

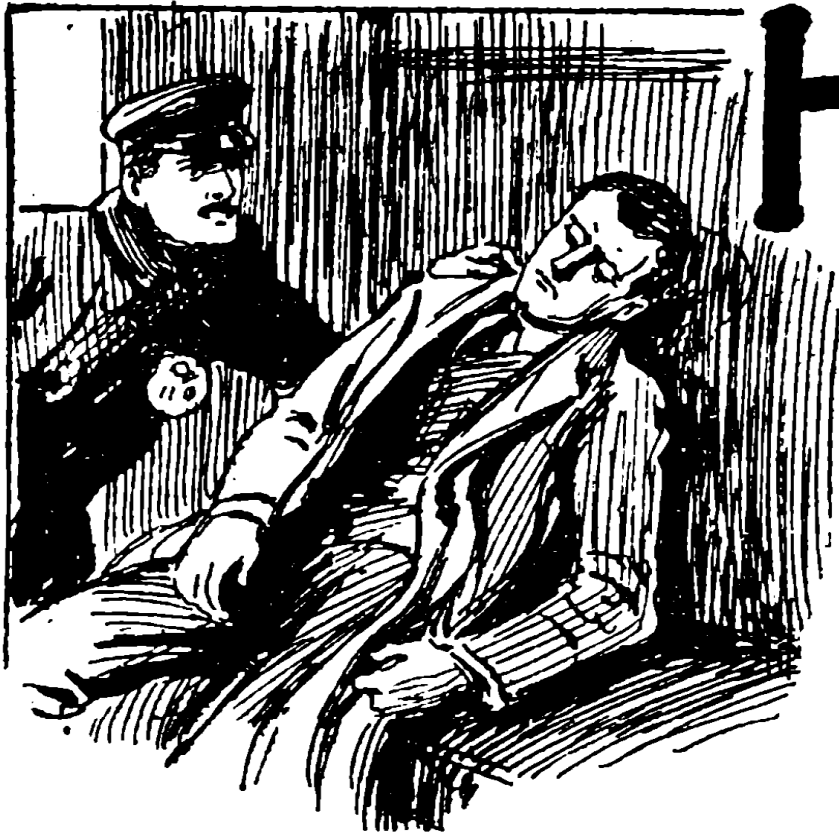
ANOTHER FINE SEXTON BLAKE AND NELSON LEE STORY.
£1,000 FOOTBALL COMPETITION.

UNION JACK LIBRARY 1½



HOODWINKED!
OR, The Diamonds of Zamkala.
W. Reade





Hoodwinked!

OR: The Diamonds of Zamkala.

A Strange and Mysterious Problem from Sexton Blake's Case - Book, introducing **SEXTON BLAKE, TINKER, and PEDRO, and NELSON LEE and NIPPER.**

By the Author of the "Tinker's Case-Diary" Series, the "Nipper at St. Frank's" Series, etc.

(The Narrative Related Throughout by Sexton Blake.)

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

An Adventure in Hampstead.

"QUEER!" I muttered, frowning. I came to a halt in the centre of the muddy pavement, and stood listening intently. The long thoroughfare, with its big houses set well back on either side, was completely deserted, and not a soul was within sight.

The district was Hampstead, the time approaching midnight, and the weather was cold and chill. I had been visiting a friend, and was now on my way to the Tube station, intending to take the Underground to Baker Street. Tinker was not with me, having preferred to remain at home reading.

I fancied that I should not have a great amount of time to catch the last train, and so I was hurrying briskly. And then my thoughts took an abrupt turn, and I came to a halt.

I stood there quite still, with my cigarette held between my fingers. Vague, but nevertheless distinct, I could hear the unmistakable sounds of two men struggling. It had been a sudden cry which caused me to pause in my walk.

I could not quite determine where the sounds were coming from, and there was certainly nobody in sight. I then observed that there was a side-turning just ahead of me, and I concluded that the commotion was proceeding from that direction.

Walking forward briskly, I arrived at the corner and stared down into the gloom.

Two figures were engaged in a fierce combat not twenty yards from me.

"H'm! Ought I to interfere?" I murmured.

The matter was decided for me a second later.

"Help!" came a gasping cry. "You murderous ruffian— Help!"

I felt that I was certainly called upon to take a hand in the game. And so, without further ado, I ran forward. Even as I was doing so I saw one of the men strike the other brutally.

Crash! He went down with a low cry, and his assailant immediately turned on his heel and dashed off down the dark street. It really seemed as though we had the place entirely to ourselves—as though no other living soul existed in the whole district.

I hurried up, and found myself staring down upon an elderly, well-dressed man. He was lying upon his back on the pavement, and his face showed signs of blood. For all this, I could see that the old gentleman was distinguished-looking. And he was quite conscious.

"Can I be of any assistance, my dear sir?" I asked quickly.

He raised himself on his elbow and stared at me in a dazed kind of way.

"The diamonds!" he gasped thickly. "The Zamkala Diamonds! They have gone! They have been stolen from me! For Heaven's sake

chase that man and recover my property! The brute attacked me—"

"I am afraid you are in a bad way," I said quickly.

"No, no! I am all right!" he panted. "Oh, why do you stand there? Go! Recover the Zamkala Diamonds, and I will be for ever grateful!"

It was no time for hesitation. Only a few seconds had passed, and I could still dimly see the figure of the fugitive thief. It was evident that he had robbed the old gentleman of some valuable property, and my only course was to give all the assistance within my power.

Demanding a full explanation would waste time, and then the diamonds would have vanished for ever. As matters now stood there was a distinct chance that I should be able to render adequate help.

I think it is one of my characteristics to act promptly, and I did so on this occasion. Pressing my elbows into my sides, I raced down the road with every ounce of speed of which I was capable.

I am not boasting when I say that I am an excellent runner. There are very few men who can outdistance me, for I always take good care to keep myself in perfect condition and ready for any emergency.

My quarry, on the other hand, was not an athlete. This was obvious from the manner in which he was running. I simply overhauled him in next to no time. And he knew that I was on his track.

He attempted to dodge across the road, probably hoping to escape in the darkness. But I was after him. And as I came up I saw that he was plump, thick-set, and encumbered by a heavy fur overcoat.

"It's no good, my friend!" I said grimly.

As I spoke I grasped his shoulder and swung him round. We were now some little distance from the spot where the original struggle had taken place, but were quite alone. Police-constables appeared to be non-existent in this district.

"Don't—don't you touch me!" gasped the man thickly.

He was almost exhausted by his run, and was hardly capable of coherent speech. But there was fear in his eyes, and I knew that I should not have much difficulty. The rogue had evidently expected to make good his escape without being chased.

"The diamonds—at once!" I rapped out.

"Hang you!" he snarled. "I will not—"

"The diamonds!" I repeated curtly.

And this time, in order to emphasise my order, I displayed my revolver, and pressed the barrel of it into the man's chest. He gave a gasp of sheer terror, and commenced trembling violently.

"You—you infernal hound!" he muttered hoarsely.

"I will give you just two seconds!" I said.

"My hand is not over-steady, and this revolver is in a most uncomfortable position for

me!"

"You've got me!" he panted. "Here, take them!"

The man thrust a hand into his coat-pocket,

and produced a washleather bag. I took it, and had no difficulty in deciding that it contained quite a large number of stones. There was no trickery about it.

"Thank you!" I said smoothly. I removed my revolver and dropped it into my pocket. And on the instant the man lurched sideways and rushed down the road. I allowed him to go, since there was really no object in detaining him. He had been compelled to give up the stolen property, and that was all that really mattered.

In a flash, however, I tore open the washleather bag and examined the contents. Yes, the diamonds were there—a selection of massive uncut stones. I switched off my electric torch and reclosed the bag.

"A most valuable collection," I decided. "Uncut, too! A splendid prize for any thief, for such stones are easy to negotiate. It is rather a fortunate thing that I am an honest man!"

It would have been quite easy for me to walk off and to vanish with the booty. I was left entirely by myself, and the real owner of the diamonds was certainly incapable of chasing me. He didn't even know how I had fared.

It is not one of my habits, however, to run off with other people's property—it is rather my habit to recover it—and I briskly retraced my steps up the dark road. And then I saw a dim figure lurching unsteadily towards me.

It was the old gentleman who had been knocked down, and he gave a husky little cry as he approached.

"Have you got them? Have you got them?" he asked shakily.

"Here you are, my dear sir!" I replied.

And I handed over the bag of diamonds. He grasped it with a feverish hand, and uttered a low cry of delight. With quivering fingers he unfastened the bag, and then felt the diamonds within.

"Yes, they're all here—all here!" he muttered. "How can I thank you, sir? How can I express my gratitude for the wonderful service you have performed? That scoundrel overpowered me, but you have retrieved the situation!"

I laughed.

"A very slight service, sir," I said. "You need not—"

"Oh, but I must do something by way of recognition!" interrupted the old gentleman, fumbling in the bag. "Here, you must take one of these diamonds as a reward—one of the biggest and finest. It is merely a slight mark of my gratitude."

But I shook my head decidedly.

"I couldn't possibly accept it," I said firmly. "It is most generous of you to make such an offer. But, my dear sir, that diamond is worth hundreds of pounds, and I deserve no such reward. Moreover, I most positively decline to accept anything beyond your verbal—"

"But it is nonsense—sheer nonsense!" he interrupted. "I wish to make you a handsome present—and indeed, I shall do so. If you refuse to accept this diamond, you will not refuse something I have in mind."

Furthermore, I am eager to explain the whole situation to you, Mr.—Mr.—”

“My name is Blake,” I smiled.
“Well, Mr. Blake, may I seek a further service from you?” said the old gentleman. “You do not know my name, do you? I will tell you—presently. I am feeling most unsteady, and I fear that I shall be unable to reach home unassisted. And I am nervous; I am terribly afraid that I shall be again attacked—”

“Have no fear,” I interrupted. “I shall be most pleased to see you safely home. If we walk to the end of this road we might possibly be able to obtain a taxi.”

“Ah, yes; that would be splendid, Mr. Blake!” said my companion. “Come, we will lose no time. And I shall insist upon taking you indoors; I shall insist upon explaining the whole circumstances to you. At present I am bewildered and dazed, and you must forgive me if I seem incoherent. My head is paining me considerably, and my eyesight is not exactly powerful. May I take your arm, sir? Would you consider it a liberty if I rested upon you?”

“I am only too pleased to help you,” I hastened to declare.

And so, he leaning on my arm, we walked up the road. I wondered who he could be, and certainly decided to accompany him home, and to hear his story. It promised to be quite interesting.

By a stroke of luck we succeeded in getting a taxi within five minutes after reaching the end of the road. I left it to the old gentleman to give the cabby his directions.

“Drive to No. 159, Grosvenor Square!” ordered my companion.

“Right, me lord!” said the cabby briskly.

We entered the cab, and I suspected that the driver was not far wrong. The old gentleman would probably turn out to be a peer. His address, at all events, was a most distinguished one.

“How lucky!” he exclaimed, as he lay back. “I hardly hoped to obtain a taxi so promptly, my good preserver. When we arrive home I will satisfy your curiosity on all points. Dear me! I am somewhat dizzy, and some brandy would not come amiss—eh?”

“Why, of course,” I said, feeling for my flask.

“No, no!” he said quickly, laying a hand upon my arm. “You must share mine, Mr. Blake! I insist! I have ample for us both, and you must grant me this little privilege. I am host, you must remember.”

I smiled, and watched him as he took from his overcoat pocket a silver-mounted flask fitted with a neat cup at the top. This was unscrewed, and he poured out a full measure. “Drink this, my dear sir,” he said pleasantly.

“After you—”

“No; you must honour me by drinking first,” he interrupted. “Come, sir!”

I took the little cup, and quickly drank it; not that I was in need of brandy. He required it far more than I did. And he poured himself out a dose, and drank it. In fact, he partook of two measures, and then put the flask away.

“Ah, that is better—much better!” he exclaimed, wiping his mouth with a silk handkerchief. “I trust that this dizziness of mine will soon pass.”

He lay back amongst the cushions and closed his eyes. At least, I judged so, for he said no more. The interior of the cab was in total darkness, and I could only occasionally catch a glimpse of my companion as we sped past a street lamp.

And so we proceeded towards Grosvenor Square.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Threaded Ferrule.

“NOW then, guv'nor, pull yourself together!”

I opened my eyes, and stared at the red face bending over me with some confusion, and vainly attempted to obey the injunction.

“If I'd known you was in this 'ere condition I wouldn't have had you in my keb!” went on the voice gruffly. “Wake up, guv'nor, there's a good 'un! I've got a wife an' kids to git home to, an' it's shockin'ly late!”

I shook myself vigorously.

“That's the way,” said the man, grasping my shoulder. “I'll give you a 'and out, if you pull yourself together. I can't waste all the bloomin' night—”

“One moment, my friend,” I interrupted dazedly.

My head was singing, but I managed to gather my wits sufficiently to see that I was in a taxi-cab, and that the driver was attempting to get me out. And I remembered all that had passed.

We had evidently arrived at Grosvenor Square, and the old gentleman must have alighted first. I felt very foolish for having dropped off to sleep; the regular motion of the taxi was responsible, no doubt.

“All right, driver; I won't make you waste any further time,” I said, preparing to alight. “I must have dozed off. We are in Grosvenor Square, I presume? Why did not my friend awaken me—”

“Grosvenor Square!” growled the taxi-man. “You're still half asleep, ain't you? We're in Camberwell—No. 16, Montjoy Terrace. The old gent told me to bring you 'ere, an' I s'pose he knows where you live, guv'nor!” I felt rather startled.

“Good gracious,” I exclaimed. “Camberwell! But, my good man, I didn't want to come to Camberwell! Why didn't you awaken me when my friend alighted in Grosvenor—”

“Lor' lummy! You seem to 'ave got Grosvenor Square on the brain!” snapped the man. “We didn't go there at all; the old gent got out in Piccadilly, just at the top of the 'Aymarket. An' he give me instructions to bring you on 'ere.”

My brain was rapidly clearing now, and I was becoming not only convinced that I was an absolute fool, but my anger rose greatly. I was simply furious with myself for having been so easily duped.

My first action was to feel quickly over my pockets; but all my property was intact, and nothing had been touched. Why on earth had the old gentleman played such an extraordinary trick upon me?

Why had he got out at the top of the Haymarket, and why had he sent me on to Camberwell, of all places? It didn't take me long to realise that the brandy I had partaken of must have been prepared in some manner—in short, drugged. It was also fairly clear in my mind that my late companion had only pretended to drink some brandy himself.

If I could have thought of any feasible reason for his remarkable behaviour I should have been more comfortable. But the old gentleman had utterly no reason to treat me so shabbily. True, I was unharmed, and nothing of mine had been taken. But the whole affair was most singular, and I was frankly puzzled.

The explanation was probably simple enough. I was a stranger to the old fellow, and he might have been afraid that I should be tempted to turn on him and take the diamonds away. And so, in his eccentric way, he had decided to get rid of me, and had adopted this curious method of doing so.

But I certainly did not want to remain in Camberwell, and I should find it impossible to get to Baker Street by train at this hour of the night. I scrambled out of the cab, and felt rather unsteady.

“Thought you was never comin',” said the driver, in a grumbling voice. “You owe me five-an'-a-tanner, guv'nor. The old gent paid me for the other part of the journey, but not for yours.”

“Look here, my man, there has been some mistake,” I said quietly. “I didn't want to come to Camberwell, and I don't want to remain here. My friend gave you wrong instructions.”

“Oh, did 'e?” said the cabby. “Well, that's your trouble, guv'nor! I was told to bring you 'ere, an'—”

“I'm not blaming you,” I interrupted. “But I want you to drive me to Baker Street straight away—”

“Not likely!” interrupted the man, in his turn. “Why, my garage is at Kennington, just near 'ere, an' I'm blowed if I'm going right over to Baker Street to-night. Not me. Why, I should never get 'ome till daylight!”

“The whole journey won't take you more than an hour, so you needn't raise all those objections,” I said impatiently. “I certainly don't want to walk home, and it'll be worth a sovereign to you if you'll drive me.”

The man scratched his chin.

“In advance?” he asked.

“I am not called upon to pay you in advance, but there's no reason why I shouldn't do so,” I replied. “Here you are—take it!”

He took the pound-note cheerfully.

“You're a gent, guv'nor!” he said. “Hop inside; I'll soon 'ave you at Baker Street. What number is it?”

I gave it to him, and then re-entered the cab. A moment later we were bowling away through the deserted streets towards the

heart of London. It was some satisfaction, at least, to be able to get home in comfort.

As I lay back and lit a cigarette the light from my match fell upon a small brass plate fixed to the woodwork in front. It simply bore the name of the motor-cab company, and gave the address in Kennington. I only noticed it subconsciously, but the knowledge was destined to come in useful later on.

By this time I had fully recovered the use of my wits; but, puzzle as I would, I could not understand why my strange old companion had left me in the lurch in such an unaccountable manner.

What were the Zamkala Diamonds? From the glimpse I had obtained of them I was quite convinced that the diamonds were of very excellent quality, and extremely valuable. And I could have had one for myself if I had so chosen. But I had certainly not earned it, and I should not have felt justified in accepting it.

I determined to look into the affair on the morrow—at least, to give it a certain amount of attention. Anything in the nature of a mystery always attracts me, and this whole adventure had been rather mysterious.

The taxi jolted heavily over a rough portion of roadway, and something struck against one of my heels. I moved my foot, and it came in contact with a hard object, which upon investigation proved to be a walking-stick.

It wasn't mine, for I had carried none. But a moment's examination was sufficient. I recognised it as the stick which the old gentleman had carried. In his agitated frame of mind he had obviously forgotten it.

“A souvenir, at all events!” I told myself, as I laid the stick on the seat beside me. “And it is quite possible that I may be able to learn much from a close examination of this cane. Walking-sticks are frequently highly instructive.”

I arrived home after a swift, uneventful run, and found, as I expected, that Tinker was in bed. I was not feeling exactly bright, and I retired to my own bed-room without any delay.

