

Mr. Clayton

Sexton Blake and Leon Kestrel!

THE UNION JACK 2^D

THE STRANGE CASE OF THE RUNAWAY SURGEON

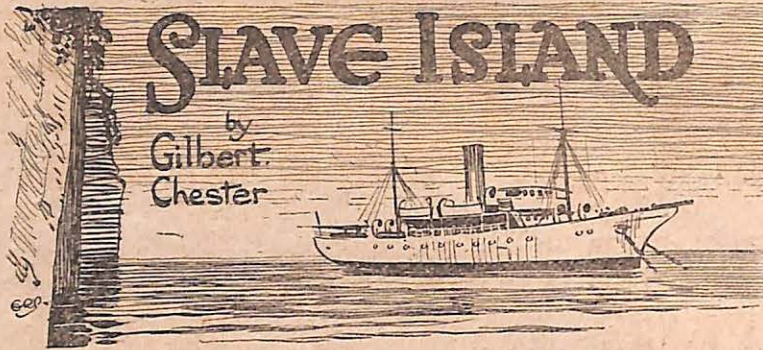


COMPLETE in this Issue, and Appealing to READERS OF ALL AGES.

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EVERY THURSDAY.

July 19th, 1924.



HOW IT BEGAN.

NIXON SCURR is a rich American, a millionaire, and a fugitive from justice. He has bought the secret of an unknown island in the Pacific from a sailor, and has set up a colony there. He has brought there, mainly by force, numbers of people whose business is to minister to his comfort.

HARRY FORREST, the hero of the story, is lured to Slave Island on the promise of a big salary to attend to the electrical installation, which has been wilfully tampered with by his predecessor, now dead.

JOAN CARTWRIGHT, a cinema actress, has also been lured to the island by Scurr with the object of marriage. She resists the unscrupulous millionaire's advances, and Forrest is the means of rescuing her from his harsh treatment, for which he incurs the enmity of Scurr.

Bought—at a Price!



HIS blood frozen with horror, Forrest compelled his half-paralysed body to stiffen courageously, and, his head held high, marched unflinchingly towards the threshold.

Whatever happened, he must spare Joan as much of this painful scene as he could.

But just as the party reached the door the girl sprang up.

"Stop!" she screamed, her eyes almost starting from her head with horror.

"To blazes!" Scurr strode forward, a hand outstretched to bar her way.

Before the menace of his brutal gesture she halted, pale, but resolute.

"You sha'n't! You sha'n't!" she exclaimed, stamping her small foot imperiously, all fear for herself vanished in sight of Forrest's peril.

"Rot! Wu's going to deal with him—his Wu's meat!" Scurr jeered. "You hold your screeching tongue, will you?"

And as she strained forward to thrust past the millionaire, the latter added:

"An army corps couldn't save him from that Chink's revenge. So you needn't bother to try, my dear. All the gold in the world wouldn't tempt Wu—and I've given Forrest to him."

Joan's slender form tensioned. For a long moment she stood erect, her white hands clenched, her eyes closed. Then, with a long, convulsive shudder, she freed Scurr once more.

Forrest does not see Joan Cartwright for some days, for she has been avoiding him, Nixon Scurr having threatened to shoot him if seen speaking to her. They meet, however, one evening, and are overheard by Wu, a Chinese torturer employed by the tyrant of Slave Island.

Forrest attacks him, and leaves him for dead when he hears a commotion at Scurr's bungalow. The tyrant is being attacked by two of his hirelings who have mutinied, one of whom, **BILL DINGLEY**, Forrest hides in his own hut.

A search by Scurr's men fail to disclose him, but Forrest is afterwards taken before the millionaire, who accuses him of trying to murder him, and demands to know where Dingley is.

Forrest refuses to tell. Then Wu is called in. He is not dead, as Forrest thought, and he reveals that the Britisher and Miss Cartwright have been speaking together.

Scurr then hands Forrest over to the Chinaman to torture as he will.

"Then I'll buy him—at a greater price!" she announced, in a still, death-like voice; a voice from which all feeling, all passion, had vanished. "A price you won't refuse, Nixon Scurr. Sooner than this—this thing should be, I'll marry you! To-morrow's your birthday. If you wish, it can be then."

"You—you mean that?" Scurr exclaimed, gripping her slim arm in a fever of excitement, while his brutish, bloodshot eyes gleamed greedily upon her lovely features. "You're not fooling me?"

She drew herself up coldly.

"On condition that you release Mr. Forrest, and promise faithfully to spare his life—to let him go unmolested—untortured—I swear to do as I promised. To marry you, since needs must, and there is no other way."

It was crude melodrama; but, as is often the way in a crisis, stagefolk react naturally to the subconscious, all-impelling call of their art, through which an urge to the dramatic is born, as second nature, in their oft-schooled minds.

Long training, long usage, had dealt with Joan as with the others, and though her words were sensational enough, she hardly realised it.

But Forrest sensed the magnificent gesture with which she sought to save him, and, what was more important, glimpsed the tragedy that lay behind the mock splendour of her spectacular sacrifice.

"And I refuse to be bought away at such a price!" he literally shouted, straining in his captors' hold. "I forbid it—reject it! I—"

"You're not asked!" Scurr broke in,

with a sneer. "Hold your derved row, will you?"

He nodded perceptively to his men.

"Let him go! She's bought him!"

The gunmen released their hold upon Forrest, and as he felt their grip relax he sprang forward towards the girl.

"Joan, Joan," he implored, "you can't—you mustn't—"

"No! A million times no!"

With a howl of fury, the Chink leapt in, whipping out an ugly, curved knife as he came, and, seeing himself about to be balked of his vengeance, slashed madly at the engineer.

But, even as he sprang, a thunderous roar burst upon the room and, amidst a drifting haze of acrid fumes, the Chink crashed to the floor in a heap, his bony arms outstretched, while Scurr stood over him, the smoke still curling up from the hot barrel of his automatic.

"I—get—him—yet."

With a dying effort, the Chinaman sought to drag himself along the floor, gripping his knife in his failing hand, as his cruel, revengeful spirit gave him power to force himself forward, despite his shattered spine.

But the millionaire, his bestial features blazing with passion, emptied his magazine into the skeleton body of the frenzied Celestial. And, beneath the deadly hail of lead, Wu, the torturer, crumpled up, to roll over, a shattered corpse, the blood streaming from his foam-flecked lips.

With a laugh, Scurr pocketed his empty weapon.

"Take this carrion away," he ordered, kicking the poor clay that had once been Wu, the instrument of how many cruelties Heaven alone knew. "I know how to deal with scum who dare to disobey my orders!"

As the gunmen dragged the dead Chink from the room, he turned to Forrest.

"You're free to go back to your hut, you great stiff!" he said, with utter indifference to what had just taken place. "But let this be a warning to you, and see you get those dynamos functioning in time for to-morrow night."

"As for Dingley—well, I guess he don't matter. It's only a matter of time before hunger drives him out of his hiding-place. And, since we'll watch you like a cat watches a mouse, you'll be able to do nothing for him, for the instant you go to him you'll be caught. Get me?"

Forrest nodded.

"Yes, I get you, Nixon Scurr," he answered. "But you can watch. You'll see nothing, for there's nothing to see."

Then, without a word, he left the room, with Joan's tired, hopeless eyes following him in mute appeal.

Of what each had inwardly dreamed, and yet to which each had refrained from giving utterance, this seemed the end.

Yet, as Forrest crossed the threshold, and the curtains fell behind him, cutting Joan off from view, the message of her eyes came to him as in a vision.

At last he knew—knew what till now he had scarcely before dared even to hope.

Joan Cartwright loved him!

Loved him, though she had given herself for his sake to another—to that bloodstained ogre in whose gold-gorged grip writhed this hapless company of slaves, dwellers in an earthly paradise, yet lodged upon the brink of a volcano.

(Continued on Page 26.)

THE STRANGE CASE OF THE RUNAWAY SURGEON

" . . . it was not because of an absence of clues—and they appeared, on the face of them, to be clues of the utmost importance. Each one seemed to have a vital bearing on the case. Yet they were all so conflicting that they combined merely to create complete bewilderment."

A cleverly constructed story, this. The creator of Leon Kestrel has surely never given us anything better. A really fine yarn, whose true solution will keep you guessing, even as it kept Sexton Blake.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

In which Blake is Interested in a Surgical Experiment.



THE wonderful operation was over. The almost oppressive silence which had pervaded the operating theatre of the great hospital of St. David's was broken by a deep sigh of relief from the sister as the famous surgeon straightened up from the motionless patient upon the slab and handed her the instrument.

The youthful face of the young house surgeon was grey and almost haggard with the nervous tension of watching while the delicate fingers of the specialist had moved swiftly and with an uncanny accuracy in the performance of what, even for St.

David's, was a miracle of surgery.

The minutest error of judgment, the deviation of a hair's breadth, and the brain would have been touched—the patient dead.

The surgeon glanced at the anaesthetist, who stood with his fingers lightly clasped over the pulse of the inanimate man. The doctor indicated by a slight nod that all was well. With infinite caution the patient was lifted from the slab to the chair and wheeled away from an ordeal in which his life had hung by a thread of gossamer. He had escaped the dire peril of the operation. It remained yet to be seen whether it would prove successful—whether this miracle of physical skill would bring about the moral salvation of the man, as the famous specialist hoped and believed that it might.

If this operation were successful in its fullest sense, then a new and wonderful era had been opened in the treatment of human frailty; another factor would be brought to bear upon the problem of the criminal and the prevention of crime.

The sense of wonder in Sexton Blake, who, with Tinker and a privileged few, had witnessed the operation, had been dulled by many amazements. Yet he had marvelled at the skill of the famous surgeon. The man's iron nerve and superb accuracy had filled him with a feeling almost of awe.

He had known Jimmy Culver first as a high-spirited young "medical" at the Edinburgh University, though even then Blake had singled out this young Scotsman as a man with a brilliant future.

The eminent detective had watched with satisfaction Culver's rapid ascent of the surgical ladder. He had heard of the wonderful operations which established Culver as a specialist in London and brought him a reputation, though



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still a comparatively young man, second to none in Harley Street.

But he had never seen Jimmy Culver at work till now. He realised now why James Ross Culver, the English surgeon, was mentioned with infinite respect not only in the British Isles, but throughout Europe and America.

The specialist turned from the basin where he had washed his hands and smiled as the dark-eyed sister handed him a towel. The detective saw a glance pass between doctor and nurse, in which there seemed something of unusual sympathy and understanding. Her hand rested for a moment upon his, and she muttered something in a low tone, which the detective could not hear.

The specialist pressed her hand slightly, and then, removing his overall, he smiled across at Blake, motioning the detective and Tinker to follow him as he passed out of the theatre.

The famous surgeon moved with the light, athletic step of a man who, fifteen years before, had been one of the flying threes the like of whom Scotland had never since put upon the Rugby field. Culver's genius had always seemed to lie in a perfect harmony between brain and hands. In those days he could catch and hold the ball from a bad pass with the same uncanny skill that he now held a scalpel.

Sexton Blake and Tinker followed him into the private chamber reserved for him at the hospital, and he waited, closing the door behind him.

When he turned round a grunt of amazement escaped the detective, for the famous specialist had become, as if by some strange magic, a changed man. His face was haggard and drawn, and his lips were twitching. He bent to draw forward a chair for Blake, and the detective noticed that his hand shot out in a half involuntary way, like a man suffering from a mild form of St. Vitus' dance.

"Jimmy," said Blake, with quick concern, "what is the matter?"

"It's nothing, Blake—nothing!" The famous specialist dropped into the chair himself, and seemed to be fighting for the control of his muscles. "It is just the—just the reaction."

It seemed incredible to Tinker that this could be the same cool, iron-nerved man whom he had watched in the theatre below. The famous surgeon's every movement there had been characterised by perfect calm and self-control.

The man who quivered now in the chair before them was a nervous wreck.

It seemed to Blake that Jimmy Culver's steel-wire nerves had snapped. Overwork and long-continued nervous tension had taken their toll of him at last. The detective moved quickly and took up a decanter of brandy upon the sideboard. But Culver shook his head quickly, his lips compressed.

"No good," he muttered. "Useless. It has no effect, Blake. There is something else. In that small drawer, below that ivory elephant. Yes, in there."

Blake opened the small drawer, and then, as he took something from it, a grunt of surprise and dismay broke from him. In his fingers, as he turned to the specialist, Tinker saw a small hypodermic syringe.

Blake frowned as he stepped over.

"What's this, in the name of reason, Culver?" he demanded. "You don't use this?"

"Yes, occasionally." Culver stretched out his hand and took it with trembling fingers. Blake watched him with dismay as the famous doctor bared his forearm and with a careful deliberation applied

the point under the skin. "A doctor is not a Superman, Blake," he muttered, "nor an archangel."

For some minutes following the injection the famous surgeon sat perfectly still in the chair, the syringe gripped in his white, sensitive hand, his eyes fixed upon vacancy. It was as if he were waiting for the insidious drug to take effect.

Gradually the twitching of his limbs ceased and he grew more placid and composed. The shadow of a smile appeared at the corners of his compressed lips, though there was a look almost of melancholy in his eyes.

He rose again to his feet and looked down at the small syringe in his hand, with an expression of fierce contempt. Suddenly he raised his hand and let the little frail instrument fall, smashing it upon the stone hearth of the fireplace.

"Finish!" he muttered in a low tone. "That is the last time." He turned to the detective and Tinker with a wry smile. "You would not have suspected when you saw me working, Blake, that I am a nervous wreck?"

"Great heavens, no, Culver!" Blake muttered quickly. "Don't tell me, Jim, that you—you have fallen for that habit!"

"Heaven forbid, Blake. But I have been working unwisely lately. I have overdone it. I just did not want to relax the effort, not till now. I have needed something to keep me going. I have not taken drugs, Blake," he added, with a grim smile, "except by medical prescription."

"Your own?" Blake snapped.

"Yes."

"It is madness, Jimmy! You know it is madness!"

Blake could see now that, all unsuspected by his patients, and even by his colleagues, the famous surgeon was himself on the verge of a severe breakdown. It was the old, old story of "Physician, heal thyself!"

"I know it is foolish," the surgeon said quietly, "but I am finished now, Blake. I'm through. You have seen the operation, you have witnessed the experiment. That man I operated on was as fine a subject as I shall ever get. You know that."

"He is an incorrigible thief!" Blake said.

"A born thief!" said the famous surgeon thoughtfully. "You yourself told me his history. Comes of honest parents, fairly well educated. One cannot trace his fall to any great temptation or misfortune, to any combination of unkind circumstances. He is a thief by reason of the shape of his skull. That is my firm opinion. There are certain pressures upon the brain which cause imbecility, lunacy, paralysis, or death. They are of the severe order. There are others, less severe, which engender a mania. When that pressure is removed and the damaged tissues are repaired, the mania ceases and the man becomes normal. That is my theory."

The detective nodded, knowing that the famous specialist's theory was no idle one. It was based upon years of careful observation and research.

"And this is the great experiment, eh, Culver?" Blake said.

"Yes; I stand or fall by it. All that remains to me now is to contain my soul in patience. I have got to wait. The man will be out of the hospital with a portion of silver plate in his skull quite fit and well in a week or two. It is his career after this that we have to watch;

his subsequent movements towards reform—or the reverse. In the meantime," the surgeon added, with a sigh of relief, "I rest."

"You need it, Heaven knows!" Blake muttered, surveying the man's haggard cheeks with some anxiety.

"I do, old man. You know," he added quickly, "that I am to be married to-morrow?"

"Great Scott! To-morrow?"

"Yes; at eleven o'clock, quietly, at the Oratory. It all seems like part of a dream to me, Blake!" He dropped back into the chair and covered his face for a moment with his hands. "It all seems misty and improbable. I have to keep repeating it over and over again before I can convince myself."

Blake knew of Culver's engagement to Sybil Longworth, whose father, Sir Ernest Longworth, had been a generous patron of the hospital. He knew they were soon to be married, though he was not aware it was to be so soon.

There was little now in the manner of Ross Culver to suggest the happy bridegroom of to-morrow. His manner did not exactly suggest dejection at the prospect, but it seemed rather as if he shrank from the ordeal of the ceremony.

"Does Miss Longworth know," Blake asked, eyeing him thoughtfully, "that you—you are so much in need of a rest?"

"She knows I am pretty tired," the surgeon muttered evasively.

"She does not know how far you've let yourself go, eh, Jimmy?" Blake persisted.

"Good lor', no, Blake! I keep cheery for her sake, and she never guesses how suicidal I feel at times. But Sir Ernest gets me down, I'm afraid. He would jag my nerves, I think, even when I was perfectly fit. There are occasions I know when Sir Ernest thinks I'm a broody sort of bear. I've caught him inspecting me suspiciously once or twice when I've dropped into the 'blues,' and he has turned away, growling and champing, as if he half wondered whether he ought to save Sybil from a horrid fate by breaking the engagement. But don't let's dwell on it, Blake."

He forced a laugh and sprang up from the chair.

"Let's get along. I shall feel cheerier away from the stench of iodoform. I've had a fear lately that one day I shall take a most hideous dislike to this hospital; I don't want to do that. Tell me," he added quickly, as if anxious to divert his thoughts into some other channel—"tell me about this scoundrel Kestrel!"

They passed out of the hospital gate, hailing a cab which crawled, fare-stalking, along the other kerb.

"He would be an excellent subject for your experiments, Culver," Sexton Blake said presently.

"He is a clever criminal, eh?" Culver said eagerly.

"A criminal genius," Blake said, with quiet emphasis. "I don't know," he added, with a smile, "whether one could ascribe his genius to any pressure of the skull, though."

"If that were so, Blake," the great surgeon said, with the hint of a smile, "we might be able to produce a genius by tapping him on the head with a truncheon. Skull-pressure will not produce a genius, Blake, but it might easily determine the use a man makes of genius. Pressure may cause a mental kink, or a moral warp. I'd like to have this fellow under observation."

"You'll find it very difficult to keep him there, Culver," Blake said with a laugh. "But he would be a fascinating subject. By the way, you still have your collection of Dutch painters, I suppose?"

the detective added, as the taxi slowed up outside the chambers in Baker Street. "Yes; and I'm still collecting. Is this your place?" He stretched out his hand as Blake rose. "Good-bye!"

"No. Come in a moment, Jimmy. I've something for your collection—a little wedding-present. Have you a Rembrandt?" Blake asked, as they entered.

"A Rembrandt?" Dr. Culver stared at Blake, and then smiled. "Great Scott, no, man!"

"Then you shall have one," Blake said quietly. "A gem."

The specialist was an ardent collector, and his pale face grew animated.

"A Rembrandt!" he muttered. "But—but you are not serious."

"I am. I have it all packed up and ready for you, Jimmy. I was going to bring it round some time this week. I found it in a Dutch farm near the German frontier during the War. It is a fine specimen, really. But you shall judge for yourself."

He led the way into the consulting-room where Pedro, the big bloodhound, lay in a deep sleep upon the rug. He did not leap up to greet his master, as was his wont, and Blake shot a quick glance at him as he stepped towards the sideboard upon which a flat, carefully-packed parcel lay.

"This is the picture, Jimmy," Blake muttered. "You'll find—Hallo!"

The sudden change in his master's voice brought Tinker round quickly.

"What's the matter, guv'nor?"

Blake did not reply. He was tearing at the knot of the string about the parcel, snatching a knife from his pocket after a moment and cutting it quickly. The inside packing was torn aside to reveal the edge of a handsome frame, richly carved. Dr. Culver moved forward eagerly, and then a grunt of amazement broke from him. The frame was there, but no picture!



"The Princess Nijowski, sir!" It was a comparatively young woman who came in, and the famous surgeon was amazed at her beauty. There was something almost regal in her carriage as she advanced, yet with an air of deference which was a subtle flattery. (Chapter 2.)

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
"To Account Rendered."



NO sound had come from Blake, but his thin cheeks had gone pale and his lips were tightly compressed.

"Where is the picture, guv'nor?" Tinker gasped.

"Gone!" Blake muttered grimly. "Stolen!"

"What?" cried the doctor, in a voice of mingled amazement and dismay.

Blake held up the empty frame with a bitter smile.

"Stolen, Culver!" he muttered. "I am sorry. It was a gem," he added bitterly. "As fine a specimen of Rembrandt's work as—"

"Guv'nor! The Chinaman!" Tinker cried suddenly. "Where is the Chinaman?"

Blake turned and stared over at the sideboard. A perfect piece of work in ivory, unearthed from some historic ruins under the wall of Peking, had gone from the place it had occupied for years in Blake's consulting-room. It was the only thing of its kind in the world—priceless and irreplaceable.

"Someone has been here, guv'nor!" Tinker gasped, and the specialist stared at the detective, who stood motionless, his face pale with disappointment and chagrin.

Blake shot a sweeping glance about

the room, and then peered over at the mat where the bloodhound still lay, sleeping.

"Pedro!" he snapped quickly.

The dog did not move, and Blake sprang towards him, dropping upon one knee, shaking him by the collar. He saw at once that the bloodhound's was not a normal sleep; the dog lay inert and senseless—drugged!

"Pedro! Pedro!" Tinker had bent anxiously over the hound and tried to haul it up on to its feet. "What's the matter, old boy? Wake up—wake—"

He paused with a grunt and plucked something from the smooth skin of the dog. It was a small dart such as was ejected from a blowpipe by certain tribes in Central America and Borneo. The lad rose with a cry of utter dismay.

"Guv'nor, he's poisoned! Look here!"

Blake sprang over and seized the small dart, eyeing it grimly through his glass. The point had been poisoned, but not with a poison virulent enough to cause death—only deep insensibility.

He noticed now for the first time that the window was open slightly at the bottom. There was a small piece of mud on the ledge—a muddy footmark clearly visible upon the carpet under the window.

In the face of the famous specialist there was an expression of bewilderment and unbelief.

"What has happened, Blake?" he cried quickly. "I don't understand."

"Burglars!" Blake replied grimly. "Discriminating burglars, Culver."

"But the dog—"

"Drugged by a poisoned dart ejected from a blowpipe. Some housebreakers throw poisoned meat to troublesome

animals, Culver, others are more ingenious."

He spoke calmly, but it was not difficult to see the intense disappointment and chagrin which underlay his calm. He strode once again to the table and raised the paper and packing in which the painting by Rembrandt had been wrapped.

A piece of white paper fluttered to the carpet, and Tinker pounced upon it. He frowned as he peered at it, and then the colour went from his cheeks, a queer light sprang into his eyes as he handed it to Blake.

The paper was an ordinary printed business invoice. Upon it was written:

"To account rendered—500,000 francs." Underneath, with the cool embellishment of a twopenny stamp, were the words: "Received on account—Item No. 1, 50,000 francs. Item No. 2, 25,000 francs."

Below the stamp was written:

"For the War Profits Liquidation Syndicate." Across the stamp itself, with a superb audacity, was scrawled the signature, "Jose Madrano-Munoz."

