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THE CLUE OF THE SECOND BULLET!

A Thrilling, Long, Complete Detective Story, introducing
SEXTON BLAKE and TINKER.

By the Author of "The Shanghaied Detective," "The Affair of the Bronze Monkey," "The Clue of the Frozen Knife," The "Tinker's Case-Diary" Series, and "Nipper at St. Frank's" Series, etc.



THE ...

Clue of the Second Bullet

A Thrilling, Long Complete Narrative of **SEXTON BLAKE** and **TINKER**, Woven Around Certain Letters Extracted from the Young Assistant's Letter File.

(By the Author of "The Shanghai Detective," "The Affair of the Bronze Monkey," "The Clue of the Frozen Knife," "The Tumbler's Case-Book" Series, and "Nipper at St. Frank's" Series, etc.)

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Letter from Miss Margaret Dell to Sexton Blake.

Hawley Manor,
Hawleyhurst, Surrey,
February 24th.

DEAR Sir,—I really don't know how to begin this letter, but I do ask you to read it most carefully, and to do as I ask. I am in a terrible state of terror and worry, and if the writing is bad, and the grammar incorrect in places, please forgive me. You will understand better when I have explained.

And, Mr. Blake, I intend to set down quite a lot, for I have several hours before me, and there is no prospect of my sleeping.

The time, as I am writing, is just one forty-five a.m., and my dear father, Mr. Montague Dell, is lying downstairs—dead.

He was murdered less than two hours ago, and I am almost mad with grief.

Who could have committed this shocking crime is a mystery, and I am writing to you because I want you to accompany Reed back by the nine o'clock train. The doctor not being able to come is terribly unfortunate, and even the policeman is not to be found.

But I am afraid I am becoming somewhat incoherent, and I must be more careful. Perhaps it will be better if I relate exactly what happened, beginning at the hour when I retired to my bed-room.

This was just before eleven o'clock, and then I was happy and light-hearted. What a ghastly change can come about in a few hours! I am not at all sure that I am doing right in writing to you in this way, but I am doing so in desperation, because I am alone—with nobody to turn to. And my father has many times spoken of your cleverness and generosity. I do hope you will help me.

My father was quite well off, and he and I have lived down here, at the Manor, for over ten years—since I was nine. My mother died before we came here, and we have lived quite alone—except for the servants.

When I went to bed at eleven o'clock I left my father reading in his study. He always remained downstairs until about midnight, for he enjoyed his last pipe before the fire before retiring.

I believe I fell asleep very quickly; at all events, I do not remember anything until half-past twelve. What wakened me I don't know, but I sat up in bed, and distinctly heard my father moving in the study—which is immediately beneath my bed-room.

And then, while I was still somewhat confused, a pistol-shot sounded. I believe I gave a little scream, for it was so sudden, and so unexpected. And I was fully awake in a moment.

The noise of the shot was most peculiar, and I am half inclined to believe that there were two shots fired practically simultaneously, or one immediately after the other. But it may have been a kind of echo. I can't quite make up my mind about it.

Everything was still, except for the moaning of the wind outside, and the ticking of my little clock on the mantelpiece. For a minute or two I was helpless; I was afraid to move. All sorts of alarming thoughts filled my mind.

Burglars! And perhaps they had shot at my father!

There seemed to be slight movements in the study; listening intently, I thought I heard faint sounds. The shot had not awakened Mrs. Porter, or any of the servants, it seemed. Mrs. Porter is our housekeeper, I must add.

She and the others sleep on the other side of the house.

At last I decided to get up; I would see what was wrong. By the time I had half dressed myself, and had donned my dressing-gown, I was feeling rather silly. I thought I had been alarming myself for nothing.

Perhaps there had been no shot at all; perhaps my fancy had run away with me. The wind might have blown something over outside, and I had imagined the rest. But I knew that I was only trying to calm my fears. Deep down in my heart I was very, very worried and anxious.

Having slipped on a pair of light shoes, I took the tiny night-light and went out into the corridor. My father's bed-room was opposite mine, and I quietly opened the door and looked in.

It was quite empty, and I could see that he had not been there at all. And he always came upstairs before twelve. What had delayed him to-night? My fears began to grow again, and I hurried downstairs.

About ten minutes had elapsed since I had first been alarmed, and the hall was dark and still. But the light from my father's reading-lamp was streaming under the study door. As I approached I felt very nervous and afraid.

But I plucked up my courage, walked forward, and boldly opened the door. I don't know what I expected to see, but I had no idea of a tragedy in my mind; I was only nervous about burglars.

The study was well lit, and the fire was glowing. The curtains had been pulled aside from the French windows, and they stood open, the wind driving in gustily as I stood in the open doorway.

But I was not looking at anything at that moment except the still form which lay sprawled upon the carpet near the hearth-rug.

"Father!" I panted, horrified.

It was my father, Mr. Blake; he made no answer at all, but lay horribly still. His position was an unnatural one, and my heart almost stopped beating with terror. For just then I caught sight of something else.

A revolver was lying on the floor, within a yard of the table!

I crept forward, breathing heavily, wondering if it could all be a ghastly dream. Then I screamed—I screamed terribly. I believe I went into hysterics for just a moment or two.

My father's face was covered with blood—there was a great pool of blood on the carpet—his head was lying in it! And he lay still—horribly, horribly still. I backed away, screaming all the time.

At last I got out into the hall—I don't know how—and I sank to the floor at the foot of the stairs. I knew that my dear father was dead; he had been shot through the brain, and his murderer had escaped by the open window.

I don't remember what happened after that; I suppose I screamed all the time. It seemed hours before anything else took place. I felt somebody taking hold of my shoulders.

"Good gracious, Miss Margaret, what ever is the matter?" came a gasping voice.

The presence of another human being had a wonderful effect upon me. I looked up and saw the housekeeper. She was very flustered, and was doing her utmost to calm me.

"Oh, Mrs. Porter," I panted, "is—is it true?"

"Is what true, Miss Margaret?" asked the housekeeper. "There, there! Don't carry on so, child! I dare say you've had a nightmare. It's a wonder to me you haven't

roused the master! I never heard such screaming—"

"Father's dead," I said faintly. "Oh, Mrs. Porter, he's dead!"

The housekeeper looked at me in amazement, and was about to speak when we heard a step on the stairs. For a mad moment I thought that I had actually been dreaming, and that my father was coming down from his bed-room.

But it was only Reed, the groom. He looked over the balustrade in a scared kind of way.

"Is anything the matter, Mrs. Porter?" he asked, in a whisper.

"Nothing that you can deal with, anyhow," replied the housekeeper sharply. "Get you off, drat you! Coming here with Miss Margaret only half dressed! Get back to bed with you—"

"Oh, Mrs. Porter, I want him here!" I interrupted weakly.

I managed to rise to my feet, and held on to Mrs. Porter's ample figure for support. After a few moments I was feeling much stronger and better, and the terror had quite left me.

"Now, child, tell me what frightened you so!" said the housekeeper gently. "Dear, dear! You're all of a tremble! You give me a rare fright, too—saying all that about the master being dead—"

"He is dead, Mrs. Porter!" I interrupted, trying to speak steadily. "My father is in—the study. He is lying on the floor—killed. He was shot by a revolver, and I've—I've seen him—"

"Lor' save us!" gasped Reed.

"Keep that silly tongue of yours still!" rapped out Mrs. Porter. "Your mistress is hysterical, boy, and don't know what she's saying. You go back to bed—go on! Off with you!"

"I'm not hysterical now, Mrs. Porter, and I don't want Reed to go back to bed!" I exclaimed. "Reed, go into the study, and be brave. Mr. Dell looks terrible, and you must brace yourself."

The groom moved about uneasily, his face very pale.

"Are you afraid, Reed?" I asked quietly.

"N-no, miss, I ain't afraid!" he said, with an effort. "But you said— All right, Miss Margaret, I'll go!"

We waited in the hall until Reed returned. Mrs. Porter, I believe, still thought that I had been dreaming. But the groom suddenly uttered a hoarse cry, and came running out into the hall.

"The master's lyin' there—dead!" panted the man. "There's blood everywhere! He's been shot—shot clean through the head!"

Mrs. Porter did not utter a word, but she left me and quickly entered the study. I followed her, and Reed tentatively brought up the rear. When I arrived in the doorway, I found the housekeeper standing quite near my father.

"Heaven help us, Miss Margaret, you were right!" she exclaimed, in a whisper. "The master's dead. What's happened I don't dare to think, but it must have been somebody else what shot him. He couldn't have—"

She paused, and I understood in a flash.

"Oh, how awful of you!" I exclaimed quickly. "You are suggesting that my father shot himself!"

"It might have been an accident," said the housekeeper, flushing.

"It couldn't have been—it couldn't!" I said, half angrily. "My father never had a revolver. I don't believe he knew how to use one. And

I know—I'm positive—that he never kept any firearms of any description."

"Besides, the window's open," put in Reed. "The window wouldn't be open on a cold night like this unless somebody had run off. But is the master really dead? Hadn't I better rush off for Dr. Esmond?"

Mrs. Porter pulled herself together. "Yes, you must go at once, Reed!" she ordered. "The master's dead, but the doctor must see him as soon as possible. And you must bring the policeman back with you, too. Oh, what a terrible affair, to be sure!"

The groom lost no time; he was probably very glad to be out of the house. Reed has got a bicycle, and he went off on that, without even troubling to light the lamps.

Hawleyhurst is only a little place, and there is only one medical man—Dr. Esmond. And we have no police-station here; only just the policeman's cottage.

Mrs. Porter made me go into the dining-room while we were waiting. I don't remember much what happened, because I was sobbing nearly all the time. But I know that Mrs. Porter did everything she could to make me comfortable, lighting the fire, and making some tea.

Perhaps you will think I am dreadfully long-winded, and that I am making this letter a great deal longer than need be. I hope you will forgive me, but I must write—I must do something to keep my thoughts occupied.

And everything—every little detail and incident—is impressed upon my mind. I have two or three hours yet, before this letter must go, and I want to tell you everything.

Reed did not return until nearly half-past one, and he came alone.

"Where's the doctor?" inquired Mrs. Porter quickly.

"He can't come, ma'am!" said Reed breathlessly.

"What nonsense! Did you tell him—"

"I never saw him!" interrupted the groom. "I rode straight to Dr. Esmond's house, and rang the bell till my arm ached. Then Mrs. Esmond came down and told me that her husband has been called away sudden-like over to Little Rickworth, for some special case or other. They don't reckon he'll be back till after six."

"It doesn't really matter, Mrs. Porter," I put in quietly. "What can be done now, anyhow?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid," said Mrs. Porter sadly. "That's true enough, child!"

"But the police will have to be told," I went on. "Haven't you seen him, Reed?"

"Not a sign of him, miss," said the groom. "I went all over the place, right from one end of the village to the other, and he don't seem to be nowhere."

"Are you daft, boy?" asked Mrs. Porter. "Didn't you go to his cottage? He's sleeping, of course. Where did you expect to find him at this hour of the night?"

"Well, not in bed," replied Reed—"leastways, not after I'd been to the cottage. One of his kids came down and told me he was on night duty this week, and that I should find him somewhere about the village. But I can't see no sign of him."

Mrs. Porter frowned. "Police never are to be found when they're wanted!" she exclaimed testily. "Well, what's to be done now, Miss Margaret? I'm afraid you're fretting terribly. It's an awful time for all of us—particularly for you."

"I don't know what to do, Mrs. Porter," I said helplessly.

"It don't look as though we can do anything till the morning," said Reed. "The doctor'll be coming soon after six, and he'll tell the policeman when he's examined the master. We can't do no more now, that I can see."

I felt like telling Reed to go out again and search for the policeman until he found him, but what would have been the use? The constable here is only a simple countryman, and he would have done no good whatever; he could only have waited until the morning to communicate with his superiors.

And so we left it at that. Mrs. Porter and Reed went into the study again and covered up my poor father with a sheet, the lamp was put out, and the door closed. Mrs. Porter advised me to go to bed.

I promised to do so, and I am now writing this letter in my own room. But the very thought of sleep is out of the question, and my own helplessness seems to weigh me down more than I can bear.

There seems to be nobody I can turn to. I have one or two relations in London, but they are all elderly, and could do nothing to help me. That is why I am venturing to write you this strange letter. For, indeed, it is strange. Mr. Blake.

You are quite a stranger to me, but yet I feel that you will answer my appeal, and that you will come down at the earliest possible moment.

Reed will go up to London by the first train, in order to take this letter, and will surely arrive by eight. There is a train back just before nine, and I want you to catch this. If you can't, will you please tell Reed so, and he will telegraph to me.

I want you to investigate the whole terrible affair, and, although I am anxious not to hurt your feelings, I must say that I am willing and eager to pay every expense, no matter how much, the investigation will entail.

I feel that you can get to the bottom of the mystery—that you will be able to find my father's murderer, and bring him to justice. Do please come, and I shall be always grateful.

I am just a girl, and I feel so terribly frightened; I have nobody with me except the servants, and I am dreading the ordeal with the police in the morning.

If you will only come you will be able to advise me, and you will be able to take charge of everything. I urge you to come to my assistance.

I don't think there is anything more for me to say, because I have told you all—and this letter has already reached an appalling length. I must wait now, with what patience I can muster, until the morning comes. In any case, please send a reply of some sort.

Yours sincerely,
MARGARET DELL.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Letter from Tinker to Nipper.

The Laurels,
Hawleyhurst, Surrey,
February 24th.

MY Dear Old Thing,—When you read the address at the top of this letter you will probably wonder what in the name of thunder—or goodness, or something—I am doing in this poky hole of a village.

Well, just at present I'm writing to you, and I may as well inform you that I am only doing so in order to kill time. It is quite unnecessary for me to say this, but I believe in being truthful.

The fact is, Sexton Blake and I are investigating a case—at least, the gov'nor is investigating, and I'm looking on. Perhaps I shall have something to do before long. Until then I shall waste my time—or utilise my time—in setting down the facts which have already occurred.

I think you'll be rather interested, but I warn you before I start that I sha'n't be able to finish. At present the whole case is in a state of flux, so to speak—I'm not talking about soldering, bear in mind.

The affair opened in rather an unusual way, and as it is my constant maxim to do things thoroughly, I'll commence at the beginning.

Picture the gov'nor and I, therefore, arising from our little cots at about eight o'clock this morning. I might add a few words here, but I don't think it would be advisable. There's no need for me to add to the picture by stating that Sexton Blake was hauling me out of bed when the bell rang. The details you can imagine for yourself. But the gov'nor, I believe, will find it necessary to affix a piece of court-plaster to his off-side ear.

When I strolled into the consulting-room about fifteen minutes after the aforementioned incident I found Sexton Blake standing before the fire deeply engrossed in a bulky manuscript.

He was just finishing, apparently, for he laid it aside, looked at the clock in a very thoughtful way, and then glanced at me.

"We can breakfast on the train, of course," he said musingly.

"On the train, gov'nor?" I repeated.

"Quite so, Tinker."

I don't believe he knew what he was talking about, but there was nothing unusual in this, of course. I have mentioned to you in previous letters how the gov'nor occasionally jaws at me in an absent-minded kind of way, and then seems surprised because I don't know what he is talking about.

"What do we want to breakfast on the train for?" I asked.

"Well, I suppose we shall be hungry—"

"But I can smell kidneys, or liver, or something, even now!" I broke in. "Mrs. Bardell will sound the gong in five minutes. And what's that you've been reading, gov'nor—a story?"

"No; a letter."

"A letter?" I yelled. "How long is it, for goodness' sake?"

"My dear Tinker, I wish you wouldn't keep bothering me with these paltry questions!" snapped the gov'nor tartly. "This is a letter from a young lady, and it was written between two and four o'clock this morning."

I stared.

"Well, that's a queer time to write letters!" I said, in surprise. "Young ladies ought to be in bed and asleep between the hours of two and four in the morning. I believe you are pulling my leg."

"Confound you, Tinker! Read it for yourself!" said Blake.

I grinned, and shook my head.

"Tell me the gist of it, gov'nor," I replied promptly.

"Your laziness, Tinker, is getting more pronounced every day," said Sexton Blake severely. "I have told you before—"

(Here followed a choicely-worded little lecture, which need not be included in this letter. I dare say your gov'nor, Mr. Lee, has a similar weakness.)

"Quite so, gov'nor," I said, when it was over. "But aren't we wasting time?"

"There is no immediate hurry for a few minutes," replied Blake. "It seems that a Mr. Montague Dell, of Hawley Manor, Surrey, was murdered shortly after midnight. His daughter has written me the very touching appeal for assistance. It is also a wonderfully concise document, remembering the girl's agitated frame of mind when she wrote it. Yes, Tinker, we will certainly go down to Hawleyhurst."