In the morning I was quite fresh, and all the effects of my “doping” had disappeared. Indeed, my appetite for breakfast was rather more keen than usual. I found Tinker standing before the fire, reading the morning paper.

“Well, guv'nor, what have you got to say for yourself?” he demanded severely.

“Quite a lot, if necessary.”

“I should think so!” he said. “I waited up for you until long after midnight, and then I got fed up and went to bed. Where the dickens did you get to, guv'nor? Gadding about in the middle of the night—”

“You will pardon me, Tinker, but I was not gadding about!” I interrupted grimly. “I should have arrived home in quite respectable time had it not been for a somewhat remarkable adventure which befell me.”

“I suppose you thought it out in bed, guv'nor?” he grinned.

“Thought which out?”

“The remarkable adventure!”

“Since you appear to be so sarcastic, Tinker, I shall say nothing further about the matter, and your curiosity must go unsatisfied,” I said sternly. “No; you needn't indulge in those absurd antics. I am firm.”

The young rascal had placed his hands before him as though in prayer, but I took no notice of him. I knew very well that he was anxious to hear what had delayed me the previous evening, but I resolved to keep him in suspense until after breakfast.

He pretended to be loftily indifferent, but I knew that he wasn't. He seized one of the newspapers and buried himself in it. Then Mrs. Bardell arrived with the breakfast-trays, and we were soon discussing fried soles and coffee.

“Rather a queer affair at Hampstead, guv'nor,” remarked Tinker thoughtfully.

“Eh? Where?”

“At Hampstead, guv'nor,” he said, stirring his coffee. “There's a report in your paper, isn't there? It seems that Lord Wraxson was robbed in the open streets of some valuable diamonds. You can clear off, Pedro, because there's nothing on the table that'll satisfy the cavity which you call a mouth.”

I laid down my paper, very interested.

“Lord Wraxson was robbed of some diamonds, Tinker—in Hampstead?” I asked.

“That's right, guv'nor,” he replied. “You were in Hampstead last night, weren't you? Ah, perhaps that's the explanation of your being late home!” he added, grinning. “I suppose you haven't turned burglar, for a change?”

"Do not be so ridiculous, Tinker!" I said, feeling nevertheless that his suggestion was perilously near the mark. "Let me see that paragraph."

"I'll read it out, if you like," he said. "The police have got charge of the case, and they're looking for both the thieves, for it seems that his lordship was attacked by two men. This is how the account runs, gov'nor:

"DARING ROBBERY IN HAMPSTEAD.

"Late last night a somewhat startling affair occurred in a quiet thoroughfare in Hampstead. The victim is none other than Lord Wraxson, who will be remembered as an explorer of considerable note. It appears that his lordship was walking home alone when the robbery occurred.

"A man of venerable appearance—undoubtedly a desperate thief in disguise—accosted Lord Wraxson, and demanded that he should give up a bag of valuable diamonds which he was carrying at the moment. His lordship naturally refused, and the stranger thereupon attacked him. There was a desperate fight for a few minutes, during which the thief obtained possession of the diamonds, but was finally overpowered.

"Lord Wraxson, the diamonds once more in his pocket, hurried away in search of a policeman. According to his lordship's story, a confederate now appeared upon the scene. This man was much more active than his original assailant, and overtook him before he could cross any police-officer—or, indeed, any ordinary civilian.

"The confederate was armed, and forced his victim to give up the diamonds at the point of a revolver. The daring scoundrel, having all the advantage, took the diamonds away, and then allowed Lord Wraxson to escape. By the time the unfortunate peer had managed to find a constable both thieves had vanished into the darkness of the night.

"The matter is being investigated by the Hampstead police, and it is understood that Scotland Yard is taking a hand in the investigation. Lord Wraxson's loss was a considerable one, for the diamonds are worth every penny of twenty-five thousand pounds. The police are hopeful of making an arrest very shortly."

"That's the account, gov'nor," concluded Tinker, laying down the paper and helping himself to a slice of bread-and-butter. "It's a queer thing, isn't it, but there's hardly ever a policeman on hand when he's particularly wanted?"

I nodded absently.

"I am startled, Tinker," I observed—"considerably startled."

"Eh?" he said. "What the dickens are you startled about? After all, it's only an ordinary robbery; nothing strange about it. Late at night, in a deserted street, it's easy enough for two desperate scoundrels to attack—"

"Quite so, Tinker—quite so!" I interrupted curtly. "But there is one fact which will astound you considerably. The daring scoundrel referred to in that account—the armed confederate—is sitting opposite to you at this very moment!"

Tinker stared at me blankly.

"What on earth do you mean, gov'nor?" he gasped.

"I mean exactly what I say."

"But you can't, gov'nor!" he protested. "You're intimating that you were the chap who forced Lord Wraxson to give up the diamonds, and that's absurd!"

I laughed grimly.

"Absurd or not, young 'un, it's the absolute truth!" I said. "It was I who compelled Lord Wraxson to give up those diamonds. You may well stare, my boy, for you are gazing upon an arrant noodle!"

Tinker looked at me very anxiously.

"You're not joking, gov'nor; I can tell that by your tone!" he exclaimed. "But what's the matter? Why are you talking so wildly? If you expect me to believe that you robbed Lord Wraxson last night—well, you'll have to expect!"

"I rose to my feet and paced the room for a moment or two.

"Here is a fine thing, Tinker!" I said at last. "Last night I was duped and deceived like the veriest country bumpkin! I actually helped a thief to rob Lord Wraxson—indeed, I committed the theft with my own hands! I am absolutely responsible for the loss of those diamonds! Upon my soul, Tinker, I feel amazingly humiliated!"

"Oh, come off it, gov'nor!"

U. J.—No. 796.

"I deserve to go to prison for being such a fool!" I said, glaring.

"But—but—"

"It's no good making excuses for me, because I deserve no consideration whatever!" I went on savagely. "Hang it all, Tinker, I have been taken down a peg or two in serious earnest! And Lord Wraxson has lost his diamonds!"

Tinker made a hopeless gesture.

"I don't know what the dickens you're jawing about, gov'nor!" he said. "I wish to goodness you'd explain!"

And then and there I did so. I told Tinker how I had met the old gentleman under such dramatic circumstances, how I had chased the man who now turned out to be Lord Wraxson, and how I had forced him to give up the diamonds. I also told Tinker how I had been imbecile enough to drink the drugged brandy in the taxi, and how I had awakened to find the "old gentleman" gone, and myself in Camberwell.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Tinker, when I had done.

"A most unpalatable story—eh, young 'un?" I said grimly. "The simple fact remains that I made myself a confederate in that robbery, and the daring rascal got completely away. You must remember that I did not see him once in a strong light, and there can be no doubt that he was cleverly disguised. Actually, the man is probably as young as myself, and he is undoubtedly a consummate actor. I was hoodwinked from the very start."

Tinker shook his head obstinately.

"I don't see why you should be so jolly hard on yourself, gov'nor," he said. "Personally, I don't think you're to blame at all."

"Nonsense!" I snapped. "I am entirely to blame."

"Well, there's no need to bark at me, gov'nor," said Tinker, in an injured tone.

"I am sorry, my boy; but my nerves are not exactly in an ideal condition at the moment," I said, pacing up and down. "I cannot help admiring the fellow, for he succeeded in making me an accomplice in the most cool way. When I came upon him lying on the pavement I naturally assumed that he was the victim; and he saw that in a flash. Temporarily out of action himself, he informed me that he had been robbed, and begged me to recover his property."

"It was rather smart, gov'nor."

"Astonishingly so, Tinker," I agreed. "The situation was not improved by Lord Wraxson's behaviour. He was almost exhausted, and thoroughly scared. If he had been able to explain on the spot, all would have been well."

Tinker grinned.

"You didn't seem to give him much chance of explaining, gov'nor," he remarked. "You simply jabbed the revolver into his chest, and told him to fork out. What else could he do? Talking didn't seem to be much good, did it?"

"The diamonds are gone, and I am mainly responsible for their loss," I declared. "I cannot possibly let the matter stand where it is at present."

"What else can you do?"

"I can recover the diamonds, and I intend doing so," I said firmly. "My dear Tinker, it is a matter of duty. I should never feel comfortable again if I allowed this affair to drop. At all cost, I must get Lord Wraxson's diamonds back and restore them to him."

"Well, that would be the right thing to do, gov'nor," said Tinker thoughtfully. "But I'm jiggered if I can see how you're going to get on the track. That old gentleman will have become a young gentleman by this time, I expect, and it'll be almost impossible to trace him. What do you know? Simply that he got out of the taxi at the top of the Haymarket. You might search for weeks, and still be no further."

"Yes, it is a difficult problem—I admit it freely," I said, filling my pipe. "It is quite a unique situation, to tell the truth. I have been frequently engaged to recover stolen jewels, Tinker, but I have never before found it necessary to recover property which I stole with my own hands!"

Tinker chuckled.

"Dash it all, gov'nor, the thing's got a humorous side, hasn't it?" he said. "It's such a quaint position, when you come to think of it. What you did was done in all innocence."

"In all idioy, you mean!" I snapped. "You can't get over the fact, lad, that I must have been half asleep, or I should not have been so completely duped. The rascal acted his part superbly, and I find

it difficult to believe, even now, that he is a professional criminal. Yet his behaviour in the taxi proves that to be the case. He used me for his own purposes just as long as it suited him, and then coolly got rid of me. I doff my hat to that man, Tinker."

"A jolly cool customer, gov'nor," said my young assistant. "But the question is, how are you going to get on the track?"

I lit my pipe, and puffed at it for a few moments in silence.

"Fortunately, the fellow forgot to take his stick away with him," I said. "There is just a chance that we may be able to learn something from it. The man left it in the taxi, and I brought it away with me."

"That's something, anyhow," said Tinker. "I remember once that you found out quite a lot from a walking-stick, gov'nor. You were able to tell, by the mud at the bottom of it, where the owner of the stick had come from. But it was largely a matter of chance, wasn't it? Those sort of deductions are all very well for a detective story, but they don't always work in real life."

"There is a great deal in what you say, Tinker," I agreed, sitting down before the fire. "However, an examination of the stick might prove quite instructive. Even if we can obtain no definite facts, we might get a few hints. Bring the stick over here, my boy; you will find it in the stand."

Tinker went outside, and had no difficulty in selecting the jewel thief's walking-stick from amongst our own collection. It was a stout article, with an ordinary plain, curved handle, heavily silver mounted.

"It appears to be fairly new," I remarked, as Tinker handed me the stick. "You will observe that it is rather lighter than one would expect, considering the nature of the wood. Did you notice that, young 'un?"

"I can't say that I did, gov'nor."

"One would be inclined to assume that the stick has a pith centre, accounting for the lightness," I went on, turning the thing over in my hands. "But it is made of cane, Tinker—a hard, solid variety of cane—and it is quite obvious that the lightness must have some other explanation."

"It's hollow, perhaps?" Tinker suggested.

"If so, there will be nothing very unusual in the fact," I observed. "It is quite a common thing for a walking-stick to be made hollow, and to have a screw-on handle. But this handle, Tinker, is part of the whole, and certainly does not unscrew. Neither is there any trick opening at the extreme end."

I was nearly ready to confess that we should be unable to discover anything from the walking-stick. It was singularly lacking in marks of any description. There was nothing whatever to show the characteristics of its owner.

In fact, the cane was a most ordinary affair, and I was just about to put it aside when I happened to glance at the ferrule. At first look this appeared to be of the ordinary type—brass, with an iron base.

It was worn considerably on one side—always the case with a stick which has a crook handle, for such a stick is constantly made to strike the ground in precisely the same position. A knobbed stick, on the other hand, wears perfectly evenly.

"H'm! This is interesting, at all events," I remarked.

"What's that, gov'nor?"

"The ferrule, Tinker, appears to be merely jammed on, for no nails are visible, which is unusual. With constant using, one would suppose that the ferrule would drop off. It must be secured by some other means."

While I was speaking I seized the ferrule and attempted to pull it off; but it was fixed on very firmly. Then, suddenly, as I gripped it, something seemed to loosen, and I knew what had occurred.

"Why, this ferrule is threaded!" I exclaimed. "Do you see, Tinker? It unscrews, like a cap. And a ferrule which unscrews is a distinct novelty. I am beginning to suspect that this stick is not such an ordinary article as I feared."

"It's certainly out of the common, gov'nor," said the lad.

By this time I had the ferrule off, and then discovered that there was an inner brass fitting, also threaded. It was hollow, and a small wooden plug filled the end. This was jammed in tightly, and all my efforts to remove it were unavailing.

"Fetch me the pliers, Tinker," I said briskly.

He did so, and came back eager to see what would be revealed when the plug was removed. The very fact that it was there proved that the stick was of a very special make.

"Ah, this is better," I said, as I manipulated the pliers.

The plug came out easily, and taking the stick to the window, I gazed into the hollow cavity which was now revealed. I could see nothing but a little ball of white cotton-wool, and I was soon probing this with a length of stout wire.

With very little trouble I succeeded in pulling it completely out, and with it came three hard objects, all of them embedded in the cotton. Threshing out the stuff with my fingers on the table, I soon discovered the actual truth.

"What do you think of those, Tinker?" I said calmly.

There were three red objects on the table, and Tinker stared at them with wonder. And he was scarcely to be blamed, for those little red objects were medium-sized rubies, and very valuable ones at that.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

A Plan of Action.

TINKER picked up one of the precious stones and examined it.

"Why, they're rubies, gov'nor!" he ejaculated. "Either that, or they're clever imitations—"

"No, my boy, they are genuine rubies!" I interrupted. "I should say that they are worth nothing less than three hundred pounds each, possibly more. My friend of last night made a big mistake in leaving this stick behind."

"Well, here's a queer state of affairs," said Tinker. "You're out after the recovery of some diamonds, gov'nor, and you find some rubies! I suppose there aren't a few more jewels in that stick—sapphires or emeralds, for example?"

I probed about with the wire, and soon established the fact that there was nothing further in the hollow cavity. But the discovery of the rubies was sufficiently interesting, and I was very elated.

"This is most fortunate, Tinker," I declared. "There is more than a chance that this stick will serve to put me on the track without delay."

"How do you make that out, gov'nor?" "My reasoning is simple," I replied. "The thief was so anxious to get rid of me last night that he apparently thought of nothing else, and when he left the taxi at the top of the Haymarket he forgot that his stick was on the floor of the vehicle. It is only natural to assume that the man will be extremely anxious to recover his property at the earliest moment."

"I can quite believe that, gov'nor," said Tinker, nodding. "It's no ordinary stick, is it? According to your calculation, it must be worth something like a thousand pounds—with those rubies in it. Even though the diamonds are worth twenty times as much, the man won't willingly allow a thousand quid to escape him."

"That is my argument, my lad," I said crisply. "Now, the fellow will either assume that I took the stick away with me, or that it was left behind in the taxi. The latter is by far the most probable."

"Why is it, gov'nor?"

"Because the man will remember that I was drugged," I argued. "He will know that I was in no fit condition to notice a stick lying on the floor. Indeed, I did not notice it until I was well on my way to Baker Street from Camberwell. If I had alighted from the cab there, in my muddled condition, this stick would have remained in the taxi."

"Well, and what then?"

"Obviously, the owner will apply to the taxi-driver, or to the company, for the return of his property," I declared. "He may, of course, decide to lose the stick, fearing that inquiries might lead to awkward consequences. But he will be aware that the police are not looking for any taxi-driver, and will probably be bold."

"How will he know where to apply?"

"The taxi was of a distinctive type—a type which is only owned by a big firm whose garage is in Kennington," I replied. "You must remember that the thief is a very astute person—I have good reason to know that—and he will know what to do when it comes to recovering a stick worth a thousand pounds. But I know what to do, too, and I shall not lose a minute."

I passed into the consulting-room, and Tinker followed me. A few moments later I was talking with the manager of the taxi-cab garage at Kennington. I asked him if it

was possible for me to have a word with the driver who took a gentleman over to Baker Street late the previous night."

"I expect that will be Simms," said the manager. "He came in very late, and I remember that he mentioned that he had just come from the West End. He was about the last man in."

"Is he on the premises now?" I inquired.

"I'll just see, sir."

I soon learned that Simms was the man who had driven me home, and that he had just arrived at the garage in order to take his cab out for the day. I requested him to come to Baker Street at once, when he would be well repaid for his trouble.

He turned up an hour later, and was ushered into the consulting-room by Mrs. Bardell, who was looking somewhat indignant. She seemed to think it highly undignified for a taxi-driver to enter the sanctity of my consulting-room.

"You remember me, Simms?" I asked.

"Of course, sir," he grinned. "You're the gent I drove home last night, ain't you? You mentioned that you was goin' to make it worth my while for comin' over here. I should 'ave got 'ere sooner, only I 'ad to take a fare to Waterloo first."

"That's all right, Simms," I said. "You remember the old gentleman who was with me last night, and who left your cab in the Haymarket?"

"Well, sir?"

"He left a walking-stick in your vehicle—I have it here," I said. "It is just possible, Simms, that there will be an inquiry at your garage with regard to this stick."

"That's all right, sir," said the driver. "If there is I'll tell 'em to come to you—"

"No; I don't want you to do that!" I interrupted. "That old gentleman is not well known to me, Simms, and I have certain reasons for making this request. Should he, or an agent of his, inquire after the stick, I want you to make an appointment with him for this evening at, say, eight o'clock."

"It can't be done, sir," said Simms, shaking his head. "That's my busiest time, an' I shall lose—"

"You will lose nothing, for I will make you a present of five pounds if you find it necessary to keep the appointment," I put in. "Go about your ordinary business for the present, but communicate with me as soon as you hear of an inquiry having been made. I will then give you more precise instructions."

"An' s'pose there's no inquiry, sir?"

"In that event, there will be no appointment, and your time will not be wasted," I smiled. "Here is a ten-shilling note to repay you for your trouble this morning. And 'phone me up at once if there is an inquiry after the stick."

The man took his departure, well pleased, and I knew that I had done all that was possible for the moment. I was quite confident that the owner of the stick would attempt to get it back, and I should have been very disappointed if the matter had fizzled out. Needless to say, I had no intention of giving the taxi-driver a hint that the stick was of any special value.

