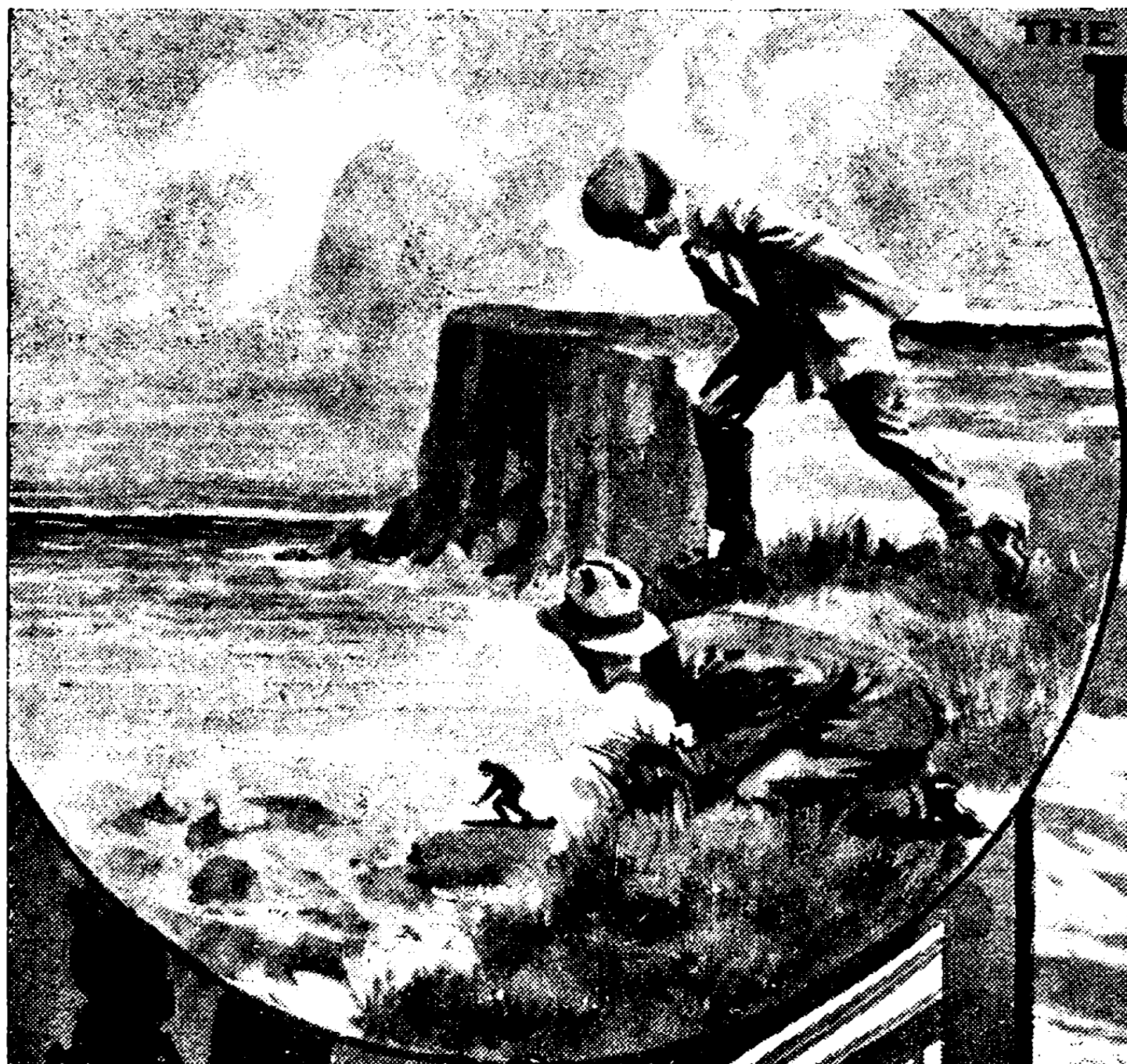


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"'TWIXT SUNSET AND DAWN!"

A Dramatic Account of Mysterious Happenings by Night on the Yorkshire Moors. Written in Story Form by Tinker, and Prepared Expressly for Publication in this Journal by the Author of "The House with the Double Moat."



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No. 1.—"TINKER'S CASE-DIARY" SERIES.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

In Which Sexton Blake, Pedro, and Myself are Found upon the Yorkshire Moors—The Guests of Sir Andrew Hambleton, Bart.—I Meet Mr. Maxwell Lambert, and Come to the Conclusion that he is Many Kinds of a Rotter.

THE sun had set in a blaze of glory.

On every hand the vast moor, sombre in the evening light, stretched away to the hazy, indistinct horizon. Overhead, the sky was clear, except for a few fleecy clouds, which seemed to hang in the air like wisps of muslin.

That last bit—about the muslin—doesn't sound very poetic, but it's the only thing I could think of. It'll have to stand. That's what the clouds did look like, anyhow.

"This is supposed to be the opening of a story. I say "supposed," because some people might think differently. But before long I shall get into the stride, and then we'll go along like one o'clock.

Not so long ago, fired by a sudden burst of enthusiasm, I set down the events connected with a certain Mr. Vernon Forrest. I called that yarn "The House with the Double Moat," and the gov'nor was kind enough to inform me that it wasn't half so dusty.—Of course, he didn't use those actual words, but they're near enough.

You see, I originally pinched the idea of writing up some of Sexton Blake's most mysterious cases from young Nipper, a great pal of mine. He's the assistant of Mr. Nelson Lee, as everybody knows. We're rivals, of course; but we're friends, just the same. And the gov'nor and Mr. Lee hobnob together, too.

Well, Nipper started writing up some of Nelson Lee's adventures, taking all the main facts out of his notebook. I don't call mine a notebook—that's not high-sounding enough. Mine's a case-diary. A diary of special cases—see? And, having been so successful with my first effort, I'm proceeding with the business.

The moors were looking glorious on this particular summer evening. The gov'nor and I—and Pedro, of course—were spending a few days in delightful laziness in Yorkshire. We were the guests of Sir Andrew Hambleton.

Sir Andrew was a bluff, genial Yorkshireman of the good old type—a real Britisher to the backbone. He had made us extremely welcome, and during our few days at Hambleton Hall we had enjoyed ourselves tremendously.

There wasn't a house-party, or anything like that. We were the only guests. Sir Andrew's soldier son was home on leave, but, of course, he wasn't a guest. He held a staff job of some sort at the War Office. This doesn't mean to say that Lieutenant Frank Hambleton was a "shirker." As a matter of fact, he had seen several months' terrible fighting in the Dardanelles, and had come home with an injured foot. He limped

a bit in consequence, and he wasn't fit for further fighting.

During the early part of the evening the four of us had been playing golf on Sir Andrew's private links. The sun had set now, and we were thinking about returning to the Hall to dress for dinner.

To be perfectly truthful, I had better add that I wasn't thinking so much about dressing as I was of the dinner itself. The Yorkshire moors make a fellow cultivate the appetite of a giant.

We'd had a good game, and it was just over. Pedro wasn't with us. He didn't care to be with us. Pedro was completely disgusted with golf, and for an excellent reason.

Only the previous day he had decided to go the round of the links with us. Half-way round, however, he had altered his mind quite suddenly. This was in consequence of Pedro getting into a line with one of the gov'nor's strokes. Sexton Blake gave a mighty swipe, and Pedro simply walked into the way. It wasn't his fault, and it wasn't the gov'nor's fault. But Pedro converted himself into a target for that whizzing golf-ball, and it hit him in the tummy.

To-day, when we had started out, the old bounder had made himself scarce. In his own mind, I dare say, he thought that golf was the silliest game ever invented.

Having finished the round, we stood chatting for a few minutes, discussing the game. I was rather worried about a ball which had disappeared. It was a new one, and I didn't like to lose it. The eighteenth hole was close against a rather patchy hedge. There were gaps everywhere, but these had been filled by the simple expedient of stretching barbed wire across. My ball, I believed, had gone over the hedge.

We were at the edge of Sir Andrew's property. Adjoining the links at this spot there was a bit of a wood, in a hollow. This was the property of Mr. Maxwell Lambert, the baronet's only neighbour.

High Moor Manor, where Mr. Lambert lived, was the only other house within sight. All round, on every side, stretched the vast, undulating moors. To the east, however, glimpses of the North Sea were visible.

Hambleton Hall was curiously situated.

It was seven miles from the nearest tillage, with which it was connected by a rough moorland road. The main highway was far distant. Two and a half miles along the moorland road, however, stood Mr. Lambert's residence. It was a gaunt old place, rather sinister-looking from a distance.

Both houses were near the sea—within a stone's-throw of the rugged cliffs, in fact. The road ran along the cliff-tops, and the whole scene was bleak and bare in the extreme. On a glorious summer day, however, the bleakness was banished, and the moors were beautiful to see.

It was evening now, as I have said, and the sun had set. I little imagined how many strange happenings were to take place before another dawn! For this queer adventure, which I am about to record, took place

in the hours of twilight and darkness, when the great moor was still and sombre.

Sexton Blake and the two Hambletons were chatting, and I strolled off towards the patchy hedge. I badly wanted to recover that ball. It was only just over in the Manor property, I knew, and the barbed wire was easy enough to tackle.

Arriving at one of the gaps, I bent down, intending to squeeze through between the lower wire and the ground. But Lieutenant Hambleton's voice suddenly brought me up-right.

"Hi, Tinker!" he called. "What are you up to?"

"Just going to retrieve the ball that whizzed over here," I replied. "Shan't be a minute!"

"I shouldn't bother about it," he said, frowning a little.

"Why not? It's a new ball!"

"I've got plenty more at home!" called Frank; and he left the putting-green and strolled over towards me, swinging a brassie.

Sexton Blake and Sir Andrew followed him leisurely.

"Why shouldn't I search for it?" I asked, as the lieutenant came up. "I shan't do any damage. It's lying in that long grass just against the trees, I believe. I'll be back in two jiffies!"

Lieutenant Hambleton smiled.

"If you're so dead-set on going, I don't suppose I can stop you," he said. "But I spotted old Lambert away on the rise a few minutes ago!"

"He won't eat me, will he?" I grinned.

"No. But he'll be deucedly unpleasant, young 'un! He's a crusty old merchant; fires up in a second if anybody sets foot on his property. But if you're quick, I dare say he'll not notice you!"

"Well, he must be a nasty rotter!" I said candidly.

Sir Andrew Hambleton looked at me with a clouded face.

"Mr. Lambert is a difficult neighbour to get on with, Tinker," he remarked. "It is a pity—a great pity—for I am anxious to be on good terms. He is the one and only neighbour we have, but it is really impossible to humour him!"

"Better lose the ball, Tinker," said Sexton Blake, cutting off the top of a blade of grass with the niblick he was carrying. "If Mr. Lambert is such an unpleasant gentleman, we don't want to incur his wrath!"

I grunted.

"No harm in recovering a lost golf-ball, is there, gov'nor?" I asked. "It's a specially good one—"

"Oh, let him go if he wants to!" interrupted Sir Andrew good-naturedly. "After all, my gentle neighbour cannot raise much of an objection, and Tinker will probably find the ball without being seen!"

"The man's an obstinate, crusty humbug!" growled Frank.

I didn't wait any longer, but dived beneath the barbed wire. I had Sir Andrew's permission, so the gov'nor only smiled. The lieutenant, his fresh young face wearing a

frown, watched me absently. He seemed to be lost in thought.

Once on the other side of the hedge, I ran across to the patch of tall grass which, I believed, concealed the lost ball. By a stroke of luck I found it within the first minute. I held it up in triumph.

"Got it!" I shouted cheerfully.

I saw Sexton Blake and his two companions looking at me. But somehow they seemed to be directing their gaze beyond the spot where I was standing. I turned, and as I was doing so a harsh voice broke upon my ears.

"Hi, boy! What are you doing in these grounds?"

Then I saw Mr. Maxwell Lambert. He had just emerged from the trees, and he was hurrying towards me angrily.

"Oh, stars!" I muttered. "This is where the band begins!"

I didn't bolt; that would have been too undignified. I calmly waited for Mr. Lambert to come up. He was dressed in a tweed suit, with rough boots and gaiters, and he carried a heavy, nobbly stick. He was grey-haired and grey-bearded, and his face was red with anger.

"How dare you set foot on this property, boy?" he demanded harshly.

"Just come over to retrieve this ball, sir," I replied, holding it up for his inspection. "No harm done—"

"No harm!" he bellowed. "You are trespassing, you young blackguard!"

I fired up at that.

"Perhaps I am, sir," I replied hotly; "but I'm not a blackguard! After all, a gentleman doesn't make a fuss just because a fellow steps on his property for a legitimate purpose—"

Mr. Lambert glared.

"Don't bandy words with me, boy!" he interjected snappily. "Get off these grounds at once! D'you hear me? I've had enough of those infernal, interfering Hambledons without being pestered by their confounded visitors!"

"I'll go," I said, breathing hard. "But there was no need for you to insult Sir Andrew—" I broke off as he raised his stick threateningly. "Better not use that stick, sir," I added quietly. "The law doesn't permit you to apply violence, even if you do find somebody trespassing!"

"Go!" thundered the man furiously.

I went readily enough. I was disgusted with the rotter, anyhow. I might have been trespassing—I was trespassing—but that was no excuse for his violent, insulting conduct.

In less than a minute I had slipped beneath the barbed wire, and I found Sexton Blake and our host smiling amusedly at me. They had been hidden by a clump of bushes. Sir Andrew had no wish to be insulted personally by his fiery, ill-tempered neighbour.

"The—the awful blighter!" I burst out indignantly.

The baronet chuckled.

"You were unlucky, Tinker," he said. "It's rather a pity you were discovered by Mr. Lambert. He will be more bitter than ever!"

"Oh, don't talk about the cad, pater!" growled Frank. "He's not coming over here, thank goodness! I should let fly at him if he started his nonsense with us! And Tinker hasn't done any harm. Lambert was bitter enough before this incident. Hang him!"

"You have had several severe quarrels with Mr. Lambert already, haven't you?" laughed Sir Andrew. "Never mind, Frank! We can afford to ignore him, that's one comfort. Mind you don't lose control of your temper; we don't want violence!"

"I wouldn't touch him with a punt-pole!" said Frank contemptuously.

We walked away, and I soon cooled down. I'd recovered the ball, anyhow. The gov'nor frowned at me a little. He didn't like the idea of my causing further trouble between our host and his neighbour. I didn't like it, either. But how the dickens was I to know that the man was such a bouncer?

Just before we left the links Lieutenant Hambledon halted.

"You take Mr. Blake and Tinker home, pater," he said. "I'm going round the links again."

"By yourself, my boy?" asked his father.

"Yes. Practice, you know!" smiled Frank. "And perhaps you'll be a good chap, Tinker, and carry my clubs to the pavilion. I shall only want this brassie!"

I took his clubs willingly.

"Dinner at seven-thirty, don't forget," said Sir Andrew.

"I'll be there, dad!" smiled the Lieutenant. And we left him; but he did not keep his word.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

In Which the Gov'nor and I See a Stranger at Satan's Gap, and We Wonder How He Got There—Lieutenant Hamledon Returns, and Some Terrible News Follows Hard on His Heels.

SEXTON BLAKE took in a deep breath of the evening air as we paused against the private gate leading to the Hall. The gardens were in front of us, and we had stowed away the golfing things in the pavilion.

"Just a quarter to seven," said the gov'nor, glancing at his watch. "Time for a breath of sea air, Tinker. What do you say?"

"I'm agreeable," I said promptly.

Sir Andrew chuckled.

"You are going to desert me now," he smiled. "What shall I say to Lady Hamledon? She'll wonder what I have done with my three companions. Don't fall over the cliffs, Mr. Blake; they're very treacherous. Satan's Gap is an infernally dangerous spot!"

"Oh, we shall only be ten minutes!" said the gov'nor. "Come on, young 'un!"

We left our host, and cut across to the moorland road, skirting the extensive Hall gardens, and arriving on the rough road in a few minutes. On the other side stretched the downs, sloping gently towards the steep cliffs.

"That Lambert fellow's a pretty specimen, gov'nor!" I remarked, as we walked.

"I am not altogether pleased with you, Tinker!" said Sexton Blake severely. "You should not have trespassed as you did! However, it is no good talking. I don't suppose you did any harm. Mr. Lambert was on the worst possible terms with his neighbour before we appeared on the scene!"

"That's not very surprising," I replied. "He's got a temper like a volcano, and a voice as biting as a new saw! It's a wonder he keeps any servants in his house! I suppose he's a bachelor—"

"A widower, Tinker," interrupted the gov'nor, lighting a cigar. "He lives with his daughter."

"Poor thing!" I said feelingly. "The daughter, I mean!"

"Sir Andrew met her on one occasion," went on the great detective. "Quite a nice girl, I understand. Perhaps Mr. Lambert is only snappy with strangers. Some men are genial with their own flesh and blood, and ill-mannered and harsh with strangers. Evidently Mr. Lambert is not a sociable gentleman!"

We struck off across the moor in the direction of Satan's Gap. We'd been there before. It was a little inlet, just a mile from Hambledon Hall. From the cliffs at that point both the Hall and the Manor were clearly visible, with the narrow road winding up and down the undulating moor.

Satan's Gap was a little bay, with sheer cliffs looking straight down into the sea at high tide. When the tide was low, however, there were rocks and shingle to be seen. There was no way down to the beach, unless you fitted yourself up with wings, or dived down. And the cliffs were a bit too high for that pastime.

It was even impossible to enter the bay from the sea, for a barrier of jagged rocks barred the entrance. At low tide these stood out of the sea like great black teeth, and at high tide they were distinguishable by the swirls of foam which constantly disturbed the blue water.

I don't suppose there had been a human being down on the beach of Satan's Gap for years—perhaps never. There was no way of getting to it. Further on, a mile along the coast, it was possible to get down to the sea; but Satan's Gap was hemmed in by the jutting headlands, and the cliffs were high and steep. If anybody had ever been cast ashore there, missing the barrier rocks by a miracle, he must have found himself in a death-trap; for the cliffs rose like walls, and when the tide was fully in those walls were washed by the sea. The high-water mark was twelve feet up the face of the cliffs. There wasn't refuge for a rat. Altogether, Satan's Gap was well named.