"Without any breakfast?" I asked coldly.

The gov'nor did not think it necessary to reply; at all events, he said nothing. He rang the bell, and a minute later Mrs. Bardell appeared.

"Breakfast will be on in a minute or two, sir," she said, half apologetically.

"As it happens, Mrs. Bardell, we shall require no breakfast this morning," said Sexton Blake. "Tinker and I are starting off at once for the country. Tell the messenger to come in here, will you?"

"Yes, sir," said the housekeeper.

She departed, looking rather indignant. But her feelings were nothing compared to mine. The prospect of breakfast on the railway-train was not particularly alluring. But once the gov'nor gets an idea into his head there's no chance of knocking it out. Personally, I couldn't see any reason why we should start off so hurriedly. Why can't people get murdered at reasonable times of the day?

The messenger, whose name turned out to be Reed, proved to be a young fellow in horsey attire, whose obvious vocation in life was that of a groom. He was looking rather scared, and I don't suppose he had had much sleep during the night.

"We are coming down with you, Reed," said Blake crisply.

"Thank you, sir!" said the man. "Miss Margaret will be very relieved, sir. She's been carrying on something awful. Even Mrs. Porter couldn't calm her, no matter how she tried."

"What was the position when you left Hawley?"

"Just the same, sir."

"Just the same as what?"

"Well, sir, the master's lying dead in the study," said Reed, with a shake of his head. "I suppose the doctor's got there by this time—not as he'll be able to do much good. Doctors can't bring dead men back to life, can they? And the police, too. I reckon they must be on the spot, noising about. There's going to be rare trouble, sir."

It was fairly obvious that Reed could tell us nothing, and the only way was to run down to Hawley Manor as soon as possible. The man had left quite early, and the situation had been unchanged at that time.

Well, old son, we took a taxi to Victoria, and managed to catch the train comfortably. I'll leave you to imagine my feelings when we discovered it was a rotten slow train, without any breakfast-saloon. The gov'nor didn't seem to notice it at all, and when I pointed out the disaster to him he calmly told me not to grumble over trifles!

However, we secured a couple of grub-baskets, and managed to appease our appetites somehow or other; and I might as well mention I had one basket entirely to myself—at least, the contents of it.

Hawleyhurst is an extremely quiet village—the kind of place where a fellow wonders how the inhabitants can continue to exist. The idea of a brutal murder having been committed amid such peaceful surroundings was rather shocking.

There was no sign of any excitement as we walked through the village towards Hawley Manor, which is only half a mile from the

station. People regarded us curiously as we passed, but there was nothing unusual in this. Strangers in a country village always attract attention.

"It seems as though the news of the tragedy has not leaked out yet, Tinker," observed the gov'nor. "Well, that is all the better. But the truth must be known very shortly."

"The inquest you mean, gov'nor?" I inquired.

"I am afraid the story of the murder will be on everybody's lips before then," replied Blake. "By the way, Reed, did your mistress mention anything about communicating with the police?"

"Only with the village constable, sir," said the groom.

"Well, of course, he is a mere nobody," went on the gov'nor. "It is quite possible that a man will be sent down from Scotland Yard; but it is just as well that we should be on the spot first."

A minute or two later we came within sight of Hawley Manor. It is quite a nice little place, although similar in general outline to hundreds of country homes. It stands back from the road, and is reached by a short drive.

Now, as you can imagine, we were expecting to find Miss Margaret Dell close upon the verge of hysterics—or at least in a state of prostrate grief. But we were quite mistaken.

For as we entered the gateway we caught a glimpse of a face at one of the lower windows. Before we were half-way up the drive the front door opened, and a girl stood in the doorway. She had evidently been on the look-out for us, and was so eager that she could not wait until we reached the porch. She came running out to meet us.

And here, before going into any further details, I may as well mention that Miss Margaret Dell is very different in appearance from what I had anticipated. In fact, I'm jolly pleased I came. One doesn't often get a chance of meeting such a jolly pretty girl as Miss Margaret. She's got deep blue eyes and a sweet little mouth, and— But it's no good. I can't describe a girl properly. All I can say is that she's absolutely top-hole.

Well, to our astonishment, she ran up to us, blushing and smiling, and there was a look in her eyes which did not express anything in the nature of grief. Even Reed was surprised.

"Oh, Mr. Blake, I'm so ashamed of myself!" she exclaimed. "I really don't know what you'll think of me; and my only excuse is that I was so worried and overwrought—"

"Yes; but what has happened, Miss Dell?" asked the gov'nor.

"My father is alive—"

"Alive?" I ejaculated.

"Yes, and not very much hurt, according to Dr. Esmond," said Margaret quickly. "Oh, you don't know how wonderfully relieved I was! And now you have come here for nothing, Mr. Blake! But please come indoors!"

And the gov'nor and I glanced at one another, but made no comment. Reed went off hurriedly to the rear-quarters, with the evident intention of putting a few leading questions to Mrs. Porter.

Miss Dell led the way into the house, and Sexton Blake and I followed her through the hall and into a comfortable sitting-room, where a fire was blazing merrily. There was no air of tragedy about the place whatever.

"I didn't know until it was too late to send you a telegram," said the girl, without waiting to be questioned. "I suppose I was hysterical when I wrote that letter in the night—it seems like a nightmare now. But I was sure that my father was dead, and Mrs. Porter was sure, too. If the doctor had only been able to come at first I should not have bothered you at all."

"Is the doctor here now?" asked Blake.

"Yes."

"And what is his verdict?"

"He says that my father is only suffering from a graze on the side of the head," replied Margaret, reddening again. "Oh, I know I've been very silly, and I want you to forgive me, Mr. Blake. It seems that the bullet only just touched him, and caused no grave injury."

"Then Mr. Dell is conscious?"

"No, not yet."

"But yet he received the injury almost ten hours ago," said Blake. "It must be more than a graze, I'm afraid, Miss Dell. And how was the shot fired? Who committed the assault?"

"We don't know, Mr. Blake; it's quite a mystery!" declared the girl. "Inspector Payne, of the local police, is here now, and U. J.—No. 824

no and Dr. Esmond are having a chat in the morning-room. The inspector doesn't seem to think that the affair is of any importance."

"But hasn't he suggested any motive or explanation?" I asked.

"He has said nothing to me," replied the girl—"nothing, at all events, except that the wound could hardly have been self-inflicted; and the doctor agrees with that, too. And I knew all along that my father could not have fired the shot himself. He has never owned a revolver at all."

Sexton Blake nodded absently.

"I think you mentioned that you heard two shots?" he asked.

"I wasn't quite sure, Mr. Blake, and I must have been mistaken," replied our fair client. "I suppose it was the echo I heard. Only one chamber of the revolver is discharged, so it is obvious that I made an error. There is really nothing for you to investigate, and I am more sorry than I can say—"

"Please don't apologise, Miss Dell!" interrupted the gov'nor. "Perhaps my presence here will not be entirely fruitless, after all. One never knows. And I can readily understand your distracted frame of mind when you wrote the letter."

"It is very good of you, Mr. Blake, to make excuses for me," said the girl gratefully. "Perhaps you would like to have a word with Dr. Esmond?"

"Yes, I should," said Blake. "By the way, is your father still in the study, or has he been taken upstairs?"

"The doctor thought it advisable not to move him," was Margaret's reply; "and he is lying on the couch, comfortably tucked up in blankets, with his head bandaged. I am still anxious about him, of course. But the doctor says there is no danger."

We left the sitting-room, and were escorted by the girl down the hall to another door. This was opened, and we were introduced to Dr. Esmond and Inspector Payne. They both seemed very pleased to make our acquaintance.

Payne is a great, fat fellow, but the doctor is only small—a dapper individual, with charming manners. I'm writing this letter in his house, so I know a bit about him. Why am I in his house? If you think you can survive the rest of this letter, you'll find out.

"I am afraid that your abilities will not be needed in this little affair, Mr. Blake," said Dr. Esmond. "Miss Dell made a mistake when she concluded that her father had been killed; but quite a natural mistake, I must admit. I was unable to come, and no proper examination was made."

"Yes, I can quite realise the position," said the gov'nor. "And what is your opinion, Mr. Payne?" he added, turning to the inspector.

"Well, to tell the truth, I don't know much of it," replied Payne. "We can do nothing, anyhow, until Mr. Dell recovers consciousness. It's my opinion that some minor burglar broke in, fired at Mr. Dell in a panic, and then fled without touching a thing—being, of course, frightened by what he had done."

"Was there anything of value in the study?"

"Oh, quite a lot, sir—to say nothing of a considerable sum in cash on the desk itself!" replied the inspector. "But the room was untouched."

Dr. Esmond shook his head.

"But there are one or two curious points, all the same," he remarked. "It is remarkable that Mr. Dell has not yet recovered consciousness, for example. The wound is only slight, and he ought to have recovered his senses hours ago. I must admit that I am puzzled."

"There's that blood, too," said Inspector Payne.

"Blood?" repeated Sexton Blake.

The doctor nodded.

"Yes," he replied. "That is another curious point, Mr. Blake. The wound, although only comparatively small, must have bled considerably. And yet I cannot quite see how such an amount of blood could have escaped."

"Perhaps there's another wound?" I suggested.

"Oh, no!" said the doctor stoutly. "My examination was quite thorough, and Mr. Dell is only suffering from a graze on the side of his head. But perhaps you would care to have a look at the patient, Mr. Blake?"

"I am quite anxious to," said the gov'nor promptly.

Dr. Esmond escorted us into the study. The inspector remained behind, and he seemed to consider that he was wasting his time. The study is quite a cheerful apart-

ment, and when we entered the fire was blazing and the blinds were raised. Upon the couch lay Mr. Montague Dell, motionless.

The gov'nor was not able to examine the wound, of course, because it was bound up. But the doctor explained the precise nature of it, and declared that no serious complications could possibly arise.

Shortly after that the doctor was called out of the room, and I noticed an immediate change in Sexton Blake. He became more alert, more active, and he seemed to be making a note of every detail of the room in his mind.

"Well, gov'nor?" I asked, after a minute.

He made no reply, and I saw that he was giving all his attention to a revolver which had been lying on the desk.

"One chamber exploded," he murmured musingly. "Quite a cheap weapon, Tinker, and not particularly powerful—although at close range deadly. The bullet evidently grazed Mr. Dell's head, and then entered that picture."

I nodded. The picture was over the fireplace, and the glass was quite shattered. But this didn't interest me particularly.

"Rather careless of the inspector to leave the revolver here, wasn't it, gov'nor?" I observed.

"I don't suppose he realises the importance of it, my boy."

"Why, is it important?" I asked, looking up.

"Very!"

I couldn't quite see it, but the gov'nor could, apparently.

"I'm not quite satisfied, Tinker," he went on, after a short pause. "Why has Mr. Dell not recovered? He is lying there, as you see, breathing quite evenly; there is nothing very wrong with him. Yet he is still unconscious. Then, there is this blood. Do you see?"

The gov'nor was pointing to an ominous stain on the light-coloured carpet. It was a large stain, surrounded by several smaller ones.

"What about it, gov'nor?" I asked.

"Well, my dear Tinker, all this blood could not have flowed from a mere graze," replied Blake quietly. "The doctor ought to know what he is talking about, and he declares that the wound is slight. Yet here we have plenty of evidence that blood has been flowing profusely. What we must establish, Tinker, is where this blood came from."

"But that's already established," I objected.

"Indeed!"

"Of course it is," I went on. "It's established that the blood was caused by Mr. Dell's wound."

"So it would appear," remarked the gov'nor absently. "So it would appear, Tinker. But we must not accept everything at its face value, so to speak. The main thing is to gather all the available data, and draw conclusions accordingly. Miss Dell has instructed me to investigate this case, and I don't think we have come down here on a wild-goose chase, after all. In fact, I am quite interested, and I intend to pursue—"

"Hold on, gov'nor!" I interrupted. "Mr. Dell moved, I think."

The gov'nor at once transferred his attention to the patient. I had seen a slight movement of the rug which covered the unconscious man. And within a few seconds I knew that I had made no mistake.

Mr. Montague Dell, in short, was coming round.

He groaned slightly, his eyelids flickered, and for a brief space he gave one or two painful-sounding gasps. Then he raised a hand and passed it dazedly over his brow.

"Fetch the doctor, Tinker," said Blake softly.

I passed quietly out of the room, and found Dr. Esmond just on the point of rejoining us in the study; he was shaking hands with Inspector Payne.

"Yes, I must be off," the inspector was saying.

"Hold on!" I interrupted. "Mr. Dell is getting better."

"Oh, splendid—splendid!" said the doctor briskly.

Payne had no intention of being left out of it, and he entered the study with us, and Miss Margaret was just behind, looking very anxious and rather excited.

Quite a change had taken place during my brief absence.

The master of the house was now sitting up, his eyes wide open, and an expression of bewildered astonishment upon his pale, haggard face. But I saw at a glance that he was in possession of his right wits.

"What—what has happened?" he asked huskily.

"You really must not disturb yourself, Mr. Dell," said the doctor, in a soothing voice. "Please lie down—"

"Stuff and nonsense!" snapped Mr. Dell, his voice stronger. "I feel somewhat dizzy, and my head is aching—but that is all. I cannot understand what— Good gracious me! What is this bandage?"

"Oh, father, don't you remember?" asked Margaret, running forward.

"Remember?" repeated Dell. "Remember what, child? What is all this mystery? Who are these—these intruders? You, sir!" he went on, pointing an accusing finger at the inspector. "What are you doing in my house?"

The fat police official coughed.

"There's no need to use that tone, sir!" he said stiffly. "I am here in the execution of my duty. I came to this house to investigate the murder of—"

"The—what!" gasped Mr. Dell hoarsely. "Did you say murder?"

"I am sorry, Mr. Dell," said Payne, in some confusion. "But, you see, we all thought that you were dead, and that some scoundrel had killed you. It is a great relief to find that your daughter's fears were unfounded. I am afraid I must put a few questions to you—"

"Not now, inspector—not now!" interrupted Dr. Esmond. "I cannot possibly allow my patient to be bothered immediately upon his recovery. It is vitally necessary that he should have complete rest."

It didn't seem as though Mr. Dell thought so himself, for he proceeded to get up from the couch. He threw the rugs aside, gained his feet, and then fell back somewhat limply.

"Oh, my head!" he muttered.

"You mustn't exert yourself, father!" exclaimed Margaret, laying a gentle hand upon his shoulder. "You are unwell; that bullet must have hurt you terribly. I was awfully frightened—"

"No doubt you would be!" broke in Mr. Dell harshly. "Women are all the same; they got into a panic at the slightest provocation! I—I suppose you are responsible for these—these persons being in my house?"

Mr. Dell indicated the gov'nor and I, and we did not feel particularly flattered. I don't know about you, old son, but I have strong objections to being referred to as a person. And I bestowed a forty horse-power glare upon Mr. Montague Dell. The gov'nor merely smiled, quite unperturbed.

"These persons, as you call them, are very distinguished gentlemen, Mr. Dell," said the doctor, before Miss Margaret could reply. "They are Mr. Sexton Blake and Mr. Tinker, of Baker Street, London."

Mr. Dell nodded curtly at us.

"I think I have heard their names," he said sourly. "But I really fail to understand what they are doing at Hawley Manor. One might imagine that some crime had been committed!"

"You will pardon me, sir, but I was under the impression that a crime had been committed," put in Inspector Payne.

"Rubbish!" snapped our host.

"Oh, father, I wish you wouldn't be so cross!" said the girl quickly.

"How can I help being cross when a mere trivial accident is being magnified into a sensation?" demanded the patient. "A sensation, by George! One might imagine that I had been half killed!"

"It is all my fault," said Margaret. "I heard the revolver-shot last night, and when I came down I thought you were dead. And—and I wrote to Mr. Sexton Blake, asking him to come down."

"Mr. Blake has had his trouble for nothing!" growled Dell.

The doctor was impatient with anxiety.

"I really must insist upon my patient having complete quietness," he said. "It pains me exceedingly, Mr. Blake, to ask you to retire—"

"When I need your advice, Esmond, I will ask for it!" broke in Mr. Dell. "You have attended me already, I believe. Very well. Send in your bill, and I will pay it. I will send for you if I want you again."

The doctor coloured.

"Very well," he said coldly. "Good-morning, Mr. Dell!"

"Please don't go, Dr. Esmond!" exclaimed Margaret, in distress. "Father isn't himself this morning. I'm sure I don't know what to do. Will you wait in the morning-room for a few minutes?"

