

UNION JACK

Special Christmas Number.



The Affair of the BLACK CAROL

A seasonable story of detective adventure, animated throughout by the gladsome spirit of Christmastide. Complete, and introducing: Sexton Blake, Tinker, Ruff Hanson, Splash Page and Mrs. Bardell.

The Affair of the BLACK CAROL



The story of how Sexton Blake foiled a sinister plot; and how he spent a real old-fashioned Christmas in the jolly company of Splash Page, Tinker, Ruff Hanson, and—not least—the worthy Mrs. Bardell.

Chapter 1.

"Christmas Comes But Once a Year!"

TINKER, Mr. Sexton Blake's assistant, sang heartily if unmelodiously, accompanying himself on the dinner gong with enthusiastic gusto.

"When on an elephant's back I pass,
Somebody beats on a sounding brass
Gong!
I'm the Rajah of Bong!"

It was lunch-time in Baker Street, and Tinker was hungry. A fire crackled cheerfully in the dining-room grate. The usually austere walls, crammed with curios and trophies, and relics of many a grim adventure, were now gaily festooned with holly and multi-coloured decorations.

The white tablecloth, with its sparkling cut glass and napery, looked inviting enough; but the steaming joint and vegetables which Mrs. Bardell had just deposited were what made Tinker's mouth water.

"Where on earth is the guv'nor?" the

lad inquired peevishly of Pedro, who also sniffed the appetising odour of roast beef with keen anticipation.

Tinker lifted his gong-stick again and continued his booming ditty:

"When I'm at home, I have poets
who bring
Chorus of praise in a kind of sing-
Song!
I'm the Rajah of Bong!"

He hit the long-suffering instrument another terrific thwack, just as the dining-room door opened and Sexton Blake entered. There was a pained expression on his clear-cut face.

"My dear Tinker, is there any necessity to impersonate a mythical rajah by denting the gift of a real one?" he inquired, with mock gravity.

Tinker replaced the gong-stick, and stared in dismay at the dent in the beautifully engraved silver gong which had been presented to his master by the Maharajah of Kurdistan.

"Jove! I'm sorry, guv'nor. But I'm feeling so dashed chirpy—and so jolly hungry that—"

They sat down at the head of the

table, and Tinker proceeded to carve the joint, while the detective toyed abstractedly with the stem of his wine-glass.

"Only four more days, guv'nor," said the youngster brightly, "and then it's Christmas Day."

Blake nodded abstractedly. He had spent the whole morning in the "stink shop," as Tinker irreverently termed the laboratory. The dinner gong had interrupted his experiment, and it seemed as if he was inclined to be touchy.

Tinker passed the well-filled plate and waited in silence until Mrs. Bardell's cookery had soothed his guv'nor's irritability. The charm worked at length, and Blake helped himself to a glass of wine.

"Of course! How incredibly foolish of me. I had quite overlooked the fact!" he ejaculated.

"My hat! Fancy overlooking Christmas," broke in Tinker. "Of all things—"

"I was not referring to Christmas, my boy," replied Blake. "But to the new Van Luyten blood test. I overlooked the fact that the reagent amidobenzene chemolyzes—"



A tap sounded at the door and Mrs. Bardell entered, breathing a trifle stertorously. In her hand she gripped a telegram. Tinker heaved a sigh of relief at the interruption of Blake's chemical dissertation.

"That dratted varmint of a telegraph boy 'ad the cheek to demand 'is Christmas box,'" began the worthy woman. "Which it's a week afore Boxing Day—though, if I 'ad my way with the young limbs, the way they work the bell, I'd box 'em on the ear-oles. Calls 'emselfs civil servants. Why, a more uncivil lot o'—"

"Er—quite, Mrs. Bardell," said Blake, as he ripped open the orange envelope. "Please tell him there is no reply."

Mrs. Bardell sniffed, and made her exit. Tinker chuckled as Blake re-read the wire.

"Anything wrong, gov'nor?" he inquired. "I hope it's not a bally case. I want to spend Christmas in peace—"

Blake chuckled as he threw over the telegram. It was brief, pithy, and characteristic.

"Howdy. Just landed. Coming to wish you a Merry Christmas.—RUFF."

"Hurrah, gov'nor!" ejaculated Tinker. "Gosh! I'll be glad to see the Hard Boiled Egg again. We're bound

to have a merry Christmas with him around, anyway!"

Blake smiled.

"If he doesn't start getting gay with Willy and Wally that is, young 'un, Friend Ruff has a diabolical knack of getting into trouble. I wonder what brings him over from New York at this time of the year?"

The detective rose to his feet, and slowly filled his briar pipe as he entered the consulting-room. Outside, in Baker Street, a faint flurry of snowflakes fell and a chill December wind rattled the window panes, enhancing the warmth and cosiness of the room within. Blake stirred the fire into a ruddy glow, and sank back into his favourite chair.

"We haven't seen our dynamic friend for some considerable time. I'm rather intrigued by his telegram, young 'un," he remarked.

"Ruff Hanson doesn't usually come to Europe on a joy-ride."

"That's so, gov'nor," agreed Tinker, staring into the glowing embers of the fire with the retrospection that a winter day evolves.

None were too busy or preoccupied to turn and smile and wave their hands as the coach rumbled by. Somewhere the kindly shade of Charles Dickens smiled down on the incarnation of his immortal dream children—Splash Page's Dickensian party, bound for the delights of Christmas at Lyveden Manor.

THE American gunman sleuth held a warm corner in the affection of the famous Baker Street trio. They had shared peril and adventure on many a dangerous trail in many lands, and now had a greater admiration for Ruff Hanson's breezy personality and essential straightness than Sexton Blake.

The admiration was mutual; for Ruff Hanson had often expressed in his own pungent fashion his equally high opinion of Sexton Blake.

"Talking of Christmas," continued Tinker, who was a youth with a single-track mind when an idea obsessed him, "what are we going to do about it, gov'nor—spend it quietly at home, or at one of the big hotels?"

Blake frowned. "Christmas in a hotel, Tinker!" he echoed. "I trust I am fairly progressive, but this modern, new-fangled idea of Yuletide at a West End hotel, with jazz bands and cocktails, is to me disgusting. Christmas is essentially a private affair—where there is a reunion of old friends to yarn over old times.

I'm afraid there'll be little of peace on earth and good will at the Hotel Stupendous, with its cosmopolitan crew of multi-millionaires and dyspeptic dowagers."

A loud bang sounded above the ceaseless hum of the traffic in Baker Street.

"Talking of old friends," chuckled Tinker, "here's one of 'em, guv'nor. If I'm not mistaken, that sounds like Splash Page's Red Peril outside."

He crossed over to the window, just in time to see the newspaper man park his vermilion roadster at the kerb; and a few moments later the journalist breezed into the consulting-room, removing his leather gauntlets.

Derek Page—known in Fleet Street as Splash Page—grinned amiably.

"Mornin', Blake! 'Mornin', Tinker! How's tricks?" he greeted cheerfully.

"Jove, it's nippy outside!"

He warmed his numbed fingers at the cheerful fire.

"What-ho, my old ink-slinger!" retorted Tinker. "I suppose you're hard-up for a story, and come here scrounging for a scoop, as usual!"

"Well, as a matter of fact," replied Splash, "I don't want to break it too suddenly, but I came along here to ask you two if you'd give a poor, lorn journalist a bite of dinner on Christmas Day. I'd ask you to my place, but you know what a bachelor flat is—"

"By all means, my dear chap!" exclaimed Sexton Blake cordially. "Tinker and I were just discussing the subject. You know you are always welcome here."

He broke off suddenly as a nasal voice sounded on the stairway.

"Don't you worry about me, Mrs. B! I kin find my way up blindfold. Say, ma'am, you sure are keepin' that school-girl complexion! You don't look a day older—"

"Oh, Mr. 'Anson, get along, do!" came Mrs. Bardell's coy reply.

"Ruff!" yelled Splash and Tinker simultaneously, and they leapt to their feet, as the door of the consulting-room swung open to admit the gigantic American.

Ruff Hanson, the New York detective, and an old friend of Sexton Blake, was clad in a tweed suit of transatlantic cut. In his hand he carried a huge, broad-brimmed Stetson, and on his battered, ugly face was a good-humoured grin, as he advanced with outstretched hand.

"Howdy, Blake, old timer?" he boomed. "Put it there if it weighs as much as the Woolworth Building! Well, well, folks! Howdy, Tinker? Dog my cats if you ain't got the tame news bound!"

"Ruff, you old villain!" yelled Tinker delightedly. "Park yourself in this chair and make yourself comfy!"

The American sank his huge bulk into an armchair and beamed genially on the trio. Some of the breeziness of his own Western prairie had been swept into the cosy consulting-room at Ruff Hanson's entrance.

Sexton Blake chuckled softly.

"Very glad to see you again, Ruff! Is it business or pleasure, this trip?"

"Pleasure, old timer—real pleasure! You're in for the merriest Christmas of your lives—and it's all on Hard-boiled Hanson!"

"Come into a fortune, Ruff?" queried Tinker.

"Something like that," explained the other carelessly. "Are you doing anything to-night?"

Blake shook his head.

"No. Christmas week is usually an off-time as far as I'm concerned. How about you, Splash?"

"Well, unless a murder happens, I'm my own boss," answered the journalist. "What's the great idea?"

"Meet me for dinner at the Hotel Splendide, and I'll wise you up," came the reply. "I want to introduce you to my sparring partner—greatest little kid you've ever struck. Say, my kid's a wonder—"

Sexton Blake stared speechlessly at the American.

It took a good deal to surprise the famous detective, but even his impassive face betrayed astonishment.

"Good heavens, Ruff!" he remarked. "Surely you've never committed matrimony!"

"For the love of Pete—NO!" roared the American. "You know my motto where fee-males are concerned—forget 'em all!"

"Then, to use your own transatlantic phrase," asked Blake, "how come? Whose is this 'kid'? And why? And so forth."

"He's young Cayterer—son of the Film King," explained Ruff. "And I'm his dry-nurse. Old man Cayterer—"

And Ruff Hanson went on to account for his unexpected presence in Europe at this Christmas season. Shorn of his picturesque and expressive—sometimes explosive—Americanisms, the facts were, broadly, these:

Ruff Hanson had been engaged some time previously by Mr. Benjamin Cayterer, president of the Lion Film Corporation, on a somewhat unusual mission.

Mr. Cayterer, an Englishman by birth, was one of the best-known and respected film magnates in Hollywood. For years he had been waging a relentless war against shady film pirates and producers, and had agitated for sweeping reforms in the motion-picture industry.

His policy was to weed out the undesirable elements which brought disgrace on Hollywood, and he was contemplating a drastic Censorship Bill to curtail the activities of, among others, his chief rival, Mr. Isidore Solmann, an unscrupulous financier with an unsavory reputation.

Solmann was the head of a shady film corporation, and he hated Cayterer's reformative schemes, and did his best by bribery and graft to bring the Englishman's studios into disrepute. Cayterer, however, had managed to circumvent Solmann's machinations, and persisted with his self-imposed task to "clean up Hollywood."

Solmann realised that once Cayterer's proposed Bill became law he would be ruined. With the assistance of two unscrupulous crooks, Solmann determined to force Cayterer into a corner by striking him through the individual he loved most in the world—his eight-year-old son, Junior.

The boy, a dreamy, wistful child, had been lame from birth with some obscure disease.

The film magnate had been horrified to receive a blunt note informing him that unless the sum of fifty-thousand dollars was paid over and a written promise made to drop the Film Reform Bill, the unknown criminals would kidnap Junior and kill him.

Instantly Cayterer suspected Solmann as the prime mover in the plot, and hence his request for the services of Ruff Hanson. That hard-boiled sleuth was already aware of Isidore Solmann's shady reputation, and learned also that Cayterer held a trump card.

Cayterer had come into possession of evidence implicating his enemy in a disgraceful dope orgy in a Hollywood Road House in which a man had been killed.

It was a statement from a crook named Giuseppe Spagoni, who was at that time serving a term of four years in a penitentiary. It implicated Sol-

mann in the shooting, and gave proof that if not actually the chief, Solmann was at least a ringleader in the dope-smuggling ring of California.

Unfortunately, the affidavit was given to Cayterer on the express condition that it was not to be used until Spagoni had served his sentence. The Italian swore that his imprisonment was a "frame-up" and he gave it to Cayterer as a precautionary measure in case he died in prison. Furthermore, unless backed up by additional proof, it had little value. Also, as Cayterer explained to Ruff Hanson, the film magnate was averse to hitting below the belt.

To use his own words as Hanson reported them to Sexton Blake:

"I may be quixotic, but I want to fight my battles cleanly and carry this Bill through on its merits."

Ruff Hanson admitted having been immediately attracted by Ben Cayterer's personal charm, and had agreed to guard Junior or, as he expressed it, "act as a dry nurse" to the little boy.

Cayterer refused to submit to the blackmailer's demand for the surrender of the letter—and frankly proposed that Ruff Hanson should act as a personal bodyguard for the next two months until the Film Reform Bill became law.

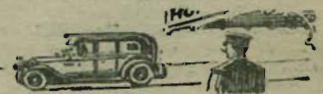
He had informed the gunman that he was leaving for England with Junior that week. It was only ten days from Christmas, and he was banking to spend Yuletide in his native land, which Junior had never seen.

"You see, Mr. Hanson," he explained. "I promised Junior that I'd let him see what a real old-fashioned English Christmas is like—with snow, holly, Yule logs, and the thousand-and-one things that have made Christmas essentially a children's festival."

The prospect of a trip to England appealed tremendously to Ruff Hanson, especially as Ben Cayterer explained that he had rented from Lord Sylvester a fine old English manor house in the heart of the Dickens country in Kent, where he proposed to stay for three months before embarking on the film production of the great novelist's works.

"And that," concluded Ruff Hanson, "is why I'm here. Acting as personal bodyguard ain't much in my line, Blake," he added, "but that kid Junior's got a sorta appealing look to him that grips me somehow. Besides—the guest of a millionaire with all expenses paid, feels mighty good to a hard-boiled sleuth that generally gets more kicks than cents! And that's why the beanfeast to-night is all on your Uncle Ruff!"

Chapter 2.



Splash Page's Scheme.

THE gorgeously-uniformed beribboned linkman of the Hotel Splendide moved majestically towards the opulent Rolls Royce limousine that had drawn up soundlessly at the entrance of the equally opulent hotel.

In his hand he gripped a large umbrella to shelter the august arrivals at that up-to-date caravanserai from the feathery snowflakes which fell from the chill and leaden sky. He opened the door of the automobile with ponderous deference, and the tall, distin-

guished figure of Mr. Ben Cayterer emerged, clad in an expensive fur-lined coat.

The millionaire's face glowed with good humour as he turned to the other occupant of the tonneau—a small boy with solemn eyes and a wan, rather wistful face, who was hugging in a tight embrace a large brown-paper parcel, from which protruded various shining wheels and a fascinating funnel.

"Hang on to your locomotive, Junior," he said cheerily. "We'll have the rest of the stuff sent up by the elevator man."

"Allow me, sir!"

With a courteous bow the commissionaire assisted the little boy to alight. He was a strange and almost pathetic contrast to the gorgeously-clad giant as he stood there, an eager excited look in his large brown eyes. He limped a little as he walked, and round one of his slender legs was clamped a hideous contraption of leather and steel.

His little hand crept forward trustingly towards his father's as they passed from the chill wind that sent the snowflakes whirling down the crowded Strand, and together entered the warmth of the hotel lounge.

It was the cocktail hour at the Splendide. From the ball-room came the liquid strains of the orchestra, and in the lounge the usual crowd of social butterflies made a hum of light-hearted conversation.

Many people glanced curiously at father and son passed towards the lift. There was something so trustful and winsome about the little lame boy as he limped along eagerly by Ben Cayterer's side. A white-haired old lady smiled kindly at the boy as he passed, and Junior gave a shy little smile in return.

"Such a delightful child!" murmured the old lady to her companion. "Poor little chap—although he's lame, he was the life and soul of the ship, crossing over."

"That's the famous cinema magnate, is it not?" queried her companion. "I understand he is to open a new branch in England here."

Her companion nodded.

"Yes, Mr. Cayterer is English by birth—a most charming man," she remarked. "I understand he's taken Lord Sylvester's old place at Lyveden for Christmas."

They passed to other topics. But the man, sitting alone at the near-by table gazed speculatively after the lift that bore Ben Cayterer and his son to their suite.

He was a loose-limbed man of about thirty-five, handsome in a flashy, superficial fashion, with dark, oily hair slicked back from a smooth forehead, and a tiny moustache that rested like a black moth on his upper lip.

His eyes were peculiarly ill-assorted, one blue and the other hazel, and set a little too closely together on either side of his long, lean nose to be prepossessing. He was clad in conventional evening kit, and wore a double collar and black tie, American fashion, with his frilled white shirt-front.

"Lyveden, huh!" he muttered, lighting a cigar. "I guess that's as good as anywhere."

He beckoned to a waiter.

"Say, get me a time-table, will ya?" he commanded.

He drummed an impatient tattoo with his fingers on the table as he waited, and gazed at their slender, tapering length with an amused twinkle. Those fingers meant a good deal to Sam McCalla, crook, cardsharp, and con man. He was as vain of his carefully-

manicured hands as a debutante or a master pianist, and had once seriously thought of having them insured. But insurance companies have an awkward knack of instituting inquiries, and Mr. McCalla loathed inquiries.

Several awkward episodes in his past career would have undeniably cropped up, in which those slim, clever fingers had played an active part. The theft of 20,000 dollars from the safe of the Farmers' National Bank at Denver City, for instance, or the unfortunate poker game on the s.s. Poseidon, in which the spendthrift son of Gertler, the millionaire pork-packer, lost fifty thousand dollars. Mr. McCalla's fingers had also figured rather prominently in another interesting, if slightly humiliating, manner, when, from information received, he had been pulled in by police headquarters, and had suffered the indignity of having their slender tips besmirched by printer's ink for the

He cupped his face in one hand, but his fingers trembled a little as he concluded the cablegram—the cablegram that was destined to have serious and far-reaching results on the lives of several people.

