

No. 3. NEW AND ENLARGED SERIES!

THE UNION JACK

2d



THE HUMAN LINK

A Long Complete Detective Novel

Introducing *SEXTON BLAKE, TINKER and WALDO, the WONDER-MAN*



FOOTBALL COMPETITION No. 1.

£1,000 WON!

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CONCLUSION:

"The Human Link."

scoundrel beggared me at the time, and obtained one hundred thousand pounds out of me by sheer fraud!"

"Did you not proceed against him?" asked Sexton Blake.

"How could I?" asked Mr. Thurston. "My own business was at stake, and if I had had the whole affair dragged through the courts, my reputation would have been gone for good. Even as it was, I heard in various quarters that I did not conduct my business in an honest way, and that I was an unscrupulous person. It was all lies, Mr. Blake—I can assure you of the fact that everything of that nature was a pure fabrication. I have been honest all my life; but, owing to that man's villainy, I was nearly ruined, and received a bad name."

"And how does this concern the documents you refer to?" asked Blake.

"In this way, my dear sir," replied our host. "After this man had finished with me, I built up my business afresh; I settled myself to work, and I met with great success. Finally, I was enabled to retire. And then, by a piece of luck, I obtained some evidence against this moneylender which will put him into prison. That evidence is contained in the documents I have told you of. But I do not choose to bring proceedings against the man. I have told him that he can have those documents when he has paid me the sum of one hundred thousand pounds—the precise sum he swindled me out of. You will call it blackmail, perhaps. It is not—I am merely obtaining the money which is rightfully my own. The scoundrel was to have called at my house at eleven-thirty this evening—or, rather, last evening—but the storm no doubt delayed him. And then my safe was stolen, and you know the rest."

Mr. Thurston went into further details, and we were quite interested. At the same time, Blake did not quite agree with our host's view, and he strongly advised him to give up his idea of expecting money from the moneylender, and to put the whole matter into the charge of the police. If Mr. Thurston had been swindled, he would receive his due—and the moneylender, also, would receive his. It was far the better way; and before we left Eliston Gardens, Mr. Thurston promised to accept Mr. Sexton Blake's advice.

So, upon the whole, we had done fairly well. And, thoroughly tired out, we returned to Baker Street.

Before Sexton Blake and I went to bed that eventful night, we were startled by the sudden ringing of the telephone-bell. It was not usual for the 'phone to clatter out at four o'clock in the morning.

Sexton Blake lifted the receiver, and placed it to his ear.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed. "Who is that?"

"That you, Blake?" came a voice over the wire.

"Yes!"

"Well, I'm Waldo!" came the calm voice. "A bit surprised to hear from me—what?"

"Upon my soul, Waldo, your nerve is positively startling," said Sexton Blake. "Let me thank you most heartily for the manner in which you saved my life—"

"Don't mention it, old man!" exclaimed Waldo smoothly. "I saved your life, but I obtained my liberty at the same time; so I think it was well worth the trouble. The only pity is that a film-operator wasn't on the spot at the moment. Just think what a fine stunt that would have made for a live-reel drama!"

"Waldo, you are quite incorrigible!" said Sexton Blake. "And I suppose you realise that it is very risky for you to phone me in this way?"

"Risky—nonsense!" said Waldo. "I am at Victoria Station, in one of the public boxes. I don't suppose you'll give the information—but even if you do they won't get me. If it comes to that, I have to thank you for allowing me to escape so lightly. I appreciate the fact very much. You could have stopped me if you had chosen to do so, for I was very nearly done after my exertions. But you simply blew your whistle, and caused a bit of confusion. Thanks, Blake, for the service!"

"Look here, Waldo, I wish you would take my advice—"

"Nothing doing!" interrupted the Wonder Man. "I have got a ripping scheme on hand for a coup which will even stagger you, Blake. You'll know all about it in three or four weeks' time, so be on the look-out. Good-bye!"

"Wait! I want to say—"

But Waldo had already hung up his receiver, and Sexton Blake turned to me, and lifted his eyebrows.

"A remarkable man, Tinker," he said.

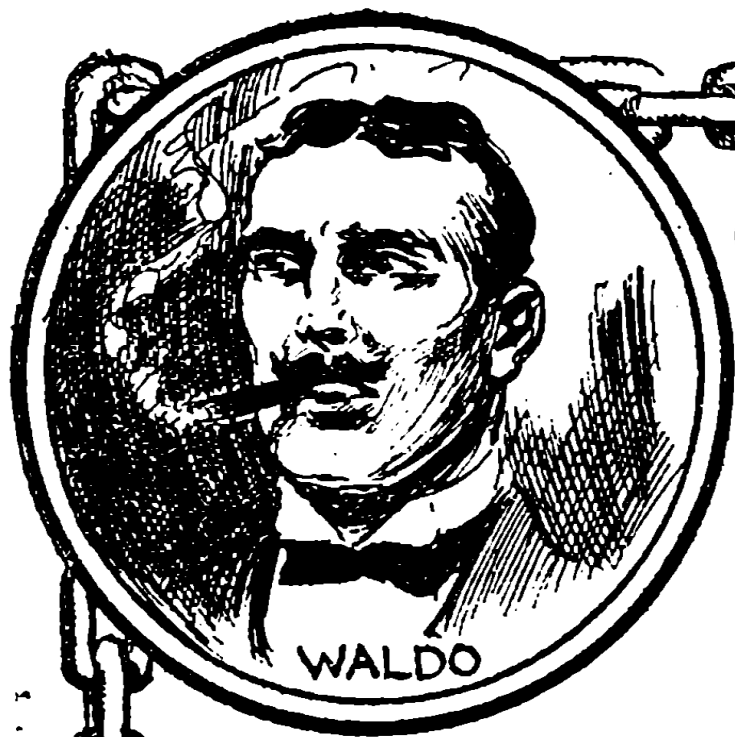
"He's a white man, sir!" I declared stoutly.

"You are quite right, Tinker; I agree with you," said the great detective, leaning back in his chair and languidly lighting a cigarette. "At the same time, Waldo is a menace to law and order, and I shall not hesitate to ruin any of his plans if I can do so. If it is at all possible, I want to get him in hand, and I want to reform him. Waldo is capable of being a fine fellow; but he cannot be a fine fellow until he leaves his present criminal life behind."

But somehow I couldn't quite picture Rupert Waldo as being an honest man. He was born to be a master criminal, and, before very many weeks had passed, Sexton Blake and I were destined to have another grim tussle of wits with him.

We had certainly not seen the last of Waldo, the Wonder Man!

THE END.



The HUMAN LINK.

AN EXCITING LONG COMPLETE DETECTIVE NOVEL, featuring that Amazing Personality WALDO—the Wonder Man, SEXTON BLAKE—the Famous Baker Street Criminologist, and TINKER—His Astute Young Assistant.

THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Mystery of the Storm.

THE lightning was positively appalling. It rent the inky clouds asunder in great, jagged forks of livid fire.

Boo-o-oom!

The thunder crashed out in peal after peal, which sounded like the united discharge of hundreds of pieces of heavy artillery.

And the rain swished down mercilessly. It descended in one bewildering sheet, casting the spray up eighteen inches, and forming a kind of haze over the soaking pavement.

It was just after half-past ten, and the night had drawn in as black as pitch, after a sultry, humid evening. And now the thunderstorm had broken with extraordinary violence—a storm which is seldom seen in the London area.

The quiet, residential thoroughfare of Eliston Gardens, St. John's Wood, was in the very thick of the storm—in the centre of the vast atmospheric disturbance. The rain was hissing down fiercely upon the wide pavement, and the lightning revealed a bare, deserted road, save for one solitary constable, who was seeking shelter on the lee-side of a high wall.

Zzzzzzz!

Again the lightning, and again the booming, thundering roar which followed. It was a storm which the residents of that district were not likely to forget for many a year.

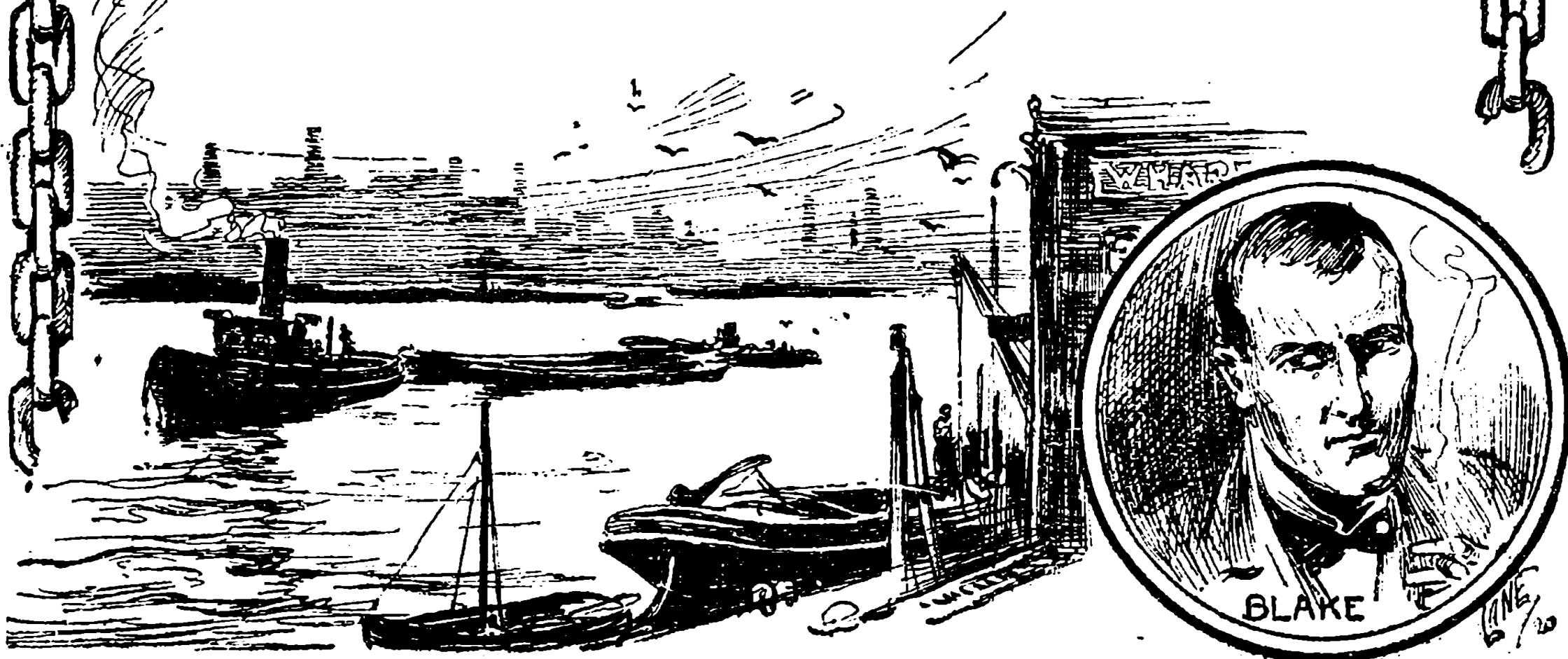
The big, old-fashioned houses were not provided with front gardens. The spacious porches were only a few feet from the pavement itself, and here and there a light gleamed in the fatlight of the houses.

The door of No. 31 opened, and the slight figure of an elderly man appeared, outlined against the soft glow of the electric light within. He stood in the doorway for some moments, then ventured out into the porch itself, just to the point where the rain splashed in.

The man was attired in a black velvet smoking-jacket, and he pursed his lips as he gazed out into the blinding rain.

"Dear, dear!" he murmured, with a shiver. "A storm of exceptional violence!"

Boo-o-oom!





The thunder roared out louder than ever, and it was obvious that the centre of the storm was rapidly approaching. The lightning, too, was becoming more vivid and terrifying in its blinding intensity.

The police-constable, walking on a few paces, saw the door of No. 31 was open—he could tell this by the fact that a stream of light came out across the pavement—and the constable walked up, and touched his helmet respectfully as he observed the slight figure of the elderly gentleman in the doorway.

“Rough night, sir!” he said gruffly.

“It is, indeed, constable!” replied the elderly gentleman. “These infernal storms are of no use to anyone! Let us hope it will soon be over!”

“I suppose the rain’s doing the ground good, sir,” said the constable.

“Bosh!” snapped the man in the doorway. “Rain of this description is utterly useless! By the way, I think you are Barrett, the man who usually controls this beat.”

The constable nodded.

“Yes, that’s right, Mr. Thurston,” he replied respectfully.

“Huh! So you know my name—eh?” said the man in the smoking-jacket.

The constable stepped into the porch, out of the blinding rain. The water dripped from his shiny cape in little rivulets, and formed pools all round him.

“You’ve been here a good while now, sir,” he remarked. “There ain’t many people in this street who don’t know you, sir.”

“Other people seem far more interested in me than I am in them!” snapped Mr. Fortescue Thurston. “Well, look here, constable. I want you to— Good heavens, that was a flash!”

Before the constable could reply there was a terrific peal of thunder, and it rolled and echoed incessantly.

“Well, I don’t feel inclined to stand out here and catch my death of cold!” said Mr. Thurston shortly. “Look here, Barrett. I want you to keep a pretty keen eye on my place to-night!”

“Yes, sir!”

“I’ve got a particular reason for saying this,” went on Mr. Thurston, nodding, as though to himself. “Dear me! I am getting quite wet!”

He felt in his pocket, producing a half-crown, and slipped it into the constable’s palm. The latter saluted promptly.

“Thank you, sir!” he said. “Yes, Mr. Thurston. I’ll keep my eyes well skinned to-night. Seems as though the storm’s getting worse, sir!”

“I think it is—I think it is!” said the man in the smoking-jacket.

He re-entered his house, and closed the door with a slam. The policeman was left standing in the porch. Mr. Thurston passed across the softly illuminated hall, and turned down a passage to the left. It was not a very long passage, and it ended in a baize-covered door.

Mr. Fortescue Thurston pushed this door, and the next moment he was within a very comfortable library. This apartment was quite away from the rest of the house, having been added to the original building some good few years back.

It was a large apartment, with two big windows, and with the other walls entirely filled with mahogany bookcases.

Mr. Thurston passed across the soft carpet, his feet sinking deep into the rich pile. In the centre of the room stood a carved pedestal-desk, the top of which was littered with many papers. A reading-lamp stood there, with its softly-shaded light flooding a somewhat untidy blotting-pad.

The thunder boomed and rolled out—

side, fairly shaking the windows, and Mr. Thurston could distinctly hear the hissing roar of the rain as it beat down.

He did not sit at his desk, but moved across to a corner of the room, where a small safe stood. It was a modern safe, and, although not large, it was enormously heavy and strong.

Mr. Thurston produced a bunch of keys, unlocked the door, and took out a black velvet bag. Inserting one hand, he removed it full of glittering diamonds. They were beautiful stones, and Mr. Thurston regarded them lovingly.

“Splendid—splendid!” he murmured. “Wonderful! Beautiful! The finest I have ever seen! How they glitter—how they glitter!”

He turned the diamonds over from one palm to the other, and he eyed them gloatingly. Perhaps there was some excuse for this, for, undoubtedly, the diamonds were worth admiring. They were of exceptional purity and brilliance.

For perhaps a minute Mr. Thurston remained with the stones in his hand, then he replaced them in the velvet bag, and stowed it safely away in a drawer. But he did not leave the safe.

He opened another drawer, and withdrew from this a sealed foolscap envelope. As he did so a curious smile came into his eyes, and he chuckled.

“Ah, my little friend, you are worth a great deal of money!” he murmured, patting the envelope lovingly. “You are worth a great deal of money!”

He chuckled again, and there was a strange, cunning look in his eyes.

“Yes, and to-night you will be sold!” he went on, still addressing the envelope.

“Yes, you will be sold—for a big sum. Have patience, my little friend. You will soon be in other hands.”

Mr. Thurston laughed softly, patted the envelope once more, and then replaced it in its drawer. He relocked the safe, and went back to the pedestal-desk in the centre of the room.

Meanwhile, the storm was raging with great violence outside.

Police-constable Barrett was at that moment standing against the wall. At this point it was only breast-high, and he could see the illuminated windows of the library quite clearly. The driving rain made the windows hazy and blurry, but they were clearly visible.

“Queer old bird!” murmured the constable. “I always thought he was, too. Wonder why he’s so anxious? There ain’t much sense in my keeping a sharp eye on the place to-night.”

Curiously enough, even as the constable’s thoughts were running in this strain he saw something dark move between him and one of the windows of the library. It only appeared for a moment, and then it had gone again.

The policeman stared over the wall intently, wondering if the storm had played him a trick, or if some dark object had actually obtruded itself between the wall and the window of the library. It was so dark that it was utterly impossible to see anything in the ordinary way.

The constable stood there, gazing intently at the windows. And he was just about to awaken himself into activity when a remarkable incident took place.

The thunderstorm was at its height. The rain descended in sheets, the thunder rolled ponderously, and the lightning seemed to be in all quarters of the heavens at one and the same time.

But then there came one flash—one lurid, vivid, glaring flash of lightning. It seared down from directly overhead—a streak of lightning that was not a mere flash, gone in a second, but a blinding flood of electricity, which was at its full intensity for an appreciable time.

And there, standing on the grass, midway between the constable and the windows of Mr. Thurston’s library, was a figure.

The policeman saw it as clearly as though the sun had been shining in its full glory. Indeed, this sudden and swift vision was even closer than that, for the figure was outlined in the lurid violet-blue glare of the lightning.

The figure was that of a girl!

The constable saw her face clearly—a beautiful, delicate face, but with the lips set in a determined manner. The girl was attired in a check macintosh, which revealed the charming contour of her figure to perfection. She was only small in stature, and upon her head there was a little toque.

But, most important of all, and a point which caused the constable to doubt his own vision, was that the girl carried a glittering revolver in her right hand. The weapon was unmistakable, and it was held steadily.

Then the darkness shot down and blotted everything out. Just that one brief, but vivid picture, and nothing more.

‘Boom—boom—crash!’

The thunder which instantly followed that flash of lightning was almost deafening. It cannoned out overhead, rolled and echoed in all directions. And the rain came down in solid sheets.

“Well, I’ll be hanged!” muttered P.-c. Barrett unsteadily.

There was not the slightest doubt in his own mind. He knew that he had seen a girl, standing only ten or twelve feet from him; he knew that she was carrying a revolver; and he knew, also, that these circumstances were extremely peculiar.