Dr. Esmond bowed, and retired—highly offended.

"And you, Inspector Payne," said Mr. Dell. "You may as well take your departure at once. I will answer no questions, so you may as well employ your time in a more valuable manner—"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dell, but I can't leave this house just at the moment," interjected the inspector. "You were attacked last night, and might have been murdered. It is my duty to ascertain—"

"You are talking twaddle, sir!" snapped the patient angrily. "There was no attack—it was an accident, pure and simple."

"But I understood—"

"I don't care what you understood," said Mr. Dell testily. "Since you are so infernally inquisitive, I will briefly explain what happened. My mind is quite clear now—I can remember everything. After my daughter and the servants had retired to bed last night I was foolish enough to examine that revolver you see on the table—"

"But it isn't yours, father!" said Margaret, in surprise.

"Don't be foolish, child, it is mine!"

"I've never seen it before—"

"You don't see everything!" said Mr. Dell, with a frown. "I bought the weapon several days ago, when I was in London. I thought it just as well to have a pistol in the house,

a minute later he had taken his departure, leaving the gov'nor and I alone in the study with father and daughter. Margaret was looking relieved, but worried at the same time—if you can understand what I mean by that somewhat contradictory statement. She was relieved because Mr. Dell was practically himself again, and worried on account of his decidedly antagonistic attitude towards the inspector and ourselves.

"Well, Mr. Blake, I trust that you are satisfied?" said Dell. "I am aware that your time has been wasted; and I believe your time is valuable. If you will let me have a statement of your account I will see that it is promptly paid. I am anxious to be left in quietness. Reed will take you to the station in the brougham."

Sexton Blake smiled.

"With regard to my fee, there will be none," he said. "I cannot accept payment for nothing. And in any case I came here at Miss Dell's request, and she is my client. She appeared to think that there were two shots fired last night—"

Mr. Dell snapped his fingers.

"Fiddlesticks!" he interjected sharply. "It was imagination—pure imagination. How could there have been two shots fired? Hasn't the revolver been examined? The girl made a mistake."

"I must have done, Mr. Blake!" put in Margaret. "You will stay to lunch, won't you? There is a train at two-thirty—"

"There is no reason why Mr. Blake's time should be further wasted," put in Mr. Dell, rising to his feet and standing before us quite steadily. "I have no wish to be inhospitable, but I do not think this is a suitable occasion for you to entertain visitors."

This was straight, at all events. The gov'nor and I, in blunt language, were given the order of the boot. I didn't mind much, although I should have enjoyed luncheon with Miss Margaret at the table.

But her father was a decidedly crusty old fellow, and he seemed more than usually crusty upon this occasion, to judge by the indignant expression upon Margaret's face. She wanted to protest vigorously, I knew, but did not like to do so in our presence.

"Come into the dining-room, father!" she said gently, taking his arm and leading him to the door. "I want to have just a word with you in private, if these gentlemen will excuse me."

The gentlemen in question smiled and bowed, and the next moment Margaret had piloted her father through the doorway, and the trouble was already commencing. The girl was remonstrating with spirit.

"Excellent, Tinker!" murmured Sexton Blake keenly.

"Eh?" I exclaimed.

"Stand by the door, and warn me if anybody comes!"

I detected a sudden change in the gov'nor's manner, and before ten seconds had passed he was dodging about the room with brisk, rapid movements. I stood at the door, wondering what his game could be. I don't know even now, so you mustn't expect me to go into details.

I only know that he seemed particularly interested in the wall opposite the smashed picture, and he seemed to be quite pleased with himself, too. I heard a sound out in the passage, and my attention was claimed for some little time, and I thought that Mr. Dell was returning.

But it was a false alarm, and when I turned back the gov'nor was just slipping something into his waistcoat pocket.

"What's that you've got, gov'nor?" I asked curiously.

"Oh, a mere trifle, Tinker!" said Blake vaguely. "But I think that my visit to this room has been decidedly instructive. And Mr. Dell's sudden recovery was remarkable—quite remarkable."

"To say nothing of his temper," I observed. "A crusty old bounder, gov'nor!"

"Quite so, my lad," agreed Sexton Blake. "I feel quite sorry for Miss Margaret."

Before we could say any more the girl herself appeared, flushed and breathless, with an expression of pain and trouble in her beautiful eyes. She glanced rapidly over her shoulder, and placed a hand upon the gov'nor's arm.

"Oh, Mr. Blake, I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed, with sincere regret. "Father's just coming, and I daren't speak before him. I'm sure I don't know why he is so ill-tempered to-day; it must be the result of his injury."

"Please don't disturb yourself, Miss Dell—"

"But I do, Mr. Blake!" she interrupted. "Father is perfectly horrid, and I don't know—"

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In case of burglars. I said nothing about it intentionally, because I knew that you and Mrs. Porter would be alarmed."

"And the weapon went off by accident, I suppose?" inquired the inspector.

"Of course it did," was Mr. Dell's reply.

"Weren't your wits sharp enough to realise that—without imagining all sorts of wild nonsense? I expect I must have touched the trigger. At all events, there was a loud report, and that's all I remember. The bullet touched my head, I presume—although, mercifully, it did not penetrate my thick skull!"

"Were you sitting down at the time of the accident, Mr. Dell?" asked Blake.

"Yes."

"You are extremely lucky to have escaped so lightly," went on the gov'nor. "But I can quite understand how the accident occurred. The revolver is a cheap one—and cheap firearms are generally dangerous."

Mr. Dell smiled without humour.

"I intend to throw the thing into the river, or the sea!" he exclaimed. "Well, inspector, is there anything else you want? I suppose the whole village is talking about my death, eh?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Payne shortly.

"You needn't worry, father," put in Margaret. "We didn't say a word to anybody, and the servants will be quite discreet. There is no reason why the accident should become public at all."

"Thank Heaven for that!" said her father, nodding with approval. "I detest publicity at all times. Good-morning, inspector!"

Payne could hardly ignore that hint, and

how to apologise! I've never known him to be so inhospitable before. You do forgive me, don't you?"

Sexton Blake laughed.

"My dear young lady, it would have given me great pleasure to have accepted your kind invitation to luncheon, and I am sure that Tinker is of the same opinion as myself."

"Rather, gov'nor!" I said heartily.

"But we realise that your father prefers our room to our company," went on Blake, with twinkling eyes. "I am very glad your original fears were groundless, Miss Dell, and that everything has turned out all right. I hope to have the pleasure of meeting you again—on a more pleasant occasion."

"Thank you, Mr. Blake; you are very kind!" said Margaret gracefully.

A few moments later Mr. Montague Dell appeared, and the gov'nor and I took our departure without any further delay. Mr. Dell being very pleased, I imagine, to obtain a good view of our backs.

We had hardly made our exit from the porch when we observed the dapper little figure of Dr. Esmond climbing into his car, which stood outside in the road. He had evidently decided that his presence was superfluous. The patient had certainly made a rapid recovery.

Dr. Esmond waited by the side of his car until we came up. As I mentioned before, he's a jolly decent sort, and both Sexton Blake and I like him immensely. And he soon proved that his heart was in the right place.

"I'm afraid you've met with cold comfort, Mr. Blake," he observed sympathetically. "I can't imagine what's wrong with Mr. Dell this morning; that graze ought not to have caused such an outburst of irritability."

"Why, isn't he usually so crusty?" I inquired.

"Good gracious, no!" replied the doctor. "He's a most amiable old fellow, as a rule. He seemed to be enormously anxious to get rid of the lot of us! Well, it does not much matter. He certainly needs no attention from me."

"A curious affair altogether," commented Blake. "Payne, I suppose, has gone back to Swanton—the local town?"

"I imagine so?" replied Esmond. "I'd like to tell you, Blake, that there is no train until two-thirty, and the hotels in the village are not exactly famed for their cuisine—"

"That sounds cheerful!" I broke in.

"And I was wondering if you would honour me by accepting an invitation to my own table?" went on the doctor eagerly. "I should be quite delighted to have the honour of entertaining Hawleyhurst's distinguished visitors!"

"Come, come!" chuckled Sexton Blake. "You are resorting to flattery, my dear sir! For my own part, I shall be most pleased to accept, and I think Tinker will echo my words. It is very good of you, Dr. Esmond."

But the doctor appeared to think that we were granting him a big favour, and when we arrived at his home, the Laurels, he introduced me to his wife, and made us thoroughly comfortable.

And that's about all there is to say in this letter, old man. I'd like to give you more details, but you'll have to wait. It is now just after two-thirty, so it's pretty evident that we're not going to catch that afternoon train. Why, I don't know. But the gov'nor has got more in his head than I can guess at present.

The luncheon was excellent, and Sexton Blake is now taking a walk—a pretty long one, I imagine, for he's been gone a long while. And I am taking advantage of this opportunity to drop you these few lines. You will notice that I say "few." As a matter of fact, this letter has gone to an appalling length, and if you can't read all, don't blame me. I've been writing at top speed, without pause, and my wrist is aching like the dickens!

Of course, I shall send you further details later on—in a day or two, I expect. That is, if there are any details to send. At present the case seems to have fizzled out. But I've got an idea in the back of my head that it'll soon take another turn. In short, old scout, I'm pretty sure that something surprising is brewing.

So until I can give you some more facts I must bid thee farewell. Please give my kindest regards to Mr. Lee, and don't forget to write soon. I haven't heard from you for weeks, you lazy bouncer!

Keep smiling! Cheer-ho!

Your affectionate chum,

E. J.—No. 810.

TINKER.

P.S.—The gov'nor has just come in—almost as I was sticking this letter up—and he is looking very thoughtful and keen. I'm more than ever convinced that I don't know half of this case yet. And Sexton Blake has asked me to tell you that he'll probably be writing to Mr. Lee before long. So tell your gov'nor to look out. Savvy? T.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Letter from Sexton Blake to Nelson Lee.

Baker Street.

London, W.

February 26th.

MY Dear Lee,—I had intended writing you before—while I was still in Hawleyhurst, in fact—but I really had no opportunity. However, the affair of Hawley Manor is still quite fresh in my mind, and I intend to give you a few details. The whole case is now settled and done with, and I think it presents a few unusual points.

I am assuming that you have read Tinker's letter to Nipper. If you have not done so, please let me urge you to read it before perusing this little narrative. If you fail to do so, you'll be quite in a muddle.

Tinker wrote his letter while I was out walking, and when I returned I had thought the affair out quite thoroughly. Dr. Esmond was in his surgery, and so I was able to have a quiet little chat with Tinker.

"You see, my boy, the case is not so simple as it first appeared to be," I began thoughtfully. "There are many points which do not agree, and I find it difficult to accept Mr. Dell's explanation."

"What's your private opinion, gov'nor?" asked Tinker.

"I am not sure that I have any opinion—at all events, I do not intend to voice one."

I replied. "We are going by facts, Tinker, and we must stick to facts. Now, Miss Margaret mentioned in her letter to me that the sound of the revolver-shot was somewhat curious—that it had an echo—"

"She thought that two shots were fired, gov'nor."

"No, Tinker," I said. "She declared that the sound might have been interpreted that way. It was nothing more than a suggestion, and at the present moment she is quite convinced that only one report actually sounded."

"Well, isn't she right?" asked Tinker.

"No."

"I can't see it, gov'nor. Only one chamber of the revolver is empty—"

"That point does not interest me in the slightest," I interrupted. "I will state as a fact, Tinker, that two shots were fired."

Tinker stared at me wonderingly.

"Oh, that's a bit thick, gov'nor!" he protested.

"There is another point," I went on. "Mr. Dell told us that he was sitting down when the revolver accidentally discharged. Have you taken the trouble to think that statement out, Tinker?"

"I don't quite follow you, gov'nor."

"Which proves that you have not been thinking at all!" I said severely. "We will assume that Mr. Dell told us the truth. He indicated that he was sitting in the armchair before the desk. Well, if the revolver had exploded in his hand, the bullet would have gone upwards, grazing his forehead on its passage. And it would have finally lodged in the ceiling, or near the ceiling."

"But it went through that picture," Tinker put in. "That seems to prove that Mr. Dell was standing up when the shot was fired. Even then he must have held the revolver level with his head."

"Exactly. And what happens when a fire-arm is discharged at such close quarters?"

"Why, the smoke is pretty certain to blacken the victim's face."

"You are not quite so dense as you appear to be, Tinker," I continued. "And yet Dr. Esmond has informed me that Dell's face was in no way blackened or scorched. It is therefore fairly obvious that the shot was fired from some little distance—probably the length of the room."

"Then somebody else was with him?" Tinker asked.

"Undoubtedly!"

"Well, I've been thinking that way myself," went on Tinker musingly. "Why was the French window open? If Mr. Dell was alone, as he stated, why did he have the window wide open?"

"Mr. Dell was not alone," I said grimly.

"That is not a mere opinion, Tinker—it is a statement which I can substantiate. You must also remember that ominous pool of blood."

"Why, you don't mean—"

Tinker paused, and looked at me very curiously.

"I suppose the other fellow in the room was wounded in the arm, or some other place which didn't hinder his movements?" he asked. "The blood must have spurted out before he could escape—"

"And stain the carpet in one place only?" I interrupted. "No, Tinker. That stain was caused by a large quantity of blood flowing from a motionless body. Mr. Dell himself lost practically no blood at all, and I'm rather surprised that Dr. Esmond should accept his patient's story so readily. However, the doctor is a simple little man, and has no suspicions against anybody. I should be very interested to know exactly what took place in that study during the night."

"You seem to know a good deal already, gov'nor," observed Tinker. "For example, how can you be so jolly certain that two shots were fired? You haven't got even a scrap of proof."

I smiled.

"I will show you several items of evidence before long, Tinker," I said. "But this will do to begin with. What do you make of it?"

I handed Tinker a small object which he took between his finger and thumb. He only looked at it for a few seconds before pronouncing his verdict.

"It's a discharged revolver-bullet," he declared.

"Precisely. Anything else?"

Tinker examined the bullet afresh.

"It seems rather large," he remarked slowly.

"Why, of course! This bullet is of a much larger calibre than those of that revolver. This isn't the bullet that grazed Mr. Dell's head."

"It might be," I replied. "At all events, it was fired in Mr. Dell's study last night."

"How do you know that, gov'nor?"

"Because I dug it out of the wall precisely opposite the smashed picture," I replied smoothly. "In fact, Tinker, there were two shots fired almost simultaneously—accounting for Miss Dell's slight confusion regarding the sound. One bullet grazed Mr. Dell, and entered the picture, and the other bullet—this one—wounded an unknown man and penetrated the wall. Or the position might be vice-versa—it is really of little consequence. The important fact is that Mr. Dell's story is a false one, and that the real account of what happened is very different. What we have to establish is why Mr. Dell remained silent as to the true story."

"It's becoming quite involved, gov'nor," said Tinker. "In my letter to Nipper—which I haven't posted yet—I haven't mentioned anything of this at all. It didn't strike me that Mr. Dell might have been telling us a faked yarn. And how, of course, we can understand his attitude."

I nodded.

"We were rather too keen, young 'un," I smiled. "Mr. Dell was extremely anxious to have us out of his house. It is my opinion that he was fully conscious long before he made any movement. And he heard us discussing the various points, and decided that our presence was most undesirable."

"Do you think he is a wrong 'un?"

"I wouldn't like to say, Tinker," I replied. "There may be a very simple explanation, if we only knew it. But whatever it is, I intend to get to the bottom of the mystery. Mr. Montague Dell has succeeded in putting the police off the scent, but I am not so dull as Inspector Payne. It is quite likely that Dell was conscious the whole time."

"He recovered jolly quickly, anyhow," said Tinker.

"Too quickly—that was where he blundered," I agreed. "I have said nothing to the doctor so far, but—"

"Hallo!" interrupted Tinker. "Look what's blowing up the garden-path, gov'nor?"

I glanced out of the window, and beheld the portly figure of Inspector Payne approaching the house. We heard the bell ring, a murmur of voices followed, and then our own door opened.

"Yes, Mr. Blake's in here, if you want him, inspector," said Dr. Esmond briskly.

"But I don't want Mr. Blake at all!" protested Payne. "I have come for you, doctor. I don't suppose Mr. Blake will be interested, in any case. It's only a suicide."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Esmond. "This is a day of sensations apparently. First of all a murder which turns out to be nothing of the kind, and now a suicide! Hawleyhurst is waking up!"

The inspector smiled grimly.