Just on the top of the cliff there stood the ruin of an old watch-tower. At least, it

looked like a watch-tower to me. It was gaunt and grim, a jagged ruin, exposed to all the winds that blew. And the winds up on that coast were not light breezes—in winter-time, at all events. As often as not they were gales and hurricanes and blizzards—all rolled into one. But the black, storm-swept ruin stood stark and ugly through all the years.

We passed this cheerful place and paused at the cliff-edge. It was not wise to go near, for chunks of the cliff were liable to fall without warning. All the same, I ventured rather close.

"Now then, Tinker," warned the gov'nor, "don't be foolhardy."

"Oh, I'm all right, gov'nor!" I said cheerfully. "I sha'n't—Hallo! Why, just look down here! This is thundering queer, anyhow. How, in the name of all that's queer, did the fellow get down there?"

Sexton Blake came to my side.

"Do you see him, gov'nor?" I asked.

We both looked down upon the beach. The tide was out, and the strip of shingle, dotted with rocks, lay beneath us, far below. The sea looked lovely in the rich evening light. It was smooth and calm, and intensely blue.

But we weren't looking at the sea.

Standing on one of the big rocks, close against the cliff-face, right below us, there was a man! We could see his movements clearly. He was washing a tin cup, or something like it, in a pool of water left by the tide. To see him it was necessary to lean over the edge rather far. It was a dizzy height, but I've got a clear head on my shoulders.

"Strange, Tinker!" murmured Blake. "I can't quite understand this."

"How did the fellow get down there?" I asked.

"I have not the faintest idea, my lad. These cliffs are sheer; there isn't hand or foot hold for a monkey. And he certainly didn't come in by water. There is no boat down there, and it is impossible to swim in the fierce current, even in this calm sea. I'm! I am frankly puzzled."

I leaned over a bit further, but the gov'nor pulled me back roughly.

"Don't take silly risks, young 'un!" he said curtly.

"But I want to see—"

"Get down flat on your face, then, and hang your head over."

"Oh, all right!" I granted obstinately. "But I was safe enough."

I flopped myself down on the grass and wormed my way forward. But when I looked down again the stranger had utterly vanished. Thirty seconds ago he had been there in full view.

"Great Scott!" I gasped. "He's gone!"

Blake lay by my side and also looked down. But, search as we would, we could see no sign of a human being. Yet there were no caves, no openings of any sort. It was absolutely impossible for a living man to disappear within thirty seconds. It was impossible for a living man to disappear at all, for there was no way out of Satan's Gap. It was a natural prison, with no cover whatever.

"Good heavens! This is quite remarkable, Tinker!" said Blake softly.

"Remarkable!" I echoed. "It's—it's uncanny! I say, gov'nor, do—do you think we really saw a man? I don't usually 'see things,' but this is amazingly mysterious. The chap simply disappeared in no time. And how did he get down there, in the first place? He wasn't a ghost!"

Sexton Blake rose to his feet after another two minutes had elapsed. I followed his example.

"Well, gov'nor?" I asked impatiently.

"My good Tinker, I am not a magician," he protested. "I am just as puzzled as you are. But there is really no necessity for us to rack our brains. I dare say the supposed mystery has a perfectly natural explanation. We had better be getting back. We shall have to scurry over our dressing, as it is."

We walked back to the Hall briskly, both of us rather silent. I was thinking of that man we had seen down in Satan's Gap. The gov'nor was thinking of him, too, I believed.

It was nearly half-past seven when we mounted the wide steps of Hambledon Hall. The massive door stood wide open, and the lounge-hall was already electrically lit. Sir Andrew had his own plant for the manufacture of "juice."

We slipped upstairs quickly, and dressed for dinner in record time. Just as we were putting the finishing touches on the big gong

sounded, old Warren, the butler, supplying the striker with the necessary power.

Only Sir Andrew and Lady Hambleton were in the great dining-room when we entered. Lady Hambleton was a dear old soul, homely and kind. There were none of the usual "swell" formalities here. We were all a happy family together.

"Haven't you brought Frank with you, Mr. Blake?" asked her ladyship smilingly.

"No. We left him on the golf-links," replied the gov'nor. "He promised to be in by dinner-time. I didn't know he was so keen on golf."

"He isn't!" said Sir Arthur bluntly. "I was rather surprised when he said he was going to stay behind to practice. Frank's always been somewhat bored by golf. I dare say your play has inspired him, Mr. Blake."

The gov'nor laughed, and dinner started. I was hungry, and I attended to the business of feeding with a will. But by the time dinner was over, and it was quite dark, Lieutenant Hambleton had not returned. Both Sir Andrew and Lady Hambleton were looking a wee bit anxious.

"Did he really promise to be in to dinner, Andrew?" asked her ladyship.

"Who? Oh, Frank!" said Sir Andrew. "Why, of course! You heard him say so, didn't you, Mr. Blake? Queer he hasn't turned up. He can't be golfing now; it's quite dark. I suppose he is dressing."

"Or doing something to that horrid motor-bicycle of his," said Lady Hambleton, with a sigh.

Privately, I thought this was rather a display of unwarrantable ignorance on her ladyship's part. But she was an old lady, and old ladies don't know much about motor-bikes. Horrid! Why, Frank's jigger was a brand-new racing Zenith, a ripping eight-horser! I'd had a long run on it, and I knew. I'm a bit of a specialist when it comes to motors, as the gov'nor will tell anybody.

We soon found, however, that the lieutenant was not at the Hall at all. He hadn't come back, and none of the servants had seen him. Sexton Blake and Sir Andrew went out on to the lawns for a cigar after dinner, and I strolled with them.

"Where on earth can Frank have got to?" asked Sir Andrew, glancing at his watch when the cigars were nearly finished. "Twenty past nine! I'm anxious, Blake."

"Oh, he'll turn up soon!" smiled Sexton Blake reassuringly.

"I wish I could think where he can have got to," went on the baronet. "He must have finished his golfing, and he can't be wandering about the moor. You see, there's nowhere for him to go. We're quite isolated up here."

After a bit we went indoors and adjourned to the billiard-room. The gov'nor and Sir Andrew played, and I marked for them. Two hours passed quickly, and we did not realise the passage of time until Lady Hambleton came in. Blake was just about to take a difficult shot, and he paused with his cue in position.

"Andrew, I am really concerned," said her ladyship anxiously. "Do you know the time? It is half-past eleven, and Frank hasn't come back yet. I am sure something has happened to the poor boy. His foot may have weakened—"

"Half-past eleven!" said Sir Andrew, looking grave. "'Pon my soul, you're right, my dear! I didn't think it was so late. Tell you what, Blake. We shall have to go out and make a search. Frank may have sprained his foot, or something. Gad! It is possible that he is still on the links. Supposing he caught his foot in a crevice or some similar trap? He would lie there—"

Lady Hambleton suddenly gave a little cry.

"Why, Frank, you bad boy," she exclaimed gladly, "where have you been?"

Lieutenant Hambleton had just walked into the billiard-room, looking as healthy as ever, and certainly in fit condition. But his face was clouded, and his eyes were gloomy.

"Sorry I'm late, mater," he said shortly. "You haven't been worrying, have you? I—I went for a stroll on the moor, and was longer than I meant to be. I don't want any dinner."

I grinned, and Sir Andrew laughed boisterously.

"You young rascal!" he cried. "We've been imagining all sorts of terrible things. No dinner? Stuff and nonsense, boy! You must be hungry—"

"I'm not!" said Frank curtly. "I'm going off to London—at once."

U. J.—No. 720.

"To-night, Frank?" asked Lady Hambleton, in alarm.

"Yes—as soon as ever I can get the bike ready!"

The lieutenant spoke almost savagely, and he was certainly preoccupied in his manner. Something had happened, evidently.

Sir Andrew went over to him and took him by the shoulders.

"Going to London to-night?" he said sharply. "What for? Don't be absurd, boy! What is the matter with you? Man alive, you are looking quite fierce! Your leave doesn't expire until next Monday—"

Frank shook himself free.

"I—I know, dad," he said, smiling forcedly. "That's all right. I'm going. I've got a reason. I'm going immediately."

"Oh, Frank," said his mother worriedly, "I wish you would tell me!"

He smiled genuinely now, but he still looked morose.

"Of course mater," he said, "I'll tell you—later on. Just now I don't feel like talking. Don't make a fuss over nothing, for goodness' sake! I'll just go and get my things ready, and then I'll be off."

He passed out of the billiard-room, and his mother went after him. Sir Andrew looked at the gov'nor and me, and then he chuckled.

"Some boyish freak or other," he remarked. "Oh, well, the youngster's all right, so we needn't worry any more! It was your stroke, I think, Blake!"

"Yes," said the gov'nor.

The game went on. It went on for about five minutes. Then came another interruption. We were all quiet, for Sir Andrew was about to pot the red. And from outside we heard the sound of wheels grinding upon gravel. The window was wide open at the bottom.

The baronet stood upright and listened.

"That sounds like a trap," he remarked, crossing to the window.

"Or a dog-cart," smiled Sexton Blake. "A visitor, Sir Andrew!"

"A visitor! At twenty minutes to midnight!" exclaimed Sir Andrew. "Who can it be, anyhow? Lambert's the only neighbour; he owns a trap. But Lambert wouldn't pay me a visit, I'm certain. Gad! The trap's stopped outside!"

Somehow, we all felt that there was something unusual in the wind. Who was this late visitor? Why had he come? The trap had been driven furiously; we heard that.

The baronet laid his cue down, and hurried out into the great lounge-hall. The electric lights were full on, and as Sir Andrew opened the massive oaken door a stream of light shot out into the gloomy night.

The trap was standing just a little distance from the broad steps, and a man staggered into the radius of light. He stumbled up the steps as though he had been drinking heavily; but the face he turned towards us was not flushed with liquor, but ghastly white with alarm and horror.

"It's Rodwell, Lambert's groom!" said Sir Andrew sharply. "Good heavens! What ails the man? Well, Rodwell, what is it?"

The man stood before us, swaying unsteadily.

"I've—I've come for help, sir!" he panted hoarsely.

"Help? What for?" demanded the baronet. "Is there a fire, or—"

"Miss Molly sent me, sir!" gasped Rodwell. "Mr. Sexton Blake is here, sir. She told me—"

"I am Sexton Blake!" said the gov'nor curtly. "What's wrong, man? Hold up—hold up! That's better, Rodwell! Now, out with it!"

The groom gulped hard.

"Miss Lambert wants you to come over at once, sir!" he exclaimed, his voice harsh with emotion. "Her father, Mr. Maxwell Lambert, has been found lying on the terrace stone dead!"

"Dead?" repeated Sir Andrew dazedly. "Murdered, sir!" breathed the frightened groom. "Fouly murdered!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

In Which Sexton Blake Investigates a Strance Crime, and Both He and I are Forced to Come to a Terribly Appalling Conclusion.

MR. MAXWELL LAMBERT murdered!

I think we were all greatly startled for a moment. Sir Andrew Hambleton caught his breath in with a

sharp hiss, and turned pale. I just stared, and the gov'nor gave no sign at all.

I pictured Sir Andrew's neighbour as I had seen him that evening—a harsh, ill-tempered, offensive old man. The dreadful news which Rodwell brought did not arouse much grief in my heart; but I was shocked, and I felt sorry for the poor chap. Ill-mannered as he was, it was awful to hear that he had been murdered!

The news was trebly startling because out here, on the moor, crimes of any sort were almost unknown. As we stood there, facing Rodwell, there was nothing to be heard for the first few seconds, except the groom's husky breathing and the impatient pawing of the horse on the gravel drive.

Then Sir Andrew spoke. "Mr. Lambert murdered!" he said, in a strained voice. "There must be some ghastly mistake, Rodwell! An accident, perhaps—"

"No, sir!" interrupted the groom. "It's murder!"

"I will go back with you at once," said Sexton Blake briskly. "No good will come of questioning this man, Sir Andrew. Tinker and I will accompany him back. We will see for ourselves. Miss Lambert is evidently aware of my profession, and she did the best thing in sending Rodwell to me!"

"Good heavens! I am bewildered!" said the baronet. "This—is this terrible, Blake! Go—yes, go by all means! There may be some mistake! And what of the police? Have you informed the police, Rodwell?"

The groom shook his head.

"How could I, sir?" he asked. "We haven't a telephone, and the village is seven miles away, as you know—over eight miles from here. And then there's only a rural constable!"

Sir Andrew uttered an impatient exclamation.

"And I am in communication with the Post Office people now!" he exclaimed. "I'm having a telephone installed this very month! 'Pon my soul, what luck! If I'd had the 'phone now, we could have been in communication with Whitby in no time!"

Just then Lieutenant Hambleton came striding across the hall. He was only half-ready for his journey, and looked somewhat scared, I thought.

"Hallo! What's the trouble here?" he asked. "I heard—"

"Terrible news, Frank!" said his father gravely. "Mr. Lambert has been murdered!"

The lieutenant started back. "Murdered!" he ejaculated huskily.

"When? How? Heaven above—"

"We know no details, Frank," put in the gov'nor. "Tinker and I are going over to High Moor Manor straight away. By James! You are just off to London, I believe? Excellent! Get off as soon as you can, and inform the police that a tragedy has occurred here, and tell them to send somebody without delay!"

Lieutenant Hambleton nodded dazedly.

"But I can't believe it!" he panted. "Mr. Lambert was all right this evening! Who could have killed him? There's only Miss Lambert there, besides the servants! It must have been an accident of some sort!"

Sexton Blake did not wait for Frank to get over his bewilderment. He crossed over to the great oaken hat-stand, and jerked off his own hat and my cap. The latter he handed to me.

"Come on, Tinker!" he said crisply. Without another word we passed out into the darkness, and Rodwell jumped into the waiting trap. Within a minute we were bowling down the drive. Just before we got to the gates, however, Sexton Blake uttered an exclamation.

"By Jove! I was nearly forgetting!" he said. "Pull up, Rodwell! Tinker, rush back and fetch Pedro! We may need him!"

"Old Pedro!" I gasped. "Of course! Fancy forgetting him!"

The trap pulled up, and I was racing back in less than a jiff. Pedro was in one of the big, empty stables at the back. I pelted round without bothering Sir Andrew. As I passed the library I heard Lady Hambleton's gentle voice raised in horror. She had evidently just been told of the tragedy.

Pedro was glad to see me, and he easily raced me back to the trap. The delay had only been about three minutes, and it was a profitable delay, as it turned out, for Pedro was destined to make himself extremely useful before another dawn.

We were behind a good horse, and the

ground was quickly covered. During the drive we did not speak. The gov'nor had no wish to question the groom. It would be better to gain information at first-hand.

So we had an opportunity of thinking over the dramatic surprise. I couldn't quite realise it, even now. I half expected to find that Mr. Lambert had met with some fatal accident. Murder seemed impossible. Everything had been so peaceful, so wonderfully quiet during our stay at Hambleton Hall, that this affair struck jarringly. Right in the middle of our holiday we were pitched bang into a murder case!

I've noticed it again and again, as often as not, when the gov'nor and I go for a holiday, we hit upon a professional case. There's no rest for the wicked, so people say. It strikes me there's no rest for the good, either!

The moor was black and sinister in the faint starlight. Perhaps it seemed to be sinister because of the tragedy which had happened upon it. But I shivered a little as I looked round. The great waste stretched out in seemingly limitless expanses to north and south and east and west. There was nothing but the vast moor and the darkness. The sea was invisible and indistinguishable from the black walls of the night.

Presently one or two clustered, dimmed lights showed in the distance. I knew that they were the lights of High Moor Manor, visible through a break in the trees which surrounded the house, and at last we turned in at the gates, and came to a halt before a wide rustic porch.

A slight, girlish figure was standing there, silhouetted against the lamplight which streamed out. She came forward impulsively, anxiously.

"Oh, I am so glad!" exclaimed a troubled but sweet voice. "Is that Mr. Blake?"

The gov'nor jumped down, and took off his hat.

"I am Sexton Blake," he said quietly. "This is no time for formal introductions, Miss Lambert. You are in terrible trouble, I hear. I have lost no time in getting here. This young gentleman is Tinker, my assistant!"

"Will you please come in?" asked Miss Lambert, steadying her voice.

We entered the somewhat dim hall, and passed into a cosy drawing-room. It was a splendid apartment, and beautifully furnished; but I only noticed this out of the corner of my eye. My attention was attracted by the girl who faced us.

I have seen a good many pretty girls, but I don't think any girl could be more charming than Miss Molly Lambert. She was small and dainty, and her eyes were simply wonderful. Deep brown they were, and gloriously large. Her figure was revealed to advantage by the simply-cut summer gown she was wearing, a silky, shimmering affair, with a rather low neck. Her bosom was delightfully white, and it rose and fell rapidly with the emotion which stirred her.

Her beauty was in no way marred by the pitiful little droop of her finely-shaped mouth or the redness of her eyes. She had been sobbing, that was evident. And yet she was calm and self-possessed.

And she was the daughter of Mr. Maxwell Lambert!

I had had an interview with the irascible gentleman, and I had pictured Miss Molly as an angular, thirty-year-old, bespectacled lady with doubtful manners. But the reality was a vision of loveliness. She wasn't a year older than nineteen.

"It is my wish to spare you as much pain as possible, Miss Lambert," said Sexton Blake quietly. "Will you just tell me the bare facts? I will not question you more than is necessary."

"I am strong enough, Mr. Blake," put in Molly bravely. "The terrible shock of it all has passed, and I want you to find out who killed my father. Oh, it is so kind of you to come! The police won't be able to get here until the morning, but you—you were almost on the spot, and I know how clever you are. It was presumptuous of me to send for you—"

"Dear me! I cannot allow you to say that," protested the gov'nor. "You have done me a service, Miss Lambert. I am anxious—eager to investigate this terrible affair."

