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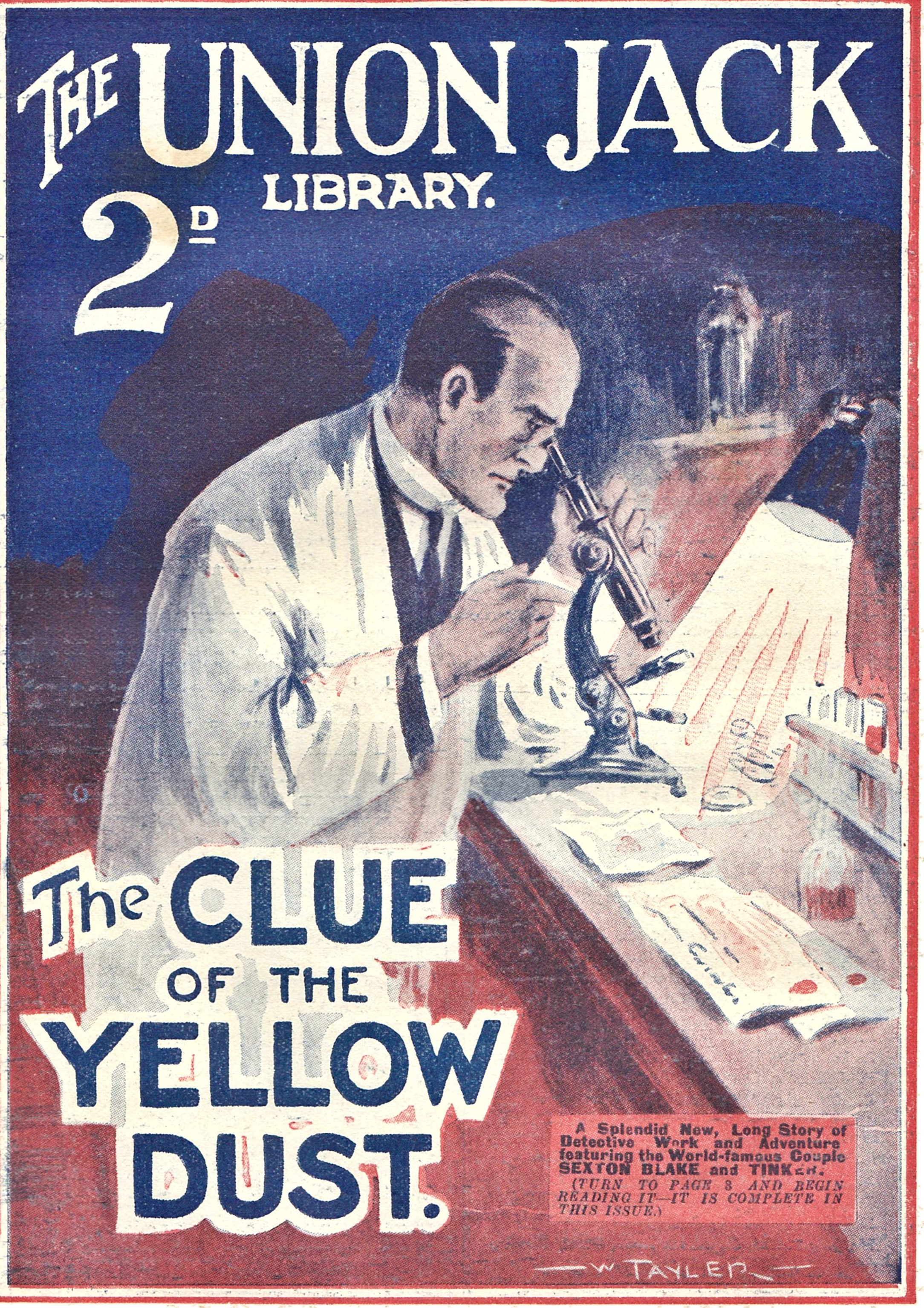

The CLUE OF THE YELLOW DUST.

A Splendid New, Long Story of Detective Work and Adventure featuring the World-famous Couple SEXTON BLAKE and TINKER.

(TURN TO PAGE 3 AND BEGIN READING IT—IT IS COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE.)

W. TAYLER

No. 939. EVERY THURSDAY. October 8th, 1921.

The UNION JACK Library

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2. Any alteration or mutilation of the coupon will disqualify the effort.
3. If any match, or matches, on the coupon should be abandoned, or full time is not played for any reason, such match, or matches, will not be taken into consideration in the adjudication.
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U.J.

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Date of Matches, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 22nd.
Closing Date, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 20th.

BRADFORD CITY	**v. SHEFFIELD UNITED**
BURNLEY	**v. CHELSEA**
PRESTON NORTH END	**v. NEWCASTLE UNITED**
LEEDS UNITED	**v. STOKE**
NOTTS COUNTY	**v. CLAPTON ORIENT**
PORT VALE	**v. SOUTH SHIELDS**
NEWPORT COUNTY	**v. PLYMOUTH ARGYLE**
SWANSEA TOWN	**v. MILLWALL**
CHESTERFIELD	**v. NELSON**
SOUTHPORT	**v. GRIMSBY TOWN**
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DUNDEE	**v. KILMARNOCK**

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

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In this competition no competitor succeeded in correctly forecasting the results of all the matches on the coupon. The prize of £1,000 has therefore been divided among the following seventeen competitors, whose forecasts contained one error:

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H. J. Pardoe, 36, York Road, E.7.
S. Midhurst, 1, Andrew Road, High Brooms, Tunbridge Wells.
F. V. Howard, 155, High Street, Linlithgow.
R. Lucas, 118, Bohemia Road, St. Leonards-on-Sea.
H. J. Merritt, The Green, Urchfont, Devizes.
E. Kemmery, Aston Arms, Market Rasen.
A. H. Wainman, 105, St. Albans Road, Seven Kings.
Charles Miles, 46, Leslie Park Road, Croydon.
A. W. Orchard, 43, Dorset Mews, S.W.1.
John B. Croom, 49, Kingsdown Road, Swindon.
L. Medhurst, Oakdale, Ockley.
Mr. Edgecumbe, 66, Albion Road, Greet, Birmingham.
A. T. V. Wright, 173, Colne Road, Twickenham.
R. J. Ross, 436, New Cross Road, S.E.14.
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THE CLUE of the YELLOW DUST.

Mystery is the keynote of this splendid story. Is it a case of forgery—or something more than forgery? The details are baffling and the facts are contradictory. There is only one clue—that of the Yellow Dust. Read how SEXTON BLAKE, seconded by the astute TINKER, used that clue and unravelled a very tangled skein.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

"The Accident Has Saved Mr. Stanford's Life."

TINKER paused abruptly and pointed.

"That reckless idiot seems to be looking for trouble, guv'nor!" he remarked, with a disapproving grunt. "The chap must be mad!"

Sexton Blake nodded.

"Yes; I'm afraid he'll come to grief if he isn't very careful!" he replied gravely. "It is quite impossible for him to see that car from his bicycle!"

The famous Baker Street criminologist and his assistant had now come to a halt and were watching interestedly. From their position upon the golf-links, high above the roadway, they could see the solitary cyclist whom Tinker had indicated.

He was a rural postman, mounted upon the usual cumbersome, red-enamelled machine, which was descending the steep and dangerous hill towards the cross-roads at the bottom at a speed which was extremely foolhardy, to say the least.

The high hedges which bordered the road at this point prevented the postman from seeing that which was quite plain to Sexton Blake and Tinker, and he continued his headlong rush down the hill quite oblivious of the fact that danger lay ahead.

A large touring-car was gliding rapidly and silently along the main road towards the foot of the hill, and to the watchers above it seemed certain that the two vehicles would meet at the spot where the two roads crossed.

"You're right guv'nor!" said Tinker excitedly. "I wonder whether I can make him hear? Hi! Look out for the car!"

Tinker placed his two hands to his mouth and yelled lustily to the postman. But in spite of his stentorian tones, the call was evidently ineffective. The man on the bicycle went serenely onwards, and—too late—he saw his danger.

The postman made a frantic effort to steer clear of the oncoming car as it loomed up before him, but all to no purpose. He swerved uncertainly, wobbled giddily for a moment, and then crashed into the bonnet full tilt.

"By jingo!" gasped Tinker. "If—if he isn't killed I shall be surprised, guv'nor!"

B-a-n-g!

Tinker's words were completely drowned by a tremendous booming report which vibrated and echoed among the surrounding hills in a shattering roar. There was no doubt that the origin of the sound had come from the cross-roads, for the scene of the accident was now marred by a great cloud of dense smoke, which hung in a cloud over the highway.

Blake and Tinker looked at one another, surprised for a moment into immobility.

"Queer!" muttered the detective, as he and Tinker recovered themselves and broke into a run. "That report sounded uncommonly like the firing of an explosive charge. The mere collision of

the bicycle and the motor-car could not have caused it."

Tinker shook his head.

"No sir!" he agreed. "There's evidently something mighty curious about this business."

For some little distance they hastened over the green surface of the extensive golf-links, and then, turning abruptly, they broke through the hedge and emerged upon the road a hundred yards or so distant from the thick smoke-pall—now slowly lifting.

Blake and Tinker had been out for an early morning stroll before breakfast, and seven o'clock had struck only a few minutes before Tinker had observed the postman's reckless descent of the steep hill.

The celebrated pair had been staying for the last few days in the small village of Wenham in the neighbourhood of Epsom, where they had put up at the local inn. After a long spell of particularly grinding work, Blake had felt the need of a little change, and had settled upon Wenham merely because the place had taken his fancy while passing along in the car.

So he and Tinker had remained, and had spent a most enjoyable three or four days in restful idleness. This morning they had arranged to return to town, and had turned out early for a final blow upon the golf-links before their morning meal.

The weather was perfect, and the gentle morning breeze upon the hilly links was exhilarating in the extreme. Blake and Tinker had been revelling in it to the full when their solitude was rudely disturbed by the appearance of the postman, and the collision which followed so swiftly.

The accident had appeared inevitable to Blake and Tinker from the first. And yet they had been quite unable to do anything to avert it.

At this particular spot the road was extremely dangerous, for the main London road crossed the hilly bye-lane at right angles. And Blake and Tinker, from the links above, had seen the motor-car and the bicycle travelling towards one another—each unaware of danger—and had been powerless to interfere.

They had met with a crash at the cross-roads, and this alone was appalling enough, in all conscience. But the tremendous explosion which had immediately followed the collision must have added to the horror of the situation considerably.

The fact that an explosion had occurred at all was in itself a most extraordinary happening, and one which seemed to indicate a mystery of some sort. Touring motor-cars, as a rule, do not travel the country laden with dangerous explosives.

Blake and Tinker by this time were quite near to the scene of the disaster. The smoke cloud had now lifted, and thinned out to a great extent, and they were able to see the wrecked and battered car quite distinctly.

"Phew! Seems to be a pretty awful mess!" panted Tinker, as they hurried along. "I—I can't see the postman, although his bike's here. Perhaps the poor chap——"

Tinker hesitated to put his thoughts into words. Both he and his master feared that the results of the catastrophe had proved fatal to the postman and probably to the occupants of the car also.

They reached the spot a moment later, and the havoc which had been caused was now quite apparent to them. The engine and fore part of the car were completely demolished, having been blown to atoms by the force of the explosion.

But the body of the car, with the exception of the dashboard, seemed to have escaped any serious injury. The chauffeur, dazed and bleeding from several superficial cuts and gashes, was still in his seat, having had a most miraculous escape from death.

In the tonneau of the car sat an elderly gentleman, hatless and scared, but apparently unhurt. He had just risen from the floor of the car, where he had been pitched by the sudden stoppage of the vehicle.

Sexton Blake took in the situation at a glance. He was somewhat surprised, in view of the tremendous force of the explosion, to find the two occupants of the car alive.

But the detective, seeing that the two men were in no need of immediate attention, at once turned and commenced a search for the unfortunate postman.

The bicycle was lying at the side of the road—a mere mangled and twisted mass of steel tubing, rims, and spokes.

There was no sign whatever of the rider of the machine, and Blake glanced at Tinker grimly.

"I'm afraid the poor fellow has been blown over the hedge, Tinker," he said, looking round as he spoke. "There seems little chance that he has escaped with his life."

Tinker nodded slowly.

"It's—it's awful, sir!" he answered, with a shudder.

Tinker paused suddenly, and listened intently.

"Did you hear that, guv'nor?" he went on quickly. "A groan——"

He pointed in the direction of the high, thick hedge which bordered the road, at the same time walking towards it. As he did so there was a sudden movement among the branches and undergrowth, and the next second the postman himself came stumbling into the roadway.

His uniform was torn and dusty, his hat was missing, and his face was scratched and bleeding. But apart from these trifles, he appeared to be little the worse for his experience.

He wiped his face with the sleeve of his coat, and blinked round dazedly, evidently wondering what had happened.

"By gum!" he muttered. "By gum!"

Tinker laughed outright in sheer relief. The man whose body they had been looking for was alive and almost unhurt, and the expression of mingled surprise and fear upon his weather-beaten features was extremely comic.

"Well, of all the extraordinary accidents this is about the limit!" exclaimed Tinker. "We expected to find everybody dead or dying, and here they are all safe and sound! It's—it's amazing!"

"It certainly is, young 'un!" agreed Blake briskly. "A stiff dose of brandy apiece and a few bandages appear to be all that's necessary."

Sexton Blake and Tinker at once busied themselves at rendering first aid to the three victims of the accident, and within ten minutes they were almost themselves again.

They congratulated themselves on their miraculous escape from death. But they were all utterly at a loss to account for the mysterious explosion which had caused such damage.

The owner of the car, a local resident named Mr. Ernest Robson, stoutly declared that there was nothing whatever of an explosive nature on the vehicle, with the exception of the petrol in the tank, and this, obviously, was in no way responsible.

Fortunately, Mr. Robson took the loss of his valuable car philosophically, being only too glad to escape with his life, and thinking of the insurance money that would enable him to get a better car. After discussing the probable cause of the explosion with Blake and Tinker, and being in no way enlightened, he elected to walk home with his chauffeur, from where, upon arrival, he would at once notify the police by telephone.

The postman, after Robson and his chauffeur had gone, looked from his mangled bicycle to Sexton Blake ruefully.

"Well, sir, I'm blowed if I know what to make of this business, that I don't," he said, shaking his head. "I reckon it were my fault for comin' down the hill too quick."

"It was certainly most unwise of you to streak down the hill as you did," agreed Blake thoughtfully. "However, the mere fact of your machine striking the car does not account for the explosion. What parcels were you carrying in your bag this morning?"

The postman scratched his head.

"Parcels?" he repeated. "I hadn't got no parcels at all, only just one little package and a few letters. You see, sir, I'm nearin' the end of my round here."

Sexton Blake nodded.

"Quite so!" he said. "Do you remember who the package was for?"

"Oh, yes, sir!" replied the man. "It was addressed to Mr. John Stanford, of Ivy Cottage. I was makin' for his house when this accident happened."

"Humph!" said Blake thoughtfully. "I fancy I've seen the place. Ivy Cottage is near here, isn't it?"

"Second house on the right up the London road," answered the postman. "But I don't see what Mr. Stanford's package has got to do with this 'ere affair, sir."

Sexton Blake made no reply, but devoted his attention upon the debris which was scattered broadcast across the surface of the road. Little scraps of the car's engine, pieces of wood and paper—obviously the remains of the letters which were contained in the postman's bag—all came under his scrutiny in turn. But after a keen glance at each fragment he discarded them.

The postman watched the detective for a few minutes, and then started searching on his own account. His official letter-bag, together with the contents, had vanished completely, and the only indication that it had existed at all was the untidy litter which now strewed the roadway.

When this fact finally dawned upon the postman, he announced his intention of going back to headquarters to report, and a few moments later Blake and Tinker found themselves alone.

"Do you think that package the postman mentioned is responsible for this affair, guv'nor?" asked Tinker curiously.

"Undoubtedly," returned Blake keenly. "There is no other explanation of the mystery, young 'un. This accident has most certainly saved Mr. John Stanford's life."

"You mean that the package contained an infernal machine?" queried Tinker.

"Yes. And but for this collision it would have been delivered at Stanford's house before now," answered Blake. "We shall have to call at Ivy Cottage after breakfast, Tinker, and congratulate the tenant upon his remarkable escape."

"Yes, rather!" agreed Tinker. "Whoever he is he ought to consider himself jolly lucky—— Hallo! What's that you've found, guv'nor?"

Sexton Blake had just picked up a small object from the ground, and Tinker was by his side in a moment, eager to see his master's find. The detective was grasping a jagged piece of metal, one side of which was perfectly smooth and polished.

"A fragment of the bomb intended for Mr. Stanford's benefit!" he murmured, with satisfaction. "I have already found part of the label from the package. Tinker, so there is no need for us to remain here any longer. It is just possible that the problem of discovering the sender of this little present will prove to be highly entertaining."

The pair left the scene of the accident a few minutes later, and returned to the inn, where they discussed the strange events over a hearty breakfast. The whole village was now agog with excitement over the mysterious explosion, and the marvellous escape from death of the three principal actors in the little drama.

After finishing their meal Blake and Tinker lost no time in getting aboard their car, and making a start for London. They called at Ivy Cottage on their way, and learned that Mr. Stanford was at present away from home.

The place was in charge of a housekeeper, and this lady informed Blake that her master only used the cottage occasionally, residing mostly at a boarding-house in Bloomsbury, the address of which she mentioned.

Sexton Blake thanked the housekeeper, and then he and Tinker continued their journey. There was no particular reason why they should interest themselves further in the matter. But the detective considered it advisable to interview Mr. Stanford as an act of courtesy, and to warn him of the danger which he had so narrowly escaped.

Accordingly Blake's car was headed for Bloomsbury, and upon arrival at the boarding-house, Tinker jumped out and inquired for Mr. Stanford.

But again they drew a blank.

Stanford was out, and the servant had no idea when he would return.

"Oh, well, never mind, Tinker!" said Blake, with a smile. "We'll look the gentleman up the next time we happen to be in the neighbourhood, that's all."