He remembered that Mr. Thurston had told him to keep his eyes keenly open. Did Mr. Thurston know anything of this charming but grim young lady in the garden? The affair struck the constable, as being decidedly strange, and, being a man of resource, he made up his mind to investigate without a moment’s delay.

He hoisted himself to the top of the wall, with the intention of lowering himself gently to the other side. But disaster overtook the praiseworthy effort of the police-officer.

He reached the top of the wall, and was just preparing to lower himself, when his helmet happened to come into contact with a swaying branch of a tree which spread overhead.

The constable’s helmet toppled over, and Barrett made a quick movement in order to save it.

The next second he slipped, and he crashed to the ground head first. The left side of his skull struck against the heavy ornamental stone border of the pathway. It was a terrible blow, and the policeman lay there still and motionless.

And the storm raged without interruption.

There was something mysterious about this incident. Mr. Fortescue Thurston, in the first place, was a curious old gentleman, and his own movements had been rather strange. But who was that charming young lady who waited out in the garden with a revolver?

The lightning flared out again and again, but there was now no sign of the girl in the check macintosh. In any case, even if she had been observable, there was not a soul there to see. The unfortunate constable still lay senseless on the garden path.

And then the climax came.

Something happened which seemed more like a terrible explosion than a flash of lightning accompanied by thunder. The storm was right overhead, and its fury was quite appalling.



There came a blinding, fearful glare, a thunderous crashing and rumbling, and then the sounds went echoing and re-echoing into the distance.

That terrible flash struck straight down, and appeared to pass completely through the wall of the building, just exactly between the two windows of the library.

The wall simply crumbled to pieces, with a shattering, devastating roar. Beams and rafters sagged down, windows were splintered, and clouds of dust arose, mixing with the rain which drove fiercely through the gaping openings.

Over half the wall literally crumbled to atoms, and the remainder was not sufficient to support the upper part of the building. Amid the crashing and rumbling there were several shouts of terror. The lights in the library had all shut out, and everything was in pitchy darkness.

It had all been so quick, so abrupt, so unexpected.

Fifty seconds earlier the library had been a place of peace and comfort and softly-shaded lights. Now it was a mass of wreckage, a place of darkness, a hideous ruin of its former self.

The storm had done its work, and it passed on its way. For the thunder grew less pronounced, and the rain ceased its pitiless downpour.

The front garden of No. 31, Elliston Gardens remained in total darkness, and no casual passer-by would have known that anything of a disastrous nature had occurred.

But the alarm was soon given.

The front door of the house was flung open with great force, and two people appeared. One was an elderly man in the dress of a butler. The other figure was that of a stout woman, obviously the housekeeper, and probably the butler's wife.

"Help!" she screamed. "Help, help!"

"It's no good doing that, Jane," interrupted the man. "I shall have to rush away down the street. There's a call-box there to the fire-station. The library's not on fire, but the wreckage must be cleared—"

"Anything the matter here?"

The inquiry came from a burly police-sergeant, who had loomed up into the light of the porch at that very moment. His cape was dripping, and he looked at the pair in the doorway with sharp scrutiny.

"We—we've been struck by lightning!" exclaimed the stout woman faintly.

"What's that?" asked the sergeant.

"Not five minutes ago," said the butler. "Did—did you see that terrible flash? The lightning struck the master's library, and it seems to be a mass of wreckage! We want help at once!"

"I'll see what I can do," said the sergeant. "I can't understand why Barrett isn't here. I haven't seen any sign of him on his beat, and he ought to be in this road just now. Now then—now then! What's all this excitement about?"

As though by a miracle at least a dozen people had appeared within the last few seconds. They stood on the pavement, looking up at the porch with eager curiosity. Many of them were servants from other houses, and they had heard the call for help.

But before anybody could make any inquiries, and before the police-sergeant could enter the house, there was the sound of hurrying footsteps from within. The butler turned, and then started back.

"The master!" he ejaculated hoarsely. "We—we thought—"

"You infernal dolt, Freeman!" shouted Mr. Fortescue Thurston, his face

distorted with anger. "Didn't you hear my calls? Couldn't you come to my assistance?"

"We thought you were buried, sir, under the debris—"

"Nonsense!" shouted the master of the house. "You are a fool, Freeman!"

Mr. Thurston was in a sorry plight. Blood was streaming from his left cheek, his clothing was smothered with dust; his left arm was badly grazed, and there was rather a wild look in his eyes.

"Steady on, sir—steady on," said the sergeant gently. "You'd better go for a doctor at once, Freeman—"

"Hang doctors!" shouted Mr. Thurston. "I don't want a doctor! I won't have one! All I need is assistance—plenty of assistance! The wreckage must be cleared away from my study at once, without a moment's delay!"

"If you'll calm yourself, sir—"

"I'll calm myself when I like, and not before!" stormed Mr. Thurston, glaring at the sergeant. "Mind your own confounded business, sir!"

"But—but—"

"Instead of gaping at me, and making ridiculous suggestions, you'd better get what help you can, and come to the library!" shouted the master of the house fiercely. "The house was struck by lightning, and the library is in a state of wreckage. By great good fortune I was not pinned down by the falling masonry. I was only struck by one or two chance pieces of wreckage. I managed to crawl out unaided, while these fools rushed to the door and shouted for help."

"We did our best, sir," said the butler respectfully.

"Bah! I am disgusted with you, Freeman!" snarled Mr. Thurston. "Don't stand there doing nothing; help the sergeant to find some more men. The debris must be cleared away at once—without a second's delay."

"Don't you think it would be better to wait until the morning, sir?" asked the police-sergeant. "It will be rather a difficult job in the dark, and the storm's not properly over yet."

"I know what I am talking about!" thundered Mr. Thurston. "Buried under the debris in the library is a locked safe, and that safe must be recovered within half an hour! It is absolutely imperative; it is a matter of vital importance!"

"I don't quite understand, sir."

"I don't expect you to understand; it is not your business to understand!" rapped out Mr. Thurston. "That safe must be recovered. There is a certain document, which I need by half-past eleven—which I must have by half-past eleven, at all costs. If it costs me a thousand pounds I must have that document! Do you understand, man? Do you realise the importance of this matter? That safe must be unearthed; it must be recovered from the wreckage."

The sergeant nodded.

"I'll do my best, sir," he said gruffly.

He turned on his heel, and yalked out to the pavement. The sergeant's own private view was that Mr. Thurston had been struck by the lightning personally, and that he had become somewhat unhinged. However, it was better to humour him; and that mention of a thousand pounds had given the police-officer an inkling that if he succeeded in recovering the safe there would be a nice fat little tip at the end of it.

It did not take him long to find several volunteers. There were a number of men among the onlookers who were only too willing to assist in the task of removing the wreckage from the library.

Mr. Thurston seemed to be on hot bricks.

"Wake yourself up, Freeman!" he shouted, dancing about impatiently. "Man alive, what's the matter with you? Don't you realise that this matter is important? Get some lamps—some candles—anything in the nature of a light! The electric lamps are all smashed and disconnected in the library. We must have light! Get some candles. Hurry yourself, you idiot!"

"Yes, sir!" gasped the butler. "I—I didn't think—"

"A man can't think without the brain to think with!" snapped Mr. Thurston acidly. "I have given you your instructions—carry them out! Sergeant, have you got those men? Don't waste time. There is not a minute to lose!"

The police-sergeant winked to his band of helpers.

"Don't take no notice," he murmured. "The old chap's properly gone!"

"Lightning, I suppose," said one of the men significantly.

They marched into the house in a procession, and Mr. Thurston himself led the way along the passage to the library. A single light was burning in the ceiling, but within the library all was darkness.

"Better not go in yet, sir," said the sergeant. "There's no telling but what there might be some loose beams or something. We must wait until a light comes along. There's no sense in taking risks."

Mr. Thurston stamped his foot.

"Freeman!" he roared. "Freeman! Where are those lights? Hurry up, you old fool! Freeman!"

"Coming, sir!" panted a voice down the passage.

A moment later the butler appeared, in a decidedly flustered condition. He was carrying two candlesticks, in which lighted candles were set, and a number of spare candles in his other hand.

"Good!" said Mr. Thurston. "We can see now."

"Don't you think you'd better leave it to us, sir?" asked the sergeant.

"No, I do not!"

"But you ought to rest yourself, sir," said the officer. "That blood on your face, and all that dirt on your clothing—"

"Confound you, man, can't you mind your own business?" shouted Mr. Thurston. "I intend to remain here. That safe must be found, and within fifteen minutes, too! It's buried beneath the debris, and there's no telling what must be shifted. Move yourself, you slowcoach—move yourself!"

The sergeant looked rather grim for a moment; then he shrugged his shoulders and turned to the other men.

"Follow me!" he said shortly.

They entered the library, and stood just within the doorway in a group. The apartment was certainly in a terrible condition. The whole portion of the room over by the window was a confused mass of wreckage.

The night wind blew in freely, for there were gaping holes everywhere, and a dozen men could have entered at the same moment. The floor was strewn with masses of bricks, stonework, broken furniture, and patches of plaster and sagging beams. Everything was utterly ruined.

The centre of the room was little better. The pedestal-desk was half demolished, a beam having fallen across it. The papers were obliterated by dust and rubbish and plaster.

That portion of the study near the door had escaped the lightest, but even here there were bricks and plaster and other



scraps of wreckage. Hardly a square foot of the room had escaped.

"Whereabouts is the safe, sir?" asked the sergeant.

"Over there—beneath that mass of brickwork and broken beams," replied Mr. Thurston, pointing. "It was originally standing against the wall, on a small iron pedestal. It is only necessary to remove these beams, and the scraps of wreckage—"

"That's all, sir," said the sergeant. "But when we move these beams there's a chance of the whole ceiling coming down on our heads. And that might cause a general collapse."

Mr. Thurston glared. "If you are afraid of the work I will find somebody who possesses a little more courage!" he snapped. "Get on with it, confound you! The minutes are slipping by, and all you can do is to stand and gabble!"

"There's no sense in being rash, sir!" exclaimed the sergeant, remaining calm with difficulty. "I'll have a look, and see if anything can be done. Over in this corner, you said?"

He took a candle, and picked his way through the rubbish. Then, bending down, he peered beneath the jagged beams and the masses of plaster. It was possible to see right underneath, for the beams had fallen in such a way that a large cavity was formed near the floor and the wall.

"There's no safe here, sir," said the sergeant at last.

"No safe!" roared Mr. Thurston. "Don't be a fool, man!"

The police-officer looked round sharply.

"I'm not in the habit of being called a fool, sir!"

"Oh, tush!" snapped the owner of the house. "You make me impatient! The safe is there; it could be nowhere else. For months it has stood in that position, and the ceiling merely fell upon it. Four men could not have shifted the safe, small though it is."

"Well, it is not here now," said the sergeant.

"Good gracious! The man's an idiot!" muttered Mr. Thurston savagely.

He strode across the room, pushed two men aside with rough impatience, and grabbed the candle from the sergeant's hands. Then he bent down, and gazed searchingly beneath the debris.

The flickering light revealed all there was to be seen.

The cavity beneath the wreckage was quite large, and it was clear except for plaster, dust, and a few splintered scraps of woodwork. And standing there in solitary prominence was a heavy metal pedestal—a massive iron affair, which was obviously a stand for something even heavier.

Mr. Thurston caught his breath in with a great gasp.

"The safe!" he shouted hoarsely.

"The—the safe is not here!"

"That's what I told you, sir," observed the sergeant.

"The safe has gone!" screamed Mr. Fortescue Thurston wildly. "It has been stolen—it has been removed. There has been villainy here. Good heavens! The safe has gone, and it contained precious stones to the value of eighty-five thousand pounds!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Tinker's Story.

"MY dear Tinker, there is no object to be gained by asking me all these questions," protested Sexton Blake mildly. "Until we arrive on the spot it is quite impossible for us to form

any opinion as to what this case may be."

"All right, gov'nor!" I grinned. "There's no harm in having a little discussion, I suppose? This Mr. Fortescue Thurston, for example—do you know anything about him?"

"Very little, Tinker," replied Sexton Blake. "He is, I believe, a retired business man, and his reputation is not what I would describe as being snowy white."

From this I deduced that the gov'nor knew one or two things about Mr. Fortescue Thurston which were not positively straightforward. Only fifteen minutes earlier, while Sexton Blake and I had been chatting in our consulting-room at Baker Street, an urgent telephone call had come through.

The net result of that 'phone call was that the gov'nor and I—to say nothing of Pedro—were seated in a taxi; and were speeding through the wet streets towards Elliston Gardens.

The storm was now quite over, and a good many stars were to be seen overhead in the deep purple sky. But, of course, everything was still soaking from the recent rain.

Our journey was only quite a short one, and we had set out to walk it; and then, of course, an empty taxi had come along. If we had had a journey of ten miles in front of us no taxi would have been found, even if we had searched half London. That's just the way of things.

Sexton Blake, as usual, would have no discussion on the matter. It was a rule of his to say as little as possible concerning a case until he had facts to go upon. It was not the famous detective's way to make conjectures concerning any affair into which he inquired.

"After all, this business doesn't seem to be much, sir," I remarked. "This Mr. Thurston was sitting in his library when the house was struck by lightning—that's what I make of it. In the library there was a safe, and when the elements had finished their little air raid the safe had disappeared. It wants a bit of swallowing, you know."

"Yes, Tinker, it would be very awkward," said Sexton Blake thoughtfully.

"Eh? What would be awkward, sir?"

"You were just talking about swallowing a safe—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

I roared, and gave Pedro a slap on his brawny back.

"That's good, my son!" I grinned.

"Swallowing a safe—eh? That's a bit of a tall order, and I don't think it would go down."

Sexton Blake looked at me reprovingly.

"You really should not bother me with idle questions, Tinker!" he protested.

"I do not suppose for one moment that this case will interest me. I only came because I need a little fresh air, and Mr. Thurston was so pressing. In all probability the police will have things well in hand by the time we arrive."

"Well, we're there already, gov'nor,"

I remarked as the taxi pulled up. "There seems to be some excitement, too. There's quite a crowd hanging about here."

We stepped out of the taxi, and Pedro came with us. In front of No. 31, which was the house of Mr. Fortescue Thurston, a large knot of people had gathered. They stood on the pavement gazing at the house, but I really could not understand why. There was nothing particularly interesting to see, and I suppose the crowd simply stood there because the house had recently been struck by lightning.

In just the same way a crowd will wait

outside a house where a murder has been committed. The only possible reason for this is that there must be a morbid curiosity within the minds of most people. They seem to find something fascinating in standing outside a house and watching the bare walls, although they know perfectly well that nothing of an interesting nature will happen.

A constable obligingly cleared the people out of the gateway, so that Sexton Blake and I could enter. And we had hardly reached the doorway, with Pedro at our heels, when Mr. Fortescue Thurston himself appeared. He had not even troubled to wash himself, and the dried blood was still on his face. His hair was dishevelled, and he looked something of a wreck. His eyes were gleaming with anxiety and excitement, and he grasped Sexton Blake's hand with almost feverish strength.

"You are Mr. Blake?" he barked out. "Good! I am glad you have come, Mr. Blake. Good! I have much to tell you!"

"I think it would be better, perhaps, Mr. Thurston, if we discussed matters in private," said Sexton Blake smoothly. "There is hardly any necessity to go into details within earshot of the curious multitude."

Mr. Thurston glanced at the crowd, and he frowned.

"Why, in heaven's name, cannot these people be cleared away?" he demanded irritably. "Why are they here? Make them go—make them look after their own business! It is positively intolerable! The police appear to be absolutely helpless, and they are certainly no good whatever!"

The constable on the doorstep winked at me, and a moment later we had marched aside, and Mr. Thurston closed the door after us with a slam.

He then became aware of Pedro's presence, and he glared at the old boy aggressively.

"Who on earth brought that dog in here?" he shouted. "Upon my soul, this is really beyond endurance!"

"Pardon me, Mr. Thurston, but Pedro is my dog, and I brought him here because he might be useful," said Sexton Blake. "He is quite harmless, I assure you."

"Oh, he is yours, Mr. Blake?" said Mr. Thurston. "That makes a difference—a great difference. I apologise. The dog may remain, of course. I have no objection whatever. But I have a great dislike for dogs of all kinds, and I would only have one in my house under very exceptional circumstances."

This statement did not impress me particularly. I've generally discovered that people who don't like dogs are not exceedingly likeable themselves. This is not true in all cases, of course, but somehow I don't take to a person who has a hatred for dogs.

Mr. Thurston took us into a comfortable sitting-room, and he closed the door. Electric lights were switched on; the apartment was quite well furnished and exceedingly tidy. Mr. Thurston invited us to be seated.

"There is a police-inspector in the library at the present moment, Mr. Blake," said our host. "The man is a perfect fool! He can do nothing but talk, and he apparently does not know the meaning of the word action. I have asked you to come because I am hoping that you will be able to assist me in a material way, and not only by your very excellent advice."

"Will you kindly explain to me exactly what has happened?" said Sexton Blake. "I shall then be able to form certain conclusions; and a personal investigation will probably help me. From your tele-



phone message I understand that you have lost a safe?"

Mr. Thurston nodded.

"It is positively amazing, Mr. Blake—it is staggering!" he exclaimed, rising to his feet, and jumping up and down. "My safe—a safe which has never been shifted from its position since it was installed! It has vanished. It has gone as though some wizard had come along and wafted it into thin air. The massive iron stand is still in its position, but the safe has gone!"

"I presume it contained valuables?"

"Valuables!" echoed Mr. Thurston.

"Man alive, there are diamonds in that safe! Diamonds and other jewels, worth every farthing of eighty-five thousand pounds! Not only that, but some documents of the most vital importance are lost—documents which I must have at once. They alone are worth double the amount of the diamonds!"

"The matter seems to be pretty serious, then?"

"The word does not adequately describe the urgency of the matter!" said Mr. Thurston grimly. "I will explain to you, Mr. Blake, what happened in the first place. As you know, a thunderstorm of exceptional violence raged about an hour ago. I was seated in the library, and a terrible thing happened. One might have supposed that a bomb had been dropped through the roof. There was a blinding flare of light, a terrible crashing of thunder and falling bricks and masonry, and then I found myself on the floor, dazed, half-stunned, and bleeding."

"It is fortunate that you were not seriously injured, Mr. Thurston," said Sexton Blake.

"I might have been killed!" exclaimed our host. "By a sheer piece of good luck I happened to be on the undamaged side of the library. I only received several pieces of plaster on my head and a liberal smothering of dust. Dizzy and bewildered, I managed to grope my way to the door. You will realise that the whole room was filled with dust and in total darkness."

"You were alone at the time of the catastrophe?"