Molly suddenly flushed hotly. "My father has been brutally killed!" she declared. "It was no accident, Mr. Blake. I will tell you the simple facts. At about eleven o'clock I heard a terrible cry. It was

uttered by my father, and I was petrified for a moment. Then I rushed towards the house—"

"One moment, if you will pardon me," said Blake quickly. "You were outside in the grounds at eleven o'clock?"

Molly nodded.

"Yes," she replied. "The cry seemed to come from the north side of the house. I hurried there, and—and found my father lying on the gravel. He was quite dead, his head being terribly battered. Oh, I cannot tell you, Mr. Blake!"

"No, of course not," said the gov'nor gently. "Your father, I presume, was carried indoors at once?"

"No. He is out on the gravel still."

"Oh! That is fortunate, perhaps," was Blake's quick remark. "Has the—has your father been disturbed, Miss Lambert?"

"I did not touch him. I just stood on the grass bordering the gravel path, and stared down at his poor injured face," replied the girl, in a low voice. "I knew that he was dead. Even in the faint starlight I could see that. And I screamed, Mr. Blake—I stood there and screamed."

"And then?" I put in tensely.

"Rodwell came rushing round, and, after him, Mrs. East, our housekeeper. Rodwell brought a lantern with him, and my worst suspicions were confirmed. Then, in a flash, I thought of you, Mr. Blake," said Molly eagerly. "I knew how cleverly you investigated—"

"You acted wisely in sending for me so promptly," interrupted the gov'nor. "Rodwell and Mrs. East, of course, came rushing along the pathway? In that case, if there are any footprints, they have been obliterated."

Molly thought intently for a moment.

"No, Mr. Blake, they didn't use the path at all," she replied. "I remember distinctly. They came across the grass to my side, and I would not allow them to go near the—"

"So nothing has been touched?"

"Nothing whatever. I have just waited for you to come."

The gov'nor gave me a quick look, and I knew that he was highly pleased. It was rather good to learn that we had a clear field for investigation. If the servants had been trampling all over the pathway, any possible footprints, as Sexton Blake had said, would have been obliterated. And footprints are often of the utmost importance.

"Did you see any sign of any intruder?" asked the great detective keenly. "Somebody killed your father, of course, and that somebody must have been quite near the spot when you arrived. Did you see anything or hear anything?"

Molly shook her head.

"I was so terribly frightened by his appalling cry that I hardly knew what I was doing just for the moment," she replied. "I heard nothing, Mr. Blake. There was certainly nobody within sight or hearing when I arrived. Rodwell searched the grounds, but his efforts were fruitless. And then I sent him off post-haste to you at Hambleton Hall."

The gov'nor turned to me.

"I am glad we brought Pedro," he said. "The old dog may be useful, Tinker. If it is possible to pick up any trail, that trail will certainly be fresh." He turned to the girl. "Now, Miss Lambert, I want you to remain quietly within the house. Tinker and I will make a preliminary investigation. If we discover anything of importance I will inform you at once."

"You are very good, Mr. Blake!" said Molly fervently. "Oh, what should I have done if you had not been here? And the police? How can they be informed? I shall have to send Rodwell—"

"I have already made arrangements for the police to be told of this tragedy immediately," put in Sexton Blake. "But I don't suppose the officers of the law will be here much before dawn. I am rather glad. I shall have an opportunity of applying my own methods to this investigation without official hindrance."

Two minutes later the gov'nor and I passed outside again. The groom had taken the trap round to the stables, and the exterior of the house was in grim darkness. Molly had told us just where to go, for Blake would not allow her to direct us personally. She was calm now, and the sight of her father's body would probably upset her afresh.

As we paused outside I took a deep breath. "Poor girl!" I said seriously. "What a

rotten shame, gov'nor! And, do you know, I can't quite settle myself to the fact that she's Lambert's daughter. She's a lovely girl, gov'nor!"

"You are quite right in saying that, Tinker," agreed Blake. "But come! We have no time for discussing Miss Molly's charms."

We had grown accustomed to the faint starlight by this time, but we were not going to rely on this alone. The detective was carrying a powerful electric torch, and he flashed this on the ground some distance ahead. We were quite sure of finding the body undisturbed. All the servants, still out of bed, were discussing the tragedy with awed voices in their own quarters. They wouldn't have approached the fatal spot for any amount of money.

Exactly as Molly had said, the remains of Mr. Maxwell Lambert lay sprawled upon the gravel. He lay face upwards, and one glance told us all that we wanted to know. The poor man was stone dead.

"Mind you don't go on the gravel, Tinker," warned Blake, in a low voice. "There are footprints—do you see? The gravel is soft, although there has been no rain. But, for the moment, I am interested in the body."

This was lying quite near the edge of the lawn, so it was not necessary for us to step upon the gravel. Mr. Lambert had obviously received a terrible, smashing blow on the forehead. The skull was battered fearfully.

"Hallo! What is this?"

The gov'nor had flashed his light close against the wall of the house. There was a very narrow flower-bed there, and the green stuff was rather thick at the border. And, lying among the plants, was something familiar. In the weak light of Rodwell's lantern this had evidently been unnoticed previously.

Sexton Blake whipped off his coat and laid it upon the gravel. He used the garment as a carpet, so that he would make no deep impression upon the gravel. And, reaching down, he picked up a golf-club.

In a moment he was by my side again.

"Without a doubt the fatal blow was delivered with this brassie, Tinker," he said quietly. "See, the head is sticky with blood—"

"Great Scott!" I burst out. "That's Frank's club!"

The gov'nor caught his breath in with a hiss. He knew that I had made no mistake. We knew the brassie well; and, indeed, the lieutenant's initials were stamped upon it.

"Heavens!" murmured the gov'nor. "This is appalling!"

"You don't think—you can't believe that—that Frank—" I broke off abruptly.

"Oh, it's impossible, gov'nor!"

The same thought had entered our minds at the same second. The weapon which had been employed was Frank Hambleton's golf-club! And we both positively knew that Frank had stayed out upon the links with that very club. He had come back without it, and he had been obviously upset and savage. More significant still, he had refused to say why he had been out so long.

The murder had been committed at eleven o'clock. Frank had not come in until twenty minutes to twelve. That had just given him time to cover the two miles and a bit which separated High Moor Manor from Hambleton Hall!

I looked at the gov'nor absolutely aghast.

"Lieutenant Hambleton did it, sir!" I panted huskily.

"Did he, Tinker?" asked Sexton Blake, with perfect calmness. "I have seen no proof of it, so far."

"But—but Mr. Lambert was killed with that brassie—"

"Undoubtedly."

"And the brassie belongs to Frank—"

"It does, Tinker," said the gov'nor, interrupting again. "But you seem to take it for granted that Lieutenant Hambleton delivered the fatal blow. We have no evidence of that. The facts at the present moment look somewhat sinister. But conjectures and guesses are idle, my boy. Don't lose your head. I do not believe for a moment that Frank committed this awful deed."

Blake's words calmed me, but I was still horrified.

"What about Pedro?" I asked. "He'll get on the track in a second, if Frank really killed Mr. Lambert. The scent'll be strong—"

"Never mind Pedro, for the moment!" cut in Sexton Blake.

He examined the brassie very closely. There was blood upon it, and there could be no

the slightest doubt that the death-blow had been dealt by it. The head of the club was made of beech-wood, and weighted with lead at the back. Swung round with full force, the brassie would have delivered a terrible blow, capable of smashing a man's head like an eggshell. And this had happened to Maxwell Lambert.

Sexton Blake laid the club aside, removed his coat from the gravel, and flashed his light up and down the somewhat narrow pathway. There were several footprints to be seen, and the gov'nor frowned.

"They are not clear-cut, Tinker," he grumbled. "We can see they are footprints, and we can see how they are placed, but we cannot identify them as being the prints of any particular individual. See! These three here were evidently made by the dead man himself. The others, coming from the lawn, were made by the murderer as he— But what is this, Tinker? Dear me!"

He bent down eagerly, intently. I couldn't make much of the footprints. As the gov'nor had said, they were indistinct. Those made by Mr. Lambert were only distinguishable because they were much smaller than the others.

"You seem surprised at something, gov'nor," I remarked.

"Exactly. I am surprised, my boy. Don't you see? Here are the marks made by the murderer as he approached. But, if we are to judge by the story the gravel tells us, the murderer did not leave the spot at all. There are no returning footprints; and the murderer could not have jumped on to the grass from the other side of the pathway without leaving a deep impression in the gravel. There is no such impression. And what are these, Tinker?"

The gov'nor's light was centred upon two round dents in the pathway, about eighteen inches apart. It looked as though two heavy objects had rested there. They were about four feet from the body.

"Looks as though a ladder had been placed against the wall, sir," I said. "A ladder would make two marks just like these."

Sexton Blake nodded. "A ladder," he mused. "But why, Tinker? I'm afraid that explanation is far from the mark, my lad. Miss Molly would have mentioned the fact, if she had found a ladder here. Besides, use your own wits, young 'un."

He waved his hand towards the wall, and I understood. The marks couldn't have been made by a ladder, because only a born idiot would have placed such an article against this wall. It was quite blank, not a single window showing on its whole surface.

And ladders don't vanish into thin air. Miss Lambert had been on the scene within a minute of her father's cry. No, those two marks had been made by some other means. They meant something—but what?

Somehow, I couldn't keep an open mind. My thoughts kept running in one groove. I had heard Sir Andrew say that Frank had had several quarrels with Mr. Lambert. There was bitter blood between them.

Frank had been left on the golf-links, carrying a single brassie. He had not returned to dinner; he had not returned until close upon midnight. And he had come in without the brassie.

That brassie was here. It had been used to murder Mr. Maxwell Lambert. The police, I knew, would arrest Lieutenant Frank Hambleton in a second, on such evidence as that. It was circumstantial; but it was terribly conclusive.

And then, again. Frank had been savage and moody; he had refused to explain why he had been out so long.

"A ramble on the moor," he had said. That was obviously thin. It was so thin that it wasn't in the least convincing.

But the point which was most significant of all hummed in my brain throbbingly. Frank had stated his intention of leaving for London without delay! Why was he leaving? Why had he decided to flee from Hambleton Hall?

The answer was obvious.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Rodwell States His Opinion, and Miss Molly States Hers—The Gov'nor and I Intercept Frank, and Bring Him Back with Us—There is Much Confusion, but a Fresh Development Comes Along Unexpectedly.

I LOOKED at the gov'nor rather grimly.

"It's as plain as my face, sir!" I exclaimed. "That's plain enough, in all consciences. Frank Hambleton killed Mr. Lambert!"

U. J.—No. 726.

Sexton Blake had been doing something to the body—covering the poor, battered head with a handkerchief—and he turned to me with an expression of determination in his keen eyes.

"I said a little while ago that Frank did not commit this crime," he said quietly. "Upon consideration, Tinker, I must acknowledge that the facts are appallingly significant. I am keeping an open mind—"

"But there's not a shadow of a doubt, gov'nor!" I protested. "It's awful! But, if Frank didn't do it, who did?"

He didn't answer, for at that moment we heard footsteps. Rodwell, the groom, was coming round the house with a lantern. He had put the horse and trap up, and had come to see if he could be of any use.

"Don't walk on that path, man!" called Blake sharply. "Get on the grass!"

Rodwell shifted on to the grass with a jump. Perhaps he thought there were a few odd bombs scattered about. He couldn't have moved more quickly, anyhow. He came up to us, looking scared.

"Your feet are fairly well shod, Rodwell," said the gov'nor drily. "They are, in addition, of substantial size, and they would not tend to make the footprints upon this path any clearer, if you added to them."

"I'm sorry, sir," said the groom. "I thought mebbe you'd like the poor master shifted inside. Beg pardon, sir, but—but he's quite dead, ain't he?"

"Yes, Rodwell," replied Blake slowly. "The body can be removed in a few minutes. I wish to ask you a question or two. Do you know if Lieutenant Frank Hambleton called upon your master this evening?"

The groom started. "Do—do you think that young Mr. Hambleton—"

"I haven't said I think anything, Rodwell. I asked you a question."

"Yes, sir, I know," the man answered eagerly. "By gum! It must have been that young officer feller! He and the master quarrelled often enough. Mr. Hambleton once said that he wouldn't be answerable for what happened if he met the master face to face."

Sexton Blake nodded patiently.

"You haven't answered my question, Rodwell," he said.

"I'm sorry, sir. No, sir; Mr. Hambleton didn't come here to-night—not that I know of," said the groom. "But I don't know who calls upon the master. I was round in my harness-room this evening late. I was cleanin' up—"

"Yes, yes! Quite so," interrupted the gov'nor. "You don't know whether Lieutenant Hambleton called or not? According to your knowledge he didn't? Well, now, did you see any sign of a stranger as you hurried to this spot upon hearing Miss Molly's cries?"

"No, sir. I didn't see anything or anybody."

"And you heard nothing?"

"No, sir. But I'm sure that Mr. Hambleton—"

"If you are sure, Rodwell, I am not," interjected Blake. "Don't allow prejudice to run away with your wits. The fact that your master was on bad terms with young Mr. Hambleton is no proof. Don't spread that story, Rodwell—it will do no good. If Mr. Frank committed the deed, he will have to answer for it in a criminal court. But if he didn't—"

"I'm sure he did, sir!" declared Rodwell stubbornly.

Sexton Blake moved across to the body without speaking further. He hadn't told Rodwell of the brassie, and didn't intend to. Why should he? Rodwell was nobody, anyhow.

The body was gently carried indoors, and placed on a couch in the dead man's library. Then the door was closed and locked. Out in the hall we came face to face with Miss Molly. She was looking ill and worn.

"It was Mr. Hambleton, miss!" said Rodwell, in a hoarse whisper.

"What did you say, Rodwell?" asked Molly sharply.

"Young Mr. Hambleton killed the master, miss!"

The girl's eyes flashed dangerously. "You may go, Rodwell!" she said, in a low, tense voice. "And if you breathe a word of that nonsense to any of the other servants, you will leave the Manor to-morrow! Now go!"

Rodwell seemed startled, but he went without delay.

Sexton Blake and I looked at Molly curiously. Why had she flared up so suddenly?

Her eyes were still alight with anger. She turned to us almost fiercely.

"Do you believe that Frank—that Mr. Hambleton killed my father?" she asked, her cheeks now flushed.

"The evidence is suggestive, but not absolutely conclusive," replied the gov'nor slowly. "I am not satisfied—"

"Do you suspect Mr. Hambleton, then?"

"Yes; I certainly suspect him of being concerned—"

"He isn't, Mr. Blake!" burst out the girl passionately. "He knows nothing of this terrible affair! Mr. Hambleton kill my poor father! Oh, you are mad—mad! I wish I had never asked you to come! Mr. Hambleton knows nothing about it, I tell you! He couldn't do such a vile deed! He is innocent—innocent!"

She stood before us defiantly, breathing very hard.

Sexton Blake was quite unmoved.

"Please do not distress yourself, Miss Lambert," he said quietly. "You are in no condition to bear excitement. You must allow me to conduct this inquiry in my own way. Personally, I share your views. I do not think for a moment that Frank would have killed your father in cold blood!"

Molly caught at the suggestion implied by the words.

"That means you think he killed my father in the heat of a quarrel—"

"Please wait until later on," interrupted the gov'nor. "If Frank is innocent he has nothing to fear. If you know that he is innocent, then you have nothing to fear. I am doing my utmost to discover the truth. I have no desire to fasten guilt upon an innocent man. But there are certain points which must be cleared up before I can make any further statement!"

The girl was still flushed.

"You believe Mr. Hambleton to be guilty—I know you do!" she said bitterly.

"If you will be perfectly frank with me, I shall be able to gather the threads together much more easily," said the great detective smoothly. "Did Frank Hambleton come to this house during the evening, Miss Lambert? Was he here at the time of the murder?"

"Am I compelled to answer that question?" Molly said in a low voice.

"There is no question of compulsion."

"Then I would prefer to remain silent, Mr. Blake."

The gov'nor snapped his fingers.

"Will you allow me to point out an important point?" he exclaimed. "You were in the grounds at eleven o'clock, Miss Lambert; you have told me so. Was Frank Hambleton with you? If so, he is obviously innocent, for he must have been with you when your father's death-cry rang out!"

"Lieutenant Hambleton was not with me," said Molly quietly.

"But he was in the grounds?"

"I cannot answer that question!" the girl declared, almost fiercely. "Oh, you are cruel—cruel! You are working all wrong, Mr. Blake! Lieutenant Hambleton did not touch my father; I will swear that!"

She turned away and left us, obviously fearful of being questioned further. I regarded Sexton Blake rather angrily. It was rotten, worrying the poor girl like this! She was just lovely, and—and I felt wild. I think I was wild because I felt sure she was wrong. Frank had killed her father!

The gov'nor walked outside on to the terrace, and lit a cigar. He stood smoking for some minutes; then he looked at me grimly.

"If Frank really committed this crime, Tinker, he did so in the heat of a quarrel," he said. "The facts are sinister. I cannot overlook the lieutenant's conduct when he arrived home. And the brassie being—"

But I am not satisfied, young 'un. If Frank killed Mr. Lambert, he would not wish to advertise the fact, would he? He wouldn't leave his golf club within a yard of the body. Of course, he might have forgotten it— But that's absurd. He wouldn't forget to remove the palpable evidence of his own guilt. It's weak, Tinker—infernally weak!"

"Frank's gone to London, don't forget!" I remarked.

"By James! So he has!" said Sexton Blake. "Gone, Tinker? In order to reach the London Road Frank would have to pass this house. We haven't heard him. I don't think he has passed yet!"

"Hadn't we better stop him?" I suggested.

"Perhaps he has gone another way," replied

Blake grimly. "If he is guilty he would hardly risk passing this house when we know that we are here. I am inclined to think, Tinker, that Frank struck the blow in a fury, without realising its force. He left the spot, thinking that he had only slightly injured Mr. Lambert. But then, again, we reach a stumbling-block. Frank knew the truth when Rodwell arrived at the Hall. Yet he only expressed horror—genuine horror, it seemed. Was he acting? And is he fleeing—"

"Hold on, gov'nor!" I interjected suddenly. "Listen!"

