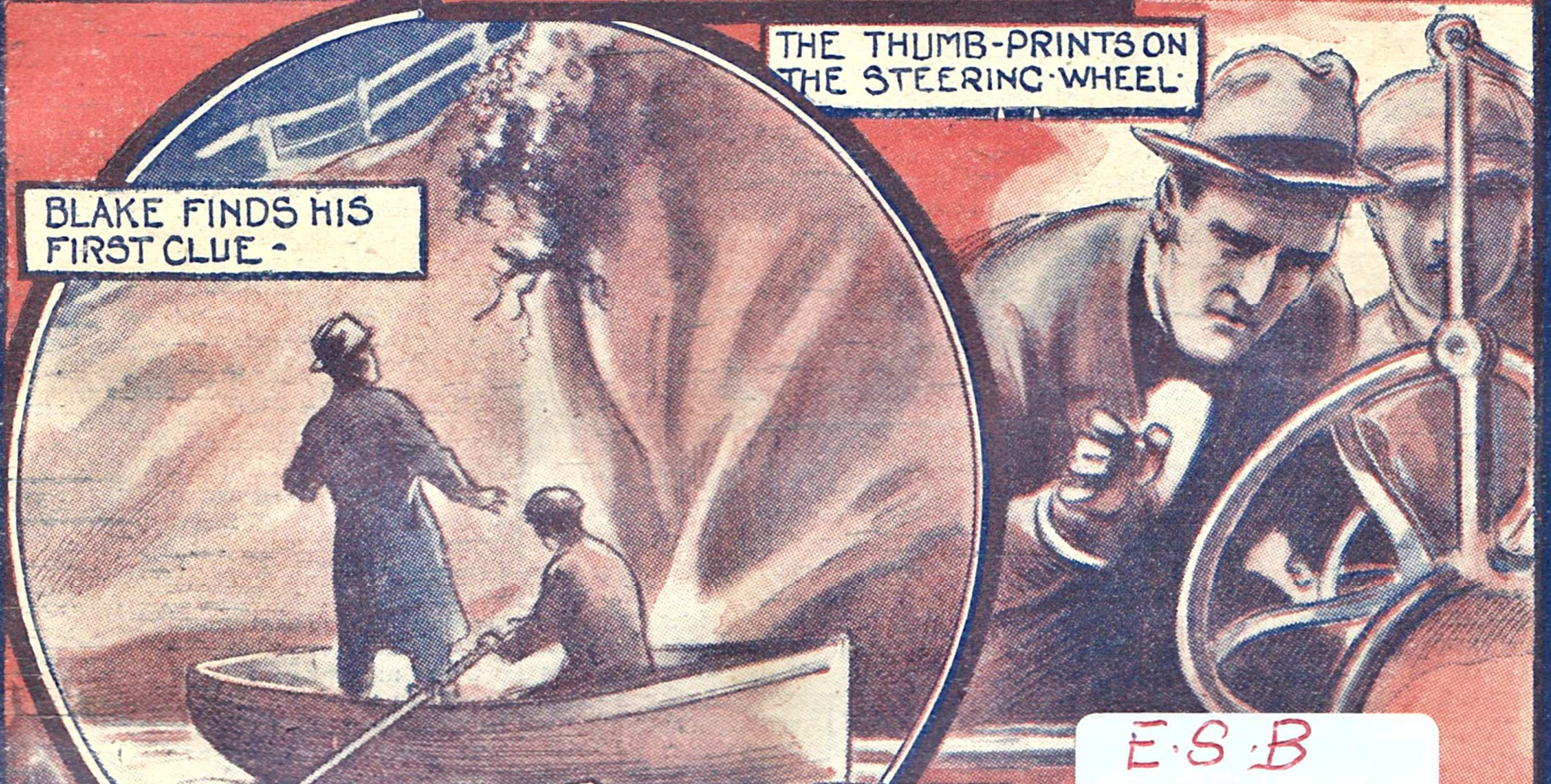


AN EXCELLENT LONG SEXTON **BLAKE** STORY APPEARS INSIDE—COMPLETE IN THIS **ISSUE**.

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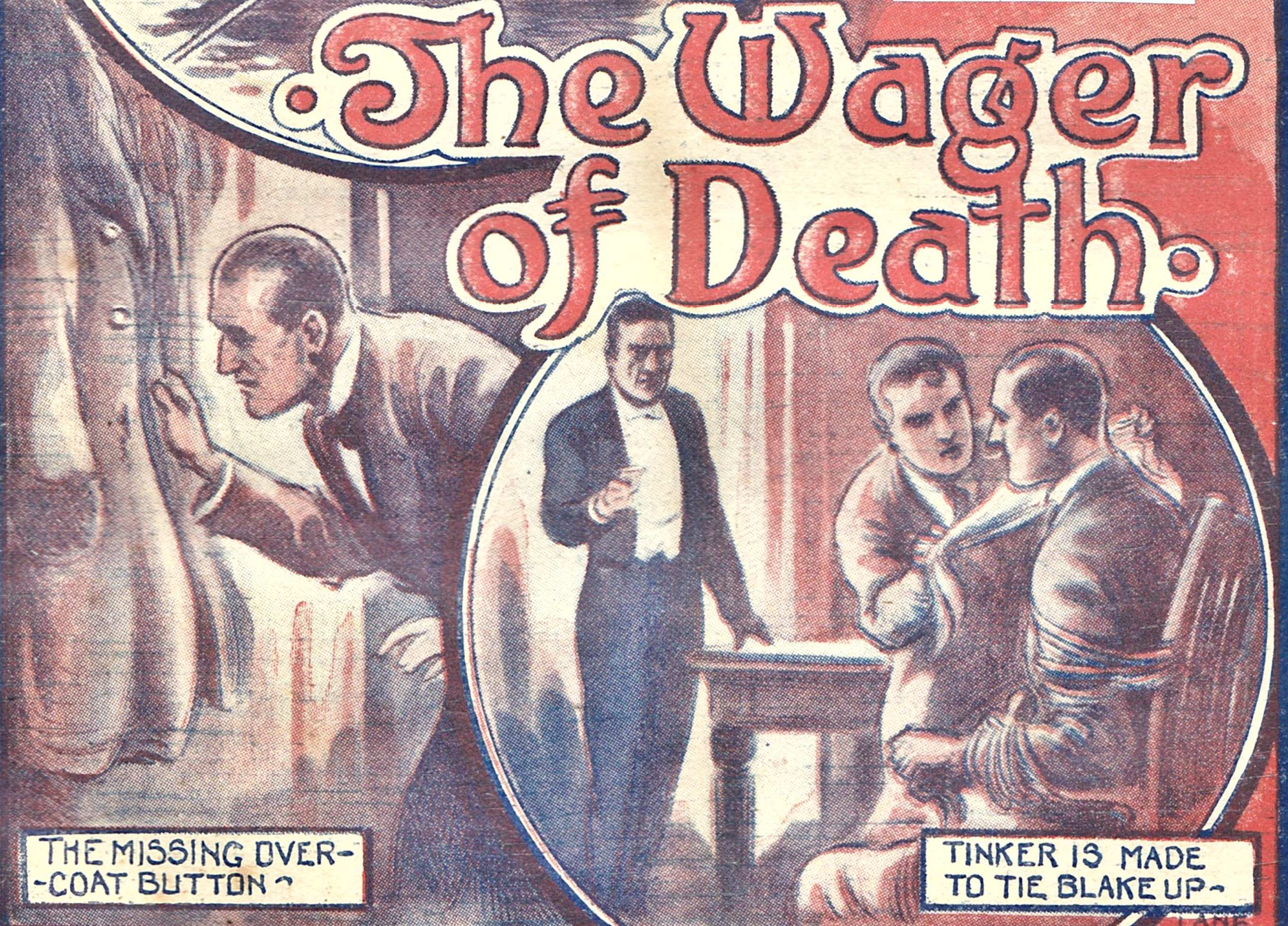


BLAKE FINDS HIS FIRST CLUE -

THE THUMB-PRINTS ON THE STEERING WHEEL -

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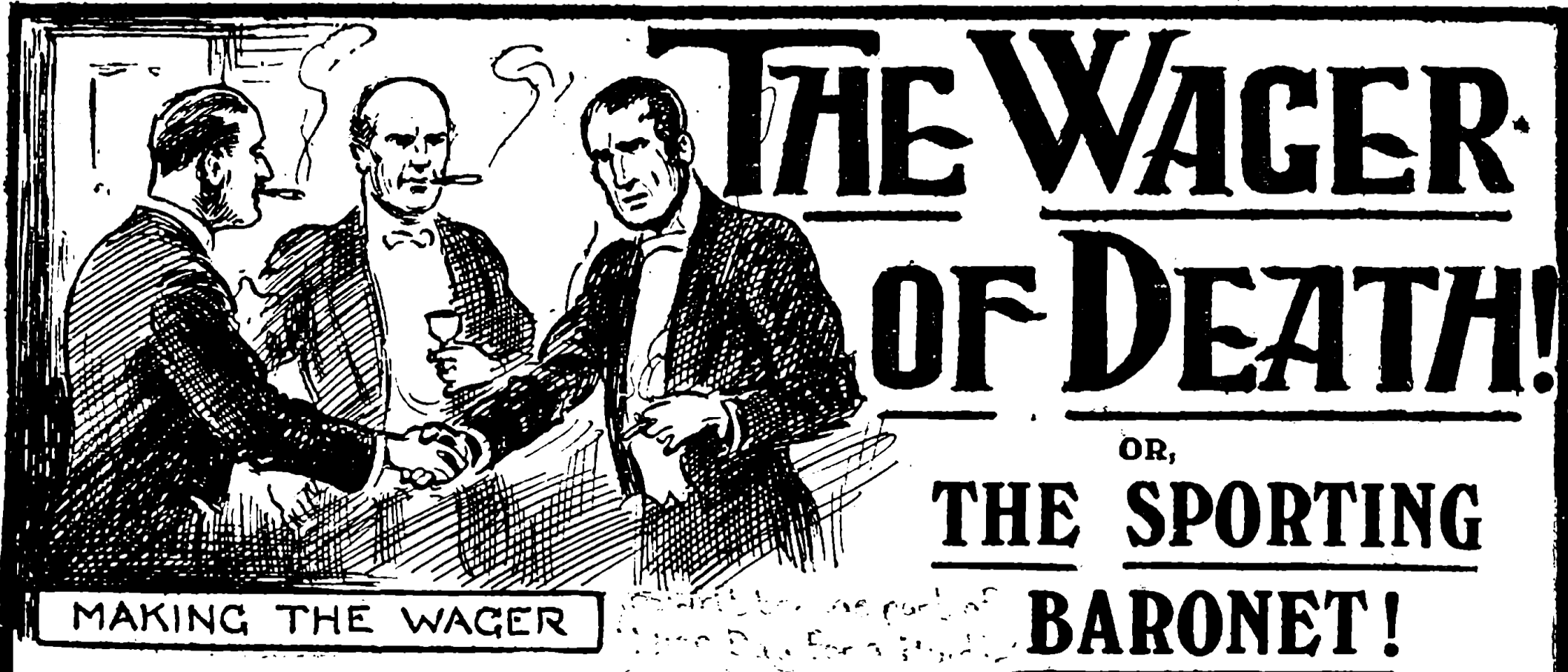
The Wager of Death



THE MISSING OVER-COAT BUTTON -

TINKER IS MADE TO TIE BLAKE UP -

The above incidents occur in the magnificent new long detective story starting inside. It features **SEXTON BLAKE** and **TINKER** in a baffling mystery, the story of which is told in an ingenious, convincing way. The tale is complete in this issue.



This fine story, by the author of the popular Waldo the Wonder-man yarns, has a particularly novel subject for its theme, and is, moreover, told in the gripping way which is characteristic of all U.J. fiction. Needless to say, Sexton Blake and Tinker play a big part in it, and altogether it is a fine example of a fascinating detective tale.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

"I Mean to Prove My Words!"

SIR HOWARD WESTLAKE took a sip of port and settled himself more comfortably in his easy chair. "Well, of course, I'm no great authority on the subject," he remarked. "But I should say that it would be impossible for anybody to reproduce the feelings of a man who is standing his trial for murder."

"It must be a shocking ordeal," said Mr. Roger Varley, tossing his cigar end into the blazing log fire. "It is easy enough for us to sit here discussing the matter, but it is a very different thing to the man who finds himself in the dock."

"I'm not assuming that the man is guilty," said Reggie Winterton. "My argument is this. Supposing a man, absolutely innocent, is placed in the dock for murder. What must his feelings be? What are his thoughts when he hears the Crown counsel outlining all the deadly facts against him—the circumstantial evidence? What must it be like for that innocent man to stand there, listening to the overwhelming evidence against him, and feeling the net drawing tighter and tighter around him? Personally, I should think it would be an ordeal that would turn him white-haired within a couple of days."

Sir Howard shook his head.

"Not necessarily, Reggie," he remarked. "We are taking it for granted that this man is innocent. Very well. If he is innocent, he will not be in any particular flurry. He will have sufficient confidence to carry him through. He will be quite sure in his own mind that the jury will return a verdict in his favour."

"And what if the jury finds him guilty?" asked Varley.

"Then, of course, the poor man will be driven almost out of his mind," said Sir Howard. "But, as I have said before, this matter is really one which cannot be discussed by people like us. We really know nothing of these matters, and it is purely a waste of time to talk about them."

Reggie Winterton laughed.

"Well, we're passing the time anyway," he said lightly. "The cigars are excellent, and that port of yours, Sir Howard, is absolutely top-hole."

The three men certainly looked extremely comfortable. It was a chill spring evening, and the trio were lounging in great easy chairs in front of the roaring log fire in Sir Howard Westlake's library.

Outside, the cold wind was whistling over the bleak countryside. Westlake Manor was situated in a particularly quiet part of Essex, and not very far from the sea.

The three men were very different. Sir Howard Westlake was big and red-faced, and somewhat coarse. He was about fifty years of age, and his head was practically bald, except for a grey fringe of hair at the rear. Sir Howard was immaculate, and it was very seldom that he had women of any kind in his house. He was a sporting man, and anything of the sporting interest always attracted him. Indeed, he looked something like a prosperous bookmaker.

Mr. Roger Varley, on the other hand, was a totally different type. Slim, austere, and severe looking, he seemed rather out of place in the companionship of these other two men. But, when he liked, Varley could be quite cheerful. And he was a wonderful chess player. It was for this reason, mainly, that Sir Howard had invited him down for the week-end. Sir Howard was very keen on chess, and he was an expert at the game himself. He only liked playing with a man who was his equal.



BLAKE



MANOR



TINKER



Reggie Winterton was quite a youngster. He was really a neighbour, for the Wintertons lived only a few miles away. Reggie's father, Reginald Winterton, M.P., was a rich landowner, and the Winterton estates were very extensive.

The young man was fresh-faced, fair, and well set up. His eyes were sparkling, and he always enjoyed the company of Sir Howard Westlake. It was quite a common occurrence for Reggie to drop in of an evening to play billiards with Sir Howard, or to join in a game of cards.

On this occasion they were having a chat after dinner before retiring to the billiard-room. Reggie had not known that Mr. Roger Varley would be present, or perhaps he would not have come. For Reggie did not like to butt in when he was not wanted. However, Sir Howard had made him very welcome, and the three were having quite an enjoyable time together.

Certainly, the subject under discussion was rather grim. For, somehow or other, the talk had got round to murder. This was probably because an important murder trial was even then being enacted at the Old Bailey.

Young Winterton lit a cigarette and leaned forward in his chair after a lengthy pause.

"We'll dismiss the subject of the actual trial," he said. "But there's this point. What must the sensation be when a man is arrested by the police? How must he feel when he's handcuffed and taken away on a charge of murder?"

"Assuming that he is innocent?" asked Sir Howard.

"Yes."

"I should say that he would feel perfectly confident," said the baronet. "Knowing that he is innocent, he would not worry in the slightest degree."

Roger Varley shook his head.

"I don't agree with that," he exclaimed. "Even supposing the man to be innocent, he would be in a pretty tight corner. Once the police arrest a man for murder, they do everything they possibly can to prove a case against him. And the man would be in a bit of a funk. Personally, I shouldn't much care for the ordeal. It would just about break me up."

"Even if you were absolutely innocent?" inquired Reggie.

"Yes," replied Varley. "Even if I was absolutely innocent. The very fact of being arrested would get on my nerves to such an extent—"

Reggie Winterton laughed.

"Well, I don't think it would have much effect upon me," he said. "If I suddenly found myself in the hands of the police, charged with murder, I should laugh at it. Being absolutely certain of myself—knowing that I was innocent—I should take the whole thing as a huge joke. It wouldn't worry me in the slightest degree."

Roger Varley gave an impatient gesture.

"That sort of talk is very cheap," he said, with a slight sneer in his voice. "I was perfectly frank with my statement. I am afraid you are inclined to be boastful, my boy. If you found yourself in the hands of the police, as you suggest, it would be a very different story. You would crumple up completely, and you would be a whimpering mass of nerves."

"Even if I had nothing whatever to do with the crime?" asked Reggie.

"Yes."

"Well, I'd like to wager on that!" said Reggie promptly. "I wouldn't mind betting a hundred pounds to a shilling that I'd keep my pecker up, and that I'd laugh at everything. Being arrested for

U. J.—No. 917.

a murder that I didn't commit wouldn't worry me in the slightest degree."

Sir Howard chuckled.

"Well, I don't suppose anybody will be conveniently murdered just so that you can win this wager," he exclaimed. "So it will be better, perhaps, to dismiss the subject altogether, and to get on to something more cheerful. I am afraid Varley's nerves are rather on edge."

"His temper, you mean, Sir Howard?" grinned Reggie.

Roger Varley snorted.

"Nothing of the kind!" he snapped.

"My temper is absolutely calm!"

His companions chuckled, for it was obvious that the very opposite was the case.

Reggie sat back in his chair, a very thoughtful expression in his eyes. He remained there for some little time. Then suddenly he sat forward. His eyes were now sparkling, and there was a flush on his face. He looked from Sir Howard Westlake to Roger Varley, and it was easy to see that an idea had occurred to him.

"Look here!" he exclaimed eagerly. "I've thought of something that will prove this—an idea that will give me an opportunity of getting myself arrested for murder!"

"Don't be absurd!" said Varley curtly.

"What's the idea?" inquired Sir Howard in a good-humoured voice.

"I hope I am not to be the unhappy victim?"

"Yes, that's just it! You are!" said Reggie.

"Eh?"

"You're the one who is to be murdered!" grinned Winterton.

"Well, it's just as well to be warned in advance!" said the baronet, smiling.

"What hare-brained scheme is this, Reggie? You always were a reckless youngster, but this seems to be something out of the common. I should just like to know how I am to be murdered. Will it be poison, a dagger, or a—"

"I'm not joking, Sir Howard—honestly!" said Reggie eagerly. "I mean, I'm not saying this just for the sake of talking. An idea has just come to me. It will enable me to get myself arrested for murder. You won't come to any harm, of course, and the police will be completely hoaxed."