"Quite alone."

"Was the safe locked or unlocked?"

"Locked!" replied Mr. Thurston. "I managed to reach the hall, and I found my fool of a butler in the porch, shouting for help."

"Well, that seems quite a sensible thing to do," remarked Blake.

"The idiot ought to have come to my assistance!" snapped Mr. Thurston. "However, I managed alone, as I have explained. A police-sergeant was soon on the spot."

"You knew nothing of your loss at that time?" asked the gov'nor.

"No, of course not," said Mr. Thurston. "I only knew that the safe had been buried in the falling debris. I managed to obtain a number of men, and, with the sergeant at their head, they entered the library, with the intention of shifting the wreckage and recovering the safe. I had a most important reason for wanting the safe opened before eleven-thirty. The document I have already referred to was urgently required at that hour. However, a thorough search revealed the fact that the safe was no longer in the library—it had, in fact, vanished!"

"Well, it couldn't have been fused by the lightning," I remarked. "It couldn't have fallen through the floor, and it couldn't have flown into space. It stands to reason, Mr. Thurston, that somebody took that safe away."

"So I should imagine. You are quite right, young man," said our host. "But do you realise that that safe could not

be lifted by three men? It would be an appalling load for four men, and they would need to be giants in strength, at that. My safe was small, but it required the united energy of six men to lift it and to carry it any distance."

"If that is the case, Mr. Thurston, it is quite clear that a number of men must have entered the library during the confusion, and they removed the safe," said Sexton Blake. "Surely some traces of these men have been found? I can hardly imagine that an affair of that sort could take place without a single witness being available."

"That is just the astounding part of it, Mr. Blake," said Mr. Thurston. "Not a soul has come forward to help us. The men who entered the library and took the safe away did so without being observed by a single soul. They must have taken my property boldly, and in quite an open manner. While the storm was on very few people were about, and I can only assume that the burglars succeeded in making a complete escape, and they left no traces whatever."

Sexton Blake looked thoughtful.

"The burglary is certainly one of a novel type, Mr. Thurston," he remarked. "Your loss is serious, and I cannot seriously think that the thieves will succeed in getting clear away. It is practically certain that there must be many clues if we only look in the right places. A safe—even a small one—is not like a gold watch. One cannot put it into one's waistcoat pocket, and walk away. A safe is a very bulky object, indeed, and the burglars could not have got far with it."

"But they have got it—they have disappeared with it!" shouted Mr. Thurston, waving his hands wildly. "That is the terrible part of it, Mr. Blake. The safe has gone, and I have lost everything. What can I do? I am worried—I am almost distracted! Surely you can give me some advice—some ray of hope!"

Sexton Blake smiled.

"My dear Mr. Thurston, let me tell you that it is quite useless to get yourself into a panic. The police will soon have matters well in hand."

"The police!" shouted Mr. Thurston. "Bah! I care nothing for the police. I do not trust them one inch! They will do nothing—nothing at all!"

"You are rather hard on the official force," smiled Blake. "Yet, in many instances, my dear sir, the police are far more capable of dealing with a case than I am. It all depends what type of affair one has to deal with. This present case, as I see it at the moment, appears to be one which is peculiarly suited to the methods of the police. I really fail to see what I can do. The safe has vanished, and it is really a question of tracking the thieves. The police force, with its great organisation, is far more capable of coping with the—"

"I will not hear of it, Mr. Blake. Please do not refer to the matter again!" interrupted Mr. Thurston sharply. "I want you to investigate this matter. I want you to use all your energy. You are a very clever man, and I do not like to hear you belittle your ability."

"Hear, hear!" I murmured.

The gov'nor chuckled.

"Really, I had no intention of doing that!" he smiled. "I was merely trying to point out, Mr. Thurston, that my own services are somewhat unnecessary. I do not wish you to incur needless expense. It is my opinion that the safe will be recovered before the morning, and the thieves lodged in gaol. I am assuming, of course, that the case is as simple as it appears to be on the surface. However, I will gladly make a few personal

inquiries, and will then discuss the subject further with you."

"Thank you, Mr. Blake," said our host. "You wish to go to the library at once, I presume?"

"Please!"

"Very well. Kindly follow me!"

Mr. Thurston led the way out of the sitting-room, and we passed along a passage, and soon arrived at the library. He opened the door and stood aside.

"There you are, Mr. Blake," he said. "You have my permission to go where you will, and to examine everything at your own pleasure. Perhaps you would not wish to be bothered with my company, and I think I can spend my time better upstairs in the bath-room, and in the dressing-room."

Our host, left us, and we entered the library. Some electric lights had now been got going—presumably by the police—and the apartment was quite brilliantly illuminated. Almost in the centre of the room stood a police-inspector in uniform, and he glanced round as we entered.

"Good-evening, Mr. Blake!" he said pleasantly. "Mr. Thurston gave me to understand that he had rung you up. I'm afraid you've come out on a wild-goose chase to-night."

"You think so, Markham?" said Sexton Blake. "It all depends, I suppose. According to the evidence, as I see it at present, there does not appear to be much scope for my own small abilities."

"You've got it wrong there, sir," said Inspector Markham, with a smile. "You mean to say there's no scope for your very remarkable abilities. The facts here are quite plain and straightforward, and it's really a waste of time for a clever man like yourself to be here. There's nothing mysterious about this place, and there's nothing intricate."

"I'm afraid you are somewhat given to flattery, Markham," smiled the gov'nor. "However, now that I am here I may as well have a look round. What is your personal opinion concerning this business?"

The police-inspector came up close to us, and when he spoke his voice was much lower.

"Well, to tell you the truth, Mr. Blake," he murmured, "I think there's something fishy about it."

"Fishy?"

"Yes," said the inspector. "I've been interviewing the servants, and I've seen one or two people who were about in the street at the time of the storm, when the house was struck by lightning, and I can't find a soul who saw any sign of a party of men leaving this place with the safe. Two servants from the house across the road were over here less than a minute after the library was struck, and they swear that nobody came out, and that it was impossible for a party of men to leave the grounds without being seen."

"I see," said Sexton Blake slowly. "Then how do you account for the disappearance of the safe?"

Inspector Markham winked.

"If you want my straightforward opinion, Mr. Blake, I discredit the story of the safe altogether," he said grimly. "It seems to me something like a fake, it you know what I mean. Not one of the servants in this house has ever been in the library; they were never allowed to enter. Consequently they know nothing about a safe, and they have never seen it. We have only Mr. Thurston's word that the article actually existed. A heavy object of that kind could not have been removed by less than four men, and yet there is no trace of such a party. The obvious conclusion, therefore, is that



there was no safe at all, and that Mr. Thurston—for some reason of his own—is putting up a faked story.”

“H’m! It seems rather curious,” remarked Sexton Blake. “There may be many reasons, of course, why Mr. Thurston should adopt a plan of that sort. At the same time, inspector, I am not convinced. Have you examined the pathway outside in order to see if there are any footprints?”

Markham nodded.

“Yes, Mr. Blake,” he replied. “Unfortunately the paths are asphalt, and they show no traces whatever; but I examined the grass and the flower-beds, and there are no footprints of any description, except one or two very faint ones. But they are small, and they are the footprints of a woman. It is quite clear, therefore, that they were made by one of these servants, who probably ventured rather close.”

Blake nodded, and moved across the room in a thoughtful way. The inspector chatted with me for a few moments, and then took his departure, explaining that he meant to have another look round the garden. Sexton Blake and I were left alone in the library. I saw that the gov’nor was over in one corner, and he appeared to be greatly interested in the stained floorboard near the wall.

“Well, gov’nor,” I asked, “what’s your opinion? That idea of the inspector’s seems to be pretty cute, to my mind. It might be some insurance stunt, or something of that sort. I don’t like the look of Mr. Thurston, and he seems to be quite capable of getting up to a piece of trickery—”

“Don’t bother now, Tinker,” interrupted Blake. “This is no time for theories; we are searching for facts, and I am already quite interested.”

“Why, sir, have you found anything of importance?”

“I cannot judge just yet, Tinker,” replied Blake. “It may be important, and it may not. But what do you see on the floor here, just near the skirting?”

I bent down, and examined the stained boards closely. At first I could see nothing, but after a very careful scrutiny I detected one or two small spots. They were almost invisible on the dark staining, but their character was quite clear after a moment’s close examination.

“They’re bloodstains, sir,” I said.

“Exactly!”

“Well, supposing they are?” I asked. “There’s nothing very startling in that, is there? Mr. Thurston was scratched, and he was bleeding.”

“Quite so, Tinker; but the facts are rather interesting, nevertheless,” said Sexton Blake. “According to Mr. Thurston’s evidence, he was somewhere near the centre of the room at the time of the catastrophe. He was knocked down by plaster, and he made straight for the door.”

“Yes, that’s what he said,” I agreed.

“Very well, then, Tinker,” went on the gov’nor, “why are these stains over here? This part of the room is certainly an obscure corner. I really cannot see why Mr. Thurston should have come here in order to reach the door.”

“The place was as black as pitch, sir, and it’s quite likely he made a mistake,” I explained.

“I have thought of that, Tinker,” said Blake. “But you do not seem to realise that before I examined this spot I found it necessary to remove a heavy screen. We must therefore conclude that Mr. Thurston came across the room in the darkness, moved this screen, got behind it, shed several drops of blood, and then made his way to the door, after replacing the screen in its position.”

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I scratched my head.

“Yes, it does seem a bit queer, sir,” I remarked. “But what do you reckon in your own mind?”

“It is too early to theorise, Tinker,” said Sexton Blake. “As I remarked a little while ago, we are out for facts, and we are obtaining facts. If you weren’t such a lazy young beggar you’d be having a look round yourself, instead of standing there with your hands in your pockets!”

“Right you are, sir,” I said briskly. “I’ll get busy!”

But just at that moment Mr. Thurston reappeared, and there was a remarkable change in his appearance. He had changed his clothing, and he had been quick over the job. He now wore a thick tweed suit, and his linen was clean. A wash and a brush up made a remarkable difference to his general appearance.

“Well, Mr. Blake,” he said briskly, “what success?”

“I’m afraid it is rather too early to talk of success, Mr. Thurston,” smiled Sexton Blake. “I am glad you have come, for there are one or two questions I should like to put to you.”

“I shall be only too delighted to answer them, Mr. Blake.”

“Thank you! To begin with,” said the gov’nor, “will you please repeat that portion of your story which deals with the actual collapse of the wall, and your escape from the library?”

“Certainly,” said Mr. Thurston. “When the crash came I was almost in the middle of the room, and I was choked with dust, and half-blinded into the bargain. Several pieces of plaster cut my face and made my head dizzy. In the total darkness, however, I somehow managed to find the door. Being familiar with the room, I succeeded in reaching the door almost in a straight line.”

Sexton Blake nodded.

“You did not, by any chance, come to this corner of the room?” he asked.

“Oh, no!”

“Neither did you move this heavy screen and get behind it?”

“Good gracious! What makes you say such a thing as that, Mr. Blake?” asked our host. “Did I get behind the screen? How ridiculous! To the best of my knowledge that screen has not been moved for many weeks. And I must remark that I do not see why you should conduct your investigations over in that corner of the room, which is practically unscratched. It is idle to expect that you will find any clues there.”

“You must allow me to work in my own way, Mr. Thurston,” said Sexton Blake quietly.

He turned away, and proceeded with his examination. I looked at Mr. Thurston curiously, and I was very thoughtful. He had not been behind the screen, and we had his word for it that the screen had not been moved. Then how had those bloodstains got there, near the skirting?

They were quite fresh; I could see that at once. It was quite clear, in fact, that the bloodstains had been dropped on the floor at the time of the catastrophe. Who had been there, behind that screen? Not Mr. Thurston. Who, then, was the individual who had been concealed there, for it was quite obvious that he had been concealed.

The whole affair was taking on a more interesting aspect.

Mr. Thurston had believed himself to be alone in the library; but, according to the evidence which Sexton Blake had discovered, this was not the case. A second man—or, at least, a second human

being—had been in the apartment. Why had he been there? And how had he escaped? Was he connected in any way with the disappearance of the safe?

There were many questions which needed answering, and I was anxious to have a chat with Sexton Blake, but I did not want to discuss the question in front of Mr. Thurston.

I went over to the corner, bent down, and made a re-examination of the spots on the floor. Yes, I was quite right, they were bloodstains, and they had been made only recently. It was clear that somebody had been bleeding, and that the drops of blood had fallen—probably before the sufferer had known of the fact. In the darkness, the stranger might have assumed that his scratch was only slight, and that no blood was shed.

On the screen itself there were one or two smears, which could not exactly be identified as finger-prints. Yet they had been caused by fingers. I could see that clearly enough. I came to the conclusion that the person behind the screen had been wearing gloves.

Sexton Blake spent several minutes there, and I knew that he had been well satisfied with his search. After that he moved about idly, as though uncertain in his actions. But I knew the gov’nor’s methods well, and I knew that he was taking in everything of interest. Not the tiniest detail missed his keen, searching gaze.

Picking his way over the debris, he reached that portion of the room which had once been the outer wall. The window-frames, of course, were completely gone; or, at least, they were demolished and wrecked, and were lying about in hopeless confusion, amid piles of broken bricks. The whole front of the room was bare, and one could see right out into the night.

Sexton Blake seemed particularly keen upon examining the window-frames. He did so by the aid of a magnifying-glass, and he appeared to be very interested. Personally, I walked about rather aimlessly. I’d examined the spot where the safe had been, and I could judge that the thing was considerably heavy, for its iron stand was very substantial and enormously strong. How had that safe been removed?

When I looked up again I found that the gov’nor had disappeared altogether. He had gone outside on to the front path, and when I arrived through the wreckage, I found Blake bending low over the wet ground, looking close at the grass with the aid of his electric torch. We were quite by ourselves, and I seized the opportunity to have a word.

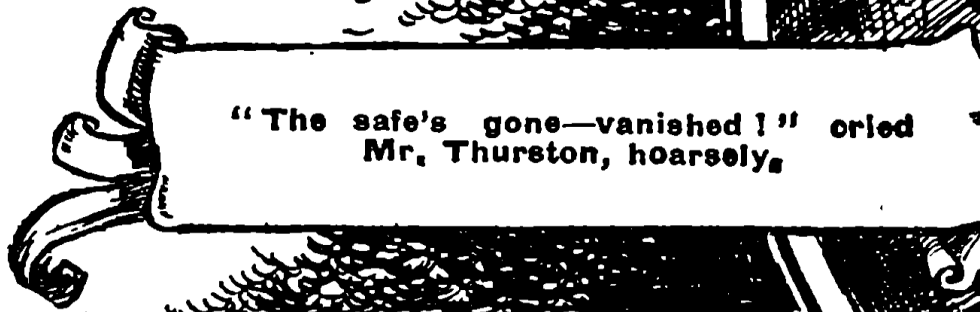
“What do you think of it, sir?” I whispered. “There must have been another man in the library—”

“Quite so, Tinker—quite so,” interrupted Blake. “That is obvious. Mr. Thurston was not alone, as he appears to think. Furthermore, this case is far more complicated than one would imagine from the facts which the police have in their hands. It may interest you to know that I have discovered several long human hairs. They were attached to the wrecked window-frame, and they are the hairs from a woman’s head.”

“Phew!” I whistled.

“In addition, I have discovered some distinct finger-prints—small finger-prints, which may have been made by a girl,” proceeded Sexton Blake smoothly. “Well, I’m not so sure about a girl; they may be the finger-prints of an elderly woman. I judge that the woman is young, because the finger-prints are small, dainty, and quite clear.”

(Continued on page 10.)





"You mean, then, that the person behind that screen was a girl?" I asked.

"By no means."

"But you just said—"

"I just said that a girl was present," interrupted Blake. "At the same time, this young lady was not the person who stood behind the screen. She was outside—here, on the path. Also, she stood on the grass. I judge that she was quite near the window of the library at the time of the disaster. She was fortunate in escaping without injury, and she owes her lucky salvation to the fact that the library wall collapsed inwards. Otherwise she would have been caught by the falling debris, and would have been buried."

"Well, I can't make anything of it," I confessed. "It seems to be a queer business, sir. What do you think—"

"Wait," interrupted the gov'nor, turning round. "What is that commotion?"

I had become aware of the noise at the same moment. Turning round, I looked across the garden towards the outer wall. The police-inspector had just run there, having been attracted by the calls of a constable. They were shouting, and there was excitement in their voices. A moment later the butler ran down the path, and he, too, uttered exclamations which expressed surprise and horror.

"I think we'd better have a look, sir," I said.

Inspector Markham came hurrying up, having caught sight of us.

"Well, this is a fresh development, Mr. Blake!" he exclaimed, panting. "The constable who should have been on this beat has just been discovered near the outer wall of the garden. He has a terrible wound on his head, and he is unconscious!"

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed.

The affair was certainly more complicated than we had thought at the outset.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

On the Track of the Storm Girl.

INSPECTOR MARKHAM looked grim.

"Evidently a brutal assault!" he declared. "There is no shadow of doubt, Mr. Blake, that the constable was attacked by some ruffian who was armed with a heavy weapon. Barrett received a terrible blow in the centre of his forehead, and he collapsed on the garden-path, here!"

Sexton Blake made no comment. He and I were standing on the pathway, and Constable Barrett was at our feet. He was about to be transferred into the house, where he would at once receive medical attention. But Sexton Blake was rather anxious to have a look at the spot before the constable was moved. There were some signs that the poor man was recovering consciousness, for he had stirred slightly, and had uttered one or two groans.

Blake's examination was only brief, and then he turned to the inspector, and shook his head.

"I'm afraid I must differ with you, Markham," he exclaimed. "I do not see any evidence of assault."

"No evidence!" echoed the inspector. "Why, good gracious, the man's skull is nearly cracked—"

"Quite so!" agreed Blake. "At the same time, inspector, it is quite clear in my opinion that the constable met with an accident."

"An accident! Do you mean the lightning—"

"Oh, no," interrupted the gov'nor. "The lightning had nothing whatever to do with the constable's condition. If

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you examine the top of the wall, just here, you will find several scratches which have been recently made. You will observe that the border of this path is composed of jagged portions of stonework—ornamental enough, it is true, but decidedly treacherous."

"Then what do you suggest, Mr. Blake?" asked the inspector.

"Why, there can be no doubt that the constable climbed the wall, stood upon it, and fell," said Sexton Blake. "The man apparently meant to drop down into this garden on his feet, but he slipped, or overbalanced, and he fell head foremost, catching the centre of his skull against the ornamental border. The blow was of such violence that the poor fellow was knocked senseless. I certainly fail to see any evidence of an assault."

