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THE VALLEY OF CRAGS!

An Absorbing Tale of Detective Work and Adventure.

NO. 3.—TINKER'S "CASE-DIARY" SERIES.

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THE VALLEY OF CRAGS!

This Story, written by TINKER from notes from his "Case-Diary," has been prepared expressly for publication in this Journal by the Author of "The House with the Double Moat." SEXTON BLAKE'S brilliant young assistant has also contributed "Twixt Sunset and Dawn," and "The Riddle of Yew Hollow."

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

In Which Sexton Blake Receives Two Phone Calls from Mr. Harvey Dorrington.

WE met Detective-Inspector Harlowe in Oxford Street quite by chance. It was just opposite Waring's. He grinned at us cheerfully as he shook the gov'nor's hand, and slapped me on the back.

"Shopping?" he inquired genially.

"Not just at present," smiled Sexton Blake. "Tinker and I are walking home, Harlowe. You're looking rather pleased with yourself. Just off duty, I suppose?"

"I've been chuckling over a little affair which occurred last night at Hampstead," said the inspector. "A burglary, Blake. One of the neatest jobs you ever saw; but the poor chaps only got twenty pounds between 'em."

"And that's why you're pleased?"

"I haven't told you the cream of the joke yet," chuckled Harlowe. "They opened the safe—a huge, modern article—by means of an oxy-acetylene plant, and generally created havoc. But they only got twenty pounds. And in the top drawer of the old man's desk—unlocked, mind you—there was a bag containing diamonds to the value of five thousand!"

"Wouldn't those burglars be pleased to hear that!" I grinned. "They'd be so pleased that they'd kick one another for a week. But who's the millionaire, Mr. Harlowe? Who's the old chap with bags of diamonds knocking about his desk?"

We drew back a little out of the foot-traffic.

"Oh, you wouldn't know his name, Tinker!" replied the inspector. "Mr. Roger Leverton is an old man with a somewhat uncertain temper. He's been bothering and pestering me all the morning. What on earth he would have done if he'd lost those diamonds, I can't imagine. The loss of twenty quid seems to have put a dazedly jagged edge on to his temper. He ought to be feeling joyful, in my opinion. But we have to deal with some queer characters."

"Do you know who did the job?" asked the gov'nor.

"Well, I'm not certain," replied Harlowe cautiously. "It smacks of the Clapham gang, and I'm having them closely watched to-day. But I don't suppose you're interested. It's just a matter of routine—and you prefer knotty problems, don't you? Time for a drink?"

Sexton Blake chuckled. "My dear man, it's tea-time," he smiled. "But if you're very anxious—"

"I wouldn't dream of spoiling your tea," grinned the inspector. "But I didn't mention what sort of drink, did I?"

"That's a hint," I said. "Mr. Harlowe's inviting himself to tea, gov'nor."

"There's no need for him to do that," remarked Sexton Blake. "He knows he's always welcome—What's that, Harlowe? Nonsense, man! Come along!"

The gov'nor beckoned to a passing taxi, and in a few minutes we were carrying Detective-Inspector Harlowe off to Baker Street to tea.

He enjoyed himself thoroughly, and the meal was quite a merry one. Sexton Blake and I had been busy for some time past; we'd only got back from Manchester that morning, and we were feeling contented—for our work there had been very successful.

Harlowe left at about half-past six, and the gov'nor and I adjourned to the consulting-room, and made ourselves comfortable. We were fixtures for the evening—for there was no work on hand, and we were taking things easily.

Pedro was in high good humour. He hadn't been to Manchester with us, and Mrs. Bardell reported that he had been in a double fit of the blues throughout our absence. Pedro, in fact, had felt insulted. But he forgave us willingly now that we were back.

By the time it was dark the consulting-room was looking quite cheerful. The electric lights were on, and a haze of blue smoke filled the air; but as the gov'nor was smoking cigars I didn't mind. I generally go on strike when he puts on his "thinking pipe." On these occasions he does his utmost to convert the consulting-room into an imitation of a kipper-factory—but I'm the kipper. Anyhow, he tries to smoke me brown.

This evening the famous criminologist was at leisure; at least, that's what he said. As a matter of fact, he was working at double pressure with his correspondence. It had got behind a bit, and he was now straightening things out, making up his diary, and all that sort of thing.

I wasn't to be outdone, so I wrote a few pages of my own special "Case-Diary"—the same as I'm doing now. Only, at that time, I was writing up that rummy affair about the Yew Hollow.

I became so engrossed in my masterly efforts that the time passed rapidly. When at last, having reached the end of a chapter, I looked up, I found that the time was nearly ten o'clock, and that the gov'nor was lolling in the armchair, with Pedro's head on his lap.

"I'm fed-up for to-night!" I exclaimed, yawning. "I see you've struck work, gov'nor. Being an author isn't all honey, you know. I don't know what it must be like to a poor chap who has to think out all his own plots.

I've got all mine handy, and that makes all the difference. When this stuff of mine is edited and titivated up, I dare say it'll pass muster."

"Fishing for compliments—eh?" smiled Sexton Blake. "You know very well it'll pass muster, you young rascal. If ever I fire you out for being lazy or cheeky, you'll have a means of livelihood at your finger-tips—"

Oh, bother! Who can that be at this hour?" The telephone-bell had jingled out, and I reached over and pulled the desk-instrument towards me.

"Hallo!" I growled sleepily. "Who's that?"

"Am I speaking to Mr. Sexton Blake?"

"No, I'm Mr. Blake's assistant," I replied.

"Is Mr. Blake at home? It's rather too bad of me to ring up at this hour, but I only wish to fix an appointment," came the voice. "I hope I'm not making myself a nuisance—"

"That's all right, sir," I interrupted, rather pleased by his tone of voice. "Mr. Blake's in. If you'll tell me when you want the appointment, I'll have a word with him. What name shall I say?"

"I am anxious to have a chat with Mr. Blake in the morning, if possible—say, at about eleven o'clock," came the reply. "Will that be all right? Tell Mr. Blake that Mr. Harvey Dorrington wants to obtain his advice."

I turned from the instrument, and looked at the gov'nor.

"It's Mr. Harvey Dorrington, gov'nor," I said. "Do you know him?"

"No, Tinker. What does he want?"

"Says he'd like to see you to-morrow morning, at eleven."

"Business?"

"He didn't say," I replied, turning to the instrument again. "Are you there, Mr. Dorrington? Mr. Blake would like to know the nature of your business."

"Well, it's about a certain disappearance," replied Mr. Dorrington. "I can't possibly go into it over the phone, but it's very urgent."

I told the gov'nor what the other had said, and Sexton Blake nodded.

"I'm not going to be busy to-morrow, Tinker," he said. "Say it's all right."

"Mr. Blake says he'll see you, sir," I announced.

"Oh, thank you very much!" The voice had quite a note of relief in it now. "I'll be there at eleven o'clock, sharp."

I yawned as I rang off. Then I turned round in the swivel-chair, and chuckled a penholder at Pedro. He cocked his eyes over at me without moving his head, and his tail whacked against the gov'nor's slipper.

"Bed-time, Pedro!" I exclaimed lazily.

The old rascal knew what that meant all right. He lifted his head, and looked at me mournfully. He wasn't at all anxious to go to bed while the gov'nor would allow him to stay in his present position. And I dare say

he looked upon it as a piece of cool interference on my part to give him any orders. Anyhow, he didn't attempt to move.

I picked up a magazine, and got interested in a short story. Sexton Blake was deeply immersed in some scientific work, and I knew that it was quite on the cards that he'd remain reading until three or four in the morning.

At about twenty to eleven, however, I decided to turn into my little cot. This was rather early for me, but I'd had very little sleep the previous night. I'd finished the short story, and so I tossed the magazine down.

"Well, I'm going to by-by, guv'nor," I said, stretching myself. "I suppose you'll stick there for another hour or two?"

"No; I'll follow you before long," smiled Sexton Blake, looking up. "Put Pedro to bed before you go yourself."

And then the telephone-bell rang again. "Oh, rats!" I growled. "Who the dickens can it be this time?"

I picked up the receiver rather savagely, and frowned.

"Who's that?" I demanded curtly. I heard a quick gasp across the wires.

"Can you come at once—at once!" gasped a voice which seemed somehow familiar. "I've just been stabbed—"

"What!" I yelled, startled.

"I am Dorrington—I rang you up before. Are you Mr. Blake—"

"You've been stabbed?" I repeated amazedly. "Quick! Tell me what has happened!"

"I can't—I'm going!" said Dorrington, in a weak, husky voice. "Please come at once—at once—"

"Where to?" I shouted.

"Oh, I forgot! Three Elms Cottage, Waverley Gardens, Gold-Gold-Golder's—"

"Golder's Green?" I put in, as the voice trailed away.

"Yes—yes—"

There was a distinct pause, but I could still hear a faint gasping.

"Are you there?" I asked sharply.

There was no reply. I looked round at Sexton Blake with rather a scared expression. He was standing beside me now, for he had heard enough to make him keenly interested. Once again I called, but with the same result. So I hung the receiver up.

"Well!" I exclaimed. "That's rather startling, guv'nor!"

"What were you saying about somebody being stabbed?"

"Why, it was Mr. Dorrington," I replied.

"You know, guv'nor, the chap who rang up about half an hour ago. He begged of us to go to him at once. Says he's been stabbed. I believe the poor chap's dead!" I ended up huskily.

"You mentioned Golder's Green?" said Sexton Blake crisply.

"He got as far as Gold, but couldn't manage the rest—too far gone," I replied.

"I believe he did get as far as 'Golder's,' though."

"But, my dear Tinker, Golder's Green is a big neighbourhood—"

"Oh, he gave the full address!" I put in.

"Three Elms Cottage, Waverley Gardens. What are you going to do, guv'nor? Rather queer the poor chap didn't yell for the police, isn't it?"

"He may have done so—without result," replied the guv'nor. "In any case, we can't allow the affair to pass unheeded. Moreover, my curiosity has been aroused. Get your boots on quickly, my lad—we'll go off at once."

We were both ready within five minutes, and then we hurried down into Baker Street, and managed to pick up a taxi almost at once—for eleven o'clock hadn't struck yet, and there were plenty of cabs about.

What should we find at Three Elms Cottage, Golder's Green?

—

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

We Hear a Strange Story Concerning the Disappearance of Miss Joyce Maitland.

THREE ELMS COTTAGE proved to be a modern villa at the extreme end of a new road on the edge of what, I suppose, is usually called a garden suburb. The house was by no means a cottage; on the contrary, it was a dwelling of some pretensions.

It stood quite by itself, and the garden which surrounded it was decently large, and

surrounded by high trees. These latter were by no means so modern as the house itself; the builder, being a sensible man, had left the trees standing, instead of cutting them down as so many idiotic builders do. The result was quite nice.

We could only see this dimly—the garden, I mean—because the night was rather dark. As we walked up the garden-path to the hall door we heard the hum of our dismissed taxi as it sped away.

And all around us everything was still and quiet. Beyond Three Elms Cottage lay a wide stretch of waste land—or it may have been cultivated. At all events, it was open country. On the other side of the villa stood a building of the same description, but it was empty. And there were no houses on the other side of the road.

I could quite understand that Mr. Dorrington was unable to make anybody hear, except by means of the telephone.

And just as Sexton Blake hammered upon the door and rang the bell it struck me as being curious that such a large house had no servants. The knock sounded hollow, and we heard the tinkling of a bell somewhere in the rear of the house.

But there was no answer to our summons.

"Nobody at home," I said softly. "That looks as though the poor chap who telephoned is lying either dead or unconscious."

"Our position is somewhat difficult, Tinker," interjected the guv'nor. "Are we justified in breaking in? We haven't an atom of authority, and yet I am disinclined to go away without satisfying myself. I think we had better look round the house in any case."

We stepped on to the well-kept lawn, and made our way past some evergreens to the corner of the house. On turning this we at once saw that one of the side windows stood open, and that there was a light burning in the room.

This was very significant. Mr. Dorrington was obviously within that apartment, and had been unable to answer the door because he lay dead. There was a feeling of tragedy in the very air.

Sexton Blake approached the window with soft footsteps, and was just about to step on to the flower-bed which bordered the house, when he paused and looked down at something which lay at the foot of the creeper that covered the lower part of the wall. It seemed to be something white.

Blake picked it up and turned it over in his hand. It was quite possible to see easily, for a fair amount of light was coming through the blind.

"It is an unopened letter," murmured the detective. "Do you see, Tinker? It has been through the post, and is addressed to Harvey Dorrington, Esq. I wonder how that came to be out here?"

"Looks as though somebody dropped it," I replied. "But it's nothing much, anyhow. Let's have a look inside the room, guv'nor."

Sexton Blake pushed back the curtains and the blind. I couldn't see, but the next moment he uttered an exclamation and hopped into the room. I followed quickly.

The apartment was brightly illuminated, and I was rather dazzled for a second. But I saw that Blake was bending over the huddled form of a man who lay on the floor near the fireplace. There was an ugly stain upon the carpet.

The room was comfortably furnished, and appeared to be a smoking "den." I only took a cursory glance round, and then stepped to Sexton Blake's side.

The man on the floor was well dressed, and bore that indefinable stamp which is characteristic of all University men. He was young, fair-haired, and clean-shaven. But his face was deathly pale, and I thought for a moment that he was dead. The front of his dress-shirt was stained ominously.

"Dead, guv'nor?" I asked, in a low voice.

Sexton Blake looked up with a smile.

"Far from it, Tinker—far from it!" he exclaimed crisply. "The wound, so far as I can see, is not even serious. A jab in the shoulder, painful, and causing loss of blood, but nothing to worry over. The man has only swooned."

"Well, that's a relief!" I exclaimed. "This house seems to be deserted. Hadn't I better try and find some water and some bandages?"

"Yes. And make haste."

"I left the room and emerged into the hall. Everything was dark and silent. I pulled out my electric torch, and made my way to the rear quarters of the house. I found the kitchen, and switched on the electric light. The place was neat and tidy and clean. The scullery lay just beyond.

I switched the electric light on here, too, and soon found a bowl and a clean tea-cloth. This tea-cloth, torn into strips, would serve as an excellent bandage for the time being. In a few minutes I was back in the den with the bowl of water and the improvised bandages.

"Good lad!" said Sexton Blake approvingly.

He had already unfastened Mr. Dorrington's clothing, and the shoulder was laid bare. The sight was rather an ugly one, for the blood had been flowing freely, and the wound itself was clotted.

Blake got to work with a part of the tea-cloth and water, and the gash was soon clean. It seemed quite a small place now, and the blood was slowly flowing again. This was only natural, but the guv'nor bandaged the place cleverly and effectively. Then he forced some brandy down the patient's throat.

The poor chap had already shown some signs of coming to, and the brandy had an immediate effect. Within a minute Harvey Dorrington moaned slightly, and then his eyelids flickered.

After another minute had elapsed he muttered a few words which I couldn't catch, and then suddenly opened his eyes. He stared at Sexton Blake fixedly, and slowly shifted his gaze to me.

"What the dickens—" he said hoarsely.

"Don't excite yourself, Mr. Dorrington," interjected Sexton Blake. "Your shoulder's a bit damaged, but the wound is not serious."

"My shoulder?" repeated the injured man.

"Why, what—Phew-w-w! That gave me a twitch then," he added, as he moved himself. "Oh, I remember! That infernal— But I was talking on the 'phone a minute ago."

"Not a minute ago," said the guv'nor gently. "I received your message, Mr. Dorrington, and came as quickly as possible. My dear sir, you mustn't move. Lie quite still."

"By Jove! Are you Mr. Sexton Blake?" asked Dorrington. "Yes, I can see you are now. I recognise you. I—I suppose I fainted. But how did you get in, Mr. Blake? I didn't answer the door."

"The window was obligingly open," smiled the guv'nor. "We knocked at the door, but received no answer. You appear to be without servants."

Harvey Dorrington shook his head.

"I keep three servants," he explained—"a housekeeper and two maids. But I don't like them in the house. They live near by, and generally leave at half-past nine. When that ruffian attacked me we fell upon the floor, and before I could get a decent blow home he'd knifed me. The cur! I tried to yell, but my voice went somehow. I suppose it was the excitement—and the pain."

"But what made you 'phone to the guv'nor?" I asked curiously.

"Well, I realised that I couldn't possibly attract attention, and I seriously thought that I was done for," replied Dorrington. "I had Mr. Blake's number in my mind—I had rung up only half an hour before, you remember—and I just called for that number in a kind of dazed, mechanical way. It was awfully good of you to come so promptly. Is—is it bad?"

"You'll be up and about to-morrow," smiled the guv'nor. "I'm afraid you'll have to have your arm in a sling to avoid moving the shoulder. But that's all. Do you think you can stand the pain of being moved? I'd like to shift you on to the lounge."

"Shift away. I'm ready."

We hoisted the patient up, and I saw him clench his teeth tightly. But we got him on to the lounge fairly easily, and another dose of brandy brought the colour back to his cheeks.

"Now I'm all right," he declared. "I suppose I can talk? I mean, it won't do me any harm?"

"If you feel inclined to talk there will be no evil results," replied Sexton Blake cheerfully. "As I said, the injury is really superficial. It was the loss of blood which caused you to swoon—nothing else."

"But don't you think a doctor—"

"That's all right, Mr. Dorrington," I put in. "Perhaps you don't know that Mr. Blake's twice as clever as any qualified physician? If he says you're all right, you can take it for granted that you are all right. A doctor would only pull a long face and get a fat fee out of you!"

Harvey Dorrington grinned.

"There's a deal of truth in that remark," he observed. "By Jove, I certainly am pleased that I rang you up, Mr. Blake. We can have that little interview now, can't we?"

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That'll save me bothering you in the morning. But, of course, you'll have to get back home, won't you?"

"You needn't let that point worry you," said the gov'nor. "If you've no objection, I'd like to hear how you came by this little pin-prick? You mentioned some ruffian, but you didn't go into any details."