"I'm to be murdered, and yet I sha'n't come to any harm?" inquired Sir Howard.

"Exactly."

"That seems interesting," said the host. "You'd better explain yourself, my lad. Well, I never expected to be murdered! By gad! This will be something fresh!"

Varley frowned.

"The best thing you can do is to dismiss the whole thing!" he said shortly. "I don't believe in joking on a subject of this kind!"

"But there's nothing in it at all, really!" said Reggie. "Nobody will come to any harm, and the police will be hoaxed beautifully! I know that you are a sportsman, Sir Howard, and I'm pretty sure that you'll agree to this scheme."

"Well, let's hear it," said the baronet, with a chuckle. "I don't suppose it will come to anything, but we might as well hear the details."

"Of course, I haven't planned it out thoroughly yet," said Winterton. "But, to begin with, it will be necessary for us to have a tremendous quarrel. For example, I shall come here on Monday evening, when you are alone, Sir Howard. We will have a tremendous bust-up—a regular slanging match. The servants will hear, of course, and I shall

take good care to shout out something to the effect that I will do you in!"

"Splendid!" said Sir Howard. "That paves the way admirably!"

It was quite clear that the baronet took the whole matter as a joke, and he did not for a moment anticipate that anything would come of it. It was quite probable that Reggie Winterton himself did not really believe that the scheme would be put into operation.

"Yes, that's the first step," went on Reggie. "Then on Monday night, Sir Howard, you must go away."

"Oh, I must go away?"

"Yes—quietly, so that nobody knows anything about it," said Reggie. "None of the servants must have any indication that you have left. You mustn't go in one of your own motor-cars, either; but that can easily be arranged. What you will do is to go straight to a little bungalow I've got on the South Coast. You'll be as safe as houses there, and nobody will know anything about it. It will be necessary for you to stay there about a week."

"I see," said Sir Howard. "And what happens in the meantime?"

"Well, on the Tuesday morning you will be missing," proceeded Reggie. "Don't you see the idea? The servants will come into the library, and they will find the whole place in disorder. There will be blood about, and there will be a knife left lying on the floor. It will be my knife, with my initials engraved upon it. There will be all sorts of other clues, too. The window will be left open, for example, and there will be footprints leading out into the open country. Those footprints will be mine."

Sir Howard nodded.

"I'm beginning to see the scheme now," he said. "Well, go on, Reggie."

"Everybody will take it for granted that you were murdered, and dragged out of the house," continued Winterton. "And, naturally, after a few investigations have been made by the police, it will be concluded that I did the horrid deed. Net result—I shall be arrested."

"H'm! It certainly seems very plausible," said Sir Howard, stroking his chin. "And I must admit that it rather appeals to me—"

"But, man alive, you can't enter into anything of this kind!" put in Varley sharply. "It would be preposterous—even dangerous! And what of the police? What would they do when they found out the truth?"

Sir Howard chuckled.

"My dear Varley, it doesn't matter a toss to me what the police do!" he said. "To tell you the honest truth, I've got a bit of a grudge against the local police, and I should rather enjoy hoaxing them!"

"The inspector at Westlake is an officious idiot, and he took very good care to be extremely self-important when he came to me a few weeks ago with regard to my cattle. A few bullocks happened to stray on to the main road two or three times, and the inspector kicked up the deuce of a dust. Said that I should have to put up new fences, and goodness knows what else. I packed him about his business."

Varley shook his head.

"I am afraid you are rather too blunt, Westlake," he said. "It makes you unpopular in the district—"

"What on earth do I care?" interrupted Sir Howard. "I am well aware of the fact that some people about here look upon me with stern disapproval. But they can mind their own infernal business, and I'll mind mine! And, as I said before, it would give me keen pleasure to play a joke on the police."

"But you can't call this thing a joke,"



said Varley. "It would involve all sorts of complications—"

"Nonsense!" said Sir Howard. "The idea is not at all a bad one."

The baronet was of an obstinate turn of mind, and Varley's attempts to persuade him to abandon the scheme had precisely the opposite effect. Sir Howard began to look upon it seriously, and not merely as a possibility. He and Varley were the best of friends; they had been for years. In fact, Varley was Sir Howard's confidant in all things. But the baronet did not like to be thwarted.

"Well, Reggie, go on," he said, lighting a fresh cigar. "How do you propose to get rid of my cumbersome person? If there is to be every appearance that a murder has been committed, there must be a body—or, at least, indications that the body has been done away with."

"The whole thing is utterly gruesome!" said Varley curtly.

"Don't take any notice of him!" smiled Sir Howard. "Go on, Reggie."

"Well, I think we can get over the difficulty all right," he said. "For example, the lake is tremendously deep; I've heard it said that the bottom can't be found in certain places. We can make it look as though you were dragged out to the lake, placed in a boat, and then dropped overboard—"

"Weighted, by gad!" chuckled Sir Howard. "That's rather good! The police would never be able to recover the body—of course they couldn't, seeing that I shall be on the South Coast! But they won't smell a rat when the body fails to turn up. And there's another point that struck me. What about this quarrel of ours on Monday night? We can't have a quarrel over nothing—there must be some subject brought up."

Winterton nodded.

"Of course," he agreed. "But that won't be so very difficult. It might be on a question of money, or—"

"One moment!" interrupted Sir Howard. "What about Sylvia?"

"Sylvia?"

"Exactly! You are engaged to Sylvia, and she is my niece!" exclaimed Sir Howard. "As her guardian, I have the right to put my foot down about this engagement. We could have a quarrel on that subject—"

"I don't quite like it, Sir Howard," put in Reggie, frowning. "Dash it all, I wouldn't like to have a row—even a faked one—about Sylvia. We can think of something better than that."

Varley sat forward impatiently.

"You speak as though you were seriously considering this preposterous scheme," he said. "But surely you must realise that it could not be done? Do you mean to tell me, Winterton, that you will allow yourself to be arrested on a charge of murder, and cause agony of mind to your fiancée and to your father?"

"Oh, with regard to the pater, I don't worry about him!" said Reggie lightly. "He could stand it all right. And as for Sylvia, I can decide what I shall do about her later on. Whatever happens, she'll believe in me all through."

"It'll be a test of her faith, anyhow, by gad!" said Sir Howard. "We mustn't leave anything to chance, Reggie. For example, if you want to get yourself arrested for this murder that isn't a murder, you mustn't be at home when you are supposed to be engaged in the cheerful task of putting me out of the way."

"Oh, that can easily be arranged," said Reggie. "I can come out late on Monday night, and I shall make certain that somebody sees me leave. In just the same way I shall show myself when I return—at about three o'clock in the

morning. I shall be wild-eyed and dishevelled then, and that'll set tongues wagging. Then, when the alarm is given in the morning, my unaccountable movements will be remembered, and I shall be under suspicion. Within a couple of hours I shall be locked up."

Varley snorted.

"And do you mean to tell me that you will undergo this ordeal?" he asked. "My dear boy, you don't seem to realise what it will mean, and I urge you to abandon the whole absurd project."

"Certainly not!" said Winterton. "I mean to prove my words—that is, if Sir Howard will agree. I maintain that there will be no terrors in being arrested, simply because I shall know that I am innocent. And I'll wager you a hundred-to-one, Varley, that I carry the whole thing through without turning a hair."

"You couldn't do it!" said Varley curtly. "Before the end of a week you would be a mental wreck. The strain would be too great for you—"

"Well, are you willing to wager on it?"

"I don't want to encourage you," said Varley gruffly. "I don't believe in the thing at all. And if I wagered it would only urge you on."

"Then you're not sincere—"

"Oh, yes, I am!" broke in Varley. "If you mean to go through with this mad scheme, I don't suppose I shall be able to stop you. And I will certainly take that bet."

"Done!" said Winterton promptly. "A hundred-to-one—in pounds—that I emerge from the ordeal cheerful and smiling, without being any the worse, mentally or physically."

The two men shook hands, and Sir Howard Westlake chuckled.

"Well, it seems that my fate is sealed!" he exclaimed, smiling.

And thus out of a casual conversation had come this extraordinary wager. Not one of the three men had originally thought that anything would ever come of that talk. Even now they knew that the whole scheme was opposed to commonsense and reason. But the compact had been made, and they were not the kind of men to draw back.

They had shaken hands upon the wager—the wager of death.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

"It Is My Duty to Detain You!"

CHIEF DETECTIVE - INSPECTOR LENNARD, of New Scotland Yard, stepped briskly out of the taxicab, told the driver to wait, and stepped across the pavement to the massive door of the old-fashioned house in Baker Street, London, W.

He pressed the bell, and in a few moments the door was opened by a somewhat stout, elderly lady in a spotlessly clean overall. It was quite early in the morning, and Sexton Blake's worthy housekeeper had been disturbed at her breakfast. She eyed the visitor without approval.

"Mr. Blake in?" asked Lennard crisply.

"Mr. Blake and Master Tinker are just having their breakfast, sir," replied the housekeeper. "I don't know as they'll like to be disturbed. Mr. Blake is very particular about his meals, and he don't like to be interrupted by callers. If I'm not being dispertinent, sir, I should advise you to wait—"

"Oh, that's all right, Mrs. Bardell!" interrupted the chief inspector. "I'll chance Blake's wrath, and beard him in his den during feeding-time. Don't trouble about announcing me. I'll go straight up."

Mrs. Bardell didn't quite like it; but

Lennard was a fairly frequent caller, and he had a masterful way with him. He brushed past the housekeeper, and ran up the stairs two at a time.

A moment later he burst unceremoniously into Blake's breakfast-room.

"Lazy beggars!" he exclaimed cheerfully. "Here's a time to be feeding! I had my breakfast hours ago, and I'm nearly hungry enough for lunch!"

Tinker grinned.

"Is that a way of inviting yourself to some grub?" he inquired. "Because, if so, there's nothing doing. We've scoffed everything, except one or two crusts, and a few pieces of bacon-rind for Pedro. You're welcome to them, if you like."

Lennard declined the offer without thanks, and shook hands with Sexton Blake. The famous criminologist was smiling, and he looked wonderfully fit. He quite understood that the chief inspector had not paid this early call merely for the sake of passing the time of day.

And Lennard was not long in getting to the point.

"Just on my way to Liverpool Street," he said briskly. "As I was coming down Holborn I thought of you, so I diverted the taxi from its course for a few minutes. I can't stop long, or I shall lose my train."

"Then what's the idea of coming?" asked Tinker. "Of course, it's a good thing we've finished breakfast, or your face would have ruined our appetites. What's the idea, Mr. Lennard? Out with it!"

The chief inspector frowned.

"I'm not speaking to you, my lad—I'm speaking to Blake!" he said gruffly. "The fact is, old man, we were rung up at the Yard quite early by the Colchester police. They believe that Sir Howard Westlake has been murdered under mysterious circumstances, and they appeal to the Yard to have a smart man sent down."

"Then why are you going?" asked Tinker innocently.

"My dear young ass, I don't intend to start a slanging-match with you now," said Lennard, with his usual good-nature. "As a matter of fact, I had nothing to do with it. The superintendent dropped on me as soon as I turned up. By all appearances, this is a very sensational case."

"Sir Howard Westlake?" repeated Blake musingly. "Isn't he the sporting baronet? I rather fancy I met him once—a big, blunt, somewhat coarse-looking individual. Have you any details, Lennard?"

"None worth speaking of," replied the chief-inspector. "I only know that Westlake Manor is in a state of disorder. Sir Howard has been murdered, and his body taken away—that's what the local people say, anyhow. I'm going down to have a look round, and—and— Well, I thought perhaps you'd care to come, Blake—if you're not busy. I know you're always interested in murder mysteries."

Sexton Blake looked thoughtful.

"H'm!" he said slowly. "As a matter of fact you have piqued my curiosity. And I'm not particularly busy to-day, either. "Thanks, Lennard! I'll accept your invitation with pleasure."

Tinker rubbed his hands together.

"Good business!" he said. "A day in the country will just buck me up. It's quite glorious this morning, too. What time is the train, Mr. Lennard?"

The inspector glanced at his watch doubtfully.

"Afraid we haven't got time to catch it now," he said. "I ought not to have called, strictly speaking—"

"You needn't worry," interrupted



Sexton Blake, reaching for the telephone. "I'll ring up my garage, and tell them to have my racer round at once. It'll be outside the door within five minutes, and we'll easily beat the train."

Lennard grinned.

"Just what I was angling for!" he said, with delightful candour. "I always prefer a private car to the railway. To be quite truthful, Blake, that's the only reason I came round—on the off-chance of being invited to run down by car."

"You artful old bounder!" said Tinker indignantly.

Sexton Blake's calculation had not been wrong, for within five minutes the famous detective's powerful racer was standing outside in Baker Street. Blake and Tinker were not long in getting ready. They merely bustled into their overcoats and travelling-caps, and they were prepared.

Sexton Blake did not regard the trip as one of any particular importance. But he had nothing on hand for the moment, and the idea of a run into the country by road rather appealed to him. Tinker, of course, was in full agreement.

The chief-inspector dismissed his taxi, and then climbed into the racer, seating himself beside Sexton Blake. Tinker squashed in, too.

They arrived at Westlake Manor after a journey which had been quite devoid of incident. Blake and Tinker were feeling very fit when the car came to a standstill. The ride had invigorated them, for the air was rather keen, and the sunlight was brilliant. They regarded Westlake Manor with approval.

It was a fine old building, and although the countryside round about was somewhat barren and bare, the Manor itself stood in some really delightful grounds. Away in the distance Blake could see the shimmering waters of a lake, or a river, and there were plenty of trees in all directions.

"Now, remember, Tinker, we are merely spectators," said Sexton Blake. "I have not been commissioned to look into this mystery, whatever it is, and so—"

"My dear Blake, you have my full permission to do exactly what you please!" interrupted Lennard. "You can roam about, and nose all over the show, if you want to. As a matter of fact, I shall welcome you, because you are as keen as mustard."

Before Sexton Blake could reply a uniformed inspector came down the imposing steps which led up to the front door. Just behind the police-inspector stood a constable, and they both saluted as Lennard walked forward.

"I'm glad you've come, sir," said the inspector. "My name is Dawson—Inspector Dawson. There's been some grim work here, Mr. Lennard. And I'm not at all sure whether we shall be able to get to the bottom of it. But there's no doubt that Sir Howard has been murdered."

"You found the body?"

"Oh, no, sir; we can't make out what's happened to it!" replied Inspector Dawson. "But if you'll come inside, sir, I shall be able to talk to you in private."

Lennard grinned.

"You needn't worry about these gentlemen," he said lightly. "Allow me to introduce Mr. Sexton Blake and Mr. Tinker. You may have heard of them."

The police-inspector looked up with a slight start. And he regarded Sexton Blake and Tinker with renewed interest. He bowed rather awkwardly.

"Very pleased to meet you, sir," he said, addressing Sexton Blake. "I've U. J.—No. 917.

heard a lot about you, sir, and Mr. Tinker. Have you come down to inquire into this case?"

"Only from a personal point of view," replied Sexton Blake. "Strictly speaking, I am an intruder, and I have no real business here. But Mr. Lennard requested me to come, and I accepted his invitation. If I can be of any service to you, I shall be only too delighted."

It was quite obvious that Inspector Dawson was impressed. And he led the way up the steps into the big lounge hall. There was an air of stateliness about the place which could not be overlooked. The antique furniture, the trophies from the hunt which adorned the walls, and the air of solid, old-fashioned respectability made quite an impression on one's mind.

"We may as well talk here," said Lennard, coming to a halt. "Now, Inspector Dawson, you might as well tell us all about it at once—tell us everything you know. By the way, who is in the house at the moment?"

"Nobody, except the servants, and they number only a few," replied the police-inspector. "You see, Sir Howard Westlake lived quite alone, except for his niece, Miss Sylvia. But she is away at present, and she wasn't expected back until to-day."

"And what are the main facts?" asked the Scotland Yard man.

"Well, we don't know very much, sir," replied Dawson. "I haven't been here long myself, and I have had very little chance of making any real investigation. I have already questioned the butler, but I can't get very much out of him. It seems that when the servants came down this morning, they found the library in a state of disorder. There had evidently been a struggle, and there are bloodstains in many places. The French windows of the library are wide open, and there are quite a number of footprints on the carpet."

"Has anything been disturbed?" asked Sexton Blake.

"Not a thing, sir," replied Inspector Dawson. "I was very particular about that, because I knew that Mr. Lennard was coming down, and he would want to see everything just as it was found. The puzzling point about the whole affair is that Sir Howard has completely vanished."

"He was evidently murdered, and his body was taken away. But why such a thing should be done is quite beyond me. But I don't think we shall have any difficulty in obtaining some very good clues, Mr. Lennard. There is the knife, for example, and the footprints. Then, again, it is fairly clear that Sir Howard's body was dragged out of the library, and taken down to the lake. I've discovered that much."

"H'm!" said Lennard. "You assume, then, that the body has been thrown into the lake?"

"Well, it certainly looks like it, sir," replied the inspector. "But perhaps you'd better have a look round yourself, and see what you can make of things. In my opinion, Jevon knows more about the affair than anybody else."

"And who's Jevon?" asked the Scotland Yard man.

"Oh, he's the butler," said Dawson.

"All right, trot him out!" said Lennard. "We'll have a chat with him before we go any further. I always like to get as many facts together as possible before I start the actual examination. We'll have a look at Jevon before we go any further."

The police-inspector nodded, and rang a bell. A few moments later an elderly man appeared. He was round-shouldered, clean-shaven, and there was an expression of worry and trouble in his

eyes. This was Jevon, the butler; and it was quite easy to see that he was almost dazed by this sudden blow which had fallen upon the household. He looked as though he had been in Sir Howard's service nearly all his life. He was an old retainer. And he came forward with faltering footsteps.

"Pull yourself together, Jevon," said the police-inspector kindly. "Matters won't be made any better by your worrying. These gentlemen are from London, and they would like to ask you some questions."

"Very good, sir," said the butler, in a low voice. "It's a dreadful business, gentlemen—a terrible affair. Whoever would have thought that the poor master would meet with an end like this? But maybe he's not dead. They haven't found the body, anyway, and it's just possible that Sir Howard might be lying somewhere, injured—"

"Yes, of course," interrupted the chief inspector. "But we will go into those details later, Jevon. At the moment I want to ask you some questions. I understand that you were the first person in the house to discover that something was wrong?"

"Yes, sir, that's quite right," said the butler.

"Tell us all about it," said Lennard. "Don't hurry yourself, and think carefully."

"Well, sir, I don't know as there's much to tell," said Jevon slowly. "The master was perfectly all right last night, and in the best of spirits. The last time I saw him alive was when I said good-night in the library. That would be about eleven o'clock, sir. He told me to go to bed, as he would be up, reading."

"Did Sir Howard often do that?"