Blake's teeth were clenched and there was a dangerous light in his grey eyes.

This, then, was the work of the Spanish steeplejack Madrano, acting under the instructions of Leon Kestrel!

After the case of the Great Syndicate Scoop, when Blake had, at the eleventh hour, checkmated the Mummer in a superb piece of criminal bluffing and prevented him from netting the French banker's reward of half a million francs, Kestrel's cool rendering to Blake of a bill for that amount seemed like a last typical gesture of warning and defiance.

This piece of cool thieving was evidence that the man meant to exact repayment.

Blake turned with a grim smile to the specialist.

"When burglars honour me, Culver, they are businesslike in their procedure. They even leave a receipt for what they have taken. Look at that!"

The surgeon glanced at the paper, and then looked over in astonishment.

"Great heavens! But this is incredible, Blake! Whose work is this?"

"Our friend Kestrel—the man we were talking about, Culver. He estimates that I owe him half a million francs from the last deal in which we were both interested. I have ignored his invoices, so he is distraining on my property. It is an original business method, don't you think?"

"And the scoundrel has claimed my Rembrandt?" Culver muttered.

"Yes—and allowed me a paltry fifty thousand francs for it. Reckoning the value of the franc on the exchange, I could have got more for it in Petticoat Lane. I am sorry, Jimmy. I have an 'Interior' by Ruytens which you shall have instead."

"But—but do you mean to say, Blake, that you will make no effort to recover this picture? I mean—"

"My dear Culver, my efforts against Kestrel and this infernal Syndicate never cease. We are continually at war; this is the fortune of war. But sit down, Jimmy. You look done-up."

They talked together for a little while. When the famous surgeon from St. David's Hospital took his departure Blake accompanied him to the taxi and pressed his hand warmly, congratulating him upon his marriage in the morning, wishing him every conceivable happiness.

But only a faint flicker came into the eyes of the surgeon as he returned the handshake. The prospect of marriage with the woman he loved, and a long rest from work, did not seem to lift the mantle of depression which had settled over him. When the cab paused outside his fine house in Harley Street he paid the driver listlessly and passed inside.

A liveried footman advanced as he entered.

"A lady is here, sir. I told her you could see no patients. She refuses to go away. She says the matter is urgent—of life and death, sir."

The specialist frowned and took the

card which the footman proffered. Upon it was inscribed in gilt script letters:

"The Princess Nijowski,
14, Rue St. Lazaire, Paris."

"A Russian, Gibbs," he muttered. "I believe so, sir. Her English is not good."

"I am tired, Gibbs. I will give her a few minutes only," the specialist said.

He passed through rather wearily into the perfectly appointed chamber where he received his private patients. The door opened silently, and the footman entered.

"The Princess Nijowski, sir."

It was a comparatively young woman who came in, and the famous surgeon was amazed at her beauty. Her hair was the deep colour of burnished gold, and arranged with a subtle Continental touch which was unmistakable. Her eyes were dark and liquid under lids which drooped in such a way as to impart peculiar charm to the face as a whole.

There was something almost regal in her carriage as she advanced, yet with an air of deference which was a subtle flattery. When she spoke her voice was so low and musical as to atone for her very broken English.

"Please, if you will pardon me, m'sieu—you are ze great specialeeest—I have ze honour to speak to Dr. Culver?"

"Yes, madam, I am Dr. Culver. I am sorry I can spare only a few minutes. This is not my consulting hour, and—"

"Yes—yes, it ees very good for you to see me. I am so grateful, m'sieu. I come to ask for your help for my husband, m'sieu." She looked at him entreatingly. "Oh, please, please, m'sieu, if you will come—you are so great, so skilful—"

"Is your husband ill, madame?"

"Oh, mon Dieu, but he is dying! He is in great agony, m'sieu. Ze French physician say that zere must be an operation toute de suite, m'sieu, at vunce. Oh, doctor, if you vill come I vill pay whatever fee you veeeh! Ve are reesh, m'sieu. It is no matter vat money—"

"Where is your husband, madame?" the great surgeon asked quietly.

"In our villa in Normandie—in France, m'sieu. I vill engage a special train—a special boat—an aeroplane—ze expense iss nothing—"

"I am sorry, madame," Dr. Culver said quietly. "It is impossible!"

"Oh, but no, doctor! You must not say it is impossible. Oh, please say you will come to save him!"

"But there are other doctors."

"But yes, m'sieu, I know. But not—not so great, m'sieu, so very skilful. Oh, please, why can you not come?"

She had caught him by the hand in her agitation, was peering appealingly into his face. But he shook his head.

"It is impossible, madame. I can undertake no more work for some time. I am sorry. To-morrow," he added, with the hint of a smile, "I am to be married—"

"Married?" Her wonderful eyes opened as she gazed at him. "Yes, I understand," she went on, with a touch of bitterness. "You mus' be married. It does not matter if my poor husband die in agony. You do not care, m'sieu. Is it not so?"

"Not at all!" the specialist said somewhat sharply. "There are others, madame, of equal skill, placed more favourably than I am at the moment. I will give you a short note to Dr. Richards, opposite. I think perhaps he will assist you."

She nodded, her beautiful eyes fixed upon him somewhat reproachfully as he took up a pen and scribbled a few lines upon a sheet of paper. As he wrote she wondered why a pen should shake so much in the hand of a man whose reputation had been built upon its steadiness.

As Ross Culver ushered her from the room there was that in the melting glance she gave him which might have moved him to relent at any other time. But now it was impossible.

Escorting her, himself, to the door, he descended the steps and indicated with outstretched hand the house of the medical colleague to whom he had referred her. Richards had flown from Croydon to Morocco on one occasion to save a patient; but he did not mind such breathless escapades.

A man in a soft felt had moved out across the path, raising a camera, and directing the lens rather insolently upon them. He raised his hat and smiled before he turned away, unperturbed by the withering glance which the woman shot at him.

"Who is zat man, m'sieu?" the princess asked, in a tone of acute annoyance.

"I am afraid I do not know, madame," the surgeon said, with a shrug of the shoulders. "A pressman, possibly."

Her eyes flashed for a moment.

"Your Eengleesh journalists have no manners, m'sieu." Her expression changed, and she smiled at the surgeon, the old hint of disappointment and reproach still in her dark eyes. "Merci, m'sieu. I vill see Dr. Reechars."

Ross Culver bowed, and his eyes rested for a moment upon her perfect figure as she moved away. Whoever the unfortunate Prince Nijowski might be he was a man of acute discernment in the matter of feminine beauty.

The specialist passed back into the house before she reached the residence opposite, and thus he did not see his visitor turn and glance over her shoulder quickly before she passed on down the street.

A powerful limousine moved towards her, gliding in close to the kerb as its door was opened from the inside. She entered it, dropping back into the seat, an expression of animation in her face as she looked into the dark, somewhat sallow face of the other occupant.

"It is as I feared, Fifto," she said quickly, and in perfect English. "We shall need other measures."

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THE THIRD CHAPTER.
"Seek the Woman!"



IT was Tinker who brought in the news, handing the evening paper to his master, and indicating, with a significant gesture, the headlines above a column upon the first page.

"I don't think you'll be surprised, gov'nor—not after yesterday," he muttered. "I wasn't. Read that."

The detective frowned as he scanned the headlines quickly. They ran:

"SUDDEN ILLNESS OF FAMOUS SURGEON.
WEDDING POSTPONED."

The brief paragraph underneath ran: "The Evening Mail" is informed that the wedding which was to have taken place at the Oratory this morning between the Hon. Sybil Longworth, only daughter of Sir Earnest Longworth, the well-known financier, and the eminent surgeon, Dr. J. Ross Culver, has had to be postponed owing to the illness of the bridegroom. Dr. Ross Culver was taken ill last evening, and his condition is said to give cause for some anxiety. The nature of the illness has not yet been announced.

A grunt broke from Blake as he read the paragraph and glanced over thoughtfully at Tinker.

"No," he muttered; "I am not surprised, my lad. Poor old Culver!"

"He has broken down, gov'nor, do you think?"

"Undoubtedly. He was in a bad way yesterday. It's a queer thing," he added thoughtfully, as he rose and picked up the telephone directory, "how often medical men ignore their own precepts. Hallo, miss! Give me Western 036. What's that?" he added, after a pause. "You can't ring them? Why not?"

"They have left their receiver off," the girl said tersely. "It has been off all day."

Blake grunted, and put up his own receiver.

"It looks as if they don't want telephone inquiries," he muttered. "I think perhaps I will go round to Harley Street and— He paused as the door opened and there came the sound of a slight altercation from the landing outside.

"It's no good, sir!" came the voice of Mrs. Bardell in a stage whisper. "He won't see anyone till I've pronounced 'em! If you'll just wait here—"

"But I'm Sir Earnest Longworth, my good woman! Tell Mr. Blake that—"

"I can't help it, sir," insisted the old lady obstinately, "if you're the Lord Mayor himself, excusing me. If you'll wait here I'll take in your card."

The old lady closed the door carefully behind her before she turned to Blake. Her face was flushed, but her lips were compressed rather obstinately.

"There's a gentleman to see you, sir—urgent. He don't seem to think that it is necessary for me to pronounce him to you, being Sir Earnest somebody or other. Here is his card, sir."

Blake glanced at the card and nodded.

"Tell Sir Earnest Longworth," he said quietly, "that I am busy for the moment, but will see him in five minutes."

The old lady passed out with satisfaction. Tinker smiled as his master moved over to his chair, dropping into it leisurely and picking up the evening paper. He scanned its pages quietly for five minutes; then he rang the bell, and Mrs. Bardell reappeared, ushering in a short, thick-necked, and rather red-faced man, who did not seem to have appreciated his wait upon the landing outside.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Blake!" he said, in rather a blustering way. "I trust I have not found you too feverishly busy," he added meaningly.

"I am always busy, but never feverishly so, Sir Earnest," the detective said quietly. "Will you take a chair?"

The well-known man from Throgmorton Street dropped into the chair, and Blake

could see from his manner that he was agitated. Blake picked up the paper and tapped the paragraph which Tinker had shown him a few minutes earlier.

"I am sorry to see this, Sir Earnest. It is most unfortunate for your daughter that—"

"What? What is it?"

"The announcement that Dr. Culver has been taken ill. I was endeavouring to get through to his place only a few minutes ago. I trust it is nothing serious."

"It is!" snapped the financier, with a frown. "It is devilishly serious."

"You mean he has broken down entirely?" Blake asked sympathetically.

"Certainly not!"

"What, then, is the nature of the illness, Sir Earnest?"

"He isn't ill!" roared the financier angrily. "Surely, Mr. Blake, a man in your profession does not believe everything he reads in the penny Press?"

"Not everything, Sir Earnest," Blake said quietly, and rather frigidly; "but I had no reason to question the truth of this."

"Then I'll question it for you, Mr. Blake!" growled the stockbroker. "That report is lies—all tommy-nonsense! I told the Press that myself. I gave that out for Sybil's sake. Hang it, man, I can't have the poor girl held up to public ridicule. I've got to avoid a confounded scandal somehow, haven't I?"

Blake was frowning, and looking over at the stockbroker with a queer expression in his grey eyes.

"I could answer that question more readily, Sir Earnest," he said quietly. "If I knew what you were talking about."

"Talking about!" cried the stockbroker. "Heavens, man, but surely you know?"

"I am a detective, Sir Earnest, not a thought-reader. I know nothing except what I have just seen in this paper."

"You do not know that my poor girl has been jilted—that I have been publicly insulted?"

Blake frowned, and shot a quick, meaningful glance at Tinker. The stockbroker, unable to remain seated, had got up from the chair, and was pacing the room restlessly.

"What has happened, Sir Earnest?" Blake asked.

"I have told you what has happened. My poor girl has been jilted—jilted like some common slavey! That cad Culver has bolted!"

"Bolted?"

"Yes, I tell you candidly, Mr. Blake, I have not felt particularly happy about things lately. I have not liked Culver's manner. The man has been broody and dejected, as if his engagement were something to deplore instead of something to be delighted about. I have felt at times that the fellow's manner has been absolutely churlish—a reflection upon my daughter."

"He has been far from well, Sir Earnest," Blake said quietly.

"Bah! It has not been a question of health, Mr. Blake. Culver has been as fit as you and I. I tell you I have not felt at all happy about things lately. I seemed to lose my trust in the man. Last night, I don't know why, but I rang through to see if all was well with him. It was instinct, I suppose. He had not been home. At midnight I rang him again. He was still out."

"I can't say why the circumstance worried me," he went on. "He might have been at the hospital—at an operation—I knew that. But it did worry me. This morning at nine-thirty I rang him again, to find that he had not been home all night, and that nobody in the household could explain his absence. Even then I did not tell Sybil of my fears. I waited till the last moment before I told her."

"Then I left her with her mother while I drove myself to the Oratory, quietly, to await him. I was glad I did. It saved her from the greatest ignominy and insult a poor girl can suffer at the hands of an utter cad. Ross Culver may be a great surgeon, Mr. Blake. He may be a friend of yours, but it makes no difference. If you will allow me to say so, the man is a hypocrite and a cad, and unworthy of a decent profession."

The outraged father turned and faced Blake squarely, glowering at the detective as if he held Blake responsible for the shortcomings of his friend.

Blake met the man's gaze with almost a provoking calmness.

"You are entitled to your opinion, Sir Earnest. You cannot expect me to subscribe to it."

"Perhaps not!" snapped the stockbroker. "In your case, I suppose, ordinary loyalty to Culver would—"

"I am not concerned with loyalty," Blake said quietly. "I am concerned with facts."

"I have stated the facts, Mr. Blake."

"You have told me Dr. Culver is missing—in other words, that something has prevented him from keeping a vital engagement."

"Something—yes," muttered the financier, with bitterness. "Perhaps you would be nearer the mark," he added darkly, "if you said 'somebody.'"

"Perhaps I might, Sir Earnest," Blake retorted; "perhaps I might not. You appear to have put your own interpretation upon the matter, Candidly, I cannot accept it. I do not believe it has been deliberate. Knowing Culver as I do, I will not believe it."

Sir Earnest Longworth growled, and strolled to the window, glaring out for a few moments before he turned, somewhat aggressively, his hands behind him.

"Of course, you do not believe it. I didn't expect you to, Mr. Blake. But I do! And permit me to say that my opinion is not quite so hasty as you may imagine. I have not been blind, Mr. Blake, and I have not been deaf. There have been whispers—rumours. You may not have heard them. I have!"

"In that respect I confess you have the advantage," Blake said, rather coldly; for there was a hint of patrician in the nature of the financier which he despised.

"You mean you have heard no rumours?" You have never, by any chance, heard Culver's name connected with—er—with anyone else?" he asked meaningly.

"Certainly not. I presume you mean with another lady?" Blake said.

"Yes."

"I have heard nothing," Blake repeated. "Had I have heard whispers," he added, "I think I should have ignored them. Rumour is a lying jade, Sir Earnest."

"Perhaps she is," returned the financier doggedly; "but there is no smoke without fire, Mr. Blake. I say there is no smoke without fire, sir! Anyhow, I have told you what has happened. I regard this deplorable business as a bitter insult to myself and a cruel slight upon my daughter."

"I am not a vindictive man, Mr. Blake. Perhaps I am glad that this has happened, in my own heart—perhaps I am intensely relieved to think that things have been nipped in the bud at the eleventh hour; but I do not intend to take it lying down!"

"I am going to have this matter threshed out. Wherever Culver is hiding—wherever he is skulking, Mr. Blake, I intend to track him down and meet him face to face! I mean to let the rest of his profession know the sort of man he is, even though his name may still pass muster with the public!"

"For that reason I have already been to my friend the Commissioner this morning and put him in possession of the facts. He is an understanding man, with a daughter of his own, Mr. Blake, and he has promised to give me all the assistance in his power. Already instructions have been given, sir. At this moment the sleuths of Scotland Yard are upon the trail of your runaway friend Culver!"

Blake was somewhat nettled by the man's manner, but he smiled placidly.

"I congratulate you, Sir Earnest. The C.I.D. is a very efficient institution. But why," he asked quietly, "if you have already secured the assistance of Scotland Yard, come to me, Sir Earnest?"

"Because I am making a few private inquiries myself, Mr. Blake," said the stockbroker promptly. "I am given to understand that you were at the hospital yesterday?"

"That is so."

"And you left with Culver? You were together?"

Blake nodded assent.

"Dr. Culver came here to my chambers, Sir Earnest. He left about noon."

"And may I ask," queried Sir Earnest intently, "whether he gave you any hint of his—er—his future movements?"

"None—except that I gathered he was going home, that he was seeing no more patients, and doing no more work until after his honeymoon. I understood that he had a

number of matters to attend to, in view of his marriage in the morning."

"H'm! So he gave you that impression?" The stockbroker frowned. "Now, tell me, Mr. Blake, was there anything in his manner at all to suggest that such a thing as this was—was possible? Can you yourself think of any reason why he—should have not appeared at the church this morning?"

"I can think of only one," Blake said quietly. "But it is rather an important reason. Dr. Culver was ill."

"Ill?" the stockbroker almost barked. "Yes. He was suffering from neurasthenia rather badly. Knowing of his marriage and the condition of health he was in, I felt rather concerned, Sir Earnest."

The stockbroker stared at Blake for a few moments, temporarily shaken, not knowing quite what to say.

"Ill?" he echoed. "Neurasthenia. It is a vague term, Mr. Blake. What, precisely, do you mean by neurasthenia?"

"A condition of the nerves approaching complete breakdown," Blake said quietly. "You must be aware, Sir Earnest, that overwork can bring a man to a state of depression and melancholy which is not only foreign to his nature, but a real danger."

"You mean to say," said the unimaginative stockbroker slowly, "that Culver yesterday was—er—depressed—melancholy?"

"He struck me as being so, Sir Earnest." "On the eve of his wedding-day, eh?" snapped the stockbroker. "On the day when an ordinary decent man should be in the highest spirits, he was morose and worried, eh?"

"I say he was unwell."

"Bah!" cried Sir Earnest heatedly. "Don't tell me that, Mr. Blake! Culver was well enough, all right. Does a doctor let himself get into that condition? Can't he recognise his symptoms, and prescribe for them straightaway, if he's a bit run down? I'm a stockbroker, Mr. Blake. People come and consult me about their investments. It is my job to know the market. Do I, then, make dud investments myself? No, sir. We've got to look a little more deeply than that. It wasn't Culver's nerves which were troubling him, Mr. Blake. It was his conscience."

"When a man gets himself tied in a tangle," he went on, wagging his finger meaningly, "he is inclined to get depressed. Culver had good reason to be worried yesterday, or I'm a simpleton."

He turned and seized up his hat and coat, pausing on his way to the door to tap Blake upon the shoulder.

"You are a man of the world, Mr. Blake," he said, in a grim, but confidential, tone, "and you have had considerable experience. In nine out of ten cases of this sort, what do you do? Cherchez la femme! That's what you do, isn't it? Find the woman in the case, and you've solved the mystery?"

"You seem rather obsessed with your theory, Sir Earnest," Blake said, with a hint of sarcasm in his tone.

But the hint was lost upon the stockbroker. He nodded, and pursed his lips grimly.

"I am," he said deliberately. "Later on, perhaps, you will know why I am, Mr. Blake. I don't think I shall have to search very far for the woman in this case. Let me tell you that in confidence. I don't think," he added darkly, "that I need look much farther than St. David's Hospital."

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. Conflicting Clues.



THERE was a meaning in the low-spoken, parting words of the injured stockbroker which was not lost upon Sexton Blake.

The detective's mind was carried back instantly to the previous morning at the hospital, and more especially to a certain handsome, dark-eyed nurse who had assisted at the operation.

Blake remembered the glance which had passed between them at the close of the wonderful piece of surgery which

Culver had wrought—a glance which spoke eloquently of a sympathetic understanding.

The detective banished the thought a moment later with a frown of chagrin to think that he should have been influenced even momentarily by Sir Earnest Longworth's mean suspicions.

Ross Culver had always been a man of powerful will and with strength of character. If he had realised that he had made a mistake in his engagement he would have played the man—of that Blake felt assured. He would not have descended to the cowardly expedient of a last-hour retreat.

The attitude which the well-known stockbroker had taken up filled Blake with a very real resentment. He felt more than half inclined to do nothing in the matter—to stand aloof from the case altogether.

But a growing concern for the missing surgeon drove him to leave Sir Earnest Longworth out of the calculation and to make inquiries, purely for his own satisfaction. It was possible that poor Culver had broken up altogether—that he had sought release from the torture of depression in some tragic way.

If this were so—if he were still alive—it was an act of common friendship to trace him, to rescue him, perhaps, from the slough of despond into which he had been sinking steadily for many months.

It was Blake's consciousness of this which took him and Tinker a little later to Ross Culver's house in Harley Street. The footman, whose usually expressionless face was distinctly gloomy, puckered his brows as he glanced at the detective's card.

"I suppose you'd better come in, sir," he muttered. "There's one of your gentlemen in the consulting-room already."

"One of my gentlemen?" Blake queried.

"Yes, another detective, sir, from Scotland Yard. You are from there, too, I suppose, sir?"

Blake pursed his lips and glanced meaningly at Tinker. Evidently Sir Earnest Longworth had persuaded the Commissioner to act promptly.

"No, I am not from the Yard," he said.

"But perhaps the official will not mind my looking round as well. Will you take in my card?"

The footman nodded, departing and returning a minute later with the request for them to enter. A smile of surprise and pleasure came to the lips of the detective when he found the broad, familiar figure of Harker awaiting him in the consulting-room.

Harker greeted them in his usual cheery way, remarking with a grin that their professional paths had crossed upon more thrilling investigations.

"It's a queer case, though," the C.I.D. man said, with a grin, "and it may develop. How do you come to be interested?"

"Dr. Culver was a friend of mine," Blake said.

"I see—ee. It's just personal, eh? What is your opinion, Blake?"

"I haven't a complete one, Harker. At present I'm inclined to think it's a case of nervous breakdown."

"Really?" The Yard man tried to look respectful, but it was obvious that he did not favour the theory in the least. Like Sir Earnest Longworth, he found it difficult to believe in a doctor breaking down in health. "You think, perhaps, he may have gone a bit queer up top—bats in the belfry, eh?" he added lightly. "Wandering—loss of memory—dunno—where—e—are sort of thing! Not suicide, I suppose?" he queried, looking over thoughtfully.

"I hope not," Blake said in a quiet tone. "Have you been looking round his papers, Harker?"

"Yes. I see there is a counterfool of a cheque, written yesterday, on 'Self,' for a thousand pounds. I've just rung up the bank, and they tell me he cashed it yesterday at about three in the afternoon. Took it away in notes—all of it."

"That's interesting," Blake said.

"Don't sound like loss of memory, does it?" said the Yard man with a smile. "You've got to remember your name to put it on the back of a cheque. But it doesn't lead us very much farther, Blake—I mean, it doesn't shed any light on his motives or future intentions, does it?"