"Well, to tell the truth, I'm hanged if I know what actually happened," replied our companion. "When I first rang you up I was at my club, and I came straight home. I let myself in, came straight into this room, and started opening my letters. Then, before I could take a breath, some confounded fellow burst in through the window and sprang at me."

"Did you see him clearly?"

"Not particularly. He caught me a smack between the eyes to begin with, and then we rolled over. After that he got busy with his knife, and—well, I think you know the rest, Mr. Blake."

"H'm! There doesn't seem to be much in that," commented the gov'nor. "Do you think there's any connection between this affair and the matter upon which you wish to consult me?"

Dorrington shook his head.

"A connection?" he repeated. "There can't be. If there is, I am too obtuse to see it. But it's simply impossible. You'll understand why when I tell you the yarn. It's my opinion that the fellow was simply a common tramp. I'm thankful he didn't finish me off completely; and I'm a bit humiliated. I'm rather handy with fists as a rule, and to be knifed in this way rather hurts my pride."

"Jolly hard lines, anyhow," I said feelingly.

"I'm afraid I'm a pretty rotten host, Mr. Blake," said Dorrington. "You'll find cigars and cigarettes on the table, and that whisky's pretty decent. Help yourself. I can't offer you anything personally. And I'd like another tot of brandy, if you don't mind."

He had his tot, and the gov'nor lit a cigar. Dorrington was feeling so much better that he indulged in a cigarette himself.

"I rang you up, Mr. Blake, because I wished to consult you professionally—to obtain your advice on a rather delicate matter," he said after a bit. "Now that you're here, I think I'll go into it at once. You don't mind, I suppose?"

"I leave it entirely to you, my dear fellow."

"In that case, I'll tell you the main facts. I'll tell you why I'm uneasy," went on Dorrington. "Of course, I may be all at sea; my suspicions are probably unfounded. That's why I want your advice. You'll know what to suggest at once. Well, briefly, a little over a year ago I was engaged to one of the sweetest little girls in the world. Joyce Maitland was her name. She's dead, Mr. Blake," he added quietly.

The gov'nor and I both became very grave.

"That's what they say!" burst out Dorrington suddenly, and with astonishing fierceness. "But I don't believe it! I can't believe it! I've got the conviction within me that poor little Joy is alive. Oh, I suppose I'm a fool, but I can't rest, I can't sleep! I feel that I must do something or go off my head!"

"You oughtn't to excite yourself in this way, Mr. Dorrington," said Sexton Blake gently. "Unless you remain calm, I think I shall have to forbid you to continue."

"I won't let myself go again," said the other huskily. "Forgive me, Mr. Blake. Joyce and I loved one another something like you read about in stories. You know what I mean. It was a deep love, which couldn't possibly be broken. Well, Joy's stepfather apparently thought that I was every kind of a scoundrel. I don't know why. I've led a pretty clean life, I believe. I've got a decent income, and I'm not bad-looking. At all events, he objected to me. He did everything in his power to influence my little girl. But he might as well have tried to handle the stars. Joy was as true as steel, and absolutely meant to marry me, whatever happened. We'd fixed it up, in fact, and then her stepfather decided to take her on a trip to America."

"That was rather a blow to me, but I couldn't prevent it. As they were only going to be away a couple of months, I didn't mind so much. I was preparing everything to marry Joyce immediately after she returned, and her stepfather could go to the dickens for all I cared. His idea, of course, was to estrange her from me during those two months. If he'd taken her away for two years his object wouldn't have been achieved."

"Joyce naturally wrote to me very frequently—unknown to the old man," went on Harvey Dorrington, allowing his cigarette to burn idly between his fingers. "She wrote from New York and Rochester, and Detroit and Chicago, and many other places. She and her stepfather were travelling West, you understand, with the idea of finishing up at San Francisco. From there they were taking a boat which would bring them home by a long sea route—for the old man was rather delicate. And it was while staying in Rock City, Montana, that the terrible disaster occurred. Poor little Joy never got to San Francisco."

Our companion's eyes were rather moist, and both the gov'nor and I could see that he had been badly hit. We waited for a few moments, but he seemed to have become absorbed in a reverie.

"What happened at Rock City?" asked Blake at last.

"Oh, yes!" Dorrington looked up with a start. "I was rather rude, wasn't I? Well, at Rock City, Mr. Blake, there happened to be a big fete going on just at the time of Joy's visit. You know how they do those sort of things in America, don't you? The whole township was holiday-making, and the chief attractions were a series of flying exhibitions. There were quite a number of aeroplanes there, I believe, and one of the aviators was a woman—a Miss Blanche Ellmore. Lady flyers are quite common in America, aren't they?"

"This young lady was keen on flying over the Rocky Mountains into Idaho State. It was a pretty stiff proposition, and she was advertising to carry a passenger with her. The whole thing was a money-making scheme, of course. The price for that flight was something like five hundred dollars, I believe. That's what the passenger had to pay, I mean."

"Well, by all I can gather, my little girl was anxious to fly, and her stepfather didn't object when she suggested going on that trip," proceeded Dorrington sadly. "I can't make out what possessed Joyce. She wasn't usually reckless. Probably the daredevil spirit was uppermost that day. At all events, she started off from Rock City with Miss Ellmore. Their machine was a splendid one, but the task was a terrible feat to undertake, especially with a lady pilot. The trip commenced amid tremendous enthusiasm. It was a huge success. Crowds awaited the news of the machine's safe arrival at its destination, which was expected during the evening. But, Mr. Blake, no news came."

"No news?" asked the gov'nor quietly. "I suppose you mean no good news? There was an accident?"

"No, I mean exactly what I said," replied Harvey Dorrington. "There was neither good news nor bad news. When the evening had closed in Joy's stepfather became anxious. He caused the wires to hum in every direction. Well, those wires were busy all night and all the next day, and every day for a week. But that aeroplane, with Miss Ellmore and my little girl on board, had vanished utterly and completely."

"Search-parties scoured the country in a hundred directions. Other aeroplanes were sent up with the idea of locating the wreck—for, of course, it was concluded that the machine had crashed down in some deserted spot. Aeroplanes have disappeared on more than one occasion, both on sea and on land. In spite of all the efforts, however, the result of all the searching was nil."

"In the end everybody had to come to one conclusion. The machine had gone out of its course, and had either descended on one of the alkali deserts or had crashed into an inaccessible canyon of the Rockies. The United States papers were full of the affair at the time, but we only had one or two minor references to it over here. What did our people care what happened to my little Joyce? From that day to this nothing has been seen or heard of those two girls and their aeroplane."

There was quite a long silence. Dorrington lay back, looking pale and haggard. But it wasn't from the effects of his wound. Sexton Blake and I felt enormously sorry for him. Any verbal expression of sympathy seemed to be out of place, however. We instinctively felt that it would jar.

"From what you have told me, it seems almost conclusive that the aeroplane met with an accident while attempting to cross the mountains," said the gov'nor at last. "Surely, Mr. Dorrington, you cannot be harbouring the belief that Miss Maitland is alive? After all this time—after a year—Why, the idea is preposterous!"

"I know that. I know it as well as you do!" exclaimed our companion tensely. "The idea's mad—crazy! But for all that I have got an idea that there was foul play of some sort. What justification have I got for that idea? None—none at all. But the conviction is burning within me, nevertheless. I can't get rid of it. And, to be absolutely frank, I suspect Joy's stepfather of some vile trickery. He's back in England now, of course, but I've never seen him since he returned."

"But surely you have some definite—"

"I've nothing!" interrupted Dorrington fiercely. "I can't produce a shred of evidence to support my theory. And that's where it all seems so hopeless. I just wanted your advice, Mr. Blake. If you tell me that there's no possible chance of my theory turning out to be true, I'll accept your decision and give up all hope. You're a man with a keen, astute brain. I'm rather a slow-witted chap. Can't you see a loophole? Can't you see a gleam of light anywhere? If I could only get a spark of clear vision I'd be mad with eagerness to get out to America to investigate on the spot. But I haven't had the heart to move. I've just been dazed by the shock of the whole ghastly tragedy."

Again there was a short silence.

I knew quite well that the gov'nor had no hope. Why, the story was one of the most straightforward I'd ever heard. It was just a case of a foolhardy trip and an unlooked-for accident. Sexton Blake and I, being disinterested parties, could look at the thing from a common-sense standpoint. But Dorrington was heart-broken and bitter. We could quite understand his state of mind.

As he hadn't actually seen anything of the tragedy, he still harboured a rather pitiful hope that the worst had not chanced. But it was foolish. In spite of his deep love, he ought to have realised that he was only adding to his agony.

"Don't be afraid to tell me just what you think, Mr. Blake," went on the young man, after a while. "I'm prepared to hear you tell me that I'm somewhat mad. I didn't expect to hear anything hopeful; but I shall be more contented in mind after I've had your advice."

Sexton Blake stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Before I say anything on the subject I'd like to ask you about this affair of to-night," he exclaimed. "I don't think it was quite such a simple matter as you believe. Just tell me again what happened."

"This stabbing business, you mean?" asked Dorrington. "Why, after I got home I came into this room, switched on the light, and stood against the desk looking over the letters which had come by the evening post."

"Was the window open at that time?"

"Why, yes! I opened it as soon as I came in. The evening's warm, and the room was rather stuffy," replied the other. "It was while I was looking over the letters that the ruffian burst in. The whole affair didn't last a minute. I can't possibly imagine why he went for me so fiercely."

"Look here, Mr. Dorrington, a man doesn't enter a house and deliberately attack its occupant unless he has some serious reason," said the gov'nor quietly. "If this fellow had been merely after what he could lay his fingers on he would have waited until the house was quiet. It seems to me that he was tremendously anxious to gain possession of one of your letters—possibly the one you were in the act of opening. In short, he wanted to get hold of it before you did open it. That's what I conclude."

Dorrington looked very keen.

"Now you mention that, Mr. Blake, I've got a dim idea that the brute did snatch the letter out of my hand!" he exclaimed. "But I don't even know what the letter was, or who it was from. I remember I was turning it over in my hands, speculating."

"Is this the letter?" asked Sexton Blake quietly.

He took from his pocket the letter which we had found just outside the window.

Harvey Dorrington looked at it, and nodded at once.

"Yes, that's the one," he replied. "Where on earth did you find it? This rather upsets your theory, doesn't it? The fellow couldn't have been after this letter—"

"On the contrary, my theory is strengthened," interposed the gov'nor. "I found this letter just outside the window, caught among the creepers. It is quite obvious that your assailant, terrified by his own action, fled from the room in such haste that he dropped the letter in climbing through the window. Probably he was unaware of this at the time. He thought that he'd killed you, and he was

simply terror-stricken. Later on, perhaps, he discovered his loss, but was afraid to come back. At all events, it is clear that he attacked you for the sake of gaining possession of that epistle."

"I am deucedly curious to see what it is," said Dorrington. "There's a paper-knife just against your elbow, Tinker. Throw it over, will you?"

Our companion was evidently a very neat man. Personally, I should have shoved my thumb under the flap. He inserted the paper-knife, and the flap came unstuck almost at once—without tearing. The envelope had become very damp, lying in the dewy creeper.

Dorrington took out three or four sheets of ordinary notepaper. He commenced reading the letter with a somewhat bewildered look on his face. Sexton Blake and I watched him with interest.

And then abruptly Dorrington uttered a gasp of absolute amazement and incredulity. His face flushed scarlet, then the blood rushed from his cheeks, leaving them deadly white. A hoarse cry rose in his throat, but it never developed.

For Harvey Dorrington swayed forward in a deep faint.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

We Read an Amazing Document, and a Great Deal is Made Clear to Us—Then Sexton Blake Indulges in Some Rather Astute Deductions.

SEXTON BLAKE sprang up quickly.

"The brandy, Tinker!" he commanded.

I had the brandy from the sideboard in a couple of jiffs, and the gov'nor forced a huge gulp down Harvey Dorrington's throat. We were both rather startled at this sudden collapse.

But, of course, the poor chap was greatly weakened by his loss of blood, and the sudden excitement had proved a little too much for him. Why he had gone off so suddenly we couldn't imagine. There was evidently something very dramatic in that letter of his.

He recovered very quickly on this occasion. It hadn't been a real swoon—only just a passing fit of faintness, brought on by the sudden shock. And when he opened his eyes again he was fully in possession of his wits.

"By Heaven!" he muttered hoarsely. "It's from the old man—from Leverton himself!" "Leverton!" exclaimed Sexton Blake sharply.

"Joy's stepfather. Didn't I mention his name before?" asked Dorrington, his eyes now blazing with excitement. "Mr. Blake—Mr. Blake, you don't understand! I think I must be going mad at last—"

"Now, now!" interjected Blake sternly. "This excitement won't do, Mr. Dorrington. You seem to forget that you are winged. Keep yourself under control, or you'll swoon off seriously. Now, what's that you said about Leverton?"

"Why, that's the old man's name—Roger Leverton!" replied our companion impatiently. "He lives at Hampstead."

"By glory!" I gasped suddenly.

I remembered, then, in a flash. Roger Leverton! That was the name of the old fellow Detective-Inspector Harlowe had told us about—the man whose house had been burgled the previous night. It was an extraordinary coincidence that we should hear of him again now. And yet, when I come to think of it, there was nothing very queer about it. The news of that burglary was practically public property.

But it was decidedly interesting to know that this Roger Leverton was the harsh old stepfather Dorrington had told us about. I called to mind that the inspector had described him as being a crotchety old buffer.

And this letter, which had caused so much trouble, was from the old man. This affair was developing in a most interesting fashion.

"Everything's topsy-turvy!" muttered Harvey Dorrington, pressing a hand to his temples. "I simply can't believe it—although I've just been telling you that I always have believed it! Joyce is alive—she's alive, Mr. Blake—"

Sexton Blake snapped his fingers sharply.

"Upon my soul, this won't do!" he exclaimed. "You mustn't get those absurd notions into your head—"

"It's true—it's true—it's true!" panted the young man, his voice rising as he repeated the words. "And old Leverton's dead! It's

just the opposite to what we thought five minutes ago!"

I looked at Dorrington rather queerly. I certainly thought in that moment that he had gone completely "off his rocker," as vulgar people put it. What could be the explanation otherwise? We knew for a fact that Roger Leverton wasn't dead, because Inspector Harlowe had been talking with him that very afternoon—and the letter must have been posted quite early in the morning to have been delivered the same day.

"Mr. Leverton is not dead," said Sexton Blake quietly.

"But he is dead—he is!" insisted Dorrington. "In the very opening paragraph he said that the letter will be posted after he has died—and the fact that I have received it proves that he is dead. It must have been posted by his executors. And he confesses that he has spirited little Joyce away. But I've only read the beginning—"

"Supposing I read the letter aloud?" suggested the gov'nor. "Of course, if you don't want me to read it—"

"Good gracious, that's just what I do want!" put in Dorrington. "I'm simply boiling with eagerness to hear it. Read right from the start, Mr. Blake, and don't waste a second!"

The gov'nor picked up the letter, and commenced reading aloud. But I'm going to set the letter down, word for word, as it was written by Roger Leverton. This is how it ran:

"118, Cromberwell Avenue,

Hampstead, N.W.

"My dear Harvey,—No doubt you will be surprised at my addressing you thus. But when you receive this letter, I shall have passed out of this life. And, before you judge me, I wish to ask your forgiveness for the great wrong I have done to you, and to Joyce. I am not hopeful enough to believe that you will forgive me, for I have been a base scoundrel.

"This communication is, in effect, a confession of my sin. And I will tell you at once that my stepdaughter Joyce is alive and well at this moment. To the world and to you she is dead—but that is not the case. And I will proceed to tell you the actual, absolute truth.

"The girl is now in Montana, living among the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, in an inaccessible spot known as the Valley of the Craggs. As I have breathed my last, there is no earthly reason why this secret should be kept any longer. I am dead, and nothing that I say in this letter can bring me punishment.

"Joyce is quite well, to the best of my belief, and will be in no way harmed when you bring her away from the valley. This valley is almost unknown, for it is surrounded on all sides by lofty crags and rocks. There is only one known entrance, and that is by means of a deep canyon, in which flows a quietly running stream. The water wends its way between perpendicular walls of rock; and these rocks join after a mile, and the canyon then becomes a tunnel, through which the stream flows. Eventually, by following this tunnel, the valley is reached.

"There is no other known entrance, for the crags and peaks bar the way. Do not imagine that Joyce is living in a wilderness of bare and barren rock. On the contrary, the valley itself is one of the most delightful spots in the whole State of Montana. There are rich woods and glorious grasslands, with the snow-capped peaks of the Rockies high in the clouds on all sides. Indeed, the Valley of the Craggs is one of the wonder-spots of the world.

"Criminal though I am, I would not have condemned Joyce to this imprisonment unless her prison was a place of real delights. I honestly believe that she will be reluctant to leave the valley. She was conveyed there in a most novel fashion—and you will anticipate the explanation before you read my words.

"In brief, the woman Blanche Ellmore is in my employ; I arranged everything with her, and with other agents of mine while in Rock City. The explanation of that aeroplane mystery is extremely simple. The machine had simply flown to the Valley of the Craggs, passing over the barrier of rocks, and had descended in perfect safety. Once there, Joyce was an absolute prisoner—for she knows nothing whatever of the tunnel exit. The aeroplane completely vanished, and nothing has ever been found of it.

"But Joyce is safe and well, and is being cared for by Blanche Ellmore. My agents convey food and other requisites through the

tunnel at intervals. You have only to journey to this valley, and Joyce will be there, waiting for you.

"You must travel to Rock City, and thence to a small township near the foothills, known as Copper Creek. The Devil's Canyon—which leads directly into the valley, as I have stated—is fifteen miles further on, right in the foothills themselves. You must follow the prairie trail to Moose Point; there you will see two lofty, towering crags in the formation of giant fingers. The canyon lies immediately between these crags. No fuller directions are necessary.