Having disposed of the matter, I cast it from my mind, and busied myself in other directions. Practically all that morning I was in the City, attending to the affairs of one of my clients.

I returned at lunch-time, when Tinker informed me that there had been no telephone message, and no further signs of Simms. I was not disappointed, for I had scarcely expected such an early result.

"Oh, by the way, gov'nor," said Tinker, "is there anything special doing this evening?"

"There might be quite a lot," I replied. "But, any case, I don't think I shall need you, my boy. Why do you ask?"

"Well, gov'nor, Nipper's coming up to London this afternoon with his gov'nor, and I thought about running round to Gray's Inn Road," said Tinker. "I haven't seen Nelson Lee and Nipper for weeks; they're so seldom in London nowadays."

"You are at liberty to visit them if you wish to," I said. "I shall probably drop round myself, if there is nothing else to do. Lee, I understand, has been having quite an interesting time down at St. Frank's College."

"Rather, gov'nor!" said Tinker. "He and Nipper have been doing all sorts of detective work, in spite of being at school. It's a half-holiday to-day at St. Frank's, so I suppose they're taking advantage of it to take a trip up."

So Tinker arranged to be out that evening. He went off soon after luncheon, as a matter

of fact, and he had scarcely taken his departure when the telephone-bell rang. I answered it at once.

"It's me, sir—Simms!" came the voice over the wire.

"Well?" I said quickly. "Has there been an inquiry?"

"Yes, sir; about an hour ago," answered the driver. "I happened to be at the garage at the time, an' the gent spoke to me himself. Wanted the stick straight off, but I told 'im it couldn't be done. I said I'd took it 'ome."

"But you made an appointment?"

"Yes, sir. I wanted to meet the gent up West somewhere, but 'e said it wouldn't suit 'im," came Simms' voice. "So I arranged to go to the River 'Otel at Hampton Court, and to be there at eight o'clock with the stick. It's a fair way out, but 'e promised to pay me well for my trouble—not that I thought about that much, seein' that I'm gittin' five quid from you."

"You have done well, Simms!" I exclaimed, with satisfaction. "You had better call round here, during the afternoon, and I'll give you the stick, and half your payment in advance."

"Right, sir; I'll come straight off!"

I hung up the receiver, and smiled with fresh satisfaction. Nothing could have gone better. My friend of the night before had decided to take the risk, and had arranged to meet the cabman at an hotel in the Hampton Court district.

It would only be necessary for me to get to the spot in advance. I could then watch the building carefully, witness the arrival of the taxi, and then wait until the jewel-thief emerged with the walking-stick.

My task would then be to follow him—to shadow him to his home. It would be the first step, at all events, and I should make further plans afterwards. The main thing was to get on to the man's track; and it looked as though I should do so with the minimum amount of difficulty.

I replaced the rubies into the stick, plugged it up, and screwed on the ferrule once more. To return the stick without the stones would be a mistake, for the owner would have suspected trickery at once.

As matters now stood he merely thought that the stick had been in nobody's hands but the cabman's, and would feel himself quite secure.

Simms turned up presently, and I handed him half the promised reward and the stick itself. He repeated the arrangement, and I gave him a few words of advice and warning.

"You must be careful, Simms, not to make any mention of me when you hand this cane over," I said. "If the man asks you any questions, evade them. Lead him to believe that you took the stick home with you, and that it has been in your possession all the time. I am not suggesting that you should resort to falsehood—"

"That's all right, sir!" grinned Simms. "A few lies o' them sort won't do no 'arm. Besides, I've already told 'im that I've got the stick at 'ome. You can trust me, sir. I sha'n't give nothin' away."

He picked up the stick, and eyed it critically.

"Seems a bloomin' lot o' fuss over an ordinary walkin'-cane," he remarked. "It beats me why you're payin' five quid, gov'nor. Still, it ain't my business, an' the money's good enough for me. I don't want to ask no questions."

"By the way, who made the inquiry?" I asked.

"Oh, a chap I've never seen afore!" replied Simms. "A gent of about forty, I should say—clean-shaven and bronzed. Said 'is father 'ad left the stick in my keb last night."

I smiled.

"Well, that's all right, Simms," I said. "You carry out your part of the programme, and give me a call to-morrow morning. I'll then hand over the rest of your payment. That's all for the present."

He went away in high good humour, little realising that the stick now in his possession was worth something like a thousand pounds. But it was to be the means of my getting on the track, and I was quite content to see it leave my possession.

Tinker was away, and so I made my own arrangements. I decided to take Pedro with me on the trip, for the old dog would probably come in useful. As it happened, it was an extremely lucky thing that I did come to that decision.

Pedro was destined to distinguish himself very thoroughly in this particular case.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

A Surprising Development.

THE River Hotel, Hampton Court, was a select establishment, and very quiet, being situated quite near to the river in a secluded thoroughfare. Its chief prosperity was in summer-time, but now it looked deserted and forlorn.

At a quarter to eight I had taken up my stand in a position of advantage. I could see the hotel entrance with great distinctness, and yet I remained concealed. Pedro was just outside me, as quiet as a lamb.

The evening was very dark, and inclined to be misty, and I was wearing a thick overcoat and warm gloves.

It will be wondered, perhaps, why I did not make arrangements to have my quarry arrested at once. He was certainly the man who had taken Lord Wraxson's diamonds—shown in his disguise.

But I preferred to be cautious. There was no sense whatever in being hasty. If I had the man arrested on sight the diamonds would be probably lost for good. Although I was convinced of the man's identity in my own mind, I had no proof to submit, and the fellow could easily brazen matters out.

On the other hand, if I acted with caution and waited my opportunity, I should be able to recover the stolen property with my own hands. I would then return it to Lord Wraxson in person, and feel that my obligation was ended.

At five minutes to eight a man walked briskly up out of the gloom, paused for a moment at the hotel entrance, and passed inside. That one glimpse was quite sufficient for me.

The man, although clean-shaven and youthful looking, was my companion of the night before. His disguise was removed, but he could not alter the shape of his head, or the set of his shoulders. He had arrived on the scene first, and I waited somewhat anxiously for Simms to put in an appearance. Everything depended upon the cabman playing his part properly.

I need not have been concerned, however, for almost at once a buzz sounded from down the road, and two points of light came into view. The taxi poked up in front of the hotel with a jerk, and I clearly saw Simms dismount, and enter the establishment, carrying the fateful stick.

I half expected him to remain inside for ten minutes or more, but he was out again before five had elapsed. He wiped his mouth as he paused in the entrance, lit a cigarette, and looked at peace with all the world. He was probably telling himself that this was the finest day he had had for months.

He drove off, and I was left to watch for the appearance of my real quarry. The man came out barely a minute later, swinging the stick in his hand. He, too, paused in the entrance, and I smiled grimly to myself as I saw him finger the ferrule. He obviously wanted to assure himself that it was fixed on securely.

He set off briskly after that, never once looking behind him. He had no fear of being shadowed, evidently.

As I followed at a safe distance behind him, I reflected upon the simple cause of events which had led me to be in my present position. It seemed almost providential that the diamond thief had left the stick behind him in the taxi-cab.

I wondered where I should end my quest, but was grimly determined to stick to this man at all cost. The night was dark, and this helped me, although, at the same time, I found it necessary to keep fairly close behind my quarry. It would have been an easy matter to lose him if I relaxed my vigilance even for a moment.

I was wearing special boots with rubber soles, and my movements were quite noiseless as I walked. Pedro knew his business, and he remained at my heels, quiet and obedient. I should not have known that he was there at all, and I even glanced behind once or twice to assure myself of his proximity.

I was led down one quiet road after another, passing scarcely a soul on the way. At length I found myself at the end of a newly-completed thoroughfare, and there was nothing beyond but blackness—obviously some waste ground or some meadows.

I knew that I was very near to the river now, and I wondered where I should finally find myself. I could just dimly see the figure of the man ahead as he paced down a narrow footpath.

"We must be cautious now, Pedro, old boy!" I breathed softly.

If once the man discovered that he was being shadowed, my whole scheme would be wrecked. And so I displayed extra care, and allowed my quarry to get somewhat farther ahead.

I followed in a crouching attitude, keeping low to the ground—in case he should glance behind, and see my figure against the skyline. I instinctively felt that the chase was nearing its end, and this proved to be the case.

The man in front of me directed his steps straight towards a low building which stood quite to itself some little distance ahead.

Not a single light was showing anywhere, and the spot could scarcely have been more lonely.

The building, I had no doubt, was a riverside bungalow. One of those places which are generally locked up during the autumn, winter, and spring, and are only used in the summer months.

I drew somewhat closer as my quarry turned in at the gateway. He closed the gate behind him with a little click, and I distinctly heard the rattle of a bunch of keys.

This was all very satisfactory. I had shadowed the thief to his lair, and I began to entertain hopes that I should recover Lord Wraxson's diamonds that very night—without even troubling to approach the police.

And then I received a big surprise.

There came the sound of a sudden, low cry, followed by muffled thuds. And as I hurried forward I saw what was happening. The man was fighting furiously with two dim figures. These had apparently been lurking in the short front-garden of the bungalow, and now a regular fight was taking place.

For the moment I was undecided. Should I dash forward and take a hand in the game, or should I remain where I stood, a passive spectator? I decided upon the latter course—until the fight began to look blood-thirsty. Then, of course, I should assert myself very promptly.

This, however, was not necessary. The whole incident had been unexpected, and I was feeling surprised and somewhat irritated. What was the meaning of this fresh development? Who were these men who had sprung out upon the jewel thief?

I deemed it safe to approach even closer, and Pedro remained behind me, slightly excited, but quiet.

"Why don't you give in, you fool?" came a breathless, muttering voice. "You know well enough that you can't get away—"

"You infernal rogues!" panted another voice.

"Stow that, Hemming!" snapped the other. "Are you going to give in quietly or not? I've got a stick here, and I'll use it—Hang you! Hold him, Tom—hold the fool!"

There had been a slight lull, but the struggle now commenced afresh. It seemed that my quarry's name was Hemming, and he was not lacking in pluck, since he continued to fight his two assailants, knowing well enough that he could not possibly hope to escape.

I heard a sickening thud, and then a slight groan. The fight ended abruptly, and only the sound of heavy panting remained. The two strangers were staring down at the still form of their victim.

"You've killed him!" muttered one of the voices.

"Rot!" snapped the other. "I only gave him a light tap. I believe he's shamming, anyway. Find his keys: they dropped somewhere on the path. We'd better get him indoors as soon as we can."

As the strangers were searching for the keys Hemming gave another groan, and moved his position slightly. I was convinced that the man was only temporarily stunned. One of his assailants moved across to him.

"Haven't you got those keys yet, Sanderson?" he whispered. "Hemming's coming round, and he'll yell for help presently—"

"If he yells we'll give him another tap," interrupted the other man. "You stay there and watch him. I can't see anything in this infernal darkness. The keys fell— Ah, here they are!"

"Good!" muttered the fellow near the prostrate Hemming.

His companion walked softly down the strip of path until he arrived at the front door. I heard the rattle of the keys and then the click of the lock. Sanderson turned and beckoned.

"Bring him along!" he murmured. "Make haste, Pratt!"

"Don't be a fool!" snapped the other. "Do you think I can shift him without your help? He's still unconscious—"

"All right; don't make a fuss!"

Sanderson came forward, and a moment later he and Pratt were carrying Hemming's inert body towards the front door. It was quite a task, for it is no easy matter to carry an unconscious man, even for a short distance.

They stumbled over the threshold into the hall, and then the front door closed with a soft thud. I remained standing perfectly still for a moment or two, and then crept forward to the gate, Pedro following.

"H'm! Rather a queer business!" I murmured, frowning. "I should like to know exactly what relations exist between those two rascals."

It was fairly obvious that Pratt and Sanderson were not confederates of Hemming's—unless they had elected to turn on their companion. But they had been lying in wait for him, and their attack had been premeditated. This was no case of a sudden quarrel between friends.

I was rather uncertain as to how I should act, for the whole situation had undergone a complete change. According to my original plan, I had merely one man—Hemming—to contend with. It would have been a comparatively simple matter to get the diamonds from him, or to await my chance to search the bungalow.

But what was the position now?

Instead of one man to deal with, I had three—or, at least, two, for Hemming was out of action for the time. By acting recklessly I should probably ruin all my chances of success. My best plan, therefore, seemed to be to hang round the bungalow and watch. Perhaps my chance would come before long.

The wisdom of this decision was apparent a few seconds later, for a light appeared in the front room, and I guessed that a candle had been lit. There was probably electric light or gas installed, but it may have been cut off at this time of the year. Or the rascals may have decided that a candle would be safer.

The point which interested me most, however, was the fact that the curtains over the window did not meet in the middle. These curtains were of heavy tapestry, apparently, and they excluded all the light, except in the centre, where they did not meet.

Behind them were heavy lace curtains, but it was possible to see through these with a fair amount of distinctness. I shook my head as I regarded the window. Every moment I expected to see the curtains pulled together until they overlapped. But this did not happen, and my hopes began to rise.

I turned swiftly.

"Lie down, Pedro! Stay here, old boy!" I whispered.

The old dog wagged his tail slightly, and flopped down obediently. And I gently pushed the gate open and entered the garden. I knew that Pedro would remain in his present position until he received further orders—or until something occurred to excite him.

The garden—if it could be called by such a name—was really nothing more than a tangle of weeds, with a few evergreen bushes dotted about. These would come in handy for cover, perhaps, in the event of a sudden surprise. They had already served Pratt and Sanderson well.

I crept very cautiously to the window, for I had observed that a dead bush lay almost in my path, and there were probably a number of rotten twigs lying on the ground. Stamping on these with force would certainly not improve my position, for dead twigs have a habit of cracking noisily.

However, I managed to avoid them, and at length arrived at the window. The curtains were still in the same position, and my first glance into the room showed me that the two intruders were celebrating their triumph by sampling Hemming's stock of brandy.

I could see them fairly distinctly, and observed that their expressions were eloquent of satisfaction. Hemming himself was invisible, and I judged that he was lying on a couch beyond my vision, or on the floor.

And now I understood why the curtains were allowed to remain in their present position. For some reason the tapestry curtains were nearest the glass, the lace curtains being fully exposed to the view of the men within the room.

At the top the tapestry met, and one glance had assured the rascals that the curtains were fully drawn. They were unable to see that a small crack remained towards the lower part of the window.

Furthermore, Pratt and Sanderson were under the impression that this neighbourhood was completely deserted—that they had the place entirely to themselves. Had the bungalow been situated in a busy thoroughfare I have no doubt that more drastic precautions would have been taken.

I watched with great interest, and with some relief I observed that Hemming was rapidly recovering. He had been propped in a chair, and I could just see his left arm and shoulder.

"Pull yourself together, man," said Sanderson, his voice being quite audible to me in the stillness of the night—for there were no disturbing exterior sounds in this deserted district.

"Better make his hands fast," suggested Pratt grimly.

This was apparently done, for I saw Sanderson take out his handkerchief and bend over the victim. The short silence which ensued was broken by Hemming himself, who spoke rather thickly.

"What's the meaning of this, you brutes?" he demanded. "If you wanted to speak to me, why couldn't you come up in the ordinary way? You'll suffer for this, I can tell you—"

"Oh, don't make a fool of yourself, Hemming!" snapped one of the others. "You're not quite in a position to utter threats, are you? If you want to know the blunt truth, Pratt and I have come for those diamonds."

"What do you mean?" asked Hemming hoarsely.

"Not deaf, are you?"

"But I haven't got the diamonds! You know as well as I do that Lord Wraxson has them in his safe!" declared Hemming. "The whole game's off, so you'd better not raise your hopes—"

"Look here, Hemming," interrupted Pratt, "those lies won't wash with us! Understand? Do you think we haven't got eyes? Do you think we don't read the newspapers? The diamonds were stolen from Wraxson last night—and you've got them!"

"I didn't steal them! I swear I didn't!" panted Hemming.

I smiled grimly as I heard those words. In a way, the man was telling the truth. I had stolen the diamonds for him. But it was merely a quibble, and Sanderson and Pratt were not deceived.

"I didn't say that you stole them!" sneered Pratt. "I said you've got them! And so you have, Hemming! We don't know who helped you in the job, but the diamonds are in your possession at this moment. We want two-thirds of them."

"You won't get one! I can't give you what I haven't got!" shouted Hemming fiercely. "If my hands were free I'd kick the pair of you outside!"

Sanderson laughed.

"Do you usually kick people with your hands?" he asked pleasantly. "And what about your head, old man? There's a lump on it the size of an egg; and I don't suppose you're feeling very bright—eh? You've got to sit there and tell us where we can find those diamonds. And if you're well behaved you'll get a glass of brandy."

Hemming appeared to choke.

"The diamonds aren't here—and you can threaten all you like!" he shouted thickly.

"It's no good; the fool won't tell us anything!" snapped Pratt. "The best thing we can do is to bind and gag him, and then search the bungalow. The couch will just do right for the job."

"You hounds! You brutes!" gasped Hemming.

But his protest was in vain, and he was lifted on to the couch. I could just see his feet, but nothing more. Pratt and Sanderson lost no time in performing their work. One of them came to the window and ripped down two cords which were used for drawing the curtains. I half expected that the man would pull the curtains to while performing this operation, but he didn't. He was too intently engaged upon his task to think about other matters.

Hemming was evidently bound most securely, for the task occupied not a second less than fifteen minutes. It was done thoroughly, as I could see by his feet. If the rest of Hemming's body was bound as securely, there was no prospect of him breaking free. And the fact that he uttered no word told that he had already been gagged.

Having performed this task, the victors refreshed themselves once more, and lighted cigarettes.

"We ought to have done it at first," remarked Sanderson. "The fool seems to think that we've got no more sense than he has. To begin with, Pratt, we'll search this room, and if we draw blank we'll go over the whole place."

They lost no time in getting to work. In spite of myself, I had been more than once inclined to go to Hemming's rescue. I have a strong dislike of seeing one man being

brutally handled by a superior enemy force, so to speak.