We both remained quiet, and on the still night air, coming across the undulating moors, we heard the steady throb of a motorcycle engine. It was faint at first, but rapidly increased in volume.

"That's Frank's Zenith, sir!" I said eagerly. "I'd know it anywhere!"

Sexton Blake nodded.

"We will hurry down to the road, Tinker," he said briskly. "The fact that Frank is passing this house is promising. It is a good sign. We must certainly stop him and hear his story!"

We hastened round the house to the drive. My thoughts were many. I told myself that Frank was guilty; but yet, at the same time, I was uneasy. The lieutenant was such a decent fellow all round—such a thoroughly good chap. Why hadn't he spoken up when he first heard of the tragedy? His own actions and the finding of the blood-stained brassie told clearly enough that he was, at least, implicated in the murder somehow or other.

And then there was Molly. She simply wouldn't admit that Frank could have had anything to do with the affair, yet she had virtually admitted that the lieutenant had been at High Moor Manor that night. Of course, they were in love with one another; I saw that in a tick. Well, Frank was a jolly sensible chap, anyhow. He couldn't have chosen a prettier girl than Molly. But what had happened during the hours of darkness previous to midnight?

My thoughts were switched in another direction, for we were on the drive now, and we saw something which rather startled us. To tell the truth, we had miscalculated. The headlights of Frank's motor-bike were quite close, and he would be past the gates before we could reach them. That meant that he'd escape!

"Run, Tinker!" roared Sexton Blake.

But he knew that it was hopeless even as he shouted out the words. We started running, however, and then got a surprise. The buzz of Frank's Zenith died down, and it was clear that he had closed the throttle. Then the light swung round, and the engine started popping briskly.

Frank Hambledon had turned into the drive!

He wasn't scooting past at all; he was actually stopping here!

Blake waved his arms, and I did the same. The next moment Frank saw us, and pulled up with a jerk. Before the gov'nor could say a word, the lieutenant burst into a torrent of excited sentences.

"You left the Hall in such an infernal hurry, Mr. Blake, that you didn't give me a chance to breathe!" he exclaimed. "I'm not going to London now! This terrible affair has altered everything! Is Mr. Lambert dead? It must have been an accident. I'm positive! I decided that I shouldn't go to London in the first minute, but I didn't get a chance to tell you. But I'll buzz down to the village, if you like, and tell the police!"

Sexton Blake looked rather grim.

"Somebody must go, at all events," he said. "Mr. Lambert is quite dead. His skull is battered in!"

"Good heavens! How dreadful!"

"The weapon used was a golf club—a brassie," said Blake quietly.

Frank Hambledon stared.

"A brassie?" he repeated. "Scott! It was mine, I'll bet anything!"

"Yes, Frank, it was yours."

There was a tense silence. The lieutenant looked at the gov'nor, then he looked at me. Perhaps he saw something curious in our expressions. At any rate, he suddenly flushed deeply, and his breath hissed between his teeth. The way he had admitted that the brassie might be his had taken my own breath quite away.

"You—you don't think—"

He paused, horrified.

"Look here, Frank, we want to get this thing clear," said Sexton Blake quietly. "Do

you know anything of this tragedy? Tell me the absolute truth. I have no right to question you—that is work for the police—but if you are wise—"

The lieutenant's eyes blazed.

"Do you mean that you suspect me of killing Mr. Lambert?" he asked furiously. "By heavens, Blake, I'll knock you down if you suggest—"

"Don't get excited," interjected Blake smoothly. "You won't knock me down, Frank, because that would be foolish. We're not going to quarrel. Just tell me the simple truth. I cannot believe that you committed this foul crime. But an assurance from your own lips would relieve me—"

"You suspect me, and that's enough!" said Frank bitterly. "Be hanged to you! I'll not answer your impertinent questions! You believe that I killed Maxwell Lambert! Well, you can go on believing it!"

Sexton Blake took the young fellow's arm.

"Now, Hambledon, don't be foolish!" he said sternly. "Don't say things which cannot be unsaid. Man alive, I am doing my utmost to get at the truth of this ghastly affair! Don't make my task heavier. If you are innocent, I am anxious to prove it; for, make no mistake, as soon as the police come, and get to know the facts, you will be arrested without a second's warning."

Frank breathed hard.

"I was foolish, I'll admit," he said, in a low voice. "Forgive me, Mr. Blake. I didn't mean what I said. But the thought that you suspected me of having a hand in killing a man infuriated me. I swear to you before my Maker that I know nothing whatever of this foul crime!"

His words were intensely serious, and we believed him.

"I can't explain several things, but I am absolutely innocent!" went on Frank earnestly. "What of Molly—Miss Lambert? Does she believe me guilty? Has she said anything—"

"She was angry when the suggestion was made to her," interrupted the gov'nor. "Come, Frank, old man, be candid with me. Let's have no mystery. At present there is a veil of mystery overhanging this crime which points in uncomfortable directions. Both Miss Lambert and yourself will find yourselves in trouble. I am telling you the simple truth, you see. You must realise the gravity of the case. Unless you can clear yourself positively you will certainly be lodged in the nearest police-station. And Miss Lambert may find her own position—"

"I can't say anything!" cut in Frank, in a hard voice.

"You mean you won't?"

"If you like!"

"You refuse to tell me where you were at eleven o'clock? You refuse to say any more than you have said?"

"Yes," muttered Hambledon coldly.

"Very well. You know as well as I do that you have condemned yourself by that refusal," said the gov'nor quietly. "But I will not press you, Frank. I will leave you to think the whole affair over. But you must give me your word, as an officer and a gentleman, that you will remain within the Manor grounds until the police arrive. Do you give me that promise?"

"I do, on my honour as an officer and a gentleman," said Frank readily.

He agreed so promptly that Sexton Blake gave him a sharp look. But the young officer was obviously sincere. I knew the train of thought which ran in the gov'nor's mind. If Frank was capable of murdering Maxwell Lambert, he was also capable of breaking his sworn oath. But I was sure that he would make no attempt to escape.

Besides, the whole case was puzzling. Now that Hambledon was here I found myself readjusting my views. I began to think that he wasn't guilty at all. Yet, at the same time, the fact that he refused to give an explanation of his movements during the late evening hours was almost positive proof of his guilt.

We walked up to the house again, and Frank kicked down the stand of his jigger. He left the machine outside, and then went indoors. We heard him talking to Molly in a low voice.

Blake was outside, and he stood frowning. He didn't like the way things were going at all. Suddenly he turned to me.

"Come round to the terrace, Tinker!" he said brusquely.

I followed him without a word. When we were on the scene of the murder Sexton Blake brought out his torch, and flashed it

upon those two curious marks which were clearly visible in the gravel.

"I have a strong idea that these deep impressions will help us a lot, if we can discover what they were caused by," said the gov'nor keenly. "Now, Tinker, look at them carefully. Use your wits."

"Why, a ladder—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Blake sharply.

I froze up, and idly gazed up the blank wall to the gutter. After all, the idea of a ladder was rather preposterous. Why should anybody want to climb this wall? The thing was silly—

"Great Scott!" I gasped.

Just for a second I stood rooted to the spot. High above, peering down at me from the stone coping of the roof, was a dim, indistinct face! Even as I gazed up the face vanished from the skyline.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

We Discover a Stranger on the Roof, and Then Things Happen Rapidly—A Gentleman with Four Legs, Named Pedro, Gets Busy.

SEXTON BLAKE turned to me sharply.

"Well, what's the matter?" he asked.

"Didn't—didn't you see it, gov'nor?"

I panted excitedly. "A face looking down at us from the roof! There's a man up there!"

"Your nerves are rocky, Tinker—"

"I tell you there's a man up there, sir!"

I declared. "I saw his face as plain as possible. He was gazing down at us when I happened to glance up. Who can it be? Why should anybody be on the roof?"

Blake was impressed by my obvious excitement.

"A man on the roof, young 'un?" he said keenly, looking up at the stone coping. "I cannot quite understand how a man got there. It is rather dark, and if a cat happened to look over the edge—"

"A cat!" I snorted. "What do you take me for, gov'nor? Do you think I don't know the difference between a man and a cat? If you don't believe me, go upstairs and look for yourself. There's a trapdoor on to the roof, isn't there?"

"That's not at all certain, Tinker," replied Blake. "There might be one. We'll see. At the same time, I honestly think that you must have been mistaken. In the name of common-sense, why should any man get on to the roof of this house? Who is he, and what is he? How did he get there?"

"Are you asking me riddles, gov'nor?" I growled. "What's the good of jawing? We'd better make investigations at once. There's somebody on the roof. I know that. He may have been one of the servants, but I don't think so. As likely as not he was the murderer, and Frank is innocent."

Sexton Blake didn't waste any more time. He walked quickly round the house, and I followed him. The gov'nor, I knew, was quite certain that I'd been dreaming. At the same time, it was necessary to make sure of the thing.

The front door was still wide open, and Lieutenant Hambledon and Molly were sitting upon a big oaken lounge. They were both looking intensely serious, and rose to their feet as we came in.

"Can you tell me if there is any way of getting on to the roof, Miss Lambert?" asked Blake, getting straight to the point.

"Why, yes! There is a skylight—no, a trapdoor, because there is no glass in it," replied Molly at once. "But it is locked and bolted, and it hasn't been disturbed for years."

"Locked and bolted on the inside, of course?"

"Yes."

The gov'nor looked at me rather triumphantly, I thought. Of course, he believed that I was all wrong. Nobody could have got on to the roof from outside, and from what Molly had said, nobody could get on the roof from inside, either. But I was obstinate. I knew I hadn't made a mistake.

I must admit, however, that I felt a little quail. There were no trees near the house, and all the walls were smooth. A monkey couldn't have climbed up. And, at the same time, I could not help realising that there was absolutely no apparent reason for a man being on the roof.

"Why, what's the idea, Mr. Blake?" asked



Hambledon and Tinker looked round the bushes. Reared against the blank wall was a ladder, at the top of which stood a dim figure. Black Peter had returned!

Frank curiously. "What do you want to get on to the roof for?"

"Tinker thinks he saw a man up there."

"I don't think; I jolly well know!" I put in bluntly.

"A man on the roof!" repeated Hambledon, rubbing his chin. "Ye gods! The murderer! Miss Lambert and I have been discussing the terrible affair, and that was the one point we couldn't settle. Where did the murderer disappear to so abruptly? On to the roof, of course!"

Frank didn't add any suggestion as to how the murderer had reached the roof from the terrace. I was puzzled myself until, suddenly, I gave a yell.

"The ladder, gov'nor!" I roared. "The chap used a ladder!"

I had expected Sexton Blake to give a terrific start. But he didn't move a hair, and smiled at me rather quizzically.

"I had already thought of that possibility, my dear Tinker," he replied. "But what became of the ladder after the man had climbed on to the roof? I don't think Miss Lambert found a ladder standing against the wall when she rushed to the house upon hearing her father's cry."

"No, Mr. Blake; there wasn't a ladder," said Molly quickly.

"Well, let's get upstairs!" I broke in. "We're wasting valuable time."

Molly led the way up the wide staircase, U. J.—No. 720.

and on the landing she pointed to a few stairs which led upwards into the darkness.

"There are two or three attics up there, Mr. Blake," she said. "They've never been used, and I believe the trapdoor is in the ceiling just at the top of these stairs. The key, I expect, is in the lock, or on a ledge just near it."

The gov'nor flashed his torch up, and we mounted to the attics. We had no fear of the man escaping. There was no way of reaching the ground from the roof, unless one jumped. And no man, however desperate, would leap down to certain grave injury.

The case had taken on a different aspect, and we were all very curious and expectant.

Molly remained on the great landing, and we ascended to the attic floor. As the girl had said, the trapdoor was in the low ceiling just at the head of the stairs. By standing on a chair it was easily reached.

It was a massive thing, with huge hinges and two bolts. The lock itself was not much good, because it was old-fashioned and rusty. The key was sticking out of the hole.

Sexton Blake turned it, and then eased back the bolts. The trapdoor hadn't been touched for many months—perhaps not for years. Certainly, nobody had gained access to the roof by this means on the present night.

The door swung back with a creak and a thud, and I saw Sexton Blake hoist himself up. Hambledon followed, and so did I.

The roof was flat for the most part, with low stonework parapets. The northern wing was a roof of the common or garden variety, with steep, tiled sides. But all the rest was leaded and flat.

Blake and Hambledon were standing quite still, peering before them. And as I drew myself up I felt a bit funny inside. Had I made a bloomer? I should look a pretty sort of idiot if—

"By James!" shouted Sexton Blake suddenly. "Tinker was right!"

And then I saw what he had seen. Dimly visible against the night sky was a man's still figure. He was on the other edge of the roof, his face turned towards us. As the gov'nor spoke, he moved and shook his fist savagely.

"Keep back!" he snarled, with a furious oath.

But Sexton Blake did not keep back. He and Frank and I dashed forward, meaning to overpower the stranger at once. I was thrilling with excitement. This development was unexpected, but very welcome. For it almost proved that Lieutenant Hambledon's hand had not struck the fatal blow. The very fact that an unknown man was on the roof of the house spoke volumes.

There was no escape for him; he was completely trapped.

But then we all received a shock.

The stranger, uttering another curse, turned abruptly. Before we could reach him he had mounted the low parapet of the coping. Then he jumped outwards and downwards, with a low cry. It was an act of desperation.

"Great Heaven!" hissed the gov'nor.

The stranger had flung himself to the ground! We waited, tensely and fearfully, for the dull, sickening thud which—

Splash!

There was no thud, but a loud splash! And Frank Hambledon gave a yell.

"He's jumped into the lake!" he roared. "Listen! He's swimming to the bank! By Jove, the hound will escape—"

Sexton Blake didn't wait another second. He raced to the trapdoor opening, and literally fell through it. I was hard on his heels. It would have been idiotic to jump down into the lake after the marauder. He had acted in sheer desperation, and might easily have landed on the stones which bordered the lake. It wasn't worth the risk, even if we lost our man.

Until Frank had told us, we hadn't known that there was an ornamental lake on the other side of the house. Only a fairly broad path separated it from the house wall. In taking his leap the man had cleared this path.

We tore down the stairs, rushed outside, and then scooted round the building. Certainly, we didn't lose any time in dawdling. But when we arrived by the side of the lake everything was still. The expanse of water was only small, but very pretty and ornamental.

The stranger had vanished into the darkness. Blake flashed his light over the surface of the water, but only a few ripples were to be seen.

"He hasn't gone to the bottom, has he?" I gasped.

"Couldn't!" panted Frank. "It's only five feet deep, this lake. Hang it all, what an infernal nuisance! If we had collared that beggar we should have got at the truth. What now, Mr. Blake? Do you still think I'm guilty?"

"Tut-tut, man! We'll discuss that later!" snapped the gov'nor tensely. "Tinker, grab that long pole there. Yes, that's right!"

I picked up a thin, long piece of bamboo which was lying against the bushes, and handed it to Sexton Blake. He reached over the lake, and fished something from the surface of the water. As it was drawn to the bank I saw that it was a cloth cap of a dark, nondescript pattern.

"Only the blackguard's cap," said Hambledon impatiently.

"Pedro might find it useful," remarked the gov'nor calmly. "Run in and fetch him, Tinker. If the old boy's any good at all he can prove his worth now."

The lieutenant slapped his leg.

"Pedro!" he exclaimed. "Why, of course! You're going to make the bloodhound get on our mysterious friend's track? Scott! I'm getting interested, Mr. Blake. If it wasn't for the terrible tragedy—"

I didn't hear any more, for I was hurrying away to fetch Pedro. I found him in one of the reception-rooms, looking very injured and forlorn. Pedro doesn't believe in being shut up in strange houses.

"Cheer up, old lazybones!" I said briskly. "There's work for you!"

"Good!" said Pedro heartily.

At least, he almost said it; for his tail wagged joyously and his eyes were full of eagerness. If he didn't actually utter the word of approval, he looked it.

Just as I was going out Miss Molly appeared, her sweet face alight with wonder. The events of the night were preventing her from brooding too much over the dreadful fate of her father. She came to my side eagerly.

"What has been happening?" she asked, her fine eyes full of excitement.

"Man on the roof, Miss Lambert!" I jerked out hurriedly. "Can't stop—awfully sorry—guy'nor waiting for Pedro. The fellow jumped into the moat, or lake, or whatever it is. He's escaped!"

"Oh," cried Molly, "how terrible! Do catch him!"

"Pedro'll track him down, miss!" I said confidently. "You see!"

I couldn't stop any longer, although I should have liked to. Grabbing Pedro's leash tightly, I led him round the house, and found Sexton Blake waiting eagerly and impatiently.

"Come along, Tinker—come along!" he said crisply. "Now, Pedro, you've got to work for your living—understand?"

Pedro understood right enough, and he sniffed at the cap as though he loved it. Then he was led slowly round the edge of the lake. He searched eagerly for the scent, and picked it up almost at once, at a spot between two bushes.

The old dog tugged at his leash tremendously, and nearly pulled the guy'nor over.

"By Jove! He's got it!" said Frank enthusiastically. "We'll soon catch up with that— Oh, but I've given you my word that I won't leave the manor grounds!" The lieutenant looked rather dismayed.

"I release you from that oath, Frank," said Sexton Blake promptly. "But I shouldn't advise you to come with us. We are quite capable of looking after ourselves, and I think you will be much better employed in staying here, explaining matters to Miss Molly—"

"By Jove, yes!" exclaimed Hambledon. "I'll stay!"

"I don't suppose we shall be very long," went on the guy'nor. "The trail is hot, and we shall travel at the double. I have an

idea that we shall capture our man almost at once. He may, indeed, be lurking among the trees within a couple of hundred yard of us. All right, Pedro, you can go ahead!"

