

TINKER'S LETTERS TO NIPPER! £300 FOOTBALL COMPETITION!

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*I ran right into the  
arms of my son  
I knew him at  
once  
he would not say  
a word of my  
memental dagger  
in his hand*

*...the dim  
...than the  
...and gazed  
...the stained glass  
...window interl  
...m. n. a.*

*Nelson Lee was driving  
he let her go and we  
roared through the night  
into the teeth of a  
blinding snowstorm*

**THE CLUE OF THE  
FROZEN KNIFE.**

An Enthralling Detective  
Tale of **SEXTON BLAKE**  
and **NELSON LEE.**



# The Give of the Frozen Knife

BY E. S. BROOKS.

Being another Remarkable Story of Mystery and Exciting Detective Work, comprising a Number of Striking Documents from Tinker's Letter-File; and introducing SEXTON BLAKE and NELSON LEE. By the Author of "Tinker's Case-Diary" Series, "Waldo, the Wonder-Man," "Nipper at St. Frank's," etc.

## "TINKER'S LETTER-FILE" SERIES.

### FOREWORD BY TINKER.

[In compiling the various letters and telegrams which are presented below I have been mainly concerned in making the narrative run smoothly. My object has not been to give a full record of my correspondence with Nipper—and others—but to arrange the letters in such a way that the sequence of events runs easily. For example, in the case of Nipper's letter to me I have not included my reply because Sexton Blake's letter to Sir Vincent Tring explains everything, and mine would be superfluous. 'Nuff said. I have spoken.

TINKER.]

### THE FIRST CHAPTER.

#### Letter from Tinker to Nipper.

Baker Street, London, W.,  
January 7th.

**M**Y Dear Nipper,—I got your note on Saturday, for which many thanks. You seem to have been having a pretty exciting time at Christmas—eh? But why the dickens don't you give more details? I shall have to give you a serious jawing when we meet if you don't improve. So look out for yourself!

There's nothing particular to tell you this trip, and I'm really writing this letter just to acknowledge yours. The guv'nor is in the laboratory making some experiments—and, incidentally, some frightful smells—and I am supposed to be pasting cuttings into a scrap-book. But I thought I'd just get this off my mind first. Pedro, by the way, has just looked up from the fireplace and winked at me. So I take that to mean that he wants me to give you his kind regards.

When you get a chance write and tell me about that affair—Whoa! The 'phone's ringing like the deuce—

10.30 p.m. About ten hours have elapsed since I wrote the above, and some rather astonishing events have taken place. As I have heaps of time on my hands, I intend to tell you the full yarn—and I shall include the details. So bear this in mind as a lesson.

When I was writing this morning I mentioned that the telephone-bell was ringing, and I shoved this letter aside. I haven't had a chance to continue it until now, and you'll easily understand when I explain. From this line onwards, I shall describe the events in story form, just like my "Case-Diary" yarns. There's no reason why I shouldn't, and an excellent reason why I should. Because I shall probably be able to make use of this letter—and others—when the case is completed, as I did on a former occasion.

I threw my pen down—causing that blot on the first page, by the way—and grabbed the telephone rather impatiently. I didn't want to be disturbed just then.

"Well," I snapped. "Who is it?"

"Is Mr. Blake there? Is Sexton Blake at home?"

The voice sounded husky, and I was quite sure that the man at the other end of the wire was in a terrible state of agitation. And I at once forgot all about writing to you, and gave more attention to the 'phone.

"Yes, I think Mr. Blake's at home this morning," I replied, without committing myself. "But who is it? If you'll give me your name—"

"I want to speak to Mr. Blake!" interrupted the voice hoarsely. "You're Tinker, aren't you? For Heaven's sake bring your master to the telephone at once! Hurry, lad—hurry!"

"Yes; but if you'll only give me your name—"

"I can't!" came the reply. "Please fetch Mr. Blake!"

Now, this was jolly queer, as you'll agree. The man evidently knew me, but I certainly did not recognise his voice, although there's nothing much in that. Some people's voices sound quite different over the telephone.

"All right," I said. "I'll fetch the guv'nor at once."

I was rather curious, in fact, and I wondered who this urgent individual could be. By the intonation of his voice I judged that he was not a highly-educated man. And without delay I walked through the communicating doorway into the laboratory. Sexton Blake was right in the middle of a chemical experiment.

"Oh, don't come bothering me now, Tinker!" he exclaimed testily. "If there's anybody on the telephonic wanting me, just take a message!"

"That's what I wanted to do, guv'nor, but the chap positively insisted that I should fetch you," I replied. "You'll have to come!"

"Who is the man?" asked Blake, glaring at me. "What's his name?"

"He wouldn't give it."

"Then go back and tell him that I'm too busy to attend to him," said the guv'nor, turning back to his retorts and test-tubes. "The infernal impudence of the man—refusing to give his name!"

I knew that argument was useless, so I went back to the telephone.

"Are you there?" I said, grabbing the receiver. "Mr. Blake says he can't speak to you. Will you please give me a message?"

I heard a quick gasp of dismay and alarm.

"But Mr. Blake must speak to me—he must!" came the agitated voice.

"Well, he won't—unless you give your name!"

There was a moment's silence, and then the voice came again.

"I don't know whether Mr. Blake will remember me, or you, either, Tinker," it said. "I'm Stagg—Benjamin Stagg. I'm head game-keeper at Tring Manor, in Essex. It's a year or two since—"

"Why, of course I remember you, Stagg, old son!" I interrupted. "What's up? Anything wrong? I didn't recognise your voice at first, although I do now. You seem to be in a rare stew over something."

"I'm in a terrible state, Mr. Tinker," replied the other. "And please—please fetch Mr. Blake to the telephone immediately! You don't know how important it is! You don't know what awful trouble I'm in!"

"Hold the line!" I said briskly. This time I seized the guv'nor's arm as soon as I entered the laboratory, and made him attend to me.

"Look here, guv'nor, you simply must come!" I said. "It's old Stagg. You remember him, don't you? He says he's in a frightful mess of some sort, and absolutely begged me to fetch you. To judge by his tone, I should say the trouble is pretty awful."

Sexton Blake sighed. "I suppose I'd better go," he said resignedly.

Did I ever mention Benjamin Stagg to you? He was mixed up in that case of the guv'nor's which we called "The Peril of the Prince." Years ago he used to be a burglar—a professional burglar, too—but he was a thundering good sort, and reformed completely. Ever since then he's been in the employ of Sir Vincent Tring, Bart., at Tring Manor, in Essex. Tring's quite an old friend, and he's always reported that Stagg is the best head-keeper in the kingdom, and as honest as the day.

So the guv'nor and I were naturally rather curious to know what Stagg could want now, and why he was in such a state of worry and alarm. Naturally, I didn't hear the whole conversation between Stagg and Sexton Blake. It was one-sided. But the guv'nor told me afterwards, and so I'll set it down in this letter as though I had heard it.

"Well, Stagg, what is the matter?" asked Blake, placing the receiver to his ear. "I understand from Tinker that you are in some trouble or other."

"Yes, sir," came Stagg's eager, excited voice. "Thank Heaven you are at home! You can help me, sir! I know you can! And if ever a man needed help I do!"

"You are talking rather curiously, Stagg," said the guv'nor, losing his indifferent air. "What sort of help do you want?"

"I can't tell you over the 'phone, sir. It wouldn't be safe!" replied Benjamin Stagg huskily. "Can I come to Baker Street? Can I come to you?"

"Certainly, if you wish it!"

"Heaven bless you, sir!" panted Stagg. "You don't think I'm guilty—"

"Guilty!" echoed Blake. "What on earth are you talking about, man?"

Stagg made a kind of gulping noise.

"I'm half mad with worry and fright, sir, and that's the truth!" he said, his voice shaking as he spoke. "If I come to Baker Street you will let me go again? Will you promise that you won't hand me over to the police?"

"But why should I hand you to the police, Stagg?" asked the gov'nor.

"Hand him to the police!" I ejaculated, startled.

Sexton Blake waved his hand, and I subsided.

"I'm in a public telephone call-box, sir," came Stagg's voice. "There's a warrant out for my arrest by this time, I expect, and I'm wanted for burglary—"

"Good gracious!"

"And—murder, sir!" added Stagg, with a gulp.

"Dear me!" said Blake smoothly. "This is indeed serious, Stagg."

"But I'm innocent, sir! I swear before Heaven that I'm innocent, sir! Do you believe me, Mr. Blake? I'm innocent!"

"Don't get into a panic, Stagg," interjected Blake. "If you do you will claim attention from every constable in the district when you emerge from that box. Pull yourself together, and remain calm."

"It's asking too much, sir. I can't be calm," replied Stagg. "I know you're a man of your word, sir, and if you let me come to Baker Street, you'll let me go again. I want to tell you everything I know, and I want your advice, sir. But will it be safe—for you, I mean? Will you get into trouble—"

"We won't consider that question just now, Stagg," interrupted the gov'nor. "If I do get into trouble, I dare say I shall manage to get out of it again. And this telephone conversation is not exactly advisable. We had better break it off at once. When shall I expect you?"

"As soon as I can get there, sir."

"Yes; but I don't know where you are—"

"I expect I shall be about twenty minutes, sir."

"All right. And be careful how you go," said Blake. "You're not a timid man, Stagg, and in a time of trial like this you ought to stiffen your backbone and hold yourself erect. Being innocent, you have nothing to fear."

"Heaven bless you for those words, sir!" exclaimed Stagg. "And if I'm innocent, although I'm afraid the police won't believe it. That's why I want your advice. Good-bye, sir! Expect me in about twenty minutes."

Sexton Blake hung up the receiver, and turned to me, with a very thoughtful expression upon his clear-cut, powerful face. At that time, don't forget, I had only heard his side of the jaw, and I was bubbling with curiosity.

But the gov'nor soon supplied me with Stagg's part of the conversation—just as I've put it above—and I stared at him—and whistled.

"Wanted for murder—eh?" I exclaimed. "I say, gov'nor, we might find ourselves shoved in prison for harbouring a wanted criminal! Oh, but that's rot! I can't believe that Stagg has broken out again!"

"That statement is somewhat misleading, Tinker," observed Blake. "Stagg, at his worst, was only a burglar. He never harmed a soul in his life, and always regarded violence with horror. That very fact almost convinces me that he is innocent of this present crime. And Tring was telling me only a few weeks ago, when I met him at the club, that Stagg had been exemplary in his conduct right from the start. Indeed, Sir Vincent's admiration for the man's honesty and devotion to duty knew no bounds. I cannot believe that Stagg is guilty of burglary again, and I certainly discredit the very idea he has committed murder. No, Tinker. Stagg isn't that type of man at all."

"And will you help him, gov'nor?" I asked.

"That all depends upon his story," was the gov'nor's reply. "Until we know the actual facts it is useless entering upon any discussion."

So for the moment we said no more about it. I wasn't feeling inclined to continue this

letter, however. As a matter of fact, I completely forgot it. I was thinking of more important things than you, my son. Don't take this as an insult. I didn't mean to refer to you as a "thing." This letter, by the way, is lengthening out some, isn't it? And it's going to be a lot longer before I've finished, because I've got such a lot to describe. But never mind, it isn't midnight yet, and I don't mind sitting up an hour or so.

Benjamin Stagg arrived after a bare quarter of an hour had elapsed. I had already taken the precaution—at the gov'nor's advice—to post myself at our door, so that there would be no delay. Besides, poor old Stagg was in a nervous condition, and he wouldn't like to give his name to Mrs. Bardell or a servant-girl. Sexton Blake, on his part, didn't want anybody to know that Stagg had come.

I felt almost like a crook as I welcomed the wanted man and furtively conducted him upstairs to the consulting-room. As you'll imagine, this experience was a bit of a novelty. Stagg, by the way, is a fairly short man, thick-set, and as strong as an ox. At one time of day he had been a champion at boxing, but a compound fracture of his right arm had ended his boxing days for good. His left arm, however, was stronger than it had ever been before, probably because it had been used more.

Stagg looked just the same as ever, except that he was haggard and work-looking. As a rule he was a most genial individual, with a sense of humour often lacking in men of his stamp. But just at present he was not feeling at all humorous, as you can well imagine.

"I hope nobody saw us come in, Mr. Tinker," he said, as we mounted the stairs. "I'm almost scared of my own shadow—"

"Don't you worry yourself, Stagg, old man!" I interrupted cheerfully. "There's no reason why you should be afraid. With Sexton Blake on your side—as I'm sure he will be—you're as safe as eggs!"

"But eggs aren't always safe, sir," remarked Stagg dolefully.

He was certainly right about that, wasn't he? I don't know who invented that phrase about eggs being safe, but he must have been somewhat off his rocker, I should think.

"Now, Stagg, what's all the trouble?" asked Sexton Blake genially, extending his hand to the visitor as he entered. "Come, come! You mustn't look like that! If you're in any trouble we'll pull you out of it."

Stagg seized the hand with almost painful eagerness.

"You're the finest gentleman in the world, sir!" he exclaimed huskily. "You've put new life into me in this first minute! But I'm afraid you'll begin to doubt when you hear the full story."

"We will see about that, Stagg," said Sexton Blake easily. "Sit down, and tell your story in straightforward, simple language. I strongly suspect that you have been alarming yourself needlessly—"

"I haven't, sir! I wish to Heaven I had!" broke in Stagg. "And I can't tell you the full story, after all. I only know a bit of it, but that was enough to bring me up to London, skulking away from the police."

"When did the murder take place, and where?"

"During the night, sir, in the Tring Woods."

"And the burglary?"

"That must have been committed at the same time," replied Stagg. "I don't know the extent of it, but I believe it's serious. You see, sir, I left the estate right early this morning, because I knew the police would be after me."

"It seems to me, Stagg, that you have taken a good deal for granted," remarked the gov'nor. "But I will make no comment until you have told all that you know. Who has been killed?"

"Young Mr. Leighton, sir, the son of Sir Vincent's estate manager," was Stagg's reply. "He was found in the wood this morning, stabbed to the heart. And the Manor had been burgled, and a lot of valuable property taken."

"How did you get to know this?"

"Well, sir, I was dressing, and two of the under-gardeners passed my cottage. They looked at the windows as they passed, but they didn't see me. And I heard them saying that I was guilty, and that the police would arrest me before breakfast."

Stagg paused and wiped his brow.

"I can tell you I was scared, sir, because

I didn't know what the men meant," he went on. "One of the kiddies from the lodge happened to come past, and I stopped him. He tried to get away at first, and looked at me as though I was some reptile. But I made him speak, and he told me that Mr. Tom had been found dead, and that the Manor had been burgled. He said that the policeman had hurried off to the station, and that I was going to be arrested before I got up."

"And what did you do?"

"I just got my hat and coat, and tore off through the woods to the high-road, going to the next station down the line," replied Stagg. "I thought I was going to be arrested at every stop, but I got to London all right. I wandered about the streets for some time, hardly knowing what I was doing. And—then I thought of you, sir, and rang you up."

"Is that all you know?"

"Yes, sir."

Sexton Blake rose to his feet, and faced the agitated man.

"Stagg," he said sternly. "Do you know what you are?"

"I—I don't understand you, sir."

"Then I will be painfully plain!" said the gov'nor, his eyes flashing angrily. "You are an absolute idiot—a fool! Man alive, what on earth possessed you? What made you run away in that hopelessly mad fashion?"

Stagg was sitting back, looking startled.

"I—I got into a panic, sir," he said weakly.

"A panic!" snapped Sexton Blake. "You took leave of your senses, I think! The very act of fleeing led suspicion to point in your direction. Just because a small urchin tells you a story which is probably a fantasy of the truth, you take to your heels and clear out of the neighbourhood. It was the last thing in the world you should have done."

Stagg winced under the gov'nor's sharp words.

"I know it, sir," he admitted brokenly. "It was the maddest thing I ever did—I realise that now. But I remembered that the police knew all about my record, and I thought they'd pounce on me at once."

"You may have been right in that supposition—the police would naturally look to you first—but if you are innocent you had nothing to fear," replied Blake. "As it is, your flight has probably caused endless mischief. You ran away before you actually knew what had really occurred."

"And what am I to do now, sir?" asked Stagg pitifully.

"You've got to pull yourself together, and act like a man," was Sexton Blake's stern reply. "I'm surprised at you, Stagg! Now look here. I am disposed to help you if I am satisfied as to your sincerity. Tell me the absolute truth, Stagg. Did you take part in last night's crime?"

Stagg rose to his feet, his face flushing deeply. And he pulled his shoulders back, and stood before us upright and defiant.

"No, I didn't, sir!" he declared solemnly. "I swear on my oath that I know nothing—I swear that I am innocent!"

"I believe you, Stagg," said Sexton Blake quietly.

"Heaven bless you for that, sir!"

Just for a moment there were tears in Stagg's eyes—tears of sheer emotion. And I can tell you, old scout, that I wasn't feeling exactly comfortable myself. But I believed the poor chap's statement. It was impossible to do anything else.

"What were your relations with this Tom Leighton?" asked Blake.

"We didn't get on together, sir," replied our visitor. "I don't like to say anything against the poor young fellow, but he was a regular little beast, sir. I can't help telling you that. He was always trying to boss the whole estate."

"Had he any authority?"

"None at all, sir. And that's what made me so mad!" said Stagg fiercely. "But he was the estate-manager's son, and he took advantage of it. During this last week or two we openly quarrelled, and wouldn't speak to one another."

"This is bad, Stagg—very bad!" said the gov'nor gravely. "It is known that you were the dead man's enemy, and it is known that you were at one time a burglar. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but we must talk bluntly at a time like this. Added to these facts the circumstance that you fled—"

"It's as black as night, sir—I know it!"

