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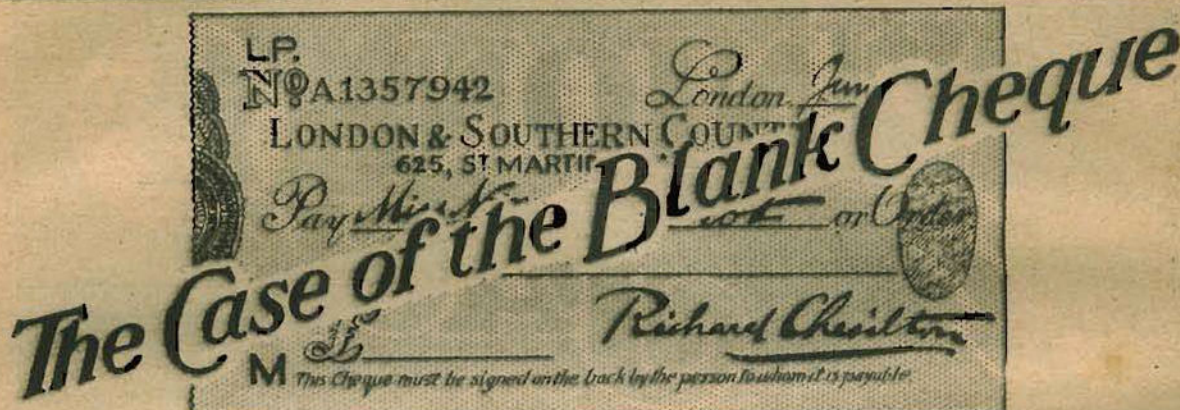
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THE SKIPPER.

THE PROLOGUE.

Down at Heatherwold—The Worries of Richard Chesilton—Norma Gets a Blank Cheque—Spoken in Jest—Pleading for Peter—Loyal to Her Lover.

HOPING that the change of air would be good for his racked nerves, and would help him to forget the various worries that preyed on his mind, Richard Chesilton had closed his flat in town, and had come down to his place in the country with his ward, Norma Heriot. Down to Heatherwold, the cosy, vine-clad little box of a house that nestled in a remote nook of the Surrey Hills, and was at a distance of five or six miles from the town of Guildford.

He had been here for a week in glorious May weather, feeling more and more bored; and to-day, as the sun was sinking to the west, he was raring the floor of his rather shabbily-furnished little library like a rest-less tiger.

To and fro he went, frowning and muttering, now ruffling his thick, tawny hair with his hand, and now tugging at his tawny moustache and pointed beard.

He was fifty years of age, and big and gaunt of frame. He was a man of many and varied tastes; fond of books, of horses, of sport, of gambling, and of all the pleasures of life. He had dabbled in several careers. Fortune had now smiled on him, and now frowned on him. He had made a great deal of money, and he had also lost a great deal.

At present he was not in financial straits. He had recently sold a number of mining shares, and the sum he had received for them was lying in his bank, waiting to be invested in something else. But there were other things that vexed and irritated him, and the more so because he was free from money troubles.

There was his son Peter, of whose whereabouts he had no knowledge. His fiery temper, which was wont to get beyond control, had led him to quarrel with the boy, drive him from home, and disinherit him. There was his nephew, Stephen Tracey, of whom he had never had a particularly good opinion. He had fallen that youth into his favour, and whether or not he was worthy of his regard, and could be trusted to keep the promises he had made, were questions of so dubious a nature that he was beginning to fear that he had acted too hastily.

And there was Norma, who had always been more or less a burden of anxiety to him. Her father had entrusted her to him five years ago and since the loss of his wife, who had been dead for three years, he had

chafed under his responsibilities to the impulsive, high-spirited girl, fond though he was of her.

Nor were these all the worries that he had. His health had not improved in the country air, and, to mention a more trivial thing, his gardener Crockern, who helped with the housework as well, had broken a leg a day or so ago, and had been sent to a hospital.

"Everything seems to have gone wrong at once," Richard Chesilton grumbled. "Confound that boy of mine! He needn't have been so obstinate! And Stephen! There's something about the fellow I don't like. He is fond of Norma, and if she would marry him, she might keep him straight. I'm afraid that it is heart-trouble that ails me; and I don't want to leave the girl's future unsettled. I wish to heavens Malcolm Heriot would come back from Australia, and relieve me of—"

He broke off as the door was opened, and Norma Heriot came into the room. She was a winsome, witching, lovely girl of nineteen, yet wise for her years, and with a strong and forcible character that could be roused on occasions. Her hair, which had been cut short around her shapely head in the style that is called bobbed, was of a deep bronze-black tint that was like henna, though henna had never touched it. And in her eyes, which were of the same colour, there lurked always a faint, quivering glint of gold. They were dancing now, and her cheeks were flushed with exercise.

"Well, here I am, Uncle Dick!" she exclaimed. It was her habit to call him that, as she threw herself into a chair. "I've been for a long walk. Miles and miles! Oh, how I love to be in the country! It is much nicer than London!"

"For you, perhaps," her guardian replied. "I wish I was back."

"Don't say that! Aren't you feeling any better to-day?"

"No; not a bit. I've been worrying about one thing and another."

"I should think you would be, Uncle Dick! If you hadn't lost your temper, and treated poor Peter so badly—"

"Never mind about Peter! I am thinking of Crockern! It is most unfortunate that he should have broken his leg, for he is needed to help old Margaret in the house, and—"

"We have lost Margaret, too, as it happens."

"Lost Margaret, too?" Richard Chesilton repeated blankly.

"Yes, she is gone," Norma answered. "She heard this afternoon that her married daughter, who has been ill for a week, had taken a turn for the worse. So I sent her off to the village, and told her she could stay for a couple of days."

"The deuce you did! How will we get along without her?"

"Don't bother about that, Uncle Dick. I can do everything that is necessary myself."

"But you were to have gone up to London for me to-morrow, Norma."

"There is no hurry, is there? I can wait until Margaret returns."

"No, you must go! There are things that I want—the books from Hatchards, the tobacco from Underwood in the Haymarket, and house supplies from Fortnum & Mason. And you have some purchases to make for yourself, I think."

"Yes, there are one or two things I need."

Richard Chesilton nodded. Sitting down to a desk, he took a cheque-book from a drawer, wrote on a pink slip of paper, and tore it out.

"Here is a blank cheque for you, Norma, drawn payable to bearer," he said. "I will make a list of the articles to be bought, and a rough estimate of their cost. And you can add to it what you will require for your own purchases, fill in the cheque for the whole amount, and cash it at the bank. But don't fill in the cheque for ten thousand pounds, or you will pretty nearly ruin me."

He smiled as he spoke. The girl's eyes opened wide.

"Ten thousand pounds?" she echoed. "Have you so much money as that in the bank?"

"A thousand or so more than that, I believe," Richard Chesilton replied. "My account is in a flourishing state at present."

"Well, I'll go up to town, if you think you can do without me and Margaret for a day. But where is your list, Uncle Richard? Mine is ready."

"I will give it to you in the morning before you start. And now you might get me a cup of tea."

Norma had tucked the cheque into her belt. She moved to the door, hesitated, and turned round.

"I—I have been meaning to talk to you about Peter," she said, in a faltering voice. "Will you let me?"

"No, I won't!" Richard Chesilton sharply declared. "I don't want to hear anything about the boy! He is no longer my son!"

"You must hear, Uncle Richard! You've got to listen to me! You were more to blame than Peter was. You lost your temper before he did. It was a silly quarrel. You said you had heard that he had been drinking heavily in London, and he flatly denied it. I am sure that he told the truth. But you wouldn't believe him, and, in your anger, you called him all sorts of names, and drove him from the house. It was you who were in the wrong. Won't you write to Peter, and tell him you are sorry? I know his address."

"Most certainly not! I'll have nothing more to do with the boy! But how does it

happen that you know where he is, Norma?"

"He—he has written to me, Uncle Richard. I wanted him to. We are fond of each other, and—and—"

"Am I to understand that you two young fools are engaged?"

"Yes. Peter asked me to marry him some day, and I promised that I would. And so I will, whether he has any money or not."

The girl's voice and attitude were defiant. Richard Chesilton was pacing the floor again, his brows knit in perplexity. He knew himself that he had been in the wrong, but his pride would not let him admit it. Moreover, he had his young ward's welfare sincerely at heart, and wished to do what was best by her.

"I was rather too hasty with the boy, perhaps," he said, in a softer tone. "He is not a suitable husband for you, though. He is not wholly bad; but he is wild and reckless, too fond of pleasure, and I doubt if he will ever settle down. It won't matter whether he does or not, however, as far as I am concerned. I have turned him adrift, and I won't forgive him unless he humbles his pride, which he is not likely to do. Stephen is my heir now, and he is in love with you, I am certain. It would be a good idea for you to marry him."

"Marry Stephen Tracey!" cried Norma, starting in consternation. "You can't be serious! Not if he was the only man in the world! I don't care a bit for him! I dislike and distrust him!"

"Why should you? I don't know of anything to his discredit."

"I am not saying that there is anything, Uncle Richard, though I have my doubts."

"To the best of my belief he is a decent and respectable fellow, Norma. And even if he was inclined to be wild you would be able to keep him straight. I advise you to accept him if he proposes."

"I tell you I won't! With all his faults Peter is a hundred times better than Stephen Tracey! I'll marry him, and nobody else!"

"Then you will be marrying a penniless wastrel. Bear that in mind, Norma!"

"I don't care if he is penniless or not! I love him, and you sha'n't speak ill of him!"

The girl's eyes were blazing, and her cheeks were crimson with indignation. She stamped her foot on the floor.

"You were in the wrong, Uncle Richard!" she continued. "You have no right to leave your money to Stephen Tracey! You ought to write to Peter to come home, and ask him to forgive you, and make another will in his favour! That's what you ought to do, and if you don't you will be a cruel and heartless man! You know as well as I do that—that—"

Norma's voice faltered and choked, and there were tears in her eyes as she opened the door and passed out of the room.

II.

The Sound in the Night—A Terrible Discovery—Norma's Temptation—The Blank Cheque—The Journey to London—Waiting for the Bank to Open.

IT was after midnight, and the silence of the grave surrounded the woods that surrounded Heatherwold, when Norma awoke with a start, and sat up in bed. Something had roused her, she was sure. As she listened intently a loud moan floated to her ears, and the next instant she heard the sound of a heavy fall.

She was frightened at first. She was sure that there was a burglar in the house. But as it occurred to her how improbable that was down in this lonely nook of the country, an apprehension of a different kind fastened on her.

"It is Uncle Richard!" she thought. "He must be ill!"

Rising to her feet, she put on slippers and a dressing-gown, and groped to the table to fumble for matches. And when she had lit a small lamp she left the room, and hurried along the corridor for several yards to her guardian's bed-chamber.

All was quiet within. The girl rapped, called his name, and rapped again. There was no response. She was certain now that something had happened, and she was shaking with nervousness as she opened the door and stepped over the threshold. She recoiled at the sight of a dusky, huddled object, and barely stifled a shriek that rose to her lips.

"Uncle Richard!" she called. "Speak to me!"

Summoning all her courage, she placed the lamp on the mantel above the fireplace, and

turned to look closely at the huddled object. Richard Chesilton would never speak again. Attacked by a sudden illness in the night, he had toppled from his bed to the floor, where he was lying on his back in a distorted attitude. Not a muscle quivered or twitched. His face was as grey as ashes. One hand was clenched at his chest, and there was a glassy stare in his open eyes.

Kneeling by him, Norma felt his heart, and found that it had ceased to beat.

"He is dead!" she gasped. "Oh, he is dead!"

Richard Chesilton had been struck down almost in the prime of life. He had passed to another world before having an opportunity of undoing the harm he had begun to fear might be wrought by his hasty temper and impulsive actions.

He had been always kind and affectionate to his ward. He had cared much for her, and she had cared much for him. His death was a terrible shock to Norma—a grievous blow. Her heart ached, tears streamed down her cheeks.

But she was a plucky girl, and she did not give way to her grief. She was alone in the house now. There was no one within a mile of her. What should she do? She ought to fetch the doctor who lived near the village, she reflected, though she knew he could not be of any assistance to her guardian.

With a glance at the still form she took the lamp from the shelf, and returned to her own bed-chamber. And as she was standing there, in hesitation, her gaze wandered to a pink slip of paper that was on her dressing-table. It was the blank cheque, and it started a train of thought in her mind. Her guardian had talked freely to her, and she knew in what state he had left his affairs.

His son Peter, whom she loved, had been disinherited, and Stephen Tracey, whom she disliked and mistrusted, was the heir. A will in his favour, leaving everything to him, was in the possession of Richard Chesilton's solicitor, Mr. Bradmore, of Lincoln's Inn.

Norma's eyes were still on that slip of pink paper to which her guardian's name was signed. He had left it to her to fill in, and had told her how much money he had in the bank. A temptation assailed her, and though she shrank from it in horror at first, feeling as wicked as if she had already committed a crime, it took a stronger and stronger grip of her as she pondered it.

She had little or no knowledge of legal matters. She was aware, however, that she had now no right to make any use of that cheque. And she knew also that the bank must be promptly informed of her guardian's death, and that as soon as they had learned of the fact his account would be sealed, in conformity with the law.

Richard Chesilton was dead, and from the moment of his decease, or as soon as the bank should get the news, it would be their duty to refuse to pay any cheques of his which might be outstanding, until they had the consent of the executor of the estate. That was exactly the situation at present.

But there were other considerations which weighed with the girl, and partly blunted her to a full sense of the wickedness she was contemplating. It was of Peter Chesilton, her lover, that she was thinking mainly. She understood him better than his father had ever done. She had no doubt that he had told the truth on the day of the quarrel, and she was no less certain that there was nothing more to his discredit than boyish follies.

As for Stephen Tracey, she had reason to mistrust and despise him. On several occasions, when she had questioned Peter, he had reluctantly admitted to her that his cousin led a fast and dissipated life in town, and had more than once nearly got into serious trouble. She knew that Stephen was a sneaking, crafty youth, and utterly unworthy of the position in which his uncle had placed him recently.

"Oh, I wish I hadn't thought of this!" she said to herself. "It would be terribly wicked, and yet I can't help feeling that it would be right in a way. Uncle Richard was not as hard-hearted and obstinate as he pretended to be. He was beginning to relent."

He knew that he had treated Peter most unjustly, and I am sure that in a day or so he would have written to him, and had him come home, and made a new will in his favour. If only he had lived a little longer! As things are now, Stephen will get all the money, and poor Peter will have nothing, and that won't be fair. He ought to have every penny! Oh, what am I to do?"

The temptation had a stronger hold of Norma now. She was powerless to shake it off. She could fill in the blank cheque for any amount she chose, and obtain the money

from the bank with safety, provided she could suppress the fact of her guardian's death for twenty-four hours.

And how easy that would be! Crockern, the gardener, was in hospital with a broken leg. And old Margaret, the other servant, had gone to her sick daughter in the village, and would remain with her for a couple of days.

There would be no difficulty, therefore, in cashing the cheque on the morrow. They would believe at the bank that Richard Chesilton was alive and well, and if his death were not to be made known until the following day no one would be the wiser.

It was a brief struggle that the girl waged with herself, and in the end the insidious temptation conquered her. It perverted her moral judgment, led her to think that she would be performing an act of justice.

"I will do it!" she vowed. "It will be for Peter's sake. He is really entitled to the money, and he would have had it if his father had lived. I will get it for him. He sha'n't be disinherited, left in poverty because of that silly quarrel! But I dare not waste any time! I must be at the bank soon after it opens in the morning, and I had better be careful not to be seen by anybody who knows me when I travel up to London! I will go at once—yes, to-night!"

Norma had made her resolve, and it did not falter. She had a determined nature, and she was capable of seeing the thing through with a courage and calmness. Having hurriedly dressed and put on her cloak and hat, she took a small bag from a closet, and descended the stairs to the library, carrying the lighted lamp in her hand.

She sat down at a desk on which were pen and ink, and, after brief deliberation, she filled in the cheque, on which her guardian had written the date of the day that had just reached the midnight hour. Then, putting the cheque in a chain-bag that was attached to her belt, she slipped out of the house, and locked the door behind her.

Heatherwold was in a lovely part of the country. The nearest railway-station, which was four miles distant, was at Langton Hatch, a tiny village that was on the line between Guildford and London.

In that direction the girl bent her steps, but not by road. She took a short cut, keeping to a footpath that began shortly beyond the grounds of Richard Chesilton's dwelling.

She thought often of the dead man in the bed-chamber, pictured him as she had seen him lying there in the distortion of sudden death. But her conscience troubled her very little. She had deluded herself into the belief that there was strong justification for what she had in mind.

"It is for Peter's sake," she reflected. "I shall be doing what Uncle Richard would wish me to do if he could know of it."

Yet she was uneasy and nervous. Starting at every slight sound, shrinking now and again from her own shadow, she traversed deep, dense woods, and crossed fields and meadows.

When she had been walking rapidly for more than an hour she passed between the scattered cottages of Langton Hatch, and another stretch of two or three hundred yards brought her to the railway-station, which was dark and deserted. She knew that there would be a train to town at an early hour of the morning, and she had meant to wait for it.

