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The MYSTERY of the MARSHES



A brilliant new Serial of Gun-running Adventure on the Essex coast, by - - - - - H. W. TWYMAN.

Bob to the Rescue.

BOB CASTLE'S heart was high with hope as he set out aboard the gun-runners' motor-boat on his race against time that misty morning.

The engine throbbed out its powerful, deep-toned song, monotonous, confidence-inspiring, soothing. The long, lean craft slipped through the water at a rate which to Bob—a devotee of the sailing-boat hitherto—was almost hypnotising in its swiftness—a swiftness, too, that continued steadily and effortlessly minute after minute, and that did not falter or vary, save at the touch of his controlling fingers on the throttle.

The sound of the long-drawn, unending slish, slish! of the cut-water as it clove the waves uplifted him till he felt he wanted to sing or shout. She was built for speed, this unnamed boat, speed and speed and speed! She was deserving of better things than to be the servant of a crew of skulking gun-runners; her fine, clean lines had not been designed, nor her sturdy, sweet-running engines built, to pander to such base uses.

Well, she was in better hands now. They had captured her fairly as a prize of war—cut her out from under the noses of her rascally owners in a manner that would have done justice to even the daring sea-dogs of Nelson and Drake. They had captured her, Bob and Jim between them, even as she lay alongside her parent ship, the Vanderveelde, in the fog of Walton Backwater, and now she was to be a potent weapon against the gun-runners themselves.

Jim and Joe Juniper, sometime skipper of the Happy Days, were in the yacht, guarding the entrance to the backwater as well as they might, in case the gun-runners' craft might try to slip out past them; while Bob and Tommy Cobbin, the yacht's cabin-boy, were hastening round the long, out-jutting finger of Pye Sand, and along the coast to Walton, to hamper their retreat should they intend to abandon their ship and seek safety by land, and make their get-away by motor-car or rail.

The youngsters had no particular reason for supposing that they would do one or the other, but the fact remained that Julius Griff and his fellow-rogues were at present bottled up in the backwater, knowing full well that their motor-boat was in the hands of Bob and Jim, and that their whereabouts were no longer unknown. They knew, by the same token, that they were in a tight place, for the police were already taking a hand in their affairs, and, should these pestilential youngsters succeed in getting word to them before they themselves could leave their hiding-place, the game would be up.

As the lads had figured it, therefore, the odds were all in favour of their attempting to squirm out of their dangerous position. They had two courses open to them, as they had believed—to wait for the wind to rise and to try to get past the Happy Days in the channel of the inlet, or to pile aboard the dinghy they had, row up the backwater to Walton, and escape thence by train or car.

Actually, however, there was a factor which did not enter into Bob's calculation, because he did not know of the existence of it. In short, the Vanderveelde was fitted with an auxiliary motor, and had no need to wait for a wind.

Thus it was that, less than half an hour after Bob and Tommy Cobbin had slid off into the thinning fog on their journey round the coast to Walton, Julius Griff had brought

his cumbrous craft silently down the channel and put into execution the dastardly scheme which has already been described.

Little did either of the couple who sat exultant, in the speeding power-boat realise the peril which even then surrounded their comrades aboard the Happy Days. They knew nothing, and could not have guessed had they been asked, of the murderous trick the gun-runners had wrought on them. And while the fiery sea of flaming oil consumed the very planks of the yacht, the motor-boat sped at her utmost speed farther and farther away, with Bob heading in a straight line for the Naze and Walton, intent only on getting there in the quickest time.

A breeze had sprung up, dispersing the last of the fog at this distance from the shore, though it lurked in patches here and there closer in. The morning was now generally bright and clear, and with few clouds. Above them, had they chanced to look up, they might have seen a few pale flecks of coloured light in the sky—the falling stars of the signal rockets fired by Jim in the extremity of their danger. The chances of seeing them, however, were remote, for in the bright light of day the spots of red fire were faint almost

OUR £4,550 COMPETITION

The Final Set of pictures, together with simple judging-form and instructions for sending in, appears on Page 10 and 19. Simply pull the Supplement from the middle of the paper, and the competition details are displayed in one double page.

to invisibility against the hard, bright light of sky and clouds.

By now they were almost a third of the way across Peunyhole Bay, and still speeding along in blissful ignorance of the stirring events that were proceeding on the other side of Pye Sand, which lay between them and the Happy Days, covered with a few feet of water at this state of the tide.

But their warning was to come in another fashion.

Suddenly, so quickly that neither of them had time to see the cause, something hurtled down and dropped into the water close alongside, sending up a splash that leaped above the level of the gunwale, the spray being whipped full into Tommy Cobbin's face by the wind.

Bob Castle saw it, too, and looked around in every direction. The thing was a mystery. Nothing was in sight. The nearest craft was the Happy Days, and she was hidden in the mist from that distance, for as yet the wind had not shifted the murk in the inlet completely. This thing that had splashed them seemed to be a veritable bolt from the blue—a flat impossibility almost, unless it had been a meteorite or a thunderbolt.

Before they could gain an answer to their mutual unasked question the boat had passed the thing, and Bob did not even turn his head to try to see. Whatever it was, it was of secondary importance to the necessity for speed. Had he but glimpsed it, however, he would have seen the burnt and blackened remains of a rocket-case floating on the

water, and the sight would have given him furiously to think.

He had hardly time to dismiss the occurrence from his mind in the light of more urgent affairs when a second warning came—and one that would not be denied. With a hollow crash something hit the turtle-deck for'ard, scattered a few vagrant sparks, and rolled upside, where it died, hissing, in the bow-wave of the boat.

It was plain enough this time—a rocket! Who could be firing a rocket at this time of day? Instinctively Bob moved the throttle, and the speed slackened. They had a supply of rockets aboard the yacht. Was this one discharged from the Happy Days, then?

He swept his glance round the visible horizon. No; nothing in sight. It was the Happy Days, then, in all probability! Had the Vanderveelde come down the channel, and was this the means Jim was taking to warn him? Were they being attacked and getting the worst of it? Yet how could Jim expect him to see a rocket bursting in the daylight? For certainly he could not have aimed them so that they would fall so close?

He little knew the danger that his cousin was in at that moment, or guessed how providentially straight and true those chance-sent messengers of hope had gone. All he knew was that all was not well with Jim, but his wildest imaginings could not have revealed the exact truth.

Doubt struggled with his inward conviction; yet he put the tiller hard down and swung round in a circle back towards the line of his creaming wake.

"Look, Bob—look!" shouted Tommy Cobbin, thrusting out a finger shorewards.

Bob looked, and something caught at his throat in a sudden grip of fear—fear not for himself, but for Jim and the skipper. Above the vague white mist something was moving. Smoke!

Then, as if by magic, the wind swept gently along the shore, and the mist was rolled aside like a curtain. First it became tinted faintly orange, and then gradually, as the intervening haze thinned, the colour grew in strength until the tragic drama was revealed in its full horror.

Fire! The yacht was afire!

There was no mistaking it now. It was the Happy Days right enough; and there—quite close to her, it seemed, but nearer the mouth of the creek, was the squat, foreign-looking shape of the Vanderveelde.

How the gun-runners' craft had so magically contrived to get thus far already Bob did not pause to think. He merely brought the boat's head round and thrust the throttle wide open, acting automatically.

The craft responded to the suddenly released force of the engine like a thing alive—like a high-spirited horse to the jab of the spur. Her forefoot lifted; the water was divided with a clean hissing noise like the tearing of silk, and the twin bow waves rolled over continuously, and slid by, to merge in the white wake of her whirling propeller.

"The Sand," yelled Tommy—"the Sand!"

But Bob had not forgotten the Sand—the treacherous bank that lay between them and their goal like a fence before a steeple-chaser. He was going to risk it—to take it in his stride!

It was a risk—a big risk. The flood tide had already covered the bank, and was steadily rising. But here and there the water was not more than a foot deep.

Well, they might get through, with luck, if they struck the right place. There was no time to go back the way he had come, around the tail of the sand.

Bob set his teeth. There was no danger to themselves in running aground—the only danger was in delay. It would mean the difference between life and death to Joe Juniper and Jim.

Momentarily the yacht was getting nearer. Hidden and revealed alternately by the clouds of smoke that rolled from her sides and the flickering fire that shone out when the breeze rose, they could now gain a better idea of what was happening.

It seemed that the Happy Days was surely doomed. She appeared not to be afire herself, but to be somehow surrounded by fire, for the black hull shone red and gold. This was indeed the case, but even then the watchers failed to guess the real cause, or to suspect the foul device by which Julius Griff had set the very sea alight.

Then, even as they looked, they hit the bank. In their excitement they had both forgotten it for the moment. There was a

(Continued on page 26.)

The AFFAIR of the ROMAN RELICS



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THE FIRST CHAPTER.

London Springs One of Its Surprises.



"WHAT was that?" asked Gregson abruptly.

He lifted his cue from the table just as he was about to make a shot, and looked across at Croxley. Both men stood perfectly still for a moment. And it seemed to them that a faint, peculiar rumble sounded, as though from beneath their very feet.

"Queer!" said Gordon Croxley, as he closed his cigar-case. "Traffic, I suppose—although I've never heard anything like that before. These buses are an infernal nuisance nowadays. Up and down here,

morning, noon, and night!"

Daniel Gregson took his shot with care.

"Yes, Maida Vale isn't what it used to be," he remarked. "I wonder you don't shift to a more modern quarter, Croxley."

"Too much trouble," replied Croxley. "This my ball? Yes, too much trouble, old man. This house is a bit old-fashioned, and it may not have every modern convenience, but the wife likes it, and there's plenty of space—big rooms, big garden—Curse! I can never make a decent shot when I'm talking."

"I shall have to keep you deep in conversation," replied Gregson, as he chalked his cue. "I must admit, Croxley, that you've got this place in splendid trim. You've made a great many improvements during the five years you've had it, haven't you?"

"One doesn't mind making improvements when he's increasing the value of his own freehold property," replied Croxley. "Your shot, you know. You ought to make a break of about twenty-five, according to the way those balls are lying."

Croxley stood back, resting his heavy frame against the edge of the table. He was not exactly stout, although getting on for it. A man of about fifty, with a heavy, rather coarse face, he showed many signs that he was fond of the good things of life—particularly those good things of a liquid nature.

Daniel Gregson was a different type—a smallish man, not over forty, with clear-cut features, but a somewhat weak chin. He was in evening-dress, like his host, but there were one or two shiny patches.

He paused before taking his shot, and looked at Croxley rather queerly.

"About that money——" he began.

"My dear fellow, don't start that again now!" said Croxley impatiently. "It's no good—I can't do it. Man alive, you don't seem to realise that these are difficult times. A thousand pounds needs finding——"

"But, hang it all, Croxley, you haven't even got to find it—you're not short of a sum like that," said Gregson. "And I've offered you security for——"

"Security?" said Croxley, with a slight stare. "It's no good to me, Gregson—not a bit of good. And I don't suppose you'll find it much good to a bank, or anybody else. Confound it, I thought we'd finished that subject after dinner!"

he remembered as the man who had been one of the guards of Joe Juniper when Bob had boarded the craft in the fog; the other he had never seen before, but he was obviously one of the ship's company.

These five must certainly be the entire personnel of the Dutch boat, for the effort to put out the fire obviously made it a case of "all hands on deck." Bob realised the position at a glance, for what he could not see with his eyes he shrewdly guessed at.

The Vandervelde had been trying to escape from the inlet in which she had been bottled up, and, on finding the Happy Days, with Jim Polden and Joe Juniper aboard her, on guard at the mouth, had somehow contrived to set fire to her. Somehow, too, her own mainsail had become involved, and was still obstinately burning.

Everybody aboard was concentrated round the fire. Even now they had not noticed the arrival of the motor-boat, the sound of which had doubtless been drowned in the noise they themselves were making, and the sight obscured by the rolling black smoke or the streaming, watery eyes to which it gave rise.

Never had the prize been so near—and yet so far. Bob almost groaned as he realised how easy it would have been to capture the Vandervelde at this vital moment—had things been a little different.

But he was practically lone-handed. Jim at that moment was lying on the well-grating, almost exhausted by his recent exertions in fighting the fire on the ill-fated Happy Days, and afterwards in rescuing her old skipper; while Joe Juniper himself was stretched out alongside him, quite insensible. Tommy Cobbin was ready enough to lend a hand in whatever might be going, but he was hardly big or strong enough to do anything useful in a scrap.

Bob's hand went instinctively to the heavy revolver which bulged the pocket of his reef-coat, but the weapon was not withdrawn. He could not hope to bring off a successful raid entirely unaided, for Tommy would have to manage the boat. No, it would have to be wit, not weapons! And in that tense half-minute in which he gazed at

the Vandervelde's decks and her frenziedly working crew, he put in a good deal of anxious thought.

Even when the flames were extinguished the great spread of canvas would be useless as a sail, with a huge hole burned in it. Without it she could make no real progress, if any at all. Her headsail alone would be useless, and she carried no other canvas aft except the mainsail.

At the present moment she was drifting unheeded on the tide. What would those aboard do when they had the fire subdued? All they could do, he reasoned, would be to coax her into a safe position in deep water with the foresail and let go the anchor. They might have a try at repairing the burned sail if they believed they had time, or they might make for the shore in the dinghy which was towing astern and scatter. The latter course was the more probable, Bob thought. They knew that the law was at last on their track. They might even have been intending to sail clear away to the Continent. Harwich was near, and now that their own craft was dangerously delayed, they might try to reach that port and get across on one of the Channel boats.

In any event, there was not much Bob could do to stop them, but what little there was he did, and quickly. With a low word to Tommy, he edged the motor-boat aft, with her engines only just turning over, and the lad caught, and held, the dinghy's painter as they came alongside. A couple of slashes with his knife, and a fathom or more of the rope was theirs. This was passed aft to Bob, who made the end fast to a ring-bolt in the stern.

Then, opening the throttle and bringing the boat about in a sweeping curve astern of the lumbering Dutchman, he let her go full out with a roar, towing the captured dinghy in his wake. The ruffianly crew of the Vandervelde had their line of communication with the shore cut, at all events.

Until that moment neither their arrival nor their departure had been noticed. Now, however, at the noise of the engine, the group around the burning sail became suddenly aware of them, and in the surprise

and preoccupation of the moment hardly knew what to do. They all stopped their exertions with one accord, and stared after the power-boat they recognised as their own. One man even collected himself enough to pull out his pistol and send a shot after the craft, but at that moment, freed from the attacks of the fire-fighters, the flames broke out anew, and the men were divided in their purpose.

Before the confused shoutings and contradictory orders had died down the motor-boat was out of reach, heading at as fast a pace as she had ever gone on a straight course due north.