"Oh, yes, sir—nearly always," said Jevon. "As a rule, he went up to bed just after midnight; but I don't remember him coming upstairs last night at all. I suppose I was asleep, and didn't hear him. Well, this morning, sir, I went into the library. I'm always the first to go in of a morning, because I open the windows, and pull the curtains aside, and all that sort of thing."

"Well," said Lennard, "what did you find this morning?"

"Ah, it's terrible, sir!" said the old butler, shaking his head. "I knew there was something wrong the very minute I entered the room, because the curtains were pulled aside, and the French windows were standing wide open. The sun was shining straight into the library, sir. I stood in the doorway, fairly amazed for a minute or two. Two of the chairs were lying over on their backs, there were many footprints all over the floor, and—and bloodstains, sir!"

"Many bloodstains?"

"Yes, quite a lot, sir—and a knife!" said the butler. "The knife was lying on the floor, midway between the desk and the French windows. It was all stained, and I was in a rare state of worry."

"What was the first thing you did?" asked Sexton Blake.

"Why, sir, I went upstairs," replied Jevon. "I knew that something was wrong, and I guessed that the master had met with an accident, or foul play. And I went straight up to his bed-room to see if he was there. I knocked on the door several times, but I couldn't get any answer. So I walked in. And I found that Sir Howard wasn't upstairs, and, by all appearances, he hadn't been in bed all night, because everything in the bed-room is in perfect order, and the bed itself isn't even disturbed."

"I see," said Lennard. "Well, what next?"

"I came downstairs, sir, shouting for—"

(Continued on page 8.)



It was evident that a struggle had taken place. (Page 8.)



Sexton Blake went down on his knees and lifted Sir Howard's right hand. (Page 11.)

"It is my duty to detain you, Mr. Winterton." (Page 10.)



assistance," said Jevon. "I was very excited, sir, and very worried. Two or three of the servants came running up, and we went into the library together."

"Did you interfere with anything?" asked Lennard sharply. "Did you touch anything in the library?"

"No, sir, only the knife," said Jevon. "I picked that up, and laid it on the desk. And then I suddenly thought that I'd better send for the police, or ring them up. I did so, sir, and before long a constable came."

"That's quite right," put in Inspector Dawson. "The constable saw at once that it was a big affair and more than he could handle. So he very sensibly rang me up at the station without any delay. I came along as soon as possible."

Lennard nodded.

"Well, it seems fairly clear that Sir Howard was attacked late last night before retiring to bed," he said. "Now, Jevon, do you remember anything occurring during the night? Did you hear any strange sounds?"

"No, sir; there was nothing out of the ordinary."

"What about the other servants?"

"I have questioned them all," put in Dawson. "They know nothing, Mr. Lennard—absolutely nothing. The first they heard of this mystery was when Jevon told them, this morning. None of the servants heard anything during the night—no disturbance, no shouts, or anything. In my opinion, it happened between eleven o'clock and midnight. And I should judge that somebody lurked outside the library windows, and forced his way upon Sir Howard after the butler went to bed."

"H'm! That seems the most likely explanation, of course," said the chief inspector. "By the way, Jevon, did Sir Howard Westlake have any late callers last night?"

The butler hesitated.

"No, sir," he said at length, "there were no late callers."

"Was Sir Howard alone all the evening?"

Again Jevon hesitated.

"He wasn't exactly alone all the evening, sir," he answered. "But I don't think there's any connection—"

"Come, come, Jevon!" interrupted Lennard sharply. "We want all the facts. It doesn't matter whether they seem to be connected or not. Who called upon your master last evening?"

"Mr. Reginald Winterton, sir."

"And who is he?" asked the Yard man. "Have you seen Mr. Winterton before? Do you know him?"

"Why, bless your life, sir, Mr. Reginald is always in and out," said the butler. "I've known him since he was a baby, sir—one of the finest, straightest young gentlemen you could wish to meet. He's engaged to Miss Sylvia, the master's niece, sir."

"Well, simply because he happened to call during the evening, we are not going to suspect or arrest him," smiled Lennard. "We are only gaining all the information we can, Jevon. Who is Mr. Reginald Winterton?"

"Why, he's what you might call a neighbour, sir," replied the butler. "His father is Mr. Reginald Winterton, M.P., and he lives only a mile or two away—on the next estate, as you might say. The families have been the best of friends ever since I can remember, and I've been in the service of Sir Howard, man and boy, for the last fifty-eight years."

"How long did Mr. Winterton stay here?" asked the Yard man.

"About half an hour, I should think, sir," replied Jevon. "He came at about nine o'clock, and left at half-past."

Both Sexton Blake and Chief Inspector U. J.—No. 917.

Lennard noticed that the butler looked rather uncomfortable while making these answers. He was certainly not at his ease, and Lennard couldn't quite understand it. He decided to put his questions more closely.

"You say that young Mr. Winterton came here at nine o'clock last night, and stayed for half an hour," he exclaimed. "Do you happen to know why Mr. Winterton called?"

"Not—not exactly, sir."

"What do you mean—not exactly?" demanded the chief inspector. "Have you any idea of the object of his visit?"

"I don't see that this is connected—"

began the butler.

"Look here, Jevon, this won't do," interrupted Lennard grimly. "You are attempting to keep something back, and you must remember that we want all the facts. What happened when Mr. Winterton called upon Sir Howard last night?"

"Nothing—nothing actually happened, sir," said the butler. "But I think Mr. Reginald and the master had a few words."

"You think they did?"

"Well, I know it, sir," admitted Jevon reluctantly.

"And what do you mean exactly by 'a few words'?"

"I don't exactly know what it was about, sir," said Jevon. "And it's most unusual for Mr. Reginald to have any words at all. They've always been on the very best of terms. Why, Sir Howard, to tell the truth, always treated Mr. Reginald as though he were his own son. They never had a cross word before in all their lives."

"But, in short, last night they quarrelled?"

"Yes, sir," said the butler, in a low voice.

"Now, Jevon, you had better tell us the exact truth," pressed the chief inspector. "First of all, you said that Sir Howard and Mr. Winterton had a few words, and now you say that they quarrelled. Was it a serious quarrel?"

"Well, I believe it was, sir," admitted Jevon. "We all heard it—even the other servants. Mr. Reginald was very excited, and he shouted at the top of his voice. By what I could understand, he wanted some money, and Sir Howard wouldn't let him have it. And in the end Mr. Reginald went storming through the hall, shouting out that he'd get even, and that—that—"

The butler came to a stop suddenly, and closed his mouth.

"Well, go on!" said Lennard.

"That—that's all sir."

"No, it isn't all," went on Lennard. "Tell us exactly what Mr. Winterton said; his precise words, if you can remember them. Did he threaten Sir Howard?"

"Well, it sounded like it, sir."

"Sounded like it—eh?" said Lennard. "Come along, Jevon, let's have the exact words. You surely must remember them!"

"Very well," said the butler. "What Mr. Reginald said was this: 'I'll be back before long, and if you don't let me have that money I'll—I'll settle you for good!' That's what he said."

The chief inspector exchanged significant glances with Sexton Blake and Tinker.

"Oh, Mr. Winterton said that, did he?" said Lennard grimly. "Are you sure they are the exact words, Jevon?"

"Yes, sir, the exact words," said the butler. "Please don't think too much of them, sir," he added pleadingly. "I could see that Mr. Reginald had been drinking, although I've never known him to be like that before. He's always so good-tempered and kindly, sir. I can't

think what came over him last night to speak in that way and to make such a row. It was terrible, sir! But I'm sure that Mr. Reginald didn't do anything to the master."

"I hope your confidence in Mr. Reginald will be justified," said Lennard. "Do you know anything else?"

"No, sir, nothing at all," said the old butler. "But I'm certain that Mr. Reginald is innocent."

"If that is the case he has nothing to fear," said the chief inspector. "And now I think we'll go along and have a look at the library. What do you say, Blake?"

"Just as you like," said Sexton Blake. "I'm only a spectator, you know."

As they walked towards the library, Tinker managed to have a few words with his master.

"What do you think of it, gov'nor?" he asked softly.

"I have really formed no opinion so far, Tinker," replied Blake. "The facts concerning Reginald Winterton are certainly very significant; but, after all, the evidence is purely circumstantial. It is quite possible that the young fellow will be able to prove a perfect alibi. But that remains to be seen. I shall be quite interested to have a look at the library. And here we are!"

They were ushered into the apartment by Jevon, who stood aside and allowed them to enter. Lennard and Blake went first, and Tinker and Inspector Dawson brought up the rear. And they stood just inside the door, looking at the room keenly.

It was quite evident that a struggle had taken place, for the furniture was disarranged, and the carpet was decidedly rucked up in one or two places. A pile of papers on the desk lay scattered upon the floor, and here and there were some ominous bloodstains. In one portion of the carpet there was quite a large, ugly patch. Here and there, spattered about, were other bloodstains, some of them actually being on the papers.

"Well, the murderer was very thoughtful," said Lennard, after a moment or two. "He has left us some excellent footprints, Blake. What do you think of them? Quite clearly defined—eh?"

"Yes, unless they are Sir Howard's," said Sexton Blake.

"They're not," put in Inspector Dawson. "I've already found that out, sir. Sir Howard took a much larger size; and he was wearing slippers, too. These footprints are those of a size eight boot, and the man was wearing rubber heels."

"Yes, I can see that," said Sexton Blake, nodding.

The footprints were, indeed, very clear. It was almost as though the wearer had been standing in mud, and had then stood deliberately in the library for the express purpose of leaving his trail behind. Lennard walked forward, taking great care not to disturb anything, and picked up a knife from the table.

"We'd better leave everything as it is," he remarked. "We shall have the draughtsman and photographer down from the Yard before long, and there'll be an infernal row if the room is disturbed. So this is the knife—eh? Quite an ugly-looking article."

He handled the knife very gingerly, not because of any natural repugnance, but because he did not want to disturb any possible finger-prints. It was a large, old-fashioned dagger, of a type that one sees hanging upon a wall, probably with another one to make a pair. It was unsheathed, and the blade revealed some significant stains. Lennard turned it over, and then emitted a soft whistle.

"James!" he muttered. "Look at this!"



Sexton Blake went to the chief inspector's side, and then understood the reason for that soft whistle; for upon the handle of the dagger were some initials, carved into the hard ebony, and these initials were "R. W." Jevon caught sight of the initials, and turned slightly pale.

"May Heaven help the boy!" he muttered under his breath.

Lennard turned.

"Did you know that these initials were on the knife, Jevon?" he asked.

"No, sir," said the butler. "I didn't notice them when I picked the knife up."

"Well, without a doubt they are the initials of Reginald Winterton," said Lennard grimly. "All this pieces together in a most satisfactory manner."

"Dash it all, it's a bit thick!" put in Tinker. "Supposing that Winterton is the murderer, he wouldn't have been fool enough to leave this knife behind."

"That is exactly what I was thinking," said Sexton Blake smoothly.

Lennard looked round.

"Oh, I don't know," he exclaimed. "Murderers do queer things at times, Blake. And Winterton doesn't seem to be the kind of fellow to do a job of this kind deliberately. I don't suppose there was much in that threat of his, but he came back between eleven and twelve to try his luck again. He and Sir Howard got talking, high words followed, and then a scrap. Winterton probably snatched up the knife, and the thing was done in a jiffy. That's how murders are committed sometimes—in hot blood."

Sexton Blake nodded.

"I quite agree with you on the main points, Lennard," he said. "But you are overlooking one or two facts. This knife is Winterton's, by the look of it, and it is only reasonable to suppose that it was brought here by the murderer. That indicates premeditation. Again, assuming Winterton to be the criminal, and assuming that he lost his head sufficiently to leave the knife behind, why did he take such a large amount of trouble to dispose of the body? If you have it one way, you can't have it the other. And I maintain that if Winterton was calm enough to drag the body out of the library, then he was equally calm enough to take the knife away and to destroy his tracks."

"Exactly!" said Tinker.

Lennard grunted.

"It's all very well to talk like that—logic, and all the rest of it!" he growled. "But we've got to go on facts, Blake. And here the facts are as clear as daylight. Winterton came here in the evening, and had a row with Sir Howard. He threatened to come back later on. And now, this morning, the library is found in this state, with blood all over the show, and with this knife on the floor. Sir Howard himself has vanished, and the assumption is that he has been carried away and hidden somewhere. And it's a ten-to-one chance that he's dead."

"I quite agree with that," said Sexton Blake. "I think there is very little doubt that Sir Howard is dead. But supposing we go outside, and have a look round? It is possible that we shall hit on something of importance."

They did not go through the French windows, but turned, passed through the hall, and then went round the house. It was a roundabout way, but neither Lennard nor Sexton Blake wanted to destroy the footprints in the library. And they were soon standing outside the French windows upon the hard gravel path.

"H'm!" muttered the chief inspector. "There's plenty to look at here, anyway!"

The gravel path extended right up to

the French windows, and the surface was rather soft near the big glass doors. There were quite a number of footprints, and some peculiar scraping marks, and, here and there, some spots of dried blood. Then curious scraping lines went right down the path in an irregular fashion, and came to a stop against a flower-bed.

"Well, one can read this quite easily," said Lennard, puckering his eyebrows.

"I should say that Sir Howard was dragged out of the library, and then along the path here. These marks were made by his heels as he was pulled along. What do you say, Blake?"

"Your surmise is probably correct," said Sexton Blake. "The body was then taken across that flower-bed, over the grass, and then on to the other flower-bed at the bottom. It is quite easy to follow the trail."

"As easy as kissing your hand!" put in Tinker.

There was no doubt that he was right. The whole thing was obvious. A man with only half an eye could tell exactly what had happened. The trail was clear.

The first flower-bed near the French windows was trampled on, and the flowers and small bushes were smashed and flattened down. The grass on the lawn was quite short, but, despite this, it was easy to see where the body had been dragged. The little party went along, examining the ground keenly.

They came to the flower-bed at the bottom, and this told the same story. They went on, through a little shrubbery, and then across a wide strawberry-bed. There had been no attempt whatever to conceal any tracks. Across the strawberry-bed was a distinct, wavering line, where the murderer had dragged his victim. The strawberry plants were bruised and torn up and battered.

"Well, we're getting on," said the chief inspector. "Have you been out here before, Dawson?"

"Why, yes, Mr. Lennard."

"And what conclusion have you arrived at?"

"Well, it seems quite clear to me, sir, that the body was dragged over towards the lake," said the police inspector. "This trail leads direct to the water. It's only a few yards farther now, anyhow."

At the bottom of the strawberry-bed there was a hedge, and a distinct gap had been made. It was not a natural gap, but one which had been literally hacked out of the hedge.

The little party passed through this gap one after the other, and found themselves upon a grassy slope which led down to the water's edge; and away in front of them stretched the lake. It was of quite a respectable size, and most irregular in shape. It went round into little unexpected corners, and here and there were tiny islands. The banks on nearly all sides were very thickly wooded. In the summer-time the place would be a paradise—a glorious spot for a quiet, cool afternoon.

Sexton Blake and Lennard went down to the edge of the water, and there the trail came to an end. There was not the slightest doubt that the body had been dragged to the spot, and had then either been placed in the water or into a boat. As it happened, a punt was lying quite near by.

"Oh, there's one thing I want to tell you, sir," said Inspector Dawson. "We found that punt floating about some little distance away. It was among the reeds, and had evidently been abandoned. I was just about to examine it when I heard your car come."

An examination of the punt proved to be very significant, for there was

blood upon it, clear and distinct. But, beyond this, there was very little to be seen, since the punt was quite dry, and the boards smooth. But as Sexton Blake was bending over it, he suddenly reached down and took something from between two of the boards.

"What's that?" asked Lennard, looking round.

"A cuff-link—gold, and studded with pearls," said Blake. "You'd better take charge of it, Lennard. It'll probably be useful for identification purposes."

The chief inspector nodded.

"Well, hang it all, there's nothing in this affair at all," he said bluntly. "It's as plain as a pikestaff. This cuff-link is obviously the property of young Winterton. It's an expensive article. Everything points to the fact that Winterton is the murderer. And I'll bet a fiver to a split pea that the body is in this lake at the present moment."

"I think there's very little doubt about that, sir," said Dawson. "But whether we shall ever recover the body is another matter."

"Oh, I don't know," said Lennard. "I think you'd better get some of your men to work, Dawson. Drag the lake thoroughly—"

"I was thinking about the same thing, sir, but I'm not sure whether we shall be successful," said the police inspector. "I'm told that this lake is very, very deep in parts—so deep that it's difficult to find the bottom. And it would certainly be impossible to drag at such a depth. It's my belief, Mr. Lennard, that the body was weighted somehow, perhaps with some bricks or scrap-iron, and then it was thrown overboard into the deepest part of the lake. If that turns out to be the case, it's very doubtful that we shall be able to recover it."

"Well, we must do our best," said Lennard. "You'd better be getting busy on the job, Dawson. In the meantime, I'll run over to Winterton's place, and have a few words with him. In fact, I shall be compelled to place him under arrest on suspicion. I'll take one of your men with me."

"Very good, sir," said Dawson. "Mr. Winterton lives at the Lodge, just about two miles away."

Lennard nodded.

"Right!" he said briskly. "I'll go over there at once, and make a few inquiries. I can't afford to waste any time on a matter of this sort. Are you coming, Blake?"

"Yes, if you have no objection," said Sexton Blake.

"Good!" grinned the chief inspector. "Then we can use your car."

They were soon off, but the journey was only a short one. Millhurst Lodge, the residence of Mr. Reginald Winterton, M.P., was a semi-modern mansion, standing quite near to the road. And as Sexton Blake steered the car up the big gravel drive towards the front door, a young man lounged out from another doorway, and stood looking on in a careless, indifferent kind of fashion. He was very well dressed, and quite handsome in appearance. Lennard looked at him sharply.

"I rather fancy that's our man!" he muttered. "And he seems cool enough, by gad!"

The young fellow came forward, regarding the visitors with interest.

Both Sexton Blake and Detective-Inspector Lennard noticed one thing at the same moment. The young man was wearing a soft shirt of some silken material, and the left cuff was held by a pearl-studded gold link. The other cuff was loose—the link was missing!



Lennard was quite blunt.

"Are you Mr. Reginald Winterton, junior?" he asked.

"Yes, that's my name," he said.

"Anything I can do for you?"

"I am Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard," said the C.I.D. man curtly. "I am in this district concerning the murder of Sir Howard Westlake, and I am afraid it is my duty to detain you, Mr. Winterton."

Reggie laughed.

"Detain me!" he exclaimed. "What on earth for? You don't suspect me, surely?"

"I am very sorry, Mr. Winterton, but the available evidence makes it imperative that I should place you under arrest," said the chief inspector. "I hope you will take it calmly, and without any bother. If you are innocent of this suspected crime, you have nothing to fear."

"I am innocent!" declared Winterton promptly. "I swear on oath that I didn't kill Sir Howard Westlake!"