She knew that she would have to wait for a long time, however. She paused at the edge of a level-crossing, with the station building close to her left, and her resolve was wavering a little, and she was vaguely inclined to turn back, when a train of empty trucks came rattling by from the direction of Guildford, and slowed up in front of her.

It was an opportunity that would save her the long period of waiting at the station. She hesitated for a moment, and then, darting forward, she grasped the rail that was fastened to the end of one of the trucks, swung nimbly to the ledge, and climbed over the top.

She had not been seen. Nobody shouted to her. She stretched herself on a heap of straw that was at the bottom of the truck, and as the train went rumbling on, with increasing speed, she closed her eyes and sank into a heavy slumber.

"It is for Peter's sake," was her last thought.

It was of her lover—the handsome, impulsive youth who had won her heart—that Norma dreamed while she slept. She awoke in the early dawn, cramped and shivering.

while the shadows of the night still hung in the sky. The train had stopped, and when she rose to her feet and gazed around her she saw that she was in a vast goods-yard that was in a south-western district of London. She had reached the great city, and she was not now in a mood to shrink from what she intended to do. She stifled the pricking of her conscience. She was resolved that Peter Chesilton should have what was justly his.

It was still so dark that no one observed her as she climbed down from the truck and glided swiftly across the wide stretch of the line, dodging around rows of passenger-carriages and box-cars that were standing motionless. She ran up a grassy embankment, and drew a deep breath of relief when she had squeezed through a gap in the hedge. A narrow passage led in front of her between blank walls, and it brought her to a quiet and deserted street.

She had her bearings roughly. She did not need to ask for any directions. She was hungry, but it was too early for her to get anything to eat. Having smoothed her disordered hair, and brushed the straws from her rumpled clothing, she set off towards the heart of the metropolis.

She had a long and weary walk. She tramped for some miles, while the daylight brightened around her, before she reached the river at Vauxhall. She got into a train that took her across the Thames and along the Vauxhall Bridge Road to Victoria, where she had a bun and a glass of milk in a little shop.

It was barely six o'clock now, and she must wait until ten for the bank to open. She did not know what to do with herself. She wandered up Grosvenor Gardens to Hyde Park Corner, and along Piccadilly.

Her limbs felt heavy as lead, and a bench that was at the edge of the pavement, opposite to the Green Park, invited her to rest. She sank down on it, and when she had been sitting there for a few moments in the cool, fresh air, a burst of laughter caused her to turn her head.

A taxi-cab was spinning by, going westward, and she had a fleeting, indistinct view of the faces of two young men at the window of it. One of them, a clean-shaven youth with fair hair, called to her and waved his hand. His companion caught him by the arm and jerked him back.

"Shut up!" he exclaimed. "What a silly ass you are, Steve!"

"I was only waving to that girl on the bench," Stephen Tracey replied, as he thrust his head from the window again. "She is an uncommonly pretty girl. Didn't you see her?"

"I had only a glimpse of her. You know who she is, I suppose?"

"No; I've never seen her before, Jim. But she was the very image of Norma Heriot, my respected uncle's ward. That's what drew my attention to her."

"It couldn't have been her, Steve, of course?"

"Good heavens, no! I should jolly well think not! The fair Norma is down at Heatherwold in Surrey, sleeping the sleep of the virtuous at this hour. The idea of her sitting on a bench in Piccadilly at six o'clock in the morning!"

Stephen Tracey uttered a maudlin laugh, and, leaning heavily on his friend's shoulder, he closed his eyes and began to snore. His cheeks were hotly flushed, and the evening-clothes that he wore were stained with wine. He was going home to his chambers at the break of day after a night of revelry.

III.

The Visit to the Bank—A Cheque for Ten Thousand Pounds—Mr. Armitage Asks Some Questions—Norma Sees It Through—A Restless Day—A Hiding-Place for the Money—Back to Heatherwold—The Awakening in the Morning.

RICHARD CHESILTON'S bank, a branch of the London and Southern Counties, was situated in St. Martin's Lane, a short distance off the Strand. It was a quarter-past ten o'clock that morning when Norma Heriot walked into the building and up to the counter. She had braced herself for the ordeal that awaited her. She meant to see it through. She was prepared for pointed questions, even for suspicion, but she was confident that all would go well if she did not lose her nerve.

U. J.—No. 826.

She took the cheque from her chain-bag, and with an air of indifference gave it to the paying-teller. He glanced at it, hesitated, and turned away.

He presently returned, on the outside of the counter, and spoke to the girl, who felt a sudden trepidation as she followed him to the rear of the premises, and into a room where the bank-manager was seated at his desk.

The teller withdrew, and Mr. Armitage, who had the cheque in his hand, looked at it somewhat dubiously, and looked up at Norma. He knew who she was. He had often seen her in the bank with her guardian, with whom he was well acquainted.

The girl did not flinch under his rather searching gaze. She did not even change colour.

"Good-morning, Miss Heriot," he said. "Take a chair. I can spare you a few minutes. Are you still staying down in Surrey, or have you returned to your London residence?"

"No; we are still at Heatherwold," Norma replied calmly, as she seated herself opposite to the manager. "We both like it down there."

"But you have spent the night in town, I presume?"

"Oh, no; I came up by an early train. Uncle Richard wanted me to."

"Ah, I see! How is Mr. Chesilton? Improving in health, I hope?"

"He is a little better, I think. He hasn't said much to me."

"You're looking pale yourself. I am afraid the country air doesn't agree with you."

"It isn't that. I had a touch of influenza, and I haven't entirely recovered from it."

Mr. William Armitage nodded. He glanced at the slip of paper again, and was silent for a few seconds, while his eyes rested on the girl.

"And now about this cheque," he continued. "It is a very big one. Ten thousand pounds is a large amount."

"I know it is," the girl assented. "Isn't there so much money in the account?"

"Yes, the cheque is quite good. I was merely a trifle curious. I am surprised that Mr. Chesilton should want to draw ten thousand pounds in cash. I dare say he proposes to invest it in some way."

"I should think so, Mr. Armitage. All I can tell you is that Uncle Richard gave me the signed cheque last evening, and told me to fill it in, and present it at the bank this morning."

"He told you to fill it in? Why didn't he do that himself?"

"I don't know why, unless it was because he had got into the habit. He has frequently given me signed cheques, which I have filled in, as you remember."

"That is true, Miss Heriot—quite true. And yet—"

The manager paused. His gaze was searching again, and Norma felt as if she must shriek and blurt out the truth. But by a strenuous effort she retained her self-control, and retained it admirably. She tossed her head, and a scornful look crept into her eyes.

"Perhaps I had better go back," she said, "and tell Uncle Richard that he must come in person. You seem to think that he should have sent me to cash the cheque—"

"No, no, my dear child!" Mr. Armitage interrupted. "I beg your pardon. It is all right. You shall have the money."

What vague suspicions he had felt had been lulled. He was acquainted with the girl, and he knew that it was Richard Chesilton's signature that was written at the bottom of the cheque. Moreover, he knew that Chesilton was a reckless, careless sort of a man, who was in the habit of making investments on a sudden whim. He was satisfied that there was no ground for unreason.

"You shall have the money, Miss Heriot," he repeated. "Mr. Robson will give it to you. But be careful with it. There are always clever rogues lurking about in this part of London, and especially in the vicinity of banks."

The girl smiled and shook her head. She was not afraid of being robbed, she declared. She left the private office, and the manager, going to the front of the banking premises, spoke a few words to the paying-teller. Norma stood quietly, coolly, by the counter, her nerves as firm as steel. A sheet of crisp Bank of England notes of large denomination were handed to her, and when she had carefully counted them and put them into her bag, she passed out of the bank and walked slowly across Trafalgar Square.

"Oh, how glad I am that it is over!" she said to herself. "I was terribly afraid, but I have nothing to fear now. I am sure that Mr. Armitage has no suspicion, and he won't say any."

Ten thousand pounds! The words seemed to be ringing in her ears, ringing above the grind and clash of the London traffic. She had a little fortune in her bag—a fortune that belonged to Peter Chesilton! She had secured his inheritance for him—or the greater part of it; and though she knew that the money legally belonged to Stephen Tracey, she argued that the will in his favour would have been destroyed if his uncle had lived.

"It belongs to Peter," she reflected. "Uncle Richard meant to forgive him, and make him his heir, so I haven't done anything very wrong."

She knew in her heart that she had, however. She was guilty of a wicked act of deception, apart from the money, and she felt an icy chill as she had a vision of her guardian lying dead in his bed-chamber.

She had deliberately lied to Mr. Armitage—told him that her Uncle Richard was in fairly good health. Yet she was resolved that, for Peter's sake, she would stifle the voice of conscience and suppress the truth. It was not yet eleven o'clock. She disliked London, and she did not want to meet anybody whom she knew, though she had no reason to shrink from recognition. She was anxious to go home. She longed for the seclusion of the country. But she was reluctant to return to Heatherwold. She was afraid that old Margaret might be there, for one thing, and then again there was no need for her to hurry back. She would have to stay alone in the empty house with the corpse of her guardian until the following day, for she was under the impression that it would be to her advantage if the death of Richard Chesilton was not discovered until twenty-four hours had elapsed since his decease.

"I had better wait until morning," she said to herself, "before I make it known. I wonder if the doctor will be able to tell how long he has been dead? No; I don't suppose he will. He won't examine the body closely."

It was an anxious day for Norma. Nothing could distract her mind. She had lunch at a place near Piccadilly Circus, and wandered for several hours about the West End, looking at the shop-windows. It was not until late in the afternoon that she went over to Waterloo, where she had to wait only a few minutes for a train.

There was nobody else in the compartment in which she travelled, and when she arrived at the little station of Langton Hatch, between six and seven o'clock, she walked rapidly through the tiny village, and struck along the footpath by which she had come. When she had gone for a couple of miles, and was in a deep, dark plantation, an idea occurred to her.

"I ought to hide the money," she reflected. "I am determined that nobody but Peter shall have it, and if there should be any trouble about it, and Uncle Richard's lawyer should insist on my giving it up, I will be able to say truthfully that it isn't in the house."

It did not take her long to find a suitable hiding-place. Having diverged a few yards from the path, and noticed a large tree that was hollow near the base, she thrust the bag that contained the ten thousand pounds into the cavity, and hastened on her way.

She got back to Heatherwold in the dusk of the evening, and it was an intense relief to her to find that the servant had not returned. She had a dread of the empty dwelling. She would not venture to the kitchen, though she craved for something to eat and a cup of tea. Having lit the lamp that she had left in the library, she went upstairs, and, with an icy shiver, guided by the door of her guardian's room, and darted into her own bed-chamber.

She locked the door, and sat for a time by a window, watching the black shadows of the night creep down on the Surrey Hills. The solitude frightened her. She was afraid of the dead.

It was late when she undressed and got into bed, and she was wearied by the miles she had tramped during the day. But she was nervous and worried, and could not close her eyes. For a couple of hours she tossed restlessly, thinking of what she had done; and when at length drowsiness stole upon her she yielded to it at once, and slept peacefully until she was roused by a dull, muffled noise.

She sat up, then sprang to her feet, her thoughts confused. It was broad daylight,

and somebody was rapping loudly on the door.

"Miss Norma!" a voice called. "Miss Norma, get awake!"

The girl's limbs trembled. She was in fear of what was to come. She unlocked and opened the door, and old Margaret stumbled into the room, her face white and agitated.

"Oh, Miss Norma," she cried, "a terrible thing has happened! It will be a shock to you. I came back not long ago, and took a cup of tea up to the master's bed-chamber. And—and he's lying there dead, stretched on the floor! The poor gentleman! He must have been taken ill in the night, and died suddenly. I'm going to fetch Dr. Abbott now, and you had better get dressed while I am—"

The servant broke off abruptly. Norma had turned ghastly pale, afraid of what the doctor might discover. And the next instant, with a stifled gasp, she reeled and fell in a swoon.

The End of the Prologue.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Day of the Discovery—Stephen Tracey Calls at Lincoln's Inn—A Demand for Money—Mr. Bradmere Inquires into the Matter—A Talk on the Telephone with the Manager of the Bank—Stephen Suddenly Remembers—Dark Suspicions—Is it a Case for Sexton Blake?—Mr. Bradmere Assents.

IT was on a Monday night that the sudden death of Richard Chesilton took place, and on the following morning Norma Heriot went up to London with the cheque. On the Wednesday, early in the afternoon, a cab rolled through one of the gateways of Lincoln's Inn, and Stephen Tracey got out of it, immaculately attired and wearing a top-hat. He was a young man of less than thirty, slim of figure, with features that would have been good-looking and attractive had they not been marked by the lines of dissipation.

There was a sparkle in his eyes, and he appeared to be in very cheerful spirits as he paid the chauffeur and entered one of the ancient buildings. With a swaggering air he ascended the staircase, and walked into the outer one of the two legal chambers that were occupied by Mr. Andrew Bradmere.

He spoke in a supercilious tone to a clerk, and then, brushing past him, he rapped on a door at the rear of the apartment, and stepped through into the private office. Mr. Bradmere, an elderly gentleman with a grey moustache, was seated at his desk. Stephen Tracey shut the door behind him, and assumed a gloomy expression as he moved forward.

"Well, I suppose you have heard the sad news?" he said.

Mr. Bradmere glanced up from his desk and nodded.

"Yes—several hours ago," he replied. "I had a telegram from Dr. Abbott."

"He told me that he had wired to you, Bradmere. I ran down to Heatherwood early this morning to have a chat with my uncle, and it was a great shock to me to learn that he had died suddenly in the night. It was due to heart trouble, the doctor said."

"It was a great shock to me also, Mr. Tracey, for I had a deep and sincere regard for my late client."

"He was a good sort. I liked the old boy. Sorry though I am for him, it is only natural that I should feel elated by the change in my financial position."

"It is heartless of you to say so!" the solicitor coldly declared. "Very heartless!"

"Oh, I don't mean it in that way!" Stephen Tracey answered. "You wrong me. And now, if you please, we'll talk business."

"Business? When your uncle has only been dead for a few hours?"

"Yes; unfortunately, it is unavoidable. There are certain circumstances which compel me to—"

The young man paused, and dropped into a chair opposite the desk. Mr. Bradmere regarded him gravely. He had never liked him, and he had conceived an aversion for him now. He took off his glasses, rubbed them with a handkerchief, and put them on again.

"What is this business you wish to discuss?" he asked.

"It relates to my uncle, of course," said Stephen Tracey. "I have been given to

understand that I am his heir. Is that right?"

"It is quite right, Richard Chesilton's last will is in my possession, and it leaves everything to you unconditionally."

"Nothing to his son Peter?"

"No; not a penny. The boy has been very badly treated."

"I don't look at it in that light. From what my uncle told me, Peter deserved to be cut off without a shilling. What of Miss Heriot, by the way? Isn't there any legacy for her?"

"No; you were the only person named in the will. And I am the executor of Richard Chesilton's estate, as you are doubtless aware. You want information about your inheritance, I dare say."

"No, Bradmere, not exactly that. I have come to you for assistance in a little matter. I need some money, and I need it at once. Can you advance me two hundred pounds?"

"No, sir; I can do nothing of the sort."

Andrew Bradmere shook his head. He leaned back in his chair, and looked severely at the young man. Stephen Tracey scowled, and traced a pattern on the floor with his stick.

"There is no reason why you shouldn't do it," he muttered.

"I am not inclined to, for one thing," said the solicitor. "Moreover, this is not the

adverse to it though I am. Your uncle had his faults, but he had a strict sense of honour, and he valued his good name. It would have been a terrible blow to him had you been publicly shamed and disgraced while he was alive. He was my friend. I had a warm liking and a deep respect for him, and for his sake, to save you from the consequences of the crime which you must have committed, I will give you the two hundred pounds."

"Right you are, Bradmere. Let me have a cheque at once, and I'll square the matter to-day."

"I should advise you to do so. If you are in danger of arrest. But I have just remembered that I have not yet informed the bank of Richard Chesilton's death. It was a couple of hours ago that I received the telegram from Dr. Abbott, and I should not have wasted any time in—"

Breaking off abruptly, the solicitor stepped to the telephone, and got into communication with the London and Southern Counties Bank. He talked for a considerable time, and Stephen Tracey showed increasing signs of interest and curiosity while he listened to the fragmentary conversation.

"What's the trouble?" he inquired, when at length Mr. Bradmere dropped the receiver on its hook. "What's all the palaver about a cheque?"

"A rather strange thing has happened,"



Norma Heriot looked over her shoulder and saw the car set out in hot pursuit.

time to talk of business matters, so soon after your uncle's death. You must wait for a week or so."

"I can't wait, Bradmere. It is absolutely necessary that I should have the money. If I don't get it there will be a deuce of a scandal, and worse than that."

"A scandal? What do you mean, Tracey?"

"I've got myself into a mess, to be candid, and there is only one way out of it. I must have two hundred pounds by eleven o'clock to-morrow morning, or—or I shall be arrested. And now you've got it straight."

"Good heavens, Tracey, is it so bad as that?"

"Yes, arrest and imprisonment. That is what will happen if you refuse to help me."

There was a short interval of silence. The young man stared into vacancy, a sullen expression on his face. And Mr. Bradmere, shocked by the disclosure, got up from his chair and paced to and fro. He stopped, his features twitching with emotion.