"Well, perhaps you're right, Mr. Blake," said the inspector slowly. "That stonework is a bit jagged, as you say. But why did the constable want to climb into the garden? What was he doing here?"

"The man himself will doubtless explain that when he recovers," said Blake smoothly. "I shall be quite interested to hear his story. It is just possible that he may be able to give us some information concerning the woman."

"The woman!" echoed the inspector, staring.

"Precisely!"

"I'm afraid I don't understand, sir," said the inspector.

"No?" smiled the gov'nor. "Well, Markham, if you will take my advice, I should suggest that you use your efforts to search for a young woman. I am of the opinion that one was present in this garden about the time of the thunder-storm. She may be connected with the disappearance of the safe—on the other hand, she may not. At the present stage of the investigations I cannot say anything for certain. But if you set inquiries afoot concerning a young woman, I have no doubt that you will meet with some measure of success."

The inspector looked doubtful.

"Well, Mr. Blake, I can't quite credit that," he said. "I have discovered no trace of a woman here—neither have any of the others. I don't want to offend you, but I think you have made a mistake."

Sexton Blake shrugged his shoulders.

"Just as you like," he said. "You must conduct your case as you think best, inspector—I will keep to my own methods."

By this time a sergeant and two other constables had lifted the unfortunate man, and he was carried into the house. Mr. Thurston was quite startled, and not a little excited. However, he did the very best he could for the wounded constable. The unconscious man was taken into the comfortable sitting-room, and laid on a couch. Then one of the servants was sent post-haste in order to fetch a doctor—a medical man lived only a few hundred yards down the road.

As it happened, a doctor was quite unnecessary. Sexton Blake lost no time in doing everything possible to assist the recovery of the constable. And the gov'nor is just as clever as any two doctors put together. What he doesn't know about medicines and poisons, and the medical profession in general, is hardly worth the trouble of learning. And before the doctor could arrive, Constable Barrett was well on the way to recovery.

In fact, he had already opened his eyes, was quite comfortable, and his head was scientifically bandaged.

Less than ten minutes later, after the doctor had declared everything to be all

right, the wounded man was well enough to talk.

He was weak and ill, but he insisted upon telling his story. This was not particularly startling, although it threw a very curious light on the whole affair. Furthermore, it positively agreed with Sexton Blake's own theory. We learned that the constable had been walking round the wall of the house during the height of the storm, and we learned that he had been attracted by a dim movement between the outer wall of the house. Then that terrible flash of lightning had come, and the constable had distinctly seen the form of a young and pretty girl attired in a check macintosh. She had a revolver in her hand, and it was quite evident that her visit to Mr. Fortescue Thurston's house was not exactly a peaceful one.

The rest was exactly as Sexton Blake had surmised. The constable, in attempting to get over into the garden, had overbalanced when on the top of the wall. And that was really all he remembered. He fell to the ground, head first, and then everything was black. It was quite obvious, in fact, that Barrett had met with an accident, and that no foul play had been committed.

"You were right, Mr. Blake—I'm hanged if you weren't!" declared the inspector. "You were right about the constable, and you were right about that girl. It beats me how you arrive at these conclusions—I'm fairly puzzled! So there was a girl in the case—eh? That makes it more complicated, I'm thinking. A girl with a revolver! Upon my soul, I hardly know what to think!"

"It is amazing—quite amazing!" exclaimed Mr. Thurston. "I have not the faintest idea who this girl could be! Why did she come here during the storm? What on earth could her object have been? I cannot possibly credit that a young girl should come to my house with the express intention of stealing the safe! It is preposterous, Mr. Blake!"

"I have never suggested that the young lady came with such an intention," said the gov'nor. "Personally, I believe she had nothing whatever to do with the case. She had come on a different mission—"

"But what mission?" demanded the host. "What reason could any girl have to come here with a revolver?"

"I was thinking that you might be able to suggest a possible explanation," said Sexton Blake.

"I? How ridiculous!" said Mr. Thurston sharply. "What should I know, pray?"

"Well, Mr. Thurston, if this woman came to your house, and if she was evidently bent upon a grim mission, I thought it just possible that you might be able to make a suggestion," said Sexton Blake. "Is there anybody you know—any young woman—who has a grudge against you? Do you know of any girl who—"

"No, I know nobody!" insisted Mr. Thurston quickly. "It is perfectly preposterous to make such a suggestion, Mr. Blake. I am surprised that you should talk in that way. I have no relations whatever with women—I detest women! And as for this young lady, she is absolutely a mystery to me!"

Sexton Blake nodded, and made no reply. I could tell that he was very thoughtful, and he was not exactly satisfied with all the evidence he had managed to obtain. I felt a bit that way, too. Somehow, I seemed to have an idea that everything was not exactly as it should be. Not that I doubted Mr. Thurston, or suspected that he was holding anything back. All the circumstances were mysterious, and we did not seem



to be able to get on any definite track.

I pictured to myself the girl standing out in the rain, clad in a macintosh, with a revolver in her hand. Then I pictured to myself the man behind the screen—the man who had been slightly injured at the moment of the collapse. Who was that man? Who was the girl?

Mr. Thurston had been in the library, and he had known nothing whatever of either of the two strangers. Yet it seemed quite clear that he had been menaced from two sides at the same moment. The thunderstorm and the collapse of the library wall had probably saved Mr. Thurston from a serious attack. And in the confusion and darkness which followed the catastrophe, the safe had somehow been spirited away.

"Well, gov'nor, what do we do now?" I asked, when I found that I was standing alone with Sexton Blake. "It seems that we've come to the end of our tether, so to speak. There's nothing more to examine, and we haven't arrived at any definite conclusions. In my opinion, the case seems to be a bit of a mix-up."

"My dear Tinker, it is early yet," said Sexton Blake. "We have hardly commenced our investigations. I think we have done here for the moment, but that does not mean to say that we shall go home. I have other work to accomplish. Pedro, in fact, might come in hand at this juncture."

"Pedro, sir?" I asked. "What can he do?"

"Well, I think it is likely that the old boy will be able to get on the track of the mysterious storm-girl."

"But what for, sir?" I asked, staring. "How will Pedro be able to pick up the scent? How will he be able to recognise it?"

"By this!" said Sexton Blake grimly.

He held something in his hand, and I noticed, with surprise, that it was a small, nickel-plated revolver.

"Hallo!" I exclaimed. "Where did you get that, sir?"

"I found it."

"Well, I'm jiggered! You found it, gov'nor?"

"Exactly, Tinker," smiled Sexton Blake. "You appear to be quite astonished."

"I'm amazed, sir."

"There is really no reason why you should be, my dear Tinker," said Blake. "I found this revolver among the flowers on the bed, just against the wall of the house, where it had collapsed. We already know that the girl in the macintosh was standing there at the time when the lightning struck. She was so frightened that she dropped her revolver, and had no time to pick it up. She simply fled, leaving us this object."

"Why, this is fine, sir!" I exclaimed. "But ought not you to hand it over to the police, sir?"

"Strictly speaking, I suppose I ought to," said Blake. "At the same time, I feel quite justified in retaining it for the moment. The police had already searched that portion of the ground, and they had missed the revolver. Therefore, I feel that I have a certain right to it. As soon as you are ready, Tinker, we will put Pedro on the trail."

"I'm ready now, sir," I said promptly.

"Good!"

We did not lose much time in getting off. I was left outside, with Pedro, while Sexton Blake went indoors, and had a few words with Mr. Thurston. The gov'nor was not long, for almost at once he came out, and we had that little part of the garden to ourselves.

"Now, Tinker," said the gov'nor

briskly, "we can go ahead with our programme."

He produced the revolver, and a moment later Pedro was sniffing at it eagerly. The old dog knew exactly what he had to do, and he did not waste much time in getting his nose to the ground. He cast about only for a moment, or two, and then his bristles stiffened, and he set off across the garden towards the wall.

"He's got it, sir," I said keenly.

"Undoubtedly, Tinker." We followed Pedro, and he led us across the wall, into the road, and then straight across to the opposite pavement. He turned to the left, and went straight along with his nose to the ground without a falter. It was quite clear that the trail was very distinct, and Pedro was following it quite eagerly.

It was fairly late at night then, and hardly a soul was about. The little crowd which had collected round the gateway of No. 31 had, by this time, melted away. Therefore, Elliston Gardens was practically deserted. From that road we passed into another, and then found ourselves going straight down towards the West End.

"It's a good thing the young lady walked, Tinker," observed Sexton Blake, as we followed closely on Pedro's heels. "But we must not speak too soon. It is just possible that the girl in the macintosh got into a taxi, a little lower down. We must wait and see, and hope for the best."

"That's the only thing to do, sir," I agreed.

We continued walking on sharply, and Pedro was not once at a loss. He went on so fast, indeed, that the gov'nor was compelled to hold him back almost the whole of the way. The ground being wet, it probably took the scent much better than would otherwise have been the case. And there was scarcely any traffic about to confuse the trail.

On we went, until, at length, we were almost in the vicinity of Baker Street itself.

"Getting near home, sir," I said, with a grin. "But I don't suppose we shall find ourselves there for some time yet."

"Probably not, Tinker," replied Sexton Blake. "Hallo! It seems that Pedro is leading us right down Baker Street."

"Right past our own giddy mansion, sir," I grinned.

"Well, it is only natural, after all," said Blake. "This road leads direct towards the West End, Tinker. The young lady of the macintosh doubtless went this way in order to reach Oxford Street and the more populated centres of London. I'm afraid the trail will not be quite so long once we reach Oxford Street and the West End. There are still many taxis going about, and motor-buses by the hundred. Still, we must trust to luck!"

After going down Baker Street for some little distance, we crossed the road. Pedro still hot on the trail. By this time we were within sight of our own front door. But we really took very little interest in this; our course lay far beyond—right into the West End. And somehow, I did not entertain many hopes of being able to track the macintosh girl down to her own door. A hitch of some sort was bound to occur before long.

And then Pedro took a hand. As he arrived opposite our doorway, he paused, sniffed at the ground, and then looked up at us. Finally, he romped up the few steps, and pawed at the front door vigorously.

"You silly old idiot!" I exclaimed. "You're not going home now! I sup-

pose you want your supper, you greedy beggar! Before you have anything to eat, you've got to finish this job!"

"Come, Pedro!" ordered Sexton Blake sharply.

Pedro walked down again, wagged his tail, and then pawed at the door once more.

"You silly ass!" I exclaimed irritably. "What's the matter with you?"

Sexton Blake produced the revolver once more, and gave it to Pedro to sniff. The old dog obeyed quickly, and then, instead of getting on the trail once more, he repeated his original performance. He pawed at our front door with greater energy than before.

I stared at Sexton Blake, and Sexton Blake stared at me.

There was only one possible explanation to account for this conduct on Pedro's part. And it was an explanation which filled both the gov'nor and I with astonishment. Blake was quite immobile and calm, but I was flushed with excitement.

"She—she must be here, sir!" I whispered.

The famous detective nodded.

"Precisely, Tinker," he said smoothly. "We have tracked the girl in the macintosh to her destination!"

And that destination was our own door!

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Statement of Miss Irene Sylvester.

SEXTON BLAKE produced his latch-key and unlocked the door, and I followed him into the hall, feeling bewildered. Pedro came behind me, and he was quite ready to rush up the stairs. But I held him back.

"What—what does it mean, sir?" I asked, in a low voice.

"My dear Tinker, it is quite useless asking me that question," said Blake. "No doubt we shall soon learn more. But it is quite clear that the young lady is at present within this house."

The gov'nor led the way up the stairs, and I followed him. But he had only traversed half the distance when Mrs. Bardell appeared on the landing. Our worthy housekeeper was carrying an empty cup and saucer, and she looked extremely pleased when she saw us. She stood aside, and waited for us to join her on the landing.

"I'm glad you've come back, Mr. Blake!" she exclaimed. "I was afraid you might be retained somewhere. When you go out, sir, there's no telling when you'll find an opportunity of getting back, sir!"

"My business did not detain me very long this time, Mrs. Bardell," smiled Sexton Blake. "I see that you are carrying an empty cup—"

"Yes, sir; I've just been into the consulting-room," said Mrs. Bardell, in a mysterious voice. "There's a young lady there, sir. She come not more than half an hour ago; in a rare state of disturbance, she was too. I never seen a young lady so worried, Mr. Blake. I thought, maybe, she'd like a cup of tea, and I hope you don't mind me taking it up."

"Not at all, Mrs. Bardell," said Sexton Blake. "The young lady's business is very important, since she has waited for me."

"That's what she said, sir," said the housekeeper. "She didn't give no name, and wouldn't answer no questions. She seemed real worried, sir. And wet—evins, she was wet, sir. If she hadn't been wearing a good macintosh, she'd have been soaked right through to the skin!"

"Very well, Mrs. Bardell; I will interview the young lady, and ascertain what



her business is," said Sexton Blake smoothly. "You may as well take charge of Pedro, please. Give him some supper, and put him in his kennel for the night."

"Yes, sir," said the housekeeper.

Pedro was not at all pleased at the idea, and he went downstairs under protest. Meanwhile, Sexton Blake and I passed along the landing, and paused outside the door of the consulting-room.

Sexton Blake was the first to enter, and he walked in briskly and I followed, full of curiosity.

There was a movement as we did so, and I saw that our visitor had jumped to her feet, and was standing with flushed face and anxious eyes.

"Good-evening!" said Sexton Blake smoothly.

"Oh, are you Mr. Blake?" asked the girl, taking a step forward. "I am so glad you have come; and I don't know what you will think of me for forcing my way into your consulting-room like this, and at such a time of the night, too! Oh, Mr. Blake, please forgive me for acting in such a way! But I am worried, and I want your advice. I need it ever so badly."

"My dear young lady, you are welcome to any advice that I am capable of giving," said Sexton Blake gently. "Kindly take a seat, and make yourself quite at home. Tinker, you will find some biscuits in a barrel on the sideboard, and I think there is some wine there, too."

"Right, sir," I said briskly.

Within a couple of minutes our fair visitor was feeling more at her ease. Certainly, she did not want the biscuits, but she nibbled at one of them just for the sake of politeness. I had taken good stock of her by this time, and I was impressed. The girl was not more than twenty-one or twenty-two. She was slim, neat, and a mass of golden hair was tucked away beneath her neat little toque. She was wearing an extremely pretty frock of blue silk—at least, I think it was silk. It might have been crepe-de-chine, or some other feminine stuff. I generally get mixed up when I start describing frocks and frills and all that sort of thing. The girl's macintosh was hanging over the back of a chair, and I could see that it was of a large check pattern.

She was certainly quite pretty, and there were two little dimples in her cheeks which appeared in a most enchanting way when she smiled. But I could see that she was far from comfortable. There was a frown on her brow, and a very anxious look in her eyes. She looked at Sexton Blake all the time, and scarcely gave me one glance. This was rather rough luck, because I prided myself that I was looking particularly smart that evening.

"First of all, Mr. Blake, I must tell you my name and whom I am," said the girl. "My name is Irene Sylvester, and I have come to you because I am badly in need of expert advice. Oh, Mr. Blake, I do want you to help me!"

"I will do my best, Miss Sylvester," said Sexton Blake. "But, first of all, you must put me in possession of the facts. What is the nature of this advice you require?"

"I will explain," said the girl, bending forward. "I do not want to mention names. I—I am really afraid to do so, and I hope you will forgive me. My father is in the hands of a terrible scoundrel, Mr. Blake, and unless something is done quickly he will be ruined. I wish I could tell you everything—I wish I could explain the exact position,"

"What reason is there in keeping any-

thing back, Miss Sylvester?" asked Sexton Blake. "It will be far better if you are perfectly frank, I can assure you. I shall be able to judge the case in a more satisfactory manner if you will tell me everything there is to be told."

"But I cannot go into exact details, Mr. Blake—I dare not!" exclaimed the girl, in distress. "I have really come here in order to ask you to see my father. He does not know that I have come, and I am anxious to take you to him, so that he may have the benefit of your experience."

"I understand that you want me to accompany you to your father's home?" asked Sexton Blake.

"Yes," replied the girl eagerly.

"Well, Miss Sylvester, I hardly know what to say at the moment," said Sexton Blake. "Before I consent to such a proposition, I must ask you to be more precise in your details. I cannot undertake to do as you require unless you can satisfy me that my time will not be wasted. I have already asked you to go into full particulars, and I must again request you for your compliance."

Miss Sylvester clasped her hands tightly.

"I will tell you this, Mr. Blake," she said. "My father is in the hands of a scoundrel. I will not mention names, for I'm afraid to do so. I would prefer you to get all details of that kind from my father himself. This wretch has got some documents in his possession which rightfully belong to Mr. Sylvester, and the man has been blackmailing my father for some time past. This evening matters came to a head, for the scoundrel was determined to ruin my father unless an impossible sum was paid."

"That was certainly rather awkward," said Sexton Blake.

"Such a drastic step would have been terrible, Mr. Blake," proceeded the girl. "My own scheme was to stop this man from carrying out his design, and that is why I went to St. John's Wood this evening. Before I could take any action, however, the storm broke, and made it impossible for me to carry out my plan."

"I think I understand," said Sexton Blake.

"It was a terrible storm. The lightning was frightful!" exclaimed the girl. "I—I really don't know how I escaped injury. And now the position seems to be worse than it was originally; that is why I want you to come to my father. It is vital, Mr. Blake; it is a matter which involves my own happiness and almost my father's life. Please—please consent to come!"

The great detective was thoughtful for a moment.

"Very well, Miss Sylvester, I will accept what you say," he said quietly. "I realise that you are somewhat hampered, for you are unable to speak freely. You do not wish to accept the full responsibility."

"Yes, that is it exactly, Mr. Blake," said the girl quickly. "All that I want you to do is to give me your word that you will come—that you will see my father at the earliest possible moment, and that you will advise him what course will be best to adopt."

Sexton Blake stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Well, Miss Sylvester, I'm afraid I cannot comply with your request," he said at last.

The girl looked up with pain in her eyes, and I was rather surprised. It was not like the gov'nor to refuse an appeal of this kind. And the girl seemed so positively genuine, too. Miss Sylvester had mentioned no names, and she was quite unaware of the fact that we knew practically everything about the case.

Sexton Blake had not thought it necessary to apprise her of the truth.