"I should advise you to say as little as possible, sir!" broke in Lennard. "Take my advice, and keep quiet. I warn you that anything you say may be taken down and used as evidence against you."

There was no fuss and no bother. Winterton allowed himself to be placed under arrest, and he went off at once, smiling and apparently cheerful. Neither Sexton Blake nor Tinker could quite understand his attitude.

"I believe he's guilty, sir!" murmured Tinker. "When an innocent man is arrested he gets a terrific shock, and becomes indignant, and all the rest of it. A guilty man can take it in all sorts of ways; he can either bluff it out, or crumble to pieces, or appear indifferent. It seems to me that the young chap is guilty."

"On the surface, it certainly seems that such is the case," said Sexton Blake. "But I have an idea that there is something behind all this, Tinker. I do not know why, but I am not satisfied with the evidence. It is too obvious—too plain and straightforward. There are many questions which are puzzling me. Would a murderer really leave so many traces? Would he allow himself to be given away so completely? And why were there no shouts in the night? Why did the servants hear nothing? It is very puzzling. I must confess."

And, before long, the evidence was even stronger. For it only needed a few inquiries at Millhurst Lodge to ascertain the fact that Reggie Winterton had been out late the previous night—and he had not come home until nearly three a.m. He had then been in a wild, dishevelled state.

Lennard gained this information from one or two of the servants, who had been aroused by young Winterton's return. Reggie had refused to give any account of himself to these servants, and had appeared to be dazed and bewildered.

In fact, from first to last, there was absolutely cast-iron evidence that Reggie Winterton junior had committed the murder. There was not a single loophole of escape. There was no other way to think. Every clue—every indication—led to the conclusion that Reggie had murdered Sir Howard Westlake.

"I'm afraid it's been rather a wild goose chase for you, old man," said Lennard, addressing Sexton Blake. "There's no mystery about this affair—no intricate details such as you gloat in. It's as clear as daylight from start to finish—a crime of hot blood, I should say. And Reginald Winterton is the murderer. The net is tightly round him, and there will be no escape. It's not

U. J. No. 917.

merely a question of circumstantial evidence, but—"

Lennard was interrupted at this moment by the arrival of Mr. Reginald Winterton senior. He had just come down from London by car, having heard the news concerning his neighbour an hour or so earlier. And when he learned that his son had been placed under arrest he nearly had an apoplectic fit.

Mr. Winterton, M.P. was a big, stoutish man of about fifty. His face was clean-shaven, except for an iron-grey moustache, and he wore gold-rimmed pince-nez. It took him some time to recover from the shock, and then he was boiling with fury.

"Confound your infernal blundering!" he exclaimed fiercely. "By gad! You will hear more of this! You must be absolutely mad to arrest my son on such a charge! He and Sir Howard were the very best of friends, and it is absolutely preposterous to assume—"

"Please calm yourself, Mr. Winterton," broke in Lennard. "I can assure you that I thought very carefully before placing your son under arrest. You do not know the details, or you would not speak in this way. The evidence against your son is of an overwhelming nature."

"Rubbish!" shouted Mr. Winterton. "Nonsense!"

But he altered his tone when all the facts had been laid before him.

Mr. Winterton was staggered by that long list of deadly facts. From first to last the evidence all pointed to young Winterton as the murderer. Reggie had quarrelled with Sir Howard—threatened to return. He had been away from home during the hours of eleven o'clock and three a.m. He had returned in a state which was obviously an excited one. Sir Howard had been missing in the morning, and the library at Westlake Manor had been in a state of disorder.

On the top of all this there was the fact that the knife found in the library was the property of young Winterton. It was one of a pair, and the fellow knife was hanging in Reggie's own private den. There were the footprints, the cuff-links—everything, in fact. It was one long succession of positive, established facts. By all appearances, Reginald Winterton junior was a doomed man; nothing could save him from the scaffold.

Winterton senior was distracted almost beyond words. He was staggered—dazed. This blow had come to him suddenly; he had never expected anything like it. He sat in his chair, crumpled up, almost a shadow of his former self.

But then, suddenly, he pulled himself together and rose to his feet.

"Mr. Blake, you are not connected with the official police," he exclaimed huskily. "Will you look into this case for me? Will you accept my commission to investigate the matter thoroughly, inside and out? In spite of all the evidence, I am convinced that some terrible mistake has been made. I cannot believe that Reggie would do this thing. I do not think he is capable of it. And, in my heart, I believe that he is innocent. Will you do your best to help him?"

Sexton Blake shrugged his shoulders.

"Really, Mr. Winterton, I fail to see that I can be of any use," he said. "You would only be incurring needless expense in employing me on a case of this kind. The evidence is absolutely deadly. If I do investigate, as you wish, it is more than probable that the results of my inquiries will be to condemn your son even more thoroughly."

"In that case, Mr. Blake, I shall not grumble," said Mr. Winterton brokenly. "If my son has really committed this

crime, then he will receive no pity from me. I cannot believe it. All I want is the truth—the absolute truth. And I am satisfied that you will be able to discover the truth. You can name any fee you wish, Mr. Blake, if you will only consent to investigate. You are here—on the spot—and I urge you to do everything that is humanly possible."

"Very well, Mr. Winterton, I will look into the matter," said Sexton Blake quietly. "But I must ask you not to rely on me too much. I will do everything I can, but more than that I cannot say."

Before Mr. Winterton could reply the telephone-bell rang. He lifted the receiver from its hook, and then turned to Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard.

"It is Inspector Dawson," he said. "He wishes to speak to you, Mr. Lennard."

Lennard nodded, crossed to the 'phone, and placed the receiver to his ear. He listened intently for a few moments, and then, in a mechanical way, he nodded.

"All right, Dawson, I'll come over at once," he said at last. "Don't interfere with anything."

He hung up the receiver and turned round.

"The body has been found!" he said grimly. "It was in the lake, just as we expected, Blake. I must go over at once."

The body of Sir Howard Westlake had been found!

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

"Give Me a Matchbox!"

INSPECTOR DAWSON was waiting near the bank of the lake when Sexton Blake and Tinker and the Scotland Yard man appeared. And near by something lay on the ground—something which was covered with a travelling rug. The newcomers needed no telling what that something was. And the police inspector was looking rather shaky.

"How did you find it, Dawson?" asked Lennard bluntly.

"Oh, no difficulty, sir," said Dawson. "I took out a small boat with one of the constables, with the intention of making a brief survey of the lake. And we were in the west corner when I noticed something tangled up among the reeds. We altered our direction at once, and soon discovered that it was Sir Howard's body. We brought it ashore at once, and laid it down there. I should say he was dead before he entered the water, Mr. Lennard."

"Stabbed?" asked Lennard.

"Yes, sir—in the back."

Lennard turned to Sexton Blake.

"I'm afraid your investigations are not going to help Mr. Winterton much," he said. "I don't see what you can do in this case, Blake. Man alive, you must know that it's absolutely impossible to clear the young fellow! He's guilty—he committed the murder. There's no other way to think."

Sexton Blake nodded.

"So it appears, Lennard—so it appears," he said thoughtfully. "But supposing we have a look at the body?"

It was rather a gruesome business, examining all that remained of Sir Howard Westlake. There was not the slightest doubt that the dead man was the baronet. Inspector Dawson recognised him at once. The body had also been identified by Jevon, the butler, and two or three other servants.

Lennard did not spend very much time on his examination. He merely satisfied himself that Sir Howard had been stabbed, as Dawson had said, and he came to the conclusion that the baronet had died as a result of that stab. In



short, he had been dead before being pitched into the lake.

"Well, this clears it up completely," said Lennard at length. "There's no need for us to look any farther."

"On the contrary," said Sexton Blake, "I think the case is more complicated."

"What do you mean?"

"My dear Lennard, consider all the facts," said Blake quietly. "If we accept them as they stand, then we must also accept the fact that Reginald Winterton is a most unusual type of murderer—that, in fact, he committed this crime and did everything humanly possible to get himself arrested."

"I don't quite follow that," said Lennard.

"But, my dear man, you must!" went on Sexton Blake. "To begin with, Winterton openly quarrelled with Sir Howard. He even uttered threats as he passed out through the hall—threats which all the servants heard. And when he left his own home, late at night, he did so, not in a stealthy manner, but in quite the opposite way. Two or three of the servants saw him depart, and at least two of them saw him come back. If Winterton had chosen, he could have avoided this. He could have left his bed-room secretly, and he could have returned secretly. And there would have been no evidence that he had been absent during the night."

"While he was at the Manor here, he not only left distinct footprints, but also left behind a dagger bearing his initials. He then brought the body down to this lake and cast it into the water, carelessly leaving one of his cuff-links in doing so. And, instead of disposing of Sir Howard in the most obvious way—by attaching weights to the body—he merely placed it in the water, so that it would float. My dear Lennard, you cannot get away from the facts, and they are very peculiar. If Reginald Winterton is the murderer, then I can only say that he is anxious to have a rope placed round his neck."

The chief inspector scratched his head.

"Yes, it certainly does seem a bit queer," he admitted. "But, dash it all, Blake, there's nothing else to think! It's the only possible conclusion we can arrive at. Here are the facts, as plain as possible. I can only assume that Winterton was either mad with rage or intoxicated. The latter is probably the real truth. Being under the influence of drink, he would not realise exactly what he was doing, although he was quite sober enough to commit the murder, and to bring the body down to the lake. It was the details he overlooked."

"I should like to have a word with the young man," said Sexton Blake thoughtfully. "Do you think it would be possible for me to have a little private talk, Lennard? He has not actually been charged with the murder yet, and—"

"Yes, yes; you can have a chat with him if you want to," said the Scotland Yard man. "He isn't far away—merely in the local lock-up. I'll scrawl a few words on the back of one of my cards, if it would be of any use to you."

"Thanks very much, Lennard," said Sexton Blake. "I will take advantage of your offer."

It only took the chief inspector a few moments to scribble the few words. Blake transferred this into his own waistcoat-pocket, and then stood looking thoughtfully at the body. Lennard was now in close conversation with Inspector Dawson. And Tinker, who was standing by, watched his master. For Tinker knew that Sexton Blake was not satisfied. Tinker could see that the famous detective was troubled by doubt. The evidence was plain enough, but that was

just what was wrong. It was too plain—too obvious.

After a moment or two Sexton Blake went down on his knees, and lifted Sir Howard's right hand. Then suddenly the detective bent closer. He forced back the dead man's fingers, and looked up at Tinker.

"Give me a matchbox, young 'un," he said briskly.

"A matchbox?" repeated Tinker, without comprehending.

"Yes. If you don't happen to have an empty one, turn the matches out," said Sexton Blake. "There is something here that might be of use to us."

Tinker was rather mystified, but he lost no time in carrying out Sexton Blake's instructions. He took a matchbox from his pocket which was very nearly empty. Tinker removed the loose matches and stuffed them into his pocket.

"Leave the box open, my lad," said Sexton Blake.

A moment later the contents of the matchbox were of a very peculiar nature. Sexton Blake closed it and slipped it into his pocket, then proceeded with his examination, frowning thoughtfully, but giving no sign of his thoughts by his expression.

He rose to his feet after a while, and then stood looking out abstractedly across the lake. Everything seemed very peaceful and quiet, and it could hardly be realised that a grim tragedy had been enacted only a few short hours earlier.

"Well, Blake, found anything fresh?" asked Lennard, with a smile.

"I was just looking at the water," said Sexton Blake. "Do you notice that there is a certain current. No doubt they are caused by streams which flow into the lake at various places. I understand the body was found over yonder, in the west corner?" added the detective, pointing.

"That's right, sir," said Inspector Dawson. "Just over there, among those reeds, right under the high bank."

"H'm! Very peculiar!" murmured Blake.

"Eh? What's peculiar?" said Lennard.

"I cannot quite understand why the body should have drifted to that particular corner," said Sexton Blake. "According to the currents—as I have watched them—the body ought to have drifted east. "We can hardly assume that the murderer placed the body in that exact spot among the reeds. It evidently drifted there; but, in that case, it could never have been placed in the water from this side, or from the centre."

The Scotland Yard man shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't see that that's of any importance, anyway," he said. "It's neither here nor there, Blake."

But Sexton Blake evidently thought differently.

"Do you mind if we go out in the boat, and have a scout round the lake?" he asked. "I have rather a fancy to look at the exact spot where the body was found."

"By all means," said Lennard. "Do as you like, old man."

Three or four minutes later, Sexton Blake and Tinker were seated in a small boat, and Tinker was rowing out towards the centre of the lake.

"What's the idea, gov'nor?" asked Tinker, when they were out of earshot of the shore.

"Well, for one thing, Tinker, I wanted to have a few words with you in private," said Blake. "And I am really anxious to look at the place where Sir Howard's body was discovered. I can-

not quite make all the pieces of this puzzle fit together. There is a mistake somewhere—a fault. I want to lay my finger on it, if I possibly can."

"What was it you put in the matchbox, sir?" asked Tinker curiously.

"Ah, yes," said Blake. "We will examine our find now, Tinker, free from observation. You must rest on your oars for a few moments."

Tinker ceased rowing, and Sexton Blake took the matchbox out of his pocket. He opened it, and emptied its contents on to the palm of his hand. There was practically no wind blowing, so he could do this in perfect safety. Tinker bent forward, and was not particularly struck by what he saw. A tiny piece of some whitish substance, which looked like paper, and a few hairs. Just this, and nothing more.

"Well, that's a fat lot!" he remarked, with a sniff.

"Not much to look at, Tinker, but of very great importance, unless I am mistaken," said Sexton Blake. "I found these clutched in Sir Howard's right hand. A few hairs, and a small piece of court-plaster."

"Court-plaster?" echoed Tinker, in surprise.

"Exactly!" said Blake. "I have been attempting to reconstruct the crime, and I imagine that Sir Howard was struck down from behind. But after the fatal blow had been delivered, the victim staggered round, and clutched at his assailant. That, after all, is quite natural, and what one would expect. Incidentally, Sir Howard clutched the murderer's head, and his fingers scraped down the man's face. Then his hand closed in death, still retaining possession of these significant scraps."

Tinker looked at Sexton Blake's palm with renewed interest.

"Those hairs seem to be grey, sir," he remarked. "What do you make of that?"

"It is very singular," said the great detective. "As we know, Reginald Winterton does not possess one grey hair in his head; he's only a youngster. Therefore, these hairs did not come from his scalp. But surely they came from the murderer's? If we accept this evidence, Tinker, we must come to the conclusion that Winterton is not guilty."

Tinker looked rather startled.

"But, dash it all, sir, there isn't much to go upon here!" he protested. "Just a few hairs and a tiny piece of court-plaster? Evidence of that kind wouldn't save Winterton's neck."

"I am not so sure, Tinker," said Blake. "It is the trivial, unimportant details such as this which really count. They are not really trivial and unimportant; they only appear to be so. Actually, they are of the most supreme significance. I am afraid Lennard is rather too prone to overlook the details, and to be satisfied with what he sees on the surface. But it is a very unsafe plan to take the obvious for granted."

Tinker was rather excited now.

"But—but what does this mean, sir?" he asked. "And why didn't Mr. Lennard find these hairs, and the piece of court-plaster?"

"Simply because Lennard did not think it worth while looking for them," said Blake grimly. "Lennard has come to the conclusion that young Winterton is guilty, and there is quite sufficient evidence to hang Master Reginald. But is that evidence true? That is what we have to find out, Tinker. And, as a beginner, I am inclined to think that there is something very fishy about the whole business. Where could Sir



Howard have clutched these grey hairs? It is obvious that he seized them at the moment of his death, otherwise they would not be held so tightly in his grip. It is equally obvious that the hairs do not belong to Winterton."

"And what about the court-plaster, sir?"

"That is a very important point," replied Sexton Blake. "I judge that the murderer—taking it for granted that Winterton is not guilty—I judge that the murderer had cut his face—probably in shaving—and had affixed a small portion of court-plaster. The position of this cut, I should imagine, is somewhere near the ear, against the cheekbone. And Sir Howard, when he seized the hair, dislodged the piece of court-plaster and clutched it in his hand."

"Oughtn't you to have shown these hairs to Lennard?" he asked.

"Strictly speaking, yes," replied Blake. "But Lennard examined the body before I did, and since he did not choose to make his examination a thorough one, I shall take my time. Now, you'd better get busy with those oars again."

Tinker picked them up, and the boat was soon down the lake towards the west corner. For the most part, this was blocked up with reeds, water-lilies, and so forth.

The lake was rather curiously formed just here. The bank was very steep—indeed, it was almost a cliff, rising up for perhaps ten feet. At the top there were many trees, and a low wooden fence. The fence had apparently been erected as a safeguard, in case somebody stumbled along through the trees in a thoughtless manner.

Tinker managed the boat nimbly, and sent it gliding along towards the desired spot. In order to do so, it was necessary to pass this cliff-like bank fairly closely, and Sexton Blake was examining his surroundings with intentness and interest.

And quite abruptly the detective held up his hand.

"Wait, Tinker—wait!" he said abruptly. "Pull back, if you can!"

Tinker ceased rowing, wondering what was the matter. And he found that Sexton Blake was staring up at the low cliff. Midway between the top of the bank and the water a short, jagged root projected. Its edge was quite sharp, and Sexton Blake was gazing fixedly at this.

"What's the game, sir?" asked Tinker.

"Possibly I am mistaken, but I wish to make sure," replied Sexton Blake. "Bring the boat in near, Tinker—right up to the bank. The water is quite deep here, and there are no obstructions."

Tinker obeyed orders, and at last the boat rested flush against the cliff. Tinker held it in position by grasping a bush which grew out of the bank. Sexton Blake rose to his feet in the boat, steadying himself by placing one hand against the cliff. Then he looked upwards.

He was now immediately beneath that projecting root—which was only a foot or so out of his reach. And when Blake had looked down at Tinker, there was a gleam in his eyes. Tinker knew what that gleam meant—it was only to be seen when Sexton Blake had made an important discovery.

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

"Splendid, Tinker—splendid!" said Blake softly. "We are getting on, young 'un. We are doing famously! This discovery is the most important of all, and it will probably lead to others."

"But I haven't seen any discovery

yet!" protested Tinker, in an aggrieved voice.

"I am in a better position than you are, my lad," replied Blake. "Do you see this root?"

"Yes, sir! What of it?"

"The end of it is quite spiky and jagged," went on Sexton Blake. "And adhering to the spike, Tinker, are some shreds of cloth."

Tinker opened his eyes.

"You—you mean that somebody climbed down?" he asked.

"Not at all," said the famous detective. "I mean something very different, young 'un. In fact, Sir Howard Westlake's body was brought to that fence above, and flung down into the lake."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Tinker, startled. "How—how do you know that, sir?"

"There can be no doubt on the point, Tinker. You may have noticed that Sir Howard was wearing a Norfolk suit made of a reddish brown tweed—quite a distinctive colour. And here, attached to this spike, there are some shreds of that reddish brown cloth. Sir Howard was brought to this spot, and flung into the lake over that fence you see above."