As events turned out, however, Sexton Blake and Tinker were to meet Mr. John Stanford under remarkable circumstances before long, and in a totally unexpected manner.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

"No Man's Money will be Safe, by Gad!"

MRS. BARDELL, the detective's housekeeper, was waiting in the hall when Blake and Tinker reached Baker Street.

"I'm very glad you've come home, sir," she said, in evident relief. "There's a gent upstairs to see you, and he's frettin' and fumin' something awful! He's been here for twenty minutes or more, stampin' up and down all the time."

Sexton Blake smiled.

"Who is the impatient visitor?" he asked.

For answer Mrs. Bardell handed her master a card, which she took from a tray upon the hall-stand. Blake glanced at the neatly-inscribed pasteboard nonchalantly, but his expression became keen as he read the name.

"Humph! Sir William Norton, Chairman of Barton's Bank," he murmured. "I can quite understand his aversion to cooling his heels here, Tinker. Sir William is one of the busiest men in London."

Blake commenced mounting the stairs as he spoke, and a few seconds later he was shaking his visitor warmly by the hand. The two had met on several occasions before, and the detective was well acquainted with the somewhat excitable character of the baronet.

Sir William was an elderly, upright gentleman, with an extremely ruddy face and grey side-whiskers, and he was attired in the conventional morning coat and neat, striped trousers.

His features were now of a more rosy hue than usual, owing to his inward fuming, and he glanced at Sexton Blake almost with reproach.

"Ha! I thought you were never coming, Mr. Blake," he exclaimed, taking a handkerchief from his pocket and mopping his brow. "It is most vital that I enlist your invaluable services in regard to a most important matter, and here have I been waiting for the last half-hour in an agony of suspense!"

Blake smiled.

"Never mind, Sir William," he said, indicating a chair. "I am now entirely at your service. What is the nature of the important matter you refer to?"

The baronet gulped.

"Brazen forgery!" he ejaculated fiercely. "Upon my soul, I have never come across anything quite so audacious in all my experience! It's—it's simply astounding!"

He sank into the chair to which Blake had invited him, and stuffed his handkerchief into his pocket savagely. It was quite plain to see that the chairman of Barton's Bank was considerably incensed.

"Forgery, eh?" said Sexton Blake, with some interest. "Suppose you give me the details, Sir William?"

"Certainly," answered the banker, with a short laugh, "if you can call them details. The information available at present is of the scantiest owing to the cunning methods employed by the criminal. I am afraid I can supply you with nothing but the bare facts, Mr. Blake."

The baronet was now a little calmer, and he glanced from Blake to Tinker, who had followed his master into the consulting-room, and who was now engaged in quietly arranging some papers in a filing cabinet.

"Go ahead, Sir William," said Blake, with a smile. "You can speak quite freely. Tinker is completely in my confidence."

The worried banker nodded, and resumed.

"Very well, Mr. Blake," he replied. "So far as we can ascertain, only two forgeries have occurred, both of them between ten and twelve o'clock this morning——"

"One moment," interrupted Blake. "Were the forgeries confined to one branch of your bank?"

"No. Two separate branches have been victimised, both in the City," answered Sir William; "but in each case the procedure was identical. To my mind, the amazing part of the business is the open and barefaced manner in which the forger carried out his scheme.

"Apparently the scoundrel was quite confident that his methods were absolutely above suspicion and consequently difficult of detection. And I must say that he was justified in his belief, for he brought off the robberies without the slightest hitch, confound him!

"As a matter of fact, the frauds were discovered quite by accident; but I'll come to that later on.

"This is what happened, Mr. Blake.

"At half-past ten this morning one of the cashiers at our Lombard Street branch was on duty behind the counter, as usual, when he observed Mr. Frederick Cleaver enter.

"This gentleman is a wealthy financier, with offices almost opposite the bank—and, incidentally, he is one of our best customers.

"Naturally, Mr. Cleaver is well known by sight to the cashiers of the Lombard Street branch, and no suspicion was aroused in the mind of the assistant when he saw the financier produce his cheque-book and fill in one of the blank forms.

"After signing and blotting the cheque, Mr. Cleaver presented it in the usual manner, and received in exchange three thousand pounds—in notes, of course—afterwards taking his departure at once."

Sexton Blake had been listening interestedly, and he now interjected a question.

"Are you sure that Mr. Cleaver actually signed the cheque upon the counter of the bank?" he asked.

"Yes. The cashier positively asserts that he distinctly saw him do so," replied Sir William. "That is the most extraordinary part of the whole business."

"Well?" queried Blake.

"It now transpires that the man who drew the cheque was not Mr. Cleaver at all and consequently the thing was a forgery!" exclaimed the banker angrily. "How on earth he made himself up to resemble our customer, and how he managed to imitate Mr. Cleaver's signature with such amazing accuracy, is the mystery which I hope you'll be able to fathom."

Blake nodded, and stared at the ceiling thoughtfully.

"This matter promises to be a most entertaining little problem," he murmured. "How was the imposture discovered so quickly?"

"Quite by accident, as I said before," answered the baronet. "It appears that Mr. Cleaver, within a short time after the forger had departed with the stolen money, had occasion to draw a cheque.

"He then noticed that one of the stamped forms was missing from the book, and at once made inquiries among his staff. Being unable to obtain any information concerning the missing cheque, he sent a clerk over to the bank-manager, notifying him of his loss, and instructing the bank to withhold payment if that particular cheque was presented.

"Naturally, inquiry soon elicited the information that the cheque in question had been filled for the amount of three thousand pounds, and cashed within the last hour—to all appearances, by Mr. Cleaver himself."

"Humph! And the financier denies the signature?" said Blake.

"Yes—absolutely," answered Sir William. "He not only denies the signature, Mr. Blake, but he positively asserts that he has not entered the bank at all to-day. I'm hanged if I know what to make of the business!"

The banker produced his handkerchief once more, and passed it across his forehead in his perplexity.

"The assistant who attended to the business swears that it was Mr. Cleaver who signed and presented the cheque for payment, and two of the other cashiers have corroborated his statement," went on the baronet. "In spite of this, however, Mr. Cleaver emphatically declares the cheque to be a clever forgery, and repudiates it entirely."

Blake nodded.

"Has he offered any explanation as to how the cheque was removed from his book?" he asked.

"None whatever," replied Sir William. "He merely states that the cheque was stolen, and that his signature was forged upon it by some person unknown. If that statement is correct, of course, the bank becomes the loser of the three thousand pounds, and our only

remedy is to discover the forger, and reclaim the money, if such a thing is possible."

Sir William Norton paused for a moment, and then resumed.

"The crime was committed with such absolute thoroughness, and with such success, that our people at once notified all our branch-managers to be exceedingly alert," he went on. "Orders were issued that the payment of all large cheques was to be suspended until the signatures upon them had been verified.

"And it was solely owing to these orders that the second forgery was discovered. The manager of our Moorgate Street branch soon learned that a cheque for five thousand pounds had been cashed only a few minutes before the orders came through, and he at once made inquiries.

"The cheque had been drawn on the account of Mr. Roger Pennington, of Old Jewry. As in the previous instance, the blank form had been filled in, signed, and torn from the book apparently by Mr. Pennington himself, and the money handed over in exchange for it.

"But when Mr. Pennington was interviewed, shortly afterwards, and shown the cheque, he acted in precisely the same manner as Mr. Cleaver had done, and unhesitatingly declared it to be a forgery. He also stated that he had not been to the bank during the morning, and he could not account for the fact that the forged cheque had been taken from his book.

"And yet, Mr. Blake, two of the Moorgate Street cashiers are prepared to swear that it was Pennington himself who entered the bank and signed the cheque! They both know him quite well, you see, and declare that no mistake is possible. So there you are! How on earth the puzzle is to be straightened out beats me completely!"

Sir William made a little gesture of helplessness as he spoke, and subsided into silence. Sexton Blake pushed a box of cigarettes across to his visitor, then took one himself and lit it slowly.

"What you have told me is exceedingly interesting," he said at last; "and I am inclined to think there is more in this business than appears upon the surface—much more.

"For instance, we are asked to believe that this forger, in addition to being able to imitate the signatures of two of your customers with such minute exactness—even under the observation of the bank's cashiers—as to defy detection, is also capable of assuming their personalities with equal success.

"I have never yet met the man who could accomplish such a feat, Sir William, even supposing he was in a position to obtain the blank cheques ——"

"But he has accomplished it, Mr. Blake!" interrupted the banker. "He has carried out his plans to such good purpose that he is now the richer by no less than eight thousand pounds!"

Blake smiled.

"Apparently there is no doubt that the money has been drawn from the two banks," he said. "But there is no evidence to prove that the two cheques were cashed by the same man."

Sir William glared.

"You surely do not suggest that Mr. Cleaver and Mr. Pennington have made false statements—that they are trying to defraud the bank?" he gasped in amazement. "Why both the gentlemen are extremely wealthy, and utterly beyond suspicion! It is ridiculous to suppose that they are implicated in any way."

"Quite so," returned Blake quietly. "By the way, I presume you have brought the forged cheque with you, Sir William?"

"Yes, yes. Here you are, Mr. Blake," answered the baronet, producing his pocket-book as he spoke. "I brought them along for your inspection, together with several genuine specimens of the two signatures."

"Good!" said the detective shortly.

He took the two slips of paper from his visitor, and placed them upon the table, spreading them out flat. Then Sir William produced a little sheaf of uncancelled cheques, all bearing the genuine signatures of the two City magnates. And these Blake compared with the forgeries.

Carefully and methodically he set about the task, first examining the signatures with his naked eye. Sexton Blake was something of an expert in caligraphy, and he had investigated literally hundreds of forgery cases.

But he saw at a glance that here was something quite new to his experience. The writing upon the forged cheques was in every respect identical to the genuine article. Every line, every stroke, was perfect, and the detective wrinkled his brow thoughtfully.

Sir William Norton was watching him interestedly.

"Well, what do you think of them, Mr. Blake?" he asked, his tone worried and anxious.

Sexton Blake looked up from his comparison of the cheques.

"I think the signatures are perfect, Sir William—absolutely flawless, so far as I can see with my naked eyes," he answered slowly. "If a forger is responsible for them, he is undoubtedly a past-master in his art."

The baronet snorted angrily.

"There's no 'if' about it, Mr. Blake!" he exclaimed. "The cheques were forged, right enough—there can be no possible question of that. And if this criminal is as clever as you say, there's no telling what he'll be up to next. No man's money will be safe, by gad!"

Blake rose to his feet.

"I don't think we need take quite so pessimistic a view of the matter as that, Sir William," he said, with a smile. "The man who engineered these frauds is undeniably smart, and I won't deny that I am more than a little interested. By the way, you might leave these cheques with me for the time being; there are several tests I want to apply to them."

"Certainly, Mr. Blake; keep them by all means," replied the banker. "I take it that you mean to conduct an investigation at once?"

"Immediately," agreed the detective. "And if there are any further forgeries I'd like you to let me know as soon as possible."

Sir William nodded, and a few minutes later he took his departure, apparently greatly relieved that Sexton Blake had consented to undertake the inquiry. And as soon as the baronet had gone, the famous detective lost no time in getting to work.

With Tinker's help a large and powerful microscope was placed in position, and the forged cheques were very closely examined by its means. Comparison of the genuine and spurious signatures was greatly facilitated by the aid of the instrument, and yet Sexton Blake seemed to be far from satisfied.

For even under the high-powered lenses of the microscope, he could find no fault, no flaw in the writing upon the cheques which Sir William Norton had declared to be forgeries.

There were none of the usual signs which are generally associated with the forger's art—none of the wavering strokes and curves which invariably appeared in the handiwork of the criminal penman.

On the contrary, both the signatures appeared to have been written with the same ease and fluency as those which were known to be genuine. And Sexton Blake, after some little time, was forced to the conclusion that the forgeries were really remarkable in their faithfulness to the originals.

The detective turned to Tinker.

"I want you to photograph these two forged cheques, side by side with two of the genuine ones," he said briskly. "As soon as you have made the exposures, bring them back to me. I want to try a few experiments upon the inks with which they are written while you develop the negatives."

Tinker, with a nod, picked up the cheques, and departed to carry out his instructions. Within five minutes the documents were again in Blake's possession, and he at once got to work upon the ink tests.

The detective was quite aware that inks differ enormously, and on more than one occasion he had secured the arrest and conviction of a criminal by a simple test of this kind.

In this instance, however, he speedily discovered that two totally different inks had been used for the forgeries, and Sexton Blake's analysis proved that a quite distinct writing fluid had been utilised in each case.

This fact, of course, opened up a new field of inquiry, and at the same time complicated the case very considerably.

Assuming the same individual to be responsible for both the forgeries, why had he used a different ink upon Mr. Cleaver's cheque to that which he had employed in the case of Mr. Pennington?

Was it because the criminal had carried out his scheme with such extreme caution that he had taken care to use the identical brands of ink which were habitually to be found in the offices of his two victims?

This certainly appeared to be the case. For Blake, as he proceeded with his experiments, soon found that the same ink was apparent upon Mr. Cleaver's genuine cheques as that used for the forged one.

And a little further inquiry convinced the detective that a similar state of affairs existed with regard to the Pennington forgery—the ink used was precisely similar to Mr. Pennington's usual brand.

What inferences were to be drawn from this information?

Sexton Blake sat in his laboratory for some little time, deeply engrossed in the problem. The matter was distinctly puzzling, and the detective did not stir until Tinker announced that the photographs, together with some enlargements, were ready for his inspection.

The lad had been very energetic, and had worked hard to complete his task so quickly. Tinker was thoroughly experienced in this sort of work, and could be relied upon to carry out instructions without a hitch.

"The prints have come out first-rate, guv'nor," he said, his youthful countenance wearing a rather worried look, nevertheless. "The signatures show up as clear as print. But I'm hanged if I can make this business out at all!"

"Why?" asked Blake, rising from his chair.

"Because there's absolutely no difference between the forgeries and the genuine signatures—at least, I can't find any!" said Tinker. "They seem to be exactly alike in every detail."

(Continued on page 8.)

Blake gathered together a little mound of brownish-yellow dust and placed it in the envelope by means of the blade of his pocket-knife. "What is this stuff?" asked Tinker. (*Page* 11.)

"Abaht two minutes arter that a bloke came out o' this 'ere office," said the newsvendor, jerking his thumb in the direction of Pennington's. (*Page* 14.)

In the waistcoat the detective found a snuff-box. When he had glanced inside it he gave a little satisfied chuckle. "Ah, the yellow dust again, Tinker!" he murmured. Tinker stared. (*Page* 15.)

— W. TAYLER —

Sexton Blake frowned.

"Humph! At that rate the enlargements don't carry us much farther," he replied. "Let's have a look at your work, my lad."

During the next five minutes the criminologist was busily engaged in making a close examination of the enlarged photographs, comparing the magnified, but faithful, reproductions of the real and counterfeit signatures.

But at the end of that time he was forced to admit that Tinker was right. There was no perceptible difference between the actual signatures of Mr. Cleaver and Mr. Pennington and those which Sir William Norton had declared to be forgeries.

"Remarkable, Tinker—simply remarkable!" murmured Sexton Blake. "By all accounts we are up against something quite new in the forgery line. I cannot remember anything similar to this case in the whole of my experience."

Tinker nodded.

"No, sir; there's something more than a little queer about it, evidently," he agreed. "I'm blessed if I can see how you're going to get a grip on the affair. So far, you've nothing to go upon."

"Not much, certainly," admitted Blake. "However, perhaps an interview with the two City gentlemen will serve to put us upon the trail. It is quite evident that the man who engineered these frauds is remarkably clever, and is probably known personally to Cleaver and Pennington."

"Yes, of course, that's obvious," said Tinker. "He'd have to know them pretty intimately to be able to impersonate them so accurately—to say nothing of being in a position to crib the two blank cheques from their books. How on earth he managed to do it without their knowledge beats me."

"Perhaps he didn't," replied Blake, with a somewhat cryptic smile.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

"This Inventor Chap Seems to be Making Hay while the Sun Shines!"

MR. FREDERICK CLEAVER, the Lombard Street financier, was pacing his private office restlessly when Sexton Blake and Tinker were announced. He was a somewhat fleshy individual—not particularly stout, but thick-set and sturdy, and in the prime of life.

He wheeled round with great agility as his visitors entered the room, and came forward to greet them with every indication of pleasure.

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Blake—delighted!" he said cordially. "Sir William Norton told me that he would endeavour to obtain your services, and I am overjoyed to see that he has succeeded. My earnest hope is that you will be able to run this confounded forger to earth quickly."

Mr. Cleaver waved his hand as an indication that his guests should be seated, and invited Blake to join them in a whisky-and-soda. The detective declined the offer, however, but accepted a cigar from a box upon the table.

"Sir William gave me little more than the barest facts concerning the forgery, Mr. Cleaver, and I hope you are in a position to throw a little more light upon it," he said, applying a match to his cigar as he spoke. "For instance, how do you account for the cheque used by the criminal being one actually torn from your own book?"

Mr. Cleaver emitted an angry growl.

"I can't account for it, Mr. Blake, that's the trouble!" he exclaimed. "I have no more idea how the scoundrel got hold of the cheque than—than this whisky decanter has! It's a mystery!"

"Where do you usually keep your cheque-book?" asked Blake.

"In my pocket—always," replied Cleaver promptly. "You see, Mr. Blake, the forged cheque was drawn on my private account, which, of course, is quite independent of the business ones."

Sexton Blake nodded.

"Just so," he said. "You are positive that the book has never been left about at any time, either here or at your private house?"

"Oh, absolutely! I am most particular about it!" declared Mr. Cleaver, with decision. "You can take my word for it, Mr. Blake, that there has been no carelessness."

"And where is the book placed at night?" asked the detective. "Surely it is not allowed to remain in your pocket after you've gone to bed?"

Mr. Cleaver smiled.

"By no means," he answered. "At night the cheque-book is invariably locked away in my library safe. Last night was no exception, and this morning the book was quite in order, the stolen cheque was not missing then."