"Just a coincidence, doctor," he said. "This suicide affair is nothing whatever to do with Mr. Dell. I didn't want to be mixed up in

it at all, but I was in Hawleyhurst, and I couldn't avoid it. The police-doctor has come down from Swanton, but he'd be very glad of your co-operation."

"Why, is it anything special?" inquired our host.

"Oh, no—except that Dr. Russel is rather puzzled!" replied Payne. "I don't suppose he'll keep you long. The body is at the station, in the waiting-room."

"Somebody killed on the railway?" inquired Tinker.

"Yes," said the inspector. "There's every appearance of suicide, but we're not absolutely sure, of course. The poor chap's a shocking sight; his head is practically non-existent, and it's quite clear that he deliberately laid himself down so that the train killed him on the spot. I don't see how he could have got into that position accidentally."

"Where was the body found?" I asked keenly.

"Some distance up the line. Nobody seemed to know anything about it until this morning, and it is assumed that the man committed suicide during the night. The body was taken to the station shortly after dawn, and it has been lying there ever since. And now Dr. Russel would be glad of your help."

"Well, I suppose I must go," said Esmond. "You'll excuse me, Blake, won't you? I don't suppose I shall be—"

"I think I'll come with you, if you have no objection," I interrupted.

"Oh, certainly!" said Dr. Esmond readily. "I shall be glad of your company, Mr. Blake—to say nothing of your advice. You may not be a qualified doctor, but I fancy you could beat me easily at my own game—in cases of this sort, at all events."

"You seem rather interested in the matter, Mr. Blake," put in the inspector.

"Well, I'm certainly curious," I replied. "I have an idea that this suicide may not be entirely unconnected with the case I am at present investigating."

Both Esmond and the inspector were rather surprised at my statement, as I could see, although they made no comment. And almost immediately afterwards we took our departure for the station, arriving there within fifteen minutes.

It is only a small place, the station at Hawleyhurst. There was no train due just then, and the platforms were deserted. It was evident, however, that something unusual was afoot, for one or two groups of people were chatting together in the booking-office, and the stationmaster was looking rather important.

"I forgot to ask you, inspector, if the dead man's identity has been established," I said, as we entered the booking-office.

"No, it hasn't," said Payne. "As a matter of fact, the body was searched almost as soon as it was found. But there's absolutely nothing on it to even hint at the name or address of the dead man."

"That's rather queer, isn't it?" put in Tinker.

"I don't know," replied the inspector. "It seems to me that the fellow prepared himself for the job. He doesn't want us to find out who he is, and there's nothing unusual in that. A great many suicides prefer to die unknown."

We were introduced to the stationmaster. He seemed quite pleased to welcome Dr. Esmond, but was rather inclined to regard Tinker and I as intruders. However, the stationmaster's opinion was of little account.

I won't go into any details regarding the mutilations of the body, Lee. There is no reason why I should do so. I only need say that the inspector's description was fairly accurate—the dead man's head was almost non-existent.

Dr. Russel proved to be a big, bluff individual, and he greeted us warmly.

"The truth is, I can't quite determine at what hour the man met his death," he said candidly. "There are one or two puzzling points, moreover. The man was killed on the spot, instantaneously; but there seems to have been a very small flow of blood."

"That is certainly curious," I agreed. "I presume you have examined the spot where the body was found, Dr. Russel?"

"Oh, yes!"

"And what was the result?" inquired Esmond.

"Well, as I told you, there seems to be an unaccountable shortage of blood," replied Russel. "Examine the body for yourself, and let me have your opinion."

Well, we made our examination—Esmond and I—while Russel chatted with Tinker and the inspector on the other side of the wait-

ing-room. Finally, Esmond looked at me rather queerly.

"I should say the fellow was killed at about one o'clock this morning, or shortly after midnight," he observed.

"That is my opinion," I agreed.

"And mine," put in Dr. Russel, who had heard our words. "But that's why I am so puzzled. We all seem to be agreed upon that point—the man died between the hours of midnight and one o'clock. But yet there is no train along this line from ten-thirty p.m. to six a.m. That is to say, there was no train whatever which could have killed the man at the hour he died."

"That's infernally queer," said Esmond, stroking his chin. "You're quite right, Dr. Russel. I remember now. The man was found on the up line, wasn't he? Well, the last train passes before ten-thirty, as you said. And the first train this morning was not until six."

Russel nodded.

"At that rate, we have two alternatives," he said. "The man was either killed by last night's train, which is too early, or by this morning's train, which is too late. What we

during the night, and he must have been lying there, dead, for several hours before being run over by the train. How he met his death is quite another matter."

"It must have been owing to an injury to the head, at all events," said Russel. "The rest of his body was lying quite clear of the rails, and is not even scratched. To judge from the deceased's general appearance, I should say he was strong, healthy, and in the prime of life. He met his death, without a doubt, by being injured about the head."

"And he was shoved on the railway-line so that all evidence would be destroyed," put in Tinker. "Why, it's quite clear! But who the dickens actually killed him in the first place?"

"I do not think we shall have much difficulty in establishing that fact," I said quietly. "But, before making any further statement, I should just like to make one or two little experiments."

Well, Lee, I have no doubt that you have arrived at a definite conclusion by this time—you have surely guessed the truth. In any case, I intend to leave you to think it over for the present.

I really have no further time at my disposal just now. It would give me great pleasure to set down the rest of this episode, but I am rather busy at present, and I must leave Tinker to write the concluding incidents.

He will probably attend to the matter immediately, but, if not, I can promise that he will write no later than to-morrow. It is just possible that I shall require him this evening, so you must not be impatient. We have work to attend to, old man, and this letter-writing must be regarded as a pleasure.

When you have received Tinker's letter, and have read the whole record of events, I should like you to drop me a few lines. I am always delighted to receive a letter from you, as you are fully aware.

With very kind regards to yourself and Nipper.

Yours, as always,
SEXTON BLAKE.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Letter from Tinker to Nipper.

Baker Street, London, W.

February 27th.

MY Dear Old Nipper,—I have been instructed by the gov'nor to address this letter to Mr. Nelson Lee—and this is how I am doing it. It doesn't always do to obey orders, particularly when they are unreasonable.

It was like the gov'nor's cheek to butt in at all. I started this particular narrative by writing to you when I was down at Hawleyhurst on Monday. And then he writes to Mr. Lee, carrying on the yarn. I suppose he got fed up with writing, so he's told me to finish it. And this, mark you, is what he calls pleasure. Well, in my opinion, it's hard work—and don't you forget it. If you don't appreciate all the trouble I'm taking, you ought to be slaughtered.

You'll hand this to your gov'nor, of course—just as I assume he has allowed you to read Sexton Blake's letter of yesterday. It broke off, I think, at the point where the gov'nor said he wanted to make one or two experiments—the scene being the waiting-room at Hawleyhurst Station.

I'm not supposed to tell you this next bit at all, but I think it's necessary. Sexton Blake calmly says in his letter that he has no further time at his disposal. Don't you believe it, my son. It's all bunkum. He was yawning like the Dickens when he got to that point, finished the letter in a hurry, and went to sleep in front of the fire! That's why I've got to write this. However, you have the great consolation of knowing that my literary efforts are much more readable than his. I'm not so blessed particular about grammar and all that sort of rot.

I seem to have written a lot, and haven't made any progress at all, so I'd better get down to business.

Well, it had been practically established that the unknown man who was found on the railway had met his death hours before the train ran over him. And this led to the obvious conclusion that somebody else was involved.

Who? The gov'nor said that Mr. Lee would probably guess. Of course he'll guess—it's as clear as water. Mr. Montague Dell was connected with this mysterious death. I arrived at that conclusion within a minute.

"It's a great pity you can't determine how the fellow was killed," said the inspector. "That would help us a lot. The case isn't

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have to decide which is the more probable of the two, because one must be correct."

"I should imagine that our judgment is slightly at fault," said Dr. Esmond, "and that the poor fellow was killed by last night's train."

"Exactly!" agreed Russel, nodding.

"Well, I differ from both of you," I said, with a smile.

"You surely do not suggest that the fellow was alive until six o'clock this morning?" asked Esmond, staring at me.

"No."

"Then I fail to understand you, Mr. Blake."

"Surely there's only one conclusion?" I remarked. "It is fairly clear to me that this man was dead before the train ran over him—which also accounts for the singularly small flow of blood."

Both doctors looked at me wonderingly.

"Gad!" exclaimed Russel. "I hadn't thought of that. I'll admit. Yet you're right, Mr. Blake. It is the only possible explanation. The man was already dead before he was placed on the rails. What do you say, Dr. Esmond?"

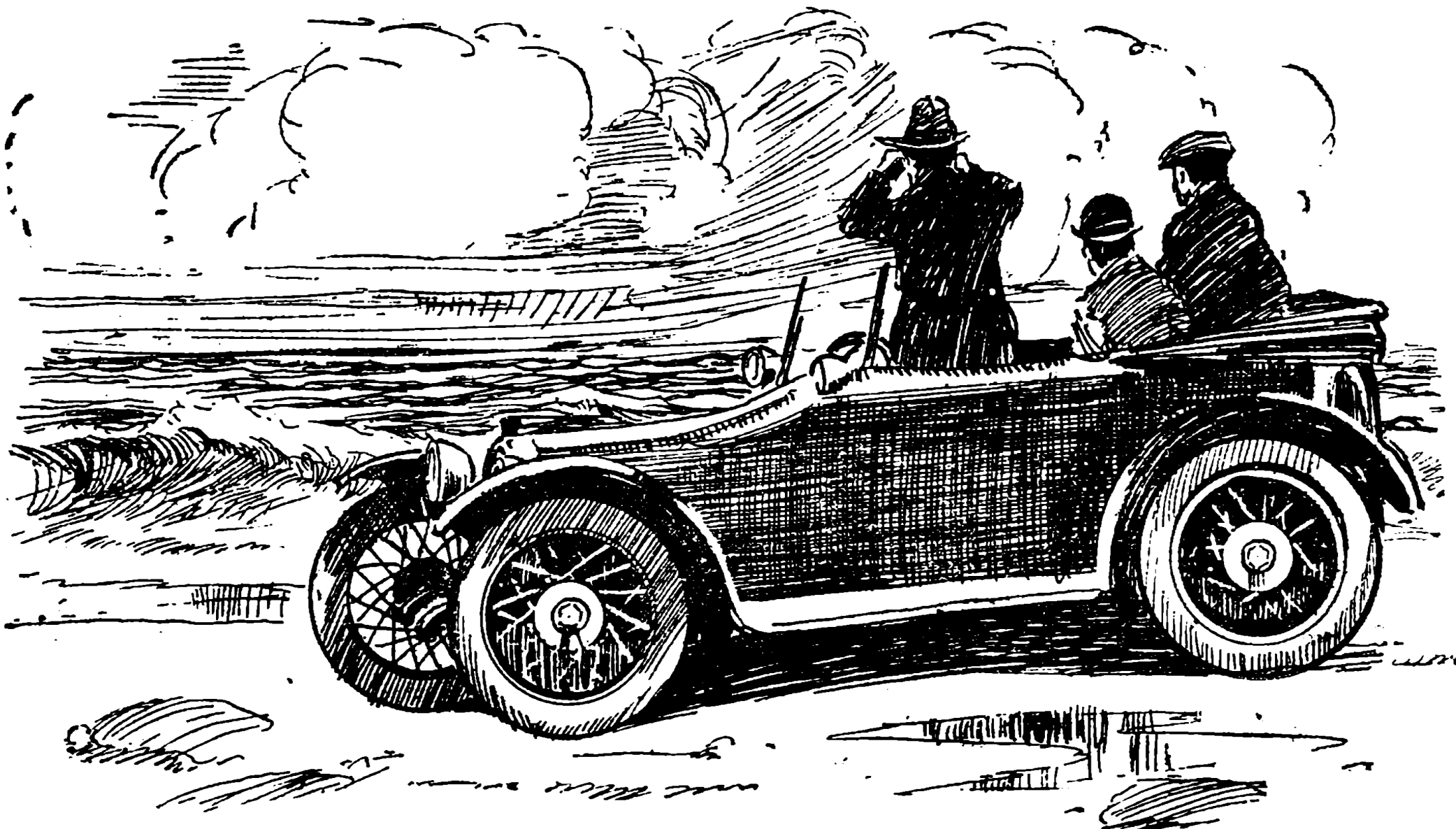
"I agree entirely," was the reply. "And this discovery alters the whole aspect of the case, for it is at once clear that the cause of death was not injuries received from the railway-train. And it is also clear that the man's death-blow was not self-inflicted. Somebody must have placed him on the rails."

Inspector Payne was beginning to take a lively interest in the proceedings.

"Yes, this does alter things," he observed. "Are you gentlemen suggesting that this man was murdered?"

"Certainly!" replied Russel.

"Well, I wouldn't go so far as to say that myself," I commented. "There is no actual evidence of murder as yet. All we know is this unknown man was placed upon the rails



Sexton Blake searched the sea in every direction, but there was no sign of a small boat. Were they too late, after all?

one of suicide, as I at first supposed, and it therefore becomes far more important."

"Exactly," agreed Sexton Blake. "I think I may be able to assist you, inspector. Do you think this button, for example, will match any of those upon the clothing of the deceased?"

And the gov'nor produced a small waistcoat-button of a brown colour. It had a kind of streak in it, and was not a button that could be confused with a dozen others. Within a minute we were all quite satisfied that the buttons on the dead man's waistcoat were of precisely similar pattern.

"It's the same, certainly," said Payne. "But all these waistcoat-buttons are here—there's not one missing."

"What about this?" inquired Blake.

He indicated the dead man's right sleeve. There should have been two buttons fixed there, but one had gone. And the remaining button, as in most clothing, was of a very similar size to a waistcoat-button.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Dr. Esmond. "That's right enough, Mr. Blake. Where did you find it?"

"Then there are a few hairs here," went on the gov'nor without replying to the doctor's question.

He carefully unwrapped a small piece of plain paper, and revealed three short hairs, tinged with grey at the roots. I didn't care to look on while these were compared with what remained of the dead man's scalp. But both doctors were in agreement that the hairs were identical.

"And, lastly, there is this tiny gold link from a watchchain," continued Sexton Blake. "This man does not appear to have worn a watch—"

"Yes, it's over here," interjected Payne. "There was nothing on the body except a watch and chain and several pounds in loose money. Now I come to think of it, I believe the chain is broken, too."

It was, and the link fitted exactly.

"I suppose you realise, Mr. Blake, that these articles are of the utmost importance?" went on the inspector.

"I should not have preserved them so carefully had I not known that they were vital," said Sexton Blake quietly. "You had as many opportunities as myself, inspector, and these clues could have been in your possession instead of mine."

Payne coughed, and stroked his grizzled moustache.

"I don't quite understand you, Mr. Blake!" he exclaimed. "Opportunities? Where? We haven't been here half an hour—"

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"But we were at Hawley Manor this morning, inspector."

"Did—did you find these things at Hawley Manor?" demanded Payne quickly.

"I did."

"But where—where?"

"In Mr. Montague Dell's study."

"Good heavens!" said Payne, in amazement. "It is not possible that Mr. Dell is responsible for this unfortunate man's death!"

"Don't forget the large pool of blood on the study carpet," I put in.

"Well, I'm hanged!" exclaimed Dr. Esmond. "That's right, Tinker. Now I can understand where the blood came from—for it certainly could not have flowed from Mr. Dell's wound."

"You suggest, in fact, that Dell killed this man?" inquired Payne.

But Sexton Blake shook his head.

"I suggest nothing," he replied. "You must draw your own conclusions, inspector. You know the facts, and you can easily put two and two together. If you had taken the trouble to examine the study more thoroughly you would have noticed a somewhat curious mark in the wallpaper, opposite the fireplace."

"That's where the smashed picture is hanging!" exclaimed Esmond.

"A curious mark?" repeated Payne. "What kind of mark, sir?"

"A hole in the plaster caused by a spent revolver-bullet," replied the gov'nor. "The bullet itself is here—I extracted it myself. As you will observe, it is of a heavier type than those contained in the cartridges of Mr. Dell's revolver. I should say that the weapon was a very powerful one."

"Good heavens!" said Inspector Payne. "This is getting rather startling, Mr. Blake. There can be no doubt that Mr. Montague Dell killed this unknown man last night, during a fight with revolvers."

"But I understood you to say that the bullet was spent," said Dr. Russel. "How could that be the case if it was fired at close range?"

"It is my opinion that the bullet passed through the man's head before entering the wall," replied Sexton Blake calmly. "Death was probably instantaneous, and that is why Miss Dell heard no cries or groans. The evidence against Dell had been accumulating continuously, and I now venture to say that the case is fairly complete."