Bob was making for Harwich. The scheme that had leapt to his brain, full-fledged with the capture of the dinghy, was simple, but it meant a race against time. With this boat's speed he might do it, however. Harwich was three miles away. Could he get there, inform the police, and return with reinforcements in time?

Three miles there, three back! This craft that throbbed and roared under his controlling hand could do fifteen an hour—perhaps twenty. He had filled up her tanks in the inlet, but he had gone a long way since then. Pray Heaven, the petrol would last out till he got there! Six miles, and a half-hour ashore, say. Nearly an hour before he could arrive back at the Vandervelde. Fully an hour, counting the slowing down to get in and out of harbour. Would he be in time to trap them?

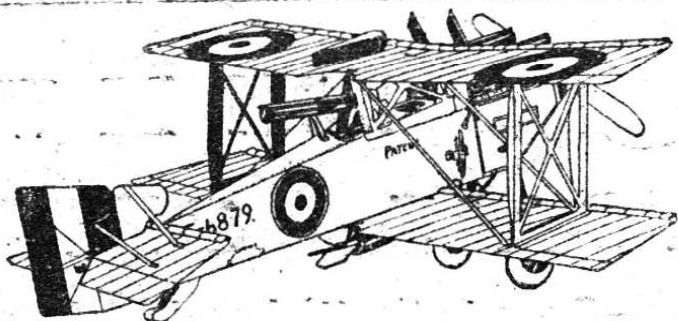
Well, he would try!

He outlined his plan to the prostrate Jim, who, despite his exhaustion and a fit of shivering after his immersion, was beginning to regain his normal self as he lay on the well-grating at his feet. Tommy was already bending over Joe Juniper, rubbing him briskly and trying to restore some signs of animation.

Jim nodded his head weakly, and crawled with an effort to his hands and knees and joined Tommy in his efforts on the skipper.

(Look out for the conclusion of this stirring serial. See page 25.)

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14-3-25

"But I need the money badly."

"Well, I'm sorry—but there's nothing doing," said Gordon Croxley gruffly. "I'm still waiting to see you make that shot. Don't talk about that money again, there's a good chap!"

Gregson bit his lip and bent over the billiards-table. As he did so there was a repetition of that unaccountable rumble. But this time the very room shook, and a side table set up a clinking rattle as the glasses which stood upon it tinkled together.

"What on earth—" began Croxley, aghast.

The billiards-room quivered, and without the slightest warning, the electric light snapped out, leaving the two men in total darkness. The glowing end of Croxley's cigar showed vaguely in the black void.

"I say, that was an earthquake!" exclaimed Gregson, his voice startled and alarmed. "Didn't you feel the floor rocking?"

"Confound this darkness!" snapped Croxley, feeling his way towards the door. "I can't understand what's happened. We don't get earthquakes in Maida Vale, Gregson!"

"Perhaps the power-station blew up."

"Power-station be hanged—I've got my own plant!" came Croxley's voice out of the darkness. "I make my electric light in a small power-house at the bottom of the garden. I can't imagine what in the world—"

He found the door and tore it open.

"Are you there, Gordon?" came his wife's voice from somewhere.

"Yes—wait a minute!" said Croxley. "The whole house is in darkness, by the look of it. You'd better keep quite still, Mary—it's no good blundering about the hall."

"But what's happened, Gordon—what's happened?" asked Mrs. Croxley, with anxiety. "I thought I felt an earthquake."

They were interrupted by the opening of another door somewhere. A maid-servant appeared with a lighted taper in her hand. The girl was looking very frightened, but the light was welcome.

"Please sir—quick!" she panted. "Something's happened outside—down the garden. I think the electric-light shed must have collapsed! There was a terrible noise."

"Good gad!" ejaculated Croxley. "Perhaps that's why the lights have gone out! Of all the infernal luck! I only had the plant installed three weeks ago. Here, give me that taper!"

Croxley was excited and anxious. He crossed the hall, wrenched open a rear door, and strode out on to a gravel terrace. It was very dark outside, for the spring evening was moonless.

He ran straight across the lawn to the bottom of the garden, Gregson following at a slower rate, for he was not familiar with the ground.

The taper went out in Croxley's hand before he reached the picturesque little stucco building which housed the lighting plant, and which was an ornament to the garden, rather than a disfigurement.

Croxley was relieved to see the building standing as firm as ever. But it was in complete darkness. He pulled open the door, strode inside, and then uttered a cry of acute alarm.

Instead of standing on firm concrete, as he had every reason to anticipate, he plunged downwards into inky space.

Gordon Croxley fell sheer for eight or ten feet, and was then brought to a jarring halt which shook every bone in his heavy frame. He toppled over,

bruised and badly shaken, and lay there, groaning.

He was bewildered. This thing was beyond his comprehension, and in his present dazed condition he could hardly collect his thoughts. He only knew that he should now be standing on the solid floor of the power-house.

What had happened to the place?

The inky darkness was confusing. As Croxley moved, painfully conscious of agonising pain, he was aware of a curious odour. There was something more than the smell of the oil engine—a kind of dank, earthy odour, grimly reminiscent of a vault.

"Are you in there, Croxley?" came a voice from somewhere.

"Stand back, man—stand back!" groaned Croxley. "The floor's giving way, I believe. Can't you bring some lights? The darkness is getting on my nerves! I daren't move—there's no telling what I'll disturb!"

"I've got an electric torch—I've just remembered it," said Gregson huskily. "Wait a minute—I'll get it out!"

He had been so startled by the events of the past few minutes that the torch had not occurred to him until then. He produced it from a hip-pocket, and flashed it on. And the sudden beam of light revealed an extraordinary scene.

Over half the floor of the power-house had subsided—it had sunk sheer for ten or fifteen feet. The oil-engine and the dynamo, and the other apparatus lay in distorted confusion amid the jagged and broken concrete of the floor.

Great gaps were visible here and there, and as Gregson flashed the light about he could see that the disaster was serious. The rest of the floor seemed likely to go at any moment.

Croxley was lying immediately below him, having fallen on to the cracked concrete, where it had subsided direct. He had fortunately crashed down where there were no jagged edges. But for this he might have suffered grave injury.

Gregson leapt down and bent over his host.

"Hurt much?" he asked.

"No, not much," grunted Croxley as he raised himself. "I'm better now. It's a wonder I didn't break my neck." He looked round. "This place is in a fine mess now, Gregson. I shall sue those infernal contractors for damages—"

He broke off, having just got to his knees, and he was staring down into one of the black crevices of the shattered floor.

"Let's have that light!" he said sharply.

Surprised by his tone, Gregson passed it over. Croxley flashed the beam into the big crevice and stared. To his utter astonishment he was looking into a hollow cavity which lay below. It was not a mere hole in the earth, as one might have expected, but a vault-like place, with a glimpse of a stone wall on one side.

"What is it?" asked Gregson queerly.

"I don't know; but there's certainly a crypt, or something of that sort, under here!" exclaimed the other. "By gad, Gregson! That explains it! This vault must have been here for centuries, and nobody knew anything about it. The enormous weight of these machines,

and the vibration, caused the roof of the crypt to collapse.

"That was that rumble we heard." "Naturally," said Croxley, as he wormed his way further in. "H'm! A bit too small for me, I'm afraid. Look here, Gregson, nip down and have a look round. There's room for you to squeeze through."

Gregson hesitated.

"That concrete might collapse, you know," he objected. "No need to ask for trouble, Croxley—"

"You'll be back in a minute," grunted Croxley.

Gregson didn't like to be thought a coward, so he took the light, and slid through the opening. But he thought it was a mad thing to do, just to satisfy his host's curiosity. He told himself that he would be out again in less than thirty seconds.

He found himself in a half demolished stone tunnel, and the beam of light revealed an opening vault immediately ahead. The air was dank and stuffy, and Gregson felt a catchiness in his throat. Then he caught sight of something protruding from a heap of debris near by. It seemed like an ancient chest, a kind of bygone relic. It had split and broken and twisted by the force of the stone and earth that had fallen on it.

Part of its contents had fallen to the floor, and Gregson looked twice. Then he crossed over, bent down, and picked a few of the objects up. They seemed extraordinarily heavy, although small.

There were a couple of coins, one or two quaint ornaments, and some other objects which looked like bangles. And Gregson's heart gave a leap when he realised that they were made of gold.

"What have you got there?" came Croxley's voice.

Gregson looked up and saw that Croxley was peering down at him through the opening.

"I'm hanged if I know," said Gregson thickly. "But there's a find here, Croxley! Why, by Jove! These things are Roman, or I'm a Dutchman! Gold, too! We've hit upon some Roman relics!"

It was only a surmise on Gregson's part, for he knew practically nothing about the ancient Romans, or their coinage or ornaments or jewellery. He only judged by the strange air of antiquity which the golden objects possessed. That they were gold he had not the slightest doubt.

A piece of concrete fell with a splintering crash, and Gregson gave a start. He was up through that crevice in about ten seconds, fearing every moment that he would be caught in a death-trap. But he reached safety, and found his host looking at him with gleaming, greedy eyes.

"Let's have a look at those things!" said Croxley sharply.

He examined them with great inward excitement.

"Yes, by gad, they're Roman!" he exclaimed tensely. "This one is a gold aureus—I can't quite see the period. These bangles, too. Gregson, this is an amazing discovery!"

"I should say it is!" said Gregson excitedly.

"Say nothing about this to anybody," went on Croxley, with a quick look at his guest. "We don't want the whole of London gathering round here like moths round a candle. We don't want any newspaper men, either. Keep it mum—you understand?"

"But it's your own property—"

ANSWERS
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"I know that!" snapped Croxley. "But I shall have swarms of sightseers round here if this news gets out. Look here, I'll see you right about that thousand pounds, old man. Come round to-morrow, and I'll fix it up."

"You mean it?" asked Gregson, with almost painful eagerness.

"Of course I mean it; but keep your own counsel about these relics."

"By Jove! I should say I will!" ejaculated Gregson gladly. "Thanks awfully, Croxley. This is good of you! I'll be round between ten and eleven."

"No need to rush like that," said Croxley irritably. "I'll have another look at that security of yours, and if it's satisfactory you'll have the thousand. Come, on, let's get out of this!"

A change had come over Gregson's face. He had had experience of Gordon Croxley before, and there was something in that last remark of his which caused a doubt in the other's mind. He already suspected that Croxley would back out of the loan when the crucial moment arrived. It was one of his favourite tricks.

But Gregson only pursed his lips and looked grim. In any case, he could do nothing but wait, and hope for the best.

The two men managed to get out of the pit, and, having reached the outer air, Croxley closed the door and locked it.

He was obliged to have Gregson's assistance in getting back to the house, for his knee was hurt a bit, and he had badly ricked his back. They passed in by the rear door into the hall, and found candles burning.

Mrs. Croxley, a slim, exquisitely-gowned woman of about forty, was waiting anxiously, talking to a pair of frightened maids.

"It's the floor of the power-house!" gaunted Croxley painfully. "It subsided, or something, and I went head-long. The whole plant is ruined, by what I can see."

"But, Gordon, we're without lights!" said his wife. "Can nothing be done? My dear, you're hurt!"

"Only a sprain," said Croxley. "I'd better get straight to bed. You'll excuse me, Gregson, won't you? It's time you were off, anyway. Don't forget what I told you."

"I won't forget," said Gregson, giving him a straight look.

They shook hands, and Daniel Gregson got into his overcoat and hat, shook hands with Mrs. Croxley, and departed. It seemed strange to him after he had walked down the garden and emerged into the noise of Maida Vale.

These old-fashioned houses were peculiarly shut off from the bustle of the busy thoroughfare, with its innumerable motor-buses. And Gregson found himself pondering over the strange events of the past half-hour.

He got on a No. 16 bus, and took a ticket to Victoria, from which point he could easily reach his comparatively shabby home in Pimlico. And as he sat on the top of the bus, smoking, the whole adventure seemed unreal.

Croxley wasn't a friend of his, but an acquaintance he had known for some long time. He had only gone to him because he knew he had money, and because his own business was in danger of crashing unless he found some new capital.

He frowned as he remembered Croxley's final words. He didn't trust the man; he wasn't sure even now that he would get that money. Then his thoughts turned to that vault beneath the earth—that hidden underground crypt which had lain there, undiscovered, for long centuries—perhaps for nearly two thousand years.



"If you please, sir," said the maidservant to Inspector Lennard, "the mistress is very upset, and she'd like you to be quick." . . . "Just a minute, sir," said the constable. "I seem to have got hold of something here. Looks like a piece of cloth." (Page 8.)

Gregson reflected that London, after all, can spring more surprises than probably any other city in the world. He dimly wondered what those Roman relics were worth, and how many of them there actually were. They were Croxley's, of course, but Gregson was naturally interested.

And so, with his mind still doubtful about the morrow, he continued his way homewards. He and Croxley were the only two men in the world who knew about that vault and its remarkable contents.

THE SECOND CHAPTER. The Beginning of the Maida Vale Mystery.



MRS. CROXLEY paused as she was about to enter the breakfast-room on the following morning. The sun was shining in through the open windows, and there was a delicious smell of coffee in the air.

"Isn't your master down yet, Jane?" asked Mrs. Croxley, in surprise.

"No, ma'am," said a maidservant who had just carried a tray in. "I don't think the master has even used his hot water yet."

Mrs. Croxley frowned slightly.

"I hope nothing is the matter, Jane," she said, with concern. "You know your master had a fall last night, and I think he hurt his back slightly. It isn't like him to be late."

"No, ma'am, it isn't," agreed Jane.

Mr. Gordon Croxley was a man of

very regular habits, and when he was in good health it was practically an unheard-of thing for him to be late for breakfast. It was his daily custom, in fact, to be down half-an-hour before the meal, in order to glance over his correspondence.

Mrs. Croxley usually came down at the sound of the gong—as she had done this morning. She turned, still looking anxious, and went swiftly upstairs. Her husband's room was next to her own, and she noted the hot-water jug outside.

She quietly opened the door and looked in. Then she stepped right into the room. The bed was empty, and there was no sign whatever of Mr. Croxley. It seemed only too clear that he had risen long before the servants had got up, and had gone out.

"Your master isn't in his room, Jane," said Mrs. Croxley when she reached the hall. "It is very strange. Go and ask cook if she knows anything. Perhaps Mr. Croxley went out quite early."

"I don't think so, ma'am," said Jane, shaking her head. "Cook was saying only a little while ago that perhaps the master would like his breakfast in bed, seeing that he'd hurt his back. And cook says she heard something in the night, too."

"She heard something in the night?" repeated Mrs. Croxley sharply.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Whatever does cook mean?"

"She thought she heard some men prowling out in the garden, ma'am, and she was regular scared," declared the maid.

"Cook must have been dreaming!"

"No, ma'am; she was wide awake, so she says."

"Didn't she get up and look out of the window?"