Tinker looked somewhat bewildered.

"But—but if this is the case, sir, then all that other evidence is faked!" he exclaimed. "Those tracks leading from the library down to the lake—"

"Undoubtedly the evidence is faked," interrupted Sexton Blake grimly. "I suspected that from the very first. The very nature of the evidence, Winterton's attitude when he was arrested—everything, in fact, struck me as being false. We have not hit upon the right note yet, Tinker; there is still a chord which jars upon me considerably. But perhaps we shall find out the truth if we only persist in our efforts."

"Well, you've done a lot already," said Tinker. "If it's a fact that Sir Howard was thrown over this fence into the lake, then it stands to reason that Winterton didn't commit the murder, and—"

"Not exactly," interrupted Blake. "Winterton could just as easily have thrown the body into the lake at this point as at any other point. But he did not commit the crime. I am convinced of that—and I am quite glad, now, that I accepted the commission of the boy's father. There is a great deal more behind this affair than we know of at present."

"And what's the next move to be, sir?"

Sexton Blake glanced round, and saw that he and Tinker were quite alone in this quiet corner of the lake. They were not under observation from any point. And the famous detective turned to Tinker, and nodded rather grimly.

"The next move, my lad, is to get to the top of this bank!" he said. "I mean to have a look at that fence, and the surrounding ground. It is quite possible that our search will not be entirely fruitless."

It was not a difficult matter for them to get to the top of the little cliff. Tinker edged the boat along until it arrived at a spot where the bank sloped down, and where it was easy for the pair to jump out. The boat was tied to the branch of an overhanging tree, and made secure.

Sexton Blake and Tinker walked up along the bank. The ground rose sharply, and it had evidently not been trodden by the foot of man for many a day. Big trees grew all round, and the ground was smothered with dead leaves, twigs, and similar rubbish. And presently the pair encountered a wooden fence. They climbed this, and then found themselves upon a road. It was not a main road,

but merely a by-lane, with an indifferent surface.

"I don't quite see where we are, sir," remarked Tinker.

"You will in a moment, my boy," said Blake. "See—this is the exact spot!"

They had continued their way along, now skirting the fence closely. And, as Sexton Blake spoke, he leaned over the rail and looked down. Immediately below lay the waters of the lake, and that jagged stump with the tiny shreds of cloth clinging to it, could be distinctly seen.

"You will now observe why this fence is necessary," said Sexton Blake. "This is a public highway, Tinker, and it was essential that some protection should be provided. The lake, you see, comes practically up to the road—but at a much lower level. No, don't stand there—keep back, Tinker!"

Tinker stepped back hastily, and Sexton Blake went forward in a gingerly way, examining the ground closely as he proceeded. And then suddenly Sexton Blake uttered an exclamation.

"O-ho! What shall we see here?" he murmured. "Look, Tinker—use your eyes! These grasses and weeds have been recently trodden down and disturbed. And I have no doubt—By James!"

Sexton Blake went down on his hands and knees, and he stared closely at the grass. He looked up with gleaming eyes, and there was a light of triumph in them.

"Blood stains, Tinker!" he said softly. "Can you see them—three, at least! Down here, right in the grass!"

"My only hat!" ejaculated Tinker.

He watched his master eagerly, and with a certain amount of fascination. For Sexton Blake was like a hound on the trail. Active, alert, and intensely alive. Here and there the great detective searched, occasionally bringing into use a powerful magnifying lens. He turned over blades of grass one by one. He examined the ground underneath. And all the time he was humming softly to himself—humming a tune out of an opera which he and Tinker had heard the previous week. But this was quite unconscious on Blake's part. He was absolutely wrapped up in what he was doing.

"Do you see these?" he rapped out suddenly. "Shreds of cloth—reddish brown! Not in one place, Tinker, but in dozens—clinging to the rough edges of the woodwork. There is only one possible conclusion to arrive at."

"You're right, sir!" panted Tinker, now thoroughly excited. "Sir Howard's body must have been hoisted over this fence, and probably assisted with a heave. Its clothing scraped along the top bar and—"

"Exactly!" said Sexton Blake. "You are quite right, Tinker. Sir Howard's body was brought to this spot, and rested upon this fence, and then pushed over. During its fall to the river it struck that projecting root below, thus providing us with a certain clue."

"But what does it mean, sir?" asked Tinker. "It's all a puzzle—"

"Dear me!" interrupted Sexton Blake. "Another find, Tinker—and a very promising one this time! Quite a nice little silver pencil—what do you think?"

Sexton Blake held up something he had just taken from beneath a thick tuft of grass. And Tinker could see it was a small, engraved silver pencil. There were no initials upon it, or anything to prove who its owner could have been, but, without a doubt, it was a find. Blake handled it gingerly—as gingerly as a photographer handles a wet plate.

(Continued on page 14.)



"I'm not going to tell you anything —not a single word!" (Page 14.)

Before he could take any action, Sexton Blake's knee came up into his back. (Page 21.)

Sexton Blake brought into play a powerful magnifying glass. (Page 12.)



He carefully wrapped the pencil up in his handkerchief and stowed it away.

"Why are you afraid to touch it, sir?" asked Tinker curiously.

"My dear fellow, surely you do not need any enlightenment on that point?" said Sexton Blake. "It is more than possible that this pencil has some fingerprints upon it—invisible to us now, but quite visible after a certain process has been gone through. I will examine the pencil later at my leisure. For the present we will continue our little investigation."

Sexton Blake rose to his feet, and then moved off slowly down the road, keeping to the grass border. Tinker himself could see very little—the grass looked all the same to him. But Tinker had an idea that Sexton Blake could see more—the famous detective's eyes were keen, and he could follow the trail.

"Yes, my dear Tinker, we are getting much warmer—distinctly warmer!" said Blake, as he moved slowly along. "The body was dragged along this way. Don't you see how the grass is disturbed and flattened? It was dragged along—Hullo! What is this? Dear, dear! The grass in this spot tells us quite a long story!"

Sexton Blake had come to a halt, and he was now staring down at the grass closely and intently. And even Tinker could see that a struggle of some kind had taken place on this particular spot. There were a good many weeds growing, and these were lying scattered about, bruised, broken, and squashed.

Blake was soon on his knees, making a close examination. And he found, not one blood stain, but many. And in one particular spot there was a large damp patch on the ground which told its own grim story. To an ordinary passer-by these stains would not have been seen—indeed, they were only obvious when one subjected the grass to a close, minute scrutiny.

Anybody happening to pass along the lane would never suspect anything—would take no notice of the fact that the grass at the side of the road happened to be flattened down in one particular spot. Such a thing was of no special significance, and would not call for any close attention.

But Sexton Blake had been following the trail tenaciously, and these apparently insignificant details became highly important. Tinker could see it, too.

After a while Blake turned round, walked into the road, and looked up and down. Not a soul was in sight, for this lane was quiet and little frequented. Blake gazed down at the road's surface keenly, walked along for several paces, and then returned. And he nodded to himself once or twice.

"Yes, Tinker, I can reconstruct the tragedy with a fair amount of accuracy, I think," he said, as though speaking to himself. "The whole thing is clear; I can read the story just as it took place."

"That's more than I can do, sir," said Tinker.

"A motor came along this road," went on Sexton Blake musingly. "Whether it contained Sir Howard or the murderer—or both—I don't know. But the car certainly came along, and it stopped here, at this exact spot. It was not a heavy car, but probably a light two-seater. Assuming that Sir Howard was in it, he got out and walked on to the grass. And then he was struck down—obviously from behind.

"And the murderer, I should think, was a man with grey hair, and with a patch of court-plaster on his cheek. We know that much, at least, Tinker. But as to his actual identity, and why he killed Sir Howard, is still a mystery.

U. J.—No. 917.

After committing the crime the murderer dragged his victim along the grass, and then pitched him over the fence into the lake. And I should say this took place after the other evidence had been faked up."

"You are quite sure it was faked, then?" asked Tinker.

"Positive, my lad—absolutely positive!" said Sexton Blake grimly. "By all appearances young Winterton is the victim of a plot, but we do not know that yet. I must pursue my inquiries closely, and without any loss of time."

"And what will be the next item on the programme, gov'nor?"

"We must lose no time in interviewing Mr. Reginald Winterton junior," replied Sexton Blake. "He may be able to supply the missing link in the chain. We must know what he was doing last night; we must know his movements during his absence from home. It is most important that we should have the full story, and not a collection of scraps. If Winterton will only be quite frank with us it is possible that we shall soon get to the bottom of the mystery."

"And we are going to the police-station now?" asked Tinker.

"At once!" replied Blake crisply.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

"This is no Joking Matter!"

"WELL, Mr. Sleuthhound, anything fresh?" inquired Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard, as Sexton Blake and Tinker walked briskly round Westlake Manor towards the front drive.

Blake had come to fetch his car, for he wanted to get to the police-station without any loss of time. And Lennard was smiling cheerfully as he met the pair.

"I have made one or two discoveries, certainly," said Sexton Blake. "But I will not tell you of these now, Lennard. I am particularly anxious to interview young Winterton, and I am going round to the lock-up at once."

The C.I.D. man stared.

"You've made one or two discoveries?" he asked curiously. "Look here, Blake, you can't bluff me! This affair is as clear as daylight. Winterton killed Sir Howard—and you know it!"

Sexton Blake shrugged his shoulders.

"I will admit that the evidence against Winterton is very strong," he said. "But we have not got to the end of the case yet, Lennard. Don't be too sure of your man, that's all I've got to say at the moment. It is highly probable that I shall give you a surprise before long."

And Sexton Blake and Tinker walked away, leaving the Scotland Yard man staring after them.

They were soon in their car, and the journey to the local police-station was only a short one. Armed with the chief inspector's card, Sexton Blake knew that he would have no difficulty in obtaining a private interview with the prisoner.

And Blake was right.

When the little police-station was reached it was only necessary to produce Lennard's card, and the pair were at once permitted to enter Reginald Winterton's cell. It was not really a cell strictly speaking, but a quite comfortable little room at the rear of the police-station.

The sergeant ushered Sexton Blake in, and he closed the door after them; whether he would remain outside was the question, but Blake did not care whether this happened or not.

"Good-morning, Mr. Winterton!" said Sexton Blake. "You have met me before this morning, I think. My name

is Sexton Blake, and I have been commissioned by your father to look into this affair—"

"That's jolly decent of the dad!" said Reginald Winterton cheerfully. "And I'm very pleased to meet you, Mr. Blake. I've heard of you many a time. And this young gentleman, I assume, is Tinker? How do, Mr. Tinker? Pleased to make your acquaintance!"

Reggie was quite calm and collected, and he regarded his visitors with an amused light in his eyes.

He had never imagined that such a distinguished man as Sexton Blake would be engaged upon the case. This was altogether too rich for words! But, in a way, Winterton was rather sorry; he had not wanted to drag a famous private detective into the hoax.

"I do not think you realise your position, Mr. Winterton," said Sexton Blake quietly. "The evidence against you is of an overwhelming nature, and the police are quite convinced that they have got hold of the right man. If it is possible, they will prove their case—and you will go to the gallows!"

"I'm not worrying at all, Mr. Blake," he said easily. "And I wish you wouldn't take any part in the case; I'd much prefer it if you dropped out altogether. I don't want to offend you, or anything of that sort; but I didn't commit this murder, so I'm not worrying. Why should I worry? I'm innocent—and there's no need for an innocent man to be alarmed just because he happens to be placed under arrest."

Sexton Blake looked grim.

"I'm afraid that view of yours, Winterton, is not a wise one," he said. "It has happened before in the annals of crime that an innocent man has been hanged by mistake. Personally, I am convinced of your innocence—"

"What?" ejaculated Winterton, starting. "You—you don't believe me guilty, Mr. Blake?"

"I know that you are not guilty," said Blake smoothly.

The young man stared.

"But—but the evidence!" he exclaimed. "It's as black as night! Everything is against me right from the very beginning to the end! According to that evidence, I haven't got a single loophole of escape."

Sexton Blake nodded.

"Precisely, if we only take the evidence which the police have so far discovered," he said. "But we will not press that matter now, Mr. Winterton. I have been commissioned by your father to prove that you are innocent, and if I am to be successful I must have your co-operation. In other words, you must be perfectly frank with me."

Reggie shook his head.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Blake, but I can't say anything!" he replied.

"You refuse to give your own account of the affair?" asked Blake.

"I'm sorry—yes."

"Come, come, Winterton! That is a very hasty decision," said Sexton Blake. "I want you to tell me what you were doing during the night. You left your father's house between eleven and twelve o'clock, I think. And did not return until nearly three in the morning. Where were you during that time?"

"I can't tell you, Mr. Blake," said Reggie easily.

"It is necessary that I should know all—"

"I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Blake, but it's no good pressing me," interrupted Winterton. "I'm not going to tell you anything—not a single word. Later on, perhaps, you'll understand why."

"And you are not worrying about your position?"



"Not in the slightest degree!" grinned Reggie.

Both Sexton Blake and Tinker were frankly surprised at the young man's attitude. He seemed to regard the whole affair as a joke, and did not appreciate the seriousness of the situation. And he was quite firm in declaring that he would not give Blake any information.

"I'm very sorry that you have taken up this attitude, Winterton," said Sexton Blake quietly. "It cannot possibly help you; in fact, it will probably have the very opposite effect. I am not an official detective; I have nothing to do with the police. You will be quite safe in confiding in me, if you wish to do so. And, once again, I urge you to be perfectly frank—"

"And, once again, Mr. Blake, I must tell you that I can give you no information whatever," put in Reggie. "That's my last word—excepting that I want you to give up the case completely. I want you to leave it in the hands of the police."

"Oh, well, you are simply asking for it!" put in Tinker impatiently. "You've found one heap of trouble, and you're doing your utmost to pitch headlong into another. Why on earth can't you trust the gov'nor?"

"It is impossible for me to say anything," said Winterton.

"But, man alive, you'll find yourself in such a net that you'll never get out of the tangle!" said Tinker urgently. "Why can't you be sensible? Mr. Blake has already had a look at the body, and he's discovered certain things—"

"I should prefer to do the talking, if you don't mind, Tinker," put in Sexton Blake firmly.

Winterton was staring at his visitors: staring in a curious, bewildered kind of way. A remarkable change had come over him during the last few seconds. Both Sexton Blake and Tinker noticed it at once.

"The—the body," said Winterton dully. "You're joking, aren't you?"

"I can assure you, Mr. Winterton, that this is no joking matter!" said Sexton Blake, in grim tones. "Your position is a serious one, and unless you are frank with me—"

"But—but I don't understand!" broke in Reggie quickly. "The body? What are you talking about? What body?"

"Tinker was referring to the body of Sir Howard Westlake," said Sexton Blake. "What other body would there be to refer to, Winterton? As far as I know, there has only been one man murdered—Sir Howard himself."

"Sir Howard—murdered!" stammered Reginald. "Yes—yes, of course! We all know that, but—but the police haven't found the body! It's impossible; that's absolutely out of the question! The police haven't found the body! They couldn't have found it!"

Sexton Blake looked at the young man closely.

"I must confess, Winterton, that I do not understand you," he said. "But you can take it from me that the body of Sir Howard Westlake has been found—in the lake. And practically all the available evidence points to the fact that you struck the death blow."

The change which had come over Reginald Winterton was most remarkable. He was now as pale as a ghost, and clinging to the edge of the table. He shook as he stood there—shook with emotion and a sudden, overpowering fear. All his former confidence had vanished, leaving him weak, shaky, and haggard.

His mind was in a whirl. He could not believe what Sexton Blake said.

Sir Howard Westlake dead—murdered! It was impossible; absolutely ridiculous. For Reggie knew very well that Sir Howard had gone away to the South Coast. It was all a hoax—a joke! Sir Howard was alive, and was probably laughing at this very moment; laughing at the way in which the police were being spoofed. And suddenly Winterton's face flushed with anger.

"What do you take me for?" he demanded thickly. "This sort of game won't work, Mr. Blake; I didn't think you would try such a dodge. I don't believe you when you tell me that the body has been taken out of the lake. It's simply a ruse on your part to get me to speak."

Sexton Blake and Tinker exchanged glances.

"Really, Winterton, your attitude is most remarkable," said Sexton Blake. "I am convinced that there is something behind all this. And, as I have said two or three times, I want you to tell me the exact truth. You do me an injustice when you accuse me of treachery. Nothing is farther from my thoughts. You seem to be quite astounded because Sir Howard's body has been found. And yet you must have known that Sir Howard was murdered during the night."

"He wasn't murdered! I tell you he wasn't—"

Reggie broke off suddenly, and strode forward, clutching at Sexton Blake's arm. His eyes were almost wild now, and he stared straight into Blake's face.

"Tell me—tell me the truth!" he said hoarsely. "Have—have they really found the body, Mr. Blake? For Heaven's sake, tell me the truth!"

Blake stared straight into the prisoner's face.

"I have already told you the truth, Winterton," he said quietly. "Sir Howard Westlake is dead, and his body has already been recovered. He was stabbed in the back, and thrown into the lake."

"Do—do you swear this—on your honour?" panted Winterton.

"Yes; on my honour!"

Reggie staggered away, his face now pale again. Sexton Blake and Tinker were quite astounded by the young man's attitude; they were in the dark, and they could not imagine why the prisoner was taking the thing in such a curious way. It almost seemed as though this was the first indication he had received that Sir Howard was really murdered.

"Heaven help me!" muttered Winterton brokenly.

He sank heavily into a chair, and sat there, staring straight before him in a dull, listless kind of way. And Sexton Blake watched him closely; watched every fleeting expression. For full realisation had come upon the young man.

And he almost went mad when he thought of the situation.

Sir Howard Westlake was dead—really dead! He had been murdered in real truth! It was no joke—no hoax. It was grim, horrible reality. The awful truth came upon Winterton like a nightmare. For he, himself, had done everything within his power to fasten the guilt upon his own shoulders.

Everything became black; he felt himself hemmed in. He was here, a prisoner in the hands of the police, accused of wilful murder! And every available clue went to prove that he—Reginald Winterton—had committed the crime. Every one of those clues had

been made deliberately—purposely. But would the police believe this? Would the police credit such a story? Never! Winterton felt stunned and dazed by the shock of it all.

And then, suddenly, he faintly remembered a few words which Sexton Blake had spoken.

Blake believed in his innocence; Blake did not share the view of the police. A gleam of hope came into his eyes as he rose to his feet. And he looked at his visitors uneasily, and with an expression of wild anxiety.

"The evidence is as black as night against me!" he muttered. "My quarrel with Sir Howard—my return at midnight—the knife with my initials—my cuff-links—nothing can save me from being placed in the dock and pronounced guilty! Oh, it's terrible—ghastly!"