"You are quite sure of that?" queried Blake.

"Certain!" was the reply. "As it happened, my wife required a cheque for something or other this morning, and I wrote it out before leaving home. There was no blank counterfoil in the book then, I know."

"Humph!" murmured Blake thoughtfully. "That means that the cheque was taken from the book after your departure from home, presumably since you arrived at the office?"

Mr. Cleaver indicated his agreement by a slight nod.

"I can see no other explanation," he said, frowning heavily. "And yet such a thing seems impossible. I came straight here to my private office, and didn't budge at all. I received several people with whom I had appointments, and after they had gone I had occasion to draw a cheque. It was then that I discovered one of the forms to be missing, and subsequent inquiries led to the exposure of the fraud."

"I see," mused Blake. "I presume that all the people with whom you had interviews were known to you personally."

"Nearly all of them," replied Mr. Cleaver. "Certainly there were two gentlemen whom I have never met before to-day. But I trust you do not suspect any of my business acquaintances, Mr. Blake? Every person whom I saw this morning is quite above suspicion—quite."

Sexton Blake smiled.

"I do not dispute that fact in the least, Mr. Cleaver," he said. "At the same time, we cannot afford to overlook any possible loophole. Now, I want you to think carefully, and see if you can recall any suspicious incident which occurred during the morning."

"Suspicious incident?" repeated Mr. Cleaver, puzzled. "I don't quite follow your meaning——"

"Did anything take place this morning which was in any way strange or out of the ordinary? No matter how trivial or unimportant it may seem, it will probably prove to be of the greatest importance," explained Sexton Blake. "Can you bring anything to mind, Mr. Cleaver?"

The financier wrinkled his brows and concentrated his thoughts upon the events of the morning. He gazed at the ceiling for a few moments, and then turned to the detective with a shake of the head.

"No, I can't remember anything unusual occurring," he said at last. "I saw several business men, as I told you before, all of them well-known City people, whose names you can have if you want them. Then I dictated a few letters, and gave some instructions to my chief clerk. After that I granted an interview to a man named Carter, who wished to insure my life. Finally, I saw Mr. Robert Edwards, who wants me to finance his invention. Edwards is a clever youngster by all accounts, and likely to become famous before he's finished. I've had a good deal of correspondence with him, and our interview of this morning was the result of it. He came to see me about—about——"

Mr. Cleaver paused, and looked at Sexton Blake rather blankly. His expression was one of almost comic dismay, and he tapped the side of his head with annoyance.

"H'm! Curious!" he muttered, almost to himself. "I'm hanged if I can recall what took place during my interview with Mr. Edwards!"

"Have you ever experienced this failure of memory before?" asked Blake suddenly.

"No, never!" declared Mr. Cleaver emphatically. "I cannot understand it at all. As a general rule, my memory is distinctly good, and, curiously enough, I can remember with perfect clearness everything which took place prior to Mr. Edwards' arrival. It is most annoying. As a matter of fact, I can't recall Mr. Edwards' departure, either!"

The detective looked at his host curiously.

"And yet you clearly remember his arrival?" he asked.

"Oh, yes! We had a whisky-and-soda together almost as soon as he came into the office," answered Mr. Cleaver.

"And after that?" queried Blake.

"Oh, after that Edwards began by thanking me for my encouraging letters to him, and assuring me that his invention would ultimately prove to be a huge success," answered Mr. Cleaver. "I'm afraid I can't say what took place afterwards. My memory seems to have broken down, confound it!"

"I take it that Mr. Edwards was not personally known to you until this morning?" asked Sexton Blake.

Mr. Cleaver shook his head.

"No; I had never seen him before," he answered. "But why are you asking me all these questions, Mr. Blake? You surely cannot imagine that Mr. Edwards has had anything to do with this forgery business? Such a supposition is preposterous! The young man is perfectly honest and open. His correspondence proves that. And it is ridiculous to assume that he would stoop to crime just at the time when he proposes to launch his invention upon the market."

"I am assuming nothing," answered Blake, with a smile. "By the way, what is Mr. Edwards' address?"

"He is living with his parents at Disnay Road, Putney," replied Mr. Cleaver. "He tells me that he has a workshop there, where he has perfected his invention, which consists of a little device for economising petrol. It is really a modification of the carburettor, and Mr. Edwards claims that its use will revolutionise the motoring industry, and make road transport the cheapest means of travel in the world."

Blake nodded absently, apparently very little interested in Mr. Edwards and his invention.

Tinker had been listening to the conversation in a very puzzled frame of mind. He was utterly at a loss to divine the drift of his master's questioning, and

resolved to seek an explanation at the first opportunity.

And when, a few minutes later, the pair took their departure, Tinker at once began his attack.

"What the dickens is the good of asking about that fat-headed inventor, guv'nor?" he demanded curiously. "He can't be at the bottom of this forgery case——"

"It is quite possible that he is perfectly innocent, young 'un," interrupted Sexton Blake. "At the same time the advent of Mr. Edwards is, so far, the only tangible scrap of evidence we have to go upon. However, before we discuss the matter any farther we will see what an interview with Mr. Roger Pennington will bring forth."

They were walking in the direction of Old Jewry as they spoke, in which thoroughfare the offices of Mr. Pennington were situated. Blake's card admitted them without the slightest trouble

Mr. Roger Pennington proved to be a man of a totally different type to Mr. Cleaver. He was thin, almost to the point of emaciation, but he was extremely active and brisk. He greeted his visitors with polite cordiality.

"I presume you have called regarding this audacious forgery, Mr. Blake?" he asked, when they were comfortably seated in his private office. "If so, I am afraid I can tell you very little which is likely to be of service to you. The whole matter is quite inexplicable to me."

Sexton Blake nodded.

"I am not at all surprised to hear that, Mr. Pennington," he said quietly. "At the same time, I have no doubt that our interview will not be entirely fruitless."

Mr. Pennington smiled.

"I am extremely pleased to hear you say so, Mr. Blake," he said crisply. "There is no doubt that the frauds have been engineered by an amazingly clever scoundrel, and the sooner he is rounded up the better. Sir William Norton has informed me that Mr. Cleaver has also fallen a victim to his villainy."

Mr. Pennington spoke with considerable warmth, and very soon he and the detective were discussing the matter in all its details. As in the case of Mr. Cleaver, Blake plied his host with numerous questions, but obtained very little satisfaction from the replies he received.

The forger had obviously done his work with the utmost care, for Mr. Pennington was quite unaware as to the methods which had been employed to abstract the cheque from his book. Pennington, like the majority of sensible business men, took every precaution to guard his cheque-book well; but, in spite of this, the spurious cheque had been written upon one of his own stamped forms.

One very significant piece of information was forthcoming, however, and Sexton Blake seized upon it. It was nothing much in itself—merely the fact that Mr. Robert Edwards, the Putney inventor, had had an appointment with Mr. Pennington that morning.

Possibly it was only a coincidence that Mr. Edwards had arranged to interview both Mr. Cleaver and Mr. Pennington upon the same day. But in view of the fact that these two gentlemen had been victimised within an hour of the inventor's call, it was surely permissible to regard him with a certain amount of suspicion.

Considerable weight was added to the theory of Mr. Edwards' complicity in the frauds when Sexton Blake discovered, by questioning Mr. Pennington still further, that of all his morning visitors Edwards was the only one who had also called upon Mr. Cleaver.

This information was certainly a step in the right direction, for it would serve to start the detective upon a definite line of inquiry. It was quite possible that nothing would result from it, but it would have been the height of folly to disregard the facts.

As in the case of the Lombard Street financier, Mr. Edwards had secured an appointment with Pennington for the purpose of obtaining capital to place his invention upon the market. And—also as in the previous case—Edwards was quite unknown by sight to Mr. Pennington, having introduced himself by means of correspondence.

Moreover, the inventor—supposedly struggling and impecunious—had arrived at the Old Jewry offices in an expensive motor-car, which he had kept waiting in the street while the interview with Mr. Pennington was taking place.

These facts, although trifling and unimportant in themselves, were tremendously suggestive. At all events, Sexton Blake decided that an investigation upon these lines would be amply worth while.

And when, a little later, he and Tinker again found themselves in the busy City street, the detective was silent and thoughtful. He walked along with his head bent slightly forward, and his gaze apparently concentrated upon the pavement in front of him.

Tinker, after one or two attempts to draw his master out, finally gave it up in disgust, and relapsed into moody silence. For five minutes or so the pair progressed in this fashion, when Tinker was suddenly brought to earth again by a terrific slap upon the back which nearly sent him headlong.

"Here, I say, guv'nor, go easy!" he gasped painfully, thinking that Blake was responsible. "Just because you've suddenly struck the right trail in your head, there no need to shove me into the gutter—— Oh, it's you, is it?" he broke off, glaring at a broad-shouldered, ruddy-faced individual, who stood upon the pavement before him. "I might have known it was your leg-of-mutton fist that biffed me in the back!"

The newcomer was an old friend of theirs—Detective-Inspector Dickson, of Scotland Yard—and he stood before them, grinning hugely.

"Took you by surprise that time—eh, Tinker?" he said good-humouredly. "I simply couldn't resist the opportunity. But what's the idea of you and Blake strolling through the City in such a cheerful mood? 'Pon my soul, you look as if you're bound for a funeral!"

Tinker snorted.

"Ask the guv'nor!" he replied disgustedly. "He's working on a blessed forgery case, and I can't get a word out of him!"

The inspector turned to Blake and whistled.

"You always seem to get going on anything really good as soon as the Yard, old man," he said, as he shook hands. "Why, we only heard of this forgery business within the last couple of hours. What do you make of it?"

"Very little, so far," admitted Sexton Blake.

"There's no doubt that this inventor fellow is the culprit," declared the inspector. "Mr. Robert Edwards, of Putney, is unquestionably the forger, Blake; he's left a very distinct trail behind him."

Sexton Blake smiled at his official friend.

"Hasn't it struck you that the trail is a trifle too distinct?" he asked.

"Too distinct?" repeated Dickson. "No, I don't think so. He arranged his appointments with his intended victims in advance, obviously meaning to decamp as soon as he had brought this coup off successfully. He's done it, too, and cleared a nice little sum of fourteen thousand into the bargain!"

"Fourteen thousand?" asked Blake sharply.

"Yes. He started with forging Mr. Cleaver's name to a cheque for three thousand; then he got five thousand out of Mr. Pennington's bank, and finally brought off a third little swindle to the tune of six thousand," said Dickson, with a growl. "Robinson, of Moorgate Street, was the last man visited by Edwards, and he's fairly raving."

Tinker whistled.

"This inventor chap seems to be making hay while the sun shines," he remarked. "If he's really the forger, he must be thundering smart; that's all I can say."

"He is smart—too jolly smart for my liking," replied the inspector, removing his bowler, and running his fingers through his short hair irritably. "He obtained banknotes of high denominations in exchange for his dud cheques, and they've all been swopped for Treasury notes at numerous banks and business houses. Moreover, Edwards himself left his home at Putney last night, and hasn't been heard of since."

"That is not surprising in the least," replied Sexton Blake. "In fact, I expected something of the sort."

"Hanged if I can see any reason for him to disappear last night," said Dickson, with a frown. "After his activities of this morning, of course, he could do nothing else but disappear. We've spread our net pretty extensively throughout London, and we ought to rope him in all right within a few hours."

Sexton Blake shook his head.

"I'm afraid you're doomed to disappointment, my dear Dickson," he said. "Your police net will prove to be quite useless in locating the whereabouts of Mr. Robert Edwards, unless I'm very much at fault."

"What on earth do you mean, Blake?" demanded the inspector, with a glare.

"Oh, just a little opinion I've got in my head," smiled Blake. "By the way, I suppose, Mr. Robinson, the third forgery victim, is just as much in the dark as the other two regarding the manner in which the fraud was perpetrated?"

"Yes; he doesn't know a thing about it," answered the inspector. "He saw this fellow Edwards by appointment, and the forgery was discovered soon afterwards. How the thunder he managed to get hold of the cheques beats me! In each case Edwards seems to have carried out his plans without the slightest trouble. It's amazing, Blake, and I'll confess that I'm completely baffled."

Detective-Inspector Dickson was very much annoyed. He was a most painstaking and trustworthy official, with quite a distinguished record, gained by hard work and strict devotion to duty in the C.I.D.

He intensely disliked to be beaten in any case with which he had been entrusted, and he usually persisted, with dogged determination, long after a less enthusiastic man would have given up.

This forgery investigation, of course, had only just commenced. But to Dickson it appeared something like driving his head up against a brick wall; he could make no impression whatever.

He discussed the matter for a further short period with Sexton Blake and Tinker, but nothing much came of their talk. Both Blake and Dickson agreed that the most remarkable feature of the

three forgeries was the absence of any tangible clue.

Whether Edwards was responsible for them remained to be proved, but whoever had engineered the crimes had done so with a completeness which was little short of wonderful.

The Scotland Yard man had a pretty good idea that Blake had already formed some sort of theory regarding the case, and he based this conclusion upon the fact that his Baker Street colleague was more than usually secretive and vague.

And Dickson's somewhat short temper was in no way improved by this knowledge. He tried his hardest to induce Sexton Blake to confide in him, but he only wasted his breath.

Blake merely smiled inscrutably, and intimated that he had nothing to impart at the present stage of the case. And the worthy inspector, with a gruff word of farewell, departed on his way in high dudgeon.

A little later—shortly after Blake and Tinker had reached their house in Baker Street—there was a further development, and one which was to lead to surprising results.

The telephone-bell in the consulting-room commenced to ring, and continued with great persistence until Tinker removed the receiver from the hook. He placed it to his ear, and listened for a few moments.

"Great Scott! It's Mr. Philip Tresmand, of Holborn, guv'nor!" he exclaimed, placing his hand over the transmitter and turning to Blake excitedly. "He says the forger has cashed a cheque for ten thousand pounds on his account."

Sexton Blake sprang to his feet briskly, and walked over to the telephone.

"Give me that receiver, young 'un," he jerked, "and go and call a taxi at once. We must go and see Tresmand immediately."

Tinker hurried off without delay, and a few minutes later he returned with the cab. Blake by this time had finished talking to Tresmand, and was ready and waiting.

Together the pair boarded the vehicle, after directing the driver to make all haste to Holborn. Tinker lay back upon the comfortable cushions, and wondered if this visit would prove as fruitless as the others had been.

He was soon to know.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
"What the dickens is this stuff, Guv'nor?"

"HALLO, Blake, old man! How are you?" ...

Mr. Philip Tresmand wrung the detective's hand warmly as he alighted from the taxi five minutes later. The two men were very well acquainted, being members of the same club.

Tresmand was so impatient that he had waited upon the kerb for Sexton Blake's arrival, and after shaking hands with Tinker, he conducted his visitors into his private office, where he invited them to be seated.

Blake and Tinker could plainly see that their host was labouring under great excitement. He was a youngish man, not more than thirty-eight, and he had already amassed a considerable fortune by square dealing in his business.

He paced the office restlessly for a few moments before speaking, finally halting abruptly in front of Blake's chair.

"I'm infernally glad you've come, Blake," he began, running his fingers through his well-brushed hair impatiently, "for I'm hanged if I can get a grip on this affair!"

"Well, let's have the yarn, Tresmand," suggested the detective.

"Yarn!" repeated Tresmand, with a shrug. "There's practically nothing to tell you, Blake. All I know is that a cheque of mine, which I know nothing whatever about, has been cashed at the bank! Simply that, and nothing else!"

"How did you learn about it?" asked Blake.

"Oh, quite by chance!" answered Tresmand. "Just before 'phoning you I happened to go to the bank, and one of the cashiers there mentioned a supposed previous visit of mine. Of course, I told him that I hadn't been in the bank before, and he began to look quite startled, and insisted that I had cashed a cheque for ten thousand pounds within the last hour!"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Tinker. "That's a large sum!"

Tresmand nodded.

"Yes, it is," he agreed. "But I'm not worrying about the money so much. The bank will have to make that good, I

expect. Quite apart from the money part of the affair, it's terribly disconcerting to know that somebody has been impersonating me, and signing my name with the same apparent ease as I do myself! Good heavens! With a man like that at large my credit will go to blazes!"

Sexton Blake shook his head.

"I feel quite certain that you are exaggerating the matter, and exciting yourself unduly, my dear fellow," he said quietly. "Yours is the fourth case of fraud which has occurred to-day, and all of them have been worked by the same individual. The cheque for ten thousand pounds was taken from your own cheque-book, I presume?"

"No, it couldn't have been," said Tresmand. "I've had it in my pocket all the time, so I'm quite sure that nobody could have got at it—— Why, you're right, Blake! Well, I'm dashed!"

Tresmand had produced the book from his pocket as he was speaking, and a very brief examination revealed the fact that one of the forms had been abstracted, leaving the counterfoil blank.

"I thought as much." said Sexton Blake. "Your experience is precisely the same as the other three."

Tresmand was looking blankly amazed, and he gasped in his astonishment.

"But—but I don't understand," he exclaimed. "This book has been in my pocket the whole of the time, and I'm certain that it hasn't been touched by anybody but myself."

"You must be mistaken," interposed Tinker. "If the cheque has been taken from the book it stands to reason that it must have been touched!"

"It hasn't! I could swear to it!" said Tresmand. "There's something uncanny about the matter, Blake, and——"

"Never mind the cheque now," interrupted Sexton Blake. "I shall be much more interested to hear an account of your own personal movements, Tresmand. Have you been out at all to-day?"

"Not until I went to the bank," was the reply. "Until then I'd been in the office since my arrival this morning, not even going out to lunch. I had it sent in from a restaurant."

"Seen many people to-day?" asked the detective.

"Yes, several," replied Tresmand.

"Who were they?"

"Hanged if I can tell you off-hand!" said Tresmand, touching a bell as he spoke. "I'll ask Jackson. He's got a splendid memory."

A smart-looking youngster soon made his appearance in response to Tresmand's ring, and he rattled off a list of names in quick succession.

"I think the last man to see you, sir, was Mr. Robert Edwards, the inventor," concluded Jackson.