"NOW, Blake, old-timer," Ruff Hanson was saying heartily, as they entered the palm court, "wrap yourself round a Manhattan, while I climb into my glad rags, and then I'll present you to Ben." He held up a pudgy finger. "George, Manhattans all round for these gentlemen, and make it snappy. Has Luigi got the table all set?"

The waiter bowed.

"Certainly, m'sieu, for six, as you ordered," he announced.

"Good! I shan't be long, folk," explained Ruff. "I hate wearing a Tuxedo, but darn me, you feel like a bent nickel among all these guys if you don't."

Splash Page chuckled as the American took his departure.

"Poor old Ruff! He has never taken kindly to the amenities of civilisation, Blake. He longs for the chaps and sombrero of his Texas days."

Blake smiled his agreement as he sipped his cocktail.

"I can't imagine Ruff—" broke in Tinker. "Why, hallo, look who's here, gov'nor!"

Blake turned as a burly, familiar figure entered the lounge, and recognised his old friend, Detective-Inspector Coutts, of Scotland Yard. The C.I.D. man looked a trifle hot under his unaccustomed starched collar. And his boiled shirt was creased in several places. His red face was redder than ever, and his little bristly moustache more than usually aggressive. A look of relief passed over his face as he recognised Blake, however, and he hurried towards the little group with obvious satisfaction.

"What cheer, Coutts?" called Splash. "Why the glad rags? Don't often see you hitting the high spots!"

Coutts sank into a chair and wiped his forehead with a violent-hued bandana.

"I'm a bit late," he grumbled. "The missus has gone away to her confounded relatives in Shropshire to spend Christmas. Couldn't find a blamed collar or a tie or—"

"Then you're a grass widower, my dear fellow," said Blake, with a smile. "And dressed to kill!"

The Yard man glowered.

"Dressed?" he snorted. "This confounded collar's got an edge like a saw. These blamed laundries ought to be abolished by Act of Parliament. Huh!"

he grunted. "Have you seen that crazy Yank, yet? He phoned me up this afternoon and asked me to dine with him here. Said it was most important."

"You mean Ruff Hanson?" queried Blake. "Then I presume we are all guests of his?"

"Who else but?" grumbled Coutts. "Rang me up in the middle of my afternoon—"

"Nap!" cut in Tinker, but the Yard man went on unheeding.

"My afternoon interview with the Chief, and told me to come and gnaw a bone with him at the Splendide, and bring a licence for those ridiculous guns of his in my pocket. Bribery and corruption, I call it."

Blake smiled with secret enjoyment.

Inspector Coutts and Ruff Hanson were temperamentally diametrically opposed—the stolid, unimaginative Yard man instinctively recoiled from the American's spectacular hustle and his fondness for gun-play; yet, deep



To my hosts of readers, near and far, here's wishing you this Christmastide the most that health and happiness can bring, and may our friendship never dwindle.

enhancement of the U.S. Government collection.

That was an unfortunate episode on which Mr. McCalla did not care to dwell, especially in the aristocratic surroundings of the Hotel Splendide.

The waiter reappeared with an A B C, and, having sipped his cocktail, Mr. McCalla studied the hieroglyphs under the name Lyveden with absorbed interest. He was engrossed in concocting a cablegram to a certain Mr. Isidore Solmann in New York when the swing doors of the lounge opened to admit a fellow-countryman of his, accompanied by three other individuals.

He looked up. Suddenly a flicker of fear crept into his ill-assorted eyes as he recognised the burly, broad-shouldered American with the humorously ugly face.

"Ruff Hanson, by all the gods!" he muttered. "But I guess he won't see me for dust."

down, Blake knew that both were firm friends and had a great deal of respect for each other.

"Ruff has some dark and sinister motive in arranging this banquet," he said slowly. "It rather looks as if we're in for an exciting Christmas."

"Howdy, folk! I wanna interdooce yuh to two mighty good friends of mine," boomed the voice of Ruff Hanson. "Mr. Ben Cayterer and son."

They rose to their feet, and Blake turned and found himself face to face with the tall, handsome millionaire and a frail little figure with round, luminous eyes and a pale, pinched little face. He shook hands with Cayterer.

"I'm very glad to know you, Mr. Blake," said the millionaire. "I have often desired the privilege of meeting you personally, for my own sake, and also for Junior here, who is one of your most loyal hero worshippers."

Blake smiled down kindly at the little fellow, who gazed up with awe at the famous detective.

"Dad, is this really Mr. Blake?" he said in a piping voice, like the chirp of a cricket.

"Sure is, sonny!" laughed Ben Cayterer as Blake solemnly shook hands with the boy. "Junior," he added, "can't go in for games much yet, but he's one great little reader, and has followed many of your exploits and adventures in the Press."

Blake shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly.

"I'm afraid they are rather exaggerated, Mr. Cayterer," he said modestly. "I understand you're to be in this country for some time?"

"Six months at least, I reckon," replied the millionaire. "It's great to be back again. I'm hoping to get busy with some real honest-to-goodness English films early in the New Year; but just now Junior and I are on holiday."

"Yes, sir," piped Junior gravely. "We're going to have a real old-fashioned Christmuss—like Bob Cratchit, an' t'ny Tim, an' Scrooge, an' everythin'."

"I see you're fond of Dickens, sonny," said Blake a smile softening his austere countenance.

"He gets it from me, I guess," said Ben Cayterer. "Say, Mr. Blake, it's my great ambition to film the master's works as they should be filmed in the country he knew and loved so well."

"We can make million dollar sets in Hollywood, but it isn't the same thing. Dickens is too English for cardboard sets in California, that's why I came home to make a pilgrimage round all the places he describes in his novels, and get the genuine authentic background for my pictures."

He turned as Ruff Hanson tugged his sleeve.

"This is Blake's side-kick, young Tinker, Mr. Cayterer. Likewise Splash Page, a newsbender; and my old buddy Inspector Coutts, the grand bezzus at Scotland Yard."

Ben Caterer smiled a welcome at the group.

"I'm very glad to meet you, gentlemen. My friend, Ruff Hanson, has already told me about you, and our little dinner this evening is an excellent idea of his for us to get better acquainted."

He turned to his son and patted his shoulder affectionately.

"Now, son. You've had your wish. Run along to Mrs. Brown and get your supper. You'll have a chance to see Mr. Blake and Tinker later on."

"You're coming to my Christmuss party, sir, aren't you?" queried the boy anxiously. "Dad says he'd ask you to. An' I want to see Pedro."

Blake nodded.

"Why surely, sonny, you shall see Pedro," he promised.

Junior shook hands gravely with the group, his luminous eyes shining with happiness as he limped painfully towards the lift.

"It's his bed-time," explained Cayterer, "but he insisted on seeing you before he went, Mr. Blake, and hearing from your own lips that you would be present at his party."

"He seems to be a remarkably bright little boy," commented Blake, with a twinkle. "How old is he?"

"He'll be ten next month, Mr. Blake. Poor little chap, he's debarred from the usual boyish games, and he spends most of his time reading and imagining all sorts of thrilling adventures and situations in which he plays the role of hero. I intend taking him to Sir Julius Rome, the great Harley Street specialist, to-morrow and see if anything can be done for that lame leg of his. I've spent thousands on the best surgical advice, but—"

Ben Caterer shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"Now what about eats, folk?" chimed in Ruff Hanson. "Mr. Cayterer here has got a proposition to put in front of you, and it's some proposition, I'll tell the world!"

"You dashed old conspirator, Ruff!" chuckled Tinker. "You've got something up your sleeve! I believe you fixed up all this show to-night!"

"You betcha!" said Ruff Hanson, with a wink. "You'll like Ben—he's a white man."

The movie magnate led the way into the private dining-room, and Tinker's eyes sparkled as he saw the invitingly-laid table with its flowers, shaded lights, glittering cut glass, and napery.

"The stuff to give 'em—oh, Coutts?" he whispered to the Yard man. "I wonder what's in the wind?"

It was not, however, till the wine and dessert stage had been reached, after a dinner that was a gastronomic poem, that Ruff Hanson enlightened the assembled guests.

He rose to his feet after the door had shut behind the discreet head waiter, and raised his glass.

"Yolk, I ask you to drink to Ben Cayterer and son—the founder of this feast," he proposed.

The toast was drunk with acclamation, and Coutts furtively unfastened a button of his white waistcoat as Ruff sat down.

"Mebbe you're wondering what's the great idea of this feed," he continued. "Wal, I'll put you wise. I'm a kinda personal bodyguard of Junior Cayterer, and believe me, that job suits my style of talent. There's a plug-ugly back in Noo York that's got it in bad for Ben here, but I guess we've slipped him. That being so, we can all take a deep breath and enjoy ourselves."

He sipped his champagne with keen enjoyment.

"'Christmas comes but once a year,' as the poet guy says. And, therefore, Ben has a great idea—blamed if that ain't poetry!" he added.

Splash Page chuckled at the look of astonishment in the face of the American at his unconscious rhyme.

"Now, Ben—you spill the beans. I've done my job and rounded up four of the best guys I know, as requested. We's up to you now."

"Well, gentlemen," said Cayterer. "Briefly told, the proposition is this. I have promised my son, Junior, to give him a real Dickens Christmas party. I have rented a place at Lyveden, near the Kentish Coast—Lyveden Manor, said to be the original of the famous Dingley Dell of the 'Pickwick Papers.' It

is the property of Lord Sylvester, and, judging from the photographs I've seen, is a beautiful old-world manor house. Unfortunately, however, I know very few people here in England, and I asked my friend, Hanson, if he could suggest names for a suitable house party on Christmas Eve.

"I have already communicated with the Reverend Ambrose Dale, the vicar of Lyveden, announcing my intention of giving a party to the poor children of the parish on Christmas Eve, and he is very enthusiastic about the idea.

"One or two friends of mine have agreed to join the house-warming, and I hope very much that you will accept my invitation for the Christmas holidays as my guests at Lyveden Manor.

"You are a busy man, I know, Mr. Blake," continued Cayterer, turning to the detective; "but even the busiest people relax at Christmas-time. Please forgive this somewhat unconventional invitation; but my son, Junior, ever since Ruff mentioned he was a friend of yours, is just crazy on having you at the party. I shall feel honoured to entertain you all at Lyveden Manor."

Sexton Blake lit a cigar and his eyes twinkled.

"I might have known from Ruff's elaborate secrecy that there was something in the wind," he remarked. "It is very kind indeed of you, Mr. Cayterer. Speaking personally for myself and Tinker, I shall be delighted to accept your invitation. A Christmas party at Dingley Dell sounds most attractive and original."

"Hear, hear!" said Splash Page and Tinker enthusiastically. "What do you say, Coutts?"

The Yard man cleared his throat.

"Well, Mr.—er—Cayterer, personally, speaking unofficially, I'm faced with rather a dull Christmas, what with the missus going to her folk at Shropshire. I'd very much like to accept—providing, of course, that I'm not on duty at the Yard."

Ben Cayterer's kindly face was wreathed in smiles.

"That's fine!" he said enthusiastically. "I'm leaving to-morrow for Lyveden, and I shall expect you gentlemen early on Christmas Eve. I—er—thought it would add greatly to the fun of the party if we all dressed in the costume of favourite Dickens characters."

"Jove! That's a topping idea," agreed Splash Page. "It looks like being a real, old-fashioned, merry Christmas—one that Dickens himself would love!"

Ruff Hanson bit off the end of a dubious-looking cheroot which Coutts had proffered him.

"I'm kinda hazy about this guy Dickens," he remarked. "But Junior's been putting me wise—and lemme tell the world that kid's got it all under his hat!"

IT was nearly midnight when the joyous little dinner party broke up.

Ruff Hanson and Blake exchanged several diverting reminiscences of the past; but it was not until his departure that the criminologist broached the subject of Ruff's real mission in England.

"I shouldn't relax my vigilance, my dear fellow!" he said gravely. "From what you tell me, danger still threatens the boy. I doubt if the fact of his being in England will prevent an attempt at kidnapping. This Solman person may be desperate enough to cross the Atlantic to 'Br' Cayterer."

"Let him try!" laughed Ruff Hanson, patting his hip pockets significantly. "I

guess Willy and Wally'll attend to him."

As they passed through the lounge together, a dark, saturnine face appeared from behind a sheltering palm. Two ill-assorted eyes glared malevolently after them.

"You wait, Hard-boiled Hanson, my bucko!" muttered Sam McCalla vindictively. "This is where it's 'finish' for you!"

He turned to his companion, a slim, Eton-cropped girl, clad in a close-fitting black-and-silver dress. Her eyes were slant, and her lids plentifully daubed with bistro, but she had a certain arresting, barbaric beauty that carried off her outre clothes and exotic colouring.

"Who's the lean guy talking to Hanson?" queried Sam McCalla.

Lil Brady, alias Liverpool Lil, narrowed her slanting eyes, thus revealing her half-Mongolian origin. Her face whitened beneath its rouge. Her fingers dug into McCalla's arm.

"That's that tec Sexton Blake!" she hissed. "Say, Sam, if you want to keep in good with me you've gotta—" She paused, and her full, sensual lips curled into an evil smile. "You've gotta croak that feller!" she whispered. "He's the snitch that sent Larry the Bat to the rope!"

Sam McCalla recoiled from the flaming hatred that shone in the woman's eyes.

He licked his dry lips nervously. "Sexton Blake, eh?" he repeated. "And yuh want him croaked? You said it, kid. I'll see he gets his Christmas present!"

Chapter 3.



The Coach for Dingley Dell.

IT was the day before Christmas. The streets were crowded with parcel-laden people bending and battling manfully against the keen wind which swept a scurry of snow into their smarting faces. Though it was but early afternoon, the shop windows were gaily lit, and exposed their tempting wares to the hurrying passers-by.

The wind was keen, but there seemed to be a seasonable, boisterous gaiety about it that whipped colour into the cheek of many a tired City worker hurrying to complete his shopping in readiness for the morrow. Tired mothers and fathers forgot their cares and troubles in the joy of spending hard-earned and long-saved money, so that the children's Christmas should indeed be merry. Even the tattered kerbstone hawkers looked less wan and hopeless as they called their wares, for hearts are warmed at Christmastide, and uplifted with the reckless joy of giving.

Fleet Street—that thoroughfare which never sleeps—was thronged with the homeward-bound traffic of the City workers as Mr. Deek Page, the star reporter of the "Daily Radio," emerged from the imposing offices of that go-ahead journal, tucked himself in behind the steering-wheel of his little vermilion two-seater, and toddled off (as he expressed it) in the direction of the Strand.

The darkening twilight had turned suddenly to evening when Splash Page had concluded one or two mysterious errands, including a final visit, by ap-

pointment, to a brightly-lit public-house close to an ancient mews in Covent Garden. There, for some time, he was in conversation with a corpulent, red-faced man, with innumerable chins and a seemingly inexhaustible thirst. The conversation was largely on the subject of horses and how to handle them.

IN Baker Street, Sexton Blake, Tinker, and Detective-Inspector Coutts, of Scotland Yard, were grouped about the fire in the cosy consulting-room. Mrs. Bardell, who had brought up some wine from the cellar, had remained to zealously brush up some ashes in the grate.

"Splash said he'd fix all the costumes," remarked Tinker, with a glance at the clock. "It's nearly five o'clock, and Ruff Hanson ought to be here by now. Wonder what's gone wrong with—"

Even as he spoke a knock sounded at the consulting-room door, and Ruff himself breezed in.

"Howdy, folk! I just had to beat it down from Lyveden," he began in his blunt, unceremonious fashion. "Poor old Ben's nutty! The cook he engaged for Christmas has caught the flu, and was taken to Lyveden hospital this morning. He's beatin' the air and generally raisin' Cain at the employment agencies; but there ain't nothing doin'."

"By gum! That's hard luck," began Tinker. "Just when we were looking forward to—"

"Forget it, kiddo!" broke in Ruff Hanson. "This is where my Ideas Department comes in! What's wrong with Mrs. B., the English queen of the kitchen, playin' deputy?"

Mrs. Bardell coloured and fidgeted nervously with the fireirons.

"Lawks, Mr. 'Anson, you do say sech things!" she murmured coyly.

"A perfectly splendid notion," said Blake, with a twinkle. "Mrs. Bardell, you see our difficulty. If it doesn't inconvenience you, or upset your previous arrangements, we would be delighted if you came down to superintend the culinary department at Lyveden Manor."

"Lawks!" said Mrs. Bardell. "You mean as 'ow you'd like me to cook your Christmas dinner for you?"

"Precisely," replied Blake. "I think Mr. Bardell's suggestion an admirable one. I'm perfectly certain that no one could cook the meal better than you."

Mrs. Bardell simpered a little and then curtseyed.

"I shall be delighted to oblige, Mr. Blake. I've allus wanted to see the kitchenings of them stately 'omes of England, 'ow beautiful they stand, as poor dear Bardell allus used to say when we 'ad our own 'ome—and a nice 'ome it was, too, with adasperisterers—"

Blake's lips twitched slightly. He guessed she meant aspidistras. Paragon among housekeepers and admirable cook though she was, Mrs. Bardell's English was weird and wonderful at times. She used words with the haziest notion of their meaning, so long as they sounded right.

"Then that's settled," said Ruff Hanson, with a grin. "I came down specially to plead with you, Mrs. B. Them waffles you made for me last time I stayed here sure were the kind that mamma useter make."

"Pardon me, Mr. 'Anson," she replied. "I presoom I'm to be primarily in sole charge of the colandery apartment. I don't want no 'ussies of 'ousemaids to dictate to me in the kitchening. I am monarch of all I purvey, as B. useter say on a Saturday night when 'e came 'ome from the Dog and Duck."

"You will be in sole charge," Blake

promised. "You needn't worry about the shopping. The provisions are already arranged for, I take it—eh, Ruff?"

"Sure. We've got all the cats," agreed Ruff Hanson.

Down below sounded the tinkle of a bell, and Mrs. Bardell waddled across the consulting-room to answer it.

"By Jove! That was a brain-wave of yours," commented Coutts. "My missus is a bit of a dab at cooking, but Mrs. Bardell beats her hollow."

"God rest you merry gentlemen; may nothing you dismay," called the cheery voice of Splash Page from the doorway a few moments later.

The newspaperman's motoring coat was powdered with snow, and he staggered under the weight of three bulky parcels.