"You have come to me for advice, Stagg, and I will give it to you," continued Blake. "You must return to Tring Manor by the very next train. You must go back and face

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this ordeal bravely. You are no coward, and you may rest assured that you will come to no harm—"

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed suddenly. "Anything the matter, Tinker?" asked Blake, turning his head.

He had an excellent reason for asking, for I had uttered the ejaculation in a gasping voice. You see, Nipper, I was at the window, and I had just seen something which fairly took my breath away.

"A car's just pulled up outside, sir," I exclaimed. "And Sir Vincent Tring is in it!"

"They—they've come for me!" panted Stagg aghast.

"Nonsense!" snapped the gov'nor. "Sir Vincent's visit is nothing extraordinary. He and I are big friends, and it is only natural that he should come to me, considering that a murder has been committed on his estate. Is there anybody with him, Tinker?"

"No, gov'nor; and he's just coming up the steps."

"Stagg, you had better get into the laboratory for the time being," said Sexton Blake calmly. "Until we know how the land lies, it would hardly be wise to allow Sir Vincent to see you here. In any case, I will keep my promise about letting you go unmolested."

Stagg lost no time in getting into the laboratory. His hat was bundled in after him, and the door was then locked. When Sir Vincent Tring was ushered in, Sexton Blake and I were peacefully reading, and we looked rather bored.

Our fresh visitor was almost as agitated as Stagg. Tring is only a young fellow, and he hadn't been married more than a year or two—a fine, splendid man in every respect.

"I'm mighty glad you're at home, Blake!" he exclaimed, wringing the gov'nor's fist. "There's a terrible thing happened down at the Manor! Can you come and investigate?"

"Steady, my dear fellow!" smiled the gov'nor. "I should like to know what I have to investigate first. By your attitude, I imagine that the trouble is rather serious."

"Serious!" groaned Tring. "It's murder, Blake—murder and robbery!"

"Dear me! No wonder you are agitated," observed Blake. "Just let me know the facts, and I will give you my opinion. Has the murderer been arrested, by the way? Do you know who he is?"

"Heaven forgive the man—I do!" replied Tring gravely. "It's that very fact which has struck me so cruelly, Blake. I am more upset about it than I am about the death of young Leighton. I don't know that I ought to say that, but Leighton was a worthless young cub, in any case. You remember Stagg?"

"Of course I do—a splendid fellow!"

"Stagg's the murderer, Mr. Blake!" declared Tring, bending forward. "It's horrible, but it's the truth. Stagg burgled my house last night, and killed Tom Leighton. There's no question about it—the evidence is overpowering. And I'm so disappointed in the man that I shall never trust human nature again. I thought he was as straight as a die—"

"Perhaps he is," interrupted Sexton Blake. "What does he say himself?"

"He said nothing—and for a simple reason," replied Sir Vincent. "When the police went to arrest him, Blake, they found his cottage empty. Stagg has gone, and he's taken his booty with him. The police are scouring the country at this very minute: they may have got him by this time."

Well, I could hardly restrain grinning at that. I'll bet Tring would have been pretty startled if he could have known that Stagg was within ten feet of him at that very moment. The wanted man was probably standing in a crouching attitude, with his ear to the keyhole—and he must have been fairly knocked over by Sir Vincent's words. I felt rather queer myself.

"I know Stagg well," said Blake; "and you will have to show me very convincing proof before I will credit that he committed murder, Tring. He may have been on the wrong path years ago, but he never harmed a living thing. I should like you to tell me the details of the affair."

Tring shook his head.

"That won't take me long, Blake," he replied. "They are overwhelmingly convincing. To begin with, there has been bad blood between Stagg and young Leighton for weeks past. Leighton, by the way, is the son of my steward, and he hasn't been on the estate long. Mr. Leighton himself is broken-hearted, and almost prostrated, because he loved that worthless young rascal, in spite of his failings."

"Is it not possible that this worthless U. J.

young man burgled the Manor himself?" asked Blake quietly.

"No, no! The job was done scientifically—by an expert," replied Tring. "You know as well as I do, Blake, that Stagg was an expert in that profession. Besides, Leighton was murdered; he couldn't have committed suicide. He was stabbed brutally in the chest, leaving a horrible, gaping wound. The man who delivered that blow was as strong as a horse—and it was a left-handed thrust. The doctor has stated that positively. Stagg is enormously strong in his left arm."

"Yes, I am aware of that," agreed the gov'nor. "But the evidence seems to be purely circumstantial, Tring—"

"Heavens above! I haven't half finished yet!" interrupted Sir Vincent. "Will this convince you, Blake? The young fellow was killed by Stagg's own knife—it's sticking in the wound even at this minute, smeared with blood! Furthermore, Stagg fled, and that alone is enough to damn him."

"What attitude have the police taken up?"

"Why, they're looking for Stagg, of course," said Tring. "Who else should they look for? It is assumed that Stagg met young Leighton while he was making off through the wood with his spoils; Leighton tried to stop him, a fight resulted, and Stagg delivered the blow in a fit of panic. I can't believe that he did it in cold blood—I won't believe it! And I want to take you back in my car, Blake. You simply must come down and investigate."

"I'm afraid it won't be much good if the local police have been inflicting their blundering methods upon the scene of the crime," said Sexton Blake. "There won't be anything left worth examining."

"As it happens, the man in charge down there is endowed with real common-sense," remarked Tring. "He knew the job was too big for him, and left everything untouched. Meanwhile, a Scotland Yard man is to go down, but if we're quick we shall get there before him—so you'll have a clear field."

"That is excellent hearing, Tring," said the gov'nor approvingly. "It makes a material difference. I shall certainly accompany you back to Tring Manor, for it will interest me greatly to look upon this mysterious affair. But Tinker will not be able to accompany us."

I had been expecting that, and I wasn't exactly gratified. We couldn't possibly leave Stagg alone, neither could we send him off. And after Sir Vincent's statement, it was quite obvious to me that Sexton Blake would not permit him to go back to Tring Manor yet awhile. That bit of information regarding the knife, in fact, had given me a slight air.

But you know as well as I do, old scout, that a murderer frequently uses somebody else's knife for the crime he commits. It's far more likely that he would do that than use his own. But the police are not always inclined to look at the sensible view of things, they pin their faith upon the obvious.

"I should like to come with you, gov'nor, but there's that other business to attend to," I remarked casually. "Are you going straight off now? Because, if so, you'd better give me your full instructions."

And I strolled over to the window, glancing in an idle manner towards the laboratory door. Sexton Blake nodded at once. He knew exactly what I was driving at.

"Yes, Tinker," he replied briskly. "And you'd better come into the laboratory with me for a few minutes: I just want to show you the things that need clearing up. I must go back with Sir Vincent as soon as possible."

"Right you are, gov'nor— Well, I'm hanged!" I exclaimed, staring down into the roadway. "I'm blessed if Mr. Lennard isn't coming now! He's making straight for our doorway."

Here was a pretty kettle of fish! A man, wanted for robbery and murder, was in our respectable abode, and Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard, was about to pay a visit. In spite of the gov'nor's almost unique position, he would get into serious trouble if the police found out that he was harbouring Benjamin Stagg. For Sexton Blake, in a way of speaking, was making himself an accessory after the fact.

But the gov'nor was as calm as ever, and greeted the chief-inspector cordially as the latter entered the consulting-room unannounced. It was Lennard's habit to drop in when the fancy took him.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Blake!" he said apologetically. "I didn't know you were engaged with a client—"

"That's all right, Lennard," said Blake. "This is Sir Vincent Tring—"

"Why, that's queer!" interrupted the C.I.D. man. "I'm just off to Pellmarsh, near Tring Manor, to look into a murder case. The local people didn't give many details, but it seems to be a pretty serious business. I judge that you came to town in connection with the matter, Sir Vincent? I'm Chief-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Lennard," said Tring, bowing. "Yes, I was just consulting Mr. Blake on that very subject. Perhaps you don't know that the murder took place on my own estate, and that the culprit was in my employ?"

"Stagg?" said the inspector, nodding. "Yes; he's an old friend of ours, at the Yard. We thought he was going straight, though. I expect we shall have him before the end of the day; he won't be cute enough to slip through the net."

Sexton Blake smiled. "It may interest you to know, Lennard, that Sir Vincent and I were about to start for Tring Manor at once, in the hope that we should be able to get down there before the Scotland Yard man," he said. "I'm glad you've been sent on this job, because we know one another—eh?"

The chief-inspector laughed in his turn. "I couldn't have come at a better time," he said. "I just ran in to tell you what was afoot, in case you might be interested, and I find you in the thick of it. I shall be quite delighted to have your co-operation, Blake. You see, Sir Vincent," he added, turning, "I know when I'm in luck. And to have Mr. Blake with me is luck of the very first quality."

"I can quite believe you, Inspector," said Tring. "But I always understood that Mr. Blake and the Scotland Yard gentlemen were—well, friendly enemies."

"That doesn't apply to me," smiled Lennard. "Mr. Blake has helped me on more occasions than I can remember, and as often as not I get the credit for it—which makes me deucedly uncomfortable."

"Since we all seem to be bound for one destination, we might as well travel together," said Sir Vincent. "Would you care to come in my car, Inspector?"

"I can think of nothing better," said Lennard genially.

"Then I will get ready at once," said Sexton Blake.

He gave me a slight nod, and we passed out of the consulting-room.

"It's black against Stagg, Tinker, but I haven't altered my original opinion," whispered the gov'nor quickly. "The finding of that knife is a mere trifle; I take no notice of it. But it is necessary for me to have a look round on the actual spot without a moment's delay."

"And I've got to keep my eye on Stagg, I suppose?"

"Exactly. Don't let him move from these rooms; don't let him go out of your sight," said the gov'nor. "He's perfectly safe here, and I don't mind risking it. If I had the slightest doubt as to his innocence I would act differently; but I think the poor fellow is the victim of a misunderstanding, and his own folly for running away."

One minute later we had reached the laboratory—entering it by the other door, through our sitting-room. We found Stagg in a terrible state of agitation and alarm. He was as white as a sheet.

"For Heaven's sake don't give me up, sir!" he breathed huskily. "I—I've heard nearly everything—"

"You will come to no harm," interrupted Blake softly. "I'm going down to Tring Manor at once, for the especial object of clearing your name, Stagg. Tinker will remain with you here, and you will be quite safe."

Stagg's eyes were round with wonder. "And do you think I'm innocent, sir, after what you've heard?" he panted.

"Yes, Stagg, I do."

"I don't know what to say, Mr. Blake," muttered the man, nearly choking with emotion. "And you're going down there to get me clear! Heaven bless you, sir!"

Five minutes later the gov'nor went off with Sir Vincent Tring and the chief-inspector. And I was left alone with Stagg. Not even Mrs. Bardell knows that he is here, and I'm having a beautiful time of it. Stagg's in bed now—the gov'nor's bed, by the way.

All this happened just after noon, and, of course, I haven't heard anything since, although the gov'nor must have made a terrific lot of investigations by this time. This letter has gone to an appalling length.

and I'm pretty nearly afraid to look at the clock.

So I'll finish up now, and let you know how things went at Tring Manor later on. If my writing has got a bit squiffy towards the end don't blame me. The fire's nearly out, and I'm stiff with cold, and my fingers are aching after slinging the ink for so long.

Still, I've got it off my chest, and I'm satisfied. Now I'll crawl away to bed, and drop this letter into the post the first thing in the morning. So good-bye, old son, until I write again.

Yours, as always,  
TINKER.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Letter from Sexton Blake to Tinker—  
Tring Manor,  
Pellmarsh, Essex.

January 7th.

DEAR Tinker,—Having an hour to spare this evening, I am utilising it by giving you a fairly complete resumé of the events which have taken place since I arrived here early this afternoon with Lennard and Sir Vincent.

I know your little weakness for details, and I don't think you'll have cause to grumble at this epistle. I also have a suspicion that you will steal this letter in the most barefaced manner in order to include it in one of your literary efforts.

Quite apart from all this, however, setting down the facts now will save me making copious notes, for they will all be here. That will kill two birds with one stone, eh?

I may as well tell you at the outset that my conviction regarding Stagg's innocence is in no way changed, except that it is greatly strengthened. I hope you are keeping our friend closely guarded. He won't have to hide away for long, unless I am vastly mistaken.

The evidence—that is, the superficial evidence, which appears to satisfy the police—is very much against the unfortunate Mr. Stagg. However, the evidence can be disposed of, if luck is with me. The inquest, by the way, will be held to-morrow, and I have no doubt that it will be exceedingly interesting.

To get on with the immediate facts, however. Upon our arrival we were introduced to Inspector Skelton, who, I believe, hails from Chelmsford. A remarkably level-headed man, Tinker, although he is rather inclined to make the mistake of looking on the surface instead of beneath the surface.

He lost no time in giving us all the essential details. They are exactly as Sir Vincent described to us in our consulting-room. The burglary was committed during the night, and the murder took place in the dense Tring Woods, on a narrow path which runs through the heart of them. The fatal blow was struck, according to the doctor's evidence, at about midnight.

We made our way to the scene as quickly as possible, for Skelton was anxious to have the body removed to the mortuary. But he thought it wise that our Scotland Yard friend should examine it before removal.

"Rather a keen frost down here," I observed, as we made for the woods across a meadow. "London seems to have escaped it, inspector."

"Is that so, sir?" he replied. "It's been cold here all the morning, although it was mild enough last night. I dare say the wind changed to east in the early hours. It's east now, at all events; and blowing smartly, too."

The frost, indeed, was very sharp, the ground being hard beneath our feet. The wind set our faces tingling, and caused us to walk with more than usual briskness. Sir Vincent, by the way, did not accompany us.

Near the fatal spot we encountered a stolid-looking rural constable. In spite of his wooden expression, however, I think he was rather relieved at our arrival. The spot was certainly a most lonely one. The gaunt, leafless trees of the Tring Woods are not set very closely together, and there was as much daylight on the path as in the open. In mid-summer it is quite another story, of course.

"There's the body, Mr. Lennard," said Skelton, as we turned a bend.

It was lying right in the middle of the path, half on its side. It is not my intention to go into any morbid details. Tinker, but I must mention the most important facts.

In order to see the knife it was necessary to bend down, for it was half hidden by the dead man's coat. The handle projected from the wound its full length, but there was no

sign of the blade, this being driven deeply in. A considerable amount of blood lay upon the path, but this, I need not say, was frozen hard, like everything else. The dead man's coat, indeed, was glistening with frost, and was quite stiff to the touch.

"Pity this path wasn't softer!" said Lennard, looking round. "There's not a footprint to be seen—this hard surface took no impressions whatever. But, of course, it wouldn't with a frost like this."

"I don't think it was freezing when the murder took place, Lennard," I pointed out. "At all events, that is not a point of importance. I shall be rather interested to have a look at the wound itself."

"We'll turn the body over in a minute," said the chief-inspector. "You haven't touched the knife, Skelton?"

"No, sir. I thought there might be some finger-prints on it."

"That's just possible, although there's no sign that I can see," said Lennard. "The blood is smeared over the whole surface of the handle, and has frozen hard. That may be helpful."

Before moving anything the C.I.D. man took careful notes of the body's position, its attitude, and various other details. They would probably be wasted, but there is never any telling which facts are important and which are not. So it is the safest method to take note of everything.

Personally, there was very little of interest to me. Except for the fact that the knife was Stagg's, there seemed no evidence that Stagg was the culprit. The police are absolutely convinced of his guilt because he fled, and because there is absolutely no sign of the stolen property, which, I may as well mention here, consisted of Tring's gold plate and Lady Tring's jewels. A very rich haul.

There is other accumulative evidence, too. Stagg was not on duty last night, and he cannot possibly produce an alibi, for he was presumably in bed. He occupies his cottage quite alone at night, his housekeeper living in the village, and attending daily.

Several other keepers have positively stated that no strangers were about the place last night, and they are quite satisfied that nobody else but Stagg could have committed the crime. For it is quite certain that the actual murderer must have known his way about perfectly, for the darkness was intense, and a stranger would have lost himself in no time. Stagg knows the woods as well as he knows his own palm.

Everything, in fact, leads one to suppose that the head gamekeeper is the culprit. As I pointed out to Stagg himself, he was a fool to run away. Had he faced the position boldly things would have been different. But it is too late now for him to come back. I shall try to establish his innocence first.

And this, young 'un, will not be an easy task.

Lennard finished his examination, and then we gently turned the body over so that it lay on its back instead of its side. Of course, it was stiff, and the task was not at all a pleasant one.

"Be careful how you remove the knife, Lennard," I said. "If I were you I should handle it by the hilt or by the extreme base of the handle. It deserves far more comprehensive scrutiny than we have so far given it."

"Finger-prints, you mean?"

"Not exactly," I replied.

"Your eyes!" grinned the inspector. "I'll warrant you've seen something which I've missed. However, we'll attend to that later."

He grasped the knife firmly with his finger and thumb as near the body as possible, and withdrew it. Rather to my surprise the knife came out without the slightest difficulty. Lennard himself noticed it.

"That's rather queer, isn't it?" he remarked. "I was expecting to have a deuce of a job to pull the thing out. Do you mind holding this, Skelton? And take care not to touch the handle."

Lennard wrapped his handkerchief round the blade, and handed the whole lot to the local inspector, who took it rather gingerly and without much pleasure. I noted that he held it as directed.

"An ugly wound!" said Lennard, after he had pulled the clothing aside. "Good gracious, Blake, it's a positive gap! Just look at it!"

I was already doing so, and now my interest was quite acute, for the wound, Tinker, was altogether much larger than one would have supposed—a great, gaping cavity in the dead man's chest. It was quite obvious that he had died an instant after being struck, for the knife-blade must have penetrated his heart.