Tresmand nodded.

"Oh, yes, I remember!" he said. "We had a drink together, and he went off in a very few minutes——"

"Pardon me, sir," said the clerk respectfully, "but I think you are making a mistake."

"Mistake!" exclaimed Tresmand, looking up quickly. "What the dickens do you mean, Jackson? How have I made a mistake?"

The clerk coughed.

"Well, sir, Mr. Edwards remained in the office some little time," he said quietly. "About five minutes after his arrival you yourself left the office, sir, and Mr. Edwards waited until you had returned——"

"Rot!" interrupted Tresmand, in some astonishment. "I don't know what you're talking about, Jackson! I have no recollection whatever of doing as you say, and I am quite positive that I did not leave Mr. Edwards alone for one moment.. Why on earth should I do such a thing?"

Jackson shook his head.

"I have no idea, sir," he replied. "But you certainly did leave the office. Both Mr. Billington and myself saw you go!"

Tresmand scratched his head.

"Well, I can't understand it," he said, in a puzzled tone. "If you and Billington saw me go, I suppose I must have done so. But I certainly don't remember it. All right, Jackson; you can go now, thanks!"

The clerk glanced at his master curiously as he retired, and Tresmand turned to Sexton Blake with a helpless little gesture. He was very much perplexed at Jackson's information, and he sank into a chair wearily.

"What do you think of it, old man?" he asked, looking at the detective. "Both my clerks tell me that I went out and left Edwards in this room, and yet I have no recollection of it whatever. Confound it! Either my servants are

trying to pull my leg, or else I'm going potty!"

Sexton Blake shook his head.

"Nothing of the kind, my dear fellow," he said cheerfully. "Personally, I am quite delighted with the news which Jackson gave us, for it has enabled me to clear up several points. By the way, did you and Edwards commence your interview by taking a drink?"

Tresmand nodded.

"Yes. He seemed to be fearfully thirsty, so I offered him a whisky-and-soda," he replied. "Naturally, I had one with him, and I was under the impression that he took his departure soon afterwards. As to leaving him alone in the office—well, I simply can't understand it, that's all!"

The matter seemed to upset Mr. Philip Tresmand very considerably, and he sat in his chair and stared at the ceiling thoughtfully. Never before in his experience had he encountered anything of this nature, and it was only natural that he should feel worried.

Tinker, too, was puzzled. He could not understand why Sexton Blake appeared to be so cheerful, nor why he had expressed his delight at the news which had had such a damping effect upon his host.

But he knew that it would be useless to ask for an explanation at this stage of the proceedings. He also knew that he would learn all there was to know when Blake thought fit to tell him, and not before.

As these thoughts passed through his mind, Tinker was surprised to see his master abruptly drop upon his hands and knees, and commence to carefully examine the linoleum in the vicinity of Tresmand's desk.

He crawled along on all fours, slowly scrutinising the surface of the floor as he went.

Apparently he was searching for something of an extremely minute nature, for every now and then he gazed earnestly through the powerful lens of his magnifying-glass, which he held within a few inches of the floor covering.

Tinker and Tresmand watched him with great interest, at the same time wondering what the detective's object could be in acting in so strange a manner. He took no notice of them, however, but continued his search as though quite oblivious of their presence.

Sexton Blake finally came to a halt against one of the chairs which stood near the central desk, and as he did so, he gave vent to a delighted chuckle. Then he focused his lens upon a certain small patch of the linoleum, and nodded his head slowly.

"Is this the chair in which Edwards sat during his interview with you, Tresmand?" he asked, looking up quickly.

"Yes. Why do you ask such a question, Blake?" replied Tresmand curiously. "What on earth do you expect to find?"

He rose to his feet as he spoke, and walked over to Blake's side, followed by Tinker. They both stared down at the oilcloth, but could discern nothing of an unusual nature.

"My luck's in, Tresmand," murmured the detective. "I have found something here with which I hope to speedily clear up the mystery of these forgeries. Tinker, bring me an envelope, and hold it open for me!"

Tinker did as he was bidden, and looked more surprised than ever when he saw that Blake was carefully gathering together a tiny little mound of brownish-yellow dust. This he proceeded to place carefully in the envelope by means of the blade of his pocket-knife.

"What the dickens is this stuff, guv'nor?" asked Tinker, eyeing the powder-like substance with suspicious interest. "Looks a bit like the German gold paint which used to be on sale!"

Sexton Blake chuckled again.

"You're very wide of the mark, young 'un," he replied, still scooping up the dust. "Try again!"

Tinker took another look at the powder in the envelope, but could think of nothing else which it resembled. He was just about to say so when Mr. Philip Tresmand suddenly slapped his thigh, and roared with laughter.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he gasped at last. "If this isn't the richest joke I've heard for months! Excuse me grinning, Blake, old man, but I can't help it! That stuff upon the floor is snuff!"

"Snuff!" repeated Tinker, looking at his master quickly. "Great guns!"

Tresmand nodded.

"Yes, just ordinary snuff!" he exclaimed. "I remember now that Edwards dropped his snuff-box exactly on this spot soon after he arrived!"

But Sexton Blake appeared to be quite unmoved by Tresmand's obvious amusement. He merely smiled absently, and continued his task of gathering up the yellow dust.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.
"We Are Getting On Famously, Young 'Un!"

TINKER and Tresmand were surprised when Blake, a few minutes later, prepared to take his departure.

As soon as he had carefully sealed the envelope containing the peculiar powder, he held out his hand to Tresmand abruptly.

"Good-bye, my dear fellow!" he said, as he shook hands. "There is nothing further I can learn here, and Tinker and myself have a good deal of work to do at once."

"But—but what's the idea of rushing off like this, Blake?" asked Tresmand. "What about the forgery—and my ten thousand quid?"

Sexton Blake smiled.

"Don't worry about it, Tresmand," he said. "I have every hope of getting upon the scent—thanks to the discovery of the yellow dust! Good-bye!"

He walked from the office without saying anything further, and Tinker followed him wonderingly. Once out in the street, however, the lad was given no opportunity to ask the questions which were upon the tip of his tongue, for Blake hailed a passing taxi, and directed the driver to take them as fast as possible to Old Jewry.

During the short journey Blake appeared to be quite cheerful, if somewhat engrossed with his own thoughts. Occasionally he smiled to himself, and then, as if finally deciding his course of action in his mind, he produced his case, and lit a cigarette.

"Well, Tinker, what do you think of it all?" he asked, looking at his assistant quizzically. "Seems to be a queer case—eh?"

"Queer!" snorted Tinker. "Queer isn't the word for it, guv'nor! Up to now the whole thing seems to be a hopeless muddle! The only thing which is perfectly obvious is the fact that this chap Edwards is at the bottom of the forgeries—there's no possible doubt of that."

"You think not, Tinker?" queried Blake, smiling again.

"No, I don't see how it could have been anybody else," declared Tinker. "This inventor made appointments with all the men who have had their signatures forged, didn't he? And all the forgeries took place after the interviews had come off. Well, the obvious inference is that Edwards is the forger, guv'nor—he jolly well must be!"

Sexton Blake, to Tinker's surprise, shook his head.

"I don't think so—I certainly don't think so, Tinker," he said slowly. "But, assuming that your theory is correct, how do you think Edwards managed the business?"

"Well, I suppose he had his plans all cut and dried, guv'nor," replied Tinker. "During his interviews with the City men, he must have taken a blank cheque from each of them in turn—how, I don't know. Then, a little later, he disguised himself to resemble them, one after the other, and cashed the cheques. Of course, it would want a bit of doing, but I don't see any other explanation."

"According to that, we must believe that Edwards, after stealing the blank cheques without the slightest trouble, is clever enough to impersonate first a stout, thick-set man, calmly visit his bank, and there write his name with such astounding accuracy that detection is impossible. And then he disguises himself as a——"

Tinker reddened a trifle.

"Well, guv'nor, it certainly sounds a bit thick when you put it like that," he confessed. "But if it wasn't done that way, how——"

"Remember that Cleaver is stout, as I said," interrupted Blake. "Mr. Pennington, on the other hand, is extremely thin. Robinson, the third forgery victim, we have not seen. But we know that Tresmand is rather over the average size, and totally dissimilar to either Cleaver or Pennington. Therefore, how is it possible that the criminal could successfully impersonate them all in such a short space of time—to say nothing of writing their signatures with a fluency which is little short of amazing?"

Tinker scratched his head.

"Dashed if I know!" he confessed dubiously. "You've made my theory look a bit sick already, guv'nor! But there are a good many things I don't understand with regard to this case. For instance, why did you tell Mr. Tresmand that you hope to get on the scent—just because you found that yellow dust?"

"I meant exactly what I said, Tinker," answered Blake. "The yellow dust is extremely important—in fact, it is at the bottom of the whole mystery!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" exclaimed Tinker. "But what the dickens is it, guv'nor?"

Sexton Blake shook his head.

"To tell you the truth, I don't know," he answered. "I have a pretty good idea, of course, but I prefer not to say until I have subjected the powder to a careful analysis. But here we are at Pennington's office, Tinker. You had better wait in the taxi for a few minutes until I return."

"What are you going to see Pennington again for, guv'nor?" asked Tinker.

"I'm not. I merely want to examine the floor of his office," replied Blake.

He was back within five minutes, and he then directed the driver of the taxi to take them to Mr. Cleaver's office in Lombard Street. Afterwards they went to Moorgate Street, where the detective had a short interview with Mr. Robinson.

Tinker had remained in the cab all the time, and Blake was quite cheerful when he rejoined his assistant.

"We are getting on famously, young 'un," he said briskly. "I have found traces of the mysterious yellow dust in Robinson's office, although it was quite absent in those of Cleaver and Pennington. I have also learned that Edwards

used a large motor-car, blue-grey in colour, and of the landaulette type of body, in which to make his calls.

"He visited Cleaver and Pennington in the morning, and Robinson and Tresmand immediately after the lunch hour, and he kept his car waiting for him in each instance for quite a considerable time. Now I want you to do all you possibly can to pick up some trace of that car, and then report to me at Baker Street. Do you understand?"

Tinker nodded.

"Yes, guv'nor!" he said brightly. "Thank goodness, I've got something to do at last! It ought to be easy enough to track the blue-grey car. Somebody must have seen it at one of the four points where it waited for Edwards. Are you going back to Baker Street now?"

"Yes, at once."

"Right-ho, sir! I'll see you later," replied Tinker, waving his hand.

A moment later the taxi drove off, and Sexton Blake lay back upon the cushions indolently. He knew that he could trust Tinker to do all that was possible to trace the car which Edwards had used, and he concerned himself no further about it.

Some little time later the detective was deeply engrossed in the analysis of the yellow dust. His laboratory was equipped with every conceivable requirement for this sort of work, and was fitted with several benches and tables, on which gleamed various delicately-made instruments, test-tubes, and retorts, and the thousand and one odds and ends which go to make up the stock-in-trade of the analytical chemist.

There were very few professional men more highly qualified than Sexton Blake in their knowledge of chemistry, and the detective hated to be disturbed when engaged in any of his intricate experiments.

But on this occasion he had scarcely commenced upon the tricky task of analysing the yellow powder when his housekeeper timidly knocked at the door and announced that a visitor wished to see him.

Blake grunted and turned his head.

"Tell them I'm too busy to see anybody just now, Mrs. Bardell," he said irritably.

"Very well, sir!" answered the housekeeper. "But it's a young lady, sir, and she seems to be very eager for an interlude with you."

"Humph! It's a young lady, is it?" growled Blake, who was now too well acquainted with Mrs. Bardell's little errors of speech to even smile. "Did she give you her name?"

"Yes, sir. She is Miss Evelyn Wrayson," replied the housekeeper. "She has come to see you about her young man, because he's disappeared. She says his name is Mr. Robert Edwards, and the papers have accused him of being a forger."

Sexton Blake rose to his feet at once.

"All right, Mrs. Bardell, show the young lady up immediately," he said crisply.

He removed his laboratory overall as he spoke; and a few seconds later he was shaking hands with his fair client in the consulting room.

Miss Evelyn Wrayson was a most charming young woman, with a great wealth of wavy brown hair and a pair of appealing brown eyes, which now showed distinct traces of tear-stains.

She was dressed in a neatly cut blue costume, which suited her delicate complexion admirably, and she stood before Sexton Blake with an expression of misery and concern upon her clear-cut features.

"Oh, Mr. Blake, I do hope you will help me!" she said, with a note of entreaty in her voice. "I am so worried about Bob—Mr. Edwards—that I scarcely know what to do. He—he is my fiance, you know, and he has disappeared completely!"

The detective led her gently to a chair, and sat down beside her.

"As it happens, I am most anxious to learn all I possibly can about Mr. Edwards," he said kindly. "Tell me everything you are able, Miss Wrayson. When did you see him last?"

"He was at my uncle's house last night, as usual," answered the girl. "But—but I haven't told you the worst, Mr. Blake. The—the papers have accused him of being a—a forger!"

"Yes, I am aware of that," replied Blake. "Do I understand that Mr. Edwards visited your uncle's house regularly?"

Miss Wrayson nodded.

"As regularly as clockwork," she answered. "He was almost like one of the family. You see, Mr. Blake, my uncle is Professor Nicholas Wrayson, a scientist, and he approved of Mr. Edwards as a prospective nephew in every way—partly, I believe, because they had so many interests in common. My fiance is an inventor, you know."

"Yes, so I have heard," said Blake. "Tell me, Miss Wrayson—did Mr. Edwards appear to be as usual last night?"

The girl looked surprised.

"Why, yes, of course!" she answered. "He was, perhaps, a trifle excited owing to the interviews he had arranged with four very influential business men in the City for to-day. Mr. Edwards was going to see them in order to persuade them to finance his invention, and he had very high hopes of his success. And—and now he has been accused of forging the signatures of the very men from whom he had expected so much!"

Miss Evelyn Wrayson produced a tiny handkerchief from her bag as she spoke and dabbed her eyes with it.

"But such an accusation is ridiculous—preposterous!" she went on, clenching her little hands helplessly. "My fiance is the very soul of honour, and totally incapable of such a terrible crime as forgery. It is quite impossible that an upright, honest man like Bob should stoop so low, Mr. Blake, and I utterly refuse to believe anything against him!"

Sexton Blake looked at his visitor approvingly.

"Bravo, Miss Wrayson!" he exclaimed heartily. "I am delighted to see that your faith in your fiance has remained unshaken in spite of everything. I certainly think you are justified in believing in his innocence, and I dare say we shall be able to prove it before very long."

The girl clapped her hands delightedly.

"Oh, how lovely, Mr. Blake!" she exclaimed. "I am so glad that I came to you, for you have cheered me up wonderfully. But why has Mr. Edwards disappeared? And where is he, do you think?"

"Ah, that is a question which I cannot answer at the moment!" said Blake, with a smile. "But I don't think he's in any danger. Tell me, Miss Wrayson—how did Mr. Edwards seem regarding these forthcoming interviews in the City? Was he keen upon them when he left you last night?"

"Tremendously keen, Mr. Blake; and he was looking forward to them with great eagerness," answered the girl. "And it is that fact which makes this charge of forgery seem so ridiculous, you see. Is it likely that Bob would jeopardise his entire future by committing these crimes—just when his prospects were so rosy, too? It's—it's terrible! And my uncle is just as indignant as I am about it."

"The professor was in Mr. Edwards' confidence regarding his affairs, then?" asked the detective.

"Oh, yes—fully!" replied Miss Wrayson. "They used to sit and discuss Bob's various ideas for hours on end, Mr. Blake. My uncle knew all about the interviews arranged for this morning, and wished Bob the best of luck. They were talking together long after I went to bed last night, as a matter of fact—which is a habit they often indulged."

Blake smiled and nodded.

"That is only to be expected," he remarked. "A scientist and an inventor would naturally be attracted towards one another professionally—quite apart from the question of friendship, and that of prospective relationship. Oh, by the way, Miss Wrayson, does Mr. Edwards possess a motor-car?"

"Yes, Mr. Blake—a little two-seater run-about," she answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Does he generally use it when he visits your uncle's house?" asked the detective, ignoring the girl's query.

"No; very seldom," she answered, somewhat puzzled. "You see, Mr. Edwards lives at Putney, and the distance to our house at Fulham is not great. I'd better leave you my uncle's address, Mr. Blake, for I hope you'll be able to give me some good news soon."

"I have every hope of doing so, my dear young lady," replied Blake.

Miss Evelyn Wrayson produced a card from her handbag and passed it to the famous criminologist. Her name was inscribed upon the pasteboard, with the address of the professor immediately beneath — "Kelvedon House, Daleham Road, Fulham."

Sexton Blake conversed for a little while longer with his fair visitor, and then she took her departure—considerably happier than when she had arrived shortly before.

The detective then continued his interrupted experiments upon the mysterious yellow dust behind the locked door of the laboratory, and this time he was allowed to finish his task undisturbed.

When at last he rose from his seat at the bench he was smiling cheerfully and humming occasional bars from one of the latest London musical shows. Evidently he had achieved his object, and was satisfied.

Five minutes later Sexton Blake was seated in a taxi once more, speeding in the direction of Holborn.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.
"The Yellow Dust Again!"

TINKER stood upon the pavement in Moorgate Street for some few minutes after his master had departed in the taxi. The lad was considerably puzzled by the events of the day, and somewhat aggrieved because Blake had been so secretive as to his conclusions respecting the four mysterious forgeries.

He felt quite certain that the detective had arrived at some sort of an explanation as to the methods employed to bring about the frauds, and was even now on his way home to seek confirmation of his hypothesis by ascertaining the exact nature of the yellow dust.

Tinker, for the life of him, could not see just where the powder entered into the business. Tresmand had declared it to be ordinary snuff, carried by Mr. Robert Edwards, presumably for use in the orthodox manner.

But Tinker knew well enough that Sexton Blake, although he had said nothing, had not accepted this explanation of the powder's presence upon the floor of Tresmand's office.

(Continued on page 14.)

When he saw that Blake and Tinker were upon him, the fugitive faced round, adopting an attitude of defence. "Come on—I'm ready for you!" he panted. (*Page* 16.)