"Go, my boy, and rescue Joyce from her delightful prison. You love her—I know that well enough. And I am convinced that she will be ready and willing to become your wife just as soon as you reach her side.

"I am writing this during life, but you will read it when I am dead. I do not think the period of waiting will be a long one for you. But even though years pass I believe that you will remain true to the memory of the girl you so dearly loved. But it is a memory no longer; Joyce is waiting for you.

"I have no more to say, except that I conclude as I opened—in asking your forgiveness for having perpetrated this deception. I have treated you badly, and I know it. I have treated Joyce badly. I can say no more.

"ROGER LEVERTON."

When Sexton Blake had finished reading the letter, we all looked at one another with curious, tense expressions. Harvey Dorrington was leaning back with a light of absolute joy in his dark grey eyes.

"My little Joy!" he murmured, taking a deep breath. "She is alive—she is alive! Oh, you can't realise what this means to me, Mr. Blake! And all along I have had that conviction within me. My little girl is still alive—still waiting for me! Heaven above, what a thought!"

"I am inclined to believe that a kindly Providence has taken a timely hand in this matter," said Sexton Blake gravely. "This joyful revelation has been made to you before its time, Mr. Dorrington. Roger Leverton's crime has seen the light of day before it should have done so—according to his plans. For the old man is still alive and well."

"That is impossible!" protested Harvey.

"Doesn't he say that—"

"Never mind what he says!" interrupted the gov'nor. "We've got to look at the facts as they stand. And I can see daylight very clearly. The mystery of this stabbing affair is singularly clear. The whole train of events, in fact, is easy to follow."

I scratched my head.

"It may be easy to you, gov'nor," I remarked, "but I'm blessed if I can see it lucidly. Why did Mr. Leverton send this letter before he died? And who was the rotter who stabbed Mr. Dorrington?"

Sexton Blake smiled.

"I'll just tell you of the thoughts that are in my mind," he replied. "I am going to make a few deductions, and I don't think they'll be very far off the mark. To begin with, this affair is closely connected with the burglary which took place at Hampstead last night."

"Which burglary?" asked Harvey curiously.

Sexton Blake selected another cigar, and lit it.

"Mr. Roger Leverton's house was broken into," he replied. "I learned of the affair from a Scotland Yard inspector only this afternoon, Dorrington. And I can now see that those burglars are primarily responsible for this letter now being in your hands."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Dorrington. "I—I don't follow!"

"You will in a few moments. I am going to make an attempt to reconstruct what happened last night at Mr. Leverton's house," said the gov'nor smoothly. "My deductions, of course, are based upon the data which I have at my disposal. We will say, then, that these burglars entered Mr. Leverton's library. They at once set to work with an oxy-acetylene apparatus, and managed to open the safe."

"That's what the inspector said," I put in.

"Exactly, Tinker!" agreed Sexton Blake. "He also told us that the burglars merely made a haul of about twenty pounds. They opened the safe, and found that it contained nothing but an insignificant amount of cash. Very naturally the men were furious. Their expenses would not even be covered. They broke open the despatch-box. Leverton kept

ripped open every drawer within the safe, they smashed the despatch-box.

"Now, in all probability, Mr. Leverton kept his legal documents within a locked despatch-box; that is the usual plan with most men," proceeded the gov'nor. "This box, no doubt, contained the old man's will and other legal papers. I gather that this letter for you, Dorrington, was among those papers, with instructions, probably, to the old man's solicitor to post it after his death. Or—and this is more likely—the instructions were contained in the will itself. In any case, the letter got thrown on to the floor. It was stamped, addressed, and sealed up, all ready for the post. The burglars never thought of opening it. Why should they? They just threw it down, and went on with their ransacking."

"By Jupiter!" I breathed. "I'm beginning to see—"

"Of course you are, Tinker! The whole thing is very simple when you come to analyse it. But Destiny had not finished her task yet. The letter lay upon the floor, and was still there when the burglary was discovered. I don't know who learned of the affair first, but I don't think it was the old man himself. His butler, perhaps—"

"Monkwell!" interjected Dorrington. "That's the name of the old man's butler, Mr. Blake. A sly, miserable kind of man."

"Very well, then. Monkwell entered the library, and discovered that the safe had been smashed open," went on the gov'nor. "This, no doubt, was in the early morning. The butler was startled, and he probably took a look round before rushing up to his master. He saw a letter lying upon the floor—a letter addressed by his master, and ready for the post. Now, I suspect that Monkwell merely concluded that the letter had been knocked off the table by the intruders. Possibly there were some other letters ready for the post lying upon the desk. Quite thoughtlessly, almost mechanically, Monkwell picked up this very vital letter, and placed it among the others which were to be posted during the morning."

"You've hit it, Mr. Blake!" said Harvey Dorrington, with conviction. "You've hit it right on the head. It's the only feasible explanation, and it's not far-fetched in the least. Your deduction is just the simple truth. By a sheer accident the letter was dropped into the post, instead of being put back into the safe. Consequently it was delivered to me this evening."

Sexton Blake nodded.

"Exactly," he agreed. "Mind you, I don't know if there were any other letters; I don't know anything for certain. I have just voiced the only plausible explanation which occurs to my mind. But I should judge that there were some other letters upon the desk, otherwise Monkwell would not have assumed that this particular letter had been jerked on to the floor. In any case, that point is of no importance, for we know that the letter was dropped into the post during the morning. It was quite an innocent mistake, and the letter was posted in the natural order of things. It was dropped into your own letter-box this evening."

"But surely the old man must have discovered the loss?"

"That's just it," nodded Sexton Blake. "He did discover it, but not until this evening. You can imagine his dire consternation and fury. The letter was missing. He rang wildly for Monkwell. He questioned the man, and Monkwell explained how he had placed the letter with the others ready for the post. Mind you, my statements may be wrong in certain details, but I am convinced that they are correct in all essentials. Very well, then. We've now reached the point where Leverton learned that his confession letter, as we may call it, was on its way to the house. What did Leverton do?"

"I should say he tore his hair," I remarked.

The gov'nor grinned.

"I dare say he did, Tinker," he replied. "But I didn't mean that exactly. Leverton was appalled. He was almost stunned by the terrible discovery. This happened, I should imagine, during this evening. The old man knew very well that if that letter reached Dorrington's hands his secret would be exposed, and complete disaster followed."

"This letter should not have been posted until after Leverton's death. The old man was in a panic—a wild, insane panic. Remember he was desperate to a degree, for he saw his whole structure of plotting crumbling about his ears. In all probability Monkwell is in Leverton's confidence to a cer-

tain degree. I am now indulging in pure guesswork, of course. But I should suggest that Monkwell came to this house at his master's orders for the express purpose of getting hold of the letter, if possible, before it was opened.

"Well, he arrived. By all that we know, I should say that he arrived practically at the same time as you yourself, Dorrington. He watched you enter, and then heard the window being opened at the side of the house. Going round, he pushed the curtain aside, and saw you in the very act of examining the fatal letter. His own safety—his own position, at least—depended upon the recovery of that document. Frantic, he burst into the room and snatched at the letter. His intention was to flee with it before you could recover from your surprise. Once safely away, all danger would be past, and the position would be as before."

"It's deucedly clever of you, Mr. Blake!" exclaimed Harvey Dorrington admiringly. "So far as I can see, you've reconstructed the whole affair, right from the very start. But I don't think the man was Monkwell, for I remember catching a glimpse of a dark beard, and Leverton's butler is clean-shaven."

The gov'nor smiled.

"That leads me to feel sure that the man was Monkwell. He had merely disguised himself to avoid recognition," he explained. "I think we know the rest, don't we? The fellow got the letter, but wasn't quick enough. You managed to get hold of him, and you both fell to the floor. Monkwell was wild with panic, and he drew out his knife, probably with the intention of terrifying you by the sight of it. In the struggle, however, the blade entered your shoulder, and you staggered back. Monkwell fled, believing that he had killed you, and he was so mad with terror that the letter dropped from his benumbed fingers as he scrambled through the window. And there the document lay when Tinker and I appeared upon the scene. Really, I believe that we have reconstructed the happenings fairly accurately."

"It's jolly queer that Monkwell should have dropped the letter, after stabbing me to get hold of it!" said Dorrington slowly. "I can't quite swallow that, Mr. Blake."

"It seems incongruous, doesn't it?" smiled the gov'nor. "But, my dear fellow, you haven't had the experience of criminals that I have. A man who has just committed murder forgets everything else in the whole world; his one desire is to flee, to hasten away from the scene of his crime. In those first mad moments he is hardly aware of what he is doing. Monkwell thought that he had killed you, and he forgot his mission. He forgot everything. He didn't even know that the letter had been jerked from his hand. I can appreciate the point fully. Afterwards, no doubt, the man discovered his loss. But was it likely that he'd come back? I think not."

"So that's the explanation of it all—eh?" murmured Harvey. "Upon my soul, Mr. Blake, it was a lucky day for me when you came upon the scene! Don't you see, if you hadn't come that letter would now have been lying outside. I might never have got it."

The gov'nor's deductions were jolly clever. He had pieced the facts together wonderfully, I considered. And, although he may have been wrong in one or two details, I was pretty sure that the reconstruction was correct in the main.

"And little Joy is alive!" said Harvey, in a gentle voice which expressed untold emotion. "Thank Heaven the truth has come out, Mr. Blake! We must now confine our energies to rescuing my poor little girl and bringing punishment upon the head of her scoundrelly stepfather!"

But Sexton Blake slowly shook his head.

"We mustn't act rashly," he said. "What will happen if we put this matter into the hands of the police? There will be delay and inquiry, and a host of red tapeism. Leverton will at once wire to his agents in Montana, and have the girl removed from the valley. When a search is made nothing will be discovered. Leverton will deny the whole thing; and it will be extremely difficult for us to prove that Miss Maitland is alive. In short, Dorrington, we must adopt strategy."

The young man looked almost alarmed.

"What do you propose, then?" he asked.

"Well, one of the first steps is to put my deductions to the test," replied Sexton Blake smoothly. "We are going to set a trap, and I have a very shrewd idea that it will be successful."

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

In Which the Gov'nor Adopts a Little Ruse With Complete Success.

HARVEY DORRINGTON'S cheeks were flushed now, and his eyes sparkled with joy and untold relief. Sexton Blake and I, of course, were jolly pleased to hear that Joyce Maitland was alive.

But what a queer business!

The secret oughtn't to have been made known until old Leverton pegged out; the cat, in fact, had been let out of the bag prematurely. This was, of course, as it should be; Fate had settled in its own mind that it would put the kybosh on old Roger Leverton's rotten scheme.

It was lucky the gov'nor and I were two of Fate's instruments, though. Without Sexton Blake's wonderful shrewdness it would have been a poor look-out for Dorrington and his lady-love.

I wondered what she was like. Somehow, I knew that she was pretty and dainty—anyhow, I should be disappointed if she wasn't. While I was wondering I saw Dorrington's gaze directed upon a big photograph which was hung in a superb frame over the mantelpiece.

A short silence had fallen on us all, and I stood up and had a closer look at the photograph. Then I knew I shouldn't have to wonder as to Joyce Maitland's appearance any longer. For this, surely, was a photograph of the girl.

She was just as I had imagined—only a lot prettier. She was smiling out of the frame with a rather merry look in her eyes, and her face was beautifully proportioned, with her lips slightly parted, revealing a perfect set of teeth.

"By gum! What a ripping girl!" I exclaimed.

"Ripping!" repeated Dorrington, in a voice which quivered. "That's hardly the word, Tinker—"

"I didn't mean that exactly," I interrupted. "She's just lovely, Mr. Dorrington. I'm tremendously glad that—that she's alive! You'll have to let her know that you're going to rescue her. Send her a cable—"

"Now, Tinker, that impulsive nature of yours is getting the upper hand," smiled the gov'nor. "We mustn't send any cables, and we mustn't let Leverton know our plans. And, as I said, I am going to set a trap for him."

"For Leverton?" asked Harvey.

"Exactly!"

"But I don't understand."

"I have been thinking," said Sexton Blake quietly. "We want time for planning and preparing. We must have time, in fact, or I won't be responsible for the result. Now, we have come to the conclusion that Monkwell fled after dropping the letter outside the window. He probably discovered his loss, but was afraid to return."

"By this time old Leverton knows that Mr. Dorrington's read the confession," I remarked.

"No, Tinker. If you thought before you spoke you wouldn't make such a statement," said Blake. "Monkwell almost certainly believes that he killed our friend here. Therefore Leverton imagines that the letter is still unopened, and that it is lying either in the room or in the garden—for Monkwell may have remembered that he carried the letter out. And I am going to prepare things so that Leverton can regain the vital communication."

"I don't follow you at all, Mr. Blake."

"Well, when Leverton finds that his servant has returned without the letter, he will either send him back, or come himself, in the hope of finding it," replied the gov'nor. "We are going to let him find it—that's all."

"But it is open," objected Dorrington.

"But it is opened, I know," agreed the gov'nor calmly. "But it happens that the flap came up intact. We can, therefore, seal it up again, without leaving a trace, after we've taken a copy."

"Taken a copy?" I asked blankly.

"Precisely! You see, Tinker, my idea is to gain time. If I know anything about criminals—and I pride myself that I am rather well versed in such matters—I should say that Leverton will make a desperate effort to get that letter before admitting himself beaten," said Sexton Blake. "In fact, we have none too much time at our disposal. The odds are that Leverton

believes the letter is lying somewhere in the garden—Monkwell having dropped it in his flight. Therefore somebody will return to regain possession of it."

"I see the wheeze, now," I remarked, with a nod. "You're going to take a copy of the document, seal it in the envelope again, and lay it outside?"

The gov'nor nodded.

"That's the idea, young 'un," he agreed. "You or I will have to watch from a safe vantage-point. If nobody comes we shall have to make different plans; for then, of course, Leverton will know that his secret is revealed. But I have an idea that the bait will be taken."

"But I can't quite see the reason for this arrangement," said Dorrington, shifting his position slightly.

"My dear fellow, I have made up my mind to help you to the best of my ability," replied Blake. "You wanted my advice, didn't you? Well, I'm just telling you my plans. If you disapprove of them—"

"I don't—I don't!" Harvey hastened to say. "It's jolly good of you, Mr. Blake, to help me as you are doing! But I like to get the hang of it properly, that's all. You've got a free hand to do as you like."

"Thank you!" said the gov'nor. "Well, Dorrington, if we keep the letter, Leverton will know that we've kept it; he'll soon find out that you're very much alive, and he will know that his own position is rocky. He will send urgent cables to his agents in America, and Miss Maitland will be taken away from the valley. With all traces removed, Leverton may then possibly attempt to bluff the whole thing out; and it's quite possible that he will succeed. What if he denies all knowledge of this letter? It would be rather difficult to prove that he wrote it. And thus the girl will remain a prisoner, and nothing will be accomplished."

"Yes; I see what you mean now."

"On the other hand, if Leverton regains the letter intact, he'll naturally assume that you know nothing about it," pursued the gov'nor. "He'll let matters remain as they are, and we shall have time for planning and scheming. Roger Leverton is guilty of criminal dealings—of abduction, in fact—but his guilt will be difficult to prove. If we can bluff him into believing that his letter has not been read—why, then, we shall probably do quite a lot. Because he will be inactive, whilst we shall be just the opposite."

"By Jove! You're right!" declared Harvey Dorrington. "I'm afraid the scheme won't work, though. I'm not so sanguine as you are, Mr. Blake. I don't believe for a moment that the old man will send for the letter."

"You haven't had my experience," smiled Sexton Blake quietly.

The gov'nor wasn't often far short of the mark; on many an occasion he had anticipated the movements of criminals with almost uncanny accuracy. He seemed to have a knack of sniffing out exactly what they intended doing, and preparing accordingly.

I fetched a writing-block from a bureau, and Blake took out his fountain-pen and commenced writing. He copied the letter quickly, word for word. Of course, we should have to give up that incriminating document; but it wasn't of much value, in any case. It was the information it contained that was valuable.

Having got the copy, Sexton Blake replaced the letter within the envelope, and then borrowed a little gum from a pot which I fetched from the bureau. The flap was then stuck down as securely as it had ever been. There wasn't the slightest trace to show that the contents had ever been removed.

"You're going to drop that letter on the flower-bed, now?" asked our companion.

"Yes. But it'll have to be done carefully," replied Blake. "For all we know, there may be somebody watching even now; and it would give the game away completely if we were seen 'planting' the letter. We had better turn the light out for a few minutes, and drop the letter on to the bed in the darkness."

"Who's going to watch?" I asked.

"You are—to begin with, at all events," replied the gov'nor.

"There's a little window—the pantry window—which overlooks this side of the house all along," remarked Dorrington. "It juts out, you see, and you can sit there quite comfortably, Tinker, and watch without fear of being seen yourself."

"I'm game!" I said readily.

The lights were switched off, and after a few minutes Sexton Blake slightly pushed the blind aside, and dropped the letter on to the bed. It wasn't likely that anybody was watching, but it was better to be cautious.

I saw the gov'nor drop the letter out clearly, for by that time I was ensconced in my position at the pantry window. As Dorrington had said, it overlooked the flower-bed all along.

I noticed, too, that some thick laurels stood upon the other side of the garden-path; so, if anybody had been watching, he couldn't have seen the letter dropped, for the laurels formed a splendid screen.

The light didn't come on again, and I guessed that Blake had shifted the patient into another room on the other side of the house. It would have looked queer to turn the light on again after a few minutes.

I soon found that the house was unwatched, for if anybody had been lurking near he certainly would have approached soon after he saw the light extinguished. But fifteen minutes passed, and they lengthened into thirty.

Everything was still and silent and black. I had the window open, for the pantry was stuffy otherwise, and could see and hear perfectly. That is, I could see with sufficient clearness to detect any strange movement. But nothing happened; the minutes went past, and the letter remained lying upon the flower-bed—a dull, greyish blob among the surrounding blackness.