"Costumes, fancy, tees for the use of, as they used to say in the Army," he announced, with a grin. "Catch, Tinker!" He flung a bulky package at the lad, who caught it deftly. "I've fixed 'em all up. I got the best in the shop. Question is, who's going to wear which?"

Coutts grinned sheepishly. "I'm not much of a hand at this carnival business, Splash," he muttered. "I don't quite see where I fit in, somehow."

Splash Page chuckled. "I've got the very character for you to impersonate, Coutts. Fit you like a glove. The most popular in 'Pickwick,' after Sam Weller, which is Tinker's role."

"Suits me all right," grinned Tinker. "But what have you got for old Coutts?"

"He takes the part of the Fat Boy—always asleep, when he's not trying to make our flesh creep," replied Splash.

There was a roar of laughter, in which Coutts joined good-humouredly.

"Symbolic of Scotland Yard, I call it," added the newspaper man, with a chuckle.

"You ought to be Mr. Potts, the editor of the 'Eatauswill Gazette,' my lad!" retorted Coutts. "A bully journalist who always made a hash of things."

"Say, Where do I fit in this outfit?" cut in Ruff Hanson. "Dickens don't seem to have written a part for a hard-boiled egg."

"Hasn't he though?" protested Splash, unwrapping a parcel. "Here's your rig-out, my lad." He uncovered a shabby-looking sartout, a curly-brimmed felt hat, and nankeen trousers. "Here's the very garb for you, Ruff. Fit you like a glove!"

"D've expect me to wear them duds?" ejaculated Ruff, recoiling from the costume. "Who in carnation ever wore clothes like this?"

"Bill Sikes, the celebrated burglar," replied Splash sweetly.

Blake's eyes twinkled.

"And what role has your fertile imagination assigned to me, Splash?" he inquired.

"Sydney Carton!" replied the journalist promptly. "Because it's the Only Way, and this Christmas is a far, far better thing than you have ever done."

"How about you?" demanded Tinker. For answer Splash Page opened his leather motoring-coat, revealing a bottle-green sartout of old-fashioned cut, with a dirty shirt and a wispy collar. A monocle dangled from a threadbare piece of cord, and with a flourish he placed a battered high felt hat at a rakish angle on his head.

"Behold in me, Alfred Jingle, of No Hall, Nowhere!" he said, striking a theatrical air.

"Jove! That's good!" said Tinker enthusiastically. "Come on, Coutts,

let's climb into our glad rags; we've got tons of make-up in the dressing-room!"

"I refuse to go as the Fat Boy," grumbled Coutts. "It'd bring disrespect on the Yard, and—and—"

"Don't be an ass, Coutts!" chuckled Splash. "That was only my fun. Look at this handsome and elegant costume, my lad. You're going to be Mr. Tracy Tupman, that stout and gallant breaker of hearts."

"Say, can't you give me a line on this guy Sikes?" pleaded Ruff Hanson, as he dubiously tried on his faded felt hat. "Was he a second-story man, or a dip, or what?"

"He murdered Nancy and kidnapped Oliver Twist," explained Splash soothingly.

Ruff picked up the nankeen trousers and scratched his head dubiously.

"I'm all of a twist myself, I guess," he remarked. "But I'll try anything once. Let's go."

HALF an hour later Mrs. Bardell tapped at the consulting-room door and gave a little scream of alarm at the amazing transformation that met her gaze.

Lounging in a saddlebag chair, with his lean, ascetic face in startling contrast to the long, untidy wig he was wearing, was Sydney Carton, who looked vaguely like that famous criminologist, Sexton Blake.

A hulking ruffian with a muffer round his bull-like neck leered horribly at the good soul, while a corpulent-looking gentleman in tights and a navy blue surtout winked at her deliberately.

"Ouch!" gasped Mrs. Bardell. Splash Page, in his role of Jingle, bowed sweepingly.

"Your pardon—should explain—Christmas Eve—spirit of carnival—revelry by night—sorry to alarm you—very," he said in the staccato, telegraphic manner of Dickens' immortal Jingle.

"Mr. Pige!" squeaked Mrs. Bardell. "Lawks, 'ow you did give me a turn! I hardly reckernised you in that there get up. Which I was wondering when we was a-goin' to start for Lyveden Manor."

"At once," answered Blake. "I hope you're ready, Mrs. B.? Tinker, phone for the Grey Panther."

Tinker, who made an admirable Sam Weller in his dark livery and striped waistcoat, set his cockaded hat at a jaunty angle.

"Granted as soon as asked, as the Balham skivvy said when the ten stun gen'man trod on 'er toe," he remarked.

He was about to cross over to the instrument when, above the ceaseless hum of traffic in Baker Street, sounded the clear, high note of a coaching-horn.

Tan-ta-ra tanty tanty! It was followed by the clip-clip-clippetty clip of horses' hoofs.

"What the deuce—" began Coutts, crossing over to the window.

Through the whirling, feathery snow-flakes he saw the dim shape of an ancient stage-coach drawn up before the door, and already surrounded by a gathering crowd. The four horses snorted and pawed the ground impatiently. The driver, an enormously fat man clad in a multiplicity of overcoats, drew in the reins, while at the back a guard continued his faufare.

SPLASH PAGE chuckled with delight.

"A little surprise for you, my lords; the stage-coach waits without!"

"Holy Heinz!" ejaculated Ruff Hanson. "You've gone crazy, Splash." "You utterly preposterous person!" said Sexton Blake, with twitching lips.

"Do you seriously expect us to travel down to Lyveden in that, Splash?"

"Sure I do!" said the newspaperman blandly. "Hang it all, it's Christmas Eve! Let's give these poor perishing moderns a thrill. Their lives are grey and unromantic enough. Think how it'll cheer 'em up in the little Surrey villages to see Dickens' characters bowling through on a stage-coach at Christmas Eve!"

"Merry Christmas, everybody!" yelled Splash Page joyously, from the top of the coach.

"Merry Christmas!" roared the crowd as the stage-coach, with the accompaniment of jingling harness and rumbling wheels, started its historic journey through the snow-laden twilight of Baker Street for the open road beyond.



"Who's the lean guy talking to Hanson?" queried the man at the table. "That's that 'ec, Sexton Blake" hissed the girl. "Say, Sam, if you want to keep in good with me, you've gotta croak that feller!"

Tinker's eyes sparkled with excitement.

"Fine! What a lark, Splash! Come on, gov'nor! I've never ridden in a stage-coach. We can stop at all the old-fashioned inns on the way—if any—and I bet we'll be welcomed with open arms!"

"We'll be had up for causing an obstruction, Blake—see if we won't," Coutts grunted. "Of all the fool things this crazy journalist's put over, this is the daftest!"

"Now that the carriage waits without, I see no help for it," exclaimed Blake. "If we keep it waiting much longer there certainly will be an obstruction in Baker Street, and we shall spend Christmas at Bow Street!"

TAN-TA-RA! Tan-ta-ra! A shrill blast rose above the busy hum of traffic in Baker Street. The corpulent driver, his red face purple in the keen north wind, clucked his tongue and gathered in the reins.

Tinker felt his blood thrill in the keen wind as he and Splash Page waved their hats gaily to the staring throng below.

"This is great, Splash!" he chuckled enthusiastically. "A Christmas in a lifetime!"

There was a smile of beatific happiness on the red face of Detective-Inspector Coutts as he lit up one of Blake's excellent cigars in defiance of anachronisms.

"Does one good to relax a bit, eh, Blake, old friend?" he exclaimed. "Too much hustle and rush about modern life. This is the way to travel!"

Sexton Blake nodded. His eyes were a trifle abstracted as he stared at the twinkling lights in the shop windows, with their tempting array of presents. The greengrocers and poulterers were doing a roaring trade, and the provision stores were packed with eager shoppers, as they passed on their triumphant way; yet none were too busy or preoccupied to turn and smile and wave their hands as the coach rumbled by.

It was a spontaneous tribute from the people of England to the noble genius

of Dickens, who, more than anyone, has kept alive the spirit of Christmas. Somewhere, his kindly shade smiled down on the incarnation of his immortal dream-children, well content that Yuletide was still a "kind, good, forgiving charitable time," and that even in the twentieth century, with its radio and aeroplanes, Englishmen still kept his memory green.

The streets of Town gave way to the pleasant, winding roads of Surrey,

in their seats and grinned cheerfully at the older men, to whom the spirit of Christmas Eve and the peaceful countryside had brought back memories, grave and gay, from the years that had passed.

"How about a little community carol singing, Coutts?" suggested Splash. "We change horses at the next village, and I'm going to stand Mrs. B. a bottle of pineapple rum, blamed if I don't!" With that Splash and Tinker began

Chapter 4.



The Spirit of Christmas.

LYVEDEN MANOR was en fete. The old house, with its mullioned windows agleam with light, its age-old eaves glistening beneath a mantle of snow in the wan moonlight, against a background of whispering elms, echoed and re-echoed, to the happy laughter of delighted children.

"Yoicks and tally-ho!" roared Tinker, as the coach clattered through the lichened stone gateway, with its carved griffins on either side, and swept up the snow-covered drive.

"Tom, give her a toot!" urged Splash to the red-faced guard, a Covent Garden ostler, delighting in the new role he was enacting.

Tan-ta-ra! blew Tom on his silver trumpet.

"Whoa, there!" Old Jim Ridge, ex-cabby, and now, for one night only, driver of the Christmas stage, drew in his horses with a flourish as the ancient oak doorway of Lyveden Manor opened and a white-haired butler stood blinking in astonishment at the sight before him.

Ruff Hanson nudged Sexton Blake.

"That's old Parsons, the butler I was telling you about. Been in Lord Sylvester's service for donkeys' years. More like an archbishop than a blamed butler!"

Tom, the guard, hurriedly fixed the ladder to the rail of the coach, just as the rotund, well-knit frame of Ben Cayterer emerged from the hallway.

He stared in astonishment as Splash Page, not waiting for the ladder, clambered down the side of the coach and bowed, with a flourish of his battered hat.

The snow had almost ceased falling, and he made a ghostly, impressive figure with his early-nineteenth-century garments on the lawn of the ancient manor-house.

"Alfred Jingle—your hand, sir! Glad to see you—very!" said the journalist.

Ben Cayterer flung back his head and gave a gargantuan roar of laughter, in which Splash joined.

He noticed that the movie magnate was clad in the swallow-tailed coat, the white tights, and immortal gaiters of the founder of the Pickwick Club.

"Lands sakes, Mr. Page!" said Cayterer. "Did you travel all the way by stage-coach? By Jove, how topping! I wish I'd thought of it!" he added enthusiastically.

"Ooh, dad," chirped a boy's voice, "is it real?"

From the hallway emerged a tiny, pathetic little figure, clad in the quaint peg-top trousers and tasseled hat of the schoolboys of a century ago.

He had a crutch under one arm, but his little face was radiant with happiness as he beheld the champing, steaming horses and the brilliant paintwork of the stage-coach.

"Tiny Tim, as I live!" yelled Ruff Hanson delightedly. "Say, Sydney Carton, clap your eyes on Bob Cratchit's youngest son!"

Little Junior Cayterer's eyes sparkled with joy as he saw Tinker and Splash and Blake descend from the roof of the coach. Suddenly a bonneted head emerged from the interior of the coach and Splash rushed to open the door.

"Mr. Cay—er—I mean Pickwick,



white and ghostly beneath their mantle of snow. The wind whistled eerily through the gaunt branches of the trees, overcoming the fainter noise of the horses' hoofs on the snow-muffled road.

"Kinda hits me where I live, Blake," said Ruff Hanson—"this England of yours. I ain't a sentimental guy, but it kinda holds you."

He pointed through the snow to where the orange glow of a cottage window shone a welcome through the trees; and across the heath was borne the chime of the Christmas bells ringing out their message of peace and goodwill to men.

Tinker and Splash Page stewed round

lustily, if unmelodiously, to burst out with

"Good King Wenceslas looked out
On the feast of Stephen.

When the snow lay round about,
Deep and crisp and even."

There was something so infectious about the age-old carol and the exhilaration of that romantic ride that soon everybody joined in, including a voice from the interior of the coach itself, as that excellent woman, Mrs. Martha Bardell, quaveringly took up the melody.

meet an old friend of yours—Mrs. Bardell—direct descendant of the famous Mrs. Bardell, of Goswell Road, whom you doubtless remember.”

Ben Cayterer smiled as he helped the somewhat breathless housekeeper from the coach.

“Say, Mrs. Bardell,” he said cordially, “this is more than good of you to fill the breach, in the circumstances.”

Mrs. Bardell gazed about her rather helplessly for a moment. Her black bombazine dress rustled as she followed the others into the spacious hall.

“Which I’ll have you know, Mr. Pige,” she announced, in a loud whisper, “that, fancy dress or no fancy dress, I ain’t agoin’ to wear trousers—not at my time of life, young man.”

“Wear trousers?” gasped the astonished newspaper man. “Who on earth suggested it, Mrs. B.?”

“I’m in the gaiters,” replied Mrs. Bardell, with dignity. “He said something about me filling somebody’s breeches—but not if I know it!” she added, clutching her umbrella pugnaciously.

“Oh, my hat!” exploded Tinker. “He means he’s glad you are going to do the cooking, Mrs. B., and that it’s jolly decent of you to come.”

“Ah!” said Mrs. Bardell, somewhat mollified; then she turned as a tiny hand clutched her sleeve and the piping voice of Junior demanded earnestly:

“Please are you really Mrs. Bardell?”

The housekeeper smiled kindly.

“Why, in course, my lamb—Martha Bardell, a widow woman this past twenty years.”

“And, please, do you still let lodgings to single gen’tmen, like it says in the Pickwick Papers?” persisted Junior, his large, grave eyes looking up seriously.

Mrs. Bardell gave a rich chuckle.

“Mr. Blake and Mr. Tinker are still single gen’tmen, my dear,” she said, “and I does my best to look arter them.”

Junior smiled his sweet grave smile, as he hobbled painfully along at her side.

“When Parsons has shown you your room, I’d like you to see my Christmas tree. I like you, Mrs. Bardell—I wish you were my nurse instead of Miss Brown. She—she thinks ‘imagination is silly.’”

“Bless the child!” said the good soul, her heart warming to the motherless bairn. “You and me’s going to be great friends.”

Blake and Cayterer winked significantly at each other, and Parsons, the butler, hovered like some grave arch-deacon at the foot of the stairs.

“Show Mrs. Bardell to her quarters, Parsons—she must be fatigued after her journey. What about something warming, gentlemen, before we join the party? You must have had a cold ride.”

“Sound idea!” agreed Splash Page. “I presume, by the way, you’ve got room for Jim Rudge, the coachman, and Tom? I had a deuce of a job to hire that stage-coach, Mr. Cayterer.”

“By all means, my dear fellow—there’s plenty of room in the servants’ hall.” He signalled to a footman.

“Williams, see that the driver and his mate have a good meal, and—er—plenty of beer. This way, Mr. Blake!” he added, passing through the spacious hallway, gaily decked with paper streamers, holly, and mistletoe, and branches of yew. From behind a closed doorway came the merry strains of fiddles, playing away for dear life, and the laughter of children.

Ben Cayterer opened the door, and Tinker stared at the cheerful scene that met his gaze.

It was a long room—brilliantly lit by a glittering chandelier.

A huge log fire blazed in the wide, old-fashioned brick fireplace.

The raftered roof was hung with festoons of evergreen, and coloured lanterns gave a rosy glow to the happy faces of some thirty children who were playing musical chairs to the tune of the fiddle, played by a thin-faced, lank-haired man, who looked like Uriah Heap.

In the corner was a gigantic Christmas-tree, glittering with dozens and dozens of tiny candles, sparkling with silver, and glinting with gold. It was laden with crackers, bon-bons, chocolate boxes, toys, and all sorts of enchantments to gladden the hearts of the little ones.

Ben Cayterer’s kindly face glowed as he led his party up the old time-worn stairs that led to the minstrel gallery. A group of people sat there, watching the children romping below with the care-free innocence of childhood. They were all clad in Dickens costume, save for a tall, silver-haired old gentleman, who wore clerical clothes.

“Mr. Blake, I want you to meet Rev. Ambrose Lane, the Vicar of Lyveden, to whose good offices I owe the success of my kiddies’ party,” said Cayterer.

The vicar smiled as he shook hands with the distinguished criminologist.

“Delighted to know you, Mr. Blake,” he said warmly. “Mr. Cayterer told me you were coming down. I am not in costume at the moment,” he added, with a laugh—for a reason that may later on be apparent.”

“The reverend’s gonna play Santa Claus,” explained Ruff Hanson, in a Bill Sikes-ish whisper.

“My daughter Enid, Mr. Blake,” said the vicar, as he presented a slim, piquantly pretty young lady, bewitchingly attired in the charming costume of Dolly Varden.

One by one the members of the little house party were introduced. Sir Anthony Trent, the bluff squire of Lyveden Hall, the neighbouring estate; his wife and daughters; Colonel Rushton, who made an imposing Mr. Bumble; and several other people prominent in Lyveden, completed the grown-up element of the party.

“I guess Junior’s lost his heart to your housekeeper, Mr. Blake,” said Ben Cayterer, as they strolled into the adjoining lounge. “It’s mighty good of her to come down and help us out over Christmas.”

Blake laughed. “She is only too delighted, poor soul. She would have been very lonely in Baker Street,” he remarked. “By the way, what was Sir Julius Rome’s verdict about the little fellow, Mr. Cayterer?”

Ben Cayterer’s eyes shone. “There’s hope, Mr. Blake!” he said earnestly. “Sir Julius thinks an operation, though risky, may prove successful. He is willing to perform it on the understanding that I take a fifty-fifty chance. But it’s worth it! I intend to put Junior in a nursing home after the holidays, and then—well, we can only hope.”

Blake nodded, and sipped his drink. “Sir Julius is a very cautious man,” he remarked. “If he thinks there is a chance, then it’s most certainly worth taking. I hope sincerely the operation will be a success.”

“Thanks, Mr. Blake,” said Ben Cayterer huskily. “It—it means a good deal to me.”

“By the way,” resumed the criminologist, lowering his voice, “have you heard anything further re the fascinating Mr. Isidore Solmann? It would be as well not to relax your

vigilance—he seems to be a dangerous enemy.”

Ben Cayterer laughed.