"She was so scared she daren't

move," replied the maid—"leastways, that's what she tells me. She thought maybe the master had gone down to the electric light house at the bottom of the garden—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Mrs. Croxley. "I expect cook imagined the whole thing. I thought she was less childish, Jane. Tell her that I am very annoyed."

"Yes, ma'am," replied Jane.

Mrs. Croxley went into the breakfast-room again, crossed to the window, and looked out over the garden. The morning was fresh and sunny. The trim, neat garden was looking particularly attractive.

But the mistress of the house was worried and troubled. She glanced at the clock, frowned, and turned towards the breakfast-table. But she did not sit down.

Perhaps that little chat with Jane had made her uneasy. Again she went to the window and looked at the little stucco building. In some strange way it seemed to attract her.

Was it possible that the cook was right? Could her husband have gone down to the little power-house for something in the night? Gordon Croxley had certainly been rather strange in his manner after his little accident. He had seemed excited, and he had been very particular about the servants receiving orders not to go to the power-house, it seemed, in spite of herself. Arriving at the door, she turned the handle. But the door was locked.

It was curiosity, no doubt, which prompted her to go round and look in one of the windows. Perhaps she was wondering why her husband had been so mysterious about the place. And then, too, there was the unaccountable failure of the electric light. Croxley had said something about the floor subsiding.

Mrs. Croxley looked in the window, and started. The familiar oil-engine and dynamo were not in view. But, peering closely, she could see some kind of wreckage. Yes, and there was something else. Shading her eyes with her hand, she looked more closely.

Sticking upwards from this strange debris, there was a boot—a leg.

Suddenly Mrs. Croxley uttered a piercing shriek and reeled away from the window. She stood there, horror in her eyes, and she screamed again and again.

The cook and the housemaid, startled beyond measure by these cries, ran, frightened, out of the house. They found their mistress on the point of swooning, and were just in time to support her.

"Oh, ma'am, whatever's the matter?" asked the maid, pale with fright.

"I—I believe—" Mrs. Croxley stopped, and shuddered.

"Oh, ma'am, please!" pleaded the cook.

"My—my husband!" panted Mrs. Croxley. "I—I believe—he's in there! I saw his foot—his leg—"

Her voice faltered, and she fainted. The two servants were utterly frightened, and hardly knew what to do. But while the housemaid held Mrs. Croxley, the cook peered through the nearest window.

And a moment later she was screaming.

"It's the master—it's the master!" she wailed. "I knew I heard something here last night—I knew it! There's been an accident! Fetch the doctor! Fetch the police!"

She ran down the garden herself, burst through a little trellis-gate into the front and ran towards the main gates. As luck would have it, a police-constable was on the corner, a hundred yards away.

"Help—help!" screamed the cook hysterically.

"Anything wrong, miss?" asked the constable sharply.

The cook was leaning over the gate, pale to the lips and trembling. A small knot of people had collected, and were wondering what the excitement was about. Buses were passing to and fro, and the outside passengers stood up in their seats, and stared as though there was something to see.

"The—the master!" panted the cook. "Oh, Mr. Croxley's hurt!"

"No need to faint about it!" said the policeman gruffly. "Come along. I'll soon look into this! We'd better go inside."

He took the cook's arm, and led the way through the trellis-gate. The crowd looked on, and felt swindled. There had been nothing exciting, after all. One or two errand-boys made loud and facetious remarks about the policeman going in to have his daily breakfast.

"What's the trouble?" asked the constable, as he shut the gate.

"I don't know. But I believe there's been an accident," said the cook, recovering herself slightly. "There's Mrs. Croxley down there. She seems a bit better now."

The officer, hoping to get something more definite from the lady of the house, walked down the garden, and looked curiously at Mrs. Croxley, who was just coming to herself. By what the policeman could see, the whole affair was a storm in a teacup.

"Look—look in there!" said Mrs. Croxley faintly. "My husband—"

The constable, who knew Mr. Gordon Croxley by sight—and had, indeed, received more than one tip from him—peered through the window of the power-house. What he saw caused him to stand back suddenly. His face was now grim and set.

He strode to the door, tried it, and looked round.

"Got the key of this, ma'am?" he asked sharply.

"No," faltered Mrs. Croxley. "My husband always kept it!"

The constable was a man of action. He stood back, and charged at the door with all the strength of his broad shoulder. There was a splintering crash, and the door flew open. It had not been

constructed to withstand such an onslaught.

"My stars!" gasped the policeman. He nearly fell headlong into the pit—for the floor had subsided right up to the very threshold. It was only by flinging out his arm and clutching the door-post that he saved himself.

The policeman's first glance made it clear to him that the floor had collapsed. But his attention did not remain on this. Down there, among the jagged concrete, lay the form of Mr. Gordon Croxley. He was face upwards, and there was a fixed waxen expression about that countenance which could not be mistaken. The policeman had seen death too often to be deceived now.

"Stand back!" he said curtly, as the cook tried to peer in. "This is no place for you, my girl! Hurry off and fetch a doctor—any doctor! There's one four doors away, if he's in!"

The cook, more frightened than ever, scurried off. The policeman took one look at Mrs. Croxley and the maid. Mrs. Croxley was still faint, and Jane was giving her her full attention.

The policeman dropped heavily down to the concrete, seven feet below, and bent over Mr. Croxley's form. Without question, the unfortunate man was dead. The constable frowned. He couldn't quite understand it. There was no sign of any wound, although it was fairly obvious that Mr. Croxley had fallen and had either broken his neck, or suffered some other fatal injury.

"Queer!" muttered the policeman, frowning.

And then he gave a violent start. On the white concrete, near by, where it sloped down, he saw a dark stain—a stain that could not be mistaken. With a quick heave he pulled the body over, and sucked his breath in through his teeth.

Projecting from the dead man's back there was the haft of a curious, antique-looking dagger!

"Murder!" muttered the policeman, aghast.

What had seemed to be an accident now revealed itself as a mystery crime of the most sensational type. That blow could never have been self-inflicted. The dagger was driven right into Mr. Croxley's back, and he must have died instantaneously.

The policeman was a smart man. Without hesitation, he climbed upwards, and managed to reach the door. He closed it, and deliberately produced some string from his pocket and roughly tied the smashed fastening.

"Better take the lady indoors, miss," he said softly, as the housemaid looked round. "There's something here it wouldn't do her any good to see."

"My husband!" panted Mrs. Croxley, starting up. "Is he there?"

The policeman hesitated.

"Is he there?" repeated Mrs. Croxley sharply.

"Yes, ma'am!" said the policeman. "Mr. Croxley is dead!"

The unfortunate lady gave a low sob, and fell back into Jane's arms.

"Take me in," she breathed faintly. "Oh, take me indoors!"

"The master dead!" exclaimed Jane, with an hysterical note in her voice. "Oh, ma'am—"

"Take the lady indoors, and come out here again at once!" interrupted the constable curtly. "I want you, my girl! Be out here as soon as you can! Don't forget! It's important!"

While the startled Jane was helping Mrs. Croxley indoors the constable produced his notebook and made rapid entries. He was still at it when the girl came running down the garden-path.

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"What's happened?" she asked breathlessly.

"Never you mind what's happened," said the officer, looking up. "You go along to the corner of Clifton Road—where the No. 6 buses turn round—and you'll find a policeman there. Or he may be just on the opposite corner against the taxi-rank. Bring him here at once."

"But s'pose he ain't there——" began the housemaid.

"Then look round till you find him!" interrupted the constable. "And make haste!"

The girl went off, and she was evidently successful, for in less than seven minutes she returned with another policeman. The two officers held a consultation, and the new arrival soon hastened away, carrying an important message to the station.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Entanglement of Mr. Gregson.



MR. SEXTON BLAKE stepped briskly out of his big touring car, the Grey Panther, opposite the entrance of Scotland Yard. Tinker was already on the pavement.

"I think we're a few minutes before time, guv'nor," said Tinker, glancing at his watch. "The chances are that

Mr. Lennard isn't here yet. I think he oversleeps himself in the morning——"

"What's that?" demanded Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard, coming up in the rear.

Tinker turned in mock surprise.

"Oh, are you there, Mr. Lennard?" he asked. "I was just telling the guv'nor what a prompt man you are——"

"You'll get your head knocked off one of these days, young man," interrupted the chief-inspector, with a grin. "Well, Blake, I'm afraid we can't go into that little matter now. I made the appointment, too, so it's up to me to apologise. But I've got to rush off to Maida Vale."

Lennard was one of the big men of the C.I.D.—a genial, hearty sort of individual, with any amount of hard common-sense. He had especially requested Blake to consult him on a forgery case that morning.

"Maida Vale?" repeated Sexton Blake. "Anything big?"

"Murder!" said Lennard briefly.

"I'm not surprised," observed Tinker. "Maida Vale's capable of anything."

"Just got the message through," went on Lennard. "Rather a mysterious affair, by what I can understand. Fellow named Gordon Croxley. Found dead in a little private electric power station at the bottom of his garden. Stabbed in the back."

"Sounds rather interesting," said Tinker.

"Yes, it's a queer affair," agreed Lennard as he eyed the Grey Panther with interest. "The dagger, I understand, is an old Roman relic, or something. There was a smart policeman on the job, and he got a message through in quick time. Busy just now?" he added carelessly.

"Not particularly," smiled Blake. "Go on, Lennard. You're going to ask me to take you over to Maida Vale, eh?"

"Well, I thought——"

"Jurap in!" invited the great detective. "If the affair doesn't detain you long I can bring you back, and then we can go into that forgery business. And I dare say you'll let me have a look round."

The chief inspector was only too glad of the offer. For one thing he wanted to get to the scene of the crime quickly, and, another thing, he was always eager to have Sexton Blake with him. Blake had a rather uncanny way of picking up clues, which Lennard took advantage of. He was a man who worked by rule of thumb, but he was always ready to accept advice when it was proffered by Sexton Blake.

The Grey Panther picked its way through the traffic smoothly, and, taking the short cut through the park, was soon gliding along Edgware Road, and thence into Maida Vale.

The late Mr. Gordon Croxley's residence was one of the big, old-fashioned houses which lay between St. John's Wood Road and the beginning of Kilburn. And there was a long front garden and extensive grounds in the rear.

Lennard did not trouble to bother Mrs. Croxley. He made himself known to the constable on duty, and was conducted straight through the trellis gate into the back garden, Sexton Blake and Tinker accompanying him.

They were soon at the door of the picturesque stucco power-house.

The smart constable, whose name turned out to be Sinclair, gave a brief account of what he knew.

"According to the housemaid, there was a sort of accident here last night," added the constable. "The floor collapsed, and the entire works fell in. But that doesn't account for the murder."

"Let's have a look," said Lennard briefly.

The door was unfastened, and Lennard entered. At least, he stood on the threshold and gazed down. One glance was sufficient. He turned with a grave expression.

"Isn't the divisional surgeon here?" he asked.

"He's been, sir, and I think he's in the house now——" began Sinclair.

But the police-surgeon himself came along at this moment, and soon afterwards the men were bending over Mr. Croxley's body. Sexton Blake and Tinker were interested witnesses.

"He must have died on the instant," said the surgeon. "What's more, the blow was delivered by a powerful man. I haven't withdrawn the dagger, but it's obviously a heavy, clumsy affair, and the murderer must have used tremendous force."

"Not much of a clue," grunted Lennard, as he stood looking round. "By George! This place is in a hopeless mess, if you like. Looks as if there's been an earthquake. What caused the floor to collapse in this way?"

"There's a kind of vault underneath," said the surgeon. "The servants have got hold of the story, anyhow. An old Roman place, I imagine. The vibration of the dynamo caused this collapse."

The chief inspector pursed his lips.

"There's more in this than meets the eye," he declared.

Tinker looked at Sexton Blake with interest.

"What do you make of it, sir?" he asked.

"With such a dearth of facts, Tinker, I don't attempt to make anything of it," replied Blake. "We know nothing,

as yet. The surgeon declares that Croxley must have been killed in the small hours of the morning—which proves that he was here at dead of night. If we can find why he came to the power-house at such an hour we might arrive at some conclusion."

"Heard somebody prowling about, perhaps," suggested Tinker. "It looks to me like a case of unpremeditated murder. Mr. Croxley found somebody trying to pilfer the place, and there was a struggle."

"It's no good making surmises of that sort, my lad," put in Blake. "Theories are useless until we have a peg to hang them upon."

They were out in the open, and Sexton Blake was gazing thoughtfully at the garden round the angle of the power-house. At the moment Mr. Croxley's body was being removed by police-officers. Lennard was holding a confab with Constable Sinclair.

"I think I shall have to have a few words with Mrs. Croxley," said Lennard as he joined Blake and Tinker a minute later. "Perhaps the lady will be able to throw some light on the business. Up to the present we can't make head or tail of it."

"Take a look at that path," suggested Blake.

Lennard looked, and saw that Blake was indicating the gravel footpath which led past the little building to the bottom of the garden. It was a well-kept path, with a rather loose surface. And this surface was disturbed in a curious kind of way.

"What about it?" asked Lennard, frowning.

"Nothing much—only it seems to me that somebody has been particularly careful to cover his footprints," said Blake calmly. "Take another look, old man. Roughly, I should say that somebody walked down that path, returned, and smoothed over the gravel as he retreated."

"By Jove!" ejaculated the inspector keenly. "I believe you're right!"

They skirted the path, walking along the lawn, and followed it down to a small, ornamental fountain which stood in the middle of a stagnant-looking pool. The water was thick and murky.

"The murderer came down here to wash his hands!" declared Lennard crisply. "Perhaps he got some blood on them, remembered this pool, and came straight down. Then he found that his footprints were marked in the gravel, so he smoothed them over."

"That's what it looks like," said Tinker.

"But I'll tell you what," went on Lennard. "He may have done something else. It's possible he threw something into this water. Hi, Sinclair," he added, raising his voice, "bring one of those men, and come down here! No, not along the path! Keep to the grass!"

Two constables came, and Lennard instructed them to drag the pool at once. They went off, and returned within a few minutes armed with garden rakes. And with these implements they set about dragging the pool.

Jane, the maidservant, joined the watching group.

"If you please, sir," she said to Lennard, "the mistress says she'll see you, if you come now."

"Good!" ejaculated Lennard promptly.

"She's very upset, sir, and she'd like you to be quick," added the maid. "It's a wonder she ain't ill in bed, poor thing! And to think that the master was alive and well only last night!"

"That's all right; don't upset yourself!" growled the inspector. "If you'd like to come along, Blake——"

"Thanks!" said Sexton Blake. "I will."

"Just a minute, sir," called out Sinclair. "I seem to have got hold of something here. Looks like a piece of cloth——"

Lennard and Blake stepped forward with interest, and found that the constable had pulled up a sodden piece of rolled-up material. It was muddy and dirty. Very gingerly the inspector took hold of it, and made a closer examination.