The old bounder had been doing his very utmost to pull Sexton Blake's arm out of its socket. Now he loped off at a swinging stride, and we doubled after him. It was very fortunate indeed that the guy'nor had thought of bringing Pedro; without him we should have been quite helpless.

We cut through the belt of trees, and soon found ourselves scrambling through a thick hedge. The broken twigs, still wet, bore ample evidence of the passing of our soaked quarry. Pedro then led the way straight on to the open moor.

"Looks like a chase, guy'nor!" I panted. "It cannot be a very long one, Tinker; the fellow only had a few minutes' start."

We struck the road a few yards further on, crossed it, and then made off straight towards the cliffs. The trail was no erratic one; the man had obviously taken a deliberate, set course.

And at the expiration of another few minutes both Sexton Blake and I came to one conclusion—Pedro was leading us directly to Satan's Gap!

And, although we said nothing, the same thoughts which were in my mind filled the guy'nor's. Satan's Gap! It was at that spot we had seen the mysterious stranger down upon the beach—the man who had disappeared so suddenly from our gaze.

Could it be that he was one of the principal actors in this queer drama of the night? I wondered.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

The Secret of the Old Watch-Tower is Revealed to Us—We Investigate, and Descend Much Lower in the World—Then Something Nasty Happens.

PEDRO made for the old watch-tower in a straight line. Just before he reached it the guy'nor pulled him up. Pedro resented this, and looked up reproachfully.

"All right, old man!" murmured Sexton

Blake. "Keep quiet for a minute. Tinker, hold him while I scout round!"

Pedro remained very quiet. He badly wanted to rush forward to the end of the trail; but he was well trained, and he knew how to obey. I waited by his side while the detective crept forward.

I saw him disappear into the gaping hole, which had at one time been provided with a stout door. The place was a ruin now, windowless and doorless. As I waited for Blake to return I heard the roar of the sea far below.

The tide was nearly up by now, and although the sea had been calm at low tide the waves were now fairly noisy. They were breaking among the rocks with a deep, never-ceasing growl.

After a bit I saw a flash of light in the old tower, and then the guy'nor appeared again. He beckoned to me in the dim starlight. Pedro understood the meaning of that movement, and he nearly bowled me over.

"Steady, you fathead!" I said sternly.

But Pedro was very anxious to finish his job. He considered that he had been badly treated. Just when he had got within smelling distance of his quarry, he had been ordered to lie quiet! It was disgraceful, from Pedro's point of view. And now he meant to make up for lost time.

"You energetic lump of sausage-meat!" I gasped, as he literally pulled me along. "You've done your bit, you ass! This is where we start!"

Sexton Blake was standing in the doorway.

"Our man is here, Tinker," he said briskly. "No, Pedro, we sha'n't need you any more. You've done well, old boy—very well indeed!"

Pedro's expression changed quickly. He knew well enough what the guy'nor was saying, and his ears went back dismally when he heard that he wasn't wanted any more. But the next second his tail wagged. He could tell by Blake's tone that he was being complimented. And so, having done his little bit, he quietly fell behind us, and took no further interest in the proceedings.

"The chap's here, guy'nor?" I asked curiously.



Tinker retreated round the corner of the cavern with Pedro. Before he could feel any anxiety, Blake appeared. "Tinker!" he shouted. "It's just going——" He was interrupted by a deafening report.

"I think, Tinker, that we have discovered the secret of Satan's Gap," replied Sexton Blake smoothly. "Unless I am very much mistaken, there is a tunnel or a stairway leading down through the cliff to the rocks below!"

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed. "That explains it!"

"The presence of a stranger upon the beach this evening, you mean?" went on Blake. "Of course. The tide is now up, and our quarry has certainly disappeared somewhere below this tower. He can't escape at the other end, and so we have him trapped. I am hopeful of capturing him right away, Tinker!"

"Good business!" I said heartily.

The gov'nor turned and walked to the other side of the ruin, flashing his light before him. The bare stone walls were dry and crumbling. Right opposite the doorway there was a great hole in the floor, and worn stone steps led downwards. We passed down these, and found ourselves in a dank-smelling cellar, which was quite bare.

But in the very middle of the floor there were some traces of recent moisture. This clearly pointed to the fact that the soaked fugitive had been on the spot a few minutes before our arrival.

The cellar was quite empty, however, and there was no other exit of any sort. At least, that is what I first supposed. But then Sexton Blake centred his light upon one of the big stone-slabs which paved the floor.

"This has been recently moved, young 'un," said the great detective grimly. "Our friend has descended into the lower regions!"

"That's where he'll go after he's been tried, anyhow," I said cheerfully. "This bit is only just the start of his journey. He's the chap who murdered Mr. Lambert, of course! No doubt about that!"

We prised up the slab, and found that the gov'nor's surmise was correct. A great, deep cavity yawned at our feet, and a nasty, earthy smell came to us. And there was a sniff of seaweed, too.

Slimy-looking stone steps led straight downwards into utter blackness. They were much worn, and some of them were broken and jagged.

"Smugglers, gov'nor, of course!" I remarked in a whisper.

"I fully expect that this old tower was at one time the haunt of smugglers," Sexton Blake replied. "And it is therefore evident that there is—or was—some way of getting past the barrier rocks at the entrance of the Gap. But we are not concerned with bygone smugglers, Tinker. Follow me, and don't make a sound!"

He commenced the descent into the black stairway shaft, and I followed behind. Pedro, quite interested, brought up the rear. We went down and down, slowly and steadily, scarcely making a sound during our progress.

I thought the steps were never going to end. They were steep and slippery, and we were forced to go carefully; and the air, as we got lower and lower, became even more strongly flavoured with seaweed and salt.

But at last we reached the bottom. The stairway hadn't turned once; it just led straight down through the cliff in a direct, steep descent. And at the bottom we found ourselves in a big, roomy cavern.

The roar and swirl of the waves sounded loudly, and we knew that the sea was only a short distance off. There was a narrow, slit-like opening in the rock-wall of the cavern, and the hiss of the breaking waves came through there.

The cavern itself was empty, except for a few odds-and-ends. An ancient spirit-keg stood against one of the walls, and on this there lay some food and a bottle of something or other—beer, probably.

Of our quarry there was no sign; but there were plenty of indications that a man had recently inhabited the place. He couldn't have doubled back on us, because the stairway was the only exit, except for the slit I have mentioned. This was narrow and low, and obviously led into an outer cave.

"He's gone on to the beach, sir," I murmured.

"But the tide is in, Tinker," said Blake frowningly.

"Not quite, sir," I replied. "The rotter is probably trying to launch a boat of some sort. The sea's making a bit of a noise, but it's calm enough, really. It's only the rocks that make it sound rough!"

"Yes, a boat could be launched easily,"

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mused the gov'nor. "And if the fellow succeeds in eluding us by that means—But come!"

It was obviously silly to remain in the empty cavern while, in all probability, the murderer of Maxwell Lambert was escaping. Sexton Blake walked across to the slit in the cavern wall, and passed through, flashing his torch on the ground as he did so. At the same time he took out his powerful automatic pistol.

I followed the gov'nor through the crevice, and Pedro kept by my side. The old boy seemed a bit uneasy as soon as we got through. He didn't like the salty, seaweedy whiff, I supposed.

We were now in a long, narrow cave. The air was damp, and the roar of the breaking waves sounded terrifically. They weren't powerful, really, but the curious formation of the cave magnified the sound to an astounding degree.

Blake proceeded to the outlet, passing numerous cracks and crannies in the rocky walls, flashing his light from side to side now and again. Pedro paused at one of the cracks, and sniffed the air suspiciously. Then I heard him growl.

"Hallo! What's wrong, old man?" I asked, pausing.

The gov'nor had passed on with the light, and I was left in gloom.

"Half a tick, gov'nor!" I bellowed. "Pedro's found something or other!"

I saw Sexton Blake turn.

"What? I didn't hear what you said, Tinker!" he shouted above the roar of the breaking seas.

"Pedro's found—"

I paused, for the old dog was growling fiercely now. I took hold of his collar, bending down to do so.

Then in a flash something happened. Something butted into me violently, and I sprawled forward, knocking Pedro flying. He rolled over, growling, but was on his feet long before I was, and he darted back towards the inner cavern in a couple of bounds.

I just caught a glimpse of his flying form, and ahead of him a dim shadow showed for a second. There was a scurry of feet, a curse, and then a heavy, dull crash.

Pedro commenced baying furiously.

"Bring the light, gov'nor!" I roared.

Sexton Blake was by my side, and he flashed the light towards the cavern entrance. Nothing but a blank wall of rock stared at us! Pedro was there, with his feet on the wall, kicking up a terrific din.

"What's happened?" asked the gov'nor sharply.

"I—I don't know!" I gasped. "Somebody gave me a push, and I sprawled over. But where's the crevice we passed through, sir? I—I must be dreaming! It's gone! There's only the rocks there!"

Blake, caught his breath in with a hiss.

"Tricked!" he exclaimed angrily. "Confound it all, Tinker! What an absolute idiot I am!"

"I—I saw something rush along—"

"Of course you did, Tinker," went on the gov'nor bitterly. "You saw our quarry! He was skulking in one of those cracks, and I passed him unknowingly. Pedro, having a keen scent, smelt him out on the instant. And the fellow bowled you both over, and ran for it."

"But—but—"

"He dashed into the cavern, and slammed the door—"

"The—the door!" I stammered.

"The door is made to resemble a portion of the cavern wall itself—the door is, indeed, composed of the solid rock. The man has passed through, and we are barred from giving chase!" said the gov'nor angrily. "Furthermore, Tinker, our own position is fraught with dire peril!"

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

In Which the Guv'nor and I Find Ourselves in a Position of Great Danger—Sexton Blake Gets a Tophole Wheeze, which Results in a Pretty Little Explosion Worthy of the Redoubtable Mr. Guy Fawkes Himself.

I WAS considerably startled.

I was so startled, in fact, that I hadn't anything to say. While Sexton Blake had been speaking his light had been playing upon the seemingly solid wall of rock which stared at us. It wasn't solid, because we had passed that way less than two minutes before.

The gov'nor had been serious enough in his remarks. Of course, the whole thing was clear to me. The blighter we were after had been fairly trapped—and he knew it. And so he had skulked in one of the narrow cracks, and Blake had passed him unknowingly.

Pedro, who owns a nose like a vacuum-cleaner, had sniffed out the chap in a second. That's why he growled. I must have been as dense as a London fog to have stood there without realising the cause of his excitement.

And, before Pedro could act, the unknown villain slung me over and scooted. He only just managed to scrape through the door before Pedro reached him. Now I come to think of it, I had heard two dull bangs immediately following the slamming of the door, bolts being shot, of course.

"It's rotten, gov'nor!" I exclaimed plaintively. "The fellow's rushing up those steps now, I expect, and by the time we escape from this place he'll have disappeared completely. But old Pedro will track him—"

"Before Pedro can do any tracking, my boy, we shall have to get past this door," interjected the gov'nor grimly. "As you are aware, the tide is coming in—there is no escape by means of the sea. We are trapped, and it is idle to deny the fact. An unforeseen circumstance, Tinker—infernally annoying, but unavoidable."

I stared at Blake in dismay.

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed. "Of course, there can only be one way out of this cave—and that's up the stairs. Satan's Gap is a prison, especially when the tide's in. Why, high-water mark is twelve feet up the face of the cliff!"

Sexton Blake did not make any comment. He was examining the door very closely. I say "door" because it's the only suitable word; but, as a matter of fact, there was no door to be seen.

It was composed of the rock itself. Originally, an oblong slab must have been cut clean out of the whole piece—the wall, I mean. This wall of rock was about four inches thick—solid stone—and separated the outer cave from the inner cavern.

The old smugglers had cut the door clean out, and it fitted so tightly that there wasn't a crack to be seen until we went right close. Anybody entering the cave from outside would never guess that a big cavern lay beyond.

The gov'nor pressed his shoulders against it, and then shook his head.

"A pick-axe wouldn't shift it, Tinker!" he exclaimed above the roar of the waves. "The bolts, probably, are also of stone. At all events, we could hammer at the thing for a year without making any appreciable headway. We had better realise at once how grave this position is."

"We shall lose our man, you mean?"

"We shall probably lose our lives!" said Sexton Blake grimly.

"Why, how's that, gov'nor?" I asked, staring. "After all, we've only got to wait until the tide goes out, and then we can walk on to the beach—"

"If the tide comes fully up while we are in this cave, Tinker, we shall conclude this night's adventures by providing some excellent but unnecessary food for the fishes," interjected Sexton Blake grimly. "We must escape within the next fifteen minutes, or perish!"

I was aghast.

"Perish!" I ejaculated. "But—but I don't see— Oh, this rotten cave must be below high-water mark!"

Sexton Blake nodded, and flashed his light towards the entrance.

"As you see, young 'un, every wall is reeking with moisture; there is seaweed on the floor," went on the detective. "I have already been to the entrance, and I find that the waves are on the point of breaking in—"

The gov'nor was interrupted by a sudden swishing roar. A body of foaming water rushed in at the entrance, and then receded angrily. At the same time we were smothered with fine spray.

The waves were encroaching already!

The object of the rock-door was quite clear. The sea, at full tide, flooded the outer cave completely, and the door had been constructed out of the solid rock in order to prevent the water from rushing into the rear cavern.

For the moment we were defeated. The fugitive had escaped, and had succeeded in placing us in a position of terrible peril.

We walked to the outer exit of the cave, but soon came back. We found that a narrow ledge led down to some rocks below. And the ledge was already washed by the breaking waves.

Within fifteen minutes the cave itself would be submerged—or, at least, untenable. To attempt to escape by water would be madness itself. We could not possibly swim out of the Gap, for the current was fierce enough at low tide. Now it would be trebly as fierce. And, even supposing we reached the mouth of the Gap, we should be dashed to pieces on the jagged rocks.

There was no escape whatever.

The only thing I could see wasn't at all pleasant. We should just have to wait in the cave until the tide came right up and drowned us like rats in a hole.

That wave which came in must have been an exceptionally severe one, for none followed it. Before so long, however, the whole floor would be awash.

"Well, this is a fine state of affairs, gov'nor," I said, trying to keep calm. "I don't see that we're to blame, though. How the dickens could we know that the awful scoundrel was sneaking in one of these crevices?"

"It matters little who is to blame," said Sexton Blake gravely. "Death stares us in the face, Tinker. Beyond that door lies safety. The whole question is—how can we smash the door down?"

"Well, if we had about a ton of dynamite we might do it," I said hopefully. "But as we don't carry dynamite loose in our pockets, I don't see that we can do anything at all. There's nothing we can use as a battering-ram."

I believe I was pale, but I wasn't a bit frightened. It seemed to me that there was no escape for us. When you're faced by a door of solid rock—four inches thick, don't forget—and bolted as tight as a drum on the other side, you don't feel very confident of busting it down.

So I was quite surprised to see a sudden eager light spring into Sexton Blake's eyes.

"You mentioned dynamite, Tinker!" he exclaimed abruptly. "I believe you intimated also that we should require a ton. That was a slight exaggeration. One ounce would suit our purpose quite well—even less. The only way of escape is to blow the door down."

I grunted. "What's the good of talking about that?" I asked. "Might as well sigh for a steam-roller—that would do the trick all right if we could get it in here. Let's think of something feasible, for goodness' sake! Time's precious!"

The gov'nor nodded briskly.

"Very precious indeed," he agreed. "Therefore, Tinker, we will get to work without delay."

"Get to work?"

"Exactly! Chuck over your revolver, my lad!"

"My—my revolver?" I repeated blankly.

"My good Tinker, don't echo everything I say in that absurd fashion!" protested Blake impatiently. "You are carrying your revolver, I suppose?"

I lugged it out, and handed it over to him.

"But—but you're not going to fire at the rotten door?" I yelled. "What the thunder's the good of that? We might as well bang our heads against it! Bullets will only chip tiny fragments off, anyhow."

"I'm not an idiot, Tinker—please remember that!" snapped the gov'nor.

"Well, what do you want my revolver for, then?" I demanded.

"You'll see, if you watch."

Sexton Blake was brisk and alive now. What the dickens he wanted my automatic for I couldn't imagine. There was a little ledge level with his chest in the wall of the cave. He placed the torch on this, and then shook out all the cartridges from my revolver. Then he did the same with his own.

"It is a possible solution, young'un," he said crisply. "It may be a failure, but it's the only thing to be done. And we must do it before the water actually enters this cave!"

I understood in a flash.

"You're going to make a bomb!" I shouted excitedly.

"Something of the sort," he agreed calmly. "I am going to take out all these bullets, and extract the powder. The explosion from the bomb, as you call it, may not be sufficient to make any impression, but we shall have to chance our luck!"

"What a ripping idea!" I exclaimed. "But we shall have to be quick about it, gov'nor," I added anxiously. "The sea's getting jolly impatient!"

But Blake did not hurry himself in the

least. It was tricky work, and by hurrying he would not have helped matters. Calmly and deliberately he performed the task, and at last everything had been prepared.

The "bomb" was a rough affair, but it ought to be serviceable. There were two uncomfortable possibilities. A wave might come dashing in at any moment. If it came in just before the explosion occurred, the precious powder would be soaked, and rendered useless. That was the first possibility.

The second was even more uncomfortable. The explosion might be a little bit too effective. In fact, the whole blessed cave might collapse, and then we should be given a decent burial, free, gratis, and for nothing.

I didn't want to be buried at all, and so this prospect wasn't very alluring. The only thing was to wait and see what would happen. There wasn't any sense in meeting trouble half-way, anyhow.

Sexton Blake made everything ready. He placed the charge just at the bottom of the door, and in the centre. Then he laid a fine train of powder along the dry stone floor. The spray hadn't reached the end of the cave yet.

Pedro sat watching all these preparations quite calmly. In fact, he was bored. He even started dozing off. He didn't know that he was a bit nearer to Kingdom Come than he had ever been before.

"All ready now, Tinker!" said Blake sharply. "Take Pedro to the entrance; never mind the breaking waves. A wetting won't do any harm. I'll fire this thing, and rush out after you!"

