control. It is easy for me to read the meaning of the fear which is gripping you and to guess the reason. But there is not yet sufficient evidence to condemn Dawson Congreve without a hearing. I have not had time to analyse this anonymous letter, but I can already pick out two points in it which require explanation on the part of the writer. Such a letter may be construed in many ways, and, in any event, it is an attempt to stab Dawson Congreve in the dark."

Gradually her sobs lessened, and, under Blake's soothing words, finally subsided altogether.

"Now tell me," he said, when she had once more gained control of herself, "what are the exact facts about the necklace? Perhaps if you would answer my questions it would be better. Afterwards I shall wish to put a few questions to your maid."

She did not raise her head, but said, in a muffled voice:

"I will answer whatever you ask me, Mr. Blake."

"Then tell me," said Blake, "are you quite positive it was the genuine necklace which was brought from the bank?"

"Perfectly," she replied. "When my maid brought it in I took it out of the case to admire it. I should have noticed almost at once had it not been genuine."

"Then, I believe, you gave it to the maid to lock up, did you not?"

"Yes."

"And she did so?"

"Yes."

"After that it was not removed from the safe until just before you left for the theatre?"

"No."

"At the theatre it was in the care of your maid until you put it on for the last act?"

"Yes, every moment. Anna is always most careful of my jewels."

"Then, after the performance, you wore it back here to the flat?"

"Yes."

"During the time it was in your possession were you close to anyone but Dawson Congreve for any length of time?"

"No, with the exception of my maid. I spoke a few words to the producer on my way out of the theatre, but Dawson Congreve was there at the time."

"Then it seems that the only time the necklace was out of the possession and sight of you and your maid was while it lay on the table in this room?"

"That is the only period of time until it was locked up in the safe."

Blake was silent for a few moments, then he said:

"You have made no charge, Miss Grafton, but I can see the doubt that is torturing you, and understand why it must do so. I grant you the evidence seems to point in only one direction, but I do not think we must therefore necessarily assume such to be the case."

Suddenly Cicely Grafton put up a hand and caught Blake by the arm.

"Mr. Blake," she said, in trembling tones, "there must be no publicity, no—no police activity. This matter lies between Dawson Congreve and myself. That is why I sent for

you. It is not the loss of the necklace, but it is the—the— Oh, I cannot say it!"

"I understand perfectly what you mean, Miss Grafton," said Blake quietly. "Shall I put it into words for you? This anonymous letter which you received and the loss of your necklace has filled you with doubts, which, although you are loth to feel, it is impossible to ignore. For your own peace of mind you must know the truth, and it must be discovered in such a way that the world shall not suspect. Am I right?"

"Yes, yes, Mr. Blake!" she cried eagerly. "That is exactly what I mean!"

"Then you can depend on me to use the utmost discretion, Miss Grafton. And, with a full realisation of the anxiety you are feeling, I shall lose no time in probing the matter to its depths. Rest assured no one shall know of the affair but you, myself, and Dawson Congreve. Now, if you please, I should like to ask your maid a few questions; then I shall go to see Dawson Congreve. Have I your permission to ring?"

Cicely Grafton nodded, and while Blake walked across to the bell she dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief.

When the maid had answered the summons Blake said:

"Something has occurred to upset your mistress. With her permission I am going to ask you a few questions, but I want you to understand before I start that these questions imply no reflection on you."

The maid looked frightened for a moment, but Cicely Grafton said:

"It is all right, Anna; you have nothing to fear."

Then Blake began:

"I want you to tell me," he said, "exactly what occurred when you went to the bank yesterday afternoon to get Miss Grafton's necklace?"

"Nothing occurred, sir," she answered readily. "I went to the bank, and gave them Miss Grafton's order in the usual way. They gave me the case, and, after opening it to see that everything was all right, I signed for it. Then I came straight back to the flat."

"Where is the bank?" asked Blake.

"Here in Knightsbridge, sir; just a few doors away from the entrance to these flats."

"Did you speak to anyone on the way back?"

"No, sir; I did not."

"What did you do with the necklace when you brought it into the flat?"

"I gave it to Miss Grafton. She had it a few minutes, then she told me to lock it up."

"Did you do so?"

"Yes, sir—at once."

"When did you next take it from the safe?"

"Just before we went to the theatre."

"Did you go to the theatre alone?"

"No, sir. I drove in the car with Miss Grafton."

"Was the case out of your possession in the theatre for even a few moments?"

"No, sir. I put it in a pocket in my skirt, and I did not take it out again until Miss Grafton required it for the third act. Then I took it out of the case, and snapped it at once round her neck."

"When did you see it next?"

"I saw it on her when she came off the stage after the performance, and it was there when I put her wrap round her as she was going home. I came in a taxi, and got here before Miss Grafton. She had taken it off and left it on that table over there, sir. While she was at supper I took it off the table, and placed it in the case, which was still in my pocket. Then I locked the case away in the safe. This morning Miss Grafton wished me to get it, and I took the case from the safe, and gave it to her. That is all I can tell you, sir."

"You have been most explicit," said Blake, smiling kindly. "And I am sure that you have taken the utmost care. That will do, thank you!"

As the maid departed he turned to Cicely Grafton, and said:

"There is only one thing to be done now, Miss Grafton, and I shall lose no time in doing it. You may rest assured that I shall communicate with you as soon as possible."

"I cannot go on to-night," she waived, "unless I know the truth!"

"If it should happen that I am not in possession of the facts of the case this evening, you must go on," he said firmly. "In order to achieve the aim you have in view you must play a part before the world as well as on the stage. Under your present mental strain occupation is the thing you

need most. I speak as I do because I know, not through any lack of sympathy with you. Think it over, and you will find I am right."

Cicely Grafton took comfort from Blake's words, and a few minutes later, when he departed, he had made her promise that whatever the day might bring forth she would go on at the Peer's as usual.

In Knightsbridge Blake got a taxi, and drove to Dawson Congreve's address in Jermyn Street. The flat was on the first floor, so, ignoring the lift, Blake walked up the few steps, and rang the bell.

The door was opened by an elderly woman, whom his keen eye at once classed as the housekeeper. He saw, too, that she was labouring under great excitement, which was exhibited in her flustered manner.

"Is Mr. Congreve at home?" he asked.

"No, sir, he is not."

"Have you any idea what time he will be here?" went on Blake.

"No, sir, I have not."

"Do you mean that he has gone out of town?" he said.

"No, sir, I mean, sir, I don't know."

"I wished to see him on a matter of great importance," murmured Blake. "It was a matter of urgency to him. I should appreciate it very much if you can give me any idea where or how I can reach him."

"Are you a friend of his, sir?"

"I am trying to be," said Blake.

"Then will you, please, step inside a moment?"

Blake accepted the invitation. Then, when she had closed the door, the housekeeper turned to him and said:

"Are you sure you are a friend of Mr. Congreve's?"

"I give you my word of honour that I have come to see him on a matter relating to the dearest friend he has in the world."

Something in his manner must have convinced the housekeeper that he spoke the truth, for she invited him into the study, which, as he entered, Blake saw was in a state of wild confusion.

"If you're his friend, sir, I'll tell you what I know," said Mrs. Thompson. "For it's needing friends he must be now. I'm terribly worried about Mr. Congreve, sir! This morning, when I came to the flat at the usual time, I found him in a terrible state. His face was all cut and bruised, and he limped as though he had hurt one of his legs. He was up and dressed, and rushing about this room like a crazy man. He was tearing up papers and letters when I came in. Then he wrote a letter, and put a cheque in it. He wouldn't have any breakfast, but sent me to the bank with the letter, and I got there as soon as it was opened."

"At the bank they put a lot of money in an envelope, which I brought back to him. When I got here he had on his hat and coat, ready to go out. He took the money, and paid me what was due to me, as well as for a month in advance; he also left sufficient to pay the tradesmen's bills that were owing. Then he said: 'Mrs. Thompson, I am going away, and am not coming back. My life is ruined. Take the furniture in this flat, sell it, and keep the money.' With that, sir, he rushed down the stairs, and that's the last I have seen of him."

Blake looked grave.

"This sounds serious," he said. "It is true that something has occurred which might have a disturbing effect, and it is because of that I came here this morning to see him. For his own sake it is essential that I find him as soon as possible. You have no idea, of course, where he may have gone?"

"No, sir, I haven't."

"Did he take any luggage with him?"

"No, sir; not a single thing. He told me to sell all his clothes and other belongings and to keep the money."

"A clean sweep of everything!" muttered Blake to himself. "It looks as though something had caused him to cut the strings suddenly."

Then, aloud, he said:

"I wonder if you will allow me to have a look round the room? I may come upon something that will indicate where he has gone. I must tell you that this matter looks serious for him."

The housekeeper hesitated. Blake was a stranger to her, and, while it was one thing to confide to him the worry which she had been compelled to keep down all the morning, it was another thing to permit him to examine her master's belongings.

Blake read the reason of her hesitation,

and, coming to a sudden decision to take the woman into his confidence to a certain extent, he said:

"May I ask your name?"

"Mrs. Thompson, sir."

"Well, Mrs. Thompson," he went on, "when I said I came here on behalf of Mr. Congreve I told you the truth. I can quite understand why you should hesitate to permit me to examine his belongings; but perhaps you will consent to do so when I tell you who I am, and why I am here. My name is Blake—Sexton Blake—and—"

The housekeeper gasped.

"Mr. Blake—the great Mr. Blake, sir?" she exclaimed.

"I don't know about the 'great,'" smiled Blake, "but I am Sexton Blake, the investigator."

"I've read all about you, sir," said Mrs. Thompson, gazing at him in awe.

"Well, Mrs. Thompson, Mr. Congreve is in trouble—serious trouble—and I have come here because I want to help him. I assure you I have not come to harm him. And any information I may get here will not be used against him."

"Then, sir, you may look about all you wish," she said.

Blake thanked her, and, turning round, cast a keen eye about the room. Then he crossed to the desk, and, seating himself before it, he began pulling out the drawers one after the other.

But his search was only rewarded by a few unfinished bits of manuscript, some notes which were obviously about a play, and some writing material.

"He has made a clean sweep," he muttered, as he pushed the chair back and got to his feet.

Then, as he turned round, his eyes fell on a capacious paper-basket which stood between the desk and the wall. It was literally overflowing with papers and rubbish, and, dropping to his knees, Blake began to pull out the contents.

"I was just going to burn those things," remarked Mrs. Thompson, who stood by watching him with interest.

Blake nodded, and pursued his search. As near as he could see, the contents so far consisted of bills, bits of manuscript, and unimportant letters, all of which had been hurriedly torn across and across.

When he had emptied about half the basket, however, he suddenly came upon a photograph torn across in half, and, holding up the pieces, he said:

"Who is this, Mrs. Thompson?"

"That's Mr. Congreve, sir."

It was a photograph of Congreve, taken in street clothes, and, after studying the features for a few moments, Blake laid the pieces on the desk. Then he resumed his search, and it was not until he got nearly to the bottom of the basket that he came upon a green stone in a gold setting, with a bit of golden chain dangling from it.

His eyes filled with a quick interest as he held it up to the light to examine it. Then the look of interest turned to puzzlement as he saw that the stone was not a genuine emerald.

Delving into the basket again, he came upon another, and another, and another, until finally he had all one hand would hold. Laying them on the desk, he counted them, and found there were fifty-eight.

Resuming his search once more, he came upon four in the very bottom of the basket, and, remembering that Cicely Grafton's necklace had been composed of sixty-three stones, he kept up his search, and at last, where it had fallen and rolled under the desk, he found the stone he sought.

Then he seated himself at the desk, and, searching until he found the largest stone, he laid it before him. On either side he placed the other stones as they graduated in size, until at last there was lying in front of him a broken necklace which in stones, chain, and setting was an exact replica of the one he had seen at Cicely Grafton's flat, and, like that one, was not made up of genuine stones. This meant that if the necklace at Cicely Grafton's flat was a replica of the genuine necklace, the one before him must also be.

Blake leaned back, and regarded the stones with a puzzled frown.

"Why were two copies of the necklace in existence?" he asked himself.

"If the copy which he had seen at Cicely Grafton's flat had been substituted for the genuine one by Dawson Congreve, then it would appear that Congreve had been in possession of two copies. But why? What possible object could he have had? And

what could be the meaning of this one lying in pieces at the bottom of the waste-basket as though it had been ripped asunder and thrown there in a rage?"

Blake was frankly puzzled. But although he looked at the thing from every possible point of view, he could find no explanation.

Leaving it on the desk for a moment, he resumed his search, and on the floor, nearly concealed by two newspapers which had been thrown there, he came upon a leather jewel-case.

Opening it, he looked for the maker's name inside, but there was absolutely nothing there to indicate whence it might have come.

The rest of the room revealed nothing of interest, and finally Blake turned his attention to the small safe which stood in one corner. It was not locked, and the door swung open easily to his pull.