The Professor wrenched the chair-leg upwards with all his strength. Before Blake could make an effort he was forcibly pitched backwards. (*Page* 18.)

"You murderous ruffian!" gasped Tinker. "What have you done to Mr. Blake?" (*Page* 21.)

On the contrary, Blake appeared to regard the yellow dust as a highly important factor in the case, and Tinker felt a trifle resentful at being left out in the cold, because the detective had not explained matters to him.

He realised, however, that standing upon the kerb was not likely to bring him any nearer to a solution of the mystery, and with a shrug of the shoulders, he began to consider the best means of carrying out Blake's instructions.

It would probably be a difficult job to locate the car which had been used by Edwards, and Tinker decided to begin his campaign by interviewing the policeman on point duty.

Fortunately, one of these gentlemen in blue was stationed quite near to the office of Mr. Robinson—the third victim of the forger's rascality, and Tinker approached him in hopeful anticipation.

But he soon discovered that the policeman had only just come on duty at that point, and was therefore quite unable to give Tinker any information. Moreover, the constable whom he had relieved had been hurriedly called to another part of London to visit a sick relation.

Tinker had disclosed his identity to the police officer, and the man was very sympathetic.

"Sorry I can't help you, Mr. Tinker," he said. "It's very unfortunate that the chap I relieved is away, for I've no doubt he'd have been able to tell you something. Why don't you try the newsboys, and those loungers over there?"

"I'm going to," said Tinker, with a nod. "I'll try the blessed lot."

As a matter of fact, Tinker did much more than this. He questioned taximen, office boys, hall porters, and commissionaires—but all to no purpose. He drew a blank every time, for not one of the people he interviewed could recall seeing the blue-grey motor-car in which Mr. Robert Edwards had arrived.

Finally, Tinker gave up the attempt, and decided that there was little chance of obtaining the information he required in this neighbourhood. Perhaps his luck would change when he broke fresh ground.

Blake's assistant was in no way disheartened. He had scarcely expected to succeed at his first attempt, and he made his way—by various short cuts which were quite familiar to him—in the direction of Lombard Street.

Within ten minutes he emerged almost facing the offices of Mr. Frederick Cleaver, and he lost no time in repeating his activities which had proved so disappointing in Moorgate Street.

As before, he commenced by having a chat with a police officer, who was stationed near the Bank end of the thoroughfare. This man remembered seeing the car Tinker described, but had not taken particular notice of it, and was unable to help much.

But the fact that the car had been noticed at all gave Tinker renewed hope, for it was quite likely that somebody else—more observant than the constable—might have caught sight of its number, or have overheard the destination orders issued to its driver.

So Tinker pursued his inquiries with diligent cheeriness for some little time, and did not consider the prospect of failure. But after exhausting every possible avenue of information in the immediate vicinity of Cleaver's offices, he was reluctantly compelled to abandon his task.

Not a single trace of the blue-grey car could he find.

"Oh, well, no good giving up hope, old son!" he muttered to himself. "I'll have a shot at Mr. Pennington's place in Old Jewry. Perhaps I'll strike the trail of the blessed car there."

He set off at once, doggedly determined not to be beaten. Tinker was as tenacious as his master's famous bloodhound when he got going upon the scent, and the thought of giving up merely because he had met with two setbacks never crossed his mind.

He soon found that there was no policeman on point duty near enough to Pennington's office to be of value as a source of information. And so Tinker, once he arrived in Old Jewry, began his questioning in the same way as he had done on the two former occasions.

After interviewing five or six individuals occupying various positions in the offices adjacent to those of Pennington, he began to fear that his quest was again destined to meet with failure.

None of the people he spoke to were able to enlighten him in the least regarding the car which Edwards had used, and almost in desperation Tinker crossed the road, and accosted a somewhat ragged newsvendor.

He could have chosen nobody better, for he soon discovered that this man knew quite a lot about the blue-grey motor-car.

"Yus, mate, I was workin' my pitch 'ere afore dinner, an' I see the car wot you want twice," he said. "A bluish sort o' colour, it was—one o' them big cars wot you can close up like a keb. It was standin' outside this office 'ere for a bit, an' then a copper came an' moved it on."

"That's the one," said Tinker joyfully. "Can you tell me anything else about it?"

The man nodded.

"Yus, rather," he replied. "Arter the copper moved it on, the driver took it off for a while, an' then came back agin. 'E was a bit wild, I think, 'cos 'e didn't like 'aving to shift away. I 'appened to be standin' on the kerb when 'e drove up again, an' 'e made a few complimentary remarks about the copper to me! 'E said 'e 'ad to pick up 'is passengers, an' 'e wasn't goin' to shift no more—not for a dozen coppers!"

Tinker grinned at the newsvendor's account of the incident.

"Well, what happened afterwards?" he asked eagerly.

"Abaht two minutes arter that a bloke came out o' this 'ere office," went on the man, jerking his thumb in the direction of Pennington's office, "and jumped into the car. I 'eard 'im tell the driver to go like blazes to Bloomsbury Grove—No. 56, I believe it was."

"Bloomsbury Grove, eh?" repeated Tinker, wrinkling his brow thoughtfully.

"Yus, that was the address right enough," declared the newsvendor. "I remember it puffickly, 'cos I used to work for a man there once—— Thanks mate! You're a proper toff, you are!"

He spoke very feelingly as he became aware that five shillings had been thrust into his hand by Tinker, who scarcely heard the man's thanks owing to the speed with which he hurried off.

For Tinker was now greatly excited. His success had been greater than he had dared to hope for. The newsvendor had supplied him with the address to which Mr. Edwards' car had been directed, and—what was still more surprising and important—Tinker had instantly recognised the address.

No. 56, Bloomsbury Grove had struck a chord in Tinker's memory at once, for it was nothing less than the address of the boarding-house to which he and Blake had gone that very morning in their search for Mr. John Stanford, of Ivy Cottage, Wenham—the man who had so narrowly escaped death by means of the explosive bomb contained in the parcel.

This was a surprising coincidence indeed, and Tinker was eager to learn more as soon as possible. He lost no time in finding a taxi, and while he was being driven towards the boarding-house, his mind was busily turning over the strange facts in his mind.

What possible connection could there be between Mr. John Stanford and the amazing individual who had so successfully engineered the four audacious forgeries?

This was a point which Tinker was unable to decide. But he certainly regarded it as a foregone conclusion that some connection existed between Stanford and Edwards—the man responsible for the frauds.

It was just possible, of course, that the long arm of coincidence had entered into the game—that Edwards and Stanford were total strangers to each other, and were residing at the same boarding-house.

But Tinker, upon reflection, dismissed this explanation of the facts as being a little "too thick"—to quote his own mental phrase. Moreover, he remembered that Edwards lived at Putney.

In any case, theorising in this manner would not help him much, and Tinker endeavoured to restrain his impatience while the taxi bowled him towards the boarding-house.

When at last it pulled up outside No. 56, Bloomsbury Grove, Tinker jumped out, and instructed the driver to wait. Then he hurried to the front door, and asked for an interview with the proprietor.

He waited in the hall until he was joined, within two minutes, by a somewhat prim, angular lady. She swept towards Tinker with a rustling of skirts, and regarded him through a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Well, young man?" she snapped irritably. "What is it you want?"

Tinker coughed.

"I—er—I've called to see one of your boarders—a Mr. John Stanford——" he began.

"Oh, you have, have you?" interrupted the proprietress sharply. "Well, you can't! Mr. Stanford is too ill to see anybody at present!"

"Too ill!" repeated Tinker, in surprise. "But—but he was all right this morning, wasn't he? The servant told me he was out when I called."

"That may be," answered the landlady. "He was all right until this afternoon, when some bearded scoundrel called upon him, and tried to murder him! Poor Mr. Stanford! We heard him groaning when his visitor had gone, and we at once sent for a doctor, who declared that poison had been administered to him!"

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Tinker. "I—I didn't expect to hear anything of this nature! Can you tell me if a Mr. Edwards came here this afternoon—in a large blue-grey motor-car?"

The landlady shook her head.

"There's nobody of that name here!" she declared. "And I have seen nothing of the car you describe. It may have been here, of course, but the only motor I have seen this afternoon is the taxi which brought the bearded murderer! Dear me! To think that such a dreadful thing should happen in my house!"

The proprietress of the boarding-house produced a handkerchief as she spoke, and Tinker thought he had better take his departure at once. It was evident that he could learn nothing further, and

the news which he had already gained was sufficiently surprising.

He bade the woman good-day, and hurried back to his taxi. After telling the driver to take him to Baker Street as quickly as possible, he jumped in, and settled down to think matters out.

The business seemed to be more tangled than ever, so far as Tinker could see. Edwards was not known at the boarding-house, and yet he had been heard to instruct the chauffeur of the blue-grey motor-car to drive him there.

And what about John Stanford? Who had poisoned him—and for what reason? It was quite obvious that somebody eagerly desired his death, as was evidenced by the fact that a bomb had been posted to his address at Ivy Cottage, Wenham.

Blake and Tinker were aware that this infernal machine had failed in its purpose, owing to the accident which had befallen the rural postman that morning as he was on his round.

Presumably the sender of the bomb was also aware that Stanford's danger no longer threatened, and had, therefore, adopted other means of attempting his life—this time by poison.

But what all this had to do with the City forgeries Tinker could not even make a guess at. He turned the events over in his mind until his head ached, but by the time the taxi pulled up outside Blake's house in Baker Street, he was just as much in the dark as ever.

He paid the driver liberally, and asked him to wait a few minutes, in case the cab was wanted again. The man agreed to do so, and Tinker charged up the steps to the hall door three at a time.

A few minutes later he burst into the consulting-room. Sexton Blake was seated there, and he looked up as Tinker entered.

"Well, young 'un, if your boisterous home-coming is anything to go by, I judge that you have got something to say—eh?"

"Rather, sir!" agreed Tinker. "After a lot of trouble I discovered that the blue-grey car had been driven to No. 56, Bloomsbury Grove — that boarding-house we went to this morning! And, what's more, guv'nor, I've found out that Mr. John Stanford—the chap who owns the cottage at Wenham—has been poisoned this afternoon!"

"Poisoned — eh?" repeated Blake. "Well, well, I scarcely expected to hear anything of this nature, Tinker. You'd better tell me the whole story."

Tinker lost no time in doing so. He related all his adventures since the pair had parted in Moorgate Street, and during the recital Sexton Blake nodded his head approvingly, finally congratulating his youthful assistant very highly.

He then told Tinker of the visit of Miss Evelyn Wrayson, and of his own trip to Holborn.

"I was lucky, Tinker," he concluded. "As it happens, I found a policeman in Holborn who had taken the number of Edwards' car, owing to the fact that the driver of it objected to being moved on. The police-officer also examined the chauffeur's driving licence, and obtained the information that the car belongs to a garage proprietor in Fulham."

Tinker nodded.

"How's that going to help you, guv'nor?" he asked. "I'm hanged if I can make head or tail of to-day's doings!"

"No, perhaps not," said Blake. "But the matter will soon straighten itself out, unless I am greatly mistaken. I spoke to the owner of the Fulham garage, and he told me that the blue-grey car had been hired for the day by Edwards, and that he had been picked up at the house of Professor Wrayson this morning."

Tinker whistled.

"By gosh!" he exclaimed. "The net seems to be closing round this chap Edwards pretty closely, in spite of what his girl says about his honesty! But where does Mr. John Stanford come in, guv'nor?"

Sexton Blake smiled.

"Mr. John Stanford, in my opinion, has played a very important part in this affair, Tinker—almost as important a part as the mysterious yellow dust," he said. "I mean to visit the boarding-house at once, for it is essential that I make a thorough search of Stanford's room without delay."

Tinker was surprised afresh at this decision on the detective's part, and he shrugged his shoulders.

"All right, guv'nor," he said resignedly. "Dashed if I can get to the bottom of your plans to-day! But the taxi I came here in is down below, so we might as well use it again."

The evening was fairly well advanced by the time they reached Bloomsbury, and Sexton Blake had no difficulty in obtaining permission to go up to Stanford's room. The angular landlady had been inclined to demur at first, but when she found that the detective was interested in her boarder professionally, she raised no further objections.

Tinker accompanied his master upstairs, and they found Stanford lying in bed, unconscious. He was undoubtedly in a bad way, and his recovery seemed to be somewhat doubtful.

Blake, however, paid very little attention to the sick man. He was, apparently, far more interested in the operation of searching the poisoned man's clothing, which he proceeded to do at once.

There was nothing in his coat or trousers-pocket which attracted more than a passing glance from Blake; but it was different with the waistcoat. In this garment the detective found a snuff-box, and he seized it upon the instant. And when he had glanced inside, he gave a little satisfied chuckle.

"Ah! The yellow dust again, Tinker!" he murmured.

Tinker stared.

"Why, that's funny, guv'nor!" he whispered. "I—I thought it was Edwards who had that stuff in his pocket? Do you mean to say that Stanford has been using it as well?"

"There is little doubt that Stanford has been making use of the powder," replied Blake. "Otherwise we should not have discovered it in his pocket."

The detective was now making a rapid but thorough search of the room, having replaced the clothing where he had found it. But he discovered nothing further—a fact which apparently annoyed him a trifle.

He and Tinker left the sick man's room a few moments later, and Blake requested the landlady to allow him to use the telephone for an important call. She made no objection, and escorted the criminologist to the room in which the instrument was situated.

Tinker, meanwhile, waited in the hall. Blake returned almost at once, and together they left the house, after thanking the landlady for her courtesy.

"I think you and I will take a run over to Fulham, Tinker, and interview Professor Nicholas Wrayson," said Blake. "I have an idea that the scientist will be able to enlighten us on one or two points."

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

"The Professor Has Betrayed Your Confidence!"

KELVEDON HOUSE, Professor Wrayson's residence in Fulham, was situated upon the corner of Daleham Road — a somewhat dingy thoroughfare, which had obviously seen better days.

By the time Blake and Tinker arrived in the vicinity the evening had almost given place to night, and the great house presented a gloomy and forlorn appearance as they approached.

The building was situated in its own rather rambling grounds, and was quite a good distance from its nearest neighbour—a circumstance which had most probably induced the scientist to settle there.

A half-circular drive fronted the house, access to which was gained by two old-fashioned wooden gates, opening upon the wide pavement. The place presented a rather untidy appearance, but, in spite of this, there were evident signs of occupation.

The garden extended for a considerable distance to the left of the house, and was divided from the pavement by a high brick wall, which was topped by a rather ragged layer of broken glass.

Sexton Blake, rather to Tinker's surprise, made no attempt to approach the professor's residence in the orthodox manner, but walked right past the driveway, merely glancing comprehensively through the gates as he did so.

Right to the far end of the garden wall he went, and upon reaching the boundary of the grounds he paused thoughtfully, and nodded.

"What's the idea, guv'nor?" asked Tinker curiously. "Aren't we going to see the professor?"

"Yes, presently," answered Blake. "I have a mind to make a little investigation of the grounds before doing so, however—and this point seems to be admirable for scaling the wall."

"Scaling the wall!" ejaculated Tinker. "What—what the dickens for, sir?"

Tinker scratched his head, but Blake only smiled.

"Well, if this doesn't beat the band!" he ejaculated. "But come on, guv'nor! If we're going over the wall, we might as well go now. The coast is quite clear."

By this time it was almost completely dark, and there was not a soul in sight. A glance at the top of the wall showed that it was clear of broken glass at this point, and it proved quite an easy matter for Blake and Tinker to hoist themselves over into the grounds of Kelvedon House.

After dropping upon the other side of the wall they waited a few moments without stirring. But the slight sounds they had made were not likely to be heard from the house, which was a good many yards distant.

The dense gloom of the garden made it somewhat difficult for them to distinguish anything around them with any degree of clearness. But they soon discovered that the place was almost entirely uncultivated, presenting the appearance of an untidy wilderness rather than a suburban garden.

Stealthily they crept towards the house, feeling their way carefully, and progressing without noise. After covering about half the distance Blake suddenly touched Tinker's arm, and halted.

"There's somebody on the prowl just ahead of us," he whispered.

Tinker nodded, and fixed his gaze ahead. He soon saw that Blake's words were true, for a man was standing a little way in front of them, apparently greatly interested in watching the house.

He seemed to be ill at ease and

suspicious, for he frequently cast nervous glances around him, almost as if he expected to be attacked at any moment by some unseen enemy from the surrounding gloom.

Perhaps some instinct told him that he was no longer alone in the garden, or perhaps he heard some slight unusual sound. At all events, he appeared to sense the close proximity of Blake and Tinker, and he lost no time in seeking safety.

Swiftly his gaze travelled in their direction, and an instant after he had discerned their dark forms standing motionless among the tangled undergrowth he set off for a distant part of the garden wall as fast as his legs would carry him.

"Come on, Tinker! We must catch him before he scales the wall!" said Blake in a low voice. "Don't make any more noise than you can help."

As silently as possible they followed the retreating figure of the stranger, who was now tearing through the garden with a certainty which proved that he was familiar with his surroundings.

There was no doubt that he was making for the wall, and Blake and Tinker knew that they would have to hurry if they were to prevent his escape. They came up with the fugitive just as he was about to leap at the high brickwork, with his arms upraised.

When he saw that his pursuers were upon him he faced round quickly, and adopted an attitude of defence, his fists clenched determinedly.

"Come on! I'm ready for you!" he panted hoarsely.

Sexton Blake raised his hand, and advanced towards the warlike figure before him.

"Bravo!" he said admiringly. "I am delighted to see you are still game enough to put up a fight, Mr. Edwards! But I assure you that fighting is now quite unnecessary—we are friends!"

Tinker gasped.

"Great pip! Is—is this chap Mr. Edwards?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, I'm Edwards right enough," interrupted the stranger, dropping his hands, and looking at his companions wonderingly. "But I'm hanged if you haven't got the advantage of me! You certainly appear to be friendly, as you say, but who the dickens are you?"

"My name is Blake—Sexton Blake—and this is my assistant, Tinker," replied the detective. "You may, perhaps, have heard of us?"