"It does not appear to at the moment," Blake said guardedly.

"He was supposed to be going abroad for his honeymoon, wasn't he?" Harker went on.

"A man would want plenty of ready cash for that trip."

"But he would hardly be likely to draw out a thousand in one bite, would he?" Blake muttered.

"He might—it doesn't tell us anything, really, Blake. He might have wanted it to take his wife away; he might also have wanted it to elope with someone else."

Blake swung round sharply and stared at the Yard man.

"So you've got that bee in your bonnet, too, have you?"

"No; it's just in the hive with the others," said Harker, with a grin. "I'm just keeping an open mind and a weather-eye on all possibilities."

Blake nodded, moving over to the open desk of the famous surgeon, peering intently here and there with keen eyes that missed no detail.

On the top of some medical books above the desk Blake took down a jeweller's catalogue, noticing that one of the pages was marked by a projecting visiting-card. That Culver had been consulting this catalogue at some time on the previous day was pretty obvious, Blake quickly deduced, by the fact that it lay untidily above his desk, and out of place, while other papers of a similar character were lying neatly arranged upon a table near by. Culver's papers were, for a certainty, tidied up at the end of each day. This one had not yet been replaced.

Blake withdrew the small visiting-card from the catalogue and glanced at it with interest. The name upon it was somewhat arresting: "The Princess Nijowski, 14, Rue St. Lazaire, Paris."

Blake touched the bell and the footman entered.

"When did that lady call?" he asked, extending the card.

"Yesterday, sir," the footman said, while Harker looked round with interest—"just before lunch, sir."

"I thought Dr. Culver was seeing no patients yesterday?"

"That was his order, sir; I turned several away. That lady insisted on waiting. She was a foreigner, sir, and I don't think she understood properly. I couldn't get rid of her."

"I see. And did the doctor see her?"

"For a few minutes, yes, sir. But I think he must have refused to treat her."

"Why?" Blake asked.

"Because I heard Dr. Culver directing her to Dr. Richards, across the road, sir."

"I see," muttered Blake, taking back the card and reaching for the catalogue. "Did she go to Dr. Richards?"

"I cannot say, sir."

"Would you mind going over and inquiring?" Blake said quietly.

"Very good, sir! Certainly!"

The footman passed out, and Blake looked over at the Yard man.

"This visiting-card came in at lunch-time yesterday, Harker," he said, "and we find it used here as a bookmark. That seems to prove that Dr. Culver was studying a jeweller's catalogue before he left yesterday afternoon, and that there is one page of the catalogue in which he was particularly interested. This is the page."

"Wedding-rings—eh?" said Harker, with a smile.

"Rings—yes, but apparently not wedding-rings. Those on this page are mainly dress and engagement rings. It is just possible that this catalogue might have some connection with that thousand pounds in cash, Harker."

"Quite. We can easily find out. What is the firm?"

"Shuttle & Weaver, of Bond Street. Shall we walk round and make inquiries?"

They passed out of the room together, encountering the returning footman at the front door.

"No, sir," he said breathlessly. "Nobody of that lady's name called on Dr. Richards."

Blake raised his eyebrows in mild surprise, and then nodded, descending the steps leisurely, with Tinker and the Yard man following.

The inquiry at the Bond Street jeweller's was productive of an immediate result. A gentleman answering the description of Dr. Culver had called at a little after four o'clock the previous afternoon. No; he seemed perfectly normal in every way—a little quiet and deliberate the assistant said. He had made a very handsome purchase, consisting of a very fine diamond necklace, for which he had paid eight hundred and

fifty pounds, and also a fine ring, set with small diamonds and a single pigeon's-blood ruby, shaped in the form of a crescent.

"And he paid for these in cash?" Blake asked quietly.

"Yes, sir. In new notes. It is most unusual for a customer to pay so much over the counter in cash."

"I should imagine so. And did he take the jewellery away with him?"

"Yes, sir," the assistant said. "I suggested that I might send them. He preferred to take them himself. He seemed a little uneasy lest they should miscarry or there should be some mistake."

Detective Harker eyed the assistant in his keen, penetrative way.

"Tell me, young man—did this gentleman mention the reason why he was making these purchases? Did you gather or suppose anything from his conversation?"

"No, sir. He was rather reticent. He said that he had an appointment at four o'clock, though."

"How came he to mention that?" Harker asked.

The ring he purchased was not exactly the same as one which he had seen in the catalogue and taken rather a fancy to. He had not a specimen in the shop exactly corresponding, although I know that we have one at our Piccadilly branch. I suggested that I rang through, and had the ring brought straight along, but he would not wait. It was then that he mentioned the appointment."

"I see! Anything else?"

"He borrowed a time-table and consulted it while I was rubbing up the necklace," the assistant volunteered.

And Blake looked over with sudden interest.

"H'm! That is interesting!" Harker muttered. "You didn't happen to notice what trains he was interested in, I suppose?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. He appeared to be looking through the suburban tables. I am not sure. One cannot—er—" He paused as another assistant came up and whispered to him.

The first assistant raised his eyebrows.

"You had better tell them," he muttered audibly.

The second assistant turned to Blake and Harker.

"Are you inquiring about the gentleman who made a big purchase yesterday afternoon," he asked—"rather tall, and athletic build; hair grey at the sides?"

Harker nodded.

"I was in the show-room upstairs, sir, and was looking out of the window when the gentleman left the shop. He crossed to the Tube station opposite, and I believe he met a lady."

"H'm!" grunted Harker, his eyes twinkling as he glanced at Blake. "You saw him meet a lady, did you?"

"I cannot be sure, sir. There was a crowd in the entrance of the station, and there usually is, and he was quickly lost. I just gathered the impression that he met a lady. I saw him raise his hat. I am sure of that."

The assistants at the jeweller's were able to shed no further light upon the famous surgeon's movements or intentions. What they had revealed was of vital interest, yet it served only to confuse the issue even more than before.

"I know you dislike the idea, Blake," Harker muttered, as they left, "but I reckon this case is like the majority—there's a woman in it."

"Admittedly," said Blake, with a wry smile. "There is Sylvia Longworth."

"Yes," said Harker, with a grin, "and an unknown quantity we will call 'X.' Possessive case, feminine gender—if you want me to parse it."

"It's a bad policy to mix algebra and grammar," Blake said, with a smile. "They don't blend, Harker."

"I think they will in this case. What do you say, young man?" he added, turning to Tinker. "I'm rather inclined to accept the evidence of Mr. N. Parker in the show-room."

"He wasn't very sure," Tinker pointed out.

"The best evidence is always slight," Harker declared, with an air of wisdom.

Blake shrugged his shoulders.

"You suspect, then, Harker, that the 'other woman' is the solution of this mystery—eh?"

"I should not be surprised, Blake."

"Logically, then, you assume for the



"Pardon me," said Blake. "Why did you not come to the door?" The slatternly, half-witted girl frowned and put up a warning finger. "S-sh!" she whispered. "My father is dead. Let him rest in peace!" (Chapter 7.)

moment that this other woman is the reason for Dr. Culver jilting his fiancée?"

"Possibly."

"And the chances are that, having thrown over the one, he has eloped with the other—eh?"

"True!"

"Consequently," Blake went on relentlessly, "the purchase of this jewellery would not be likely to be made for the woman he was jilting?"

"Hardly!"

"It would be intended, then, for the unknown female quantity you call X?"

Harker glanced quickly at Blake, beginning to wonder where this interrogation was leading him. He remained thoughtful for a moment.

"Yes," he admitted presently. "I should say that he bought this jewellery for another woman."

"With whom," Blake suggested, "being missing, he has eloped—eh, Harker? He consulted a time-table, remember, and there is a suggestion that Miss X was awaiting him at the Tube station. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that they went off together last evening, is it?"

"I think it is."

"The withdrawal of all this money seems to point that way, I suppose?" Blake muttered, half to himself.

"It points very much that way," echoed Harker, advancing into the trap.

"I see!" Blake said quietly. "So Culver, being utterly heartless and unscrupulous, draws out a thousand pounds in cash in order to meet the expenses of a long and probably distant elopement. But his fascination for the lady is such that he spends nine hundred and seventy pounds with a jeweller, and pays for it in notes. Do you realise, Harker, that he thus has a little under thirty pounds to elope on? Not very much, Harker, my friend, to defy scandal and fly with a lady to the Continent!"

Harker was too good a detective not to see the force of Blake's logic, and to realise that he had been led into a deductive pitfall. He smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"That's the weakness of the theory, of course," he fenced adroitly. "But, as I said, it's worth while keeping a weather

eye on all possibilities. There are other things beside intrigue," he added quickly. "A lot of things may happen, for instance, to a man who is carrying nearly a thousand pounds' worth of jewellery in his pocket."

"Exactly!" Blake said quietly.

He reminded Harker of the case of a jeweller's messenger who had disappeared with three hundred pounds' worth of jewellery, to be found twenty-four hours later, bound and gagged, in a quiet part of Epping Forest. The messenger had no recollection of anything except that he had received a heavy blow from behind when passing along a narrow and somewhat unfrequented court in the West End at one of the busiest times of the day.

What had happened to a messenger might also happen to a purchaser.

"We reckoned that case was Long Wilson's," Harker muttered, "but we could never get any evidence."

"You made it hot for him, though, so I understood," Blake said.

"We did—so hot that he vamoosed to Germany. Anyhow, I think I'll be getting along to the Yard now, Blake, and give the Commissioner a report to date. He's rather keen about the case."

He took his departure with a cheery nod, and Blake and Tinker made their way back leisurely to Baker Street. The detective threw off his coat, and donned the old familiar dressing-gown—the garment which seemed inseparable from Sexton Blake and those periods of profound meditation which were often so brilliantly productive.

There was ample food for thought in the mystery which surrounded the disappearance of the famous surgeon. Clues had begun to collect, but in such a conflicting way that the path of investigation seemed at present to lead only to bewilderment.

Blake relapsed into a brown study, from which he was only recalled some hours later by a ring from Scotland Yard. It was Harker at the other end of the wire, and the C.I.D. man had learned a few facts in the interval which gave an added importance to the theory of robbery.

"I've just heard that Long Wilson is in London again, Blake," he said. "Not only

that, the man was seen by a point policeman who knows him in the vicinity of Shuttle & Weaver's yesterday about four o'clock. He appeared to be loitering for some purpose. This might have some bearing upon the case."

"Yes. Does this man specialise in jewel thefts?" Blake asked, for Long Wilson was somewhat too crude a criminal to come particularly under the detective's notice.

"Yes; of the hold-up variety. He was originally a pickpocket and a racecourse tough," Harker replied. "If he was shadowing Dr. Culver, anything might have happened. He's pretty thorough in his methods, and always has plenty of accomplices."

"I see?" Blake pursed his lips and smiled. "So you are inclining towards the robbery theory now, Harker? You are not now so impressed with the 'unknown quantity'?"

"I tell you I'm keeping a weather eye all round," the Yard man insisted, with a grunt.

The Yard man's ideas might have undergone another severe change could he have overheard the conversation which took place five minutes later between Blake and Sir Ernest Longworth, who rang through and spoke with a certain mingled bitterness and complacency.

"I thought I would ring you, Mr. Blake, as what I have to say may be of interest. You remember our conversation of this morning?" the financier asked quickly.

"Perfectly well, Sir Ernest," Blake said coolly.

"You remember my—my contention—my—my explanation of this business? You did not agree!"

"I still do not agree," Blake said. "Ah-h!" The bitter chuckle of the stockbroker was perfectly audible over the wire.

"H'm! Then let me inform you of a little coincidence which has just come to my notice, Mr. Blake. Just a coincidence, probably nothing more!" he added, with distinct sarcasm in his tone.

"Well?"

"I have made inquiry at the St. David's Hospital," Sir Ernest Longworth said, slowly and deliberately, "and I find that one of the nurses is missing. Sister Margaret, I think they call her," he added, "a rather handsome woman, I believe, Mr. Blake.

"Of course, it is quite a coincidence," he added, with still more deliberate sarcasm. "Strange, I mean, that a well-known doctor and a sister at his hospital should disappear at exactly the same time, and without either leaving any word or clue in the matter. Of course, there is no connection between these facts, Mr. Blake! That is unthinkable in such a man as Dr. Ross Culver!" He laughed with great bitterness.

"But, candidly, now, is it not strange that I—er—I—er—Hullo, there—hallo! Confound the girl! Hallo! Are you there?"

But Sir Ernest was not permitted to indulge his mood any farther. Blake had jammed up the receiver, and with a furrowed brow he strode across the room and dropped again into the armchair.

Blake's belief in Ross Culver's honesty was very difficult to shake, and the very suspicions of such a man as Sir Ernest Longworth tended only to strengthen them. The dark-eyed sister whom they had seen in the hospital Blake had resolutely put out of his mind, placed her, as it were, outside the field of investigation. Yet her pale, rather beautiful face had obtruded itself again.

Was it true? Had she also disappeared? Could it, after all, be possible that—

An exclamation of impatience broke from Blake as he bent and knocked his pipe on the grate. He refilled it slowly, and relapsed again into silence, glancing round presently at Tinker, from whom a sudden, long-drawn whistle had escaped.

The lad had sprung up, and was holding an illustrated periodical in both hands, whilst he peered at it amazedly.

"Ram and scuttle me!" he said presently. "It is her!"

"Who?" Blake asked, stretching out his hand.

"Guess, guv'nor!" exclaimed Tinker quickly.

He stopped as Blake took the book, and glanced down at a clear and very excellent photograph which bore the title:

"Dr. Ross Culver, the eminent Harley Street Surgeon, who is to be married tomorrow."

The photograph depicted Dr. Culver on

the lower step of his house in Harley Street, in conversation, it seemed, with a young woman of rather remarkable beauty. The brevity of the descriptive matter below the photograph might have caused an ordinary reader to imagine that the lady was the doctor's fiancée, Sylvia Longworth.

Blake knew that it was not; but it was not this knowledge which drew from him a sudden exclamation of interest and astonishment. It was the knowledge that the woman to whom Culver was talking was one whom Blake knew for the cleverest and most dangerous adventuress in the world.

There could be no mistaking the light oval of the face—the inscrutable eyes—the perfect form, perfectly clad.

This was Fifette, the beautiful confederate of Leon Kestrel—next to the Mummer himself the most dangerous figure among all those mysterious figures in the Kestrel Syndicate.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER. The Tangled Skein.



disappearance of the eminent surgeon was

THERE was a smile of mingled bewilderment and unbelief upon the face of Tinker as he looked over into the frowning face of the detective.

As if the clues in the case were not already sufficiently conflicting, there was now introduced another and rather startling factor. The mere possibility that Leon Kestrel or one of his confederates was remotely connected with the disappearance of the eminent surgeon was

WELCOME Professor REECE

at the newsagent's next Thursday! But be there early, or he will have gone. Plenty of other readers want to meet him as well, you know! The better way, come to think of it, will be to order your copy in advance. What about it?

sufficient to undermine every previous surmise—to put another complexion upon the whole mystery.

"This beats me, guv'nor," Tinker confessed, when Blake had finished a close study of the photograph. "I'm flummoxed! Do you think that is Fifette Bierce?" he asked quickly. "I mean it—it looks remarkably like her; but photographs are sometimes deceptive."

Blake shook his head slowly. "There is no deception here, my lad. This is Fifette."

"What do you make of it, then, guv'nor? I mean the whole case seemed complex enough before, Heaven knows, but this makes it—"

"Still more confusing," Blake said thoughtfully. "Let's clarify it a little, my lad. Culver has disappeared suddenly and completely under mysterious and rather painful circumstances. On the face of it, there seem to be three possible explanations. Let's take them one by one.

"The first," he proceeded, laying his forefinger upon his palm, "is the theory we ourselves have been inclined to favour, though it does not appeal to Sir Ernest Longworth and Scotland Yard. That theory is that Dr. Culver has had a breakdown, under the depressing influence of which he has run away or, possibly, committed suicide. It

is a tragic suggestion to make, but neurasthenia is a common forerunner of mental unbalance and suicidal mania, so we must face the possibilities.

"Supporting that theory we have the fact of Culver's own run-down nervous condition, and the fact also that it has lately been aggravated by occasional drugging.

"Against that theory we have the facts that, so far as we can ascertain, he was quite calm and normal in his actions after he left here. His visit to the jeweller's and his purchase of expensive jewellery seems to indicate a normal desire to purchase a bridal gift for his fiancée and a normal intention to proceed with the wedding arrangements. He did not return home after the purchase of the jewellery, so if this theory is the right one, the fit must have descended upon him suddenly, and his disappearance must have been unpremeditated."

Tinker nodded, and Blake went on in his clear, deliberate way:

"The second theory, advanced confidently by Sir Ernest Longworth, and secretly favoured, I think, by Harker, is the suggestion of another woman in the case. It is erected upon the supposition, of course, that poor Culver is a complete rotter and cad, that he has backed out of his honourable obligations like a craven, and has gone off with another woman with whom there has been a secret intrigue. It is a detestable suggestion," Blake said quietly, "but, logically, we must admit that there are distinct elements of suspicion.

"In favour of the elopement theory we have the fact that Ross Culver was obviously upon very good terms with a certain sister at the hospital. Also we have the rather startling fact that this particular sister is also missing, her disappearance having apparently coincided with that of Dr. Culver. On the face of it, that coincidence seems almost conclusive."

"I'm afraid it does," Tinker admitted. "To Sir Ernest Longworth it is proof positive," Blake said. "For the moment we will regard it as a mere item in the evidence for the prosecution. Now, against this theory, we can only set two factors—one, my knowledge of the character of Dr. Culver and my firm conviction that he would not do anything quite so despicable; two, that, having the intention to elope with this nurse from the hospital, he would hardly leave himself with only a few pounds in cash to go away with."

"He might have been in possession of a fair amount of ready cash already, guv'nor," Tinker said. "And, granted that he is a cad, it is quite likely that he purchased the jewellery as a gift for the nurse. I'm simply putting the case, of course. Our defence is a bit weak, guv'nor."

"I admit it, my lad. On paper, it is deplorably weak—in fact, it is very nearly illogical. But, in spite of that," Blake continued, almost passionately, "I will stake my reputation and every penny I possess that Sir Ernest Longworth is utterly and detestably wrong. It is not that Culver is an old friend, or that I owe him any allegiance; it is simply that I will back my judgment of character against any hysterical stockbroker's any day of the week!"

Tinker nodded and smiled. "That brings us, then, to the theory of robbery, guv'nor. What about that?"

"It's a rather flimsy theory," Blake said thoughtfully. "In this case with next to no facts to support it. All Harker could advance in favour of it was that a man with nine hundred pounds worth of jewellery about his person is a likely subject for attack, and that Culver might have been set upon like that jeweller's messenger was a few weeks ago.

"Some colour is now lent to that possibility by the fact that a certain criminal known by the police to favour that sort of crime has been seen in London—was seen, in fact, loitering in the vicinity of Shuttle & Weaver's about the time when Dr. Culver made his purchases. That is the theory of robbery."

"You're forgetting the latest clue, guv'nor," Tinker said quickly. "The theory is stronger than that now."

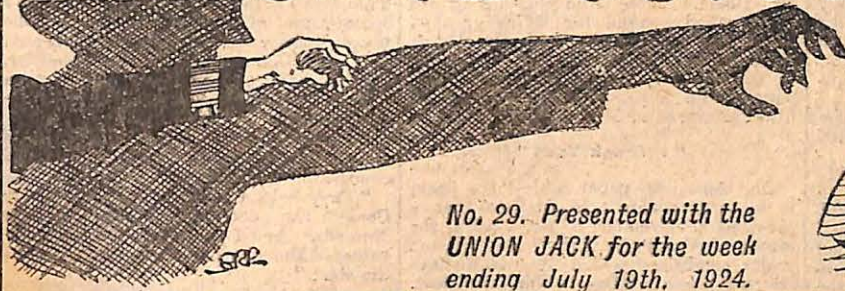
"In what way, my lad?"

"I think the doctor may have been robbed, but not by 'Long' Wilson. I believe this is the work of Kestrel, guv'nor. It is the work of the Syndicate."

The detective nodded, and glanced once more at the photograph in the paper.

(Continued on page 19.)

THE U. J. DETECTIVE SUPPLEMENT



No. 29. Presented with the
UNION JACK for the week
ending July 19th, 1924.

Far-fetched Frauds

*Bold swindles that have
deceived thousands. Far-
fetched, but fact!*

No. 2.—The Man Who Discovered the "Big Nail."

THE whole world was startled when, on September 1st, 1909, there came momentous news from a man of whom the general public had never heard before. It was news that electrified everyone capable of registering a thrill of emotion—or admiration for the performer of deeds of danger and endurance.

The news was from the explorer, Dr. F. A. Cook. He had discovered the North Pole; had planted the Star-Spangled Banner of the United States there, thus adding several thousand square miles of fresh territory to the possessions of his native land.

Some people remembered Dr. Cook as the surgeon who had accompanied the Peary Arctic Expedition, in 1891; as a member of the Belgian Antarctic Expedition, in 1897; and as the man who had, with such conspicuous success, led the expedition to explore Mount McKinley, in Alaska, in 1903. And now he had surpassed all his previous achievements with this crowning triumph.

America was frantic with joy, and there was almost as great excitement in Copenhagen—for it was to that port that the man who had found the North Pole was speeding, aboard the Hans Egede.

Impatiently the world waited to offer its rousing welcome to Dr. Cook, the modest explorer who had set out on his stupendous task with such little fuss and ostentation that millions of people were unaware, until news of the discovery of the Pole came through, that Dr. Cook had ever undertaken to reach it.

Meanwhile, various small items of news trickled through to the newspapers concerning the tremendous achievement—just enough to whet the appetites of the public for more. Everyone knew now that there was no doubt about the extent of the returning explorer's claim.

He had definitely stated that he reached the North Pole on April 2nd, and that two days later he had turned his back on it and started out on his long and difficult march home across the

almost illimitable frozen wastes which he—Dr. Cook—was the first white man to conquer.

The Stars and Stripes.

Who first gave voice to the suspicion that it was all a fake it is difficult to trace, but the reason for that first suspicion was soon pretty clear. The explorer's amazing speed in returning home from the Pole made various geographers sceptical that he had ever been there.

But for a time the suspicions of a few scientists were swamped beneath the floods of joy everywhere apparent in

America. The United States had got another Colony, even though it was not a scrap of use to anyone but the Eskimos who peopled it and the seals that lived there. Most of the American newspapers made the most of it, the "New York Herald" leading off with this:

"It is an American who first set foot on the peak of the world, and the flag that now flutters under the icy solitude of the North Pole is the Stars and Stripes."