"Well, I'm not so sure about that," objected Payne. "I don't want to make a blunder, you know. I can't see how Mr. Dell could have performed all the work which must have been done. He was

rendered unconscious by the wound on his head. How could he have carried this dead body to the railway-line?"

"He couldn't have done so while unconscious, certainly," he said drily.

"Then we must assume that there was a third man?"

"By no means."

"But, my dear sir, there must have been a third man—there must have been!" insisted the inspector. "There's no other inference to draw—"

"Except that Mr. Dell was never unconscious at all," the gov'nor put in.

"Ah! Now you have got it—that is undoubtedly the truth!" said Dr. Esmond. "I was extremely puzzled by Mr. Dell's condition. I think I told you that he ought to have recovered hours before he did? He is only grazed, and I can quite believe that he retained his senses throughout."

The inspector commenced making notes in his pocket-book.

"I must obtain a warrant without delay," he said grimly. "I am inclined to act upon my own responsibility, though, and detain Mr. Dell at once. I think I shall be fully justified in doing so."

"After the crime, Dell was undoubtedly bewildered for a few moments," said the gov'nor. "But he had his wits about him sufficiently to hide the body of his victim before his daughter entered the study. She assumed that he was dead, and the house-keeper was of the same opinion. And while the body was supposedly reclining in the study, it was actually very much alive—disposing of this other body."

Payne nodded.

"It's only a comparatively short distance across the fields to the railway-line—from Mr. Dell's house," he said. "And the spot where this fellow was found would be approximately at the nearest point to Hawley Manor. Yes, everything fits perfectly; Mr. Dell is guilty."

"Without a doubt," declared Dr. Esmond. "How appalling! How truly appalling for that sweet girl! It will be a terrible blow for her—she will have nobody left in the world. It is terribly sad!"

"And but for Mr. Blake here we should probably have remained in ignorance of the rascal's guilt," said the inspector. "I should be a fool if I did not confess that I owe everything to you, Mr. Blake. It is extremely fortunate that you came down this morning."

"And what is your present programme?" asked Dr. Russel.

"I intend to arrest Dell at once, without waiting to obtain a warrant," replied the

inspector. "The man might become suspicious and make off. This is a case of murder, and drastic measures are necessary."

"I agree with you," said the gov'nor; "but I think it would be as well to apply one further test, inspector. There are quite a number of footprints on the gravel, outside Mr. Dell's study window. I suggest that we take the measurements of this man's boots and compare them with the footprints. If they tally, it will be the very final link."

The inspector nodded. "Yes, that is quite a good idea, sir," he said, with far more respect than he had shown earlier in the day. "Is it your intention to accompany me to Hawley Manor?"

"I was thinking of asking for your permission—"

"Oh, nonsense, sir!" interrupted Payne. "I shall be most gratified to have you with me—and Master Tinker, too!"

Master Tinker pulled himself together, and glanced at himself in the mirror. The inspector evidently took me for a kid, but I wasn't offended. I suppose you've been treated in just the same way. It's queer how people fail to realise our importance, isn't it?

The two doctors were left at the station, and Inspector Payne, accompanied by Sexton Blake and I, set off on a second visit to Hawley Manor. It was now just after four o'clock, and the daylight was already beginning to wane—although, naturally, it was still quite light. It doesn't get dark these days until well after five.

I did not altogether care for our mission. I'm not exactly a soft-hearted chap, but I couldn't help feeling jolly sorry for Miss Margaret. It would have been better, perhaps, if her father had been really dead; for, as things stood at present, he would be arrested, tried, and probably hanged. The murder was an unusually brutal one.

Dell had killed his victim, and had carried him to the railway in order to give the crime the appearance of suicide. He would not have a leg to stand on at the trial—and he would deserve his sentence.

But it would be frightfully hard on Margaret. I found myself half hoping that the man would be able to escape, or something of that sort. Sexton Blake had drawn his net tightly, and there could be no escape from it.

He knew practically all the facts except what had actually taken place in Dell's study during the night. The prisoner himself would be able to supply those details, but we thought it quite possible that we should not hear them until the trial.

The inspector was determined to indulge in no subterfuge. His plan was to see Mr. Dell, and to effect his arrest immediately. As it turned out, this was not practicable.

For when we arrived at Hawley Manor we were informed by a maidservant that Mr. Dell had gone out for a walk. Payne gave the gov'nor a very significant glance when he heard this piece of news.

"A walk—eh?" said the inspector. "Your master seems to have recovered with wonderful rapidity."

"Yes, sir," said the girl. "He seems all right again, now, except for his temper. We've never known him to be so irritable before."

"I don't wonder at it," said the

inspector grimly. "How long ago did your master start out?"

"About twenty minutes, sir."

"Which direction did he take?"

"I'm sure I don't know that, sir!"

"Was he alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"H'm!" said the inspector. "This makes it awkward, Mr. Blake. Did your master say what time he would be back?" he added, turning to the girl again.

"He didn't say anything, sir."

There was a short silence, which I broke.

"Perhaps Miss Margaret will know something," I suggested. "Is she in?"

"Miss Margaret has been getting a little rest, sir," said the maidservant. "She never had a wink of sleep last night, and I shouldn't like to disturb her now. The master went out without saying anything to the mistress. He told Mrs. Porter not to disturb her on any account."

The inspector glanced at Sexton Blake. "I am afraid your mistress must be disturbed now," he said. "Please tell Miss Dell that we wish to see her at once."

"Very good, sir," said the girl. "Will you please wait inside?"

We trooped in, and were left in the morning-room while the maidservant went in search of Miss Margaret.

"He's skipped!" murmured Payne grimly. "He smelt danger, and cleared off!"

"There is really no reason why we should assume that," said Sexton Blake. "It is far more likely that he is uneasy about his victim, and has gone out to see how the land lies."

"Well, I don't feel comfortable," declared Payne. "I think I ought to have the district searched immediately, and—"

He broke off as the door opened, and turned round. Miss Margaret stood before us, looking rather flustered.

"I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed. "Have I



There, lying at the foot of the stairs, was the still form of Mrs. Dell.

kept you waiting long? I was just having a little nap, Mr. Blake."

"We came to see your father, Miss Dell," said the gov'nor gravely.

"I believe he has gone out for a walk," said the girl. "I have just been told, but it seems so strange of him. He ought not to be out of doors with his head so bad. Do you think his brain has been affected by—by the accident?"

"I hardly think so," replied Blake. "Possibly he will soon be back, my dear young lady. In any case, I am afraid you must prepare yourself for a somewhat painful shock. But before going into any details, will you allow us to examine the gravel outside the study window?"

"Why, of course!" said Margaret, wondering. "But—but I don't understand! A painful shock! Oh, Mr. Blake, you don't mean that my father has met with an accident—"

"Oh, no!" interrupted the gov'nor. "Inspector, I should advise you to go and examine those footprints—I will join you in a minute, or two. Be very careful, won't you?"

Payne went off at once, rather pleased to be doing something.

"Now, Miss Dell, I have a most unpleasant duty to perform," said Blake gently. "Your father did not tell us the truth—he did not give a true account of what took place in the study last night."

The girl sat down, looking frightened. "Not—not the truth?" she said, in a whisper.

"No. His account of what took place was invented," said Sexton Blake. "Your father had a visitor, and it is quite certain that something in the nature of a quarrel took place."

"Oh!"

"Did you hear voices last night—"

"No, Mr. Blake, I heard nothing!" interrupted the girl quickly.

"Are you sure? It is very important."

"I am positive."

"Then it is evident that your father and his visitor spoke quietly, so that the household would not be disturbed," said the detective.

"There is another question I wish to ask. Do you know if your father had an enemy—a man he hated?"

"Oh, Mr. Blake, you are frightening me!" said Margaret. "I don't know what you mean! My father never had any enemies that I know of. We have always lived so peacefully, and quietly."

"Your father has never mentioned a possible enemy?"

"Never—never!" said our fair companion, with great vehemence. "Have you found out that a man came here last night, and fired that shot at my father?"

Sexton Blake nodded.

"We have found out something far graver than that," he said quietly. "Your father, Miss Dell, is responsible for the death of an unknown man who now lies at the railway-station. I urge you to remain calm—"

"But it is impossible!" exclaimed Margaret, turning deathly pale.

"It pains me exceedingly to tell you this," continued the gov'nor. "But I would prefer to tell you now, Miss Dell—for you would certainly receive the news in a more brutal form later on. Until the full facts are ascertained, you must not worry unduly. Perhaps the police are wrong in what they think—perhaps I am wrong. But at the present moment your father is suspected of a terrible crime. And Inspector Payne came here with the intention of arresting him—"

"Oh, I can't bear it!" panted Margaret, rising to her feet and breathing heavily.

"There must be some terrible mistake—some ghastly misunderstanding! The inspector won't arrest my father—he can't! Oh, he can't!"

She sat down again, and burst into a flood of tears. Sexton Blake and I stood looking on—silent and miserable. I was miserable, at all events. The gov'nor's face expressed compassion.

As you realise, old man, it was a rotten position. But the thing had to be done, and it was far better for us to tell Margaret than to leave the revelation to the blunt inspector.

"I—I am afraid you'll think I'm terribly weak!" sobbed the girl, looking up with tear-stained eyes. "But I am so frightened, Mr. Blake. I am sure you must be mistaken. I have had a terrible experience, and my nerves are not capable of standing much more strain. And I can't help believing that what you say is right!" she added inconsistently. "My father had acted so strangely ever since this morning, I was sure there was something wrong—something more than he had told us. But I can't bear it—"

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She suddenly sprang to her feet, her eyes gleaming.

"Where is Inspector Payne?" she demanded, almost fiercely.

"Out in the garden, miss," I replied, "against the study window—"

She did not wait for me to finish, but ran out of the room, with the gov'nor and I following close behind her. As it happened, the inspector was just passing through the study on his way back to us, and he halted in some astonishment.

"I've come to you, Inspector Payne, to beg of you not to arrest my father!" exclaimed Margaret tearfully. "Oh, I know he hasn't done what you think! He is one of the kindest men who ever lived! He wouldn't harm a soul, and he never had any enemies at all—"

"I'm very sorry, Miss Dell, but I'm a police-officer, and my plain duty is to effect the arrest of your father at the earliest possible moment. He is guilty of killing a man—"

"He's not guilty! He didn't do it!" panted the girl.

"If your father is innocent, Miss Dell, you have nothing to fear—neither has he," put in Sexton Blake quietly. "Therefore, if you are convinced of his innocence, your mind can be easy."

She made no reply, but walked rather unsteadily to a chair near the table, and sat down.

The portly inspector looked at us, shrugged his shoulders, and shook his head regretfully.

"I don't like this business, Mr. Blake," he said frankly. "If people who commit crimes would only think of those who love them—well, there would be less wickedness in the world. But this won't do," he went on, giving himself a shake. "Every moment is of value. The man's guilty—not a doubt of it."

"Have you compared the footprints?"

"Yes. They are exact," was the reply—"absolutely exact."

"Then our best course will be to leave this house without delay—"

But the gov'nor was interrupted by a sudden cry from Margaret. We looked round, and found that she was staring at a bulky envelope.

"What can this be, Mr. Blake?" she asked, half in alarm.

"I cannot tell you," replied the gov'nor. "Probably a letter your father has written and forgotten to post."

"Yes; he locked himself in the study here for fully three hours, and wouldn't let anybody disturb him," said Margaret. "But it's not for the post, Mr. Blake. It is sealed up, and it is addressed to me."

Again Sexton Blake and the inspector exchanged glances, and I knew what they thought—and I expect you can guess, too. That letter was probably a full confession, and Mr. Montague Dell was now making an attempt to elude the chase.

"Let me see it," said the gov'nor quietly.

He took the letter, and I was able to read the words written upon the face of it. In the centre was the following inscription: "To my daughter Margaret." And in the left-hand bottom corner were the following words, boldly written in red ink: "Do not open this until six p.m."

"What ever can it mean?" asked the girl. "Why should my father have written to me? And why must I not open it until six o'clock?"

Sexton Blake glanced at his watch.

"It is just after four-thirty," he said. "An hour and a half to wait. Let me advise you, Miss Dell, to open that letter at once, notwithstanding the injunction. The letter may be of the most vital importance."

The girl was plainly troubled by doubts.

"I don't know whether I ought to open it now," she said. "Would it be right, Mr. Blake?"

"I have already given you my advice," replied the gov'nor.

Only for a second longer did Margaret hesitate. Then she broke the seal and opened the letter. So that you may follow everything clearly, I am enclosing the document in this letter, and you had better look through it straight away before reading the conclusion of my own narrative.

The following chapter, as it will be seen, is composed of Mr. Montague Dell's letter to his daughter. It is necessary to the continuity of this history that it should be included in this portion. The conclusion of my letter to Nipper will, of course, follow later on in its right place.—TINKER.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Letter from Mr. Montague Dell to His Daughter.

MY Dear Little Girl,—I am going to pain you, and I am going to cause you untold grief. But it is a duty which must be performed, and I would be a coward to shirk my responsibility. When you read this letter I shall be—

But I will not mention that yet.

Firstly, it is my intention to tell you of the events which took place in this study, where I am penning these words, between the hours of eleven and twelve last night. It will be a great shock to you, little Margaret, but you must try to forgive your unfortunate father.

I am convinced that I should have been perfectly safe but for the presence of Mr. Sexton Blake. But he suspects me. He knows that my story was untrue. And he will do his utmost to bring disaster upon my shoulders.

I have no bitter feelings towards Mr. Blake. After all, it is his profession to detect criminals—and I am a criminal. By taking the action I have now decided upon, I shall slip through Mr. Blake's nimble fingers.

It has always been my opinion that a blow is all the harder to bear if it is delivered slowly. I shall therefore tell you bluntly what occurred last night, detailing the whole affair afterwards. It is better that you should know the truth at the outset.

I killed Roger Clayton. I shot him dead.

You will now realise, perhaps, why I have treated you so strangely to-day. Truth to tell, my little sweetheart, I have been almost mad with worry and pain and anxiety.

Until to-day I have been a good man, I believe. I have lived decently, and have always had a horror of lying. But during this last twelve hours I have died continuously; I have performed ghastly acts which amaze and appal me; I have lived in a kind of nightmare. But there will be a finish to it all before long, and this is my one consolation.

You do not know Roger Clayton. You have never seen him, and I do not think you have ever heard of him. I had almost forgotten him myself. And last night he came, unexpected, unannounced.

It will be as well, perhaps, if I explain who the man is—or was.

Many years ago, before I married your dear mother, Clayton and I were acquainted. We both met your mother, then a sweet girl of about your own age, at the home of a mutual friend—at a birthday-party, I think.

There is nothing new in what followed; it has happened hundreds and hundreds of times in the past, it is happening to-day, and it will continue to happen in the future. Both Roger Clayton and I fell madly in love with the girl who afterwards became your mother.

It is not necessary for me to say who found favour in her eyes. She loved me, and promised to be my wife. Clayton was jealous, and his animosity was not long in revealing itself. He took his defeat badly.

However, he went away before your mother and I were married, and I heard nothing more of him. Indeed, he had gone practically out of my memory. I do recollect, however, that he sent me a letter just before my wedding-day filled with bitter taunts and veiled threats. He accused me of taking from him the woman he loved, and swore that he would come back some day.

Naturally I took no notice of his vapourings; he had always been somewhat wild in his speech and manner. And his accusations were quite untrue and unjust. He had had similar chances to myself, but your mother never really cared a snap for him, and never would have done.

Well, Clayton went away—to Australia, I believe. I thought that I should never see him again, and had almost forgotten his very name—until last night. I have told you that I killed him. But I have not told you how the tragedy came about. The law, no doubt, will stamp me as a murderer, but I am quite sure that you, Margaret, will sympathise with me.

I do not remember what the exact time was, but it was either just before or just after midnight. I was sitting in the chair before the fire reading, as I usually do. I was on the point of retiring, and had even put my book aside, when I thought I heard something tapping on the glass of the French-windows.

Now, this was unusual.

The house was very quiet. You were in bed, and all the servants had retired also. At first I thought that I had been mistaken, but I sat up and looked at the heavy curtains, and listened afresh.

Tap, tap!

It came again, and I knew that something was outside on the gravel. It struck me that it might be a cat, or some such animal.

I did not quite accept the view that a human being was tapping upon the glass.

If a visitor was calling he would certainly not behave in such a curious manner; and a burglar would scarcely tap upon a window to gain admittance. The sound was repeated, and I decided to investigate.

I rose quietly from my chair, crossed the room, and pulled the curtains aside with a sudden jerk. The light in the study, as you know, is shaky, and the windows were black as I gazed at them.