“Hang Izzy! I’ve heard nothing since I sailed. I guess he’s too cautious to try any tricks in England; he might have done in New York, but with Ruff Hanson around—he’s got a fat chance!”

A knock sounded at the door of the lounge, and the handle turned slowly. A moment later Pedro, the majestic bloodhound, entered, accompanied by little Cayterer Junior, his boyish face flushed with excitement.

“Look, daddy!” he piped. “Mrs. Bardell interdooced me to Pedro. Isn’t he a scrumptious dog—and so polite! Why, he knocked at the door with his tail before coming in.”

Pedro’s noble head and mournful eyes rose a little as he saw his master, and Blake’s eyes twinkled.

“I think Master Pedro ought to go to bed, don’t you, Mr. Cayterer?” he suggested. “He’s getting rather too old for Christmas parties!”

“P’raps you’re right, Mr. Blake,” said Junior gravely. “May I give him a bone, and make him comfy?”

“Surely, son, but mind you take Parsons with you. Pedro can sleep in the stables and dream about rabbits. Hurry up, or you’ll be late for Santa Claus.”

The little boy clutched Pedro’s collar, and obediently trotted out of the room.

“Fine dog that, Mr. Blake,” commented Cayterer. “Gentle as a lamb with children, eh?”

“With children, yes,” repeated Blake, with emphasis. “But I’m afraid Mr. Isidore Solmann wouldn’t notice much gentleness.”

“Hey, you guys!” boomed Ruff Hanson from the doorway. “What’s the big idea? The stage is all set for Santa Claus, and here you are mopping up hooch like a coupla bootleggers.”

Blake rose to his feet with a cluck of annoyance.

“Of course—how careless of me! I’ve forgotten the parcel. See you in a moment, Mr. Cayterer.”

He strode rapidly down the hallway and climbed the stairs to his bed-room.

MEANWHILE the fun in the raistered dining-room was growing fast and furious.

Musical chairs had given place to blind man’s buff, and the shrieks of laughter when Splash Page chased the corpulent Colonel Rushton, until they both fell sprawling over the coal scuttle, rang throughout the ancient manor. Blake found the Rev. Ambrose Dale busily affixing the long white beard of St. Nicholas when he returned to the minstrel gallery with his parcel.

“A few toys for the little ones, vicar,” he said.

The Rev. Dale smiled his thanks.

“Very kind of you, Mr. Blake,” he said. “Do you know, I think Christmas is the best time, because it is the kindest time. Lyveden is a very poor parish, and for weeks I have been worried about the kiddies and how to give them a Christmas treat—yet, here, as though it was an answer to prayer, Mr. Cayterer throws open this house for their benefit. Bless you both, Mr. Blake!”

Sexton Blake’s austere face flushed a little.

“Christmas belongs to the children, vicar,” he said quietly. “It is the least we can do in return for the joy that Dickens gave us—to see that the youngsters have theirs.”

Splash Page and Tinker, hot, perspiring, but thoroughly happy, were the life and soul of the party. Ruff

Hanson in one corner was regaling a crowd of small boys with tales of breathless adventure in Texas, when the magic name of Santa Claus was announced.

Instantly there was a hush as the scarlet-robed figure descended the stairs and took his place at the Christmas tree.

Ben Cayterer, beaming down benevolently from his seat in the minstrel gallery, was joined by Ruff Hanson. The American grinned cheerfully.

"Say, Ben, I'm all-fired glad I took this job!" he said. "I'm tickled to death with a Dickens Christmas."

It was a merry ceremony that followed. Thirty pairs of eyes gazed eagerly and expectantly at the Christmas tree as Santa Claus began to distribute its glittering gifts.

Amid frantic happiness and noisy jollity, the evening passed, and about ten o'clock thirty tired, but thoroughly happy children left for home in charge of parents or guardians, their arms full of toys and heaven knows how many delectable enticements.

"Well, that's that!" breathed Ben Cayterer at length. Enjoy your real Dickens party, son?"

Little Junior's eyes glowed like stars. "It was splendid, dad," he said eagerly. "I enjoyed it more'n anything I've ever had. I—I think Mr. Dickens would have enjoyed it, too. Don't you think so, Mr. Blake?"

Blake's look softened as he met the gaze of those serious brown eyes.

"I'm sure of it, sonny," he said gravely.

"Run along to bed, son," counselled his father. "Santa Claus will drop in on you soon. He's busy getting some more toys."

Junior turned obediently and raised his little tasselled cap.

"Good-night, everybody!" he piped, in his cricket's chirp of a voice. "I'm Tiny Tim, you know, so I can say, God bless us every one!"

And there was an unwonted tenderness in the eyes of even the youthful Tinker as he gazed after the frail little figure limping slowly out of the room.

Chapter 5.



Christmas Ghosts.

UPPER had been served. Round the crackling oak Yule logs in the spacious fireplace of the library were grouped the remaining members of Ben Cayterer's Christmas house-party.

Colonel Rushton, still clad in his robes of Bumbledom; Sir Anthony Trent, who made a rollicking Micawber; Ruff Hanson, looking ferociously villainous as Bill Sikes; and the famous Baker Street trio—Blake, Tinker, and Mrs. Bardell—and, finally, Detective-Inspector Coutts.

The vicar of Lyveden and Enid had been prevailed upon to stay the night, for the wind howled menacingly down the chimney. The vicarage was a good four miles from the manor, and the good clergyman was loath to exchange the comforts of the cosy hearth for the blustering north-easter that rattled the millioned windows with boisterous glee.

Ben Cayterer had invited Mrs. Bardell to join the guests, and that good soul, embarrassed at first by the attention shown to her, lost a good deal of

her shyness after sipping the excellent '51 port from Lord Sylvester's well-stocked cellar. Enid Dale, looking bewitchingly pretty in her flowered Dolly Varden dress, was deep in conversation with Ben Cayterer.

Splash Page was arguing about the War with Colonel Rushton, while Blake was discussing the conclusion of Dickens' unfinished novel—"Edwin Drood"—with Sir Anthony Trent.

Ruff Hanson winked slyly at Tinker on the couch and whispered below his breath:

"Look at old Ben, kiddo! Seems mighty interested in Miss Dale, don't he?"

Tinker nodded, and slyly jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

On the sofa that fascinating Lothario, Mr. Tracy Tupman—alias Detective-Inspector Coutts—was gazing up admiringly at Mrs. Bardell, who was evidently holding him enthralled with pearls of culinary wisdom.

Scraps of their conversation reached Tinker, and he grinned with amusement.

"It's the hoysters that do it, Suspector," she said. "I'll write out the recipe for stuffing roast turkey so's your missus kin 'ave it 'andy. You beards the hoysters, mix 'em with the breadcrumbs, 'erbs, and seasonin', add a little more egg to bind the forcemeat, an'—"

The worthy C.I.D. man hung on every word of that admirable cook's recipe. Coutts was a good trencherman, and had a terrific admiration for Mrs. Bardell's cooking. There were times when he privately compared that estimable woman to his wife, and felt faintly resentful that Blake should have secured such a paragon.

A mocking hoo hoo! sounded down the chimney, followed by the hiss of the blazing logs as a shower of sleet, blackened by soot, fell into the grate. Mrs. Bardell clutched Coutts' sleeve, and her left hand flew to her black bombazine bosom.

"Oh, Mr. Coutts, I'm that skeered! That old himage, Parsons, told me as 'ow this 'ouse is 'aunted."

There was a lull in the general conversation, and Ruff Hanson's nasal voice drawled.

"Say, Ben, Mrs. B. says there's a spook in this place. Did you rent that along with the rest of the house?"

The millionaire shook his head.

"No, there was no mention of any ghost, as far as I know," he remarked.

Splash Page chuckled and pointed to the ancient grandfather clock which tick-tocked solemnly in the corner.

"'Tis now the witching hour of night, when churchyards yawn and graves give up their dead!" he chanted solemnly.

Mrs. Bardell gave a stifled scream.

"I declare, Mr. Pige, you give me the fair creeps!" she protested. "As poor B. useter say, 'There's more things in 'eaven than are dreamt of in your phrenology.'"

Tinker's lips twitched. He felt a malicious desire to draw Mrs. B. out. Her malapropisms were things not exactly of beauty but joys for ever.

"Did you ever see a ghost, Mrs. B.?" he queried innocently.

"That I did, Master Tinker, and a gashly sight it were," she said. "It was while me and poor B. were courtin' 'E took me to a circus one day, and we went to see 'Marier Marten, or the Murder in the Red Barn.' It froze the marrow in my bones, as the saying is. I was all worked up. The ghost of the pore murdered Marier came to the wretch in the condemned cell, howling somethink awful. Her nightdress was

all covered in blood, and the willain screeches out somethink about 'Remorse—remorse! My kingdom for remorse!' and she varnishes before my very eyes into thin hair, as the saying goes."

The company's exclamations or smiles, or even laughs, were suddenly stifled as the old clock in the corner began to chime the midnight hour. Sir Anthony Trent glanced up at the large, sombre oil-painting of a dark, saturnine man dressed in Elizabethan costume.

"I say, padre, it's Christmas Eve, and all that, what? How about telling us that ghost story of yours about jolly old Hugo the Headless? You know all the facts, and his portrait up there will give us all the right atmosphere."

The Rev. Ambrose Dale smiled benignly and lit his cigar.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen, it is a Dickens' Christmas Eve, and, in short, I am quite agreeable. It's certainly a weird story, and—"

"Lawks, sir, you give me the fair creeps already!" broke in Mrs. Bardell, glancing at the painting barbedly. "If it's worse than Marier Marten—"

She broke off suddenly. Above the sough of the wind and the pelting hail that lashed the millioned windows came a long, mournful wail that seemed to hold a world of agony in its depths.

"What's that?" gasped Splash Page, starting to his feet.

Crash!

EVEN as the newspaper-man spoke that unnervingly sudden sound startled the occupants of the cosy library. Enid Dale, white and trembling, pointed a shaking finger at the panelled wall.

"Daddy, daddy, look—the portrait of Sir Hugo!" she cried.

A dazed silence fell on the group—for the portrait in its heavy gilded frame had crashed to the floor, face downwards.

Sexton Blake quietly crossed over to the fallen picture. His action was so deftly methodical that it soothed their overwrought nerves. The criminologist examined the worn wire that had held the portrait to the picture rail—then he shrugged his shoulders.

"H'm! Queer coincidence, gentlemen. The wire has snapped. It is evidently very old and brittle."

Mrs. Bardell rose to her feet, her usually placid face was flushed.

"Which I says that I'm going to bed, gen'l'men," she announced firmly. "I don't 'old with 'orors—not by no means. I'm also locking my bed-room door. Gen'l'men didn't oughter wander about arter midnight, with or without 'eads, as this 'Eadless Gentleman must have done. The vicar 'ere is a spirituous adviser, and I 'opes 'e advises this 'ere spirit to for ever 'old 'is peace."

She turned to the Reverend Ambrose, who coughed a little uneasily.

"Er—I'm sorry if I have scared you, ladies," he stammered. "Perhaps it was a little injudicious of me to offer to tell that particular story—but you demanded a ghost story, you know!"

Sexton Blake smiled.

"I presume the apparition of Sir Hugo is supposed 'o haunt the manor in the approved headless ghost fashion?"

"That is the legend—but whether it is true or not, I cannot say," replied the clergyman.

"I'd like to see that spook," broke in Ruff Hanson grimly. "Willy and Wally are mighty good psychic investigators!"

He patted his hip pocket significantly.

Ben Cayterer yawned and glanced at the clock.

"Guess I'll slip up and see how Junior is," he remarked uneasily. "I've got a pillow-slip full of toys to deposit by him

bed. He's still a firm believer in Santa Claus."

Sexton Blake was very thoughtful as Mrs. Bardell and Enid took their departure. The vicar followed their example later, and Coutts, Tinker, Ruff Hanson, and Blake were left to themselves, and began to discuss the curious incident of the fallen picture.

They broke off suddenly as a strangled exclamation from the doorway caused them to turn their heads.

Ben Cayterer stood there—his face livid. In his hand he held a dagger and a slip of paper. From his open mouth came strange, unintelligible noises that were scarcely human.

But it was his eyes that gripped Blake's attention—they were terror-filled and almost protuberant.

"My—my Heaven, Mr. Blake!" he gasped. "They—they've got Junior!"

He swayed and would have fallen had Blake not supported him.

"Brace up, Mr. Cayterer!" commanded the detective sharply. "Brandy, Tinker—"

The youngster leapt to the sideboard and poured out a stiff peg of the cordial. Gradually Ben Cayterer's face cleared, but his fingers were trembling as he held the crumpled slip of paper.

"I found this, transfixed by the dagger to Junior's pillow!" he said huskily. "My kiddie's gone! For Heaven's sake, Mr. Blake, advise me! I—I don't—What shall I do?"

Blake took the document, which was typed on an ordinary sheet of slate-grey notepaper. The dagger-slit in the top right-hand corner was about half an inch wide. The message, though brief, was sinister with import:

"Got your kid. Twenty thousand bucks and Spagon's spiel, and you'll get him back. Wire acceptance to Juniper, 2a, Saga Street, Pilsico—and keep out the balls or—it's curtains."

Chapter 6.



Business as Usual.

"BLUERELLS!" roared Ruff Hanson. "They've got the kid! C'mon, Blake, let's go! Ben, I'm a gink that oughta be kicked from here to

Hoboken! But by the Great Horned Toad, I'll get these guys, and get 'em good!"

The dynamic American had leapt to his feet, a grim, fighting look on his weather-beaten face.

"It's not your fault, Ruff," said Ben Cayterer wearily. "I might have known that—"

"Not my fault!" roared Ruff. "Say, you hired me to protect that kid, and while I was down here the plug-ugly Yid—"

"Never mind that now!" snapped Sexton Blake. "Where is Junior's bedroom?"

Ben Cayterer unsteadily led the way up the wide, old-fashioned staircase. He halted on the first landing, and pushed open a bed-room door, revealing a bright, cosy room in which a gas-fire glowed, and an oaken bedstead took up most of the room. There was a communicating door, and Ben jerked his finger towards it.

"That leads to my bed-room."

"H'm!" said the detective slowly. "Was this door locked?"

The millionaire shook his head.

"No, sir, I never dreamt it was necessary, with so many of us in the house," he said brokenly. "My kid!"

His voice trailed off miserably, and his eyes held a stricken look.

"Help! There it goes again!" roared Ruff Hanson, holding a stubby finger

I T was pitch-dark in the gardens of Lyveden Manor. The wind soughed through the branches of the elms, and the sleet cut and stung their faces like a thousand thongs.

"You take the rear of the house. Splash!" ordered Ruff. "Tinker, go



aloft. "What the blue blazes is it, Blake?"

The wind had now fallen somewhat, and, high and shrill, came a repetition of the ghastly, inhuman wail that had startled Mrs. Bardell in the library.

Sexton Blake rapidly took command of the situation.

"Ruff, you and Splash make a tour of the grounds," he ordered. "Coutts, you'd better investigate the hallway and first floor, and see if any doors have been left open. Tinker, you join Ruff—take Pedro."

He stopped and picked up a tiny shoe and handed it to his assistant. His calm, matter-of-fact manner did a good deal towards steadying the millionaire's almost frenzied anxiety.

Ruff and Splash, with Tinker at their heels, hurried downstairs. Parsons, in the hallway, approached the American deferentially.

"Er—is anything wrong, sir? I was about to retire when—"

"Report to Mr. Blake!" snapped Ruff as he unbolted the hall door. "Mr. Cayterer's son has been kidnapped!"

The manservant's jaw dropped. "Good Heavens, sir! Master Junior kidnapped?" he echoed. "You don't mean to—"

"Snap into it!" snarled Ruff, and the butler recoiled at the ferocious fashion with which the American produced his wicked-looking six guns as he stepped out into the blustery night.

get the dawg! I'll scoot up the driveway."

The American parked one of his guns at his hip, and flashed on his electric pocket-lamp. He made a queerly sinister figure in the storm, clad in the rough garments of Bill Sikes and a scowl twisting his battered features.

He flashed his light on the gravelled drive, which was now ankle-deep in sleet and slush. Many motors had arrived at Lyveden Manor that night; the rats and tracks of various makes of tyres crossed and re-crossed each other in hopeless confusion. He could make out faintly the wheel-marks of the stage-coach, but, in view of the sodden state of the ground and the incessant sleet, it was almost hopeless to pick out anything less unusual in that mass of motor-car tracks.

Suddenly there came a deep-throated bay, and Tinker appeared from the dark outline of the stables, holding Pedro on a leash.

"Found anything, Ruff?" he yelled.

"Nary a thing!" roared the American. "What about the dog-gotta line on the trail yet?"

Tinker shook his head.

"Seems a bit fogged—and I don't blame the old boy! If, as I suspect, the kidnapers came by car, Pedro won't be able to pick up the scent."

Ruff Hanson and Tinker plodded on silently towards the huge ornamental gates of the Manor house. Then, sud-

denly through the storm, they heard the chug-chug of a high-powered motor-car, and two yellow beams cut through the darkness.

Together they raced to the gates, just as a gleaming yellow car hurtled along the roadway. They caught a glimpse of a dark figure crouched over the wheel, and Ruff Hanson flashed his torch at the vehicle. In one split second he caught a glimpse of the driver. His face was hidden behind a black mask.

Crack!

With the speed of light Ruff Hanson's

They met Splash Page at the entrance, but the journalist had little to report. All the windows were securely fastened, and the back door was locked and bolted.

"Whoever pulled the coup must have got in by the front, or one of the bedroom windows!" he announced.

MEANWHILE, Sexton Blake was conducting a minute examination of the missing boy's bedroom. Most of the little fellow's Tiny Tim clothes were neatly

The detective strode towards the communicating door and pulled it open. Instantly a keen current of air blew in from an open window.

"Ah!" said Blake significantly, as he crossed over to the sill and flashed his torch to the depths below. "See! A most convenient stack-pipe, Mr. Cayterer! The mystery of ingress and egress is solved."

"But I can't understand why Junior didn't cry out or scream, Mr. Blake. I always warned him not to speak to strange men or to accept anything from them. He was an obedient little kid, and I bet he'd have hollered like blazes if there was a stranger in his bed-room."