"There is something wrong about this," I

observed. "The wound, Lennard, is out of all proportion to the knife. I can't quite see how a single thrust could have caused it."

"Perhaps the murderer jabbed three or four times."

"And struck in the same place continuously?" I said. "That's hardly feasible, old man. No, Leighton was killed by one direct blow, I imagine. And it was not a steady blow, either. The knife entered obliquely, causing one edge of the wound to be ragged and torn. What do you make of that?"

"I should say the hilt caused it."

"Obviously," I replied. "But Stagg's knife has no hilt, Lennard."

I had only noted this fact myself after the knife had been withdrawn; and Lennard now looked up at it quickly and with great interest.

"That's so," he agreed. "At the same time, I don't think it's very important, Blake. The ragged edge might have been caused by the murderer working the knife about afterwards in order to make sure of his victim."

"But why didn't he take the knife away?" I asked. "If he could stop to work it about, as you suggest, he could surely have stopped to remove it. Is it likely, Lennard, that Stagg would leave it here?"

"No, it's not likely; but he did it!" replied the inspector grimly. "That's the point we've got to look at. The man was in a panic, and hardly knew what he was doing, I suppose."

"Why are you so sure that it is Stagg's knife?" I asked, turning to Skelton.

"Oh, several people have identified it, sir!" said the inspector. "The under-keepers have seen the knife in Stagg's possession scores of times; and his own initials are on it, too—engraved on the little plate. There's no question about the ownership of the weapon, sir."

"When was Stagg last seen using that knife?" I inquired.

"Yesterday," answered Skelton. "Two men have agreed upon that point. Stagg was pointing some sticks outside the little woodshed last evening, and the knife couldn't have got into anybody else's possession. But really, sir, I don't see why all this matters. There's no question about the murderer's identity. Stagg has fled, and he wouldn't have done that if he hadn't been guilty. And he didn't make off when we tried to arrest him; he had vanished long before."

"I should like to have a word with those under-keepers," I said.

"Well, there's no reason why you shouldn't," said Skelton. "They're probably within half a mile of us."

As it happened two of Stagg's fellow-workers arrived upon the scene within five minutes, having been drawn there, probably, by our presence. I made myself quite pleasant, and drew the men aside.

"I should just like to ask you one or two questions concerning the weather," I remarked smoothly.

"The weather, sir?" asked one of the men, in astonishment.

"Precisely. This frost, for example. Do you know when it set in?"

The man scratched his head, probably to aid his memory.

"Why, there wasn't any frost until about five o'clock this morning—was there, Jim?" he said, turning to his companion.

"I reckon it set in just before five, Smith," said Jim. "I was getting up at about that time, and I noticed how cold it was. It was the wind, sir. It sprang up quite sudden like, and blew as cold as the North Pole."

"The night previously had been comparatively mild?"

"That's right, sir."

"You are quite sure of this?"

"Yes, sir; and I dare say there are other people who can tell you the same, if you particularly want to know," said Smith, not without some slight sarcasm. "The village policeman didn't come off duty until six, and he'll know all about it."

"Thank you!" I said. "I must have a word with that worthy individual. You are quite certain there was no frost at midnight?"

"Not a trace of it, sir."

Well, Tinker, I continued chatting with the two keepers for quite a time, and I may tell you that the result pleased me. I learned one or two points which gave me much satisfaction.

Lennard had completed his examination by this time—not that it was of much use. The body and the ground near it was singularly lacking in data. There was really nothing to be discovered now that the knife had been removed.

"I'm afraid you've come down for nothing, Blake," observed Lennard, lighting a cigarette. "This isn't one of your cases at all."

it's too straightforward. You're rather keen on mysterious details, eh?"

"This affair is not without its mysterious details, Lennard," I replied. "And if a tip will be of any use to you, I have one to offer. I don't suppose you'll take it, but you might later on."

"What is it, anyhow?"

"Don't waste time in looking for Stagg," I said easily.

The chief-inspector stared.

"Why, do you think he'll slip through our fingers?" he asked.

"That's not the point," was my reply. "Whether he slips through your fingers or not, you needn't bother about him. Benjamin Stagg didn't commit this murder; I can positively assure you of that, Lennard."

"Hang it all, Blake, don't upset me in this way!" protested Lennard. "You don't make such a statement unless you're pretty sure of yourself, I know. But how can you be certain? Stagg's guilt is self-evident."

"Exactly," I agreed; "it is too self-evident."

"But why did he run off in the night?"

"There is no evidence that he did," I replied. "In fact, if you make inquiries, you will probably find that he was here in the early morning. He got wind of the fact that the murder had been committed, heard that he was suspected, and took fright. So, like a fool, he fled."

"Much as I value your advice, Blake, I can't quite credit this," said the chief-inspector, shaking his head. "Don't forget the burglary. We haven't had a look at the Manor yet, but Skelton assures me that the job was done in the most finished style—no clumsy amateur work about it. Stagg is the only man who could have done it, and you must also remember that Stagg was on infernally bad terms with young Leighton. It didn't need much provocation for him to fly at the young fellow. And if Leighton met him while he was loaded up with the stolen stuff—well, violence was the most natural thing."

"Possibly," I agreed. "But if you get Stagg, you'll get the wrong man."

And, with that, I bent down and made another examination of the body, having just remembered something. I was slightly amused, for I knew that Stagg was perfectly safe. The police will not suspect that Stagg has found a sanctuary in our highly respectable dwelling, Tinker. It behoves you to keep our friend's presence there a very close secret.

Lennard was looking rather uncertain when I rose to my feet.

"Can you tell me if young Leighton was in the habit of drinking, Inspector Skelton?" I asked.

"Well, yes, he was," admitted the inspector. "I was having a chat with the local constable, and he told me that the deceased had been seen drunk on more than one occasion. I don't think his loss will sadden the community very much, for he was certainly a good-for-nothing waster. On the estate here he was simply detested, and I haven't heard a good word in his favour."

"Which seems to indicate that he had other enemies in addition to Stagg?" I asked.

Skelton shook his head.

"That's won't do, Mr. Blake," he said. "I wouldn't say that Leighton had any enemies. People disliked him, and held him in contempt. But they weren't antagonistic. Now, in Stagg's case, it's different."

"How so?"

"Well, I'll grant that Stagg was provoked," said the inspector. "For the last month he's had to put up with an infernal amount of interference from this wretched youth. Things became so bad, indeed, that Stagg even appealed to Sir Vincent, and I believe young Leighton was to have left the district next week. However, Stagg did not merely dislike Leighton—he fiercely loathed him. And you can judge what would happen when the two met at midnight, under such dramatic circumstances. Stagg had committed that theft, and to be stopped by Leighton was altogether out of the question. So he killed the fellow."

"Hang it all, Blake, you can't get over it!" added Lennard. "You hold no brief for Stagg, I suppose? You'd better leave this affair to us; it's too simple for you to waste your time on. There's really nothing to be done. The inquest will be held to-morrow, and by that time Stagg will probably be in custody. He'll be sent for trial, and there's an end of it."

I laughed.

"Perfectly simple, eh?" I observed. "So it appears, Lennard. But it isn't. I can assure you the case is decidedly complex. I

U. J.—No. 799.

should like to have half an hour with you, old man, with that knife for company. I fancy you will sing a different tune when we have finished."

The chief-inspector and I spent that half-hour, young 'un, and I wasn't far wrong in what I had said. For Lennard looked very serious, and although he sang no tune, his views had undergone a revolutionary change.

This will leave you somewhat puzzled, I know. But I shall clear matters up when I write you to-morrow, concerning the inquest—that is, if I have sufficient time. I can't promise you a long letter, in any case.

With regard to the burglary, there was nothing to be seen worthy of note. Lennard and I had a look round, but learned nothing further. The job was certainly performed by a man who knew his business. But the burglary, to tell you the truth, is put completely into the shade by the murder. It is a very secondary affair.

Sir Vincent Tring has insisted upon my remaining at the Manor until after the inquest. He doesn't like to believe that Stagg is guilty, but he frankly confesses that he cannot see any other way. Yet I am quite sure that Tring will be overjoyed when my efforts bear fruit. For I intend to prove Stagg's innocence before I am through.

Lady Tring—a most charming girl, Tinker—was very disappointed at not seeing you. She has very lively recollections of your cheerful personality, and has asked me to include her kind regards in this letter. I hope you won't feel too flattered.

I have another interview booked for eight o'clock this evening, and this will be with the doctor who examined the body. And as the time is drawing near for my appointment, I shall have to conclude. In any case, I have set down all that there is to be told.

To-morrow promises to be a most interesting day, and I am looking forward to it with pleasure. I can't guarantee that I shall meet with complete success so early, but I shall at least produce some rather startling evidence at the inquest. Can you guess what that evidence will be? You will be a somewhat remarkable fellow if you can, considering that I have given you no hint.

Let me once more impress upon you the importance of keeping our unhappy guest closely confined to his room. I am trusting to you to supply him with food unknown to the household. Your task is no light one, for Mrs. Bardell, I regret to say, is somewhat addicted to inquisitiveness.

So be on your guard, Tinker, and keep Stagg safe. I promise you that your duties will soon be at an end. Of course, if I cannot possibly establish Stagg's innocence, he will have to go, and take his chance. But I do not even entertain such an event.

There, my boy, that's all for the present.

Affectionately,

SEXTON BLAKE.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Letter from Tinker to Sexton Blake.

Baker Street, London, W.

January 8th.

**M**Y Dear Old Guv'nor,—You deserve ten good-conduct marks for writing so promptly. I got your letter this morning, and I'm terrifically interested. What the dickens have you got up your sleeve for the inquest to-day? Something sensational, I'll bet! If you don't write and tell me all about it, I shall never smile upon you again.

It was decent of you to squat down, and write to me last night, so that I should get the letter this morning. In my present position of warder-in-chief, I'm confined to barracks, so to speak. There's nothing doing, and I'm lonesome. Of course, Stagg is here to keep me company; but he's not a very cheerful merchant. He's so frightfully worried.

When I said there has been nothing doing, I wasn't exactly sticking to the truth. For, as a matter of fact, I have had visitors. And, what's more, I've let them into the secret. I hope you won't call down maledictions upon my innocent head for taking this step. Can you guess who the visitors were?

The one and only Nelson Lee, and the ditto Nipper.

They blew in quite unexpectedly just before luncheon—a most suspicious hour, by the way. I wouldn't dream of suggesting that they came in the hope of obtaining a free feed, but they got one, all the same. They

had just arrived in town, and are planning to stay three days, I believe.

Of course, there was a scramble at first. I shoved poor old Stagg into the laboratory, and told him to imitate a mouse. Then I suddenly remembered that I had written to Nipper last night—posting the letter this morning—describing the full details of the affair. I know you won't mind, guv'nor. Nelson Lee and Nipper are as true as steel, and can be trusted right through.

Naturally, Nipper hadn't got my letter. I expect it's still chasing him about. It was only posted a few hours before he and his guv'nor arrived. He looked decidedly disappointed when I told him.

"Oh, I say, that's rotten!" he said. "Was it important, Tinker? You said just now that it contained some terrific secret—"

"And so it does, my son," I broke in. "Look here, Mr. Lee, I don't know if the guv'nor will approve, but I'm going to tell you something!"

"You are rather mysterious, young 'un," smiled Lee.

"And so would you be, sir, if you had my job!" I replied feelingly. "Do you know that in there"—I nodded to the laboratory door—"resides a man wanted by the police at this present moment for burglary and murder?"

Nelson Lee raised his eyebrows.

"No, I didn't know it, Tinker," he replied; "and, what is more, I suspect that you are attempting to pull my leg—as Nipper would put it. I am quite sure that this most respectable house is no harbour for murderers."

"Well, it isn't," I said. "Poor old Stagg isn't a murderer; I only said that he's wanted for it. He's innocent. But, look here, sir. You'd better read the copy of my letter to Nipper, and then read the guv'nor's letter to me—which arrived this morning. You'll get the hang of the whole thing, then."

"Good idea!" said Nipper heartily.

Well, for the next twenty minutes they were busily engaged in scanning the respective specimens of our lovely calligraphy, Nipper leaning over Nelson Lee's shoulder.

When they had done they were looking highly interested.

"And is Stagg here now?" asked Nipper.

"Yes, in the laboratory."

"Well, I think he's innocent, don't you, sir?" went on Nipper. "Dash it all, the chap can't be guilty! Lennard is an old friend of ours, I know, but he's just as liable to make mistakes as anybody. Besides, Mr. Blake says that he's got some startling evidence for the inquest to-day."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I certainly think that Stagg is innocent," he agreed. "I don't blame Blake at all for keeping him here. The chances are that the man will be cleared within a day or two. I should like to have a word with him, Tinker."

I jumped, and then paused.

"Do you think you'd better, sir?" I asked doubtfully. "I'm thinking of Stagg. He's in a state of nerves, you know, and he might catch a fright. He thinks we're keeping the whole thing mum."

"And so you are, Tinker," said Lee. "Nipper and I don't count. At the same time, it will be just as well to leave Stagg to himself. I feel sorry for him, because I am strongly disposed to believe in his innocence—in fact, I do believe in his innocence! But your master, Tinker, will soon set things right."

"He doesn't seem to have lost much time, sir, anyhow," I replied. "I should like to know what's happening down at Pellmarsh now."

And so I should, too. I expect you're in the thick of the inquest, guv'nor: And I've got to stick up here, wondering and guessing. It's rotten, when you come to think of it! I'm simply nowhere in this blessed case!

Nelson Lee and Nipper didn't stay long after luncheon. Having used our place as a kind of temporary restaurant, they buzzed off—literally—in their car. But as we use their abode in the same way often enough, it's all right.

Now, guv'nor, I want to impress upon you the one solid fact that I'm getting fed-up. I never was a chap who cared for inactivity. And I'm getting that just now—in chunks. There's simply nothing to do, except fetch Stagg his grub, and see that he's comfy.

Strictly speaking, though, all this can't be termed inactivity. Because I've had the very dickens of a job to keep out of Mrs. Bardell's way. She's a quiet old bird, but I think she's guessing things already.

For instance, when I went out to get some breakfast for our guest, she eyed the bag I was carrying—that is, when I came back—

rather suspiciously. And it's a bit of a job to jaw with Stagg in whispers. If you don't hurry things up, I shall have lost my normal voice altogether when I see you again. In fact, I've got so used to whispering, that I almost did it when I was speaking to Mrs. Bardell an hour ago.

I think I shall give old Stage my dinner to-night, and go out and find some for myself, and then repeat the performance at meal-times to-morrow. It'll make things so much easier. But you can't think of everything at once, can you?

Of course, I'm keeping Stage sealed up in the laboratory with hardly a break. I've fixed up that folding bedstead affair, and it suits him all right. And, naturally, I always lock him in when I go out.

What will happen if our dear official friends find out about it, gov'nor? Shall we get penal servitude, or just hard labour? I hope this letter doesn't get unstuck on the way, or I might be in quod by the time you get it.

Everything is all right so far. There hasn't been a hitch. But we can't keep it up for long, gov'nor. And the sooner you send the word that everything's O.K., the better. But there's no need to ask you to hurry up. I know that you're doing wonders down there, anyhow.

One or two people called this morning, but I dealt with them easily enough, because none of them were important. There's no need for me to go into details, because you wouldn't be interested. Besides, I don't want to bother you when you're in the middle of this Stagg business.

The fact is, gov'nor, I'm drying up, because I haven't got anything more to write about, so the best thing I can do is to conclude. When I've got a whole heap to write about, I'm all serene, but I'm as slow as a funeral when I'm obliged to think of every paragraph before I set it down. And it doesn't do your penholders any good, either. I've had a fair-sized supper off two, already.

You can rest quite content that I'm looking after things at this end. So we'll let it go at that, gov'nor. It's quite possible that a letter from you will cross this on the way, but that doesn't matter. In any case, this note doesn't need a reply, that I know of.

So I'll just wait, and consume my impatience with all the patience I can. That looks a bit mixed, doesn't it? Still, you know what I mean. Please give my kind regards to Mr. Lennard, and give him my sympathy also. Because the poor old chap is off-side, by what I can understand.

Well, good-luck, gov'nor, and I hope this affair is soon settled.

Yours affectionately, as always,

TINKER.

P.S.—Pedro, by the way, is looking very fed-up, too—although this isn't very surprising, considering the disgusting amount of grub he packed into his tummy about half an hour ago.—T.

#### THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

##### Letter from Sexton Blake to Tinker.

Tring Manor,  
Pellmarsh, Essex,

January 8th.

DEAR Tinker,—I have, after all, found an opportunity of writing to-day. And I think it is quite possible that this letter will run to a considerable length. For I have a great deal to tell you, and a lull has occurred which will continue for some hours. Everything is now fresh in my mind, and I can do nothing better than set the facts down while I have the chance.

I am writing this in Sir Vincent's library. It is now evening, and the events of the day have been most interesting. The inquest, of course, was the most entertaining episode of all.

I will just tell you what happened.

You have attended so many inquests, Tinker, in the course of our work, that it would be a pure waste of time for me to set down the preliminary details. Neither shall I attempt to describe the full proceedings. I shall simply tell you all that is of interest in the case, and ignore the long-winded repetitions which are usually associated with inquests.

The inquiry was held in the small village school-room, one that has been disused for some years. The jury, largely composed of rural tradespeople and farmers, viewed the body, and then entered the room, looking somewhat awed.

The medical evidence was the first taken.

Dr. Bell, the local medico, is a brisk little man, and he gave his evidence clearly and concisely. He described the exact condition of the body when he had first examined it, and stated that death must have occurred instantaneously.

"Furthermore, there can be no doubt that the blow was a left-handed one," he proceeded. "The angle at which the knife-handle projected, and the very nature of the wound itself, leave no doubt on this point."