Then I distinguished some object moving on the other side of the glass. A man was standing there, but I could not recognise his features in the gloom; I only knew that he was looking at me.

I was rather startled, and you will not be surprised to hear this. For a man to be outside the study window at midnight was sufficiently unusual and extraordinary. I scarcely knew what to do, but I saw him touching his lips with his forefinger, plainly indicating that I should remain silent.

It was mysterious, but I decided to see who the fellow was, and what he wanted. The thought entered my head that he was possibly one of the village folk, somewhat the worse for liquor, who had wandered into my garden without knowing exactly what he was doing. So I slipped the catch back and drew the bolts.

"Well?" I asked in a low voice. "What do you want?"

The man stood in the open doorway, and replied:

"I want—you!"

I regarded him with renewed astonishment. He was attired in a tweed suit and a heavy overcoat, with a bowler-hat pulled over his eyes. His face was bearded, and I did not recognise him, although I must say that there was something about his face which seemed to strike vague chords in my memory.

"I don't know what you mean," I said. "If you have lost your way, I will willingly direct you—"

"I have not lost my way!" he interrupted. "This is Hawley Manor?"

"Yes."

"And you are Montague Dell?"

"You have the advantage of me," I said, peering at him keenly.

"Is your memory so bad that you do not recognise an old face or an old voice?" asked the stranger. "I will come in, and perhaps the stronger light will enable you to discover my identity."

I did not resist. I allowed the man to enter the study, and closed the glass door after him. I did not secure it, however. You will wonder, perhaps, why I am setting all this down at full length, even going so far as to record the actual words spoken—so far as my memory serves me. But I want you to understand precisely what took place, my dear little girl, for I shall never have an opportunity of describing the tragedy personally. Therefore, it behoves me to leave no details unrecorded. And you must be patient.

The intrusion of this stranger was something most unusual, and his whole attitude was masterful. He had entered my house as though he had a perfect right, and although calm I was somewhat incensed inwardly.

"Well, sir?" I inquired. "Are you satisfied? You have forced your way into my abode, and I can only assume that you have made some mistake. I must request you to explain—"

I paused at that point, staring at him closely. For in the strong light of the reading-lamp I could see his features more distinctly. He was smiling at me with a kind of sneer on his face—a sneer which I recognised at once. It transformed his face, and I knew the truth.

"Roger Clayton!" I exclaimed wonderingly. He laughed.

"I thought you would recognise me," he said. "It is many years since we met, my dear Dell. You did not expect to see me to-night, but Fate has decided that we should meet."

"You are talking very strangely," I replied. "Sit down, Clayton. Why couldn't you have come at a reasonable hour—and why couldn't you have rang the bell like a reasonable human being?"

"Because I am anxious to have you to myself," replied Clayton.

"I think I detect a note of animosity in your tone," I exclaimed. "Good gracious, Clayton, you are not keeping up the old quarrel? After nineteen or twenty years it is all over, surely? In any case, it was your own doing—"

"You do not understand," interrupted Clayton. "I have not come here to pay my respects, Dell. I have come here to quarrel with you!"

"Indeed!" I said. "I'm afraid it won't happen, Clayton. I have no intention of quarrelling, and you had better depart as soon as possible."

He laughed again—a curious, bitter laugh. "I shall depart when I choose," he said; "or, perhaps, I shall never depart at all! Fate will decide."

I could not understand him. He had always been a queer fellow, even in his young days, but his eccentricities had apparently become more pronounced in later years. He sat regarding me with an expression in his eyes which I can only describe as gloating.

"I'm not quite so sure about Fate," I said in reply to his remark. "I think the decision will rest with me, Clayton. This is my house, and I have no intention of letting you create a disturbance. My daughter is asleep, and the servants are asleep. I do not want a soul to know that you have been—"

"Your daughter!" he interrupted suddenly. "How old is she?"

"Nineteen."

"And as pretty as a picture, I'll be bound!" he said. "As pretty as her mother used to be, Dell. I should like to see her—"

"You won't!" I interjected curtly.

"We shall see," he went on. "Nineteen—eh? And her mother died just over ten years ago, Dell. She died at your hands, you infernal rogue! You pitched her into the grave—"

"Are—are you mad?" I gasped, white with fury.

"No. I am not mad; I am stating the truth!" Clayton exclaimed tensely. "Dare to deny it, you cur! Your wife—the girl I loved with all the passion and ardour of my soul—was sent to an early death by you—you! By Heaven, Dell, I have come here to make you pay!"

I was simply dumb with amazement, horror, and anger.

"I have waited for years," went on Clayton, bending forward. "My opportunity has been long in coming, but it is here now. When I first saw the reports of your brutality in the newspapers I went insane with fury. But I was thousands of miles away, and I could do nothing. For years I have cherished the thought of this night, and the hour has now come! You will pay for your cruelty and villainy, Montague Dell. You will answer to me!"

I began to understand then, little Margaret. And you, no doubt, will understand, too. We have often had little chats about that terrible scandal—eh? You were too young to understand it at the time, but you wanted to know everything when you grew older. And you know the facts, little girl: you know that no man loved a woman more dearly than I loved your mother.

It was a dreadful affair, and I shudder to think of it, even now. My anger subsided somewhat, and I faced Clayton grimly.

"You do not know what you are saying!" I exclaimed in a low voice. "You are in ignorance of the real facts—"

"Bah! I expected you to say that!" said Clayton fiercely. "Do you deny that a report was circulated in the newspapers—published broadcast through the country—that your wife was driven to commit suicide by your cruelty? Do you deny that?"

"No," I replied. "But—"

"You dare not deny it!" he continued, producing a newspaper from his pocket. "It is here—in my very hands! I have kept this paper for ten years, waiting for my opportunity of throwing it in your vile face!"

I breathed hard with emotion.

"Look here, Clayton; you are justified, perhaps, in displaying this spirit," I said. "But you do not know the truth. I tell you. Have you seen the issue of that newspaper for the 23rd of the month? That issue is dated the 17th. I remember the very days—"

"I have seen only this," he broke in. "It is sufficient, Dell! It is publicly proclaimed that you were the indirect cause of your wife's death—the death of the woman I passionately loved. She was beyond my reach, but I loved her as dearly as ever. And when I saw how brutally you—"

"Wait!" I interrupted. "Listen to me, Clayton. My wife was killed accidentally, as that report describes. I do not know why I should explain all this to you, but I do not want you to labour under this mistaken idea any longer. The subject is painful, even after all these years. My wife was found one morning at the bottom of the stairs—"

we lived in London then—and she was dead."

"Killed by you!" said Clayton harshly.

"No," I went on, striving to keep calm. "I was in bed at the time, and the servants aroused me, and a doctor was fetched. I will not tell you of my grief; I will not tell you that I was nearly mad with sorrow. There were bruises on my dear wife's body, and her death had been caused by a fractured neck, owing to the terrible fall. It was assumed that I had caused the bruises, and that she had fallen down the stairs by accident. In short, it was believed that my wife had met her death accidentally, but in consequence of brutal treatment on my part."

"Those are the actual facts, you hound!" snarled Clayton.

"They are nothing of the sort," I said quietly. "I was detained by the police, as that report in your hands states, and two of my servants informed the police that my wife and I had quarrelled violently late the previous evening. It was on the evidence of those servants that I was detained, and the newspapers published the so-called 'news' before the real truth was known. If you have read the later reports—"

"I have read this one only—it is sufficient!" I rose to my feet, and laughed bitterly.

"Clayton, you are doing me a terrible wrong!" I said. "There was a foolish misunderstanding—an insane misunderstanding—which would appear farcical, were it not so grievously tragic. Everything came out at the inquest, and I was totally exonerated. The coroner and jury expressed the deepest sympathy with me in my sad bereavement, and the newspapers published apologies and regrets. The explanation is so simple—"

"That it is quite easy to invent?" sneered Clayton.

"By Heaven, do not say that again!" I exclaimed, almost choking. "I will finish what I was saying, and then you will go. At that period my wife and I were rehearsing for a little private theatrical performance, and in the play we were supposed to quarrel. The servants heard us going over our parts, and thought that we were really quarrelling. When everything was explained—when witnesses had testified to the truth—it was seen that I had been terribly wronged. The doctors found that the bruises on my wife's body had been caused by the fall. She had probably walked in her sleep—we never really knew the actual cause of her fall—and met her death. It was an awful affair, Clayton, and all the more awful because of the scandal which was attached to it."

He made no reply for some moments. As you are fully aware, Margaret, what I told him was the positive truth. The later edition of the various newspapers explained the thing fully. Your dear mother and I loved one another devotedly, and her death was a blow from which I have never fully recovered. But for you, my sweetheart, I do not think I could have borne the agony.

As for this man to come here and rake the whole shocking trouble up again—and to do so in such a manner—filled me with fury. He only knew half the story, and had never taken the trouble to discover the rest. Of course, he preferred to believe that I was guilty of cruelty, for he always hated me.

"Do you expect me to believe what you have told me?" he asked, with the same sneer.

"You may believe it if you choose; it matters not to me," I replied. "You have only to go to a newspaper office and consult the files, and you will learn—"

"It is quite possible that the newspapers published the report you mentioned, but I would not believe them," said Clayton. "But you took care to have the vile story white-washed, Dell. You treated your wife like a beast—"

"Stop!" I broke in fiercely. "One more word, Clayton, and I will pitch you out of this house, neck and crop! I have explained all, and that is sufficient. Go! Leave me at once, or I will not answer for what takes place!"

And then, my little girl, the real drama began.

Clayton produced a revolver from his pocket. His eyes were glittering as he did so, and he pointed the weapon at me unsteadily. He was so fiercely excited that his hand quivered. But he was all the more dangerous because of that, for his finger was on the trigger, and we were at such close-quarters that no bullet could miss.

"I told you that I have come here to make you pay, Montague Dell!" he exclaimed tensely. "By thunder, and you shall pay!"

"You—you fool!" I panted. "Put that thing down!"

"Oh, no!" he said. "This revolver is loaded, and it will shortly be fired. But you will have a chance, Dell, if you agree to what I propose. I intend to arrange this matter on a fair basis. But if you're obstinate, I shall shoot you as you sit in that chair! I will kill you without mercy!"

"What—what do you propose?" I asked, fighting for time.

"A duel!"

"A what?" I gasped, in amazement.

"A duel!" he repeated, producing another revolver. "We shall have equal chances, Dell. I do not care if I die—I have no wish to live! But either you or I will pass out of this life to-night! We will face one another and we will fire at the same second—"

"It is a mad, preposterous suggestion!" I exclaimed hotly. "I will have nothing to do with it, Clayton! I have no desire to kill you, or even injure you; and I do not want to risk my own life—"

"You are afraid?"

"No," I said angrily. "But I do not see why I should take part in this mad enterprise. You must be out of your mind, Clayton! I tell you there was a mistake when my wife died—"

"Agree to what I propose, Dell—agree to this duel—or I will shoot you!" said Clayton fiercely. "No, don't move! Don't attempt to get up, or I will shoot you at once! Decide! I will allow you one minute by that clock!"

He was in grim earnest—I knew it. And the revolver in his right hand was kept levelled at my heart.

What a terrible position!

A move on my part, an attempt to get the revolver, would be fatal. Even if I succeeded in grasping his hand, he would shoot me with the other weapon. I was utterly helpless. You will realise, Margaret, that my predicament was a very appalling one.

I had either to fight a duel with this infuriated idiot—for I could not credit that he was in his right senses—or be shot dead as I sat on the chair. What could I do? What alternative was there?

The fight was forced upon me—I was helpless in the matter. Any man, I believe, would have decided to engage in the duel. What else was there for it? To be murdered without resisting? No; I would at least meet Clayton on equal terms.

He had forced this mad duel, and I could do nothing but accept.

"The minute is up!" he said suddenly.

"Do you realise what this means?" I asked. "Supposing you kill me, Clayton? You will be hanged for murder. And if I kill you—"

"You will be hanged for murder!" said Clayton, with a curious laugh. "Splendid, Dell! It makes little difference, either way. Do you think I care? We have equal chances, and I mean to be fair."

"If you will listen to reason—"

"Do you refuse to fight?" he demanded fiercely.

"No. I am ready," I replied, rising to my feet.

"Excellent!" said Clayton. "Here, take this revolver! You see, I am trusting you, Dell. We will face one another without delay—you before the fireplace and I opposite to you."

He gave me the weapon, and watched me closely as I examined it. I do not know much about pistols, Margaret, and I was half-afraid to touch the thing. And I was in a highly-nervous state.

"It is loaded," said Clayton. "Pull the trigger—that is all."

He had given me the bigger of the two weapons, but I suspected that the one he retained was more accurate. In strict truth, I fully believed that I should die within the next few minutes. It did not even enter my head that I might be the victor in the insane duel.

"Well," said my visitor, "are you ready?"

"Yes, I am quite ready," I replied. "At the same time, Clayton, I want to urge you to be reasonable. Cease this foolish nonsense, for the love of Heaven! Have you not thought of Margaret, my daughter—"

"She will be well rid of you—for you will die, whatever happens now," he interjected. "Your daughter will be glad to be free, Dell. I have no doubt that you have treated her as cruelly and as harshly as you treated her mother."

I compressed my lips, and my eyes blazed.

"Come," I said steadily, "we will fight—we will get it over!"

He took up his position opposite to me.

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"I will count three!" he exclaimed, his eyes gleaming wildly. "As I say 'three' we will both fire!"

We both raised our revolvers, and I was conscious of a peculiar thrill. Could this be really happening? Surely it was the most fantastic adventure a man ever experienced? Forced to fight a duel in his own study, at a moment's notice! And I was positive that I should die.

"One," said Clayton deliberately—"two—three—"

Crack-crack!

The two reports were almost one: we fired simultaneously, or nearly so. I really think he pulled his trigger a shade before I compressed my own finger. And it is an absolute fact, Margaret, that I fired wildly, without attempting to take aim. Indeed, I did not know how to handle the vile weapon.

Something touched the side of my head—something which felt like a red-hot iron. I did not fall, although I staggered, partially dazed. And blood was streaming down my cheek.

I knew that I had been hit; and I knew that the wound was slight. A mere graze, although it looked far more serious, with the blood streaming over my face. In a kind of dream I saw Clayton's figure huddled on the floor, right in front of me. He had fallen on his face. And there was blood on the carpet—a pool, ever-increasing in size.

"Heaven help me!" I gasped. "I have killed him!"

In a sudden fever—panic—I knelt down and turned him over. Then I uttered a hoarse cry. My bullet had passed clean through his brain—he was dead! He had been killed on the instant. He had aimed deliberately at me, and he had missed. I had aimed wildly—and my bullet had sped true!

And then, all in a second, I realised what it would mean. I had killed Roger Clayton, and I should be arrested. I should be tried, condemned—and hanged! Was there no way out of the terrible position?

My wits were unusually acute. The wound in my head did not worry me at all; in fact, I thought I saw a way of escape. Would it not be possible for me to declare that there had been an accident? The two shots had sounded like one; I was injured; and not a soul knew that Clayton had visited me. I could dispose of his body later—easily.

I could make out that I had been tinkering with a revolver, and that it had exploded, injuring me. Anything—no matter how wild—seemed better than submitting to arrest and imprisonment, with the certainty of being condemned to death later. The duel had been none of my arranging; I had only consented to it as an alternative to being shot in cold blood.

The house was quiet. I stood listening intently. Surely the reports had been heard? At first I could only detect the sounds of my own heart beating. Then, Margaret, I heard you moving about in your bed-room.

I knew that you would soon be down.

And I became intensely active; I worked at express speed.

It was a terrible task to move Clayton's body, and at first I failed. I pulled at his clothing, attempting to lift him from the floor. But my strength was not capable of the effort.

I feared that I should be interrupted at any moment. Well, matters couldn't be worse if I was. So I did my utmost, and at last succeeded in dragging Clayton into the big cupboard, next to the fireplace. I threw one of the revolvers in after him, and his hat, too.

There was nothing whatever to show that a stranger had been in the room with me; we had spoken throughout our conversation in low tones, and I was sure that you had not heard us. My only chance was to resort to bluff—and I was convinced that I should succeed.

For I had already formed a plan for the disposal of Clayton's remains.

I heard you on the stairs, and knew that I had only a few seconds. I placed myself on the floor in such a position that my head rested on the carpet close against the pool of blood. It was awful, little girl, but you must remember that I was almost out of my senses with worry and panic.

Well, there is little more for me to tell that you do not already know. When you entered the room I pretended to be unconscious; I had not realised that you might think I had been killed.