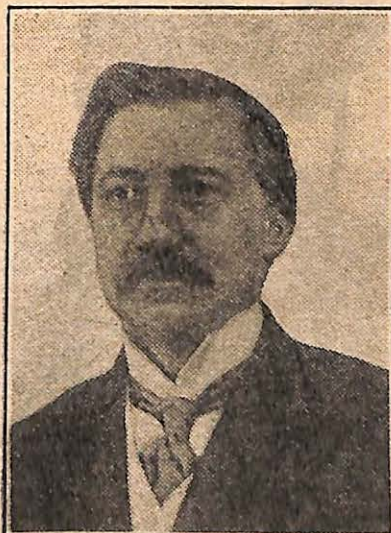
That bit about the flag fluttering in the icy breeze was merely a poetic touch. It read much better than the bald account of the actuality would have done. But perhaps when that little note of admiration was penned the enthusiastic scribe was unaware that Dr. Cook, finding nothing to which he could nail his country's flag, had—or said he had—left a small silk emblem in a metal cylinder lying on the ice.

The man who financed the expedition next came forward to give the lie direct to those who asserted that Dr. Cook couldn't have reached the Pole, because he had started so ill-equipped. He declared that every imaginable contingency had been provided for in Dr. Cook's outfit. It even included gum-drops—two barrels of them—because:

"An Eskimo will travel thirty miles for a gum-drop; his sweet tooth is the sweetest in the world."

Well, Dr. Cook would soon reach civilisation now, and the world would know the truth—whether the detractors of the achievement were actuated by jealousy, or whether they were scientifically sound in their arguments that the explorer was a mere Polar tourist, who lied where he could not succeed.

They said that if his astronomical notes were sound when they came to be examined by some public body, that would be proof enough that the Pole



Dr. COOK, who made a big fortune by "discovering" the North Pole. Now doing time in a United States gaol.

[Photo: Illustrations Bureau.]

had actually been reached. Astronomical notes were about the only evidence he, or anyone else, could have.

Then came the landing. Dr. Cook set foot in Copenhagen on September 4th. To say that the delighted populace gave him a rousing reception would be to make a serious under-statement of fact. They went wild with excitement, and the leading citizens almost fought to do him honour.

The explorer's first action was to telegraph to the President of the United States, in this strain:

"I beg leave to report that I have returned from the Pole."

To the newspaper reporters who flocked around him he stated, "I do not claim to have put my finger on the exact spot," but swore he had been within gun-shot reach of the Big Nail, as the Eskimos habitually call it. Naturally, it is difficult to know when one is at an exact spot when there is nothing there to mark it!

He went on to say that he hadn't nailed the Stars and Stripes to the Pole. There was nothing there to fasten it to, or hang it on. The best he could do was to leave a tiny silk flag wrapped in a metal cylinder lying on the ice—where those who doubted him might find it if they cared to go and look, and also if the ice hadn't opened and let the thing through to the floor of the Polar Sea!

Two others, he said, had shared with him the difficulties of that last long tramp, and with him had reached the Big Nail. They were young Eskimos, named Etukishuk and Ahwelah. The explorer, on his return, had left them behind in their village home, as they displayed no anxiety to go with him to Europe and share with him the honours certain to be showered on the discoverer of the North Pole.

Honours Galore.

Someone suggested to Dr. Cook that Copenhagen University would doubtless examine and work out his astronomical observations, as entered by him in his notebooks on his journey North. It would take but a few hours to do this, and the published result would put to flight the geographers who sniffed so loudly, and would firmly place him on a high pedestal by the side of Columbus.

But Dr. Cook saw no reason for any violent hurry. People had been content to wait patiently for the printed proofs of the claims of other explorers. Why couldn't the world wait for his, instead of badgering him like this? He refused to be hurried; the world would have to wait.

Then came the cabled reply from the President of the United States—the reply to the explorer's previous message. Mr. Taft said:

"Your report that you have reached the North Pole calls for my heartiest congratulations, and stirs the pride of all Americans that this feat, which has so long baffled the world, has been accomplished by the intelligent energy and the wonderful endurance of a fellow-countryman."

Honours continued to be thrust on the returned explorer. He was received by the King of Denmark, and afterwards attended a banquet, at which four hundred other famous people appeared,

given by the municipality in the Town-hall.

Whilst he was thus being favoured the newspapers of the world were splitting up into rival factions—for and against Dr. Cook. Those who disbelieved his story raked around for whatever they could find that would help to throw further discredit on his tale of having found the Big Nail. With glee they pounced on a previous achievement of his—the ascent of Mount McKinley.

"I Thank You!"

One American paper said: "We deem it an unfortunate circumstance that a previous achievement of Dr. Cook's, the ascent of Mount McKinley, was effected under conditions which are not dissimilar to those incidental to this latest feat. He ascended the mountain unaccompanied. Geographers and men of science have been disinclined to credit him with the performance, and we regret to say that Mount McKinley is to-day officially an unconquered peak. Of course, Dr. Cook was attended on his Polar expedition by natives."

If only those native Eskimos, Etukishuk and Ahwelah, could be found, the claims of Dr. Cook could be disproved or substantiated. At the moment, however, he was being lionised at a meeting attended by the King and Queen of Denmark and other members of the Royal Family, as well as 1,500 distinguished "commoners." As a climax to those proceedings, the Royal Geographical Society of Denmark pinned to his breast their coveted gold medal.

Returning thanks, Dr. Cook concluded his speech with the words:

"There will be nothing further given of the story until you get it in consecutive form in the book. I thank you!"

Then appeared on the scene another explorer—Commander Peary, who completely knocked the bottom out of Dr. Cook's story by declaring him to be an

unqualified impostor, and maintaining that he—Peary—had found the North Pole whilst his rival had been loafing around hundreds of miles away from it.

The Polar War then started briskly. The rivalry between Cook and Peary spread, and all over the civilised globe people took sides. It grew more heated still when Commander Peary accused Dr. Cook of having stolen his Eskimos and a quantity of stores from his—Peary's—base camp.

Dr. Cook ignored the question of stores, but replied to Peary's accusation concerning the Eskimos.

"They belong neither to Peary nor to Cook," he declared, "for they are Nomads. And I paid them ten times the value of the gun and knife agreed on at the start."

Eskimos Interviewed.

Without endeavouring to make good his claims in any other way, Dr. Cook departed for the United States, landing in New York on September 21st. A band played on the deck of his boat as they drew near to shore, and the delighted thousands assembled on the quayside roared themselves hoarse in admiration of the home-coming Polar hero as they observed a young lady approach him and drape about his neck a wreath of white flowers. Every boat in harbour blew its siren in sheer hero-worship. But the immediate effect of it all appeared to be lost on Dr. Cook.

At any rate, about the first thing he said on landing was that he had done with Arctic exploration. He'd leave the South Pole to Captain Scott and Lieutenant Shackleton. He had done his bit by annexing the North Pole for the United States. For the next few weeks he intended to busy himself lecturing on his journey.

Some three weeks later Commander Peary threw another bomb, as it were, into the enemy's camp. And he made a direct hit, devastating Dr. Cook's defences with the statement that he had certain proof that that impostor had never been out of sight of land during the whole of the period in which he was supposed to have performed his wonderful journey.

Commander Peary had seen the two Eskimos most nearly concerned in Cook's exploit, and they had laughed at their former master's claim. Peary's startling statement concluded thus:

"The boys' answer that they killed no game, made no caches, and lost no dogs, returning with loaded sledges, makes the attainment of the Pole a physical and mathematical impossibility, as it meant feeding three men and more than twenty dogs during a journey of 1,040 geographical miles on less than three sledge-loads of supplies."

But Cook had not fired his last shot yet. He replied that the Eskimos had purposely misled the inquirers, in accordance with their solemn promise to

The "Big Nail" impostor, in his "war paint" as an Arctic explorer. (Photo: Illustrations Bureau.)



him to give no information to Commander Peary and his men.

"Where's Cook?"

"They were instructed," he said, "not to tell of our trip over the Polar Sea. They kept their word, but their evasive replies have been twisted to suit a perverted interest. I will enter on no controversy now. Later I will bring them to New York at my own expense and let them tell their story."

A brave pronouncement that, and at first it carried a deal of weight. But Dr. Cook spoiled it all by vanishing. Rumours that he had left for Europe by such and such a liner cropped up every hour. The missing man's solicitor said that the explorer's object in disappearing was to gain needed rest and be within reach of the Danish scientists who were to examine his Polar records.

As soon as the stage was clear of Dr. Cook, the explorer's secretary showed up, with a despatch-box filled with his employer's Polar records. Two detectives drove behind the secretary's carriage as he travelled from the steamer to the bank, where, in an underground fireproof safe, the records were to be deposited until they could be examined by the experts of the Commission of Investigation.

The secretary declared that Dr. Cook was still in New York, busy at his book. If he was, his ears must have burned next day, when two men—an insurance agent and a retired sea captain—made affidavits to the effect that they had been hired by Dr. Cook to concoct observations and make faked records, to serve as proof of his Polar journey.

Dr. Cook's secretary hotly denied it. But his employer continued to lie low and say nothing. Perhaps he realised that his daring trip into the realm of fantasy was not going to turn out so successfully as he had anticipated.

Though he wasn't doing so badly. His banking account had swollen tremendously. It was estimated that by his Polar exploits he had netted about £30,000—partly by way of payments for articles to the newspapers on "How I Discovered the Pole," and partly by way of lecturing fees.

Angry!

The people of St. Louis, in the States, paid most dearly for their entertainment. For two lectures there Dr. Cook received £2,800. Even so, the sum was less than he wanted, for he had previously asked for £3,200! The £50,000 that he asked for the publishing rights of his proposed book he never got.

The publishers all declined to have anything to do with it until the scientists agreed it wasn't all a fake. As a matter of fact, the scientists agreed in denouncing the imaginative explorer in vigorous terms. And that was the end of the book.

Perhaps there was no one so upset about it all as the Danes, the Danish Crown Prince in particular. Their welcome to the hoaxer had been so warm, and their belief in him so great, that with his downfall and exposure their feelings boiled over. "Angry" scarcely describes their emotion.

Their feelings grew still more fierce

when Cook's records were finally examined and officially declared to contain no proof whatever that he had ever been anywhere near the Pole.

And so Dr. Cook goes down in history as one of the most monumental impostors the world has ever known. But he doesn't quite disappear from the story yet. We hear of him a bit later on as the central figure in connection with some gigantic oil swindles in the United States.

He lately stood his trial for these swindles in the Federal Court at Fort Worth, Texas, and was sentenced to fourteen years' imprisonment and fined £2,400. Twelve other defendants were sentenced with him, but Cook's sentence was the stiffest of all.

Sentence passed, the self-styled discoverer of the North Pole, and oil stock swindler, was asked whether he hadn't anything to say. He hadn't. The judge took the opportunity of delivering a little homily. Said he to Cook:

"So you have come to the point where your peculiar personality fails you. The twentieth century should be proud of you. History gives us Ananias and Sapphira. They are forgotten, but we still have Dr. Cook. You should restore the money which you have stolen from widows and orphans. Are not you haunted at night by these pitiable figures? You ought to be paraded as a practical warning in every State where you have sold stock!"

Thus did this modern Ananias fade from public life, his private life henceforth—for fourteen years—to be directed and governed by warders and prison sentries.

Managing the Mad Motorist.

THREE months' imprisonment, and a visit to the morgue."

Although such a novel police-court sentence as the above has not yet been heard in this country, our cousins across the Atlantic are no doubt quite familiar already with such an occurrence.

New York is being overrun with reckless motorists. Speed laws apparently count for nothing to most of these offenders. They pay the fine imposed by the judge, and make a hasty departure, eager to make up the time that has been lost at the court.

That is what they have been enabled to do up to a few months ago.

But American judges, on the lookout for some effectual means of bringing the crime home to the criminal, are now introducing some original ideas into the forms of punishment they mete out to offenders.

This applies especially to violators of the speed laws.

Judge Bartlett, presiding at the Detroit Court, Michigan, has issued an edict that all offenders convicted in his court of careless or too speedy driving shall be taken on a personally conducted tour through the hospitals where victims of motoring accidents are received.

Those drivers who have been sentenced by him to a term in gaol, whether they are men or women, are to be given the additional entertainment of a visit to the morgue, "to view the results of motor-drivers' carelessness."

The Mayor of Indianapolis, Indiana, another upholder of the rights of the pedestrian, has also instituted a novel method of punishment for violators of the speed laws.

Judges are too apt to let the offender off with a light fine, in his opinion, and Mayor Lewis has made this new drastic

FROM ALL QUARTERS.

law with the hope of putting a stop to reckless driving.

All offenders against the speed laws who come under his jurisdiction are to be subjected to a test of their sanity.

The test may be carried out by a fully qualified doctor, and no arrested speeder is to be allowed out on bail. During the enforced wait for the medical examination, arrested road-hogs will, according to Mayor Lewis' instructions be confined in padded cells.

The Shopkeeper Samaritan.

A man with a pie in his hand was seen running along the street in a little North-country town. Behind him ran another man, who was, to judge by his apron, a shopkeeper.

"Thief! Stop, thief!"

A crowd collected in an incredibly short space of time, as crowds do, and a policeman joined the hunt.

By this time the shopkeeper had caught his man and had given him a hefty punch in the eye. That put a stop to the race. The policeman arrived on the scene, where the two chief actors in this little drama were talking together, and the crowd surged round, eager to see the thief marched off in the company of the law.

But they were to be disappointed.

"It's all right," said the shopkeeper to the policeman. "You leave him to me. He did steal my pie, but he tells me now that he was starving and out of work, and could not resist the sight of the pie as it lay within his reach."

"Do you want him arrested for stealing?" asked the constable.

"Oh, no!" quickly replied the shopman. "I'm very sorry I hit him. I'm quick-tempered, or I wouldn't have done it. You leave him to me. That will be all right!"

Back to the shop, with the crowd at their heels, went the two men, the thief and the man in the apron. Once inside, the latter proceeded to act the part of a Good Samaritan. He bathed the eye, which was by this time beginning to swell, and gave the starving man a hearty dinner.

Nor was this all. When the man had eaten his fill, his benefactor, still zealous in his attempts to make reparation for the blow, gave the destitute man five shillings to help him on his way.

Much Ado About a Penny.

The Scotsman who sued a fruit hawker for the return of sixpence recently was by no means the only person to sue for such a small amount.

The sum of one penny was the amount in dispute in a case heard at the Mayor's and City of London Court a few months ago. This was being sued for by the London General Omnibus Company, Ltd.

A man who had paid his fare on a bus for a certain distance did not get out where he should have done, but travelled some little distance farther. The conductor pointed out the man's error, and demanded another penny for excess fare. This the traveller refused to pay.

The name and address of the latter were taken down by the conductor, and the next to be heard of it was when the case was tried at the above court, where the Omnibus Company were allowed the penny claimed, plus fourteen shillings costs.

Finger Prints!

By *H.W. Twyman*

Part One.

An account, written in simple, non-technical language, of all the developments that have happened in this interesting branch of criminal science since we published the series of articles on the same subject two years ago.

"It is far too fascinating to give up." Thus spoke Detective-Inspector Alden, on retiring after twenty-eight years' service at Scotland Yard, mainly in the finger-print department.

He was, of course, referring to his favourite study, and even after such a long acquaintance with the subject of finger-prints, he has not had enough of it, but intends to keep in touch with the science in private life.

One can easily understand that finger-prints may be of interest to the technical expert who has spent a good deal of his life studying them, but the expert has by no means a monopoly of the fascination.

Apart from the technical side of the question, with which the public has no desire to be concerned, there is still a lot that is interesting for the outsider, who can have the less complicated side of the subject put before him in a way that he can understand and enjoy. And there is a lot that is interesting about it, too.

It is the object of these articles to record all the latest discovered facts relating to the science of finger-prints, and, moreover, to present them with the technicalities left out and the interest left in.

Many readers will remember that this subject was extensively dealt with in a series of articles in the Supplement early in the previous volume in 1922. Much has happened in the world of crime and anti-crime since then, however, and the science of finger-prints, amongst other things, has by no means been standing still.

To mention the greatest advance of all, a quite new discovery has been made by Dr. Edmond Locard, the chief of the Police Laboratory at Lyons, which may in time altogether supersede fingerprints as we know them. This new discovery is called poroscopy, a name which merely means that identification is established not only by the ridges of the finger-prints, but by the invisible pores thereon.

Doctor Locard has also discovered means of distinguishing finger-prints left by criminals even when gloves are used. Both these very interesting phases will be gone into more fully later on.

Noses and Veins.

Another discovery which has been made quite recently is that animals, such as dogs, cows, and pigs, can as easily be identified by their nose-prints as human beings can by their finger-prints.

Yet another investigator has made the discovery that the veins at the back of a person's hands are as individual in character as are finger-prints themselves, and has completed a plan for classifying them for purposes of identification.

This latter method perhaps hardly comes under the heading of finger-prints, but at all events it is yet another means to the same end—the absolute identification of criminals. And the easier the criminal is identified the harder it will be for him to continue to commit crime.

But these are the latest developments. Let us run back for a moment to the beginning of things.

The question is often asked: "Who first discovered the uses of finger-prints in criminal work?"

That is a rather difficult question to answer, and, possibly for that very reason, some misconception has arisen about it.

One frequently sees, even in what should be well-informed papers, the finger-print system referred to as the Bertillon system. This is quite wrong, for Alphonse Bertillon, as head of the identification department of the Paris police in 1879, was the inventor of a totally different method—that of identifying men by measuring certain bony parts of the body.

As a matter of fact, when the finger-print system was first introduced to the notice of the French criminologist, he regarded it as unworkable, and frankly said so. Finally, however, he came round to the view that it might be given a trial, and eventually used it as an adjunct to his body-measuring method.

Like most other Western inventions, the individuality of finger-tip impressions is reputed to have been known to the Chinese long before the Christian era; but the claims of the ancient Celestials we can well afford to ignore here.

The Fathers of Finger-prints.

The peculiarities of the markings at the tips of the fingers was probably first noticed about a hundred and fifteen years ago, for in 1809 a book was published by one Thomas Bewick, with the print of one of his fingers as a signature, and the words: "Thomas Bewick, his mark."

As it was commonly his practice to sign his work in this fashion, it is safe to say he was aware of the individuality of his own finger-print, though perhaps he could not realise how absolute was that individuality, nor to what use such prints—then merely a curiosity—were to be put a hundred years afterwards.

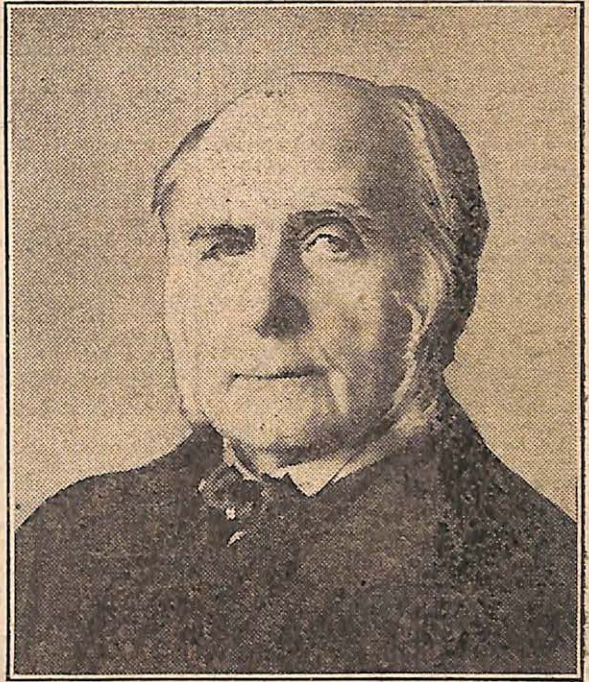
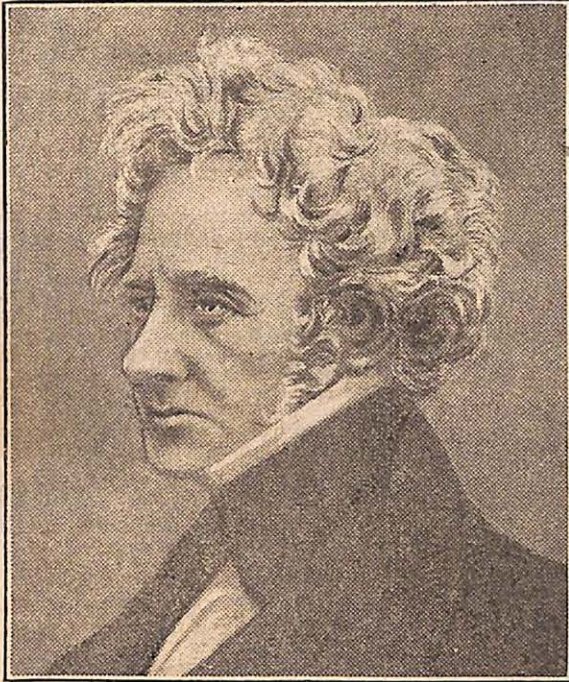
Fourteen years went by before the subject seems to have cropped up again.

In the library of



DOCTOR EDMOND LOCARD at his desk in the Police Laboratory, Lyons. He is the discoverer of a wonderful new system of finger-print identification, which will be fully described next week.

[Photo: Paris and London Studios]



THE FATHERS OF FINGER-PRINTS.—Sir William Herschell (left), and Sir Francis Galton (right), pioneers of the science of finger-prints. The present system is largely founded on their early efforts and researches in what was then an unknown realm of science.

[L.E.A. and Rischgitz Collection.]

the Royal College of Surgeons, in London, is a rare manuscript written in Latin.

It was the work of a German, Professor Purkenje, and was written by him, not as the revelation of a new discovery, but merely as a sort of essay which he was required to compose in order to qualify for his degree of Doctor of Medicine.

In this manuscript—of which only two or perhaps three copies are now in existence, he comments on the fact that the ridges on the skin of the hand and foot are of great variety. He had even investigated far enough into the subject to classify them into various groups, but apparently missed making the biggest discovery of all—that any particular finger or footprint was different from any other in the world, and that a person could be absolutely identified by that means alone.

That obscure examination-paper, or diploma work, served its purpose when it had gained its author his degree, and the unsuspected germ of the discovery it contained was allowed to be forgotten amongst the dusty archives of the University of Breslau for fifty or sixty years.

In 1880 an Englishman, named Doctor Henry Faulds, published the results of discoveries he had been making into the subject. From his statements in the journal which contained his article, it is clear that he was responsible for discovering the three great factors that make finger-prints of such practical utility to-day.

He found that they are permanent, and do not change from birth to death; that they are individual to their owner, and are never duplicated; and that, among other things, they might be useful as a means of identifying criminals.

Forestalled.

The publishing of his researches brought about an interesting sequel, but one that must have been very disappointing to Dr. Faulds.

Sir William Herschell claimed that he also had made use of finger-prints, and twenty-two years earlier.

He had held an official post in India at that time, and it had been his practice to compel the natives to make impressions of their inked thumbs on documents by way of a signature.