"By Jove, a scarf!" he ejaculated. "Silk, too! Now, then, be careful, Sinclair. Take hold——"

He paused as the scarf was unrolled. Sodden as it was, there were significant traces of bloodstains. The scarf had been so tightly rolled that the stains had failed to wash out. And the scarf, fully unrolled, was seen to be in perfect condition and practically new.

"This is a find!" declared the chief inspector eagerly. "And look at this! Initials! 'D.G.', as clear as you like! We ought to make use of this, Blake!"

"Yes, there can be no question that it was flung into the pool during the night," agreed Sexton Blake. "It's amazing, Lennard, how rash these murderers are! This is a direct clue."

Lennard nodded.

"They always make a blunder some where," he remarked. "In this case, the fellow fooled himself that he had hidden up his tracks. You can easily follow what happened. He got some blood on his hands, used his scarf, and then got scared. Remembering the pool, he ran down the path and threw the scarf in—anything to get rid of it. Afterwards he saw the footprints, and got the wind up. So he did his best to obliterate them. Must have walked backwards, smoothing out the marks with his hand."

The clue was an important one as Sexton Blake himself was ready to admit. But the great detective had a feeling that nothing could be definitely determined until Mrs. Croxley had been interviewed.

Mrs. Croxley was in the drawing-room when Sexton Blake and Leonard were ushered in. Tinker had discreetly remained outside. Blake himself felt something like an intruder.

The drawing-room was dim, for all the blinds were down in deference to the dead. Mrs. Croxley was lying on the lounge, surrounded by cushions. She was looking pale and drawn.

"I hope you won't keep me very long, inspector," she said quietly.

"Not long madam," said Lennard. "But there are one or two things that you can probably tell us. I understand there was a kind of accident in the power-house last night?"

"Yes; the floor collapsed, and the oil-engine and dynamo fell, and all the lights went out."

"Were you and your husband alone at the time?"

"No; we had a visitor. They were playing billiards when it happened," said Mrs. Croxley. "But I don't see how this can help you, inspector. The collapse of the power-house floor isn't connected with my husband's death."

"Your husband was killed during the night," said the inspector. "It is obvious that he went down to the power-house for some reason, and was then attacked. Do you know anything about that visit?"

"Nothing whatever. I was sound asleep."

"You were not disturbed during the night at all?"

"No. My husband and I have always used separate bed-rooms."

"Your first intimation that anything was wrong was when you found him missing this morning?"

"Yes," replied Mrs. Croxley. "Ellen, the cook, told me that she had heard somebody moving about in the garden in the night. I couldn't understand it, and went down to the power-house more by instinct than anything else, I think. I seemed to feel that something dreadful had happened. And then, when I looked in the window, I saw—I saw——"

"Quite so," interrupted the inspector gently. "You cannot possibly account for your husband going to the power-house in the middle of the night?"

"It is a complete mystery to me," said Mrs. Croxley.

"You don't think it was connected with this Roman vault the surgeon has told me about?"

"But I do!" said Mrs. Croxley, sitting forward. "That's just what I do think, inspector! Last night my husband was quite excited about the vault, and he and Mr. Gregson——"

"Mr. Gregson?"

"The visitor we had last night," explained Mrs. Croxley. "After the lights went out they both visited the power-house together, and it was Mr. Gregson who first discovered the reason for the collapse."

"Gregson!" muttered the inspector. "Can you tell me his Christian name?"

"I'm not sure, but I think it is Daniel."

Lennard shot a quick glance at Blake.

"Daniel Gregson," he said musingly. "I don't wish to imply anything against the gentleman, but can you give me a few facts concerning him. Mrs. Croxley? You see, he was with your husband last night, and it seems that he is the only man who knew of this Roman vault. We may find it necessary to question him."

"You don't think that Mr. Gregson——" began Mrs. Croxley.

She paused, and looked suddenly excited.

"Oh, but it's too dreadful!" she went on, in a hushed voice. "I never dreamed that Mr. Gregson might have done it! It's terrible! But he came to my husband for money, and my husband refused him. I believe."

"If you will tell us more of this friend——"

"Mr. Gregson was not a friend, in the usual way," said Mrs. Croxley. "Just an acquaintance, you understand. He only came to dinner last night for the purpose of business. I don't know much of my husband's affairs, but I think Mr. Gregson wanted to borrow a thousand pounds."

"Yes?" prompted the inspector.

"My husband wasn't quite satisfied with his security, and I think he refused to entertain the loan. And Mr. Gregson was just going when all the lights went out."

"But I thought he and your husband were playing billiards?"

"Well, I mean, the business transaction had fallen through, and they were having a friendly game before Mr. Gregson went," explained Mrs. Croxley. "Oh, I wonder if Mr. Gregson came back and tried to get some of those golden ornaments from the vault? But he couldn't, inspector! Such a thing is too awful!"

Both Lennard and Sexton Blake were impressed. Mrs. Croxley's information was most significant, and she herself seemed to realise it.

The mystery was becoming clear.

Gregson, disappointed and angry at having failed to get the money he wanted, had left the house, desperate. Later, he had remembered the Roman relics. He and Croxley were the only men who knew about that vault. Returning like a thief in the night, Gregson had entered the power-house, and Mr. Croxley had heard him.

He had confronted Gregson—possibly the latter was attempting to escape with his spoils—and there had been a quarrel. And Gregson had used one of his ill-gotten relics for the purpose of stabbing his victim.

It seemed perfectly clear and obvious. Perhaps, thought Blake, a trifle too obvious.

"Can you tell me where Mr. Gregson lives?" asked the inspector grimly.

"I'm sure I don't know," replied Mrs. Croxley. "But I'm more and more convinced that he knows something——"

There was a tap on the door, and the housemaid entered.

"Please, ma'am, Mr. Gregson's called," she announced.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. Sexton Blake is Exasperating.



THE chief inspector spun round.

"Allow me, Mrs. Croxley!" he said swiftly. "Ask Mr. Gregson into one of the other rooms, Jane, and tell him that Mrs. Croxley will only be a moment."

"Yes, sir," said Jane. "Mr. Gregson's terribly upset, sir."

He didn't know anything about the—the master until I told him a minute ago. It seemed to knock him right over, sir."

"Did you tell him that I'm here?" asked Lennard sharply.

"No, sir."

"Then don't," said the Scotland Yard man. "Go back and tell him that Mrs. Croxley will be with him in a minute."

"Very good, sir."

The girl went out, and Lennard turned swiftly to Mrs. Croxley.

"Can you suggest any reason for Mr. Gregson's call?" he asked keenly.

"Oh, I'm so bewildered—I'm so terribly bewildered!" murmured the poor woman. "But now I come to think of it, I believe my husband said that Mr. Gregson would call this morning. I think he has come to make a last effort to negotiate that loan."

"Oh!" said Lennard, pursing his lips.

This was an unexpected snag. Sexton Blake saw it at once. If Gregson was the murderer, it was extraordinary that he should turn up this morning at the very scene of his crime. But the chief inspector was satisfied after a moment's quick thought.

He took a direct line of reasoning. Assuming Gregson to be guilty, the man had come this morning to keep his appointment—knowing that Mrs. Croxley knew of the arrangement. If he had stayed away the circumstance would have been suspicious. Although it required all his courage to come, he had realised that it was his only safe course.

"If you'll excuse me, Mrs. Croxley, I'll go at once," said Lennard. "I may want to question you again, but I'll try my best to spare you the ordeal. Come, Blake, we'll go."

They bowed to Mrs. Croxley, and went out. As Lennard closed the door he looked at Blake significantly.

"Plain as a pikestaff, eh?" he murmured.

"Perhaps, Lennard—perhaps," said Sexton Blake. "But I shouldn't be too sure, if I were you."

"But, man alive, the scarf!"

"I am not overlooking the scarf," said Blake quietly. "I have no doubt that you will detain Gregson, but take my advice and be careful. Let me repeat your own words—there's more in this than meets the eye."

"There was then, but there isn't now!" grunted Lennard. "Anyhow, five minutes with Gregson, and I'll know the full truth. Come along—you'd better be in at the death."

They found Gregson pacing up and down the morning-room. The very look of the man was significant. He was haggard and pale, and there was a jumpy nervousness in his manner which struck the inspector at once.

"I'm from Scotland Yard," said Lennard bluntly. "Mr. Gregson, I believe?"

"Yes," said Gregson. "What does it mean? They tell me that Mr. Croxley is dead. It's a terrible thing—a terrible thing! I came here on purpose to see him—an appointment."

"I think you were here last night, Mr. Gregson?"

"Yes, I had dinner with Mr. and Mrs. Croxley."

"You know all about the Roman vault under the power-house?"

"I know something—"

"Did you come back here during the night?" asked Lennard abruptly.

"During the night?" ejaculated Gregson. "Good heavens! You don't think that I—"

"I'm just asking you, Mr. Gregson," interrupted Lennard. "Did you come to this house during the night?"

"No, I did not."

"Can you prove that?"

"Prove it?" said Gregson. "Of course I can. I was at home. I went to bed shortly after midnight, and—"

"By the way, have you lost your scarf?" broke in the inspector.

"My scarf?" Gregson's hands went to his collar, and he looked rather startled. "I thought I was wearing— No, I must have forgotten it. But why do you ask? I don't see how—"

He broke off, more haggard than ever.

"Has your scarf got any initials on it?" pressed Lennard.

"Why, yes, my own initials—D. G.," said Gregson. "I don't seem to remember what became of it. I thought I was wearing— You don't think I killed Gordon Croxley?" he burst out, in a kind of panic. "You don't think that?"

"Don't get excited," interrupted Lennard. "Wouldn't it be better, Mr. Gregson, to be quite frank? Did you kill Gordon Croxley? Come along—better get the thing over—"

"You're mad—you're mad!" shouted Gregson, backing away. "I don't know anything about it, I tell you! I don't know anything about it! Croxley was alive when I saw him last."

"I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to come with me, nevertheless," said Lennard grimly. "Until I've made further inquiries, Mr. Gregson, you'll be detained."

Daniel Gregson stared blankly, dazedly. And then, with a curious sound, he collapsed, as white as death, and with guilt written on every line of his features.



"Put up your hands!" came a sharp command. Waldo laughed, for the voice was that of a woman. Next moment Mrs. Croxley appeared, flashing her torch on him. "Stand just where you are," she ordered sternly. (Page 22.)

SEXTON BLAKE stirred his coffee thoughtfully.

"A curious affair, Tinker," he observed. "I don't know quite what to make of it. Of course, we only just glanced at the case; but I can't help thinking that Lennard is on the wrong trail."

Blake and Tinker were at Baker Street, and were concluding luncheon. After Mr. Daniel Gregson had been taken away in custody, Sexton Blake and

Tinker had left the house at Maida Vale. There had been nothing else to be done.

"On the wrong trail, gov'nor?" repeated Tinker, looking up from the early edition of the evening paper. "But how? There's not a shadow of doubt that Gregson is the murderer. What about that scarf? And what about the way he collapsed when old Lennard put it to him plainly?"

Blake lit a cigarette.

"Innocent men have collapsed before now, Tinker," he said thoughtfully. "I venture to suggest that fifty per cent. of innocent men would collapse if they were suddenly charged with committing a brutal murder—and if they were victims of circumstantial evidence."

"Well, there can't be any other kind of evidence in a case like this," said Tinker. "The murder took place in the middle of the night. There were no witnesses, and Gregson was the only man who knew about those valuable relics. Besides, he was keen after money, and Croxley had refused."

"I will admit there are the full ingredients," said Sexton Blake. "However, Tinker, Lennard has got hold of nothing which amounts to actual proof."

"I don't know about that, sir," said Tinker. "Don't you call it proof when

Gregson's scarf is found in that pool—all bloodstained?"

Sexton Blake leaned back.

"It is proof that Gregson's scarf was used for the purpose of wiping away some bloodstains, but it is not proof that Gregson used the scarf," he replied. "It is merely another item of circumstantial evidence. It is very easy to put two and two together, and make more than four, Tinker."

"Oh, well, it seems good enough for me, sir," said Tinker. "You haven't discovered anything else, have you? I mean, you haven't hit upon another trail?"

"Not exactly a trail, Tinker."

Tinker looked up, staring.

"Does that mean that you've spotted something that all the rest of us have missed?" he asked, with quick interest.

"Perhaps," smiled Blake, rising to his feet.

"I say, you're in one of your mysterious moods this time, gov'nor," grumbled Tinker. "If you've hit upon something I think you might take me into the secret."

"There's really no reason why we should pursue the subject at all," replied Sexton Blake. "I will admit that I am interested, but we can do nothing. I have not been commissioned in this case, and I cannot make personal investigations, because I have no right on Mrs. Croxley's property. So perhaps we had better count ourselves out."

Tinker wasn't satisfied. If Sexton Blake had seen something significant—something which had an important bearing on the case—he would not be content to remain idle. But it was quite like the famous detective to assume an indifferent attitude.

(Continued on page 20.)

The AFFAIR of the ROMAN RELICS.

(Continued from page 9).

Tinker was interested, because the newspapers were already reporting the case in big headlines. The Press, apparently, was determined to make a sensational affair of the drama.

It was the Roman relics which gave the murder such an interest.

Somehow the reporters had got hold of the story—probably through the agency of the domestics. As yet there were only hints, but Tinker knew enough about newspaper men to be sure that the later editions would be fairly filled with details.

He followed Sexton Blake into the consulting-room, and found the detective looking at a card which Mrs. Bardell had just brought in. Blake was rather thoughtful.

"Yes, you can show Mrs. Gregson up," he said slowly.

"Poor lady! She looks fair done-up!" said Mrs. Bardell sympathetically. "She ain't far from being historical, by what I can see."

Mrs. Bardell went out, and Tinker looked across at Blake.

"Mrs. Gregson?" he said inquiringly.

"I don't think it's a coincidence, Tinker; the lady is apparently the wife of the accused man," said Sexton Blake. "It is possible that she may be able to tell us something of interest."

Mrs. Gregson was showing acute signs of distress when she came in. She was rather a frail woman of about thirty-five, and Blake judged her to be quite good-looking under happier circumstances.

Blake did his best to calm her, for it was fairly obvious that she was on the verge of a breakdown.

"They told me that you were at Mr. Croxley's house this morning, Mr. Blake!" she exclaimed tensely. "You were there when my husband was arrested. Oh, it isn't true—it isn't true! He didn't kill Mr. Croxley!"

"Your husband has not been arrested, Mrs. Gregson," said Sexton Blake soothingly. "He has merely been detained for inquiries. If he is innocent, he will soon be released. There is really no reason why you should alarm yourself to this extent."

"But they won't believe me, Mr. Blake—they won't believe what I tell them!" she exclaimed pitifully. "Just because I'm his wife, they won't accept a word! And yet I can prove his innocence!"

Mrs. Gregson looked at Sexton Blake appealingly.