"I never had a good opinion of you," he said, "but I did not dream that you were so utterly bad. Richard Chesilton has made a bad mistake. He had far better have left his property to his son, of whom I know nothing creditable. If he had asked my advice I should have—"

"Look here, I'm not going to listen to a lecture," Stephen Tracey interrupted. "If you won't advance me the money I'll get it from a moneylender."

"No, you need not do that."

"You will help me, then?"

"Yes; I suppose I shall have to, strongly

the solicitor replied, as he sat down at his desk again. "I have been talking to Mr. Armitage, the manager of the bank. It appears that Miss Norma Heriot presented herself there yesterday morning, and cashed a bearer cheque for ten thousand pounds which your uncle had given to her."

"Ten thousand pounds! Good heavens! Why did my uncle draw out so much money?"

"I don't know, Tracey. I can't understand it. Had he intended to make an investment he would have first consulted me."

"Well, I hope the money is safe. It must be in his desk down at Heatherwood."

"I dare say it is. The girl was to have taken it back with her. By the way, there is another thing that puzzles me. It was a blank cheque, merely dated and signed by Richard Chesilton, that was given to Miss Heriot. She filled it in herself for the sum of ten thousand pounds."

"She filled it in herself, Bradmere?"

"Yes; so Mr. Armitage stated. No doubt it is all right, though. Your uncle was always careless in regard to money matters."

"I'm not so sure that it is all right," said the young man. "I am beginning to feel a bit anxious. If I should lose the ten thousand pounds—and there is a chance that I may—how much will be left for me?"

"I can tell you roughly," Mr. Bradmere answered. "There is a balance of eighteen hundred pounds to your uncle's credit, and I have in my possession securities belonging to him of the value of seven thousand pounds."

"Nearly nine thousand in all—eh? That would be a half of what I ought to have." You needn't worry, Tracey. You will get the ten thousand pounds."

"I should hope so. I will raise the deuce if I don't. This is certainly a queer business, Bradmere. I don't like it. Yesterday my uncle gave a blank cheque to Norma Heriot. She fills it in for a stunning amount, buries up to town and cashes it, and last night my uncle dies suddenly."

"The cheque bore the date of Monday, the previous day," the solicitor remarked. "So Mr. Armitage said."

"The date isn't important. It is the amount of the cheque, and the fact that Norma filled it in. I am not suggesting that she drew more money than she was told to, but it looks as if—"

Stephen Tracey paused and sprang to his feet. A sudden flash of memory had brought a startled look to his eyes.

"By heavens, there is something wrong!" he cried. "I am certain there is! It was Norma Heriot I saw between six and seven o'clock yesterday morning in Piccadilly, sitting on a bench by the Green Park, as I was driving home in a cab!"

"It is impossible! You are mistaken! The girl couldn't have been sitting there at such an hour!"

"She was there, Bradmere! I had a good look at her, and was struck by her marvellous resemblance to Norma! Of course, it never occurred to me at the time that it might be her, but I am now sure that it was. I could swear to it!"

"But how could she have been there at that hour, Tracey?"

"That's what I want to know. There is no mistake about it. It was Norma I saw right enough. I know how the trains run! She couldn't have spent the night in London, and she couldn't have got up by the earliest train before seven o'clock! She must have walked all the way from Heatherwood, or somebody gave her a lift, and when I saw her on the bench she was waiting for the bank to open!"

"Well, if your statement is correct, it is most extraordinary."

"It is infernally mysterious, Bradmere! I tell you again that there is something wrong. On Monday night the girl comes to town with a blank cheque given to her the previous day, and draws ten thousand pounds from the bank. Last night, within about twenty-four hours after he had signed the cheque, my uncle dies suddenly, and is found dead in his room this morning!"

"It was heart trouble that killed Richard Chesilton," said the solicitor. "Miss Heriot could not have had anything to do with his death. You surely don't imagine that she had. It would be a horrible suspicion."

"I'm not suspecting her of murder!" replied the young man. "Don't talk like a fool! I can't account for the affair of the cheque, though, and neither can you. But I'll tell you what I think. My uncle didn't mean to draw ten thousand pounds. It was given to Norma to be filled in for a small amount, to buy things in London with; and she deliberately took advantage of the opportunity, and drew the ten thousand."

"With what object, Tracey? That is the question."

"I'll tell you what her object was! I'll bet I am right! She is in love with that rascal Peter, and she drew the money with the intention of giving it to him, because she knew that he had been disinherited!"

"I can't believe it! I can't!"

"I do, Bradmere. That is the explanation of the mystery. I doubt if the money is at Heatherwood now. That cunning little beast of a girl has probably handed it over to Peter Chesilton. By heavens, I'm afraid I'll never see a penny of it! Something must be done at once. It is my money, and I rely on you to get it for me. If I lose it I'll hold you responsible. Bear that in mind!"

Stephen Tracey was angry and excited. He thumped the floor with his stick, and glared at Andrew Bradmere, who was greatly disturbed by the young man's insinuations. He paced to and fro again, his face very grave and troubled.

"If it was Miss Heriot you saw on the bench in Piccadilly early yesterday morning," he murmured, "I am inclined to think that you may be right."

"Of course I am!" exclaimed the young man. "I've been robbed of half of my fortune, and if the girl don't give me the money, I'll have her arrested! I'm going straight down to Heatherwood! Are you coming with me?"

Andrew Bradmere nodded. He glanced at the papers that were strewn on his desk, and then, stepping across the room, he took his hat and stick from a peg.

"Yes, the affair calls for prompt investigation," he said. "I quite agree with you. It would appear that something is wrong. You and I will go down to Heatherwood, and see the girl. And we will take Sexton Blake with us, if he is at home, and can spare the time," he added, as he turned to the door. "He is an old friend of mine, and for the girl's sake I would like him to be present at the interview. If she yielded to temptation, and drew the money to give to Peter Chesilton, I wish to be lenient with her. It is a delicate matter, Tracey, and Blake is the man to deal with it."

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Blake and His Companions Arrive at Heatherwood—In the Death Chamber—When Did Richard Chesilton Die?—Old Margaret Makes Some Startling Admissions—Norma Returns—A Full Confession—The Girl Will Not Part With the Money—At a Deadlock—Norma Takes to Flight—A Futile Pursuit—Back to Town—Blake Agrees to Take the Case—A Faint Clue—Instructions for Tinker.

It was five o'clock in the afternoon when old Margaret, the servant at Heatherwood, saw a motor-car, in which were four persons roll through the gateway, and into the drive. She opened the door as the car stopped, and Andrew Bradmere walked into the house with Sexton Blake and Stephen Tracey, and an elderly man with a grey beard and a monstache. The latter was Dr. Abbott, who had been picked up on the way at his residence near the neighbouring village.

The servant shut the door, and gazed at the visitors in surprise.

"We have come to see Miss Heriot," said the solicitor. "Is she at home?"

"No, sir, she isn't," old Margaret replied.

"She is not here? Where has she gone to?"

"Only for a walk, sir. I told the poor child to go, as she has been terribly worried and distressed, and I thought the fresh air would do her good."

"Well, we will wait until she returns. And, meanwhile, we will go up to see the body of Mr. Chesilton."

It was at Blake's suggestion, made before they entered the house, that Andrew Bradmere spoke of viewing the corpse. During the drive down to Surrey in his car the detective had heard the whole story, and he had conceived a vague and startling suspicion that had not occurred to his companions.

The servant remained below, and the little group, led by Stephen Tracey, ascended the stairs, and stepped into the chamber of death. The dim light revealed the rigid form of Richard Chesilton stretched on his bed beneath a sheet, a calm and peaceful expression on his waxen features.

The window-blinds were drawn, Blake raised them high, and then, moving to the bed, he closely and thoroughly examined the body. His countenance did not change, but when he had finished, there was an odd glitter in his eyes. His medical knowledge, which had been tested on similar occasions, had enabled him to make a most significant discovery.

"At what time this morning did you get here, doctor?" he quietly asked.

"At about nine o'clock," Dr. Abbott replied.

"Did you make an examination of the corpse?"

"No; not a close one, Mr. Blake. I did not think it was necessary."

"Was Mr. Chesilton lying on the floor when you arrived?"

"No; the servant had lifted him on to the bed, she told me."

"From your observation of him, doctor, how long did you judge that he had been dead?"

"For something like four or five hours."

"Well, you were wrong," Blake declared.

"Richard Chesilton had been dead for at least thirty-six hours, and probably more than that."

"Thirty-six hours?" exclaimed Dr. Abbott and the solicitor in one breath.

"Yes, there is no doubt of it," asserted the detective. "I am positive that I am right. The signs are infallible. I should judge that Mr. Chesilton died at about midnight on Monday."

"I—I can hardly believe it!" gasped the physician.

"It is a fact," said Blake. "You can see for yourself."

There was silence for a moment. Andrew Bradmere and the young man were staring at each other in consternation, too bewildered for words. Dr. Abbott was leaning over the bed, closely scrutinising the corpse, and feeling the rigid limbs. He straightened up, and nodded gravely.

"You are right, Mr. Blake," he said. "I fully agree with you. I am rather short-sighted, else I should have discovered this before. Yes, you are right—Mr. Chesilton has been dead for more than thirty-six hours."

Stephen Tracey had been listening as one dazed, and now, his cheeks hotly flushed, he swung round on the solicitor.

"By heavens! What did I tell you?" he cried. "I knew there was something wrong! Thirty-six hours ago, and more! My uncle died on Monday night, after he had given the blank cheque to the girl! And Norma purposely suppressed his death, kept it a secret until this morning! She cashed the cheque in London yesterday, knowing that she had no right to draw the money! Knowing that the bank would have refused payment had they been aware that my uncle was dead! The wicked little cat! I have been robbed of ten thousand pounds, and if I don't get it back, I'll—"

"Hush! Hush! Tracey!" Mr. Bradmere interrupted. "Have you no respect for the dead? Remember where you are!"

The young man paid no heed. He was madly infuriated with Norma Heriot, and he had forced his unwelcome attentions upon her at every opportunity. But all he was thinking of now was the ten thousand pounds.

"I want to see that girl!" he raved. "I want my money!"

"Hold your tongue!" Blake bade sharply. "No more of this! I am dealing with this matter, and you will leave it to me entirely! It is not at all certain as yet that the young lady has done anything wrong!"

"I hope she hasn't!" said the solicitor, shaking his head dubiously. "Mr. Chesilton thought the world of her."

The case had at least assumed a very serious aspect. The time at which Richard Chesilton had died had been roughly settled. Blake was sure of it, and so was Dr. Abbott, and that they should agree was conclusive. They left the death-chamber, and went downstairs to the library. Stephen Tracey, who had been cowed by the detective's stern rebuke, conversed in low tones with Andrew Bradmere. And the doctor, at a word from Blake, brought the servant to the room.

"My young mistress hasn't returned yet," she said.

"I want to talk to you, not to Miss Heriot," Blake answered. "When did you last see Mr. Chesilton alive?"

"It was at luncheon on Monday, sir," old Margaret replied.

"At luncheon on Monday? Not since then? How is that?"

"It is because I have been away, sir. My married daughter who lives in the village has been ill, and Miss Norma let me go to her on Monday afternoon, telling me that I could stay for a couple of days. And I did so."

"Are there no other servants here?"

"No, sir; only myself. Crocker, the gardener, broke his leg last week, and is in hospital."

"You didn't return until this morning, then?" Blake continued.

"Not until seven o'clock this morning, sir," the woman answered.

"So Miss Heriot was alone in the house during your absence?"

"Yes, quite alone, except for the master."

"Where was she when you came back?"

"She was in bed, and asleep, sir. It was I who discovered that Mr. Chesilton was dead, when I took him a cup of tea. I wakened Miss Norma, and then fetched Dr. Abbott."

"It's as plain as daylight," declared Stephen Tracey. "Norma knew that my uncle had died on Monday night, and she kept it quiet. Told nobody, so that she would be able to cash the cheque at the bank yesterday. Where the deuce is the money? That is the question! I wouldn't mind betting that she has given it to—"

"Listen!" Andrew Bradmere interrupted. "Somebody has just come in."

"It is Miss Norma," said the servant.

There were footsteps in the hall. The door was opened, and Norma Heriot walked into the library. Her cheeks were flushed with exercise, but there was a look of distress, and of something more than distress, in her eyes. She stepped short, and the colour

ebbed from her face, leaving it deathly pale, as she gazed at the little group of people. She was at no loss to account for their presence. She knew that her sin must have been discovered.

"Ah, here you are!" exclaimed Stephen Tracey. "We have been waiting for you, Norma! We want to know what you have done with—"

"Will you hold your tongue, Tracey?" broke in the solicitor. "This is Mr. Sexton Blake, the detective, Norma," he added. "He has come to talk to you about a very serious matter."

Blake nodded. At first sight he had taken a liking to the girl. He could see that she was high-spirited and wilful, and he could read defiance in her eyes.

"Some very strange things have happened, Miss Heriot," he said, "and Mr. Bradmere has brought me down to Heatherfold to investigate them. Some time on Monday, presumably, Mr. Chesilton gave you a blank cheque which he had signed. You filled in that cheque for a sum of ten thousand pounds, and on Tuesday you went up to London and cashed it at your guardian's bank. And now tell me when Mr. Chesilton died."

"It—it was last night!" Norma Heriot stammered.

"No, that is not true. I have just seen the body, and I am satisfied, as is Dr. Abbott, that your guardian died in the course of Monday night—more than thirty-six hours ago."

"Yes, he did. I will admit it. I was wakened on Monday night by the sound of a fall, and I hastened to Mr. Chesilton's bedroom, where I found him lying dead on the floor."

"And you deliberately suppressed his death during all yesterday, and left it to the servant to make the discovery this morning?"

"Yes, for a god reason. I didn't think that I would be doing anything very wrong. I will tell you the whole truth. I am not afraid, for I felt that I had a right to—"

The girl paused for a moment. She was frightened and agitated, but she pulled herself together, and told the story with forced calmness.

Stephen Tracey winced as he listened to her. She spoke of her guardian's quarrel with his son Peter, and of the harsh and unjust way in which Peter had been treated by his father; of the will that Richard Chesilton had made in favour of his nephew, and of the ill reports she had heard of that young man.

"It was on Monday afternoon that I had the blank cheque from Uncle Richard," she resumed. "He gave me a blank one because he didn't seem to know how much money I would want. I was to fill it in for as much as I thought I would need, and get the money at the bank the next day, and buy a lot of things in town. And that night, after I found Mr. Chesilton lying dead in his room, I yielded to the temptation to do a service to Peter. I saw how easy it would be to conceal his death for a day or so, as both of the servants were away. I knew that Peter had been badly treated, and that he has not done what his father had accused him of. I was sure that if Uncle Richard had lived he would have forgiven him, and destroyed the will he had made in favour of Stephen Tracey, and left everything to his son. The same night I left the house, and walked through the woods to Langton Hatch, and travelled up to town in an empty goods-truck. It was hardly more than daylight when I got there. I walked about, and sat on a bench in Piccadilly until ten o'clock. And then I went to the bank and presented the cheque, which I had filled in for ten thousand pounds, and Mr. Armitage gave me the money. I returned to Heatherfold in the evening, and slept until Margaret rapped on my door the next morning, and told me that Ebenezer Richard was dead."

"The audacity and daring of the girl had shocked Dr. Abbott and the solicitor. They looked at her in stupefaction, at a loss for words."

"Where is the money now?" asked Blake. "Have you given it to Peter, Chesilton?"

"No, I haven't," Norma Heriot replied.

"Where is it, then? It is in the house, I suppose?"

"No, it is not. I have hidden it somewhere, but I won't tell you where!"

"Are you speaking the truth, Miss Heriot?"

"I am, on my solemn word of honour! I never tell lies. You can believe me or not!"

"I do believe you. I know that you are not trying to deceive me. But this is a very serious matter. The money rightly belongs to Stephen Tracey, as he is Mr. Chesilton's heir, and if you do not give it to him you can be put in prison. For your own good, for your

own sake, you must let him have the ten thousand pounds."

"I won't!" vowed the girl. "He shan't have a penny! Uncle Richard didn't know how bad he was, or he would never have made that will in his favour! The money rightly belongs to Peter, and I will see that he gets it!"

"I am afraid you don't realise your position," said Blake. "You have committed a double crime. You can be severely punished for filling in the cheque for ten thousand pounds, and for concealing your uncle's death. People have spent years in prison for lesser offences."

"I don't care! I am willing to go to prison for Peter's sake!"

"Don't talk so recklessly and foolishly, Miss Heriot. You will be sorry if you persist in your obstinacy. I am warning you!"

Norma Heriot shook her head. Her dogged nature had been thoroughly roused, and, believing that she was right in a way, she was determined that she would not yield. She stamped her foot, and gazed in defiance at the detective.

"You must be mad, Norma!" said Stephen Tracey. "I don't want you to get into trouble. I had meant to have you arrested, and I can do it. But I'll make you an offer. I have always been fond of you, as you

He has no claim to it. Won't you tell me where you have hidden it?"

"No, Mr. Blake, I won't! You can't make me! If Peter can't have the money, nobody else shall!"

"Think of the consequences. The ignominy of arrest, a trial before a judge and jury, and a term of years of imprisonment!"

"I—I don't care! You can't frighten me! Whether I have done right or wrong I will endure anything for Peter's sake! That is my last word!"