"You apparently realise it now, Mr. Winterton," said Sexton Blake quietly. "You have suddenly become alive to your own peril; and it seems that this realisation on your part is due to the fact that Sir Howard's body has been recovered. What is the truth concerning this affair? Again I ask you to tell me—"

"Yes, Mr. Blake—yes!" said Winterton eagerly. "I'll tell you everything now; I will explain the whole mad business. I didn't know. I thought it was a joke. I thought—I thought—Oh, Heaven help me, I was under the impression that Sir Howard was still alive!"

"Blessed if I can understand him!" muttered Tinker.

"But—but you said that you believe in me, Mr. Blake!" went on Winterton, clutching at the detective's sleeve. "Do you mean that?"

"I did mean it, Winterton. And I am more than ever convinced now that you are not guilty of this crime," said Sexton Blake calmly. "And, what is more, I rather fancy I have a good chance of establishing your innocence if you will only tell me the exact truth."

"I will, Mr. Blake; I'll give you the whole yarn!" said Reggie huskily. "But—but why should you think me innocent! Everything points to my guilt: I faked up all that evidence on purpose!"

"On purpose?" shouted Tinker.

"Yes; I must have been mad! It was only a joke!" said Reggie. "It was a wager, Mr. Blake—a wager with Varley. Why, good heavens, Varley can get me out of this! He knows all about it! He'll be able to prove that it was a hoax. I needn't worry at all!"

An expression of infinite relief came into Winterton's eyes, but Sexton Blake and Tinker could not understand what he meant.

"I must confess, Mr. Winterton, that I am more than puzzled," said Blake. "I think you had better begin at the beginning, and tell us the full story."

"Yes, I will; that is my intention," said the young man.

And, without any more beating about the bush, he went into his surprising tale. He explained to his listeners how he had been chatting with Sir Howard Westlake and Mr. Roger Varley. He described how the conversation had got round to the subject of murder, and how, in the finish, the grim wager had been made.

Winterton did not leave out any details. He described the full story from start to finish.

"I wish to Heaven I had taken Varley's advice," went on Reggie. "He was against the thing from the start, Mr. Blake; he told me I was a young—"



idiot to have anything to do with it. And I suppose I was, too. But Sir Howard agreed to the proposition, and that's how it came about. We did everything exactly as we had planned. The quarrel, of course, was only a make-believe one. It was done on purpose to provide evidence; so that the servants could hear. Then, later on, when I returned to the Manor, I proceeded with the rest of my plans. Sir Howard left almost at once by car—"

"By car—eh?" interrupted Blake quickly. "What kind of a car?"

"Oh, a little two-seater of mine," replied Winterton.

Sexton Blake nodded, and glanced at Tinker.

"So I imagined," he said. "Well, please go on, Winterton."

"There's very little more for me to tell," said the other. "After Sir Howard had gone, I proceeded to make the evidence. It was quite an easy job."

"But what exactly did you do?"

"I disordered the dining-room, left my knife lying on the floor, and left quite a decent trail of bloodstains."

"How did you obtain the blood?"

Winterton smiled faintly.

"Oh, that was quite a simple matter, Mr. Blake," he replied. "If I cut my hand, or anything of that kind, it would have been a tremendously big gash in order to get sufficient blood. So I adopted a more simple expedient. In other words, I braced myself up and delivered a hard punch on my own nose."

"And the result was satisfactory?" asked Blake.

"Quite. You see, I'm rather a full-blooded fellow," said Winterton, "and before many minutes had passed quite a lot of gore had escaped. It was sufficient for my purpose, and I made use of it. But I must admit that my nose was a bit swollen afterwards."

"I am not surprised to hear that," said Sexton Blake. "You proceeded down to the lake, I presume, making your tracks as you went, in order to delude the police into believing that the body had been dragged that way?"

"Exactly," said Reggie. "But, you see, being certain that Sir Howard had gone straight on to the South Coast—to my little bungalow—I did not worry. I assumed that Sir Howard was alive and well, and would appear at the right moment. But this—this is awful—ghastly!"

"Yes, you appear to be in a tight corner," said Blake slowly. "But perhaps we shall get you out of it, Winterton. I hope so, at all events."

"But will the police believe the truth?" asked Winterton anxiously. "Will they believe that I really did fake up all the evidence in this way?"

"At the present moment I strongly suspect that the police will look upon the whole thing as a fabrication," said Sexton Blake. "You must admit, Winterton, that the story sounds ridiculous, and we can hardly expect the police to credit—"

"But—but don't you believe me, Mr. Blake?" asked Reggie.

"Yes, I believe that you have told me the absolute truth," replied Blake. "But I am not the police, Winterton. Moreover, I have made one or two other discoveries of which the police are in ignorance, and which place me in quite a different position. For example, I made one or two deductions, and a part of your story corroborated them. And, apart from all that, I know that you have not been lying. Your very attitude tells me that. But you must let me say, Winterton, that you were unwise and foolish to enter into any such arrange-

ment. This wager of yours was a mad one!"

"I realise that, Mr. Blake. I know it now only too well," said Reggie bitterly. "But how was I to suspect that Sir Howard was killed? And who did it? Who could have murdered him in this terrible way? So far as I know, he hadn't an enemy in the world."

"The murder was committed by somebody who made his plans well in advance," said Blake grimly. "It was done deliberately—a premeditated murder. And you say that only this Mr. Roger Varley and Sir Howard and yourself knew about it?"

"That's all, Mr. Blake," said Reggie. "I had intended telling Sylvia—Miss Westlake—but I didn't have the opportunity. She and I are engaged, you know, and I meant to let her into the secret, so that she shouldn't worry. She was due to turn up this morning quite early; but something must have delayed her. I've been worrying a lot about that."

"And you tell me that Mr. Varley knows the whole truth?"

"Everything. He was with Sir Howard and I when we made the compact," replied Winterton. "As a matter of fact, my wager was with Varley."

"In that case there ought to be no difficulty in establishing your innocence," said Sexton Blake. "If I can get you released at once, Winterton, all the better. Afterwards I will investigate this matter and do my utmost to bring Sir Howard's murderer to justice. Can you give me Varley's address?"

"Yes; he is in London."

"Very well, Winterton, I will communicate with him at once, and get him to come down," said Sexton Blake. "As soon as he arrives I will tell him exactly what has occurred, and ask him to reveal the whole truth to the police. It is quite likely that you will be released without delay."

"It's splendid of you, Mr. Blake! You're a brick!" said Winterton gratefully. "But for you I don't know what I should have done!"

Very soon afterwards Sexton Blake and Tinker left Winterton's cell, and they went out to the sergeant. Blake was active and busy, and his first task was to get into telephonic communication with Mr. Roger Varley, the third party to the compact. As luck would have it, Sexton Blake was successful in catching Mr. Roger Varley at once.

"Yes, Mr. Blake, I have heard of the tragedy," said Mr. Varley, through the telephone. "A very sad affair. And I am extremely sorry for Winterton. I cannot possibly believe that he is guilty."

"Circumstances have arisen, Mr. Varley, which make it essential that you should come down here as soon as possible," said Sexton Blake. "Winterton particularly urges you to do so; and I think you understand what I mean. Can you come now?"

"Well, Mr. Blake, it would be very inconvenient for me to come down just now," replied Varley over the long-distance wires. "But if Winterton is in such serious trouble, and he thinks I can help him, I will certainly come. What is your personal opinion of the case?"

"To tell you the truth, Mr. Varley, the evidence is overwhelmingly black against young Winterton," replied Sexton Blake guardedly. "On the face of it there is no loophole of escape. But Winterton is very anxious indeed to see you. He declares that you may be able to clear his name. I urge you to come at once."

"Very well, Mr. Blake. I will run down in my car," said Varley. "You may expect me in about two hours' time

—probably sooner. By the way, where shall I come to?"

"Well, at the present moment Winterton is being held at the little station at Westlake village," replied Blake. "You had better come straight here, Mr. Varley. If by the time you arrive Winterton has been transferred to Colchester, we can soon make the trip."

A minute later Sexton Blake rang off. He was looking very thoughtful, and by no means despondent.

"Well, it won't be long before we know the absolute truth, sir," remarked Tinker. "If Varley knows all about this compact—this silly wager—it will make a big difference to Winterton's position. I'm not sure that the police will release him."

"After due thought, Tinker, I am inclined to agree with you," said Sexton Blake. "After Mr. Varley has corroborated Winterton's story, the police will be sceptical; for it must be remembered that Varley is an old friend, and the police will accept his evidence with a certain amount of suspicion. They will assume that Varley agreed with Winterton just on the offchance of being able to effect his release. The position is a difficult one."

Not long afterwards Chief Detective Lennard arrived, and he, too, interviewed the prisoner. Reggie Winterton had now changed his tactics, and he was telling the whole truth. He told Lennard exactly the same story that he had told Sexton Blake. He kept nothing back, for he realised that his best course would be to reveal the truth. Secrecy would avail him nothing.

When Lennard emerged he found Tinker lolling about just outside the police-station. And Tinker was looking rather bored.

"Blake anywhere about?" asked the Scotland Yard man.

"I'm blessed if I know," said Tinker. "He went off somewhere when my back was turned, not long ago, and I've lost him. That's just like the gov'nor. He's thinking, I suppose—mooching about somewhere all by himself, and we shall be lucky if we see him during the next hour or two."

"H'm! He's got a lot to think about!" grunted Lennard. "And I'm afraid your gov'nor has bitten off more than he can chew this time, Tinker. He'll never get Winterton released, for the simple reason that Winterton is guilty."

"Have you heard his story?" asked Tinker.

"Yes, every word of it," replied the chief inspector. "I understand that he told Blake the same yarn—about the compact and the wager, I mean?"

"Yes," said Tinker. "Don't you believe it?"

Lennard grimly shook his head.

"Not a word," he replied bluntly. "It's a fabrication from start to finish, young man. It's a wheeze by which Winterton hopes to throw dust into our eyes. But it won't work. And Winterton has asked Varley to come down, hoping against hope Varley will take the bait and agree with the story. But it won't work, Tinker—not with me."

Tinker was about to reply when Sexton Blake appeared in the village street. The famous detective walked slowly along, and he was right opposite the police-station before he seemed to notice that Lennard was standing there. He came to a halt and nodded.

"A little spell of waiting, Lennard," observed Sexton Blake. "I can do nothing until Mr. Roger Varley arrives."

"But, man alive, you don't believe that cock-and-bull yarn of Winterton's, do you?" asked Lennard.



"What cock-and-bull yarn?"

"About the wager, and the faked evidence, and all that twaddle!"

"My dear Lennard, I can assure you that Winterton has told us the truth," said Blake. "I believe every word of his story, and I am convinced of his innocence. It wasn't Winterton's hand that struck the fatal blow."

The chief inspector raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, come, Blake!" he protested. "You can't bluff me like that. And you can't possibly say, in all seriousness, that you believe Winterton's story. It's probably a string of lies!"

"Do you think so?" smiled Blake. "Well, time will show, Lennard—time will show."

"Of course, I'd like to believe that Winterton is innocent," went on Lennard. "But it can't be done, Blake. The evidence is overwhelming, overpowering. And you will never get me to believe that Sir Howard Westlake entered into any such mad arrangement. And you'll never get a jury to believe it, either. The rope's round Winterton's neck already."

Sexton Blake merely shrugged his shoulders, and walked on. And after that he disappeared for about an hour. Truth to tell, Sexton Blake was walking about, thinking deeply, pondering over all the facts which had come before his notice.

He turned up again just when Tinker was beginning to feel thoroughly and absolutely fed up. And then, almost at the same moment, a big open car appeared in the village street. It came roaring along, and finally pulled up in front of the little police-station.

Out of the car stepped a tall, thin man of austere appearance. He was attired in a thick motoring-coat and cap. And just as he was about to enter the station, Lennard appeared.

"Good-morning, sir!" he said briskly. "I take it that you are Mr. Roger Varley?"

"That is my name," said the newcomer, nodding. "Mr. Sexton Blake, I understand, is here, and he requested me to come down—"

"Yes, that's right, Mr. Varley," interrupted Lennard. "Blake did request you to come— Here he is! Blake, let me introduce you to Mr. Varley."

Sexton Blake came forward, and shook hands with the visitor.

"I am delighted to meet you, Mr. Blake," said Varley warmly. "Many times have I heard of your wonderful exploits, and I have often wished that I should have the luck to meet you. I am much gratified to make your acquaintance."

"Thank you, Mr. Varley!" said Sexton Blake. "I would not have troubled you to come down this morning, but Winterton was very anxious. You see, I have been commissioned by the boy's father to look into this case, and to establish his innocence, if possible. But, as I told you over the 'phone, the evidence is very black."

"But of what assistance can I be?" asked Varley, in surprise. "What can I do? Certainly, I know the boy, and I like him well. He and I were always great friends, and it is terrible that he should have met with such a tragic end. I am not a man to reveal my feelings, but inwardly I am greatly affected."

Sexton Blake nodded.

"I can quite believe that, Mr. Varley," he said quietly. "It is good of you to have taken the trouble to come down, and, now that you are here, we will not waste your time. Winterton has told a very curious story, a story which, if it is proved to be true, will go a long way towards establishing his innocence. Win-

terton declares that you can corroborate this story."

"I?" said Varley. "I must confess that I am quite in the dark."

The chief inspector coughed.

"Well, the fact is, Mr. Varley, Winterton declares that you and he made a wager," he said. "I understand that you were down here—or, rather, at Westlake Manor—a few days ago."

"That is quite right," said Varley, nodding. "I stayed with Sir Howard for a day or two. As you may know, I was in the habit of making frequent visits. Winterton looked in one evening, too."

"And did you enter upon this compact?" asked Lennard sharply.

"Compact? What compact?"

Varley looked from Lennard to Sexton Blake with mild surprise.

"Apparently, Mr. Varley, you are quite in the dark," said the chief inspector. "To be brief, Winterton has told me that the whole thing was arranged beforehand, between you and Sir Howard and Winterton himself."

"Arranged!" echoed Varley. "But—but I don't understand. Are you trying

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to make out that I was a party to this crime—"

"My dear sir, nothing of the sort!" interrupted Lennard. "According to Winterton's story there was to be no crime, but apparently a fake. The whole thing was planned as a hoax upon the police. Everything was to point to the fact that Sir Howard had been murdered, and all the evidence indicated Winterton as the murderer. But actually Sir Howard arranged to go away to the South Coast for a week—"

"I don't know what on earth you are talking about," said Mr. Roger Varley deliberately. "I know nothing of any wager, and this is the first I have heard of a compact. Surely you do not believe the story? It is quite probably a desperate invention of Winterton's, put forward in the hope that it will assist him in his present predicament."

Lennard shot a keen glance at Sexton Blake.

"Well, to tell you the truth, Mr. Varley, I thought as much," he said. "I didn't believe the story myself. It was rather too tall for my liking."

"Winterton's insane to suggest such a thing," said Varley, "although, poor boy, I don't absolutely blame him."

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

"I Have One or Two Other Inquiries to Make!"

MR. ROGER VARLEY was quite cold and impassive.

There was a puzzled frown on his brow, and he looked like a man who had been told something he could not fully understand. He was worried, too, and turned to Chief-Inspector Lennard, grave and sorrowful.

"I am extremely sorry that I am unable to help young Winterton," he said. "If I could have corroborated his story it would have given me the greatest possible pleasure. But what can I do? I've never heard of the wager before. It is news to me. Either Winterton must have dreamed it, or it is a deliberate falsehood, designed for the one purpose of clearing himself. Heaven knows that I would do everything in my power to help the young man. I like him. I've known him for years, and it will grieve me beyond measure if he is proved guilty of this foul crime."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Varley; but it seems to me that there's only one course to be taken," said Lennard grimly. "Winterton will be charged with the murder, brought before the magistrate, and probably remanded. In the end he will be sent for trial at the next assizes. The case against him is complete in every detail."

"Oh, quite!" agreed Sexton Blake, nodding. "Winterton, in the face of all the evidence, is undoubtedly guilty."

The chief inspector looked up.

"But I thought you said he was innocent?" he asked.

"A man is entitled to change his opinion," said Sexton Blake smoothly. "And you must remember, Lennard, that I accepted Winterton's word. But Mr. Varley has exploded that story, and what possible conclusions can I draw? I am afraid my efforts have been wasted in this case, and I shall spend no further time on the matter."

"Well, that's about the most sensible thing you can possibly say," remarked Lennard.

Mr. Varley nodded.

"Yes, Mr. Blake, I think it will be a waste of time if you proceed further with this inquiry," he said. "Obviously there is nothing to be gained, since Winterton is certainly guilty. The very fact that he told this cock-and-bull story proved that."

Shortly afterwards the chief inspector went into young Winterton's cell, in order to tell him of the arrival of Varley. And Sexton Blake accompanied the Scotland Yard man.

The prisoner sprang to his feet at once as the two men entered.

"Has—has he come?" he asked eagerly. "Is Mr. Varley here?"

"Yes, Mr. Varley is here," replied Lennard. "Now, Winterton, I do not wish to press you, and it is entirely in your own power to refuse to speak. It would, indeed, be far better if you said nothing at all, but reserved your defence until the right time."

"But there's no reason why I shouldn't speak!" exclaimed Winterton. "I am innocent. I have nothing to fear. Hasn't Mr. Varley told you about the wager? Hasn't he explained how we faked up all the evidence, and how—"

"Now, now, Mr. Winterton, this sort of thing won't do!" interrupted Lennard curtly. "I'm surprised at you for inventing such a story. You might have known from the very start that it wouldn't wash."

Winterton looked bewildered.

"But—but I don't understand!" he stammered.

"Perhaps you will understand when I



explain to you that Mr. Varley knows nothing whatever about any compact or any wager," said the chief inspector. "In short, there was no wager, and—"

"Good heavens!" gasped Winterton, clutching at the table. "Does—does Varley deny it?"

"He does, as I expected he would," said Lennard.

"But—but it's true—every word of it is true!" shouted Winterton desperately. "Don't you believe me? Do you think I should stand here and tell all these lies when I know it sounds all so preposterous? I knew Varley would corroborate my story—"

"But Varley has not corroborated it," put in Sexton Blake gently. "You must accept that fact, Winterton. Mr. Varley has informed us that there is no truth whatever in what you have said."

"Then Varley is a liar!" shouted Reggie hotly. "He is a foul, contemptible liar! Bring him here! Let me see him face to face!"

"I shall do nothing of the sort!" said Lennard curtly. "And, furthermore, I refuse to say anything more to you, Winterton, while you are still in this obstinate frame of mind. This kind of play-acting won't do. And you had better take my advice, and say nothing at all. Keep your own counsel. You'll have plenty of time to prepare your defence before the trial comes off."

They went away, leaving Reggie Winterton pale, haggard, and with his mind in a state of chaos.

This was the very last thing that he had expected. Right from the start he had relied upon Mr. Roger Varley's corroboration. He had counted on Varley to help him. Now, for some inexplicable reason, Varley denied all knowledge of the wager!

It was the most staggering blow of all. Varley did not stay. Having had a short chat with the chief inspector, he entered his car once more and started off straight away for London, having important business in the City for the afternoon.