"It is your opinion, then," asked the coroner, "that the murderer is a left-handed man?"

"I do not think I will make such a statement as that," replied the doctor. "I merely emphasise the fact that the murderer used his left hand on this occasion. It is also a fact that the blow was delivered with brutal force."

"Have you examined the knife carefully?"

"I have."

"And do you think the murder was committed with that knife?"

Dr. Bell raised his eyebrows. "Surely there can be no question?" he asked. "I certainly do believe that the murder was committed with the knife which was projecting from the wound when the body was found. The wound itself is jagged and large, and I must frankly confess that it puzzled me somewhat at first. It is quite clear, however, that the knife was driven fiercely home, and the wound afterwards enlarged."

"Can you identify the knife?"

"No. I never saw it until yesterday."

That practically concluded the doctor's evidence, and the next witness was Mr. Thomas Leighton, the father of the dead man. He is a frail-looking man, Tinker, and his grief was almost pitiful to witness. Indeed, it was as much as he could do to keep himself under control as he gave his evidence.

"What is there that I can say?" he exclaimed huskily. "My son has been killed—you all know that. He was not, perhaps, an ideal son, but I loved him nevertheless. I beg of you to call the next witness."

"I don't like to distress you, Mr. Leighton," said the coroner gently, "but I should like you to tell the court what you know of your son's movements on the night of the crime. When did you see him last?"

"A few minutes before eleven."

"Where?"

"He was in his own room at my house," replied Mr. Leighton. "Tom was lolling in front of the fire, reading a novel. I bade him good-night and went up to bed. In the morning I learned that he was—dead!"

"You did not hear him leave the house?"

"No."

"You heard no sounds whatever during the night?"

"No; I fell asleep at once."

"Was your son the worse for drink on that night?"

Mr. Leighton's eyes blazed.

"Is this necessary?" he shouted angrily.

"There has been a terrible amount of idle talk circulating concerning my son. I will not deny that he occasionally took more liquor than was good for him, but he was never actually the worse for drink!"

"You have not answered my question, Mr. Leighton," said the coroner quietly. "Was your son the worse for drink on the night of the murder?"

"I don't know. He seemed all right when I bade him good-night," replied the witness. "Why don't the police do their work properly? Why don't they arrest Stagg? He killed my son! He burgled the Manor! It was Stagg who ruined my life and—"

"Please calm yourself, my dear sir!" interrupted the coroner curtly. "Was your son on bad terms with anybody?"

"Yes—with Benjamin Stagg."

"And with nobody else?"

"No."

At this reply there was a distinct murmur of subdued indignation throughout the school-room, and Mr. Leighton flushed deeply.

"That is to say," he went on, in some confusion, "my son had no enemies at all excepting Stagg. Being on bad terms with anybody means very little, after all. I think Tom managed to get himself disliked by a great many people, mainly owing to his somewhat impetuous, interfering nature. But there was no real harm in the lad, and he always acted for the best. He thought he was helping me in my work. With Stagg it is different. Stagg hated my son, and the pair were constantly bickering and quarrelling. Indeed, towards the end Stagg went so far as to utter actual threats."

"Of what nature?"

"Well, he said that he would kick Tom off

the estate with the toe of his boot if he did not go before the end of this present week."

The jury were not particularly impressed by this statement. They probably felt, Tinker, that Stagg was justified in uttering such a threat, for there are quite a good many people down here who would have been glad to see young Leighton booted out of the place.

The rest of Mr. Leighton's evidence was quite uninteresting. He was somewhat exhausted when he had finished, and sank into a chair, asking for water. And there he sat, apparently indifferent to everything.

Dr. Bell was recalled for a moment, and made a statement to the effect that the murder had been committed between the hours of eleven and one—that is to say, in the neighbourhood of midnight. This point was a most important one, and should not have been overlooked in the first place.

Well, Tinker, the next important witness was Inspector Skelton. Having been sworn, he described the burglary—in which, of course, you are not particularly interested. Neither was the jury, for that matter.

Skelton related how he had found the body, and all the other details. And then came his coup d'état, so to speak. The evidence he gave certainly made the jury sit up quite considerably.

"Having obtained a warrant for the arrest of Benjamin Stagg," he said, "I went to Stagg's cottage in order to execute that warrant, for everything pointed to the fact that Stagg was the guilty man. My quest was useless, for Stagg was not to be found. In short, he had fled."

"But is this quite relevant?" asked the coroner.

"It is, sir," replied Skelton grimly. "Having failed in my original object, I searched Stagg's cottage, and in the kitchen, beneath the sink, I found a pail half filled with water. And that water was blood-stained!"

There was quite a little sensation at this. "And what did you infer from that discovery?" asked the coroner.

"Well, sir, it was quite clear that Stagg went home after committing his crime, washed his hands, and fled with his boots."

"But is it quite feasible that the man would leave that water in the pail?"

"We are dealing with facts, sir," replied Skelton. "The bloodstained water was in Stagg's kitchen, and it is an item of important evidence. In addition, I found several blood-smears on the sink. The front room was in a state of confusion, clearly pointing to the fact that Stagg made a hurried flight. On a second examination of the house, I found that Stagg had changed his clothes and had left his working attire behind. And, quite apart from all this, beneath the table of the front room I found a solid silver spoon engraved with a 'T.' That spoon is one of the articles stolen from Tring Manor."

As you can well imagine, young 'un, this evidence was almost conclusive. There wasn't a soul in the school-room who believed in Stagg's innocence after that. The jury, without any further evidence, would have declared a verdict of wilful murder against our unfortunate friend.

But the most important evidence of all had not been given. And I could not help smiling somewhat grimly to myself as I pictured the change which would be wrought when I told the actual truth. For, so far, all the evidence had been of a commonplace character.

The next witness was Smith, an under-keeper. This man testified that the knife found in the wound was the property of Benjamin Stagg. He had seen the knife in Stagg's possession for many months.

"When did you see it last?" asked the coroner.

"On the evening of the murder, sir, just before dark."

"It was in Stagg's possession then?"

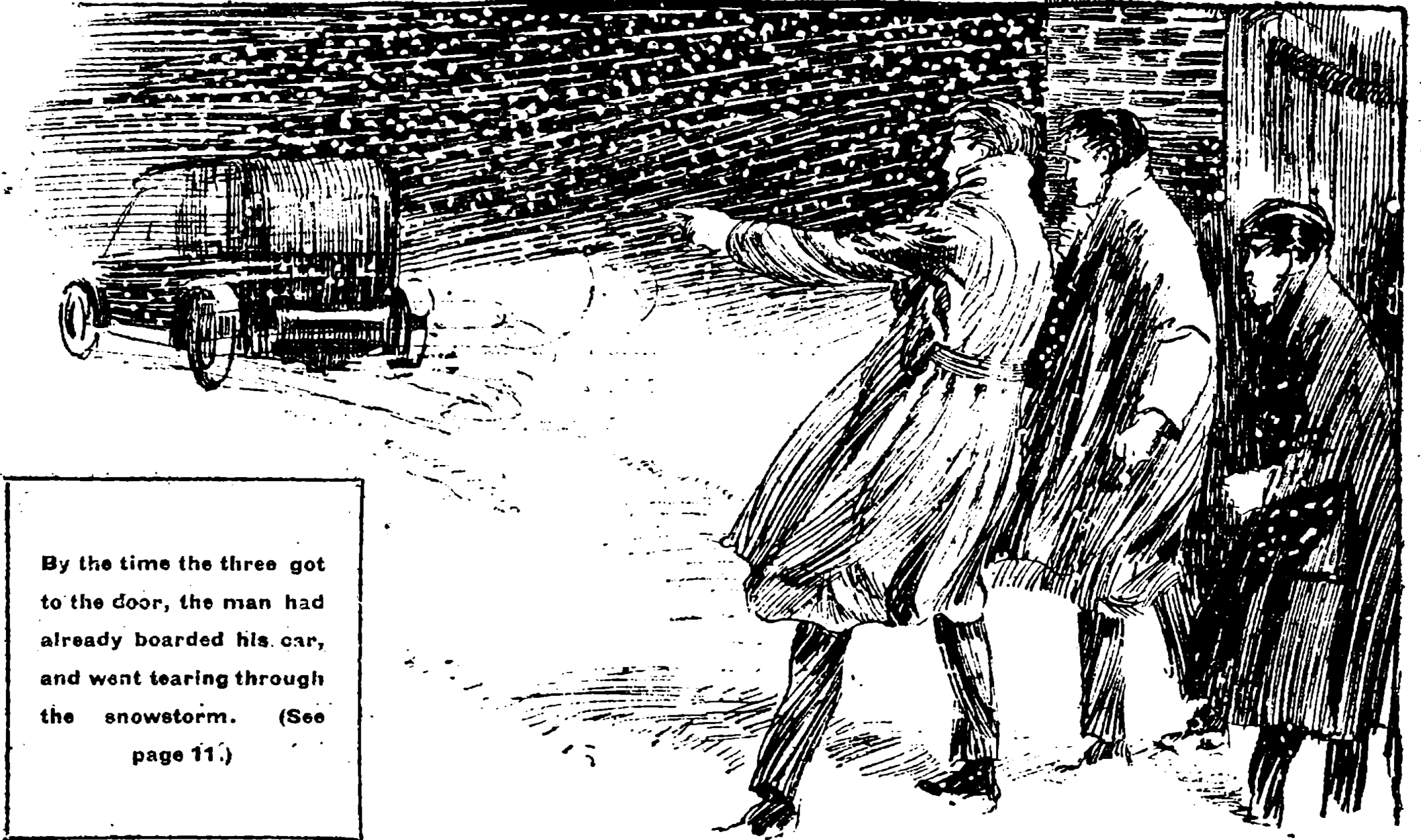
"Yes, sir; he was pointing some sticks with it just outside the door of the woodshed," replied Smith. "That was the last I saw of it, until I identified it in the body."

Other witnesses also made it clear that the knife was the property of Benjamin Stagg, and that it had been in Stagg's possession right up to the time of the murder—or, at least, until the evening of the murder.

After that, Tinker, I was called. And I was not sorry, for I was anxious to throw a different light upon the whole affair. For, with certain facts in my possession, I knew I should have no difficulty in doing this.

"I understand, Mr. Blake, that you are in a position to give certain evidence in connection with this inquiry?" remarked the coroner.

"That is so," I agreed. "It is quite possible



By the time the three got to the door, the man had already boarded his car, and went tearing through the snowstorm. (See page 11.)

that you will think that I am wandering from the subject, but I must beg of you to have patience. In the first place, I should like to tell the court what I saw just outside the doorway of a small woodshed on the border of the woods. I made this examination yesterday, after viewing the body of the deceased in the wood itself. Almost under the window of the shed there stands an old upturned barrel. Immediately overhead, hanging from the gutter, I saw an icicle fully five inches in length."

"Is this quite—er—necessary?" asked the coroner.

"It is an item of vital importance," I replied. "One would suppose that there would be an even pool of frozen water—that is, ice—immediately below that icicle; for it is quite obvious that the water had dripped before the icicle formed. But there was something very curious on the surface of the barrel. Directly beneath the icicle the woodwork showed only a faint film of ice, but on either side of this faint film a considerable ridge projected—in other words, two ridges running parallel. Only one possible conclusion could be drawn from this. Some object of an oblong character had been resting on that barrel before the frost set in. The water dripped from the gutter upon this object slowly. The frost, of course, made a great difference. The icicle began to form, and the drops which fell upon the barrel froze. Now, that object which had been lying there was Stagg's knife, and it is most essential to realize the fact that this knife was there five or six hours after the murder had been committed, for the frost did not set in until five o'clock. There are many witnesses who will testify to that fact. I therefore state it as a positive item of evidence that Stagg's knife was not placed in the wound until the early morning. Thus we arrive at the inevitable conclusion that the murder was committed by quite another weapon, and that Stagg's knife was substituted—obviously in order to shift suspicion."

I needn't tell you, Tinker, that this statement of mine was received with amazement and incredulity. The jury was plainly doubtful, and the coroner pursed his lips and stroked his chin as he bent forward.

"A most ingenious theory, Mr. Blake, but we have no proof whatever!" he exclaimed, shaking his head. "There is no evidence to show that Stagg's knife was lying on that barrel—although it is just as well to remember that Stagg was cutting sticks at that precise spot earlier in the evening. There is nothing remarkable in the assumption that Stagg might have left his knife there by accident. But that is not evidence. We are dealing with facts—"

U. J.—No. 799.

"Quite so," I interrupted calmly. "I have not come here to merely expound a theory. Stagg's knife was closely examined by myself and by Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard, who will doubtless be called later. Now, that knife provided a most interesting study. Dr. Bell has clearly stated that the murder was committed at, approximately, the hour of midnight—when there was no frost whatever. I intend to prove, here and now, that the murder was not committed by means of the weapon which was found in the body. Stagg's knife was not placed in the wound until after six o'clock. Moreover—and this is a most important point—I contend that such a deep, jagged wound could not have been caused by the knife in question. The murderer's actual weapon was longer, broader, and with a widely-projecting hilt."

"I am not quite sure whether this is all in order, Mr. Blake, but it is nevertheless most interesting," remarked the coroner. "The point which I should like explained is this: How did you arrive at the conclusion that Stagg's knife was substituted for the murderer's weapon in the early morning?"

"I will tell you," I replied. "Upon examination, I found that the handle of the knife, on one side, was thickly coated with ice. This ice could not have formed there while the knife was projecting from the wound—simply because the ice was on the underside, as the body was lying. Moreover, there was no water to drip upon it. But the most vital item is that the handle was smeared with blood, and this blood, please mark, was smeared over the ice. That one fact alone is sufficient to prove my contention. I will put the thing clearer. The murder took place at midnight, when there was no frost. I cannot tell you what weapon was used, because I do not know. But at about six o'clock the murderer decided to implicate Stagg. He took that knife from the barrel, without noticing in the darkness that there was ice on one side of the handle. He smeared the handle with blood, and left the weapon in the wound, after having removed the other weapon. It will be readily understood that, under no circumstances, could the knife have been in the body from the moment of death. And knowing that a substitution was made, it is unnecessary for me to point out that there has been some trickery."

The coroner nodded.

"This is all very startling," he observed. "But how is it that the murderer did not notice the ice on the handle of the substituted knife? And how did he pick it up if it was frozen to the barrel-top?"

"I can give no evidence on that point," I replied. "It is safe to assume, however, that the murderer picked up the knife in the gloom

of the early dawn—perhaps before the dawn. I have reason to believe that the blade was projecting over the edge of the barrel. Therefore, a sharp wrench would pull it free at once, and the murderer could scarcely have been in a peaceful state of mind. It is most probable that he did not notice the ice at all."

After one or two minor statements I concluded my evidence, and I found everybody regarding me with great curiosity. Mr. Leighton was greatly impressed, and seemed more agitated than ever. But this was scarcely surprising, because I am quite sure that he wants to believe Stagg guilty.

Lennard was called next, and he corroborated all my statements in detail. For, Tinker, I had taken the inspector into my confidence, and he was thoroughly convinced that my conclusions were sound.

One or two other witnesses testified that the weather had been mild at midnight—the hour of the murder—and that a keen east wind had sprung up towards five o'clock in the morning, accompanied by a sharp frost.

It is impossible for me to give you the result of the inquest in this letter, because no result has been reached. Lennard asked that the inquiry should be adjourned, so that the police can gather further evidence. And so it has been adjourned, and the worthy Lennard is now wondering how on earth he is to get on the track of the real murderer. He has certainly abandoned Stagg, and our guest is comparatively safe. But you must be just as careful as ever, my boy.

It would not have mattered a great deal if I had reserved my evidence until later on, if the coroner's jury had brought in a verdict of wilful murder against Stagg. The verdict of a coroner's jury is not of much consequence, as you are aware, but I am hopeful of getting this affair settled almost at once.

And now, young 'un, since I find that I have time, I intend to add a page or two to this letter, describing the events which took place immediately following the inquest. For I am quite certain that those events are of the first importance in this inquiry.

I think I told you that Mr. Leighton is a somewhat frail gentleman, and that his condition was not improved by his terrible worry and grief. Well, Tinker, at the adjournment of the inquest, Mr. Leighton came very near to collapsing. The strain had been rather too much for him.

"You must allow me to see you home, my dear sir," I said, taking his arm. "Or perhaps you would like me to order a carriage—"

"No, no!" broke in Mr. Leighton, attempting to pull himself together. "It is very kind of you, Mr. Blake; but I have held up so far, and I will hold up now."



But I insisted, and before long we were both walking slowly through the park towards the steward's private house. This turned out to be a most charming residence, although not large.

Mr. Leighton asked me to enter with him, so that I might partake of a little light refreshment. I agreed at once, and we both seated ourselves in his old-fashioned lounge-hall. This apartment is filled with old curios and antique furniture. A most interesting hall, Tinker, in every way.

A big fire was roaring in the open grate, and Mr. Leighton insisted that I should draw my chair up before it and get thoroughly warmed before going on to the Manor. By this time he had recovered his composure to a certain degree.

"This is a terrible business altogether, Mr. Blake," he said, passing a hand over his brow. "I don't know how it will end, I am sure." I must honestly confess that I was startled by your evidence, for I had been convinced of Stagg's guilt. You appear to have knocked a hole in the bottom of the whole theory."

"It was the knife which aroused my suspicions right from the very start," I replied quietly. "It was too small for the wound, Mr. Leighton—"

"I beg of you to change the subject, Mr. Blake," said my companion. "As you will realise, I am terribly, terribly upset. My son was not all that he might have been, but he was my son, for all that. And his loss is an awful blow to me. May I offer you a little whisky or brandy?"

I suspected that he was in need of a stimulant himself, but did not like to partake of it without me joining him. So I at once complied, and he walked across to the old oak sideboard, and busied himself with the decanters.