Norma Heriot was splendid in her courage and defiance, wrong though she was. She knew herself that she was in the wrong, but she would not yield. For some minutes, while Stephen Tracey sat in sullen silence save for an occasional remark, Blake argued with the stubborn young lady and threatened her, and Mr. Bradmere and the doctor joined their entreaties to his. It was of no avail, however. The girl defied them all.

"Well, I won't waste any more words on you now," Blake said, at length, with a shrug of the shoulders. "Go up to your room, and consider the matter carefully. And when you have realised the price you will have to pay if you persist in your refusal, as I trust you will, come down and tell us where you have hidden the money. If you do that you will not be punished."

"I will never do it!" Norma Heriot exclaimed. "Never!"

Her gaze, fierce and challenging, swept the group, flashing from one to another of them. Then her overspent feelings gave way. Her lip quivered. She burst into tears, and walked from the library sobbing, yet with her head proudly erect, and her stubborn will unshaken.

"What a spirit she has!" said the solicitor, half in admiration.

The door swung shut. Stephen Tracey started after the girl, and stopped at a forbidding glance from the detective.

"This is a nice state of affairs!" he cried, in exasperation. "Ten thousand pounds! More than half of my inheritance gone! Stolen by Norma! And I believe the girl is capable of going to prison rather than tell where the money is concealed!"

"Yes, I dare say she is," Blake assented.

"It wouldn't do any good to have her arrested then?"

"It might, and it might not, Mr. Tracey. I should be sorry to put her to the test, though."

"It is a terrible thing," said Andrew Bradmere. "I can hardly believe that Miss Heriot has been so wicked. I don't think she realises the heavy penalty she has incurred."

"Well, she'll catch it hot if she remains obstinate," declared the young man. "And she richly deserves it, too."

Dr. Abbott, who was deeply impressed by the gravity of the affair, could not stay any longer. He had several patients to see. He departed, remarking that he would walk home by the footpath through the woods. And when he had gone the others discussed the situation.

They were all of the opinion that, short of taking extreme measures, they would not be able to compel the girl to restore the money. Her contemptuous, stinging refusal of Stephen Tracey's offer had stirred him to a high pitch of wrath. He stormed and blustered, swearing that he would do this and that.

"The little vixen!" he exclaimed. "I'll have no mercy on her! I'll swear out a warrant for her arrest! I'll have her shamed and disgraced; punished to the fullest extent of the law! It is the only course! It is my duty, Bradmere, and it is yours, too, as executor of the estate! You know that!"

The solicitor nodded. He agreed that if the ten thousand pounds could not be obtained by threats or persuasion, there would be no alternative but to resort to the law. Moreover, he felt that in any case, so grave were the offences that the girl had committed, she could not be let off.

But Blake had some sympathy for her, understanding the motive that had actuated her, and not doubting that she believed there had been strong justification for what she had done. He was loth to take harsh measures.

"Perhaps Miss Heriot will change her mind after a little reflection," he said. "She has not clearly grasped the position. She is blinded to her love for young Peter Chesilton, convinced that he has a sort of a moral claim to the money because he was unjustly disinherited. Yes, I think I can bring her to reason, if I have a quiet talk with her. I will go up to her presently, and—"

"Look—look! There she goes!" cried the

NEXT WEEK!

"The 'World Tour' Swindle!"

INTRODUCING

SEXTON BLAKE,
TINKER, and
'TROUBLE'
NANTUCKET,
(The American Sleuth.)

know, and I'm not a bad sort. I'll let the matter rest as it is, and overlook what you have done if you will marry me, and give me the money!"

"Marry you!" the girl cried, in scorn, her eyes flashing. "Never in the world!"

"You would rather go to prison, would you?"

"Yes, I would—a thousand times rather! I love Peter, and I am engaged to him!"

"The more fool you! He is a worthless, dissipated scoundrel!"

"How dare you call him that? It is a wicked lie! I know what kind of a life you lead, for Peter has told me more than once! You are a hard drinker, you gamble and cheat, you mixed with the lowest people in London, and you are—"

"You brazen, lying little hussy! By heavens, you will get what you deserve! If you don't give me that money I will—"

Stephen Tracey's voice choked with rage, and, with an oath, he flung himself at the girl, and raised his arm to strike her. But Blake was too quick for him. Seizing the young man by the collar, he jerked him back, and threw him roughly into a chair.

"I told you to hold your tongue," he said angrily; "and I won't tell you again! Sit there and be quiet!"

He turned to Norma Heriot, and appealed to her again, though he felt in his heart it would be useless.

"Don't let yourself be blinded to what is right by the fact that Peter Chesilton was unjustly treated," he urged. "I beg you to be reasonable!"

"I am reasonable!" the girl passionately declared. "Stephen Tracey has no right to the money! It belongs to Peter!"

"It does not belong to him, Miss Heriot,

young man. "By heavens, she is escaping! What fools we were to give her a chance!"

A faint, throbbing sound floated through the open window, and there was a glimpse of Norma Heriot spinning down the gravelled drive on a bicycle. The next instant the trees and shrubbery hid her from view.

"We shouldn't have been so careless!" exclaimed Andrew Bradmere. "We might have known she would slip off if she could!"

"You must pursue her in your car, Mr. Blake!" urged Stephen Tracey. "If we don't catch her we may never get the money! No doubt it is concealed somewhere in the neighbourhood, and she has gone to take it from its hiding-place. And then she will make a dash for London."

"Oh, do let her go!" pleaded the old servant, who had been in the room during the whole of the dramatic scene. "Don't arrest her! I am sure she didn't know she was doing wrong!"

She clutched at Stephen Tracey's arm, and with a snarl, he shook her roughly off, and hastened from the house, followed by Blake and the solicitor. The car was standing just outside, but by the time Blake had started the engine, and driven down the garden to the open gateway, the girl had got a good start.

They saw her at a considerable distance, pedalling as hard as she could along a road that ran to the south. She had just reached a crest of high ground, and, as she rode over it and disappeared, she looked back.

"She can't get away," declared Andrew Bradmere. "We will surely be able to catch her up."

"Yes, I should think so," the detective asserted.

"Unless she abandons her bicycle, and slips into the woods," said Stephen Tracey. "And I'll bet that's what she'll do!"

Norma Heriot had utterly vanished when the persners gained the crest from which she had glanced behind at them, and they did not get a another glimpse of her. They sped swiftly on for a mile or so, until they came to where two roads crossed. Blake checked the car, and shook his head.

To right and left, and in front, stretched narrow, twisting highways that were shaded by the overhanging boughs of trees. The girl was not to be seen on any of them, and it was impossible to tell in which direction she had gone. A shower that morning had washed the dust from the roads, and the sun had dried them. Not the least trace of the bicycle tyres was visible.

"We'll have to let her go, I suppose," said the solicitor.

"Yes, for the present," Blake replied. "We may as well give up."

But Stephen Tracey would not hear of it. He insisted on going farther, and his companions yielding, they held straight on for another mile. They perceived no trace of the bicycle on the hard ground, and, at length, realising that it would be useless to continue the search for Norma Heriot, they turned around and drove back.

"Norma must have got the money by now," the young man said savagely. "She will probably hide in the woods until it is dark, and then be off to town. I am pretty certain that she has Peter Chesilton's address in London. She will give the ten thousand pounds to him, and I dare say they will be married at once, and clear out of the country—and with my money. Good heavens, what a loss!"

"The situation isn't hopeless," Blake answered. "There is a chance of our finding the girl shortly. As for the money, young Chesilton may refuse to take it."

"Refuse to take it?" echoed Stephen Tracey. "He won't be such a fool! I wish I knew where the fellow is! Unfortunately, I don't!"

"Haven't you any knowledge of him, Bradmere?" inquired Blake.

"No, none whatever," the solicitor replied. "He disappeared several weeks ago, after the quarrel with his father, who heard nothing of him afterwards. But I have no doubt that Miss Heriot has been in communication with him, and that she knows his address in London, as Tracey has suggested. If she joins him—and that must be her intention—they will both keep in hiding. Though Peter Chesilton is a decent boy, as far as I know, I believe he will be inclined to hold on to the stolen money. He may feel that he has some right to it."

They were drawing near to Heatherwood now. They stopped at the house for a little time, and when they had given some instructions to old Margaret they ran on to the residence of Dr. Abbott, and stopped again to have

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a brief conversation with him, relating to the death of Richard Chesilton. And then, in the dusk of the evening, they set off on their return to London. For some little time not a word was uttered. At length, Stephen Tracey turned to the detective:

"Look here, Mr. Blake," he said, "it isn't likely that the police will be able to find that confounded girl, so I want you to do it for me! I must have my ten thousand pounds! And I don't care a hang what it costs!"

Blake glanced at the young man. He had conceived a strong dislike for him.

"No, I can't do it!" he replied. "I can't take any commission from you!"

"Why not?"

"Because I am not inclined to, Mr. Tracey."

"But it is in your line of business, sir, and I will pay you a liberal fee. If Miss Heriot isn't soon caught—"

Andrew Bradmere cut the young man short with a gesture.

"Let us regard the affair as between you and me, Blake," he said, dividing what was in his mind. "As executor of Richard Chesilton's estate, I am bound to make every effort to recover the stolen money, and I ask you as a favour to assist me."

"Well, that puts a different complexion on the matter," Blake answered. "At your request, Bradmere, I will take the case in hand. I will try to find the missing girl, and recover the money."

"When you have got hold of her, I will make her suffer as she deserves!" vowed Stephen Tracey. "The brazen thief!"

Blake shrugged his shoulders, and there was an odd glitter in his eyes as he sent the car spinning on. He did not propose to let this young man have his own way entirely, if he could prevent it.

Blake went off soon after breakfast the next morning, and when he came home late in the afternoon he was in a quiet and thoughtful mood, which meant he was considering some problem, and that he did not want to be questioned.

It was not until he had had his tea, and was comfortably settled in a lounge chair with his favourite pipe, that he remarked to Tinker that he had had rather a busy day. The lad had, of course, heard all about the affair, and was keenly interested in the fortunes, or misfortunes, of Norma Heriot.

"What luck?" he asked. "Have you learned anything about the girl?"

"No, not yet," Blake replied. "I have been trying to find her, and young Peter Chesilton as well; but I have not met with any success. Andrew Bradmere has been with me all day. We made inquiries here and there, at places in the West End which the young man used to frequent, and at a club which he belonged. And then, having drawn blank, we went to the late Richard Chesilton's flat in Bayswater. Miss Heriot had not been there, nor is there any likelihood of her venturing near the flat. Bradmere and I had luncheon together, and I afterwards returned with him to his chambers in Lincoln's Inn, where he found Stephen Tracey waiting for him. I had been waiting to see Tracey, and I easily persuaded him and the lawyer to consent to my proposal that the concealment of Richard Chesilton's death and the affair of the ten-thousand-pound cheque should be suppressed for the present. I pointed out to them that it would be less difficult for me to find the girl if there should be no mention of the case in the paper, and it should not have been put into the hands of the police. Tracey went off satisfied, and, after his departure, I had a talk with Andrew Bradmere, and got some vague information from him, which may or may not be of value. I shall put it to the test, at all events. I'm going to send you up to Scotland."

"To Scotland?" echoed Tinker. "To search for Miss Heriot?"

Blake nodded. Rising from his chair, he took an atlas from a shelf, glanced over it, and put it back.

"I will tell you briefly of the conversation I had with Mr. Bradmere," he said, as he sat down again. "It related to the girl. I asked the solicitor what knowledge he had of her parentage, and it appears, from what little information he could give me, that she is of Scotch descent. Her mother is dead, and Richard Chesilton was an old friend of her father's. The latter—a man named Malcolm Heriot—went out to Australia three or four years ago, and left his daughter in Chesilton's care. At intervals he wrote to his friend Chesilton, and he is still out in that distant land. The main point is, however, that Malcolm Heriot formerly resided with

his wife and child somewhere up in Perthshire, and presumably in a lonely part of the country. The solicitor remembered Chesilton having remarked to him on one occasion, a number of years ago, that Heriot lived in the vicinity of Ardenrag. That was all Bradmere could tell me. He does not know if the place still belongs to Malcolm Heriot, if the man sold it when he went out to Australia, or if he let it. But I have an idea that the girl, who would have friends or acquaintances in the neighbourhood of her former home, may intend to hide in Scotland, in the belief that it will not occur to anybody to seek her there. She may propose to live at the house alone, if it is still her father's property, or with servants who may have been in charge of it during his absence. If she goes there she will write to Peter Chesilton, and he will probably go to Scotland himself. It is a slim clue, yet I feel that it may be worth following."

"And what of Stephen Tracey?" asked the lad.

"I am not bothering my head about him," Blake replied.

"He is to be reckoned with. If I'm not mistaken, gov'nor, you want to get the stolen money from Norma Heriot and screen her from punishment."

"Yes, that is quite right. I have some sympathy for her."

"Well, aren't you afraid that Tracey may get on the girl's track by the same means that you have in mind?"

"No, my boy, I am not. In my presence to-day the young man asked Andrew Bradmere if he could tell him where Miss Heriot used to live, and Bradmere, at a sign from me, evaded giving him the information which I subsequently gleaned from him."

"It is all right, then. That fellow Tracey would have the girl arrested if he could; but as he doesn't know what you know there is no need for you to worry about him."

"No, I think not. I dare say Tracey believes that Norma Heriot is in town, while I am pretty sure that she is not. So I will send you up to Perthshire, and you will start your inquiries at Ardenrag. It is a tiny village situated some miles to the north-east of Callendar, and not far from Loch Tay. And if you should learn that Norma Heriot is at her old home, or staying with friends in the neighbourhood, I will join you at the village."

"And when am I to go, gov'nor? At once, I suppose?"

"No, not for several days. You will wait until after Richard Chesilton has been buried. There is just a chance that his son will come to the funeral, and if so—"

Blake broke off abruptly. Tapping the ashes from his pipe, he got up from his chair and stepped to the door.

"I think I'll take a walk, my boy," he added. "I will be back in time for supper."

Thus the matter rested for the present. There could be no doubt that the girl was in communication with Peter Chesilton; and if he should attend his father's funeral—as possibly he would—it would be easy, by keeping him under surveillance, to discover where Norma Heriot was.

Thus Blake argued, and for that reason he did not at once follow up the slender clue he had obtained. During the next couple of days he sought for the girl in London, and the utter failure of his efforts inclined him to put more faith in his theory. He did not see Stephen Tracey again, nor did he give much thought to him. Though he knew that the young man was in a relentless mood towards Norma Heriot, he felt that there was some excuse for what she had done, and he resolved that if he could get the stolen money from her he would have her dealt with leniently.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Tinker Finishes a Long Tramp—The View from the Hilltop—The Village of Ardenrag—The Landlord of the Dappled Stag—Some Interesting Information—The House of Grayle—Tinker's Vigil in Darkness—A Woman with a Basket—The Face at the Window—Back to the Village.

IT was late in the afternoon, towards the close of a day of perfect weather, that a lad in rough tweeds and walking-boots, with a stick in his hand and a rucksack strapped to his back, paused on the crest of a hill that was in the northern part of Perthshire.

The lad was Sexton Blake's young assistant.

He had nearly reached his destination, and as he sat down on a flat stone to rest, and gazed at the scene that met his eyes, he felt that he had never beheld anything to equal it.

No trace of Norma Heriot had been discovered, and Peter Chesilton had not gone to his father's funeral. The dead man had been quietly buried in a little Surrey churchyard, in the presence of Sexton Blake and the solicitor and Stephen Tracey; and that same evening, the detective's slim hope having failed him, Tinker had left London, and travelled in a sleeping carriage through the night to Glasgow. He had broken his journey here for several hours, and then, leaving the city of St. Mungo by the Caledonian Railway, he had gone as far as Killin, and from there set off on foot along the road that ran eastward.

And now, after a tramp of a number of miles, he was at the end of his journey. The view that stretched in front of him was typical of the finest of Highland scenery, grand and majestic, and yet with dainty,

The lad had little or no knowledge of the place to which he was going. Rising from the stone, he descended the rugged track on weary limbs, and in the space of a hundred yards found himself in the village of Ardenerag. He passed a couple of vine-clothed cottages, and stopped at a quaint little building which was obviously an inn.

That it was called the Dappled Stag, and that the proprietor of it was a certain Jock McTavish, were indicated by a signboard that was suspended over the doorway, and bore a faded painting of the noble animal of the Highlands. And in a cool, little tap-room, with latticed windows, Tinker made the acquaintance of Mr. McTavish.

He was a big, burly man, with a sandy beard and moustache, a mop of sandy hair, and keen, twinkling eyes that were as blue as the water of Loch Tay. He took a pipe from his mouth, and nodded.

"Good-day to you, young sir!" he grunted.

"What can I do for you?"

"I am on a walking tour," the lad replied,

"and I want supper and a bed."

ceases, where he washed off the dust and grime of the journey. He was in no hurry to seek for information. He was here in the guise of a tourist, and if he were to make inquiries too promptly he might show his hand.

"I'll have to be careful," he said to himself. "It is only remotely possible that Norma Heriot is in this neighbourhood, but if she should be she is amongst friends, and a word of warning would send her off like a frightened bird."

The lad waited until he had had his supper, and in the dusk of the evening, when he was seated alone in the tap-room with Jock McTavish, he guardedly approached the object that had brought him to Ardenerag.