"Let me fire it, gov'nor!" I said eagerly.

"No; there's danger. I'll do it!"

The gov'nor's tone was very decisive, and I didn't waste any time in argument. Time was too jolly precious! I grabbed Pedro's leash, and led him to the far-end of the cave. It was a good thing the cave was so deep, for this would probably save us from flying splinters. There was a sharp corner, too, round which we could shelter in safety.

The waves were breaking on the rocks noisily, and Pedro protested in no uncertain manner. But I sternly ordered him to remain still, and he obeyed. The foam washed over our feet, and the spray smothered us. Then, before I could feel any anxiety, I heard rapid footsteps. Sexton Blake appeared.

"Hold steady, Tinker!" he shouted. "It's just going—"

He was interrupted by a deafening report. The very rocks seemed to shake, and a terrific gust of smoke-laden air roared out of the cave like steam from a pipe. Numerous splashes, too, told us that portions of flying rock had come out, too. If it hadn't been for the jutting rocks, we should have been hit in scores of places.

A great cloud of smoke followed, but by the sound of the report there had been no big fall of rock. The charge hadn't been sufficient to cause a general collapse.

"Now for the verdict," said the gov'nor calmly.

He plunged into the dust and smoke, and I followed. Pedro was a bit frightened now, and seemed reluctant to accompany me. All this business was getting on his nerves. He couldn't understand what was the matter, and I didn't feel like explaining things to him.

The dust was choking inside, but we plunged through it, and arrived at the end of the cave. The rock wall was standing just the same! The gov'nor's electric torch showed it up plainly, with the scorched, blackened spot where the charge had exploded.

"N.G.!" I groaned. "Oh, gov'nor, how utterly rotten!"

"You are referring to the door, I presume?" suggested Blake smoothly. "That is certainly rotten, for it is cracked in fifty places. See, Tinker, a kick or two will bring it down!"

"By gum!" I shouted joyously.

The gov'nor was right. The door, although standing, had been cracked and splintered over every inch of its surface. Without waiting for Sexton Blake to act, I kicked furiously. At the same time, as luck would have it, a great wave came roaring and swirling in, half smothering us.

The explosion had taken place just in the nick of time.

And as I kicked it there was a rumbling crash. The rock door collapsed in a jumbled heap, and the foam swirled among the debris impotently.

The way to freedom was clear!

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

We Get Back to High Moor Manor, and Frank Hambleton Tells Us the Whole Truth—We are Greatly Enlightened, but the Mystery Seems to be as Deep as Ever—Which, as We All Agree, is Rotten.

WE were saved!

It was not until then that I fully realised the awful peril we had been in. But I know for an absolute fact that if it hadn't been for Sexton Blake's 'cute idea we should have perished miserably.

With that rock-door barring our way of escape, we should have been drowned like Huns in a rammed U-boat. But, of course, Huns deserve to be drowned—U-boat Huns, anyhow—whereas we were three gentle creatures, with no particularly bad habits.

We stepped over the debris of the wrecked door into the big cavern, and a swirl of foaming water from the next wave hurried after us, as though it was angry at losing its prey.

The cavern was quite empty; the bird had flown.

"The awful scoundrel!" I said feelingly. "Fancy trying to kill us like that, gov'nor! He's got away now, of course. We can set Pedro on the trail again, but the fellow's got a thundering long start!"

Sexton Blake was smiling pleasantly.

"Never mind our interesting quarry for the time being, Tinker," he said. "We must congratulate ourselves upon having escaped from that terrible predicament. We don't know who the man is, or what his object was in killing Mr. Maxwell Lambert. But, make no mistake, he shall answer for his crime!"

"You think he was the murderer, gov'nor?"

"There can be little doubt of that, my lad," said the gov'nor. "The callous manner in which he left us to our fate proves that he is utterly desperate and villainous. We shall have to find out what he was doing on the roof. According to my theory, we ought to find an interesting object in that ornamental lake!"

"An interesting object, gov'nor?"

"Exactly. Can't you guess?"

"No, I'm blessed if I can!" I said.

"Well, we won't bother about that now," went on Blake calmly. "To tell you the truth, I am anxious to get back to the Manor. The Unknown may have gone back there, and Frank is all alone!"

"Scott! You don't think—"

"I am not exactly sure what I think," interrupted the detective. "Let's get back, and pursue our inquiries. If Pedro picks up the trail, all the better. Our friend knew that Pedro was with us, and he will therefore think that the dog has perished. He won't have taken any pains to smother his trail!"

But after we had mounted the long flight of stone steps, and had reached the welcome open air again, Pedro made straight off across the moor in the direction of High Moor Manor.

"He's following the same old trail, sir," I remarked.

"Or the fresh one," said Blake. "The murderer may have gone back, as I said."

We hurried along, eager and expectant. The hour was now very late—or, rather, very early. But dawn was still an hour or two distant, and the sky was dark and cloudy. The great moor looked grim in the deep gloom. A chill wind was moaning across its vast surface.

When we arrived at the Manor grounds Pedro followed exactly the same course as before. He went through the gap in the hedge, and then on to the edge of the lake. It was clear that he had taken us back in the murderer's original path. In all probability, Pedro had mixed up the two trails near the old watch-tower, and had followed the wrong one.

We weren't going back, however, to make him find the right one. We wanted to hear what Frank Hambleton had to report.

We were damp and uncomfortable; in places where the sea had splashed over us we were quite soaked. But sea-water wouldn't hurt us, and there was no time to think of changing. Besides, we hadn't any other clobber to change into.

Our experience hadn't affected our nerves in the least. The gov'nor, I know, was tremendously keen to get to the bottom of this strange affair. Frank Hambleton wasn't

guilty, although he must have been implicated in some way or another. It was a rummy business altogether.

It was the complete lack of motive which puzzled me. Mr. Lambert hadn't had any enemies. It wasn't a case of revenge. And it wasn't a case of robbery. Then what the dickens was it? And what did Sexton Blake expect to find in the lake?

The threads were horribly tangled, and they seemed to get worse instead of better.

As we hurried round the house we saw a light in the servants' quarters. Apparently the worthy domestics were too unsettled to go to bed. They were probably waiting for Rodwell to come back with the police. For we soon found that the police had not arrived. Rodwell had been sent off in the trap to the village.

Frank and Molly were talking with Mrs. East, the old housekeeper, in the drawing-room. They all looked up expectantly as we strode in. I dare say we were looking pretty disreputable.

"Did you catch the fellow, Mr. Blake?" asked Hambledon eagerly.

"Nearly; but he escaped us."

"Oh, how dreadful!" cried Molly, in distress. "We—we thought—"

"That a man of my reputation and over-rated ability would not fail to capture a fleeing criminal upon an open moor?" suggested Blake smoothly. "I am not super-human, and Tinker and I met with a bad check"

"We nearly got killed!" I put in. "That scoundrel tried to murder us, too!"

"Great glory! The man's mad—he must be!" said the lieutenant. "That's it, Mr. Blake. The fellow must have escaped from an asylum—"

"No," smiled the gov'nor. "He is not a lunatic. He has, in fact, displayed great cunning. But has anything happened here during my absence?"

"Nothing whatever, Mr. Blake."

The detective sank into a chair, and I followed suit.

"Why, you are both soaking!" cried Molly suddenly. "No, don't get up, please! Never mind the chairs! I didn't mean that. But what has happened to you? One would think you had been in the sea. But that's impossible."

Blake smiled grimly.

"Not impossible, because we have been down among the rocks of Satan's Gap," he replied. "I will tell you what happened."

He did so, and they listened with interest.

"So that's why we lost our quarry," finished up Blake. "He tricked us, and we nearly perished in that cave. Perhaps the man is now fleeing across the moor, but I have an idea that he is still skulking about."

Frank looked grave.

"It was a ghastly experience," he said. "That explosion idea of yours was splendid, Mr. Blake! But it seems to me that I ought to be perfectly frank with you. This case is puzzling, and it would help you, I believe, if I told you all the facts as I know them. Mr. Lambert was killed by a terrible blow from my brassie. I want to tell you how that club left my possession."

Sexton Blake nodded.

"I was expecting you to tell me everything," he said quietly. "Please go ahead."

Molly murmured a few words to the housekeeper, and they both left the room, closing the door gently behind them. Frank produced his cigar-case, and he and the gov'nor lit up.

"Now, Mr. Blake, I am going to tell you everything I know," said the young officer thoughtfully. "You're wondering why I didn't speak out at first? I'll explain that. A stranger has appeared on the scene—the murderer, without a doubt. So I feel justified in speaking. The position has been infernally awkward, and I don't mind admitting it."

"It's awkward still, as far as I can see," I remarked.

"It is, Tinker," agreed Hambledon. "Now, Mr. Blake, I expect you are fully aware of the state of affairs between Molly and myself. We are engaged. She promised to be my wife this evening."

"You must allow me to congratulate you, Frank!" smiled the gov'nor.

"Thank you! I've loved Molly for months past, but my love-affairs have been very difficult. Mr. Lambert detested me. He quarrelled with me several times. He told me plainly that he would never allow me to become his son-in-law. But Molly, you see, held different views, and the resultant state of affairs was very difficult for both of us."

"Why did Mr. Lambert detest you, Frank?"

Hambledon flushed angrily.

"I don't know. Nobody knows," he replied. "Because he was an ill-tempered, selfish, prejudiced old man, I suppose. Oh, I can't help talking like that about him! He's dead, and it would be hollow for me to pretend to be sorry. I'm not. He was an absolute rotter! He treated poor Molly shamefully, although she was always dutiful and gentle with him. By Jove, I've felt like knocking him down dozens of times! But I didn't kill him—I didn't touch a hair of his head!"

"Didn't you ever give him cause to dislike you?"

"Never. Unless you call paying attention to his daughter cause," said Hambledon. "He never gave me a chance. He ordered me off his grounds the very first time I met him. That was because I was with Molly, I expect. The truth is, Mr. Blake, Maxwell Lambert was utterly selfish. He didn't want to lose his daughter. He wanted to keep her locked up in this barren moorland home until she became an old maid. She looked after him well, and he only thought of his own comfort. The man was brutal, too. He often handled Molly disgracefully. She did not love him. How could she? The shock of to-night's tragedy has upset the poor girl's nerves, but in her heart she can have no deep sorrow."

Sexton Blake nodded.

"Please go on!" he said. "I am very interested."

"Well, this evening, after you left me on the golf-links, I fully intended to get home for dinner," Frank went on. "I practised a bit, but my real object in staying out by myself was to see Miss Lambert. We had arranged to meet in a little summer-house, on the edge of the Manor gardens at half-past seven. I should have been late for dinner, I know, but that would not have mattered. Molly and I had often met in the summer-house; it was a little secret retreat of ours. With her father so opposed to me, we were forced to meet in secret. It was deucedly awkward, as you will imagine."

"All troubles and difficulties are light where love is concerned," smiled Blake.

"Well, there's something in that," agreed Hambledon, nodding. "But, just before leaving the links something happened which really angered me, and which made my relations with Mr. Lambert even more difficult. I was strolling along the grass bordering this property when I happened to see a young bird entangled in some netting. Nothing to be startled at, as you will admit, but it led to trouble."

"Trouble with the bird?" I asked, with a grin.

"Not exactly. I crossed the fence to release the little bouncer," said Frank. "Its legs were rather badly tangled up, and I didn't like to go past without lending a hand. Silly of me, perhaps you'll say, but there it was. Well, I did the trick, and the bird flew off decidedly grateful. Then, as I was about to return to the links, I heard a growl, and Lambert's dog rushed at me."

"It's a fierce brute, and Lambert had always taught it to fly at me on sight—that was one of his little ideas of geniality. The dog looked too aggressive for my liking. I wasn't afraid of it, but I was angry. I knew very well that Lambert had set the animal on to me deliberately."

"What did you do?" asked the gov'nor.

"I slung my brassie at the brute," said Hambledon. "Perhaps I was rather too severe. Anyhow, the club caught the animal fairly in the ribs, and it rushed off howling. Then, before I could turn, Mr. Lambert himself appeared with a shot-gun. I don't think I have ever seen him so furious as he was at that moment."

"He simply foamed at the mouth with anger, and threatened to pepper me with gunshots unless I moved off his property on the second." Frank breathed hard. "I kept quite calm. It didn't suit my book to have another quarrel with him. But I pointed out to him that my brassie was lying in a clump of bracken, ten yards away."

"Ah!" said Sexton Blake. "That's one point."

"Lambert abused me disgracefully—he even used bad language," went on Hambledon warmly. "But that shot-gun looked rather spiteful, and I knew quite well that he wouldn't hesitate to use it while he was in that state of fury. So, upon the whole, I thought it wisest to beat as dignified a retreat as possible. So I went, leaving my brassie in the Manor grounds."

"Lambert must have picked it up," I said sagely.

"Quite a clever deduction of yours,

Tinker," smiled Frank. "Undoubtedly he picked it up. But I didn't know what became of it at the time. Well, I mooched about for half an hour, and then went to the summer-house to meet Molly. By that time I had cooled down, and had fully determined to settle matters with Molly, one way or another. I even thought of persuading her to run away. You'll admit that my love-affairs were somewhat stormy."

"The summer-house is easily reached from the links by slipping through a belt of trees to the borders of the Manor gardens. Fortunately, Lambert had never suspected our meeting-place, and so we were able to chat together in private."

"Was Miss Lambert waiting for you?" I asked interestedly.

"No!" growled Frank. "I was late, too. She didn't turn up until half-past ten!"

"Phew! That must have tried your patience!" I exclaimed. "Three blessed hours! No wonder you didn't turn up for dinner!"

"It was a tedious wait, I'll admit," said Lieutenant Hambledon ruefully. "But I couldn't very well leave the spot while I was expecting Molly every minute, could I? I was anxious, too. I was pretty sure that her brute of a father was deliberately keeping her indoors. This actually turned out to be the case, as she told me when she finally arrived. Well, I'll skip the next ten minutes—"

"Naturally!" I grinned.

"Now then, Tinker, I don't want any cheek!" said Frank, his eyes twinkling. "I'll just tell you the decision we came to in plain words. I asked Molly to be my wife, and she gave me the answer I longed for. But she added a proviso which somewhat dampened my spirits. I'd known for months that she would give me the right answer at the right moment, and it was my idea to take her away from her father almost at once. But she didn't care for that idea. She wanted everything to be amiable. Above all, she was anxious for her father and myself to become friends."

"I told her it was impossible, but she didn't accept that view. In short," added Frank gloomily, "she told me to leave her severely alone for three months. I had her promise, and so I knew that everything was all right in the main. But three months! It was rather hard lines, Mr. Blake. She said that the present situation was impossible, and that during the three months she would do her very utmost to influence her father in my favour. Well, I was forced to agree to the arrangement. How could I do otherwise?"

"I think I understand now why you were so moody when you returned home at eleven-thirty," smiled Blake. "My dear Frank, you were very short-sighted. Within a week Miss Lambert would have repented of her decision. But your young heart was disappointed, and you were, in consequence, rather savage with those whom you loved. Why didn't you tell your mother and father of all this?"

Frank shifted uncomfortably.

"The pater was rather opposed to the idea of my marrying Molly," he replied gruffly. "I knew he'd alter once he came into close contact with Molly. But I had promised her I wouldn't say anything until the agreed-upon time had expired. Our engagement was just our own little secret. Under the circumstances I decided to leave for London without a minute's delay. Then, while I was dressing, the news came that Mr. Lambert had been murdered. I was amazed and shocked, but before I could tell you that I'd altered my decision you had cleared off. For, of course, with Mr. Lambert dead, my object in going to London was destroyed."

"And that is all you know?" asked the gov'nor keenly.

"All," replied the lieutenant seriously. "Honestly, Mr. Blake, I know nothing whatever of the murder. Who killed Mr. Lambert, or why he was killed, is an absolute enigma to me."

"But why the dickens didn't you tell us all this straight away, Mr. Hambledon?" I asked curiously.

"Well, the whole case looked rather black against me," replied Frank. "And, by speaking out, I thought I might possibly bring suspicion on Molly. She had remained silent because of the same reason, only she was anxious on my account."

"I am glad you got rid of that notion," smiled the gov'nor. "Really, Frank, you should have been candid with me at the

very start. There's no fear of your being implicated in the slightest degree. In the absence of the mysterious stranger whom Tinker and I chased, the case did appear somewhat black."

Just then the door opened, and Molly entered.

"Have you finished your little talk?" she asked, her sweet face flushed somewhat.

Frank smiled at her.

"Yes, I've told Mr. Blake everything," he replied.

"And I, Miss Lambert, would like to ask you a question or two," said Sexton Blake, rising to his feet. "Can you tell me what the time was—approximately—when you and Lieutenant Hambledon parted?"

"Why, some little time before eleven," replied the girl.

"And you remained in the summer-house?"

"Yes. I was thinking," she replied, with a slight flush. "I don't think I quite realised how late it was. And it was while I was sitting there that I heard my father's terrible cry. I immediately rushed to the house, and—"

"Please don't give yourself pain by repeating those details," interjected Blake quietly. "Do you know whether your father incurred the enmity of anybody during the past few years? A servant, say—a discharged groom—"

"No, Mr. Blake; I don't know of a soul!" declared Molly gravely. "Curiously enough, my father always treated servants generously. Yet he was harsh and cruel to people he disliked. And he engendered dislikes for no apparent cause. Why he showed such an antipathy to Sir Andrew Hambledon and his family has always been a mystery to me. When we first came here there was a little dispute about a strip of land between the two estates, and I believe that started the ill-feeling. But father certainly had no enemies."

The gov'nor asked Molly a few more questions, but she could tell us nothing of any value. Mr. Maxwell Lambert had just been a crusty, gouty old gentleman with plenty of money, but hard to get on with owing to his violent temper.

And the mystery, it seemed, was as deep as ever.

We all felt rather depressed. And yet, had we only known it, the knot was even then loosening, and the threads would soon be straightened out.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

Sexton Blake Finds the "Something" in the Lake He Had Been Looking For—And the Air is Cleared Somewhat—Frank Hambledon, for Some Reason, Suddenly Gets Excited.