Blake stooped, and his keen gaze fell on the heavy portiere curtains that bellied out in the night wind from the open window.

Suddenly he shot out a finger and thumb, and seized a minute fluffy object from the heavy plush, and placed it carefully in his wallet.

"Found a clue, Mr. Blake?" Ben Cayterer was watching him curiously.

"Maybe," was the cryptic reply. "I'm inclined to think that it was not a stranger that entered Junior's room to-night, but a very old and very familiar friend."

The millionaire stared at Blake with astonishment.

"An old friend?" he echoed. "Good heavens, Blake, you don't mean to insinuate that—"

"I insinuate nothing at the moment," was the quiet reply. "Come, I see Tinker and Ruff racing across the lawn. There is evidently something doing."

Together they descended to the hallway, and while Ruff recounted their adventure with the yellow car, Tinker called up the local police at Lyveden.

"The man was masked, you say?" demanded Sexton Blake.

Ruff Hanson nodded.

"I only caught a glimpse of him, old-timer, but I swear his dial was covered from eyes to chin. Then again, he returned Wally's compliment pronto—or perhaps it was his pal in the tonneau. They're the crooks all right, Blake, and I bet they'll be nabbed within an hour."

Sexton Blake shook his head slightly. "In the first place, that may be a fake number," he remarked. "Furthermore, they can easily abandon the car, and I confess I'm curious to know why they loitered about so long, once they had kidnapped the boy."

"Junior was abducted at least an hour ago; why, then, should these miscreants in the yellow car hang about the neighbourhood when it was all to their advantage to get away?"

Ruff Hanson scratched his bullet head. "Beats me," he said. "But say, how d'you figure it out that it was an hour back since Junior left?"

Blake waved the question aside as almost annoying.

"There was a gas fire in the lad's room," he said briskly. "He retired to sleep before 10 p.m., and yet the bed was cold when we entered. In a warm room a bed retains the warmth of a person's body for a considerable time."

"You're a whale on the grey matter, old-timer," said Ruff Hanson admiringly.

Sexton Blake turned to Ben Cayterer. "My dear fellow," he said quietly, "if you will be guided by me, you will try and rest. There is nothing we can do until the morning. I'm convinced that no harm can come to Junior; it's not him they want, but Spagoni's confession, primarily, and twenty thousand dollars incidentally. The latter demand, I imagine, is a sort of private

(Continued on page 16.)



Mrs. Bardell gave a little scream of alarm at the transformation that had taken place. "Your pardon—should explain—Christmas Eve—spirit of carnival—sorry to alarm you—very!" said Splash Page, in the manner of Dickens' immortal Alfred Jingle.

Dickens characters, left to right: Alfred Jingle (Splash Page); Sydney Carton (Sexton Blake); Sam Weller (Tinker); Tracy Tupman (Insp. Coultis); Bill Sikes (Ruff Hanson).

gun spoke. He had aimed for the back tyre. The car swerved slightly, but did not falter on its way. A tongue of flame leapt from the rear of the tonneau.

There was a soft plut, and a bullet embedded itself in a trunk of a tree, four inches away from the American's bare head.

"By the great horned toad!" roared Ruff. "Them's the guys, Tinker! C'mon! I guess I punctured their back wheel an—"

He pulled back the bolt of the wrought iron gate and raced down the roadway. There was no sign of the yellow car, and the American scratched his chin ruefully.

"Don't tell me I can't shoot straight, kid! I never miss!" he remarked, pointing to a fresh wheel-track in the road. "It's just my blamed luck them guys have solid tyres—or luck!"

Tinker turned back with Pedro.

"I'm going to phone!" he announced. "I've got the number and description of that car. The police will stop it!"

"Say, kiddo, you sure use your eyes!" said Ruff Hanson approvingly, as they retraced their steps towards the Manor House.

folded on the back of a chair, and the metal frame that supported his lame leg was a pathetic relic propped against the side of the bed.

"Can you tell me if any of his everyday clothes are missing?" Blake queried.

Ben Cayterer fumbled in the wardrobe, his usually rubicund face grey with apprehension.

"I guess I can't find his little Norfolk suit, Mr. Blake—the one he was wearing before the party!" he announced. "But how the blazes did they get into the bed-room? That's what beats me! D'ye think Junior was drugged, or—"

Blake shook his head and pointed to the bed, the counterpane of which was neatly drawn back, disclosing a pillow, in which was the soft depression caused by the little boy's head—and a minute slit to the right through which the dagger had been plunged.

"No; I do not think they used violence. There is no mark of a struggle," he announced. "As to his method of entry—this window is locked on the inside. He either walked in through the passage door or through your bed-room."

CHRISTMAS!

CHRISTMAS!

It's been a long time getting round, but we shan't have much longer to wait (to quote the remark of the old lady when she saw the balloon being inflated).

Well, the first and most pressing duty for me is to give you the jolly old glad hand, and wish you all the best!

Here's to all of you—dark or fair, fat and forty, frail, freckled, or frabjous! Old, young; mothers, fathers; uncles, aunts—I salute you all, whether you're here at home in Britain or in some un-Christmassy climate beyond the seas! Here's the glad hand of Yuletide greeting my patient readers who have survived my weekly burblings for so many weeks—and I wish I could greet you in person!

This is the first Christmas I have had the opportunity of getting over my own individual greetings.

Duty, did I say? Why, it's a pleasure!

In the Dickens' Manner.

I AM especially bucked to know that you are going to have the story of that memorable Christmas of ours at Lyveden Manor.

That was a real corker of a Yuletide, if ever there was one! A bit disturbing at times, with an element of tragedy cropping up, but all atoned for by a No. 1 sized happy ending, as you'll see.

It was a very sound scheme, too, of my pal, Splash Page's, to make us all rig ourselves up in Dickens costumes and journey down in the good, old-fashioned way by stage-coach, with the guard tooting on his horn all the time, and the dogs howling in harmony, and people cheering and waving as if they were enjoying it as much as ourselves—as perhaps they were.

I'm sure Mrs. Bardell never had such a treat in the span of her natural life; and as for Ruff Hanson, of course he'd never seen anything like it. Christmas in the States, apparently, still awaits the Dickens touch.

Willy and Wally Intrude.

YOU'D have been tickled to death to see Ruff as Bill Sikes, I know. This hard-headed, say-it-with-lead Yank wasn't at all anxious to get himself into the rig, and (between ourselves) only did it so as to be sociable.

But you ought to have seen him when he got himself into that Bill Sikes outfit! He was the living image of the character—certainly the best of all of us. The favourite implement of the original Bill was, I believe, a bludgeon, but Ruff Hanson wasn't at all at home with the one Splash supplied him with, but brandished his two guns, Willy and Wally, most of the time.

It was as strange to see the legendary Bill Sikes with a couple of six-shooters as it would be to see Robinson Crusoe dusting out his little wooden hut with a vacuum cleaner.

Symbolic.

BY the way, the gifted artist who is entrusted with the illustrations to this Yuletide yarn of ours—and I specially like his version of us dressed in our Dickens costumes—looked in at Baker Street yesterday to talk over a few details.

He caught me in the midst of hanging the decorations in the consulting-room, and forthwith made a sketch. This appears above, and I want you to notice the beautiful symbolism in the foreground.

My paste-pot and other paraphernalia of the horrible Index are rather obscured on this occasion by the more festive clutter of paper-chains.

Which is distinctly as it should be!

A Kind, Forgiving Time.

ONE of the people who have the real, right Christmas spirit is Mr. Mead, magistrate of the Marylebone Court.

"I don't like to send anyone to prison at Christmas-time," he said to an erring member last year, and let him off with a caution.

Good luck, Mr. Mead! I second that remark of yours!

Here's wishing you a happy time *this* Christmas, with no thoughts of newly-prisoned gaol-birds to disturb you!

Yule Agree!

THIS is a sadly imperfect world, I'm afraid, and even at this season of jollity and good will, when we are all doing our best to be friendly disposed towards the whole world, crime rears its ugly head.

Like Mr. Mead, we none of us want to see a crook sent to prison at Yuletide, but you've got to draw the line somewhere, and there are times when I shouldn't shed even a glycerine tear to see it happen—cases of mean theft, for example.

I remember an instance where a workman, who had been paying into a Winchester slate club for nearly twelve months, drew out his share to buy Christmas fare and Christmas luxuries for the children, and took it home and left the money in his bedroom while he left the house for a few minutes.

The money—£61—had vanished when he returned.

The thief who did that—well, I hope he swallowed the sixpence in the Christmas pudding!



Hard Luck!

AND here, while I think of it, I offer my sincere commiserations to all imprisoned juries, if there be any such.

It doesn't often happen, I know, that the twelve good men and true are shut off from their wives and families all through the Christmas holidays, and I don't recall a case in this country.

But one jury was unlucky in New York last year. They were trying the notorious oil scandal case, involving a multi-millionaire oil king and a very high U.S. Government official in charges of bribery.

It was expected that it would sort of weaken the jury's resolution if they were allowed out within sound of the chinking of gold—and the defence had an illimitable supply—so the judge ordered them to be closely guarded during the whole course of the trial.

This imprisonment lasted for a period of months, including Christmas.

It could hardly be called the festive season in their case; but let's hope they made up for it by having a prosperous New Year!

Take This Tip.

I HOPE that none of my long-suffering readers get run in this Yuletide, by the way.

TINKERS + XMAS



Sexton Blake's jocular assistant decorates the corner pages with

Not that I'm hinting you're an abandoned set of ruffians. On the contrary, I feel certain that all of you regularly scooped the pool of the Sunday prizes in your youth. No; but what I mean to say is that lawbreaking at Yuletide is perfectly easy, if you go the way about it.

Do you happen to know that if you the road-sweeper or the dustman Christmas-box, on the understanding your street or dustbin will receive honour of his special attention during the coming months (and he having done without the knowledge or consent of mayor and corporation), you are liable to a term of imprisonment not exceeding years, or a fine of not more than £100. (And quite enough, too, I should say.)

Anyway, if you don't believe me, see 99 Vic., cap. 72, para. (d), sub-section clause XI.—or some such number.

On the other hand, you may have no bread and water and a plank bed if you bestow your largesse on the postman. The Postmaster-General has the sanction and authority of the Postmaster-General for his Christmas pudding. Besides which, he can't deliver more than the tradesmen send you.

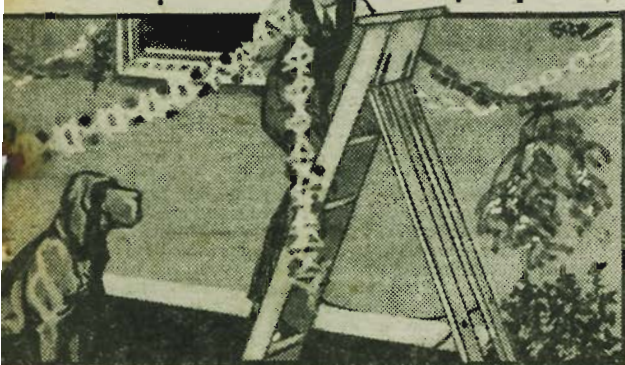
Cooked His Goose!

THE mention of postmen brings up the subject of the unfornunate man in Vienna.



Robert may have his duty to perform, but here's a City of London police station Christmas pudding on his

S · NOTE BOOK ·



ing-room at Baker Street with paper chains—and these reasonable brevities.

Some altogether absurd period after his Yuletide dinner the postman brought to his door a goose which had been sent him by a friend in Hungary, and which it was intended should have been the star turn on the Christmas bill of fare.

Its condition by that time was—well, it wasn't as fresh as a rosebud. All we need say about it was that the postman was doing his duty nobly in delivering it at all, and was not at all sorry to be rid of it.

The postman (between gasps) explained that the bird had been detained over the holidays by the Customs officials for some red-tape reason or other.

After giving the remains decent burial, the recipient grabbed his pen and wrote rather a stinger of a letter to the Customs. He mentioned sarcastically that the Viennese were not in the world solely to pay taxes and be the playthings of officialdom, and other items to that effect.

Result: He was hauled off to the police court, and made to pay a fine for the crime of "insulting official honour."



Really Ghostly!

THIS being the merry season of Yule, and the Yule log being in position and burning bright, draw up your chairs and let's have a ghost story.



on Christmas Day, but he has his photo of the cook at one of the trying an advance sample of the men. They're passing it as O.K. already.

How's this for a start?

You may remember there was a sensation some time ago about a ghost having been seen by a night-watchman at Barnet. Soon after this a local J.P. wrote to the Press, giving his own experiences.

At the extreme northern boundary of the Grange (he wrote) is an old house which has been partly rebuilt, and underneath are some large cellars from which, for many years, at intervals low rumbling noises as of heavy weights being moved, short, sharp tapings, and sounds like muffled voices are distinctly heard.

At the invitation of the occupier of the house I have on several occasions been inside. I have heard a kind of suppressed report, like the discharge of an air-gun, and more frequently a jingling noise, which seemed to move about the room.

Once I saw quite plainly a spirit. Looking at it closely, I saw right through it. Gradually it passed away. I have seen strong men walk away from the house with wide, staring eyes and trembling limbs.

Other and bolder people have sought excitement—women have been seen to hurry away with their shawls wrapped closely round them, seemingly anxious to get away from the scenes they had witnessed.

Pretty eerie, that! But listen!

Accurate, but Misleading.

PERHAPS you've guessed it?

Yes, it was merely a bit of very clever spoof.

The mysterious house referred to was actually a public-house. The noises in the cellar were made by the trundling and tapping of casks, and the suppressed reports were nothing more alarming than the popping of corks.

The uncanny jingling which was heard all over the place was caused by glasses on the bars, and the spirit which the facetious J.P. saw, and which gradually passed away, departed down the usual channels; while the trembly people who hurried away from the place were generally making their exit from the bottle and jug department.

The publication of this explanation caused a good deal of amusement in the district, for even Barnet people failed to recognise a description of a house well known to them.

On the other hand, there were many believers in the other kind of spirits who were somewhat peeved, for they had written offering explanations of the phenomena which accounted for everything but spirits of the bottled variety.

Notice to Quit.

TO be serious, however.

Here is a ghost story for which I have no humorous explanation to offer.

A newly-married couple were spending their honeymoon in a certain house in Rome. One night the bride awakened to see the shadowy form of an old woman sitting on the table at her bedside.

Frightened, she hid her head under the bedclothes. Immediately a shower of heavy blows fell on her shoulders. She said afterwards that they felt as if they were from a stick, wielded by a strong arm.

She shouted in alarm. Her husband woke up, heard her story, and bravely searched the whole premises. Nothing could be seen. Also, the windows and doors were all fastened on the inside.

Stranger still, the same thing happened the following night, except that the husband saw the apparition this time—and got the beating, too.

They didn't pause to investigate again, though, but ran out into the street.

This spectre with a grudge against married couples seems to be rather amusing at first sight, but the curious fact is that, about a year previously, another couple had been driven from the same place in exactly the same way.



Talking of Spectres—

"WHAT is your husband's occupation?" asked the magistrate's clerk of a lady in trouble at one of the London police courts.

"He's an inspector," she replied.

"Inspector!" interrupted the other lady in the case indignantly. "The only thing he inspects are the bottoms of beer-glasses!"

* * *

For One Day Only!

REFERRING back to my sad suggestion about some worthy reader of mine being led away in clanking chains this Christmastide—in other words, falling foul of the law—let me reassure you.

According to that ponderous tome, "Halsbury's Laws of England" (which I have just got down from the gov'nor's bookcase, so as to use it as a bit of uplift in hanging the Christmas decorations), "no summons, warrant, or other process may be served on Christmas Day."

There appears to be an exception, however.

There is nothing to stop a writ from the King's Bench or Chancery Division on the (otherwise) glad day.

But stay! Even those formidable writs cannot be served on a Sunday, and Christmas Day this year is also a Sunday.

Harassed readers who have spent most of their time looking round corners for bailiffs can therefore slink under the shelter of their family roof-tree this Yule and defy the whole bunch of them.

* * *

The Policeman's Lot.

THERE is at least one London policeman who stands a chance of having a happy Christmas, and—what is more to the point—a prosperous New Year.

A few weeks ago he heard that a more or less legendary uncle of his had died in America worth £2,000,000, and that he was entitled to a part of the share-out.

When I last heard of him he was writing to the lawyers in the United States putting in his claim, and I expect he is watching the morning postal delivery eagerly just about now, sorting out the letters from America from moneylenders' circulars offering to lend him ten thousand pounds on note of hand alone.

* * *

Query?

SEVEN women, one after another, applied at the Willesden Police Court for separation orders from their husbands a week or two back.

"Are all the women in Willesden trying to get rid of their husbands?" asked the magistrate. "Is it in preparation for the Christmas festivities?"

"Surely not! How can families be festive without father dressed up as Santa Claus?"

(Continued from page 13.)

commission for Mr. Isidore Solmann's agent for the kidnapping."

"I guess you're right, Blake," said Ruff. "To-morrow, when this cursed storm lets up a bit, we kin get busy. How about covering this Juniper chap in Sago Street?"

Inspector Coutts, who had strolled into the study, grinned.

"4a, Sago Street is very well known to me," he remarked. "It is run by a barber named Wilton, and is an accommodation address much used by the criminal class. There's very little chance that the real kidnapper will call for the letter in person; he'll probably send an entirely blameless individual to collect Mr. Juniper's wire."

"Then you think—" began Cayterer. "I think I'll get rid of this rig-out, sir," said Inspector Coutts, indicating the blue surtout of Mr. Tracy Tupman. It looked foolishly frivolous now that tragedy had appeared on the scene. "The police are bound to be on the look-out for a yellow car, and if we turn in now we can tackle the case freshly in the morning," he added.

Sexton Blake nodded.

"No harm will come to your son for a day or two, at least, Mr. Cayterer," he said kindly. "I have a theory that he will be restored to you very shortly indeed."

The millionaire looked at the detective, but Blake's face was impassive as the Sphinx.

"I hope to Heaven you're right!" he said fervently. "Er—good-night, gentlemen! I shan't sleep, but— You'll excuse me, I—I have had rather a shock."

He turned slowly and mounted the stairs in the direction of his room.