"I suppose you've lived a long time in these parts, Mr. McTavish?" he remarked.

"All my life, man and boy!" Jock McTavish answered. "My father kept the Dappled Stag before me."

"It's a snug little box of an inn. And what is the name of the village, by the way?"

Stephen Tracey raised his hand to strike the girl, but before the blow could descend Sexton Blake had gripped him by the collar.



delicate touches that softened the harshness of it.

Immediately beneath him, at the bottom of a rough and winding track, which branched off the road he had been following, the tiny village of Ardenerag was nestled on a shallow plateau that was smothered in verdure. The village itself was on high ground, and it overlooked a wonderful panorama of mountain and moorland, lake and river. In the nearer distance wild and savage glens dropped precipitously, choked with dense timber, tangled vegetation, and granite buttresses. Beyond the glens were level patches of dark, nodding woods that reached to the shore of Loch Tay, where green islands dotted the broad sheet of water that danced in the brilliant sunshine, and reflected the sapphire blue of the cloudless sky. And across the loch, not far from the opposite side of it, Ben Lawers reared its snow-capped head, amongst a cluster of other peaks as lofty and sublime.

"No, I've seen nothing before to equal this," the lad reflected. "I should like to stay some time in this neighbourhood. I am afraid there isn't much chance of it, though, for Norma Heriot would hardly have come away up here to hide. More likely she had been married to Peter Chesilton in London, and they have hopped it to the Continent. And yet the guv'nor's theory may have been right."

"They're to be had here, sir," the landlord assented. "And plenty of Scotch whiskey of the best."

"It doesn't matter about the whiskey. That's not much in my line."

"So I was thinking from the look of you. 'Tis easy to see you're a Sassenach, and not a Helander. And where will you have come from?"

"From London, Mr. McTavish."

"From Lunnun Toon? Not on foot, surely?"

"No; I travelled as far as Killin by rail, and tramped the rest of the way. And a fine tramp it was."

"Ay, there's fairish scenery in these parts. And now, what will you be having to eat?"

"Any old thing that's a native of the country," said Tinker. "I dare say there will be Scotch broth, and a sheep's head, haggis, a dish of kail, and oatmeal porridge with cream poured thick over it."

Jock McTavish grinned and chuckled.

"You'll be guessing wrong," he replied. "There will be bread and cheese, and a pudding, and a salad, and as tender a mutton-chop as you could get in Lunnun Toon. And a wee sup whiskey, if your Sassenach palate will be craving for it."

A couple of rustics entered, and the landlord, having served them with the mountain dew of Ben Lawers, called an old woman, and bade her see to the guest. She led Tinker up to a tiny bed-chamber under the

"You'll no' be knowing that, sir, when you're in the very place itself? 'Tis the village of Ardenerag."

"Why, that's rather a curious coincidence! I remember my guv'nor speaking of a friend of his, a man who came from Ardenerag, or from somewhere near!"

"That may be, sir. And what can the gentleman's name have been?"

"It was Heriot—Mr. Malcolm Heriot."

The landlord took his pipe from his mouth and glanced at Tinker. But there was no suspicion in the look he gave him.

"Ay, young sir, I knew Mr. Heriot well," he said. "He belonged herabouts, as did his people. He lived yonder at Grayle, in the direction of the loch. There's a footpath leads to it, at one time, but it's gone pretty well to rack and ruin during these days."

"Nobody living there now?" asked Tinker.

"No; it's been shut up since Mr. Malcolm went away more than three years ago. He had little or no money, and he sailed for Australia, to seek his fortune. I dare say he's dead now."

"Had he no family, Mr. McTavish?"

"Ay, he had a daughter, and a bonnie lass she was. He took her away with him, and I heard that he left her in the care of a friend in Lunnun. And I've not heard of her since."

"What did he do with his house?" the lad continued. "Did he sell it?"

"No, he just shut it up; and it's still as he left it. It's been in the charge of two old servants, Sandy and Janet McKay, who live in a bit cottage farther beyond the dwelling."

"Hasn't the girl been up to see them in these past years?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir. And if she had been here I would have heard of it."

"You have a visit from the servants now and again, I dare say?"

"Not verra often, sir. Once in a while old Sandy drops in."

Tinker had got as much information as he could expect to get, and he was satisfied that it was trustworthy. He discreetly changed the subject, and a little later, when several of the village people had entered the tap-room, he remarked to the landlord that he was going for a stroll.

Crossing the road in front of the Dappled Stag, he held along it to the left for a few yards, and came to a footpath, which he judged to be the same as Jock McTavish had mentioned. He struck into it, and was at once shrouded in murky gloom. He was disappointed by the result of his inquiries, and yet it was no more than he had anticipated.

"The gov'nor was wrong," he reflected. "I thought he was. The girl wouldn't have come away up here into the wilds. But I'll make absolutely certain of it before I go back to London."

He was descending a wild and rugged glen, which was so heavily timbered that he could hardly believe that he was so near to habitations. The moon was high in the sky, and here and there a silvery glint of it shone through the intermingled foliage, and revealed the twisted path. An antlered stag bounded away on crashing hoofs, and a blackcock whirled on drumming wings from the heather.

For more than a mile Tinker went down and down, scrambling through thickets and amongst scattered boulders, with black, tangled hills rising on both sides of him. And at length, when he began to fear that he was going wrong, he suddenly emerged from the cover into a wide, grassy glade, and saw the house of Grayle in front of him.

He stopped, and drew back a little into the shadow. He had reached the childhood home of Norma Heriot, and he gazed at it with interest. It was rather a large dwelling of two stories, built of greystone, and the moon shone full on it, bathing in a soft glow the crumbling masonry, the ivy-clad walls, and the weeds that grew at the foot of the terrace.

The lad circled entirely around it, keeping to the edge of the shrubbery, and returned to where he had started from. He had seen no glimmer of light at any of the windows. He had paused to listen, and heard not the faintest sound. The girl could not be in hiding here. He felt sure of that. But he did not mean to retrace his steps until he had visited the cottage of the old servants who had charge of the place.

"She might be there," he said to himself. "If she did come up here, as the gov'nor imagines she did, she would be more likely to stay with the servants than in the empty house."

He scoured the cover that bordered the garden, moving here and there, and soon hit upon a path that led to the eastward. He went cautiously along this, and when he had gone for a couple of hundred yards he perceived through the foliage a yellow gleam of light.

He stole on a little farther, and found that the light shone from the window of a tiny cottage. He approached it noiselessly, and looked into a small room, where an elderly woman and an old man with a grizzled beard were seated at their frugal supper.

This was the home of Sandy and Janet McKay, and there was nobody else with them. There was no sign of Norma Heriot. The old couple spoke at intervals in low tones, but the window was shut, and Tinker could not hear what they were saying.

He presently glided away, and returned by the path to the house. He was certain that the girl was not staying with the servants, nor did he believe that she was at her father's dwelling. Had she come up to Scotland, he argued, she would either be at the cottage or she would have had the servants with her at Grayle.

Yet there was a vague doubt in his mind. An impulse made him keep vigil for a time.

and he yielded to it. For half an hour he lurked in the garden, creeping here and there amongst the trees and shrubbery, and gazing at the darkened, silent house from different points of view.

And at length, when he was about to withdraw, his patience was unexpectedly rewarded. His heart gave a quick throb as he heard faint rustling footsteps. He darted behind a tree that was opposite to the side-door of the dwelling and half a dozen yards from it.

The footsteps grew more audible. And suddenly, from the direction of the cottage, there appeared an old woman who wore a shawl. It was Janet McKay, and she carried a basket on her arm.

"By Jove, I know what this means!" murmured the lad.

As the woman drew nearer, walking up the gravelled path, her approach was heard by somebody within the dwelling. The white face of a girl was visible for an instant at the left of the doorway. A moment later the door was opened, and there was another brief glimpse of the girl as she admitted the old servant.

"That settles it!" thought Tinker. "My word, the gov'nor was right after all! Norma Heriot is living here alone!"

After waiting for a brief interval he crept from his hiding-place and moved warily round the house, until a slight sound attracted his attention. He stopped at a shuttered window at the rear of the premises, and, gluing his eye to a thin crevice, he tried to peer into the room beyond. He could distinguish two blurred figures, and that was all. The persons were talking, but he could not catch a single word.

He had learned enough, however. There could be no doubt at all that Norma Heriot was in hiding at Grayle, and that the servant was in the habit of bringing her food. She was living here alone, and, of course, she had the stolen money with her.

Elated by his success the lad stole away, and retraced his course up the steep and wooded glen.

"It will be good news for the gov'nor," he reflected. "I'll send a wire to him as soon as I can, and in a day or two he will join me at Ardencrag."

In cheerful spirits he trudged back to the inn, and when he had questioned Jock McTavish, and learned that he would have to go to Killin to send a telegram, he turned in for the night, and fell asleep almost as soon as his head touched the pillow.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

A Visitor to Grayle—The Meeting of the Young Lovers—Norma Pleads with Peter Chesilton—The Youth is Obstinate—Stephen Tracey Appears on the Scene—in a Relentless Mood—Peter Loses His Temper—A Desperate Fight—Stephen Gets the Best of It—Norma Takes to Flight with the Money—A Hot Pursuit Across the Loch—The Pass of the Cattle—Safety at Last.

It was on a Tuesday that Tinker arrived at the village of Ardencrag, and on the Wednesday he hired a trap and drove to Killin, whence he sent a telegram to Sexton Blake in London. It was a long journey up to Perthshire, and the lad, judging that Blake could not reach the village until late on Thursday, concluded that in the meantime he had better lie low at the Dappled Stag.

After sunset on the Thursday evening, as dusk was falling, a youth who had walked from Killin entered the village of Ardencrag, and turned off from it by the footpath that led towards the loch. He was a slim, good-looking young fellow, with a ruddy, healthy complexion, crisp, black hair, and a small moustache.

He had never been in this part of the country before, but directions had been given to him at Killin, and he knew where he was going as he descended the glen to the plateau at the bottom.

The moon was shining, and as he drew near to the house of Grayle, his steps were heard, and the girl whom Tinker had seen opened the door to him just as he reached it.

"Oh, Peter, so you have really come!" she exclaimed. "How glad I am to see you! I have been so lonely—so miserable. I—I was afraid that you would not!"

Norma Heriot's voice faltered, and there were tears in her eyes as she threw herself into Peter Chesilton's arms. He clasped her to him for a moment, kissing her lips and cheeks; and then, slipping from his embrace,

she shut and locked the door, and drew him along the hall and into a room on the left.

It was a comfortably-furnished sitting-room. The shutters of the windows were closed, and a lamp was burning on the table. The young lovers gazed at each other in silence for a few seconds, both at a loss for words. Norma Heriot was pale and anxious. She was frightened by the look on the youth's face.

"What is the matter, Peter?" she asked. "Why don't you speak to me? You—you don't think I have done wrong, do you?"

"Yes, Norma, I do," Peter Chesilton replied hoarsely. "I didn't intend to come, but I changed my mind. I was sorry for you, and I felt that you would need me. I was horrified, staggered, when I received your letter telling me all that you had done. How could you have been so mad? What an awful scrape you're in! You will have Sexton Blake, the detective, on your track. And there is Steve Tracey to be reckoned with. He will show you no mercy, you may be sure!"

"Oh, Peter, don't talk like that! I am frightened enough as it is. I thought you would comfort and cheer me. It was for your sake—because you had been badly treated. I knew that if your father had lived he would have forgiven you and made another will, and left everything to you. That is why I filled in the blank cheque for ten thousand pounds and took it to the bank. And I dared not tell them that Uncle Richard was dead, else they wouldn't have given me the money!"

"But it isn't my money, Norma. I have no legal claim to it, no matter what my father's intentions may have been. There is a will in Stephen Tracey's favour, and every penny belongs to him!"

"But Uncle Richard didn't mean him to have it! Can't you understand that?"

"It doesn't make any difference. I appreciate your motive—I know that it was for my sake; but you were wrong. I tell you again that I haven't any claim to the money. You will have to give it up."

"No, no! Don't ask me to do that! I won't, Peter!"

Peter Chesilton shook his head doggedly. He had never done anything dishonest, and had not his love for the girl been so deep and passionate, had he not realised from her letter that she had been blinded by her love for him, his feelings for her might have changed.

Norma Heriot's lip quivered as she studied his cold, obstinate face. She had not expected such a greeting from him.

"Don't be angry with me, Peter!" she pleaded, putting a hand on his arm. "I need you so badly, and it will break my heart if you are angry. It is not Stephen Tracey's money. It really belongs to you, and you must keep it. You were most unjustly treated by your father. He realised that afterwards, and, had he lived, he would have—"

She paused for a moment, listening to a faint, creaking sound. "It is only the wind," she said. "Every little noise alarms me. And now, do be reasonable, Peter! Don't make me give the money to Stephen. We needn't bother about him. He will never think of looking for me at Grayle, and neither will Mr. Blake. Why shouldn't we be secretly married, and live here happily together? Nobody will disturb us. It may be a couple of years before my father returns from Australia."

"My dear girl, you are talking utter nonsense!" declared the young man. "I am amazed that you should behave like this. You are a fugitive from the law, hiding from arrest with the stolen money in your possession, and yet you coolly propose that I should be an accomplice in your crime!"

"It isn't a crime! You don't love me any more, Peter! I am sure you don't!"

"Don't be so absurd, Norma! Nothing can change my love for you! I will be only too glad to marry you, and the sooner the better; but not until the money has been restored. You must give it to me, and I will take it to Stephen."

"And what if I refuse? What then?"

"I shall have to force you, Norma, for your own sake. And if I can prevent you from being punished for your folly, I will."

"Oh, Peter, how cruel you are! Do you really mean that I must give up the money? Do you insist?"

"Yes. You know that I am serious."

"Well, I suppose I will have to yield. I think it is a shame, though, after all I have risked. Of course, I know that I did wrong, but as you had been treated so badly by your father, and he had been deceived in Stephen, I thought I would be justified in—"

Norma broke off abruptly. Steadily footsteps had just been heard. The next instant the door was thrown open and Stephen Tracey strode into the room and confronted the startled young couple. He was flushed with rage, and there was a savage glitter in his eyes.

"You didn't expect to see me, either of you!" he exclaimed. "But here I am! You are a cunning dog, Peter, but you weren't cunning enough for me! I hadn't a doubt that you knew where Norma was, and that I could find out by setting a watch on you. And I was right. I have shadowed you all the way from London to Killin, and from Killin to Grayle. And now, if you please, I'll have the money that belongs to me!"

The girl was white and speechless with terror. She clung to Peter Chesilton, who was looking at his cousin in cold contempt. And yet he was afraid of him. He could read a relentless, ruthless purpose in his eyes.

"You have been listening, have you?" he demanded.

"Yes, I have been listening from the hall," Stephen Tracey answered. "I have heard every word."

"Then you know that I have just told Norma that she must give up the money, and that she has agreed to do so. It belongs to you, and you are welcome to it. But you must let the matter rest at that."

"Let it rest! No, Peter, I will do nothing of the sort! When I leave here with the money I shall go straight to the police and have a warrant issued for Norma's arrest!"

"You won't be so cruel, surely? What Norma did was for my sake, and she is sorry for it!"

"I don't care a hang if she is! She is a brazen little thief, and I intend to have her punished as she deserves! I won't show her any mercy! There's no use in arguing about it!"

There was silence for a few seconds. The girl was trembling like a leaf, and Peter Chesilton was beginning to lose his temper. Stephen Tracey was enjoying the situation, and was resolved to do his worst. He was in a jealous fury. He hated his cousin because he had won Norma's love, and was determined to hurt him through her.

"There has been enough talk!" he said, in a sneering tone. "Let me have the money, and I'll go."

"And will you let the matter drop?" asked Peter. "Or do you intend to have Norma arrested?"

"Of course I do! Haven't I told you so?"

"For Heaven's sake, Steve, don't do it! Have pity on the girl! We are engaged. I am going to marry her!"

"Oh, no, you are not! Not if I can help it, Peter! It won't be for a long time—not until she comes out of prison, shamed and disgraced as she deserves to be! And you won't want her then! You will be a fool if you do! I've said my last word. If both of you were to beg of me on your bended knees I wouldn't!"

Stephen Tracey ended the sentence with a mocking laugh, and turned to the girl, who shrank from him as he stepped towards her.

"My ten thousand pounds!" he snarled.

"Where is the money?"

"I—I will give it to you, if you will promise not to have me arrested," Norma faltered.

"Swear that you won't!"

"I will swear to nothing! The money! Be quick about it!"

"Oh, Stephen, have pity on me! Don't send me to prison! It will kill me! I am sorry for what I have done! Won't you, please, forgive me, and—"

The girl's voice choked. She burst into tears, and sank down on a chair, sobbing hysterically.

"My money, you stubborn little vixen!" raved Stephen Tracey.

He seized her by the arm, and shook her violently. And the next instant Peter Chesilton wrenched him from her, and flung him backward, sending him spinning across the room.