The night was growing old—as the poets say. I was expecting it to grow grey hairs, in fact. In other words, I was anticipating the grey dawn.

I became stiff and irritable and decidedly fed-up. The gov'nor and Dorrington were having a nice little chat—planning and arranging things, of course—and I was out of it all. I felt quite in the cold.

But the gov'nor's instinct—or whatever it was—turned out to be dead right.

For, just as I was preparing to murmur a few choice remarks, I heard a faint crack, as though a small branch had been snapped. I was on the alert in a second, watching with all my eyes. That sounds as if I've got a dozen, but I've really only got two. The novelists say things like that, though, so I suppose I'd better do the same.

I watched intently, and almost at once I saw a dull, black form emerge from behind the bushes. He came slowly, and was stooping.

"Searching the ground!" I told myself. "That shows that he doesn't know exactly where he dropped the letter. Ye gods and little wheelks! The gov'nor's wheeze is going to work out, after all!"

For, to tell the truth, I'd been a wee bit sceptical; I'd thought that nobody would come for the letter. The stranger suddenly stood upright, and remained still for a second. Then he took a quick step forward, bent down, and grabbed up the letter.

I saw him feel it all over carefully, and then he stuffed it into an inner pocket.

"You don't think you're being diddled, my beauty, do you?" I grinned to myself. "But you are! You're being diddled beautifully!"

The dim figure melted away quickly; he just glided behind the bushes, and I saw no more of him. But a minute later I heard a faint footfall on the pavement beyond the wall.

My duty being done, I closed the pantry window and made my way through the house to the dining-room. I found Sexton Blake and Dorrington quite cosy and comfortable. Our host was lying full length upon a lounge, and the gov'nor lolled in an easy-chair. They were both smoking fat cigars, and had apparently forgotten all about little me.

"Well, Tinker?" asked Blake keenly, sitting forward.

"O.K.!" I announced. "The bait's been taken, gov'nor—swallowed whole, in fact. Somebody came and grabbed the letter a couple of minutes ago."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Dorrington, with a whistle.

The gov'nor rose to his feet.

"I've been a little bit uncertain—especially during this last hour," he admitted. "I'm glad—extremely glad—that my ruse has worked. It proves, Dorrington, that my surmises were correct. I'm very pleased with the way things have gone. It is far better for Leverton to believe that his secret has not been exposed."

"What's the next move?" I asked eagerly.

"Well, we've got to decide that, Tinker," replied Sexton Blake. "It's a very pretty

plot, and it has been exposed by a trick of Chance—or, rather, by the innocent actions of some unknown burglars and Leverton's own butler. If Leverton's safe had not been rifled, the secret wouldn't have been revealed until the old man's death. And that, perhaps, would not have occurred for years. The situation is rather humorous in one respect, Dorrington. You have to thank a gang of cracksmen for this revelation."

"If ever a burglar breaks into my house I'll treat him like a lord!" declared our companion, with a smile. "I'm a friend to all burglars for life!"

Sexton Blake chuckled.

"We can breathe now," he went on. "To have kept the letter would have been to put Leverton on the alert, and he would have made strenuous efforts to avert the disaster. But, as the position stands, Leverton fondly imagines that he is as safe as ever—that his secret has not been exposed. Happily, however, we know the exact truth."

"And will you take up this case for me, Mr. Blake?" asked Dorrington eagerly.

"My dear man, I have taken it up!" smiled the gov'nor. "I'm going to work on it strenuously; I'm going to rescue Miss Maitland. And while I am engaged upon that task Roger Leverton will be congratulating himself that everything is safe. You see, Dorrington, by acting as we have done, we shall have an absolutely free hand. Afterwards, of course—when we have rescued your fiancée—we shall be able to deal with the culprit."

I looked at the gov'nor eagerly.

"But—but this means that we're going out to Montana—" I began.

"Exactly, Tinker," yawned Blake. "That's what it means. We'll start just as soon as Dorrington is fit; we'll start for the Valley of the Crags. By Jove, it sounds quite romantic!"

Harvey Dorrington's eyes gleamed.

"It is romantic, too, Mr. Blake," he said. "We're going out to the wilds, to rescue from imprisonment the dearest little girl in the world—the girl who has promised to be my wife!"

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

In Which Three Alleged Prospectors Arrive at Copper Creek, Montana, to the General Interest of the Natives—Sexton Blake Has a Little Argument with Lean-Jaw Luke—And After That Things Get Very Busy All Round.

COPPER CREEK, Montana, was called a city by its inhabitants. But I called it a collection of rough-and-ready shacks, with a central drinking-saloon as its principal public building.

There were other buildings, of course—a bank, and a dry-goods store, and one or two minor factories. But, on the whole, Copper Creek was a dingy, sleepy little Western village.

It was tucked away in a valley, with the prairie all round, and the Rocky Mountains in the far distance raising their summits to the clouds. Intervening lay the undulating foothills, pine-clad and sombre in many places.

There was no railroad at Copper Creek; from Rock City it had been necessary to travel by stage-coach. We could, of course, have hired a motor-car, but the "road" was merely a prairie trail, over which motoring was well-nigh impossible. Besides, we didn't want to create any sensation.

Some time had passed since Sexton Blake and I spent that memorable night at Harvey Dorrington's house in Golder's Green.

The young man, who had plenty of money of his own, insisted upon paying every expense. The gov'nor had thought, perhaps, that his services weren't required, and he had offered to stay in England. But Dorrington had nearly had a fit, and had implored Blake to go out to America.

Dorrington's wound was pretty painful, but he was able to get about all right, with his arm in a sling. He had insisted upon leaving England by the first available boat, and we had done so.

But, upon the gov'nor's advice, Dorrington had spread the news pretty thoroughly that he was off to the Mediterranean; he had even booked a passage in a big P. and O. liner. This was for Roger Leverton's benefit; we didn't want the old rascal to guess things.

And at last we had arrived in Copper

Creek; and Leverton remained in England, blissfully unconscious of the impending catastrophe.

Harvey Dorrington was himself again by this time. His wound had practically healed, and he was bronzed and healthy. The sea-voyage had done him a world of good. And he was intensely eager to press on with all speed. Both the gov'nor and I could see that he was very much in love.

Naturally, old Pedro had come with us; we couldn't leave Pedro behind. And he was a pretty useful lump of dog's-meat at times. In an adventure of this sort he'd probably prove to be of value.

Before entering Rock City we had all purchased "Western" kits. By this I mean that we were now dressed after the fashion of the average prospector. For we were posing as prospectors in Copper Creek. We didn't know who Leverton's agents were; but it was pretty certain that they were located at Copper Creek. And it didn't suit our book to give them an inkling of our real object out West.

Pedro was taken round to the back to be fed and housed, and we were shown into a low room to partake of a meal.

"Well, we've got here," I remarked, as I sat down on a hard chair. "Not exactly a place of luxury, but it'll serve all right. I don't quite like Pedro being shoved round the back, gov'nor."

"Oh, he's all right for the present!" said Sexton Blake. "We'll fetch him in before we turn in." The gov'nor looked round, and then lowered his voice. "No discussing our real object, you know."

"Of course not!" said Dorrington, who was bronzed and cheerful. "We'll be getting on the trail for the foothills to-morrow, prospecting."

The door opened, and one of Hank's daughters appeared with a supply of grub. She was a rough-and-ready sort of girl, but quite pleasant. And while we were feeding her father took advantage of a slack time to come and have a few words.

He lounged in, and I felt the room shake perceptibly. His face was all wrinkled up

it rather suited us to be regarded as harmless tenderfoots.

"You're a cheerful sort of host, Hank!" grinned Dorrington. "But I suppose you do get a lot of fools now and again. I've generally noticed, however, that gold or other valuable stuff isn't found until a whole host of prospectors have been over the same spot. There's such a thing as striking lucky, you know."

"Gee! I guess you'll need to strike good an' hard to find that luck," said Hank, lighting a black-looking cigar. "But say, strangers, I jest came in to hand you a word o' warning. My eyes ain't exactly as youthful as they was wunst, but they've sure seen you're kinder fresh. Waal, ef you ain't blamed keerful, you'll find yerselves up agin trouble!"

"Trouble?" repeated Sexton Blake questioningly.

"Sure! Mebbe you ain't heard of Lean-Jaw Luke?"

"Who's he?" I grinned. "A comic paper hero?"

"Say, you make me laff!" said Hank grimly. "Comic! Waal, I'll allow he's a reglar pieter to look upon, but he's one o' the toughest bad men in this yere State. Lean-Jaw Luke an' his gang gen'rally raise blazes when they git around the Creek!"

"What about the sheriff?" I asked.

"I figger we've got a sheriff in this city, but he don't cut no ice when Lean-Jaw's around," replied the saloon-keeper. "Say, that man's most gen'rally missing when Luke's gang comes to town. An' e don't appear agin until the shootin's all over. An' say, ther's talk around that Lean-Jaw's comin' to the Creek to-night."

"That sounds promising," remarked the gov'nor.

Hank's face became quite serious. "I calc'late you're guests in my hotel," he exclaimed. "I don't want no trouble with them blazin' cusses. I'd sure advise you to sit tight right here. I won't let on as I've got strangers around."

"My dear Hank, we're not going to imprison ourselves just because of a touse-headed ruffian," said Dorrington. "I think we're quite capable of looking after ourselves. Still, thanks for the tip. We'll be on our guard."

"I've jest warned you, that's all," said the saloon-keeper. "You'll be plum crazed ef you show your faces in the saloon to-night. There'll sure be a dandy racket in any case, with them doggone hoboes gettin' soused. An' ther'll be shootin' ef Luke gits gay. Mebbe you've got a wad? That'll sure be Luke's ef you don't take my advice."

And Hank departed, with a sage nod of his head, and allowed us to get on with our meal.

"Apparently there's going to be a little excitement this evening," smiled the gov'nor. "As it happens, we do possess a wad—three wads, in fact! But I've got an idea that Luke won't finger them."

"Poor old Hank evidently thinks we're regular duffers," said Harvey. "It would have been a pity to disappoint him. I suppose you're handy with a revolver, Mr. Blake?"

"That's just about the right word," agreed Sexton Blake. "Perhaps I'm a little handier than Lean-Jaw Luke even. And Tinker's pretty smart, too. But I don't suppose we shall have to use our weapons. These aren't the early days in the 'bad lands.' I expect that the redoubtable Luke is overrated."

We all possessed revolvers, and Dorrington could shoot very decently. Upon the whole, we reckoned that we could take care of ourselves quite well. For, in spite of Hank's warning, it wasn't likely that this gang would seriously attack us. The only danger lay in Lean-Jaw getting "gay."

We finished our meal, and the gov'nor and Dorrington sat smoking and chatting for a while. It was our intention to take the prairie trail to Moose Point the following morning. The Devil's Canyon lay just beyond. And our movements after we arrived at that interesting spot would be largely directed by circumstances. So it was impossible to make any definite plans. The first thing was to get to the valley itself.

After a while Hank's daughter brought in a smelly oil-lamp, and coarse voices from the saloon told us that business was brisk.

But we weren't left in any doubt as to the arrival of Lean-Jaw Luke and his merry men. We heard the galloping of many horses, and then loud, rough shouts. After that came an addition to the sounds in the saloon. Sexton Blake rose to his feet.



The strange form struck Hatchet in the chest. He grunted heavily, staggered back, and went down with a crash.

Sexton Blake meant to rescue Miss Maitland, if possible, absolutely on the quiet. After we had got her away from the Valley of the Craggs and out of the State we should be O.K. And we had just "fetched up" at Copper Creek.

At the time of our arrival it was getting on towards evening. The autumn day had been fine and warm, and the air was now quite sultry. There wasn't much feeling of autumn in the air, at all events.

We made a bee-line for the saloon, which appeared to be the building of first importance in the township. We soon found that it was run by a gentleman who rejoiced in the name of Hank Leadbitter—not that there was much to rejoice over in a name like that! He must have lead a bitter life saddled with a name of that sort. (I pointed out that pun to the gov'nor, but he refused to see it.)

Hank—as he was always called—was a huge man with hands like legs of mutton. And the rest of him was in the same proportion. How the dickens he moved about in the limited space behind the bar is more than I can ever imagine. But he seemed to do it quite easily.

The saloon was practically empty when we entered, and we soon fixed up about rooms.

under the influence of the huge smile he was wearing.

"Guess you're new around these yere parts?" he suggested. "I'll allow you look good an' smart in them Noo York clothes. We don't figger to dress keerful in Copper Creek."

"We haven't been to the Creek before, Hank," said Sexton Blake cheerfully; "and I don't suppose we shall bother you for long, either. I've heard there's a good field for prospectors round here."

"Say you've heard a hull lot o' things in your time, I guess," replied Hank. "It ain't my way to give advice or take it. No, sir! Ef you're around the Creek prospectin'—waaal, say, git goin'! You'll mebbe larn a heap o' hoss-sense afore you hit the trail. Ther's bin prospectors around here afore. I sure guess they was all-fired hoboes, anyway!"

That remark, of course, was a gentle hint that we were "all-fired hoboes," too. Prospecting was apparently played out in this part of the State, and those unfortunate people who came to Copper Creek with that object in view were regarded as "hoboes."

But we didn't care what the inhabitants of Copper Creek thought of us, so long as they didn't think the right thing. In fact,

"If Hank hadn't spoken to us," he smiled, "I should have voted for remaining here. But I want to convince our excellent landlord that we're not quite such boobs as he seems to imagine. And I'm rather interested to make the acquaintance of this celebrated outlaw—for, by what Hank says, I judge the fellow to be an outlaw. Out in these wild parts the only law seems to be that of might."

We passed through the little, low passage into the saloon itself. Hank was handing out drinks—rye-whisky for the most part—at express speed, and the dollars were rolling in continuously. The proprietor and two bartenders, in fact, all had their hands full.

I saw Hank's perpetual smile vanish for a second as we appeared. He was quite a kindly man, and he was really anxious that we shouldn't hit any trouble.

The saloon presented a very animated spectacle. There were three great oil-lamps burning, and the air was thick with rank tobacco-smoke. This, combined with the fumes of the coarse whisky, created quite a considerable odour.

Men of all sizes and ages lounged against the bar, or sat at tables gambling. Some of them were harmless citizens, while others were men from the prairies and outlying ranches. These were mostly dressed in rough shirts and wide-brimmed hats, while their legs were encased in plain leather or sheepskin chappis.

The noisiest men of all were half a dozen bechapped individuals against the bar. Each man made a big display of firearms; they stuck out at their hips prominently. They weren't ordinary revolvers; they were huge, formidable-looking articles.

There was a shout as soon as ever we were seen.

"Say, you didn't let on as you had guests, Hank!" shouted one man.

"I don't figger to yell my business around, Squinty!" said the saloon-keeper tartly. "Ef I hev swell guests in my ho-tel, I kinder reckon ter treat 'em like gents. They allow that they're goin' prospectin'—"

He was interrupted by a series of loud, coarse laughs.

"Say, I allus enjoy talkin' with jays of this calibre!" exclaimed a huge man with a lean, leathery face. "Say, strangers, I guess I'll interdooce meself. I'm Luke Armstrong—known around this hyar State as Lean-Jaw Luke. I don't figger to stand any fancy truck like them swell collars you've got around your necks! In Copper Creek we jest shoot up all doggone boobs!"

The man was evidently showing off. He wanted everybody to know that he was cock of the walk; and the crowd in the saloon expected us to stand shivering in our shoes. We were wearing collars, certainly, but only of the soft variety.

"You appear to be under a slight misapprehension," said the gov'nor gently. "If we choose to wear 'fancy trucks,' as you delicately put it, that's our business, surely! And because we are strangers, that doesn't mean to say that we are 'boobs.' I don't want you to have a wrong idea of things, Luke!"

Lean-Jaw gulped down some whisky, and grinned.

"Say, don't he talk pretty?" he asked, appealing to the general company. "That kind of dandy chin-music gits me fair rattled, I guess! These jays need settin' right, I calc'late. Say, Squinty—Hatchet—Snakes—jest raise the dust some! I'd like to see these cusses dance!"

I'll admit that we were a bit startled.

Lean-Jaw and three of his henchmen—known as Squinty Mike, Hatchet Lewis, and Snakes Fowler, as we found afterwards—all drew their revolvers at the same second. And they fired off about a dozen shots before we could breathe. The bullets pattered round our feet like hailstones on an asphalt sidewalk. As the flooring was of earth, with sawdust liberally strewn over it, the bullets merely kicked up the dust.

"Great Scott!" I heard Dorrington gasp.

But the gov'nor was as cool as ice, and he was smiling amusedly.

"You rather fancy yourself—eh?" he smiled. "That exhibition is interesting, Luke, but not at all startling. I rather object to having my boots smothered with dust, however. Perhaps you've never tried it yourself?"

And Blake drew his own revolver, and planked half a dozen shots round Lean-Jaw's own feet. The man jumped back, with a bellow, but was too completely surprised to do anything for the moment. Meanwhile,



Sexton Blake and Tinker saw at once that one of the side windows stood open, and that there was a light burning in the room.

the gov'nor slipped his revolver away, and drew out his second one.

"Holy Mackinaw!" ejaculated Hank, from behind his bar. "I'm a hull heap amazed, boys! I sure figgered as that boob couldn't fire a gun nohow. Say, Luke, you'd best be keerful. You've had your joke, an' I don't figger to allow blood-spillin' around this lay-out!"

"Yew blazin' pig!" snarled Luke savagely. "I guess I don't take a bluff from no man! Ef I wusn't good-tempered I'd sure give you such a dose of lead-poisonin' es your vitals'd let in atmosphere like they was a blamed sieve!"

Sexton Blake laughed.

"Don't look so fierce, Luke!" he exclaimed lightly. "You're not going to be a fool, surely? Have a drink with me, and admit that you're more surprised than you'd allow at first. I guess the whole crowd can have any drinks they like, and I'll foot the bill. We don't want any quarrelling."