Edwards was very much astonished.

"Heard of you?" he exclaimed. "Why, I should jolly well think I have! But—but what on earth are you doing here, Mr. Blake? As a matter of fact, I'm rather in a fog about things. I've been imprisoned all night, and I've only just succeeded in making my escape."

Blake nodded.

"I am not at all surprised to hear that," he observed. "Professor Wrayson, of course, is responsible?"

"Yes, confound him!" agreed Edwards. "What on earth his object can be I don't know. We have always been on the very best of terms. But last night, for some unknown reason, the professor and a companion of his set upon me. They bound and gagged me, and carried me into a shed at the bottom of the garden, where I lay helpless all night."

Edwards ground his teeth angrily as he spoke.

"This morning Wrayson ungagged me while I ate some food, but since then I've been left entirely alone. Naturally, I spent the time in trying to escape, and succeeded in doing so just before you turned up in the garden. What does it all mean, Mr. Blake?"

"It means, Mr. Edwards, that the professor has grossly betrayed your confidences, and has used your name and personality to engineer a neat little swindle to the tune of twenty-four thousand pounds!" answered Blake slowly.

Mr. Robert Edwards stared at Blake in amazement.

"Good heavens!" he gasped. "Do—do you mean that the professor is a criminal?

"Undoubtedly; and an amazingly clever one at that!" returned the detective. "He has succeeded in robbing each of the four City magnates with whom you had appointments to-day, by sending a confederate to interview them in your name!"

"The—the scoundrel!" ejaculated Edwards. "This will be the ruin of me! All my hopes were centred upon obtaining financial help from those four men, and now—— Oh, it's simply ghastly; But, I say, Mr. Blake, what about Miss Evelyn. She's not mixed up in this business, is she?"

He spoke with great anxiety in his tones, and the detective smiled.

"No, no, my dear fellow. The young lady is quite innocent," he said. "She came to me in a terrible state of anxiety regarding your disappearance, and is in no way responsible for her uncle's criminal acts. I congratulate you on choosing so charming a life partner."

Edwards heaved a great sigh of relief.

"Thank Heaven for that!" he ejaculated. "I always knew she was true blue, Heaven bless her! But look here, Mr. Blake, how the deuce has the professor been working his swindle, as you call it?"

"Chiefly by clever manipulation, and the help of a confederate," answered Sexton Blake. "He has succeeded in drawing large sums of money from the banking accounts of the four City gentlemen I mentioned, and so astutely did the professor lay his plans that you, Edwards, are suspected by the police of committing a four-fold forgery!"

The young man drew his breath in angrily, and clenched his fists.

"By heavens! The—the despicable hound!" he panted. "But I can scarcely believe it, Mr. Blake. How on earth can I be suspected of forgery when I've been a prisoner all day?"

He was soon enlightened when the detective explained all the various happenings to him. Blake related everything which had occurred since the morning in as few words as possible, omitting nothing, and concluding with an account of his own and Tinker's visit to the Bloomsbury boarding-house.

Edwards listened with tense interest, his eyes glinting with anger as it became obvious to him that all along he had been the scapegoat for Professor Wrayson's villainous schemes.

He was greatly puzzled, however, by Blake's mention of the yellow dust, and by the fact that traces of it had been found in the offices of both Tresmand and Robinson. He could not understand, any more than Tinker had done, what the powder had been used for, and he said as much to the detective.

"The yellow dust?" said Blake, with a smile. "Ah, my dear fellow, the yellow dust is at the bottom of the whole mystery!"

"But what is it, guv'nor?" asked Tinker.

"It is a peculiar drug, extracted from a little-known Indian herb," answered Sexton Blake. "I have come across something very similar on former occasions, but nothing quite resembling this in its effects. I made a very careful analysis of the sample available, and my suspicions were amply confirmed."

"Hanged if I can see what it was used for at all!" said Edwards. "What are the effects of the powder?"

"It acts upon the brain," explained Sexton Blake. "Its action, when taken into the human system, is to produce temporary loss of memory, and at the same time to render the subject completely submissive to a strong will, owing to the deadening effect upon the delicate nerves of the brain. Apart from these characteristics, the subject is quite normal in every way, and recovers within half an hour. His mind, however, is a complete blank regarding what has occurred while under the influence of the drug."

Tinker and Edwards looked at one another in amazement.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" exclaimed Tinker. "So that's the explanation of the blessed yellow dust, is it?"

"Undoubtedly," returned Blake. "From the first I could not bring myself to accept the facts regarding the forgeries as they appeared upon the surface, for the simple reason that no single man could possibly have carried them out. Remember that in each case the supposedly forged cheques were signed upon the counters of the bank, always, according to the bank cashiers, by one of the well-known customers.

"Now, cashiers, as a general rule, are pretty smart fellows, and it seemed highly improbable to me that four of them would be taken in as easily as we were asked to believe—completely deceived, mind you, both by a false cheque and a false customer at the same time.

"So I came to the conclusion, quite early in the investigation, that no forgeries had occurred at all, and no impersonation of the banks' customers, either. By some means or other, it seemed certain that the four City magnates had been induced—obviously without their knowledge—to visit the banks and draw out the money themselves.

"The discovery of the yellow dust confirmed my suspicions, which became certainties after I had analysed the sample. Then came the visit of Miss Evelyn Wrayson, who told me about your disappearance, Edwards, and also about the appointments you had made regarding

your invention. Finally, Tinker traced the motor-car which had been used by the criminal to a boarding-house in Bloomsbury, and the whole case immediately became clear and connected."

Sexton Blake paused, and looked at his two astonished hearers with a smile. But Edwards still seemed to be puzzled.

"The story you have told sounds very much like fiction in its sensational audacity," he said, with a grin, "and I've no doubt that it's all perfectly clear to you. At the same time, I'm dashed if I can get the hang of it completely! For instance, how were the frauds worked exactly?"

"Well, in my opinion, they were suggested to Professor Wrayson, in the first place, by two things," replied Blake. "One was the fact that he possessed a quantity of the peculiar Indian drug, and the other was the fact that the appointments you had arranged in the City would afford him a unique opportunity to make a considerable sum of money by its use.

"He commenced operations by making you a prisoner, Edwards. Then he arranged with his confederate—Mr. John Stanford, of Bloomsbury, and Ivy Cottage, Wenham—to impersonate you today in the City. This was quite easy, because you were unknown personally to any of the gentlemen with whom you had an appointment—a fact of which the professor was well aware.

"The rest was really very simple.

"Stanford, in the personality of Edwards, the inventor, kept the appointments. A few minutes after he had been received into the private office of each of the men, he produced his snuff-box; a perfectly natural action on his part. We will assume that a glass of whisky-and-water is in front of each man as they converse, as we know it actually was.

"Stanford would have no difficulty in finding an opportunity to slip a little of the powder in his companion's whisky. And that done, the effect would be almost immediate. Stanford merely made his suggestions regarding the cashing of the cheques, and his victims immediately carried them out, each one of them actually visiting the bank, signing their cheque, and returning with the money in notes, which they handed to Stanford.

"A little later, when the effects of the powder wore off, they would remember nothing whatever of what had taken place, and would naturally declare the cheques to be forgeries. In reality, of course, they were quite genuine, and consequently no hitch could possibly occur respecting them until they were repudiated by the men whose signatures they bore."

Edwards was greatly impressed.

"What a remarkably clever scheme, Mr. Blake!" he said. "And what a terrific nerve the professor has got to put it into practice! I suppose he reckoned that the frauds would not be discovered for some little time?"

"Possibly," agreed Blake.

"And what about John Stanford, the chap who actually did the dirty work, guv'nor?" asked Tinker. "Who poisoned him?"

"Professor Wrayson is undoubtedly responsible for Stanford's condition," said the detective. "Having used his accomplice to carry out his scheme, he presumably desired to get him out of the way. The professor, therefore, sent him a bomb by parcel-post, which would await him upon arrival at his house at Wenham. It is impossible to say for certain, of course, but the possibility is that the bomb was arranged to explode when the wrappings were removed, or the string cut. As it turned out, the thing went off on impact as the result of the collision we witnessed. Stanford, however, returned to the boarding-house at Bloomsbury, instead of going to his country place, and thus upset the professor's plan to murder him.

"So Wrayson disguised himself by wearing a beard, and visited Stanford in the boarding-house, where he again attempted to dispose of him by administering a dose of poison. It is possible that Stanford demanded too great a share in the proceeds of the swindle to please the professor, who adopted this means of ridding himself of his accomplice, and taking all the money for himself. At all events, there was no evidence that Stanford had benefited greatly when I made a search of his room."

Edwards and Tinker were greatly surprised at the masterly manner in which Blake had reconstructed the surprising events of the day. There could be no doubt that the detective was right in his deductions, for everything fitted in with an exactness which was simply wonderful.

Nothing now remained to be done but to interview Professor Wrayson. Edwards and Tinker were eager to do so at once, but Blake shook his head.

"I have arranged with Detective-Inspector Dickson to come along with a couple of his men," he said; "and I think it will be better if you two remain outsde to receive him. Meanwhile, I am most anxious to have a little chat with the professor. I have an idea that he will prove to be a most interesting individual."

Edwards and Tinker were quite agreeable to this, and the trio, after a few more words, made their way out of the gloomy garden into the roadway once more.

And Sexton Blake, while his two companions awaited the arrival of the worthy Dickson, approached the front door of Kelvedon House, and knocked loudly.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

"When the Sponge Descends Low Enough ——!"

SEXTON BLAKE, as he stood upon the doorstep of the professor's residence, realised that his position was a somewhat delicate one.

He was quite certain, in his own mind, that Wrayson was the master brain who had engineered the City frauds, and it was equally certain that the wily scientist had taken good care to leave no tangible proofs of his connection with the matter.

And proofs were essential before police action could be resorted to.

The professor, of course, was liable to be charged for the part he had played in the attack upon Edwards, and for causing the young man to be detained as a helpless prisoner.

But a charge of this sort would be totally inadequate to satisfy the detective. Blake was anxious to secure sufficient proof of Wrayson's complicity to render him open to immediate arrest, and so clear Edwards' name from the stigma with which it was now associated.

Exactly how he was to accomplish this task, Blake did not know. But the first step towards its execution was to meet the professor face to face.

The time was now well past ten o'clock, and the detective waited in some impatience for the door of Kelvedon House to be opened to him. He had no idea what servants were kept in the place, or whether there were any at all. But after a few minutes he heard somebody coming towards the door, apparently from the back regions of the great house.

A moment later the ponderous door was thrown back, to reveal an elderly woman, no doubt Wrayson's housekeeper. She looked at the visitor without interest, and made no demur when Blake stepped into the hall, and handed her his card, with a request that he might see the professor without delay.

"He's in his private den, I believe, sir," said the woman. "If you follow me I'll take you there at once."

Blake nodded, and did as his guide indicated. He thought it strange that she made no attempt to announce his arrival beforehand, but this seemed to point to the fact that the professor regarded himself as quite secure from suspicion, so secure that he had not even thought it necessary to give orders that no one was to be admitted to his presence.

The old housekeeper, obviously, was not in the professor's confidence regarding his criminal acts, and was probably an honest and hardworking soul. Blake followed her to a door at the farther end of the gloomy hallway, where she paused.

"This is the professor's room, sir," she said, opening the door. "You'll find him in there!"

Blake thanked her, and passed into the room. He thought the housekeeper's behaviour somewhat erratic, for she had made no attempt to inform her master that a visitor wished to see him.

If a tiny seed of suspicion was planted in the detective's brain owing to this extremely easy entry into Wrayson's den, he dismissed it at once. The housekeeper was certainly not an accomplice in a prearranged plan to trap him. Of that he was positive.

Blake stood just inside the door of Wrayson's den, and surveyed the room with quick, comprehensive glances. It resembled at first sight a rather untidy workshop, for around the walls were hung numerous tools and utensils of all descriptions.

Under the window stood a great bench, littered with an untidy collection of scientific instruments, glass retorts, test-tubes, jars, and bottles in endless variety.

A couple of easy-chairs were drawn up against the fireplace, but apart from these there was very little else in the way of furniture. The rest of the room

seemed to be devoted entirely to the professor's work.

Most curious of all was the fact that a large trapdoor was wide open in the centre of the floor, and as there was no sign of Wrayson within the room, Blake concluded that he was down in the cellar.

He noticed that an overcoat and hat were lying upon the end of the bench, together with an umbrella. Immediately beneath them, upon the floor against the leg of the bench, stood a strong, black leather bag.

Blake, upon the impulse of the moment, tiptoed towards it silently, resolved to seize this unique opportunity of ascertaining the nature of the bag's contents. It was obviously placed there in readiness for departure, as the presence of the coat and hat indicated.

Quickly he pressed the catch and opened the bag. A glance inside caused his keen eyes to gleam with satisfaction, and he knew that all his suspicions were justified to the hilt.

For the bag was stuffed to the top with Treasury notes!

This was proof of the professor's guilt, indeed, and Blake had no doubt that the bag contained the whole of the proceeds of the City "forgeries."

Quick as a flash he reclosed the bag, and assumed an upright position once more in the very nick of time. For the professor, at that moment, emerged from the trapdoor, and blinked at his visitor through his gold-rimmed pince-nez.

Blake stepped forward.

"Good-evening!" he said pleasantly. "Your housekeeper showed me into this room a moment ago, but did not take the trouble to announce my arrival. You are Professor Nicholas Wrayson, are you not?"

By this time the newcomer had stepped from the ladder which led upwards from the cellar, and was standing within the room. He was a striking-looking man, rather above the average height, and with small, piercing black eyes and clean-shaven chin. His age might have been anything between forty and fifty, certainly not more than that, for his hair was perfectly black, without a single trace of grey.

He regarded his visitor for a moment, and then bowed politely.

"That is my name, my dear sir," he said, his voice silky and courteous. "May I have the pleasure of knowing——"

"Certainly!" interrupted the detective. "My name is Sexton Blake, and I have come to see you upon a matter of some importance."

The professor nodded.

"Delighted to meet you, Mr. Blake," he said softly. "I must apologise for the scanty comfort of this room, but I beg of you to be seated. We can talk much more sociably then."

He indicated the two easy-chairs as he spoke, and both men walked towards them. Blake noticed that his companion was eyeing him very closely, as if trying to read what was passing in his mind.

But the professor failed to learn anything from the inscrutable features of the detective, whose expression gave no hint as to his innermost thoughts.

"Now, Mr. Blake, what is this important matter you wish to discuss with me?" asked Wrayson, sitting down as he spoke. "I have not a great deal of time at my disposal, as I am leaving London by the midnight train for Scotland."

Sexton Blake smiled.

"I had an idea you were preparing for a journey, professor," he replied lightly. "But I fancy it will not take you so far afield as you anticipate. As a commencement of our interview, I must congratulate you upon the amazing success of your City campaign."

Wrayson raised his eyebrows slightly.

"You refer, of course, to the astonishingly easy manner in which I obtained the twenty-four thousand pounds?" he asked calmly. "Thanks, Mr. Blake! I thought myself the scheme was rather neat. I'll admit, however, that I did not expect to be discovered quite so soon; and I should have been quite safe for several days but for you. To tell you the truth, I am not very surprised at your coming. What do you propose to do?"

The professor's voice was still quite calm and silky, and he appeared to be in no sense perturbed. Blake realised that Wrayson must have seen him looking into the black bag, and in consequence had been forewarned that danger threatened. If so, his coolness was amazing.

"I propose that you give up the stolen money and surrender quietly," answered Sexton Blake. "The game is up, professor, and everything is known, down to the smallest detail. If you had been content with the money you obtained, and had not poisoned Stanford, your accomplice, I dare say your downfall would have been delayed——"

"Is Stanford dead?" asked Wrayson. "I sincerely hope so, for the man was too greedy to be allowed to exist. He actually demanded two-thirds of the proceeds of the day's work, and threatened to inform the police if I did not agree to his terms. Possibly I made a mistake in poisoning him, but I could not allow him to have it all his own way. You see, Mr. Blake, I am quite outspoken with you."

Sexton Blake became grim.

"Look here, Wrayson! We've carried this banter quite far enough, in my opinion," he said sternly. "Are you going to surrender quietly, and so spare your niece the humiliation of a scene?"

The professor laughed.

"Certainly not, Mr. Blake!" he said genially. "I freely admit to you that all you have said is quite true, but I positively decline to surrender either myself or the stolen money. Moreover, I might as well inform you that I have many other plans in view for enriching myself still further by means of the invaluable Indian drug used so successfully to-day. Can I be more candid than that?"

Wrayson's coolness and audacity were astonishing, and Blake ground his teeth.

What possible object could the professor have in conducting a conversation of this kind? He must have known that further pretence was useless—that he was completely beaten.

But if he did, he certainly showed no indication of it. His face still wore the smile of complacency assumed for the occasion, and his general demeanour was one of extreme placidity.

"I fancy your immediate future will be amply provided for—in one of his Majesty's prisons!" said Sexton Blake.

"You think so?" purred the professor silkily, stooping to pick up a handkerchief which had dropped from his hand. "I am sorry to disagree with you, Mr. Blake, but I certainly consider you're mistaken."

As he spoke, Wrayson's outstretched hand suddenly grasped the leg of Blake's chair. The movement was quite unsuspected, and the detective could not be blamed for being unprepared.

The professor wrenched the chair upwards with all his strength, and before Blake could make the slightest effort to save himself, he was pitched backwards forcibly. The back of the big chair formed a sort of chute as it struck the floor with a dull thud, and Blake found himself hurtling downwards—utterly helpless.

Wrayson had judged the manœuvre with precise accuracy, and had tilted the chair so that his victim would pitch headlong through the open trapdoor in the floor, and fall into the cellar beneath.

The simplicity of the plan had been amply justified, for Sexton Blake now lay upon the hard floor of the cellar, severely bruised. His heavy fall had dazed him considerably, but before he could rise, the professor leapt down from his den and dealt him a brutal blow upon the side of the head.