I seized the opportunity to glance very closely at the wall which immediately faced me. For, to tell the truth, some objects which hung there had attracted my attention as soon as I set foot in the place.

Now, my dear Tinker, I don't want you to jump to any rash conclusions. But these

objects which claimed my interest were nothing more nor less than two formidable looking daggers. They were there for ornament, but had not been manufactured originally for the purpose of adorning the wall of a private country house.

Huge things, strong and stout, with heavy hilts and glittering blades. Now, it was rather astonishing that these daggers should be here. A mere coincidence, probably, but I could not help seeing that one of these daggers exactly fitted the picture—the mind-picture—I had formed of the murderer's actual weapon.

Nor was this all. I was greatly struck by the fact that one dagger was spotless, whilst the other revealed obvious signs of dust. Why should one be dusty and the other clean? It was significant in the extreme.

But I did not form any hasty conclusion. This matter required closer attention, and I rose to my feet and strolled over to the window. My back was towards Leighton, and if he glanced round—as I believe he did—he undoubtedly assumed that I was inspecting the landscape.

Actually, I was gazing at the daggers out of the corner of my eye, for they hung on the wall near to the window. I dare say you have noticed that when a picture is moved after having been hanging for a considerable time, that the wallpaper is of slightly darker colour, owing to the fact that the main surface has faded, whilst the protected portion retains its original shade.

It was just the same in this case. Under the edge of the clean dagger I saw a distinct mark of a darker tint—proving, Tinker, that the weapon had been recently taken down and replaced. But it had not been replaced in precisely the same position as it had formerly occupied.

There is no object to be gained by beating about the bush. I will tell you at once that I am of the positive opinion that that dagger was the weapon which caused the death of young Tom Leighton.

Is his father the murderer?  
No, my boy, assuredly not. Apart from

the fact that a father seldom murders his own son, Mr. Leighton is not physically capable of having delivered the brutal blow which caused the young fellow's death. He simply could not have done it, and so I have ruled him out of my reckoning.

At the same time, I know very well that Mr. Leighton knows a great deal more than he has admitted. He can, I believe, tell the whole truth; and there is some sinister secret here. I have progressed wonderfully upon the whole, and I mean to have no rest until I have settled the matter completely.

I did not let him see that I had even glanced at the daggers, and accepted a whisky-and-soda with a polite word of thanks.

"Do you intend to remain down here, Mr. Blake?" asked my host.

"Well, it all depends," I replied guardedly. "There is just a chance that I shall return to London at once, leaving the police to settle the affair off their bat. I think they are capable of doing so."

"Quite—quite!" he said, with more hastiness than caution. "I really think that your powers are wasted on such a case as this, Mr. Blake. I suppose you have dealt with investigations of this kind fairly frequently?"

"On the contrary, Mr. Leighton, I do not remember another case with a frozen knife as a valuable clue," I replied. "Some years ago a colleague of mine was very successful in probing a mystery concerning a frozen revolver, but that case differed from this very materially. I am referring to my friend, Mr. Nelson Lee—"

"Nelson Lee!" ejaculated Mr. Leighton abruptly.

He half rose from his chair, and then sank back with a confused laugh.

"You are acquainted with him?" I inquired.

"No, no, Mr. Blake—dear me, no!" he replied quickly. "But I have, of course, frequently seen Mr. Lee's name in connection with criminal investigation. A remarkably clever man, I believe—almost as clever as yourself."



Stagg looked worried and haggard, and placed his hand to his head. "I am perfectly innocent," he muttered hoarsely. "I know nothing about the affair." (See page 3.)

"You are too complimentary, Mr. Leighton," I said lightly. "Mr. Lee is one of my oldest friends, and we occasionally work in unison. There are some cases which are better dealt with—"

"Yes, yes, of course," interrupted my host. "Mr. Lee's help would be of great value, I have no doubt. I was wondering if any news has arrived concerning Stagg; for, in spite of your statement, it is my conviction that Stagg is implicated in this dreadful tragedy. He has, at least, decamped with my employer's stolen property."

"Appearances certainly point in that direction," I agreed.

Mr. Leighton sipped his whisky somewhat noisily, but this was because of his agitation. Indeed, I distinctly heard the glass clink against his teeth two or three times. He was greatly upset, greatly confused. Why?

Why should the mention of Lee's name have caused such a change? Leighton's abrupt interruption hinted that he was most anxious to change the subject. I was somewhat puzzled. It was certainly queer that Nelson Lee's name should have caused the marked agitation in Mr. Leighton.

I came to the conclusion, Tinker, that it was high time for me to depart. I had only dropped in for a minute or two, remember. But, even as I was rising to my feet, the door opened, and a maidservant appeared.

"Well, what is it?" asked Leighton testily. "A gentleman to see you, sir," replied the girl.

She came forward, and laid a card before her master. Mr. Leighton glanced at it, turned a shade paler, and hastily rose to his feet.

"Yes, yes, show the gentleman in to me," he said. "Show him into the morning-room, Jane. You are going, Mr. Blake? I am sorry you could not stay longer. I dare say I shall only be a few minutes with this caller, who has come from Chelmsford on a matter connected with the estate."

But I insisted upon going, and I saw the relief in Mr. Leighton's eyes as I shook his hand. The lounge-hall was really shut off from the entrance-hall, and when I went to fetch my hat and stick I passed the fresh visitor, who was being escorted to the morning-room by the maid.

I don't think the gentleman saw me squarely, but I certainly saw him. And it did not increase my good opinion of Mr. Leighton to discover that he had told me a deliberate falsehood.

For the caller was not from Chelmsford, neither had he come on a subject connected with the estate. For I recognised him at the first glance. The man was no less a person than Mr. Howard Moore.

In case your memory fails you, young 'un, I will remind you that Mr. Howard Moore is probably the most rascally moneylender in the West End of London. He is a particularly slimy scoundrel, and blackmail is one of his favourite pastimes.

Well, here was a curious state of affairs. Why had this moneylender come here? Why did he stalk down the hall as though he owned the whole property? And what exactly is Mr. Leighton's position? Where does he fit into the general plan?

These questions will be answered, I hope, in the very near future. I can assure you, however, that Leighton is not the murderer. How his son came to be killed is still a mystery to me, and I do not mind confessing it.

I shall now bring this letter to a close, since there is nothing else to record. It is still comparatively early in the evening, but I do not think that any definite action will be possible until to-morrow. I may mention that I have already despatched a wire to Mr. Nelson Lee.

There is just another point which might interest you—it will, at least, set you thinking. I am beginning to suspect that the rose-trees in Stagg's garden are not entirely unconnected with the case. Cryptic? Well, perhaps it is, but see what you can make of it.

Affectionately,  
SEXTON BLAKE.

**THE FIFTH CHAPTER.**

Telegram from Sexton Blake to Nelson Lee.

NELSON LEE, Ancient House, St. Fränk's College, Sussex.—Can you manage to run up here at once?

Am engaged upon important case, and your co-operation is absolutely necessary.  
U. J.—No. 799.

Please do your best, and let me know by wire when may expect you. It is vitally important.

SEXTON BLAKE.  
Tring Manor, Pellmarsh, Essex.

**THE SIXTH CHAPTER.**

Telegram from Nelson Lee to Sexton Blake.

Sexton Blake,  
Tring Manor,  
Pellmarsh,  
Essex.

NIPPER and self starting at once by car. Will arrive between seven and eight. Regret delay in replying, but your telegram had to be re-directed from St. Franks.

NELSON LEE.

**THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.**

Letter from Nipper to Tinker.

Tring Manor,  
Pellmarsh,  
Essex.  
January 8th.

MY Dear Old Chief-Warder,—Talk about hustle! I give you my early-bird—Welsh for "word"—that the gov'nor and I have been on the go ever since we left you at lunch-time to-day! I didn't guess then that I should be writing to you this evening.

But you see, old top, things have been happening. I believe that Mr. Blake has already written to you this evening—just before we arrived—and you'll probably get this marvellous literary effort by the same post. That will be quite decent, because you'll have a connected account of what's been happening.

You see, your gov'nor has told you in his letter all about the inquest, and about that dagger in Mr. Leighton's house, and the visit of Moore, the moneylender. Well, I shall continue the yarn practically from that point. But on second thoughts I don't suppose you'll get this until to-morrow evening, because to-night's post will certainly be gone by the time I've got it done—if it isn't gone already. Still, it doesn't matter much. To tell you the honest truth, I'm-fed-up. I'm disgusted. I'm in a frightful temper. I feel like chucking things at somebody. Why? If you'll pay attention I'll just tell you.

Early this evening, at about tea-time, Nelson Lee and I were at our rooms in Gray's Inn Road, wondering which theatre to go to. We couldn't quite make up our minds. As it happened, we didn't have to, because a telegram arrived which put an end to all such gay plans.

Your gov'nor, it seems, sent my gov'nor a wire—to St. Franks, of course. He didn't know that we were in London, and the wire chased us to Gray's Inn Road. Mr. Blake wanted Nelson Lee to go down to Tring Manor as soon as possible. Well, what did we do?

The gov'nor promptly sent a telegram, we jumped into our car, and by half-past seven we arrived in Pellmarsh. It's a good thing this place isn't far from London, or we couldn't have been on the scene so promptly.

I don't know what the weather's like in London, but it's snowing like the merry dickens down here. No ordinary snowstorm, mind you, but a roaring-blizzard. Mr. Blake said it won't last long, though, so that's one comfort.

Sexton Blake was delighted to see us, and was waiting on the terrace here when we arrived. At that hour, I'd better explain, there was no sign of snow at all, and the night was cloudy, though fine.

"Upon my soul, Lee, this is splendid!" Blake exclaimed, as he wrung the gov'nor's hand. "I knew that you would do your best, but I didn't hope to see you here before the morning at the earliest."

"I should have been here sooner if your wire had come direct to Gray's Inn Road," replied Nelson Lee. "I've brought Nipper with me—mainly to keep him out of mischief. And there's just a chance that he might be useful."

Sexton Blake greeted me cordially, and then we passed inside, leaving the car to find its way round to the garage. Then we were introduced to Sir Vincent Tring and

Lady Tring. I had pictured to myself a white-haired old baronet and a kindly old lady.

And, lo and behold!—as they say in the fairy-tales—I found myself being greeted by a most cheerful young fellow and an extremely pretty girl. For Lady Tring isn't anything but a girl, after all. You and your gov'nor know a thing or two, my son. Tring Manor is a fine place, and I wouldn't mind staying here for a month. I'm jolly glad we've made these new friends.

But I'm getting a bit off the track, aren't I? You mustn't blame me if I'm long-winded, because, as I said, I'm feeling fed-up, and I've got two or three hours to kill. So I may as well kill them by trying to bore you.

The introductions over, the gov'nor and I were escorted to Sir Vincent's library by Sexton Blake. I think he had already given the tip to Sir Vincent that he wanted to have a word with the gov'nor on the quiet. At any rate, Sexton Blake was jolly mysterious.

"Quite naturally, Lee, you want to know why I have asked you to come down at such short notice," he said briskly, proffering his cigarette-case. "Well, old man, I'm not going to tell you just yet. This isn't a formal visit, but a most informal one, and Sir Vincent quite understands."

"But what's the game, sir?" I inquired curiously.

"Apparently, Nipper, Mr. Blake is not feeling inclined to be communicative at the present moment," smiled Nelson Lee. "But you can be quite sure that he has an excellent reason, and we shall know everything in good time."

"But we know quite a lot already, sir," I remarked. "About the murder, for example, and about Stagg being at Baker—"

"Dear me!" interrupted Blake. "I can see that you have already called upon Tinker. So he has told you everything? Well, all the better, because it has saved me the trouble. But that's not why I am slightly mysterious. I want you to come with me, Lee."

"Where to?"

"To where I lead you," replied the gov'nor, grinning.

"I suppose I'm out of this, then?" I asked gloomily.

"Not unless you like, Nipper," said Blake. "There's no earthly reason why you shouldn't come, if you guarantee that you'll keep quiet."

And we started off without delay. It was a risky thing to do, you know. We might have been going miles away, for all we knew, and then we should have been late for dinner.

We plodded through the chilly night, and took a kind of footpath over the park. Where we were bound for was a mystery—as big a mystery as our purpose. The wind blew icily, and I drew my overcoat more tightly around me.

To make our happiness quite complete, snow commenced falling in large quantities. That was the beginning of the blizzard I mentioned a little time ago. And it wasn't any half-and-half affair. The snow whirled down in clouds, covering the hard ground with a film of whiteness in next to no time.

"I don't want to grumble, sir, but I hope we're nearly there," I remarked casually.

"Yes, Nipper, we are nearly there, and let me remind you that it is not necessary to hear your voice to be sure that you are with us," replied Sexton Blake. "In other words, I want you to be very quiet, and not to talk at all."

"Anything you like, sir!" I agreed. "I suppose this is a new kind of game." Very shortly after that we saw the lights of a house looming out of the clouds of snow ahead. And we were almost upon the building before we knew it. Sexton Blake opened a front gate, and we all passed into somebody's garden. Obviously we had no business there, for we didn't march up to the front door, as respectable people mostly do.

Instead we cut across a strip of lawn, went round the angle of the building, and found ourselves facing a long, narrow window. It wasn't the window which let daylight into a room, but merely an ornamental affair, with stained glass, and was a fixture.

Just for a minute I thought we'd come to a chapel, or a school-room, or something. But I was wrong. It was a private house, and the window was one of a pair, which adorned a kind of lounge-hall, with the main window in between. This, by the way, was heavily and thickly curtained.

"I have brought you here, Lee," whispered

Sexton Blake, "because it is quite possible to see clearly into the apartment through this stained glass. It is quite clear, as you will notice, but red, and you must take no notice of the lurid effect."

"But, my dear man, what's the idea?" asked the gov'nor.

"Within this room you will see somebody sitting in an easy-chair," replied Blake softly. "Just climb on the sill and have a look. I want you to tell me if you have seen that man before, and, if so, I should like to know his name."

"Oh, I see!" smiled Nelson Lee. "A question of identification?"

He climbed upon the sill as requested, and for some moments gazed through the stained glass of the window intently, the snowflakes whirling about his head and shoulders, looking blood-red in the light which came through the coloured glass. It was rather a weird scene.

"Buck up, gov'nor!" I breathed, shivering.

He didn't hear me, of course, but he climbed down almost at once, as it happened. And I saw him nod to Sexton Blake. We withdrew from the window for several yards, and stood in a little group behind the shelter of a holly-bush. I know it was a holly-bush, because it had a slight argument with my face.

"You set me rather a difficult task this time, Blake," murmured the gov'nor. "My memory has been strained, but I have placed the fellow."

"Positively?"

"Yes, although I haven't set eyes upon him for close upon ten years," replied Nelson Lee. "His name is Roger Burke. Am I right?"

"His name is not Roger Burke here," said Sexton Blake. "But if you are really sure, Lee—"

"I'll stake my life on it! Not only the facial characteristics, but also that small scar on his left cheek, tells me his identity," said Lee. "He is Roger Burke, and when I last saw him he was in the dock in the Old Bailey."

Sexton Blake slapped his thigh.

"A true shot!" he murmured. "Somehow, I thought I was right, Lee. This man is named Leighton here, and he is Sir Vincent Tring's estate-manager. It is his son who has been murdered, as you know. This afternoon I happened to mention your name to him, and by his expression and manner I gathered that you were not exactly on brotherly terms with him."

"It was I who caused him to be sentenced," said the gov'nor grimly.

"As I suspected; and that is why I wanted you to come down," went on Blake. "I could have approached the police, of course, and they could have searched their records; but I wanted to do this quietly, without allowing Leighton—or Burke—to take the alarm. How long was his sentence?"

"Three years' penal servitude."

"What for?"

"An ingeniously-devised burglary," answered Lee. "But it was only one of his jobs; he had been at the game for several years, and was an expert cracksman of the scientific variety. He must have been out for seven years, and I should say that he has reformed."

"I don't think so," was Sexton Blake's dry reply. "At all events, he has broken out again. No doubt he obtained this position here by means of fraudulent recommendations and references. But Sir Vincent, I think, has always been satisfied with the man—for he is a capable and an excellent manager."

Well, old son, we continued our little discussion against that tree for about fifteen minutes. I believe it was your gov'nor's idea to see which one of us would freeze first. I think I won. Blake told us about the daggers on the wall of Leighton's lounge-hall, and about the burglary.

"I think there is little doubt that Leighton is the man who broke into Sir Vincent's house," concluded Sexton Blake. "The thief, at all events, was a man who knew his business from A to Z, and a man who was fully acquainted with the habits of Tring's household, and with the plan of the house. Leighton fits in with that description far better than Stagg—who very seldom went to the Manor at all, and certainly knew nothing of Tring's private business. Leighton, on the other hand, knew quite a lot. And we mustn't forget those daggers. This man can tell us everything, I believe, if he will only speak."

"But I don't see how you can get him to speak," said Lee. "The only way is to have him arrested on suspicion—"

"I don't think it would be wise to go to that length just at present," interrupted Sexton Blake. "I can't bring myself to believe that Leighton has been assuming his grief. He is, in fact, worried and troubled to a point almost beyond endurance. An arrest, I am sure, would be followed by a complete collapse; and that might mean brain fever and death. It is my idea to face the fellow squarely, unofficially, and get the truth from him."

"H'm! That's not at all a bad idea," agreed Nelson Lee.

Your gov'nor isn't a man to waste time, old scout. Before I knew what we were up to we had arrived at the front door and Sexton Blake was ringing the bell. A maid-servant opened the door, and was nearly blown to the back of the house by the rush of wind and snow. However, she valiantly held the door open until we had entered, and then took Sexton Blake's card.