"I can prove he's innocent, Mr. Blake, but they won't believe it!" she repeated, clasping and unclasping her hands. "Oh, it isn't fair! It isn't just!"

"Will you tell me what your proof consists of?"

"My husband returned home last night, after his interview with Mr. Croxley, and he told me everything about his failure, and those Roman antiques," she replied. "And he was hoping that Mr. Croxley would help him this morning. He was in bed before midnight, Mr. Blake, and he didn't get up until eight o'clock this morning. How can they say that he murdered Mr. Croxley in the middle of the night? Oh, how can they say it?"

"I am afraid your husband's alibi, although seeming satisfactory to you, is far from satisfactory to the police," re-

plied Sexton Blake gently. "Are you a heavy sleeper, Mrs. Gregson?"

"Not heavy, but I generally sleep soundly."

"Then it is conceivable that your husband got out of bed after you were asleep, and went to Maida Vale—"

"But he didn't!" insisted Mrs. Gregson excitedly.

"I'm not saying he did. But such a thing would have been possible?"

"It wouldn't, Mr. Blake. I should have known," she replied.

"The police, I am afraid, would not accept that view," replied Blake. "Your evidence, Mrs. Gregson, is of little use in a case like this. Has your husband ever got up in the middle of the night without your knowledge?"

She thought desperately.

"Sometimes," she admitted at length.

"We have two children, Mr. Blake. About a month ago my little daughter coughed rather severely in the night, and my husband heard her and got up. He was with her for over an hour, until she was better. Then he came back to bed."

"And did you know this?"

"Not until the morning, when he told me."

:: NOTICE TO :: COMPETITORS.

For your convenience the Final Set of pictures and the simple judging-form for use in sending in your entries have been printed overleaf and extended across a double page. Detach the Supplement, and the competition pages will be found readily accessible.

THOSE readers who have become acquainted with this paper during the run of our great £4,550 competition now closing cannot have failed to make the acquaintance also of the stories which appear week by week in these pages.

To every new reader to whom a gripping, well-told detective tale appeals, these yarns of Sexton Blake and his lovable assistant, Tinker, will doubtless have come as a revelation. Those who know a good story when they see one will realise that, in this comparatively unpretentious twopenny paper, every week appear stories that for sheer grip and interest often surpass those published in cloth covers as current novels, cost anything from two to ten shillings.

You have, by this time, come to know and appreciate our other characters besides Sexton Blake—Professor Reece, Waldo, Yvonne, Zenith, Kestrel, and the rest. Well, why forgo them?

Stories in which they appear are frequently published. Professor Reece, for instance, will turn up next week, and Huxton Rymer the week after.

There is a constant succession of our "old favourites" stories. The "U. J." is proud to have a staunch and steadfast following composed of readers who, having once seen the merit in these yarns, continue to read them year after year.

It's a happy position to be in—to be able to look forward, regularly every week, to a real reading treat—hours of enjoyment for twopenny, in fact.

Why not join this happy band?

Other features of the paper, too, may have appealed to you—the Supplement, or the sterling excellence of our well-chosen serials, or our weekly Football Competition. It's all the same, whatever it is. You know by now that you can't buy a paper anything like this *anywhere*, for there is nothing like the UNION JACK published.

Take this tip, then—don't give up the "U. J."! Tell your newsagent to keep on the weekly order you gave him for the run of the competition.

Make it a standing order—twopenny a week!

"Well, there you are!" said Blake quietly. "That's just a case in point. You can surely see why the police are unwilling to accept your evidence? If your husband can get up for an hour without your knowledge to attend to your little daughter, it stands to reason that he could have been absent for two or three hours last night. The police take the view that it would have been quite possible for him to go to Maida Vale, commit the murder, and return within the space of two hours."

Mrs. Gregson looked at Blake wild-eyed.

"But I had the toothache last night," she insisted. "I slept very lightly. I kept waking up. My husband couldn't have left the house without my knowledge—he couldn't have done! Oh, Mr. Blake, don't you believe me?"

"Yes, Mrs. Gregson, I do," replied Sexton Blake. "But again I must impress upon you the importance of the fact that the police will not believe it. You tell me that your husband was in bed from midnight until eight o'clock. I quite accept your statement."

"Then—then you don't believe that Dan committed the murder?"

"I am quite convinced that he didn't," replied Blake.

Mrs. Gregson was overwhelmed for a moment, but the expression of relief in her eyes was good to see. Tinker, who was listening, was frankly astonished. Until now he had never known that Sexton Blake held such a decided view on the case.

"Thank you, Mr. Blake—thank you!" muttered Mrs. Gregson. "If you believe my husband innocent, then perhaps there is a chance. Will you help me? Will you try to prove his innocence?"

"I had already decided to make a few private inquiries," replied Blake. "Since you have appealed to me in this way, however, I will enter into the investigation with even greater zest. If it is within my power to free your husband from this position, I will certainly do so."

"I—I don't know how to thank you, Mr. Blake!"

"The time to thank me, Mrs. Gregson, will be when I have restored your husband to you—if, indeed, I bring about that happy event," said Sexton Blake. "My advice to you is to go home, and be brave. I have every reason to believe that your husband will soon be released."

"Soon?" she repeated, with a quick look of hope.

"To-morrow, at the latest," replied Blake smoothly.

"Oh, but you don't mean—"

"Leave the matter in my hands, and I don't think I shall disappoint you," interrupted Blake. "If I can obtain your husband's release to-day, I will do so, but it may not be until to-morrow. But don't worry. Go home, and make your mind as easy as possible."

Mrs. Gregson went into a kind of daze, and Sexton Blake filled his pipe, lit it, and stared musingly out of the window. Tinker was looking at his master rather grinnily.

"I say, sir, that was a bit risky, wasn't it?" he asked.

"Risky? What was risky?"

"Telling her that she'll have her husband back to-morrow?"

"Why risky, Tinker?" asked Blake. "You don't think I should have made such a statement unless I had excellent grounds?"

"Look here, gov'nor, you've got something up your sleeve," said Tinker indignantly. "It's like your nerve to keep me in the dark all this time! If Gregson didn't kill old Croxley, who did?"

"I wonder?" said Blake slowly. "At

the same time, Tinker, I don't think I shall wonder for long! I have an inkling—just a faint inkling—”

“Well, sir?” asked Tinker eagerly. “But inklings are not facts, young ‘un,” said Sexton Blake, with his most exasperating air. “And Facts are what we are going after—and what, I hope, we’ll get.”

**THE FIFTH CHAPTER.
Waldo at Work.**



RUPERT WALDO tossed the evening paper aside, and gazed at the ceiling. “Why not?” he murmured dreamily—. “One never knows one’s luck, and in these hard times there’s nothing left for it but to take a chance. I’ve a good mind to have a shot at it.”

The Wonder Man was lying back in an easy-chair, his feet on the table and a cigarette between his lips. Judging

by appearances, he was not suffering from any particularly hard times.

He wore a luxurious dressing-gown, silk slippers, and the apartment was in keeping with its occupant. Softly shaded electric lights were glowing, and there was a general air of affluence.

But one cannot always judge by general airs.

To tell the truth, Rupert Waldo was short of funds. Not that this worried him to any great extent. With his extraordinary facility for appropriating other people’s property and his constant fund of optimism, he never worried himself over such trifles.

At the same time, he preferred to pick and choose. Waldo was no ordinary burglar—no common cracksman, who was tempted by the mere thought of gain. He preferred to select his “enterprises” with the care of a connoisseur.

Nothing had attracted him for several weeks, and so he had drifted leisurely on, his cash growing shorter and shorter.

Waldo’s nerve was colossal, and his contempt for the police was stupendous. At the present time he was occupying bachelor chambers in the heart of the West End, and, what was more, he had taken little or no precaution in the way of disguise.

If it came to a tussle with the police he was always ready to enjoy the fun. And his very recklessness served to protect him. Not caring whether he was “spotted” or not, it generally happened that he was allowed to go his own sweet way.

He picked up the newspaper again and glanced at it.

“A sordid business—not in my line at all,” he murmured, with a yawn. “Not that Mr. Gordon Croxley didn’t deserve all he got. I don’t know the man personally, but I know the type. At a long shot, I should judge that he was a fairish blot on the face of Society. All honour to Mr. Gregson for having given Mr. Croxley a first-class ticket to a warmer climate. But that’s not the point. I’m only interested in this entertaining account of Roman relics.”

The evening paper, as Tinker had said, was full of the thing. It seemed that the police had investigated the vault and found a great chest of Roman coins, Roman ornaments, and other valuable antiquities. Learned professors in gangs were getting pent up with excitement.

“Roman gold,” commented Waldo lazily. “And why not? I don’t see why Roman gold shouldn’t be just as good as any other kind. And it has a certain dash of piquancy which attracts me. Maida Vale isn’t far off, and some exercise would probably do me a whole lot of good. Yes, old man, it’s got to be done. You’ll never sleep peacefully until you’ve had a good look inside that Roman vault!”

He chuckled to himself, passed into his bed-room, and shed his dressing-gown. Then he changed. Within twenty minutes he was ready to depart on an errand which promised to be full of interest. He wore a dark lounge suit, a light overcoat, and rubber-soled shoes.

It was between ten and eleven, and the



“Look, Lennard—look closely,” commanded Blake. “And have your handcuffs ready. Here is the murderer of Gordon Croxley.” “The murderer?” gasped Lennard, aghast. He bent down, whilst Blake forced back Mrs. Croxley’s hair. The Yard detective started, for without her mass of curly hair the woman looked different somehow. (Page 25.)

early hour did not deter him. Waldo was just as likely to commit a burglary at noon as any ordinary cracksman at two a.m.

Outside, the West End was just beginning to liven up, for in a short time the theatre crowds would be out. Strolling towards Piccadilly Circus, Waldo took a benign interest in the glittering electric signs, and paused to admire a new one which he hadn’t noticed before.

There were plenty of empty taxis about, and he hailed one and jumped in, telling the driver to take him to the St. John’s Wood Road entrance of Lord’s cricket ground. The taxi-man may have thought it strange for somebody to go to Lord’s ground at eleven o’clock at night, but he said nothing. He had driven fares to stranger places than that.

Arriving, Waldo got out, and then walked leisurely down towards Maida Vale, where there was still plenty of life. He turned to the right towards Kilburn, still strolling along as though he had no definite purpose in mind.

It was unnecessary for him to identify the late Mr. Gordon Croxley’s house, for as he approached, he observed a few morbid people gathered outside the gate, looking at the house.

He crossed the road, entered the gateway in front of everybody, and strode up the drive. He was inwardly amused. It was all so easy. Why climb over garden walls, and act like a common thief, when he could do the job like a gentleman?

One glance was sufficient to show him the trellis-gate leading to the back garden. So, instead of approaching the house, he walked to the gate, lifted the latch, and passed through. Those who were watching took it for granted that this self-possessed individual was a high Scotland Yard official—and two people, at all events, definitely recognised Waldo as Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard, and did not hesitate to say so.

Waldo walked down the garden, and dimly saw the little stucco building looming up. A burly form was standing at attention near the door. Waldo didn’t even hesitate.

“Ah, still on duty here, my man?” he asked benevolently.

“Yes, sir,” said the constable. “That’s the way—never neglect your job!” went on Waldo, with approval. “All alone here?”

“Yes, sir!” “Splendid!” smiled Waldo. “Couldn’t be better, in fact.”

The constable peered forward in the gloom.

“Beggin’ your pardon, sir, but I don’t think I know you,” he said respectfully. “A newspaper man, sir? If so, I’m afraid I shall have to ask you to leave.”

“That would be distressing, just as I am enjoying your delightful conversation,” said Waldo. “I suppose you’ll be on duty all night? Rather a lonely job—”

“Not all night, sir—I shall be leaving at one o’clock.”

“It’s just as well to know these things,” commented the Wonder Man with a chuckle. “I hate doing it, old man, but there’s nothing else for it. You seem such a sportsman, too.”

The policeman, who had no reason to anticipate trouble, took it for granted that this gentleman was one of those enterprising newspaper men. But a moment later he found out his mistake.

For Rupert Waldo deliberately attacked him.

On the face of it, the thing seemed ridiculous. The constable was a six-foot-three giant, and proportionately broad. Waldo, although tall, seemed insignificant by comparison. A tussle between these two must, it seemed, inevitably end one way.

But it evidently ended the other way.

Rupert Waldo was not known as the Wonder Man for nothing. Even if P.c. Barrett didn’t know that Waldo was a kind of superman, Scotland Yard did. But P.c. Barrett’s knowledge was soon increased when it came to a matter of strength, Waldo stood supreme.

He seemed hardly human, for his strength was staggering—his muscles as taut and powerful as steel cables. Added to this, the fact that he was constitutionally incapable of feeling pain, and it will perhaps be realised that Waldo was something of a novelty.

P.c. Barrett thought so, at all events.

He thought so, particularly, when he was hurled over Waldo's shoulder like a sack of feathers. The trouble was, he didn't land like a sack of feathers.

The constable's weight and bulk were against him. He fell with a thud which half dazed him. The next moment, before he could make any outcry or attempt any movement, a kind of steel band pinned his neck down and held him like a vice.

He struggled, it is true, but a large blue bottle will struggle in the grip of a tiny spider. This particular "bluebottle" was in just such a hopeless predicament.

Waldo had once fought a single-handed battle with a fierce leopard, and the leopard had got the worst of it. P.-c. Barrett was helpless within thirty seconds. From his point of view, the affair was the most staggering thing that ever happened to him. From Waldo's, it was merely an amusing incident.

At all events, the unfortunate constable was tied up with stout cord almost before he could recover his breath. A heavy pad was fixed over his mouth and nostrils, and bound there. He could breathe all right, but when it came to a matter of making a sound, he was at a disadvantage. And the cords were so cunningly fastened that no amount of struggling would loosen their grip.

"Sorry, old man, but you were in my way a bit," murmured Waldo coolly. "You don't mind, do you? Oh, and just a word! Take a tip from your uncle, and keep still. If you struggle, those cords will get tighter, and you can't loosen them again. The more you squirm, the more pain you'll get. So don't say I haven't done my best."

The constable gave an inward grunt, but could do no more. He was a diligent officer, and he was enraged at this whole affair. He was alarmed and humiliated, too. Even now he couldn't understand how it had happened. He struggled fiercely.

But he stopped almost at once—for his cords became painfully tight.

"What did I tell you?" asked Waldo pleasantly.

After that the constable thought he was dreaming. He was under no misapprehension regarding his own weight—his wife, in fact, frequently referred to him as "a hulking great brute," owing to his tendency to knock over the household furniture. And when Waldo coolly lifted his victim off the ground as though he were a baby in arms, P.-c. Barrett could be excused for thinking that he was under a delusion.