However, it suited my plans all the better, for I was left alone in the study—alone for the remainder of the night. Until Clayton's body had been got away I was in a fever of anxiety.

There was little fear of anybody entering

the study until this morning, and I was more hopeful than ever of safeguarding myself.

My plan, in brief, was to make it appear that Clayton had met with an accident, or had committed suicide. The railway was my only hope. It is near, and I reckoned that I should be able to drag the body across the fields. It was necessary to destroy traces of the bullet-wound—and the railway presented the only means.

You must forgive me, my little sweetheart, for horrifying you with these ghastly details, but it is necessary that you should know the exact truth. Without a soul knowing, I took Clayton to the railway-line, and placed him on the metals. His clothing contained nothing which would reveal his identity.

I was sure that these country police would not connect the "accident" here with the supposed suicide on the railway. And within a week everything would be smoothed over, and my danger would have passed.

That, at all events, was my plan.

I got back, exhausted, and was prepared to carry the deception through. Dr. Esmond was puzzled when he examined me, but I don't think he suspected much. At all events, he would have caused no trouble.

But you sent for Mr. Sexton Blake—and he is not a man to be deceived.

I knew nothing of it until he actually arrived. And then, Margaret, I was very alarmed. I began to fear that my plan would fail. Mr. Blake would very quickly arrive at the truth.

I had evidence of this as soon as he entered the room. He thought I was unconscious, and he talked with his assistant, Tinker. Both of them are amazingly astute, and they were not satisfied. They were not content to go away, believing that they had been called from London needlessly.

And I decided that the only course was to "recover," and get them out of the house as soon as possible. This, as you know, I did. I acted harshly and inhospitably; but it could not be helped.

Furthermore, I am positively convinced that I am in a trap. The jaws are preparing to close even as I write this letter. Sexton Blake has gone—but he has not gone far. He intends to ferret out the truth. I know him—and I know his methods. Before leaving Hawleyhurst he will unmask me.

I do not cherish any ill-feeling towards him; Mr. Blake is a good man, and he is merely doing his duty. He cannot realise that I have been grievously wronged, and that the blame is not mine. I killed Roger Clayton, but it was not murder; although I am afraid the police will regard the crime as such.

Mr. Blake is at the doctor's—Reed told me so two hours ago. And the body has been found on the railway-line. The police, represented in the person of Inspector Payne, will not suspect me. But Mr. Blake will. He will examine the body. He will put two and two together.

But the most important point of all is this. The bullet which killed Roger Clayton went clean through him, and lodged in the wall, opposite the fireplace. I did not think of this at the time—a murderer always forgets something. But I have seen the hole in the plaster, and I have made a terrible discovery. The bullet is missing! The second bullet—which is of vital importance—has gone. Who could have taken it? None other than Sexton Blake.

And this is why he has not left the village—this is why he remains. Mr. Blake suspects me, and before night he will have his case complete. I know it—I am positive of it.

And I cannot face the ordeal, little Margaret. Heaven help me, I cannot submit to arrest; I cannot submit to the trial, and to a disgraceful death on the gallows. It is too terrible—too ghastly.

I have committed no sin, but I am lost.

You have received several great shocks, little girl, and you must now steel yourself for another—the greatest shock of all. When you read these lines I shall be dead. I shall put an end to everything—everything.

So that you may know what has become of me, I will tell you my plan in this letter. But I beg of you to keep it secret. I shall disappear, and not a soul save yourself will know what has become of me.

Within ten minutes from now I shall start. I shall go out for a walk, and I shall wander to the beach. There are boats there, and I intend to take one. By six o'clock—when you open this letter—I shall have completed my scheme. It is simple. And it is sure.

When I reach a spot about two miles from the shore, my intention is to tie weights—stones, or something similar—to my feet. I shall then plunge down into the sea, never

to rise again. My remains will never be recovered.

And you, my poor little sweetheart, will be left alone. Forgive me for all the pain I am making you suffer. But it must be—there is no other way.

My will is in order, and all my property is left to you.

I only request that you shall not grieve over me. I ask you, as a last request, not to mourn. Do not wear black, Margaret. Go away to London, to your Aunt Alice, and do your utmost to forget all that has happened.

There is nothing more for me to say—except that I should like you to give Mrs. Porter fifty pounds before parting with her, and smaller sums to Reed and the other servants. Use your own discretion.

And I hope with all my heart that people will not think that I have taken my own life during "temporary insanity." I am well aware of the step I am taking, and it is the best.

Again, my sweet daughter Margaret, I ask you to forgive your unfortunate father.

God bless you, child, and may He guard you always.

—Your loving
FATHER.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Letter from Tinker to Nipper —Continued.

WELL, what do you think of it, my son?

I am assuming, of course, that you have read Mr. Montague Dell's remarkable letter carefully. It deserves to be read carefully, anyhow. It is a very striking human document, in its way.

Sexton Blake read it aloud to all of us. Margaret, you see, didn't feel up to it—perhaps she felt that it contained something terrible. And the gov'nor read it out quickly and clearly.

Inspector Payne and I listened wonderingly, and Margaret sat in her chair, awed and frightened. But she didn't interrupt, although she must have been greatly agitated. But the unfolding of the story rather comforted her, I think. For it was made clear that Mr. Dell was not guilty of deliberate murder.

But when Blake arrived at the last page, when Mr. Dell states his plan for departing from this troubled life, the girl rose to her feet, shaking with sobs, and almost hysterical.

"Oh, father!" she panted pitifully. "Oh, he's dead—dead!"

"It can't be helped, miss," said the inspector clumsily. "You'll have to bear up and be brave. It is a terrible trial—"

"Dear me, Payne, what are you thinking about?" interrupted Sexton Blake, pointing to the clock. "It is still fifteen minutes to five, and I am quite hopeful. You seem to forget that we have read Mr. Dell's letter an hour and a half before the arranged time."

"What—what do you mean, Mr. Blake?" asked Margaret, wild-eyed.

"I mean that your father did not intend you to read this until six o'clock," replied the gov'nor grimly. "It is providential that you opened it a few minutes ago, Miss Dell. We may be able to save your father from his folly."

"Oh," said the girl breathlessly—"oh!"

"We must look alive, then," observed the inspector. "This statement makes the whole case clear, Mr. Blake. A queer business, too." I'm hanged if I'm not sorry for Mr. Dell."

"Sorry for him!" echoed Sexton Blake. "Man alive, he deserves sympathy and kindness from everybody. To say that Mr. Dell has committed murder is a sheer absurdity, and no criminal court would condemn him."

Margaret clasped her hands feverishly.

"Do—do you mean that, Mr. Blake?" she asked, clinging to the gov'nor's sleeve.

"Of course I do, Miss Dell," replied Blake gravely. "Your father has got himself into a rather serious fix by attempting to conceal the affair—but that is all. He will be tried, of course, but I have no doubt that he will be acquitted. And we have not heard all the facts, either. It is quite probable that witnesses will be available—people who know Clayton, and who can give valuable information."

"But—but father has killed himself—"

"Nonsense!" interjected the gov'nor. "I am quite certain that we shall be able to avert the disaster. Mr. Dell will be in no hurry, and we have a clear hour at our disposal. Inspector, do you happen to know if

there is any boat with an engine in it available about here?"

Payne shook his head.

"We are some little distance from the sea," he said. "I don't know what they've got down there. Of course, it's taken Mr. Dell a fairly good while to walk, but we shall be able to get there quickly. What do you propose, Mr. Blake?"

"We will go at once, by motor-car," replied the gov'nor. "No, Miss Dell, I can't allow you to come. There may be some rough work, and although I do not want to hurt your feelings, I must say that your presence would hinder us. And every second is of value."

"But you'll let me know at once, won't you?" pleaded the girl.

"Yes, I promise you that."

The gov'nor spoke very gently, and we left Margaret standing at the door looking after us, still bewildered and confused. More had happened during the foregoing twenty-four hours than in all her life before.

Luck was certainly with us, for as soon as we got out in the road we saw Dr. Esmond's motor-car bowling along towards us. Sexton Blake waved his hand, and the genial little doctor drove up.

"I can't stop to explain, but will you lend me your car for an hour?" asked Blake crisply.

"Certainly!" was Esmond's prompt reply. "Here you are! Take it!"

"Good man!" said the gov'nor approvingly. "Pile in, inspector—Tinker can cling on behind!"

"No room for me," observed the doctor—"not that I could come, in any case. I don't know what the trouble is, but I can see it's something important. There's enough spirit in the tank for fifty miles, Blake."

"We sha'n't need a quarter of it, thanks."

A moment later we were off, shooting down the road at full speed. The gov'nor had never been in the car before—at least, he hadn't driven it—but we tore along at a frightful rate. I expect you've experienced something of the same kind when Mr. Lee has been in a hurry—eh?

Hawleyhurst is only a short distance from the coast, as you will discover if you care to consult the map. And we were there almost before we knew it. There is a kind of addition to the village down there—expressly for the use of summer visitors. At this time of the year everything is deserted, of course, and only a few small boats were drawn up on the beach.

We scanned the sea anxiously as we came within sight of the little bay. The water was quite calm, but only a steamer was visible on the horizon. There was no sign of a small boat. But Sexton Blake pulled the car to a standstill, and whipped out a pair of small binoculars. With these he searched the sea in every direction. Then he took a deep breath.

"Yes, over to the south-west!" he rapped out.

"Can you see the boat, gov'nor?" I gasped.

"I did a moment ago."

"Oh, my hat!" I exclaimed excitedly.

We were soon off again, but we did not go far. Sexton Blake's eyes must have been amazingly sharp that evening, for he drove straight to a low wooden building where a sign painted on the outside announced the fact that rowing-boats and motor-boats were available for hire.

Well, by a lucky chance—the second lucky change in succession—we found the proprietor at home, and the position was briefly explained. Blake gave no reasons; he simply wanted a motor-boat at once.

"Yes, sir, I can do it for you," said the man. "If you'll wait half an hour—"

"I can't wait five minutes," interrupted the gov'nor.

"I'm sorry, but I can't do it," said the man. "I've got to get the petrol, and the engine needs tuning up—she hasn't been used for months."

"I have a supply of petrol here, and I dare say the engine will pull sufficiently for our needs," said Blake. "We'll all give a hand, and I'll pay you double the price you ask. But you've got to hurry as you've never hurried before."

The way that fellow speeded up was simply astonishing. The boat was not ready in five minutes, but by the end of ten she was in the water, and the engine was running. And we all scrambled aboard and commenced the journey.

The proprietor did not come with us; he could see, at a glance that the gov'nor could handle the craft perfectly; and Inspector

Payne's presence was sufficient guarantee that we should not run off with the motor-boat. Besides, we had left the motor-car behind.

"I don't know whether we shall do it, but we can only try," said Sexton Blake tensely. "It'll be tough-and-go, Tinker. What is the time now?"

"Nearly half-past five, gov'nor."

"Then we must get this engine to do better," growled the detective.

It was not a very powerful one, but Sexton Blake coaxed it and persuaded it to do better things. How he manages to get speed out of a mass of iron and steel is more than I can imagine—that is to say, speed that the engine is not expected to accomplish.

We were soon shooting along at a fine pace, and I was perched up in the bows, eagerly scanning the sea. The minutes passed, and I could see nothing except the water. I began to fear that the end had already taken place.

But after fifteen minutes had passed we rounded a number of projecting rocks, a good distance out to sea, which had partially obstructed our view. And then we saw, in the far distance, a small boat.

A man was standing up in it.

"It's Dell!" exclaimed the inspector hoarsely.

"Yes, and he's just about to jump, too!" I shouted.

"Don't be too sure," said the gov'nor, as cool as ice. "Tinker, you'd better take one of those oars, and tie your handkerchief to it."

"What the dickens for?"

"A flag of truce!" jerked out Sexton Blake. "Mr. Dell will probably suspect that we are coming to effect his arrest—and that would precipitate his contemplated suicide. A white flag might make him pause."

"A good idea, sir," declared Payne approvingly.

There were two oars in the boat—in case of emergency, I suppose—and I soon had one of these fixed up. Then I waved the improvised flag aloft steadily, and kept it there.

Meanwhile, we kept our eyes anxiously upon the figure in the boat. By this time we could see that he was Mr. Montague Dell. Furthermore, he was working frantically, bending down double.

"Fixing the weights to his feet!" grunted the inspector.

There was no doubt that he was right. We were still a good distance off, but presently we grew within hail.

"Hold on, Mr. Dell!" shouted Sexton Blake. "Don't jump yet!"

Dell turned his face towards us for a moment, and then worked harder than ever. Once he went overboard there would be no hope for him. Weighted, he would sink rapidly, and diving would be useless. The water at that point is a good many fathoms deep, I believe.

The man took no notice of us, and it was quite plain that he was fully determined to defeat us, for he was anticipating arrest. I began to think that it had been a mistake on our part to bring the inspector with us; it was his uniform which scared Mr. Dell.

And, my dear old son, the worst happened.

I may as well tell you that at once. And it happened just when we thought we were going to win. We were sweeping towards the stationary rowing-boat, feeling sure that we were in time, when Mr. Montague Dell stood upright and faced us with arms outstretched.

"You have nearly caught me, Mr. Blake!" he shouted. "But I shall beat you, even now! Good-bye!"

"Wait!" bellowed the gov'nor frantically. "We have come— Good heavens!"

For at that moment Mr. Dell jumped.

Both the inspector and I yelled out with horror. The rowing-boat swayed over to the gunwale, and Mr. Dell struck the water heavily, chest first. But a hitch occurred—a hitch that saved his life.

He went clean overside, and attached to his feet were lengths of line with great stones affixed. And one of these ropes mercifully caught in a rowlock, and jammed tight.

As a result, the weight of Mr. Dell's body and the sudden jerk pulled the boat completely over, and turned it bottom upwards. Dell himself had vanished, and for a horrible moment we thought that he had gone.

But as we swept up we found that the ropes were still jammed, and it therefore stood to reason that the poor man had not sunk far. And even as we were looking round he bobbed to the surface. For the

weights, you understand, had not taken effect at all. Owing to the jam they were hanging from the boat, and not from Mr. Dell.

"Catch hold of those ropes, quickly!" shouted Blake. "They may become disentangled at any second! Splendid, Tinker—splendid!"

We were going at some speed, being unable to stop, but I leaned over and grabbed two of the ropes with fierce energy. They slipped, I nearly lost them; but then my grip tightened. Incidentally, I was nearly pulled headfirst into the sea, and I should have been if Inspector Payne hadn't grabbed hold of me.

My shoulders are aching even now, two or three days later, as the result of the strain. But I clung on, and dragged Mr. Dell and the boat round after us. It wasn't long before we came to a stop, and then the poor old fellow was hauled aboard our craft, too exhausted to protest much.

But he still had some life in him, and as he lay at the bottom of the boat, breathing heavily, his eyes flashed with an angry glint.

"Why couldn't you let me finish it all?" he gasped hoarsely. "I meant to defeat you, Mr. Blake. And now I shall be dragged through a terrible criminal trial, and hanged"

"My dear Mr. Dell, you are quite mistaken," said Sexton Blake gently. "You will stand your trial, no doubt, but I do not think the result will be very dreadful. You have been alarming yourself quite needlessly."

"Of course you have, sir!" added the inspector gruffly.

"It is easy for you to talk," whispered Montague Dell. "You do not know the truth. I may as well confess now. I am responsible for the death of Roger Clayton, and—"

"We have read the letter you left behind," put in Blake. "That is why we are here, Mr. Dell. But there is no reason why you should anticipate such dire punishment for what you did. No jury in England would convict you for murder."

"But—but I killed him!"

"Against your will," said the gov'nor quietly. "But you must not talk now, Mr. Dell. Tinker, help me to get his clothes off. I dare say we can spare enough of our own, between the three of us, to provide dry garments."

Well, we managed it somehow. Mr. Dell, however, was compelled to go without those very necessary garments known as trousers. I positively refused to take mine off, and the inspector was horrified at the thought of losing his. But the gov'nor's long travelling-coat was of ample length to cover Mr. Dell to the ankles.

The journey back was accomplished more

slowly, particularly as we were towing the rowing-boat, which we managed to get on an even keel again. By the time we reached the shore Mr. Dell had recovered so rapidly that he was sitting up, and was actually smoking one of the gov'nor's cigarettes.

"I am afraid I have been a fool," he was saying. "But I was frightened out of my wits, Mr. Blake. And even now I cannot help thinking that I shall be charged with murder and convicted for that crime. Supposing they do not hang me? What then? I shall be given penal servitude for the remainder of my days."