Two minutes later she returned from the lounge.

"Yes, Mr. Leighton will see you, sir," she said.

Blake led the way, telling the maidservant that it was not necessary for her to escort us into her master's presence. A wave of cheerful warmth came out of the big apartment as Blake entered, and I caught a glimpse of a cheerfully blazing fire.

"I didn't expect to see you again this evening, Mr. Blake," I heard Leighton exclaim, in cordial tones. "Come in and sit down. It's turned out to be a very wild night, and the fire is—"

The man's voice faltered, and he broke off and uttered a hoarse, alarmed cry. For, at that moment, he had caught sight of Nelson Lee. I saw his face, and it expressed sheer horror and fright.

Perhaps you'll ask why? Well, it was Nelson Lee who got him "jugged" in the first place, and his guilty conscience did the rest. He had committed burglary only a night or two back, and the gov'nor had napped him for burglary years ago. Lee's presence now naturally filled him with wild alarm. He probably believed that we had come to arrest him on the spot.

And he wasn't taking that medicine!

He acted, in fact, in a manner which a Yankee would call slick. Whether it was sheer coolness or blind panic I don't know; but he twirled on his heel like a top, dashed for a door, and dived through it—that is, through the doorway. I'm not suggesting that he was a wizard. Before Sexton Blake could interfere, the door slammed, and we heard the key turned in the lock.

"Upon my soul!" rapped out Blake angrily.

We rushed to the other door, and passed out into the entrance-hall. But we were in a strange house, and didn't know our way about. As a consequence, we hadn't the slightest idea where we were going, and blundered down a passage, and finally found ourselves in a conservatory.

Here we paused to take our bearings, and to listen. The wind was howling, and the snow sounded audibly upon the glass. By this time we had wasted several minutes, and just as we were about to explore farther, we heard an unmistakable buzzing roar.

"A motor-car!" snapped Blake. "Man alive! He'll get away from us!"

Your gov'nor tried to open the outer door; but it was locked, and there was no key. So we dashed back, with the intention of getting out into the road, and heading Leighton off as he drove out. He must have worked like a demon to get the car going in such a short time; but I suspect that it was all in readiness for instant use, in case of emergency.

Of course, we didn't get him. I've already told you that I'm feeling fed up—and now I know why. We got out into the road just in time to see the car charge out of a little alley, and shoot down towards the main-road. The snow was massing upon the ground by this time, and it was descending in dense clouds.

"I don't think you need any further proof, Blake," shouted Nelson Lee, above the roar of the wind. "The fellow wouldn't have fled if he had been innocent."

"We must give chase in your car, Lee," said Blake rapidly. "Leighton will have a start, but your car can travel at double the speed—and those wheel-marks will not be obliterated by the time we get on the trail."

Not another word was said. We shot off like cross-country runners, arrived at the Towers in a breathless state, and dragged out the car in next to no time. And then we careered off, the headlights—huge electric things—casting a blinding glare on the dazzling snow.

We picked up the tracks of Leighton's car without difficulty, but we were only just in time. Already, in places, the snow had drifted over, obliterating everything. It was simply shocking, the way the snow came down. The roads were one solid mass already.

Nelson Lee was driving, and he let her go at a really dangerous speed. If any other vehicle had happened to meet us during that ride, it would have been all up. Even those brilliant headlights were almost useless in the driving fog of snow which swirled around us.

But as we proceeded we noticed that the car-tracks of our quarry were growing clearer and more distinguishable. In short, we were rapidly gaining. And then the catastrophe happened. It wasn't to be wondered at, considering the nature of the chase—and considering, also, that we were on strange roads.

I could have sworn that we were on a long straight, level stretch. And then, without the slightest warning, we rammed a hedge. There was an abrupt turning in the road, and the corner was exposed to the full force of the storm. The tracks just there were invisible, and the gov'nor had had nothing to guide him.

It was all over in a second. I found myself floundering in snow, quite unhurt, but confused. The car was listing heavily to port, and down by the bows, Sexton Blake and Nelson Lee were still on it, and also unhurt.

"We've run off the road, Blake!" shouted the gov'nor. "I'm hanged if I could see a thing! But nothing seems to be hurt, fortunately. If we can only get the car going again, we shall—"

"Quite hopeless, old man!" yelled Blake. "It'll take us an hour to extricate the car, by what I can see of it."

And it did. The giddy thing wasn't even scratched, and the damage amounted to exactly nil. This, as you'll agree, was most fortunate. But we had lost our man—and that was most unfortunate.

Our united efforts, to say nothing of the efforts of the engine, were required to get the car out of the snowdrift; for that was the cause of the trouble. We had plunged slap into one without knowing it—one of those deceptive rosters, that looks like the solid road until you strike it.

At last, however, we got the old car going, and drove back to Tring Manor, calling at the village first, however. Here we picked up Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard.

And now, at this moment, while I'm writing to you, the gov'nor and Sexton Blake are acquainting Lennard with all the facts. By this time, no doubt, they'll have done so.

Curiously enough, the gov'nor has just been in, and has given me another item of cheerful news. The telegraph-wires near Pellmarsh have given up the ghost, and Lennard can't even communicate with the county police.

But he's just going off on another task—and that is to search Leighton's house. After the man's hurried flight, Lennard feels himself justified in taking decisive action. Personally, I don't suppose he'll find much in the house; but there's no telling.

Sexton Blake is going with him, but I prefer to remain here in front of a warm fire. Snow-storms are all very nice, but I've had all I want of snow for this evening. I know when I've had enough.

Sir Vincent has just come in, and as he seems inclined to talk I'll break off for a little while, and then finish up this letter by telling you the result of the chief-inspector's search when he comes in.

Elapse of one hour. Same scene. Your gov'nor and Mr. Lennard arrived about ten minutes ago, looking like animated snowballs. But they are cheerful, and their grins are large. Whyfore this thushness? When I add that Sir Vincent's grin is larger than those of Sexton Blake and the inspector, you'll guess that something has happened.

Every item of the stolen property, in fact, is now back in the possession of Sir Vincent and Lady Tring.

"We've found the whole job lot of stuff in a cupboard upstairs," said Lennard, standing with his dorsal aspect to the fire, and rubbing his hands with satisfaction. "How the thunder you managed things, Blake, is a mystery to me. I don't mind confessing that I hadn't the slightest suspicion against Leighton."

"Neither had I until after the inquest," replied Sexton Blake. "As you know, I took Mr. Leighton home, and while I was there I used my eyes and ears to such effect that you now see the fruits."

Lennard grunted.

"But I don't see how you did the trick,"

he replied. "I think your eyes and ears, old man, must be of a special brand. Well, it's not for me to grumble. We've got the loot; and before long we'll get the man. He can't have got far in this infernal storm."

"I don't know about infernal, inspector," I grinned. "I always thought that infernal meant something hot. But, of course, there's no accounting for tastes. If you think a blizzard is hot—"

"I don't want any of your cheek, my lad," said Lennard, wagging his head. "As I was saying, we shall soon get Leighton himself. But where will that take us? I don't see the way clear, you know, Blake. We've almost proved that Stagg isn't the murderer, and now we know that he's not the thief. You were right from the start—hanged if you weren't! Stagg's innocent, and he probably sheered off because he got into a funk. But who's the murderer?"

"He is not Stagg, and he is certainly not Mr. Leighton," was Sexton Blake's reply. "The mystery is hardly solved yet, Lennard, and it will not be solved until Leighton is captured and compelled to tell his story."

And so, old son, for the time being there's nothing further to be done. I don't know how long it will be before Leighton is collared, but the inspector seems cheerful enough. Let's hope the whole business is cleared up soon. In any case, it's a big feather in your gov'nor's cap. He has conducted the whole investigation in his usually masterly style.

And now, as dinner is practically ready—Lady Tring ordered it late for this evening in order to suit all parties—I think I'd better dry up. If I don't, my fountain pen will. It's just about empty already—something like an important section of my anatomy. I intend to fill it up without delay—but not with ink.

Your part in this affair hasn't been exciting, but you mustn't worry about that. You have been doing highly necessary work, and your name will go down to posterity in connection with this case with full honours.

So, for the present, I bid thee farewell, sweet one.—Your sincere chum,  
NIPPER.

**THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.**

**Letter from Mr. Benjamin Stagg to Tinker.**

East London.

**D**EAR Mr. Tinker,—I expect you will be very surprised to get this letter from me, and I hope with all my heart that you will forgive me for slipping away as I did. But I wasn't thinking of myself, sir—I swear I wasn't!

I didn't mean to write at all. I wanted to go straight away so that you wouldn't be bothered no more. But something's happened to-night, and I feel that you ought to know.

It's queer, Mr. Tinker, and I believe I'm just a little excited. It seems to me that something must be wrong, and if my innocence can be proved because of it, I shall go mad with relief and joy. I know I haven't made any mistake, as sure as I've sat down to write this letter.

But I'm afraid I'm getting muddled, sir. It will be better for me to tell you exactly how I went away, and what happened afterwards. I only hope that Mr. Blake and you won't be angry.

I shall never forget the wonderful kindness of Mr. Blake in letting me stay at Baker Street. He's trying to prove my innocence even now, and I'm beginning to think that I was a fool for running off.

But, as you know, sir, I was in a very gloomy mood this evening. You tried your best to cheer me up, but it wasn't any good. I got sort of depressed, and gave up all hope of ever being able to go back to Tring Manor a free man. I told myself that I should end up by being sent to prison. And I'm innocent of everything; that's what makes it so terrible.

Do you remember, sir, how you told me not to worry, and how useless your efforts were? Then you settled yourself down with a book, and left me to my thoughts, giving me up as a bad job. I don't blame you, sir, for I was in a shockingly bad humour this evening.

You took a book and sat reading before the fire. And I smoked my pipe and thought. I knew what grave risks Mr. Blake was taking by keeping me at Baker Street. It's a serious offence, and he might have got into awful trouble if the police had found out.

And I should have been the cause of that.

trouble. It sort of struck me all at once, sir, that I might be the means of getting your master into a fix that he couldn't very well get out of.

And I'm not worth it. I'm not worth taking all that risk for. I'm wanted for murder, and to harbour such a man is as good as helping in the murder itself. Mr. Blake would have found himself in the dock, in spite of his strong position, if I had been twigged.

And all this worried me. I knew I oughtn't to have been there. I felt mean for having come to Mr. Blake in the first place. To tell you the truth, sir, I've been imposing on Mr. Blake's good nature, and on your good nature. And it wasn't right. It wasn't fair of me to expect you to keep me in hiding.

That's just the truth, sir. And as I was sitting there, with you reading opposite to me, I wondered if I should speak to you and suggest that I should go. But I knew what you'd say, and I kept my tongue still.

I was beginning to think that Mr. Blake would never prove my innocence. The papers all say that I'm guilty, and it seems that the police have found some terribly black evidence against me. But I didn't kill young Leighton, and I didn't steal anything from the Manor. It's just my luck, sir. And this evening, in my gloomy mood, I began to think that I should never get out of the hole.

So what was the good of staying at Baker Street? What was the good of endangering you and Mr. Blake for a moment longer? It all seemed so hopeless, and I wanted to get away—to vanish, completely, so that you wouldn't get into any trouble. It was all very well for just a day, sir, but I'm sure that Mrs. Bardell has been getting suspicious.

I hope you won't think that I was thinking of myself, and that I went away because I was afraid of arrest. I swear on my oath that I only went because I didn't want you to be in trouble, or your master either.

You'll forgive me, I know, Mr. Tinker. When you went out for ten minutes to post that letter you had been writing, I made up my mind to just take advantage of the opportunity and slipped off.

I dare say it was a foolish thing to do, but I acted on impulse, and once I had gone I didn't dare to come back. I managed to get out without you knowing anything about it, and walked away down Baker Street in the snow.

I was glad it was snowing, because there were so few people about, and nobody took any notice of me. It was quite late then, as you'll remember, and I walked towards the City, hardly knowing where I went. But when I found that policemen didn't even look at me, and that I was fairly safe, I began to collect my wits. I'm glad I went now, because I'm not a burden to you any longer.

And I decided to go to a little place—some lodgings—where I should be safe for the time being. You'll notice that I haven't put any address on this letter, and I didn't mean to. I don't want you to know where I am, sir. I'll bear my own troubles, and not place them on your shoulders.

And now, I suppose, you're wondering why I'm writing this letter at all? I didn't mean to write a word, and I'm only doing so now because I saw something while I was walking down Oxford Street which made me wonder.

The snowstorm was very wild—and it is now, if it comes to that. I'm writing this in that lodging I referred to, and it's nearly two o'clock. I don't care if I'm hours in finishing this letter. I'm a slow writer, sir, and I can't get on quickly with composition, either.

I mean to send this letter in the morning, early, and then you'll understand more about it. But I'm wandering again, sir.

I was telling you about that incident in Oxford Street. I was trudging along with the wind behind me. Only a few people were about, and practically no traffic. And I happened to look at a man who was crossing from the other side of the road towards me. He was in the full glare of all the big lights, and I recognised his figure at once.

He was Mr. Leighton—the father of the young fellow who was murdered!

I was rather startled at first, and I quickly pulled my collar up and tried to avoid him. But he didn't seem to know where he was going at all, and took no interest in his surroundings. And Mr. Leighton was different altogether, too. Please don't think I was mistaken; I know well enough that he was Sir Vincent Tring's steward. As a rule, Mr. Leighton walks briskly, with his head straight up. It was snowing, I know, but that wasn't any reason why he should act so queerly.

For he seemed to go along in a furtive way, as though he was afraid of everybody. And although I passed quite close to him, he turned his head away, and wouldn't even look at me. And, just out of curiosity, I turned and looked at him.

I even went so far as to walk after him, wondering why he should be up in London at such a time as this—when his son was lying dead at Pellmarsh. And then I noticed that he took great care to avoid every policeman he passed—and, for that matter, everybody else, too. He acted just like a wanted criminal—just like I've been acting myself, only in a more pronounced way.

And for Mr. Leighton to do that was surprising. I followed him to Oxford Circus, and then down Tottenham Court Road. Perhaps my imagination is a bit wild, Mr. Tinker, but I'll swear that he fairly slunk into a small private hotel. I watched through the glass doors, and saw him hurry upstairs.

Well, I found out that the place is called Handley's Residential Hotel, and after that I went my own way, because there wasn't anything else to do. I felt like going into the hotel and inquiring, but it would have been too risky. So I came on here—to the address where I'm writing this.

I think I shall be quite safe here, but if I'm not it will be my own fault. And I hope Mr. Blake won't be angry when he knows. I only went away because I was afraid that my presence would cause trouble.

You've been wonderfully kind to me, and so has Mr. Blake. I sha'n't forget it, sir. I sha'n't forget it as long as I live. And if I come out of this awful affair all right, it will be through Mr. Blake's efforts. I feel sort of chokey when I think of all the trouble he is taking—taking for me! And I'm nobody: I'm just a gamekeeper, who used to be on the crook.

Now that I have come here I'm beginning to feel more hopeful. I don't know why, sir. I've got an idea that Mr. Blake will prove my innocence. Perhaps Mr. Leighton's funny behaviour has set me hoping—and suspecting, too. Is it possible that he knows something about the murder? I shouldn't be surprised, sir. I never liked him much, and I fair hated his son, although I don't like to say hard things about the dead.

I've got wonderful faith in Mr. Blake. I remember what he did for me years ago, when everything seemed more hopeless than it does now. And Mr. Blake will get me out of this. He's the finest gentleman on earth, sir. It wasn't right of me to place him in danger, and that's why I went away.

Please don't try to find me, Mr. Tinker. If there's any good news, it'll be in the papers, won't it? If I see anything good—if I see that I'm safe—I'll come to Baker Street again, and thank you for all you've done. And I'll thank Mr. Blake, although I don't know how I shall do it.

But I'm too hopeful, perhaps. In fact, sir, I don't know what to think, or what to hope for. I'm in terrible doubt. I shall thank Heaven on my knees if everything comes all right.

I can't send this letter by post, because I want you to get it in the morning. But there's a little boy here, and I shall give him his fare, and a shilling, and tell him to put the letter in your box. And he won't wait for an answer; he'll just deliver the letter and come away. So you won't know anything until Mrs. Bardell takes the letter up to you, sir. It's the best way.

And now I must close. I hope that my information about Mr. Leighton will be useful, and that I haven't made a fool of myself. What I've done, I've done for the best, and I hope you'll forgive me.

Heaven bless you, Mr. Tinker, and your good master, too. Whatever happens, I shall never forget your kindness. You and Mr. Blake believed in me when the evidence was blackest, and I am proud to sign myself,

Your faithful and obedient servant,  
BENJAMIN STAGG.

**THE NINTH CHAPTER.**

**Telegram from Tinker to Sexton Blake.**

**S**EXTON BLAKE, Tring Manor, Pellmarsh, Essex.—Come at once. Our guest has vanished. Want you here at earliest possible moment. Other very important news. Please wire, or come.

TINKER.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

Letter from Sexton Blake to Sir Vincent Tring, Bart.

Baker Street, London, W.,  
January 10th.

MY dear Tring,—By this time, no doubt, you are fully aware of the main facts concerning the Leighton murder affair. At the same time, I am quite sure that you will welcome some details of the last act in that little drama.

It is not necessary for me to refer to the events which took place at Tring Manor on Thursday morning, when Tinker's telegram arrived—the events, at least, which occurred before I took my departure.

You know that I was rather upset by the wire, and that I immediately took you into my confidence with regard to Stagg. I preferred to leave Lennard out of it—not because I feared anything from the official force, but because I thought it better that he should not know. If Stagg had remained at Baker Street I should have told Lennard everything; but his flight made a difference. I was most annoyed with the man for running off just when everything was coming right.