But it was a fact. Waldo lifted the constable up direct, poised him in his arms, and then walked quietly round to the back of the power-house. He carried his burden as though it were a featherweight.

The constable was placed against the rear wall, nicely screened from the night breezes by a couple of laurel bushes. And there Waldo left him—with a parting injunction not to snore too loudly.

And this amazing crook got down to work in earnest.

The beam of an electric torch illuminated the interior of the little building. Behind it, Waldo was taking stock of his surroundings. He had closed the door, and felt satisfied that he would not be disturbed until one a.m.—although he had no intention of remaining so long.

"There seems to have been a bit of a crash," he murmured. "H'm! The floor simply caved in—and there, I observe, is the entrance. None too wide, but we must see what can be done."

It was just one of those tricks of Fate which had caused Mr. Gordon Croxley to choose this particular site for the power-house. Had it been built on the other side of the garden, there would have been no collapse. But who could have known about that centuries-forgotten vault only a few feet under the surface?

Strong enough to withstand time, the vault had, nevertheless, succumbed to the weight and vibration of modern machinery. Waldo pondered on these matters as he looked at the distorted ironwork, the masses of cracked and crazy concrete, and the general debris. He realised that another collapse was quite on the cards. For the flooring had not crashed clean through the ceiling of the vault; a considerable portion of it was jammed, and might give way at the least vibration or shock.

But Waldo was a fatalist. If he was to die by being crushed to death, there was an end to it. He wormed his way into the black cavity—the only opening large enough to squeeze through—and found himself in the curious walled tunnel.

Moving forward, he examined the adjacent vault with care, and was rather disappointed to find no trace of hidden treasure. From the newspaper reports, he had gathered that the place was simply overflowing with it.

"Is this another of life's little tragedies?" he murmured. "Alas, the duplicity of these newspaper gentry! I verily believe they have invented the Roman relics for the sake of a good story!"

It was a blow to Waldo, and he felt annoyed with himself for having fallen into the trap. Then he remembered the constable on duty. Why had the man been placed there if there was nothing of value within the building?

He searched round more carefully, and then his hopes returned. Half concealed by falling stones and earth, he could see a quaint looking chest. It was jammed so tightly that the police had not attempted to move it. They had been afraid of a general collapse, and orders had already been given for a contractor's firm to remove the debris from above. After that the vault would be explored by experts.

But Waldo thought otherwise. He looked at the chest, and examined the mass of stonework which crushed it. He re-

membered the enormous weight of the machinery above, but this did not deter him. If he could only get this chest a little eased, he felt that he could withdraw it without precipitating a collapse.

So, placing his light near by, he got to work. Very gingerly, he forced stone after stone out of its position. Once or twice he used all his strength, and the debris only moved after a struggle. Five ordinary men could not have shifted those stones as Waldo did single-handed.

And, as he had anticipated, the chest became freed—but not until an ominous quiver had passed through the overhanging mass, causing stones and dust to fall with a significant rumble.

Once, indeed, Waldo had leapt back, expecting the whole thing to cave in. But it didn't. And the chest was now free. He attempted to pull it farther out, and then paused. Even his enormous strength was taxed. He gave another heave, and instead of pulling the chest out he wrenched one end clean off.

Showers of small articles scattered themselves over the dank stone floor. There were rings in dozens, armlets, coins of many sizes, and other ornamental trifles. Seventy per cent. of the stuff was made of pure gold.

From an antiquarian point of view, this find was probably one of the most stupendous that history had ever known. In all probability, the origin of the hoard would never be discovered. Perhaps it was the booty of some ancient invader who had pillaged the Roman Governor's treasure-house.

Waldo was not interested in history. The stuff was here, and that was all he cared about at the moment. Later, no doubt, he would examine his spoils with the interest of an expert. But when work had to be done, Waldo was not the man to waste time.

He caught a sound behind him, for his hearing was very acute. And at the same moment the flash of an electric torch smote him in the eyes. He stood there without moving. He was just a little startled, but he showed no sign of it. His own electric torch was still gleaming, but its beam was playing in the opposite direction.

"Congratulations!" said Waldo smoothly. "I had no idea that a human being could walk so quietly. For once I have been caught napping. It is an occasion I shall long remember."

"Put up your hands!" came a sharp command.

Waldo laughed. The voice was that of a woman! This was a fresh surprise. He put up his hands, and a moment later Mrs. Croxley came through the rough crevice with a panther-like agility.

She was dressed in a clinging evening-gown, with a loose scarf round her neck. And as she faced Rupert Waldo she looked at him with a grim intensity which spelt danger.

"Stand just where you are!" she commanded sternly.

"One moment, and I am at your service," said Waldo.

He quickly stooped, picked up his torch, and flashed the light round full upon Mrs. Croxley. She stood dazzlingly revealed as she uttered an angry exclamation.

"Make another movement, and I will fire!" she said tensely.

"What is this—what is this?" asked Waldo in a soft voice. "By the Lord Harry! Is it possible? Surely we have met before—and under very different circumstances? Eight years ago were you not known to a certain select circle as Sweet-faced Vivian?"

Mrs. Croxley started back with a low intake of breath.

"I thought I was not mistaken," laughed Waldo. "Once seen, never forgotten, eh? I will admit the transformation is the work of a genius, but I should always know those eyes."

"Oh!" panted Mrs. Croxley, with a kind of sob.

Deliberately, she raised her arm, and Waldo caught a glitter. Like a flash, he dodged, but at the same second there was a spurt of flame as Mrs. Croxley pulled the trigger of her revolver.

There was a shattering, echoing report, a haze of smoke, and Rupert Waldo fell like a log, and rolled over with wide-staring eyes.

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THE SIXTH CHAPTER.
Complications and a Crash.

TWO dim forms stood in the shadow, as the front door was opened by Jane, the housemaid.

"Is it possible to see Mrs. Croxley?" asked Sexton Blake politely.

"I don't know, I'm sure, sir," replied the maid. "The mistress hasn't been herself all day, and—"

"I shall only detain her for a few moments," put in Blake.

"Very well, sir, if you'll please come in and wait."

Blake entered the hall, and Tinker followed. It was very dim, for only an oil lamp burned on a small bracket. The whole house seemed grim and forbidding—the absence of electric light and the shadow which hung over it both contributing to this effect.

Tinker was rather puzzled. He had expected his gvn'or to make a move long before this. But Blake had been out, and had not returned to Baker Street until late. And now, some little time after eleven, he and Tinker were making this call. It was an inexcusably late one.

Perhaps Blake had some reason for making it late. Tinker assumed that Blake was expecting Mrs. Croxley to be in bed, so that they would only have the police guard to deal with. And Blake, of course, would have no difficulty in obtaining a clear field for investigation.

The maid returned after a few moments.

"I thought the mistress had gone to bed, sir, but I think she's outside in the garden," said Jane. "My! It's more than I can understand—that's what it is! After what happened last night, too!"

Blake raised his eyebrows.

"Mrs. Croxley is in the garden?" he repeated. "Are you sure?"

"Cook saw her go out five minutes ago, sir."

"May we go through?" asked Blake. "You know me, of course? I was here with the chief inspector this morning."

"Why, yes, of course, sir," replied the girl, looking at the visitors with a kind of admiration. "You're Mr. Sexton Blake, sir. There's a policeman down the garden, and but for him cook and I wouldn't be here. We feel sort of safe now that the police are on guard. I expect the mistress must have gone down to have a talk with the young man."

"Very possibly," agreed Blake.

They were led through the hall, and passed out on to the terrace. But Tinker noticed that Blake was frowning as he walked down the garden-path towards the little building at the bottom.

"Rummy, isn't it, sir?" asked Tinker.

"Decidedly," agreed Blake. "I'm afraid it will upset my calculations somewhat—By James! Did you hear that?"

They both halted, listening intently.

"What was it, sir?" asked Tinker. "It sounded like a shot—a bit muffled, but—"

"It was a shot right enough," interrupted Blake. "What on earth can be happening now? This is a queer place, Tinker, and no mistake! Come along; we'd better see what the trouble is."

They rushed to the power-house, but it seemed deserted. There was no sign of any police guard. The door stood half open, and blackness yawned within that place of grim association.

Blake pulled out his electric torch, and leapt lightly down to the sunken concrete. But as he caught a glint of light from the crevice, he snapped out his own. He could now see down with clearness, for a section of the vault was illuminated in striking contrast to the surrounding darkness.

Mrs. Croxley was standing down there, one hand at her neck, and the other holding a revolver. She swayed slightly, and the picture was one which impressed itself strikingly on Blake's mind. Just near Mrs. Croxley lay the still body of a stranger.

"She's killed somebody, sir!" muttered Tinker, aghast.

Blake said nothing, but scrambled down through the opening. Tinker followed. The stone chamber was illuminated by Rupert Waldo's electric torch, which had not snapped out upon falling.

"What has happened?" asked Blake quickly.

"Oh, how thankful I am you have come, Mr. Blake!" panted Mrs. Croxley, who seemed on the point of fainting. "This—this dreadful place! I came down the garden to speak to the officer, and found him gone. And there was a man prowling about down here."

"But why did you enter?"

"I don't know! Oh, I don't know!" she sobbed. "He attacked me, and—and I fired! He's dead—he's dead! May Heaven forgive me, I've killed him!"

Blake gave her one swift, grim look.

Then he bent down, and peered closely into the face of the man on the floor. He only gave the slightest start, but Tinker saw it.

"Do you know him, gvn'or?" he asked tensely.

"We both know him. Tinker—for he is our old acquaintance, Rupert Waldo," said Blake. "This affair becomes more complex as we proceed!"

Mrs. Croxley tried to pull herself together, and her breathing became less strained. But she was pale and wan, and there was a curious fire in her strange, burning eyes.

"I—I didn't mean to kill him!" she muttered, as though speaking to herself. "I—I pulled the trigger before knowing it."

Blake rose to his feet.

"Really, Mrs. Croxley?" he asked, curiously grim.

She looked at him with a sudden flash of defiance.

"Do you doubt my word?" she asked, with a fierce flood of anger.

"Frankly, Mrs. Croxley, I do," replied Sexton Blake. "I think this farce has proceeded quite long enough. I came here for the especial purpose of bringing it to an end, although I hardly expected to find you in these circumstances. Don't you think you've carried it far enough?"

She backed away, breathing heavily.

"Far enough?" she repeated. "What—what do you mean?"

"I mean that you killed Mr. Gordon Croxley, and that you deliberately faked the evidence in order to implicate a perfectly innocent man," replied Sexton Blake curtly. "It may interest you to know that I suspected you from the very first—"

"Stand back—stand back!" exclaimed Mrs. Croxley, her voice rising shrill. "Move one step and I'll shoot you as I shot the other man!"

"I must obey—for you are an expert!" said Blake sardonically.

She backed towards the exit, and Tinker, who was near by, looked on in dazed astonishment. This denouement had taken him completely by surprise. He had never suspected that Blake's object in coming here had been to denounce Mrs. Croxley as the assassin!

But Tinker had not lost his resource. Some instinct told him that it would be fatal to let Mrs. Croxley reach the exit. Blake could do nothing, for he knew that death stared him in the face. Mrs. Croxley had not uttered an idle threat. When she fired she would fire to kill.

But Tinker, with a sudden sideways leap, grabbed for her ankle. She anticipated him by the fraction of a second, and leapt up. Tinker sprawled over, and Blake leapt forward as Mrs. Croxley vanished through the narrow aperture.

At the same second the electric light flashed out.

The darkness was utterly black, and Blake, guessing what was coming, threw himself aside. At the same instant a spurt of flame appeared from above, and a bullet pierced sharply against the stonework.

"I'll kill you all!" came Mrs. Croxley's voice, harsh and unnatural. "You'll never live to say a word against me—never!"

She fired again, but there was no danger now, for Blake and Tinker were well out of range, owing to the confined nature of the opening. And there was an abrupt quiver in the air.

Some loose stones fell, a boulder crashed down, and as Blake and Tinker backed away with their hearts in their mouths, a vicelike grip seized them, and flung them backwards like skittles—in the very nick of time.

There was a devastating crash, a blinding, choking mass of dust, and it seemed that no power on earth could save the pair from destruction. But, somehow, they escaped. Only a few flying pieces of stone hit them. And the thunderous noise died away.

"Gvn'or!" gasped Tinker hoarsely.

"It's all right, young 'un, I'm not hurt!"

muttered Blake. "Thank you, Waldo, for your prompt action. You possibly saved our lives. How did you know the collapse was coming at that moment?"

A soft laugh sounded in the thick, dusty atmosphere.

"I didn't know—I suspected it," he replied. "Those tumbling stones warned me, and it was no time for hesitation. Well, Blake, we've been in a few queer positions in our time, but this beats them all. The three of us bottled up underground! Well, as it's no use flying at one another's throats, supposing we call a truce?"

Waldo's electric torch flashed on, and it was hardly possible to see owing to the dust. The light reminded Blake that Waldo had done him a further service, for the sudden extinguishing of the light had undoubtedly destroyed Mrs. Croxley's aim.

"Pretty bad, but things might be worse," commented Waldo, as he stared round into the murk. "Got a handkerchief, one of you? It's all right; I'll use my own, but I hate messing it up!"

He withdrew his handkerchief, and proceeded to dab an ugly, livid wound on the side of his neck. Blood had been flowing freely, and Tinker shuddered as he looked on.

But Rupert Waldo was quite unconcerned. With her face transfigured by hatred, Mrs. Croxley rose to her feet. Only by the merest fluke had she escaped being crushed to death.

For during the fresh fall of concrete and steel, caused by the concussion of her revolver—and precipitated, earlier, by Waldo's weakening of the wedged stonework—she had nearly been trapped.

That part of the concrete beneath her feet had sagged down, she had slipped and fallen. Expecting to be crushed, she now found herself unharmed. Trembling in every limb, she fought her way out into the open.

Once there, she leaned against the doorpost, panting.

For two minutes she remained, recovering. Then, turning, she stared into the fatal building. She could see nothing; but a dead, utter silence reigned.

Mrs. Croxley shivered.

In her heart she felt that Sexton Blake and Tinker had been crushed to instantaneous death by the fallen mass. Never for a second did she believe that they could have escaped.

Well, it was over now—her own danger was past. But those in the house knew, no doubt, that Blake and Tinker had been here! Something would have to be done—some story must be invented.

And while she stood there her active mind engaged in thought, she heard a curious sound. The night was very still, and the sound seemed to come from behind the power-house. It was caused by the crackling and swishing of breaking bushes, as though something was being dragged across the garden.

Mrs. Croxley caught her breath, and walked quickly round the building. She was confronted by a burly object which rolled on the ground. Even in the faint starlight she recognised it as the figure of the policeman who had originally been on guard.

At the sight of him she knew exactly what to do.

Bending down, she pulled at his bonds. "Something dreadful has happened, officer!" she panted. "Oh, when will this terrible day come to an end?"