But in this case I deemed it wiser to remain inactive. For one thing, Hemming was not deserving of any pity, and he was certainly not being hurt in any great degree. His captors had merely rendered him helpless—which, to tell the truth, was a distinct advantage from my point of view.

The whole situation, in fact, was eminently satisfactory.

Sanderson and Pratt were very kindly performing the work which I had come here to undertake. They had dealt with Hemming, and were now finding the diamonds for me. My turn would come when the jewels were in their possession. There was no reason why I should act now, for such a move on my part would be premature.

I could scarcely help smiling as I waited outside in the darkness. The situation was not without its humour. After Hemming's assailants had taken all their trouble to secure the diamonds, it would be my task to relieve them of their booty.

This prospect did not fill me with any misgiving. I was confident that the task would be comparatively easy, and I did not object to being saved the trouble of searching personally.

The minutes passed slowly, but still Pratt and Sanderson kept up their labours, ransacking the room with great thoroughness. I began to wonder if Hemming was right, after all. Had he in the course of the day succeeded in disposing of his ill-gotten loot? This hardly seemed possible, but there was just a chance that such was the case. If so, I should be greatly disappointed.

But I need not have worried—in point of fact, I didn't—for a moment later Pratt uttered a sharp exclamation of satisfaction and delight. Sanderson was by his side in a moment.

"Yes, here they are—all the merry collection!" came Pratt's voice, in exultant tones. "What a liar! Swore they weren't here, and look at this!"

The candle was standing on the table, and Pratt approached and laid upon the cloth a small wash-leather bag—which I had good cause to know, and to recognise on the instant.

Pratt tipped it upside down, and a collection of uncut diamonds rolled out upon the tablecloth. They looked like mere pebbles, of no value whatever, and only an expert would be able to judge their exact quality. And even then it would be impossible to value the stones without cutting them.

"Don't look much, do they?" remarked Sanderson.

"They're worth a fortune!" said Pratt, flushed and excited. "I've seen a few uncut stones in my time, and these are genuine enough. Besides, wasn't it reported in the papers that they're worth twenty-five thou? They don't look worth sixpence at present, but you wait until they're cut!"

Pratt shovelled the diamonds back into the bag, closed the opening, and dropped the bag into his pocket. He threw his cigarette-end away, and lit a fresh one. Then he grinned over towards the couch.

"Makes you go green—eh, Hemming?" he remarked. "Well, you shouldn't have been so infernally greedy. We were willing to take two-thirds, and leave you your share, but now you've lost the lot!"

"And serve him right!" said Sanderson grimly. "We'd better clear, old man."

I knew that the men would be emerging from the bungalow within the next minute, and I was rather undecided as to my plan of action. Yet it was highly necessary for me to come to a decision without a moment's delay.

And I did so. I determined to hold the rascals up at the point of my revolver as soon as they emerged from the front door. It would really be a repetition of my performance in Hampstead. For the second time I should seize the diamonds by force. But on this occasion my object was to get the stones in order to return them to their rightful owner. I meant to repair my blunder of the previous night.

And I could do no better than pursue the same tactics. With this object in view, I crept from the window and planted myself immediately behind one of the bushes which grew close to the shallow steps leading to the front door.

I was none too soon, for, glancing round, I saw that the light in the front room had been extinguished. The unfortunate Hemming, apparently, was to be left bound to the couch, and his chances of getting free were quite remote.

I heard the two successful rogues in the hall, and it was evident that they were strangers in the place, for one of them blundered noisily over a chair, and a few violent oaths followed.

Then, as the door opened, I withdrew my revolver and held it ready.

The moment for action had arrived.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Success—and Disaster!

SANDERSON paused on the threshold, and did not emerge.

"What about the sparklers, Pratt?" he asked. "You've got the lot, you know. We ought to divide them."

"Do you think I shall run off?" snapped Pratt.

"No; but we might as well come to an understanding—"

"Don't be so confoundedly impatient," said the other, interrupting for the second time. "The houseboat is only a few hundred yards away, and we shall be absolutely private there. Wait until we get aboard."

"Oh, all right," said Sanderson.

They prepared to come out, and I remained still for about one second. I had already changed my plans. It would be far better, I concluded, to wait until these men were in the confined quarters of the houseboat they referred to. There would be much less chance of their making a dash for freedom, and much more security for myself. It would be easy to hold them up from the doorway, and make them obey my orders.

But there was Pedro to consider. He was just outside the gate, lying quiet. He would be there when Pratt and Sanderson emerged from the garden, and his presence would at once arouse their suspicions.

I was on the point of going back to my original plan when Pratt spoke.

"Wait a minute," he said. "I've forgotten the keys; they're on the table."

"We don't want them," objected the other. "The lock will click to."

"Yes; but we might want to get in again. I'd better fetch them," said Pratt. "You've got some matches, haven't you?"

They both went back along the short hall, Sanderson striking a match as they entered the doorway of the front room. This was my opportunity. I quietly and swiftly left my place of concealment and made for the gate. Pedro was waiting there, patiently and obediently.

"Good old boy!" I breathed. "Come on!"

I hurried round the angle of the fence, and crouched down there, in complete concealment. Pedro stood just in front of me, eager and alert.

"There's nothing doing just yet, Pedro," I whispered. "Lie quiet, old fellow."

He understood perfectly, and I waited for the pair of rascals to emerge. They did so almost at once, and closed the door behind them. They strode down the path, and passed out of the gateway.

"Quiet as the grave," remarked Sanderson, with satisfaction. "Couldn't have a better spot for this job, Pratt. But we'd better not stay on the houseboat too long. I think we ought to clear out of the district to-night."

"Nervous, eh?" laughed Pratt. "My dear man, we're safe as houses!"

I wasn't quite so sure of that, but I did not think it necessary to enlighten the confident Pratt. His enlightenment would come soon enough, in any case. He and his companion strode away into the darkness.

In a moment I was on my feet, and, with Pedro in the rear, I stole after the men. If Pratt had spoken truthfully—and there was no reason for me to doubt the statement—the houseboat was only a few hundred yards away.

And this proved to be the case.

Out of the darkness loomed a squat, ugly building, which seemed to be standing in a meadow, just beyond a hedge. But closer investigation revealed the fact that the houseboat—a very old, ramshackle affair—was moored in a quiet backwater of the river.

It was fairly close to the bank, but not close enough for a man to jump on board. A small gangway—actually a plank—led across, and Pratt and Sanderson negotiated this gingerly. They disappeared into the doorway of the deck-room, and a match was struck.

Standing on the bank, I saw Pratt light an oil-lamp. As the flame increased I noted



The man emerged from the hotel carrying the walking-stick. Sexton Blako noted with satisfaction that he fingered the ferrule carefully. (See page 6.)

that the apartment was very small, that it had only one doorway, and that a small table occupied the centre of the room. Both men took seats on that side of the table which was opposite the doorway, so that they faced it.

Nothing could have been better for my purpose. But I was not permitted to see anything further, for Pratt suddenly rose to his feet, and drew a heavy cloth completely over the window, shutting out all the light.

"I was expecting that," I murmured. "Well, it doesn't much matter in this case. There is nothing to be gained by delay."

It was my intention to act at once, before the diamonds were divided—before they were removed from the bag, in fact.

"Lie down, Pedro!" I ordered. "You've got to stay here, old boy."

Pedro looked up at me in a reproachful kind of way, and lay down. He evidently considered that he was being left very much out in the cold. I had brought him on the offchance that he might be needed. So far, however, there had been nothing for him to do, but there was no telling how events would shape themselves.

I smiled grimly as I pulled a silk handkerchief from my pocket, and bound it round the lower portion of my face. There was no reason for me to take the precaution, but I thought that it would add to the effect, and produce more panic.

Then, grasping my revolver firmly, I stepped upon the gangway and crossed to the untidy deck. Pratt and Sanderson, no doubt, had hired this houseboat for the express purpose of watching Hemming, whom I judged to be a former confederate of theirs.

The plank sagged as I walked across, and I felt that it was in a rotten condition. Immediately below, the black water was choked with reeds and other growths. The water itself was absolutely stagnant.

It was highly necessary for me to be cautious, for my plan would be ruined if Sanderson and Pratt received an inkling of my object at this stage of the proceedings.

I reached the door, and opened it abruptly. The situation was quite dramatic. The two men were so startled that they sat in their chairs, staring at me almost dazedly. On the table before them lay the bag of diamonds, and Pratt had just been in the act of opening it.

The lamp stood to the left, and did not interfere with my view. It was in an ideal position, for I could see the thieves clearly, and they could see me. The table intervened, so there was no prospect of a sudden attack on their part. They were completely at my mercy.

"Who—who—" began Pratt huskily.

"Hands up, both of you!" I said, in a harsh voice. "Quickly, you scum!"

My revolver wavered from one to the other, and they deemed it wise to obey my order. That revolver looked dangerous. Both men were pale and startled, and there was an evil glitter in Pratt's eyes. Sanderson seemed scared out of his wits, and he was trembling visibly.

"That's better!" I said, as their hands were upraised. "Push that bag over towards this edge of the table!"

"You—you infernal thief!" snarled Pratt savagely.

He grasped the bag, and held it tightly. I knew well enough that he rebelled at the thought of tamely handing me the diamonds, and he was ready to risk his skin to outwit me.

"Now then; over with it!" I snapped, bending forward aggressively. "This place is very quiet, and a shot wouldn't be heard by anybody save ourselves. I'm not bluffing, Mr. Pratt!"

He glared at me fiercely, but said nothing. "Revolver bullets are cheap," I went on. "I don't mind losing one; but I fancy you would mind receiving it, my friend. I am in a hurry. Over with that bag, hang you, or I'll shoot!"

The final sentence I uttered in harsh, biting tones. Pratt started, and stared feverishly at my revolver. Sanderson gave a gulp, and clutched at his companion's arm.

"Hand it over, you fool!" he muttered.

"Do you want to be shot?"

Pratt swore violently, and threw the bag over towards me. It slid across the table, and stopped just against the edge. I picked it up at once, and held it lightly in my left hand.

"I am much obliged," I said pleasantly.

My task was completed—far more easily than I had dared to hope—and it only now remained for me to make my retreat. This presented no difficulty, for outside all was pitchy dark, and I should be able to slip away in a few moments.

The diamonds were in my possession for the second time; but when I parted with them

again it would be to hand them over to Lord Wraxson. I should then feel that I had made amends for my blunder.

But misfortune stepped in in a curious way. "I wish you good-evening, gentlemen!" I said mockingly.

As I spoke I took a step backwards, towards the door immediately in my rear. It was highly necessary to keep Pratt and Sanderson covered until I made my exit. But my foot descended upon something soft and yielding.

There was a frightful squeal, which I instantly recognised. I had trodden on a cat! The animal, no doubt, had made its home on the houseboat—or it may have been a stray—and it had entered by the door.

At all events, the cat's presence there was disastrous for me. I lost my equilibrium, and staggered sideways. My shoulder hit against the doorpost, and I nearly collapsed. Pratt was on his feet in a second.

"Now's our chance!" he shouted thickly. "On him, man!"

Instinctively, I knew that I was in danger of being overpowered. And as I vainly attempted to recover my balance I thought of the diamonds. The washleather bag was still clutched in my left hand, and the door was wide open behind me.

I acted on the spur of the moment.

Even as Pratt reached my side I flung my arm out through the doorway. The bag of diamonds went flying out into the blackness of the night—on to the grassy bank, I imagined. At all events, they were safely out of the way for the moment. Later on, if I succeeded in getting the better of these men, I could easily recover the loot.

But the whole situation was changed.

Pratt was determined, and he grabbed me fiercely as I succeeded in recovering my balance. The wretched cat which had caused the catastrophe—an unintentional pun, for which I crave forgiveness—had scuttled away under the table, spitting and snarling.

"Lend a hand, Sanderson, you fool!" gasped Pratt.

He made a fierce lunge at my right arm, and succeeded in grasping my wrist. The next moment we were struggling furiously, Pratt endeavouring to obtain the revolver, while I strove to break away from him.

But for Sanderson, I should have succeeded in a few moments. But Pratt's companion plucked up his courage when he saw that I was busily engaged. He blundered round the table, trembling with excitement, and seized an old fishing-rod, which stood propped against the wall.

The next second the rod whirled through the air, and struck me across the mouth—a most cowardly blow. My lip was cut, and two front teeth slightly loosened, and the pain was considerable.

Just for a second the vigour of my attack was relaxed, and Pratt succeeded in hooking his foot round my right heel. I was tripped, and found it impossible to save myself in that confined space.

My head thudded against the boards as I floundered down. Pratt and Sanderson were upon me at once, and further resistance was out of the question. But Pratt was taking no chances.

"Some of that rope—quick!" he panted.

"Anything'll do!"

In less than three minutes I was bound hand and foot—roughly, but effectively. Not until then did Pratt take a breathing space. He raised himself from my prostrate form, and stood over me, panting heavily.

"I don't know who the thunder you are, but your little game's spoilt!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "You put up a decent fight, I'll admit, and you'd have got away but for that cat. I'll feed the little brute on milk for the rest of its life!"

I was too infuriated to give any answer—even if I had felt so inclined. When success had been so near it was exceedingly bitter to realise that I was now under dog. Yet I couldn't blame myself for what had occurred.

Under no circumstances could I have been prepared for the event which had caused the disaster. The cat had stolen in silently, and when I stepped backwards I hadn't a thought of any misadventure. Anybody who has trodden upon a cat will know what an upsetting effect it has upon one's balance.

However, the misfortune had occurred, and there was no sense in being angry. I was glad that I had succeeded in throwing the diamonds out, for it would take my captors some time to find them—possibly hours, if the bag had fallen amongst the reeds.

And there was Pedro on the bank. I could not expect too much of the old dog, and if I called him now he would probably share my fate. Pedro is not a ferocious beast, and

these men could easily deal with him. Some people imagine that bloodhounds are exceedingly fierce brutes, but this is a mistake. They are really nothing of the kind, and seldom attack human beings.

I finally decided to leave Pedro where he was, and to see what would happen. While being bound I had made a final attempt to get free, but the task had been impossible. In a large open space I might have succeeded, but not in a cramped position with a wall on one side and a table on the other, so that I could scarcely shift.

"What about that revolver?" asked Sanderson nervously. "You'll kick it in a minute, Pratt!"

"You seem to be confoundedly nervous!" snapped the other man, seizing the revolver and stuffing it into his pocket. "What are we going to do with this fellow? That's the question."

"Can't we take him into the other room?"

"I don't fancy having the brute here!" said Pratt savagely. "I'll tell you what—we'll carry him to that deserted old boathouse just along the bank. He'll be secure there, and can yell until the middle of next week without attracting any attention."

"And what then?" asked Sanderson.

"Why, we've got to search for those diamonds!" snapped Pratt. "They're outside somewhere. Didn't you see how he flung them out of the doorway? I expect we shall find 'em on the bank somewhere."

"Hadn't we better look for 'em now?"

"No. Let's get rid of this skunk first."

I was half afraid that the rascals would search me and take all my valuables. And there was quite a considerable amount of money on me, to say nothing of my gold watch and chain and other costly articles. But Pratt and Sanderson were so anxious in regard to the diamonds that they didn't think it worth while to plunder me. Their main object was to get me out of the way.

I maintained a complete silence, having no desire to converse. Truth to tell, I was beginning to think that these fellows would be careless, and that I should be able to escape as soon as they turned their backs.

A deserted boathouse did not sound like a very secure prison.

I was roughly grasped and dragged out on to the deck. It is really surprising that the gangway plank did not collapse as I was carried across. I certainly expected it to do so, for it sagged and groaned and creaked in the most disconcerting fashion.

However, we got across safely. And then, still being dragged, I was conveyed along the bank for some little distance, at length finding myself in front of a very low building, almost invisible behind a clump of willows.

The door was secured on the outside with a couple of rusty bolts and a decrepit padlock which was apparently without a key. Pratt wrenched it off and dragged the bolts back.

I was carried inside and flung roughly down.

"Shut that door," panted Pratt, "and strike a match!"

The door creaked to, and Sanderson struck a match, applying it to a candle-end which Pratt produced from his pocket, having evidently brought it with him from the houseboat.

The wick was short, and the light was a mere glimmer. It was sufficient, nevertheless, to show me that the little building was by no means so ramshackle as I had hoped. The walls were of brick, and quite solid; and the door, for all its age, was stout and heavy. The only satisfactory thing about it was that a space of six or seven inches lay between the bottom of the door and the ground. The opening was quite considerable.

"Those chains will come in handy," remarked Pratt, nodding to the end wall.

And then I saw that there were several rusty chains fixed to stout iron rings. Some very cautious individual had evidently used them in the past for securing boats, probably with padlocks, in order to prevent them being stolen.

And there was something else which didn't please me in the least. A coil of thick rope was hanging from a hook on the wall, and Pratt took this down. I was then bound

more securely, the ropes being threaded through the links of the chain in such a manner that escape for me was practically out of the question.

"There! I reckon he'll do!" said Pratt at last. "We'll clear off now, and fetch those diamonds. Then we'll scoot, Sanderson; we'll slide right off the landscape."

"And the best thing, too!" growled the other man.

Pratt turned to me as he was about to blow the candle out.

"I don't know when you'll be found, but if you keep up a continual yelling all day tomorrow you might be heard by somebody," he said. "It's just about ten o'clock now, and I hope you'll have a quiet night."