This was done at first partly as a sort of solemn ritual so as to make the "signing" more impressive, but after a time Sir William noticed that there was a remarkable variety amongst the prints that accumulated—a piece of observation which led him to attempt to devise a system by which persons could be identified.

The method he tried proved too unwieldy, however, and after a time the whole thing was abandoned, and no mention was made of it in print till he replied to Dr. Faulds's article.

From the evidence, it would seem that these two men are the joint discoverers of the usefulness of finger-prints—a fact that is not so well known as it might be, for their names, especially that of Dr. Faulds, are almost unknown even to people who have a special knowledge of the subject.

Another pioneer was Sir Francis Galton, to whom Dr. Faulds was referred by the famous Charles Darwin when he asked for his co-operation in the investigations he was making. Galton carried the new science a good step farther, but it was left to the ingenuity of another Englishman to take finger-prints out of the theoretical class and place it in the practical.

Mr.—afterwards Sir—Edward Henry was Inspector General of Police, in 1897, in the Lower Provinces of India when he devised the ingenious system of classification known as the Henry System. It was "tried out" first in India under his guidance, and, being found successful, was afterwards adopted by Scotland Yard in 1901 for use in this country.

Since that time, of course, the use of finger-prints in police work has gone on from strength to strength, and has been

adopted by practically every police force of the world.

Nowadays, of course, many minds are working on it to improve and amplify it still further; and poroscopy and other fascinating developments have arisen, of which we shall hear later.

First Finger-prints of Fiction.

Before we leave the subject of the early beginnings of the subject, a curious, and a very interesting, instance may be cited.

Detective-story writers by hundreds have penned tales in the plots of which finger-prints play an essential part. Who wrote the first? Who has the distinction of being the first with the finger-prints of fiction?

The famous American author, Mark Twain, seems to be the one to claim that honour.

He published a book in 1883—at a time when finger-prints had been heard of by none but a few English scientists—entitled, "Life on the Mississippi." In that book there is a tale which shows that the author knew all about the individuality of finger impressions, and that, according to a character in the story, they had been known of thirty years before—that is, about the time that the German professor, Purkenje, wrote his historic manuscript.

"When I was a youth," says the character in the book, "I knew an old Frenchman who had been a prison-keeper for thirty years, and he told me there was one thing about a person that never changed, from the cradle to the grave—the lines in the ball of the thumb. And he said that these lines were never exactly alike in the thumbs of any two human beings."

Nowadays, of course, this is a commonplace, but when this, the first finger-print story, was told, it must have been a novelty.

It is a far cry from the primitive speculations of the pioneering scientists, and the first finger-print story, to the wonderfully-equipped police collections of prints in all parts of the world, and to

the innumerable tales by detective writers of the present day about finger-prints. Yet it is only a matter of forty years—a short time, indeed, for the big developments that have been made.

Experts all over the world, and especially in France and America, are devoting their minds to the subject, and evolving scientific side-lines out of it, some of them of absorbing interest.

Superintendent Collins, of our own Scotland Yard, invented a code for telegraphing photographs of the finger-prints themselves by wire.

And so the work goes on—one discovery treading on the heels of another.

Collections.

Meantime, the collections of finger-prints—the backbone of the whole system—continue to grow. Scotland Yard, on the latest computation, has 450,000 of them, and every week sees more added.

But America—that home of big things—is the place for the big collections.

Probably the largest group of prints in the world is that at the U. S. War Department at Washington. There they have recorded the impressions of no less than five millions of men. The reason for this, it should be mentioned, was that every American soldier during the War was finger-printed with the object of identification in case of need. A rather better method, it will be agreed, than the "identity disc" worn by our own troops—a thing that could easily be lost, or even found on the body of a man to whom it did not belong.

New York's finger-print bureau accommodates 720,000 sets of prints; and Sacramento, the capital of California, houses 80,000 more, and adds another 3,000 to the number every month. So it is with other cities in their degree. All the police departments, not only of America, but of the rest of the up-to-date

world, collect finger-prints with the fervour of a small boy collecting cigarette pictures—and with a good deal more system.

Criminals, of course, know and fear the menace. They know that the chance-left print may mean a much longer sentence than their present crime may bring; they can change their name, but not their fingertips, and they recognize the painful fact that the silent evidence of an impression taken from the police files may stamp them as old offenders.

The story of the criminal who, arrested for an unimportant crime, went through the painful process of tearing the skin and flesh from all his fingers and thumbs with a bootlace-tag, has already been recorded in these pages.

A Vain Sacrifice.

This ordeal, agonising as it must have been, has since been eclipsed, by another man, an American. The motive of preventing identification was the same, but the method was different. Patrick Cassidy, the offender in question, cut off one of his fingers.

He knew enough of the finger-print system to realise that any person with less than the usual number of ten digits is classified in a special manner which allows for the mutilation, and he knew also that after his arrest he would inevitably be finger-printed. He hoped by this stoical sacrifice of a finger of his left hand that his record would be looked for amongst the "mutilated" section, and that his former misdeeds would not come to light at his trial.

Disappointment was in store, though! The expert at headquarters eventually turned up the right set, after some confusing searching, among the un mutilated class. The man's "history"

showed that he had no less than fifteen previous convictions for one thing and another, so the self-amputation didn't do him much good.

The ironical part of it was that his arrest was only on a minor charge which, together with his past record, only brought him ten days' imprisonment. He couldn't have got much more had he saved his finger.

That is an instance where the finger-print expert has triumphed. Now for one where he has failed.

A negro was hauled before a magistrate's court in New York and was sentenced to a term of three months' imprisonment for some misdemeanour. The magistrate ordered that he should be finger-printed, so that they should have something to remember him by in future.

He was handed over to the charge of Mr. Louis Gottlieb, an expert attached to the court.

"Hold out your hands," he said to the prisoner.

The negro pulled them out of his pockets and extended them.

"No good to ya, boss!" he said, with a grin.

He was right. One hand had all the fingers missing, and the other had been severed at the wrist.

The finger-print specialist was baffled, but only for a moment. He bethought him of taking the man's footprints instead, and glanced down at his feet.

Only the stumps of a couple of wooden legs showed beneath the trouser-ends!

NEXT WEEK.—Further interesting facts concerning the very latest advances in the science of finger-prints.

MUSICAL MEALS FOR MURDERERS!

The prison cell in America is very often the "open sesame" to comfort and concerts.

IN the United States, where the extremist ideas of prison reform are practised, there is a goal where the inmates are now in the habit of having music played during meal-times.

This in Clinton Prison, Dannemora, New York, the strongest, most inaccessible, and least-liked prison in America. It is an isolated place, to which are banished only the most intractable and dangerous of convicts—escapers, gunmen, and such. Among its inmates are many life-terminers—murderers, most of them.

One of the few redeeming features of the place is the brass band, organised by the officials, and composed of convict musicians. Depressed and hardened by the iron-bound discipline of the bleak prison-house, the convicts, as was to be expected, often became restive and insubordinate, especially at meal-times.

With the fear of imminent mutiny confronting him, the Warden (or Governor) of the prison set to work to think out a remedy.

The remedy was to hand in the prison band.

"Would the band," asked the Warden,

"care to play some popular tunes while their fellow-prisoners were eating?"

The band was willing. The suggestion met with great enthusiasm, in fact. It was a fine idea for all concerned, and had the immediate effect of putting the convicts in a more cheerful frame of mind. Thus they enjoyed their meals to a greater extent, and were more ready to obey orders.

An appealing incident is related of a convict at the State penitentiary at Huntsville, Texas. This man, who was "in" for stealing, was an artist and a musician. After he had been in the prison for some time, he heard that the Governor of the State intended visiting the institution for the purpose of making an inspection.

This news set him thinking, and eventually engendered a scheme in his mind—novel as it was daring, and so fantastic as to be almost hopeless.

At any rate, he would try.

First of all, he asked the Warden's permission to send to his home for his treasured violin. The request was granted, and after having safely received the instrument, the musician practised religiously to regain the old skill that

months of prison life had almost annihilated.

At last the time came for the Governor's visit. Once again the convict approached the Warden, this time for permission to play before the visitor. The permission was given, and the player, all a-tremble with hopes and fears, drew his bow across the strings of his violin, and, before that small audience, began playing for the greatest prize a prisoner can gain.

From the throbbing strings he conjured forth some appealing old songs—songs of home—and played as he had never played before. The State Governor listened. One plaintive song followed another. Liberty—home—songs of childhood—the magic of melody from a master's hand enthralled the Governor.

He listened for an hour, indulgently at first, then sympathetically, and finally enchanted, gripped by the emotions the convict's violin called forth.

Then at last came "Home, Sweet Home." The sweet minor key of the simple air that has stirred generations brought the Governor, as it brought them all, completely within the spell.

The last lingering note died away, and left the air vibrating with the memory of that haunting melody. It was the psychological moment, and the convict seized it to put his fate to the test.

He asked for his liberty—for a pardon.

The Governor had been conquered.

The convict's request was granted; his violin had been more eloquent than any logic.

To-day he is a free man.

Born into Crime!

by W.H. Jago.

A quarter of a million of India's brown population are hereditary thieves and rogues of one sort or another. The babies born into quite a number of tribes are dedicated automatically to a life of wrong-doing

INDIA, with its teeming millions of population, has always been a happy hunting-ground for criminal tribes.

Some, as, for instance, the Mahrattas, founded kingdoms which they maintained by the proceeds of their plundering and robberies. So powerful was this tribe, and another called the Pindharis, that when English rule was first established the civil authorities were totally unable to cope with them.

Not until after a series of wars was their power broken. Even to-day remnants of the tribes still exist, and although they retain none of the glamour of old, yet they still retain their predatory instincts.

Most of the criminal tribes of India are aliens, having come across the border from Persia or the countries beyond the Himalayas. But the police have great trouble in proving that they are not entitled to be classed as British subjects, otherwise it would be easy to deal with them by deportation under Section III. of the Indian Penal Code.

So, too, most of the tribes have long been broken up into separate parties, who have wandered far and wide over India. This accounts for the variety of names by which each tribe is known. For they acquire a new name according to the dialect of the district in which the band is living.

For instance, the tribe most familiar to the English and most feared in India, the Pathans, are also called Ut-Khels, Mohmuds, Yusufzais, Kabulis, Khans, Afgans, and so on.

It has already been said that the people in India, especially those in the villages, fear the Pathans more than any other tribe.

They have every reason for doing so, for, not only is the Pathan more strongly built than the average native, but he is avaricious, crafty, and bloodthirsty to a degree. There is no end to the tortures that the Pathan devises to extract information from the householder he is plundering or the guardian of the temple's jewels.

Trade—and Sidelines.

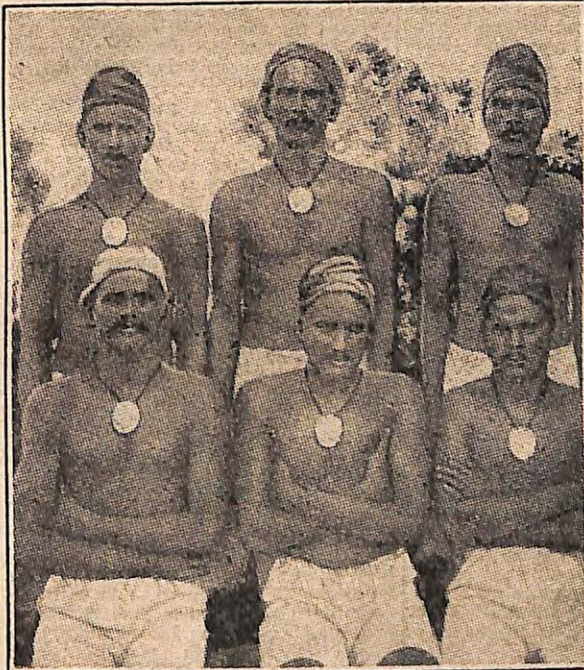
One can tell a Pathan at a glance. He is more muscular than most natives of India, and his flowing robes, none too clean, as a rule, and large head-dress give an added effect to his superiority in height and strength. His foreign origin is shown both by his ruddy complexion and his haughty attitude towards the real native, whom he despises as cordially as they despise him.

Some of the Pathans roam about the country in gangs, going from place to place with no apparent reason for their wanderings. Like all the nomadic tribes, they take with them donkeys, on the backs of which they pile the mats with which they make their mat houses. Each

donkey usually carries mats enough to build one house.

Many, however, have settled down in a village and married a native girl, at the same time taking up some form of occupation which is, ostensibly, an honest one. But usually this occupation is merely a cloak to cover others which give them an opportunity for indulging in their avaricious and dishonest propensities.

A favourite occupation with the Pathan is that of a cloth-dealer of the hire-purchase type, and with this he combines moneylending as a side-line. Both



KULLARS of Trichinopoly. Men of this tribe—but not necessarily those pictured above—have their own idea of what is right and wrong, and that idea is usually different from European standards.
(Photo: Clarke & Hyde.)

of these trades gives him a chance of making a larger profit than his customer originally bargained for. Should the unfortunate native get behind in his payments then the once affable merchant becomes a stony-hearted Shylock, who demands his pound of flesh as well as two or three more.

If intimidation and threats are unavailing then he will not shrink from using physical force. The fact that the Pathan has a legitimate trade adds to the difficulties of the police when called

upon to deal with one. Into the bargain he has a more than usual knowledge of the weaknesses of the village classes, and makes full use of this when the time comes to put on the screw.

Suppose the fictitious Bapoo has got behind with his payments to the mythical Rahman Khan, then Rahman will call upon him and remind him of his debt. Bapoo pleads that trade is bad or that crops are poor, and begs an extension of time.

Rahman, however, remains firm. He runs a business and not a charity. Perhaps Bapoo had better sell a buffalo, for if the debt is not paid in two days, then—

Bapoo is quick to understand what that "then" implies, and no sooner has Rahman Khan departed than Bapoo rushes into his house and, handing a stick to his wife, commands her to administer to him a good beating. A few minutes later Bapoo runs off to the patel (head man of the village) to lay a complaint against Rahman for having assaulted him.

Thereupon Rahman is hauled off to the village chauri to await the magistrate's inquiry.

At the trial Rahman will defend the charge by telling the truth—not so much from desire as from policy. On the other hand, almost every adult in the village

comes forward to substantiate Bapoo's accusation. The conflicting evidence that is brought forward is somewhat disconcerting for the magistrate, but it does not surprise him.

He knows that native witnesses believe that as they have been called upon to give evidence they are expected to say something, even though they may have been miles away from the scene of the crime when it was committed.

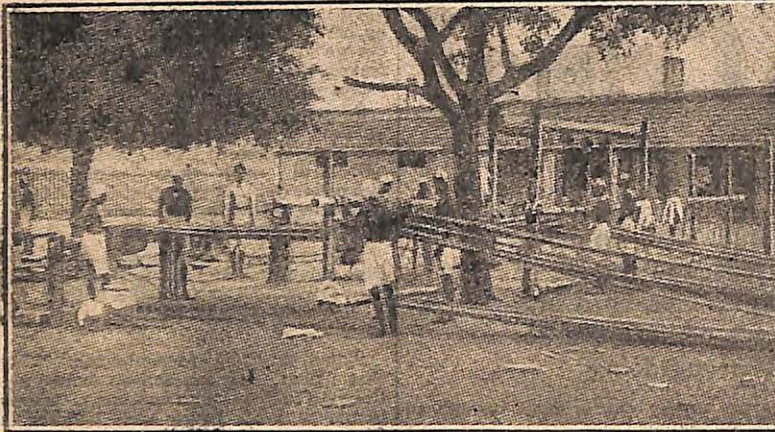
Then the magistrate notices that the wife of the tearful, protesting Bapoo is not amongst the list of witnesses, so she is forthwith sent for. She arrives in charge of the village constable under the belief that some charge has been brought against her.

So unnerved is she that the magistrate has little difficulty in extracting from her the truth.

Of course, Rahman Khan is acquitted, and Bapoo sent away with a caution to be more careful in future about telling the truth.

Solace for Sufferings.

Such a case as the above may seem fanciful to the average English reader, but it is a commonplace with those who have the administration of justice in India. Also, it illustrates how difficult it is to the police to bring home a crime to such an astute criminal as is the Pathan.



AN INDIAN PRISON is of necessity built on the open air principle. Here native prisoners are seen making coir matting. The job is supposed to be part of their punishment, but you will notice the "workers" are taking it all very leisurely. Note, too, the primitive looms. [Photo: Clarke & Hyde.]

The trial has gone much as Rahman expected it would, nor did the accusation come as a surprise. But now Rahman calls once more on Bapoo and actually threatens him with personal violence. At the same time he demands a further sum as solace for his sufferings whilst under arrest. This time Bapoo sees no way of escape. If Rahman did resort to violence then it would be useless, after the recent exposure, to lay a complaint to the patel. By one or other means Bapoo raises the sum demanded.

Even the wares of the Pathan may be a cloak for other nefarious deeds. It is quite common to find housebreaking implements or even arms and ammunition hidden amidst his innocent-looking bales of cloth or carpets. So, too, a Pathan will travel enormous distances in order to commit a crime or evade arrest. In one instance a party of these criminals, after committing an act of dacoity, were found to have walked no less than a hundred and fifty miles in the two following days.

Most readers of the U. J. Supplement are familiar with the methods of the English and American coiners. So, too, they are acquainted with the word "fake," used to designate the coins that the coiner produces.

Now, this word, introduced into England by ex-soldiers who have served in India, is a corruption of the name Fakir-coiner, another name for a Mohammedan tribe of the Chupperbands. Part of the year the members of the tribe will settle down in a village, even taking up some agricultural occupation.

But shortly after the period of the Mohurrum festival the men leave their homes and wander around the country, frequenting the fairs and bazaars dressed as professional mendicants with the usual paraphernalia of beads, alms-bag, bowl, and tongs.

Working together in gangs, they indulge in petty theft and pony-stealing if they get the chance, and some of them are adept at various forms of the confidence trick.

Peculiar Precautions.

But their real speciality is coining. They carry with them a set of rather primitive implements for this purpose, and never make more than a few coins at a time, after which they destroy the mould. Although the coins are crudely made, the Chupperband has little difficulty in passing them, usually by some very elementary trick of sleight of hand.

He will go into a shop and order several articles at the same time, placing several genuine coins on the counter. It is more than likely that the shopkeeper will look at the coins and see that they are genuine. Then, while his back is turned, as he gets the articles from the shelves, the coiner will substitute a fake coin for one of the genuine ones without the shopkeeper being aware that he has been tricked.

When arresting a gang of Chupperbands the police have to take somewhat peculiar precautions. Before they start to search the gang they handcuff them, and then set them some distance apart from each other. If an inexperienced policeman should chance to leave the gang close together, then they would proceed to start a sham quarrel. Before the policeman has time to separate them they find an opportunity of disposing of any incriminating material they chance to have concealed upon them.

There is another tribe that has its own speciality. These are the Bhamptas, whose home was originally in the Deccan; but they now carry out their nefarious trade all over India. Nor do they keep to the roads on their travels, but instead use the railways. For the Bhamptas are trained from early childhood in luggage pilfering and pick-pocketing.

When on their thieving expeditions they assume a variety of disguises, a by no means difficult thing to do in India. Some dress as well-to-do Mahrattas on a pilgrimage, others as Lingat traders, or even the inevitable mendicant (an always safe disguise in India).

But policemen on duty near a railway-station, bazaar, or anywhere where a crowd has collected, have no trouble in identifying a Bhampta.

Ripped Bags.

Always on the look-out for possibilities, his gaze wanders restlessly from person to person, and frequently towards any policeman who may be near. Working in parties, their methods differ little from that of the English "dip," though in other directions they have ingenious tricks of their own.

It is customary for travellers in India to take a midday siesta beneath the shade of a roadside tree. Before going to sleep they place their bundles beneath their heads, more as a safety precaution than a pillow. This, however, does not deter the Bhamptas.

Waiting until their prospective victim

is fast asleep, they approach him silently. Then one of the Bhamptas sticks a pin deeply into the sole of the sleeper's foot, and leaves it there. The victim jumps up with a terrified start, thinking that he has been bitten by some poisonous snake. Quick as a flash another of the gang snatches his bundle, and the party make off at top speed.

Before the unfortunate traveller has awakened sufficiently to realise what is happening, and also remove the pin from his foot, the thieves have gained a considerable start.

This tribe has an extensive sign language. For instance, if one of a gang wraps his shoulder-cloth round his arm it is a sign to the others not to approach him. For this sign implies that he is "tied up," that is to say, that the police are watching him.

Above all, they are a nuisance to the railway companies, for the Bhamptas make a special study of railway thefts. A frequent method by which they carry out their luggage pilfering is the following:

Two of them will enter a compartment on one of the night trains. While one sits down on the seat the other lies down on the floor, covering himself with a cloth under the pretence of going to sleep. The other will then cover his knees with a cloth in order to further conceal the movements of his companion.

Taking the small, curved knife which the Bhamptas carry between the upper lip and the gum, the man on the floor rips open the side of the bags which the other passengers have placed under the seat, and hands up any valuables to his companion. At the next stopping-place they leave the compartment and enter another, repeating the process, if possible.

Worshippers of Bhwani.

The worst insult that you can offer to a native of Orissa is to call him a Pan.

To this may be added that there is a widespread belief in India that all weavers are rogues.

Now, the Pans are a tribe who have an hereditary occupation, that of weaving, but they are not above indulging in thefts and dacoity if opportunity offers. Nevertheless, under a good master they can remain honest. So, too, they are both brave and strong, and for these reasons a police zemindar will often employ Pans as a good bodyguard.

Another criminal tribe is that of the Korchas (Kaikadis). While both the men and the women are drunken and dissolute, yet they are not without some pride in their profession. They look down with disdain on petty theft, preferring to consider robbery and dacoity (robbery with violence by organised gangs) as their special hereditary profession.

Like the Haburas and one or two other of the criminal tribes, the Korchas are extremely superstitious. They are worshippers of the terrible goddess Bhwani, and will not set out on an expedition if they consider the omens are not in their favour.

If a dacoity of unusual violence has been committed the police at once suspect the Korchas, and immediately inquire whether any shoes have been included in the booty taken by the robbers. For it is characteristic of this tribe that they hold some strange superstition in connection with the stealing of their victim's shoes.

The foregoing by no means exhausts the list of criminal tribes which infest India. But much that has already been said would apply to most of the other tribes. In conclusion, it may be mentioned that there are upwards of 250,000 persons in India who are members of one or other of these criminal tribes.

The Strange Case of the RUNAWAY SURGEON.

(Continued from page 10.)

"You are brought to that conclusion by this portrait, I suppose, my lad?"

"Chiefly—yes, guv'nor. Aren't you?"

"Leave me out of it for a moment," Blake said, with a smile. "You regard this call of Fifette Bierce upon Dr. Culver as having an important bearing upon his disappearance, eh?"