But, as it turned out, Stagg's sudden departure bore fruit. Indeed, I will even say that I am now heartily glad that he decided to flee. For, by a curious chance, he was able to supply some highly valuable information.

But I will relate everything at length.

Mr. Nelson Lee, Nipper, Lennard, and I left for London within half an hour of the receipt of Tinker's telegram. We passed through the village soon after nine-thirty. The roads were shockingly choked with snow. But in the full daylight we had no difficulty in making the journey—more particularly after we had reached the main highway.

It was fortunate that the snowstorm spent itself during the night. The day, as you know, broke fine and clear. And quite early in the forenoon Lee pulled up the car in Baker Street. Tinker had evidently been watching, for he was down almost as soon as I stepped upon the pavement.

"Splendid, gov'nor!" he exclaimed. "I didn't expect you for another hour. I've got some news—"

"No doubt you have, Tinker, but this is scarcely the place to tell me of it," I interrupted.

Tinker was very surprised to see Nelson Lee and Nipper there, but a few words of explanation sufficed. Nipper had written to Tinker, I think, but the letter hadn't arrived. The action of this whole affair had been so rapid that there was hardly time for a regular exchange of communications.

I left Lennard chatting with Lee and Nipper in the consulting-room, and took Tinker into the laboratory and faced him.

"Now, young 'un, what's it all about?" I said briskly. "How is it that you have allowed Stagg to get away? Did I not leave you here to guard the man—"

"Oh, chuck it, gov'nor!" protested Tinker. "Don't grumble at me, for goodness' sake! It wasn't my fault—really! I just went out to post a letter, and when I came back I found that the silly old ass had bunked."

"But why?" I asked. "Why did he—er—bunk, Tinker? What possible reason could he have had for such a step? Had you squabbled—"

"Great Scott! Of course we hadn't!" interrupted Tinker indignantly. "He was a bit depressed, that's all, and I tried to cheer him up. He wasn't like a prisoner, you know. I didn't think it would be necessary for me to watch him, or to lock him up when I went out to post a giddy letter!"

"You appear to think, Tinker, that I am blaming you," I said. "Nothing of the kind. I'm just trying to discover why Stagg went. It seems such an extraordinary thing. And what is your other news?"

Tinker produced a letter from his pocket. "This will explain things a lot better than I can, gov'nor," he replied. "It's from Stagg, although there's no address on it, and I don't know where he is. It was delivered by hand this morning. You can bet I was relieved to get it, because I'd been worrying like the dickens all night."

And Tinker handed me the letter. I read it through slowly and deliberately, and so that you will be able to understand exactly, Tring, I am enclosing it herewith. I should advise you to read it at once, before you finish my own letter. And I should like you to return it to me at your convenience.

Assuming that you have now perused Stagg's remarkable epistle, I will continue straight on. I think I can understand Stagg's frame of mind, and I don't altogether blame him for running off. At the same time, it was rather foolish of him, after having remained so long.

And you will now see why I am pleased that he went. For, by a wonderful stroke of chance, he spotted Leighton, and followed him to the private hotel in Tottenham Court Road. This, as you will agree, was most fortunate.

I was immensely pleased.

"My dear Tinker, Stagg has performed a valuable service for us," I said genially. "Last night Mr. Leighton fled, and we completely lost him. And now I come here to find that Stagg is able to provide us with Leighton's exact address. Handley's Residential Hotel is a very quiet, select place, and just the type of house which Leighton would be likely to choose."

"Then he is the murderer, gov'nor?" asked Tinker wonderingly.

"No, young 'un, I don't think so; but he is certainly the thief, for all the stolen property was found last night in Leighton's house," I replied. "But come. We will acquaint Lennard of this fact—although, remember, he is not to know that Stagg has been here, and that we are indebted to our gloomy friend for this information. Lennard can be told of that later on."

And so we passed into the consulting-room, where the chief-inspector eyed us somewhat interestedly. I am quite sure that he suspected something.

"Do you care to come, Lennard?" I asked crisply. "We are just going along to Handley's Hotel, in Tottenham Court Road."

"What on earth for?"

"To interview Leighton. He's staying there, I believe."

Lennard stared.

"Staying there?" he repeated. "Do you mean to say that you have found out where Leighton is hiding?"

"Yes; I think so, at all events."

"When you think so, Blake, it's as good as a certainty," replied Lennard. "But how in the name of wonder did you do it? Tinker's told you, of course; I don't need to be a policeman to know that. But how did Tinker know?"

"Ah, that's just it!" grinned Tinker. "The fact is, inspector, I had a vivid dream during the night, and I saw you arresting Leighton in Handley's Residential Hotel. So we're going there to make it real."

Lennard grunted.

"Going to be mysterious about it, eh?" he said. "All right, I don't care. If we get Leighton, I shall be quite satisfied. But I'm hanged if I can understand how you people find these things out."

We all smiled, and without any further delay took our departure, still making use of Nelson Lee's motor-car. But Lee didn't mind, and was quite eager to see the finish of the affair. For that little jaunt was destined to be the finish—and quite a dramatic finish, too.

We arrived at the hotel without incident, and I at once asked the clerk if a gentleman named Leighton was staying there. He shook his head, and declared that nobody of that name was on the premises.

"But I think a gentleman came late last night," I went on, giving a description of Leighton in detail. "Am I right?"

"There was a gentleman such as you describe who booked a room last night," said the clerk. "But his name is Webster. In any case, I should like to know why these inquiries are being made, sir. Is there anything wrong with the man?"

"Yes," put in Lennard briskly. "I am a Scotland Yard detective, and I have every reason to believe that Webster is Thomas Leighton, alias Roger Burke, who is wanted for burglary."

"Good gracious!" ejaculated the clerk, aghast. "I—I'll fetch the manager."

This gentleman having been brought to the scene, Lennard briefly explained our business, and we were escorted upstairs. Tinker and Nipper managed to come, too, although I had given Tinker to understand that his services would not be at all necessary in this particular instance.

Lennard rapped upon the door of the room occupied by "Webster" and we heard a quick footstep within. The next moment the door was flung open, and Thomas Leighton faced us. For one second he stood quite still; then he reeled back with a hoarse cry.

"Hold up, Mr. Leighton!" said the chief-

inspector sharply. "There's no need to get excited. I say, Blake, just help me."

I was already doing so, for Leighton had quite collapsed, and was incapable of action. He hung limply between us, and fell into a heap after we had lowered him into an easy-chair.

"I knew you would come—I was afraid of it!" he muttered huskily. "But I thought I should have more time than this. This is the end of it all—the finish! But I'll swear that I did not kill my son!"

"Nobody is saying you did," put in Lennard. "You are not suspected of the murder, Mr. Leighton, although I have an idea that you know quite a lot about it. Wouldn't it be better if you told us the simple truth—the whole truth? I can give you my word that obstinacy will do you no good."

"I—I want some brandy!" gasped the prisoner weakly.

This was supplied to him, and the neat spirit brought some of the colour back to his cheeks, and caused him to sit up in his chair. His jaw tightened, and his eyes wore an expression of resignation and something like defiance.

"Well, what are you going to do?" he asked. "There's no hope for me; I'm broken. You know that I'm Burke, I suppose?"

"Exactly," I replied. "And we know, also, that you are responsible for the burglary at Tring Manor, Mr. Leighton."

"Yes; I might as well admit it," said the man. "Where is the sense in denying the charge? I will tell you everything that occurred, gentlemen—yes, everything. What I say now will be the whole truth. And Heaven help me!"

He took another sip of brandy, and then proceeded.

"It seems to me that Stagg and I can be placed in the same category," he said bitterly. "For I am a reformed criminal, too. Yes, that's true. For seven years I have lived as straight as a die. I came out of prison disgraced and sobered. Crime had only brought me penal servitude, and I decided that I should live honestly for the rest of my life. And I meant it, gentlemen—I meant it. I obtained work of a kind during the year following my release, and from that I rose to a better position. Ultimately I went to Tring Manor, to take charge of Sir Vincent's estate. I thought that I was going to be happy there, and I was happy until this present year."

"And what happened then?" asked Lennard.

"I got into financial difficulties," said Leighton. "No, I'm not suggesting that Sir Vincent did not pay me sufficient income. On the contrary, he has always been most generous. I had certain family worries, for my son had left school, and had been staying with some relatives in the North for two or three years. It was arranged that he should come to me, and I was hopeful that he would be given a position on the estate."

"But you were talking about financial worries?" the inspector suggested.

"Yes, yes. That is correct. I suppose I have been a fool, but I'll swear that I did everything for the best," declared Leighton. "Like other fools—and there are many of them about—I speculated heavily with all my available capital. Had those speculations been a success, I should have been able to retire by this time, with a comfortable income. But they failed, gentlemen, and I found myself almost submerged in a tossing sea of trouble. One difficulty led to another, and there was no way out whatever. My troubles grew steadily worse, and I tried expedient after expedient, hoping to get my head above water."

"Didn't you appeal to Sir Vincent?" I asked.

"No, Mr. Blake," was the reply. "I was afraid to."

"But why?" I asked. "Tring is a most generous man, and he would have got you out of any trouble—"

"I may as well tell the truth now that I am done for," interrupted Leighton. "I promised that I would tell you the whole story. I dared not approach Sir Vincent because, in my despair, I had been mad enough to become entangled in a crooked deal. I could not explain without revealing that fact. And yet I had to have money—I had to have sufficient to get me out of the morass. With that money I should have been able to settle the matter secretly, and not a soul would have known."

"I gather that you were blackmailed?" I asked quietly.

"Not exactly. I borrowed—" Mr. Leighton paused. "But how do you know?" he went on. "How could you gather—"

"I recognised Mr. Howard Moore when he called upon you," I explained.

"Ah, yes! I had forgotten that you know most of those people by sight, Mr. Blake," said the prisoner. "Mr. Moore is a vampire—a vile scoundrel! It was he who pressed me; it was he who threatened to expose the whole thing. And in desperation I resorted to an act which started the whole ghastly trouble."

"You burgled Sir Vincent Tring's house?" suggested Lennard grimly.

"Yes."  
"In the belief that Stagg would be accused?"

Leighton's eyes glittered.  
"Yes!" he exclaimed fiercely. "I wanted Stagg to be accused! I wanted Stagg to go to prison! I loathed the man like poison! He and my son were always at loggerheads, and the blame was Stagg's in every case!"

"That question, of course, is not one that need be discussed here," I said. "But I happen to know that Benjamin Stagg is a genial, kindly-natured man, and he is liked and respected by everybody on Tring's estate and in Pellmarsh. Your son's reputation, on the other hand, was strikingly different, Mr. Leighton."

"You are against him—of course you are against him!" said Leighton bitterly. "But I did not expect anything else. The poor boy is dead now, and I—I—Heaven help me!" He almost choked for a moment, took more brandy, and resumed.

"No matter at whose door the fault lie, Stagg and my son hated one another," he said. "And I hated Stagg because of that. The idea came into my head that if I could only burgle the Manor, Stagg would be suspected. I meant him to be suspected. It was my plan to implicate him hopelessly."

"There's nothing like being frank about it!" said Lennard contemptuously. "Well, go ahead, Mr. Leighton."

"There is no reason why I should conceal anything," continued Leighton. "It was a despicable thing to do to try and implicate Stagg. I am well aware of that. But a man in my position fights for his existence, and I was absolutely ruthless in my efforts to extricate myself. Somebody had to be responsible for the burglary, so why not Stagg? I knew that he had been on the crook before he came into Sir Vincent's employ, and I hated him, I tell you! What did I care what happened to him? I wanted him out of the way."

"Well, I got the stuff easily. There was no difficulty at all in breaking into the Manor and taking what I required. I meant to take it up to London, and to sell it. I knew where that could be done. And, had everything gone as I hoped, I should have laid a trail which would have led the police to arrest Stagg. But a ghastly accident altered everything—"

"An accident?" repeated the chief-inspector sharply.

"Yes! And you can believe me or disbelieve me, whichever you like!" retorted Leighton, his eyes gleaming. "I will tell you how it happened. It was just about midnight, and I was returning with the stuff to my own house—"

"At midnight?" asked Lennard. "You cracked the crib rather early, didn't you?"

"I thought it better to do so. Sir Vincent's household always retired at about half-past ten," replied Leighton. "People are early in the country, you know. And I wanted to complete the job before my own bed-time, so that I could have a sort of alibi, if necessary."

"But as I was walking along the path through the wood I ran right into the arms of my son. I knew him at once, although he didn't appear to recognise me. He knew nothing of my plans, and I threw my bag amongst the trees and tried to reason with him—"

"But why should you want to reason with him?" asked the inspector.

"I suspect that the young fellow was intoxicated," I put in quietly.

"Yes, he was. And what of it?" demanded Leighton. "He had taken more than usual, even, and was not capable of speaking with me, or even recognising who I was. He simply lurched about, and laughed in the inane fashion customary in drunken people. And I was rather startled to see that he

carried one of my big ornamental daggers in his hand."

"Oh, did he?" said Lennard. "That's interesting."

"I tried to get the weapon away from him, but the young fool eluded me, and then he stumbled forward, tripping on a projecting root," said Leighton. "As I sit here, gentlemen, I swear that I did not even touch my son. It was dark, and I don't know how the tragedy occurred. I heard a horrible cry, a thud, and a gurgle. And there at my feet Tom lay—dead!"

There was a moment's silence.  
"We have only your word—" began Lennard.

"Hang you!" shouted Leighton hoarsely. "Do you think I care now? Believe what you will, but I have told you the truth. The knife must have struck the ground point upwards, and before it fell from that position Tom's body dropped upon it with all its weight. Can you not imagine the result? The blade drove in deeply, penetrating his heart."

"Personally, I believe you," I exclaimed. "It is really the only manner in which the affair could have occurred. You ought to have given information on the spot, Mr. Leighton, and you would have come to no harm."

"You idiot!" shouted Leighton violently. "What about the stolen things? I had to go on! I was simply bound to go on! And there was my son, apparently murdered! I fled from the spot panic-stricken, even forgetting to take my bag away with me. And I got into my smoking-room, and sat there for hours on end—for hours thinking, thinking. I was stunned by the shock of it all, and I don't know even now what I did, or how I spent that awful night."

"But just as dawn was breaking I seemed to get my wits back. And I remembered, with a cold shudder, that one of my own daggers was still in the body. I nearly went mad for a few minutes. If my son had been found I should be arrested and hanged! There was nothing to show that the affair had been an accident."

"And so you substituted Stagg's knife for the dagger?" asked the inspector.

"It was on the spur of the moment that I did that," was the reply. "I happened to see Stagg's knife as I passed the woodshed, and the sight of it set my brain into motion again. I began to see my way clear. And I snatched up the knife and ran swiftly with it down the path."

"The body was still there; and the blood— But I can't speak of that without feeling sick. I took out the dagger, and placed the knife in the wound instead, smearing the handle with blood. How I did it I don't know, but all my natural feelings were numbed in my panic. And then I had to wash my hands. Where? There would be investigations, and I knew well enough that the police would suspect everybody, and make minute investigations."

"You accordingly visited Stagg's house?" I remarked.

"It was Stagg's knife, so why not carry the thing further?" he said huskily. "I knew that Stagg was a heavy sleeper, and I went straight to his cottage, got in by a back window, and washed my hands in a pail of water; but not before I had smeared the sink, and had left other traces."

"I brought the dagger with me, too, and washed that. Under no circumstances could I leave any bloodstain in my own house. And when I returned I was clean, and I hung up the dagger in its original place. I thought I was safe then, and went to bed."

"And what about the loot?"

"Oh, I forgot! I took that, and concealed it in a cupboard," replied Leighton. "But I left a couple of spoons in Stagg's house—although the police, I believe, only found one. I waited for the storm to burst, for sleep was out of the question. It had burst now, but not as I expected."

And there, my dear Tring, you have practically everything. The whole mystery has been cleared up in every detail. Leighton was a cold-blooded scoundrel, and I felt no pity for him. He had not committed murder, but he had done something almost as bad. He was utterly worthless.

You will notice that I speak of him in the past tense—and for an excellent reason. For Thomas Leighton is no longer alive. He defeated Lennard—and justice—at the last moment.

The chief-inspector was in the act of getting out the handcuffs, in order to effect the arrest, when Leighton sprang to his feet.

"Do you think you'll take me?" he shouted shrilly. "Never! I'll go to my death rather than submit!"

And, upon my word, he did. Before any of us could prevent him, he hurled himself with terrific force at the window—which was closed. There was a splintering, shivering crash, and Leighton went clean through.

I don't think I need say much more about it. The room was many storeys from the ground, and a paved yard lay immediately below. The fellow was killed on the spot, and was stone dead when we got to him.

Naturally, Lennard was upset for the moment; but he is a man who recovers his composure rapidly. And, after we had seen to the removal of Leighton's remains, we held a little consultation.

"I'm glad it's all over, Blake, and I've got a lot to thank you for!" declared the inspector. "I don't think there's any doubt about Leighton's story—it's obviously true. And poor old Stagg, of course, is vindicated. What an infernal idiot he was to run away!"

"Perhaps so," I agreed. "But what would you have done in the same position, Lennard? Stagg was terrified, and he fled while in that state. Those kind of actions are mostly performed in a panic, as you know. I suppose that warrant for his arrest is dead now?"

"As dead as Leighton and son!" replied the inspector. "Stagg's as free to walk about as I am. But, look here, Blake, there's just one point I can't quite fathom. Perhaps your wonderful brain can manage it. Why the deuce was that young fellow carrying a huge dagger at midnight?"

"Oh, that reminds me, guv'nor!" put in Tinker. "What did you mean by saying that Stagg's rose-trees were connected with the case? I suppose that was a bit of swank?"