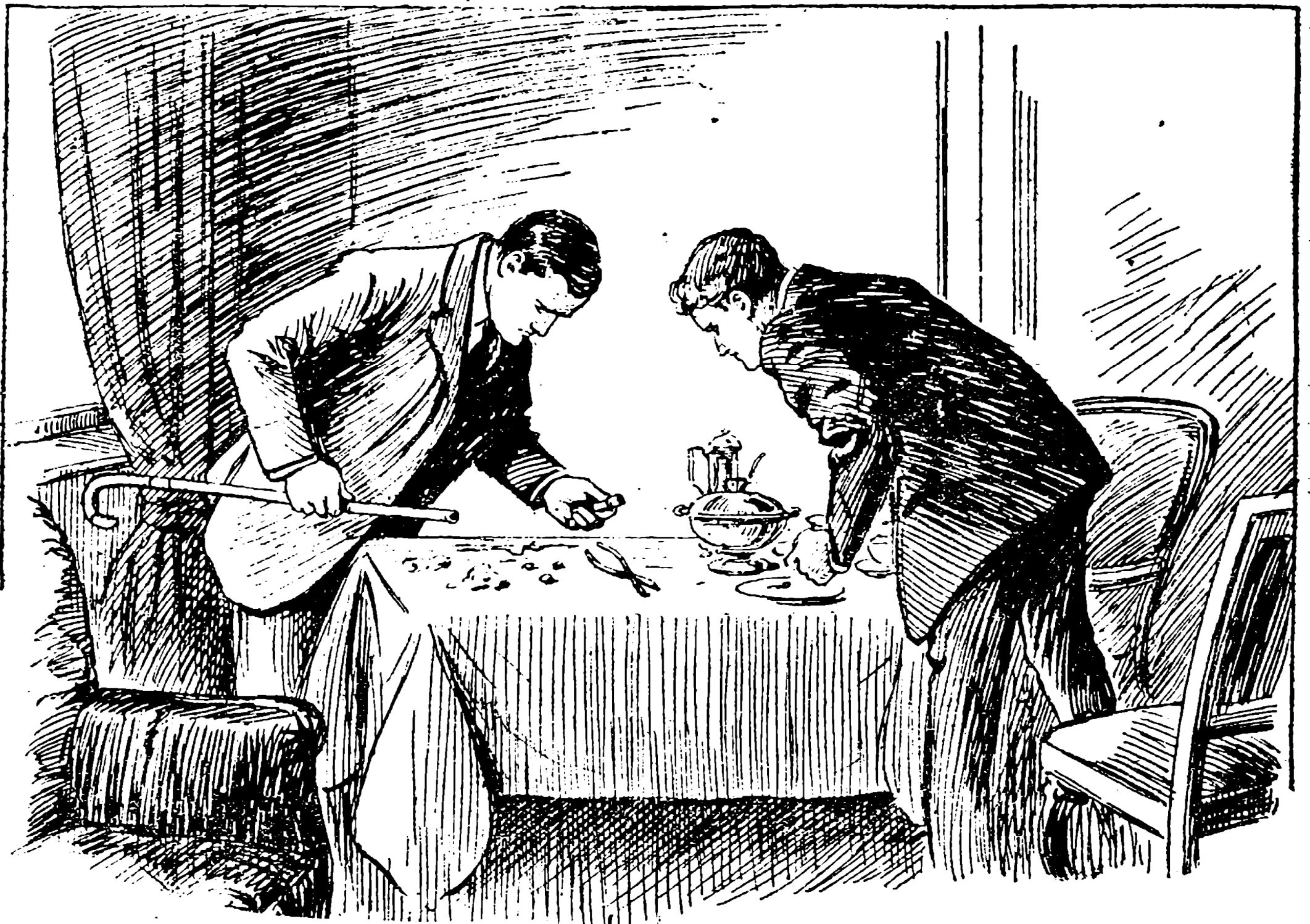
I made no reply, and Pratt laughed shortly and blew the candle out. Then he and his companion passed outside, and the door was closed, the bolts being shot and the padlock secured. Not that this really mattered, for there was no prospect of my ever reaching the door.

"Well, old man, you've got yourself into a frightful mess this time!" I murmured, somewhat bitterly. "And all because of that brute of a cat. A cat! By James, what a thought!"

Five minutes' hard work convinced me that escape was impossible. My arms, fortunately, were not bound to my sides, and I was able to move them about fairly freely. But as for untying my ropes, this was out of the question. I couldn't bend forward and reach my ankles, or even my knees, owing to the chains. For my shoulders were secured to one chain, and my feet to another, and I was compelled to lie full-length in a shockingly uncomfortable position.

And I pictured to myself Pratt and Sanderson searching for the diamonds and finding them. They would make themselves scarce without delay, of course, and there would be little hope of getting on their track.

But there was Pedro—I had been forgetting him. If only I could obtain my freedom I could set Pedro on the trail at once, and he would be able to track the rascals with the greatest ease. The scent would probably end at a railway-station or on a tramway route.



With the help of the pliers Sexton Blake soon screwed off the ferrule of the walking-stick. The latter was hollow, and a number of diamonds shot out on to the table. (See page 5.)

But careful inquiries after that would possibly lead to substantial results.

Where was Pedro? I confess that I was becoming somewhat anxious about him. He had not been in evidence when I had been conveyed across the plank from the house-boat. Had the old dog been watching all the time?

Pedro has many curious ways, and he's quite a cunning old rascal. He was quite capable of remaining in the background, inactive. I had told him to lie quiet until further orders, and it seemed as though he had literally obeyed.

While I was pondering thus I suddenly became aware of a familiar sound, and I listened intently. It was the sound of sniffing, and I recognised that particular sniff immediately.

"Pedro—Pedro, old boy!" I said softly.

A low whine came from the other side of the door, and then followed much scraping and grunting and scrambling. My hopes were raised at once. Pedro had arrived, having evidently followed my trail, and the space beneath the door was sufficiently large to enable him to crawl through.

A triumphant grunt came to my ears, followed by a pattering of feet, and Pedro proceeded to do his utmost to wash my face. He was very joyous, and I need not add that my own feelings were somewhat akin to his.

For the coming of Pedro suggested possibilities.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Pedro Does His Duty.

"CONFOUND you, Pedro! Keep your sloppy tongue to yourself!" I exclaimed, jerking my head out of his way. "All right, old fellow; don't get excited! I don't know where you've been all this time, but you might be useful now."

For a thought had occurred to me. It was somewhat too optimistic, I imagined, but it was worth trying. Pedro's instinct was wonderful, and I meant to give it a good testing on this occasion.

In short, it was my intention to send him home. This was certainly a tall order, and I strongly doubted whether he would ever reach Baker Street. But there was just a faint chance that he would. The instinct of a dog is something more than mere human beings can readily understand.

Although my hands were bound, I found it possible to take a pencil from my waistcoat pocket—after much trouble. I also succeeded in fishing one of my cards out, and I scrawled upon it the brief message:

"Hampton Court—River Hotel—Pedro will lead from there. Come at once. Need help."

In the darkness it was quite possible that I had written one line of words upon another, although I had done my best to avoid this. However, in my extremely hampered position, I couldn't be at all sure that the message would even be decipherable.

With great difficulty I managed to secure the card in the buckle of Pedro's collar, piercing it with the pin of the buckle so that it couldn't possibly work loose during the journey.

And my scheme, although so problematical, was not quite so wild as it would first appear. Pedro would probably never reach Baker Street—I hardly expected that he would—but he would undoubtedly be seen by any number of policemen on his wanderings, and one of these worthy individuals would probably consider it his duty to take possession of Pedro, and hustle him off to the nearest station.

The card, of course, would then be found. My name was upon it, and the message was just as valuable to the police as it would be to Tinker. They would lose no time in coming to my assistance. It was even possible that Pedro would be seized in the Hampton Court district itself, and my rescue would be then much sooner.

At all events, the plan would succeed one way or the other. I was quite convinced of that.

"Now, Pedro, you've got to obey my orders," I said, speaking to him tensely. "Home, boy—home as quickly as you can!"

Pedro whined slightly, and I felt him quivering.

"Home, Pedro!" I repeated. "Go home, old fellow!"

He gave one more whine, and then trotted across to the door. A quick scramble, and then complete silence. He had gone, and there was nothing for me to do but to await his return, whenever that would be. I was ex-

U. J.—No. 796.

tremely pleased, however, that I had brought him out with me, for he was proving very useful.

His sagacity was of the highest order, as I had proved on many occasions, and my hopes ran high. Pedro wouldn't fail me. I never even considered the possibility. Pedro would bring help one way or another.

And now, since there is nothing of further interest to recount regarding my own adventures in the old boathouse, it will be just as well for me to transfer the scene to another quarter, for this record of events will then be far easier to follow in its correct sequence.

This fresh scene is Baker Street—my own residence. At half-past eleven, almost to the minute, Mrs. Bardell was preparing to retire for the night. My housekeeper was rather later than usual, having entertained a lady friend in her own quarters.

That friend having now been disposed of, Mrs. Bardell was intent upon seeking the repose of her couch. She was walking along the basement passage—as she told me afterwards, with many interesting details—when she heard a vigorous scratching and scraping at the area door.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Mrs. Bardell. "What can that be?"

Her first thought was that several cats of the neighbourhood had elected to join in a free fight in the area. But the absence of ear-splitting howls pointed to the fact that this was not the case.

The scratching and scraping continued; and then came a whine. Mrs. Bardell, very startled, had been on the point of fetching one of the maidservants, who had already retired. But that whine settled the question.

"Why, if it isn't that Pedro!" said Mrs. Bardell, with great relief.

She hastened to the area door, unlocked it, and unbolted it. The very instant she turned the handle the door was thrust violently into her face, and Pedro bounded in.

There was something unusual about this, as Mrs. Bardell could see at a glance. Pedro was excited. Moreover, he had been running hard, for he was in a wet perspiration, was panting heavily, and his tongue lolled out, as it does when the old dog is in the tropics.

"Why, whatever's the matter with you, Pedro?" demanded Mrs. Bardell, looking at him wonderingly. "And where's your master—where's Mr. Blake?"

The housekeeper knew that Pedro had gone out with me comparatively early in the evening, and for him to return alone, and in this condition, was something which had never occurred before.

Mrs. Bardell didn't know what to do for a moment or two. Tinker was out, and he would probably not return till midnight, or after. He was over at Gray's Inn Road, with Nelson Lee, as Mrs. Bardell knew.

And, seeing that something was decidedly wrong, the worthy woman came to a most sensible decision. She resolved to go upstairs, and to telephone to Nelson Lee's address without delay. She felt that this was a matter beyond her powers, and that Tinker ought to attend to it.

Accordingly, she lost no time in getting to the telephone. A few minutes of flustered delay was occasioned while she was searching for the required number in the telephone book. Pedro, meanwhile, was staking about in a most unsettled condition.

Mrs. Bardell disliked telephones exceedingly, for she generally got muddled. After attempting to make herself heard at the Exchange by speaking into the transmitter without releasing the receiver from its hook, she remembered that most essential detail.

She then succeeded in giving the number, although she made the further mistake of speaking into the receiver. Mrs. Bardell was undoubtedly very flustered on this occasion, for she was alarmed as well as excited.

With great relief she managed to get things right at last, and then heard a voice at the other end of the wire.

"Who is that?" came the voice. "Hallo, hallo! Can't you answer?"

"Is that Mr. Tinker?" gasped Mrs. Bardell.

"No, although Tinker is here," came the reply. "My name is Lee."

"Oh, Mr. Lee, will you please tell Mr. Tinker to come at once?" said Mrs. Bardell hurriedly. "Pedro's most amazingly excited, sir, an' I don't know what can have happened to him. Please tell Mr. Tinker to come."

"I believe I am talking to Mrs. Bardell, am I not?" asked Lee.

"Yes, sir; that's right—"

"Hold the line for just a moment."

Mrs. Bardell didn't know what it meant, but she clung to the instrument almost despairingly. And then Tinker's welcome voice made itself heard.

"Hallo, Mrs. Bardell, what's the matter?" it came over the wires. "Has the gov'nor turned up yet?"

"No, sir; and I'm awfully worried," said Mrs. Bardell. "Pedro's just come home, Mr. Tinker, an' he seems right queer. He's simply soaking with perspire, an' he must have been running for miles! An' he's ever so excited. Please come home at once, sir, because I don't know what to do."

"All right!" said Tinker promptly. "I'll be there as quickly as possible, Mrs. Bardell."

At the other end of the line Tinker hung up the receiver, and gazed at Nelson Lee and Nipper with some show of alarm in his eyes. They were all in Lee's consulting-room at Gray's Inn Road, and Tinker, in point of fact, had been getting ready to take his departure. Nelson Lee and Nipper were only on a flying visit to London for a change, being really located at St. Frank's College at this period.

"Well, it's jolly queer, Mr. Lee," said Tinker. "What the dickens can be up? Mrs. Bardell doesn't usually get in a such a stew."

"The best thing is to hurry home with all speed!" replied Nelson Lee briskly. "You can have the loan of my ear if you like. In fact, Nipper and I might as well drive you to Baker Street. It will be a little blow for us before going to bed."

"Oh, good!" said Tinker. "Thanks awfully, Mr. Lee!"

"Rats!" grinned Nipper. "The gov'nor's curious, my son. He wants to find out what all the excitement's about. I expect it'll be a storm in a teacup; but that doesn't matter. I'm game for any old thing."

"It's rummy that Pedro should turn up alone," remarked Tinker thoughtfully. "Mrs. Bardell said that Pedro's dripping with perspiration, and that he must have been running for miles. And he seems to be unusually excited."

"It is just possible," said Nelson Lee, "that your master has sent him home with some message, Tinker. Appearances would point that way, at all events. Do you know what work Mr. Blake has been engaged upon to-night?"

"Not exactly, sir," said Tinker. "I came over here before the gov'nor completed his plans, but I expect he's been doing something in connection with those diamonds belonging to Lord Wraxson. You know I told you about them."

"Well, let's get off!" said Nelson Lee briskly.

Nipper had already been busy with the telephone, communicating with the near-by garage where Nelson Lee's car was kept. By the time the trio reached the pavement the car was just being driven down Gray's Inn Road, in charge of a mechanic.

Two minutes later Nelson Lee was at the wheel, and the little party was whizzing towards Baker Street. The journey was completed rapidly, but it was after midnight when Baker Street was reached.

Mrs. Bardell, as Tinker had half-expected, was waiting on the doorstep, anxiously scanning the road.

"What's wrong, Mrs. Bardell?" asked Tinker quickly.

"Which I don't know, Mr. Tinker," declared the housekeeper. "I'm rare pleased to see you, sir, that I am! An' you, too, Mr. Lee! I'm mortal afraid that something's happened to the master."

"You mustn't be alarmed," said Tinker reassuringly. "The gov'nor will turn up safe and sound, and there may not be much in the affair at all. Where's Pedro, by the way?"

"I locked him in the consulting-room, sir," replied Mrs. Bardell. "He was that restless and fidgety that I couldn't do nothing with him, so I took him upstairs and shut him up. I was afraid he'd take cold, waiting about in this raw air, an' him in such a state of perspire."

Tinker hurried indoors, followed by Nelson Lee and Nipper. Mrs. Bardell brought out the rear, and hovered in the corridor outside the consulting-room, being most anxious to hear what was afoot, but not caring to intrude.

Pedro gave a bay of joy as Tinker entered the consulting-room and switched the lights on. In a moment Pedro planked his front paws against Tinker's chest, and nearly sent him staggering backwards.

"Whoa! Hold on!" exclaimed Tinker.

"That's all right, old boy. What the dickens

is the matter with you? I say, you must have been running a bit, Pedro! Just look at his legs, sir!"

Nelson Lee nodded. "It is quite evident, Tinker, that Pedro has come from a considerable distance," he said keenly. "He is by no means exhausted, but thoroughly tired. I wonder if Mrs. Bardell has been thoughtful enough to give him a drink?"

"Oh, yes, sir!" came the housekeeper's voice from the doorway. "I offered him milk, but he wouldn't touch it, although he drank ever such a lot of cold water! An' as for food, he turned his nose right up!"

"Excitement, I expect," commented Nipper.

"Well, I hardly know what to suggest," said Nelson Lee slowly. "We can't very well go out—"

"Why, what's that on his collar, sir?" exclaimed Tinker suddenly.

"Your eyes are sharper than mine, Tinker," said Nelson Lee, bending down and holding Pedro, while Tinker rapidly unfastened his collar. "It appears to be a visiting-card, considerably chafed and worn, too."

The card was extricated, and by this time Tinker and Nipper were in a fine state of excitement, although Nelson Lee remained stonily calm. Mrs. Bardell still hovered in the doorway, on tenterhooks.

"What is it, sir?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"It is one of Mr. Blake's cards," replied Lee. "Perhaps you would care to examine it, Tinker?"

"No; you read it, sir."

"H'm! This writing on the back was undoubtedly written in the dark," said Lee grimly. "It is not only atrociously scrawled, but hinting that Blake's hands were hampered in some way, but one line of writing is superimposed over two others. Can we decipher the message? That's the point."

"I can, sir," said Tinker, craning over. "It's the gov'nor's writing all right, although it looks so spidery. Yes; there you are! Hampton Court—River Hotel—Pedro will lead—lead—What's the next?"

"Pedro will lead from there." I think that's it," said Nelson Lee. "The other words are almost invisible, owing to the chafing of Pedro's collar. But I can distinctly make out 'need help' at the end. Ah, I've got it!" he added suddenly. "Those faint words are 'come at once.'"

Tinker looked alarmed.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated. "The gov'nor seems to be in a tight corner of some sort, sir. What's the full message? 'Hampton Court—River Hotel—Pedro will lead from there—come at once—need help.' That's it!"

"Well, nothing could be plainer, could it?" said Nelson Lee. "Your master, Tinker, wants us to hurry to the River Hotel, Hampton Court. Pedro will pick up the trail from that spot. Blake evidently doesn't know exactly where he is situated, or he would have given more precise directions."

"Can—can you come with me, sir?" asked Tinker eagerly. "If I could only have your car, we'd get to Hampton Court in no time and—"

"My dear lad, I have already decided that Nipper and I shall go with you," interrupted Nelson Lee crisply. "In an emergency like this we could scarcely act in any other way. Your master is in need of urgent help."

"We'll start without a second's delay," declared Tinker. "Oh, my goodness! Why does the gov'nor go off without me, and get himself into a hole?"

Nipper was staring at Pedro.

"I'm blessed if I can understand it!" he exclaimed. "Do you mean to tell me that Pedro's found his way home—all this distance—from Hampton Court? Why, it's not possible."

"It is not only possible, young 'un, but an absolute fact," said Lee. "Pedro is a brainy animal, as we have reason to know, but it was his instinct which served him so well on this occasion. I fancy, however, that Blake really sent Pedro out in the hope that some police-officer would get hold of him. Pedro, however, did much better."