It was obvious, of course, that this girl had gone to Mr. Fortescue Thurston's house in order to obtain the documents to which she had referred, which rightfully belonged to her father. The thunderstorm had intervened, and a delay had been caused. But those documents had been stolen with the safe, and I could understand the girl's agitated frame of mind. I gathered that she was almost afraid to go home to her father and report what had happened. That is why she wanted Sexton Blake to be by her side—as a kind of moral support.

It was just as well, perhaps, that the gov'nor did not tell her all he knew. She would only be very upset, and Blake's own investigations might be hampered. By following up this girl's request there was a big chance that we should get on the track of the right man. And yet Sexton Blake had refused to do as she asked.

"Oh, Mr. Blake, you do not mean that!" exclaimed the girl, rising to her feet, her eyes filled with excitement.

"I mean it, in the sense that I cannot come with you now, Miss Sylvester," said Sexton Blake smoothly. "If, however, it will be of any use my coming to your father's address within, say, one hour—well, I can do so. If you go now, I can promise to be at an agreed spot half an hour later."

Miss Sylvester's eyes gleamed with delight.

"Thank you, Mr. Blake—oh, thank you ever so much!" she exclaimed impulsively. "That will do splendidly! It will please me more than I can say! It is very, very kind of you!"

"Not at all," smiled Sexton Blake. "If you will give me your father's address—"

"I—I am afraid I cannot do that," interrupted the girl uncertainly. "Oh, if you only understood, Mr. Blake! You would know how awkward it is for me to stand here and appear so mysterious. Everything is quite all right. I can assure you—everything is straightforward and honest. But it is decidedly necessary that certain things should be kept secret."

"Very well, Miss Sylvester," said Sexton Blake. "I will accept your word, and I will wait until I see your father before pressing for further details. Perhaps you will be good enough to tell me where I will have the opportunity of meeting Mr. Sylvester?"

The girl nodded.

"Yes, Mr. Blake," she replied. "I want you to come to the premises of Messrs. Sylvester, Grant & Co., Limited. It is a big warehouse, just on the other side of the river, not far from London Bridge. My father is in his office at present, and he is awaiting my return. I shall go to him at once, and tell him you are coming. The office in this warehouse is an old one, for my father's firm has moved into new premises recently, and the warehouse near London Bridge is now almost deserted. My father has a very particular reason for being there at present. He wishes to be quiet, and to avoid all publicity. You will necessarily understand that this matter is not one to be made very public."

Sexton Blake nodded.

"I understand that, Miss Sylvester, of course," he replied, smiling. "Very well. I will do exactly as you say."

"Oh, it is good of you, Mr. Blake! You have relieved me more than I can possibly tell you," said the girl gratefully. "Thank you ever so much! I am sure that you will be able to tell us exactly what we must do; you will be

(Continued on page 14.)



Sexton Blake snatched the wig from "Miss Sylvester's" head!



Making not a sound, Tinker stole up the stairs.



The rope descended swiftly, and Waldo was a prisoner!





able to make things perfectly clear and easy."

The girl then proceeded to give the gov'nor exact details as to the manner in which he could reach the premises of Messrs. Sylvester, Grant & Co., Limited. I listened intently, for I wished to know all the facts, too.

There was evidently something rather mysterious about the whole business. Mr. Sylvester undoubtedly was in trouble, otherwise he would not be at his office at such an hour of the night. It was quite late, and I did not like the idea of this pretty girl going down the lonely streets near the riverside at such a time. Indeed, I could not understand why Sexton Blake was not willing to accompany Miss Sylvester on the spot.

A few minutes later the girl took her departure, and Sexton Blake lost no time in closing the consulting-room door. We heard our late visitor descending the stairs on her way to the street.

"Look here, gov'nor," I protested quickly, "what's the idea of this? I don't see—"

"Probably you don't, Tinker," snapped Blake briskly. "Listen! I have got some instructions for you. Follow Miss Sylvester, and do not let her know that you are on her trail—"

"Follow her, sir!" I echoed, staring.

"Yes."

"But—but, hang it all," I exclaimed, "that—that seems like spying, sir!"

"It seems like nothing of the sort, my lad!" interrupted Blake curtly. "You do not understand this matter fully, it seems. Do as I tell you. Follow Miss Sylvester, and do not let her get out of your sight."

"But we know she's going to this warehouse, sir—"

"Precisely! But we do not know what will happen to her en route!" interrupted the gov'nor keenly. "I want you to go, Tinker, so that you will be able to protect her in case of any eventualities. I have a particular reason for not accompanying the girl personally, and you will understand that later. However, I do not intend Miss Sylvester to be subjected to any danger. Therefore, it is your duty to follow her, and to act as a kind of bodyguard, in case of necessities."

My eyes gleamed.

"Oh, I see, sir!" I exclaimed. "That makes all the difference."

"Of course it does!" said Sexton Blake. "Get off with you, young 'un. Keep Miss Sylvester under your eye constantly, and do not let her once out of your sight. When you arrive at your destination, wait in a convenient spot until I arrive, which will be in about half an hour's time—that is, half an hour after you get there yourself. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, sir," I replied, grabbing my cap.

Less than ten seconds later I was rushing down the stairs, and I arrived in the street just in time to see Miss Irene Sylvester walking briskly in the direction of the West End. I was now feeling particularly pleased with myself.

Sexton Blake had not sent me to spy on our fair visitor, but to act as her bodyguard.

It was just the kind of job I liked. In case anything unforeseen happened to the girl, I was on the spot to butt in, and to go to the rescue. Somehow, I rather hoped that everything would not go smoothly. I was anxious to distinguish myself.

It was not too late for motor-omnibuses; for a good many of these vehicles were still running; and it did not surprise me when I saw Miss Sylvester hail

U. J.—No. 888.

a No. 13 'bus, and jump upon it. It was necessary for me to act quickly.

The girl went straight inside, and I was on the step of the 'bus before she had turned round in order to take her seat. The next moment I was on the stairs, and I knew perfectly well that she had not seen me come on board. She was inside the 'bus, and I was on the top. I knew that she was inside, but she did not know that I was on the upper-deck. Everything was quite satisfactory.

The terminus of the No. 13 'bus, of course, was London Bridge Station. Therefore, this 'bus would go straight through almost to our destination.

The journey, as it happened, was quite uneventful. In fact, I did not expect anything to occur while we were on the motor-'bus. If Miss Sylvester chanced upon any adventure, or ran into any danger, it would certainly be while she was going down the dark and lonely streets near the riverside.

Of course, I kept a sharp eye open during the journey. At every stop I looked over the side of the 'bus in order to see who stepped off and who went on board. Miss Sylvester did not leave until the vehicle had crossed over London Bridge, and had stopped just at the bottom of the station approach. Then she tripped lightly round the corner, and disappeared down Tooley Street. I was on her track with alacrity.

It was quite easy to follow my fair quarry, since her check macintosh was easily distinguishable, and there were not so very many people about at that time of night; and even in the event of her turning round and looking back, she would not recognise me.

I had turned up my coat-collar, was wearing my cap in a slouchy manner, and I assumed an altogether different walk. I looked, from a distance, like one of the numerous loafing youths who are to be found in the streets of that district late at night.

And so we went on, and I was rather disappointed that nothing exciting occurred. Presently the girl turned down into a quiet little alley, and from there we passed along numerous tiny streets, until at length we were almost on the riverside.

I knew that we could not be far from our destination, and this turned out to be the truth. It was necessary for me to go with extreme caution now, because Miss Sylvester might suspect things if she happened to see me in the rear two or three times.

In order to obviate any chance of discovery, I altered my walk almost continuously, and tried to change my appearance in little ways, too. By doing this, I think I quite met the requirements of the case.

In front of a huge, towering building the girl came to a halt. It was in a very small alley, and not another soul was in sight. The very instant the girl paused I slipped into a little doorway, and stood quite still, watching out of the corner of one eye.

Miss Sylvester glanced up and down, and then entered a narrow doorway. I only waited a moment or two, and then cautiously approached.

Upon arrival I saw several large bills announcing the fact that the property was for sale, and that the firm of Messrs. Sylvester, Grant & Co., Limited, had moved to newer and larger premises some little distance down the river.

I tried to puzzle out why the senior partner of the firm chose to come to his old office, rather than await Sexton Blake in his new place. There was evidently a good reason for this. The

element of mystery in the affair only added to its attractiveness.

The door was not fastened, and a gentle push set it slightly open. All was quiet, and I wondered whether I should venture in, or whether I should wait outside until Sexton Blake arrived.

And it was at that moment that something else decided my course of action.

I had got the door slightly open, and was listening intently, on the alert for any interruption, when a sound came to my ears. It was a slight scream in a girlish voice.

And this scream was almost immediately followed by harsh words, uttered in an undertone. They were followed by several examples of bad language which made my blood boil.

The girl's voice again came to me—now in a tone of entreaty and terror. A scream, louder than the other, but came down to my ears.

I simply shivered with rage and excitement. Miss Sylvester was being attacked!

I dashed through the doorway, found myself in a place of darkness, and came to a slight halt. Then, when my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, I saw a flight of stairs almost in front of me. I did not waste any more time, but hurried up those stairs at the double. Flight after flight I traversed, until, nearing the top of the building, I saw a faint gleam of light overhead. It was flickering, and I came to the conclusion that a candle was burning on the top landing.

I now moved more cautiously, and crept up the remaining flight of stairs slowly and deliberately. But then my movements were suddenly electrified.

Several feminine gasps, followed by a little cry of pain, made me jump up like a Jack-in-the-box. I simply rushed up those stairs, and stood on the landing, staring into a big store-room. It was quite empty, except for one or two old boxes and some litter lying in the corners. Upon one of the boxes stood a spluttering candle, and by the light of this I saw something which set me into action, so to speak.

Miss Sylvester was struggling helplessly in the grasp of two powerful men. One had a rough cloth over her mouth, and the other was holding her hands behind her back. She struggled gamely, but it was quite hopeless.

And then I sailed in.

"You—you infernal ruffians!" I shouted hotly.

Crash!

My left fist thudded with considerable force on to the side of one of the ruffian's heads. He staggered, released his grip of the girl, and faced me with a snarl.

"Oh, I—I—"

Miss Sylvester tried to speak, but she was just on the verge of collapse. She only uttered those few gasps, then sank to the floor in a dead faint.

My blood was fairly up, and I fought with sheer desperation.

And I realised how necessary it had been for me to come along. I knew that Sexton Blake's fears were fully justified.

But, unfortunately, I had taken on more than I could manage. These two men were huge, hulking ruffians of the riverside, and they were all muscle. The girl's fainting fit, too, was all to my disadvantage, for it released the second man.

With the two of them against me, I had very little chance.

I fought with all my strength, and used every ounce of my energy, but it was useless. I managed to dodge several brutal blows, but this could not go on for ever; and at length one of the



men delivered a punch which arrived on the side of my head with the force of a battering-ram.

I staggered, slipped, and fell heavily to the floor. Everything went round dizzily, and I lay there in a dazed condition, unable to move.

"That's settled him, mate!" panted one of the men gruffly. "The inter-ferin' young brat!"

I hardly remember what happened after that, although I have a hazy recollection of being carried across the store-room to a wide opening which overlooked the river. We were far up, many feet from the ground, or from the river. For this opening was immediately over the river itself. The warehouse was flush with the tide, and there was a huge, rusty crane near by.

I was completely bowled out, and I could do nothing. I dimly remembered

that dreadful place alone with the two men. And Sexton Blake would not arrive on the scene until half an hour had elapsed.

Miss Sylvester's position was an appalling one.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

A Surprise—An Old Enemy.

SEXTON BLAKE was almost invisible.

He sat in an easy-chair in his consulting-room, and he was surrounded completely by a haze of blue-grey smoke. The consulting-room, in point of fact, was almost uninhabitable. It was as though a thick November fog had suddenly invaded the apartment.

But the explanation was quite simple. The famous criminologist was smoking hard. An old-fashioned briar was be-

the taxi he was standing in front of the deserted warehouse.

All was quiet, and Blake looked up and down searchingly. He waited for some moments, and it was quite clear what his object was.

He was, in fact, looking for me. But I was helpless at that moment in the cabin of the old barge on the other side of the warehouse. Therefore Sexton Blake looked in vain.

"Well, I don't know what has happened to Tinker," murmured the great detective to himself. "However, I suppose the young rascal is somewhere near by."

The gov'nor was quite right, but he did not know of my predicament.

He evidently thought that it was a waste of time to search about, for he entered the doorway almost at once, and proceeded to mount the stairs. When

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being placed in the huge bucket, which was used in ordinary circumstances for raising merchandise up from the barges which usually run underneath the warehouse.

And that is really the last thing I do remember. My head was singing dizzily, and a terrible throbbing pain was in my brain. But at the same time I was thinking, in a dreamy kind of way, what was happening to Miss Sylvester.

She had been left up in that store-room at the mercy of the two rogues. She had fainted, and she was unconscious. The position was really terrible, and I had failed. Sexton Blake had told me to keep on her track, and to guard her if any danger occurred. And I had failed!

Certainly I had done my utmost. But the fact remained that I was hors-de-combat, and Miss Sylvester herself was at the mercy of the two ruffians who had captured her. As for her father, I had no thought for him at the time. Obviously he had been overpowered before the girl arrived. And now she was in

tween his teeth, and he was smoking in that fashion which he usually adopted when he was thinking deeply and with extreme concentration. He smoked automatically, and already half a pouchful of tobacco had been consumed.

At length Sexton Blake rose to his feet, threw his pipe on the mantelpiece, and he switched on the electric lights. One glance at the clock told him that he had no time to lose. He compared his watch to the clock, and nodded.

"I must be off!" he muttered briefly.

It did not take him more than thirty seconds to get into a light overcoat and a comfortable cap. Then he left the house, and set off briskly down Baker Street. Before he had reached the end of the thoroughfare he obtained a taxi, and gave the driver instructions to drop him on the other side of London Bridge.

Sexton Blake arrived at his destination quickly, and then set off on foot to locate the abandoned premises of Messrs. Sylvester, Grant & Co., Ltd. The detective had no difficulty whatever in finding his way, and ten minutes after leaving

he had nearly reached the top he was aware of light footsteps, and he paused. But the next moment a girlish figure appeared in the doorway at the top of the landing, and she leaned over the banisters and looked down.

"Oh, it is you, Mr. Blake!" she exclaimed gladly.

"Yes, Miss Sylvester," said Sexton Blake. "I have kept my promise, you see."

"It is splendid of you, Mr. Blake!" exclaimed the girl. "Please come up: My father is here, and he is waiting to see you."

Sexton Blake joined Miss Sylvester on the landing. The girl had now discarded her macintosh, and she was looking flushed and excited, and somewhat dishevelled. At the same time the charm of her personality was very apparent. She looked up into Sexton Blake's face with eyes that were full of anxiety and concern.

"I am thankful you have come, Mr. Blake!" she exclaimed, touching his hand. U. J.—No. 888.



arm. "Oh, I have had such an adventure! When I arrived here I was attacked by two men, and I was in a state of awful terror."

"Dear me!" said Sexton Blake. "I am very sorry to hear that, my dear young lady."

"The men were brutal, Mr. Blake, and I think I fainted," said the girl. "I have a dim recollection of a stranger coming to my rescue, but I do not remember what it was, or who the man could be. When I came to myself I was lying on the floor, and my father was bending over me."

"I am pleased to hear that you came to no harm," said Sexton Blake gravely.

"You see, the two men had attacked father first," explained Miss Sylvester. "They bound him up and left him in his office. But father is very active, in spite of his age, and he got free. And when he appeared with a revolver both the men fled. Otherwise I don't know what would have happened to me."

Sexton Blake nodded slowly.

"And do you know who these men are?" he asked.

"No, Mr. Blake; neither father nor I have the faintest idea," said the girl. "But that is wrong, perhaps. Father suspects that they were set upon us by the scoundrel I have already told you about. But please come into the office at once, and I will introduce you to my father. He is waiting to see you, and he is very anxious."

Sexton Blake inclined his head, and followed the girl across the big store-room towards a glass-topped door in one of the walls. A light was burning within, and Miss Sylvester opened the door and stood aside.

Sexton Blake found himself in a very comfortable apartment—at least, it would have been comfortable under ordinary conditions. At present it was practically devoid of furniture. Only a bare deal table and one chair were there, and the sole illumination was a small electric pocket-lamp which stood in the middle of the table. In the chair sat an elderly man, and he rose to his feet as Sexton Blake appeared.

"I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Blake," he said in refined tones. "I am sorry that I have to meet you in such peculiar surroundings, but it is unavoidable. You will understand this after I have fully explained. It is very good of you to come in response to my daughter's appeal."

"Oh, father, I knew that Mr. Blake would come!" said the girl brightly. "And I am so pleased! He will now be able to understand everything, for you can explain fully."

"Yes, my darling, you are quite right," said Mr. Sylvester. "Mr. Blake, I shall be honoured if you will take this seat—"

"Oh, no!" interrupted the detective. "You be seated, Mr. Sylvester, and I will stand. I should like you to realise that I am under no misapprehension concerning this little drama."

"I—I don't understand, Mr. Blake," put in the girl wonderingly.

"No?" said Sexton Blake coolly. "I think you do, my dear young lady!"

The famous detective withdrew his hand from his pocket, and in his fist was held a very serviceable-looking revolver. Both Miss Sylvester and her father stared at Sexton Blake in positive wonder, and the girl took a step backward. The next second Sexton Blake acted.

His right fist shot out, and he made a quick grab at Miss Sylvester's toque.

Swish!

The toque came away in his hand, and U. J.—No. 888.

with it came every portion of the girl's superb golden hair!

"Now, Mr. 'Sissy' Hudson, I think you will be more comfortable in these!" said Sexton Blake grimly.

Snap, snap!

Before a second had elapsed a pair of handcuffs were locked in position over the girl's wrists. She staggered back with an unladylike curse.

"Well, upon my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Sylvester calmly. "That was smart work, Mr. Blake!"

Sexton Blake was standing so that he had both his companions within sight. He did not allow either of them to get behind him. The girl was standing with her back to the wall, looking dazed and bewildered, and her face was disfigured with rage.

And it was quite obvious that "she" was a man.

The wig being removed, a close-cropped head was revealed, and although the pretty features of the face were there they no longer looked the same. Without that wig and the ravishing curls the face could be seen at its true worth.

"You—you infernal dog!" snarled the "gentle maiden."

Sexton Blake smiled.

"You were evidently under the impression, Mr. Hudson, that I was deceived," he observed. "Nothing of the kind! The very instant I set eyes upon you in my consulting-room I knew your identity. I knew that you were Mr. Frank Hudson, familiarly known among your own friends as 'Sissy.' Your female impersonations are certainly wonderful, and I compliment you upon your performance upon this occasion. I fancy it has deluded Tinker right along the line. But Tinker has had no experience of you, as I have. You are exceedingly clever—"

"But not clever enough for you, Mr. Blake," interrupted Mr. Sylvester.