SEXTON BLAKE moved across to the door.

"I am going outside now to make a little experiment—to test a theory. Do you care to come, Frank? I am very anxious to solve this strange riddle. I have a general idea as to how the crime was committed, but the motive is still obscure."

"I'll come, of course," said the lieutenant. "The police will be hithering about before long, and then we shall be cross-examined until we are fit to drop. If you could only piece the facts together before the police arrive—"

"That is my wish," said Blake briskly.

We passed outside, and found the night was still dark. Not even the first faint flush of dawn was showing in the eastern sky. We had left Pedro indoors, for he wouldn't be any use on this particular expedition.

At the scene of the crime the gov'nor came to a halt. Frank and I looked about us interestedly. Particularly we looked at the wall of the house. It was bare and windowless. How had the murderer gained access to the roof? If a ladder had been used, why wasn't it here? Ladders can't be shoved in a chap's pocket. Rope-ladders can be stowed away, of course; but those two marks on the gravel couldn't have been made by a rope-ladder.

"I have been thinking this thing out," said Blake musingly. "Whether my theory will prove to be correct or not remains to be seen. First of all, we will go round to the lake."

"What on earth for?" asked the lieutenant.

"To look for something in the water."

"To look for what?" I yelled.

"Something that floats," replied Blake, with a chuckle.

And, without saying anything further, he walked round the house. We followed him. Arriving at the lake, the gov'nor flashed his torch upon the surface of the water. There was nothing to be seen except the water itself, and some clumps of lilies near the left bank.

Sexton Blake walked round slowly, and then gave a little exclamation. Bending over the side, he reached down and grabbed something from among the lilies. With a heave he pulled it out, and then Frank and I saw a portion of an ordinary wooden ladder. It had been floating nearly submerged, and the lilies had effectually hidden it.

I gave a grunt.

"A ladder!" I exclaimed. "Why, that's what I said all along. You scoffed at me when I said those marks on the gravel had been made by a ladder, gov'nor. I was right, after all!"

"For once, Tinker, your wits were keener than mine," said Sexton Blake calmly. "The finding of this ladder in the lake makes things quite clear to me, although the motive for the crime is still veiled."

"Clear!" exclaimed Hambledon. "The thing's no clearer to me, Mr. Blake. What's that ladder got to do with the crime? And how did it get into this lake? I'm hanged if I can get the affair straight at all!"

"Well, to begin with, Mr. Lambert was not killed as we first suspected. He did not receive a swinging blow from your brassie. I don't know whether you are aware of it, Frank, but two of Mr. Lambert's ribs were broken, and his left hand severely grazed."

"By Jove, I didn't know that!"

"Neither did I," I cut in. "You didn't tell me, gov'nor."

"I was puzzled, Tinker, and you know well enough that I never speak of my theories until I have proved them to be sound," replied Blake. "Now, there were two alternatives. Either Mr. Lambert had been struck twice with the brassie—once on the head, and once on the chest—or he had sustained a severe fall. I regarded the latter possibility as the most probable."

"Why?"

"Because of the grazed hand. The poor man fell, of course, but the hand was grazed so severely that only a drop from a considerable height would have caused the injury. If you will come indoors, I will show you exactly what I mean."

We passed inside, and went straight to the room in which the body was lying. Here Sexton Blake showed us the dead man's hand. As he had said, it was shockingly grazed. Moreover, two fingers were broken.

We made the further discovery that certain portions of the clothing had been cut and ripped by the contact with the gravel. I hadn't noticed this at all previously. But I now realised that all this could have been caused by an ordinary fall—that is, a fall from a standing height.

We left the room of death in silence, and sat down in the big, comfortable hall, and then Sexton Blake proceeded to explain his theory.

"Mr. Lambert's condition told me quite conclusively that he had fallen from a considerable height," he began. "I half believed that the whole thing was an accident—that he had gone on to the roof for some reason, and had fallen off by mischance. But the discovery of the stranger on the roof knocked that idea on the head."

"As far as I can see, Mr. Lambert was sitting indoors—in his library, I suppose—when he heard a suspicious sound from outside. He suspected a tramp, or something of that nature, and he picked up your brassie, Frank, to use as a weapon if necessary. Of course, he had brought it home with him after the little scene you have described."

"Yes, that's clear enough," nodded Hambledon.

"Well, this is how I reconstruct the tragedy," went on the gov'nor. "When Mr. Lambert came round the house he found a ladder reared against the wall, and a man climbing up it. Why any man should wish to gain access to the roof is still a puzzle to me. Mr. Lambert must have thrown his club down in anger, and it fell upon the gravel. Then he climbed the ladder in an outburst of fury, and had reached the top in safety."

"He must have been mad to place himself at such a disadvantage," I said.

"He was not mad, Tinker, only furious. He did not stop to consider the risk. Mr.

Lambert was hot-tempered, and he was naturally incensed to discover a marauder climbing on to the roof. I have a shrewd suspicion that he suspected the man of being you, Frank. He thought that you were trying to get into the house."

"By Jove! That's possible!" said Hambledon, nodding. "That would account for his fury, wouldn't it? He thought that I was up to some disgraceful game or other concerning Molly!"

"Exactly. But when he got to the top of the ladder he had been pushed violently off by the stranger. It may not have been deliberate; it may have been a mere attempt to prevent Mr. Lambert from stepping on to the roof. At all events, he fell, and his head, by a strange chance, crashed upon the brassie. Do you see? Presumably, Mr. Lambert did not die immediately, for he must have moved convulsively, casting the club into the flower-bed."

"But he couldn't have done that, gov'nor," I protested.

"My dear Tinker, I don't mean that he picked the club up," said Blake. "It may have been hurled there by the force of the fall. A thing like that can never be explained, but I am quite sure that Mr. Lambert's dying convulsions caused the brassie to find its way on to the flower-bed. It is a minor detail, anyhow."

"And what of the murderer?" asked Frank.

"He was terrified, naturally, but had been afraid to descend, lest he should be caught red-handed. He knew that Mr. Lambert's cry must have aroused the household; and so, on the spur of the moment, he pulled the ladder up on the roof!"

"Great Scott!" I gasped. "Of course!"

"Once the ladder was on the roof—which is flat, remember—there was nothing whatever to show that a second man had been present," continued the gov'nor shrewdly. "When Miss Lambert arrived upon the scene, and a minute later Rodwell and Mrs. East, they saw nothing of a suspicious nature. They simply found Mr. Lambert lying dead upon the path."

"But, unknown to them, the murderer was on the roof the whole time, probably looking down at them. I think the most likely assumption, however, is that the fellow attempted to escape without delay. What did he do? What is the most natural thing a man in that position would do?"

"Why, get down and hook it!" I said promptly.

"Precisely," agreed the gov'nor. "And he would just as naturally choose the other side of the house as a spot to lower the ladder. While the servants were gathering panic-stricken round the dead body the murderer would be escaping. But the scoundrel met with a very unpleasant check!"

I gave a little gasp.

"The lake!" I ejaculated. "The ladder fell into the lake!"

"Exactly. He dragged it across the roof, lowered it hurriedly, and in the darkness the lower end of it slipped into the water," said Blake calmly. "It fell before he could prevent the calamity. And then? Why, then the man was marooned upon the roof, with absolutely no means of getting down. He was there until, in sheer desperation, he leapt down into the water."

"But what was he doing on the ladder in the first place?" I asked.

Sexton Blake shook his head.

"I am still unenlightened on that point," he replied. "What could he have been doing? Attempting to break into the house? Assuredly not, for there were many lower windows open at the time."

"H'm! It's a puzzle," said Frank thoughtfully.

"The stranger was no lunatic," went on the gov'nor. "From what Tinker and I have seen, we know that he was in the old cavern at Satan's Gap this evening—or, rather, last evening. He had come to the Gap deliberately, with the set intention of getting on to the roof of this house. A burglar? Possibly; but why should he trouble to bring a ladder round, when several windows were unlatched, and would remain unlatched, probably, all night? The roof, he must have known, was hopeless!"

"It all seems so pointless!" I exclaimed.

"Hardly, Tinker. But we can't quite see the point, that's all," smiled Sexton Blake. "It is very clear, however, that the man, although a stranger to us, was no stranger to this locality."

"How do you arrive at that conclusion, Mr. Blake?"

"My dear Frank, didn't the fellow know all

about the secret stairway down to Satan's Gap?" asked Blake. "That points to very intimate knowledge of the neighbourhood. The man was evidently a native of this coast, and he came to the Manor for one certain purpose. What could that purpose be? If there had been a big burglary here a few weeks ago—"

Hambledon suddenly turned red with excitement.

"By glory!" he cried, leaping up. "Why didn't I think of it before? I've got it, Mr. Blake! A'pound to a ha'penny I've guessed the truth!"

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

In Which Frank Tells Us of a Nine-Year-Old Crime, and of the Misdoings of Black Peter—Soon Afterwards We Interview the Gentleman Himself—And Dawn Breaks, to Find the Mystery Cleared Up.

LIEUTENANT FRANK HAMBLEDON stood before us, quivering with intense excitement. His eyes were gleaming, and his expression was eloquent of the emotion which filled him.

Sexton Blake nodded to the chair.

"Sit down, Frank," he said smoothly. "You've guessed the truth, you say?"

"Of course I have!" declared Hambledon. "Why, it's as clear as daylight! Black Peter was the man who killed Mr. Lambert!"

"Black Peter?" I asked. "Who's he when he's at home, anyway?"

Frank sat down again.

"He's a scallywag, Tinker," he said quickly. "He was a native of Hanniscombe, the village eight miles along the coast. In Hanniscombe Black Peter earned a very bad reputation for himself. His full name is Peter Fletcher, but he was always called Black Peter on account of his evil ways. When I was a boy I used to hear all sorts of tales about him!"

"Why do you connect him with this crime?" asked Blake.

"Because of an affair which occurred at this very house just nine years ago," said the lieutenant. "I know the history of it well. Mr. Lambert only bought the house four years ago. Previous to that it was the Yorkshire seat of the old Earl of Hanniscombe!"

The gov'nor nodded.

"I knew that the earl had a place in this county," he said, "but it is news to me that High Moor Manor was his country seat. The Earl of Hanniscombe was very poor, if I remember correctly."

"For a member of the peerage, he was poverty-stricken," said Frank. "That was no discredit to him, of course. The family had been in difficulties for generations. Just nine years ago the earl's son, the Hon. Arthur Lacey, arrived home from India or Burmah—Burmah, I believe. He had been away for two years, and he brought with him some splendid Burmese rubies—stones of the pigeon-blood variety—the very finest in the world, I imagine."

"Ah, I am beginning to see daylight!" murmured Blake.

"Lacey had worked hard to obtain those rubies," went on Frank. "He had had luck, of course, and with the proceeds of the stones he meant to restore the fading glories of the old family. But, two days after Lacey's arrival at the Manor, the rubies disappeared."

"Phew!" I whistled. "And Black Peter took them?"

"Yes. The rubies, if I remember rightly, were left in one of the bed-rooms—the son's bed-room," said Hambledon. "That was disgracefully careless. But who would think of robbery in this wild spot? Just at that time Peter Fletcher, who was a painter by trade—or a plumber—was repairing the coping of the roof. He had ladders against the walls, and all that sort of thing. The jewels were missed, and certain clues pointed to Black Peter as the thief. He was the only man, in fact, who could have gained access to the bed-room. He must have entered by the window and stolen the rubies. They were never found."

"I was waiting to hear that," smiled Blake. "I think I can piece the rest together myself, Frank. Black Peter was found guilty, and

sentenced to ten years' penal servitude. He is now out on ticket-of-leave. The sentence was unusually severe, because the man would not reveal the hiding-place of the rubies."

"Exactly! The old earl searched for months, but the stones never came to light," said Hambledon. "Lacey was nearly mad with fury and chagrin, as you can well imagine. It was not much comfort to know that the thief was in prison. Five years later the old earl, disappointed and heart-broken, died. Lacey became the Earl of Hanniscombe, and he is now in London, I believe. He sold the Manor very soon after his father's death."

"And Black Peter, having been released from prison, remembered the prize he had hidden," said Sexton Blake, nodding. "He came straight to this spot, and took up his quarters in the old cavern at Satan's Gap. Without a doubt, Frank, we have arrived at the solution of the mystery. Evidently the rubies are hidden on the roof—embedded in the concrete itself possibly. Black Peter, having stolen the gems, realised that discovery might follow. So he concealed his booty as soon as he obtained it. It would have been a simple thing to conceal the rubies in the wet plaster. He was repairing the coping-stones, I understand?"

"Something like that," replied Frank. "But has he recovered his loot? Did he get the gems while he was on the roof?"

"It is more than likely," was Blake's comment. "But I feel inclined to make an examination at once. In any case, Black Peter is doomed. He will be traced and arrested before a week has passed, I am sure."

Of course, the whole affair was explained now. I realised how naturally everything had happened. Frank himself had never been in any real danger, although we had thought him guilty at one time. Mr. Lambert may have been murdered, but Black Peter had obviously committed the crime in a moment of desperation. It was, after all, something in the nature of an accident. Mr. Lambert had fallen off the ladder in the struggle at the top.

Sexton Blake rose to his feet and passed outside.

Now, away in the east, the first flush of dawn was showing. We walked down the side path without speaking. The gov'nor passed a clump of bushes, and we followed behind.

Then suddenly Blake halted.

"Not a sound!" he exclaimed, in a tense whisper.

"Why, what—?" Frank stopped as the detective held up his finger.

Hambledon and I looked past the bushes. The blank wall at the side of the house was faintly visible, and there, reared against it, was the ladder! On the ladder, at the very top, stood a dim figure!

Black Peter had returned!

We all stood watching, silent and tense. The faint sounds of a steel implement striking stonework came to our ears. And we could see Black Peter working hurriedly and energetically.

He was chipping the coping away at the lower part of it, just underneath the roof itself. And we understood. Until now he had never had the opportunity of getting at his spoils.

Mr. Lambert had surprised him even as he mounted the ladder, and from the roof itself he had been unable to reach down to the spot where the rubies were concealed.

After the incident at Satan's Gap, Black Peter had apparently been hanging about, awaiting an opportunity to complete his task.

And now, in a state of desperation, he had returned. He knew well enough that he might never have another opportunity. And he knew, too, that the police had not arrived on the scene. He probably thought that Sexton Blake and I were dead.

But the man was no professional crook.

He had made a bad blunder to start with. He should never have essayed his risky task so early in the night. And, having failed at the first attempt, he ought to have cleared right out of the neighbourhood for several weeks. But Black Peter was a rough, black-guardly villager, with no idea of caution. He had come here for the jewels, and he meant to have them.

It was now or never, and Black Peter preferred now.

Which was, perhaps, very fortunate, for it saved us a lot of trouble, and it saved the police a lot of trouble. He couldn't have been more obliging if we had asked him.

We allowed him to work away industriously.

"Let him get the stones," whispered Sexton Blake. "He knows where they are better than we do. When he's got them we'll take a hand. And, unless I am mistaken, I can hear the sound of a motor-car. Perhaps it is the police. If so, events could not have turned out better."

Even as the gov'nor was speaking we saw Black Peter put his tool into his pocket. Then he commenced descending the ladder with swift steps.

"Come on!" muttered Blake crisply.

We pelted across the lawn, and arrived at the foot of the ladder just as Black Peter stepped off it. He twirled round, with a low, snarling cry. But he was gripped in a second, and held firm.

"Well, Frank?" asked Blake crisply.

"Yes, he's Peter Fletcher right enough," said Hambledon. "You scoundrel! You killed Mr. Lambert!"

The man uttered a gasping cry. He was staring at Sexton Blake and me—staring as though his eyes would bulge from their sockets. Then he started struggling madly, and fiercely. He was a hulking ruffian, and had the strength of a bull.

But Frank and the gov'nor held him easily.

"I'm done, gents!" he panted at last. "I—I thought I'd burgle this house, but you've beaten me! I've got nothin'—"

"Nothing except the rubies—eh?" said Blake pleasantly.

He dived his hand into Black Peter's coat pocket, and fished out some objects which looked like pebbles covered with plaster. They were the Earl of Hanniscombe's rubies.

"I didn't kill the gent!" gasped Peter frantically. "I swear I didn't, gov'nor! He fell off the ladder. I didn't touch him hardly. He was goin' to collar me, an' I tried to keep him off. He fell down—"

"It may have been an accident, but you were undoubtedly the cause of Mr. Lambert's death," cut in Sexton Blake curtly. "You'll have to answer for your crime, Peter Fletcher!"

"I didn't mean to do it! I—I—" the man broke off dazedly.

"Hallo! Here come the police!" I said, as a motor-car turned into the drive.

Five minutes later Black Peter was handcuffed, and Sexton Blake was leisurely explaining things to the local inspector, who had come over the moor with a couple of constables.

And so the mystery was made clear. The whole affair had taken place between the hours of sunset and dawn. And at last, tired but cheerful, Sexton Blake and I—Pedro, of course—returned to Hambledon Hall for a well-earned rest.

In due course the rubies were handed over to their rightful owner, and I needn't add how delighted the Earl of Hanniscombe was. And in due course, also, the gov'nor and I received an invitation to a certain wedding.

It was a ripping affair that wedding, and the bride looked simply lovely. I don't think it's necessary for me to add the names of the bride and bridegroom. I'll leave that to the imagination. Why should I waste time in writing something down that's absolutely obvious to everybody?

THE END.

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THE OPENING CHAPTERS TOLD HOW:

"Lord Tinribs"—otherwise Lord Drumriggs, and heir to Earl Cadlands—arrives at Redrooks, and proves in no uncertain manner that he is well able to look after himself.

On his first night he and his chums, Puggy and Fubbs, turn the tables on their enemies, who had arranged a "massacre" for their benefit. Tinribs hides Copping away, who had spied on their movements, and throws a dummy, supposed by the ragging party to be Copping, from the window. Dowber, a Sixth-Former, hides the dummy and imprisons Copping in a disused cellar. His idea is to frighten Tinribs into thinking that it was the real Copping that he threw from the window, and, pretending to be his friend, offers to get rid of the "body"—for a consideration.