Further conversation would have been a waste of time, and the trio, having assured Mrs. Bardell that everything would turn out all right, hastened down to the motor-car with the excited Pedro in front of them.

Nelson Lee took the wheel, and Nipper and Tinker seated themselves in the tonneau, with Pedro between them. The old dog was now looking quite satisfied, for he evidently knew that measures were being taken of a satisfactory character.

The journey was a swift one. The hour

being late, the roads through London were practically empty and deserted. Nelson Lee drove the car at a rate of speed considerably higher than the regulations permitted.

However, they were not hailed by any officious constable, and finally arrived at the River Hotel without incident. Pedro leapt down from his seat, and commenced hurrying down the dark road with a low whine of excitement. He evidently knew what he was up to, and paused reluctantly when he found that nobody was following.

Tinker ran after the faithful bloodhound. "Just a minute, old man," he said. "We'll soon be off."

But Nelson Lee could hardly leave the car standing out in the road, neither could it be taken with them, for there was no telling where they would have to go. The landlord of the hotel, however, was not yet in bed, and he readily agreed to have the car housed in his garage.

This operation took about five minutes, and then the chase continued. Pedro was in no doubt as to his direction, and he led the way eagerly. Tinker had found it necessary to fix a leash to Pedro's collar, and the party proceeded almost at the double along the deserted road.

The way led down several quiet thoroughfares, and then across a piece of waste land, or a meadow, towards the river. The party went straight past Hemming's bungalow, Pedro never pausing for a moment.

They also passed the ancient houseboat, which was apparently deserted, and then came within view of my prison. I heard Tinker's voice while he was some little way off, and then recognised the tones of Nelson Lee.

"Splendid!" I thought. "Upon my soul! Pedro must have got home, after all! I hardly anticipated such good fortune."

It was interesting to know that Nelson Lee had come with Tinker, and I knew that my release would now be only a matter of minutes. I had made several attempts to get free from my bonds during the interval of Pedro's absence, but had only succeeded in working my hands slightly loose—at the cost of grazed wrists.

Pedro was the first in, as I had anticipated, being too impatient to wait until the door was unbolting. He bounded over to me with a bay of delight.

"Good old boy—you've done well!" I exclaimed heartily.

"Guv'nor!" shouted Tinker from outside.

"All right, young 'un, you needn't have such a note of alarm in your voice," I reassured him. "You find me in a most unfortunate position, but the situation is now practically restored—thanks to Pedro."

The door was spring open, and two electric torches blazed out upon me. Tinker came running forward with a shout of consternation, Nelson Lee caught his breath in sharply, and Nipper whistled.

"What the dickens has happened, gov'nor?" gasped Tinker.

"Such a question is scarcely necessary, my lad," I said grimly. "As you observe, I have managed to conduct my inquiries this evening in such a way that I finally got myself into this preposterous fix."

"I think I detect a certain note of bitterness in your voice, old man," said Nelson Lee. "How are you? I can't very well shake hands at the moment, but I hope to have that pleasure almost at once."

Three knives were brought out simultaneously, and my rescuers cut through my bonds in a dozen places. With their assistance I managed to get to my feet, and although the "pins and needles" sensation was excruciating for some few minutes, I smiled with pleasure.

"Well, I suppose I must thank you all equally," I said, stamping about.

"By no means," declared Lee. "You must thank Pedro. He was the carrier of your message, and without him we should have been helpless. The old dog has worked wonders, Blake."

I was soon put in possession of the facts, and my admiration for Pedro was considerable—although I'm afraid I neglected him at the moment. He had done his duty, and had flopped himself down with the utmost content.

"But we want to know what you've been doing, gov'nor!" said Tinker eagerly.

"It is rather a curious story, but I will tell it as briefly as possible," I replied. "By the way, Lee, do you know anything about those Zamkala diamonds?"

"Tinker has told me a few facts concerning some diamonds belonging to Lord Wraxson, but I did not know they were called the Zamkala diamonds," replied Lee.

Within five minutes my rescuers were in possession of the main facts of the case. I briefly described how I had shadowed Hemming, how I had obtained the diamonds from Pratt and Sanderson, and how that infernal cat had upset me in more ways than one.

"A pure misfortune, Blake," said Nelson Lee, at length. "You had the most atrocious luck. It must have been galling to submit to defeat when victory was so near, just because of a stray cat."

I nodded.

"I am afraid that Pratt and Sanderson have cleared off by this time," I said. "For some time I heard them searching about amongst the grass—their voices came to me faintly, but audible. They must have found that bag of diamonds, and cleared off. I suppose you saw no sign of life on the houseboat as you passed?"

"We saw nothing, gov'nor," said Tinker.

"Well, I think we had better search that houseboat as a preliminary move," I went on. "We might possibly be able to find some clue which will serve to help us. If not, other methods must be adopted."

By this time the circulation of my blood was in full working order once more. I only felt slightly stiff in my joints. My lip was swollen, and my front teeth ached, but this was merely a detail.

Arriving at the houseboat we crossed the plank, and at once entered the room where the struggle had taken place. We used our electric torches as a means of illumination, and made a quick but thorough search.

Tinker and Nipper, meanwhile, explored the other portions of the vessel. After ten minutes we collected together on the deck and compared notes. There was nothing on the houseboat of any value as a clue. But one point was quite clear. Pratt and Sanderson had decamped.

"It's no good searching on the bank for those diamonds, I suppose?" suggested Tinker.

"Not a bit of good," I replied promptly. "The diamonds have gone, or Pratt and Sanderson would not be gone. Besides, the bag could not have been far off, and it must have been found with comparatively little trouble."

"Then what's the next move, gov'nor?"

"The next move, Tinker, will be to interview Mr. Hemming at the bungalow," I said grimly. "He, I have no doubt, is still in a somewhat similar position to that in which you found me. We must release him and hear what he has to say."

"But why not go straight after those other two rotters, sir?" suggested Nipper.

"Because there is a distinct chance that Hemming will be able to give us some valuable information," I answered. "He knows Pratt and Sanderson, and there is more than a probability that Hemming will be in a position to name some possible haunt in London. In that way we shall save much time. My original idea was to put Pedro on the track of Pratt and Sanderson, but I think it would be far wiser to deal with Hemming first. If we draw a blank we can easily try the other scheme on. The trail will be just as fresh."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Quite a good plan, Blake!" he said. "But there is no need for us all to go to the bungalow, surely? You and Tinker will be quite capable of dealing with Hemming."

"Why, you're not thinking of going on, sir?" asked Nipper indignantly.

"Of course not!" laughed Lee. "But it would be an act of wisdom, perhaps, to divide our forces. Nipper and I will remain here, Blake, and keep an eye on this houseboat. It is on the cards that your two worthy friends will return, although not probable. I suggest being on the safe side, however."

"Perhaps it would be just as well," I agreed. "Thanks, Lee! Tinker and I will hurry off at once, and will return for you as soon as we have dealt with Hemming. I don't suppose we shall be very long."

And, without any further waste of time, Tinker and I left our friendly rivals and hastened away towards the bungalow, Pedro at our heels.

What was to be the next move in the game?

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.
What Hemming Had to Tell.

Hemming's bungalow was looking very dark and deserted as we turned in at the gateway. I had already resolved to go straight down to the rear and force an entrance by means of a back window.

The front-door key was in Pratt's possession, and we couldn't very well enter by that means. A rear window, however, would present no difficulties. A bungalow of this type was not exactly secure.

My idea proved to be correct. A small lean-to scullery or kitchen projected out from the main structure, and the window of this was absurdly insecure. I had been prepared to smash the glass, but this was not necessary.

The preposterous catch was pushed back within a minute, and the window opened. Tinker scrambled through first, and I followed. Pedro, having received no orders to stay outside, leapt in after us.

"Mouldy little place!" said Tinker disparagingly, flashing his light round the untidy kitchen.

"You might as well light that candle, Tinker," I said, indicating a candle which was fixed in a cheap painted holder, with a box of matches lying alongside. "There's no need for us to exhaust our batteries."

Tinker did as I bid, and then we pocketed our torches, and I seized the candlestick. Carrying this, we proceeded along the hall until we arrived at the door of the front room. We entered, and one glance was sufficient.

Hemming was still on the sofa, bound tightly and utterly helpless. He had managed to work his gag off, and he was glaring in our direction.

"Come back, have you?" he exclaimed fiercely. "Why, what—Who are you? What are you doing here?"

His voice was utterly startled in tone.

"No doubt you recognise me, Mr. Hemming?" I suggested, laying the candle down and approaching the couch. "You surely remember that little affair last night at Hampstead? It was not very gentlemanly of you to give me drugged brandy in the taxi-cab."

Hemming stared at me in wonder. "How—how can you recognise me?" he asked huskily.

"I have been giving you quite a considerable amount of attention, Mr. Hemming," I replied. "Your disguise was an excellent one, but I know you at your true worth now. Last night you hoodwinked me most thoroughly, and made me your accomplice. I am not the man to take such treatment tamely."

"You—you don't understand, Mr. Blake!" panted Hemming. "And I haven't got the diamonds any longer. They—they were stolen from me by two scoundrelly rascals named Pratt and—"

"Quite so! I know all about it!" I interrupted. "And I have come here, not to effect your release, but to obtain what information I can concerning those two rogues. I advise you, Hemming, to be quite frank with me."

The man was still dazed.

"I can't understand it!" he muttered. "How on earth did you get on my track? How did you find out that I lived here? How did you know my name? How did you know anything about Pratt and Sanderson?"

"Quite a number of questions!" I said pleasantly. "I don't feel inclined to satisfy your curiosity, Hemming."

"Perhaps he doesn't know who you really are, gov'nor," Tinker remarked.

"I know that this gentleman is Mr. Blake," said Hemming.

"Ah, but there are plenty of Mr. Blakes," went on Tinker. "But there's only one Mr. Sexton Blake—"

"What?" gasped the prisoner. "Are—are you Sexton Blake, the detective?"

I nodded.

"Good heavens!" Hemming was amazed and startled. "Then I do understand! I—I suppose you've come here to arrest me? And I didn't know! I got you to help me last night, and then drugged you! What a fool I was! And yet I thought I was exceptionally clever!"

There was something about Hemming which attracted me. He didn't seem to be the type of man I should set down as an habitual criminal. Indeed, there was an expression of honesty in his eyes, and his voice was refined and musical.

"Pratt and Sanderson have got away with the diamonds," I said quietly. "I am anxious to get on their track, and you, Hemming, must help me. You must tell me everything you know about those two men. Last night I stole the diamonds from Lord Wraxson, being under a false impression. And it is my intention to restore his lordship's property at the earliest possible—"

"Wait, Mr. Blake!" interrupted Hemming, his eyes gleaming. "Will you give me a

chance? Will you let me tell my story? You're going to hand me over to the police—I know that. I can't expect anything else. But for mercy's sake let me explain the position!"

His tone was so earnest that I was impressed.

"Very well," I said, after a moment. "Cut the ropes, Tinker!"

"But he might try to bolt, gov'nor—"

"I won't! I swear that I will submit!" interjected Hemming quickly. "Forgive me, Mr. Blake, for treating you as I did last night. I—I didn't realise what I was doing. I am terribly sorry."

I made no comment, but lit another candle which stood on the table. Meanwhile Tinker was removing the ropes which bound Hemming to the couch. He rose at last, and stretched himself painfully. Tinker kept a wary eye open, I noticed. But there was no chance of Hemming getting away.

Tinker had taken the precaution to feel in the man's pockets before releasing him, but had found no concealed weapons. And now Hemming sank back on to the couch, his face showing evident signs of the pain he was suffering.

"How is your head?" I asked.

"Oh, pretty right by this time—" Hemming paused. "But how did you know that anything was wrong with it?" he added.

"I happened to see the attack upon you," I replied, smiling. "I might have intervened, but there was no time. Well, Hemming, I am ready to hear what you have to say!"

He looked at me steadily.

"I don't want you to think that I'm a crook, Mr. Blake," he said. "I acted crooked last night, I'll admit, but I didn't do you any harm. And I offered you one of the diamonds, didn't I?"

"Considering that they were not your property, that was comparatively easy," I replied grimly. "The diamonds belong to Lord Wraxson—"

Hemming jumped up.

"They don't!" he shouted passionately. "They don't! The diamonds are mine—mine! Wraxson is a murderous scoundrel, and he ought to be in prison! If you get those stones, and return them to that brute—"

"Steady—steady!" I put in gently. "There is no need for you to get excited, Hemming. Sit down again and calm yourself!"

The man obeyed, breathing hard.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Blake!" he muttered. "But somehow my blood boils when I hear Lord Wraxson mentioned. I'll tell you the whole yarn from the very beginning. Do you think you could let me have a cigarette?"

"Certainly!" I said, smiling. "Help yourself!"

He selected a cigarette from my case, and we both lit up. Then, after puffing away for a few moments, Hemming leaned forward. There was a very earnest, intense expression on his bronzed face.

"Wraxson and I met out in Africa," he commenced. "That was two years ago, and he hadn't succeeded to the title, then. He was just nobody—a worthless younger son. In fact, who had gone out to Africa because he wasn't any good in England. His name had an unpleasant smell about it in London, I believe. But I didn't know this at the time, and we were two Englishmen amongst crowds of blacks. We met right out in the jungle, quite by chance, and as he was going up-country in the same direction as myself, we decided to go together."

"That was quite natural," I remarked. "White companionship, even of a questionable character, was welcome to you, I dare say."

Hemming nodded.

"But I didn't know he was of a questionable character," he said. "Wraxson was a most pleasant fellow to talk to—and is now, I suppose—and at first I didn't see under the surface. We got on well together, and had some rare hunting adventures. I will say that Wraxson isn't lacking in courage, and he's a good hunter. But he's a vile scoundrel, for all that."

"You can't expect us to take your word, you know," put in Tinker.

Hemming shrugged his shoulders.

"No, I suppose not," he agreed, rather bitterly. "You think I'm several kinds of a scoundrel, don't you? And I don't expect you'll believe a quarter of what I'm telling you now. But it's the truth, every word of it, as Heaven's my judge. I should be an absolute fool to fake up a yarn for your benefit, Mr. Blake. I've read about you, and I know that you're not a man to trifle with."

"Yet you trifled with me last night," I observed drily.

"But I didn't know—I didn't know who you were," put in Hemming quickly. "I do now, Mr. Blake, and you won't find me trying to hoodwink you again. There's no need for me to go into full details of that up-country trip which Wraxson and I undertook. I'll tell you what happened when we got to Zamkala River."

"Where you found the diamonds, no doubt?" I inquired.

"Yes. The Zamkala is only a small stream, actually," went on Hemming. "I don't suppose many white men have seen its banks, for it runs right through the pygmy country. We camped there, on the banks of the river, and stayed at that spot for a couple of months, using it as a centre for hunting expeditions."

"Well, one day I happened to see a dirty-looking stone in the hands of one of the pygmies—we were quite friendly with the tribe, and they were by no means hostile," continued Hemming. "That stone attracted my attention, for I was quite convinced that it was a diamond of considerable value."

"Why were you so sure of that?"

"Well, Mr. Blake, I'd knocked about South Africa for a year or two, and I'd even worked for a time in one of the big diamond mines—that was when I was fairly on my uppers, and had to find something to do," said our companion. "So I knew a bit about diamonds, and I was surprised to see this stone in the possession of the savage dwarf. He didn't seem to value it much, and I offered him a pocket-knife for it. Upon my word! You should have seen the little fellow's face light up! He exchanged eagerly, and seemed to think me an absolute fool for making such a bargain."

"The pocket-knife was of use to him," I smiled, "and the stone valueless."

"Yet it was worth seven hundred pounds. If it was worth a penny," declared Hemming firmly. "Naturally, I was delighted with the barter, and Wraxson called me a lucky devil for having got hold of the diamond. And then came the really astonishing sequel."

"I think I can guess what it was," I said. "Can you?"

"I gather that other pygmies came to you with further supplies of diamonds, eager to bargain on similar lines?" I suggested.

"Yes, that was exactly the case," said Hemming. "Why, within a week Wraxson and I had enough diamonds in our possession to make us rich for life. My hunting trip seemed a mere farce, and I was anxious to get to the coast. And, mind you, the payment we made to the pygmies—chiefly cheap pocket-knives and mirrors—mainly came out of my own stores. Yet Wraxson and I divided equally, and we considered ourselves highly fortunate."

"We tried to make the pygmies tell us where they got the diamonds from, but they were mum," continued Hemming. "We offered them the most priceless treasures—in their eyes—but not a word would they say. There may be millions of pounds' worth of stones out there, a veritable reef; but Wraxson and I were inclined to believe that the diamonds had come up-country, brought by the natives, and passed from tribe to tribe. However, that is of little importance. We had our prize, and made preparations to break camp, and make for the coast."

"Quite a natural decision," I commented.

"And it was then, Mr. Blake, that I found out Wraxson's true character," said Hemming, rising from his seat and pacing up and down as he talked. "Two mornings before we meant to get on the move he and I went out to shoot something for breakfast. Well, I only need to tell you that Wraxson deliberately shot me in the back, intending to kill me outright."

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Tinker.

"It's the truth—I swear it's the truth!" said our companion earnestly. "That foul brute took advantage of me, and pulled out his revolver, and fired when I was unable to defend myself. The bullet entered just below my right shoulder-blade, and penetrated the lungs."

"Did you lose consciousness?"

"Not at once. I just managed to turn my head as Wraxson bent over me, and I caught a glimpse of his eyes," said Hemming. "There was an expression of gloating triumph in them, and I knew in an instant what his game was. He wanted all those diamonds for himself, and he had tried to kill me in order to obtain them. In fact, he thought he had killed me, and went away leaving me there in the forest. He probably thought that even if I wasn't quite dead,

some prowling beast would soon finish me off.