"No, Tinker, I am not given to swanking," I smiled. "And I think one explanation will suffice for the two of you—at all events, it is the only explanation that I can suggest. In my preliminary inquiries I learned from a couple of under-gardeners that young Leighton had once threatened to cut down all Stagg's pet rose-trees—just out of spite. Stagg takes a great pride in his little garden, and young Leighton knew it. The threat was probably an idle one, as most threats are. But you must remember that the young man was intoxicated on the night of his death. It seems to me that he had remembered his threat, and had noticed the daggers on the wall. In his drunken state he decided to sally forth with the intention of making hay of Stagg's garden. And on the path he met his father—and you know the rest. Can you think of anything better?"

"No, I'm jiggered if I can!" said Lennard. "What do you think, Lee?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Blake is undoubtedly right," he replied. "And that point is the only one which needed clearing up."

There is really nothing more to tell you, Tring. Stagg has already arrived at your place by this time, and he will have told you his side of the story. He came here this morning, immediately after seeing in the papers that he was quite safe. He was excited, and almost overwhelmed with gratitude.

There's no need for me to repeat what he said, because I'll warrant he's been eulogising my name to you in the most exaggerated manner. Stagg is a good fellow, and, if I might offer a word of advice, I should suggest that you promote him to the position of your steward. I am quite sure that he is capable of attending to all the duties, and it would be rather a neat consolation for him, after this time of trial.

The case has been a fairly simple one, but remarkable on account of the frozen knife clue—a clue which the police missed, but which was of the utmost importance, seeing that it led to the turning-point of the whole affair.

When you are up in London next time, don't forget to drop in and see me. I shall quite enjoy a chat with you. And I hope that you will have no further tragedies.

Tinker wishes me to enclose his kind regards for both Lady Tring and yourself—and I, needless to say, repeat them.

With all good wishes,  
Yours very sincerely,

SEXTON BLAKE.

THE END.

New Short Serial.

# FROM SCHOOL TO SEA.

By CHARLES HAMILTON.

## INTRODUCTION.

Between DICK TREVELYAN, a boy of fifteen, and MR. GADSBY, his stepfather, there is bitter blood. The boy's real father had died, suspected of murder, and Gadsby takes any opportunity of taunting his stepson with this unpleasant fact.

Should Dick die a small fortune is to come into the hands of Gadsby. The latter concocts a scheme with a schoolmaster named CARKER, and the result is that Dick is transferred to the school of that gentleman, where he has an unpleasant time.

Dick runs away from the school, and, after an exciting pursuit, escapes in a small boat. SAMUEL CARKER, son of the headmaster, and an enemy of Dick's, manages to jump into the boat as it leaves the shore. Out to sea a vessel hails them.

(Now read on.)

## Picked Up!—(continued).

"A HOY! Haven't you a glim?" came a roaring voice.  
"A what?"  
"Bust my tops'ls! A glim—a blink—a light?"

"No!"

"Sing out, then!"

There was, in fact, great danger of the rescuing vessel passing over the tiny boat in the darkness. But, thanks to a ceaseless "singing out," such a catastrophe was avoided. The ship lay to close enough for a rope to be thrown. Dick caught it and made it fast. Five minutes more, and the pair were on the stranger's deck.

In a glare of lantern-light Dick Trevelyan found himself facing a short, stout, ruddy sailorman, in captain's attire, with a pipe in his mouth. As for Samuel, as soon as he was quite safe his nerves gave way utterly. He threw himself upon the deck, blubbering hysterically.

"Bust my topsails! Where did you spring from, laddy?" demanded the red-faced captain, looking at Dick, taking no notice of the blubbering Samuel.

"Boat adrift," replied Dick concisely. "I'm from Devonshire."

"Well, do you know where you are going to now, young shaver?"

"No, sir."

"Melbourne, sonnie—right across the world. How do you like the idea?"

Dick's heart beat with gladness. Australia! Far from the clutches of either Mr. Gadsby or Elisha Carker!

"Oh, sir I'm so glad!" he said impulsively.

The jolly-faced skipper looked at him rather queerly.

"H'm! Bust my topsails! What have you been doing in Devonshire—eh?"

Dick flushed. The suspicion, though, was not an unnatural one under the circumstances.

"I have done nothing I have reason to be ashamed of, sir," he answered in a low voice.

"All serene, laddy! I believe you," said the skipper kindly. "But, anyway, Australia's the word, for I couldn't turn back the Boadicea on any account!"

Dick was very glad to hear it. Samuel was as yet too hysterical to hear or heed anything.

Leaving the empty boat dancing away upon the waves, the Boadicea turned her prow once more towards the boundless Atlantic, hearing Dick Trevelyan away swiftly toward the rosy regions of hope.

## The Boadicea—The Captain and the Crew—A Startling Meeting and a Mystery.

STRANGELY enough came the dawn to Dick Trevelyan. He had slept soundly in a corner of the cuddy. At day-break he was up.

The wide sea glimmering in the rising sun, the boundless heavens fleeced with clouds,

formed a scene new and wonderful to the boy who had never been out of sight of land before.

The straining masts, the bellying canvas, the bronzed, bearded seamen and swarthy lascars, the smell of tar and the keen, salty breeze—he thought he could never tire of them.

What a change after dull, dreary Cliff House, and the creaking voice, the cruel face, the pitiless cane of Elisha Carker!

But Samuel's feelings were very different. Cliff House had been a house of bondage to him. He was dismayed at the thought of being carried so far from home.

"It's all your own fault, you cub!" he said to Dick, when they met to breakfast in the pantry. "I'll make you smart for it, too!"

Dick laughed carelessly.

"Better not try it, Sam'ny. You haven't got old Carker or Skimp to help you now. I'm willing to let bygones be bygones; but if you badger me I'll give you a hammering you won't get over in a hurry!"

And Samuel, after a little cogitation, decided to leave Dick Trevelyan severely alone.

Breakfast over, the boys were called to the captain's cabin. Captain Mitford was as ruddy and genial-looking as when Dick had seen him first.

"Seeing that you're booked for Melbourne, lads, I expect you will do something for your rations," he said. "Are you willing to work?"

"More than willing, sir!" Dick answered cheerfully.

Samuel made a long face, but he could not venture to dissent. Work was never agreeable to Samuel. An objection was on the tip of his tongue. But there was something in Captain Mitford's keen eyes, kindly as they were, which warned him that no nonsense would be tolerated.

Captain Mitford nodded approval to Dick's reply.

"Very good! I don't like idlers. And now, please, explain to me how you came out at sea in a boat."

Fortwith Samuel burst out with a tale of woe. How Dick had run away from school; how he—Samuel—had valiantly tried to recapture him; how, between Dick's rascality and the unlucky ebb tide, he had come to be adrift upon the Atlantic.

Captain Mitford listened quietly. Then he asked, without comment, for Dick's account.

Dick told the plain truth. The story of Mr. Gadsby's hatred, of Elisha Carker's cruelty, of Samuel's bullying, of all that had forced him to run away.

"Your accounts don't agree, that's clear," Captain Mitford remarked. He had no doubt of Dick's veracity, for he read the boys' characters in their faces. But he did not deliver his opinion. "Take my advice. Let bygones be bygones, and make the best of the situation!"

By the skipper's orders, the sailmaker cut down some sea-clothes for the boys, and their school attire was discarded.

Dick took to the new life with a zest; Samuel with subdued grumbling. The result was that Dick began to develop into a fine, active sailor lad, while Samuel remained the hulking hobbledohy he had always been.

Some description of the Boadicea and her crew may not be out of place here.

She was a fine brig, belonging to Cardiff. Captain Mitford was part owner.

The chief mate, Llewellyn, was a Cardiff man. Stoke, the second, hailed from Bristol. The crew numbered thirty, and of these nearly a dozen were British.

The rest were Swedes and lascars.

Captain Mitford was a skipper of the old school—fond of his glass and his bottle, and, indeed, seldom without a pipe in his mouth wherever he was.

Dick liked the skipper immensely; while Samuel soon grew to hate him, for he was decidedly rough on shirkers.

Upon the first day of Dick's sailor-life occurred a strange incident, which he did not soon forget.

The ho'sun's mate, David Yorke, was on the sick-list, and in the dog-watch the steward sent Dick to him with a savoury.

Yorke was in his bunk in the fore-castle, which was none too well lighted. Dick dimly saw a pallid face peering at him from the bunk.

"Good heavens! Who are you?"

It was a cry, eloquent of fear and horror, which broke wildly from the lips of the sick man.

Dick started. His first thought was that Yorke had suddenly gone delirious.

The seaman stretched out his hand, and clutched the boy's arm before he could get out of reach.

"Who are you?" he repeated gaspingly.

"Is your name Trevelyan?"

Dick looked at him in amazement. How did this sailor of the Boadicea know his name?

"Tell me, is your name Trevelyan?"

"Yes; Richard Trevelyan."

"Who was your father?"

"Robert Trevelyan, of Trevelyan Grange," replied Dick, more and more amazed.

The seaman released him, sinking back weakly into the bunk.

"I knew it. I could not mistake the Trevelyan face. Heaven forgive me!"

"Did you know my father?" Dick asked eagerly.

Yorke gazed at him fixedly, and burst into a strange, mirthless laugh. Dick felt that he had stumbled upon some hidden mystery.

"Did I know him? What matters? How came you here? What are you doing aboard the Boadicea?"

Dick explained. Naturally the name of Carker passed his lips. As he heard it the seaman broke again into his dissonant laugh.

"Carker! This is the cub grown up, then! Elisha's cub! Strange that we should meet."

Dick did not understand in the least. After he left Yorke he pondered over the sailor's mysterious words and looks, but could not fathom any solution of them.

In the following days he took a good deal of interest in Yorke, and by talking with the other fore-castle hands learned what was known about him, which was not much.

He had not been brought up to the sea, but he was a good sailor. He was quiet, reserved; but had a devil in him when roused. He described himself as a Liverpool man; but on one occasion in talk he had inadvertently referred to Devon as his native county, which led the wisecracks of the fore-castle to surmise that there was something in his past which he wished to keep secret, doubtless for excellent reasons.

Yorke seemed to take a fancy to Dick.

He did not talk to him much. But he helped him when he could—explained to him various details of seamanship, and took his part in fore-castle "rows."

For the last-mentioned service Dick had cause to be especially grateful.

There was a rough set amongst the crew, much given to bullying and cuffing. Yorke's friendship stood the boy in good stead.

Yet, grateful as he was for kindness shown, Dick could not find in his heart a liking for Daniel Yorke.

There was an indefinite something about the man which seemed to repel him.

## In Southern Waters—A Dark Plot and a Sudden Outbreak—Mutiny.

DAYS passed, and weeks. The Boadicea ploughed the sunny waters of the South Pacific.

Dick was becoming a good sailor. Samuel, on the other hand, proving useless on deck, was turned over to the steward. Dick and he, therefore, did not often meet.

Dick did not know when it was that he first became aware that all was not as it should be forward, but by the time the Boadicea was in Australian waters he was conscious of an undercurrent, of something which certain members of the crew talked over among themselves in whispers.

He knew that there was disaffection forward. He vaguely felt that there was something more. But what?

Captain Mitford was a good skipper, but

he was "hard as nails" upon idlers. And the Boadicea's crew contained a considerable proportion of would-be idlers.

The lascars, especially, were a sullen set. Dick had often seen their black eyes flash savagely at the skipper.

In short, the "old man" was pretty well hated forward.

Dick had a sort of presentiment that ill would come of it.

But he was far—very far—from suspecting the terrible mischief which was brewing aboard the Boadicea during these sunny days.

It was with terrible suddenness that the outbreak came.

One calm, starry night, when the starboard watch went off duty, Dick proceeded to his bunk as usual.

But it suddenly struck him that the others were making no motion towards hammock or bunk.

Daniel Yorke was speaking in a low voice to Bjornsen, a tall, loose-jointed, fair-bearded Swede, and the rest were gathered round them.

Dick looked at them. He felt that a crisis had come. There was, so to speak, danger in the air.

Bjornsen made a gesture towards him.

"But the boy, Yorke?"

"He must not be harmed."

"It would be safer—"

Yorke silenced him with a gesture, and walked across to Dick.

The boy's heart was beating wildly.

A sudden sense of danger had rushed upon him like an icy blast.

"Don't be alarmed, Trevelyan. Your life is safe."

"If you keep quiet," added Bjornsen.

"Waste no time, mates. Rope him up!"

Resistance was out of the question.

Dick was bound hand and foot. He spoke only once.

"What are you going to do, Yorke?"

"You'll see soon enough," was the brief reply.

And the seaman did not meet Dick's eyes. Bjornsen gagged the lad with a not over-clean neckerchief. Powerless to move or speak, Dick was lifted into his bunk.

He laid there, his pulses throbbing, a thousand horrible images of mutiny and murder flitting through his excited brain.

"Are you going to wait for Carker, Bjornsen?" asked one of the seamen.

The Swede nodded.

"Yes. If he succeeds he will bring us the captain's revolvers."

A few minutes later Samuel entered the fore-castle. Bjornsen met him eagerly.

"Have you got them?"

Samuel, nodding, drew a case from under his jacket. Bjornsen seized it eagerly, and opened it. He took out a revolver. Yorke took the other.

"Was the old man asleep?"

"Rather! Snoring like a porpoise."

"Is Llewellyn in his cabin?"

"Yes."

Bjornsen drew a deep breath.

"Come on, mates! It's time!"

The seamen, led by Yorke and Bjornsen, crowded out of the fore-castle.

Samuel, though he had joined in the plot of revolt—partly through native rascality, partly because he was afraid of getting his throat cut if he didn't—had no intention of taking part in the fighting, if there was any.

That wasn't in his line at all.

He sneaked into the cook's galley, and stayed there, shivering, till it was all over.

Dick, helpless in his bunk, listened with straining ears for sounds from the deck. He heard the voice of the second mate—amazed, probably, by seeing the off-duty watch return to the deck before eight bells.

"Hallo! What's amiss?"

The question was not answered.

Dick heard a pattering rush of feet, an exclamation of angry surprise, then sounds of

a desperate struggle. Then the savage voice of the Swede:

"Stick him, you fools! There's no time to waste!"

A choking scream succeeded, a deep groan, and a sullen splash in the sea.

Dick's brain reeled. Horror thrilled in every vein. It was murder—brutal murder—that had been done there under the stars.

"To the cabin!" Again the strident voice of Bjornsen.

Footsteps, voices receded aft. Cries, crackling pistol-shots echoed through the ship.

A violent shudder ran through Dick's limbs, his head seemed to turn round, and he was conscious of nothing more.

Black oblivion shut out the horrors of the night.

(To be continued.)

(Next week's story, under the title of "THE AFFAIR OF THE BRONZE MONKEY!" is taken from SEXTON BLAKE'S Case-Book, and introduces the Great Detective, and TINKER, and the bloodhound PEDRO. By the Author of "The Case of the Three Hairs," "Hoodwinked," "Waldo, the Wonder Man," "Tinker's Letter-File" Series, etc. Please order in advance.)

**FOOTBALL COMPETITION No. 8. £50 WON.**

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

H. COLLINS,  
28, Gloucester Road,  
Hounslow,

whose forecast contained twenty correct predictions.

**OUR FOOTBALL COMPETITION OFFER. £300 MUST BE WON!**

**ONLY TWELVE MATCHES.**

**SCOTTISH AND IRISH READERS MAY ENTER. NO ENTRANCE FEES.**

**£300 will be Paid for Correct Forecast or NEAREST.**

Below you will find a coupon giving twelve matches which are to be played on SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 8th. We offer the sum of £300 for a correct forecast of the results of these matches. No goals are required.

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 £300. If no one forecasts the results of the twelve matches correctly, the money will be paid to the reader whose forecast is nearest. In any case the full amount of £300 must be won.

Coupons, which must not be enclosed in envelopes containing efforts in other competitions, must be addressed to:

**FOOTBALL COMPETITION No. 12,  
Gough House, Gough Square,  
LONDON, E.C. 4,**

and must reach that address not later than THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 6th.

This coupon and offer will be repeated next week. This competition is run in conjunction with "Answers," "The Family Journal," "Home Companion," "Woman's World," "Marvel," "The Butterfly," and "Answers' Library," 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," "The Family Journal," "Home Companion," "Woman's World," "Marvel," "The Butterfly," "Answers' Library," and "Union Jack," dated February 1st, or the issues of those journals dated February 8th, 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

3. The prize of £300 will be paid to the competitor who sends in on one coupon the correct results of all the matches. Should no competitor succeed in doing this, the prize will be awarded to the one

sending a coupon showing the nearest number of correct predictions. In the event of ties, the prize will be divided. In any case the full amount of £300 will be paid, even should any of the matches be abandoned. If that should happen, such matches will not be taken into consideration in the adjudication.

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 condition of entry that the Editor's decision shall be accepted as final and legally binding in all matters concerning this competition.

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

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

**Football Competition No. 12.**

Matches Played SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 8th.  
Closing Date, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 6th.

- |                   |                    |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| BRENTFORD         | v. MILLWALL        |
| TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR | v. CRYSTAL PALACE  |
| CHELSEA           | v. ARSENAL         |
| BRADFORD          | v. COVENTRY CITY   |
| LINCOLN CITY      | v. BRADFORD CITY   |
| NOTS FOREST       | v. LEEDS CITY      |
| BOLTON WANDERERS  | v. ROCHDALE        |
| PORT VALE         | v. EVERTON         |
| AIRDRIEONIANS     | v. CELTIC          |
| HIBERNIANS        | v. DUMBARTON       |
| QUEEN'S PARK      | v. PARTICK THISTLE |
| RANGERS           | v. MORTON          |

I enter Football Competition No. 12 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. ....