"Say, that's good an' straight!" put in one of the more sober citizens.

"No man draws a gun on me without sufferin'!" growled Luke fiercely. "I guess I'll give this hoboe jest one chance. Ef he proves that he can handle a gun same as I ken—waal, I'll say no more. But ef he can't, then there'll be a hull pile o' trouble gettin' around right quick!"

"Don't you be a blamed idiot!" snapped Hank. "We ain't hev'in' no shootin' matches in this saloon, Luke. Say, stranger, I guess you'd best—"

"Don't you worry yourself, Hank," interjected the gov'nor. "I'm quite ready to take this man's challenge. And he's perfectly at liberty to make all the trouble he likes—if I don't handle my gun decently."

There was quite a buzz in the saloon. As a general rule Copper Creek was dull and slow. The visits of Lean-Jaw created a diversion now and again; but for an Eastern "boob" to pit himself against the redoubtable outlaw was something of a sensation.

As for Dorrington and I, we were quite cheerful. We'd been rather alarmed during the first few minutes; for these rough men

counted life cheaply, and they wouldn't have hesitated long at shooting to kill. But Sexton Blake's genial attitude and cool fearlessness won over the majority of the crowd. I would have backed the gov'nor's shooting against anybody's in the world, and so I felt easy in mind. But Hank Leadbitter was looking very serious. He knew that Luke was the cleverest gun-man for miles around, and he viewed the whole affair with considerable qualms.

"Now, you blamed coyote, we'll see what you ken do with that toy gun o' yours!" said Lean-Jaw contemptuously. "Say, boys, jest look at it! That ain't a gun—thet's sure a kid's pistol!"

There was certainly a great difference between the gov'nor's neat revolvers and the huge weapons used by Luke. But Sexton Blake's "guns" were much finer articles in every way, actually.

Although the great detective had given a display of his marksmanship, there wasn't a single man in that whole crowd who really thought that he could hold a candle to Lean-Jaw. And I must confess that the big rascal could shoot amazingly well.

He stood before the bar twirling his two revolvers over and over in his hands with superb dexterity. But Sexton Blake knew that trick well enough.

"Do that, you scented jay!" sneered Luke. "Why, certainly!" said the gov'nor promptly.

He drew his own guns like lightning, and gave a display which left Luke absolutely in the cold. I was grinning hugely, and nudged Dorrington with delight. It was really enjoyable to see this bully taken down a peg or two.

"Waal, gee!" gasped Lean-Jaw.

He knew that he was beaten, and we could tell that he was already feeling a bit uncertain. This had the effect of making him more savage than ever.

"Say, Hank, git three o' your blame swill-bottles over hyar—with corks in 'em. I guess I'll—"

"I ain't goin' to hev no shootin' in this saloon!" objected Hank.

Luke didn't make any verbal reply. He calmly sent a bullet crashing through a full bottle of whisky which stood upon a shelf among many others. Hank moved with amazing swiftness, and produced three empty bottles in next to no time. He knew well enough that Lean-Jaw was quite capable of spilling a dozen bottles of whisky, if he felt in the mood for it—and there would be no compensation.

"You're plum crazed, sure!" growled Hank, as he pushed the three bottles across. "Ef you was a decent citizen, Luke, I guess you wouldn't go around spillin' folk's property. Thet's your all-fired bottles—git busy with the racket, but I don't want no holes blown through the walls of this hyar s'loon. Git me?"

Lean-Jaw picked up the bottles without making any comment. He walked across to the end of the saloon, to a spot where a low bench ran along one wall. A cowboy was sprawled on this bench, half drunk.

Luke lifted his boot and calmly kicked the man off the bench on to the floor. There was a howl, and a chorus of laughs. The cowboy crawled away painfully, but he was too drunk to offer any resistance. Besides, resistance against Lean-Jaw Luke was never thought of.

I leaned over the bar, beckoning to Hank.

"Don't you worry yourself, Hanky!" I said easily. "If there's any damage done to your property, we'll foot the bill."

"Say that's real fine!" exclaimed the saloon-keeper heartily.

He was relieved, and the smile returned to his face. This crowd in his saloon meant a good deal of extra profit for him, for drinking was going on continually; but if a lot of his stuff was ruined, the profit would become nil. Upon the whole, Hank preferred to do a quiet, even business.

"Now, say, d'you see them bottles?" said Lean-Jaw abruptly.

I looked round. The three whisky-bottles had been placed side by side upon the bench, and the cork of each was lightly laid upon each bottle.

"Now, you all-fired hobo, I'll jest show you what shootin' really is! I don't figger to boast any," sneered Luke; "but I 'lows thet ain't a cuss in the State of Montana as ken face this hyar proposition without feelin' kinder mean an' small!"

"What's the idea, Luke?" asked Sexton Blake calmly.

"Guess you'll see—right now!" said Lean-Jaw, jerking out one of his revolvers.

"Hold on a minute," put in the gov'nor. "That wall behind the bench is only of wood: your bullets will go clean through. We don't want to—"

"Say, quite this durned soft talk!" interrupted Luke savagely. "I allus hated hot air wuss'n poizen! I don't figger to care a cuss where them bullets go. Ef ther's fools on the other side o' the wall—waaal, I guess they ken taste lead!"

"It's all right, stranger," put in Hank. "Thet's only a backyard."

Lean-Jaw Luke lifted his revolver, and there were three rapid reports. And the three corks went flying—the bottles themselves not being touched. It was good shooting, and every man in the saloon knew it.

Luke, dropping his smoking revolver into its holster, and swaggered across to the bar. There was a sneering, contemptuous expression upon his face.

"Git busy!" he said harshly.

"Say, this ain't kinder fair!" put in one of the other men. "We can't expect this high-flyin' galoot to handle a gun like Luke—"

"Guess the guy had best hurry up!" interjected Lean-Jaw grimly. "He's gotter knock them corks off again—same as I did. Ef he fails, ther'll be a hull heap of blood flowin' around."

Sexton Blake smiled.

"I thought you were going to set me a difficult task, Luke," he observed. "Supposing we have six bottles instead of three? The test would be somewhat more severe, wouldn't it? Hank, pass over three more bottles."

The gov'nor's coolness took everybody by surprise. The crowd had expected Blake to cry off the contest; but, instead of doing that, he had made the task doubly difficult.

"Gee!" murmured Hank. "I'm dreamin', sure!"

But he handed over the three bottles and watched. The gov'nor set them alongside the others. There were now six bottles in a row, close against one another. I'll admit that I was a bit uncertain myself, although I knew Sexton Blake better than anybody.

To pick off those six corks accurately would be an amazing feat of marksmanship. If the gov'nor failed it would mean that our position would be uncomfortable, perhaps perilous. But if he succeeded Lean-Jaw would be completely overwhelmed.

There was a hush as Blake drew out his revolver. One or two glasses clinked and a few feet shifted, but that was all.

Six shots rang out in rapid succession. The gov'nor's automatic was one of the finest weapons made, and he knew how to handle it perfectly. The slight haze of smoke cleared away, and there was a general shout of astonishment.

For all the bottles were standing exactly as before—but each cork had disappeared. Every one of the detective's shots had been dead true! I felt like jumping into the air with glee.

"Sufferin' Moses! This guy ain't got no lies around him, sure!" shouted one of the men enthusiastically. "Say, boys, you ken call me a fust-class hog ef I don't shake that feller's fist!"

The man who had spoken pushed his way forward with the intention of wringing the gov'nor's hand. But at that moment something rather startling occurred.

Lean-Jaw Luke, with a loud oath, jerked out his revolver.

"Now's our time, boys!" he grated out harshly.

And at the same second he jammed the muzzle of his revolver into Sexton Blake's chest. Simultaneously Squinty Mike, Hatchet Lewis, Snakes Fowler, and three other men drew their revolvers.

"Now, Mister Sexton Blake, I guess you'll put your hands up—good'n quick!" snarled Luke triumphantly. "You blamed British p'liceman, I'm goin' to blow chunks out o' your karkis ef you try any tricks!"

My heart jumped, and I felt Dorrington grip my arm. Sexton Blake remained quite calm, but his teeth snapped together grimly.

Luke had chosen his time well—the cunning rascal! The gov'nor had already emptied one of his revolvers, and the other was now in a similar state. For the moment Blake's automatics were useless. Knowing this, Luke had acted promptly. The outlaw had seen by the great detective's exhibition that he was far too handy with a revolver to be a comfortable customer to tackle.

My blood rose to boiling point.

Almost before I knew it my own revolver

was in my fist, and I pulled the trigger. A yell of agony followed the report. But my shot had sped true. The bullet, in fact, had hit the long barrel of Luke's revolver, and had jerked the weapon out of his hand.

Sexton Blake made a grab for it, but Lean-Jaw was just a shade too quick. His other revolver rammed itself against the gov'nor's side.

"Jest one inch more, an' I'll shoot!" grated Luke fiercely.

Then something hit me a fearful crash on the back of my head. I afterwards learned from Dorrington that Hatchet Lewis had clubbed me with the butt of his revolver. My hat saved me from serious injury, and the blow, moreover, hadn't been very severe. I was just dazed and dizzy; but not unconscious.

I was aware of a terrific commotion. Several shots were fired, and shouts and yells filled the air. And when I recovered my wits sufficient to understand things I found that Sexton Blake and Dorrington and I were outside under the veranda of the saloon. We were bound hand and foot with stout lariats.

And, quite near by, stood a buckboard, ready for instant departure, with a splendid team of horses already harnessed. Lean-Jaw Luke was giving directions, and two of his men were standing in the doorway of the saloon with levelled revolvers.

Even without knowing the exact facts, I can easily guess what had happened. Luke's gang had fired several shots to terrify the peaceable citizens of Copper Creek. These men, brave enough, no doubt, knew that any interference on their part would lead to grave injury, if not death.

And so Sexton Blake and Dorrington and I had been overpowered with little difficulty. We had been taken at a great disadvantage, and I was already wondering why on earth Luke had acted in such a way. Why were we bound? Where were we to be taken in the buckboard? And how on earth had Lean-Jaw known the gov'nor's identity?

We hadn't given our names to a soul. Even in Rock City we had been careful not to reveal our true identities. We had, in fact, assumed different names for the time being. And yet Luke had spoken as though he had known the name of Sexton Blake for years!

There could be only one explanation.

Lean-Jaw Luke was acting under definite orders. He had been instructed to capture us and carry us off.

I bitterly realised that, in some way or other, Roger Leverton had discovered the truth, and had sent instructions to his agent. Without a doubt Lean-Jaw Luke was that agent. And we were in the enemy's hands!

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

We Are Carried Off by Lean-Jaw Luke and Imprisoned—Hatchet Lewis Meets with an Accident, However, and an Old Friend Appears on the Scene.

THE big-wheeled buckboard rattled along the prairie trail at a high speed, jolting and swaying dangerously.

The night was not absolutely dark, for the heavens were dotted with brilliant stars, with only a few fleecy clouds here and there.

Within the buckboard itself lay Sexton Blake, Dorrington, and your humble servant. We were bound and helpless, and were jerked about, jarred, and bruised with every jolt of the vehicle. In front sat the teamster—Squinty Mike—and he was handling his team with the skill and certainty of a born prairie-man.

Ahead of us rode Lean-Jaw Luke and Hatchet Lewis and another ruffian. And in the rear came Snakes Fowler and the other members of the gang. The buckboard with the three prisoners was being escorted to—where?

That was a difficult question.

We hadn't the least idea as to where we were being taken. There was not the slightest doubt, however, that we had been captured according to a prearranged plan. Lean-Jaw wasn't carting us away just for the fun of the thing. He was acting under positive instructions.

As we were lying in the buckboard side by side, we found it possible to talk when the jolts weren't quite so severe. Our hands were tied behind our backs, the rope being then carried down to our ankles. Our legs, therefore, were forced back, and it was utterly out of the question to attempt to get free.

"By gum!" I gasped, as I found my face close to the gov'nor's. "This is a rotten business, gov'nor!"

"How's your head, Tinker?" asked Blake. "Oh, it's aching nineteen to the dozen!" I said. "But I don't care about my napper, gov'nor. What does this mean? It strikes me that Lean-Jaw is Leverton's agent, and that we have been collared by Leverton's orders."

"I can't believe that," said Dorrington, who had heard me. "Good heavens! And we were practically at our journey's end. What idiots we were to venture into the saloon!"

"My dear man, we should have been captured in any case," interjected Blake. "Luke and his gang came to Copper Creek for the express purpose of getting hold of us. We might have been able to put up a decent fight, but the end would have been the same. And we're not dead, remember."

"But why in the name of wonder have we been collared?"

"I think Tinker's explanation is the true one," replied Sexton Blake, as the buckboard jolted dizzily. "Leverton has learned the truth, and his agents are merely carrying out orders. From the fact that we have been taken prisoners, I judge that we are to be held until Miss Maitland has been safely removed from the valley."

I heard Dorrington's teeth snap in helpless fury.

"That'll be a sheer disaster!" he muttered hoarsely. "If Joyce is taken away the position will be hopeless, Blake. There won't be an atom of proof against Leverton, and we shall never be able to find Joy— By glory, I'm not going to stand it!" added Harvey furiously. "I'll fight until the last!"

The buckboard gave an extra heavy jerk just then, and Dorrington's mouth was banged against my head with uncomfortable violence for both of us. And we mentally decided that conversation was rather painful.

I don't know exactly how long the journey lasted, but it must have been about an hour roughly. A few minutes before we stopped, however, I caught a glimpse of some straggling buildings over to the right of us.

"Passing a village, gov'nor," I said. "No, Tinker. It appears to be a collection of ranch-buildings," exclaimed Blake. "By James, I wonder if this can be Moose Point? If so—" The gov'nor paused, and raised himself. "It is Moose Point, Tinker!" he added tensely. "Do you see the two towering crags? The Devil's Canyon lies right between those pillars of rock. We are within four or five miles of the canyon."

"Then—then we're being taken to the Valley of the Crags?" I gasped.

"Possibly," said the gov'nor. "But I don't think that's likely."

Conversation became difficult again; for we were rattling down into a hollow, with greater speed than comfort. The buckboard was swaying really dangerously, and I half expected to be pitched out at any moment.

While I was wondering what it would feel like to hit the hard earth travelling at that speed I became aware that the pace was slackening. And, almost at once, the ungainly vehicle came to a halt. The team stood quivering and steaming from their exertions.

I could dimly see Lean-Jaw Luke dismounting from his horse, giving some harsh orders meanwhile. And then the gov'nor and Harvey and I were yanked out of the buckboard and carried unceremoniously into a roughly-built barn.

The barn wasn't a building such as we have in England. As a matter of fact, it was merely a lean-to shed, with a low roof and a crazy door. The place was very small, and, from the smell of it, very dirty. It was obviously a building which had belonged to the ranch over the rise. But it was now disused, by the look of it.

We were dumped down, side by side, with our backs to the wall, and the door immediately facing us. Right next to Sexton Blake stood the wreckage of some agricultural implement or other. I could just see the rusted iron parts projecting outwards. And the gov'nor, incidentally, had sat down forcibly upon some odds and ends. He complained rather candidly, and shifted his position.

But we were unable to hold any conversation among ourselves. Our captors cleared out, with the exception of Lean-Jaw Luke and Hatchet Lewis. These two calmly rolled and lit cigarettes.

"Feelin' gay?" asked Luke sneeringly.

"Just about as gay as you'll feel before so

very long!" I snapped, in spite of my determination to hold no conversation with the rascals.

"I'll allow you make me smile some," went on Lean-Jaw. "Guess you wasn't figgerin' on this hyar kinder racket. Waal, my fine Britishers, I'm real sorry to keep you hyar awhile. You'll sure git mused-up some; ther's a hull heap o' crawlin' insects around this barn—you'll sure find 'em afore long."

"You confounded rascal!" burst out Dorrington.

"Say, words don't hurt my hide none!" exclaimed Luke calmly. "I guess hot air doesn't cut no ice with me, sonny. You're good'n fixed—git me? You're located right hyar, in this barn, until I feel kinder gentle-hearted. Yep, sure! But it's up to you to make the next move, Mister Sexton Blake."

"Indeed," said the gov'nor smoothly.

"Sure! I'm needin' dollars," explained Luke. "I'll allow I found a tidy wad when you was bein' roped. But I'm a feller who likes dollars a heap. Guess ther' ain't no satisfiyin' me once I git goin'. Mebbe you've been wonderin' why I've brought you along this way?"

Lean-Jaw spat contemptuously.

"Say, we're wastin' time, Luke," put in Hatchet. "Don't fergit what hez to be done—"

"I don't want no lip, Hatchet!" snapped Luke harshly. "Guess I know what I'm doin'. These strangers ain't the sort we want around Montana State. The air ain't healthy for 'em. An' if they want to quit—Waal, they ken quite jest as soon as they agree to pay me ten thousand dollars."

"By George!" gasped Dorrington.

"Mebbe you'll agree right now?" suggested Lean-Jaw.

"Not to-night, Luke," said Sexton Blake easily. "Your request is surprisingly modest, but I don't feel inclined to agree to it."

Lean-Jaw chuckled.

"Guess you'll hev a good time fer thinkin' over the hull question," he said. "I'll see you again to-morrow, mebbe. Ef you git longin' fer light refreshments Hatchet will be on hand to attend to you. Guess he'll hand out jest anything you like."

And the rascal bent down and took his departure from the shack. It was necessary to bend down, because the doorway was low. Hatchet Lewis went out, too, and the door was pushed to with a bang.

We could still hear Luke's voice.

"Say, Squinty, I'll need to talk to you a-piece!" he was saying harshly. "You ain't got that team unharnessed yet. Guess we're leavin' the buckboard behind this trip. An' ther' ain't no time to fling around, either."

"But, say, Luke, we'll need a canoe, sure—"

Lean-Jaw swore loudly.