"I lost consciousness a minute after he had left me, and then I remembered nothing more until I awoke in a semi-delirious state in the hut of one of the pygmies. It seems that I had been left out of the forest for two days, and by some strange chance nothing had interfered with me. The pygmies found me after Wraxson had moved on, and they nursed me back to health. It was a long, slow job, and I wasn't able to walk until two months had passed.

"But I'm a strong beggar, and I pulled through in the end. How those little black fellows extracted the bullet I don't know, but they did. And they cared for me wonderfully. I shall always be grateful, for they undoubtedly saved my life. When I was completely well I determined to go north."

"You heard nothing of your treacherous companion, meanwhile?"

"Not a word," replied Hemming. "He must have made for the coast with all speed. And there, I suppose, he learned that both his elder brothers had been killed during the fighting on the Western Front. His father had also died, and he was unexpectedly in possession of a title and a considerable estate. The diamonds, to him, lost most of their value. As for me, I drifted northwards by degrees, penniless, and I needn't tell you all my adventures.

"I finally joined his Majesty's Forces, and fought in the East African campaign," said Hemming. "When the fighting was practically over there I was transferred to Egypt, and then to France. A winter in the Somme trenches—or, rather, February and April of this year—did me no good. My old wound troubled me, and I was finally invalided out of the Army. For a month or two I was in a convalescent home in Wales, and didn't reach London, cured, until this autumn."

"And then, no doubt, you thought about the diamonds again?"

"I did!" declared Hemming grimly. "I saw some reference to the tragedies in the Wraxson family in an Illustrated Sunday paper, and I suddenly realised that the present peer was the murderous rascal who had been with me in Africa. Well, Mr. Blake, I went and saw him—I faced him squarely."

"And what happened?"

"What one might have expected," said the other bitterly. "I was nobody—a fellow without any money or influence. Wraxson was a peer of the realm, and he calmly denied all knowledge of me. Said he had never seen me before in his life. I threatened to go to the police, and he simply laughed, and told me I could do what I liked. Well, what was the good of me going to the police on such a matter? I knew my threat was an idle one, and it was. But I found out one thing during that interview.

"The diamonds were still undisposed of. Perhaps Wraxson didn't mean to do anything with them until after the war—I believe there's some difficulty in getting over to Amsterdam nowadays. And, besides, Wraxson has got a fine income, and the diamonds don't interest him so much."

"The awful rotter!" said Tinker indignantly. "He ought to have given you the whole collection. He ought to have made all the amends in his power."

"But he didn't," said our prisoner. "He thought it was wiser to ignore me, and actually threatened to hand me in charge if I pestered him again. Well, Mr. Blake, that's about all. I waited until I had a chance, and watched Wraxson as a cat watches a mouse. I clung to him like glue. And I found out that he intended taking the diamonds to a friend of his last night—just to exhibit them. Well, I waited for him in that quiet Hampstead road, knowing that he would pass that way on foot. I needn't go into details as to how I found out all this, need I? I encountered the brute, having carefully disguised myself beforehand, in order to mystify him. But he succeeded in getting away, after a struggle, and then you appeared on the scene. You know what happened then, of course. A wild idea came to me that you might be able to get the diamonds, and so I made out that Wraxson was the thief, and that he had stolen the stones from me. You believed it, and rushed after him."

"And held him up at the point of my revolver," I said grimly. "I don't regret having done so now, Hemming. Knowing all the facts has made a very great difference in the whole affair."

"You—you believe me, then?" asked Hemming huskily.

I held out my hand.

"Yes, I do believe you," I said simply.

He seized my hand with great eagerness, and pressed it hard.

"You're a white man, Mr. Blake!" he said earnestly. "I was terribly afraid that you would think my yarn a mere fabrication, and that you would hand me over to the police. But I'll show you the bullet-wound if you like—"

"That is not necessary, Hemming," I interrupted. "I should like to know why you drugged me in the taxi-cab."

"I was mad, I suppose," he replied. "But in the eyes of the law I had committed a deliberate theft, and I was afraid to tell you everything. Besides, you might have got into trouble. I didn't know you then, Mr. Blake. I thought it best to get rid of you, without doing you any real harm."

"And you did so with singular cleverness," I remarked. "Your acting, Hemming, was of a very high order. Have you ever been on the stage?"

"Yes, for a couple of years," said Hemming. "But that was ages ago, and I never cared for the life. But I was considered fairly decent at the job, I believe. After I left the taxi-cab last night, at the top of the Haymarket, I came straight here. And then I remembered that I had left a walking-stick in the cab. I was angry, because that stick contained three small rubies which I had got hold of in East Africa just before joining up."

"It was that stick which helped me to get on your trail," I explained. "I took it home, Hemming, and arranged with the taxi-driver for you to meet him. So when you left the River Hotel I was close behind."

Hemming smiled ruefully.

"And I thought I had been smart!" he said. "You saw Pratt and Sanderson spring out on me, then? You were near by?"

"Exactly!" I replied. "But who are those two men?"

"Oh, I suppose I've been several kinds of a fool over this job!" said Hemming. "I met Pratt and Sanderson a month or two ago, and thought that they'd be able to help me in getting the diamonds. I took them into my confidence, and then felt that I'd made a mistake. I distrusted them, and called the deal off. So we parted, and it is weeks since I saw them—until to-night."

"They evidently read the reports in the papers, and put two and two together," I observed. "They knew that you had got the diamonds, Hemming, and meant to force them from you, as they actually did. The rascals hired a houseboat just up the river here, and I dare say they have been watching your movements for weeks."

"And I knew nothing about it!" said the other. "I've been a fool, and no mistake!"

I rose to my feet. "Well, Hemming, although I believe your story," I said, "I shall have to obtain some sort of corroboration. I mean to see Lord Wraxson, and I shall thresh the matter out thoroughly. In short, I intend to see that you obtain your rights."

"It's good of you, Mr. Blake," said Hemming. "But Wraxson will deny everything, I expect. You'll get no corroboration from him."

"No?" I smiled. "We shall see. If Wraxson lies to me I shall detect it at once. He won't be able to bluff me, my dear fellow. You needn't fear that. But the most unfortunate point about the whole case is that the diamonds have vanished. Can you tell me anything about Pratt and Sanderson?"

"Nothing, Mr. Blake," he replied. "I never had much to do with them, and I really thought they'd gone up to Manchester. I'm afraid I can't give you much information."

"It's up to Pedro, then, gov'nor!" said Tinker briskly.

"Yes; and we will return to the houseboat without delay!" I exclaimed. "You must come with me, Hemming. There is just a chance that we can get on the trail, but I'm not by any means sure."

"You mean that we shall recover the diamonds?" asked Hemming eagerly.

"I am hopeful of doing so."

"And what will you do with them—hand them to Wraxson?"

"Certainly not!" I replied quietly. "They are yours, Hemming, by all moral right, and you shall have them! But we are premature. The diamonds have still to be recovered."

As a matter of fact, we did recover them, but not in the way we expected.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

Pedro Solves the Mystery.

NELSON LEE gripped Nipper's arm tightly.

"Do you see anything, young 'un?" he breathed

"Yes, gov'nor," replied Nipper. "Two figures are coming along the path. But we needn't be cautious. They're Mr. Blake and Tinker, I expect."

"That was my first impression," said Lee. "But look again, Nipper. Those figures appear to be of equal height, and there is just a chance that they are those of Pratt and Sanderson, the two men Blake is after."

"Well, we shall soon see," growled Nipper. He was feeling rather sore. Nipper didn't believe in inactivity, and he considered that he and his master had been left out in the cold. Literally, this was the truth, for the night was raw. However, it had been Nelson Lee's own suggestion, so Nipper had no reason to grumble.

Moreover, they had been watching the old houseboat for nearly an hour, and nothing had happened. Nipper hadn't expected that anything would. It was a sheer waste of time, in his opinion. And he was getting chilled, and felt miserable.

The prospect of a diversion was welcome, and he watched the two approaching figures with interest. He and Nelson Lee were out of sight behind a handy bush, which grew quite close to the houseboat gangway.

They waited, listening. It was quite evident by this time that the approaching figures did not belong to Tinker and myself. Lee and Nipper knew that. It was possible, of course, that the men were harmless residents of the district, but it hardly seemed likely that honest people would be walking in this lonely spot at such an hour of the night.

And as the pair approached it could be heard that they were engaged in a somewhat heated argument. And their words revealed their identity.

"What's the good of talking like that, confound you?" snapped one of the voices. "That interfering brute threw the bag into the river, I suppose, and the only thing we can do is to drag it!"

"That's all very well, Pratt, but I don't call it safe!" protested the other voice. "It's a mad thing to come back here after what's happened. I've half a mind to leave you to yourself—"

"All right; clear off!" snarled the other. "If you think I care for that threat, Sanderson, you're mistaken. We set out to get those diamonds, and we actually had them. You know as well as I do that they were thrown out of the doorway, and they simply must be close by."

"Didn't we search for a whole hour without finding 'em?"

"Very likely; but that doesn't mean to say they're not there," said Pratt. "I didn't think you were so beastly nervous. There's no danger. Hemming can't get away, and that other fellow's in the boathouse. Not another soul knows anything about the affair."

"Oh, well, I'm uneasy, and I don't mind admitting it!"

"We went away to fetch these rakes, and I'm going to drag the river," said Pratt. "The bag must have fallen in amongst the reeds just near the bank, and if we persevere we shall be successful. As for your uneasiness, you'd better get into a different frame of mind."

"And yet Sanderson was not exactly unwise in being uneasy," remarked Nelson Lee, abruptly appearing from behind a bush. "I advise you, my friends, to throw up your hands instantly. Two revolvers are covering you."

Pratt and Sanderson stood stock-still, both startled enormously. The latter was terribly scared, and his hands went up without a second's delay. Nelson Lee had chosen his moment well.

Nipper was near by, and he, too, held a revolver in his hand. But Pratt, with a snarling oath, was not in the mood to tamely surrender. He whirled the heavy rake he was carrying over his head and charged at Nelson Lee.

Crack! There was a spurt of flame and a sharp report. The bullet from Nelson's revolver flew harmlessly past Pratt's head, as Lee had intended, but the shot brought the man up with a jerk, and he staggered back, gasping.

"The next time I shall shoot to injure," said Nelson Lee grimly. "Throw that rake down, and put your hands up! Do you hear me?"

Pratt did, and the rake was flung aside and his hands went up. That revolver-shot had scared him.

"Now, Nipper, you'd better get busy!" went on Lee in crisp tones. "These two men will stand back to back, and you can bind their ankles together. I fancy that will render them helpless for the moment."

"Right, sir!" said Nipper promptly. "Now then, back to back, you buggers!"

Pratt and Sanderson, still holding up their hands, obeyed the order. And Nipper, without losing any time, tied his handkerchief firmly round Pratt's left ankle and Sanderson's right. As the two men were facing in opposite directions, any attempt to escape would be futile.

Pratt's own handkerchief, whipped out by Nipper, formed the other bond. Then some string was utilised to bind their wrists together behind their backs. They were now in a most impossible position, and quite helpless.

Nelson Lee lowered his revolver.

"That's better, my friends!" he said pleasantly. "So you returned in order to drag the backwater here? That is most satisfactory, for it proves that you have not got the diamonds."

"Who are you—hey?" growled Pratt savagely.

"My name would be of no interest to you," said Lee; "but you might like to know that your prisoner of the boathouse has escaped, and that he is now effecting the capture of your accomplice, Hemming."

"He's no accomplice of ours!" snapped Pratt.

"I told you what it would be, you blamed fool!" said Sanderson hoarsely. "This is what comes of returning here. We ought to have bolted while we were safe. Now we shall end up in gaol!"

"It's just as well that you realise—" began Nipper.

He paused, and stared into the gloom.

"Somebody else coming, sir," he added quickly.

On this occasion it was Tinker, Hemming, myself, and Pedro. We had heard that revolver shot, and were hurrying up to investigate. My delight can be imagined when I saw that Pratt and Sanderson were prisoners.

"Splendid, Lee!" I exclaimed. "Why, this is astounding."

"Who's that with you, sir?" asked Nipper quickly.

"Oh, let me introduce you to Mr. Hemming!" I said. "He's not the criminal we supposed him to be, but a very badly-used man. You needn't be startled, Hemming. This gentleman is Mr. Nelson Lee, my colleague."

Both Lee and Nipper were surprised to find that I was on amiable terms with Hemming. Lee quickly explained how he had captured Pratt and Sanderson, and Tinker and I were highly pleased. Hemming's excitement was considerable.

"Have they been searched, Mr. Lee?" he asked eagerly.

"Searched!" snarled Pratt. "What's the good of searching us? We haven't got the infernal diamonds! This man you called Blake threw them into the reeds, against the bank. They're there still."

I regarded Pratt keenly.

"That story won't wash, my friend," I said. "You'll hand over—"

"Hang you, I've told you the truth!" shouted Pratt.

"I think he's right, Blake," put in Nelson Lee. "Both he and the other man arrived here with rakes, and they were talking about dragging the water just near the bank. They haven't got the diamonds."

And Lee repeated the words he and Nipper had overheard.

"This is all the better, I remarked smoothly. "The diamonds can't be far off, and if they fell into the water we can easily recover them—especially as these gentlemen have been kind enough to bring rakes. I imagine that they were put to considerable trouble to obtain them."

A grunt from Pratt was ample evidence that I spoke the truth. And then and there, we commenced the dragging operations. That is to say Nelson Lee, Hemming, and I did so. Tinker and Nipper were left to guard the unhappy prisoners.

"I think it will be just as well to commence operations by my going on board," I said. "You two remain out here. I will throw an object in approximately the same manner as I threw the bag of diamonds, and it will be your task to see where it falls. It might help us."

"Yes, quite a good idea," said Lee, nodding. I found a small block of wood on the deck, and entered the room where the struggle had taken place. Taking up my position just within the doorway, I flung the block out into the open in the same direction as I had thrown the bag of diamonds. Then I went outside, and crossed the plank.

"Well, where did it fall?" I asked.

"Why, right over here!" replied Lee, in a puzzled voice. "As you can see, Blake, the spot is fully eight feet from the bank, and I can't quite understand it. If you repeated your throw accurately the diamonds ought to be close to this spot."

I flashed my torchlight upon the ground.

"H'm! There's something wrong here, evidently," I remarked. "The ground is bare, and the bag would be visible at once; yet Pratt and Sanderson didn't find it. And I'll swear I threw this piece of wood in the same manner as the bag!"

"My dear old man, you couldn't have done!" objected Lee. "If the bag fell amongst the reeds you must have cast it in a totally different direction. I think you must have gained a wrong impression at the time."

This seemed to be the only explanation, and I was compelled to accept it, although I was far from satisfied. Lee and I commenced plying the rakes through the reeds. The water was only shallow, and we could easily touch the bottom, and drag the rakes along. It was really a most unsatisfactory process; but we had no other tools on hand.

After twenty minutes' hard work we had achieved no result, and Hemming was beginning to look despondent. And, to tell the truth, I was not exactly happy on my own account. It was a mystery where the diamonds had vanished to.

I did not entertain the idea that Pratt and his companion had taken the stones away. The very fact that they had returned with rakes proved that such was not the case—to say nothing of the words which Lee and Nipper had overheard when the men came up.

No, the diamonds hadn't been seen since I threw them out of the doorway. I paused in my labours near the bank with an impatient exclamation, and looked down at Pedro, who was near by.

"Find them, boy!" I said, half humorously. "We've failed, so now you'd better have a go! Find it, old chap!"

And then Pedro acted in the most astonishing fashion. I had expected him to wag his tail, and remain otherwise still. But, on the instant, he gave a joyous bay, and lumbered over to a bush which grew near by—the bush, in fact, behind which Lee and Nipper had found cover.

Pedro proceeded to scrape up the ground with his front paws vigorously, sending the earth flying in a shower behind him. We all paused and gazed at the old dog in surprise.

"What on earth is he up to?" asked Nelson Lee.

"I only spoke to him in fun," I remarked. "It can't be possible that Pedro has—"

And then Pedro left the bush, and came bounding towards us. There was something in his mouth, which he dropped at my feet in triumph. Then he wagged his tail with keen satisfaction, and barked in his deep voice.

"Good gracious!" I ejaculated.

At my feet lay the bag of diamonds. I snatched it up and quickly examined it. It was intact, and only slightly covered with damp earth. Nelson Lee and Hemming stared at the bag in amazement.

"But how in the world did Pedro know?" asked Lee wonderingly.

I suddenly gave a roar of laughter.

"How did he know?" I repeated. "Why, my dear Lee, those that hide can generally find. I've heard. I understand this thing perfectly now. Good old Pedro! He certainly saved the situation; for, without his action, Pratt and Sanderson would have got completely away with the diamonds."

"But what did the dog do, Mr. Blake?" asked Hemming excitedly.

"When I went on board the houseboat I left Pedro on the bank," I explained. "That piece of wood, I imagine, fell in approximately the same spot as this bag. My calculation wasn't wrong. Pedro was lying here, and when the diamonds came out he appar-

ently considered in his canine mind that he was expected to do something. Accordingly, he carried the bag behind that bush, scratched a hole, and concealed it—as he would a bone. Then he must have waited behind the bush on guard, as it were; that's why I saw nothing of him when I was carried across the plank. Later on, becoming uneasy, he trailed me to the old boathouse."

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Lee, laughing. "No wonder those fellows searched in vain—no wonder our dragging operations were fruitless. Pedro has solved the riddle."

And Pedro knew it, too. He stalked about proudly, as though he had performed his part with unusual thoroughness. The old bounder had evidently considered that the bag was not to be brought to light until he received the order. It was a most lucky chance that I had given him that order.

Hemming, after an examination, pronounced that all the diamonds were there. And, as a proof of his good faith, he handed the bag into my keeping. This, I considered, was the right thing for him to do. And he made a further suggestion.

"I don't know what you'll say to this, Mr. Blake," he said. "But I was wondering if it wouldn't be better to let Pratt and Sanderson go? They've gained nothing, and there's really been no harm done."

"Don't you feel inclined to charge them with assault and robbery?"

"Well, it's difficult," said Hemming, scratching his head. "The law won't consider that the diamonds are mine, and the whole thing will have to come out. I might even find myself arrested. The police are after the man who took Lord Wraxson's diamonds, remember."