The interior, however, was quite empty, and, after satisfying himself that there was nothing else in the room which could throw any light on the affair, he returned to the desk.

He gathered up the stones, and, placing them in the case, snapped it shut, and dropped it into his pocket. Then he began to gather up the papers which had been in the waste-basket, and took from one of the drawers some large manuscript envelopes which he had seen there.

It took three of the largest to hold the papers, and when he had stuffed them full Blake sealed them up.

"I'm going to take these with me, Mrs. Thompson," he said, turning to the housekeeper. "I shall examine them later, when I have more time at my disposal; and I shall take good care of them."

"Very good, sir," she responded. "It's a good thing you came when you did, for I was just going to burn them."

"I'm going now to try and discover which way Mr. Congreve has gone," went on Blake. "If I find him I'll let you know, Mrs. Thompson, and until you hear from me I would suggest that you do nothing about selling the contents of the flat."

"I won't, sir—I won't!" she replied. "I shouldn't have done so in any event, not until I had heard something from Mr. Congreve."

Blake took his departure then, and, walking down to the ground floor, sought the lift-man.

"Were you on duty here when Mr. Congreve went out this morning?" he asked.

The man nodded.

"Yes, I was," he answered, in a surly tone. "Did you call him a taxi, or did he walk?" asked Blake sharply.

"I'm not here to answer the questions every stranger asks me!" retorted the man.

Blake shot out a hand and gripped him by the collar.

"Answer my questions, and answer at once!" he snapped out.

Taken aback, the custodian of the lift came down to earth, and stammered:

"He—he took a taxi."

"Did you call it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Off the rank across the street?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then come to the door with me, and tell me if the driver has returned to the rank!" ordered Blake.

Still keeping hold of the man's collar, he drew him along to the door, where he stood while the other examined the half-dozen cabs which stood on the rank across the street.

"That's him on the fifth one, sir," he said.

"Are you sure?" snapped Blake.

"Sure, sir."

"Very well," said Blake, as he released his hold on the lift-man's collar. "And the next time you are asked a civil question, see that you answer it properly."

Running down the steps, he walked across to the cab-rank, and, pausing beside the fifth in the line, he said to the driver:

"You took a fare from over there this morning?"

"Yes, sir," responded the man.

Blake drew out a half-sovereign, and allowed the man to see it.

"Where did you take him?" he asked.

"To Euston, sir."

"Very well. Drive me there as quickly as possible, and this half-sovereign is yours."

Blake climbed into the cab, and, pulling out of the rank, the driver headed for Piccadilly Circus. He lost no time in getting to Euston, and, springing out there, Blake tossed him the gold piece.

"By the way," he said, as he turned to enter the station, "what time was it when you got here?"

"Just after eleven, sir."

"And it's now ten minutes past twelve," muttered Blake. "That means that he has got about an hour's start of me."

He searched about the station until he got hold of a porter he had known for years.

"Look here, Bayles," he said, "I want you to find out for me all the trains that have left Euston from eleven o'clock until now. Slip along to the train despatcher's office, and ask there."

"All right, Mr. Blake. I sha'n't be long," responded Bayles, as he hurried away.

It was about five minutes before the man returned, carrying a slip of paper in one hand.

"There have been nine trains out, sir," he said—"five of them suburban, two for the North, and one Liverpool express."

Blake took the list, and scanned it rapidly.

"What track did the Liverpool express go from?" he asked.

"I think it was Number Three, Mr. Blake."

"Come along there, then, Bayles. I want you to find as many porters as you can who attended it."

They made their way along to track No. 3, where Blake ascertained that the Liverpool express had left from there. Then Bayles passed the word among the porters, and gradually those who had attended the Liverpool train began to gather round Blake.

Blake took out the torn photograph, which he had brought from Jermyn Street, and circulated it among them.

"Men," he said, "if any of you recognise that photograph, let him speak up! I have reason to believe he left Euston during the past hour, and it is possible that he took the Liverpool express or one of the other trains for the North. It is probable that he limped when he walked, and I know that his face was badly cut and bruised. Do any of you remember him?"

Scarcely had Blake finished speaking when one of the porters stepped forward.

"I remember him all right, sir," he said. "At least, I think it must be the man you mean. He was dressed in a grey suit and grey soft hat. He limped as you say, sir, and he looked as if he had had a rare old bashing. He had no luggage, and he was in a first-class compartment."

"That's almost certain to be the man," said Blake, pulling out a handful of silver.

He gave the man half-a-sovereign for his information, and then, adding some silver, said:

"You and your mates have some refreshment."

As they thanked him and moved away Blake turned back to Bayles and said:

"What time is there another train for Liverpool, Bayles?"

"There will be one a few minutes past one, sir," he said. "They're running an express through to catch the Melantic, which leaves Liverpool-to-night."

Blake pulled out some money.

"Get me a first-class return, Bayles, while I have something to eat and send a telegram. Meet me here before the Liverpool express leaves."

"Blake walked across to the refreshment-room and ordered something to eat. When he had finished he made his way along to the telegraph office in the central hall, and wrote out a telegram to Tinker.

This is what he said:

"Am off to Liverpool one o'clock express. Pack a bag, and express to me, Midland Hotel, Liverpool. In meantime want you to go to 29x, Jermyn Street, and keep surveillance on flat occupied by one Dawson Congreve. If anything eventuates, communicate with me at once, Midland, Liverpool. Will wire you again from there.—Blake."

After that Blake wrote out a telegram to Cicely Grafton, worded thusly:

"Have some news, but nothing definite. Am off to Liverpool. Will communicate with you as soon as possible. Be brave.—Blake."

When he had despatched the two telegrams Blake made his way to the bookstall, where he purchased a small tube of paste and a packet of foolscap. Then he walked along to where Bayles was waiting for him with his ticket.

"I've got you a carriage by yourself," announced the porter, "and I've put a 'Reserved' label on the windows. You'll be all alone clear through to Liverpool, be-

cause I'll keep the door locked until the train starts."

Blake expressed his satisfaction, and followed Bayles along to the carriage which had been reserved for him. There he tipped the man liberally, and, climbing in, took off his hat and coat.

He sat smoking until it was time for the train to start, then, when they were outside the station, and gathering speed, Blake opened one of the manuscript envelopes which he had filled at Congreve's flat.

Before removing the contents, however, he opened the packet of foolscap, and spread several sheets out on the opposite seat, after which he unscrewed the cap of the tube of paste. Next he drew out the contents of the manuscript in the envelopes, and, laying them on the seat beside him, began to go through each item carefully.

He divided them into four classes, putting bills and receipts in the first pile, manuscript and manuscript notes in the second, letters in the third, and sundry odds and ends in the fourth.

When he had arranged the torn pieces as well as was possible, he opened the second and third manuscript envelopes, treating their contents in the same fashion.

When he had finished that he turned his attention first to the pile of bills and receipts. These he ran through rapidly, discarding all but one, and this one he studied carefully for some minutes.

It had been torn into only four pieces, so it was a simple matter to spread a little paste on one of the sheets of foolscap, and arrange the pieces in their proper order.

The receipt was one from a certain well-known firm of Bond Street jewellers, dated only the day before, and indicated that Mr. Dawson Congreve had bought and paid for "one imitation emerald necklace, in eighteen carat gold setting," of the value of thirty pounds.

When Blake had finished arranging the pieces, he laid the foolscap sheet aside to dry, and turned his attention next to the pile of letters. He glanced in the most cursory fashion at these, only reading sufficient words on the torn pieces to assure himself that the writing had nothing to do with the matter on hand.

Not in the whole pile did he find anything which seemed to indicate a reference to the case, so he thrust them over beside the first pile.

He next applied himself to the heap of manuscript and manuscript notes. Some of the manuscript was typed, and all of it had suffered less destruction than the other two piles he had examined.

It was easy enough for him to see that the typed copies were draft portions of a play, and Blake guessed shrewdly that they referred to the drama on which Cicely Grafton had said Dawson Congreve was at work.

He went through the sheets rapidly, laying them aside as he did so, until he came to several smaller sheets, covered in some instances with pen, and in others with pencil writing.

He found the arrangement of these pieces the most difficult he had so far attempted. But by dint of patience he managed gradually to get each arranged in its proper order, with the pieces where they should be.

As he completed a piece he would read it, and if its nature was obvious he would push the pieces to one side. If he were in doubt he would leave it undisturbed for future examination.

In this way he gradually weeded out most of the sheets, until there were left seven, which he had reserved for further scrutiny.

Now he set himself to arrange these in sequence, and when he was satisfied that the arrangement was correct, he began to read carefully the writing on the first sheet, passing from that to that which was obviously the second, and so on, to where it finished on the seventh.

As he proceeded Blake became intensely interested in what he was reading, and when he had finished he straightened up with an expression of satisfaction.

"The great, big-hearted, quixotic fool!" he muttered, as he lit a cigarette. "Now I perceive what before was a deep puzzle. And yet, even now, I don't understand where the hitch occurred in his plans. It must have been. But there, I'll wait until I run him down. Then it will be time enough to get at the truth of this matter. But I'll just arrange this little lot of manuscript; it will come in handy later on."

With the utmost care Blake placed seven sheets of foolscap side by side, and, after

spreading them with paste, attached the manuscript pieces to them one by one. He left them on the seat to dry, and made a cursory examination of the fourth pile of sundries and oddments.

There was nothing there to attract his interest, so, picking them up, he stuffed them back into one of the envelopes, sealing the torn top with a little paste. He placed the pile of bills and receipts and the letters in another envelope, while he jammed the remaining manuscript and manuscript notes into the third, treating the torn tops of these two envelopes as he had treated the first.

By this time the foolscap sheets were sufficiently dry, so, collecting them together and placing the sheet containing the receipt on top, he folded them up, and thrust them into an inner pocket.

That done, he lit a fresh cigarette and consulted his watch, discovering, to his surprise, that he had been engaged over four hours on the work. That meant, since he was travelling on a boat express, he would reach Liverpool in less than another hour. "So, leaning back in the corner, he murmured:

"I've got one of the imitation necklaces, the receipt for it, and an extremely interesting bit of manuscript. Cicely Grafton has another imitation necklace. The next thing to do is to run down Dawson Congreve, and, after that, to discover the whereabouts of the genuine necklace."

With that conclusion he sank into deep thought, pondering over the matter, until the train finally arrived at Liverpool.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Blake Finds Dawson Congreve—A Mad Act—Congreve's Confession—A Familiar Voice.

ON stepping out of the train at the station in Liverpool Blake's first act was to enter a telephone-booth and telephone to the Midland Hotel, where he always stayed, to announce that he was in Liverpool, and would require rooms that night. Then, jamming the three manuscript envelopes into the pocket of his overcoat, he emerged from the station, and secured a taxi.

He had ascertained from the train officials that the Melantic was moored at the Canada Dock, so, ordering the man to drive there, he climbed in. Swinging out of the station-yard the cab turned down Sandhills Lane, passed under the overhead railway, then drove along beside the goods-station, until it came to the Canada Dock.

Blake arranged with the man to wait for him, and, securing a porter, he was conducted along the docks until he came to the basin in which the Melantic lay.

He joined the rush of passengers who were crowding up the gangway, and, reaching the deck, went down the main companion-way, past the dining-saloon, and along until he found the purser's office.

That harassed individual was seated at his desk, preparing for the rush of passengers which were already beginning to descend upon him. He glanced up irritably as Blake entered, but the next moment his brow cleared, and he sprang to his feet with outstretched hands.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "I did not know you were sailing with us!"

Blake shook hands, and smiled, as he recognised the purser as one he had known intimately for some years.

"I didn't know you were on the Melantic," he said.

"I'm only relieving this run," replied Taylor, the purser. "I go on from Montreal by rail, and join my own ship at Vancouver. We're all in the same company, you know."

A crowd of passengers was already pressing in at the door, so, bending forward, Blake said swiftly:

"Can I have a few words with you, Taylor? I sha'n't keep you two minutes."

"Certainly you can," said the purser. "I'll close the door on these people."

Approaching the door, he announced to the passengers that he would be able to attend to them in a few minutes. Then he closed the door and returned to Blake.