"Touch her again, if you dare, you infamous cad!" he cried hotly. "You shall have your money! And when you have got it you will clear out of this, and hold your tongue! If you don't, if you dare to have Norma arrested, I will be even with you one of these days! It is your money legally, but by rights it belongs to me! I know you for what you are, and if I had told my father before he died, as I wish I had, he wouldn't have left you a penny! You got on the right side of him by lies, leading him to believe that you were worthy of his regard and trust! And now you're in a savage mood, and bent on having your revenge, because I

am engaged to Norma! That's what's the matter with you, Steve! You wanted her yourself, but she knew what a low, dissipated scoundrel you were, and, rather than marry you, she would have—"

"You lying cur! I'll pay you for this!" Stephen Tracey fairly yelled the words. He leaped forward and struck at his cousin, who parried the blow, and hit back. They sprang at each other, and grappled. And, as they reeled to and fro, fighting desperately, the girl sat looking on in mute horror, with tears streaming down her cheeks.

It was a brief struggle. Tracey was the stronger of the two, and he soon gained the advantage. By a frenzied effort he wrenched himself free, and as quickly, drawing back, he let fly with his clenched fist with all his might.

The blow landed on Peter Chesilton's jaw, and nearly lifted him from his feet. He went down like a log, with a heavy crash, and lay motionless on the floor. He had struck his head against the base of the wall.

"Oh, you have killed him!" shrieked Norma, springing from her chair. "Killed him!"

"I don't care if I have!" Stephen Tracey exclaimed, with an oath. "It was his own fault! He would have it! And now for my money! Where is it?"

He turned to look at the prostrate form of his cousin, fearing that he had indeed killed him, and then gave to the girl an opportunity which she was quick to grasp.

Darting to the door, she slipped from the room, and flew like the wind up the staircase, and along a passage to her bed-chamber. There she heard a savage shout and rapid steps as she slammed the door shut, and locked it.

She reached beneath her bed, and snatched a small bag, in which were the ten thousand pounds in banknotes; and then, hastening to the window, she threw the casement open.

Stephen Tracey was pounding and kicking on the door, and the girl knew that it must soon yield to his attack. Not for a moment did she hesitate. Swinging over the window-ledge, she clutched at the tough growth of ivy which clothed the wall, and climbed down nimbly by it to the garden at one side of the dwelling. A smashing, rending sound rang in her ears, and she knew that the door had been beaten in.

She sped across the lawn, and, as she stopped at the edge of the shrubbery, she saw the infuriated youth at the window. And the next instant he, too, was descending by the ivy.

"You little fiend!" he cried. "I'll wring your neck when I get hold of you!"

It was a critical situation. A mile behind Norma, to the south, was the village of Andencrag, and to the right of her, within a short distance, was the cottage where Sandy and Janet McKay lived. But she knew that if she were to go in the direction of the village she would be overtaken, and she was afraid that the servants would not be able to protect her if she should seek safety with them.

For a few seconds she was almost paralysed with fright, feeling as if she must swoon. And then, as she saw Stephen Tracey drop from the ivy into a clump of bushes on the terrace, she pulled herself together, and, on a sudden resolve, fled to the left towards the loch.

Her sole impulse was to escape from her pursuer. She must elude him, and find a temporary refuge somewhere. But she was not blinded to prudence by her fears. She had a fixed purpose in mind, and what she proposed to do was best under the circumstances.

"The Goblin's Cave!" she reflected. "If I can get there without Stephen seeing me, I shall be safe!"

She was familiar with the country for many miles round her old home, and instinct guided her unerringly as she fled through a dark and tangled plantation that sloped gradually downwards. She could hear Stephen Tracey in chase of her, and her bounding tread, the loud rustling of the bushes through which she forced her way, drew him after her.

Again and again he shouted to her to stop, but she ran the faster, clinging to her bag as she threaded the maze of trees and thickets, and scrambled amongst loose stones.

She was panting for breath, and ready to drop from exhaustion, when she burst out of the dense cover within several yards of the gravelly shore of Loch Tay. The wide, flashing sheet of water stretched in front of her, as smooth as a mirror, steeped in the silvery glow of the moon. And behind her was her enraged pursuer, raving and cursing as he tore through the woods.

There were two boats at the edge of the loch with oars in them; one a small one, and the other somewhat larger. The small one belonged to Sandy McKay, and the girl had expected to find it here.

As she reached it she glanced in dismay at the other boat. It was twenty yards from her, and she had no time to get to it, else she would have sent it adrift.

She dared not delay for a moment. Thrusting the smaller craft from the gravel, she sprang into it, dropped to the middle seat, and shipped the oars. She bent to them with desperate strokes, pulling rapidly out from the shore; and she had not gone very far when Stephen Tracey came crashing out of the plantation, and hurried to the water's edge.

He shouted at Norma, shaking his fist in baffled rage. And then, glancing right and left, he observed the other boat, and ran to it as fast as he could. It was a heavy craft, and by the time he had driven it off the gravel, and got to work with the oars, the girl was a couple of hundred yards beyond him.

"I'll get you yet!" he called to her. "You don't get away from me so easily, you cat!"

Norma was not much alarmed. She had a good lead of her pursuer, and she was sure that she could keep it, as she was in the lighter and the smaller of the two boats. She did not relax her efforts. Steadily she pulled across the upper end of the loch, leaving a trail of foam behind her, gliding by several tiny islands that dotted the stretch of deep blue water.

She had a mile and a quarter to go, and now and again she glanced over her shoulders, and took her bearing from the snow-capped peak of Ben Lawers. Her confidence increased. Stephen Tracey was gaining on her by strenuous exertions, but she was still well ahead of him, when at length she drove her craft deep into the gravel on the northern side of the loch.

Snatching the bag, she leaped ashore, and sped up a strip of sloping bank. She looked back at the young man, and as she plunged into the wooded cover, his voice rang savagely to her ears. Her arms ached, and her heart was pounding against her ribs.

But she did not stop to rest. Having held to the left for a few yards, she turned north again, and hurried on through trees and bushes, until she came to the mouth of a narrow and gloomy gorge, shut in by bleak, and lofty hills.

It was the place she had meant to come to. It was known as the Cattle Pass, because in the old days of border warfare the wild clan of the MacKenzies had been wont to drive herds of stolen stock through it. And in this pass, at a spot that was difficult of access, was the cavern that was known as the Goblin's Cave.

Norma had no doubt that she would be able to find it, as she had been there once with her father, years ago. She stopped for a short interval, listening with strained ears. And then, having heard no sound of pursuit, she continued her flight into the sombre gash of the hills.

Had she not been a courageous girl she would have been terrified by her surroundings, for she had often been told that the place was haunted by the ghosts of the dead MacKenzies. The pass grew wider and wider as she advanced. To right and left of her were rugged slopes of loose shale, with here and there a patch of stunted scrub, or a big boulder of fantastic shape. Above her she could see stars twinkling in the cloudless sky, but the light of the moon did not penetrate to the bottom of the gorge.

"I will be safe in the cave," she said, to herself. "It will be impossible for Stephen Tracey to find me. I'll spend the night there, and in the morning I will decide what to do next."

She had formed no plans. She was afraid what the future might hold in store for her. She did not mean to keep the stolen money. It was the fear of arrest, of imprisonment, that prevented her from going back with it, and giving it to its rightful owner. She longed for Peter Chesilton now, as she had not longed for him before. She shuddered, and a lump rose in her throat, as she pictured him lying motionless on the floor. She did not believe that he had been killed, but she was sure that he had been badly hurt.

Higher and higher she mounted through the pass, by a narrow and winding track, while her strength gradually failed; and at length, when she had gone more than half a mile from the loch, she bore to one side at the sight of a familiar landmark, and ascended

towards a black spot that was visible a number of yards beyond her.

It was a hard climb, and she was completely exhausted, almost on the point of fainting when she reached the entrance to the Goblin's Cave, and reeled into it.

Her first thought was of the bag. Groping in pitch darkness to the rear of the subterranean chamber, which was roughly oval in shape, she fumbled about with her hands, and thrust the bag into a cranny in the wall of rock.

Then she retraced her steps to the mouth of the cavern, and crouched there, gazing down into the shadowy depths of the ravine. She felt that she was safe, and yet she was nervous and apprehensive, fearing that Stephen Tracey might have followed the course of her flight.

When she had kept vigil for a quarter of an hour, starting at every slight sound beneath her, she yielded to an overpowering sense of drowsiness. In vain she struggled against it. She slid to the ground, and sank into a heavy slumber.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Sexton Blake Comes to Ardenerag—and Brings a Faithful Friend with Him—Tinker Tells the Story—Down the Glen—Exciting Times at Grayle—Peter Chesilton Explains—Pedro Gets the Scent—The Pursuit of Norma Heriot—The End of the Trail—Around the Loch.

It was shortly after dark on the Thursday evening when Tinker, sitting at his supper in the Dappled Stag, heard a throbbing noise that swelled louder and nearer. He guessed who was coming. He jumped up from the table, and hastened out to the road just as a large motor-car slid opposite to the inn and stopped. On the driving-seat was a young man, and from behind him descended Sexton Blake, in tweeds and a cap, followed by a huge bloodhound that leapt upon the lad with a joyous bark of welcome.

"Here we are, both of us," said Sexton Blake, as he clasped his young assistant's hand. "I hired the car at Killin, and I brought the dog because I thought he might be needed."

"I don't think so," Tinker replied. "No, it isn't likely."

"Well, it doesn't matter. The change of air will do him good. And now let me have your story. You merely stated in your wire that you had traced Miss Heriot."

"I'll tell you all about it while you are having your supper, guv'nor. You're hungry, aren't you?"

"No; I had a very heavy tea at Killin. And I want to hear your story now."

There was not very much to relate. Standing with his master outside of the inn, the lad told briefly and in a low voice of the result of his inquiries and his visit to the house of Grayle.

Meanwhile, Mr. Jock McTavish had stepped to the door of the inn, and was gazing curiously at the stranger and the great hound. He had been listening, and it was probable that his keen ears had caught Norma Heriot's name. So Blake suspected, and for that reason he decided to act at once on the information that Tinker had gleaned for him.

"Run the car round to the back of the inn, Ferguson," he said to the chauffeur, "and then go inside and have what you want to eat and drink. You can spend the night here, and drive me back to Killin to-morrow. And now we'll be off to Grayle, my boy," he said, turning to the lad. "I think we had better go there without delay."

"The girl is there all right," said Tinker. "I doubt if you will get the money from her, though. You will have to search for it in the house, and you may not be able to find it."

"Perhaps I can persuade Miss Heriot to give it to me, my boy."

"And if she does, guv'nor, will you let her go free?"

"Certainly I shall. It was to screen her from the consequences of her folly, if she should be in a reasonable mood, that I have made this long journey to Scotland. Otherwise I should have telegraphed to you to have the young lady arrested."

The landlord's curiosity was not gratified much to his disappointment. He was informed by the lad that the strange gentleman and the chauffeur would be staying the

night at the Dappled Stag, and then, with Pedro padding at their heels, Blake and Tinker struck across the road, and disappeared in the footpath that ran to the north. They rapidly descended through the glen, now groping in dark patches, and now emerging into open spaces bathed in moonlight, while the hound ranged right and left in the tangled cover.

When they had got to the bottom of the path they saw a glimmer of light at a window of the lonely dwelling, and as they were crossing the lawn they were surprised to hear loud and excited voices. They knew that something must have happened. Hastening round to the left of the dwelling, they found the side-door open.

"Listen!" said the lad. "That sounds like a young man's voice. I'm afraid Stephen Tracey is in there."

"I dare say he is," Blake assented. "Come, we'll go in at once."

They slipped into the house, and glided quietly along the wall to an open doorway, where they paused for a moment to look into the room beyond. There were three persons here, and they stared in consternation when Blake and the lad suddenly appeared, followed by the big hound.

A young man with a dark moustache was sitting on a chair, with a handkerchief tied around his head; and standing by him were Sandy and Janet McKay, both intensely agitated. It was obvious to Blake at a glance that something was seriously wrong.

"You are Peter Chesilton, I presume?" he said, as he stepped forward.

"Yes, sir, I am," the youth replied. "And who are you?"

"My name is Blake. I am a detective, and I have come from London to see Miss Norma Heriot, and recover from her the large sum of money which she has stolen."

"So you are Mr. Sexton Blake? I knew that you were looking for Norma, and I have been afraid that you would succeed in tracing her."

"And where is she now? What has happened? I can see that there has been a struggle, and that you have been—"

"If you are a detective, sir," Sandy McKay interrupted, "I'm hoping you'll get to the bottom of this affair. There have been queer doings at Grayle, and my wife and I are greatly worried. We heard shouts as we were sitting at supper in our little cottage yonder, and hastened to the house to find this young man here alone. He had been knocked down and hurt, and was just coming to his senses. And Miss Norma has disappeared, sir. We have searched high and low, and there isn't a trace of her."

"The poor dear!" half sobbed Janet McKay. "She has taken to flight, and it must have been because of this strange youth, whom I have never laid eyes on before. My husband has been putting questions to him, but it is little he has learned as yet. Will you get the truth out of him, sir?"

Blake nodded gravely. He believed he knew what had occurred. He glanced at Tinker, and turned to Peter Chesilton.

"Has Stephen Tracey been here?" he asked sharply.

"Yes, sir, he has been," the young man declared. "I had a fight with him, and I got the worst of it. The scoundrel was bent on having Norma arrested, and I lost my temper and—"

His voice faltered, and he pressed his hand to his head. He had scarcely yet recovered from the effect of his injuries. He drank a little brandy from a flask that Blake gave to him, and then, feeling better at once, he clearly and briefly told the whole story. Having spoken first of the letter he had received from the girl, and of his arrival at Grayle, he described all that had subsequently happened.

"When I recovered consciousness," he continued, "these old servants were with me, and the girl was gone. They say she isn't anywhere in the house, so she must have fled. I am afraid that Tracey went after her, and that he will do her some harm."

"I don't think you need be worried," Blake replied. "I dare say Miss Heriot fled from fear of your cousin, but I doubt if he has gone after her. Most likely he has disappeared because he was afraid that you were seriously injured by the blow and the fall."

"I am not so sure of that, sir. It is not only the money that Stephen Tracey wants. He is madly in love with Norma, and he hates her because she is engaged to me."

"Yes, I know that. And what of the money? Has the girl taken it with her?"

"I don't know if she has or not, Mr.

Blake. She didn't tell me where she had hidden it. I doubt if she has it with her, though."

"Why do you, Chesilton?"

"Because she had been willing to give it to Tracey. I had led her to realise what a wrong thing she had done, as I have told you."

The situation was perplexing and grave. If Stephen Tracey had been in pursuit of the girl when she fled—and it was to be feared that he had been—he might in his rage have done her some injury had he caught her. And as a considerable time had elapsed since his disappearance, and he had not returned, there was reason to think that he had recovered his ten thousand pounds. Otherwise he would have come back. The dread that he might have seriously injured his cousin would not have kept him away.

The old servants, questioned by Blake, admitted that they had known that the stolen money was in the girl's possession, but asserted that they had not known where she had concealed it. Peter Chesilton had risen from his chair, and was pacing restlessly to and fro, his features twitching with emotion.

"We are wasting time, Mr. Blake," he said hoarsely. "We must try to find Norma at once. She was in a distracted state of mind, terrified by that scoundrel Tracey's threats. He wouldn't show her any mercy. He swore that he would send her to prison, and that is why she fled. She was afraid to stay here with him. He was in a furious rage, and there is no telling what he may have done to the poor girl if he caught her. As for the money, I don't believe she had it with her. It must be hidden somewhere in the house. I see you have brought your bloodhound with you, and I have read a lot about his skill in tracking people. Wouldn't he be able to—"

"I have been thinking of that," Blake broke in. "I dare say Pedro will help us. But we must have some article of clothing that has been worn by Miss Heriot to give the dog the scent."

He spoke a few words to Janet McKay, who hurried from the room, and returned shortly with a small slipper that showed signs of wear.

"I fetched this for you," she said to the detective. "I got it from Miss Norma's bed-room. I was up there before, but I didn't notice until this time that the lock of the door was broken and a panel kicked through. And the window is wide open, sir. Miss Norma must have fled to her room and locked her door, and when the man you called Tracey burst it open I should think she climbed down from the window by the ivy, and he did the same."

They were ominous discoveries that the servant had made. Blake and the lad looked at each other, and Peter Chesilton turned pale.

"By heavens, it is just as I feared!" he cried. "Stephen Tracey must have been in hot pursuit of Norma, and she could have hardly got away from him. And it is at least half an hour since she fled. I am afraid to think of what may have happened in the meantime."

"We will soon know," Blake replied. "This slipper will put Pedro on the girl's track, and he will follow it to the end. Don't be alarmed, Chesilton. Miss Heriot may have eluded her pursuer. I rather believe that she took the money with her."

"You think that it was in her bed-chamber, Mr. Blake, and that she went up to get it?"

"Yes, it would appear that she did."

"Perhaps you are right, sir. But I can't understand why Norma would have carried off the money. I had insisted on giving it to my cousin, and she wouldn't have dreamed of keeping it for herself. And now for the dog. Don't let us waste any more time."

Janet McKay was left behind, and Blake and the lad, accompanied by Peter Chesilton and the old man, hastened from the house to the side door, and round to the terrace that was beneath the window of Norman Heriot's room.

There was no delay here. Having sniffed at the slipper and ranged to and fro on the grass, Pedro picked up the girl's scent. There could be no doubt that he had it, and when the leash had been attached to his collar he set off at a trot. Then he had crossed the lawn in the direction of the village, and plunged into the scrubbery, he bore to the left, and led the little party into deep, dark woods.