"Which happens to be myself," I remarked drily.

"Well, in a way," agreed Hemming. "But it seems to me that the affair will be complicated if we don't let those fellows go free. And, after all, there's nothing much to charge them with; and they'll go away with empty pockets."

I was inclined to agree with Hemming that it would be better, all things considered, to send Pratt and Sanderson off. By doing this the police would not be brought into the matter at all—which was really far more satisfactory.

So the two men were informed of our verdict. They couldn't quite believe it, and suspected that I was bluffing. However, after their bonds had been removed, and they were told to make themselves scarce, they were convinced.

Pratt was off in a moment, but Sanderson paused.

"I'm sorry we turned on you, Hemming," he said, with some show of decency. "It was Pratt's idea, and I didn't like it from the first. And I think Mr. Blake's a real gentleman for letting us go."

"You have to thank Mr. Hemming for that," I said quietly.

Sanderson went off a moment later, and I noticed that he took quite an opposite direction to Pratt. It was apparently his intention to avoid his accomplice in future. And that was the last we saw of either of them.

As for the rest, it is quickly told.

We all repaired to Hemming's bungalow, refreshed ourselves with some very excellent whisky which he provided, and then walked to the River Hotel. Hemming came with us, for I thought it far wiser that he should be with me until the matter was completely settled up.

We arrived at Baker Street in the early hours—travelling in Lee's car, of course. Nelson Lee and Nipper bade us good-bye, and went their way. They had been of excellent service, and I thanked them very warmly.

In the morning, while Tinker remained with Hemming at Baker Street, I journeyed to Lord Wraxson's house at Hampstead, and requested an immediate interview with his lordship.

He turned out to be a man very much as Hemming had described—about forty years of age, stoutish, and obviously dissolute. I do not intend to set down that interview in detail, for it would not prove of sufficient interest.

It is sufficient to say that I told Wraxson in the plainest of plain language that he was an unmitigated scoundrel, and that he deserved to go to prison for the rest of his life. At first he tried to bluff, and got into a towering passion. It was then my turn to

bluff, and I quietly informed him that unless he dropped all police proceedings forthwith, he would probably find himself in the dock charged with the attempted murder of Arthur Hemming.

He could see that I was determined, and that I knew all the facts of the case. This, coupled with my profession, scared him most thoroughly. He abjectly assured me that his revolver had gone off by accident, and that he had fled from the scene in a moment of passion.

This, of course, I took—to use a popular phrase—with a pinch of salt. However, it was a confession, and Wraxson had given himself away. He promised to let the whole thing drop from that minute, and I knew that he would do so. He was scarcely in a position to act otherwise.

And so I returned to Hemming with the

good news. There were fully three-quarters of the original diamonds in Hemming's bag, and these, I considered, were easily his share. Wraxson had no doubt disposed of the others—not that he deserved a single one of them.

However, Hemming was set up for the rest of his life, and his gratitude to me was rather touching. He insisted upon Tinker and I accepting two of the diamonds, and we agreed. Those diamonds are now amongst our most prized possessions—cut and set to perfection.

Hemming, I believe, has settled down somewhere on the South Coast, and he has recently got married. He certainly deserves to spend a quiet life, in ease and comfort, after his highly adventurous career.

And that, I think, is all that I need to say.

THE END.

FOOTBALL COMPETITION No. 7. £50 WON.

Matches Played Saturday, Nov. 30th, 1918.

In this Competition no competitor succeeded in correctly forecasting the results of all the matches. The Prize of £50 has therefore been awarded to:

M. J. GAMBLE,
82, Ogilvie Street,
Belfast, Ireland,

whose forecast contained fifteen correct predictions. Five of the matches on the coupon were abandoned, and these were not taken into account in the adjudication.

THE PROFESSOR'S GOLD.

A Magnificent Story of Nelson Lee, Detective.

INTRODUCTION.

Only the preliminary paragraphs of this short serial appeared previously. They introduced a small town in Yorkshire and a strange character known as the "Professor"—reputed a miser. Both he and his gold—if there is any—disappear mysteriously, and Nelson Lee investigates the case at the request of a friend.

(Now read on.)

The Mystery at Dead Man's Hollow—(continued).

A VERY slight inspection sufficed to convince him that neither windows, roof, nor door had been tampered with, and a further examination proved that several boxes, which had presumably contained the Professor's gold, had been broken open and emptied of their contents.

"Now, Nelson Lee," he said to himself, as he sat down on the corner of a heavy oaken chest, "let us argue this matter out. A shriek was heard in this house at ten o'clock the night before last, from which it is manifest that at that time some person or persons must have been in the place. Half an hour later this person had disappeared. How did he leave the house?"

"It is certain that he did not leave by the windows, the door, or the chimney. There only remains, therefore, the roof, the floor, and the walls.

"It is clearly impossible for him to have passed through the walls, and the roof is thickly thatched with straw. Consequently, however ridiculous it may sound, he must have gone through the floor. There is no other way.

"And it is not so ridiculous, after all, when you come to think of it. The whole of the surrounding district is honeycombed with the workings of the old mines, and it is quite on the cards that one of these underground passages runs beneath this house.

"As the house is at the bottom of a hollow, there is possibly only a small thickness of ground beneath the roof of the passage and the floor of the house, and a determined man might easily break through. Let us investigate."

With a thick iron bar, which had served the Professor as a poker, he commenced to rap upon the floor, which was flagged with smooth, square slabs of stone, and he was presently rewarded by discovering that one portion of it gave out a hollow sound. Striking a match, for dusk was now approaching, he went down on his knees and examined this portion of the floor. He quickly detected that one of the largest stones had recently been removed.

It had evidently been pushed up from below, for there was no projecting edge, or anything by which it could be raised from above, and it fitted quite closely to the stones around it. As there was nothing in the house by which he could prise it up again, he returned to the Miners' Rest, and asked to see the landlord, whose name was Adam Young.

"You used to work in the mines, Adam, did you not?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied the landlord. "I worked in 'em up to the time the company went smash."

"Then you probably know the workings pretty well?"

"Every inch of them, sir!"

"Do any of them run under Dead Man's Hollow?"

"Oh, no, sir! They runs in quite a hopposite direction."

"That's strange!" muttered Nelson Lee. "I'll swear there's an underground passage of some kind under Silas Hinton's house!"

"You must be mistaken, sir," answered the innkeeper. "There's nowt but solid rock under Dead Man's Hollow. The seam doesn't run in that direction, so it was never worked."

"Anyhow, I intend to have a look beneath that floor," said Nelson Lee. "Can you supply me with a pick, a lantern, a coil of rope, and a ball of string?"

"Certainly, sir!" replied the landlord; and he quickly produced the articles in question.

Armed with these, Nelson Lee returned to Dead Man's Hollow, and prised up the stone in the floor.

He then perceived that, as Adam Young had asserted, the house was built upon rock; but that portion of the rock below the stone he had removed had been recently hewn away, and he found himself peering into a kind of well, whose depth he could not guess.

Having fastened his rope to one of the iron bars in front of the window, he tied his lantern to the other end, and lowered it through the opening. It came to a halt about fifteen feet below, and as the well—if it was a well—was apparently dry, he let himself down by means of the rope.

When he reached the bottom he found himself in an underground passage, whose roof was six or seven feet below the floor of the house. A portion of this roof had been hewn away, leaving nothing but a simple stone, which could easily be pushed up, between the passage and the room above.

A few yards from where he alighted was the body of the Professor, and one glance at his livid and distorted face showed that he had been smothered, probably by one of his own pillows as he lay in bed.

Whilst he was examining the body by the light of his lantern he heard stealthy foot-steps in the room above his head.

"What a fool I was to leave the door unlocked!" he muttered hastily; and, springing to the rope, he commenced to swarm up.

Before he reached the top, however, the rope was suddenly cut across, and, as he tumbled back into the underground passage, the stone was replaced over the opening, and the heavy oaken chest dragged upon it.

An Explosion—The Mine Flooded.

"I AM rightly served!" muttered Nelson Lee. "I ought to have had more sense than to blurt out my suspicions to Adam Young. It is he, no doubt, who has followed me here and trapped me, for he is the only person who knew I was coming."

"I have learnt something by my foolishness, however; I have learnt the name of Silas Hinton's murderer. By his own confession, Adam Young is acquainted with every inch of these workings, and he must have known that he was lying when he said they did not run in this direction. His only object in telling me such a deliberate lie was to put

me off the scent, and I think, therefore, that we may safely assume that Adam Young, knowing there was this passage under the Professor's house, broke his way through, and murdered the old man for the sake of his gold.

"To do this he must have entered the mine at another place, and if he could enter, I can get out; so there is no occasion for despair at present. But there is no time to be lost, for, having blocked up one way of escape, he will naturally hasten to block up the other."

Tying one end of his ball of string to one of the wooden beams which propped up the roof, he started off on his journey of exploration, unwinding the string as he went.

Ten minutes sufficed to convince him that he was only plunging deeper into the mine, and he accordingly retraced his steps by means of the string. The place was like an enormous rabbit-warren, with passages (or "drifts," as they are called) branching out in every direction, and, but for this ingenious device, he would have quickly lost himself in the labyrinth. With the aid of his string he was able to come back to the starting-point after every fresh attempt.

About two hundred yards from the spot where Silas Hinton's body lay, he came to a wooden door in the wall of the drift, and, turning aside for a moment, he passed through this door, and found himself in what was practically a cave hewn out of the rock, but which had formerly been the blacksmith's shop inside the mine.

A heap of ruins in one corner showed where the hearth had been, and above this heap was a narrow shaft, which had served as a chimney. The stars were shining down this shaft, and, placing his lantern on the ground, he started to climb up.

Several of the bricks, with which the shaft was lined, had been left projecting in the form of steps, this having been done to enable the chimney to be cleaned; but, in spite of this, the ascent was neither easy nor safe.

The whole interior casing of bricks were insecure, and it crumbled away beneath his feet like dry and rotten wood.

By dint of dogged perseverance, however, he accomplished three-fourths of his task in safety, and then an accident occurred that stopped all further progress in that direction. The masonry proved rottener than ever he had believed. It gave way beneath his feet, and Nelson Lee fell headlong down the shaft, amid a copious shower of bricks and stones.

How the detective contrived to escape destruction he never knew; but though he escaped with his life, his body was a mass of cuts and bruises.

Thinking that his escape was now assured, he glanced up the shaft once more, preparatory to renewing his climb.

To his dismay, he found that the stars were no longer visible, for the upper part of the brickwork had fallen in a solid mass, and was tightly wedged about half-way up the shaft. Nothing short of blasting would suffice to dislodge it, and, with a sigh, he turned away.

His lantern had been utterly demolished by the falling brickwork, but by striking a match—his last but one!—he found his way to the wooden door, and continued his journey along the drift.

He had not proceeded far before his quick sense of hearing detected the striking of a match some distance in front of him, and, with a dim foreboding of fresh disaster, he pressed forward at full speed.

Upon turning the corner he saw that Adam Young, having inserted a charge of blasting-powder in a hole in one of the sides of the drift, and having laid a train about twenty yards in length, was in the act of firing this train with a match.

With a cry of indignation he rushed forward, but at the same moment a thin line of

flame sped towards him, and he had barely time to spring into a neighbouring recess ere the rock was rent asunder with a deafening report, and an enormous mass fell right across the drift and cut off his way of escape. This was by no means the full extent of the disaster, for, loosened by the shock of the explosion, a portion of the roof fell in, and as this took place about half a dozen yards in the rear of him, he found himself imprisoned between the two fallen masses.

To advance or to retreat was equally impossible; but worse was still to follow.

There was a spring of water in the rock above the drift, and that portion of the roof which had fallen formed the bed of this spring, so that now it was free to pour into the mine.

As the section of the drift into which it flowed, and in which Nelson Lee was imprisoned, was blocked both before and behind by masses of rock, the water, of course, was unable to make its escape, and consequently rose, inch by inch, up the side of the drift.

In other words, the intrepid detective was cooped up in a narrow underground space, which was filling with water at such a rapid rate that in ten minutes' time he was up to his knees!

Escape and Victory.

By the light of the last remaining match, Nelson Lee examined the mass of rock which blocked his way in front. It plugged up the narrow drift like a cork in a bottle-neck, but he fancied he could perceive a narrow space between the top and the roof through which he might possibly crawl. Before he had time to make sure of this his match burnt out, and thenceforward he was in absolute darkness.

With his hands outstretched before him he stumbled along the pitch-dark drift, now wading up to his waist in water, and now only ankle-deep. Although he realised quite well the necessity of proceeding cautiously

and quietly, lest Adam Young should be lurking in one of the many recesses with which the mine abounded, he could not avoid a certain amount of stumbling and splashing, and he could only hope that his enemy had given him up for lost, and left the mine.

He soon discovered that this was not the case, for upon turning a corner he perceived a lighted lantern standing on a ledge of rock on the side of the drift. There was no sign of Adam Young, however, and he paused to ask himself the meaning of this strange phenomenon.

"I have it!" he muttered at last. "The scoundrel has heard me coming, and knowing how difficult, if not impossible, it would be for me to shoot in the dark, he has left that lantern to reveal my presence as I pass, and has concealed himself a little distance away. I could almost fancy that I saw the gleam of a revolver half a dozen yards beyond the lantern on the opposite side of the drift. He is only waiting for me to come forward into the light, and then he will fire. What is to be done?"

A moment's reflection suggested a plan, and he silently groped on the floor of the drift until he found a stone. Having measured with his eye the distance between himself and the lantern, he took what school-boys call a "shy," and knocked the lantern off its perch.

As the lantern fell into the water, plunging the drift in darkness again, he rushed towards the spot where he fancied Adam Young was hiding. Quick as he was, the innkeeper was quicker, and he only succeeded in grasping the tails of his coat. There was a sound of rending cloth, and the next moment Adam Young was tearing down the drift.

"He is hauling himself up a rope," thought the detective; and he clutched the foot with savage desperation.

Finding that he could not free himself by kicking, Adam Young pulled out his revolver and fired. The bullet splashed harmlessly into the water, but by the flash Nelson Lee perceived that Young was clinging to a rope-

ladder, which hung through a hole in the roof of the drift.

With a jerk he pulled the innkeeper down, and in endeavouring to secure him flung him against the side of the drift. The result of this was terrible to contemplate, for in Adam Young's pocket there was a quantity of blasting-powder and a box of matches! The sudden crash against the wall ignited the latter, which in their turn exploded the powder, and Silas Hinton's murderer was literally blown to bits.

The concussion of the air was so terrific that Nelson Lee was flung to the ground, but, picking himself up, he groped his way to the ladder, mounted through the opening in the roof, and found himself in the cellar of the Miners' Rest!

There is little more to tell. The whole of the professor's gold was found in Adam Young's bed-room, and as Silas Hinton had no heirs, and had made no will, the Crown stepped in and claimed it. "In consideration of Mr. Nelson Lee's distinguished services"—so the official document ran—a sum of money was granted him, and this he forwarded to Dr. Patterson, with the request that he would distribute it amongst the poor of the deserted village.

THE END.

(Next week there will begin another short serial of Nelson Lee, an account of whose adventures appears every week in the "NELSON LEE LIBRARY." The splendid long complete story of SEXTON BLAKE and TINKER which will appear next week is entitled "THE CLUE OF THE CUFF-LINK," a Fascinating Romance by the Author of "Dirk Dolland's Redemption," "The Amazing Affair at Clannere Mansions," "The Silent Partner," etc., including the Stories of the Bat and the Mysterious Mr. Reece. Please order in advance.)

£1,000 Cash Prize for a Simple FOOTBALL FORECAST

No Entrance Fee! No Goals Required! 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, JANUARY 11th. 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 £1,000. 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. 10.
GOUGH HOUSE, GOUGH SQUARE,
LONDON, E.C. 4,**

and must reach that address not later than THURSDAY, JANUARY 9th.

This competition is run in conjunction with "Answers," "Answers' Library," "The Marvel," "The Family Journal," "Butterfly," "The Home Companion," and "The Woman's World," and readers of those journals are invited to compete.

RULES WHICH MUST BE STRICTLY ADHERED TO.

1. All forecasts must be made on coupons taken from "Answers," "Answers' Library," "Butterfly," "The Marvel," "The Union Jack," "The Family Journal," "The Home Companion," and "The Woman's World," dated January 4th, or the issues of those journals dated January 11th, 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 or full time is not played for any reason, no competitor shall be entitled to claim the prize of £1,000, 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, in his opinion, is good and sufficient reason, and it is a distinct con-

dition 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, JANUARY 9th. 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. 10.

Matches Played SATURDAY, JANUARY 11th.

Closing Date, THURSDAY, JANUARY 9th.

- | | |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| BRENTFORD | v. CHELSEA |
| WEST HAM UNITED | v. TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR |
| MILLWALL | v. CRYSTAL PALACE |
| FULHAM | v. ARSENAL |
| CLAPTON ORIENT | v. QUEEN'S PARK RANGERS |
| HULL CITY | v. BRADFORD |
| LINCOLN CITY | v. SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY |
| NOTTS FOREST | v. LEICESTER FOSSE |
| ROTHERHAM COUNTY | v. HUDDERSFIELD TOWN |
| SHEFFIELD UNITED | v. COVENTRY CITY |
| BLACKBURN ROVERS | v. BOLTON WANDERERS |
| BLACKPOOL | v. STOKE |
| BURY | v. BURNLEY |
| MANCHESTER CITY | v. ROCHDALE |
| OLDHAM ATHELTHIC | v. EVERTON |
| PORT VALE | v. PRESTON NORTH END |
| AIRDRIEONIANS | v. THIRD LANARK |
| DUMBARTON | v. ST. MIRREN |
| HAMILTON ACADEMICALS | v. FALKIRK |
| KILMARNOCK | v. RANGERS |
| MORTON | v. MOTHERWELL |
| PARTICK THISTLE | v. AYR UNITED |

I enter Football Competition No. 10 in accordance with the Rules and Conditions announced above, and agree to accept the published decision as final and legally binding.

Signed
Address.....
U.J.