Tinribs then disappears. Copping is found by Mr. Scourage, and then Tinribs suddenly reappears in Mr. Scourage's room—via the chimney, smothering both Scourage and Dowber with soot. At the same moment Tinribs' father appears on the scene, and, after explanations, Tinribs is exonerated of all blame, which upsets all the schemings of Dowber and Mr. Scourage. Later the three pals and Tinribs' girl cousins make off in the earl's car and upset a dogcart. Having settled with the owner, the party arrange a sculling race. Tinribs' skiff is run down by Major Drumriggs' pleasure yacht, and the major, Lord Drumriggs' uncle, attempts to kidnap his nephew. Tinribs, however, succeeds in escaping. The major makes a second attempt, and Tinribs enlists the services of Chippy, stable-boy.

(Now read on.)

Dark Deeds Undone!

"Pardon me," a voice said—the voice of the man in the car, Tinribs thought—"are you from Redrooks School, sir?"

"Yes," said Chippy readily.

"And the young gentleman who fell into the river some time ago?"

"Yes," said Chippy again.

"Then you're Lord Drumriggs?" the questioner continued. "Well, my lord, the earl, your father, has got to hear about it, and is very anxious. He's sent me here for you. Will you please step in?"

Chippy apparently made no reply.

The door slammed to after a moment. Then came the sudden whir of the engine and the sound of the car moving away.

Tinribs got ready. As the big motor-car passed the end of the lane he leapt out after it. It was not yet travelling so fast that he was unable to overtake it.

He gripped the back of the car-body, and swung himself to a seat on the back springs. It was a cramped, awkward position, but he clung on.

Some evil game was afoot, something in which his uncle, Major Lyon Drumriggs, was concerned.

Tinribs was convinced of that now, and he meant to get to the bottom of it.

For a distance of about five miles, according to Tinribs' reckoning, avoiding the main roads, the motor-car rushed on, until at last it came to a halt on the tow-path at a lonely and deserted part of the river.

Once during the journey Tinribs thought he had heard Chippy's voice calling out in protest. His perch was too perilous for the schoolboy to investigate; but he never suspected that anything worse than an altercation between the stable-boy and his companion had taken place.

Directly the car came to a standstill Tinribs dropped away from his seat. There being nothing better at hand to hide him, he crawled into the rank weeds and high grass that marked the edge of the towing-path.

It was well he did so, otherwise he must have been seen by the two men who sprang out of the motor-car. Even then, as they

came out on the path, and looked cautiously to right and left, Tinribs thought they must inevitably discover him.

"Is it all right?" asked the chauffeur, in a hushed voice. "I didn't hear nothing."

"I didn't give him a chance," returned the other, the man who had been in the tonneau with Chippy. "The job's as good as done. Whew! Let's make haste and get it over."

Beads of perspiration broke out on Tinribs' forehead. What did the fellow mean? Why was Chippy remaining so quietly within the car? What job were the men in a hurry to get over?

"Go down to the old tub and see if the road's clear," the man went on. "I'll keep watch over the cab."

The chauffeur stepped briskly away. Tinribs risked discovery to see where he was going. But it was not fate. Moored close to the river was an old, derelict of a houseboat, its paint peeled from its boards, its whole appearance that of a boat left there to rot and break up with the ravages of time and the river.

"All Sir Garnet!" the chauffeur replied, when he returned. "I've been aboard her. She's already half under water."

"And there's not a soul in sight," added the other. "Give me a hand with him. Sharp, now!"

Tinribs, parting the grass to get a better view, saw the man swing open the tonneau door. Presently the two of them carried out something wrapped in a motor-rug. That something, by the size and appearance and limpness of it, could be nothing else than Chippy.

Tinribs started with horror. Chippy was at the least unconscious, and perhaps was beyond the hope of all recovery.

And it might have been him—Tinribs! It was meant for him.

The schoolboy was in a dilemma. Should he come out of his hiding-place and confront the scoundrels with their crime? Tinribs was trembling violently. The words of the men somewhat reassured him, and guided him in his plan of action.

"Think he'll wake up?" asked the chauffeur.

"Not for an hour or two," answered his companion. "Not until it's too late for him to make any fuss about it. This means a big thing for the boss," he went on. "He'll weigh out handsome for this."

"Well, let's get it over!" muttered the chauffeur. "These ain't the sort of jobs I'm proud of."

Carrying their burden between them, the two men went off. Tinribs watched them climb aboard the creaking houseboat.

When they had disappeared Tinribs left his hiding-place, and, moving in a half-circle, to avoid being seen from the derelict, reached the towpath. A few paces brought him alongside the houseboat.

What were the men doing with Chippy aboard? He felt he must know. It was due to him to risk anything to prevent harm happening to his stable-boy friend.

He leapt lightly aboard the crazy vessel. Treading softly, he moved across the deck, and then turned swiftly to the dark interior of a cabin as the sound of voices near at hand reached him.

"What's that?" asked the hoarse voice of the chauffeur. "I could swear I heard someone there."

"It's nobody, you fool!" returned the other man. "You're nervous. But get ashore. This job's done now. I'll see to the plug."

The chauffeur moved so closely to the door behind which Tinribs was hiding that the boy could easily have touched him. The man waited impatiently on the towpath. After two or three minutes had elapsed the other joined him. The two hurried away.

Tinribs knew what their villainous work was now. They were sinking the old houseboat. The strange, gurgling sound that came up from the bottom of the crazy vessel was proof enough.

They had placed an unconscious lad aboard, believing him to be Tinribs, and had plotted that while he still laid in a senseless condition the waters of the river would rush up and engulf him in their choking grip.

It was unbelievable—ghastly! And his uncle, Major Lyon Drumriggs, was at the head of this foul plot. The uncle who posed as being a good friend to him. The uncle whom he had never offended by so much as an angry word.

Tinribs shuddered violently. A wild, whirring, rushing noise broke on his excited senses.

It was the big motor-car. The engine had been kept running. Now it started off, and the sounds grew fainter and fainter, till at last Tinribs thought it was safe to venture from his hiding-place.

The motor-car was out of sight. There was not a soul to be seen anywhere. The river was deserted. The sun had sunk an hour before, and the grey of twilight was giving a silvery appearance to the water.

Tinribs made for the cabin, from which he guessed the two men had emerged. There, doubtless, he would find the unconscious body of his stable-boy friend.

There were two cabins. The door of the first he touched yielded before him. He looked in. It was bare. Muddy water covered the floor-boards, and was oozing slowly in from the side partition.

Tinribs tried the adjoining cabin door. He could not move it. It was locked, apparently.

"Chippy!" called Tinribs. "Chippy! Can you hear me?"

There was no reply.

The gurgling sound of intruding water grew more insistent as he stood there straining at the door. Again and again, becoming feverishly agitated about Chippy, Tinribs hurled his shoulders with all his strength at the panels.

They creaked and groaned, but the door held tight. Sweat was pouring down Tinribs' face now. He hurried out to the deck. At last, after a careful search, he found what he sought—a heavy balk of timber.

Using this as a ram, after a few hefty blows, Tinribs succeeded in beating the door open.

He was not too soon. Already the cabin was half-full of water. As he stepped in he was immersed up to his knees. Tinribs scarcely noticed it, so intense was his desire to grab at the silent figure lying at full length, about which the tinged water was lapping.

"Chippy!" he cried involuntarily. "You're all right now, see!"

He bent over the stable-boy. In the semi-gloom Chippy's face looked ghostly. His eyes were open, but there was no sign of life, only a glassy stare in them.

Tinribs bent over him. Putting his hands under Chippy's armpits, he pulled him through the shattered door, and with difficulty, partly carrying, partly dragging, got him somehow on to the deck, where the fresh, evening air could play about the stable-boy's white, cold face.

Tinribs was puzzled. He had never seen anyone in this senseless condition before, and he did not know what to do for the best. It was useless to appeal for help, for there was no one in sight.

But he did the right thing, nevertheless. Struck by Chippy's cold hands and the grey appearance of the flesh, he began to vigorously chafe them between his own.

He was rewarded at length by feeling a degree of warmth come into them. He rubbed the boy's cheeks in a similar manner, and shook him violently by the shoulders.

And all the time Tinribs was conscious of a sickly-smelling odour, which he put down to the drug with which Chippy had been sent to sleep. And all the time the gurgling sound of the river water rushing into the leaky houseboat grew louder and still louder.

The crazy craft was slowly sinking in the deep water, but he did not know that then.

"Chippy—Chippy!" cried Tinribs frantically. "Wake up, old son—wake up!"

Chippy gave no sign of life. Tinribs slapped his hands, and shook him more violently than ever. All of a sudden, after one of these shakings, Chippy's chest gave a spasmodic quiver. He partly rolled over, and a milky-looking fluid was vomited from his throat.

The odour was pungent then, and after the sickness the boy wearily opened his eyes and looked about him.

"Chippy," cried Tinribs, "it's all right! You know me! The villains have gone! You're safe now!"

Chippy nodded. He understood, but was too weak to talk. Presently he caught at Tinribs' hand, and with his assistance struggled to his feet.

"That's better," he murmured. "I—I tried to fight him, mate," he went on. "He be too quick for me. But—but look there!"

He pointed a trembling finger at the river. The houseboat had sunk so low, till the water was beginning to lap over its sides.

"Heavens!" gasped Tinribs. "Quick! Let's get off!"

It was no easy matter. Already about six feet of water separated the houseboat from the bank. Tinribs could have jumped it fairly easily, but there was the difficulty of Chippy.

He was pulling round, it is true, yet he trembled violently, and stumbled when he moved.

"I can't make out what be the matter with me!" gasped the stable-boy. "I've never been like this afore. Come on, mate! We've got to chance it!"

"Let me get ashore first," said Tinribs. "Then I can help you, perhaps!"

He took a running spring from the deck. The jump landed him on the very edge of the bank, and he slipped precariously on the mud for a moment or two till he recovered his equilibrium, and managed to get on to firm ground.

"Come on, Chippy!" said Tinribs.

The boy moved slowly to the side. He jumped with all the strength he could muster. He fell three feet at least short of the bank. With a mighty splash he went below the surface. But Tinribs was prepared. As he came up the schoolboy gripped him, and dragged him into safety.

Chippy was soaked. The water poured off him as if from the coat of a terrier just back from a swim. Tinribs was wet, too, though not so uncomfortably.

But the immersion had a strange, unexpected effect. It drove the remaining senselessness from Chippy's aching head. It had wonderful reviving effects.

Chippy shook himself and laughed—the noisy, care-free laugh Tinribs had heard in the stable-yard.

"Love-a-duck!" he grinned, passing his hand over his forehead. "I've woke up, mate! I've sort of come out of a bad dream. Phew! Where's them villyuns what lugged me here?"

He looked to right and left, and held his clenched hands to his sides, as if he thought of running after the motor-car which had brought him there.

"You'll have to run at the rate of sixty miles an hour, and then you wouldn't catch 'em!" smiled Tinribs. "It's home, old son. That's the best thing now!"

They left the towing-path, and gained the high-road. Chippy knew the direction back to Marshmallows, and they set off at a fair pace.

"How—how did you get here, mate?" said Chippy, after a while. "That's what's puzzling me!"

Tinribs explained how he had ridden on the back spring of the motor-car body.

"And you—you saved me from that?" the stable-boy resumed, nodding back at the houseboat. "I don't rightly understand it. I sort of got an idea they meant to do for me, them pair o' villyuns!"

Tinribs was thinking hard. Chippy had served him to excellent purpose—had helped him to fathom the diabolical cunning of his uncle, the rascally Major Lyon Drumriggs. Tinribs meant to pay his friend well, but he felt that the business was too terribly important for him to explain to and confide in the stable-boy.

"Well, anyway, whatever their game was, it failed," said Tinribs. "Feeling all right now? I'm sorry I let you in for this. I had no idea you'd get such rough handling!"

"That's all right, mate!" grinned Chippy.

"It's a bit o' fun now it's all over. Won't I make Liz Parkins laugh!"

Tinribs was thoughtful for a time.

"Chippy," he said at last, "will you do me a favour? Will you keep mum about what's happened to-night? You see, there's some mystery about it. I want to get at the bottom of it first!"

"Right-ho!" agreed Chippy readily. "It'll be our secret—eh? I give my word I won't split. And here's my duke!"

The two boys solemnly shook hands.

They had covered two miles of their journey now. Going to a small bakery in a village, the boys stuffed themselves with cakes and ginger-beer, and went walking again with renewed energy.

It was pitch-dark when they reached the Roebuck. Chippy's clothes—in reality Tinribs', of course—were almost dry by now. They crept upstairs to the room Tinribs had occupied earlier that day, and with much half-suppressed laughter they exchanged suits.

Paying his bill, Tinribs rejoined Chippy, who was waiting for him outside the inn, and who had announced his decision to accompany Tinribs to the railway-station in order to catch the last train back to Redrooks.

"Chippy," said Tinribs, as they shook hands outside the red-brick station, "I'll never forget what you've done for me to-night."

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Here's what I promised you, and a little more besides as a special present!"

He pressed coins into Chippy's hands. Reluctantly the stable-boy accepted them.

"It's been a lark!" he grinned. "I've fair enjoyed myself! Wish you was allus at the Roebuck. We would have a time! I'd give up Liz Parkins then!"

"I'll see you again, Chippy," said Tinribs. "I suppose I can always see you at the Roebuck? One of these days, when I've done with school, I'll find a better job for you than stable-boy. But until we meet again don't say a word!"

"Right-ho, mate!" grinned Chippy. "Not half a word!"

There was a hasty handshake, for the local train came bustling in with much noise.

It was past eleven o'clock, and the great school was in profound gloom when Tinribs climbed the massive iron gates, and let himself down by the porter's lodge.

Not a sound; not a light. The big, creeper-clad school looked ghostly in the wan light of the watery, moonless clouds.

It had no terror for Tinribs. Silently he crept across the quad, and gained the wing wherein was situated the Fourth Form dormitories.

He soon found what he sought. It was a rope-end dangling unseen amongst the ivy.

Tinribs took several deep breaths. Getting a grip on the rope, he hauled himself up hand-over-hand, resting every now and then by getting a foothold on the brickwork.

And at length, when his tired arms seemed as if they had no further pull in them, he

reached the dormitory window. He had to rest for a few moments on the broad sill before he could muster sufficient strength to raise the lower window, and drop noiselessly into the room.

Mr. Scourage, as well as Major Drumriggs, had been again defeated!

Mr. Scourage Gets a Shock.

Org! Snorg! Org! Snorg!

Tinribs, tired out with his exciting day's adventures, was sleeping the sleep of the just and healthy.

His snoring was not particularly musical, and, though the sun was up, and sending a golden shaft of light across the dormitory, it had no effect for a long time upon the juniors lying more or less at their ease in the rows of beds along each wall.

Puggy Playfair was the first to wake up. He sat up in bed with a start, wondering with half-roused senses what on earth was the matter.

Org! Snorg! Org! Snorg!

He followed the direction of the sound, saw Tinribs flat on his back, his nose pointing skyward, the bedclothes slightly heaving as he breathed, and then grinned.

"Kamerad!" he gasped, putting up his hands. "No shoot! Me one childer, many wives!"

The snoring went on as unmusically as ever. His appeal was in vain.

"You beauty!" he growled. "So you got back all right! Climbed the rope like a giddy monkey, three storeys up, in the darkness of night, and entered dorm with the neatness of a professional burglar! For a real, live lord, Tinribs, you've got no end of a nerve! And you're making a most unearthly row! I'm hanged if I shall put up with it all on my little lonesome!"

He reached for a boot, and hurled it with careful aim. It just missed Fubbs' classic countenance, as he lay serenely curled up, fast asleep, and landed with a thud on his chest.

Fubbs made a spasmodic heave, and jumped half out of bed.

"Help!" he groaned. "Stop dancing on my chest, will you?"

He checked himself, and stared with open mouth at the grinning face of Puggy.

"You, was it?" he cried. "Who the—what the—why the—"

"Hark, otherwise list—that is to say, give ear!" grinned Puggy. "Rememberes? thou not, my child, the words of the ancient ballad, 'Oh, father, I hear the church bells ring! Oh, say, what can it be?'"

"Church bells!" growled Fubbs, putting his hands over his ears and staring round the dormitory. "It's more like a fog-horn factory! What on earth is it? Is it some-body's pet hippopotamus having his breakfast out in the bath-room?"

"No, my son," said Puggy. "It's old Cabbage having a clean shave. He's filing off his whiskers!"

The idea of the detested Mr. Scourage having a beard like iron filings was too much for Fubbs, and he laughed aloud.

But though it disturbed several boys, it made not the least impression on the sleeping Tinribs.

Org! Snorg! Org! Snorg!

Fubbs looked round the dormitory, then at last he saw that my Lord Drumriggs' bed was occupied.

"Jumping jubes!" he exclaimed. "Look what the tide's washed up! Bless my marrow-bones, if it isn't Tinribs himself who's causing this ghastly disturbance of the peace! Oh, Algernon, this is too sudden! Puggy, countrymen, fellow-sufferers, lend me your ears—"

"We've come to bury Tinribs," chimed in Puggy, "after we've hanged, drawn, quartered, and otherwise slaughtered him!"

"Oh, turn off the tap!" cried Fubbs. "Anybody got a cork big enough to stop up the Blackwall Tunnel—I mean, that noisy orifice surrounded by his ruby lips!"

All were awake now in the dormitory, and were watching the proceedings with distinct amusement. Their laughter made no difference to Tinribs. The snoring went on as gleefully and as regularly as ever.

"It's not exactly an Edison-Bell record!" groaned Puggy. "What on earth shall we do?"

"Empty the pitcher over him!" was one suggestion.

"Kick him out of bed and bump him!" was another.

All the ingenuity of the Form was turned on in the discussion.

(To be continued.)