"You blamed doggone son of a coyote!" he snapped. "Ain't I in charge o' this lay out? Ain't ther' two big canoes along down the canyon? Gee! You make me tired! We'll only need one o' them canoes, and you're askin' me ef— Pah! Git busy, you cuss, or I'll sure git plum rattled!"

I grinned in spite of our misfortunes.

"Luke's temper seems to be rather raw," I remarked.

"So raw, in fact, that he has given us a rather interesting piece of information," said Sexton Blake. "There are two canoes in the canyon-stream, Tinker, and only one is to be used."

"Which leaves one for us, I suppose?" I asked sarcastically. "A fat lot of chance we shall have of using it, sha'n't we? We can't possibly get free, even if we struggle for hours—and that ugly brute of a Hatchet Lewis is going to stand on guard! We're in a proper fix this time, gov'nor."

Sexton Blake didn't answer. He knew well enough that my words were true. Our position, indeed, looked a degree or two worse than hopeless. In spite of all our precautions and care, we were destined to fail in the end—actually within sight of the Devil's Canyon. It was the irony of Fate.

I heard Dorrington breathing hard.

"You don't seem to realise what this means, Tinker!" he exclaimed huskily. "We're beaten—heaten at the very post! Heaven above, what a ghastly mess we've made of it all! We must escape—we must—we must!"

"We sha'n't help ourselves by getting into a panic, Dorrington," said the gov'nor gently. "I'm quite sure that Tinker does realise what our predicament means—we all realise it."

Harvey almost sobbed with rage.

"These foul-mouthed scoundrels are going into the valley to-night!" he muttered

feverishly. "They are going to take poor little Joy away—take her to a place where we shall never be able to find her! It's appalling, Blake! To think of those hounds polluting the valley with their vile presence!"

"I don't suppose they're going to interfere with Miss Maitland to-night," I remarked comfortingly, although I knew quite well that Lean-Jaw Luke and his gang were determined to carry out the work before dawn.

But Harvey wasn't comforted at all.

"You can't deceive me that way, Tinker," he said bitterly. "After all our journeying—when we are within sight of our goal—we meet with this disaster! I feel like going mad! These accursed ropes—"

I heard Dorrington striving vainly to free himself. I didn't say anything, and the gov'nor remained silent. In a few minutes our companion got over his moment of wildness, and lay back, breathing hard.

Outside, we heard the prairie-men getting ready for departure. I wondered if Luke had been speaking the truth when he said that Hatchet Lewis was to be left on guard. Had it been a piece of bluff?

The shack, although old and rough, was strong enough to hold us. Besides, our ropes were so secure that escape was utterly out of the question. Unless something very unexpected occurred we should remain prisoners.

I gained a slight amount of comfort from one thought. We hadn't been killed. Evidently Luke had received strict instructions not to harm us seriously; for Luke himself wouldn't have hesitated a second at "letting daylight into our vitals," to use the delightful expression of these gentlemen.

And, being alive, there was a chance that we should be able to get busy, somehow or other. The gov'nor was a masterpiece for getting out of tight corners. Could he possibly get us out of this one?

"What did Luke mean by demanding ten thousand dollars?" asked Harvey abruptly.

"Why, that was bluff," replied Blake.

"Bluff?"

"Of course—and clumsy bluff at that. Luke wants us to believe that he has imprisoned us just for the sake of forcing some money from us," said the gov'nor. "That is absurd, of course. The real reason is obvious. Luke and his gang are going into the valley to take Miss Maitland away."

"The dirty brutes!" muttered Dorrington fiercely.

"And we, of course, are being held prisoners until the work is accomplished. Luke couldn't possibly have acted without instructions; and that means that Leverton has discovered the true state of affairs. We have met with a set-back, Dorrington; but we shall win in the end."

"I pray to Heaven we do!" breathed our companion.

"Luke is rather lacking in tact," went on Blake amusedly. "By addressing me by my real name he gave himself away. How could he know my name, except from Leverton? Cheer up, Dorrington! I haven't given up hope yet!"

We fell into a short silence again; and I heard the sound of horses thudding along the prairie-trail. Lean-Jaw and his men had started off for the Devil's Canyon. In the near vicinity of the barn all was silent and still.

Had Hatchet gone off with the party?

I wasn't left in doubt long, for I heard footfalls near by, and then a short cough. I recognised it as Lewis'. The man was on guard, as Luke had said. My spirits fell somewhat, for I knew that we couldn't hope to escape with Hatchet Lewis on the watch. He was armed to the teeth, so to speak, and he wouldn't hesitate to shoot at the slightest sign of activity on our part.

Not that we were in a position to become at all active. Bound as we were, we couldn't even lie comfortably. We were hunched up, and ached in almost every limb. I accepted the position calmly and philosophically. There was no sense in whining because luck had gone against us.

We heard Hatchet moving occasionally, and now and again a tinny kind of clank. Apparently the watchman was taking it easy on an upturned bucket. After a while we heard him mutter an oath. We, of course, weren't talking now, for Lewis could have heard every word we said.

After the oath came the sound of foot-steps, and the door was pushed wide open. We could see Hatchet's angular form out-

lined against the starlit sky. He bent forward, trying to see us, I expect.

"Feelin' gay?" he asked humorously. "We don't want any gibes!" growled Dorrington, who couldn't keep his tongue still under the circumstances. "You infernal rogue! You'll find yourself in the State penitentiary for this!"

Hatchet Lewis laughed coarsely. "Guess you ken talk penitentiary till you're blue, sonny!" he replied. "Thet kinder rocket don't fizz none! Guess you'd best sit tight an' quit this hot-air stunt. Say, I 'lows you're sure useful in some ways. I'm pinin' fer a smoke, an' I ain't got a match. Mebbe you'll oblige?"

Hatchet stepped forward, with the intention of going through our pockets, probably. But just then he suddenly drew himself upright, and I saw his hand drop down to his hip.

And from outside we heard a slight sound. The next second a most astonishing thing happened. A huge, shapeless kind of form blundered into the shack. Hatchet ripped out his revolver, but wasn't quite quick enough.

The strange form struck him in the chest. He grunted heavily, staggered back, and lost his balance. Down he went with a crash, and I heard a horrid kind of thud. An almost dead silence followed.

In a flash I remembered the old farm implement which was lying almost exactly opposite the door. Hatchet must have struck his head on one of the jagged projections. All this happened in about a second, of course, and before I could draw a full breath I heard the gov'nor give a grunting gasp.

"Great Scott! What's happened?" I asked.

A shivery feeling passed all over me, for something had stepped upon my legs—something which wasn't human! The sound of my voice must have attracted it. It was heavy and big, and I distinctly felt my hair rising. Thoughts of wild animals whizzed through my mind. But what wild animals were there out here?

Before I could think further I felt hot breath in my face, and a curious panting sound. Ye gods! I thought my last minute had come for certain. And then the climax came.

A great, slobbery thing, hot and dripping, flopped over my face. I gave a huge yell. It started by being a yell of fright, and ended up in a shrill crackle of excitement and relief.

For I recognised that lick in a second.

"Pedro!" I howled huskily. "I don't think I've ever been so relieved in my life as I was at that moment. What a thundering ass I'd been not to recognise Pedro before! It was his breath I'd felt, and his slobbery old tongue."

"Pedro!" repeated Dorrington amazedly. "You're mad, Tinker!"

But I knew I hadn't made any mistake. For after Pedro had recovered from the shock of my terrific yell he was proceeding with the business of washing my face. I couldn't possibly resist, because my hands were bound.

"You old boulder!" I gasped joyfully. "Pedro, I'll buy you a solid gold collar studded with diamonds after this! Gov'nor, why the dickens don't you speak? And, by gum, what's happened to Hatchet?"

Pedro by this time was crawling all over me, giving little yelps of delight. And just then I heard another grunt from Sexton Blake.

"Why didn't I speak, Tinker?" he panted. "Because I was nearly smothered—that's why! You don't seem to have been aware of the fact that twelve stone of humanity fell upon me. Hatchet seems to have met with an accident. He's quite unconscious, at all events."

"I'm absolutely in the dark!" came a plaintive exclamation from Dorrington. "What's happened? How on earth could Pedro knock that ruffian out of time?"

"He caught his head on this ironwork," explained the gov'nor. "It was rather a severe crash. Ugh! Upon my soul! Pedro, you dripping rascal, go and get rid of your superfluous moisture on Tinker!"

I grinned. Pedro was evidently venting his feelings on the gov'nor. But everything was really confused, even now. I couldn't understand what had actually happened. We were all in the dark, and couldn't move a finger. Pedro had the upper hand of the lot of us. He simply used us as carpets, and lumbered from one to the other of us until he got tired of the game. In all probability he was wondering why the dickens we were acting

the fool—why we didn't pat him and act like rational beings.

"The situation has changed amazingly," came Sexton Blake's voice. "Undoubtedly we have to thank Pedro for what has happened."

"Pedro, old man, I apologise," I said seriously. "I'd clean forgotten all about you. Where the thunder did you spring from?"

Pedro didn't answer—except by way of his tail. His rear quarters happened to be near me, and something heavy caught me a smack on the nose.

"Go and wag your tail somewhere else!" I exclaimed. "For goodness' sake, gov'nor, tell us how this miracle happened!"

"There's no miracle about it so far as I can see," replied Blake. "Pedro came along, scented out Hatchet, and sprang upon him. Pedro's a tidy lump to hit a man in the chest, and Hatchet wasn't prepared for it. He fell, stunning himself upon this ironwork. Then he rolled on to me, and by the look of things he's knocked out for quite a while. But don't bother me for a few minutes."

I wondered what the gov'nor meant by those last few words. The first feeling of joy was beginning to pass off. After all, our position wasn't vastly improved—in fact, it might even be made worse. Hatchet would come to himself before long, and then, by way of revenge, he'd try a little revolver practice. But then, of course, Pedro would keep him in check, I reasoned.

There could only be one explanation of Pedro's presence. With his usual sagacity, he had known that something had happened to us—I'm referring now to the affair at the Copper Creek saloon. Pedro had been in the rear quarters, and he must have scented out trouble.

Getting free, he had failed to find us, and so he had started off on our trail. He couldn't possibly have trailed us actually, but his canine instinct must have told him that we had been carted off in the buck-board.

Or it was quite possible that old Hank Leadbitter had deliberately set Pedro on our trail. Anyhow, the old dog was here, and that was what mattered. And he had knocked all the life out of Hatchet for the time being.

That, I'll admit, was a wonderful stroke of luck. But even if the brute hadn't been sent flying, he would have had a pretty bad time with Pedro. And I don't think he would have been allowed to use his revolver.

There had been a short silence, except for sundry little grunts from Sexton Blake. He was trying to shift Hatchet's weight from himself probably. Then came a little sigh of satisfaction, followed by more shufflings.

"Shifted the rotter, gov'nor?" I asked.

"I believe so, Tinker," replied the gov'nor calmly. "Our luck's not so bad after all. In fact, I have got a strong notion within me that we shall defeat Mr. Lean-Jaw Luke in spite of everything."

There was something in Sexton Blake's tone which thrilled me. I don't know what it was, but he seemed to be intensely satisfied with himself, and he didn't talk like a man who was lying bound and helpless.

I got another surprise a second afterwards. For something dim loomed up before me—a man rising to his feet! My heart jumped. Hatchet Lewis had come to his senses—

But then, before the thought had really taken shape in my mind, I recognised the figure. It was Sexton Blake, and he was a free man!

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

In Which We Arrive at the Devil's Canyon—And Venture Into the Unknown.

FREE!

I couldn't quite believe it for the first breathless moment. But I understood why Sexton Blake had spoken with such satisfaction in his voice. Without saying a word to us, he'd quietly freed himself.

But how? How in the name of all that was queer had he managed the trick? The problem was beyond me, and so I didn't attempt it. I asked the gov'nor for an explanation instead.

"Fortune favours us, Tinker," said Sexton Blake cheerfully. "What did I tell you, Dorrington? We're not downhearted yet, are we? Lean-Jaw hasn't got much of a start—and we've got the buck-board. We knew, also, that we're within a few miles of

the Devil's Canyon; and there's another canoe which we can use."

"Fits in like a glove, doesn't it?" I asked, with keen satisfaction. "By jingo, I can see some excitement coming along! But this is a good sign, if I know anything at all. We're going to win through!"

"It's almost too good to believe!" exclaimed Dorrington eagerly. "But how did you get free, Blake?"

The gov'nor, who was slashing through my bonds with a knife, condescended to explain.

"These things are usually very astonishing until the truth is known; and then they are very simple," he remarked. "We owe our escape primarily to Pedro's timely appearance. He knocked Hatchet flying, and Hatchet fell upon me. It took me about one minute to discover that the haft of his sheath-knife was within a foot of my face. He fell across me, you'll understand."

"So that's what you were doing!" I ejaculated. "You were fishing out the knife, and cutting your bonds? I thought you were merely shifting Hatchet Lewis away. Well, of all the luck!"

Hatchet's sheath-knife had severed my bonds by this time, and I was on my feet, stretching myself. I had "pins and needles" badly, but I didn't care a rap about that. I was free; and a minute later Dorrington was free, too.

I seized Pedro in my arms and hugged him. He'd saved the situation, as sure as Fate. Without Pedro we should have been done for. As the situation now stood, we looked like romping home winners.

Pedro was fully aware of his own importance. He strutted about triumphantly, wagging his tail with huge satisfaction. The position was now quite good. Lean-Jaw Luke and his gang believed that we were helpless, and they would consequently be unprepared for any developments.

Sexton Blake took out his electric torch—which hadn't been pinched—and flashed the light upon the unconscious Lewis. There was a nasty gash upon the back of his scalp, and the blood had been flowing slowly. Blake made a careful examination.

"An ugly sort of wound," he announced at last. "I'm afraid Hatchet will be laid up for some little time. But he's as hardy as a mule, and I don't think there's much fear of his pegging out. Just for safety's sake we'll rope him up before we go."

Hatchet was roped up accordingly. But the gov'nor bound his head carefully, and made him as comfortable as possible. If he regained consciousness, he'd be unable to move; but it wasn't likely that he would recover his wits before daylight at the earliest.

"Now for the buck-board!" said Blake briskly.

We passed outside into the night. Low upon the horizon a half-moon had risen into view, and was flooding the scene with a weak, yellowish light. A short distance from the barn we saw the buck-board; and, tethered to some railings, was the team. Hatchet, of course, had been looking after them.

We found the harness quite handy, and in less than ten minutes everything was ready for departure. Clear and distinct against the night sky stood the two towering crags which marked the entrance to the Devil's Canyon. They were about four miles distant, across the prairie, which was here beginning to become broken and hilly.

Our own revolvers had been confiscated, of course. And so the gov'nor wisely took possession of Hatchet's weapons—two of them—and some spare cartridges. I took one automatic, and Blake kept the other.

Then we started off, Blake being the teamster. He handled the team splendidly, and we bowled along at a spanking pace, Pedro loping along beside us joyously. If he got tired we'd take him aboard, of course.

Well, nothing happened during that ride. The keen night air freshened us up wonderfully. My head had been aching like the dickens, but it was now clear, and only the surface bruise remained, to give me a twinge now and again.

It was easy enough to follow the trail for a certain distance, but we found that it ran straight on in a dead line, whilst the twin crags were away to the north. So the buck-board was steered upon the open prairie, and the pace was now slower.

When we got fairly close we found that we should have to walk the rest of the way, for the surface changed, and became jagged and rocky, with boulders and treacherous pits at frequent intervals.

And so, behind a big chunk of rock, we alighted and secured the horses, leaving them harnessed, of course.

"We can't leave them unguarded," said Dorrington doubtfully.

"Perhaps Tinker will remain behind," suggested Sexton Blake.

"Perhaps he won't!" I retorted promptly. "None of your tricks, gov'nor! If you think I'm going to be left out of this bit of fun you're jolly well mistaken! I usually behave quite obediently, but I'm jolly well going to be rebellious if you—"

The gov'nor chuckled.

"Pedro will remain on guard, Tinker," he interrupted. "He's a dog, I know, but he'll keep watch far better than either of us. If we are successful in our enterprise we shall find him here, true to his trust."

Pedro didn't like it at all. As soon as he was given his orders his ears drooped, and his tail vanished. But it reappeared soon, and gave one or two feeble wags.

"It's hard lines, old man," I said sympathetically. "But you've done your bit, and done it well. Besides, you may be able to give a hand later on."

Pedro was comforted, and he looked much more cheerful. Leaving him with the buckboard and horses, we set off among the rocks, picking our way towards the great, towering crags.

From a distance they had seemed to be within twenty yards of one another; but they were actually separated by fully two hundred yards. We kept our eyes well open now, for it was quite on the cards that Squinty Mike or another of the gang had been left in charge of the "plugs" while the others ventured into the valley.

But we saw no sign of any living thing. And presently the sound of trickling water reached our ears. Picking our way down a rock-strewn slope, we suddenly came upon a narrow, swiftly-running stream. It seemed to be extremely shallow, and I wondered how a canoe could be navigated upon it.

After following the course of the stream for half a mile, however, it became quieter and deeper. The moon was now higher, and was shedding a soft, silvery light upon the rocks and surroundings.

Sexton Blake paused as we emerged from behind a big boulder. He stood looking up the rise, and pointed.

Dorrington and I looked, and saw, outlined against the sky, the forms of several horses. But there didn't seem to be any man with them. In all probability they had been tethered and left alone. And we were glad to see them, for we knew that we must be close to the spot where the canoe lay concealed.

We feared that we should have great difficulty in locating it. Dorrington, in fact, was overwhelmingly anxious. We couldn't blame him, poor chap. This was merely an exciting adventure for the gov'nor and me. But for Harvey Dorrington it meant everything in the world. I could see that he was thinking of that sweet-faced girl constantly and continuously. He was in a fever of mad impatience, but controlled himself admirably; he knew that Sexton Blake was doing his very best.