"Poor old Ben!" said Ruff. "Blake, I feel real mean about this. I should have slept outside that kid's door instead of listening to fool ghost stories. Dog my cats, if I get hold of that plastering plug-ugly I'll—I'll—"

"Police have sent out an A.S. message, gov'nor," broke in Tinker, coming in from the telephone.

"They've traced the number of the motor-car already to—"

"Ah!" said Blake, with a significant lift of his eyebrows. "And to whom does it belong?"

"The Rev. Ambrose Dale," said Tinker.

"Holy smoke!" growled Ruff Hanson. "Wouldja believe it? That hoary-headed old sinner that was splitting the spook stuff!"

Sexton Blake said nothing, but there was a queer expression in his grey eyes that Tinker alone understood.

THERE was a subdued atmosphere of gloom at Lyveden Manor on Christmas Day, which dawned clear and frosty, with the added seasonableness of snow in place of the pelting hail of the night.

Ben Cayterer, hollow-eyed and distraught, took his seat at the head of the breakfast table and turned to Blake.

"No news, I suppose?" he said dully. Blake shook his head.

"Coutts took an early tramp to the station at Lyveden early this morning, and up till now the police have been unable to trace the yellow car."

"Ah, good-morning, Mr. Cayterer, good-morning!" boomed the mellifluous voice of the clergyman from the doorway. "Parsons has just informed me of the terrible tragedy that has befallen you. My dear fellow, why didn't you call me? I was too far away in the east wing to have heard anything, and I'm afraid I selfishly luxuriated in my

really comfortable bed. Good-morning, my dear!"

He turned to Enid, who had just entered the room, looking very fresh and winsome in her simple, tailor-made frock.

"Oh, daddy!" she said. "Isn't it dreadful! I've just heard the news from Mrs. Bardell." Her grey eyes clouded with sympathy as she turned to the millionaire. "Mr. Cayterer, I can't tell you how shocked I am at this awful news. I do so hope that you'll hear something soon."

"Thank you for your sympathy, my dear!" said Cayterer huskily. "We didn't disturb you last night—what was the use? I—I'm hoping that Mr. Blake here will soon discover what's happened to my boy. He's been a veritable tower of strength to me."

"I'm afraid the situation at the moment is rather obscure," said Blake. "In this sort of case time is an important factor. We must not be too precipitate. Junior, I am convinced, will be safe for a time, for the kidnappers have no reason to treat him harshly if they are under the impression that you will pay the ransom."

"I suggest you wire to this address in Sago Street, Coutts has already advised Scotland Yard to keep the shop under observation."

"Yes, but—what shall I wire?" queried Cayterer helplessly. "I hate submitting to these curs. It's not the money I object to, Mr. Blake, but the principle of the thing. Yet these scoundrels have me utterly at their mercy now, and they know it."

"Well, bear up," smiled Blake. "There are always three rounds in this blackmailing game. They may be described as the demand, the acceptance, and payment, either by cash—or, if the luck holds, penal servitude."

He helped himself to some toast and marmalade, then turned to the Rev. Ambrose.

"By the way, vicar," he inquired, "can you recall the number of your automobile?"

The reverend gentleman paused in the act of conveying a devilled kidney to his mouth.

"I haven't got a motor-car, Mr. Blake," he said, with the trace of a smile. "I'm afraid my stipend is too slender to maintain what is, after all, only a luxury."

Tinker stared blankly at the vicar and gave a smothered "ouch!" of pain as Ruff Hanson's heavy boot kicked him significantly under the table.

Chapter 7.



The Black Carol.

SAGO STREET, Pimlico, on Christmas morning, looked even more depressing than it did on the three hundred and sixty-four other mornings of the year.

The snow which had fallen during the night had been ploughed by passing traffic into a brown, porridge-like mess. A blood-red sun hung low in the sky, and completed the slush-making process by rapidly melting the snow on the dingy slate roofs, so that it dripped mournfully on to the pavements, to the discomfort of the pedestrians.

Two places only were open on Christmas morning in Sago Street. At

the corner the Spotted Dog, a gimcrack gin palace, was crowded with most of the male inhabitants of that unsalubrious thoroughfare. Across the road, the hairdressing establishment of Mr. William Wilton was likewise crowded with several blue-chinned gentlemen in various stages of deshabille, awaiting their turn for the barber's ministrations. The dingy, faded windows of the shop were crammed with dummy packets of cigarettes which, gaping and bulging from sheer age, exposed their spuriousness the more; various pomades and unguents for beautifying hair and moustachios; corn cures; mysterious envelopes of many colours purporting to contain certain winners for forthcoming races, and similar tawdry stuff.

A rat-faced little man, clad in a plum-coloured suit, a check cap and lemon-topped boots, sidled furtively from the Spotted Dog into Mr. Wilton's saloon and glanced inquiringly at the knight of the lather brush.

"Anythink for Juniper—Jas. Juniper?" he queried, in a wheezy voice.

Mr. Wilton jerked his pomaded head in the direction of a letter-rack.

"Telegram. Just come. Terrippence!" he said laconically.

The rat-faced man handed over three coppers, and snatched an orange envelope from the rack. He did not trouble to open it, but sidled out of the shop without troubling to express his hope that Mr. Wilton should have a Merry Christmas. In Sago Street he paused, glanced furtively to the right and left, and then crossed over to the Spotted Dog.

A husky-looking loafer in corduroys who was leaning against the wall of that decrepit hostelry, expectorated slowly and sidled up alongside the apprehensive Mr. Juniper.

"Merry Christmas, Wally," he said affably. "Nice new style in suitings you've got on. Christmas present?"

"You go to blazes!" snarled Mr. Juniper. "And mind your own business!"

"Tut, tut! Harsh words on a Christmas morn, Wally! I'm surprised at you!" reproved the other, affectionately tucking his arm through that of the incensed Mr. Juniper.

"You leggo my arm, or I'll—" began Wally, baring his yellow teeth in an ugly grimace.

"You're taking a little walk with me," said his imperturbable companion. "You haven't opened your telegram yet, I see. Might be an invitation to dinner with the Lord Mayor. Tisn't the first time you've been a guest of his, is it, Wally?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," growled the other, changing colour. "My name's not Wally. I don't know you, and if you don't leggo my arm, I'll call a cop."

"Dear, dear!" replied the other, in the same cool, maddening tone. "Here's Constable Jervis at the corner. Remember him, Wally. Now, are you going to come across—or shall I put you in stir for Christmas?"

A terrified look came into the little crook's face as he saw the implacable look in the other's eyes.

"Swelp me, sergeant! I ain't done nothink!" he whimpered. "I'll swear I ain't!"

"Tut, tut!" clucked Sergeant Steele, of the C.I.D. "A double negative makes a positive. If you ain't done nothing you must have done something. Let's take a look at that wire."

Mr. Juniper saw that resistance was useless. With a sigh, he pulled out the unopened telegram.

"Here you are, rot yuh! Blowed if I reckernised you as a busy in that rig-out! I don't know nothing about wot's in the wire, and I don't care!"

The plain-clothes man scarcely glanced at the orange envelope. Still keeping his grip on the little man's arm, he hailed a passing taxi.

"You're coming a little ride with me, Wally," he said softly. "How long you stay in stir depends on yourself. D'ye get me?"

The rat-faced man said nothing; but his face was murderous as the cab rolled on towards the Westminster police station.

"Let's see, you came out two months back, didn't you, Wally?" said Detective Steele. "I can hold you for failing to report, you know."

"Listen here, Steele! A bloke offered me a fiver to collect that telegram for him. Who he was I dunno—s'welp me bob, I ain't ever seen 'im before!"

"Ah!" said Steele softly. "And where were you to meet this philanthropist with the telegram?"

Wally hesitated. He licked his dry lips nervously.

"I wasn't to meet him anywhere. I 'ad to post it on to him to a certain place—miles away from 'ere," replied Wally.

"I see," drawled the detective. "What's this fellow's name? And what's he like?"

The little crook glanced nervously out of the window as the cab drew up before the dingy portals of the police station.

"I don't know 'is name. 'E called 'imself Robinson," he said; then added, with sudden animation: "Ram sort of cove 'e was, too—'e was dressed as a clergyman, and talked like a sky pilot, too!"

Detective-Sergeant Steele glanced shrewdly at the unfortunate crook.

"A clergyman, eh?" he echoed softly. "And you weren't to meet him. Then how was he to get the telegram?"

"S'welp me—I 'ad to post it on to 'im," mumbled the wretched man. "I 'ad to send it to Mr. Richard Robinson, care of the G.P.O., Saxenham."

"Ah!" said Sergeant Steele softly. "Mebbe you'll get a Christmas dinner, after all. Come in the cooler for a bit, my lad, while I check up on your statement."

SEXTON BLAKE and Tinker were alone in the library of the Manor-house when a laconic message arrived from Scotland Yard, reporting the detection of the man the Yard detective had familiarly addressed as "Wally."

Blake scanned the telegram, and his grey eyes narrowed.

"H'm! Saxenham is a few miles from here, young 'un. The unknown kidnapper has evidently covered his traces pretty completely. He seems to be a person of considerable resource. I think you and Coutts should take a little run over to Saxenham immediately and keep tabs on the post office. In accordance with my instructions, Steele has forwarded on the wire of acceptance, and I fancy the elusive Mr. Richard Robinson will fall into the trap."

"But, I say, gov'nor," began Tinker earnestly, "I hate to suspect a person without definite proof; but it looks to me as if the Rev. Ambrose is acting kind of queerly. Why should he deny that he has a car? Or, for that matter, there's the hint you let fall that young Junior was kidnapped by an old and intimate friend. It seems inconceivable to me—unless it all points to the vicar."

Blake smiled cryptically.

"As usual, young 'un, you are deduc-

ing from false premises. Your job is to hang around the post office at Saxenham. I'll put a phone call through to the local postmaster to advise him of your coming. Get Coutts and the local inspector to detain anybody asking for letters addressed to Robinson, and we shall see—what we shall see."

Tinker rose to his feet, a puzzled expression on his boyish face, just as Ruff Hanson entered the room.

The gunman sleuth's battered countenance was unusually grave.

"Say, Blake," he drawled, "this case is kinda getting me down. Poor old Ben Cayterer's hit darned badly. He's just walking around and around the house like a guy who's been hoodooed. The suspense is killing him; and we can't do a darned thing. Our hands are tied until this skunk shows out in the open—"

"Which will be very soon, I trust," interrupted Blake. "The police have already got the kidnappers' go-between in London."

Briefly the detective described the turn events had taken.

"Well, that's something!" ejaculated Ruff Hanson. "Guess I'll travel with Coutts and Tinker to this Saxenham place."

He squared his massive shoulders, and there was a purposeful look on his weather-beaten face.

"Hot dog! You lemme get at him!" he muttered vindictively. "I'll show the skunk where he gets off!"

Blake did not reply; he was wrapped in thought and pungent clouds of tobacco-smoke. None knew better than he that it was a waiting game, and he had a shrewd notion that the unknown kidnapper was not likely to walk blindly into a trap.

The afternoon shadows of Christmas Day were lengthening into twilight.

Big Ben Cayterer sat hunched in his armchair, his leonine head in his hands—a picture of despair.

Even the ebullient high spirits of Splash Page could not dispel the gloom that seemed to enshroud the Manor-house. The Rev. Ambrose and his daughter had returned to the vicarage; and the other local guests, after expressing their sympathy with the stricken millionaire, had unobtrusively withdrawn from the house of sorrow.

Splash Page, after wandering gloomily round the grounds of Lyceden Manor, re-entered the library just as Parsons wheeled in the tea-wagon.

The butler's face was grave as he announced that tea was ready.

Ben Cayterer looked up vaguely from his reverie.

"Er—yes! All right, Parsons," he said listlessly.

"I beg your pardon, sir," coughed the manservant. "I suppose there ain't—ahem!—isn't any news of young Master Junior yet, sir?" he inquired. "We are naturally very concerned in the servants' hall, and—"

"Yes, quite! I appreciate your sympathy, Parsons. No; I'm sorry to say there is no news. Mr. Blake is just telephoning through again to Saxenham."

"Now, don't you worry, Mr. Cayterer," said Splash. "You've got Blake's word that he'll see this through, and believe me when he says so—it goes."

"This blighter Robinson—or whatever his beastly name is—will call for the telegram, and friend Coutts'll be waiting for him with a pair of handcuffs."

"I doubt it," said the voice of Sexton Blake himself. He had quietly appeared in the doorway.

"This man Robinson seems to be an exceptionally cautious and clever criminal," he went on. "I have just rung through to Saxenham, and I'm

afraid I have nothing encouraging to report."

"What's that?" demanded Cayterer, his face grey.

"A small urchin named Joe Fowler called at the post office, inquiring for a letter for a Mr. Robinson. Coutts cross-examined him, and the boy's story was a simple one. A tall gentleman in a fur-lined coat in a motor-car stopped him on the outskirts of Saxenham village and offered him five shillings to collect the letter and bring it to him."

"His description of the man was vague. He was more explicit about the car—a yellow coupe. Coutts and Ruff Hanson promptly bundled the boy into their automobile and drove hurriedly to the rendezvous at Saxe Bridge."

"Yes, yes; go on!" urged Cayterer eagerly.

"And there was no sign of the elusive Mr. Robinson," concluded Blake.

"By heavens!" groaned Ben Cayterer hollowly. "We're done, Mr. Blake! We're licked!"

"Nonsense!" said the detective sharply. "The situation is complicated, perhaps, but not hopeless."

"Tell me, Blake," began Splash Page curiously, "what you meant precisely when you said Junior didn't cry out because he met an old friend?"

For answer the criminologist unearthed the little fluffy object he had discovered in the missing boy's bedroom, together with a tiny scrap of red material.

"White crepe hair, my dear fellow; and on the stackpipe I found a shred of this red flannel. What does that suggest to you?"

"Good heavens! I see it now!" ejaculated Splash Page. "Junior didn't cry out because he, like most other kids last night, was expecting Santa Claus."

"Precisely," said Blake. "Our crook is an enterprising and versatile individual; it was a touch of genius to disguise himself in the one costume which would allay a child's suspicion."

"The cunning rat!" growled Ben Cayterer. "I suppose he pinched the Rev. Ambrose's costume after the vicar had dispensed with it?"

Blake shook his head.

"On the contrary, I have taken the opportunity of examining that costume, and this material is an entirely different texture to that of the vicar's. There were two Santa Claus' here last night!" he added significantly. "By the way, Mr. Cayterer, do you happen to know of anyone named Lemuel Clay?"

The millionaire shook his head.

"Why, no—" he began. Parsons, the butler, who was deftly removing the empty tea-things, dropped one of the fragile cups with a crash. His fingers fumbled as he bent over the debris, and Blake's eyes narrowed.

"I'm sorry, sir!" mumbled the manservant. "I'm afraid I've been very clumsy!"

His back was towards the detective as he picked up the broken pieces of porcelain, but when he straightened his face was as white as death.

A loud knock sounded at the front door of the house, and a look of relief came into the butler's face as he hurried to answer it.

Splash Page and Tinker exchanged significant glances. The newspaper-man had noticed the butler's agitation at the mention of Lemuel Clay's name. What did it mean, and who was the mysterious Mr. Clay?

Parsons returned a few moments later with a round, flat package in his hand.

"One of the villagers left this for you, sir," he said deferentially.

Cayterer took the parcel and examined it curiously. It was wrapped in brown

paper and was about eight inches in diameter.

He undid the string and revealed a black waxen gramophone record.

"Now I wonder who sent me that?" he said blankly. "Blamed if I know any musical villagers!"

He scanned the disc with some bewilderment. The hand-written label of the record was, "A Christmas Carol, Specially Recorded," and it was obvious that most of it had not been recorded on, only a narrow ring of sound-impressions being visible.

"That looks like a new and up-to-date form of Christmas waits," laughed Splash Page.

Blake leaned over and examined the record curiously. Suddenly a queer expression crept into his grey eyes, and his mouth tightened into a grim, firm line. From his pocket he whipped out a silk handkerchief, and with it he took the disc gingerly from the millionaire's hand.

"Say, what's the idea?" began Ben Cayterer blankly.

Blake did not reply verbally, but crossed over to the gramophone in the corner of the library.

He fixed a needle in the sound-box of the instrument and gently placed the record on the turntable.

A faint whirring sound followed, and then through the library a scream of agony rang out, piercing and shrill.

"Don't! Don't! Oh, daddy, daddy, he's hurting me!"

It was the voice of Junior Cayterer!

The millionaire leapt to his feet, his face bloodless, his lips twitching spasmodically.

"Blake," he croaked hoarsely, "what devilry is this? What—"

His voice trailed away as a metallic, incisive voice came from the gramophone.

"Say, Ben, how'd've like your Christmas carol? The kid gets more of the hot iron unless you come through with the dough and call off your 'tecs."

Chapter 8.



Ruff Runs Into Trouble.

WHITE and trembling in every limb, Ben Cayterer stared at the diabolical disc which had so faithfully recorded the voice of his little son screaming under the torture of his captors.

"The fiends! The cunning fiends!" he croaked. "By Heaven, Blake, this is more than flesh and blood can stand! I—I—"

With a moan, he crumpled into his chair. His iron constitution had snapped under the intolerable strain of hearing the anguished cries of the son he idolised. Sexton Blake snapped off the ghastly record with its mocking title. An unwanted spot of colour blazed in his cheeks.

"By Heaven, Splash," he hissed, and his fists clenched savagely. "I'll get this man, if it costs me all I possess! Quick! Get Mr. Cayterer to bed and let him rest; the strain's proved too much for him. Ring up the doctor."

With the aid of Parsons, the journalist managed to half drag, half carry the emaciated figure of the movie magnate to his room.

Meanwhile, Blake took off the record and carried it to his bed-room, wrapped in his silk handkerchief. He switched

on the light and opened his research-case, from which he took a phial of white powder. He lightly dusted both sides of the record and examined it minutely through a powerful lens.

An hour later Tinker found him, on his return, busy with a pad of telegraph-forms and a pencil. The criminologist hardly looked up from the columns of abstruse figures he had jotted down on a pad when the lad entered the room.

"I say, guv'nor," began Tinker, "we've had a deuce of a wild-goose chase!" he began.

"This cunning blighter Robinson sent a kid—"

"I know, I know!" snapped Blake irritably. "Go down to Lyveden post office, tell them it's police business, and get these wires off immediately."