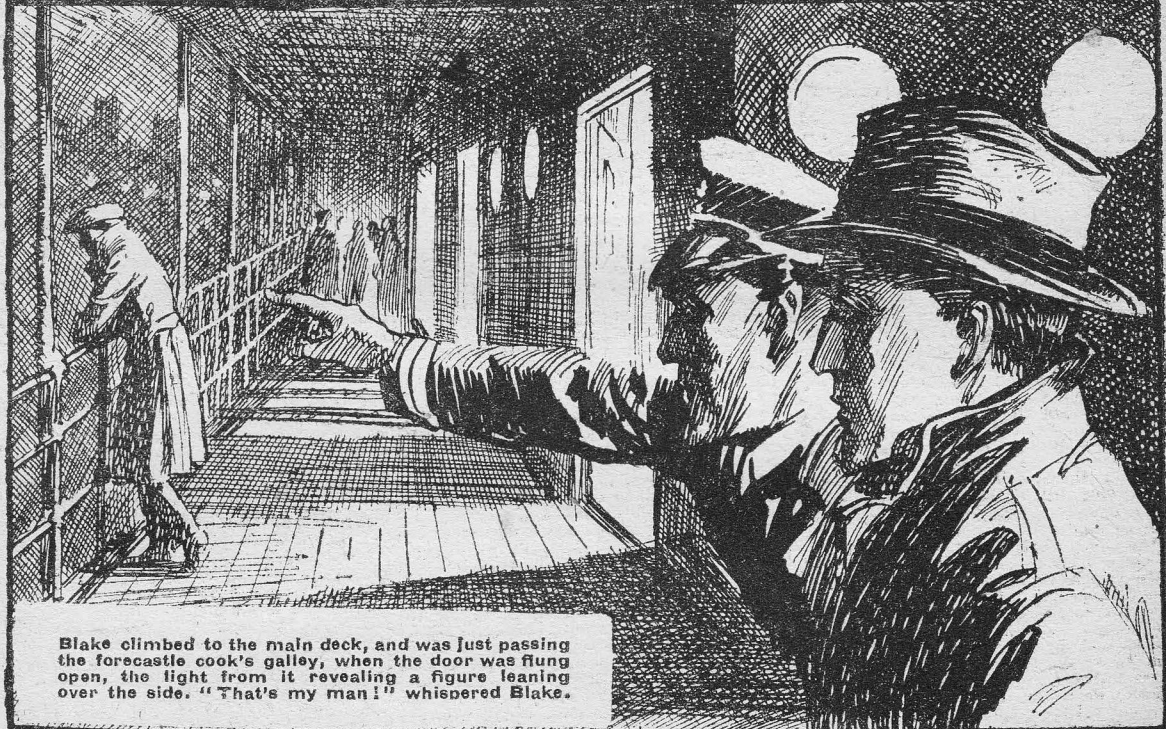
"Look here, Taylor," said Blake quickly, "I'm not travelling with you this voyage. I've come on board to try to find a man whom I think it is just possible may try to sail on her. This is the first ship leaving

(Continued on page 10.)



1
(1) "Are you the proprietor?" asked Sexton Blake.

(2) The detectives and Congreve paused as they came to Wheeler's door, and, under cover of the sound of the voices, Blake pressed lightly on it, to find that it yielded easily.



Blake climbed to the main deck, and was just passing the fore-castle cook's galley, when the door was flung open, the light from it revealing a figure leaning over the side. "That's my man!" whispered Blake.



3
(3) Under Sexton Blake's soothing influence, Cicely Grafton was soon able to control her emotions.

(4) "Your men have just gone up," the proprietor whispered. "For heaven's sake don't make too much noise!"



to-day, and I have reason to believe he will try to leave England. Can you make it possible for me to have a squirt at your passengers?"

"Why, yes, that will be easy enough," responded the purser. "I can't go with you myself, but I'll send for the assistant-purser, and have him take you round. Here's the list of first and second class passengers to go on with. You may find a hint there. If you'll go to the smoking-saloon, I'll send the assistant-purser to you in a few minutes. They will be sitting down to dinner pretty soon, and he will take you through both dining-saloons so you can have a look at them."

"Thanks! That will be splendid!" said Blake, as he took the passenger-list. "I'll see you before I go."

He opened the door, and, pushing through the crush of newly-arrived passengers, made his way up to the promenade-deck and aft to the smoking-saloon. He found a corner seat, and ordering a whisky-and-soda, went carefully through the list of passengers while he sipped the drink.

He had already finished the list—though he did not for a moment expect to find anything in it, for he knew that Dawson Congreve's departure from London had necessarily been a hurried affair—when a young man in uniform entered, and appeared to be searching for someone.

Blake rightly guessed that it was the assistant-purser, and, catching his eye, nodded. The young man came across to him, and bending down, said:

"Are you Mr. Blake?"

"Yes," answered Blake. "And you are the assistant-purser, I think?"

The other nodded.

"The purser sent me to you," he said. "He told me you would explain what you wanted."

In a few words Blake did so, and when he had finished the assistant-purser said:

"They're just sitting down to dinner now. If you will come along with me, we will go through the saloons, and it will appear as though you were just looking around to choose a seat."

Blake left his hat and coat in charge of the smoking-saloon steward, and accompanied the assistant-purser out on to the promenade-deck. Crossing the gangway to the second-class promenade-deck, they entered the saloon there, and walked slowly up one side.

As they went along Blake cast a keen, searching glance at each passenger, but not even when they had come down the other side to the door again had he seen anyone who looked at all like the photograph he possessed of Dawson Congreve.

Making their way along the first-class saloon, Blake went through the same course of procedure there, but with the same result. As they emerged and climbed the companion to the deck again the assistant-purser said:

"Did you see your man, Mr. Blake?"

Blake shook his head in disappointment.

"No," he said. "I am certain he was in neither saloon; but, of course, he may be keeping to his cabin."

"I can easily find that out from the stewards," remarked the assistant-purser. "But how about trying the steerage? Do you think there is any chance of finding him there? We've got a big mob forward this voyage."

"It can do no harm," responded Blake. "Shall we go down?"

"At once, if you wish," rejoined the assistant-purser.

They made their way forward and along the maindeck to the companion, which led down into the steerage quarters. The steerage-eating quarters on the Melantic were far superior to those on a good many Transatlantic boats, and, while rough and bare in appearance, were clean enough. The steerage passengers at the moment were just finishing their evening meal, for instead of dinner they were served a sort of high tea.

Blake and the assistant-purser walked slowly along beside the long tables, which were covered with American oilcloth, examining each passenger as they went. But although they made their scrutiny with the greatest care, they reached the door again without seeing any signs of the man they sought.

They climbed to the maindeck again, and were just passing the fore-castle cook's galley, when suddenly the door was thrown open, and a flood of light came out on to the deck. As it did so it revealed the figure of a man who was leaning over the side gazing out towards the Mersey. The sudden opening of the door caused him to turn round quickly,

and as the light fell on his face Sexton Blake caught the assistant-purser by the arm.

"It's all right," he whispered. "There's my man there."

"Shall I leave you?" asked the assistant-purser.

"Please. And thank you very much."

With a nod, the assistant-purser went along the maindeck, and a moment later the door of the cook's galley closed, leaving that portion of the deck once more in shadow.

Blake crossed softly to the side until he was standing close to the man who was leaning over it. Then, lifting his hand, he laid it on the other's shoulder.

"Well, Congreve," he said quietly, "what are you doing here?"

Under his hand he felt the other's shoulder muscles stiffen like whipcord, and Blake instinctively braced himself for what might follow. But by a strong effort of will Congreve seemed to control himself, and, turning his head slowly, he said:

"You've got the wrong man. My name is not Congreve."

"Listen, Congreve," said Blake, ignoring his statement. "I'm going to say a few things to you, and I want you to hear me out. I know that you are Congreve, but you don't know who I am. My name is Blake—Sexton Blake—and I have come to Liverpool to find you. Don't draw back. I am not representing the police. I have come on behalf of Cicely Grafton, and no one else knows. I went to your flat this morning to find you, but you were gone. I was able to trace you to Euston, and figured you would try to make the Melantic."

"Now, Congreve, I know all about Cicely Grafton's necklace, and she knows it is gone. She received an anonymous letter this morning which spoke in pretty rough terms of you. I must say, Congreve, the evidence looked pretty strong against you, and you did not make it appear any better by running away. You should have remained and faced it out."

"I couldn't!" broke in Congreve bitterly. "I couldn't tell her about the past, for she would never have forgiven me. And now it is too late!"

"Nonsense!" said Blake sharply. "How do you know she would not have forgiven you? How do you know what any woman will do when she loves a man? She will put the thumb-screws on everybody else in the world, and she will prate for ever of what she would do under certain circumstances. But there's one thing a woman always forgets to take into account until she has experienced it, and that thing is love. It doesn't make any difference whether it's the love she bears a parent, husband, or child—she'll fight for the object of her love, and make excuses for every sin but perhaps one, and that is the scorning of herself. If Cicely Grafton wouldn't forgive you for the past her love wouldn't be worth having."

"Her love would be the most beautiful thing—the most priceless thing in all the world!" broke in Congreve hotly.

Blake smiled to himself under cover of the darkness. He had deliberately set out to drive Congreve to this point.

"Well," he said carelessly, "I've come to you as a friend, Congreve, and if you can prove to me that you were acting with honest intent we'll find a way out. On the other hand, if you were not, then the best thing you can do is to get as far away from England as possible, for you will have broken Cicely Grafton's heart. She liked you and trusted you, and here I find you sneaking out of the country like a criminal, and wearing clothes that, from their appearance, I fancy you must have picked up in a second-hand shop here on the water-front. You need not fear pursuit by the police, for she would never permit any publicity."

"I tell you I'm not running away from the police!" stormed Congreve. "I don't care two raps for them. I'm running away from her. I can't face her—I can't! I only want to get on the other side of the world, where I'll never see her again!"

"Well, you are the queerest sort of a lover I've ever seen in my life!" drawled Blake. "You profess to care for the lady, and yet you are fleeing from her as though she had the plague."

"Oh, you don't understand!" said Congreve wearily. "Go away, and leave me alone!"

"Nothing doing," rejoined Blake cheerily. "You're coming with me, Congreve, and we'll talk things over."

"I tell you I'm going to stay here!" snapped Congreve, with a curse.

Blake took him by the arm.

"You are coming with me," said Blake steadily. "I don't want to ask the ship's officers to put you on the Melantic, but if you refuse, I shall have to do so; and—the purser happens to be a friend of mine."

Congreve yielded at last, and, keeping tight hold of his arm, Blake led him along the maindeck and up to the promenade-deck, from which they descended the gangway to the deck. From there Blake guided him along until they came to the taxi, into which he motioned Congreve.

Ordering the driver to take them to the Midland Hotel, he climbed in himself. He had resolved to say nothing more until they arrived at the hotel, and, leaning back in the corner, he began to plan the exact procedure he should adopt.

They had passed under the overhead railway, and were driving up Sandhills Lane, when, from beneath his lowered lids, Blake saw the light from a street lamp flash on something which Congreve held in his hand.

Blake sat up with a jerk, and shot out his hand, but Congreve anticipated him, and quickly lifted the thing he held to his lips. Blake made another grab, and got him by the wrist. Then they closed in a violent struggle for the mastery of the thing which Congreve had in his hand.

Blake wasted no time whatever. Holding Congreve's wrist with his left hand, he worked his right down, then brought it up sharply to the point of Congreve's chin. Congreve's head went back with a jerk, and, grasping the object which he held, Blake tore it from between his fingers.

One glance he took at the small phial of poison, from which Congreve had drawn the cork with his teeth. Then, with an exclamation of rage, he hurled it through the open window of the cab, where it struck the pavement, and rolled into the gutter, dissipating its contents as it went along.

"You're a fool, Congreve!" he said sternly. "Why don't you get hold of yourself, and act like a sane individual?"

Congreve was hunched up sulkily in the corner of the cab, and did not reply. Nor did Blake speak again until they drew up in front of the Midland, and then it was only to say:

"Get out, Congreve. You are coming in here with me."

Settling with the man, Blake kept Congreve close beside him, and, passing through the great lobby, approached the desk. There he ascertained the location of his rooms, and, securing the key, bade Congreve come along.

They went up in the lift to the second floor, and along the corridor, until they came to the door of Blake's sitting-room. He turned on the lights as he entered, and, after motioning Congreve to a chair, closed and locked the door.

Removing his hat and coat, which he had got from the smoking-saloon as he left the Melantic, he tossed them to one side. Then taking out his cigarette-case he offered it to Congreve. When they had lit up Blake also seated himself, then, looking Congreve in the eye, he said:

"Now, Congreve, it's up to you. Are you going to make a clean breast of everything or not? If you'll take my advice you will do so."

Congreve threw up his hands with a hopeless gesture.

"What does it matter?" he said. "I'll tell you the whole thing."

He was silent for a few minutes, then he started to speak, and, beginning with the time when he had come down from Oxford, he related to Blake, without reservation, the details of his life up to the time when his old associates had called on him in London and had offered him the choice of two evils.

"You can see how I was situated," he said, when he had reached that point. "I didn't know what to do nor which way to turn. If I yielded to them it meant that I would have to rob the woman I loved, and even if I managed to bring it off—without being suspected, I would have been tortured by conscience for the rest of my life. Besides, I could never bring myself to rob her in order to possess her. On the other hand, if I refused Wheeler's demands, it meant that he would tell her all about my life in New York, and, holding the ideals she does, she could never forgive me. Or, if she did forgive, she would never forget."