"A vital bearing—yes, guv'nor. She is the foreign-looking woman who called upon him yesterday, whom the footman says insisted upon an interview. What was the name she gave?"

"The Princess Nijowski," Blake said quietly.

"That's it! The very sort of name she would be likely to assume. It's her favourite role every time, guv'nor. We don't know what passed between them, or what excuse she gave for calling. But we know that he referred her to another doctor across the way, and that she did not avail herself of the recommendation. But she was simply paving the way for what was to happen later on. That's my opinion."

"I see," Blake said, with quiet emphasis. "Then you presume that Culver's intentions were known to her, eh?"

"How, guv'nor?" exclaimed Tinker quickly. "I mean, my lad, that this interview took place before his visit to the jeweller's, and before his visit to the bank. In fact," Blake added, with a smile, "I very much question whether at this juncture Culver had even written his cheque on 'Self.' Your presumption must be there, Tinker, that Fifette knew beforehand that he was going to write a cheque, that he was going to cash it and convert it into jewellery sufficiently worth while to interest the Syndicate."

Tinker opened his mouth, and closed it again quickly, staring at Blake in a somewhat confused way. His suddenly conceived theory had been very rudely shaken, but he was loath to part with it.

"Yes, guv'nor," he agreed, after a pause. "She must have had information that—er—I mean, Fifette must have had some idea that—"

"In short, my lad, your theory is that Culver has been kidnapped by the Syndicate, acting under Kestrel's orders?"

"Yes," said Tinker, a little nervously; for he was floundering even worse than Harker had floundered.

"And the Syndicate, having an equal opportunity to kidnap him when he was in possession of a thousand pounds in sheer hard cash, chose to delay their attack until he had converted the cash into jewellery which would never realise the same amount, and be somewhat difficult to convert at all, except at a sacrifice?"

Tinker smiled somewhat wryly, seeing the force of Blake's argument.

"I don't know about that, guv'nor. It—might not have been convenient—I mean, it might not have quite fitted into their plans to capture him before they did. Anyway," he went on, rather doggedly, "I'll bet that is the solution. Fifette Bierce did not call on him for fun."

"Besides, we know that she is not the only member of the Syndicate now in London. It was Madrand who broke in here and stole the Rembrandt and the Chinese ornament. We got the rumour, too, a fortnight ago that Kestrel had crossed, and was either in London or in Liverpool. There may be flaws in the theory, of course, guv'nor," he added, "but I'd rather attribute this business to the Kestrel Syndicate than to that ex-race-course hooligan Harker fancies."

Sexton Blake shrugged his shoulders, and tore out the tell-tale photograph, folding it carefully and transferring it to his pocket-case. The disappearance of a Harley Street surgeon upon the eve of his wedding was more in the nature of a social scandal than a case for criminal investigation.

It was the sort of problem which would have been entrusted in most cases, not to Scotland Yard or to himself, but to the ferrets and agents of some ordinary firm of Divorce Court investigators.

Yet it was gradually coming home to Sexton Blake that he had not for years been called upon to investigate a mystery

more baffling and more involved, or to inquire into a problem the clues of which were more at variance and conflicting.

He had settled down to a further period of quiet rumination, striving to evolve some thesis into which every known circumstance of Culver's disappearance could be made to fit, when the door opened, and Mrs. Bardell entered, presenting for the second time in twenty-four hours the card of Sir Earnest Longworth.

Blake frowned as he bade the old house-keeper to show him up. The manner and attitude of the disappointed girl's father irritated him beyond measure.

But, to Blake's surprise, a great deal of the bluster had disappeared from the man's manner when he entered. An element of doubt and uncertainty had undermined Sir Earnest's anger. He was a little petulant now and bewildered, though still obviously suspicious.

"Here's a queer kettle of fish, Mr. Blake!" he blurted out. "I can't make head or tail of it, and I might as well admit it! Culver is up to something, confound the man, but what it is Heaven only knows, because I don't! Look here!"

He thrust his hand into his pocket, and drew out a diamond necklace of exceptional brilliance and beauty, laying it upon the table.

"Look at this, Blake!" he muttered. "It has just arrived by post, addressed to my daughter."

"From Dr. Culver?" Blake asked, glancing at the stockbroker quickly.

"From Culver—yes."

"With no message?"

"Yes. Here is the message, Mr. Blake. I tell you, I am bewildered! I can't make it out! Look at it!"

He drew a jewel-box from another pocket

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and opened it, taking out a small card, upon which a few words had been scribbled with a fountain-pen. When Blake read them he was conscious of a little thrill of satisfaction. The message was a tender one. It ran:

"To my beloved Sweetheart and Wife.—
From her devoted Husband, J. Ross Culver."

The stockbroker was studying Blake's features with almost pitiful intenceness as the detective read the message slowly.

The arrival of this necklace with its tender message, had plunged Sylvia Longworth into a state of grief bordering upon hysteria, which had rended her father's heartstrings. Not only that, but it had re-established her trust and belief in the man she loved, so that Sir Earnest, after his heated denunciations of the surgeon, had first repeated his suspicions, then apologised, and finally fled from the house, sore and bewildered, with his daughter's tearful reproaches gnawing at his conscience.

"Wh-what do you think of it, Mr. Blake?" Sir Earnest finally blurted out, and his blustering manner had become now almost entreating.

"I am delighted, Sir Earnest!" Blake said quietly. "For your daughter's sake, I am more than delighted!"

"Yes. But—but she is almost crazy, poor girl! It is all so illogical, so inexplicable, Mr. Blake! I mean, think of the poor child's torture of mind! First one thing, then another! It—it doesn't lead anywhere, explain anything—that's what I mean! How do you account for it, Mr. Blake?"

"I can't account for it," Blake said quietly.

"But surely you have some idea?" the stockbroker cried hoarsely. "Doesn't it—er—convey anything to you? Doesn't it point to anything?"

"Of course. It points to one thing very

clearly, in my opinion, Sir Earnest," Blake continued calmly. "It proves to my satisfaction that you have very badly misjudged Dr. Culver, and that he has not jilted your daughter in the way you imagine. To my mind, Sir Earnest, it disposes of your theory of an elopement with another woman."

The stockbroker stared at Blake in a blank way. He was obviously a little ashamed of himself, yet, at the same time, still inclined to be suspicious and a little defiant. But he was very clearly nonplussed by this unlooked-for development—utterly nonplussed.

It was Mrs. Bardell once again who broke the awkward silence which followed.

"Mr. Arker is here, sir. Shall I tell him to wait?"

"No; show him up," Blake said quickly. "Inspector Harker is the detective, Sir Earnest," he said, turning to the stockbroker, "who has been detailed by the Commissioner to investigate this case. I think he will be surprised by what has happened."

And Harker was. When he saw the necklace and read the message which had accompanied it, a low whistle of astonishment escaped him.

"Jehos!" he muttered. "But this is queer, isn't it, Blake?"

"It seems rather remarkable," Blake agreed, with a smile.

"I mean"—Harker stared across at the detective with puckered brows thoughtfully—"I mean it puts a different complexion on the whole case. It upsets everything. It isn't the sort of thing a man would do when he was eloping with a—"

"An unknown quantity!" Blake put in, with a smile. "I have just expressed the same opinion to Sir Earnest here. It upsets that theory, doesn't it?"

"Without doubt," said Harker thoughtfully.

"And it upsets the other theory, too, Harker," Blake said meaningly. "The theory of robbery, I mean." The detective glanced across at Tinker's bewildered face with a wry smile. "Whoever the robbers may have been supposed," he added quietly, "the theory of robbery is now quite untenable."

"You mean that Culver has not deserted my daughter for someone else, and that he has not been kidnapped for purposes of robbery, eh, Mr. Blake?" said the stockbroker slowly.

"Yes." "That means, then, that we're left without a theory and without even a clue. We've got nothing, eh?"

"I'm afraid not, Sir Earnest. We have got to recommence our investigations from a different viewpoint altogether."

The financier nodded in a rather unconvinced way, and paced the room up and down, his eyes fixed upon the carpet, his brows puckered deeply.

"I'm not so sure that my theory is altogether ruled out," he growled presently, turning on his heel and staring at the two detectives. "I'm not so sure at all. Culver might have been a bit conscience-stricken at the last moment, and sent this necklace as a sort of peace offering—a parting gift, like, to make up for his own absence. I shouldn't be surprised."

"And he enclosed this message," Blake said, with deliberate sarcasm, "in order to make the present more acceptable under the circumstances, eh?"

"He might have sent it as a blind!" snapped the financier irritably. "I shouldn't be surprised at that, either. I don't care what you think, Mr. Blake. This nurse he was sweet on has disappeared at the same time—vamoosed mysteriously. You can't get away from that!"

"I think that might be explained away quite innocently, Sir Earnest," Harker put in quietly. "We have had some news of the lady from the hospital."

"You have? What news?" the stockbroker asked eagerly.

"A lady in the uniform of a nurse, and answering to the description of the Sister from St. David's, has been knocked down by a motor not far from Croydon, and is at present lying in the Cottage Hospital at Purbridge. I came here, in fact, to ask Mr. Blake to come down to Purbridge with me. I believe you know the lady, Blake. You could identify her, if she is unable to disclose her own identity."

Blake nodded. He would have known the pale-faced, dark-eyed Sister Margaret among a million other women. Sir Earnest Longworth was looking over eagerly.

"You mean you are going now, inspector?"

"At once—yes."

"If you would care for me to run you down in my car—"

"It is very kind of you," Harker said. "Not at all. If I can do anything at all to get this unfortunate matter cleared up I will do it. If I have misjudged this lady I am sorry—devilishly sorry. It would be a great relief for me to know that I had misjudged her—that she has had nothing whatever to do with—with Culver's disappearance at all. I shall be delighted to run you down."

The powerful Rolls belonging to the stockbroker awaited the party outside, and the chauffeur nodded as Sir Earnest gave him directions. They glided swiftly through the West End and across the water, leaving London quickly behind them, and reaching the little village hospital at Purbridge in less than an hour.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

"Kestrel is Dead!"



THE local doctor in attendance was just leaving as they arrived, and he paused for a few minutes to discuss the case.

"A fractured collar-bone and concussion," he said to Blake. "The concussion is rather severe. She has not yet recovered consciousness."

"When was she brought in?" Blake asked.

"Yesterday evening, about five-thirty. The

accident happened upon the road here, almost outside the hospital. In that respect, it was fortunate."

"She was knocked down by a car, I understand, doctor?"

"We thought so at first. Upon a more careful examination of her injuries, I do not think so. I am of opinion that she fell from a car."

"Really?"

The doctor had drawn Blake and Harker aside.

"I feel sure of it, gentlemen. There is no sign of such a bruise or contusion as there must have been if a car had struck her. She seems to have pitched upon her shoulder first, and to have struck the side of her head violently upon the road. Do you know the lady?"

"We believe her to be a nurse who is missing from St. David's Hospital in London," Harker said, in his unemotional, businesslike way. "If we can establish her identity—"

"Of course. She had nothing in her possession which gave us any clue. I will take you up," the doctor said.

He led the way, and Sir Earnest, extremely curious, joined the party which ascended the short flight of steps and passed through into the quiet, comfortable ward.

A few other patients regarded them curiously as they passed along to the bed around which a large screen had been drawn. A kindly-faced nurse looked up from her constant vigil by the side of the unconscious patient.

Blake took a quick, penetrative glance at the woman in the bed. The mass of soft dark hair was now almost hidden under the bandages which enclosed her head; her eyes were closed, the long dark lashes lying in rich contrast upon the cheeks, which were now pale as alabaster.

But there could be no mistaking the handsome, straight-cut features, the slight lines of pain upon the brow, as of a woman who had looked life in the face and who had suffered.

"It is Sister Margaret," Tinker muttered. Blake nodded, and bent over the bed, raising the limp white hand for a moment and pressing the dangerously low pulse. A moment later he let the hand fall gently, and, turning, nodded meaningly to the doctor, who led the way silently from the bed.

"You know her, Mr. Blake?" the doctor asked outside the ward.

"Yes. She is a nurse from St. David's Hospital. We will instruct the people there, and get in touch with her relatives. We are much obliged."

The famous detective's face was calm and

placid. His expression betrayed nothing of the sudden emotion which had arisen within him. But it was as if a bomb had dropped suddenly, shattering every theory and every belief which he had held.

A little over an hour ago he had definitely discarded the theory of robbery. The detestable theory that Dr. Culver had had an affair with another woman had also been finally and completely laid to rest beside the equally futile theory of robbery.

But now Blake himself was floored—suddenly and completely.

And the strange thing was that neither Harker nor Sir Earnest Longworth knew it. Nor, even, did Tinker.

When Blake raised the left hand of Sister Margaret, none of them had seen what Blake had seen. None of them had noticed the beautiful ring, obviously new, which glistened upon the third finger.

It was a diamond-cluster ring—the diamonds being clustered about a single, large ruby, crescent-shaped, and of wonderful purity. A ring of such beauty and of such a striking pattern was not easily forgotten.

Blake knew, the instant his eyes fell upon it, that this was the ring—this ring upon the left hand of the unconscious nurse—was the one which Dr. Culver had bought from the jewellers the afternoon before at the same time as he purchased the necklace.

That was the bombshell.

Upon the journey back to London Sexton Blake was silent and uncommunicative in a way which frankly puzzled Sir Earnest Longworth, though Harker and Tinker accepted the fact philosophically, knowing his master's changing moods.

Sir Earnest now openly confessed his mistake, and was inclined to be distinctly apologetic to Blake for having misjudged his friend. He was inclined, he said, to accept Blake's original theory that poor Culver had succumbed to a breakdown. Perhaps the strain had resulted in loss of memory—in which case he might be wandering the country for some time before they traced him.

Harker, knowing a little more of the circumstances of Nurse Margaret's accident, was more puzzled than the stockbroker; but he also, in the absence of any other tenable theory, was inclined to the same solution.

Blake accepted their remarks en route with non-committal remarks, expressing no opinion one way or the other.

It was not until they had reached home, and darkness had fallen, that the detective, ensconced once again in his favourite armchair, confessed to Tinker that he had never in his career been more completely baffled.

And it was not because of an absence of clues. There were several clues—and they appeared on the face of them, to be clues of the utmost importance. Each one seemed to have a vital bearing on the case. Yet they were all so conflicting that they combined merely to create bewilderment.

Tinker opened his mouth and stared in blank astonishment when Blake told him what he had seen upon the finger of Nurse Margaret.

"Surely, gov'nor—it—it could not be—I mean—"

"It is, my lad," Blake said rather petulantly; "and you may let that fact suffice. After finally dismissing Sir Earnest Longworth's theory of intrigue—after he himself had practically discarded it—we have it confirmed in this astounding manner."

"Yet the necklace, which was purchased at the same time as this ring, has been posted by Culver to Sylvia Longworth with a message of endearment. Those are two important clues, each pointing to a different conclusion, each diametrically opposed."

"The theory of robbery," Blake went on, "has now nothing to support it. Consequently, we are at a loss to understand what reason Fiffette Bierce can have had for calling upon Culver, or what part, if any, the Syndicate can have played in the affair."

"Our original theory of nervous breakdown

—the one to which Sir Earnest Longworth has now veered round—is more or less discredited. There is nothing now to indicate that Culver was not perfectly normal till the moment of his disappearance. Thus, as I have already said, we have certain vital clues, all of which contradict each other and lead us nowhere.

"And, to make confusion more confounded, we now have an added mystery to solve regarding this Sister Margaret. How comes she to be wearing this ring upon her engagement finger? How came she to fall from a car, the driver of which evidently drove on and left her stunned and unconscious on the road in Purbridge?"

Tinker shook his head slowly. If the mystery were baffling to Blake, still more was it inexplicable to him. What connection had this nurse with the case? What connection with it had Fiffette Bierce, alias the Princess Nijowski?

Could it be that the subtle and intriguing mind of "the Prince Prefecture" was behind it all? Had Dr. Ross Culver been made the central figure in a cleverly spun web of mystery and intrigue—the reason for whose spinning they could not yet divine?

It seemed a vague thesis, but the only one which was left. Certainly in the very elements of its mystery the case savoured of Kestrel and the insidious Syndicate he controlled.

And the leaders of the Syndicate were at present in London. Madrano, the Spaniard, was there; of that they had had plain proof in the theft of the two art treasures from Blake's rooms. Fiffette was there, too, under the imposing pseudonym of the Princess Nijowski. Kestrel himself was in London, so rumour whispered.

An hour had passed when Blake was awakened from his reverie by a sharp, rather startling snarl from Pedro. The great bloodhound had leaped suddenly out of his apparent sleep upon the rug, and with bared fangs he sprang towards the window.

A dark shadow had appeared upon the pane for an instant, and Blake dropped to his knees from the chair, moving swiftly on all fours to the cover of the wall near to the window.

"Look out, my lad!" he muttered warningly to Tinker. "Quiet, sir!" to Pedro. "Quiet!"

The bloodhound crouched obediently and without noise, though his lips drew back farther on his teeth as the window was raised an inch from the bottom. Eight long, tapering fingers appeared. Blake drew his automatic from his pocket and brought it into line grimly.

"M'sieu Blake!"

The whispered voice from the window was low and husky. Blake moved forward slightly.

"Who is that?"

"It is I, the Spider! May I come in?" said the voice in French.

A gasp broke from Tinker, and Blake rose quickly from his crouching posture.

"Beaudelaire?" he said in a low tone.

"The same, m'sieu!"

Blake smiled rather grimly, though there was an expression also in his face of mild astonishment. The last person he had expected there that evening was the French dwarf Beaudelaire—that queer, inscrutable hunchback, whose natural genius for investigation and espionage made him one of Blake's most valued allies.

Neither Blake nor Tinker had seen the Spider since they left him upon that memorable night in the Parisian catacombs—if they excepted that transitory glimpse which they had obtained of his queer, ghoul-like figure when, with Vernier of the Prefecture, they pursued the escaping minions of Kestrel into the eerie underworld beneath the Black Chateau.*

It was on that occasion they had learned, rather bitterly, that Beaudelaire was not always with them. It suited his purpose sometimes to run with the hare instead of hunting with the hounds.

"Come in, mon ami!" Blake said in a low but cordial voice. "Entrez, mon bon!"

"Then call off that cursed dog," growled the dwarf, "if you would not have me knife him!"

Blake smiled and crossed to the other room, ordering Pedro to follow, closing the door, behind the hound as it passed

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* See "The Syndicate for Sale!" in No. 1,070 of the "Union Jack."—Ed.

obediently inside. When the detective turned, the window had already been thrust up and the queer, hunched, half-birdlike figure of the dwarf hopped down into the room, a broad smile upon his hideous face.

A growl came from beyond the door, and the hand of the dwarf went quickly to his hip. He turned and peered about him apprehensively.

"It is all right, mon ami! The dog is safe!"

"He may well be, curse him! I hate the species!"

"He would not touch you without my order," Blake said quietly. "But this is a surprise and a great pleasure, friend. You have news for me, perhaps?"

"I have news, m'sieu!"

"Good! Then it can wait a moment! Be seated, my friend. It is not often we have the distinction of your company," Blake said, with the effusion of compliment which he knew well was nectar to the hunchback. "Permit me!"

He crossed to the sideboard and withdrew a small bottle of absinthe, which he kept there for such visits as this, placing it with a small basin of lump sugar and a glass upon the small table beside the dwarf. Beaudelaire grinned, and let the spirit drip slowly through the sugar into the glass.

When the glass was nearly full he raised it and tossed off the contents in one gulp, setting down the glass and peering across at Blake with deep-set eyes which glistened strangely.

"I have told you I have news for you, m'sieu! It is such news as you do not hear every day."

"What news is this, m'sieu?"

The dwarf hopped down from the chair and sprang to Blake, leaning up, whispering something into his ear which Tinker did not hear—something which fetched Blake from his seat with a hoarse cry.

"What?"

"I believe it to be true, m'sieu," the dwarf said audibly; and Tinker had never seen a more hideous grin of satisfaction upon a human face before. The bead-like eyes gleamed under the bridge of the hooked, hawk-like nose. "I have come with all speed to tell you. Leon Kestrel is dead at the Villa Des Roches at Flambeaulieu!"



"Come in, my friend!" said Blake in a low but cordial voice. "Then call off that dog!" growled the dwarf. "That is, if you would not have me knife him." (Chapter 6.)

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.
At the Villa Des Roches.



THE dusk was deepening into darkness, and a night mist had begun to creep out from the shadows of the wood as the decrepit horse limped with its rickety conveyance along the lonely road which skirted the Forest of Flambeaulieu in the Mayenne Province.

Upon the other side of the road a tributary of the Mayenne River wound a lazy course until its current quickened between a number of huge boulders which overhung the stream, like huge, brooding sentinels in the dusk.

One boulder in particular, which rose almost vertically from the water, seemed of phenomenal bulk, until its outline emerged more clearly as that of a sturdy, stone-built house, whose wooded grounds spread from the villa itself, and then tapered towards an iron gate which opened on to the road.

It was outside this gate that the limping horse stopped eventually. The French driver of the out-of-date conveyance turned to his two passengers.

"The Villa des Roches, messieurs!" he growled.

The taller and elder of the two passengers sprang down silently and paid the driver, the excess of fare being sufficient to win an added grant of gratitude.

"I would be glad to be returning with you, driver," he said. "Ours is not a pleasant errand."

"How so, m'sieu?"

"The gentleman in the villa yonder is dead, they tell me."

"I am not surprised, m'sieu," the driver

said, with a shrug of the shoulders. "It comes to all of us."

"Eventually, yes, driver. But this was a young man, I believe."

"Bah! If he was young, then I am an infant! If he is dead, he has had his fling!" the driver growled.

"You did not know he was dead, driver?"

"Non, m'sieu!"

"Then why are you not surprised?"

"He has been ill. The doctor from Flambeaulieu has been each day—two or three times. I have driven him more than once. A patient must be nearly dead to drag the doctor so often from his garden. You are the notary, perhaps, m'sieu?"

"I am making inquiries," came the reply.

As the horse turned and limped back along the road towards the lonely station, the two passengers turned into the creaking gate, advancing through the belt of trees to the drab house beyond.

Their feet fell without noise upon the mossy path, and the younger looked up and spoke in a low tone.

"It doesn't seem possible that he is really dead, guv'nor! Yet I suppose the Spider can be trusted?"

Sexton Blake nodded grimly.

"Beaudelaire is not often mistaken, Tinker. I trust he is not now."

"It means the end of a scourge," Tinker muttered meaningly. "Yet it sounds too good to be true. Somehow one never regards Kestrel as ordinary flesh and blood. Did the Spider know the cause of his death, guv'nor?" he asked, lowering his voice to a whisper as they approached the silent, gloomy house.

"No; he believes it to be poison!" Blake muttered.

The detective raised a finger as though to check further conversation as they emerged from the shadow of the trees and advanced towards the house. No sign of a light gleamed from the narrow windows of the villa. It seemed silent and deserted, as if with the last breath of the great arch-criminal the allegiance of his confederates had departed also—and they had fled, leaving the house with its dead.