He handed his assistant a sheaf of forms and relocked his research-case.

Tinker gave one glance at the grim, strained expression on his guv'nor's usually impassive face and hurried out of the room.

Blake sat for a while drumming his fingers in a ceaseless tattoo on the arm of his chair, then he doffed his lounge suit and changed into his dinner jacket.

DOWNSTAIRS, Ruff Hanson, Coutts, and Splash Page were talking in whispers when Blake entered the library. The American looked up with a haggard expression.

"Say, old timer, the doc's been. Ben's had a slight stroke, and musn't be disturbed on any account. What's happened exactly?"

"Happened?" echoed Blake. "It means that this man Robinson—or whatever his name is—is the most heartless and brutal blackmailer I have ever experienced in a fairly lengthy professional career!"

The detective's voice was vibrant with passion.

"He is torturing that child; and with callous devilry has actually recorded the poor little fellow's screams of agony on a gramophone record. I tell you, Ruff, that if I lay my hands on him I'll—"

His fists clenched and his voice was a trifle unsteady.

"By the Holy Heintz, I'll—I'll croak him for sure, Blake!" declared Ruff passionately. "I ain't ever killed, except in self-defence, but this time—"

An ugly look crept into his blue eyes, and his hand dropped significantly to his hip.

"Dinner is served, sir."

Parsons' imperturbable voice broke in suavely as he entered the room with his peculiar, cat-like tread.

Coutts gave a slight grimace.

"I'm afraid it's not going to be a very cheerful meal, Blake," he remarked. "Poor Mrs. Bardell, she's spent hours preparing it! We musn't disappoint the old girl."

Together they filed into the dining-room, just as Tinker returned, cheeks aglow, from his errand to the village.

"Sent 'em off, guv'nor. The local inspector O.K.'d them; but the telegraphist didn't half curse at having to work overtime on Christmas Day!" he announced.

Blake nodded abstractedly as he sat down to the table.

It was a far from hilarious meal. The screams of the crippled boy still rang in Sexton Blake's ears, and the illness of their host added to the gloom that reigned like an evil miasma about the house.

The turkey—beautifully cooked, and stuffed with Mrs. Bardell's famous oyster forcemeat—did not receive the appreciation it deserved; and even the advent of the plum-pudding, in its glory

of holly and ruin, was greeted in a subdued fashion.

Mrs. Bardell herself sensed the tension as she entered with the pudding.

The good soul had luxuriated in what she called "a reel good cry," and she had uttered several blood-curdling threats in the servants' hall relative to the fate that lay in store for the kidnappers of her "little lame lamb," as she dubbed Junior Cayterer.

It was the most dismal Christmas dinner that Tinker ever remembered, and there was a sigh of relief when the meal was over and they adjourned to the library.

"Blamed if I know what we kin do!" said Ruff Hanson plaintively. "The dragnet's all out; but we ain't got a description of the skunk. The auto with the masked men belongs to the vicar, according to the cops; yet, according to the reverend, he hasn't got one."

"That is easily explained," retorted Sexton Blake. "The vicar did at one time possess a car, but he sold it to a local garage. He couldn't afford to keep it up. I've checked that end of the case, and also ascertained that the car was recently bought by a Mr. Lemuel Clay."

"Who's Lemuel Clay, guv'nor?" asked Tinker eagerly.

"That's what I should like to know myself," was the quiet reply. "The police have no record of the man—nor, by an oversight, had they noted the fact that the vicar had sold his car."

"Fact is, we're up a darned gum-tree!" said Ruff Hanson bitterly. "And it's my darned fault! I've acted like a cheap skate! I reckon it's about time I quit this game and—"

"You are not to blame, my dear fellow," broke in Sexton Blake. "We are all equally culpable, for that matter. This man Robinson is an unusually resourceful and daring criminal. Tomorrow, very probably, there'll be a further demand from him—with instructions how to pay over the money. It is then that I shall act."

"Well," announced Splash Page gloomily, as he dug his hands into his trousers pockets, "it isn't often I regret a scoop, Blake—and, talking journalistically, this is a big beat for me—but I wish to Heaven it hadn't occurred! That little kid tortured, and—"

He smiled cynically. From the village church came the peal of Christmas bells in a glad carillon—clanging joyously their Yuletide message of peace on earth—goodwill to men. It seemed a ghastly mockery—one that failed to drown the agonised shrieks of the winsome little boy with the serious brown eyes.

"Don't! Don't! Daddy, they're hurting me!"

None of the four friends were sentimentalists, but the thought of a cripple child being tortured in cold blood at Christmas-time—the happy feast of childhood—filled them with berserker rage.

The Dickens Yule that they had planned was darkened by the thought of Tiny Tim alone—helpless—seared—and they were all powerless to help.

A silence fell. In the grate the logs crackled, and the flames roared gleefully up the chimney.

Outside the snow began to fall—thickly, heavily. The high wind of the previous night had fallen, and for a while each one present was occupied by his thoughts.

Tinker was the first to break the silence.

"I think I'll turn in, guv'nor!" he

announced. "It's not particularly bright, and I'm feeling a bit tired."

He yawned lustily, and with a fugitive smile left the room.

"Poor kid, I'm afraid I've landed him—and all of you—into a tough kinda Christmas!" said Ruff Hanson lugubriously.

Blake smiled.

"It's not your fault, Ruff—let us hope to-morrow will bring some definite news. I have distinct hopes that the identity of Mr. Robinson will be revealed—and likewise that of Mr. Lemuel Clay."

opened the door. His room was situated in the east wing of the manor house, and overlooked the servants' quarters. For a moment or two he stood tensely in the passage, listening. Silence—a brooding hush, sinister with menace.

The gunman sleuth exchanged one of his weapons for an electric-torch, and in his bare feet tiptoed soundlessly down the corridor. At the head of the stairway he paused and flashed the light into the cavernous gloom of the hallway below.

The hall was empty. An ancient

The cupboard-like elevator was fairly roomy, but the big American had to crouch in an uncomfortable attitude before it would accommodate his bulk. He tugged at the cord. Soundlessly, the lift descended into the basement.

It stopped with a jerk—and Ruff found himself in the well-stocked wine-cellar of Lyveden Manor. An electric light bulb gleamed in the arched roof. The bases of innumerable wine bottles glistened in the light. That much Ruff saw as he cautiously emerged from his cramped position—and then it happened.

A couple of masked men sprang from the shadow of a wine bin, and unluckily for Ruff his foot caught in the lift rope as he turned to grapple with his assailants.

"Crack!"

His six-gun spoke. One of the masked men gave a squeal of rage as his upraised arm spurted blood. Ruff's bullet had found a billet—but he was hampered by his position. Before he could disentangle his foot from the clinging rope the second man brought down the barrel of a heavy Smith-Wesson revolver on the American's skull.

It was a brutal and savage blow. Ruff Hanson collapsed limply, his body half in and half out of the lift.

"It's that nosy Yank!" muttered the man with the shattered wrist. "Quick, get him away before the others start investigating."

Together the two crooks dragged Ruff Hanson's unconscious body out of the lift and dumped it unceremoniously on the floor of the cellar.

The wounded man cursed lividly as he surveyed his limp forearm.

"Quick, get Jean and Jules!" he snarled. "I'll have to bandage this before I bleed to death."

He scowled at the helpless American, and kicked him brutally in the ribs.

"Is the tide on the turn?" he demanded hoarsely. "We'll have to clear out before that hound Blake gets wise."

"Clear out nothing!" rasped the other. "You stay on till that next consignment comes. That fool Blake's too darned busy looking for Cayterer's brat to mosey around here."

He crossed over to one of the wine bins and pressed a small button let into its side. Immediately the bottle-laden shelves swung back, revealing a cavernous passage from which came a breath of the fresh, clean air of outdoors.

"You get back to your room, Parsons!" snapped the man in the mask. "Pitch what yarn you like to account for that broken wrist. The sound of the shot won't penetrate upstairs. They knew what they were doing when they built these cellars. No jerry-building Council-house stuff down here."

Parsons, the silent and irreproachable butler of Lyveden Manor, removed his mask and his face worked strangely.

"I'm getting windy, Clay," confessed the man addressed. "That hound Blake's got X-ray eyes. Once he finds out about—"

"Don't be a fool!" snarled the other. "I tell you that after to-morrow we're on velvet. Jules'll look after this beauty. It's a dark night, and 'no names no pack drill,'" he added, with a significant scowl at the unconscious American.

From the cavernous aperture in the wall of the wine cellar there came the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Upstairs with you, quick! We'll attend to this brute!" snapped Clay.

With trembling fingers Parsons tied a handkerchief round his injured wrist,



Sam McCalla crumpled up with a gasp of agony as Mrs. Bardell's umbrella caught him a vicious dig; and then the indomitable woman turned to belabour Liverpool Lil.

"W HOOO! Hooooo!"
A long, inhuman wail rang eerily out through the night silence that enshrouded Lyveden Manor.

Ruff awoke with a start. Even before his eyes were really open, his great fists had reached under his pillow for his beloved six-guns. It was nearly three a.m., he noted, glancing at the illuminated dial of his watch that hung on the bed-rail.

"What in tarnation?" he growled. "Sounds like a blamed owl, and get—"

Again that eerie wail cut into the night silence. The gunman sleuth leapt noiselessly from his bed—pistols in hand. It was the same sound that he had heard during the vicar's ghost story the previous night—mocking, menacing.

"If that's Headless Hugo," rasped the American, "this is where he gets his!"

Ruff Hanson drew on his flamboyantly-coloured dressing-gown and softly

grandfather clock ticked solemnly in the corner. In the small grate a few red embers smouldered.

"Queer!" muttered Ruff Hanson. "I could have sworn I heard—"

He broke off suddenly. His trigger finger tightened. A queer metallic clank, as if someone was dragging heavy chains along a stone floor.

He crept down the stairs. The clanking was fainter now. He turned abruptly to the doorway that led to the butler's pantry.

It was ajar. He saw a panelled room with plain but serviceable furniture and a service lift that communicated with the wine-cellar. Ruff Hanson's eyes narrowed as he glimpsed a yellow line of light behind the doors of the lift.

"Now, what in tarnation—" he breathed, tiptoeing towards the panelled wall. "It looks as if—"

Again came the eerie inhuman wail.

"Hot ziggety dog!" snapped Ruff, tugging at the doors of the service lift.

and without a backward glance slowly ascended the cellar stairs that led to his sanctuary.

SEXTON BLAKE and Tinker entered the breakfast-room punctually at 8 a.m.

They occupied the west wing of the manor-house, and the queer sound that Ruff Hanson had heard during the night had not penetrated so far to disturb their slumbers.

"How is Mr. Cayterer this morning?" inquired Blake as Parsons entered with the coffee.

The butler shook his head gravely.

"Not very bright, sir. He says he'd be grateful if you'd drop in on him after breakfast. He had a very troubled night."

"You don't look any too bright yourself, my man," said Blake, after a keen scrutiny of the butler's pale face and restless eyes. "What's happened to your wrist? Had an accident?"

"I—I—er—strained it, I think, sir. I slipped going down the wine-cellar stairs," was the halting reply.

Blake shot a keen glance at the man and noted his embarrassment. He said nothing, however, but smiled a greeting as Detective-Inspector Coutts and Splash Page entered the room.

"Good-morning!" said the Yard man cheerfully. "Topping morning for a walk, eh, Blake?"

He jerked his head towards the window. The lawn of Lyveden Manor was white with frozen snow, and there was a keen, healthy tang of frost in the air.

"Ruff's late this morning, gov'nor," announced Tinker. "He's generally an early bird."

The youngster helped himself to toast and marmalade as the butler re-entered the room with a bundle of letters.

"The morning post," he announced. "A letter and a telegram for Mr. Blake, one for Mr. Hanson, and the rest for Mr. Cayterer."

"Good! Better see if Mr. Hanson's coming down, Parsons," said the detective, ripping open the telegram.

"Ah!" he gave a sigh of satisfaction as he read the brief message it contained.

"We progress, my dear Coutts—we certainly progress. The Record Department, with their unflinching efficiency and dispatch, have already fathomed the identity of the elusive Mr. Robinson."

Coutts paused with an impaled kidney midway between his plate and his mouth.

"What's that?" he inquired. "C.R.O. have him taped? By Jove, that's good news, Blake! Who is he?"

Blake tapped the telegram with his lean fingers.

"Mr. Robinson is an American crook named Sam McCalla, who has already served a term or two in the States. Here's a full description of him, with the additionally interesting information that he is believed to be in England and working with a notorious woman crook named Liverpool Lil."

"I know the vixen," said Coutts. "She works the blackmailing stunt. Unscrupulous as she is pretty. Jove, that simplifies matters, Blake! With those descriptions, it won't be a few hours before—"

"If you please, sir, Mr. Hanson does not appear to be in his room," announced Parsons, in an agitated voice. "His morning cup of tea is untouched on the floor of the corridor—"

"What's that?" Blake snapped sharply; and his eye narrowed as it

fell on Parsons' wrist. Hastily the butler tried to conceal it behind his back, for creeping through the plentiful supply of bandage was a crimson stain.

With a bound the detective rose to his feet and twisted the butler's left arm behind his back. Parsons gave a squeal of agony.

"Queer sort of sprain that bleeds, Parsons!" snapped the criminologist. "Let's have a look at that wrist!"

The butler was powerless in Blake's vice-like grip. He writhed and squirmed, but his struggles were useless.

"Take off that bandage, Splash," ordered Sexton Blake. And, despite the man's struggles, the newspaper man unbound the injured limb. The fresh, clean bullet-wound, hidden by its protective wrapping of gauze and oiled silk, was revealed.

"Ah!" said Blake softly. "Now, Parsons, come across—and come across quick. Who shot you?"

Parsons licked his dry lips nervously.

"I—I don't know!" he quavered. "As Heaven's my witness, Mr. Blake, I—"

"Coutts"—Blake's eyes were very stern as he turned to the Yard man—"take charge of him! Perhaps a few hours in a cell might loosen his sullen tongue. I charge him with being concerned in a conspiracy to demand money with menaces."

"Before Heaven, I'm innocent, Mr. Blake!" cried Parsons. "I don't know anything about Master Cayterer! I—I had nothing to do with it, and that's Gospel truth!"

There was a ring of sincerity in the man's voice, and Blake looked at him searchingly.

"If you are innocent, how, and why, were you shot?" he demanded.

"I—I can't tell you!" said the man sullenly. "It was nothing to do with Junior Cayterer—that I'll swear on the Book!"

Coutts grabbed hold of Parsons' sound arm.

"You're going to take a little walk with me, my man!" he announced grimly.

Parsons looked wildly round the room, but escape was impossible. Cursing, protesting his innocence at the top of his voice, he was led out of the library between Coutts and the elated newspaper man.

"By Jove, gov'nor!" ejaculated Tinker. "The plot certainly thickens. What made you suspect Parsons, gov'nor?"

Blake shrugged.

"Whether he is implicated with this man McCalla remains to be seen. One thing is certain—he knows Mr. Lemuel Clay, who, it seems, is the owner of the yellow car that Ruff Hanson saw on Christmas Eve. His agitation in the library when I mentioned the name to Mr. Cayterer was palpable proof of the fact. I have a hunch that an hour or two in the cooler, as the Yanks say, will induce him to confess."

"But where's Ruff, gov'nor? After all, we've no definite proof that Parsons is implicated."

"If I'm not much mistaken, that bullet-wound came from either Willy or Wally," said Blake quietly. "That means that friend Ruff has already tumbled to Parsons' duplicity."

He opened the envelope, which had been forgotten in the excitement, and read its typewritten contents with a frown. It ran as follows:

"Clear out of this case, you poor tec. Tell Cayterer that unless he comes

across by to-morrow midnight the kid'll die—slowly. Hand the money and Spagoni's spiel to the man you'll find waiting at the cemetery gates at 11 p.m. Boxing Day.

"He is unaware of the contents of the package you gave him, so keep the cops out of it, or—"

"This man McCalla means business," said Blake grimly. "Come along, young 'un! I'll phone his description to the police-station, and then we'll make a search of the estimable Parsons' room."

Chapter 9.



Mrs. Bardell to the Rescue.

WHEN Ruff Hanson recovered consciousness it was nearly daybreak. His mouth was parched and dry, and his tongue felt like a piece of scorched flannel.

He was conscious of a numb, aching pain in his limbs, and it did not take him long to realise that he was as trussed and helpless as Mrs. Bardell's Christmas turkey.

He tried to rise painfully, but his throbbing head pained abominably, and he let loose a pungent string of Texan profanity as his eyes became accustomed to the dim light of dawn.

He found that he was bound hand and foot, and confined in a dark, noisome cubby-hole that smelt of tar and seawater. By the gentle rocking motion he deduced that he was aboard ship, though whereabouts on the ocean he could not gather.

"Blue bells, what a blamed fool!" he muttered bitterly. "Hog tied like a poor simp—me, Ruff Hanson—the tough from Toughville!"

He racked his brains to account for his presence aboard this malodorous craft. There was no throb of engines, and the rocking motion of the boat was rhythmic and gentle.

"I guess we're at anchor somewhere, but where and how I'm blamed if I know!" he murmured. "Hot dog! If I c'd lay my mitts on that guy Parsons I'd—"

He broke off as the door of his prison opened cautiously and a swarthy, bearded individual clad in a blue jersey and an oily peaked cap surveyed him with arms akimbo.

"Ha! Zo you haf conscionsness recovered!" said the newcomer, expectorating neatly into a pool of rancid bilge-water.

"Say, listen, squarehead!" demanded Ruff. "What's the big beezeezus?"

The other grinned sardonically. "You Yankee fool, your nose into odder beoble's business 'ave boked, never again vill you do dat!"

"I'd like to poke a gat into your blamed ribs!" growled Ruff. "You herring-faced Hun!"

"You vait till der boss come, you another song vill sing," was the stolid reply.

"Say, listen, squarehead!" pleaded Ruff, though it went much against the grain with him to plead with any man. "If a thousand dollars are any good to ye—hand me a knife!"

The other laughed harshly. "You tink I a fool am? My orders are to see you don't escape."

He stooped over the prostrate American and scanned his bonds with approval.

"Ha! Jules have a goot job of dose knots made," he announced gutturally. "Later you take a voyage, and you ain't coming back!"