Blake made an impatient gesture, but did not speak.

"It was while I was trying to find a way out," went on Congreve, "that, for no particular reason, I began to wonder what I should have done had I created a like

situation for one of my characters. The thought grew and grew on me, until finally it gripped me so hard I decided to create just such a situation, with myself as the principal character. In order to work it out I began to set it down on paper, and as I wrote I gradually evolved a plan by which I would have made my fiction character get out of the situation. But I was a fool—a fool! I will explain how later. This is the solution which I worked out:

"I, as my character, was to allow my old associates to think that I had fallen in with their demands. They had left me a copy of the necklace which I was to substitute when occasion offered. I made my character take that necklace, and from it have another copy made. Then, with this new copy in his pocket, he went to meet the girl, from whom he was to steal the necklace. "In my plot I made my character arrange the substitution when he was assisting the girl on with her wrap. As he did so he was to manage to unclasp the necklace and let it slip to the floor. Then he was to drop the cloak, and as he bent to pick them up he was to make the substitution. But, as it worked out, this was not possible. I did steal Cicely Grafton's necklace, but not in that manner. It was far easier.

"We had returned to the flat after the gala performance at the Peers', and she took off the necklace in the sitting-room, laying it on a side table. She then left the room to see about supper, and while she was gone it was an easy matter for me to make the change. But let me get on with the plot.

"When my character had secured the necklace, he was to return to his flat, where his old associates were to call that night. Then he was to bluff them. He was to inform them that he had been anticipated, and that the necklace had already been stolen. If he could succeed in carrying out that bluff, and could make his old associates feel that he had really tried to get it, then there was a chance that they would not send the letter to the girl which they had threatened to send. If he were able to carry off his part there was a chance that they would think he had had the will, and would take it for the deed.

"Then, when the danger had passed, and they had gone away, my character was to return the necklace anonymously to the girl, and in this way he would have prevented her from being told about his past mistakes, he would have saved the necklace for her, and he would still have had a fighting chance to win her. That was the plot which I devised, and which I tried to carry out, but I failed miserably.

"I have already told you how I secured the necklace, and now I will tell you where I failed. On returning that night to my flat in Jermyn Street I found my three old associates—Wheeler, Pickard, and Bode—already waiting for me. As I had planned to do, I told Wheeler that the necklace had already been stolen, and then he asked me where the copy was which he had left with me. Fool that I was, I had left it in my desk, and told him so!

"And all too late I realised the ghastly mistake I had made. He knew that if I had intended to steal the necklace I would have taken the copy with me, and, of course, he did not know about the replica I had made myself. In order to carry out the plot I should have had his copy in my pocket.

"Well, I don't know much about what happened after that. The three of them set on me, and beat me into unconsciousness. I regained my senses in the early hours of the morning, and found they had gone through my clothes, and taken the genuine necklace with them. So they had secured it after all.

"On the floor beside me was the case containing their copy. I drank a brandy-and-soda to steady myself. Then the sight of that necklace on the floor drove me into a frenzy. I tore it to pieces, and hurled it into the wastepaper-basket. Then I sat down to think things over. I knew exactly what Wheeler would do after discovering that I had fooled him. I knew he would write to Cicely Grafton, and I felt sure in some way he would manage to throw the suspicion of the theft on me. The worst of it was I had stolen the necklace, but, having it no longer in my possession, how could I even attempt to justify my action? I knew that I had done a mad thing, and that it would cause me to lose her for ever. There was only one thing to be done, and that was to get away. I made my preparations as rapidly as possible, and—well, you know the rest. I

swear to you I have told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth!"

Blake had not said a word while Congreve related his story. But now, as the other sank back in his chair, half-exhausted from the strain, Blake bent forward and said:

"Congreve, I have listened closely to everything you have said, and I want to tell you that I believe every word of it. Not only do I read sincerity in your face and your tone, but I am going to tell you something that I have held back until now. I went to your rooms this morning, and persuaded your housekeeper to have a look around. I found a mass of stuff in your wastepaper-basket, and brought it away with me.

"On my way to Liverpool I examined each item carefully, and in the lot I found the receipted bill for the necklace, which you purchased in Bond Street, the necklace itself, and the seven pages of the plot which you had written out in order to find a solution of the dilemma in which you found yourself. They are in my pocket at this moment, and they are sufficient to check the main points of your story.

"If it is true in those major particulars, I am willing to believe the minor elements. I do believe you did what you did in order to protect Cicely Grafton. But it is up to you and to me to prove that to her. I do not believe that the exposure of your past would have caused a change in her feelings towards you. I have talked with her, and I think I know. However, in order to clear the whole thing up, both you and I must strain every nerve to get back the necklace.

From you I want a complete description, with the full names, of your three old associates, then we will go after them."

A new light appeared in Congreve's eyes. "Mr. Blake," he said brokenly, "you have given me hope where there was none! Instead of running away, I'll fight! I'll not rest until we have run down Wheeler's gang, and whether Cic-Miss Grafton forgives me for the past or not I'll straighten out the present, anyway. Then I'll leave the future in the lap of the gods!"

Just at that moment the wall telephone rang shrilly, and, taking down the receiver, Blake heard Tinker's voice.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Tinker Picks Up the Trail—A Hot Chase—Blake's Decision—The Necklace at Last!—The End.

TO understand how Tinker happened to arrive at Liverpool so soon after Blake, it will be necessary to go back to the time when he received the telegram which Blake sent from Euston.

Up to that moment Tinker knew nothing whatever of the case on which his master was engaged. He only knew that Blake had gone out that morning to see Cicely Grafton, but, of course, he had no idea what had developed.

Blake's telegram told him little, but the orders which it contained were explicit enough, and Tinker lost no time in getting ready to carry them out. He changed rapidly into the disguise of an Italian boy, and then made his way from Baker Street to Jermyn Street.

When he had located the block of flats where Dawson Congreve had his apartments he walked slowly up and down for some time, keeping a close surveillance on the place. But as time went by and nothing out of the way occurred, Tinker became dissatisfied with the course of events, and decided to enter the building to see if he could find out anything there.

When he mounted the steps, he walked through to the lift, and was able to benefit by the lesson which Blake had given the lift-man earlier in the day, for, although he was surly, he responded promptly to Tinker's guarded questions about Dawson Congreve.

Tinker had just managed to elicit the information that Dawson Congreve had gone out that morning, and had not yet returned, when a taxi skidded into the kerb outside. Glancing in that direction Tinker saw that it contained considerable luggage. Then the next moment the door was jerked open, and a man jumped out.

Tinker's trained faculties of perception took in the details of the man's appearance as he ran up the steps. He saw a man, tall, dark,

and of a distinctly American cut, but, of course, he did not know that it was Chris Wheeler, who had been the cause of all Dawson Congreve's troubles.

Wheeler came swiftly through the lobby, and, scarcely glancing at Tinker, paused before the lift-man.

"Is Mr. Dawson Congreve in?" he asked abruptly.

"No; he is not," responded the lift-man.

Wheeler hesitated a moment, then he said: "All right! When he comes in I want you to give him a message. Tell him that a man called and said that the letter had been sent—just that; the letter has been sent. He will understand."

Wheeler turned then, and passed out of the lobby as swiftly as he had entered it.

The lift-man was still staring surlily at his retreating back when Tinker swung round and hurried after him. Tinker just managed to reach the top of the steps as Wheeler placed his hand on the door of the taxi.

"Drive to Euston Station, and go as quickly as possible," he heard him say to the driver. Then he disappeared inside the cab, where, just before it turned, Tinker was able to distinguish, for a brief second, the figures of two other men.

He himself ran down the steps and across the road to the cab-rank. Jumping into the first one, he told the driver to follow the other taxi to Euston. And the next moment they went racing away in its wake.

They drew up at Euston just a few seconds after the other, and, slipping quietly out of his cab, Tinker mingled with the throng of people on the platform. All the time, however, he was closely shadowing the other three, and when they approached the ticket window he was close on their heels.

He kept his place in line until he heard the one in advance order three single tickets for Liverpool, and at the same time make inquiries if the next train would get to Liverpool in time to catch the Melantie.

Tinker heard the ticket-seller express a doubt on this point, then he slipped out of the line, and hurried along the platform to find out at what time and from which track the next Liverpool express would leave.

Ascertaining this information, Tinker hung about until he saw the three men whom he had been following coming along in the wake of a porter, who was wheeling a truck piled high with their luggage.

Keeping well out of their view, Tinker sized up the luggage, quickly noting as he did so the numerous labels, which announced the fact that the owners had come across on one of the big liners at some recent date.

He watched them until they passed through the gate and down the platform from which the next Liverpool express would leave. Then he leisurely made his way back to the booking-office window. He purchased a third-class single ticket for Liverpool; then, as he had a few minutes to spare, went along to the refreshment-room, and got something to eat.

He was on the platform in good time, however, and was close at hand when the objects of his interest followed their luggage into a compartment. Tinker found a third-class carriage as close to them as possible, and from which it would be easy to keep a fairly constant surveillance of his quarry.

When the train finally pulled out, he knew for certain that all three were going by it, for none of them walked back up the platform. With the exception of a woman, occupied with a young baby, Tinker was alone in his carriage, and it was not difficult for him to take a quick look out of the window on either side as they paused at a station. But when they finally arrived at Liverpool Tinker knew that his men had not left the train on the way, and as he stepped on the platform they emerged at the same time.

Tinker hung about near them until they had secured a porter, and directed him to collect their luggage. Then, as they all moved towards the main exit, Tinker went along at their heels.

Write to the Editor of

ANSWERS

if you are not getting your right PENSION

He was on the spot when their luggage was piled on to a taxi, and his ears were strained listening when instructions were given to the driver where to go. Tinker was lucky enough to secure another taxi almost at once, and, pulling out of the station-yard, they followed the other cab down Sandhill's Lane to the Canada dock.

There the cab in front paused, and, as his own cab drove slowly past, Tinker heard one of the dock-porters being questioned about the Melantic. From the reply he gathered that she had already dropped down the river; and then, peering back through the little window at the rear, he saw the other taxi turn and drive back towards the great bulk of the goods-sheds near at hand.

He gave swift instructions for his own driver to follow, and from the goods-sheds the chase led along beneath the overhead railway to a small hotel not far from the dock.

Now Tinker's driver drew up some distance ahead of the other cab, and, watching through the little rear window, Tinker saw the luggage being removed and carried into the hotel. When the three men had followed it in the taxi drove away, and, satisfied that he had his quarry placed definitely, for a time at least, Tinker leaned out of the window and told the driver to go to the Midland.

On his arrival there his first act was to inquire at the office for Blake. He was able to ascertain that Blake had rooms at the Midland, and was, in fact, in the hotel at that moment. His next act was to ring up Blake on the telephone, and it is already known how his call came through just at the moment when Dawson Congreve had finished his story.

Blake told the lad to come up at once, so, going along to the lift, Tinker gave the number of his master's room. A few seconds later he was shaking hands with Blake, and then being introduced to Dawson Congreve.

"What brings you to Liverpool, my lad?" asked Blake, as the door closed.

Briefly Tinker explained.

"I did not know whether I ought to follow them or not," he said. "But you said I was to use my own discretion, so I did so. I was talking to the lift-man at the time, and the words used, as well as their haste to get to Euston, caused me to prick up my ears, and somehow I felt that I should go after them. Anyway, I did, sir, and here I am!"

"You did exactly the right thing, my lad," remarked Blake. "It just happens that the three men whom you followed to Liverpool are the ones we most desire to find at the present moment—or, at least, judging from your description, I should think they must be. It was my intention to return to London, and endeavour to pick up the trail there; but if, as I hope, they are the men we want, then it is most move swiftly to reach them before they find it possible to escape from the country, for that is such their intention I feel certain."

"There is no question but that they are the three," put in Dawson Congreve. "Tinker's description fits them to a T."

"You are certain that their luggage was taken into the hotel to which you followed them?" asked Blake, turning to Tinker.

"Quite, guv'nor! I made certain of that before I came on here to find you."

Blake glanced at his watch.

"It is nearly half-past eight," he remarked.

"I think we should postpone dinner, and go after them at once."

Congreve was only too anxious to accept Blake's suggestion, and while Tinker did not yet know the full details of the case, he had gathered sufficient from Blake's remarks to tell him that some excitement was promised.

Blake and Tinker both had their automatics, and while Congreve was unarmed, he announced himself as ready to tackle one of the trio, and to handle him.

As they descended in the lift, and passed through the lobby to the street, both Congreve and Tinker looked somewhat incongruous in the garments they were wearing, and, while a few of the guests might have been surprised at seeing them there in an hotel like the Midland, Blake was well known to the hotel management, which during the past had become quite accustomed to the strange figures which frequently called upon Sexton Blake when he was staying there.