What would they find here? Peter Chesilton feared that some ghastly discovery would be made, and Blake also was inclined to be apprehensive. He took his electric torch from

his pocket, and played the silvery flare amongst the trees and into the tangled thickets.

But their fears were not verified. For half a mile they went on, the hound pressing steadily ahead of them, holding unerringly to the scent. Finally, they broke from the cover on to open ground, within a few yards of the shore of Loch Tay.

Pedro trotted straight on, and a moment later he stepped at the water's edge, and looked up at his master with a low whine. He had got to the end of the trail, and here, bitten deep into the gravel, was the mark of the bow of a boat.

"Well, Chesilton, I told you not to worry about Miss Heriot," said Blake. "She has crossed the loch."

"Ay, and it will be my boat the young lady has taken!" declared McKay. "I kept it just here, sir."

"She has escaped from Stephen Tracey, thank Heaven!" exclaimed Peter Chesilton. "He could not have been with her!"

"No, I should think not," Blake assented. "He must have abandoned the pursuit."

"I'm not so sure of that," said the old man, as he glanced to the left. "A larger boat, belonging to a gentleman of the neighbourhood, has been lying yonder for some weeks. And it isn't there now, sir, as you can see. I'm thinking that fellow Tracey must have taken it."

"When did you last see it there, McKay?"

"Only this morning, sir."

The disappearance of the larger craft was a blow to the little party. Norma Heriot had escaped in the one boat, and there was every reason to believe that Stephen Tracey had gone after her in the other.

All was quiet. Not a sound could be heard except the faint rustling of the breeze.

Blake gazed gloomily out on the tranquil sheet of water, and glanced at the hills that encircled it within a short distance to the right.

"How far is it around that end of the loch?" he asked of the old man. "I mean, how far to a point opposite to where we are now standing?"

"Not very far, sir," Sandy McKay replied. "It will be something like two miles."

"Is there another boat to be had anywhere near?"

"No, sir, I have no knowledge of any. If we are to get over yonder we must walk, and there's a good path."

Blake nodded, and looked gloomily at his companions. He took a serious view of the situation now, but he did not speak of his fears.

"Come along!" he said. "We are not baffled yet, Chesilton. We'll work our way around, and no doubt Pedro will pick up the girl's scent when we get to the opposite side."

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Norma Awakes—The Shadow of the Future—The Figure in the Gloom—A Falling Stone Betrays the Girl—Stephen Tracey's Demand—A Desperate Struggle in the Cavern—The Bay of a Hound—Stephen Takes to Flight—Blake Comes with His Companion—The Storm on the Lake—The Capsize Boat—The Fate of Stephen—After the Storm.

NORMA awoke shivering, chilled by the cold breeze that was blowing through the Cattle Pass.

Her thoughts were confused at first, and then a flood of memory surged upon her—the struggle she had witnessed in the room at Grayle, the blow that had killed or injured her lover, her escape from the house with the money, and her flight across Loch Tay and up to the Goblin's Cave. How long she had slept she did not know, but she judged that it had been for a considerable time, as the moon was much lower than it had been.

Her heart ached, and a feeling of sickening despair gripped her as she realised the position she was in. She was not now in fear of Stephen Tracey. She had cluded him, and she was sure that he would not be able to find her, whether or not he was still searching for her.

It was the prospect of the future that terrified her. Bitterly she regretted her folly, wishing that she had never yielded to the temptation. She had a relentless enemy in Stephen Tracey. She could expect no mercy or pity from him. He would not be satisfied with the recovery of the money of which she

had robbed him. He was determined to punish her to the full extent of the law, and not Peter Chesilton, not anybody else, could protect her from arrest and imprisonment.

"Oh, what am I to do?" she said to herself, half-aloud, as she rose on her cramped limbs. "There will be no safety for me at Grayle, or at Sandy McKay's cottage, or in London! No safety anywhere! And even if I were to get far away, how could I live? I have only a few pounds of my own, and I dare not touch any of the money that is in the bag! If only I had Peter here to comfort me! He would help me if he could, but—"

She broke off abruptly, startled by a faint sound that had just floated to her ears. Creeping forward a little, on to a flat shelf of rock that projected from the mouth of the cave, she rested her hand on the rugged wall to one side of her, and peered down into the depths of the ravine.

Something or somebody was moving there. Out of the murky gloom, into a pale shaft of moonlight, appeared the shadowy figure of Stephen Tracey. He had been up the pass while the girl slept, and was returning towards the loch.

Norma was paralysed by a numbing fear. She crouched there on the shelf, lacking the power to stir a limb, until the young man had got a little distance beyond her, and then, as

vixen! But I'll spare you and forgive what you have done, if you will be my wife!"

"Your wife!" gasped the girl. "No, no, anything but that! I love Peter, and I am going to marry him!"

"Indeed you are not!" Stephen Tracey vowed passionately. "You shan't marry Peter! I want you myself, and I mean to have you!"

"Never in the world! I won't, Stephen! You must be mad! I would rather be dead, or spend years in prison, than be your wife!"

"You will have to be! I would risk anything for you, my little beauty! Unless you promise to marry me, and swear that you will keep your word, I will carry you off somewhere! And I won't let you go until you are willing to marry me!"

"You dare not! You could not be so wicked! You have the money! Be content with that! Oh, for Heaven's sake don't—"

"Will you marry me, Norma? Yes or no?"

"No—a thousand times no!"

"Then I'll make you! I'll break your stubborn spirit! By Heaven, I believe I would kill you rather than let Peter have you!"

Norma screamed, and screamed again, as Stephen Tracey threw his arms around her and strained her tightly to him. She struggled with him desperately, in a frenzy of terror, while he gradually overcame her resistance. His lips were close to hers, and his mocking voice was at her ear. In vain she tried to thrust him off.

"I'll have one kiss!" he vowed. "Just one before I take you away from here!"

Norma was faint and dizzy. Her senses were swimming. But as her strength failed and she swayed limply in her assailant's embrace, the thunderous, muffled baying of a hound was heard at no great distance.

It frightened Stephen Tracey. Letting the swooning girl fall at his feet, he gazed from the shelf of rock to the bottom of the pass, and was the more frightened by what he saw.

Fear urged him to take to flight. Forgetting the bag of money that he had flung on the floor, he whipped out of the Goblin's Cave and crawled as fast as he could along the side of the hill, in the opposite direction to the loch.

When he had gone for a dozen yards, he disappeared around a jutting boulder, and by then Sexton Blake and his companions were mounting the steep slope. Pedro bounded ahead of them, baying loudly; and when they entered the cavern, and Blake flashed the light of his torch, Norma had recovered from the shock, and was shrinking in terror from the big bloodhound.

"Peter!" she cried, at the sight of her lover. "Oh, Peter!"

She burst into tears, and the next instant she was clasped in Peter Chesilton's arms, and he was kissing her in rapturous joy and relief.

"Thank Heaven, you are safe, Norma!" he said hoarsely. "Thank Heaven! That scoundrel Tracey! We saw him leave as we were climbing the hill. I have been worried—triflingly worried. What a bad time you must have had of it!"

Sandy McKay was almost as delighted as was the young man. Observing the bag on the floor, Blake picked it up and opened it.

"Ah, here is the stolen money!" he declared. "I told you, Chesilton, that Miss Heriot had taken it with her!"

Peter Chesilton let go of the girl, and turned to stare at the crisp banknotes with which the bag was filled.

"Yes, you've got it," he said. "I don't want it, and Norma doesn't. Why didn't she leave it at Grayle? It was stupid of her to bring it with her, and it puts her in a worse position. Why didn't she give it to Tracey when she had the opportunity? I wish she had—"

"I wanted to give it to him, Peter," Norma Heriot interrupted. "He could have had it. He tore the bag from my hand, and threw it to the ground, and he must have forgotten it when he ran away. But it was more than the money that he wanted, more than to have me arrested! Oh, Peter, he frightened me horribly! I was fighting with him, struggling hard, when he was alarmed by the baying of the dog. You nearly lost me! Stephen swore that he was going to carry me off somewhere, and keep me a prisoner until—until I would promise to be his—"

The girl's voice choked. Overcome by her feelings, realising that a narrow escape she had had, her tears flowed again, and she sobbed hysterically. She clung to Peter Chesilton, who spoke to her soothingly, and soon got her into a calmer mood. Then she told the whole story; and when she had



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she was about to withdraw, her clutching fingers dislodged a loose flake of stone from the surface of the wall. It fell into space, rebounding from rock to rock, and as it landed at the bottom of the gorge, Stephen Tracey stopped and looked up.

"Ah, there you are!" he shouted, as he got a vague glimpse of the girl. "I see you!"

The falling stone had betrayed Norma's hiding-place. Frantic with terror, hardly knowing what she was doing, she darted to the rear of the cavern, and tore the bag from the cranny in which she had thrust it. She shrank as far as she could into a cleft in the wall, and as she waited there in harrowing suspense, trembling violently, she heard crunching footsteps and the noise of loosened shale sliding down the hillside.

A shadow darkened the mouth of the cave. A match was struck, and the light of it revealed the crouching girl to Stephen Tracey. With an oath he pounced upon her, and, seizing her by the wrist, he dragged her roughly across the floor to the exit of the cabin, and pinned her against the wall.

His hot breath steamed on Norma's cheeks, and his eyes stared into hers. She was horribly afraid of him. She felt the blood flowing like ice in her veins.

"Let me go!" she panted. "Oh, please, do! I will give you the money! Here it is!"

"The deuce with the money!" cried the young man, as he tore the bag out of her hand and hung it from him. "I want more than that!"

"I—I didn't mean to steal it, Stephen! I am sorry! I thought that Peter had a right to it! Be merciful, and don't send me to prison!"

"You don't deserve any mercy, you little

finished her lover's face was crimson with rage.

"It's a good thing for Stephen Tracey, and for me, Norma," he cried hotly, "that he fled before I got here! If I had seen you struggling with him I am afraid I should have killed him!"

"Ay, and I'm feeling the same!" exclaimed old Sandy McKay. "I'm thinking I should have wrung his neck!"

Blake was considering the matter while he filled and lit his pipe. Peter Chesilton's eyes wandered to the bag, and he shook his head.

"I wish Tracey had taken the money!" he muttered, half to himself. "I wonder what he will do next?"

"He will have me arrested!" sobbed the girl. "He must be more vindictive towards me than he was before, and he will go straight to the police!"

"Yes, I dare say he will," the young man assented. "There isn't any mercy to be expected from him. I don't know, though. After what he has done to-night, Norma, he may be in the mood to let you alone, provided he gets the money. What do you think about it, Mr. Blake?"

Blake hesitated for a moment. "I'll be candid with you," he replied. "It is a complicated situation, and there is no telling how it will end. It was on a sudden impulse, from the fear that he might be roughly dealt with for assaulting Miss Heriot if he should be caught here, that he took to flight when he heard the hound baying. By now he has had time for sober reflection, and it has probably occurred to him that he was to some extent justified in attacking you, Chesilton, and in pursuing Miss Heriot with the stolen money in her possession."

"For his violent assault on her there was no justification, as he must be aware, and that knowledge should have some weight with him. On the one hand, he may return to Grayle, and wait there to receive the money, with the intention of letting the matter rest at that, and taking no proceedings against the girl on the condition that none be taken against him. On the other hand, if his jealous rage and thirst for revenge prove stronger than his prudence, he may go to the nearest village and demand a warrant for the arrest of Miss Heriot. I am strongly inclined to doubt if he will do that, however. And now let us be off!" he added. "We will get back to the house as quickly as we can, and we may find Tracey there."

"I hope he will be!" said Peter Chesilton. "But if he isn't there, and he has Norma

arrested, will you be able to do anything for her?"

"It is doubtful if I would be," the detective answered. "I am bound to admit that."

There was not much consolation in the statements Blake had made. He was loth to raise false hopes, for he was very much afraid that Stephen Tracey would stop at nothing.

His companions saw that he was worried, and they were all in gloomy spirits when they left the Goblin's Cave and descended the rugged hillside to the bottom of the pass. They rapidly retraced their course to the loch, and here they made a discovery that might mean one thing or another.

Only the large boat was drawn up on the shore. The smaller one had disappeared, and only Stephen Tracey could have taken it. He could not have been gone long, but there was no sign of him anywhere. Nor would he have been visible even if he had been within a short distance, for the water was shrouded in darkness. The moon had dipped below the horizon, and black clouds had rolled over the sky from the west. Lightning was playing faintly across the crest of the hills, and thunder was muttering.

"There is going to be a storm," said Sandy McKay.

"Yes, and a bad one," Blake replied. "What ought we to do? Will we have time to get across, do you think?"

"Ay, sir, I'm thinking we will have. There are two pairs of oars, and we'll be able to make good speed."

"Very well, McKay. We'll risk it."

"There would be no risk for us in this big craft, sir, storm or not. But it would be a different matter for that fellow Tracey, with his frail cockleshell of a boat."

They put off without delay. Blake took one pair of oars and Sandy McKay took the other. Peter Chesilton and the girl sat in the stern, and Tinker perched himself in the bow, with the bloodhound at his feet.

Not a breath of air was stirring, and the surface of the water was as smooth as glass. Swiftly and steadily the boat glided on, and it had got to the middle of the loch and was approaching a small islet that was almost directly in front, when the threatened storm burst.

It was very sudden, as if with one accord the elements had let loose their fury. The rain fell in a pelting torrent, and a mighty gale sprang up, lashing the water to creamy waves. Then the lightning blazed almost in-

cessantly on the horizon, the thunder crashed and roared and reverberated like artillery. The boat heaved fore and aft, and pitched dizzily from side to side.

"Oh, we'll be drowned!" gasped Norma Heriot. "I am so frightened, Peter!"

"We are quite safe, dear!" Peter Chesilton replied, as he slipped his arm around her waist. "You need not be a bit frightened."

"No; there will not be any danger, Miss Norma!" declared Sandy McKay. "I've been on the loch many a time in worse weather than this!"

The girl's anxiety was lulled. Blake and the old man bent lustily to the oars, pulling harder and faster. The little islet was very near now, and as the craft slid by the point of it, and veered a trifle to the left, a lurid streak of lightning played on the agitated waters and revealed to Blake and his companions a startling sight.

"Look—look!" shouted Tinker.

For a fleeting instant there was a glimpse of Stephen Tracey at a distance of a hundred yards or so. It could be seen that he had lost an oar, and that his frail boat was at the mercy of the waves, tossing and spinning like a mad thing. He perceived the other craft approaching, and called for help. The dazzling light vanished, and all was dark.

"It is Stephen!" cried the girl. "He has only one oar! I am afraid he will be drowned!"

"I'm thinking he will be, miss!" Sandy McKay told her. "There's not much chance for him."

"Pull harder, McKay!" bade Blake. "Do your best! We must save the fellow if we can!"

Still faster dipped the oars, creaking and cracking to the strain. The big boat ploughed on and on through the pouring rain, breasting the roaring, foaming billows. There was another shrill appeal for help, and another vivid flash of lightning. And now Stephen Tracey had disappeared. Only his small craft could be seen, and it was bottom up, swaying and reeling amongst the waves. There was nobody clinging to it.

"By heavens, the fellow is gone!" exclaimed Blake.

"Ay, he has capsized," Sandy McKay assented; "and I fear it is the last of him, sir. It would have been useless for him to try to swim in such a storm."

The girl burst into tears, and Peter Chesilton was speechless with horror. In this awful moment he pitied his cousin, forgetting how evil he had been. Blake and the old

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man pulled with desperate strokes, with all their might, and in the course of a few minutes they came alongside of the floating boat.

They sought for Stephen Tracey, and sought in vain; and then, knowing that he must have perished, they went on their way.

They were somewhat alarmed for themselves, the storm having increased to such a pitch of fury that they were in danger of foundering. Fortunately, there was another small island within a short distance of them, and by Sandy McKay's advice they decided to take shelter there.

They succeeded in reaching it, and none too soon, for their craft had shipped so much water that it could not have kept afloat much longer. They beached it, and with heavy hearts stepped out.

And as they stood on a strip of gravel, drenched to the skin, a streak of lightning revealed a ghastly object that was floating close by.

Blake at once plunged into the loch, and after a brief struggle, which his companions anxiously watched, he swam slowly ashore with the body of Stephen Tracey.

"That was a very brave thing to do, sir," said Sandy McKay. "It was foolish of you to risk your life, though, knowing the young fellow to have been drowned."

"I'm not so sure that he is dead," Blake answered. "He has not been in the water long, and we may be able to pull him round."

They did all that they could. The body of Stephen Tracey was stretched on the sand, and for half an hour they laboured with him, trying by every means that they could think of to restore respiration. But their efforts were of no avail, and in the end they gave up. There was not a spark of life in the young man.

"We can do no more," said Sandy McKay. "He is dead, sir, and not all the doctors in the world could put breath in him again."

Norma Heriot was sobbing bitterly, and Peter Chesilton was terribly shocked by the tragedy. Blake was shocked. He was sorry for the youth, feeling that the punishment for his sins had been heavier than he deserved. Yet he could not resist the impulse to speak a few words of consolation to those who were so sorely in need of it.