"I thought what it would be right along," said Lennard. "I never expected Mr. Varley to acknowledge that preposterous yarn of Winterton's. Evidently the young fellow thought of it in desperation."

"You may think me very foolish, Lennard, but I am of the opinion that this case is by no means settled," said Sexton Blake. "However, I will say no more at the moment. I intend calling at the Manor before returning to town."

And shortly afterwards Sexton Blake and Tinker were gliding along in their own car towards Westlake Manor. Tinker was rather puzzled, and he did not know what to make of the whole business.

"I suppose we're going back to London this afternoon, sir?" he asked.

"Possibly. Tinker—possibly," said Sexton Blake absently. "But I am not yet satisfied. I have one or two other inquiries to make."

"But Winterton is guilty—you said so yourself, guv'nor!"

"Eh?" exclaimed Blake sharply. "I said so myself? Bluff, my dear Tinker—sheer bluff! Surely you had enough sense to see that? I wanted the excellent Mr. Varley to think that I had finished my investigations—that I had given up the case."

"But why should you want him to think that?" asked Tinker, surprised.

Sexton Blake looked at Tinker grimly.

"Because Mr. Roger Varley is the murderer!" he replied evenly.

Tinker opened his mouth, but no words came. He stared at his master blankly, with his eyes very wide open. But Sexton Blake was gazing straight ahead,

and quite unmoved. He apparently did not think that his remark was a very startling one.

"Varley is the murderer!" gasped Tinker. "But—but— Oh, I say, guv'nor, this is a bit too thick, you know!"

"My good Tinker, where are your wits to-day?" asked the great criminologist. "Did you not observe that Varley has grey hair? Did you not notice that on his right cheek he has a small cut which, we will assume, was recently covered by a small portion of court-plaster?"

"Great Scott!" said Tinker. "But—but this is startling, sir!"

"Not at all," said Blake calmly. "I anticipated it all along."

"But you didn't say anything—"

"I kept my own counsel, my lad; and I wanted to make certain before I spoke," said Blake. "I believe every word of Winterton's story and I know for a fact that Varley was lying. His whole bearing proved it. His very attitude was false. Not for one moment did his tone ring true. He denied Winterton's story, but merely for his own ends."

"By jingo!" muttered Tinker. "I'm beginning to see things now! But why should Varley want to murder the old man? What motive could he have had—"

"That is what we must find out, Tinker," interrupted Blake. "And when we have found out we must obtain some very clear evidence of Varley's guilt. I am afraid that the police would not be satisfied with the material which I have in my hands at the moment."

"No; it's rather flimsy, sir."

"Exactly," said Blake. "We must get hold of something of a more concrete nature. I do not think you have troubled to consider this affair in all its aspects. Think carefully, Tinker. We will take it for granted that Winterton's story is true. Very well. We find that three men knew of this wager—Sir Howard Westlake, Reginald Winterton, and Roger Varley. It was to be a hoax—a kind of joke on the police."

"Winterton and Sir Howard entered into it recklessly, and in a sporting spirit. Varley had nothing to do with it, actually. He was presumably in London when the pretended murder was carried out. But, to tell the truth, Varley must have been near by, watching. He saw Sir Howard leave in the little car, and knew that Winterton would fake up the evidence, as had been arranged. And now we must begin to theorise."

"Varley, no doubt, stopped Sir Howard on the road, got into the car, and persuaded Sir Howard to go along that little lane which leads past the lake. At a certain spot he brought the car to a standstill, and then murdered his companion, afterwards throwing him over the fence into the lake. He took certain precautions to cover his tracks, but he evidently assumed that no investigations would be made in that quarter."

"Ah, he didn't know that you would be on the job, guv'nor!" said Tinker.

"Possibly not," replied Blake. "But I've done nothing particularly wonderful. Lennard ought to have made these discoveries; he had the same field of inquiry that I had. But he simply took it for granted that the obvious obvious evidence was the true evidence. In that Lennard made a mistake."

"To return to the murder. Varley is the only other man who knew of that wager, and he also knew that he could deny it in perfect safety, since his denial would be at once accepted. For some reason he wanted to get Sir

Howard out of the way, and he seized this opportunity."

"Do you think he would have murdered the baronet in any case?"

"I hardly think so, Tinker," replied Blake. "But this preposterous wager put this idea into his head. He saw how easy it would be for him to kill Sir Howard in reality, and with very little danger to himself, since all the available evidence pointed directly to Winterton as the murderer. A cunning scheme, Tinker—cunning and clever. Our friend Varley is apparently a cool customer. If he had only taken a little more care he would have been perfectly safe. But he left his own trail behind, and that is how we shall get him. I can assure you, young 'un, that Varley will not escape the gallows."

Tinker had no opportunity to ask any further questions, for Westlake Manor had now been reached. Not that Tinker wanted to ask any questions—he had too many thoughts in his mind. This sudden revelation came as a surprise to him. And it opened his eyes a great deal."

He could not quite understand Sexton Blake's movements after the Manor had been reached. For the great detective prowled about in all sorts of odd corners of the grounds. He examined footpaths, flower-beds, and other apparently useless spots—useless, from Tinker's point of view.

And then in the middle of it a big limousine rolled up, and came to a halt in front of the house. From it stepped a very charming young lady. She was tastefully attired, rather above the average height, and possessed a mass of wavy brown hair and a pair of deep blue eyes, which were suspiciously moist.

Tinker, who was lounging about the front, lost no time in dodging off to find Sexton Blake. At first Tinker's efforts were fruitless, but he ultimately unearthed the detective crouching in the midst of some laurel-bushes.

"What on earth are you doing, guv'nor?" asked Tinker.

"I am examining some footprints, my lad; and quite interesting they are, too," replied Blake. "This is the spot where Varley stood last night. He waited here, in full view of the library French windows, but quite unseen himself. We are getting along, Tinker; we are tightening the net."

"I just came to tell you, guv'nor, that Miss Westlake has arrived," said Tinker. "At least, I assume she is Miss Westlake. A jolly pretty girl, anyway; and if you don't buck up you'll probably miss her. Because it's a ten-to-one chance that she'll go off to the Wintertons' place when she finds there's nobody here but the servants."

Sexton Blake emerged from his retreat.

"You are quite right, Tinker; we must have a few words with Miss Westlake at once," he said briefly. "She may be able to give us some important information."

For the life of him Tinker couldn't understand what information Miss Sylvia Westlake could give; but he didn't ask any questions. And presently he followed Blake into the big lounge hall, where Jevon was talking to Miss Westlake.

"Yes, Miss Sylvia, it's a terribly bad business!" the butler was saying. "I'm mighty glad that you weren't here this morning—But here's Mr. Blake, miss. I sha'n't need to fetch him now."

Sexton Blake introduced himself in a few words, and expressed his deepest sympathy with the girl on her sad bereavement. Miss Sylvia, to tell the truth, was in a high state of nervous tension, and was almost on the verge of tears.

"Oh, Mr. Blake, I am so glad that I have seen you!" she exclaimed. "This



affair is dreadful—positively dreadful! I can hardly realise that it has actually happened. To think that Uncle Howard is dead! I didn't know anything about it until an hour or two ago. And—and Reggie—Mr. Winterton—he and I are engaged, Mr. Blake, and—and—”

Her voice faltered, and she did not finish the sentence. And she looked very charming as she sat there—although, at the same time, the sadness in her eyes made Tinker turn his head away.

“You must be very brave, Miss Westlake, and patient,” said Sexton Blake gently. “I am very hopeful of achieving good results, and I can promise you at once that I will do everything within my power to establish Mr. Winterton's innocence.”

“Then—then you do not believe him guilty?” asked the girl quickly.

“On the contrary, I am convinced of his innocence,” said Blake. “Although the case against him is very black, I can see several promising rays of light. And if I can only conduct my investigations as I would like, it will not be long before your fiance is at liberty.”

“Oh, Mr. Blake, you must prove Reggie's innocence—you must!” said Sylvia, laying a hand upon Blake's sleeve and pressing his arm tightly. “Reggie couldn't do a thing like that—he couldn't!”

“Miss Westlake, I want you to keep quite calm, and answer my questions—that is, if you can answer them,” said Sexton Blake. “I am not inquisitive, but I should like to know a few facts, if possible, concerning your late uncle's affairs. I understand that he was your guardian?”

“Yes, Mr. Blake, that is quite true.”

“Do you know if he had made any plans in the event of his death?”

“Yes; and I did not quite agree with them,” said Sylvia. “You see, Mr. Blake, Uncle Howard has been my guardian for quite a number of years—ever since my parents were drowned in that dreadful Titanic disaster.”

Tears welled into her eyes, and for some moments she was silent. And Sexton Blake and Tinker waited, not daring to disturb her.

“Please—please forgive me, Mr. Blake,” she faltered, at length, looking up. “But—but it seems too awful! I have had so much sadness in my life, and now, at a blow, I have lost my uncle, and—and Reggie is—”

“I cannot possibly express my sympathy, Miss Westlake,” put in Blake quietly. “But please do not worry yourself unduly with regard to Mr. Winterton's position. I know that it is distressing you to be answering my questions in this way. But it is most important that I should know these things, and I would prefer to hear them from your lips. Can you tell me who will benefit by your uncle's death?”

Sylvia controlled herself with an effort. “Why, I—I suppose I shall, Mr. Blake,” she said.

“You will inherit Sir Howard's money?”

“Yes.”

“And I believe I am right in stating that your uncle was very rich.”

“Yes, I think he was, Mr. Blake,” said Sylvia. “And—and that will be black against poor Reggie, won't it? He and I are engaged, and the police will certainly assume that—”

“We will not speak about what the police will assume,” interrupted Blake gently. “I am trying to get hold of facts, Miss Westlake. Please do not think me ungentlemanly, but can you tell me your age?”

The girl looked rather surprised.

“I am just nineteen,” she replied, looking at Blake curiously.

“Then your uncle, no doubt, has made provision in his will for a guardian to be appointed?” asked Blake. “For, being an heiress, the law requires that you should have a guardian until you are of age.”

“Yes, I know that, Mr. Blake. My uncle spoke of it with me,” said Sylvia. “He made his will only a month or so ago, and I remember everything clearly.”

“And do you know who your new guardian is to be?”

“Why, yes, my uncle's oldest friend—Mr. Roger Varley.”

Tinker shot a keen glance at his master, but Blake seemed quite unmoved.

“This is very interesting, Miss Westlake,” said the detective evenly. “So Mr. Roger Varley is now your guardian, or will be after the reading of the will. Are you entirely satisfied with this arrangement?”

“Oh, Mr. Blake, what does it matter?” asked the girl brokenly. “But, as a matter of fact, I am not satisfied. Not that I dislike Mr. Varley—he has always been very nice. But, at the same time, I was not very pleased with my uncle's decision.”

Sexton Blake asked a few more questions, but they were of very little importance. He had gained the information he needed, and that information was very significant.

For, assuming that Varley was the murderer, a very definite motive for the crime now became apparent; and that was a big step forward. As a result of Sir Howard's death, Varley became the girl's guardian, and she had inherited Sir Howard Westlake's considerable fortune. Varley would be in a position to handle the money almost as he wished. And Blake felt quite certain that Varley had some schemes in mind for appropriating a considerable part of the fortune for himself. Moreover, it was extremely probable that Varley himself would benefit largely by the terms of the will.

“There are one or two other points that we must clear up, Tinker, and then we shall have our man in a corner,” said Blake, some little time later. “The present evidence is not sufficient. I rather fancy that we shall find that Varley is in financial difficulties. But that remains to be seen. For the moment I am going to pursue a certain line of inquiry here—on the spot.”

“What's the scheme, guv'nor?”

“Well, Tinker, I've been thinking about the motor-car,” said Blake. “According to Winterton, Sir Howard left in that car, which is Winterton's property. The idea was to proceed to the South Coast. But, as we know, Varley appeared on the scene, murdered Sir Howard, and then had the car on his hands. What would he do with it?”

“Abandon it somewhere?” ventured Tinker.

“Good gracious, no!” said Blake. “That would not do at all, young 'un. For it would help to corroborate Winterton's story—it would prove that the car had actually been used. Varley's most likely course would have been to take the car back to its garage, and leave it there. I have learned that Winterton kept the small two-seater in a little garage to itself—a place which had formerly been a coach-house. It is reached by means of a side lane near Millhurst Lodge, and Varley could easily have put the car back without disturbing anybody. I intend going there at once, and having a look round.”

Half an hour later Sexton Blake and

Tinker were within the little garage, which was, indeed, some distance from the lodge, and quite isolated. The car was a neat little two-seater, and Blake examined it with interest. He went over everything—he examined the wheels, the springs, and gave particular scrutiny to the foot-pedals and the steering-wheel.

After sprinkling a curious greyish-yellow powder over the steering-wheel, he blew the powder off, revealing a most excellent set of finger-prints. They were clearly the finger-prints of the man who had last driven the car.

“Unless I am greatly mistaken, these finger-prints will prove to be those of the incautious Mr. Varley,” said Sexton Blake, with much satisfaction. “He was very unwise to remove his gloves, and so— Dear me! What is this?”

Blake suddenly bent forward, and reached down. His lean, strong fingers grasped a small object which had been on the bottom of the car, almost concealed by the mat. He held it up, and it proved to be a button of a somewhat large size, and curiously chased. Attached to it was a minute portion of dark green Melton cloth.

“That may belong to Winterton, sir,” said Tinker.

“Possibly, but we shall see,” said Blake. “It seems to me that it was torn from the coat bodily. Clearly the result of haste in jumping out of the car. The button must have caught upon some projection, or something of that sort.”

Sexton Blake was entirely satisfied with the result of his visit to the garage, and very soon afterwards he was closeted with Lennard, having a long, serious talk with that astonished individual.

Blake spent fully an hour with the chief inspector, and by that time the worthy Scotland Yard man had had his eyes widely opened.

He accompanied Blake to the garage, and then went along to Westlake Manor. He examined the laurel bushes, he paid great attention to a wooden fence above the lake, and he positively swore when he saw the bloodstains upon the grass.

“By thunder!” he ejaculated, removing his bowler, and scratching his head. “How on earth you got on the track of all this, Blake, beats me!”

“My dear fellow, I used my eyes,” smiled Sexton Blake. “Well, I rather fancy I have converted you, Lennard, and now I must waste no further time. I shall return to London at once, for I have certain things to do. You won't forget what I have told you, and you will be ready for action when required?”

“You bet I shall!” said Lennard promptly. “Blake, old man, this is very good of you; you've helped wonderfully. And, what's more, by the time you've finished you will have saved young Winterton's life!”

“I hope so, at all events!” said Sexton Blake. “I have ascertained that Winterton never possessed such a thing as a green Melton coat. Mr. Varley, on the other hand, has been seen in such a garment on several occasions. But we need proof, Lennard, and you need not worry. I shall get it.”

Exactly fifteen minutes later Sexton Blake and Tinker started off for London. They had grim work to do!

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

“Quite dramatic, Mr. Varley!”

VILLIERS AVENUE, Kensington, was a quiet, select thoroughfare.

It possessed an old-world appearance of prosperity and sedate gentility. The private houses on either side were large and commodious, and



were all inhabited by people of considerable means. Without considerable means they couldn't have inhabited the houses at all.

No. 63, like the others, stood to itself, and was the private residence of Mr. Roger Varley.

Sexton Blake and Tinker walked briskly down Villiers Avenue. The time was just nine-thirty; and Blake and Tinker were well aware of the fact that Mr. Varley was at his club. Nevertheless, they were bent upon calling at No. 63, for the ostensible purpose of seeing the householder.

Blake pushed open the gate, and walked up the short tiled path, Tinker following close behind. And, in answer to the detective's ring, the massive front door was opened by a stout gentleman of extremely prosperous appearance. Undoubtedly, he could be no less a person than the butler.

"Will you please take my card to Mr. Varley, and say that I should like to have a few words with him on a most important subject?" said Sexton Blake smoothly. "You might further add that—"

"Beggin' your pardon, sir, but Mr. Varley is out at the moment," said the butler. "To the best of my knowledge, the master is at his club."

"How extremely annoying!" said Sexton Blake, frowning. "Perhaps I have called at a somewhat unconventional hour. When do you expect Mr. Varley home?"

"Well, he can't be long now, sir," said the man, regarding the slip of pasteboard with interest. "Mr. Sexton Blake, sir? I am sure Mr. Varley will be disappointed at having missed such a distinguished gentleman as yourself, sir—if you'll pardon me for saying so."

"My business is of the utmost importance, and I should prefer to wait for Mr. Varley, if such a thing is possible," said Blake. "I could, of course, go to your master's club, but I should probably miss him on the way, and that would waste much valuable time."

The ruse was quite successful, for the

butler forthwith invited the callers to enter, and he conducted them down the hall, and ushered them into a comfortable apartment where a gas-fire was sending forth a cheerful glow.

"If you'll wait here, gentlemen, I will tell the master as soon as he arrives," said the butler. "Can I offer you anything in the way of refreshment, sir, while you're waiting?"

Blake politely refused, and the butler withdrew, closing the door noiselessly behind him.

"It worked, gov'nor—it worked!" whispered Tinker.

"Hush, my lad—hush!" said Blake softly. "I had no doubt that we should be successful thus far. But our real object has yet to be accomplished."

They sat down, but only for a few minutes. Then Blake was active again. He went to the door, listened, and then quietly turned the handle. Having opened the door, he again listened.

Everything was quiet in the big, comfortable hall. As Blake listened, he heard the faint echo of feminine laughter—evidently proceeding from the servants' quarters, in the basement.

And Sexton Blake did not hesitate.

He moved quietly out into the hall, strolled along quite carelessly, in case he should be surprised, until he arrived at a little alcove where quite a number of overcoats and other garments were hanging. Never for a moment did Sexton Blake expect to find the green Melton. He assumed that Varley would have placed that garment elsewhere.

But it was the unexpected that happened.

Blake had hardly got opposite the alcove before he saw a long, thick Melton overcoat, with fur cuffs and collar. It was the very article which he required.

He instantly observed that the buttons were of a curious pattern, and chased in a peculiar way. Quick as a flash Blake produced the button that he had found in Reginald Winterton's car. And a moment's examination of the coat proved that he had made no mistake. The

bottom button was missing—including a small portion of material.

Without a doubt, the last person to drive Winterton's car had been Sir Howard Westlake's murderer. And this button, belonging to Roger Varley's coat, had been found in the car.

Blake strolled away from the alcove, highly elated. And he succeeded in getting back into the room without being observed. At least, he imagined so. But for once the great detective was wrong.

"Any luck, gov'nor?" asked Tinker softly.

"The very best!" replied Blake. "I located the coat with no difficulty. Tinker—one might almost think that it was placed there for my especial benefit. Now we merely require our cunning host's fingerprints, and I do not think we shall have any difficulty in obtaining them. Varley suspects nothing."