They got a taxi outside, and, directed by Tinker, the man drove through to the small hotel, where the lad had marked down his quarry. They drew up outside, and, telling the man to wait for a few minutes, Blake made his way into the hotel, followed by Congreve and Tinker.

H. J.—No. 703.

It proved to be not only small, but a decidedly disreputable-looking place. The few persons whom they saw about were, one and all, of a shabby appearance, and mostly foreigners of sorts.

After glancing keenly about them, Congreve and Tinker both signed to Blake that the men they sought were not there, and, nodding his understanding, Blake approached the desk. Behind it was a man well past middle age, and of forbidding aspect.

Blake sensed instinctively that he was the proprietor, and, leaning over the counter, he said:

"Are you the proprietor?"

"I am!" responded the other curtly.

"I wish to have a few words in private with you," went on Blake.

"If you've got anything to say to me, say it here!" responded the other, in a surly tone, sizing up Blake's companions as he spoke. "If you want rooms," he went on, "you pay in advance if you've got no luggage."

Blake bent a little closer to him.

"I do not desire rooms," he said curtly. "I desire a few words in private with you, and you will be wise to meet my wishes."

Something in Blake's words caused the other to eye him keenly. Their wills battled for a moment, then, with an abrupt gesture, the proprietor of the hotel said:

"Come this way."

Blake passed behind the counter, and followed him through a door at the rear. He found that it led into a sort of small private office furnished with a desk, which was untidily littered with papers, an ordinary chair, a table, and a couch. The air of the room was heavy with the odour of stale tobacco and spirits. It was evidently the sanctum sanctorum of the hotel proprietor, and in its atmosphere and appearance correctly reflected his character.

When the door had closed after them Blake stepped into the middle of the room to avoid the chance of his voice carrying beyond the door. Then, in a low tone, he said:

"I do not know your name, but on your own statement you are the proprietor of this hotel, and therefore the man to whom I wish to speak. But before I take up the matter on which I have come to see you I intend telling you my name and profession. My name is Blake—Sexton Blake—and I am a criminologist."

The other eyed Blake sharply.

"I have heard of you," he said. "What is it that you want?"

"About an hour ago," went on Blake, "three men arrived at this hotel with some luggage. I have reason to think that they tried to catch the Melantic, which dropped down the river this evening. They missed her, however, and it is almost certain they will try to get away to America by the next boat sailing from Liverpool. It just happens, however, that they are in possession of some stolen property of a very valuable nature. If you are prepared to act with me in this matter, I think I can recover that property without arousing any scandal or police interference. In that way your name and the name of this hotel will be kept out of the matter. On the other hand, if I have to requisition the services of the police, there will be a considerable amount of publicity. I know the men I want came to this hotel, because my assistant, who is outside, followed them from London."

"I'm not saying they're here, and I'm not saying they ain't here," said the proprietor. "No hotel can demand a certificate of good character from everyone who stays under its roof."

"I am fully aware of that," responded Blake. "But do not forget that when a scandal does occur in an hotel it does not do the name of the place any good, and it naturally turns the eye of the police in that direction."

From the appearance of the hotel and its proprietor Blake had shrewdly guessed that he might not be any too anxious to attract the attention of the police to himself. And in this surmise he had been absolutely correct. There were a good many things about the way in which that hotel was conducted which the proprietor did not wish the attention of the police attracted to, and for that reason he surrendered to Blake.

"Well, supposing they are here?" he said.

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you simply to tell me the numbers of their rooms and how to get there," said Blake. "I'll do the rest. If you do so, I am prepared to promise you that there will be no police activity in the matter."

"I'll do that much," conceded the proprietor. "But you won't be able to go ahead now because the men you want are not in the hotel. They came about an hour ago and booked rooms. Then they said they were going out to get something to eat. They have not returned yet."

"Then I'll wait," said Blake. "Can you put us in some place where we shall be close at hand when they come in?"

"You can stay in here if you want to," said the proprietor, "and I can tip you off as soon as they get back."

More particularly because he had not yet had dinner, Blake's nature rebelled at the thought of waiting in that stuffy little room. But at the same time it had a certain strategic value which he was quick to see. So, nodding, he said:

"Will you tell my friends to come in here?"

The proprietor grunted, and, opening the door, left the room. A few moments later the door swung back to admit Congreve and Tinker. Blake motioned for Tinker to close the door, and when the lad had done so he related the details of his conversation with the proprietor.

"Do you think there is any chance of him double-crossing us?" asked Congreve. "He looks like a crook himself."

Blake shook his head.

"He won't dare," he said. "He's got nothing to gain and a whole lot to lose by taking such a course. Now we will wait here until he gives us the tip. In self-defence you had better smoke, Congreve, but I don't think it would be wise to talk too much."

Blake seated himself in the desk-chair, while Congreve and Tinker sat down on the couch. Congreve and Blake both lit cigarettes, then they set themselves to wait for the return of Wheeler and his companions.

Nearly an hour dragged by without any sign from the proprietor, but then the door opened softly, and he slipped into the room.

"Your birds have just gone up," he whispered. "Their rooms are on the first floor—sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen. And now, for Heaven's sake, don't make too much row!"

"Not any more than is necessary," said Blake, as he rose and tossed away the end of his cigarette.

They passed through the office without any appearance of undue haste. Then, when they had reached the staircase, Blake slipped his right hand into the pocket of his coat where his automatic reposed, and Tinker followed his action.

They stole softly up the stairs until they reached the floor above, and there, taking the turn to the left, Blake continued on until he reached the door of No. 16. He listened there for a few moments, but could hear nothing inside, so, tiptoeing along softly to the next door, he listened again.

He could hear voices on the other side, so, making a sign to Congreve and Tinker, he drew out his automatic and laid his fingers gently on the handle of the door.

Under cover of the sound of the voices of those in the room he twisted the handle round and round until it would turn no more. Then he pressed lightly against the door.

It was not locked, and yielded readily, and the next moment Blake was standing on the threshold calling "Hands up!" and covering Wheeler, Packard, and Bode, who had been talking by the table in the centre of the room.

Tinker stood up beside Blake, with his automatic raised, too, while Congreve came on the other side, and gazed slowly from one to the other.

Dead silence followed for a few minutes, then, recovering from his amazement, Chris Wheeler dropped his hand to his hip in order to jerk out his weapon. With a swift leap, however, Blake sprang across towards him, and jammed the barrel of his automatic against Wheeler's chest.

"I would not try that," he said, in even tones. "Something unpleasant will happen to you if you do."

Tinker had not been slow to follow Blake's lead, and now he held his weapon against Packard's side, while Congreve stood ready to hurl himself upon Bode.

Thus they stood for a little while, until at last Wheeler's hand came slowly away from his hip, and then, with fingers outspread, he raised both arms above his head.

Under the compelling influence of Tinker's automatic Packard did likewise, and Bode, seeing the action of his leader, made no attempt to create trouble. Without removing his eyes from Wheeler's, Blake said:

"Rip up some towels, Congreve, and tie their hands behind their backs!"

Congreve circled round Bode warily, then, snatching up a towel from the washstand, he began tearing it into strips. He secured Bode first, then turned his attention to Packard, and finally Wheeler.

That done, Blake lowered his weapon, and began swiftly going through Wheeler's pockets. He searched him thoroughly and systematically, and it was when he had reached Wheeler's hip-pocket that he brought out a small leather jewel-case. As its nature was revealed he glanced at it with a quickening interest. Then he turned and opened it under the light.

As the cover flew up he saw within, on a white satin bed, a string of deeply-coloured emeralds, and, taking out the necklace, he examined it more closely.

"Caught with the goods on," he murmured softly. "There can be no doubt about these stones. They are all genuine, and as nearly perfect as possible. It is the blue emerald necklace belonging to Cicely Grafton!"

Congreve regarded it eagerly, fingering the stones with a thrill of pleasure. Then, when Blake was finally satisfied that it was indeed the famous blue emerald necklace, he dropped it back on its bed of white satin, and slipped the case into his pocket.

Now he motioned for Tinker to close the door, and when the lad had done so Blake turned to Wheeler.

"Wheeler," he said slowly, "you've played your game, and during it I will confess that you have held some pretty strong cards. But the trouble was you played straight through without due regard for the trump card. You tried to blackmail Congreve, and when you had done that you did what you could to ruin him. You have already dealt him the heaviest blow you could, and now he has nothing to fear from your further activities. Were it not for certain private reasons, I should not hesitate to make this a police affair. But there are certain considerations which restrain me from doing so. Therefore, I was going to give you and your companions twenty-four hours' grace in which to get out of England. But I warn you emphatically that if you do not sail from Liverpool tomorrow, I shall call the attention of the police to the fact that you are here. I am satisfied, and those for whom I am acting will be satisfied with the recovery of the necklace.

"If you will take my advice you will in future confine your activities to New York, where possibly they will be more appreciated and more successful than here. That is all I have to say to you. Someone will come up as soon as we have left the hotel to release you."

With that, Blake signed to Congreve and Tinker, disregarding the flow of curses which Wheeler began to spit out viciously, and likewise the very evident desire of Congreve to reply.

"I promised we would do this thing as quietly as possible," said Blake. "We have got what we came for, so let us go. Remember whose desire it is, Congreve, that there shall be no publicity!"

Blake opened the door as he spoke, and, with a final glance at Wheeler, he followed Congreve and Tinker from the room and down the stairs to the office, where he told the proprietor to send someone upstairs to untie the three crooks. Then he led the way out to the taxi which was still waiting, and, ordering the driver to go to the Midland, lit a cigarette, with a sigh of satisfaction.

Sexton Blake had little fear that Wheeler and his companions would not get away from England as quickly as possible. The unmasking had been too sudden, too overwhelming, too ruinous to all Wheeler's plans for him to dare to run the risk of having the police put on his track.

Even should he determine to run that risk, and should try to return to London, in order to make another attempt to get possession of the necklace, his efforts would be absolutely futile.

In the first place, Cicely Grafton was too well warned by now not to take every care that the necklace should no longer be so easily accessible. Furthermore, he would have to abandon all hope of utilising Dawson Congreve as a tool. Then, with Sexton Blake and the police on the look-out for him, he would have the slimmest of slim chances to secure the magnificent necklace which had been in his actual possession such a short time before, and which he had so nearly managed to get away with.

As far as the whole case was concerned the



Slowly, step by step, Congreve approached, fascinated, yet repelled by the glittering stones. Then he swiftly carried out the plan he had decided upon.

incident of Wheeler, Packard, and Bode was now looked upon by Blake as a dead issue. He was not far wrong that Wheeler would accept his defeat, and, had it not been for his promise to Cicely Grafton, he would have liked nothing better than to have put Wheeler and his companions behind the bars.

The only thing remaining for Blake to do now was to hand the necklace back to Cicely Grafton, and then to explain to her the full meaning of the part which Dawson Congreve had played in the affair. And, now that his evening's excursion had been so successful, he determined to get back to London as soon as possible.

On their return to the Midland Hotel, Blake discovered that there was a train leaving at midnight, and, after consulting with Congreve and Tinker, it was decided that they should take that train.

They had just sufficient time for a late dinner before leaving for the station, and, in deference to the rather extraordinary garments worn by Congreve and Tinker, Blake had the meal served in his own private sitting-room.

They reached London early in the morning, and before going their different ways Blake told Congreve the details of what he proposed doing with regard to Cicely Grafton.

He and Tinker were very busy all that morning, but a little past noon Blake telephoned Cicely Grafton, asking her if she would come to supper at the Venetia after the performance that evening, and adding that he had good news for her. Her eager tones almost persuaded him to tell her what had happened, but he refrained, deciding it would be wiser to carry out his plans as already arranged.

That evening he and Congreve and Tinker dined at the Venetia, where Blake reserved a small private room on the balcony for supper. Then they went on to the Peer's, and slipped into some seats near the back,

where it was impossible for Cicely Grafton to see them.

That she hoped much from the words Blake had spoken to her over the telephone it was not difficult for him to see, for there was a life in her acting—a sparkle, and almost nervous excitement, which he knew was due to those words.

By sheer force of will, however, she submerged the personal element in the artist, and, until the curtain went down on the last act, she did not falter once, although at times Blake feared that she had been near the breaking-point.

Congreve and Tinker went on to the Venetia alone, while Blake went round to the stage-door, and passed inside.

Cicely Grafton kept him waiting only a few seconds, then in her ear, which had been drawn up in front of the stage-door, they drove round to the Venetia.

Blake led the way at once to the balcony, and, opening the door of the private supper-room which he had engaged, ushered her in. The waiter, who had seen them pass along the balcony, appeared the next moment, but Blake told him he would ring when he required him.

He assisted Cicely Grafton off with her wrap, then, standing beside the supper-table, the linen and silver of which were gleaming softly under a shaded light, Blake thrust his hand in his pocket, and drew out the small leather case which he had taken from Chris Wheeler.