"In a way it is for the best, Chesilton," he told him. "I ought not to say that, perhaps. This is not a fitting time to talk of what you will gain by your cousin's death, and of the difference it makes to Miss Heriot. But I may remind you that the shadow has passed. The girl has nothing to fear now. She has suffered heavily for her folly, and she will not be punished any further. And you, being next-of-kin to Stephen Tracey, will inherit the whole of your father's estate, including the ten thousand pounds."

Peter Chesilton was thinking of his sweetheart, not of the money. He clasped the weeping girl in his arms, and kissed her quivering lips.

"Did you hear, Norma?" he said. "Do you understand? Whether or not poor Stephen meant to have you arrested, it is beyond his power to do so now. You have nothing whatever to fear."

The fury of the storm was abating. The rain and lightning ceased, the wind fell, and the thunder faded away in the distance. And presently, when the waves had subsided and the water was fairly smooth again, Blake and his companions got into the boat, and with sad hearts pulled on across the loch, taking with them the body of Stephen Tracey. The clouds had scattered, and the glow of the twinkling stars shone on the pallid features of the unfortunate youth as he lay on the bottom of the craft.

"It was a very bad storm, sir," remarked old Sandy McKay, "and I'm just thinking that all of us have much to be thankful for."

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

The Morning After the Storm—A House of Sorrow—A Visitor Comes to Grayle—A Joyful Surprise for Norma—Malcolm Hears the Story—A Promise of the Future.

WHEN the little party arrived at Grayle, several hours after midnight, shivering in their wet garments, Janet McKay was waiting there for them. Knowing that they would come back drenched by the storm, she

had made a couple of blazing fires and prepared hot coffee.

There was ample accommodation for Norma Heriot and her guests, and though they were not in the mood for slumber, they were all compelled to go to bed, so that their clothes might be dried.

Blake got some sleep, and at the first flush of dawn he rose and dressed, and walked up the glen to Ardencrag. He returned in the car by a circuitous road, accompanied by Jock McTavish and a local constable, and drove back with them to the village with the body of Stephen Tracey.

He returned to Grayle about eleven o'clock, to find that the old servant had breakfast ready, and that Tinker and Peter Chesilton had come downstairs. Presently the girl appeared, looking pale and ill. She had not been able to sleep, and she had no appetite. But Blake persuaded her to have something to eat, and her spirits rose a little as she sat at the table with her companions, while Janet McKay hovered around them with tempting dishes.

Meanwhile, a gentleman who had travelled by a steamer from Killin, and landed at the eastern end of the loch, was walking through the woods towards the dwelling. He was a big, broad-shouldered man, clad in rough tweeds, with a bushy beard and moustache of a tawny colour, and features that had been deeply bronzed by the sun of the tropics. He carried a bag in one hand and a stick in the other.

There was a lump in his throat, and his eyes were dim, as he crossed the lawn to the house. He stood gazing at it for a moment, and was about to turn in the direction of the servants' cottage, when a confused sound of voices floated to his ears.

He did not know what to make of it. He listened in surprise, and then went noiselessly forward to the side-door, which he found to be unlocked. Slipping quietly in, he glided along the hall, and paused by the dining-room door.

He stood outside of it for a few seconds, and then, throwing it open, he gazed in bewilderment at the scene that met his eyes.

There was a moment of hushed silence. Norma was staring in breathless, incredulous amazement at the man in the doorway, as if she thought that he was an apparition. Jumping up from her chair, she ran to him and flung herself into his arms.

"Father—father!" she cried. "Oh, dear father!"

It was Malcolm Heriot, the owner of Grayle. He had unexpectedly returned from the wilds. Speechless with emotion, he embraced his daughter, when he had not seen for long years. And while he kissed her, and stroked her hair, he glanced at the group who were seated at the table.

"My little Norma!" he said hoarsely, putting her from him, and gazing at her fondly. "You're not changed! Not a bit! You are just the same, only prettier than you used to be! How I've longed for you, thought of you, dreamed of you, night after night! I've come back from Australia—back with twenty thousand pounds! I struck it rich, and found a lot of gold! I landed at Glasgow yesterday! I wanted to give you a surprise! I intended to get the house in order, and have old Janet write to you in London, and have you come up here on some pretext! And, to my astonishment, I find you here! What does it mean? And who are these people?"

"They—they are staying here," replied the girl, who was so agitated and excited that she could scarcely speak coherently. "You know Peter—Peter Chesilton! You know him well! His father is dead, and—"

"Dead!" interrupted Malcolm Heriot. "My old friend Richard Chesilton!"

"Yes; he has been dead for a week or so. It is very sad. And poor Peter, who was badly treated, came to Grayle because—"

"Go on, Norma! These other friends of yours? Who are they?"

"I am trying to tell you, father. The gentleman is Mr. Sexton Blake, the London detective! The boy is Tinker, his assistant! And the big dog you see is his bloodhound, Pedro, who can track anybody by their scent!"

"A detective here, in my house! My dear child, what on earth does it all mean?"

"How can I explain, if you keep on asking questions, father? Awful things have happened here! You will hardly believe it! I

have been a wicked girl—terribly wicked! I stole a lot of money for Peter's sake, thinking he had a right to it! But it belonged to Stephen Tracey, and he came after it last night, and I fled from him to the Goblin's Cave over in the hills! He followed me there, and I was saved from him by Mr. Blake and the others. And afterwards, while the storm was raging, Stephen's boat was upset, and—and he was drowned in the—"

The flow of words was stifled on Norma's lips by a sudden burst of tears. Her feelings wrought to a high pitch, terrified by the thought of the confession she must make to her father, she sank down on a chair, and sobbed bitterly. Malcolm Heriot looked at her helplessly for a moment, a dazed expression on his face. With hesitating steps, his haggard features twitching, he moved towards the table. His eyes rested on Peter Chesilton, and wandered to the detective.

"What does it mean?" he demanded, his voice ringing sharply. "What in Heaven's name does all this mean? Tell me! Don't keep me in suspense any longer!"

"There is no need for you to be alarmed, sir," Blake replied. "It is not as bad as you may think it is. Your daughter has committed an act of folly, of more than folly, and the consequences might have been very serious. But she has nothing to fear now."

He told the whole story to the stupefied man, omitting no detail. He began by speaking of the death of Richard Chesilton, and the temptation to which the girl had yielded, and when he had related all that had subsequently occurred, he concluded the narrative with an account of Stephen Tracey's death in the storm-dashed waters of Loch Tay.

"I repeat that your daughter has nothing to fear, Mr. Heriot," he continued. "And I trust that you will forgive her, and think none the less of her. She was blinded by her love for young Chesilton, believing there was justification for what she did, and she has suffered quite heavily enough for her sins."

Malcolm Heriot drew a deep breath. His pallid face brightened, and a look of intense relief crept into his eyes. He lifted the weeping girl from her chair, and, as she clung to him, sobbing pitifully, he slipped his arm around her, and tenderly kissed her cheek.

"Don't cry, Norma!" he said. "It's all done and over with, and I'm not going to utter a word of reproach. I can understand how you were tempted, and it is not in my heart to blame you. I am only too thankful that the black shadow has passed, and that you can be happy again. Don't cry, child! Look up and smile! You shall marry Peter, as I have always hoped you would some day, and the three of us will live here together at Grayle. Yes, we will be happy here, in the old home where your childhood was spent. But when I think of what might have been, of the price you might have had to pay for your—"

Malcolm Heriot's voice faltered and broke, and there was a mist before his eyes, and a choking sensation in his throat, as he took the detective's hand, and clasped it fervently.

"Heaven bless you, Mr. Blake, for what you have done for my little girl!" he said huskily. "I would like to tell you how grateful I am, how deeply I appreciate your kindness, and your mercy, but there are no words that can express my feelings. I say again, Heaven bless you!"

Thus ended the curious case of the deferred death, and the ten thousand pound cheque. It was several days later, after Stephen Tracey had been laid to rest in the little churchyard at Ardencrag, that Sexton Blake and Tinker left Grayle to return to London. And, as they travelled down from Killin in the bright sunshine, through the splendid scenery of the Highlands, they thought of the three people in the old dwelling by Loch Tay, and were glad that by their efforts they had spared them a sorrow that must have clouded all their lives. Yet it was only partly due to them. They did not know what had been in Stephen Tracey's mind when he fled from the cavern in the Cattle Pass, but they had little doubt that had he not perished in the storm he would have done his worst, and the ruthless arm of the law would have torn Norma Heriot from her father and her lover, and shut her in from the world behind the stone walls of a prison.

THE RED RAIDER;

Or, *OUTLAWS OF THE AIR.*

— BY A. S. HARDY. —

THE OPENING CHAPTERS.

JACK ROYSTON, a clever young inventor and air pilot, after many experiments, succeeds in perfecting the biggest and fastest machine that the world of aviation had yet known.

Everyone is overjoyed at the triumph Jack has brought to the Mayne Royston Works, with the exception of a scoundrel called JIM KENT. This fellow and two other choice rogues, are jealous of Jack, and, being led by Kent, the trio manage to steal the wonderful new machine.

Jack pursues Kent to France, and is on the point of having the scoundrel arrested, when he—Jack—is detained by the French military authorities.

A Gallant Effort.

THE officer rose to receive the telephone, but at that moment the bell rang. The commandant, receiver to ear, listened excitedly to what was said over the wire, then, with an oath, he turned, ringing out a stern command.

"Send a guard to the aerodrome! Stop the red aeroplane!" he roared. "Shoot down the men in her if they don't obey the order of arrest!"

Instantly the orderly-room was in commotion. Men rushed out, carrying their rifles in their hands. Commands rang outside in the still night. Bugles blew.

The commandant, with hand outstretched to Jack, cried:

"Monsieur, I beg your pardon. But you can forgive my doubting you?"

"We're wasting time!" cried Jack. "They'll be off before we can get there! Quick, let us go!"

Out they ran, officers and men, visitors and guards!

Before them, as they reached the open, stretched a sheet of blackness.

In its middle there sat some twinkling lights. A rifle spoke. Hoarse cries echoed loudly.

Then a broad beam of silver light shot across the black background. It was followed by a second, a third. Flares were lit as if by magic. Jack saw the red raider, his beloved Bee, revealed to him in the glare. He saw the heads of the three men in her. She was his stolen machine, right enough.

"Stop them!" he yelled, as he ran like a madman across the open. "Don't let them get away!—Shoot, shoot!"

But already the raider was moving. He saw her glide forward, her engines purring beautifully, saw her rise within a few yards.

"Use your machine-guns! Turn a field-gun on her!" he roared. "Blow her to bits if you can't stop her any other way!"

Commands were uttered.

But it was too late! Before even the first machine-gun spoke—and the French soldiers had to be careful, for fear of killing their comrades—the Bee was up and off, and they could see the men in her waving their hands derisively.

Up she mounted, up and on! For a moment she hung like a big red bird in the broad beams of the searchlights, then passed beyond their radius, and was gone!

Hoarse cries and shouts rang upon the air, as excited Frenchmen dashed about the aerodrome.

Then the beams of the searchlights lifted, and the aeroplane was caught for a moment or so in an arc of light.

Instantly guns spoke, and shells began to burst about her.

Messages were meanwhile being flashed to distant aerodromes and gun-stations, in the vain hope that the raiders might be intercepted and brought down, in spite of the advantage they had gained.

At the same time a fast battle-plane, a swift, light machine with immensely powerful engines, and fitted with machine-gun and wireless was rushed out into the open.

There she lay, ready to start, her engine already warm, but without a pilot to steer her.

Jack and the commandant of the aerodrome rushed madly up to where she stood.

"Name of a dog!" roared the French commandant. "Is there no one to follow these scoundrels?"

"There's no pilot here, sir," answered a broad-shouldered under-officer.

Jack's eyes blazed as he looked at the French aeroplane and recognised the type.

"I can manage her," he said, with an eagerness that thrilled. "I have been up in her type before. Let me go up in her. It's our only chance."

He pleaded earnestly, while the commandant hesitated.

"It is out of order," he objected. "I cannot permit it, and yet—"

Jack saw him shut one eye, and so fully charged with meaning was the eloquent expression of his face, that, without a word, Jack swung himself up, dropped into the cockpit of the fighting-plane, and set her engines racing.

With a cry to the men in front of him to stand away, he started her running.

The astonished Frenchmen scattered as she taxied up. The next moment she was off the ground, and, rocking like a living thing, mounted swiftly upward towards the sky.

In amazement they watched her go, marvelling that the English boy could control her so perfectly, never having seen her before.

Held by the silver beams of the searchlights, then lost in the blackness beyond, to be revealed again as she sped onward, growing ever smaller and smaller, they saw her go in hot pursuit of the red raider.

Soon she looked no bigger than a tiny silver bird. It seemed as if the bursting shrapnel must strike her, though it had missed the scoundrels who had fled in the Bee.

But she kept her course, and was gone.

"He'll never do it!" muttered one of the British officers, as he walked sadly back across the aerodrome. "Goodness knows when we shall see him again. I've a sort of an idea that when news of Royston does come to hand it won't be pleasant hearing."

The others said nothing. A wave of depression held them silent. They had been startled by the pace and power of the red machine. They felt that Jack Royston had gone upon a hopeless chase indeed.

Meanwhile, Jack flew onward, guided on his course by the broad beams of the searchlights which sprang up as if by magic from the earth below, revealing quite plainly the path his enemies had taken.

On and on he sped, grinding his teeth to think that fast as his borrowed machine was, she could not compare in speed with the Bee, whose master engine had been the product of his facile brain.

He tested his wireless, and smiled grimly as he found it in perfect order. With eyes straining ahead to pick up the raider, he flashed messages to the air, and his heart leapt presently when he caught a reply—"Strange machine unarmed. Gun-stations warned. Follow searchlights."

The message came in French, which Jack understood readily enough.

And so, with the brilliant lights to guide him, he flew swiftly onward, without a thought as to the petrol supply he might have aboard, wondering whether a miracle might not turn the scales in his favour, after all.

Onward into the night, on and on, with the best pace he could force out of the

mobile engine of the French machine, the boy sped upon his hopeless quest.

Now and again his eyes strayed to the clock whose face was plainly revealed to him by the electric lamps of the cockpit.

The hands were not moving. The clock had not been wound up, he supposed. He had no means of gauging the passage of time.

The lights of a big town showed below. Ahead of him was a bright, unbroken stretch of mellow light which told that a great city lay southward of his course. Was it Paris, he wondered?

Ahead of him the searchlights showed their broad, friendly beams, and he could see little pricks of light which he knew well enough were bursting shrapnel shells.

The city was passed and left far behind. On he flew at the same unbroken speed, with numb fingers glued to the steering-wheel, and feet that were frozen set upon the controls.

He was pierced through and through by the biting wind, for he wore only his civilian suit over the lightest of underclothing.

Physical discomfort that bordered closely upon suffering was a matter of complete indifference to him in view of the task that lay before him; and when of a sudden a small tiny object, which shivered like living silver in the beams of the powerful lights ahead of him, revealed itself against the dead, black background of obscured sky, his heart leapt within him, with a joy unspeakable.

So, though the engine of his French battle-plane could not compare with that of the Bee, he was gaining. With eyes riveted upon the silver speck ahead, he confirmed the opinion within a few minutes that he was incontestably flying the faster, for what reason he could not tell. A thousand conjectures forced themselves upon his mind—that something was amiss with the Bee's engine, that those who sat in her had been wounded, or the machine itself injured by the gunfire.

He could see the Bee now mounting, then dropping to avoid the heavy barrage which the French gunners, as keen as mustard after having had nothing to do since the Armistice long ago, were putting up.

Jack's blood ran like fire through his veins. He was hot with the spirit of the chase. Nearer and nearer he drew, and already he was getting his machine-gun ready for the time that seemed sure to come.

The raider mounted higher. Clouds shut her from his view for a moment, but only to reappear nearer than before.

"By gum, they don't realise that anything can catch 'em! I believe they fancy they're as safe from pursuit as if they were flying in an unknown world!" thought Jack.

Getting every ounce of power out of his engine, he sped on fiercely now, and at last opened fire.

But as the machine-gun began to purr like a living thing, the musical rattle of the explosions sounding like sweetest music in his ears, his engine ceased to fire, and, with a gasp, he realised that the race was over, and he'd lost.

A cry of dismay rang from his lips, for he'd built fond hopes upon his chance of late. A swift examination showed him that the petrol supply had given out.

And then down, down, down he went. The silver speck vanished from the range of his vision, searchlights caught him up and held him, and shells began to burst around.

Great Scott! They imagined that he was the raider! They were peppering him!

Controlling the battle-plane as well as he could, he flashed out urgent signals of distress, which were unheeded, and bits of the wings were cut away as the fierce barrage continued.

He ceased to care for anything then. He did not mind what happened to him. He looked upon himself as lost.

It seemed an endless period of time while he was falling earthward. He could only guess how near the earth he was.

Suddenly below him a tiny light flickered for a moment, then went out. An instant later he saw a broad belt of light, that curved and wound like a serpent in the darkness beneath him.

Experience told him it was a river, and he decided to take the risk of a plunge.

Down, down, and the winding belt of light grew broader.

He was a hundred feet above it—less! Steadying his machine for the crash, he steered her cleverly, and then—There was a sudden shock! He felt himself caught up out of his seat and flung through space.

Then something hit him with a shattering crash, and he knew no more.

(A magnificent long instalment next week.)