"I think it is correct to put it that way," said the detective, nodding. "I knew, of course, that this little trap was laid especially for my benefit, and I have apparently walked into it like any simpleton. But you will find that I am not quite so foolish, Mr. Rupert Waldo!"

The elderly man slapped his thigh.

"Good!" he exclaimed with delight. "Upon my soul, Blake, you beat me at every turn! Splendid! Not only have you unmasked my young friend, but you are not even deceived by my own disguise—which I prided myself was quite beyond detection. Good luck to you, Blake—you deserve to win!"

As he spoke, "Mr. Sylvester" removed his grey wig. He was then revealed as a man of about forty. He was not particularly big, and he did not look particularly strong, but he was none other than Rupert Waldo, the astute criminal who had become known throughout the civilised world as "Waldo, the Wonder Man."

Sexton Blake had sprung a surprise—and he had proved conclusively that he was much smarter than his would-be captors. They had set a trap for the great detective, and he had walked into it.

But Blake had not walked into that trap blindfold. He knew exactly what he was doing, and that made all the difference. And it was fully in keeping with Waldo's character to take the whole thing calmly—and to compliment Sexton Blake upon his astuteness. Waldo was a criminal, but he was a sportsman.

"Now, Waldo, I want you to fully understand that I am in earnest," said Sexton Blake. "I have this revolver in my hand, and I shall not hesitate to use it if you give me cause to do so. I know well enough that you are impervious to

any simple wound—a revolver-shot through your arm would not inconvenience you in the slightest degree."

"Exactly!" said Waldo calmly. "I am happily the possessor of flesh which is quite incapable of feeling pain. I can burn myself in the most severe manner without knowing it—I can cut a gash in my flesh without being aware of the fact. I do not know what pain means—and it is almost impossible to stun me. I can't explain why I am so peculiarly constituted, but it is just a natural phenomenon."

"Quite so!" agreed Sexton Blake. "Your characteristics are well-known, Waldo. You are known as the Wonder Man because of your singular peculiarities. But, although your flesh can feel no pain, your bones, I take it, are quite normal. And if I have cause to fire this revolver, I shall fire with the intention of breaking your right leg. My aim is good, and I shall not fail. Therefore, I wish you to understand that it will be quite futile for you to make any attack upon me, or for you to attempt to escape."

Waldo bowed.

"It is just as well that we should understand one another, my dear Blake," he said. "You have touched me on a raw spot. My bones, as you say, are normal. If one happens to get broken I feel no pain—but I am quite incapacitated. I shall heed your warning, and I shall take good care that I leave this room with two whole legs. Well, how did you get on the track? I shall be enormously interested to know how you saw through my little game."

"The man must be inhuman—super-human!" snapped out Mr. "Sissy" Hudson from the wall. "I've deceived thousands of men before now; and he is the first one who hasn't been hoodwinked!"

Sexton Blake nodded.

"You see, Mr. Hudson, you have brought your own peculiar calling to a fine art," he said. "You have been successful so long that you did not think it possible for any human being to be aware of your real identity."

Hudson looked savage, but said nothing. He was a man of very slight build, and he had taken advantage of this fact to adopt a new line of criminal procedure. His hands and feet were tiny—just like a girl's—and his features were even and well-formed. He possessed a pair of deep blue eyes, which were equal to those of any girl. Mr. Hudson, in fact, was effeminate in every way except his nature. He was a keen, cunning criminal—and he was as masculine as any crook in London. It was only in his face and figure that he differed.

It was Mr. Hudson's own particular line to venture out attired as a very attractive girl, and to lure unsuspecting men of wealth into the hands of a gang of confederates—who rapidly fleeced the wealthy gentlemen of all they possessed.

Rupert Waldo was a different type of individual. He was a criminal in a thousand. Until now, Sexton Blake had never known Waldo to work with a companion. It had been the Wonder Man's boast that he had always conducted his affairs single-handed—he would never allow himself to be mixed up with a confederate. Apparently he had broken his rule on this occasion.

"I do not see any reason why I should explain matters to you, Waldo," said Sexton Blake. "At the same time, I think I will satisfy your curiosity. There is very little to tell, in any case. I presume you are aware of the fact that I have investigated the disappearance of Mr. Fortescue Thurston's safe?"



Waldo nodded and smiled.

"Yes, I am aware of that," he said. "I figured that you would be called upon to investigate, Blake—in fact, I planned my whole scheme upon that assumption."

"So I imagined," said Sexton Blake. "Well, Waldo, I admit I was puzzled with regard to the safe's disappearance. I was also puzzled concerning the young lady who had been present outside in the garden. I discovered one or two golden hairs, and the revolver which the supposed young lady had held. By means of that revolver, Pedro tracked our friend Hudson to my own rooms."

"Then—then you knew all about me?" asked Hudson, aghast.

"Precisely!" said Blake. "But I did not know at that time who you actually were. When you spun me your pretty little story I knew it was a fake. I knew that it was a lure in order to get me into this trap. But I complied with your request, and I appeared to fall into the scheme with my eyes completely closed. I might also mention that a very close examination of the golden hair assured me that it was from a wig, and not from a human head. That set my suspicions going in the first place."

"By thunder! You're a cute bird!" snapped Hudson savagely.

"When I saw you, Mr. Hudson, I knew the truth within a few minutes," proceeded Blake. "During the first few moments of our conversation I was somewhat puzzled. I knew well enough that you were not what you seemed to be—but I could not place you. However, after a very brief period, I knew you to be that very old friend of Scotland Yard—'Sissy.' I allowed you to go, and I set Tinker on your trail. And now I have arrived, as I promised. But the circumstances are not precisely as you would have chosen them."

"Well, your young brat of a Tinker is settled with, anyhow!" snapped Hudson. "We dealt with him all right!"

Sexton Blake's eyes gleamed. "Have you harmed the lad?" he demanded, in a low, grim voice.

"I'm afraid Sissy would have been somewhat drastic," put in Waldo. "But you must remember, Blake, that I am in-charge of this affair; and I think you know me well enough to be quite certain that I should not cause Tinker to come to any harm. As you probably know, I have a great and wonderful respect for Tinker and yourself; and I shall never allow either of you to come to any harm. Tinker is quite safe, I can assure you—although he is helpless."

"He thought he was on my track, and I didn't know it!" put in Hudson sneeringly. "But I got on to the young fellow's game as soon as he entered this warehouse. So we played a little drama up the top here. I was attacked by the two ruffians, and I knew well enough that Master Tinker would fall into the pit. He came rushing up, sailed in, and within three minutes he was bowled out."

"I do not blame Tinker in the slightest degree," said Sexton Blake. "He acted as I should have liked him to act. He thought that you were a young lady in distress, Hudson, and he went to your rescue. He faced overpowering odds in order to save you from the hands of the two ruffians, and his efforts were very praiseworthy."

"That's exactly how I looked at it, Blake," put in Waldo. "Tinker acted like a good 'un, and I respect him highly. In fact, I didn't like treating the young beggar roughly. It went against the grain. Well, you have explained about Hudson—but how in the world did you know who I was? I thought this disguise was good!"

"The disguise is quite excellent," said

Sexton Blake. "Had I not had any suspicions, I might have been deceived. But, my dear Waldo, I had a suspicion at the very first that this safe-robbery was one of your own particular cases. There were several facts concerning the affair which, to my mind, pointed to you as the culprit. What I could not understand was the presence of the young lady outside."

"Oh, I'll soon put you into possession of the facts," said Waldo smoothly. "When you've had your say, Blake, I will do a bit of talking."

"That is very good of you, Waldo," said Sexton Blake. "It is almost time for you to commence now, in fact. I have very little more to say. After Mr. Hudson had departed, with Tinker on his track, I received a telephone-call from Inspector Markham, who has the case in hand at St. John's Wood. He informed me that a safe had been found on a piece of waste land, two or three hundred yards away from the house. And there were only the footprints of one man. Mark-

to speak unless you wish to, Waldo. I will give you ten minutes if you want it, and then I must request you to accompany me as quietly as you can—"

"Yes, we know all about that," said Waldo calmly. "You want to take me to the police-station? Exactly! A very pleasant prospect, but one which I do not think will be fulfilled. However, to tell you the yarn. I won't make it a long one, but will just give you the outline."

"That is all that is necessary," said Blake.

"For some time past I have been lying low," said Waldo. "I have been in London all the time, mind you, because I don't believe in running away from danger. I've taken a certain pleasure, in fact, in running the gauntlet. Well, I got to know that Mr. Fortescue Thurston had in his safe a number of diamonds and other precious stones worth something in the nature of a cool eighty thousand. I didn't see any reason why I should not lift those stones, because I am rather hard up at the moment. I also had a way of getting rid of the goods at a fair price."

"I presume you learned of this diamond haul from our friend, Mr. Hudson?"

"Exactly!" said Waldo. "You'd better not say anything about me!" snapped Hudson curtly. "I shall get a long stretch as it is, without you making things worse."

"My dear man, you needn't be afraid," said Waldo smoothly. "What I say will not harm you in the slightest degree. Yes, Blake, I was put on to the coup by Mr. Hudson here. It seems that he had instructions from a higher power, which I do not think it necessary to mention, to obtain a certain valuable document from Mr. Thurston's safe. He didn't feel quite up to the task of doing the job alone, and he requested me to give him a hand. At that time he had no real idea of my identity. He was under the impression that I was merely an ordinary crook. Well, I consented, and we went into details."

"The plan was this. Hudson was to tap on the window, and get Mr. Thurston to admit the young lady in distress. As soon as she was within the library Hudson intended holding up the unfortunate Mr. Thurston at the point of his revolver. And while he was doing that I was to emerge from behind the screen, and between us we would overpower our friend. It would then be a simple matter to rifle the safe, and to completely disappear without leaving a trace."

"But why did you not do the job alone?" asked Blake.

"Because I didn't want the police to have a clue," said Waldo. "The police know that I have always worked alone—that I have made an invariable rule of it. Therefore, this time I decided to break my rule. I intended to leave many indications that the work had been completed by two men, and I was practically certain of being able to throw the police completely off my own scent. But that thunderstorm absolutely upset the whole plan, and ruined everything."

"So I imagined," said Sexton Blake.

"You see, the lightning struck Mr. Thurston's library, wrecked the whole room, and Sissy fled—partly in terror, and partly because he thought I was buried in the debris, and that the whole game was no good. However, he carried out the other part of our little programme, hoping that everything would be all right in the long run. Meanwhile, I extricated myself from the library, and found Mr. Thurston had

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ham was positively staggered, and he could not account for the tracks. But it came as no surprise to me—in fact, it conclusively supported the theory I had already formed—that you were the culprit."

"It's a confounded shame!" declared Waldo regretfully. "I did my best to carry that safe to a place where no footprints would be seen. But that storm ruined everything. It made the ground soft, and I couldn't carry out my original scheme at all. However, I'm not grumbling."

"I take it that you were in Mr. Thurston's study while the thunderstorm was at its height," said Sexton Blake. "You were concealed behind a screen, and your intention, no doubt, was to spring out and attack Thurston at the opportune moment. However, the storm came, and with it the lightning. Your own plan was therefore knocked on the head."

"Exactly!" said Waldo grimly. "I was knocked on the head, too. A piece of brick came flying across the room, and it caught me a terrific whack over the left ear. Well, since you are here, Blake, I might as well explain. I know you'll be interested. And there's no reason why I should hide anything from you. I expect you know most of it already, in any case."

"It is your own choice," said Sexton Blake. "There is no necessity for you



gone. I wanted those diamonds, and I didn't see any reason why I should walk off without them. So I picked up the safe, and carried it down the garden path, round to the side, and over a wall on to a piece of waste ground. It only took me ten minutes to open it, and I succeeded in getting the diamonds, and Mr. Hudson's documents into the bargain."

"I don't believe it!" growled Hudson. "You couldn't have lifted that safe alone!"

"I will overlook these insults," said Waldo calmly. "It only shows, my dear Hudson, that you don't know me. I will admit that the safe taxed my energy to the utmost. I am strong, but that safe was heavy, and I only just managed to lift it on to my shoulders. Once there, however, the rest was fairly simple. So you see, Blake, how the thing was done."

"Yes, I see that," said Sexton Blake. "But what made Hudson come to my place in Baker Street?"

"Oh, yes; I haven't told you about that yet," said Waldo. "I wanted to be on the safe side. I wanted to be absolutely certain of this coup being brought off successfully. And somehow, whenever I manage to do anything big, Blake, I find you at my heels, and I respect you so highly that I was practically certain that you would get the better of me unless I made full preparations in advance."

"You are quite complimentary!" smiled Blake.

"Not at all," went on the Wonder Man. "My little scheme was this. I thought it would be possible to lure you, by means of Hudson's charms, to this warehouse. I assumed that Tinker would come with you. Then, the idea was to place you in a very comfortable barge, which is waiting below at this present moment, and to take you right down the river into a little backwater. You and Tinker were to be kept there for at least three weeks."

"A very nice little programme," commented Blake.

"Exactly! You see, I figured out that Thurston would appeal to you for assistance after the police had failed," went on Waldo. "And you are such a keen beggar, Blake, that I was almost sure that you would get on the right track. You can see that my fears were all justified. But I certainly did not suspect that you would see daylight quite so soon. I have not told you my full plan yet, and I have no intention of doing so. During this next three weeks, by the aid of the money I shall obtain from the diamonds, I mean to bring off a coup which will startle the whole of England. And I shall be content in the knowledge that you are out of harm's way, and that you will be unable to hinder my progress."

"You are assuming. I see, that your plan will be successful," smiled Blake. "Please undeceive yourself, Waldo. You need not think that you will take me prisoner, as you suggest, and that you will be allowed to escape."

"My dear Blake, I respect you, as I have already said; but I must contradict you in this instance," said Waldo calmly. "I shall escape, and I am afraid that you are doomed to three weeks' rest cure, with Tinker as your sole companion. With regard to Hudson's visit, I knew that the best way to lure you here was to appeal to your sympathies. I judged that a young lady would be able to get round you, and I used the name of Sylvester because it is the name of the chief partner of the firm which has recently vacated these premises."

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"Yes, I guessed that," said Sexton Blake. "And now I think we will be making a move. Waldo, I want you to act sensibly. It will give me great concern if I am compelled to break one of your legs. I don't want to do it, and your only chance is to obey my instructions to the letter. At the first sign of treachery I shall fire, and I tell you candidly that your leg will be snapped like a carrot!"

Waldo smiled.

"I am not at all impressed," he said smoothly.

Crack!

There was a muffled report, and the next instant Sexton Blake's revolver was torn from its grip, and it fell to the floor with a clatter. The famous detective, alert as he was, had not been prepared for that move on Waldo's part. Waldo had had his fingers on the trigger of a revolver in his own pocket, and at the precise moment he had fired, not to cause injury, but to disarm Sexton Blake.

The detective made a grab for his weapon, but Waldo acted quickly. He grasped Blake by one arm, swung him round, and held him tightly.

"No, Blake, I don't think so!" he said grimly. "I am very sorry to—"

Sexton Blake struggled furiously. He was angry with himself for having been disarmed with such supreme ease. But Blake was really struggling now for a reason, because he had not been foolish enough to come to this warehouse without having made full preparations beforehand. However, the position looked serious enough, and Waldo certainly had the upper hand.

The Wonder Man's strength was positively amazing. It was something which no normal human being could fully understand. Waldo was capable of dealing with six men single-handed, and they would have no chance whatever of overpowering him.

Therefore, Sexton Blake, in spite of his skill and agility, was like a babe in the Wonder Man's grasp. Sexton Blake was certain that I was helpless, and he could not expect any aid from me. The position was tense and dramatic.

But the gov'nor was wrong. I was not quite so helpless as Rupert Waldo believed!

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

The Escape from the Barge.

THE atmosphere was quite ghastly. Mixed with the smoke of foul shag tobacco was an overpowering odour of villainous rum, to say nothing of tar, stale kippers, onions, and various other choice things of a similar description.

I was feeling quite queer in the region of the belt, mainly owing to the effect of the atmosphere. The light in the place was supplied by a smelly oil lamp which swung from a hook in the ceiling, low over the small table in the centre.

You will easily have guessed by this time that I am referring to the little stuffy cabin in the barge—the vessel which was lying in the river, just beneath the old deserted warehouse.

I was lying in a bunk—at least, I was not bound and gagged, as might have been expected. The blankets in the bunk were far from clean, and the smell was far from pleasant. However, I was only too pleased to find that my limbs were free, and that I was capable of moving if I got the chance.

I had come to my wits about twenty minutes earlier, and had been for some time in a dreamy condition, where I didn't care what had happened or where I was.

But now I was fully alert.

My head was very sore, and it

throbbed painfully; but this was only a minor consideration. I had come to no real harm, and I was now on the lookout for a chance to make my escape.

There did not seem to be much chance at the moment, I must admit.

Seated at the table, which was practically within arm's reach of me, were two men—the two ruffians who had bowled me over so successfully in the upper store-room of the warehouse. They were engaged in a game of cards, and appeared to be enjoying it.

They were playing that highly elevating and cultivated game known as "ponton," and they seemed to be getting quite a measure of enjoyment out of it. And one of the men—the fellow who held the pack—was raking in his companion's money at quite a remarkable speed.

Therefore, the winner was intent upon his winnings, and the loser was intent upon getting his money back. The two men did not have much time to glance in my direction.

Not that they had had any cause to look at me. Upon coming to my wits I had lain quite still, and had not moved an inch. And now that I knew exactly where I was, I took great care to remain perfectly still, in order to let the ruffians know nothing of my condition.

Apparently they thought that I was senseless, and that I should remain senseless for some time. Otherwise I should have been bound and rendered quite incapable of action. I was extremely glad that this was not the case, for I had no intention whatever of remaining a prisoner if I saw the slightest loophole of escape.

My first thoughts were for Miss Irene Sylvester. It was a relief to me to find the two men here, and it was a source of alarm at the same time. What had they done to the girl? What had become of her? Was she a prisoner on the barge, too—in some other dark and smelly hold?

At that time, of course, I did not know of the trick which had been played upon us. I did not know that Miss Irene Sylvester was a fake, and that she was actually a clever criminal of the male species.

"Durned if you don't 'ave all the bloom'n' luck, Jim!" said one of the two men, adding a few curses by way of ornamentation. "I reckon it's about time I got that pontoon."