Pressing it open, he lifted up the emerald necklace, and laid it in her outstretched hand. She gave a little cry of joy as she held it up to the light, then, turning impulsively to Blake, she said, with a catch in her voice:

"Tell me, I beseech you, Mr. Blake, what it all means! I can wait no longer!"

"That is why I have asked you here to-night, Miss Grafton," he said slowly, "to tell you what it all means. I shall keep

nothing back, I shall gloss nothing over. I intend telling you all there is to tell, and submitting to you the different exhibitions of proof which I have."

Then, laying his hand over hers, Sexton Blake began, and related to her in all its details the story which Dawson Congreve had told him, and which he himself had been able to substantiate. When he had finished he looked at her kindly.

"And now you know the whole story, Miss Grafton," he said, "what is the—cr—verdict?"

"Oh, you have been so good—so good!"

she cried out. "Where—where is Dawson, Mr. Blake?"

"Dawson is waiting, in case you should want him," rejoined Blake.

"Then—then will you, please, bring him to me?"

"I will send him to you," responded Blake softly, as he drew out a chair for her.

Passing from the room he went along the balcony, to where it had been arranged that Congreve and Tinker should wait. They were there, and Congreve had the expression of a spectator at his own funeral. His eyes asked Blake an unspoken question, and, laying his hand on Congreve's shoulder, Blake said:

"Go to her, Congreve; she wants you! Tinker and I will waylay the waiter, and order supper."

It was a little over ten minutes later that he and Tinker went along to the door of the supper-room and knocked. As they entered, the new light which had come into Congreve's eyes, and the soft flush of happiness which still lingered on Cicely Grafton's cheeks, told them that, for those two at least, all was again right with the world.

THE END.

A FINE WRESTLING STORY.

THE WRESTLING CHAMPION.

By T. C. WIGNALL.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Brothers.

THE two brothers Jimmy and Jack Hopton were so much unlike that it was difficult to believe that they were brothers at all. Jimmy, who had been an acrobat at a circus, had been made a confirmed invalid through the treatment of Whelan, his manager.

"Some day, Jim," Jack had said, speaking in a low voice, "I shall make Whelan sorry that he was ever born. He was a brute to you, and I'll be a brute to him when I get the chance"

"But how can you do it?" asked Jimmy.

"From to-night I am going to start preparing myself," answered Jack. "Down in High Street Dan Murphy has just started a physical culture school. There you can learn boxing, wrestling, and all the other things. Dan Murphy teaches you to become strong, and I am going to ask him to make me the strongest man in Milltown. When I am that I will look for Whelan, and make him suffer."

Jack was as good as his word. For five months he attended Murphy's classes faithfully, until in Milltown he bore the reputation of the strongest man in the whole of the district. He had become a fine boxer, but where he particularly excelled was in wrestling.

"You'll make a champion boxer in time, I've no doubt," said Murphy, two months after he had taken the lad in hand; "but if you take my advice, you will go in specially for wrestling. You are a bit too thickly built for boxing, but those big leg muscles of yours, and your biceps, and your great shoulders—why, they are just the things for wrestling! I really believe I could make you a champion of the world!"

"Go ahead, then!" said Jack Hopton.

A month later a certain promoter did his best to induce him to turn professional.

"Why," argued he, "here are you, a magnificent specimen, fit to wrestle with the best that can be found, refusing to sign the best contract I have ever offered to anyone!"

"I am quite content as I am," said Jack.

"I don't want to become a professional."

"But for goodness' sake tell me why?" pleaded the promoter.

"There are two reasons," answered Jack. "The first is that I've got a very excellent job, which pays me well, and which I am never likely to lose so long as I behave myself. That's one reason, but it isn't the important one."

"Then what is the other?"

"At home I've got a young brother, who does not get much happiness out of life. Some time ago he was crippled by a brute, and I have been saving up my strength ever since then in the hope that some day I would meet that man."

"What a funny reason!" said the promoter.

"It may seem so to you," replied Jack; "but when I do meet the man that so badly treated my brother there'll be things happening that will be talked of for many a day by those who are present!"

"I hope I'll be there to see it," mentioned the promoter, fingering Jack's muscles once again. "But, my, what a

waste! To think of you using all that fine strength for revenge, when you could be making a fortune from it! Oh, well, I suppose it can't be helped! But if ever you think of changing your mind and becoming a professional, let me know. I'll fix things all right!"

For a long time after that Jack Hopton kept up his training. Five years had passed since Jimmy's fall, and the invalid had practically forgotten it. Not so Jack, however. He still cherished a bitterness that boded ill for Whelan when they met.

It was coincidence that really gave Jack his chance of getting his revenge. One night, on his way home, he noticed a bill announcing the programme at a local music-hall the next week. The "star" turn was Angus McPherson, described as the champion wrestler of the world.

Jack, hugely interested, read the bill carefully. It was clear to him that McPherson was a great wrestler, for the names of some of the men he had beaten were world-famous. McPherson issued an open challenge to every man in Milltown to meet him during the week, offering £5 to any man who could stand against him for five minutes, and £500 to anyone who could put him on his back.

"Jimmy," said Jack, when he reached home, "we are going to the Empire on Monday night. I called in and booked two seats when I was passing. The world's champion wrestler is there, and I may be able to pick up a few tips. You'll come, won't you?"

"Certainly!" said Jimmy. "That will be fine!"

On the Monday night the two brothers walked to their seats, and the people whom they passed could not help but notice the striking contrast. Jack was huge of frame, and exuded health and strength; Jimmy was weak, and only walked with difficulty.

The first part of the programme was made up of comedians and the like, and the brothers took but little interest. Then, late in the evening, the number of the "star" turn went up, and the audience shifted uneasily in their seats.

Jimmy was not looking at the stage when Angus McPherson came in, but the roar of applause caused him to look up. When he did so he almost collapsed in his seat.

Jack turned around quickly, thinking his brother was ill.

"What's the matter, Jimmy boy?" he asked tenderly.

"Oh, oh!" muttered Jimmy, totally unable to speak because of his surprise.

"Let's get home!" said Jack, half rising from his seat. "You're ill!"

"No; I'm not!" answered Jimmy warmly.

"Don't you know who that man is?"

"What man?" asked Jack, completely mystified.

"Why, him!" cried Jimmy, extending his hand in the direction of Angus McPherson.

"No," replied Jack. "What do you mean?"

"That's Whelan!" said Jimmy, under his breath.

"Whelan!" gasped Jack, looking at the stage. "Surely you are mistaken!"

"No, I'm not!" said Jimmy stoutly. "Do you think I could forget him?"

He was right. Angus McPherson was Whelan. Neither of the brothers knew that years before the circus had struck a bad

patch, and had eventually collapsed altogether. Whelan then went back to wrestling, of which sport he had always been a fair exponent.

By careful watching, and more especially by bribery and unfair means, he had, after a while, won the championship. That had been his aim from the very start, for with the title of champion he could easily secure a lucrative engagement on the music-halls.

Now he stood posed on the stage, a fine figure of a man, whilst the two brothers looked at him, fascinated.

Presently Jack spoke in a whisper.

"Jimmy," he said tensely, "this looks like my chance. Are you quite sure it is Whelan?"

"Absolutely, dead certain!" answered Jimmy.

"Then I'll do it!" announced Jack.

"Do what?" inquired Jimmy.

"He has an open challenge to anyone to meet him," explained Jack. "On Wednesday night I will be here, and when the challenge is issued I will accept it."

"Do you think you can beat him, Jack?" asked Jimmy.

"I'll have a good try," replied Jack. "Anyhow, if I don't, he'll know he's been in a real wrestling match!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

"Revenge is Sweet,"

THE Empire at Milltown was packed to the doors on the Wednesday evening.

The brothers Hopton had taken the precaution of booking seats, and so, when the show opened, they sat in the row of stalls next to the orchestra. Before leaving home Jack had put on his wrestling trunks underneath his clothing.

"How do you feel, Jack?" asked Jimmy anxiously, as they took their seats.

"Fit as a fiddle!" came the reply. "I'm just dying to get at him!"

"Don't make any mistake, Jack."

"You bet I won't!"

At ten o'clock the stage was cleared for the appearance of Angus McPherson. There walked on with him his manager and announcer.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the latter, "the champion is willing to wrestle any man in the audience, and will give five pounds to the man who can stay for five minutes, and five hundred to the man who can beat him. Is anyone prepared to take up the challenge?"

"Yes; I am!"

The reply came clear, and carried to all parts of the building. Most of the audience leaned forward in their seats, and when they recognised Jack Hopton a subdued murmur went around.

"Step this way, then!" said the manager uncertainly, and looking at the proportions of Jack.

Jack was on the stage in a twinkling, and was taken into the wings to remove his clothing.

All this while the manager was trying to think of some plan. He didn't like the look

of Hopton at all; he seemed too strong and healthy.

"See here, young fellow," he said, "are you a professional?"

"No," answered Jack shortly.

"Well, now, we don't want any funny business. You do the same as all the rest of them. Go down on your shoulders when I shout 'Four minutes!' and when you get off I'll present you with a sovereign. That's good pay, isn't it?"

Jack was tempted to spring at the manager and throttle him. But he knew that would not be diplomatic, so he kept his face down so that the manager could not see the disgust written upon it.

"Understand, my lad?" asked the manager.

"Yes," answered Jack, in a whisper.

Two minutes later he was standing on the mat, McPherson opposite him. The house had been hushed into a dead silence, and, looking down, Jack could see his brother Jimmy, sitting far forward in his seat, his usually white face flushed with excitement.

He and the champion came to grips without hesitation.

"Don't start being funny now," hissed McPherson, as he felt the strong grip of Hopton's hand on his back, "or I'll hurt you! And don't forget to go down at the word 'Four!'"

For the first minute Jack did no more than feel out his opponent. He had sensed at the start that he was up against a powerful man, and one who knew a good deal about wrestling.

But anyone who had caught a glimpse of Whelan's face would have known he was not happy. There was a look of dread expectancy upon it. He had already tried to throw Jack, but had found the task like trying to uproot a house.

"Two minutes!" called the timekeeper, who was also the manager.

Whelan broke away suddenly, and as soon as he did so bounded forward again. It was an old trick, and it took Jack by surprise, for he was rubbing the perspiration off his hands when Whelan jumped.

They went down with a crash, Whelan on top, but the first thing Jack did was to make a bridge. Then, for a full minute, there was a terrific struggle. Whelan forced out all his strength in an effort to get his opponent's shoulders on the mat, but all his efforts were unavailing. Then, bringing all his strength to bear, Jack literally threw Whelan off. The champion fell in such a position that had Jack been able to get at him at once he would have won there and then; but at the identical moment the manager, seeing that disaster was imminent, stepped in between them.

"Three minutes!" he intoned; and as he spoke he knew that this quick move had saved the champion.

Jack was worked up to a fine pitch now. He knew he could beat Whelan, but he had made up his mind to do it in such a way that would leave no doubt.

"Didn't I tell you not to get fresh?" hissed Whelan, as they came to grips again. "I'll cripple you now!"

"Like you did my brother, Whelan," answered Jack quickly.

He saw the quick look of terror come into Whelan's face, and knew that his words had gone home.

So far as the audience knew, they were still wrestling, for each had his arms about the other. But in reality they were not using any strength, and Jack was talking.

"It's some years since you did it, you coward," he said, "and I swore then I'd have my revenge! Next time you get a chance, look down into the first row of stalls, and you will see a crippled man sitting there. That's Jimmy, my brother, the man you nearly killed. I'm going to cripple you to-night, Whelan!"

"Don't be a fool!" muttered the champion. "Go down now, and I'll give you any money you like."

"All the money in the world wouldn't be sufficient!" said Jack.

"Four minutes!" cried the timekeeper, stepping forward, in the belief that Hopton would now drop to the ground.

When he saw that he did not do so he came a little nearer.

"Go down, you idiot!" he whispered. "Go down, or you'll get nothing!"

For answer, Jack swung the champion clean off his feet.

When they saw this the audience went wild, and yelled their approval.

Spreading his feet apart, Jack commenced to turn, and, gathering momentum quickly, he swung Whelan around so that the champion's body was at right-angles with his own.

"Let go!" cried Whelan, in terror.

Jack obliged by doing so at once, and Whelan fell in a heap on the mat. Jack could have finished him there and then, but that didn't suit his purpose.

"Five minutes!" shouted joyful voices in the audience.

Whelan had no great excess of courage, but he was now driven to desperation, and knew that he had to make a fight for it. What with rage and fear, he was beside himself, and it was from then—immediately after he raised himself from the ground—that the audience saw such a wrestling match as they had never seen before. Whelan was practically fighting for his life, and so it was that he put up a great resistance.