It had been startling news which Beaudelaire had brought so mysteriously to Baker

Street the night before—news which, when communicated, would draw such a sigh of deep relief from Scotland Yard as to find an echo in the police headquarters of every other country in the world.

It was news which filled Sexton Blake with a sense of intense satisfaction—yet filled him also with the desire to confirm it. He dared not accept it as the truth until he had obtained some confirmation. Even the genius of Beaudelaire was not infallible.

Yet, important as it was, Tinker had been surprised that Blake should have left the case he had in hand to come post-haste like this to France and Flambeaulieu. It was not like the detective to desert an investigation like that of Dr. Culver's disappearance—especially when it had led him to a point of bewildering uncertainty. He had never known Sexton Blake before to be sidetracked from an interesting case.

During the journey Tinker had fastened upon several interesting speculations, none of which had led him anywhere. There was no time now, however, for further theorising. He followed Sexton Blake quietly up the broad steps to the heavy door of the house. Blake raised the knocker, and knocked boldly upon it. There came no reply.

Blake waited for some minutes before he knocked again, this time sending the echoes resounding in a hollow manner through the house. Still there came no sound of voice or movement. The detective backed down the steps, glancing up at the upper windows, each clothed in deep shadow.

A third time he knocked, without result. Then he groped in his pocket for a bunch of skeleton keys, bending over the heavy, old-fashioned lock of the door, manipulating the keys dexterously. Within a minute there was a slight creak, and the door opened inwards.

The roomy hall of the villa was bathed in shadow, and as the couple entered a quick, low word of warning broke from Tinker. Blake also had seen the vague shadow crouching by the curtains beyond; his hand went to his hip quickly.

"Who is that?" he demanded in a low tone.

He was prepared to see the shadow fit

away, to have to spring after it in pursuit, for its movements had been furtive and suspicious. Instead, the short, slatternly figure of a girl came forward, her long, ill-kempt hair tumbled wildly about her face, her feet bare upon the mosaic tiles of the hall. She did not speak, but advanced silently, peering at them with a vacant, half-wit stare, in which there was more than a hint of fear.

"Pardon me!" Blake said, stepping towards her. "Why did you not come to the door?" She frowned, and put up a warning finger quickly.

"Sh-h!" she whispered. "My father is dead. Let him rest in peace!"

There was something moving and tragic in her vacant, half-witted manner, as there was something eerie about her figure there, half crouching in the darkness. Blake saw the condition of her mind, and knew that she must be humoured.

"I am sorry. Where is your father?" "Come!" she whispered. "I will show you. But you must tell no one that he is dead. If they ask you, you must say that he is only sleeping."

Blake glanced across at Tinker quickly. What did it all mean?

The half-witted girl turned and beckoned them to follow her, leading the way up the carpeted staircase, and across the upper landing to the narrower staircase beyond. A pungent odour of chloroform assailed their nostrils, and Blake paused a moment with a frown, to inhale critically.

The half-witted girl was already awaiting them in the small bed-room above. As they entered, she stole across the room and drew back a white sheet from the motionless figure upon the little bed.

Blake's heart stopped for an instant as he crossed quickly. The husky words of Beaudelaire were running through his mind: "Kestrel is dead in the Villa des Roches, at Flambeauille!"

A gasp broke from him the next moment. The man upon the bed was dead, but it was not the body of Kestrel. It was the body of a man shrivelled and aged, the yellow skin drawn across sunken cheeks, the hands, which had been reverently crossed upon his breast, gnarled and emaciated.

The detective turned presently to the girl behind them.

"Is this your father, my child?"

"Yes, m'sieu."

"What is your name?"

"Marie."

"What was your father's name?"

"Pierre."

"What other name had he, my child?" Blake asked, and she shook her head vacantly.

"I do not know, m'sieu."

Blake glanced at Tinker, and stole silently from the death-chamber. On the landing outside the moon shed a feeble gleam through the fanlight above.

"Of what did your father die, my child?"

Blake asked the girl gently. And she shook her head, with a half smile.

"When did he die?"

"I do not know."

"But you must know. I say, when did he die?"

"I cannot say. He did not speak when I went to call him this morning. I shook him and pinched him, but he did not answer me. I believe he is dead, but I have told no one. When the boy from the farm brought the milk this morning, he said: 'Where is old Pierre?' I said: 'He is sleeping. He is very tired.'"

She laughed, and put one finger to her head in a queer, crafty way, as though she had done something very clever. Blake looked down at her odd figure pitifully.

"Are you here alone, Marie?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, m'sieu."

"Where are the people who were living here?"

"They are gone. Mam'selle is gone, and the other messieurs. They have taken him away. He is dead, too."

A grunt broke from Tinker, and a light came into the detective's eyes.

"Who is dead, Marie?" he asked quickly.

"Monsieur who has been ill—M'sieu Bonhomme. He is dead. I saw them carry him away."

The poor, half-witted girl laughed, and then, with startling suddenness, burst into a flood of tears, out of which Blake and Tinker could not coax her. They tried to humour her, to question her, and elicit something of the truth about the strange household, of which she now was the only one remaining. But when she spoke she was wild and incoherent, and they could discover nothing.

They left her kneeling at the bed upon which the old man lay, and descended to the lower floor, upon which they had first detected the strong smell of an anæsthetic.

The door of a bed-room stood half ajar, and Blake's brows puckered as he entered. A large bed, lately occupied and unmade, stood in the middle. Near by five smooth planks had been spread upon three trestles, the whole covered with a white, blood-stained sheet.

Upon the washstand were rolls of bandages and a receptacle containing a solution of antiseptic. The big basin still contained a large sponge and water, discoloured a pinkish hue.

"Hallo!" Tinker muttered. "What has been happening here, guv'nor?"

And Blake shrugged his shoulders, picking up a small, sharp surgeon's scalpel, which had seemingly been overlooked.

"It seems pretty obvious what has been happening," he muttered.

He strode from the room, and down the stairs to the front door.

"Where are you going, guv'nor?"

"To see the local doctor who attended this Monsieur Bonhomme," Blake said.

They strode once more away from the lonely Villa des Roches, pausing at the entrance to the village to question a farm-hand.

The peasant pointed down a slope, across the wall of a garden in which a light moved continually, like a will-o'-the-wisp, or some gigantic glow-worm, crawling rapidly.

"The doctor is there, m'sieu, with the lamp. Roses are the only patients who will fetch him out after dark. He thinks as much of us as he does the slugs in his garden."

Blake smiled. Evidently the doctor's inattention to his practice had won him a rather evil reputation in the village, and when Blake and Tinker sought him out he relinquished his pursuit of slugs with very bad grace.

"Yes, m'sieu," he said. "I have been attending M'sieu Bonhomme at the villa. I have given him a great deal of my time. I give him no more."

"So I understand," Blake said, bridleing a little at the man's choleric manner. His manners were certainly not French. "When a patient dies off there is an end of treatment."

"Dies?" The doctor looked up at Blake sharply. "You mean M'sieu Bonhomme is dead?"

"I am told so."

"H'm! Then I wash my hands of it, m'sieu. I gave up the case some days ago."

"I believe you were attending him frequently until recently, doctor. May I ask what you were treating him for?"

"His daughter called me in and told me

he had been poisoned. I treated him for arsenical poisoning. Later, when other symptoms appeared, I had cause to revise the diagnosis. I judged him to be suffering from peritonitis in an acute form, and recommended an operation."

"I warned them that it would be a highly dangerous one, and one which could be entrusted only to a skilled surgeon. I recommended a surgeon in Paris. Then they abused me, and called me a fool and an incompetent, saying I should never have made the mistake in the first place. I will stand such insolence from nobody, m'sieu. I walked out of the place, and sent in my bill within an hour. I was finished."

"You are not aware, then," Blake asked, "whether other medical attention was procured?"

"I do not know, m'sieu," the doctor said frigidly.

"Or whether this operation you considered necessary was performed?"

"I do not know. In fact, m'sieu, I do not care. I do not listen to local tittle-tattle. I have made no inquiries. I find my garden enough to engage nearly all my attention. If M'sieu Bonhomme has succumbed, then I am sorry. He has been badly served by his daughter and his friends."

"But I understand," Blake said suggestively, "that Mademoiselle Bonhomme is a charming young lady."

The little doctor, with his shaggy eyebrows and fierce moustache, drew himself erect, and stared with his grey, aggressive eyes rather challengingly.

"M'sieu," he said, "you speak French enough well, but I believe you, by your accent, to be English. What are the lines of your English poet? If she be not fair to me, what care I how fair she be?"

Blake smiled, remembering suddenly a cutting he had in his pocket. It was the portrait, taken from the illustrated paper, of Dr. Culver talking to his visitor, the Princess Nijowski, on the day of his disappearance.

"Do you recognise that young lady, doctor?" he asked, and the doctor took one keen glance at it before handing it back.

"It is Mam'selle Bonhomme," he said promptly. "The gentleman I do not know."

Blake nodded, and returned the photograph to his pocket.

"There is a half-witted girl at the villa, doctor, and her father."

"Yes—old Pierre Lemarc. He and the girl have been caretakers and servants at the place for some years."

"Then I am afraid the old man's days of servitude are over, doctor. He is dead."

"Dead!" cried the doctor quickly.

"Yes. It is just heart-failure and senile decay, if I may encroach upon your province, doctor," Blake said, with a smile. "But it would be better, I think, for a formal visit to be paid. The girl is not a responsible person to be left in charge."

The doctor rang for a servant, despatching her in search of a village official who, Blake gathered, corresponded to the English coroner's officer—stating rather grudgingly that he would go up.

Further searching inquiries in the village were disappointing, revealing very little.

M'sieu Bonhomme, apparently, was a wealthy man who owned a powerful limousine. The limousine, driven by a liveried chauffeur, had left the villa some days ago, returning yesterday. This morning it had left again, passing through the village and along the Alencou road. On each occasion the blinds had been drawn, and the occupant, or occupants, apart from the chauffeur, were invisible to curious eyes.

It was with a feeling of considerable disappointment that Tinker accompanied his master back to the station at Flambeauille and entrained for the tedious journey back to Cherbourg.

The long journey to the Villa des Roches had taught them little. There was no doubt now that "Monsieur Bonhomme" was none other than the notorious "Prince Pretence" and that Mademoiselle Bonhomme was Fifette.

It was proved, too, that the Mummer had been prostrated by an attack of peritonitis—the only hope of recovery being an immediate operation.

There were evidences in the sick-room that the operation had been performed—and it flashed now like a flood of light upon Tinker that Blake had expected to find the missing surgeon at Flambeauille. He had not been side-tracked at all.

But the great fact which they had come

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to ascertain still eluded. "Kestrel is dead," Beaudelaire had said.

"Do you still think the Spider is right, gov'nor?" he asked eagerly.

"We shall know when we get back to London," Blake said quietly. "Dr. Culver will tell us that."

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER. The Truth Comes Out.



IT was not often that the good-natured and somewhat emotional Mrs. Bardell permitted the detective to see that she took more than a passing interest in the cases which he was called upon to investigate.

Her function was to cook and keep house and to minister to the material needs of Sexton Blake and Tinker. Moreover, as she had once informed Tinker, she had not been "dragged up like some of the imperent minks who can be seen nowadays masearceting as 'ousemaids.'" She challenged anyone to prove, or even to assert, that she had not been taught her place and kept it.

Very rarely, however, she was moved into making a comment upon a case in hand, or expressing an opinion of a person concerned in the case.

That the spirit of indignation had moved her on this present occasion was obvious as she stood in the consulting-room at Baker Street, with arms akimbo, a somewhat challengingly expression in the gaze she directed at the detective. It seemed as if she held her right forefinger in readiness to whip it from her hip and present it at Blake, like a revolver.

"Humid beans is as they was created, Mr. Blake," she stated deliberately, "whether they're 'igh or 'umble, and you might say that it ain't for the likes of me to set in judgment; but how that man has got the darling presumptuous to show his face again, and so soon, I can't imagine! And 'is lordship is as cool and calm as you like, just as if all he'd done was to miss a train or forget a appointment at the pictures."

Blake could hardly resist a smile.

"It is hardly fair of you to condemn Dr. Culver, Mrs. B., until you know his explanation."

"I dare say he's like the rest of the male spectrum, excusing me, Mister Blake," remarked the old lady frigidly. "He can make his own story good and tell a good tale. But nobody will convince me that there's any excuse for a man leaving a pore young woman who he's sworn to love and cherish 'igh and dry at the church on her weddin' morning. You may think I'm hard-hearted, but I'd never forgive a man for that, sir—no, not if he went down on all fours and grovelled to me. It would turn my love to 'ate, Mister Blake, and I can tell you that much."

"But Miss Longworth was not kept waiting high and dry at the church, Mrs. Bardell," Blake pointed out. "Only her father was there."

"And bad enough for him," exclaimed the old lady, "to be 'eld up to reticule by a crowd of Nosey Parkers! I know the sort of tittle-tattle what goes on at weddin's—I've been to too many in my time, Mister Blake, as I can assure you. And what about the poor girl sobbing her 'eart out at home? Men don't think of that, do they?"

"I think Dr. Culver may have been very genuinely distressed, Mrs. Bardell. You must remember there is such a thing as unavoidable absence."

"Not at weddin's!" snapped the old lady obstinately. "No, Mr. Blake—not at weddin's! A man's either there, or he ain't there; that's how I look at it."

Blake smiled, and remarked that it was a fortunate circumstance that the late Mr. Bardell was duly in position upon that vital occasion, and the old lady opened her mouth to retort.

She perceived the twinkle in Tinker's eye, however, and closed it again quickly, contenting herself with a significant sniff, indicating distrust and contempt, not so much for the detective and Tinker, as for the sex to which they had the bad taste to belong.

"Shell I show the gentle—er—er—shell I show the doctor up?" she asked coolly, selecting her words.

"If you will, Mrs. B. I am anxious to see him," Blake said promptly.

A minute later Blake rose to grasp the extended hand of the famous surgeon whose return to Harley Street had been as quiet and mysterious as his departure. His face was a shade paler than usual, his penetrative eyes brighter.

"I am pleased to see you back, Culver," Blake said quietly. "It is a great relief."

"It is good of you to say so, Blake. I believe I have been causing you and other folks a certain amount of anxiety."

"You have," Blake said, with a wry smile. "When did you return?"

"Yesterday," the famous surgeon said. "I came almost immediately to you. You were not here, and no one seemed to know where you had gone."

"I returned from France to-day," Blake said.

"From France?" The surgeon stared.

"Why have you been to France?"

"To look for you, primarily," Blake said, smiling. And the look of perplexity in Culver's face increased.

"How did you know I was in France?"

"I deduced as much. But we will talk about that later. You have a story to tell?"

The surgeon nodded, dropping into a chair and drawing it up as he peered at Blake in a significant way.

"Blake," he said slowly, "if we were strangers—if we were not friends, and you had taken no interest whatsoever in the business—I should have come here just the same—I should have come to consult you professionally."

"Really?"

"Yes, I have had a most amazing experience—a most extraordinary experience. Even now I have to pinch myself to believe I have not been dreaming. You can take it, Blake, that I do not exaggerate when I say that no English doctor has ever had such an experience. It is like the plot of a sensational novel."

Blake looked at the eager face of the famous specialist thoughtfully and nodded. He could pretty well have outlined the story he was about to hear, recounting it backwards in the manner of a skilled detective. He nodded, remaining silent.

"The affair begins, Blake," Dr. Culver proceeded, "pretty well from the time I left you after the operation. You remember—when you discovered that your flat had been burgled by one of this Syndicate gang you are running to earth?"

"Yes, I remember. You left to go straight home, I believe," Blake said.

"That is so. I went straight home. I had previously given orders that no patients were to be admitted. I could see no one until after my honeymoon. To my surprise, I found a young woman in the consulting room—a woman who simply refused to go without an interview. She was amazingly pretty, and, if I may say so quite dispassionately, one of the most perfectly formed creatures I have ever encountered. She was a Frenchwoman of good birth, married to a Russian nobleman—Prince Nijowski. Have you ever heard of him?"

"I have heard the name—yes," Blake admitted, with a side glance at Tinker.

"Her husband was dangerously ill, she told me, in France, and she had been instructed by the local doctor there that an immediate operation was necessary. She begged me to go back with her and perform it, promising to secure the best and swiftest possible transport, saying that I might name my own fee. I refused, of course, explaining why it was impossible, and gave her a note to a surgeon opposite—a man who has only recently bought his practice, and who would have gone, I believe, like a shot."

"Did she go to him?" Blake asked.

"No. But you shall see. I'm coming to that. I had my lunch, and sorted out a few papers, getting things more or less in order for my holiday. In the afternoon I went to the bank, cashed a cheque, and called at the jeweller's in Bond Street, making a couple of purchases—wedding-presents for Sylvia."

"A necklace and a ring, I believe?" Blake said.

"That is right. I suppose you ferreted that out, eh?" the surgeon added, with a swift smile. "Well, at four o'clock that afternoon, Blake, I had an appointment with a friend."

Next Week:—

THE CONFEDERATION

(See Page 27.)

"A lady friend?"

"Yes!" Dr. Culver raised his eyebrows and smiled in rather a wry way. "I suppose scandal has been busy in my absence, eh, Blake? The friend I allude to is a nurse at St. David's. We were in the same hospital during the war, Blake, and have always been good friends. I knew her husband in the War-days, too, and still know him."

"Her husband?" Blake queried.

"Yes. The poor girl has kept her marriage dark at the hospital. It has not been too happy a one. Since the War, Fellowes, her husband, has become a hopeless inebriate, and he is now in an inebriate home."

"But let me pass over this quickly. Before the War, and up till the time when he was wounded in the head by shrapnel, Fellowes was an excellent fellow and normal in every way. Margaret Fellowes believes, and I believe, too, that he has become an inebriate because of a certain cerebral pressure, just as I contend some men become criminals."

"I am naturally very interested in the case, both from a professional standpoint and for the sake of poor Fellowes and his wife. There has been some talk of my operating—in the same way as you saw me operate the other day—though, of course, nothing has been said to anyone else in the hospital. It was for this reason, and because she knew that I was to be away for some time that she begged me to meet her that afternoon and go down to the home where her husband at present is. I promised to go down and make some sort of an examination. That, purely and simply, is the explanation of my appointment with Mrs. Fellowes that afternoon."

The surgeon paused, and Blake glanced meaningfully at Tinker. Here was a simple and complete explanation of that apparent intimacy between doctor and nurse after the operation. Here was explained the nature of their meeting. But there was still to be explained the queer circumstance of Nurse Margaret wearing the ruby ring which Culver had declared to be a present for his bride.

"Mrs. Fellowes and I met at the Tube station," Dr. Culver went on, "and got in a taxi en route for Charing Cross. We were talking, I believe, about my marriage in the morning, and I remembered showing her the presents which I had bought. She admired the necklace very much, and the ring also. Woman-like, I suppose, she slipped the ring on to her finger—as Sylvia tells me she has since explained—when the taxi pulled up quickly—we were then, I believe, in Cockspur Street—and I became aware that a woman's voice was calling me from another car which had drawn up alongside."

"To my surprise, I recognised the Princess Nijowski, the young woman who had called at my house a little earlier. She was seated in a big limousine, in company with a small foreign-looking man, and she seemed, for some reason, exceedingly distressed."

"Naturally, I got out, and inquired what was the matter. She begged me to enter the car, motioning Mrs. Fellowes to come also. But I explained that we were bound for Charing Cross to catch a train."

"I will drive you there," she said, in broken English. "Permit me to drive you there, m'sieu. But I beg of you! I must have just one word with you, if you will be so kind, I beg you to give me your advice!"

The surgeon smiled rather grimly, and paused a moment before he went on.

"It would have been childish to refuse," he said—"though even then I might have declined to make use of the car if Mrs. Fellowes had not pressed me to. She was impressed, I think, with the French lady's great distress. I paid the taxi-driver, and joined Princess Nijowski in the limousine—Mrs. Fellowes and myself facing them."

"The car moved off rapidly, and to my astonishment, swung into Whitehall and raced away. I was in the act of protesting,

when I became aware that a small automatic pistol in the woman's hand was covering me. To make matters more difficult, the small foreign man had also taken out a revolver, and was covering Mrs. Fellowes.

"Great heavens!" I cried. "What is the meaning of this?"

"We mean you no harm," the Princess Nijowski said, "and you shall come to no harm, m'sieu, provided you do as you are told. I must tell you that I am desperate. If either of you move or shout, or attempt by the least sign to call assistance, I shall be compelled to shoot you in cold blood!"

The keen eyes of the surgeon were upon Blake, and, as the narrative grew more tense, he spoke in a quick, low tone.

"I laughed, Blake," he went on quickly. "Frankly, it seemed too absurd—this cold-blooded threat coming from the lips of a dazzlingly pretty woman. Yet the man with her looked fierce and sinister enough, and I could see that Mrs. Fellowes was trembling. I think, had it not been for her, Blake, that I should have chanced my arm. But she was covered also, and I had an awkward feeling that this strange woman meant what she had said.

"I protested, of course, and did my best to persuade them out of their mad course—to no purpose. Seeing that they were intent on kidnapping me, I begged them to release Mrs. Fellowes. 'If you will put her down,' I said, 'I will come without resistance.' The Princess Nijowski shook her head. 'Non,' she said. 'Madame is a skilful nurse. We cannot spare her.'

"It was a powerful car, Blake, and we were flashed out of London in a jiffy. We were passing through a small village when I was startled to find that Mrs. Fellowes was no longer beside me.

"Suddenly, taking even the others by surprise, she had whipped open the door and sprang out, regardless of the speed at which we were travelling. I remember turning and letting out a cry of dismay as I saw her flying huddled upon the white road behind; but the cold nose of the woman's automatic was pressed against my cheek, and I was powerless to do anything.

"A few minutes later, Blake, we passed, I think, through Croydon, pausing presently at the gate of a big flat field, in which, to my amazement, an aeroplane awaited us. It sounds like a story, doesn't it?" he added, with a grim smile. "But on my life it is true. With a couple of revolvers pressed quietly into my back, I was requested to take my seat in the fuselage, Madame la Princesse and her chaperon joining me.

"We were two thousand feet up and speeding over the Surrey hills before I was relieved from the pressing attention of those two revolvers. When Madame put hers away, it was with a smile of apology.

"M'sieu must accept my apologies," she said in broken English. "But he will now perhaps be reconciled to his fate. If the mountain, m'sieu, will not go to Mahomet, Mahomet must go to the mountain." A little later, Blake, we were over the Channel, heading southwards towards Cherbourg.

The famous surgeon paused to accept the cigar which Blake offered him, lighting it and puffing at it thoughtfully.

"Before you go any further," Blake interposed, "I presume Nurse Fellowes was still wearing the ring?"