"I shall lose it in a minute, mate—don't you worry!" said Jim, with a grin. "Then you'll 'ave a chance of getting your money back. Shove over that bottle, there's a pal!"

The other man tipped some of the contents of the bottle into his own glass before passing it. The two men were going to have a drink—a drink which I had no difficulty in recognising as rum. But they took a considerable amount of water with it, and the fumes which arose to my nostrils were not at all pleasant.

"Best not take too much of that stuff, Jim," said one of the men. "We've got some work to do yet, an' the boss won't like it if we get too much down us."

"I can stand a lot yet, Bill," said Jim. "Lemme see, you want another card, don't you?"

"Yus, mate," said the other. "Durned! You give me a queen—that makes it twenty-three. Busted again!"

"Rough luck, old man!" grinned his companion.

The game proceeded, and I could see that one of the men—Bill—was not exactly sober, even now. He had been partaking of the rum fairly liberally, I took it; and the effect was showing itself.

I wondered who the boss could be, and why these men were waiting. They



didn't give me any attention at all, and so I felt quite safe for the moment. But it was out of the question for me to make any move until the men shifted their position. I could scarcely lift a finger without it being observed.

I thought of all sorts of schemes whereby I could get the better of these two men. I thought it just possible that if I suddenly sprang out, jumped across the table, and made for the tiny stairway, I should succeed in getting away.

But that would not suit me at all. For one thing, there was a big risk about it; it was more than possible that I should fail, although there was a sporting chance that I should succeed.

However, there were other considerations. For example, if I escaped in that way, both the men would know of it, and

"The kid don't want no lookin' arter!" said Bill contemptuously. "He's dead off; that punch I give him fair knocked his wits away."

"Well, you can't be too sure," said Jim, lighting his pipe.

He left the table, and mounted the little companion-way to the deck. Bill took another swig of rum, and lay forward in his chair.

He had had rather too much already, and the heated, stuffy atmosphere of the cabin probably made him feel sleepy. At all events, he placed his head on one arm, and lay quite still. Rather to my surprise, he uttered several vigorous snores a moment or two later. It had not taken him long to doze off.

For a brief moment I thought of slipping out of my bunk and climbing the

In any case it was the best thing I could do. For I had hardly finished the operation when I heard Jim's footsteps on the stairs. There would have been no time for me to have carried out my first plan. I should have been caught red-handed, and would have been bound hand and foot, in all probability.

So I lay back in my bunk, and assumed my original position. Bill had no idea that I had been active, and when Jim came down he uttered a grunt.

"Look lively, mate!" he said. "It won't do to go to sleep, you know. There's a lot of work to be done to-night!"

"Sall right!" mumbled Bill, raising his head. "I ain't goin' to sleep, old mate. Yus, I've got the pontoon, ain't

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J.J.

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Closing Date, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 28th.

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EVERTON	v. LIVERPOOL
SHEFFIELD UNITED	v. ASTON VILLA
W. BROMWICH ALBION	v. HUDDERSFIELD TOWN
BRISTOL CITY	v. CLAPTON ORIENT
NOTTS FOREST	v. BURY
ROTHERHAM COUNTY	v. WOLVERHAMPTON W.
WEST HAM UNITED	v. BLACKPOOL
BRENTFORD	v. SOUTHAMPTON
BRIGHTON	v. LUTON TOWN
NORWICH CITY	v. BRISTOL ROVERS
SWINDON TOWN	v. EXETER CITY

I enter Football Competition No. 5 in accordance with the Rules and Conditions announced above, and agree to accept the published decision as final and legally binding.

Signed

Address

5

they would give chase at once. And, if they failed to recapture me, they would report to the boss—whoever he was—that I had got away. And that might alter the plan altogether.

It would be far better for me to escape from the cabin and leave the men in ignorance of the escape.

As luck would have it, my chance came much sooner than I expected.

Jim, who was winning, lost the pontoon at last, and Bill uttered a keen exclamation of delight.

"Now I shall have a chance of gettin' that money back of mine!" he declared grimly. "My luck's been rotten to-night!"

"Well, just a minute, Bill," said Jim. "I think I'd best go on deck for a minute to see if everything's all right. You stop down 'ere and look arter the kid!"

companion to the deck. But this plan did not commend itself to me after I had given it a moment's careful thought. I might possibly meet Jim on his way down, and it was more than possible that I should awaken Bill as I passed through the cabin.

No; I had a much better scheme.

Within reach of me was the rum-bottle, and I did not waste a fraction of a second in getting busy. I leaned over from my bunk, seized the bottle, and poured a considerable quantity of the fiery spirit into each glass. In that dim light it looked very similar to the fairly weak mixture of rum and water which I had poured into the water-jug. So, before half filling those tumblers with rum, I had emptied them. The two men, therefore, would probably swig down the contents of the glasses without a thought, and would take the rum neat.

I? Right you are; let's start. Everythin' all quiet on deck?"

"Yus, as far as I can see," replied Jim.

"Well, ere's luck!" said Bill.

He raised his glass, and drained it. Jim emptied his at the same moment, and I chuckled inwardly. My little plan had worked even better than I had supposed. Both of the men had swallowed the spirits at a gulp, as was their habit. They had not had time to detect that it was not a mixture of rum and water. But they knew it well enough afterwards.

"Why, you blamed fool!" exclaimed Jim fiercely. "Wot's the idea of pourin' all that rum in the glasses? I thought it was three-parts water."

"That's wot I thought too," said Bill. "I never touched the bottle."

Jim examined the bottle, and he



examined the jug, and he looked up again.

"Didn't do nothin', eh?" he said. "Wot's this 'ere in the jug, then? Whv, you blamed idjit, you poured the drinks out o' them glasses, an' then you filled 'em up again with neat rum. A fine trick that was!"

"I never did nothin' of the sort!" growled Bill. "I ain't quite so drunk as all that, Jim!"

"Oh, -don't be a fool!" said the other man. "If you didn't do it, who did? That kid, I suppose?" he sneered. "The fact is, you're so blamed drunk already that you don't know where you are! An' that lot you jest took will fairly put the lid on it!"

"I dunno how it happened!" said Bill.

"Well, you won't be no good in ten minutes' time!" declared Jim. "I told you distinctly that we was to have nothin' but a weak mixture. There's a lot o' work to be done, an' we've both been drinkin' heavy this evenin'. We've both had enough, as a matter of fact. This big dose now will just about bowl you over!"

Jim was undoubtedly right. Within a very few minutes Bill had laid his arm on the table, and he was snoring with extreme vigour. Jim shook him again and again, but it made no difference. The man was drunk, and he could not be aroused.

Jim sat down, slowly filled his pipe, and glared round. He looked up at me once or twice, but I took care that he did not see anything suspicious. And then, to my great joy, I found that my plan was working successfully. I had begun to fear that Jim would not go off, but my hopes were soon realised.

Jim evidently intended to keep awake.

He lit his pipe, he moved up and down the cabin once or twice. But he was unsteady, and finally he sat down, took a swig of water, and closed his eyes. That was fatal. Almost immediately afterwards the pipe fell from between his lips, and he sank down in his chair, with his chin on his chest.

Within three minutes he was sleeping, not so soundly as Bill, but he was undoubtedly asleep. Only a good shake would awaken him.

I lost no time.

Slipping out of the bunk, I slipped lightly to the floor, and then risked capture for the sake of a little piece of camouflage. It would be wiser, of course, to clear out of that cabin as soon as I possibly could.

But I spent two or three minutes in faking up a figure in the bunk. This was fairly easy, for I borrowed one or two cushions from another bunk, placed a blanket over them, and pulled the rough curtain half-across, exactly as it had been while I was there. Even a searching glance in that dim light would not reveal the fact that I had vanished. Anybody would have been willing to swear that I still lay in the bunk, motionless and unconscious. Only a close examination would reveal the truth.

As gingerly as a cat walking on hot bricks I crossed the floor, and mounted the companion-stairs. They creaked abominably, and I suspected every moment that my flight would be discovered. But luck was with me, and at last I reached the deck, and I took in several gulps of pure air with huge relief.

Neither Jim nor Bill had the slightest idea that I had gone.

I lost no time in getting off the barge. This was quite a simple matter, for it was right against the wharf, and all I had to do was to step up and get ashore. I knew that over half an hour had

elapsed—in fact, an hour had passed by since I had arrived—and therefore Sexton Blake was probably on the spot.

Where was he?

I judged that he would be round the other side—probably at the top of the building, in the room where I had been attacked. In any case, it was up to me to make quick investigations. So I made my way round to the front of the warehouse, or, to be more exact, to the back. And I arrived in the little alley, and found that it was deserted.

The door was still unfastened, and when I entered I stood listening intently. The place was very silent down there, but for a moment I faintly heard the sounds of voices. They came down to me in a hushed murmur, and I could not distinguish whose voices they were, or what was being said.

But, without losing any time, I mounted the stairs, and at length arrived in the big, deserted store-room. And then I knew in a moment where the voices were coming from.

There was a glass-topped door in one wall, and there was a light showing within. Also, there were shadows of human figures on the glass. I crept over silently, and was greatly relieved when I heard Sexton Blake's voice.

But I did not do anything rash. I did not burst into the room and blurt out my own adventures. I thought it would be far wiser to wait, and to listen a few moments before entering.

I did so.

And five minutes later I was extremely pleased with myself. It was very fortunate that I had acted with caution, and that I had not blundered in. For I now knew practically every atom of the truth. Miss Irene Sylvester was none other than a clever crook, and we had been hoodwinked—at least, I had. I felt furious about it, and my one desire at the moment was to give Mr. "Sissy" Hudson a punch on his extremely well-formed nose.

However, I repressed this impulse, and waited. It was a great shock to me to learn that the other man in the room was no less a person than Rupert Waldo himself.

Waldo!

I recollected with vividness all the adventures we had had with that astonishing criminal. Time after time Sexton Blake had found himself engaged in a battle of wits with the Wonder Man. And, although Waldo was a criminal of exceptional ability, it pleased me greatly to realise that Sexton Blake had been his master right from the very first.

Yet, in spite of the fact that Waldo was a rogue, I couldn't help having a sneaking liking for him, somehow. He was a rogue—a great one. He was prepared to go to any length of villainy to attain his ends; but, at the same time, he had the instincts of a gentleman within him.

More than once Waldo had proved himself to be a man of courage and chivalry. More than once he had performed actions which had surprised us. For example, Waldo had had Sexton Blake in his power on one famous occasion, but Waldo had not harmed a hair of the gov'nor's head. Why? Simply because the Wonder Man declared that he possessed a great respect for Sexton Blake.

He admired the gov'nor greatly, and that admiration was too vast to allow Waldo to perform any action which would bring harm to Blake. Neither, for that matter, would Waldo touch me. And it was just like him to explain to Sexton Blake the full details of his present scheme.

It was a great delight to me to learn

that the gov'nor had been astute enough to see through the plot from the very first. Sexton Blake had not been duped for one moment. He had played his cards well, and he held the trump the whole time.

And then came the turning of the tables.

I heard the crack of Waldo's revolver, and almost at once I knew that Sexton Blake was helpless—that he was at Waldo's mercy. I was greatly alarmed, for I realised that the position was serious now.

What could I do alone?

I looked round hastily, hoping to find some big chunk of wood, or a bar of iron, with which I could give Waldo a crack on the head. It was about the only possible method of dealing with him. It was no use whatever using gentle methods with the Wonder Man.

But I could find no piece of wood, and no piece of iron. All I could see was a long length of tow rope—fairly thin for tow rope, but tremendously strong, nevertheless. It was of about half-inch diameter and practically new. In desperation, I grasped this rope, and prepared to make a big effort to help the gov'nor in his moment of extremity.

The glass-topped door was glazed, but there was one little tiny crack at the bottom corner, and I had already applied my eye to this. I knew, for example, that Hudson was manacled, and that he was helpless. And now I bent down, and looked through the hole again. I did not remain there for more than one second.

Waldo had his back to the door, and was quite unsuspecting of any danger. If he moved his position, and faced the door, my chances of success would not be half so great. For Waldo would be aware that I was on the spot, and he would deal with me with perfect ease. Therefore, it behoved me to waste no time.

Crash!

I swung open the door with terrific force, dashed in, and swung the rope high in the air. Swish! It descended right over Waldo before he could turn. I drew the rope tight, binding the Wonder Man's arms to his sides. He struggled with the fury of a tiger.

"Lend a hand, gov'nor!" I gasped frantically.

But Sexton Blake needed no telling. He was on Waldo in a second. I was on him, too. And even between the two of us, with the assistance of the tow rope, we had every atom of our work cut out to hold Waldo down.

But he suffered from the great disadvantage that his arms were secured to his sides. He went down on his face. I got on his legs, and Sexton Blake on his back. We were tossed here and there, we were bruised and battered; but, after a few minutes of fierce struggling, we succeeded in binding the rope securely round Waldo's legs and arms and body. Strong as he was, there was not much chance of his breaking those bonds.

Hudson sank back against the wall, thoroughly scared. He did not even seem to have the initiative to make a bid for liberty. He was only a very small man, slight, and probably very weak. And this excitement was rather too much for him. He simply remained a spectator, which was all the better for us.

"Good boy, Tinker!" panted Sexton Blake approvingly. "You came in at the right moment!"

"That's what I thought, gov'nor!" I gasped. "Great Scott! I had an idea that we should never be able to hold him down!"



Rupert Waldo looked up at us and smiled.

"Well, you've got me, Blake," he said smoothly, and with no sign of exertion. "After this, I think I shall steer clear of you altogether. I sha'n't try any more of those stunts. Man alive; you seem to be born lucky! You've got me, and it's no good grumbling. I never was a grumbler, and I take life as it comes."

"It really makes very little difference, Waldo," said Sexton Blake. "Tinker has helped me at the moment, but even if he had not arrived you would not have escaped."

"Oh!" said Waldo. "How do you make that out?"

"Why, you surely do not imagine that I should venture here alone?" asked Blake. "You do not think that I should enter this place without having taken due precautions? It may interest you to know that there are at least twenty-four police-officers surrounding this warehouse at the present moment."

"Well, I'm hanged!" exclaimed Waldo. "I didn't think you were so cute, Blake!"

"I had a very shrewd idea that you were here, and I communicated at once with Scotland Yard," said Sexton Blake smoothly. "They lost no time in sending a considerable force. But they had instructions not to move or to show signs until I gave the signal."

Sissy Hudson uttered an oath. "What's the good of it, Waldo?" he asked savagely. "We're beaten all the way along, and it's Blake who's done it. If I hadn't gone to his rooms we might have been able to get clear away."

"My dear man, don't delude yourself," said Waldo smoothly. "There was no chance of us getting away. Blake was on the track at once; and you can take it from me that when Blake gets on the track, and when he's really hot on the scent, as he was in this instance, there's not much chance for people of our sort. Blake is the biggest enemy I've got. He ruins every one of my plans; but I don't blame him for it. I don't bear him any malice."

"I do!" snarled Hudson. "Why?" inquired Waldo. "Why should you bear him malice? He is only doing his duty to the community; he is only assisting the ends of justice. You and I are criminals; we are human outlaws. Therefore it is necessary for us to be better than the hunter. Unfortunately, we are not equal to Sexton Blake, and the result is that we find ourselves in a mess at the finish. I have a great admiration for the way in which you have conducted this affair, Blake. I have lost everything, and I'm a prisoner. But I wish you luck!"

Sexton Blake smiled. "You are a most original fellow, Waldo," he said. "I think you are sincere, too. Why, in Heaven's name, don't you make up your mind to live a different kind of life? Take your term of imprisonment, and when you come out—"

"You may as well save your breath," interrupted Waldo. "To begin with, I sha'n't go to prison—I sha'n't even stand my trial. The police won't be able to hold me for forty-eight hours, and that's not a boast. It's not a bit of good me attempting to lead an honest life—it doesn't suit me. I shall carry the game on as I have started it, and it's more than possible that you and I will have other tussles in the future."

Sexton Blake shrugged his shoulders. "Well, Tinker," he said, turning to me, "have you anything to report?"

It did not take me long to tell Sexton Blake of the two drunken men in the barge, and the gov'nor decided to visit that cabin at once.

"I am fairly certain, Tinker, that the booty which was taken from Mr. Thurston's safe is in the barge," he declared. "In any case I am going to make a search at once, after I have cleared out the two men who are supposed to be guarding you."

"Another brain-wave!" exclaimed Waldo calmly. "Blake, I believe you've got second sight, or something of that sort. You are quite right about the diamonds and the documents; they are in the cabin of the barge, tucked beneath the locker on the left-hand side."

"You—you fool!" hissed Hudson. "What did you want to tell him for?"

"Why shouldn't we make it easy?" asked Waldo blandly. "Blake has won, and we are helpless. He'll search the cabin and find the stuff, so why shouldn't I give him the straight tip?"

Somehow or other I was quite certain that Waldo was speaking the truth—he had really given away the hiding-place of the booty. He knew well enough that it was impossible for him to obtain it now and for him to get away with it. Therefore he saw no reason why he should not reveal the truth.

"You will remain up here, Tinker," said Sexton Blake. "And I have an idea in mind. These two men on the barge may be recovered by this time, and they are expecting the bucket to go down with me on board, unconscious. Therefore I have a mind to travel down into the barge by means of that bucket. You can operate the machinery up here. It is quite simple."

"Right you are, gov'nor!" I grinned. "It's the quickest way, after all."

I noticed that Hudson gave Waldo a quick, almost startled glance, and I was rather puzzled.

Before leaving the room Sexton Blake took the precaution to slip another pair of manacles over Hudson's feet, and there was a peculiar grin on the man's face as he did so. I did not like that grin. It was such a terrible contrast to the perfectly sweet smile which he could adopt when he liked, and there was something sinister about it.

"Now, Tinker," said Sexton Blake, "you can operate the machinery in the outer room, and you can keep your eye on this door at the same time. There is no chance of the men escaping, and I will send up half a dozen policemen within five minutes. You remain on guard until they appear. You have your revolver?"

"Yes, gov'nor."

"Very well. If Waldo gets up to any tricks, don't forget that your revolver is loaded," said the gov'nor grimly.

Waldo smiled, but made no comment. He probably knew well enough that I should not fire the weapon, and he also knew that Sexton Blake's threat was not absolutely genuine. Somehow or other neither the gov'nor nor I would like to fire on Waldo. We would only do so, in fact, in the event of positive emergency.