Finding it impossible to unfasten the knots, she took a tiny, pearl-handled knife from her dress, and cut the cords. A minute later P.-c. Barrett was writhing about in agony, as his restored circulation gushed through his veins.

"Thank you, ma'am!" he panted. "What's been happening? I heard shots, it seemed to me."

"If you had been at your post, instead of in this predicament, another tragedy might have been averted," said Mrs. Croxley, in a stricken voice. "You deserve to be dismissed from the Force!"

"It wasn't my fault, ma'am!" protested the policeman. "The man who got me down was like a fiend! I've never known such strength; I couldn't believe it! He attacked me, and trussed me up like you found me!"

Mrs. Croxley gave a weary sigh.

"It must have been the man I found down in the vault!" she murmured. "I came out here to speak to you, constable, and I found that man below, searching about, and attempting to rob the vault!"

"I thought that was his game!" growled Barrett painfully.

"He attacked me. I shot him!" muttered Mrs. Croxley. "And then—and then Mr. Blake came and Mr. Tinker. They were looking after the man who attacked me, and I and I scrambled out! Then there was a terrible rumble—"

She paused, sobbing piteously. "Sakes alive!" panted the policeman. "You—you don't mean that Mr. Blake—"

"Yes—yes—yes!" moaned Mrs. Croxley, acting her part with skill, her voice rising to a shrill pitch with assumed horror. "They were down there when the collapse came. Oh, constable, they're buried—they must all be buried alive! It's too dreadful to think about!"

The policeman forgot all about his pain. "You'd best come indoors, ma'am!" he said sharply. "There's been enough trouble! I'll report at once. If you've got a telephone, I'll get through to the Yard. Mr. Blake killed!"

He was rather stunned by this piece of appalling news. He hastened Mrs. Croxley indoors, having swallowed her plausible account of the affair whole.

And there were others who would swallow it whole, too.

For the police had no suspicions against her, their attention being centred upon the unfortunate Daniel Gregson. Blake, it seemed, was the only one who knew the truth—unless Waldo can be counted.

And now that these were out of the way—buried beneath those tons of debris—the danger was over. Mrs. Croxley was convinced that her safety was assured.

The servants had known of Blake and Tinker's arrival, and her account of the tragedy would easily satisfy the authorities. Gregson would go to the gallows, and her ultimate immunity was certain.

Unfortunately for Mrs. Croxley, there was one flaw in the scheme of things. Sexton Blake and Tinker were very much alive. But how long they would remain alive seemed to be a rather doubtful question.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER. Waldo's Way Out!



"THAT'S better," said Waldo contentedly. His handkerchief was tied round his neck, and the deep score-cut, caused by Mrs. Croxley's bullet, was hidden from view.

"You've got nine lives, Waldo," said Blake quietly. "Of course, you were feigning unconsciousness while you were lying on the floor?"

"Yes; I wanted to have our fair friend at a disadvantage," replied the Wonder Man. "Then you butted in and spoiled everything. Don't imagine this wound hurts me—I haven't felt a thing."

"You're a most extraordinary man!"

"Others have expressed themselves in a less kindly manner," said Waldo lightly. "No doubt Mrs. Croxley, as she calls herself, is now deluding herself that we are all dead and buried. Possibly she is right. This tomb doesn't seem any too airy."

"Why did she shoot you, Waldo?" asked Tinker.

"Why? Because I knew more than was healthy for her," replied Waldo. "But it seems to me that action is called for. Much as I enjoy your conversation, Blake, the most important thing at the moment is to find a way out of this prison."

Waldo took the light, and made some investigations. They were in the vault itself, and the greater part of the stone tunnel leading from it was obliterated. A sloping mass of stone was wedged right down to the floor, and there was not an outlet of any kind.

"We're bottled up all right," said Waldo, as he swept the light round. "I wonder why it is, Blake, that we generally meet under the most extraordinary circumstances? I don't regard this as one of our true battles of wit. Strictly speaking, we aren't up against one another at all. I merely looked in to take a few pickings, and find myself in this mess!"

Blake looked round keenly. "The sooner we can get out the better!" he exclaimed. "Mrs. Croxley may be assum-

ing that we are still alive, and will make a bolt for it. It will save a lot of trouble if we find a way out."

"It will save us a lot of anxiety, too," said Waldo. "Personally, this form of death is one of my pet aversions. I understand that I shall ultimately adorn the gallows, but I have my doubts. But I regard the gallows with distinct favour compared to being buried alive."

"Isn't there any possible way?" asked Tinker huskily.

Sexton Blake was looking at the formation of their prison. All three were pretending to be calm, but they were not. There was no hint of animosity. Sexton Blake and Rupert Waldo generally chatted amiably during their dramatic meetings. And although Blake had always got the better of the Wonder Man, Waldo bore no grudge.

He regarded life as a kind of tussle, and whenever he got the worst of things, he merely smiled and started all over again. His greatest ambition was to bring off a stupendous coup, and leave Sexton Blake in the cold.

"How about this?" he suggested. Just above their heads there seemed to be a break in the stonework. Waldo was standing against the sloping mass—a huge slab which seemed absolutely solid.

But where it had fallen into its present position, a considerable mass of loose rubbish and earth was jammed overhead. Blake took stock of this with a grave eye.

"It seems to me that another part of the floor has collapsed," he said slowly. "If so, the weight immediately above us cannot be very excessive, for the dynamo and the engine are at the other end."

"My idea, exactly," agreed Waldo, nodding. "But when you say the weight isn't excessive, I beg to differ. However, we'll try. I'm always ready to chance my luck."

"What are you going to do?" asked Blake sharply.

"Stand over there, at the end of the vault, and hold your breath," replied Waldo. "No, don't interfere; this is my funeral. Not literally, I hope, but you understand what I mean."

"Man alive, you mustn't do that!" shouted Blake harshly. "If you disturb that great slab, it'll come unwedged, and crush you in a moment."

"I'd sooner be crushed than suffocated," replied Waldo grimly. "In any case, it's our only chance—and I'm the man to do it. I'm not boasting, Blake, but my strength is a trifle more than yours. So stand over there, and hold yourself ready to act."

Blake hesitated. What Waldo was proposing was apparently an act of insanity—an attempt at suicide. If he shifted that slab, and held it, all would be well. But if it proved too much, nothing on earth could save him.

And Waldo was prepared to do this without a quail. The risk would be mainly his, for his companions would be comparatively safe in the vault, which extended beyond the limits of the loosened debris.

"Look here, Waldo—" began Blake. "Too late, old man!" said Waldo. "Hold still!"

He placed his back against the solid mass, wedged his hands on his knees, and exerted all his strength. The crucial moment had arrived. If Waldo could support the weight, all would be well. If he loosened the mass, and failed to support it, the end would be swift.

There came a flood of loose stones and earth and broken scraps of concrete. It fell down like rain, but it was over in a few seconds. Blake leapt forward in the dust, and flashed his light upwards.

A wide crevice was revealed, and the pile of stones beneath provided an excellent foothold. One good heave, and Blake would be able to win his way upwards to freedom.

"Go on, man!" muttered Waldo tensely. "Through with you!"

Blake flashed his light on the other. Then he pursed his lips. Waldo was in dreadful straits. He was only holding the mass by the sheer exertion of all his strength. He trembled—literally trembled in every inch of his frame, under the terrible weight. His veins stood out, his muscles were taut, and the pressure must have been killing. Already the perspiration was beginning to pour from him.

"Up!" he croaked. "I can't stand it for more than a minute!"

Sexton Blake caught his breath in with a hiss.

"No, Waldo. We can't go and leave you

like this!" he shouted. "We shall escape, but you'll be crushed to death."

"Go, you fool—go!" muttered Waldo, between his set teeth.

"Tinker—up with you!" snapped Blake. "Here, take this light! In one of the corners you'll see two heavy crowbars. Bring them! We either get out of this trap together, or not at all!"

And as Tinker leapt to the opening, Blake placed his hands against the stonework, and relieved Waldo of some of the weight. Blake exerted all his own strength, but Waldo was still trembling. Blake hardly dared imagine what strain the Wonder Man was undergoing.

Tinker found that the opening was easy to negotiate. Carrying the light, he leapt upwards, and found that Blake's surmise was correct. The other portion of the floor had collapsed. The place looked like a nightmare. The confusion and disorder were intensified.

But up in a far corner, as Tinker swiftly saw, were two thick crowbars—or heavy iron rods. He ran over the uneven and wrecked flooring, and reached the bars. They were almost more than he could carry, but he struggled back with them. One by one he lowered them down, and then flashed his light through the opening. His heart was thumping madly. Even now there was a doubt as to whether his master would escape.

"Stay there, Tinker!" shouted Blake. "All right, Waldo? Can you stand it for another second or two?"

"Carry on!" breathed Waldo tensely.

Blake released his own support, and for a second it seemed that even Waldo would crumple up under the fearful strain. Blake seized the first iron bar, and jammed it against the heavy mass, which was already beginning to shake and rock.

The second bar was placed in position a moment later.

"Try it!" said Blake. "See if it will bear!"

"You get out first!"

"No, not until—"

"You get out first!" shouted Waldo harshly.

Blake knew that there was no time for hesitation.

"I won't move until you test those bars!" he retorted curtly.

Waldo relaxed his efforts, and Tinker watched, fascinated, holding the light steadily despite his excitement. It seemed to him that his heart missed a beat. There was a grinding, crunching noise as the bars bit into the stonework, but the mass did not fall.

"O.K.!" panted Waldo. "Out with you!"

Blake clambered through the opening, and Waldo came at his heels. But Waldo knew something that Blake didn't. Those heavy bars were unable to stand the strain which the Wonder Man had borne! For Waldo had felt them bending even as he took his own support away.

His leap through the opening was literally a leap for life. Only by acting with the agility of a monkey did he escape. For as he won clear the crowbars bent double, and the whole mass of stone crumpled and crashed.

Blake and Tinker were flung back as the flooring heaved beneath their feet. And Rupert Waldo threw himself out of danger. He was soaked to the skin with perspiration, and he was still quivering in every fibre, as the result of that terrible ordeal.

But even now he didn't lose his sang-froid.

"Good!" he exclaimed huskily. "Well, Blake, that's all right, eh? Sorry I can't stop—got an appointment!"

It was seven feet up to the level of the door. But Waldo gave one spring, and reached the threshold. For a moment he stood outlined against the night sky, and he turned.

"Until we meet again!" he whispered. "Glad I was able to lend a hand, you fellows. So-long!"

His outline vanished, and by the time Blake and Tinker reached the opening all sign of the Wonder Man had gone.

"By Jove, sir, he's a caution!" breathed Tinker.

Blake made no comment. He was staring across the garden at the lighted window of the drawing-room. Two shadows were visible on the blind—the shadow of a man and the shadow of a woman.

"Never mind Waldo, Tinker," said Blake quietly. "We must deal with Mrs. Croxley."

Waldo has departed from his usual custom this time, for he has served the ends of justice."

Grimy and dishevelled as they were, Blake and Tinker ran lightly across to the house. The next few minutes promised to be dramatic.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.
"When Rogues Fall Out—"



CHIEF DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR LENNARD was looking horrified.

"But why did Blake come here at all?" he asked, with intense distress. "It's the most appalling thing I've heard of! Are you sure of this, Mrs. Croxley? Is there no possible hope?"

"I don't know—I'm afraid not!" said Mrs. Croxley, her voice faint with weariness and anxiety. "They were

down there when the floor caved in. And after that there was silence—complete silence. Oh, I can't bear to think of it."

Lennard was rather stupefied. He had come from the Yard post-haste, in response to an urgent summons. And the news that Sexton Blake and Tinker were dead staggered him beyond anything that he had ever heard. Mrs. Croxley had told her story with consummate skill.

"I must go out at once, and see what can be done," muttered Lennard. "Perhaps there is a faint chance—"

"There is no need for you to trouble yourself, Lennard," said a well-known voice behind him. "We are not quite as dead as Mrs. Croxley appears to imagine."

Lennard whirled round with a gasp of joy. Blake and Tinker were in the room, having entered by means of the french windows. They looked a pair of scarecrows, but they were safe, and fairly sound.

Mrs. Croxley leapt up from the couch like a tigress.

"Quick, Lennard—hold her!" shouted Blake.

At the same second, to the chief-inspector's bewilderment, Blake flung himself forward. Mrs. Croxley failed to escape. Blake caught her outflung arm as she rushed for liberty, and held.

The next moment, to the Scotland Yard man's stupefaction, Blake was struggling and fighting with Croxley's assassin. The fury of her struggling was awful.

But at last Blake prevailed. He held her down, with her shoulders on the floor, and her hair all loosened. Her face was purple with uncontrollable fury. Tinker was holding her lashing feet.

"Good heavens!" gasped the chief-inspector.

"Look, Lennard—look closely!" commanded Blake. "And have your handcuffs ready. Here is the murderer of Gordon Croxley!"

"The murderer?" asked Lennard, aghast.

He bent down, whilst Blake forced his hand over Mrs. Croxley's hair, and held it smooth down. Lennard started violently. Without her mass of fluffy hair, the woman looked different.

"Allow me to introduce Mr. Vivian Freeman!" snapped Blake.

"Vivian Freeman!" shouted Lennard.

"Known as Sweet-faced Vivian, and wanted for the murder of his wife at Wandsworth, eight years ago," rapped out Sexton Blake. "You didn't know, did you, Lennard, that you had been conversing with the Wandsworth murderer?"

Lennard gave one gasp, and brought out his bracelets. With two clicks they were on the murderer's wrists, and it was over. Vivian Freeman, arrested after eight years, collapsed.

The denouement was startling in the extreme.

The chief-inspector, although amazed, was joyous. His was now a double victory—thanks once again to Sexton Blake. For eight years the Wandsworth murderer had eluded every effort of the police.

The facts, however, were comparatively simple, as is generally the case in such affairs. Vivian Freeman was an actor, and

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How's that for an idea? Something to look forward to—eh? Yes, it certainly is!

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More particulars next week.

he had won fame on the boards as a female impersonator. Later he had drifted into crime, and had found it more profitable than acting. He had become known as Sweet-faced Vivian, owing to his effeminate appearance.

After cruelly murdering his girl-wife in a flat at Wandsworth he had apparently vanished off the face of the earth. In reality—as his trial disclosed—he had succeeded in getting to Birmingham, where he had sought refuge in the home of Gordon Croxley, a criminal associate.

By sheer chance, Croxley had arranged for a housekeeper to enter his home, and this housekeeper had wired that she was unable to come. So, in desperation, Freeman had filled the post—for he had arrived in Birmingham in the guise of a woman.

He had never been traced, and after the hue and cry had died down, Croxley and his "housekeeper" had gone abroad. A year or two in Italy, and Freeman had become so used to his female character that he was more at home in female attire than in the dress of his own sex.