Wrayson now seemed like a different being altogether. The smile had left his face, and in its stead there appeared an expression of baffled, vindictive fury. There was no doubt that he had seen

Blake examining the black bag containing the money, and had deliberately lured the detective into his cunningly-devised and hurriedly-planned trap.

He now dragged Blake's half-conscious form towards a large beamlike post which ran from the floor of the cellar to the ceiling above, in the manner of a supporting pillar. Then the professor unhooked a coil of rope from a nail upon the wall, and prepared to render his prisoner helpless.

But Sexton Blake still had some fight left in him—as Wrayson soon discovered.

With a superhuman effort, the detective rose to his feet before the rope could be flung round him, and he lunged out determinedly, landing a blow upon Wrayson's jaw which made him stagger drunkenly

The professor, however, was fresh as paint. Moreover, he was possessed of tremendous wiry strength, which he now made use of to good purpose. He recovered from his opponent's blow instantly, and delivered a counter thrust with his clenched fist which sent Blake reeling.

The detective was weak and unsteady from the effects of his headlong plunge into the cellar, and before he could gather his strength together for another onslaught, Wrayson managed to get the rope round his arms and shoulders.

In a few moments Blake was completely helpless, trussed up from ankles to neck. But even now the professor was not satisfied, for he lifted the detective to his feet, and propped his fettered body against the great wooden post.

A few more turns of the rope were sufficient to bind him securely to the stanchion, and when this was done, Wrayson regarded his handiwork with satisfaction—and an apparent return of his good humour.

"Ah! I think that will do nicely, Mr. Blake," he said, in the same soft, silky tones he had used before. "I have a few simple preparations to make for your especial benefit, and then I shall be reluctantly compelled to leave you."

The detective made no reply, but contented himself with watching the movements of his captor as he bustled about the cellar. Blake's head was buzzing painfully, and his back ached abominably from the effects of his fall. But he was in full possession of his faculties, and quite interested in Wrayson's mysterious activities.

What their precise nature was Blake could not tell; but the professor soon enlightened him.

"No doubt you are curious, Mr Blake?" he said, smiling softly. "Well, it is only fair that I should explain the exact meaning of all this, considering that it is entirely for you that I have taken the trouble to arrange it."

He waved his hand as he spoke, indicating a small tank—connected to the tap by a rubber hose, several vessels containing liquid, and finally a corked bottle attached to a soaked sponge by a length of thin twine.

"This tank, as you see, is partially filled with water," he went on affably, "and the corked bottle, when placed in the water, acts as a float. Now this bottle is attached to a sponge, soaked with a little chemical preparation of my own, the nature of which will be apparent to you in a few moments."

He placed the bottle in the water-tank as he spoke, and Blake saw that its buoyancy was sufficient to keep the soaked sponge suspended in the air upon the twine.

"Immediately beneath the sponge you will notice, I have placed a pan of liquid," continued Wrayson, pointing, "and when I turn on the water, the sponge will gradually descend as the float rises upon the surface of the water. It is all very simple, you see, but I have every confidence that it will succeed in its object, Mr. Blake."

The professer turned on the tap a little way, and the water began to trickle through the hose into the tank. As he had indicated, the sponge hanging over the side of the tank immediately began to descend towards the pan of liquid below it.

"When the sponge descends low enough to touch the liquid beneath it," said Wrayson gloatingly, "the meeting of the two chemicals will result in a flame, which will set fire to the paraffin I have placed upon the floor near by. There is surely no need for me to go into further details, Mr. Blake, for your own imagination is quite capable of grasping the situation!"

Professor Nicholas Wrayson, although he was literally condemning Blake to a living death, still spoke in the same silky fashion, and with the same complacent smile upon his face.

As he had said, his preparations were extremely simple, but nevertheless, as dangerous and deadly as though he had placed a time-set infernal machine at Blake's feet.

Even now the water was steadily rising in the tank, and the soaked sponge was appreciably nearer to the liquid chemical in the pan. Sexton Blake watched calmly, his lips set in a hard, determined line, but without the slightest sign of fear in his grey eyes.

Wrayson walked towards the ladder at the foot of the trapdoor, and paused with one foot on the first step.

"I estimate that you have at least five minutes more to live, Mr. Blake," he remarked affably. "After that time, I am afraid that Kelvedon House will be little more than a seething mass of flame. Incidentally, I shall be well on my way to the station with the proceeds of to-day's work, without fear of molestation. This old house is insured for two thousand pounds, and I can collect it upon my return to London."

Blake made no reply to the professor's words. His brain was even now busy in trying to devise a means of escape, and the astounding and inhuman callousness of Wrayson's actions were partially lost upon him.

By this time the scientist had ascended the ladder, and had disappeared into the room above without another word to his victim. Sexton Blake heard the trapdoor closed with a bang, and he knew that he was left to his fate.

And what a fate!

Lashed to the stanchion, utterly helpless, he would be burned at the stake like the martyrs of old as soon as the running water allowed the two deadly chemicals to meet.

Blake realised that he was in a tight corner—that his peril was terrible and very real. He knew that Tinker and Edwards were in the street above, waiting for the arrival of Dickson, but this fact gave him very little comfort.

Even if they knew of his urgent need of help, it was doubtful if they could reach him in time to be of use, for the water was trickling inexorably into the tank, and every second brought the moment of his death nearer.

And Sexton Blake, his jaw tensely set, was compelled to watch the chemically-soaked sponge slowly descending into the pan of liquid beneath it.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

"You have been right all along."

TINKER, meanwhile, was getting impatient.

Nearly fifteen minutes had passed since Sexton Blake entered the door of Kelvedon House, and during that time Tinker had been slowly patrolling the drive in company with Mr. Robert Edwards.

So far there was no sign of Detective-Inspector Dickson, whom Blake had said would arrive very shortly, and Tinker found himself becoming very anxious.

"Look here, Mr. Edwards," he said, "I've got an idea that something's gone wrong with the guv'nor's plans. We haven't heard a sound since he went in to see old Wrayson, and I don't like it!"

Edwards looked at Tinker, and shook his head.

"I don't think there's any cause to worry," he remarked. "Mr. Blake is quite capable of taking care of himself, and he probably won't thank us if we butt in now——"

"It's all very well to say that," interrupted Tinker. "Of course, the guv'nor is more than a match for three chaps like Wrayson in the ordinary way. But with these scientist crooks it's different. Anyhow, I feel like having a look round on my own—— By jingo! Did—did you hear that?"

Tinker had paused as the sound of a dull, far-away thud came faintly to their ears from the rear portion of the house, and he glanced at his companion quickly. Edwards nodded, and clenched his fist.

"I believe you're right, Tinker," he exclaimed. "That sound came from the professor's den, and it looks as if your guv'nor's having trouble!"

As a matter of fact, the sound which they had heard did come from Wrayson's room, and it had been caused by Blake's overturned chair striking the floor.

After that one dull thud nothing further was audible to Tinker and Edwards, but they were now alarmed, and determined to ascertain what was happening.

Quickly and silently they made their way round to the back of the old house, and Edwards led the way to the window of a small breakfast-room, now dark and silent.

"This is about the easiest window to force," he whispered. "The catch is a bit wonky, and it ought to be simple enough."

"Right-ho!" replied Tinker, feeling in his pocket for his knife. "We'll soon have that crazy-looking affair opened!"

He set to work at once upon the window-catch, and after two or three attempts he succeeded in forcing it back without making much noise. He was not very particular regarding this, however, owing to his hurry.

Tinker lost no time in raising the lower sash, and then he and Edwards scrambled through into the room.

"You'd better let me lead the way," said Edwards. "I know the geography of this old barn as well as I do my own house. Come on, Tinker, keep close behind me."

Tinker did so, and followed his guide through the doorway into the passage beyond. Edwards, of course, being a frequent visitor to the professor's house, was quite familiar with the interior, and he led Tinker through the darkness without the slightest hesitation.

"This is the door of the professor's den," he breathed, pausing abruptly. "What do you intend to do next, Tinker?"

Blake's assistant considered.

"Perhaps we'd better wait here for a few moments, just to see if we can learn what's happening," he whispered at last. "If the guv'nor's all right, there's no need for us to interfere."

Edwards nodded, and the pair waited in silence for perhaps two minutes. No distinct sounds reached their ears during the interval, but a moment later Tinker's

face blanched as he heard the professor's parting words to Sexton Blake.

Quite distinctly Wrayson's silky tones floated up through the open trap-door, and Tinker turned to Edwards with a gasp.

"Good heavens! Did—did you hear?" he panted. "He told the guv'nor that he's only got five minutes to live! The awful ruffian is going to set fire to the house!"

Edwards nodded.

"Not if we can prevent it!" he replied tensely.

Tinker grasped the door handle, and turned it. He had expected it to be locked, but found to his surprise that the door opened readily, and he and Edwards charged into the room, with grim and determined expressions upon their faces.

Professor Nicholas Wrayson had just reached the top of the ladder, and was in the act of closing the trap-door, as they appeared. He swung round sharply as the newcomers entered, and glared at them vindictively.

He recognised Edwards instantly, of course, and his face fell a trifle. He had believed the young man to be still a secure prisoner in the garden outhouse, and his sudden appearance here upset his plans entirely.

The professor knew that he was now completely beaten, but he had no time to utter even a single word before Tinker was upon him.

"You—you scoundrel!" panted Tinker angrily. "You murderous ruffian! What have you done to Mr. Blake?"

By way of reply, Wrayson lunged out at Tinker's face, and the blow sent the lad reeling unsteadily. But he recovered in an instant, and charged into the professor with all his force.

Wrayson's attack upon Tinker had sealed his own doom, for Edwards quickly rushed to the youngster's assistance, and between the pair of them they made short work of the now baffled criminal.

Wrayson was a strong man, and he possessed plenty of pluck and agility. But he was no match against the two angry and determined young men, whose blows made him sick and faint.

After three minutes of strenuous fighting, Tinker landed a right to the jaw, which completely knocked the professor out, and he sank down with a groan of pain.

"That's about all he'll need!" panted Tinker quickly. "You keep your eye on him while I go down the cellar and see what's up with the guv'nor."

As he spoke a loud knocking came from the direction of the hall door, and Tinker concluded that Detective-Inspector Dickson had arrived with his men. But he made no attempt to let them in—his beloved guv'nor came before anything else.

Quickly wrenching open the trap-door, Tinker scrambled down the ladder, scarcely knowing what to expect. But he gave a great sigh of relief when he saw that Blake was alive, and apparently unharmed.

The detective, still bound securely, had managed to wriggle down the post into a sitting position, and had then stretched out his feet towards the twine which supported the deadly-soaked sponge.

In this manner Blake had rendered the professor's cunningly-devised death-trap harmless, for he had prevented the sponge from reaching the pan of liquid, and had thus averted the possibility of fire.

Tinker opened his eyes wide with surprise as he beheld his master's position, and he stared round the cellar wonderingly.

"I'm glad you've come now, young 'un," said Blake, with a wry smile. "My legs are getting a little too stiff to be comfortable! Be careful, Tinker; on no account allow that sponge to come in contact with the liquid in the pan!"

Tinker nodded, and under the detective's instructions he quickly removed the sponge, and commenced to cut the ropes which bound Blake so tightly. As he did so, Blake briefly explained what had happened to bring about the disaster to himself.

Sexton Blake was little the worse for his unpleasant adventure, and he and Tinker ascended to the professor's den. They found Dickson there with two other plain-clothes men, who now had charge of the baffled scientist.

Miss Evelyn Wrayson, disturbed from her slumbers by the noise and excitement, had come down, and was delighted to find her fiance safe and sound, and proved innocent of the infamous forgery charges.

Blake gave the assembled company a detailed acount of the manner in which the frauds had been perpetrated, and many expressions of surprise were heard at the ingenious methods employed.

Professor Wrayson, now handcuffed and harmless, listened to the detective, with a smile upon his face, apparently quite at his ease.

"I congratulate you, Blake," he said, in his purring, silky voice. "There is no other man in London who could have discovered what you have done in such an amazingly short time. You have been right all along the line, and I shall take good care to be more cautious next time."

Dickson grinned.

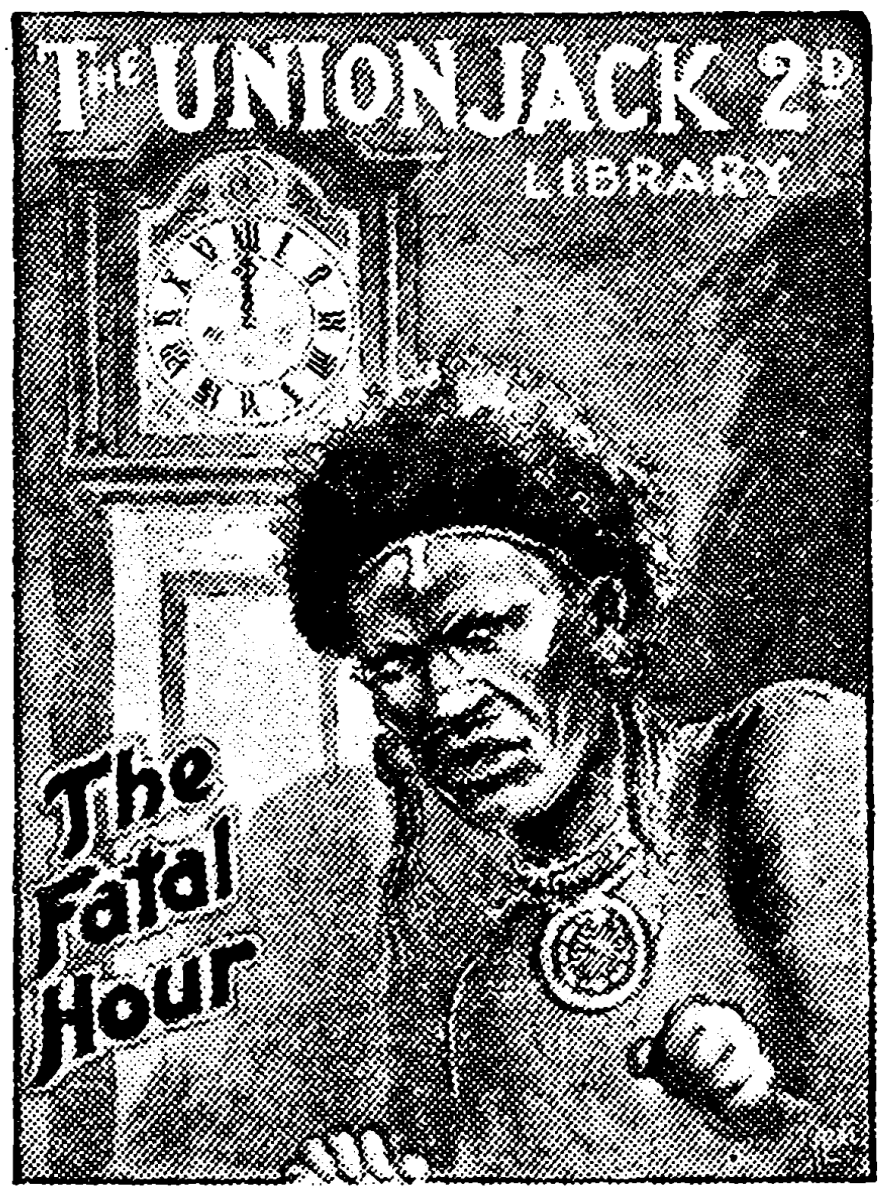
"Your 'next time' won't be for a good number of years, Wrayson," he remarked.

As Blake had surmised, the black bag contained the whole of the stolen money, and this was taken charge of by Dickson. The strange case had ended in a satisfactory manner for all concerned, and the professor had received decidedly the worst of it in his first encounter with the famous detective.

Tinker looked dubious as he and Blake made their way to Baker Street.

"I shouldn't be surprised if old Wrayson keeps his word, guv'nor," he observed.

THE END.



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Twelve o'clock, whether at noon or midnight, heralded the coming of some terrible disaster for Sir James Wrench. "Every time the clock strikes twelve, then you will have reason to remember the hour and the day that Chuka died!" ran the warning message. How effectively that warning was followed up, and how much more effective it would have been in its sinister object had not Sexton Blake intervened, you will read next week in one of the most thrilling and dramatic yarns of mystery and detective adventure that the "U. J." has hitherto published. It is, without exaggeration, a story well worthy to uphold the UNION JACK tradition, and the scene in which the action is laid—Midland readers will be interested to know—is around the Liverpool and Merseyside district. Don't neglect next week's chance to read this splendid paper. Anticipate it NOW by ordering in advance!

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THE WORST HOUSE AT ST. WALSTAN'S.

YOU CAN BEGIN READING THIS FINE SCHOOL SERIAL with THIS INSTALMENT.

SYNOPSIS.

Seldom had any school received any new boy more remarkable in every way than the fourteen-year-old lad who arrives one fine day at St. Walstan's. His name is Anthony Samuel Smith—Tony for short—but he is by no means an A.S.S.

His Housemaster, Mr. Bernard Flackton, keeps his boarders on short rations, being obliged to cut down the food bill to save money he has lost by gambling on the Stock Exchange. This suits Tony Smith least of any, and he becomes the leader of a faction which revolts.

Flackton's House, as well as being the worst-fed at St. Walstan's, is an "also ran" in other departments. In sporting matters it is ingloriously behind.

In one particular cricket match against Coppinger's House Flackton's is badly defeated. Wade, one of the few enthusiasts of the team, holds a meeting of the eleven, and upbraids them for the slackers they are.

A shindy results in Collins' study, where the meeting is in progress, and at the height of it Mr. Flackton himself interrupts the proceedings. Collins, the eleven captain, tries to pass the matter off by explaining that they were merely skylarking.

(Now read on.)

Out of Bounds!

"HUMPH!" grunted the housemaster, as he surveyed Collins and the others suspiciously. "Your skylarking is apparently of an extremely crude brand!

"Judging by the noise and the dishevelled appearance of some of you, the roughest kind of horseplay would appear to be its principal ingredient. One scarcely expects senior boys to conduct themselves like a mob of hooligans; and still less does one expect a house-captain not only to countenance such riotous behaviour, but to himself take part in it."