But Sexton Blake did not know that Mr. Roger Varley would very soon have good cause to suspect a great deal. For almost immediately after Blake had entered the room, a figure quietly descended the thickly-carpeted stairs. It was a large figure, that, in fact, of the butler.

And he was looking rather startled. He had seen Blake fumbling with the overcoat—he had seen Blake walking quietly back along the hall.

"Good heavens!" muttered the man. "I must have been taken in! Sexton Blake and Tinker—not likely! A couple of crooks, I should think, with a specially-printed card. Picking pockets—that's what he was doing!"

The butler was undecided as to how to act, and when he got down into the hall he paused irresolutely. And then, to his infinite relief, a key grated in the lock of the front door, the door opened, and Mr. Roger Varley appeared.

"What on earth is the matter with you, Kenson?" said Varley sharply, as the butler came swiftly towards him, with a finger over his lips. "What is the idea of this mysterious behaviour?"

"Hush, sir!" said the butler, in a hoarse whisper. "They are in the morning-room—"

"Who are in the morning-room, you fool?" snapped Varley.

"I think they must be burglars, sir," said Kenson. "They came not ten minutes ago, and I thought they were Mr. Sexton Blake and Tinker—"

"What!" muttered Varley, grasping the butler's arm. "Sexton Blake and Tinker! They are here? Answer me, you dolt!"

"I'm trying to tell you all the time, sir!" gasped Kenson, startled by his master's attitude. "The gentleman looks a real swell—dress and everything. I never thought he could be anything else but the real Mr. Blake, sir."

"And why on earth should you assume that you have been deceived?" asked Varley sharply.

"Well, sir, I happened to go upstairs just now, and as I was coming down, I saw the man who called himself Mr. Blake over by the alcove," said the butler. "It looked to me as though he was comparing a button which he had taken from his pocket with the other buttons on the green coat—that Melton travelling coat of yours, sir. But, of course, I must have been mistaken. He was really picking the pockets—"

"Go!" snapped Varley harshly. "I will deal with these—these people! Do not interrupt me, Kenson!"

"But they may be desperate, sir—"

"I will deal with them, I tell you!" snarled Varley. "Go!"

The butler had never seen his master

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like this before, and he went away hurriedly, leaving Varley in the centre of the hall.

In that moment Roger Varley knew that all his plans had come to naught—that he was discovered—that this was the end of all things for him.

But Varley was not frantic with alarm. Instead, he was filled with an overpowering fury—a cold, grim, deadly fury—against Sexton Blake.

And Roger Varley positively thrilled when he realised that Sexton Blake and Tinker were here—in the house! He must flee—that fact dinned into his head throbbingly. He must get away at once, before he actually found himself under arrest. But if he fled, Blake and Tinker would be on his track. And, quite suddenly, Varley had developed a horror of Sexton Blake.

Before flying for his life, he must deal with this human bloodhound!

And, with a firm, steady step, Varley walked down the hall to the morning-room. He had divested himself of his overcoat, and was now revealed as being attired in immaculate evening-dress. He opened the door of the morning-room and entered.

Sexton Blake rose to his feet.

"I am sorry to disturb you at such a late hour, Mr. Varley——" he began. "Sit down!"

The words were rapped out like the crack of a whip. And, as they were being uttered, Mr. Roger Varley produced something from his hip-pocket. This something was a neat, serviceable revolver, and he pointed the barrel with accurate aim at Sexton Blake's breast.

For perhaps ten seconds there was absolute silence in the room. Blake, in that moment, knew that something unsuspected had occurred to put Varley on his guard.

"Quite dramatic, Mr. Varley," he said smoothly. "But may I inquire what the idea happens to be?"

"Sit down!" repeated Varley, in cold, cutting tones. "By Heaven, Blake, if you do not obey my orders I will shoot you down! I mean it—and you know I mean it! It matters not to me now whether I kill you. One might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb!"

Sexton Blake sat down.

"You admit, then, that you killed Sir Howard Westlake?" he asked calmly.

"It is apparently useless for me to keep up the game of pretence any longer," replied Varley. "I know why you came here, Blake, but you will not go away! You may be laughing to yourself; perhaps you think I am bluffing? Make no mistake! If you move the space of one inch with any limb of your body, I shall fire! The same words apply to Tinker. I may mention that I have taken several prizes for accurate revolver-shooting."

"It is just as well that you have warned us, Mr. Varley," said Sexton Blake. "Tinker, keep perfectly still! Our host is quite serious, and in grim earnest. You are a valuable assistant to me, and I do not wish you to meet with an untimely end."

Again there was a short silence. Tinker was standing against the table. He did not move—he had more sense.

"My orders must be obeyed explicitly," said Varley. "Tinker, go to the cupboard on your left and open the door. Inside you will find a long piece of blind-cord. Bring it out. If you attempt any trickery, or if you think you can throw something at me, Blake's life will pay for your foolishness!"

Tinker went to the cupboard and got the cord obediently. He had more sense than to do otherwise. The tables were turned, and Blake and Tinker were in the power of this desperate murderer.

"Good!" said Varley. "You will now take that cord and bind Blake to his chair. Remember, you must do the work thoroughly. The cords must be tight and the knots secure. I shall be watching you. Go ahead! And remember this—if either of you makes the slightest outcry it will be the last word you will utter!"

Tinker went ahead. There was nothing else to do.

He took the cord and bound Sexton Blake firmly to the chair. He passed the cord round tightly, taking orders all the time. He was compelled to make knots at frequent intervals. And at last Blake was fixed firmly in the chair.

"Now take the big scarf on the couch and bind it round Blake's mouth!" commanded Varley. "Bind it tightly!"

Tinker could do nothing but obey.

"Splendid!" said Varley, his voice quiet, but singularly harsh. "Now, Tinker, come forward here and bend down. Grasp your ankles firmly. Go on—do it! I shall shoot if you don't!"

Tinker bent down and grasped his ankles. He suspected what was coming, and he attempted to throw himself aside as Varley brought down the butt of his revolver with great force.

Crash!

The revolver struck Tinker's head with considerable force. But, owing to the youngster's half-performed movement, it was only a glancing blow. He rolled to the floor, stunned, but not seriously. If he had received the full force of that blow, he would undoubtedly have been badly injured.

Varley acted like lightning. He ran forward, briefly examined Tinker, and then procured some more cord. Coolly and deliberately he tied Tinker up and then gagged him. Both Blake and Tinker were now helpless.

Varley looked round him, his eyes glittering strangely. He went to the window, and found that it was securely fastened. Then he crossed over to the fireplace and turned off the gas. The fire went out with a "pop."

Varley's next move was a significant one. He seized the top of the gas-fire—which was not particularly hot—and wrenched the whole thing round. The leverage thus obtained was sufficient for his purpose. The supply pipe snapped, and instantly a hissing roar of gas surged out into the room.

Still deliberate in his movements, Varley turned out the gas overhead. Then he went to the door, opened it swiftly, passed outside, and closed the door tightly. He turned the key in the lock and placed the key in his pocket.

Sexton Blake and Tinker were now imprisoned in that death-chamber—with gas pouring out direct from the main. The window was tightly closed, and Blake and Tinker would be dead long before the smell of gas penetrated into the hall.

Varley lost no time.

He hurried upstairs, went straight to his bedroom, and transferred a large supply of cash into his own pockets. Then he hastily packed a small valise, and hurried downstairs again.

It was the work of a moment to slip into his overcoat and hat. The servants were all below in their own quarters, and had not the faintest idea of what had been going on. It would probably be an hour before the butler happened to come along the hall. By that time Varley would be well away.

He opened the front door and stepped outside.

"I don't think so, Mr. Varley!" said a quiet, grim voice.

Varley stood stock still, his eyes nearly starting from his head. For there, facing him, was—Sexton Blake!

It was astounding—unbelievable!

Blake—here! And less than five minutes before hardly had left him bound and helpless in the morning-room, and the murderer at the mercy of the gas. Sir Howard Westlake's murderer was absolutely staggered.

A firm hand grasped his arm. Then, before he could take any action, a knee came swiftly up to the small of his back, and the next moment Varley was on the ground. "Here you are, Lennard!" said Sexton Blake calmly. "I thought I should give him a bit of a surprise. You're welcome to him now. How's Tinker getting on?"

"Oh, coming round splendidly!" said Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard briskly. "Sorry to trouble you, Mr. Varley, but you will oblige me by stepping into a taxi that I have waiting!"

Roger Varley collapsed.

He gave one low cry and fell inert. The strain had proved too much for him, and the Scotland Yard men had no difficulty in taking him to the police-station.

Meanwhile, Lennard had remained with Sexton Blake. And the pair walked round the house to the morning-room window. Sitting here, propped up against the wall, was Tinker, feeling very dazed, but improving rapidly.

Mr. Varley had been quite unconscious of the fact, when arriving home from his club, that his house had been surrounded by detectives. Sexton Blake and Tinker, after all, had not been in such a perilous position.

But, in spite of the strong bodyguard, they would undoubtedly have perished but for the singular astuteness which had been displayed by Tinker.

"Splendid, young 'un—splendid!" said Sexton Blake, as he helped Tinker to his feet. "I saw what your game was at once. When you bound me up, at the point of Varley's revolver, you apparently did the work with complete thoroughness. But, fortunately for us, our cheerful host was unacquainted with trick knots!"

"You bet he was!" said Tinker, with a grin. "I take a pride in those knots, guv'nor. When I'm tying 'em they look as firm as any knot possibly can look. Varley was completely deceived."

"And all you had to do, Blake, was to exert a little pressure?" asked Lennard.

"Precisely," said Sexton Blake. "I was half-afraid that Varley would test the knots after Tinker had finished, but he apparently did not think it worth while. I was free in less than a minute, and I flung up the window, carried Tinker outside, and walked round to the front door—to greet Mr. Varley as he made his exit."

"Neat!" commented Lennard approvingly. "Infernally neat!"

That very night Reginald Winterton was released from custody—a free man. Solely owing to Sexton Blake's astute methods, he had gained his liberty, after being a prisoner for less than twelve hours.

And Sexton Blake had made two staunch friends and admirers—Reggie Winterton and Sylvia Westlake. But before long the latter charming individual thought it desirable to change her name. Needless to say, Reggie thought it desirable, too.

Roger Varley was committed for trial. The evidence against him, as supplied by Sexton Blake, was of an overwhelming nature. And, in due course, the murderer of Sir Howard Westlake was found guilty by twelve good men and true, and he suffered the extreme penalty of the law.

THE END.

U. J.—No. 917.



START THIS STIRRING MYSTERY AND SPORTS YARN TO-DAY!



THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

Geoff Carslake, captain of Nalcombe United, is a clerk in a shipping office. Nalcombe win a Cup given by Mr. Dingwaree, a wealthy Indian. Hidden in the Cup is a famous ruby eye stolen from a temple, and supposed to bring ill-fortune on whoever possesses it.

Harold Mudah, an Indian medical student and a member of the Nalcombe team, is commanded by Thacass, a priest from India, to recover the stone, but he is several times unsuccessful. It ultimately comes into the possession of Dolly Letchworth, Geoff's sweetheart, who gives it to him as a present. Mudah unsuccessfully attempts to steal it, and flees from the town, together with Thacass.

Geoff is unjustly dismissed from his situation in Nalcombe, and accepts the offer of a place in a big London club. He achieves a brilliant success, and also does well in his new job in the London shipping office until he is tempted into playing cards. Sustaining heavy losses, he is forced to pawn his watch; but the pawnbroker, being attracted by the Ruby Eye which is attached to the chain, offers to lend five pounds on it, a sum which Geoff accepts.

Lepstein, the pawnbroker, communicates with a servant of Thacass named Rahid, and it is decided to send for the priest, who is still in search of the stone. The same evening, however, Geoff wins nearly thirty pounds at cards, and he accordingly returns to the pawnbroker's the following morning to redeem the pledge, and arrives to find Lepstein gloating over the Eye.

(Now read on.)

Thacass Takes a Hand.

THE pawnbroker had a little desk, with a glass screen to it at one end of the counter, and behind this he was gloating over the stone through a magnifying-glass.

Mr. Lepstein was a gentleman who thought of himself first of all, and of his own ends. Money was a great thing with him. He was one of those who put money before all else, and he had not been at all satisfied with the promise that Rahid had given him about his "reward."

He knew that Rahid was associated with a strange league of men—a powerful league—and that they were mostly foreigners. But then Mr. Lepstein had had a lot to do with foreigners in his time. He had been something more than just a pawnbroker. There had been more than one shady bit of work in which he had been connected, and he was not inclined to be frightened by mere threats.

He was firmly convinced now that this little jewel was indeed worth a fabulous sum of money, and since it had come into his hands—since he had been the one to detect it, from certain rather vague information that he had received, it did not seem at all right to him that it should go out of his possession again without him gaining something substantial for himself.

Thacass, the priest! He knew that Rahid spoke about him with bated breath—that this same Thacass was reputed to be an individual who would stand no nonsense—that he was a dangerous sort of customer to come up against.

But, after all, what did that matter?

The Luck of the Cup!

A Magnificent New Football and Adventure Story.

By WILLIAM E. GROVES

In a case like this Mr. Lepstein would have the law on his side. The young chap who had brought this stone in obviously did not know its value. If he could be persuaded to part with it quickly, if it could become legally the property of Mr. Lepstein, then—

"Good-afternoon!"

The pawnbroker started violently, and looked up. And there was the object of his thoughts leaning across the counter and smiling at him.

Geoffrey pointed to the stone.

"It seems to me," he said, "that that little pendant of mine is very interesting to you, sir."

Lepstein tried to sweep the stone out of sight, but it was too late. Geoffrey stretched forth his arm, and he had taken the stone in his hand.

"Give it back!"

The pawnbroker spoke swiftly.

"It's mine!" he went on. "You have no right, young fellow, to come into this shop and snatch at things like that!"

Geoffrey laughed.

"Perhaps I am as curious as you are," he said. "I'm sure I apologise if I seemed rude, but I have come to redeem this pledge."

Lepstein's jaw dropped.

"You said Saturday!" he gasped.

"I know I did. But I have had a bit of luck, quite unexpectedly, and I am in the position to pay you back now, and take what is my own!"

As he spoke these words Carslake pushed the requisite amount across the counter, together with the ticket.

"I think," he said quietly, "that this squares us, doesn't it?"

"No!"

Lepstein almost shrieked out the words. Here, it seemed, was a fortune slipping from his grasp.

"Give it to me back! I will—"

"You will do nothing, my friend, only take the money I give you. I am claiming what is my own. If you don't like that, you are, of course, quite at liberty to call a policeman."

And so, for all his cunning, Mr. Lepstein was done absolutely. It would do him no good at all to attempt a high hand with this young fellow, who had the law on his side.

So he changed his tone.

"Your little stone interests me, sir," he said. "I may say that my friend has had a look at it, and he says—"

He paused.

"Well?" Geoffrey asked.

"It is of no value actually. If you went from here and tried to sell it elsewhere you would get nothing on it at all. But he—my friend—has taken a fancy to it. He has commissioned me to offer you a price for it—a very big price. You are lucky. He wants to use it for a certain purpose, and I can offer you fifty pounds. Think of that, my young friend! Fifty pounds—cash paid across the counter now! Think of what you can do with fifty pounds! Come now! It's a chance of a lifetime! You'll sell it—eh?"

Carslake shook his head.

"I won't!" he said.

"Not for fifty pounds?"

"No; nor for a hundred and fifty or five hundred!"

"Then you're mad!"

It was as much as Mr. Lepstein could do to keep his temper.

"I may be. But I am going to keep a tight hold on this, for I know that neither you nor your friend would offer me fifty pounds for an article unless it were worth considerably more to you!"

"I tell you," Lepstein snarled, "that it is worth nothing! It is a curio, that is all."

Very deliberately Geoffrey put the stone in his pocket.

"As a curio, then, I will keep it," he said.

It was useless for Mr. Lepstein to argue; nothing he could say or do would alter Geoffrey's decision.

He had quite made up his mind now that there was something more than met the eye in all this; there was something of value about this little stone, and he would go elsewhere and get it valued.

If he were mistaken—if it were just a curio pure and simple—then he would keep it, since Dolly had given it to him. If it turned out to be worth a lot, then it would be only fair that Dolly Letchworth should know about it.

And that was how it happened that Thacass, travelling post-haste from the North of England, got to Lepstein's shop that night and heard the tragic news that the pledge had already been redeemed.

Things looked rather black for the pawnbroker just then, for the tall priest caught him by the throat and forced him to his knees.

"You traitor!" he hissed. "You have sold the stone! You dog! Do you know the penalty for that? It is death—instant death!"

"Police! Help!"

Lepstein gasped out the words as, with a sudden movement, Thacass flung him away so that he collapsed in a heap on the floor.

"Very little good your police will do you!" the priest said. "I tell you not all the police in London will save you from death if through you we lose that stone again! If—"

Rahid stepped up to him then, and whispered something into his ear, and Thacass nodded, and calmed down again.

"Quick!" he said. "The name and address of the man who redeemed the pledge!"

Lepstein did not shout out again for the police. They were alone in the place, and there was something in the other's eyes that he did not like.

He staggered across to his little safe and took a book from it, and he gave the name and address they asked for.

"Carslake—Geoffrey Carslake!"

Thacass started. He remembered that name. It was the young fool who kicked the football about, who had been connected with the Dingwaree Cup in the first instance.

So that it looked as if there had been something in what Mudah had said, after all—that Mudah knew more than Thacass had at first been prepared to admit.

"He took the stone back to-day?"

"Yes; about two o'clock this afternoon. He—he seemed to have some sort of idea that it was worth something. I—I tried to keep it. I offered him fifty pounds for it, so that," the cunning Lepstein added, "I could keep it for you, sir, but I could not persuade him. And what could I do? He had the law on his side. He could have called in a policeman, and I should have been compelled to—"

Thacass interrupted him with a swift, imperious gesture.

"Better for you if you had gone to prison than cross my purpose!" he said. "For getting trace of that stone you would have been rewarded well—ay, even enough to satisfy your greedy soul, which understands nothing beyond money! But for losing it again—if lost it is to us—you will pay the



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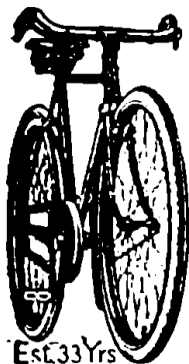
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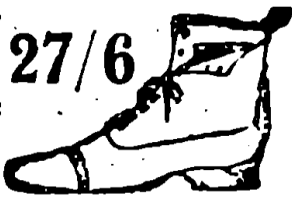
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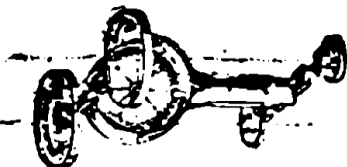
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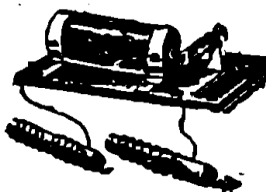
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