It was rather a decent wheeze of the gov'nor's to go down to the barge by means of the bucket. The two men below were expecting him, and when they saw the bucket descending they would have no suspicions. And Blake would be able to capture the two men with the greatest of ease. If they received the slightest warning that all was not right they would probably seize the stolen goods and would make a bolt for it, thereby causing a great deal of trouble.

The crane was an old one, and it had been disused for some time. All the same, it was strong, and it was not one of those massive steel affairs which require half a dozen men to look after them. It was quite simple to manage,

and I lost no time in getting to the mechanism.

I swung the arm close in against the wall, and raised the chain so that the bucket was exactly flush with the opening. Sexton Blake had no difficulty in stepping in, and he knew at the same time that the crane was quite safe, since I had been lowered in it. In fact, it was made to carry the weight of half a dozen men if necessary.

"All ready, gov'nor?" I asked. "Yes, Tinker. Lower away," said the gov'nor.

I proceeded to carry out the order, and Sexton Blake was swung out into mid-air, and the bucket slowly descended.

Meanwhile, Waldo and Hudson were alone in the inner room. Waldo was quite impassive. He made no attempt to escape, since he probably knew that it was futile. And that same sinister grin was still upon Hudson's face.

"Well, he's done for this time!" he muttered with savage glee.

"Done for?" repeated Waldo. "Who's done for?"

"Blake!" "Indeed! How do you make that out?" asked Waldo.

"Why, when we lowered Tinker into the barge we discovered that one of the links, some little distance from the bucket, was broken through," replied Sissy Hudson, with grim pleasure. "The link was opening even then, and it's a wonder Tinker reached the barge in safety. Blake is much heavier, and that link will never stand his weight. As soon as he gets swung into mid-air the link will break, and Blake will crash down to death!"

"Is—is this right?" demanded Waldo, with a sudden fierce and intense fire in his eyes.

"Yes, it is right, and I'm glad!" snarled Hudson. "He's done us, and now he'll receive his finish!"

Waldo knew well enough that Hudson was telling the truth. One of the links of that old chain had parted; it had barely been enough to carry the bucket down on the former occasion. Now, with Sexton Blake's weight in the bucket, that link would snap almost at once, and the great detective would be dashed to death.

Waldo performed something which was almost a miracle.

His face went blood-red, he exerted every ounce of his strength, and his teeth were set, and his eyes glittered. His binding-ropes creaked, they began to snap, and several of them burst asunder, as though they had been mere threads.

With a mighty roar Waldo charged to his feet. He knew well enough that it was too late to shout out a warning. He could tell by the clatter that Sexton Blake was already in the bucket, was already suspended in space. If the detective was to be saved something must be done at once, on the instant, without the loss of a second.

And Rupert Waldo acted.

How he had burst his bonds was a marvel which I shall never forget as long as I live. Under ordinary circumstances even Waldo would not have been able to do it. But he was given added strength in that vital moment, and he seemed to possess superhuman energy.

With one bound he was through the outer room, and I saw him flash by as I turned round with a startled gasp. I thought that Waldo was about to commit suicide, or something equally drastic. For he dived completely out of the opening in one tremendous spring.

Sexton Blake was now in mid-air, hovering a great many feet from the barge.



Waldo flashed through the air, and he grasped that rusty chain with both hands. And there he clung, risking his own life in order to save that of Sexton Blake!"

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

The Human Link.

SEXTON BLAKE, in the bucket, was amazed to see Waldo flash out from the opening and to grasp the chain, twelve to fifteen feet above him. The great detective's first thought was that Waldo was escaping, and that he had sinister intentions.

But Sexton Blake was not left long in doubt. He knew the truth almost at once.

For Waldo was only just in the nick of time.

He slithered down the chain like a monkey, and his keen eyes were upon each link as he descended. And there, some little distance above the bucket, he saw one link which was open to a dangerous extent. And even as Waldo looked, the opening enlarged, and the link gave an ominous crack.

Waldo was now holding to the chain with both his hands, his legs were dangling sideways, and he firmly grasped the upper part of the chain with one fist, and then he seized the lower part—but just then the disaster took place.

Crack!

The link broke with the report like that of a revolver-shot.

By this time I had dashed to the door, having brought the crane to a standstill. And I felt a sickening sensation when I saw what had happened. I momentarily closed my eyes, and I shuddered. I knew that the chain had broken, and I expected to see both Waldo and the gov'nor dash themselves to pieces on the deck of the barge below. But no crash came, and I opened my eyes again.

I stared out, and I stared at the chain. And then my eyes nearly started out of my head with positive stupefaction.

For I saw something which I had deemed to be impossible.

There was Waldo, hanging in space—in mid-air—with one arm grasping the upper end of the chain. In his other arm he held the loose section of the chain, with Sexton Blake and the bucket descending from it. Waldo himself formed a link—he took the place of the link which had smashed!

It was staggering, and I could only stare at it in blank wonder. How any human frame could stand such an ordeal was more than my wits could understand. But it was true. Waldo was there—holding the gov'nor from death. The Wonder Man—the master criminal—had saved Sexton Blake's life.

And then I heard his voice.

"What's the matter with you, Tinker?" he called up, in deadly calm tones. "Why can't you lower away? I'm not capable of standing this strain for ever, you know!"

"Good heavens!" I gasped. I was electrified into activity, and I sprang back to the levers as though I had been stung by something. Waldo was calm—in spite of the terrible strain. Waldo had spoken to me in quite a normal voice.

He was indeed a Wonder Man!

Sexton Blake said nothing. He stood quite still in the bucket, gazing up at the straining human form overhead, and wondering, probably, whether Waldo would be able to stand it. And then, without a jerk, I recommenced lowering the chain. I worked the mechanism as rapidly as I could, and, yard by yard, the

bucket grew nearer and nearer to the deck of the barge.

At last it struck the boards with a heavy bang, and Sexton Blake leapt quickly out, and stood aside.

Crash!

The chain was released by Waldo on the instant, and it fell to the deck with a terrific clatter. Waldo himself did not wait. He had an opportunity of getting away, and he seized it.

But it had not been in his mind to make a bid for liberty when he had jumped from that store-room. His sole thought had been to save Sexton Blake's life—and he had done it.

But now that the peril was over—now that Sexton Blake was safe—Waldo thought of himself. He swung himself on the chain, and then leapt.

Splash!

He struck the water just beside the barge, and then, with rapid strokes, plunged out into mid-stream. Sexton Blake was there, standing on the deck, and he could have flung himself in, and thus prevented Waldo's escape. For there were many police near by, and they would soon have come to his assistance.

But Sexton Blake was human.

He blew his whistle vigorously, and drew his attention to the waiting officers. It was for them to capture Rupert Waldo—not for Sexton Blake to do so. And the gov'nor probably knew that Waldo would be able to get away—that he would be clever enough to elude the pursuit of the police.

There was tremendous confusion almost immediately afterwards.

I rushed down from the store-room with all speed, and when I arrived at the barge I found it smothered with policemen, and I found my two late captors dazed, bewildered, and handcuffed. Sissy Hudson was also in the hands of the police. So a clean sweep had been made—with the exception of Waldo himself.

And a brief examination of the barge proved that Waldo had been correct. The diamonds and the documents were there—intact. Sexton Blake took charge of them, after explaining matters to the police. It was the gov'nor's intention to return them without a moment's delay to Mr. Fortescue Thurston.

"It was the most wonderful thing I've ever seen in all my life, sir!" I exclaimed breathlessly, when I had a chance of talking to Sexton Blake. "Waldo saved your life—and how his bones were prevented from breaking, I don't know. It was a miracle!"

Sexton Blake nodded.

"You are right, Tinker!" he said gravely. "It was a wonderful piece of work. That man's strength is something which neither you nor I can fully understand. And do not forget that in order to reach the chain he had to burst those tremendous ropes which we bound round him. It is beyond my understanding."

"He's a marvel, sir—a living wonder!" I declared. "And he did all that—he risked his own life—in order to save yours!"

"I am aware of that, Tinker; and somehow I have quite a warm spot in my heart for Waldo, rogue though he is," said Sexton Blake. "I must count myself very lucky to be alive at this very moment. And, although I suppose it is not exactly right for me to say it, I hope with all my heart that Rupert Waldo gets clear away!"

"Hear, hear!" I echoed fervently.

Mr. Fortescue Thurston was still awake when we arrived at 31, Elliston Gardens, about forty minutes later. It was now

between two and three o'clock in the morning, but Mr. Fortescue Thurston was on the alert.

He opened the door personally in response to our ring.

"Oh, it is you, Mr. Blake!" he exclaimed. "Come in—come in! I hope with all my heart that you have something satisfactory to report."

"We entered the house, and accompanied Mr. Thurston into the comfortable sitting-room.

"Yes, Mr. Thurston, I am pleased to tell you that my efforts have been successful," said Sexton Blake smoothly. "Will you be good enough to check these diamonds, and also the documents? I think you will find them quite correct."

Blake produced a sealed envelope from his pocket, and a velvet bag in addition. Mr. Thurston stared at them with round eyes.

"You—you have recovered the stolen property?" he asked faintly.

"Yes—as you see."

"Wonderful—wonderful!" shouted Mr. Thurston, rushing at Sexton Blake and gripping his hand. "Thank you, my dear sir—thank you with all my heart! I had been worrying with every minute that has passed, and I had come to the conclusion that it would be impossible for me to have my goods returned—at least, I never suspected that I should see them again so soon. You are a wonderful man, Mr. Blake! I thank you exceedingly!"

Sexton Blake smiled, and Mr. Thurston calmed down somewhat. He was flushed, and his eyes were gleaming with joy and relief.

His hands were shaking so much that he could hardly check the diamonds to see if they were correct. But after a very brief scrutiny he reported that everything was in order.

"And how did you manage it, Mr. Blake?" he asked wonderingly. "How on earth did you do it so quickly?"

Sexton Blake briefly explained the circumstances, and put Mr. Thurston in possession of the facts.

"Wonderful—wonderful!" said our host, rubbing his hands together with delight. "I have heard many reports concerning your astuteness, Mr. Blake, but now I know, from my own personal experience, what a remarkable man you are. In order to aid me you have risked your life, and you have gone through an experience which would appal most men. I must give you a fee which will compensate you to the full."

"My fee is not excessive, Mr. Thurston," smiled Sexton Blake. "It has been a short case, and I have had practically no expense. I think one hundred guineas—"

"Tut, tut!" interrupted Mr. Thurston impatiently. "How ridiculous—how absurd! One hundred guineas, indeed! My dear sir, I insist upon handing you a cheque for not a farthing less than two thousand pounds! Do you realise that you have saved me a fortune—that you have saved me from utter ruin? Two thousand pounds, sir—and nothing less!"

Sexton Blake shrugged his shoulders.

"As you wish, Mr. Thurston," he smiled. "It is not for me to refuse. If you are satisfied, I can assure you that I am!"

"Good! Then everything is all right!" chuckled Mr. Thurston. "I am particularly pleased about the documents. A good many years ago, when I was in business, I was swindled out of a fortune by an unscrupulous money-lender. I was in difficulties at the time, and this man got me into his clutches. The infernal

(Conclusion on page 2.)



THE FIGHTING SCOT.

Our Stirring Story of the Ring.

The Scene at the Club.

It was perfectly obvious to everyone in the Hurlen Boxing Club that Hughie Huxter would not be able to stay another round. The game little boxer had fought with dogged determination through the first three rounds, but now, as he answered the gong for the fourth, he looked groggy, and it could be seen that the old wound over the eye—which Mason had opened up early in the contest—was giving him a deal of trouble.

Still, one look at Huxter's rugged features proved beyond all doubt that he meant to fight to the last gasp on the off-chance of being able to land just one blow that might, miraculously, give the husky Mason his quietus.

But it was not to be. Miracles do not happen at Hurlen.

Mason, crouching like a panther, with his chin tucked away, circled round his man, knowing that victory must be his, yet determined to take no chances.

Not a blow was struck for the first minute of the fourth round, and the spectators began to display signs of unmistakable impatience.

"Box him, Hughie!"

"What's the matter with yer, Mason? Hev yer got glass elbows?"

"Say, this ain't a cake-walk!"

Cheap witticisms and cries of derision came from the cheaper parts of the house, but the two boxers' old hands at the game, men who were not easily influenced—paid not the slightest heed. A novice, spurred on by the contemptuous remarks, might have rushed in to destruction, but not so the two boxers in the ring.

They were oblivious to everything other than the job in hand. One man meant to reap victory in the shortest possible time, and the other determined to strain every nerve to stave off defeat.

Both contestants were strong, plucky, and capable exponents of their profession, but Mason was the man with that extra ounce of strength that was to give him the verdict in the long run.

Pad! pad! sounded their quick steps on the taut canvas, and then Mason, moving like a flash of light, stepped in and planted a snaking left to his opponent's badly damaged eye.

Hughie Huxter gave a gasp of pain and surprise, and stepped back; and even as he did so Mason followed him up, hitting with both hands, and sending his man reeling before him.

Back, back went Hughie, until his shoulders were touching the hemp.

His face was deathly pale under the white lights above the ring, and the trickle of blood which flowed from the wound on his face made him an almost ghastly figure to behold.

Furthermore, he was gasping for breath, for the blows he had shipped to the body were veritable pile-drivers. This was inevitably the beginning of the end, and Hughie's backers knew it.

"Sky the towel, son!" shouted a hoarse voice. And as the words penetrated to the boxer's clouding brain he shook his head vigorously and covered up.

"No, no!" he breathed, and rushed into his man, meaning to play his last card.

But if he hoped to take Mason off his guard he was disappointed, for the boxer

met the rush with a smash to the damaged eye which brought Hughie up standing, and then, as he swayed drunkenly, his eyes glazing, he hooked him to the jaw, clean to the point, and Hughie, with scarcely a groan, slithered to the floor of the ring.

"One—two—"

So began the count, but Hughie only moved a limb convulsively, and then remained perfectly still, rigid, down for the count.

The hall was hushed, every eye fixed upon the boxer who had fought so gamely.

"Out!"

No sooner did he hear that word—the boxer's death-knell—than Mason bent down, and lifted Huxter to his feet. Then, with the aid of the defeated man's seconds, who had jumped into the ring, he helped to get Hughie to his corner.

It had been a clean and clever contest, and each man received a generous round of applause when he left the roped square.

Once the ring had been vacated the spectators settled themselves more comfortably in their seats, and a buzz of animated conversation broke out.

And the two names that passed from lip to lip were those of "Beady" Jordan and the Fighting Scot.

Speculation was rife as to what would happen, and it was soon apparent that the odds were in favour of Jordan beating the young Scot in the first six rounds.

The backers based their opinion upon "Beady's" vast and varied experience, although the spectators who had seen Reddy at work were loud in his praises, and declared that he would give the redoubtable Beady much to set him thinking.

"The kid could punch a hole through a brick wall!" declared one "fight fan," who was recognised as an authority.

"We'll see!" declared his neighbour cautiously. "The lads should be in the ring by now."

Scarcely had he said the words than Beady Jordan, clad in a gaudy silk bath-gown, came striding down the gangway, and at the first sight of him a roar of welcome threatened to lift the roof, for Beady was the type of fighter that very often appeals to the crowd. He was what is sometimes termed a "tricky" boxer, especially when he managed to get his man on the run. It was then that he would indulge in "playing to the gallery"—holding his big jawl out temptingly, laughing in his opponent's face, and the like, all tricks which are years old, but can usually be depended upon to raise a laugh at the other man's expense.

Beady, with a grin upon his heavy features, climbed through the ropes, and took up his position in the centre of the ring. He looked thoroughly self-possessed as he gazed round the crowded hall, waving his hand to anyone he recognised in the audience.

"Beady's the boy!" yelled one of his rabid partisans.

And Beady answered the shout.

"Sure thing, kid!" he returned, with a grin.

He walked to his corner and sat down, his big fists resting upon his knees.

Half a minute passed, and Beady, a consummate actor, looked towards the door through which Reddy should appear. And the expression upon his

heavy face was that of anxiety, wonderment, speculation.

The crowd was not slow to take its cue from the boxer.

"Where's the Scot?" came a gruff voice from the gallery.

"Yes, where's the——" began another voice, when the door of the dressing-room opened, and a figure came hurrying down the gangway leading to the ring.

But it was not the figure of the Fighting Scot that appeared.

It was Murray Cave, looking pale and excited. He made straight for the M.C.'s table, and spoke a few hurried words into the official's ear.

The M.C. looked incredulous, amazed.

"But it can't be!" he was heard to say. "The thing's impossible!"

The words came to Beady Jordan, and a leer twisted his thick lips.

"Say, what's it all about, Murray?" he asked, getting up from his chair, and leaning over the ropes. "Where's the Scot?"

Murray Cave looked up sharply, and his eyes glinted with anger.

"I reckon that's a question you could answer, Beady," he said, controlling his voice with an effort.

"What the heck d'yer mean by that?" demanded Beady, with an ugly look. "What the——"

His voice died away as the M.C. climbed through the ropes, and pushed him gently towards his corner.

The official strode to the centre of the ring, and then spoke in stentorian tones which carried to every corner of the big hall.

"Say," he began. "I'm sorry to have to tell you that the contest between Beady Jordan and the Fighting Scot cannot take place to-night, for the simple reason that the Scot can't be found. He was in the building a little while ago—in his dressing-room—and then his manager, Murray Cave, was called away." The M.C. did not see the necessity of mentioning that the message was a bogus one. "Well, when he returned to the dressing-room his man had vanished complete. He hunted all over the building for him, but nobody appears to have set eyes on him.

"The whole thing's mysterious, but it can't be helped. The Scot's vanished."

The packed audience had listened to the manager's clean-cut words in silence, and it was now, when his voice died away, that the silence was broken by a derisive laugh.

It was Beady Jordan who laughed—a mirthless, taunting sound that brought a flush of red anger to Murray Cave's face.

"Say, Murray," drawled the boxer insolently. "it ain't exactly difficult to figger out what has happened, is it?"

There was no mistaking the meaning of the words—their inference and the big promoter took a step towards the ring.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded, in hard tones. "What are you gettin' at, Beady?"

"Waal," drawled the fellow easily. "I sorter figger it out that the Scot's a quitter! He got cold feet, and beat it!"

"You lie!" returned Murray Cave hotly, his fists clenching convulsively. "You lie, you cowardly scoundrel, and I state right here, before the whole crowd, that you're at the bottom of this dastardly affair. But I'll get to the truth of the matter, and if I find that you've so much as hurt a hair of that boy's head I'll squeeze the life out of your worthless carcass!"

(Another dramatic instalment on Thursday next.)



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