"I can only repeat that I'm very sorry, sir!" said Collins. "It sha'n't happen again!"

"It had better not happen again! Such conduct is simply outrageous, and not to be tolerated! Now be off to your studies, and let there be no resumption of such hooligan antics, either to-night or on any future occasion!"

So Wade and the others departed, not sorry to have got off so lightly.

It is to be feared that none of them—not even Collins—felt the slightest contrition. Reprimands from Mr. Flackton rarely had any real effect, for the housemaster had long ago forfeited the respect of his boarders.

. . . . . .

At dinner-time next day there was more trouble!

Once again Tony Smith declined to eat the wretched fare set before him, and once again Lindsay and several others followed his example by throwing down their knives and forks, and pushing their plates away in disgust.

Mr. Flackton instantly bore down on Tony.

"Still in a fastidious mood, are you, Smith?" snarled the master. "Very well! Since you are not inclined to eat, I will not have you at my table! Leave the room at once! You are doing your utmost to sow the seeds of dissatisfaction among your schoolfellows! Take yourself off! Your presence annoys me!"

Without another word, Tony rose from his chair and walked out of the dining-hall.

He was ravenously hungry, but he had no intention of remaining in that condition. Aldhurst was, he knew, out of bounds except on half-holidays; but this fact did not deter him. Having put on his cap, he started off from the town, and in a quarter of an hour was seated in the little luncheon-room at the rear of Jaffard's shop.

After enjoying a good, square meal, Tony went to the shop counter and expended seven or eight shillings on pressed beef, pork-pies, and half a dozen rolls.

These things having been neatly packed in a folding cardboard box, Tony tucked the box under his arm and made his way back to the school.

He passed through the school gates quite openly, taking no pains to avoid being seen. But, as it happened, there was nobody about, and he reached Flackton's House and made his way to Dormitory No. 2 without having encountered a solitary master or boy.

Placing the provisions in his locker, he descended to the Fourth Form Common-room in search of Lindsay and Jukes. Both were there, and neither was looking very happy. It isn't easy to look happy when you are jolly hungry and have no prospect of getting anything to eat for several hours!

"Hallo!" greeted Jukes, as Tony appeared. "Where have you been?"

"Into the town!" was the reply.

"What!" exclaimed Jukes, aghast. "Don't you know Aldhurst is out of bounds?"

"Can't help that! I'm not going to starve so long as I've any money left to buy grub with. I've just lunched—or rather, dined—at Jaffard's."

"Great Scott! You're a precious cool hand, no mistake! Why, if the Head found out you'd done that, you'd get into a frightful row! It was an awfully risky thing to do!"

"Blow the risk! Flackton should give us decent food, and then I shouldn't need to break bounds. By the way, did you two chaps eat your dinner after I was turned out of Hall?"

"No," answered Lindsay ruefully. "We resisted the temptation, although we were so beastly hungry that it was difficult not to swallow some of the muck."

"Did any of the other chaps who 'downed knives' pick 'em up again?"

"Yes. Dawson, Handley, and young Brandreth thought better of it, and cleared their plates."

"So only you two stood out, eh?"

Lindsay nodded.

"What did Flackton say to you about it?"

"Not a word. But when pudding was served out Jukes and I were passed over."

"Well, never mind if you were, old chap! You shall both get your teeth into something better than Flackton's stodgy duff! Come up to the dormitory and have a snack! I brought a few things back from Jaffard's in case you might be peckish."

The faces of Lindsay and Jukes lit up with joy. They tried to express their thanks, but words failed them. They could only look their thanks and follow Tony up to the dormitory three stairs at a time.

Arrived there, Tony made for his locker, and lifted its hinged top. Then a sharp cry escaped him and he looked at his chums in blank dismay.

"What's the matter, old chap?" asked Lindsay.

"It's gone!" gasped Tony. "The grub has been stolen! It was in one of Jaffard's cardboard boxes, and I brought it up here. Some dirty skunk evidently saw me coming upstairs with the box under my arm. Guessing there was grub in it, he must have waited till I went downstairs, and then come in and sneaked the box out of my locker!"

A groan of disappointment escaped Lindsay and Jukes.

"Who could have taken it?" the latter exclaimed. "Not Fatty Boyle, surely?"

"No," said Lindsay. "Boyle's a greedy beggar, but he wouldn't do a mean thing like that. Wonder if it was Holker or Fenton?"

"We'll soon find out!" exclaimed Tony. "Come on! There's not a moment to lose if we are to save that grub!"

He dashed from the dormitory, and, followed by his ravenous chums, descended to the floor below.

In a few moments they were in the passage where the study jointly occupied by Holker and Fenton was situated.

Without ceremony Tony turned the handle of the study door, and entered like a whirlwind.

One glance was sufficient to show him that he had come to the right place!

For, on the study table lay the cardboard box, and there, in the very act of cutting the string which encircled it, stood Holker. Watching him with expectant eyes and watering mouth was Fenton.

"You dirty thieves!" cried Tony. And before Holker or his crony could elude him the young giant had seized them by the scruff of the neck, one in each hand. The next moment he was banging their heads together.

Not until their skulls had collided half a dozen times did Tony throw the two

louts from him with a gesture of disgust.

Half-dazed by the treatment meted out to them, the pair stood blinking at each other and rubbing their ill-used craniums.

Just one look of contempt Tony shot at them, then, picking up his stolen property, he left the study, and with his two friends returned to Dormitory No. 2.

A Trial Game for Tony.

FOR the next half-hour or so Lindsay and Jukes enjoyed themselves immensely; while Tony derived almost as much enjoyment from watching them eat.

When at length their hunger was appeased, not much remained in the package which Tony had brought from Aldhurst.

The three were just about to leave the dormitory and go downstairs when the door suddenly opened, and Wade thrust in his head.

"Oh, here you are, Smith!" exclaimed the Sixth-Former. "I've been hunting for you all over the place. You play cricket, don't you, Smith?"

Tony replied that he did.

"Well, then," said Wade, "get into flannels directly afternoon school's over, and come out to the ground. There's going to be a scratch game between a side picked by Collins and one picked by me. The sides include chaps of the Sixth, Fifth, and Fourth, and, though you're a dark horse, I've chosen you as one of my lot. You're willing to play, I s'pose?"

"Oh, rather!" answered Tony. "I'll be jolly glad of a game."

"Right you are, then! I'll expect to see you out yonder as soon after half-past four as you can manage it."

And Wade vanished.

"By Jove, you're in luck, old fellow!" remarked Lindsay. "Wade must think you've the makings of a decent player in you or he wouldn't have picked you. He and Collins get up these scratch games occasionally when they want to fill a vacant place in the first eleven. But I've never known 'em give a Fourth-Former a trial before."

"And not very many Fifth-Formers get a chance, either," put in Jukes. "Seabrook is the only Fifth man in the eleven. All the others belong to the Sixth."

"I expect," Jukes went on, "that Wade is feeling pretty sick about the way Coppinger's slaughtered Flackton's yesterday. Looks as though he and Collins are anxious to find fresh talent. I do hope you'll come off all right and get your House cap, old fellow! If you do, it'll give the Fourth no end of a lift!"

"Have you played much?" asked Jukes.

Tony shook his head, and smiled whimsically.

"I didn't mention it to Wade," he said, "because if I had he might have changed his mind about having me on his side. But the fact is, you chaps, I haven't had a game all this season!"

"What!" exclaimed Jukes, aghast.

"Not one solitary, single, blessed game!" confessed Tony. "You see, the school I went to in London was a day-school, and I hadn't a chance of playing. But in Australia I used to play regularly—scarcely missed a day. Of course, we were only a kids' team; but it was good practice, all the same.

"We had a first-rate man to coach us, too—old Donald McAllister, who years ago, long before we were born, was one of the best all-round cricketers in New South Wales. McAllister never came to England with an Australian team; but he played in several of the Tests down there, and did jolly well in 'em, too."

"We haven't got a cricket coach here," said Lindsay. "We haven't even a proper groundman. The gardener does a bit to the pitches when he thinks he will—which isn't often."

"Oh, it's a rotten old school altogether!" declared Jukes almost savagely. "When I first came to St. Walstan's I was as keen as anything on games. But there was no chance for a kid to learn to play anything decently, so I chucked tryin'."

"Same here!" said Lindsay. "There's no encouragement to go in seriously for cricket, footer, or athletics of any sort. The Head takes no interest whatever in sport, while most of the masters absolutely hate it. They pretend it interferes with school work."

"Yes," chimed in Jukes; "one of old Flackton's favourite gibes is that fellows who do well at games never do well at anything else. Thick-headed dunces, he calls 'em!"

"What rot!" exclaimed Tony scornfully. "A chap who talks like that isn't fit to be a master!"

Further discussion of the subject was cut short by the ringing of the bell for afternoon school. So the three chums went downstairs, and a few minutes later entered their class-room, to imbibe what knowledge they could from Mr. Podmore, the fat little classical master, who took the opening lesson.

It was a close, oppressive afternoon, and masters and boys alike were heartily glad when, at half-past four, school was dismissed.

Tony Smith lost no time in changing into flannels and making his way to the cricket-ground. Within a few minutes of his arrival there all the boys chosen to play in the scratch game had put in an appearance, and were more or less eager for the coming fray.

Collins and Wade were the last to stroll into the pavilion. They at once tossed up, and Collins winning, of course elected to take first innings.

Not one of the seven House eleven members whom Wade had so severely "told off" on the previous night was playing.

In the "pick-up" for sides, Collins had chosen Denyer, while Wade had taken Seabrook. The rest of the two teams were, for the most part, Fifth Form fellows who had at one time or another shown a glimpse of form in second-eleven and practice games. Truth to tell, they were not a brilliant lot; but, unfortunately, there was no material of better class available.

Tony was the only Fourth-Former who was being given a trial. It was his size and strength which had gained him this honour. So far as cricket was concerned, he was quite a "dark horse," who, for all Wade knew to the contrary, might be a complete duffer at the game. But, somewhat to Collins' amusement, Wade had nominated Tony to play for his side, although had the match been one of importance he would hardly have risked making such a choice. In a scratch game like this, however, Wade felt himself at liberty to try experiments.

And, oh, what a triumph for Wade this particular experiment proved!

For in a manner truly sensational did Tony Smith justify his selection. Not only did he give those who witnessed his debut the surprise of their lives, but he really surprised himself.

It all began when Collins and Denyer, the two first men in, had knocked up sixty runs between them, and looked as if they were "set" for as many more. Wade had tried half a dozen bowlers—himself included—without being able to break up the partnership.

Beckoning Tony in from long-field, Wade tossed the ball to him without a word.

Tony's first delivery fairly puzzled Collins. The ball wasn't a fast one—in fact, it was, if anything, under medium pace. But Collins had no idea what to do with it. The ball pitched well to the off, and Collins stepped out and swung his bat backward as though he contemplated a drive. Then he hesitated—and was lost! For that guileless-looking ball broke right across, and upset Collins' middle stump.

The next man in survived a couple of deliveries. He touched neither, however, and his wicket only escaped by a hair's breadth. Both those balls had, like the one which had bowled Collins, broke in from the off. The next ball, however—a very slow and very tempting ball—pitched to the leg side. The batsman smote at it vigorously, missed, and, to his blank amazement, found that he had been clean bowled. Tony, it seemed, could vary both pace and break.

The two remaining deliveries of his opening over were carefully blocked by the newcomer. Then Denyer, having scored a four, a two, and a single off the bowler at the other end, found himself confronting Tony.

And as with Collins, so it was with Denyer. Tony's first ball beat him absolutely. It was a much faster ball than any he had hitherto sent down, and it came dead straight, without any break on it whatever. Denyer made a feeble, fumbling sort of stroke; but the ball whizzed past, and sent one of the bails flying a dozen yards.

In mercy to Collins' side we refrain from describing in detail the remainder of that innings.

When Tony was put on to bowl the score had been sixty for none. Yet the whole side was out for seventy-nine, and of the ten wickets Tony had captured eight at a cost of five runs only!

Wade was not a demonstrative fellow, and all he said was: "Well done, Smith!" But inwardly Wade was bubbling with delight. For his experiment had succeeded. A fine bowler had been unearthed—a bowler who would not only be a tower of strength to Flackton's House, but who would be a valuable accession to the school eleven.

Printed and published every Thursday by the Proprietors, The Amalgamated Press, Limited, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C. 4. Advertisement offices: The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Subscription rates: Inland, 13s. per annum; 6s. 6d. for six months. Abroad, 11s. per annum; 5s. 6d. for six months. Sole agents for South Africa: The Central News Agency, Ltd. Sole agents for Australia and New Zealand: Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Ltd.; and for Canada, The Imperial News Co., Ltd. Saturday, October 8th, 1921.

Wade's only regret was that the cricket season was so near its close. However, although it was too late now for Flackton's to evade the "wooden spoon," the house might even yet finish the season by taking a scalp or two.

But there was to be more excitement before that scratch game was finished!

Originally, Wade had intended Tony to bat eighth wicket down. Before leaving the pavilion to open his innings, however, Wade altered the order of names, and Tony learned that he was to go in at the fall of the second wicket.

He hadn't long to wait. Ere three overs had been bowled, two wickets were lost with only eight runs scored. So Tony joined Wade, and, having taken centre, straightway got to business.

The very first ball sent down to him he drove all along the grass to the boundary; the second he lifted square to leg clean out of the ground.

As that finished the over, Wade now had his turn. He, too, got a couple of fours off successive balls, but was then missed in the slips. This narrow escape somewhat cooled his impetuosity. He played the rest of the over with extreme caution, and without scoring again.

But there was really no need for Wade to bother himself about scoring, for Tony was evidently prepared to do all the hitting that was necessary.

Never before had runs been scored at such a rate at St. Walstan's! It wasn't crude "slogging," either. Tony timed the ball perfectly, and showed himself master of quite a variety of strokes, hitting in most attractive style all round the wicket.

The seventy-nine scored by Collins' side was quickly passed, as was the hundred. Time after time the bowling was changed, but all to no purpose. Neither Wade nor Tony could be got out, and when at length stumps had to be drawn the score was 146 for two wickets. Of that total Wade, the two dismissed men, and "Extras" were responsible for 39; the balance of 107 stood to Tony's credit!

During the first part of the game there had been only a mere handful of spectators present on the ground. What they lacked in numbers, however, these had made up for in enthusiasm.

Led by Lindsay and Jukes, they had cheered Tony Smith to the echo as he captured wicket after wicket of Collins' side. But this boisterous appreciation of his bowling was as nothing compared to what happened when he commenced to lay about him with the bat. Then, indeed, had the onlookers yelled with delight and excitement.

So much so that the row they kicked up had attracted many others to the scene, to find out what was the matter.

By the time play finished a large crowd had assembled.

The gathering comprised boys of all ages, belonging to the various St. Walstan's "Houses."

And among them was Trenton—Trenton the mighty. Trenton, the captain of Snell's House, and captain of the School Eleven.

Now Wade, as has been said, was the only representative of Flackton's House who had a place in the School Eleven. Wade, therefore, it was whom Trenton drew on one side after the conclusion of the sensational scratch game.

"I say, Wade," began the mighty one, with eager enthusiasm, "that chap Smith's a real corker, isn't he?"

"Yes," said Wade, who never "enthused" about anything or anybody, "he's a pretty decent bat."

"Pretty decent!" exclaimed Trenton. "Good lord, man, he's simply magnificent! Never saw such cutting and driving in my life—outside County and 'Varsity cricket, of course! You've found a treasure, Wade! Flackton's House is in luck at last! Smith's batting alone ought to make you cock House next season. I suppose he doesn't happen to bowl as well?"

"Oh, yes, he's quite a decent bowler, too," replied Wade quietly. "Anyway, he got eight of Collins' let out for five—all clean bowled!"

Trenton's eyes opened to their widest extent.

"Great Jupiter!" he gasped. "That decides it, then!"

"Decides what, Trenton?"

"Why, decides me to do what no previous captain of the School Eleven has ever done!"

"And what's that?"

"I'm going to give a Fourth-Former his cap! Smith's going to play for the school against Daneswood on Saturday week! That's our only remaining fixture, as you know. Daneswood licked us badly a month ago; but, if young Smith only gives us of his best, we ought to get our revenge in the return match!"

"He's going to help his own House whack your House before then!" returned Wade, a trifle grimly. "Don't forget Flackton's are playing Snell's next Wednesday."

"Oh, by Jove, yes; so you are!" laughed Trenton. "Well, that match will be a good trial for Smith, and——" He broke off, considered for a moment, then added: "On second thoughts, I won't give him his school cap just yet. I'll wait and see how he shapes against us on Wednesday."

(In a later instalment the reader will see what was to be the outcome of the "discovery" of Tony Smith. Also, there are developments in store regarding Mr. Flackton. Don't miss future copies.)

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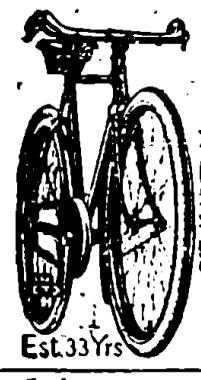

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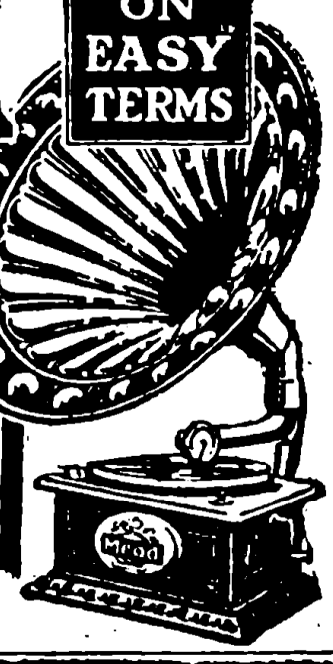

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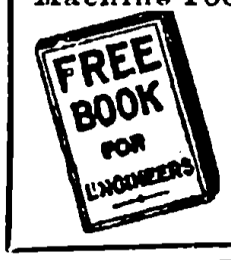

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