Sexton Blake laughed.

"Have you taken the trouble to consider your exact position?" he asked. "This man, Clayton, comes to you, and threatens to murder you unless you engage in a duel with him. You chose the latter, as any man in his right senses would do. Strictly speaking, Clayton caused his own death; the fact that you pulled the trigger of the revolver is of small importance."

"But will a jury believe my story?" asked Dell. "There is not a soul to substantiate it, Mr. Blake. There is only my bare word—"

"At present," put in the inspector. "It's quite likely that the position will be very different within a day or two, sir. Clayton must have had friends—or people who knew him, at least—and it's quite probable that he talked about his projected journey to Hawleyhurst. We shall see, sir. Your only mistake was to attempt to hide the facts from us, but you can be excused for that."

This little conversation took place while we were nearing the shore, and, looking up, I suddenly noticed a trim, girlish figure standing on the beach. I looked again, and gave a shout.

"Your daughter's here, sir!" I exclaimed.

Mr. Dell jumped up.

"Heaven bless her!" he exclaimed. "What a brute I have been, to be sure! I don't think she will ever forgive me for being such an arrant coward."

By all appearances he was forgiven at once, judging from the manner Miss Margaret hugged him when he stepped ashore, assisted by the inspector and me. And I wasn't at all surprised when he broke down.

It was pitiful to see the way he sobbed. But he had been through a terrible experience, and the wonder is he bore up as he did. We took him home in the doctor's motor-car, and it wasn't until late in the evening that he was escorted by Inspector Payne to Swanton.

And he's there, old scout. I think he is due to appear before the magistrate tomorrow morning, but I'm not quite sure. In any case, neither Sexton Blake nor I anticipate any particular trouble.

I can't tell you anything more, because I don't know it.

You have received all the facts, what with Sexton Blake's letter and mine, and you will see the result of Mr. Dell's trial in the newspapers. I only hope that he is let off lightly. He deserves to be.

Please show this letter to Mr. Lee, because it really ought to have been addressed to him in the first place. But I dare say he'll like it just as well. And don't forget to write to me soon, telling me what you think of the whole case.

Your very affectionate chum,
TINKER.

CONCLUDING NOTE.

SINCE the above correspondence was written, Mr. Montague Dell has stood on trial for the killing of Roger Clayton. And some very surprising facts came out on that occasion.

There was no lack of witnesses. And there was no necessity for the jury to accept Mr. Dell's bare word. Because it turned out that Clayton had escaped from a convalescent home was merely another name for a nice little dwelling where they detain people who are wrong in the head.

Clayton hadn't been there many years, but his delusion was known to every keeper in the place—or what was thought to be his delusion. He wanted to fight a duel with a man named Dell, over a long-forgotten love affair. The people at the home thought it was simply a disorder of the brain. But, as my letters have shown, the "disorder" had a foundation of fact.

Clayton had escaped, had purchased the revolvers, and had found his way to Hawleyhurst, for in general matters he was quite sane. It was thus made quite clear at the trial that Montague Dell's account of what took place during that night was strictly and absolutely true.

The duel had been forced upon him. He had been compelled to participate in it in order to save his own life. And the prisoner was acquitted, the jury expressing the opinion that he had committed no wrong, and sympathy was extended towards him.

After that, of course, Mr. Dell was set free, and at present he is still living at Hawley Manor as comfortably as ever. And both he and his daughter are grateful to Sexton Blake for the gov'nor's part in the affair.

It is quite safe to say, at any rate, that but for Sexton Blake's presence Montague Dell would have taken his own life, absolutely needlessly. And that's all I need to set down.

TINKER.

(On no account miss next week's Great Detective Drama, "THE HAND IN THE SHADOW.")

THE END.

A DEAD MAN'S SECRET!

A Story of a Great London Mystery, introducing **NELSON LEE**, the Famous Detective.

By **MAXWELL SCOTT.**

INTRODUCTION.

MR. RALPH THOMSON, newly returned from Australia with his daughter Ruth, is murdered in the train bearing him homewards. The author of the crime departs, taking the murdered man's bag.

NELSON LEE, by questioning the daughter, learns that the father was prompted to return on account of "a discovery" he had made. He is attacked and stunned after leaving the murdered man's house, but nothing is taken from him. What were his aggressors after?

Lee tracks them to a certain house, from which he manages to purloin a letter. Then he returns to Gray's Inn Road.

(Now read on.)

Nelson Lee Arranges a Wedding.

HALF an hour sufficed for Nelson Lee to make his toilet; but, instead of returning at once to Arthur, he slipped into his work-room. Here, for the first time, he examined the letter he had purloined from Sir Oliver's room. It ran:

"Melbourne, Oct. 6th, 189—.

"Dear Sir,—I am surprised to have received no answer to my former letter. Though you have treated my offer (which my lawyer calls a 'foolishly-generous offer') with silent contempt, I am still desirous of avoiding litigation, and will give you one more chance of accepting it. My daughter and I are leaving Melbourne by the Orient Steam Navigation Company's boat the Austral, which is timed to arrive at Plymouth on Nov. 21st. We shall proceed to London by train, where, for a day or two, at least, we shall stay with

friends. If you decide to accept my offer, a letter addressed to the care of Mrs. Pryce, 19, Raglan Road, Stoke Newington, will find me. If you do not write I shall take it that you refuse to entertain my offer, and I shall at once place my proofs in the hands of a competent English lawyer.

Yours faithfully,
RALPH THOMSON.

"Sir Oliver Drew, Bart.,
Riversdale Hall,
Kent, England."

"How provoking!" muttered Nelson Lee. "Why on earth didn't he drop the other letter, instead of this? This makes the case clearer, of course, for it explains how Sir Oliver came to be so well acquainted with the Thomsons' movements, and how he obtained the Pryces' address, but the other letter no doubt contains the details of the dead man's discovery. Since, however, the letter is not available at present, I must try and supply the details myself," and, walking across to one of the book-cases, he took down a thick, gold-lettered volume, entitled "A History of the English Aristocracy."

Turning to an article on "The Drews of Riversdale Hall," he perused it with a profound attention, which presently gave place to suppressed excitement. When he had finished the article, he closed up the volume, and, replacing it in the book-case, muttered to himself, "I no longer need to see the other letter. I have discovered the dead man's secret!"

When he returned to Arthur, whom he had

left in the sitting-room, all trace of excitement had vanished from his face, and, seating himself at the breakfast-table, he announced that he was ready to hear his story.

In brief, straightforward terms, Arthur told him of his adventure with the masked intruder, and, in return, Nelson Lee described the attacks which had been made upon him in Raglan Road and Paddington Station. The story of his journey to Riversdale Hall, and the discoveries which had resulted therefrom, he suppressed for the present, for a reason which will presently appear.

"The point upon which I want your advice," said Arthur, "concerns the safety of Miss Thomson. Her father has been murdered, you have been assaulted twice, and I have been attacked once. Who knows but what she may be the next victim? What steps do you think I ought to take to protect her?"

"Marry her!" said Nelson Lee curtly. Arthur shook his head. "I don't think she would consent to that so soon after her father's death," he said. "Besides, I would rather wait until you have found out—if ever you do find out—what it was that her father discovered. It may be that the discovery will make her a very rich girl, and, in that case, I could not think of holding her to her engagement."

"Nonsense!" said Nelson Lee. "You surely do not doubt the sincerity of her love?"

"Heaven forbid!" said Arthur fervently. "But I would never lay myself open to the charge of marrying a girl for her money."

"You surely do not mean to say that you would deliberately wreck the happiness of two human lives for the sake of a silly scruple?" said Nelson Lee impatiently.

"I would never marry a girl who was immensely richer than myself," said Arthur firmly. "You may call it a silly scruple, if you like, but I should never respect myself again if I did."

"Ah, well," said Nelson Lee, "it will be soon enough to discuss the question when it arises! At present my advice to you is to marry Miss Thomson without delay. And, as I live, here is the lady herself!"

Mrs. Pryce and Ruth had been purchasing mourning in the City, and, on their way back to Raglan Road, they called for Arthur.

Nelson Lee went to the door to meet them, and, drawing Ruth aside, he told her more of his discoveries than he had deemed prudent to tell Arthur, and explained to her the nature of her lover's scruples. The result of this conversation was shown in the following dialogue, which took place when the ladies entered the sitting-room.

Walking up to where Arthur sat, Ruth took his hand in hers, and said:

"Will you marry me, Arthur?"

"When?" he stammered.

"To-morrow morning, at eight o'clock! Mr. Lee says we can be married by special

licence at the Registry Office, at Stoke Newington."

"Isn't this rather abrupt?" he began. "Would it not be better to wait until—"

"Where is your chivalry?" demanded Ruth. "It is not every day that a woman asks a man to marry her. I have laid myself open to a charge of unwomanly forwardness, and you reject me!"

"No, no!" stammered Arthur. "I will marry you, if you wish, at the hour and place you name."

"And I will be the best man!" said Nelson Lee triumphantly.

Nipper—The Detective's Queer Disguise—On the Track of the Missing Papers.

PUNCTUALLY at nine o'clock, just after Ruth and the Pryces had departed, Nipper came bounding into the room.

He had quite a lot to tell about the men he had followed to a place just off Holborn. At the time he did not know that it had any bearing on the present case.

"I had better take you there, sir."

"Very well," said the detective. "But it would never do for us to go out together in our present clothes. The difference in our appearance would attract everyone's attention, which is just what I want to avoid. Either you must put on better clothes or I must put on shabbier. Which shall it be?"

"I should be happy to oblige you," said Nipper, with sublime cheek, "but unfortunately my evening-dress is at my huncle's! But I don't mind being seen with you, for once in a way, in your working clothes."

There was something so indescribably ludicrous in the manner in which this impertinent speech was delivered, that Nelson Lee was doubled up with laughter.

Having somewhat recovered his gravity, he presented Nipper with a cigarette, and, bidding him keep out of mischief, retired to his work-room to make the necessary changes in his attire.

Being left to his own devices, Nipper first made himself comfortable in an easy-chair, and then lit his cigarette. He was a about half-way through it, when there was a rap at the door.

"Come in!" cried Nipper. And there shuffled into the sitting-room a seedy-looking tramp, who asked, in a thick, unsteady voice, if Mr. Lee was in.

"He is," said Nipper, blowing a cloud of smoke into the visitor's face, and thereby causing him to cough in a most distressing fashion. "But wot's your business with Mr. Lee? He's engaged at present, and I'm his assistant."

"Indeed!" said the tramp, after another violent fit of coughing. "Then p'raps you can tell me—"

"Well, I'm blowed!" said Nipper. "Yer own mother wouldn't know you in that get-up. There's got to be no more o' these tricks, if you and me ain't to quarrel! My nerves won't stand 'em."

"All right," said Nelson Lee. "I only wanted to test my disguise. Now, then, come along with me to Holborn, and remember, if any questions are asked, my name is Stubbins, and we're both on the look-out for a job!"

"Right you are, Stubbins!" cried Nipper delightedly.

A ten minutes' walk brought them to Holborn, one of the busiest thoroughfares in London, and five minutes later they arrived at Barber Lane, a short and somewhat narrow lane, lined on each side by offices and show-rooms.

"This is where the motor drove to," explained Nipper. "The office where it stopped is about 'arf way along on the left-hand side."

"All right; but I must see it," said Nelson Lee. "Keep close to me, and we will saunter along on the left side of the street. When we pass the office don't stop and point at it, but just say, 'This is it,' and we will walk past as though we had no interest in the place."

When they had traversed about half the length of the street, Nipper suddenly stooped down to pick up a piece of orange-peel, at the same time saying, in a low tone of voice, "That's the place, guv'nor!"

The office they were then passing had little to distinguish it from its neighbours, except its general air of desertion and neglect. This, however, was very marked. The solitary window on the ground-floor was securely shuttered on the inside, and, like those in the upper storeys, was coated with dust and grime. The doorstep was the colour of the pavement, the handle was green with

verdigris, and on the door, which was locked, an oblong patch of paint, slightly cleaner than the rest, testified to the fact that in former days the door had boasted of a plate. Now, instead of a shining plate, the door bore a label, on which were the words:

"DENTON BROS.,
Toy Dealers,
Removed to 270a, Fetter Lane."

On the inside of the window, scarcely legible through the grimy pane, was a printed card, which stated that "these commodious premises" were to let, and that "full particulars, together with permission to view them," could be obtained of "Messrs. Gray & Whitworth, solicitors, 75, Cannon Street, agents for Sir Oliver Drew, Bart."

Having taken in these details at a glance, Nelson Lee sauntered across the road, to where an ancient individual with a broom was engaged in sweeping the street.

"It's a cold day, mate," he said, by way of introduction. "Dentons 'ave fitted, I see."

"Ay! They left a couple of months ago," replied the sweeper.

"Jest my luck," growled the detective. "Me and my lad could always count on a crust, and mebbe a copper, at Dentons'. Ain't nobody took the office?"

"I dunno," replied the sweeper. "The bobby on this beat told me yesterday that a couple of coves had drove up about five in the morning with a motor full of boxes and things, but I ain't seen nobody myself."

Whilst they were thus conversing, a man appeared at the end of the street, and after glancing nervously up and down the road, approached the empty office. With a thrill of wild excitement, Nelson Lee recognised Sir Oliver's red-haired chauffeur! The red hair was concealed beneath a jet-black wig, and his clothes were evidently borrowed from his master's wardrobe, but that it was the chauffeur he had not the shadow of a doubt.

When he drew nearer he bestowed a searching glance upon the three tattered individuals on the other side of the street, but apparently he failed to recognise Nelson Lee, and, producing a key, he unlocked the door of the office, and walked in. He only remained inside long enough to make sure that nothing had been disturbed, and then he reappeared, locked the door, put the key in the ticket-pocket of his overcoat, and walked rapidly away.

"Come along, my lad," said Nelson Lee to Nipper. "Let's be moving!" And, bidding the sweeper adieu, he followed the rapidly-retreating form of the chauffeur.

"Can you pick a pocket, Nipper?" he asked, as they turned into Holborn again.

"I 'ave done it when times was bad," replied Nipper unblushingly.

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"Well, you see that man who has just been into the office. In his ticket-pocket is a door-key. Get it for me without attracting his attention."
 Without a word, Nipper took from his pocket a couple of boxes of matches, and, hurrying forward, begged the man to buy a box.
 The chauffeur refused, with an angry gesture, and Nipper, with a crestfallen air, dropped back and rejoined his companion.

"Can't you manage it?" asked Nelson Lee, for though he had narrowly watched Nipper's every movement, he had seen nothing to arouse the slightest suspicion.
 For answer, the young rascal coolly slipped the key into his hand!
 "You're a perfect young terror!" gasped Nelson Lee, in amazement. "Where on earth did you learn to pick pockets like that? In future I shall look well after my pockets when you're about!"
 With hurried instructions to Nipper to keep a sharp look-out at the station, the detective retraced his steps to Barber Lane. On the way he turned into a clothier's shop, and, pulling off the stubby beard with which he had decorated his chin, he said to the astonished shopkeeper:

Lee appeared, and, muttering, "This must be the other gent," favoured the detective with a long and curious stare.
 Apparently he failed to recognise in this well-dressed, clean-shaved gentleman, the tramp to whom he had recently spoken, and, without interruption or incident, Nelson Lee unlocked the door and entered.

(Do not miss next week's enthralling instalment of this grand serial.)

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"I am a detective. It is necessary for me to change my disguise at once. Give me an ulster that will reach to my heels, and cover these rags and tatters."
 The shopkeeper showed signs of demurring, but at the sight of a well-filled purse he hastened to obey. In less than ten minutes, and at a cost of seventy shillings, Nelson Lee had acquired a long brown ulster and a round felt hat, attired in which he once more sallied out.

He had not proceeded far, before he was haunted by the consciousness that someone was dogging his footsteps. It was a strange, uncomfortable feeling, all the more disquieting because, though he turned round sharply several times, he was unable to detect or identify the shadower, or even to make certain that he was being shadowed.

"Bah! I am becoming nervous," he muttered. "I must take a holiday when I have done with this case."
 At a lamp-shop in Holborn, he purchased a dark-lantern, ready trimmed, and from a boy in the street he obtained a box of matches. Then, turning up the collar of his ulster, he once more entered Barber Lane.

The uncanny feeling that he was being followed still continued to haunt him, but, brushing his fears aside, he marched boldly up to the door of the empty office.
 Nearly half an hour had elapsed since his previous visit, and the old sweeper had worked his way to the door of the office. He suspended his operations when Nelson

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2. Any alteration or mutilation of the coupon will disqualify the effort.

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