"Yes. In the excitement of what happened we had both forgotten it."

"And what of the necklace?"

"The box was in my hand. I should, perhaps, have told you. Before I entered the aeroplane it was taken from me by the princess. 'Permit me,' she said. 'Is this of importance?'

"Of great importance," I said, explaining what it was and who it was for.

"It shall be despatched," she said, and crossed to another man, talking to him in a low tone for some moments before she gave it to him. I was not worried about it, Blake. Somehow I trusted the woman's honesty in this respect."

"And where did the aeroplane take you, Culver?"

"To a point, I should judge, not far from Cherbourg, some little distance inland from the French coast. There, again, a powerful limousine was waiting. The organisation was perfect. It seemed to be all cut and dried."

Blake nodded grimly.

"And then, Culver—"

"It was dusk when I was brought to a rather gloomy-looking house. It was near to a river—that is all I could see. An old

man and an imbecile girl seemed to be in charge of the place. Upstairs, writhing in agony on the bed, was the reason for the whole queer, desperate business."

"The Princess Nijowski?"

"Yes. And, believe me, Blake, the weirdest, strangest specimen of a man I have ever seen. However such a beautiful woman as that came to be married to such a man I cannot hazard a guess!"

"In what way was he strange—in manner?" Blake asked.

"No; in appearance. The man himself was dazed with pain. He might have been forty, he might have been seventy. I could not tell when I looked at him. His head was destitute of hair, he was without eyebrows; even his eyes were colourless. The man's glands must have been devoid of any pigment whatever.

"What made him look most hideous, I think," the surgeon went on, "was the fact that he had no teeth. His cheeks were thin and flaccid and sunken in so that the man looked more like a corpse than a living being—and a queer corpse at that, Blake."

"A brief examination of the man showed what was the matter. There was an internal abscess, with severe inflammation, and the only hope was operation. It probably meant short-circuiting the intestine by six inches, and I told the man's wife so. 'That is my judgment of your husband's condition,' I said. 'What do you propose to do, madame?'

"I want you to operate, m'sieu," she said coolly.

"I have no instruments," I said.

"They are here," she said. "Everything you need is here. I myself will assist you."

"Supposing I refuse?" I said, conscious of the extraordinary nature of the situation.

"In the name of pity, m'sieu," she said, with tears in her eyes, "you will not now refuse! Now that I have brought you all this way, m'sieu, you will save him for me."

"She did not seem to consider the fact," Ross Culver said, with a grim smile, "that she had shangaied me—brought me there at the point of the revolver. I reminded her of the fact, pointing out also that my fiancée would be waiting in vain for me at the church, not knowing where I was. But she merely shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"M'sieu," she whispered, "a woman will wait. Death is not so patient!"

"And did you still refuse, Culver?"

"How could I? I should have been morally guilty of murder by so doing. Nobody with feeling could have stood by and watched the agonies of the man on the bed. We rigged up two tables for a slab, and by the light of an incandescent petrol lamp I operated.

"It was an awkward job, and touch and go to the last; but we got through it between us, and—I must give the woman her due—she worked heroically. After the operation, and when the patient had settled a bit, I was given food, and, later on, a comfortable bed."

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

"Leon Kestrel Still Survives!"



"THE next morning I was up betimes, but the door of my room was locked on the outside. I hammered upon it, and Madame came, pale, but with a look of genuine gratitude. She had been sitting up with her husband all night, Blake, and her hair was disordered in a way which seemed to make her beauty strangely haunting. Once more I could not understand her devotion to the queer human freak whose life I had saved.

"I shall never forget the kindness of m'sieu," she said. "Prince Nijowski will see that it does not go unpaid!"

"He has come out of the anæsthetic?" I asked.

"Yes, m'sieu. He is sick and ill, but he is grateful. He has given orders that m'sieu must be speeded back to England with all haste. My husband will not stay here another hour now. We shall return to Paris."

"But it is not yet safe to move him," I pointed out to her.

"He will be removed with great care, m'sieu," she said. "You yourself shall superintend."

Blake nodded. Every fact now dovetailed perfectly with the facts which he and Tinker had themselves ascertained.

"Why was Nijowski so eager to be removed, Culver?"

"I cannot say. He was placed upon a stretcher, and carried to a bed specially prepared in the powerful car which had brought me there the night before. I travelled with them as far as Alençon.

"There I was presented with a ticket for London, via Paris, and a few hundred francs in French money. The last I saw of them was the car moving at a moderate speed down the hill from the station. I got into the train, and I don't think I properly awoke from the semi-coma of bewilderment which had come over me until I reached Victoria."

The famous surgeon leaned back in his chair, and looked at Blake with a grim smile.

"That, Blake," he said slowly, "is a brief history of the most amazing adventure I have ever had, and the most remarkable operation I have ever performed. That, also, is the simple explanation of poor Sylvia's disappointment, and the very unkind things which I believe that old bear, Sir Earnest, has been saying about me."

"This morning a letter came, bearing the Paris postmark. In it was a draft on the Bank of England for £5,000—in grateful consideration," as the brief note is worded, "of your superbly skilful operation." Candidly, Blake, it is the most handsome fee I have ever yet received. But—but— he paused, and looked at Blake with a wry smile—"is it not all absurd? Doesn't it sound incredible?"

"It does, rather," Blake admitted, smiling. "What does Miss Longworth think about it, Culver?"

"She is dumbfounded, of course. But now she knows the truth, I think she is rather glad that it happened. She agrees with Madame Nijowski that 'a woman can wait, but death is not so patient.'"

"And Sir Earnest, Jimmy? What of him?"

"He's breathing fire and brimstone," said the famous surgeon, with a laugh. "Having decided that the best plan for all concerned was to keep the facts quiet, he has been rushing round to all his clubs telling everybody what has happened. He has already been to the Yard, and ordered them to get in touch with the French police. He says it is a piece of French high-handedness which he will not tolerate. He will track down this Prince Nijowski at all costs."

"I see; and what then?" Blake asked, with a smile.

"Challenge him to a duel, I suppose," said Dr. Culver, with a grin. "If Nijowski backs out, then he'll probably write and ask the French Premier to name the weapons. But seriously, Blake," he added, "it is an extraordinary situation. I am back here in London, safe enough, and with a big fee in my pocket. I fancy, too," he added, "that the adventure has rather tuned up my nervous system. I certainly feel better than I did. But I don't see how I can let things rest, exactly. In the interests of the medical profession, I suppose I ought to take some action in the matter."

"You mean you ought to trace this man Nijowski, and demand an explanation?"

"Yes, or his wife. She was the moving spirit in it all."

Blake nodded, and glanced across at Tinker.

"I think perhaps you would be advised to let well alone, Culver," he said thoughtfully; and the surgeon stared at him in amazement.

"Good heavens! Take it all lying down? Why?"

"Because you'll never trace Nijowski," Blake said.

"Why not?"

"For the simple reason that he is the most elusive person in Europe," Blake said quietly.

"But—but I don't understand," the famous surgeon stammered.

Blake smiled and leaned over, his grey eyes resting upon the somewhat bewildered face of Dr. Culver earnestly.

"You are a good fellow, Culver, and you would always go out of your way to help a fellow-mortal. But this time, I am sorry to have to tell you, that you have done humanity an immense disservice.

"Good heavens! Why?"
 "You have mustered all your skill to perform a difficult operation under very adverse circumstances. Are you aware," Blake added slowly and deliberately, "that you have saved the life of the biggest rogue in Christendom?"

For a moment the well-known specialist stared aghast. Then he leapt from his chair, staring at Blake incredulously.

"Heavens, Blake! What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

"I am afraid it is true. One slip of the knife, Culver, in the Villa des Roches, and you would have ended for all time the sinister career of the most dangerous criminal in the world. It is strange," Blake added, with a grim smile, "that only the other morning at the hospital you should have expressed a desire to operate upon the man. You did not dream any more than I did that your opportunity would come so quickly and in the way it did. As it is, Jimmy, Leon Kestrel still survives as a menace to Europe and the world."

Dr. Culver stared at Blake and literally gasped. His cheeks had gone pale.

"You—you do not mean this?" he stammered presently.

"It is only too true."

"This—this weird specimen who called himself the Prince Nijowski was really Leon Kestrel?"

"Yes."

"But—but—great heavens, I can't believe it! And yet—and yet—mon Dieu, but I believe you are right. The man was hairless, toothless—a little make-up would have changed him out of recognition. And this woman—his wife—who—who—"

"It is not his wife. As tenants of the villa in Flambeaulieu they were known as Monsieur Bonhomme and his daughter. Others of the gang were staying there with them. You remember an oldish man they called 'Papa'?"

"Yes."

"He is the father of this bogus princess. Her name is Fiffette Bierce, and she is Leon Kestrel's most dangerous accomplice." Blake smiled. "There is a queer irony about it all, Culver, don't you think?"

"It is amazing—amazing. Ye gods, to think I did not know—did not dream. And it was touch and go, too, Blake. The man's life hung by a thread. Jove, but I wish I had known who he was!"

"Why?" Blake asked.

"I would never have operated!"

"Are you quite sure?" Blake asked, in a quiet tone, eyeing the surgeon thoughtfully.

"Of course not—er—that is—" Culver hesitated. "Well, I suppose I would not. It—it is rather hard to say, Blake," he added, with a wry smile.

"It is," Blake muttered. "It is a problem I should not care to be faced with. But there, it is done with now, Jimmy. The moving finger writes, and having writ—' as the poet says. Fate is a queer thing. When do you get married?"

"To-morrow."

"And Kestrel pays for your honeymoon," Blake said, smiling.



The surgeon was in the act of protesting about the car's direction, when he became aware that a small automatic in the woman's hand was covering him. To make matters more difficult, the small foreign man had also taken out a revolver, and was covering Mrs. Fellowes. (Chapter 8.)

"It is blood-money—dirty money!" the surgeon declared vehemently. "I will not touch it!"

"Then it will lie at your bank, Culver. You cannot return it. If I were you I should take what Fortune gives you. It was a legitimate fee."

"Then I shall give it to the hospital," Dr. Culver said. "By the way," he added, in a tone of gratitude, "you are a brick to give me that Rembrandt. It is a superb specimen—a treasure. And that little Chinese ornament. It is one of the finest bits of old Cathay that I have ever seen. Sybil is mad about it—delighted."

Tinker had suddenly sat up in his chair. Sexton Blake's placid expression had changed completely in a few seconds. He stared at the surgeon strangely.

"My dear Culver," he said quickly, "what in the name of sense are you talking about?" It was Culver's turn to look astonished. He could not understand.

"The picture—and the ornament!" he exclaimed quickly. "You—you gave them to us for a wedding present. You sent them round to-day!"

Blake stared at him, and then laughed. "On my life, I did nothing of the sort. They were stolen from the flat here. You know that. Hang it, man, weren't you here when I discovered the loss of them?"

"Of course. But I presumed that you had recovered them. I mean—"

"Do you really mean that they have arrived at your place?"

"Certainly—both neatly packed. With a short note. I've got it here in my pocket. Come, Blake," he added, with a quick smile. "I've been badgered about and bewildered enough lately, in all conscience. My wits are already sufficiently scattered. Don't pull my leg!"

"Let me see the note," Blake said quietly. Dr. Ross Culver drew a small piece of paper from his pocket, glancing at it first before he handed it to Blake. Upon it was scrawled the message: "With congratulations and best wishes."

Blake read it, and nodded with a wry smile.

"That is your handwriting, is it not?" the surgeon asked.

"It is a passable imitation of it," Blake said.

"Good heavens! Do you still mean they did not come from you?"

"Only indirectly," Blake said quietly. "Actually they came from the Kestrel Syndicate. The Mummer, you see, has decided that I owe him a small matter of half a million francs; in fact, Fiffette Bierce herself put in the invoice. Because I refute the debt, the Syndicate is distraining."

"Distraining?"

"Yes, in their own way. They are helping themselves to instalments as opportunity occurs. It just happened that the last instalment which they seized from my flat here came in handy as a present to you—a present in token of Kestrel's gratitude for saving him. Actually, Jimmy, I have not yet given you anything. But it is all a little complicated. Now do you understand?"

But Culver had dropped into Blake's chair and was motioning rather feebly towards the decanter upon the sideboard.

"Give me a drink," he entreated, "then I'll try!"

THE END.

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(Continued from page 2.)

The Death Fence.



"WHERE does Scurr store his magazine, his armoury?" Forrest demanded of Dingley when, on his return to his hut, he secured the door, certain now that the escaped gunman's true hiding-place was unsuspected.

On his way back from Scurr's bungalow a plan had come into the engineer's mind,

and he meant to lose no time in putting it into execution.

At all costs Joan's wonderful self-sacrifice must be prevented.

Dingley seemed surprised at the question.

"He's a secret cellar under his bungalow, Mr. Forrest. It's bung full of stuff—guns, cartridges, and all that. But what's the use? You could never get at it?"

"Never mind; we'll see about that," Forrest responded, with a quiet smile.

He saw his way quite clearly now. It was a desperate scheme, a slender hope, with the odds piled high against success. But it was the only road to safety—his safety and Joan's. And with that in view, it was well worth risking.

Throwing off his jacket, he sat down on the edge of the truck bed, and, his chin in his hands, remained wrapped in silent thought for a long while.

His eyes on the floor, he wrestled mentally with the problem he had set himself to solve.

How might this gate—the only gate—to "Slave Island," be taken—taken, and, when taken, held?

Dingley stood watching him with interest; but the Cockney did not attempt to interrupt the chain of thought passing through his companion's mind.

He realised that in the engineer lay his one chance of life and safety.

At last Forrest rose to his feet, an expression of quiet satisfaction in his eyes.

"I've put the details together," he announced. "I saw the plan as a whole, but I couldn't quite see how it was going to work out in one or two respects. How to cover ourselves against contingencies. But—"

Beckoning Dingley to him, he went on speaking in a low, hushed tone, and when at last the engineer finished, the Cockney nodded eager assent.

Whatever it was that Forrest had planned, it was plain that Dingley assented to it.

The engineer, his scheme worked out, wasted no further time in talk. Throwing himself down on his bed, he went to sleep, and in a few minutes was slumbering as peacefully and quietly as though Slave Island, Nixon Scurr, and the brutal criminals in his pay were a thousand miles away.

For a while Dingley stood watching him; then, stooping to raise the loose

floorboards, the Cockney turned away with a look of silent admiration.

"He's a nerve—not 'arf!" he muttered. "Sleepin' like that when 'Eaven knows wot to-morrow 'ull bring with it! Still, it's nerve wot we want—'im and me. Only that, and luck, will ever get us out of this infernal 'ole!"

Then, dropping through the hole in the floor, he replaced the board over his head, and vanished for the night.

Next morning Forrest awoke early and went to the power-house, where he worked rapidly on the plant. The trouble he had faked up was a simple matter to put right. A few hours' work, and the dynamos were humming with that monotonous drone that spoke of perfect order.

When his labours came to an end he looked at his watch. It was long past noon, and the sweltering heat upon the island was at its height. But he viewed the result of his toil with satisfaction, and, wiping the sweat from his brow, sat down to rest for a few minutes.

In such climates it was not good to work in the heat of the day, but when time pressed the angle of the sun's rays mattered little. And, exhausted though he was, he presently rose, left the power-house, and walked across to Scurr's bungalow.

He found the place in quietness, with only an armed crook dozing at the doorway. But the fellow did not wake as he stepped past; so, crossing the hall, he found the doorway to Scurr's room and peered in.

Nixon Scurr was slumbering in a cane chair, his great form a-sprawl along the adjustable backpiece and footrest. But at the sound of Forrest's light tread the millionaire started up with an oath, and, half-crouched on the edge of his chair, glared suspiciously at the intruder.

"If you think you can get away with it—if you've come here with any idea of doing me in, you scum—" he began, with a bestial growl.

But Forrest checked him with a gesture of contempt.

"I'm unarmed, Mr. Scurr. I couldn't kill you if I wished—and it would do me no good, anyway. I came here to tell you that the plant is functioning—that you can have your illuminations to-night."

As he spoke he went to the wall and pressed one of the electric switches. Instantly the lamps suspended from the low ceiling shone, flooding the darkened room with a brilliant white light.

"Good!" Scurr eyed the lamps with satisfaction, not unmingled with relief. "Well, you can get back to the power-house. And, see here, mind that you keep the plant right, now you've got it going. Got that? It'll be the worse for you if you don't."

"Don't worry—it'll be all right now," Forrest assured him, and went back to the power-house as the millionaire had ordered.

During the rest of the afternoon he remained at his post, oiling, testing, and tending the plant with loving care. But all the while he strained his ears to listen for sounds that, sooner or later, as he guessed, must come—sounds of the celebrations that would commemorate Nixon Scurr's baneful birthday.

When the sun went down, and long shadows fell athwart the floor of the hot power-house, the signs of revelry expected by Forrest were not long in materialising.

Through the open windows came the

blare of distant music, mingled with the noise of mirthless laughter. Scurr's birthday celebrations were commencing.

But the proofs of this were patent not merely by the evidence of the engineer's ears; the power-house switchboard gave additional and visible testimony.

Forrest could see by the load indicator how the "juice" was being mopped up, and one after the other he had to throw in his reserve dynamos to supply the ever-increasing demand for current.

Then, after darkness had completely fallen, the load went up with a bound. Something on the island—some lights, some motor—that swallowed current as blotting-paper absorbs moisture was thrown into action.

A grim smile flitted across the engineer's mouth.

Nixon Scurr had thrown his death fence into action. The deadly current was, for the first time in many weeks, flowing once more through the wires that spanned the only exit to the island and its mountain ring.

That and that only could account for the responsive juzzing of the boosters.

But still Forrest waited, imperturbable, patient.

The night was before him, and time was on his side. The moment for which he longed was not yet.

Presently, through the ever-increasing noise of revelry that drifted in through the windows upon the hot night air, came sounds of a different timbre.

The tramp of men, of many feet; the harsh grating of gruff voices, broken by an occasional guffaw.

Forrest went to the door and peered out into the darkness.

A knot of men—a platoon almost—was passing the power-house. And the path down which they came ran in the direction whence ran those cables for which the engineer had been unable to account.

Every one of the men was armed. Their rifles slung across their backs, they tramped raggedly down towards the little town which, ablaze with light, lay in the hollow below.

"Well, that current's going at last!" One of the newcomers spoke in a loud-pitched voice. "I'm about sick of patrolling that infernal place. Now we can take a hand in this bust-up to-night. I was beginning to think we'd be done out of it."

"Yes, you bet you weren't the only one that was right glad when Scurr sent up word we could quit," another made answer.

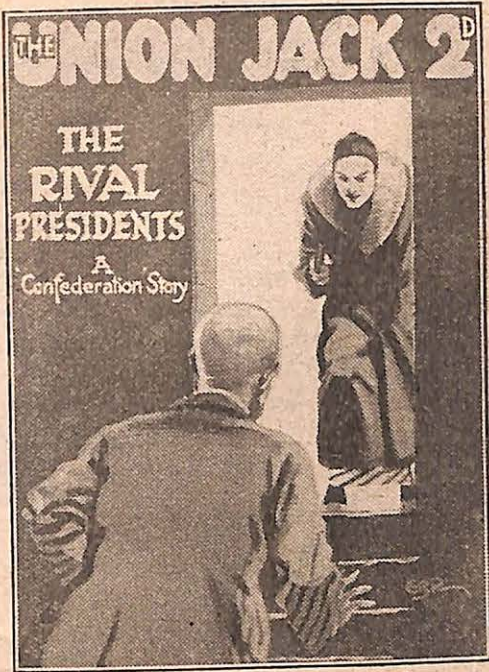
"Well, it's safe enough now, anyways. No one'll git through them wires to-night, not with that current flowing through 'em. We're safer'n we've been for weeks—in fact, ever since the Ole Man went an' shot up that other engineer feller."

A moment later the party vanished down the pathway towards the town, and Forrest was left alone, save for the surly sentry who stood guard in the little outhouse by the generating station.

The engineer smiled quietly, and went back to his post.

That squad of armed men that had gone by were the gunmen Scurr had had quartered up at the gap while the "live fence" was out of action. Now that the current was going again the guards—or most of them—had been withdrawn.

(Continued on page 28.)



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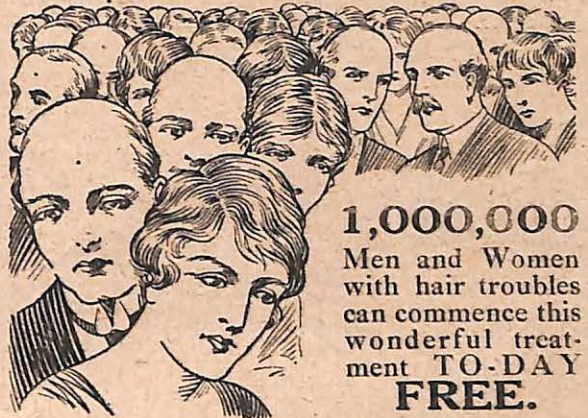
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(Continued from page 26.)

And that was not only what Forrest had anticipated would happen; better still, it was what he wanted.

So far, everything was going well. Would the luck hold, and the rest of his plans fall out as he had wished?

Or would something intervene—something that, like a bolt from the blue, would flash out from the unseen, and bring the structure of his hopes crashing down like the collapse of a house of cards?

Only the event would show.

For hours the debauch down at the bungalow town had gone on.

It was long past midnight, and still the uproar, the blare of music, the drunken shouts and high-pitched laughter streamed in at the windows.

Starting in a quiet manner, the revels assumed larger and more disorderly proportions.

From a rather mirthless attempt at celebration, they had grown as the evening progressed into a bacchanalian riot.

Standing at the power-house door, Forrest listened, frowning.

His sleeves, rolled up to his elbows, his pipe in his mouth, he stared out into the night—stared across the zone of intervening darkness to the light-bathed bungalows beyond.

Down there bedlam had broken loose. Hoarse yells, the screams of women, the crazy ring of drunken laughter showed how the celebrations were going.

Nixon Scurr was feeding "booze" to his henchmen.

Secure in the knowledge that the "live fence" was once more in order, he pandered to his own vanity by stimulating the enthusiasm of his hirelings.

After a moment the frown on Forrest's face changed to a grim smile. But then his mouth hardened again.

With the bonds of discipline loosened, the celebrations had become an orgy.

How did Joan Cartwright fare, down there amongst the bungalows, with red riot raging amongst the brutish ruffians that upheld Nixon Scurr and his evil regime?

At the thought of the girl, and what dangers might encompass her, the engineer's blood ran cold. The satisfaction he had at first felt on account of the chaos that should prove so helpful to his plans passed away.

She might be in peril at the hands of these drink-maddened scoundrels, against whose liquor-born licence even Scurr might be unable to protect her.

He must wait—wait until the crucial moment arrived.

(What is in store? What will be the result of Forrest's plan? Next week's instalment contains some exciting stuff! Book it now!)



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