In spite of our fears, however, we found the canoe practically at once. Picking our way down to the edge of the stream, we spotted it in the moonlight. It was quite a decent little craft, and was lying in a kind of backwater, secured by two ropes, fore and aft, to the rocks.

"Ripping!" I exclaimed. "It's a lucky thing we saw those gee-gees, gov'nor. We should probably have walked straight on, past this spot, if we hadn't had reason to investigate closely."

We were soon standing beside the canoe. To our satisfaction, we found the paddles lying in the bottom. Sexton Blake dropped something into the canoe, and it rattled a trifle.

"What's that, sir?" I asked.

"Something I found in the buck-board. It may be useful," replied Blake. "A length of iron chain, Tinker. Didn't you notice that I brought it along with me?"

"I'm blessed if I did!" I replied. "What's it for?"

"You'll see in good time."

The gov'nor wouldn't explain further, and I hadn't any time to press him. For we were climbing into the canoe, and getting ready to push off. I caught a glimpse of Dorrington's face in the moonlight. It was alight with intense eagerness; his eyes were shining almost feverishly.

"We must hurry!" he exclaimed tensely.

"How much start do you think those scoundrels got, Blake?"

"Well, judging by the swiftness with which we arrived here—we had no hindrance, remember—I should say that Luke and his men only left this spot about twenty minutes ago," replied the great detective. "But the odds are in our favour, in any case, Dorrington. There's no other exit from the valley, and so we are bound to encounter them sooner or later. That's when the real excitement will begin."

"We'll rescue Joyce, or die in the attempt!" muttered Harvey grimly. "At least, I will. I'm not going back to England without her, Blake!"

We pushed off from the rocky bank, and were soon gliding swiftly and steadily downstream. The gov'nor sat in front, paddling carefully, and keeping his eyes open to their widest extent.

After we had been going only a few minutes the rocks began to tower above us on both sides. As we proceeded they grew higher and more jagged, until at last we were gliding along between great towering walls. Only a little strip of the starlit sky gleamed far above us.

Farther on the walls became smoother, and closed in towards their summits. It was like travelling between two lofty buildings, with only a few yards of space between. Only these "buildings" were continuous.

The slit of sky became narrower and narrower, and the darkness was intense. We were compelled to feel our way along, more by instinct than anything else. Sexton Blake didn't want to use his electric torch; for it would serve as a beacon to the enemy, and would warn them of our approach.

The canyon was narrow and winding.

The stream was now sluggish and quiet; instinctively, we felt that the water was very deep. Odd gurglings and echoes came from either side as the slight wash caused by our canoe made the eddies roll up against the crannies and cavities in the rock walls.

The darkness was worse than ever. Everything ahead was a dense black wall, which no human eye could penetrate. But almost by instinct we kept the canoe going at a fairly decent pace.

The sides of the cleft now being smooth, there was no particular danger of running the canoe upon jagged rocks. Several times, upon putting my hand out, my fingers encountered the cold, smooth rock.

The stream couldn't have been more than six feet wide at many points, and was, I judged, tremendously deep. And overhead the slit of sky became broader and narrower alternately.

The stars gleamed down through that little slit, but the meagre amount of light could not penetrate to this great depth. For the perpendicular walls of the canyon were now of an appalling height. They rose on either side of us, sheer, towering, and impressive.

The summit of the amazing natural cleft must have been seven or eight hundred feet above our heads—very possibly more. The fact that the stream was sluggish rather surprised me. In the spring, no doubt, the canyon was probably a raging waste of water, treacherous and unnavigable.

"How much further?" breathed Dorrington, from behind.

Sexton Blake allowed the canoe to glide forward as he turned.

"Shssssh!" he warned. "We mustn't speak."

And now we realised why the gov'nor issued that command. His words, low as they were, echoed among the rocks in a most eerie manner. The soft "Shssssh" came back to us again and again, ghostly and uncanny. But at last it died out into the distance—only to come hissing back a moment later.

The rock echoed and re-echoed in a most astounding manner. An ordinary full-voiced remark would have echoed in this way for several minutes, and would have been simply appalling in its loudness. Therefore, it was vitally necessary to make no sound at all.

Away over our heads the slit of sky became utterly black. I wondered if some dense clouds had covered the stars. But then I realised that the two sides of the canyon had closed together over our heads, far above.

Just as I was telling myself that we were in the tunnel, I glanced up again. And there, like a narrow line, I saw a tiny opening. The rocks had parted again, and we had not yet come upon the tunnel.

At one point we felt ourselves moving forward a little more quickly, and we knew

that the current had increased. Then the canoe grazed one side of the canyon slightly. Blake paddled away from the rock wall—only to encounter the other wall a second later.

The stream, in fact, was less than five feet across. But this narrow strip was quite short, for presently we instinctively knew that we were on the bosom of a wider stretch. The current was much slower.

I didn't know whether to be pleased or displeased with the current. It was helping us now; but on the return journey it would retard us. We should need every ounce of speed then, probably. But I was greatly comforted by the thought that if the current retarded us, it would retard any possible pursuers. So it made little difference either way.

Once again darkness closed in overhead. On every side—ahead, behind, and skywards—there was nothing but pitch blackness. It was so dense, in fact, that it seemed like something tangible. I knew that Sexton Blake was sitting just in front of me, and that Dorrington was behind. But they were hidden in the inky pall. A blind man could have seen as much as we did in that beastly canyon.

And now even the friendly stars had vanished from our gaze. It seemed as though we had left the world behind us, and were penetrating some unreal, monstrous domain. I remembered reading about a cheerful place known as Hades—often referred to by Lean-Jaw Luke, although he used a different word to express himself. And I also remembered that somewhere in Hades there was a river called the Styx, with a cheerful merchant named Charon in charge of a boat. I was half-expecting to come across the gentleman.

At any rate, the place didn't seem at all earthly. I've been in some queer spots in my time, but this canyon amid the foothills of the Rockies was about the rummiest hole I'd ever struck. I recollected that it was called the Devil's Canyon; so my likening this stream to the Styx wasn't so very inappropriate.

I couldn't quite believe Leverton's statement that the Valley of the Crags was a place of wonderful beauty. How could a glorious valley, such as he described, be hidden away among the peaks, with only an entrance of this sort? It didn't seem natural. But then, of course, there are some jolly queer places out in Montana State.

We glided on at a slower pace now, for we were certainly within the tunnel. Now and again I raised my hand above my head, but my fingers encountered nothing but empty atmosphere. The roof was quite out of reach.

At the same time the curious feeling of space had disappeared. We knew without seeing, that the canyon had changed its character. The rocks had closed together, forming a narrow, confined tunnel.

After about another two minutes I ventured to raise my paddle; and this time I felt it touch something within about four feet of our heads. The blade of the paddle grated softly upon smooth rock.

Just then the canoe gave a little shiver, and I knew that Sexton Blake had brought it to a standstill for some reason. We lay quite still, and sat silent and wondering—at least, Dorrington and I did. Why had the gov'nor stopped, and what was he doing? I can't possibly describe how horribly helpless I felt, how shut in, how intensely impatient to see the open sky once more. Although the air was pure and fresh, I felt almost suffocated.

And I wanted to know things. I wanted to know what Sexton Blake was doing. There was an utter oppressive silence brooding over everything. Even the faint gurgles of the water had ceased, as we lay stationary.

Then, right in front of me, I saw a tiny glow. After that intense darkness the glow seemed to be quite brilliant, and it was directed against the rock side of the tunnel. I could distinctly see the black, damp sides.

Then, in a flash, I understood. The gov'nor was afraid to use his torch in the usual way, and so he had smothered the bulb with several folds of his handkerchief, tying it securely in. The result was that when he pressed the button only a subdued glow appeared. At any distance the light would have been invisible, unless, of course, it was pointed directly up the tunnel.

"I don't think the echoes will be so disconcerting here," murmured the gov'nor softly. "Paddle the canoe slightly forward, Tinker, and stop when I tell you."

"What's the idea?" whispered Dorrington, from behind.

"Blessed if I know!" I breathed. "The gov'nor's up to some game or other."

"Hang it all, we're wasting time!" murmured Harvey impatiently.

He was terribly anxious to press on with every ounce of speed; and his reason was an excellent one. His fiancée was menaced by Lean-Jaw Luke and his gang, and Dorrington was naturally anxious to be upon the scene.

But whatever Sexton Blake was doing—whatever he had in mind—I knew that he was not wasting time.

Slowly and silently I used my paddle, and the canoe glided forward over the practically still water. Sexton Blake crouched in the prow of the canoe, directing his muffled torch from one wall to the other. The tunnel at this point was just about five feet in width.

Almost before I'd fairly started the gov'nor quickly ordered me to stop. The canoe pulled up with a jerk, for Blake was hanging on to a piece of rock. He directed his light upon the wall.

A foot above the surface of the water a ledge about a foot wide ran into the distance. This ledge would have accommodated several men, at a pinch. And the rock at the back of the ledge—and the ledge itself—was jagged and uneven, formed into all sorts of fantastic shapes.

The opposite wall was just as jagged, but there was no ledge to speak of. Numerous projections of rock stood up, however. I saw Sexton Blake nod to himself as he viewed the surroundings.

"This spot will do well," he whispered. "Hand up that chain, Tinker, and mind you don't make any unnecessary noise."

"What's the idea of all this, Blake?" asked Dorrington. "Heaven knows, we haven't got any time to waste! We're simply ruining all our chances of being successful. Why can't we press on?"

"We shall do so in about three minutes!" muttered the gov'nor.

"Three minutes!" ejaculated Dorrington angrily. "That may make all the difference between success and failure. Confound it all, Blake, I don't see the sense of this idiotic delay!"

"The chain, Tinker," said Sexton Blake quietly.

I was already handing it to him, and he took it gently. Dorrington sat behind, fuming. The gov'nor had completely ignored his last remark, and it probably made him impatient. I didn't blame him; in fact, he was keeping himself amazingly well under control.

Blake looped one end of the chain over a projection of rock which stood only a few inches above the surface of the water. He secured the links quickly, but effectively, and then pulled on the chain with all his strength. But the rock held secure.

Then the gov'nor pushed against the wall, and the nose of the canoe swung over to the other side. The chain was now hanging across the water—or, rather, it was sagging deep into the water, for it was fairly long. And the gov'nor secured the other end just loosely, merely looping it over a projection.

Then his light snapped out.

"Now we'll push ahead!" he murmured crisply.

"But what's the idea of that chain, sir?" I asked curiously. "What's the good of it lying there, submerged? You're not hoping to catch any submarines, are you?"

Sexton Blake made no reply to this intelligent remark of mine, but paddled on into the darkness with renewed speed. Although the delay had seemed an age, the actual time taken had been just under three minutes.

And now we made good progress.

With superb skill, Blake kept the canoe in mid-stream, and we glided along noiselessly. Quite suddenly something brushed against the gov'nor's cheek, and then hit mine.

It seemed to be a small branch of a bush, and I wondered. But, immediately following, a regular cluster of leaves struck us. And then, all at once, I saw a glorious sight. Right over my head gleamed the stars, and behind a distant mountain-peak was the glow of the moon.

We had emerged from the tunnel.

We were in the Valley of the Crags!

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

What Happened in the Wonderful Valley—Joyce Maitland Proves Herself to be a Girl of Quick Action, and We Make Our Dash for Liberty—We Then Find That Forethought is a Great Thing, and Success Favours Our Cause.

"BY jingo!"

I murmured the explanation in a tense, triumphant voice. Our exit from the tunnel had been so sudden that it took me completely by surprise. But I realised that the tunnel-mouth was screened by trees, and so we had had no warning.

This end of the tunnel was unlike the other. For the great canyon had disappeared, and only comparatively low walls of rock rose on either side of us. These, as we could plainly see, fell away lower down the stream.

We paddled with great caution. Rounding a bend, a strange sight met our gaze. The rock-banks became level, and we could see for about a couple of miles straight across the valley. And now I knew that Leverton had not exaggerated.

The whole scene was bathed in silvery moonlight, and we could see woods and lovely stretches of grassland. Right across the valley rose dozens of stupendous, impressive peaks. The crags completely surrounded the basin in which we found ourselves. The place had been appropriately named.

Gazing behind, I saw that the tunnel entrance was hidden by the bushes, and beyond it the rocks rose up sheer. But, in spite of all these crags and peaks, the valley itself was a place of delights.

With the sun shining down in all its glory I could well understand that the scene would be wondrous indeed. But just now we were not thinking of scenery. There was more serious work on hand.

Beyond a clump of trees, which stood comparatively near to us, we saw the corner of a low-built, wide building. Undoubtedly this was Joyce Maitland's prison—her compulsory home. Looking round, I saw that Harvey Dorrington was trembling visibly with the intense excitement of the moment. His face was flushed, and his eyes gleamed with a burning eagerness.

After all these months—after having forced himself to believe that Joyce was dead—he was now within sight of the spot where she had been living throughout the terrible, anxious time. He was within sight of her home, where probably she was even now peacefully sleeping.

For there was no sign that Lean-Jaw Luke and his gang had commenced their rascally operations. Probably they had negotiated the tunnel even slower than we had done, for they fondly imagined that they had the whole night before them. In any case, they couldn't have been in the valley for more than half an hour; and there were preparations to make.

We pushed the canoe on quickly, but Sexton Blake abruptly turned its nose towards the left bank. The rocks had now disappeared, and the river was a delightful place, with grass-grown banks, and with the scent of flowers in the air.

Bushes grew in profusion on both sides of us, and I soon saw why the gov'nor had turned the canoe in. For there, between two bushes, lay the second canoe. It was larger than ours, and seemed to be newer.

Blake landed just on the other side of one of the bushes, and motioned to us to be silent. Although the moon was shining, an intervening peak rendered this part of the valley quite dark. We could just see all the surrounding objects with the necessary amount of clearness to guide ourselves.

A strange stillness brooded over the valley.

Dorrington and I scrambled out, and the canoe was made secure. Walking cautiously, we crossed a strip of grassland to the clump of trees which had hidden the house from our view. Arriving, we skirted round, and at last came within actual sight of the little building.

We were all pleasantly surprised, for we had been expecting a roughly-built shack. Instead, however, we saw a neat little bungalow, with a wide veranda running right round the building. It was painted white, and the roof was neatly thatched.

Many trees grew quite near, and we saw

an outbuilding just a little distance away. And here it was that our attention found its real attraction. For in the outbuilding a steady light was gleaming, yellow and warm. "Old Leverton can't be such an absolute rotter, after all!" I murmured. "This little house isn't so dusty. If Luke and his men built it, they're more useful than I ever thought they could be."

"Now, look here, we must make some rough sort of plan," said Sexton Blake softly. "Upon the whole, Dorrington, I think you had better remain here."

"Why?" burst out our companion. "Why?"

"My dear man, don't speak so loudly!" exclaimed the gov'nor. "You want to know why? Well, I'll tell you. I'm quite sure you'll be able to control yourself admirably when you meet Miss Maitland. But absolute quietness will be necessary in this affair. And the girl, at sight of you, would probably utter an involuntary outcry. It wouldn't do, Dorrington. The whole thing might be ruined."

"She'll be quiet enough—"

"I'm sorry, but I must insist upon this course," said Blake quietly. "Surely you can trust Tinker and I, Dorrington? Remain here, and keep silent. If you see anything suspicious, you must, of course, use your own discretion. We can't possibly make any definite plans."

Harvey breathed hard.

"You know best, Blake!" he muttered. "Go ahead; I'll remain here."

"We won't keep you in suspense a second longer than is necessary."

"May Heaven grant you success!" breathed our companion fervently.

We left him there, and crept silently forward. The bungalow was clearly visible, but it stood in absolute darkness and silence. There was no human being to be seen. Naturally, there was nobody on the watch; Luke wasn't expecting any surprise.

By the look of things, a consultation was being held in the outhouse, and it was our intention to make investigations. We arrived at the veranda without mishap, and then saw that the door of the bungalow stood half open. But everything was black and still.

Turning the corner, we came within sight of the outbuilding. It was closer than we had imagined, and we could see right into the place through the window. And the first tangible object we saw was the head of a woman.

I caught my breath in sharply, but then realised the truth. I wasn't looking at Joyce Maitland, but at her keeper—Blanche Ellmore, the woman who had piloted the aeroplane to this valley. Leverton must have been paying her a stiff fee for this monotonous task of hers.

She was talking quickly, although we could only hear a dull murmur. And we caught a glimpse of Luke and Squinty Mike. Our supposition had been correct. The scoundrels were holding a consultation—planning things with the woman. Joyce, presumably, was in the bungalow, totally unconscious of the impending peril.

"The situation couldn't be better!" murmured Sexton Blake into my ear. "We must act without the loss of a second. These brutes may become active at any moment!"

"What are we going to do, gov'nor?"

"Enter the house at once."

"But—but Miss Maitland may be in bed," I said quickly.

"Very possibly," agreed the gov'nor. "We shall have to arouse her, that's all. This is no time for formalities, Tinker. I don't suppose she has the least idea that anything unusual is afoot; she imagines that she is utterly alone with the woman Ellmore."

We returned to the veranda, and crept noiselessly and swiftly into the doorway. Blake's "muffled" torch came into use again here, and we saw that we had stepped into a barely-furnished living-room. Facing us was a half-open door, and to the left was another door.

I saw the gov'nor nod, and I understood. The first door apparently led into Blanche Ellmore's bedroom; and the second door, which was tightly closed, led into Joyce's apartment. It was no time for formalities, as Blake had said, and he stepped softly across, and tried the handle of the door.

It turned, and the door opened. We both entered the room, and Sexton Blake flashed his light round, holding it steady after a second. And then I found myself gazing upon a roughly-made bedstead. It was pro-

vided with fine blankets and sheets and pillows, however.

And there, upon the pillow, lay a girl's head, with masses of dark, lovely hair straying over the white pillow-case. Joyce was fast asleep, and she looked just lovely.