As Jack advanced Whelan jumped aside, at the same time extending his fingers in an effort to gouge the eyes of his opponent. It was a vicious trick, and the audience screamed their disapproval.

Jack averted his head as soon as he saw the extended fingers. Then he leaped forward like a panther, wound his long arms around the body of Whelan, and pressed with all his might. Whelan howled as he felt his ribs going, but just at the moment when it seemed as if something must go, Hopton released the pressure.

Backwards and forwards they swayed, like men drunken. Whelan's eyes were bursting from his head, and his breath came in quick, short gasps. The manager, fascinated and unable to do anything, stood by helpless.

Skilfully Jack worked Whelan to and fro, trying vainly for a hold that would end the struggle. For a long while he was unsuccessful, but at length a smile came into his face as he slipped his left arm around Whelan's neck. With the wrist he threw the champion's head forward, whilst with his right he grasped Whelan's right wrist. It was a tremendous hold, and as soon as those in the audience who understood wrestling saw it they knew that the end was in sight. Whelan screamed again when he recognised he was powerless, but every time he moved the pain was intense.

"He's got him! He's got him!" yelled Jimmy, standing up on his seat.

"It's the hammer-lock!" cried a youth in the gallery.

Quickly Jack bent back the champion's arm, but just at the second when everyone expected to hear the snap of the limb, he again released his hold. As quickly as he did that he grasped Whelan round the body, spread his feet, and lifted the champion high above his head.

It was a supreme effort of strength, and the crowd lay back in their seats too amazed to cheer. Never before had they seen such a spectacle.

For a moment Jack held Whelan high above his head. Then those who were near to the stage heard him mutter:

"My revenge! I've paid you back for what you did to Jimmy!"

As he spoke he flung Whelan from him. The champion dropped in a sad heap close to the wings, and lay quite still. His reputation had been broken for ever. Not only had he been beaten by an unknown youth, but he had been used almost as a toy.

The audience were on their feet, yelling and shouting.

"What about the five hundred pounds?" cried one.

There stepped on to the stage the proprietor of the music-hall.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I will see to it that the five hundred pounds is paid by the defeated man. His salary for the week will be put towards it, and he will have to make up the remainder. I am asked to say by Mr. Hopton, our townsman, however, he does not want the money. He desires it to be given to charity."

There was another terrific outburst of applause at this; and then, just as Whelan came back to consciousness, and commenced crawling from the stage, Jack, fully dressed, walked over to the smiling Jimmy.

"Such a revenge as that was worth waiting for," said Jack, sitting down by the side of his brother.

"It was," said Jimmy, laughing heartily for the first time for years.

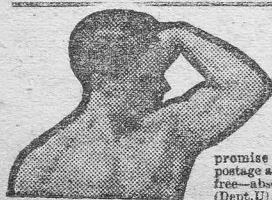
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THE ARISTOCRAT OF THE SCHOOL.

A Grand New Serial of School Life.

By **ANDREW GRAY** and **AMBROSE EARLE.****THE FIRST CHAPTER.****The Arrival of Lord Tirribs.**

"HERE! Hi! Whoa, Fubbsey, you ass, come here! Who's this 'Lord Tirribs' everyone is shouting for? Surely to Hexham we're not going to have any rotten lords shoved on to Redrooks next? Things haven't got so bad as that?"

Puggy Playfair encountering Frank Fairlie—otherwise "Fubbs"—for short—barging along the passage, had caught him by the jacket-tails and swung him round with a bump.

Fubb's prompt answer was to slam out a wild left-hander, regardless who his cross-questioner might be.

Whereupon Puggy, ever ready to accept challenge, even from his dearest pal, slipped the lead neatly, and, fetching Fubbs round the middle, deposited him on the tiled floor with a whack.

"Ho, ho! You would, would you?" he panted, flipping his quarry's ears for him. "You can't return a civil answer to a civil question—eh?"

"Wow! Stop it!" appealed his victim. "Puggy, you ass, I'll spifficate you for this! Stow it, do you hear, and let me up!"

"Let you up! Not much! When you smack me on the nose just for asking you gently who this blitherer Lord Tirribs is that they're all howling for! You're running past yourself, don't you think, my son?"

But when about the fourth passer-by took a header over them just then, as they struggled in the dark passage, Puggy decided not to press the matter further, but let his prisoner rise.

There they stood, confronting each other, each on his guard for a resumption of hostilities if the other wanted it.

But anger was all gone in a puff. The first day of a new term was not the day for quarrels, and particularly between chaps who had been bosom pals from the first week they had joined.

The youngsters burst into a shout of laughter, and dusted each other down. Then Puggy came back to his original demand again.

"Lord Tirribs! Blessed if I know!" replied Fubbs. "It's a 'have,' I should think. Nobody would be ass enough to send a real lord here to this shop."

"And yet, half a mo!" he broke off. "Now I think of it, it's the Head, I heard, who wants him. So he may be a new boy, after all."

There was quite a number of them. Betug first day of term at Redrooke, newcomers were trooping up from all directions. Most were old faces, but here and there were new ones, looking scared and bewildered.

And well they might. For the school was a regular Bédlam. Everybody was charging about as they pleased. Strings of boys, arm-in-arm, were galumphing into crowded studies and out again, capsizing all and sundry, to the tune of the "One grasshopper jumped right over the other grasshopper's back," which was the latest song from the trenches, it seemed.

Out in the spacious, red-brick quadrangle station-cabs kept rolling up. Doors were banging, drivers arguing, trunks being bumped to the pavement by perspiring school-ports.

And still shouts were heard, passing the word along through the din:

"Has anybody seen Lord Tirribs? Lord Tirribs this way! The headmaster wants him instantly!"

The bulk of the boys, like Fubbs, looked upon it as a "have." But when Dr. Meekins, headmaster of Redrooke, was seen peering about amid the crowds, accompanied by a

red-faced, angry-looking gentleman in tall hat and white waistcoat, the fellows began to see that there must be something in the query after all.

It quite took their breath away, of course. Redrooks was always a school for the sons of gentlemen, certainly, but hardly for dukes and earls.

Imagine the flutter, then, when it was known that there really was a young lord, lost, stolen, or strayed somewhere, who was to be a pupil at the school.

More than that, the red-faced gentleman seemingly was none other than the lordling's father, the great Earl Cadlands.

"Cadlands! One of the richest old snobs in England!" exclaimed Puggy. "What ever is he sending his cub here for? Why don't he bung him into Eton?"

"Yes, that's more like it!" grinned Fubbs. "We don't want any blue-blooded blitherers swanking round Redrooks! And did you ever see such a vulgar exhibition as the old buffer is making of himself? Here comes Scourage now, to shove his oar in."

Mr. Scourage, though only second master, had more to do with running the school really than the Head.

He was one of the pushful, browbeating type, that can cringe and fawn, though, promptly enough when it suits their book.

Now he came to his chief's assistance, though actually it was to brush him aside and show their aristocratic patron that the only man who counted was himself.

And, indeed, this was virtually the case. Dr. Meekins, though a clever and distinguished scholar, had little of the grip necessary for managing a big public school. Seeing this, Mr. Scourage, like the pushful customer he was, was fast usurping his shoes.

He it was who had been interviewing the parents of new boys these last two terms, arranging the necessary business and fees. It was with him, therefore, and not Dr. Meekins, that the earl had hitherto had to deal when entering his son and heir.

The latter, indeed, had never been told a word about their new, distinguished pupil until now, when Earl Cadlands came bursting on the scene like whirlwind. He was all of a twitter in consequence, and only too relieved to see his subordinate arrive to his aid.

"Oh, there you are!" puffed the nobleman, catching sight of Mr. Scourage. "So you've deigned to turn up at last? Why the dickens weren't you here before to receive me—eh?"

"I beg your pardon, my lord!" apologised Mr. Scourage, cringing. "I have to be busy superintending generally, I am afraid. But I understand there is a little matter in which I may be of service to you."

"Little matter!" exploded the earl. "You call losing my fathead of a son a little matter, sir! I left Dawkins, my footman, to conduct him up from the station to your miserable premises, and the fool goes and lets him give him the slip! Look at him—there, I mean!"

It was no parlour-puzzle to pick out the repentant Dawkins from the trembling group hovering round the nobleman's coat-tails. The poor man was pale as suet-pudding, and sweating in every pore. Evidently he quite expected to be beheaded before the affair blew over.

"Ah, your son, Lord Drumrigs!" murmured Mr. Scourage obsequiously. "I have been watching most particularly for him, my lord. But he has not arrived yet. No doubt he is on the way."

But this sort of twaddle was mere fuel to the nobleman's wrath.

"On the way!" he bellowed. "I should just think he is on the way—since I saw him

at your beastly station myself! What I want to know is where he is now? Do you think I take the trouble to send my son and heir—hang him!—to a fifth-rate school like yours, for you to lose him in the first five minutes? Find him, can't you, you dunder-heads! I've got to be in the House of Lords in less than an hour! Do you think I can waste my time here for ever?"

The old gentleman was in a tearing rage. He had Mr. Scourage scuttling like a hen in two twos, while as for the poor old Head, he had lost his wits altogether.

However, the boys of Redrooks had not. All the insults about "fifth-rate school" and "miserable premises," got their dander up. They were not going to stand it even from an earl.

"Rotten cheek, I call it!" raged Puggy, his blue eyes blazing. "What's the whelp's real name? Drumrigs, did he say? We'll give him 'drum,' and the old boulder, too, before we've done with him!"

"Yes, by Jimmy, won't we just!" vowed Fubbs. "Some pink-cheeked, pink-eyed, golden-haired 'mummie's darling, you bet, in silk trousers and diamond-studded socks. Where is the little beast? Let's rout him out and tear him up first, just to show his dadda what we think of him!"

They were dashing off to engage in the search of their victim. Just at that moment, though, sounds of quite another hue-and-cry sounded, from outside the school this time.

Hoootings echoed from beyond the gates. They drew nearer and nearer.

"Stop 'im! Paste 'im! Teach 'im to come saucin' us, the sweep! Go on, Bill! Go it, 'Arry, or 'e'll slip yer!" invoked frantic voices, urging the more swiftly-footed on.

The boys of Redrooks knew who these were likely to be. There was a big engineering works about a mile away, whose lads were always daggers-drawn with the school. Now they were chasing some unlucky kid, obviously, by the hullabaloo.

A stone, hurled at the fugitive's head, whizzed through the gates and demolished the window of the porter's lodge. Cheers greeted the smash of glass. Again a heavy lump of road-metal struck the door and rebounded.

The next instant the target for these missiles came darting into view, scurrying into the haven of the school quad.

Who he was no one could think. He was a gawky, loose-limbed boy of about fifteen, by the cut of him, but by his togs should be bound for the school.

His tall hat, which is part of the Sunday uniform of all Redrookers, was bashed down over his ears, his Eton jacket slit up the back, his collar hanging by one buttonhole only.

As for his face, one could hardly see that at all. He was smothered in mud, one eye was horribly blacked, while his mouth looked as if it had been hit by a Zeppelin bomb.

Nor was this all. Behind him, being towed along at top speed by a bit of cord, was the most miserable-looking mongrel that ever escaped the lethal-chamber of the Dogs' Home.

Like its owner, it was slathered in such mud as could only be found in the Rook-bridge Navigation Canal, close to which the engineering works were situated.

It was not only smothered in filth, but it had a tin can tied round its miserable tail, also a brick still hanging round its neck, half choking it.

Its rescuer—for such he looked to be—had had no time to cut this loose. His life was in almost as much danger as the tyke's.

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The Aristocrat of the School.

(Continued from page 16.)

In he came rocketing, the mob of roughs almost daring to follow him, even through the gates.

Sight of the serried ranks awaiting them, however, gave them pause. So they stood, hooting still and hurling in stones and abuse, until the school porters backed by a score of big Sixth-Formers, made a charge which sent them scattering. The big wood gates were slammed amid Redrooks' cheers, and now all had time to get a closer view of the victim of the chase.

The youngster was so blown he could hardly stand. But, catching sight of the earl, backed by Dr. Meeking and Mr. Scourage, he pulled himself together.

The nobleman's face was a picture. He looked as if he were going to have a fit. Apparently this was the missing "Lord Tinribs," as the Redrooks were calling him.

"You—little—blackguard! Where in thunder have you been?" demanded his august parent, with never a thought as to his hopeful's injuries. "Do you hear me? Am I to ask you twice, you incorrigible little hooligan? Where did you come by that filthy dog? Throw it away, sir—kick it away!" he raged, seeing the youngster had picked up the trembling mongrel and was hugging it doggedly to his shirtfront.

"Your lordship, allow me," interposed Mr. Scourage soothingly.

But the earl was not going to permit any one else to speak but himself. He swept the second master aside as he would a coat on a peg.