He had even let his hair grow like a woman, and had so got "into the skin" of his part that his very actions were feminine. So Croxley had returned to England with Freeman posing as his wife. And for five years they had lived in Maida Vale without a soul suspecting the truth. Even the servants had never had the faintest breath of suspicion that their mistress was in reality a man.

Croxley, it seemed, had been a brute. He had taken every advantage of his position—he had never ceased to remind Freeman that he was a slave. One word from Croxley, and he would go to the gallows. Freeman, in fact, had been forced to give his brains to his master—for Freeman was a bit of an inventive genius in his way. And it was

Croxley who had always reaped the benefit of Freeman's ideas.

And so, with nobody knowing, "Mrs. Croxley" had lived the life of a slave, always at Croxley's bidding. And on the fatal night, after Croxley had explained about the Roman relics, they had both visited the vault.

Upon coming out, carrying a few of the relics, there had been a quarrel. According to Freeman's confession, Croxley had attempted to strike him down. And in a fit of temper he had driven an ancient dagger taken from the heap of relics in Croxley's back.

And afterwards, in order to divert suspicion from himself, he had attempted to implicate the unfortunate Gregson—who, needless to say, was freed without a stain on his character. Freeman had found Gregson's scarf on the hallstand, and had used it to full advantage.

But he had reckoned without Sexton Blake. Blake seldom forgot a face, and at one time he had come into contact with "Sweet-faced Vivian." A vague suspicion at first, "Mrs. Croxley's" identity had become a certainty. And Blake had acted accordingly.

As for Rupert Waldo, he treated the whole matter in his usual philosophic manner. Reaching home on that eventful night, he reviewed the situation with calmness.

"Well, we can't always be successful," he murmured regretfully. "I suppose I must set it down as another of my little frosts. However, I had quite a nice little chat with Blake, and it's quite possible that these will come in useful."

And the Wonder Man, proceeding to empty his pockets, piled handful after handful of ancient Roman gold coins upon the table.

Apparently, it wasn't such a frost, after all.

THE END.

THE MYSTERY OF THE MARSHES



(Continued from page 2.)

grinding, a grating undertoot. The speed slackened, stopped. Bob and the boy were flung forward with the force of arrested motion. She hung there for an agonising instant, her propeller churning the water astern into a yellowish compound of sand and foam.

Then, before Bob could even snatch at the lever to slow her racing, tortured engine, a wave lifted the craft free.

She leapt forward again to the thrust of the screw, quivering along her whole length, hit again, dragged for a second, and then shot forward into deeper water.

They were over!

Bob gasped with relief, white-faced with the anxiety of the moment and his fear that they would be too late. But his brain was cold and calm, and his hand obeyed its instinctive command. The tiller moved a trifle, and the bow bore dead on the yacht again.

They were over the bank, but they were still far off, and the question hung in doubt—would they be in time?

"It's going out—the fire's going out!" yelled Tommy Cobbin in shrill excitement. Bob nodded. The flames were certainly

dying around the Happy Days, and at intervals two figures could even be seen on her deck, darting back and forth, busy with buckets. They obviously had no idea the motor-boat was making for them, and no time to look. Actually, neither of them had dared to hope that Bob would return.

Together he and Tommy sent out a shout, which they repeated again and again. But the figures took no heed; they were too far away.

Then, with a suddenness that gripped their hearts afresh, they saw a new danger. A column of flame shot up from the forepart of the yacht. One of the figures—the smaller—saw it as soon as they, and rushed forward, bending down and doing something that momentarily checked the blaze.

Bob realised that the hatch of the forepeak had been clapped in place, and, as he surveyed the width of water that separated them from the yacht that was now a furnace, breathed an unconscious prayer for their comrades' safety.

The last act in the drama of the Happy Days happened swiftly.

A muffled roar that was the explosion of the oil-filled stove down in the forepeak, a burst of flame and sparks, and the end had come. The bows leapt asunder, a momentary vision of jagged black against the lurid background of flame. The water rushed in, and clouds of steam arose mast-high that blotted out everything for five age-long seconds, and then parted as the stern of the unhappy craft was lifted, revealed for a moment ere she slipped smoothly down, bow first, to her last resting-place.

What had become of the two humans it

was impossible to say. Mechanically, Bob checked the speed and changed the course, so that they passed astern of the place where she had been, and then bore round again to starboard on the farther side.

The steam swirled and eddied about them. Tommy Cobbin had crawled along the precarious, rounded deck to the bows, where he hung on by some small projection, searching the face of the waters for some sign of their comrades.

Suddenly he shouted, pointing. Once more Bob, who could see nothing for the steam, changed the course. There was a slight jar as the bow scraped against something that slid alongside towards the stern.

Bob looked over, abandoned the tiller, and grabbed just in time.

His fingers clutched cloth—the collar of Joe Juniper's coat. The man was unconscious, his head supported above the water by Jim Polden's right arm, whose left encircled an oar that upheld them both.

Tommy came scrambling from the bows, and together they tumbled them in over the boat's low freeboard, while the boat drove on, taking them whither it would. How they got the dead weight of the two exhausted survivors aboard they could never afterwards tell, but they did it somehow. Together they lay on the bottom grating, Jim gasping and unable to speak, and the skipper altogether unconscious.

"Look out—look out, Bob!"

Bob Castle rose upright at the lad's shout, and jumped to the tiller.

The motor-boat, unheeded, was tearing straight for the Vanderveelde, which lay in their path a bare twenty yards away! Even

(Continued on page 27.)

BACK NUMBERS!

The Editor will be pleased to publish, free of charge, any reader's announcement for the sale, purchase, or exchange of back numbers. Letters should be addressed: The Editor, UNION JACK, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. It should be mentioned that advertisements other than those concerning back numbers—such as correspondents wanted and the like—cannot be published. These columns are intended primarily for those who wish to fill up gaps in their collection of "U. J." Supplements, etc.

FOR SALE.

U.J., Nos. 1,056-1,107, with Det. Supp., Vol. 2, complete. First reasonable offer accepted, or will exchange for anything useful.—W. Hill, 10, Dane Street, Brightside Lane, Sheffield.

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For bound vol., 1923, U.J. Det. Supp., would exchange 50 odd numbers U.J. minus Det. Supp.—G. Nunney, 29, Redcliffe Street, Swindon.

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Sexton Blake Lib. numbers wanted in exchange for U.J., 1923, 26 odd numbers; and 1922, 26 odd numbers; all complete with Supp.—T. Edwards, Faulkners Fold, Coreley, near Tenbury Wells, Worcester.

U.J. Det. Supps., 90 odd copies for various numbers of U.J. from 809-1,096. Write for list.—E. T. Brookes, 61, St. John's Street, Kate's Hill, Dudley, Worcester.

(Continued from page 26.)

as Bob put the tiller hard over and the craft swerved to port, he was aware of what was going on aboard her.

A group of four men—one of whom was their chief, Julius Griff—was gathered about the mainsail where it was furled loosely about the boom near the mast.

They were working frenziedly, trying to beat out a fire! The sail was well alight, and they were trying to smother the flames with a large piece of canvas—another sail, probably. Only one man had a bucket, and he was in the act of hurling the water from it over the burning mass. None of them had any eyes for the approaching craft in the imminence of their own danger.

It was a case of swift Nemesis!

The rockets which Jim and Joe Juniper had so hurriedly discharged had not all soared into the air. One of them had been a "dud," and, as if guided by the hand of Justice itself, had shot but a little way upward, and then curved in a dropping trajectory and buried itself in the mass of the Vandervelde's lowered mainsail. There, hidden in the mass of canvas, it had re-

mained unnoticed while the gun-runners aboard were gloating over the fate of the Happy Days, long enough to thoroughly ignite the sail.

When the rising flames had at last attracted attention to their own danger, the damage was done. Bob realised their position even before the motor-boat had safely cleared the vessel's stern.

It would be impossible to replace the mainsail, for almost certainly they did not carry a spare. It meant that they were trapped where they were! Bob did not know about their auxiliary engine, but, as it happened, that did not alter the correctness of his view, for Julius Griff had been intending to sail away for the safety of the Continent, his gun-running work accomplished, and he had thought fit to squander all his available petrol and oil in the effort to encompass the destruction of the Happy Days and all aboard her.

His attempt had failed, if only just. And now, it seemed, the luck was changing, and the game was coming round once again into the hands of those who represented law and order!

Time and Tide.

THE problem that faced Bob Castle, as he slowed down the motor-boat just astern of the gun-runners' craft and took in the scene that was going on aboard her, was one that would have puzzled a far wiser head than his for an immediate solution.

Julius Griff and his gang seemed to be in the hollow of his hand at last, but the fortune of war had not been kind. The prize was dangled in front of Bob's eyes, but tantalisingly out of reach.

There were five men aboard her, active amidships around the burning tack of the mainsail near the mast, all with their backs towards him, and unconscious of the craft that now lay with stopped engines a few yards from the Vandervelde's starboard quarter. Bob recognised but three of them—the American-Italian whom he knew as Angelo Battista; Isaac Tabush, the taciturn deck-hand; and Julius Griff himself, the skipper of the vessel, and one of the chiefs of the gun-running organisation.

Those were the three, at least, whose names he knew. One of the remaining two



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U.J.

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17

he remembered as the man who had been one of the guards of Joe Juniper when Bob had boarded the craft in the fog; the other he had never seen before, but he was obviously one of the ship's company.

These five must certainly be the entire personnel of the Dutch boat, for the effort to put out the fire obviously made it a case of "all hands on deck." Bob realised the position at a glance, for what he could not see with his eyes he shrewdly guessed at.

The Vandervelde had been trying to escape from the inlet in which she had been bottled up, and, on finding the Happy Days, with Jim Polden and Joe Juniper aboard her, on guard at the mouth, had somehow contrived to set fire to her. Somehow, too, her own mainsail had become involved, and was still obstinately burning.

Everybody aboard was concentrated round the fire. Even now they had not noticed the arrival of the motor-boat, the sound of which had doubtless been drowned in the noise they themselves were making, and the sight obscured by the rolling black smoke or the streaming, watery eyes to which it gave rise.

Never had the prize been so near—and yet so far. Bob almost groaned as he realised how easy it would have been to capture the Vandervelde at this vital moment—had things been a little different.

But he was practically lone-handed. Jim at that moment was lying on the well-grating, almost exhausted by his recent exertions in fighting the fire on the ill-fated Happy Days, and afterwards in rescuing her old skipper; while Joe Juniper himself was stretched out alongside him, quite insensible. Tommy Cobbin was ready enough to lend a hand in whatever might be going, but he was hardly big or strong enough to do anything useful in a scrap.

Bob's hand went instinctively to the heavy revolver which bulged the pocket of his reefer-coat, but the weapon was not withdrawn. He could not hope to bring off a successful raid entirely unaided, for Tommy would have to manage the boat. No, it would have to be wit, not weapons! And in that tense half-minute in which he gazed at

the Vandervelde's decks and her frenziedly working crew, he put in a good deal of anxious thought.

Even when the flames were extinguished the great spread of canvas would be useless as a sail, with a huge hole burned in it. Without it she could make no real progress, if any at all. Her headsail alone would be useless, and she carried no other canvas aft except the mainsail.

At the present moment she was drifting unheeded on the tide. What would those aboard do when they had the fire subdued? All they could do, he reasoned, would be to coax her into a safe position in deep water with the foresail and let go the anchor. They might have a try at repairing the burned sail if they believed they had time, or they might make for the shore in the dinghy which was towing astern and scatter. The latter course was the more probable, Bob thought. They knew that the law was at last on their track. They might even have been intending to sail clear away to the Continent. Harwich was near, and now that their own craft was dangerously delayed, they might try to reach that port and get across on one of the Channel boats.

In any event, there was not much Bob could do to stop them, but what little there was he did, and quickly. With a low word to Tommy, he edged the motor-boat aft, with her engines only just turning over, and the lad caught, and held, the dinghy's painter as they came alongside. A couple of slashes with his knife, and a fathom or more of the rope was theirs. This was passed aft to Bob, who made the end fast to a ring-bolt in the stern.

Then, opening the throttle and bringing the boat about in a sweeping curve astern of the lumbering Dutchman, he let her go full out with a roar, towing the captured dinghy in his wake. The ruffianly crew of the Vandervelde had their line of communication with the shore cut, at all events.

Until that moment neither their arrival nor their departure had been noticed. Now, however, at the noise of the engine, the group around the burning sail became suddenly aware of them, and in the surprise

and preoccupation of the moment hardly knew what to do. They all stopped their exertions with one accord, and stared after the power-boat they recognised as their own. One man even collected himself enough to pull out his pistol and send a shot after the craft, but at that moment, freed from the attacks of the fire-fighters, the flames broke out anew, and the men were divided in their purpose.

Before the confused shoutings and contradictory orders had died down the motor-boat was out of reach, heading at as fast a pace as she had ever gone on a straight course due north.

Bob was making for Harwich. The scheme that had leapt to his brain, full-fledged with the capture of the dinghy, was simple, but it meant a race against time. With this boat's speed he might do it, however. Harwich was three miles away. Could he get there, inform the police, and return with reinforcements in time?

Three miles there, three back! This craft that throbbed and roared under his controlling hand could do fifteen an hour—perhaps twenty. He had filled up her tanks in the inlet, but he had gone a long way since then. Pray Heaven, the petrol would last out till he got there! Six miles, and a half-hour ashore, say. Nearly an hour before he could arrive back at the Vandervelde. Fully an hour, counting the slowing down to get in and out of harbour. Would he be in time to trap them?

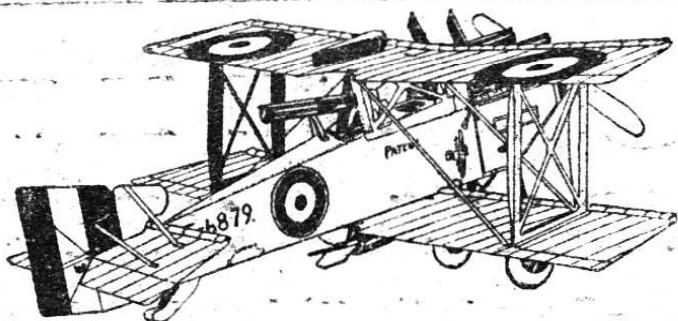
Well, he would try!

He outlined his plan to the prostrate Jim, who, despite his exhaustion and a fit of shivering after his immersion, was beginning to regain his normal self as he lay on the well-grating at his feet. Tommy was already bending over Joe Juniper, rubbing him briskly and trying to restore some signs of animation.

Jim nodded his head weakly, and crawled with an effort to his hands and knees and joined Tommy in his efforts on the skipper.

(Look out for the conclusion of this stirring serial. See page 25.)

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