I felt pretty rotten. It seemed a mean thing for the gov'nor and I to be intruding in this barefaced way. But what else could we do? We had to rescue her, and it was absolutely necessary to tell her the brief facts.

"She'll scream when you wake her!" I murmured.

"If she attempts to, young 'un, I shall have to act drastically," replied Blake. "Everything depends upon how Miss Maitland behaves."

Just then there was a movement from the bed, and then a little sigh.

"Is that you, Miss Ellmore?" came a sleepy, sweet-toned voice from the darkness; for the gov'nor had switched off his light.

I caught my breath in, and waited.

"Don't utter a sound!" whispered Sexton Blake steadily. "We have come to rescue you, Miss Maitland. Keep absolutely silent, or we shall be discovered. We want to take you away. Mr. Harvey Dorrington is waiting outside."

The girl sat up in bed quickly, and I heard her give a quick gasp. It was impossible to see her, however; and I dare say she was glad of that. The darkness made our presence in the girl's bed-room less awkward.

"Oh!" she said, with a catch in her voice. But she didn't scream, and I could have grinned with delight if the situation hadn't been so desperate. Joyce was proving herself to be a girl of nerve.

"Who are you?" she breathed softly.

"Friends from England," replied Blake. "Mr. Dorrington is just outside. Please listen to me carefully. Several men are here; they are talking with the Ellmore woman; they mean to take you away. Mr. Dorrington and I have come to save you, and there is not a second to lose. Get dressed as quickly as possible; don't trouble about details. Just throw some clothing on, and come outside. We shall be in the living-room. If you can be ready within three minutes it will be excellent; if you can manage it within two minutes it will be splendid!"

We heard the girl slip out of bed.

"I'll be ready in two!" she whispered. "But you must go now."

I believe she started dressing before Sexton Blake and I got out of the room; but the darkness concealed everything. We closed the door with just sufficient noise to assure her that it was closed.

"Two minutes, gov'nor!" I whispered. "That's asking a lot, isn't it?"

"She'll do it, Tinker," replied Blake. "Miss Maitland is about the most sensible girl I have ever met. She has behaved in the most wonderful manner. She grasped the situation at once."

Sexton Blake was right.

Joyce appeared in a surprisingly short time; we heard her come out of the bedroom, and then stand undecidedly in the darkness.

"Are you there?" she whispered.

"Yes," replied the gov'nor. "You have been quick, Miss Maitland. I believe that we shall get you away safely. Please remain silent, and trust me."

We passed out of the bungalow, and the starlight seemed quite bright after the dense gloom of the building. The moon was still behind the distant peak. I could see that Joyce was dressed hurriedly, but neatly, nevertheless. But she had no coat or hat, and her feet were encased in slippers.

"Did you say that Harvey is here?" she asked, her voice quivering. "Oh, I can't believe it—I can't—"

"You'll believe it in less than one minute!" interrupted Blake quickly. "Miss Maitland, I am more delighted than I can possibly say! By your coolness and promptness you have made our venture successful. If you had been distrustful and alarmed we should certainly have failed."

We were creeping swiftly away.

"I have been waiting for this moment for months," said the girl softly. "Oh, I knew it would come, sooner or later! Something has always told me that Harvey would come for me. But how did you manage to silence Miss Ellmore?"

The gov'nor didn't explain matters; for we had arrived within twenty yards of the clump of trees, and we could see Dorrington's tall form dimly outlined against the grass-land.

He came forward at a run.

"Have you been successful?" he asked, with untold anxiety in his voice. "Have you—Joy—Joy!"

There was absolutely no restraining him. He just took the girl in his arms and kissed her passionately. Under the circumstances, he didn't care a jot about the presence of the gov'nor and I. I don't suppose he even realised that we were there. He was restored to the girl who had been dead to him for over a year.

But we couldn't allow this sort of thing to go on for long.

Sexton Blake and I had discreetly moved on for about a hundred paces, and we remained still for about half a minute—not longer. Then the gov'nor walked back swiftly.

"We must go!" he exclaimed. "By James! Did you hear that?"

He needn't have asked the question, for we had all heard a shrill, alarmed cry in a woman's voice. We guessed in a second that Blanche Ellmore had discovered the absence of her charge. Joyce hadn't been bolted and barred in because she knew well enough that there was no escape from the valley. Her imprisonment had been in the nature of a marooned person on an island; she was free to go where she pleased, but there was no escape.

"They have found out that I've got away!" exclaimed Joyce quickly. "Oh, don't let them take me again!"

"You can be sure of that, little girl," said Dorrington, in quivering tones.

With one accord we commenced racing towards the stream. We knew that the trees hid us from the house; and so we crossed the open space without any attempt at concealment.

But one of Luke's gang must have been scouting round. For, in the distance, we heard a furious bellow, followed by a string of oaths and shouts. That meant that we had been seen, and an immediate chase was certain.

"Great Scott!" I gasped. "Now we're in for it!"

"We'll beat the brutes!" panted Dorrington. "We've got to beat 'em!"

As we arrived at the river-bank we heard the thud of the pursuers' feet as they tore after us. Dorrington and Joyce jumped into the canoe, and set it rocking dizzily. I followed, and the gov'nor came last.

"Let's sink their boat!" I panted.

"No time, Tinker—no time! We ought to have done it before!"

Both Sexton Blake and I realised that we had made a slip. Undoubtedly we should have rendered the second canoe unnavigable. But it's always easy to remember these things when it's too late. The gov'nor doesn't often make a bloomer of that sort.

We had actually been within a dozen yards of the other canoe, and we hadn't touched it. It was a most preposterous oversight, when I came to consider it. But then, of course, we hadn't expected to find the other canoe at all; and we had been intensely eager to rescue Miss Maitland. Valuable time would have been wasted if we had monkeyed with the second canoe. So, upon the whole, perhaps we'd acted in the right way.

We shot into mid-stream, and as all secrecy was at an end now I jerked out my revolver—or, rather, Hatchet's—and fired three shots in quick succession. I aimed at the other canoe, and I heard my bullets rip through its side.

"That may delay 'em a bit!" I panted savagely.

But I wasn't very hopeful. It was more than probable that the holes had been made above the water-line. I couldn't waste any further time, for the next moment I was paddling for all I was worth.

There were only two paddles, and Sexton Blake and I worked with furious energy. Dorrington sat in the centre of the canoe with the rescued girl. They were both silent and enthralled with the tenseness of the situation.

There could be no doubt that we were being pursued. I could hear Luke's voice roaring out with tremendous fury. One or two shots were fired, but we were too far away for any bullets to reach us. And then, just before we turned a bend, I saw the chasing canoe come swinging round the stream.

And, by the look of it, they had four paddles going. That gave them a big advantage, although, to offset it, their canoe was bigger than ours. One thing was

certain, however. The chase would be a stern one.

The gov'nor and I worked as we'd never worked before. The canoe simply hissed through the water against the sluggish current. And then I heard Sexton Blake speaking.

"Dorrington," he said, "you'll find an electric torch in my left-hand coat-pocket. The bulb of it is obscured with my handkerchief. Fish it out, old man, and pull the handkerchief off. Then cast the light ahead."

In less than twenty seconds he had done the trick. The torch was a good one, and shed quite a decent beam of light ahead of the canoe. I knew that Blake didn't want it here, however. He was thinking of the tunnel and the canyon beyond.

Ahead of us loomed the towering mass of rock, which seemed to ascend almost to the heavens. Close to the water's edge drooped the foliage of the trees, and we were making for the spot at full speed.

"Oh, we shall go to our deaths!" exclaimed Joyce, with a little catch in her voice. "Where are we making for, Harvey? There's no exit—"

"It's all right, darling. Don't you worry," said Dorrington, with a happy, boyish laugh. "There's a tunnel on the other side of those bushes, and that's the way to freedom. We came this way, and so we know all about it."

The girl didn't speak. She just sat there, holding herself ready for the plunge into the blackness. As I was behind, she was sitting just in front of me, and her hair, which was all loose, kept waving into my face with the breeze.

And then we plunged into the tunnel—swish! There was just one burst of leaves all over us, and then we were speeding swiftly between the walls of rock, our paddles making a deafening noise now that we were careless of secrecy. The splash of the water sounded fifty times magnified.

But in the rear of us the pursuers were creeping ever closer. Although I tried not to be pessimistic, I knew well enough that we should be caught long before we reached the outer edge of the Devil's Canyon. I thrust the thought aside, and paddled on doggedly.

And then came a yell from Sexton Blake.

"Ease her, Tinker—ease her!" he shouted. "Pull up, young 'un!"

I couldn't imagine what the dickens had happened, but I obeyed the instructions without a thought. I saw Blake grab a projection in the rock, and the canoe came to a jerky stop. Far up the tunnel, to the rear of us, we saw a lurid light and heard the splashing of paddles.

Luke and his men were hot on the track, and they carried a flaming torch with them. This delay seemed absolute madness to me.

"The light, Dorrington!" snapped the gov'nor.

Harvey switched the light round, and then I saw, with a gasp, that Blake was pulling the canoe round so that he could reach the steel chain he had fixed up earlier. He grasped the end of it, and pulled it tight with a jerk. Then he gave one or two swift turns round the rock.

"Now paddle for all you're worth!" he ordered sharply.

"But what the dickens is that chain?" demanded Dorrington.

"A boom, my dear fellow—a boom!"

What a blithering idiot I had been not to have realised it before! But in the excitement I hadn't given the thing careful thought. Of course it was a boom. Blake had prepared it beforehand in case of emergency, and so that we should only be delayed a moment now. The chain had been left slack, so that our canoe could pass over it unharmed.

But now it was stretched tightly over the surface of the water, only a few inches above it. It was quite invisible at a distance of ten yards. And those in the pursuing canoe had been too far away to see what we had been doing.

We heard triumphant shouts behind us as we paddled onwards. Lean-Jaw Luke was quite sure that he had us at his mercy. And but for the boom he certainly would have had us.

I looked round expectantly just at the right second. I saw the pursuing canoe give a kind of leap. A dull crash followed, and then the torch fell spluttering into the water. A series of wild shouts and curses echoed appallingly in the tunnel.

"They've capsized!" I roared. "Hurrah!"

"But they'll drown!" cried Joyce fearfully.

"Don't you believe it, miss!" I grinned.

"There's a ledge running all along one side, and they can crawl on to that. And there they'll have to stop until we send a rescue-party to fetch 'em off."

Our success was complete and absolute. Not only had we rescued Miss Maitland, but we had captured Lean-Jaw Luke and his gang, for until a rescue-party went up the tunnel again they would be compelled to cling to that ledge and brood over their failure—and, incidentally, their past sins.

A surprise was awaiting us when we arrived at Copper Creek in the early morning—a surprise which was swiftly followed by tragedy.

We had found Pedro guarding the buck-board faithfully, and he had been extremely joyful to see us. The first light of dawn was beginning to show, and we were all tired out with the night's adventures and excitements.

The journey across the prairie to Copper Creek was uneventful, and I believe I went to sleep once or twice. At last we pulled up before the veranda of Hank Leadbitter's saloon. And it was here that we received the surprise.

For, as Sexton Blake stepped on to the veranda, an old man emerged from the building, his face working with uncontrollable fury. I knew at once that he was Roger Leverton, for Dorrington gasped out the name behind me. And the old man had obviously seen us approaching from the window.

"You scoundrels!" he screamed. "You have done this, you interfering dog!"

He had turned upon the gov'nor in a perfect frenzy of rage. A revolver was in his hand, but the old man didn't pull the trigger. He scarcely knew what he was doing. He

hurled it at Sexton Blake's head with all his force. But his aim was wild and erratic.

And then the tragedy occurred. I've sometimes thought that it was the hand of Providence that directed that revolver. For it struck one of the veranda posts with a crash, and there was an instant report. Roger Leverton fell to the ground with a wailing, gasping cry.

In one minute Sexton Blake had made the announcement that the old man was mortally injured, and was rapidly dying. The revolver, striking the post, had exploded, and, by some trick of Fate, the bullet had entered the body of the man who had thrown the weapon.

Poor Joyce was completely overwhelmed, and Dorrington took her inside without delay. But before the morning had passed she had recovered somewhat, and was able to hear her stepfather's last words.

The old man confessed everything, and begged for forgiveness. He explained that he had married Joyce's mother because she was a tremendously rich widow. He had been penniless. They had not been happy, for Leverton was an evil-minded man in many ways. She had died, and had left everything to Joyce—everything she possessed. Leverton, badly wanting money, knew that he could not get it from his stepdaughter. And so he had planned her "death," thus gaining control of the fortune.

He had planned everything cunningly and completely, and when he and Joyce went to America the whole affair had been arranged. Exact details were never forthcoming, but we knew the main facts. Old Leverton wasn't altogether bad, however. He knew that he had wronged the girl terribly, and so he had written that fatal letter so that everything should be set right when he died.

It was rather unfortunate for him that he did write the letter, for it had directly led to

the undoing of his scoundrelly plot. And, incidentally, it led to Lean-Jaw Luke and several other gentlemen of the same calibre retiring into the State penitentiary for quite a long period.

Roger Leverton died—forgiven.

Both Joyce and Harvey, in their wonderful new-found happiness, could have forgiven almost anything.

Before leaving Copper-Creek we all visited the Valley of the Crags again; but this time we did it in daylight, and Blanche Ellmore was allowed to go free. She had treated Joyce with kindness throughout her imprisonment, and the girl did not wish her to suffer. We found the aeroplane, dismembered, in an outbuilding, for it had not been used since that memorable flight.

The return journey to England was a time of great joy for Harvey Dorrington and the girl of his heart. The gov'nor and I and Pedro enjoyed ourselves, too. And within a month of our arrival in England we were invited to a quiet little wedding. I reckon that's about all I need to say—except that I'll just put:

THE END.

(In next week's issue of the UNION JACK a splendid long complete story will be published under the title of "The Case of the Uncensored Letter," by the Author of "Five Years After," "The Publisher's Secret," "East and West," etc.

Owing to the extra length of the long, complete story, it is impossible to publish an instalment of the serial story this week. A long instalment will appear in the next issue.)

£500 Cash Prize for a Simple FOOTBALL FORECAST.

NO ENTRANCE FEE!

NO GOALS REQUIRED!

You may send as many efforts as you please.

Scottish and Irish Readers may Enter.

On this page will be found a list of the football matches in the London Combination, the Midland Section, the Lancashire Section, and the Scottish League, to be played on Saturday, September 29th. All that competitors have to do is to strike out, in ink, the names of the teams they think will lose. If, in the opinion of the competitor, any match or matches will be drawn, the names of both teams should be left untouched.

The competitor who succeeds in accurately forecasting the results of all the matches on one coupon will be awarded the sum of £500. In the event of no competitor succeeding in doing this, the sum of £50 will be awarded to the competitor who sends in on one coupon a forecast nearest to the actual result. In cases of ties, the prize will be divided. Coupons, which must not be enclosed in envelopes containing efforts in other competitions, must be addressed to:

**FOOTBALL COMPETITION No. 1,
GOUGH HOUSE, GOUGH SQUARE,
LONDON, E.C. 4.**

This competition is conducted in conjunction with "Answers," "Answers' Library," "Woman's World," "Home Companion," "The Family Journal," and "The Marvel."

RULES WHICH MUST BE STRICTLY ABIDED BY.

1. All forecasts must be made on coupons taken from this issue, or the current issue of one of the other journals taking part in the contest, and it is essential that the names of teams shall be struck out in **black ink**. The undertaking at the foot of the coupon, to accept the Editor's decision as final, must also be signed in **black ink**, and the address clearly given.
2. Any alteration or mutilation of the coupon will disqualify the effort.
3. If any match or matches in the list should be abandoned before full time has been played, for any reason, no competitor shall be entitled to claim the prize of £500, but the prize of £50 will be paid to the competitor sending a forecast on one coupon, nearest to the results of the matches actually played.
4. The Editor reserves the right to disqualify any coupon for what is, in his opinion, good and sufficient reason, and it is a distinct condition of entry that the Editor's decision shall be accepted as final and legally binding in all matters concerning this competition.

5. No correspondence may be enclosed with the coupons, and none will be entered into. Neither will interviews be granted.

6. Entries will be accepted until **THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 27th**. Any received after that date will be disqualified. No responsibility for any effort or efforts lost, mislaid, or delayed can be undertaken. Proof of posting will not be accepted as proof of delivery. Unstamped or insufficiently stamped efforts will be refused.

Football Competition No. 1 Coupon.

Matches Played Saturday, September 29th.

Closing date, Thursday, September 27th.

Cross out losing team; if draw, leave both standing.

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| WEST HAM UNITED | v. TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR |
| FULHAM | v. MILLWALL |
| QUEEN'S PARK RANGERS | v. CLAPTON ORIENT |
| THE ARSENAL | v. CHELSEA |
| CRYSTAL PALACE | v. BRENTFORD |
| BIRMINGHAM | v. BARNSELY |
| HUDDERSFIELD TOWN | v. HULL CITY |
| BRADFORD CITY | v. NOTTS FOREST |
| GRIMSBY TOWN | v. BRADFORD |
| LINCOLN CITY | v. SHEFFIELD UNITED |
| ROTHERHAM COUNTY | v. LEEDS CITY |
| SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY | v. LEICESTER FOSSE |
| AIRDRIEONIANS | v. MOTHERWELL |
| CLYDE | v. QUEEN'S PARK |
| HAMILTON | v. FALKIRK |
| BLACKBURN ROVERS | v. BURNLEY |
| BLACKPOOL | v. STOCKPORT COUNTY |
| EVERTON | v. LIVERPOOL |
| BOLTON WANDERERS | v. BURY |
| MANCHESTER CITY | v. MANCHESTER UNITED |

I enter Football Competition No. 1 in accordance with the rules and conditions announced on this page, and agree to accept the published decision as final and legally binding.

Signed

Address

M.