"Am I to be defied by my own flesh and blood?" he demanded, amid the angry murmurings of the boys. "Drumrigs, you little scoundrel, I'll have your excuse and apology, if the headmaster has to flog you here and now! You were told to come straight on to the school. Instead of that, you have been fighting again!"

"Quite right, pater; I have been fighting again," was the sullen reply. "I was coming on here all right, only I saw some brutes trying to drown a dog. They were not only drowning it, but torturing it, too!"

"And that, you think, is sufficient excuse for keeping me waiting here?" demanded the angry earl. "You go and attack them like a hooligan, and get yourself into this filthy state! It was the same at Eton when you were expelled!"

"Eton, by Jove!" You could hear the gasp of surprise from every boy's lips.

To have a chap from Eton sent to Redrooks must be taken in the light of a compliment, even if he had been expelled.

However, the peppery old nobleman very soon eased their minds on that score. No doubt his rage had made him forget himself. It was hardly likely that he would have deliberately given away his own son in such fashion. Yet, having done so, he brazened it out.

"Oh, yes, 'Eton, by Jove!' he sneered, turning on them all. "That makes you flatter yourselves, doesn't it, to have me send my son here to your tinpot school after that?"

"But I am doing it to punish him!" he announced. "I am sending him to Redrooks to consort with counter-jumpers and clodhoppers, in the hope that it may shame him into remembering his own blue blood and amending his manners. But if it doesn't—if it fails—I shall disown him, and leave all my fortune to a new Home for Imbeciles!"

"Oh—ha—yah! Weally now, you astonish me!" came then in a mocking yawn from Puggy's corner of the crowd.

Mr. Scourage's face was a picture. He had been quietly standing under this shower of vulgar insult with an air of abject humility. But in a trice he flashed up into a glare as if he would have flayed the interrupter alive could he have spotted him.

As for Dr. Meeking's, he was still all of a twitter, poor man. It is doubtful whether he grasped what his august visitor was talking about at all.

However, Puggy's retort had some effect in making the earl remember where he was, and how much he was giving himself away.

"Enough!" he said. "I have spoken, and, at any rate, no one can say that I have not made myself clear. And now, Drumrigs," he added, turning on his offspring, "I leave you. Remember that I am giving you your

last chance. You have proved an incorrigible disgrace on your name and breeding. Refuse to reform, and you will never darken my doors again! Mr. Scourage, note that, please!"

He turned to the second master as if the Head had never existed. Mr. Scourage snatched at the compliment, and replied, with a smug smile, so oily that, as Fibbs said, it almost left grease-spots on his collar: "Yes, my lord, certainly! Your son shall receive our very closest attention and respect."

"Hang the respect, and give him a bath now and a flogging every day of the week! That is more what he needs!" snapped Earl Cadlands churlishly, turning away.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Mr. Scourage Pays a Visit to "Puggy" and "Fubbs."

The group of boys parted, and the nobleman went sailing through, followed by the trembling Jawkins. He took no farewell of his son at all.

His lordship's car was round the corner at the headmaster's entrance. He climbed aboard, and the big school gates were flung open again to afford the great man exit.

He had forgotten the roughs outside. They must have been listening, and discovered that the youth who had given them such a run between them was the old gasbag's son.

So—whack!—smote a stone against the emblazoned panels, and—smash!—sounded another, demolishing the plate-glass wind-screen to splinters.

"Booh! Yah! Here's the young cub's pa! Give it 'im!" whooped the roughs.

And give it him they did. The gilt-buttoned Jawkins got a stone in his chest which knocked all the wind out of him. The earl got another on his silk hat which sent that headgear spinning beyond recovery. He could have forgiven that, but not the pat of mud which the next instant smote him in the eye.

"Police! Murder! Mr. Scourage, what are you doing? Why don't you send your boys to drive these ruffians off?" bellowed the nobleman, for the car had misfired or something, and there he was stranded, with the crowd bombarding him.

"Certainly, my lord! Coming at once! Here, boys!" cheered the second master valiantly. "Redrooks to the rescue! Beat them off, my lads!"

He started to run forward, but, to his chagrin, not a soul moved to back him. A more absolute let-down could not be conceived. Mr. Scourage went purple with rage.

Fortunately, though, the chauffeur managed to get his car on the move again at that instant. It lurched forward, the roughs scattered; a last shower of stones, and it was gone.

When the boys and Mr. Scourage had time to look again Lord Tinribs was already vanishing in the direction of the matron's quarters.

Under the escort of the Head himself, he was being conducted there to have his hurts attended to. The ridiculous mongrel still trailed gratefully at his heels.

Mr. Scourage eyed the trio with a scowl. The lordling was his particular charge, in more senses than one. He resented his chief pushing himself forward in this fashion.

Still, there was plenty of time, and Mr. Scourage could afford to wait. The earl had exalted him and treated the real headmaster like mud. And that was wine and honey to Mr. Scourage.

So, swallowing his annoyance, he hurried off on his doubtless multifarious duties, leaving the boys to drift back to their proper quarters or not, as they chose.

For there was no glossing the fact that the discipline of Redrooks had been going all to the dogs this last term or two.

The Head seemed all in a dream over his own hobbies or worries—no one could quite fathom which. And as for his subordinates, they appeared to have given up bothering.

And right merrily had the school taken advantage of this laxness. In five minutes now the uproar and horseplay were in full swing again.

But the insults Redrooks had just been subjected to were not forgotten. Loud was the fury and bloodcurdling the threats against this sprig of nobility who had been foisted on them.

They were going to show him who were the "clodhoppers and counter-jumpers" when they got hold of him.

And so said Puggy, and Fubbs, too. They were furious.

However, as half an hour passed, and there was no sign of their victim being delivered over to their hands, the grass-hopper quadrille parties were soon charging up and down the passages again.

"Fag massacres" were in full swing, while from the studies of the big fellows of the Sixth and Fifth came a suspicious scent of cigarette-smoke even.

Puggy Playfair and Fubbs Fairlie, though, had small time to bother over any of these antics. The "Galloping Major" mobs gave them a wide berth, for the best of reasons. Both were young terrors when rubbed the wrong way.

Had anybody come barging into their study now while they were stowing away their precious belongings, they would have been flung out neck-and-crop in double-quick time.

For their study was their castle. It was the end one of the passage, and the snug-gest in the whole row.

It had a fireplace in it, and two narrow windows looking right out into the famous Redrook avenue of elms. It was from the cawing colony in these that the place was said originally to have got its name.

The two loved their den, and would not have swapped it for a million pounds. Their only dread was that some day old Scourage would come walking in and dispossess them of it.

Or, what was almost as bad, insist on their having a third fellow lumped on to them on the plea that it was too big for two only.

If ever he did they had vowed to make the interloper's life such an absolute purgatory that he would be only too glad to take poison to get out of it.

"Still, there you are," Fubbs was growling, as he slammed away his stack of books on to the cupboard shelves. "Let's hope it won't be this term. And if it is let's hope it won't be that blighted bounder that blew in here this afternoon—Lord Jimjams, or whatever he calls himself. He'd be the limit!"

Puggy shuddered. Such a possibility was too execrably painful to think about.

Scarcely were the words out of Fubbs' mouth, though, than the door flew open as from a blast of wind, and in, like a ship in full sail, came the very pair whose names had just been on their tongues.

Mr. Scourage and Redrooks' latest importation, the youthful Lord Drumrigs, stood on the threshold.

Puggy and his chum rose, though their hearts fell plump.

Mr. Scourage glared at them and sniffed, then looked up at the ceiling and down at the floor, and round at the cupboard, as if sizing up the dimensions of the place.

"Ha! H'm!" quoth Mr. Scourage, while the youth behind him, with his eye badly swollen and his mouth twisted out of shape, glowered boorishly.

He was a little cleaner, certainly, but how in wonder he came to be an earl's son it beat them to think. There was not the smallest trace of the aristocrat about him.

"Great scissors! If his father had been a dustman, it would have been more like it!" thought Puggy, wrinkling his nose with contempt.

"Ha! H'm!" grunted the master again, at last allowing his eyes to return to the inmates.

"Well, you two, you'll have to turn out of this!" he snapped.

"The faces of the youngsters fell.

"Out of this, sir—our study, you mean?" they pleaded.

"Of course! Can I put it any plainer? I want your room for Lord Drumrigs here, who has just—er, ahem!—just come up to Redrooks from Eton."

Mr. Scourage laid unctuous emphasis on the "come up," grinning over his smart way of putting it. But there was no answering grin on the faces of his victims.

They knew perfectly well what being turned out of their study now would mean, when all the others had been snapped up.

"And where are we to go, sir?" demanded Puggy, with the courage of despair.

"Oh, I don't know!" was the callous answer. "I suppose you'll have to find room with the juniors in the class-rooms if you can get no other place."

"But we can't get any other place—not now, sir!" protested Fubbs. "We've had this study for two years."

"And surely, sir," chipped in Puggy, "if anybody ought to rough it with the juniors, sir, it's the new boy, and not us."

"What!" thundered Mr. Scourage, horror-

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The Aristocrat of the School.

(Continued from page iii of cover.)

struck. "You dare to suggest to my face, and to his, that his lordship should not have the best the school can afford in the way of accommodation? Poof! But some of you commoners want teaching your places, I think! Clear out your rubbish from here, and make room for his luggage at once! Do you hear?" he blustered. "And you—each of you—do me a thousand lines of Virgil by Wednesday for your impertinence!"

Puggy gulped, so did Fubbs. If ever two boys were on the verge of open mutiny, they were. They glared at the lordling.

He was just finding his tongue, evidently. "Look here, sir—scuse me!" he said. "My father's an earl, I know, but I don't want that thrown up against me here all the time. I quite see what these fellows mean. I wouldn't turn out if I were they!"

"Oh, you wouldn't?" gasped Mr. Scourage. "No; I'm hanged if I would!" was the stout reply. "It's my place to go and pig in with the juniors—unless, of course, these chaps like to make room for me here with them."

He looked lingeringly round the snug room, as he added this afterthought.

Puggy and Fubbs, though, were almost as much taken aback by the notion as when ordered to pack up their traps and walk.

Here the whole school was simply seething with fury at the way this upstart had been forced into its midst.

Gangs of them were actually waiting to

fall on the lordling and tear him to ribbons for his father's insolence.

And of these Puggy and Fubbs had been loudest in their condemnation of the snob. Yet here they were being asked to take him in to chum with them!

"Which means not merely making him cur pal, but sticking up for him to the rest. Impossible!" they decided in their hearts.

Evidently he read their opinion of him in their eyes. They took no trouble to disguise it, in fact.

"Oh, well," he said, with something of a laugh, "that's all right! If they won't, they won't! I'll ask no favours." And with that he turned to walk out again.

Mr. Scourage, however, had managed to find his voice at last.

"Stop!" he commanded.

"No, I won't!" was the dogged retort, as Lord Tinribs still slouched on.

"But you will! Do you hear me?" thundered the master, not used to being defied in this fashion.

Lord Tinribs faced about then with ill grace.

"These boys will vacate this study at once, and you will be installed in their place!" announced Mr. Scourage.

"No, they won't!" came the flat reply again. "At least, they can turn out if you like, but I'm not going to take their place. Not much! The class-rooms are good enough for me. So that settles it."

Puggy and Fubbs were simply splitting their sides at seeing old Scourage put down in this fashion. They hated him like poison, as did every boy except the toadies.

And, because they hated him, they almost felt like loving this black-eyed owl, who, a few minutes before, they were vowing to flay alive.

"Look here, sir," struck in Puggy then, "we don't want to be dogs in the manger. If Lord Tinribs—"

"Tinribs!" bellowed Mr. Scourage. "How dare you?"

"Drumfigs, I mean, sir—or Dunwigs. I didn't catch his name quite, sir," stammered Puggy. "But I mean this fellow here. If he thinks it won't hurt him to pig in with us, why, Fubbs and I don't mind trying to make him welcome. We heard what his guv'nor said about the reason why he had been sent here—"

"Guv'nor! Guv'nor!" shouted Mr. Scourage, horrified. "Are you referring to the Right Honourable the Earl Cadlands? You yuigar little brute?"

"Oh, that's all right!" struck in their lordling. "Nothing to get excited at over that. I call him 'guy'nor' myself, when it isn't something worse. So I'll accept the offer," he added frankly. "I'll bring my traps up here, and I dare say we shall get on all right together."

"So good-bye—and thank you!" he said, ushering Mr. Scourage out of the room as if he had been a valet, and not even a greater man than the Head himself at Redrooks. "I'm all right now. Tell 'em to send my bags up here as you go down, will you? And don't you worry any more about me. Good-night!"

Before Mr. Scourage knew quite what had happened he was outside in the passage, and the door shut in his face.

"Lord Tinribs" has arrived! Will he become "chummy" with his new study-mates? Or will there be ructions in the study? Be sure you read next week's splendid instalment, and do your friend a good turn by telling him all about it!

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