He slammed the door behind him, leaving Ruff Hanson to his thoughts.

Who was the mysterious boss, and how did he come aboard the ship?

Vainly he tried to answer the questions.

"If I only had my gats now!" he groaned. "There might be a fighting chance to—"

He broke off suddenly, for, as the ship gave a slight lurch, he slipped from the coil of rope on which he had been flung and felt a knubly protuberance beneath his armpit.

"Blue bells!" he chuckled. "They've left me Wilbur!"

Wilbur was the whimsical name with which he had christened his little Bolt automatic, which he carried sleeping or waking, Texan fashion, in a shoulder holster. Evidently his captors had been content with removing his two six-guns, Willy and Wally, and had overlooked the tiny, but equally deadly, weapon smuggled beneath his armpit in its oil-skin holster.

"Oh boy!" breathed Ruff Hanson happily. "This is where I pull some Houdini stuff, and then 'say it with lead.'"

The gunman sleuth knew all there was to know about ropes. In his earlier life in Texas as a cowboy he was an expert lariat-thrower, and had amused his comrades in the bunkhouse and at Rodeos by imitating some of the late Houdini's spectacular escapes.

It was a knack once learned as a source of amusement that had proved him in good stead in his later career as a detective. Heartened by the knowledge that he was armed, Ruff squirmed and wriggled to manoeuvre the necessary "slack" which was a preliminary to freedom.

It was a tough job. The knots had evidently been tied by a seaman, and were cunningly placed in the salt-stiffened rope that was wound like a hammock lashing round his body.

For over an hour he squirmed and wriggled to ease his cramped wrists, the rope fraying his flesh, and his strong white teeth aching with the effort to unfasten the knots.

He was forced to desist from his efforts at length to take a breather.

Panting and exhausted, he lay back just as the door opened and the bearded man peered in. He seemed to be satisfied that his captive was safe, for he gave a sardonic chuckle and made a grimly suggestive gesture with his finger across his throat as he took his leave.

Gradually Ruff's perseverance was

rewarded, and he succeeded, at the cost of bleeding wrists, in wrenching his hands free from their bonds. Though his head still throbbled like a steam-hammer, he feverishly set to work to untie his pinioned legs.

The pain was excruciating as the blood circulated into his cramped limbs again.

His rugged face twisted into an ugly grin as he slid his hand into his armpit, and his fingers closed round the cold, comforting butt of his automatic.

He was a strange spectacle, with his bloodstained head, bare feet, and flowered silk dressing-gown; but there was grim purposefulness in his face as he crept towards the door, that boded little good for his captors.

MEANWHILE, Mrs. Bardell, having superintended the luncheon arrangements, had arrayed herself in her best black bombazine dress and her black straw bonnet, with its nodding osprey plume and glistening jet ornaments.

"Jane Ellen," she announced, "I'm going to take a little institutional afore lunch. Now that that 'umbog and hippogriff Parsons' has been pinched p'raps you'll believe what I said about 'im. Let this be a warning to you, my gel. Dill-water runs steep, as the proverb says; tho' what the price of baby's dill-water as got to do with it I can't condescend."

She sniffed audibly, and, grasping her umbrella, sallied out of the kitchen into the spacious grounds of Lyveden Manor.

She passed through the lodge gates to the winding roadway that led to Lyveden on the one hand and the little fishing village of Saxenham on the other. By the signpost she halted and peered at the indicator.

Wind and rain had almost obliterated the faded lettering, and Mrs. Bardell turned to the right.

Even as she did so a powerful automobile turned the corner at a great pace and churned a gout of slushy mud from a puddle, depositing the greater part of it on Mrs. Bardell's precious bombazine dress.

"Hi, you willain!" she screamed, shaking her umbrella at the rapidly-disappearing juggernaut. "I'll have the lore on you, I will! You great 'ulking road-'og, a-splashing and smashing your way as if you owned the blooming earth!"

With her pocket-handkerchief she strove to repair the damage, but with little effect. Grasping her skirts and displaying an alarming expanse of elastic-sided boots and striped stocking, the good soul hurled objurgations at the heedless motorist.

"That means I'll have to tramp to Lyveden for some petrol to clean this mess, if there's a chemist open," she said bitterly.

Resolutely gripping her umbrella, she trudged down the road, fulminating against motorists in general. She paused for breath on the outskirts of Lyveden village, then suddenly her eyes glittered. In the driveway of a house set a little back from the highway she caught a glimpse of a high-powered car.

It was the green Hispano that had ruined her dress.

There was a "To Let" sign flanking the gateway, and the place had a dilapidated appearance, although the house showed signs of occupation.

Mrs. Bardell grasped her umbrella in her left hand, and with the light of battle in her eyes marched through the gateway.

The automobile was empty, but she approached the house wrathfully, her black bonnet nodding and its jet ornaments clattering with her indignation.

"I'll let 'em know who's 'oo!" she muttered. "The odacious—"

She broke off suddenly. A curtain had been raised for an instant in an upper room and a small white face appeared for a second at the window.

It was the frightened face of little Junior Cayterer!

"Well I'm blest!" gasped Mrs. Bardell indignantly. "The pore lamb! I'll—"

Even as she spoke the boy's face vanished and the white curtain was replaced. Mrs. Bardell's face grew crimson with wrath. She approached the paint-blistered doorway and tugged at the bell. It pealed reverberatingly through the house.

A hurried movement sounded from behind the portal and the door was opened a bare inch or two.

"What d'ye want?" queried a female voice ungraciously.

"Open this door, you 'ussy, or I'll scream the place down!" retorted Mrs. Bardell promptly. With a lightning lunge like a fencer she thrust her umbrella into the aperture and levered open the door.

"How dare you!" shrieked the tall, well-dressed woman on the other side. "What is the meaning of this unwarrantable outrage?"

Mrs. Bardell stood there, bosom heaving, umbrella raised defensively.

"Outrage, you woman you! I'll show you outrage! Not only 'ave you kidnapped a pore innocent, but ruined my best bombazine, which pore dear B—"

"For Heaven's sake, Lil," called a masculine voice from the head of the stairs, "what's all the row about?"

"This woman's crazy!" said Liverpool



Thousands of boys already find lots to interest them in Hobbies Weekly. Large free fretwork designs and helpful how-to-make articles on all kinds of pastimes. Ask your newsagent for a copy every Wednesday—price 2d.

They never go out now!

Fretwork keeps them happy all the time. With a Hobbies Outfit they make all sorts of fine things, toys, models, brackets, wireless cabinets, and even furniture. Any Hobbies Outfit contains all the necessary tools to make a start, but be sure they are Hobbies and not inferior foreign ones which are quite unsatisfactory.

HOBBIES FRETWORK OUTFITS

FREE
We will send a specimen copy of Hobbies and interesting free leaflets about fretwork to anybody writing to Dereham for them as below.

Obtainable from any ironmonger or stores or Hobbies Branches in London, Glasgow, Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield, Leeds, Southampton, Brighton, **HOBBIES Ltd. (Dept. 34), DEREHAM, NORFOLK**

Complete from 2/6 to 45/-. Every one complete. All British tools. Designs from 1d. to 1/6 and all tools and materials for the beginner.

Get this CATALOGUE. A 264 page Catalogue with 1/6 design free. Articles on Fretwork, Carpentry, Polishing, and instructions how to build 600 different everyday articles. Price 2d. complete, any newsagent or ironmonger. Or 1/- post free from DEREHAM



Lil, unplussed for the first time in her life. "She came barging in here like a mad woman, and—"

"Crazy, am I, you scarlet 'ussy!" screamed Mrs. Bardell.

"Thwack!" Her umbrella caught the woman a resounding blow across her shoulders.

Liverpool Lil gave a scream of rage, and she leapt at Mrs. Bardell, who side-stepped nimbly. The woman crook's eyes flashed with fury, her fingers curved like the talons of a hawk about to strike.

"Sam, you fool! Get this she-cat out of it, or—!" she cried hysterically.

Sam McCalla bounded down the stairs, his saturnine face working convulsively.

"Get out of here, woman!" he thundered, "or by heaven I'll—"

"Ouch!" He crumpled up with a howl of agony as Mrs. Bardell's umbrella caught him a vicious dig.

Liverpool Lil gave a snarl of fury and scrambled at Mrs. Bardell's bonnet, but that indomitable woman belaboured her with her trusty gamp, emitting piercing screams at the top of her lusty lungs at the same time.

"For—Heaven's—sake—!" gasped McCalla, painfully trying to recover his breath. "What is the matter? What does all this mean?"

"It means," snapped a quiet voice from behind the half-open door, "that the game's up, Sam McCalla. Stick 'em up!"

The door swung open, and on the steps stood Sexton Blake, an automatic in his hand.

LIKE a cat, Ruff Hanson tiptoed along towards the door of his prison.

To his delight he found that it was merely latched, and not barred. Evidently his captors had trusted to the skill of the man who had tied the ropes to keep him effectually a prisoner.

Cautiously he opened the door, and found himself in a narrow companion-way. The sound of low voices reached him from the end of the passage, and he advanced cautiously, gun in hand, towards it.

He paused at the door of a cabin, and heard the voice of the man who had felled him the previous night in the wine cellar of Lyveden Manor.

"It's all U P, boys! That white-livered cur Parsons' bound to squeal!" he snapped.

"Better go while the going's good, and let the other consignment go. How the blazes were we to know Blake and the Yard were spending Christmas at the manor?"

"That's true enough, boss; but are you sure it was only on account of the Cayterer kid they're down here? These local police are fools, anyway—they think smuggling passed away a hundred years back. But you never know."

"I tell you this Cayteree business ain't anything to do with us. Why couldn't the blasted fool stay in the States?" growled the other. "After all, we're only bootlegging in silks and whisky—it's one of the learned professions over there. If that fool Lord Sylvester hadn't sub-let the manor we'd have been safe, with Parsons in charge of the old smugglers' cellar that leads to Saxenhann Cove."

Ruff Hanson grinned. He was beginning to see daylight. Parsons and the masked men he had seen in the yellow car had nothing to do with the kidnapping of Junior—they were smugglers. Evidently the extensive cellars of Lyveden Manor were used as a secret

storing-place for smuggled goods, and were connected by a subterranean passage to the sea.

"What about the Yank?" queried another voice.

"Oh, him?" The boss' voice was contemptuous. "Let him rot! Best thing we can do now that Parsons' pinched is to clear. The Sea Sprite'll take us to Rochester, and then we'll put—"

"Your blamed mitts as high as they'll go!" snapped Ruff Hanson, as he flung open the cabin door with a crash and levelled his gun at the three occupants of the cabin.

One was the bearded German, another was a tall, powerful-looking man with a bald, egg-shaped head and a fierce black moustache, while the third was a squat, grizzled Frenchman.

Ruff was enjoying himself. "Sorta hits you where you live—eh, boys?" he remarked pleasantly. "Now, don't try no funny business, Mr. Lemuel Clay. I kin hit the pip blind-fold at forty paces!"

"Curse you!" snarled Clay, the smugglers' leader. "I'll get you yet, you hound! Pierre's on deck, and—"

NEXT WEEK!

Another long complete story of

FURG, the FUR-MAN!

Sexton Blake and Tinker in the wilds of the Canadian backwoods, and a plot that overshadows anything that Furg has ever attempted before. You must be certain to get—

CAPTIVE CARGO!

Order it now for next Thursday.

A sudden commotion sounded overhead, and a police-whistle shrilled.

Down the companion-ladder came the sound of heavy footsteps, and the voice of Inspector Coutts snapped out:

"This way, Splash and Willis! Grab 'em before they—"

"Howdy, Coutts, old timer?" said Ruff Hanson pleasantly, as the Yard man appeared at the cabin door. "Pleasant I'll bunch, ain't they? Take 'em as a Christmas-box—it's Boxing Day!"

A volley of imprecations broke out from Lemuel Clay.

"I suppose that white-livered hound Parsons squealed?" he cried shrilly. "By Heaven, I'll get him, if I wait ten years!"

"Yes, Parsons squealed," answered Coutts. "You're under arrest, so come quietly! And a very nice little Christmas-box, too!" he added, with a grim chuckle as he snapped the handcuffs on the wrists of Mr. Lemuel Clay.

Epilogue.

MRS. BARDELL was indeed "monarch of all she purveyed," to quote her own words, a few hours after Mr. Sam McCalla and Liverpool Lil were placed behind prison bars, there to meditate on the meagreness of their Yuletide fare.

It was nearly 7 p.m., and Blake's redoubtable housekeeper queneed it regally in the spacious kitchens of Lyveden Manor.

She was clad, as befitted her majesty, in a spotless white apron over her black bombazine, and she wielded a wooden spoon as a sceptre, while her minions hastened to do her bidding.

A delicious odour of roast turkey permeated the atmosphere.

Splash Page sniffed appreciatively and cocked the battered beaver of Alfred Jingle over his forehead.

"Oh, boy, lead me to it!" he grinned at Tinker, who had likewise donned his Dickensian costume. "What a day!"

Everyone was in high spirits now that the dark shadow of tragedy had been lifted from Lyvedon Manor. At Ruff Hanson's suggestion everybody present had resumed their Dickens' costume, and were now assembled before the crackling log fire.

"We ain't gonna be cheated outa our Christmas feed for the sake of a bunch of plug-uglies!" Ruff remarked.

It had been an easy matter to persuade Mrs. Bardell that her triumph in tracing the kidnapper of young Cayterer should be celebrated by another Christmas dinner in place of the one that had been spoiled.

Everyone had lent a hand with the preliminary arrangements, with the result that the unregretted absence of Parsons had made little difference to the household routine.

Little Junior Cayterer, despite his alarming experience, seemed very little the worse for his adventure, and had slept solidly through most of the afternoon. Sexton Blake himself had departed on a rather mysterious errand to London shortly after McCalla's arrest, and Tinker glanced uneasily at the clock, which had just struck seven.

"Wonder what the gov'no's up to?" he murmured to Splash. "Queer he should dash off like that! He said he'd be back for dinner, but if this storm gets much worse, I doubt it."

The mullioned windows rattled in the keen east wind as if skeleton fingers rapped on the panes, and down the chimney, soot-blackened sleet sizzled in the glowing coals. Suddenly the long siren woot of the Grey Panther was heard, and Ben Cayterer's rather tired eyes brightened.

"Sounds like Mr. Blake," he said eagerly. "I'll go and see."

He crossed over to the hall, and Tinker and Splash heard Blake's quiet voice outside, together with other deep, resonant tones, that were unfamiliar. The door shut softly, and they heard feet mounting the stairs.

"Something dashed mysterious is going on," muttered Tinker. "I wonder what the deuce it is?"

"Possess your soul in patience, my lad," reproved Splash.

Ruff Hanson and Coutts were playing a weird and wonderful game at the card table in the corner.

"What the deuce are you playing at?" chuckled Splash Page.

"Game of Noo York—which is 'Rollen de bones' in the vernacular. He's skinning me alive. Where'd you learn to play dice, Coutts?" he demanded of the Yard man. "You'd win a fortune in the States."

The inspector grinned widely as he pocketed a pile of silver. "I ran a Crown and Anchor board when I was in the Army!" he said complacently.

Over half an hour went by, the dinner going reverberated throughout the house, but still there was no sign either of Blake or Ben Cayterer.

The minutes passed, and Splash glanced uneasily at Tinker.

"What on earth's happening?" he queried. "Dinner was fixed for seven-thirty, and here it is after eight o'clock."

Suddenly a tap sounded at the door, and a moment later the footman and housemaid entered, bearing aloft great silver dishes.

They were followed by Mrs. Bardell, red of face, triumphant of mien.

"Dinner is served, gents!" she said, and with a flourish, took off a gleaming dish cover and revealed a vast turkey.

"Hurrah!" yelled Tinker. "Jones, tell Mr. Blake that dinner is ready. I believe he's with Mr. Cayterer somewhere."

The footman nodded, and withdrew, while Mrs. Bardell, knife and fork poised above that gigantic bird, beamed round the table.

"Which I sez it as shouldn't," she remarked, "a more lushus or tender bird I've never cooked, gen'lemen."

"You're right, Mrs. B.," agreed Splash. "The last was great, but this is a champion! They say that Christmas comes but once a year, but this time we're having it twice."

"And rightly so," said the voice of Ben Cayterer from the doorway. "Gentlemen, thanks to Sexton Blake and Sir Julius Rome, this is the happiest day of my life—"

A tense, amazed silence fell on the assembled guests; for, on the threshold, his hand in his father's own, stood Junior, again clad in the costume of Tiny Tim. But—miracle of miracles—he had no crutch, and the ugly iron strut which had disfigured his frail little leg was gone.

The boy's brown eyes were shining with excitement as Sexton Blake, accompanied by a tall, grey-bearded man

in evening dress, followed them into the room.

"Mrs. Bardell and gentlemen, may I present to you Sir Julius Rome, the distinguished specialist," he said quietly.

The great physician bowed, and Tinker understood at last. This, then, was the reason for Blake's mysterious errand to London.

"Heaven bless you, sir!" said Ben Cayterer huskily. "Gentlemen—you will, I am sure, rejoice with me that Sir Julius, at the urgent request of Mr. Blake here, came down to see Junior, instead of waiting until after the holiday, as we had planned.

"I was afraid that the ordeal through which he had passed might have affected him seriously, but I am pleased to tell you that not only is he little the worse for his adventure, and—best of all—he will be able to walk normally in a few days.

"An operation which Sir Julius performed to-night, together with a course of treatment, and I hope Junior will be able to romp with the best of us."

Splash Page whistled softly.

He had heard, of course, of Sir Julius Rome and his miraculous cures and uncanny skill as a bone-setter. Looked on askance by the medical profession at first, his great work during the War, when he had cured literally thousands of so-called hopeless cases, had earned for him his knighthood and a warm public esteem.

To-night, in a few minutes almost, he had diagnosed the trouble that had baffled the best doctors of America, and here before them, in the person of the shining-eyed boy, was the proof.

"Look, dad, I can walk to the table by myself," piped the child, in his boyish treble.

Rather slowly he walked towards his chair, and, as he reached it, a great roar of applause burst out from the table.

Mrs. Bardell's honest face beamed with happiness. Tears of joy rolled down her red cheeks. Ruff Hanson gave a mighty bellow that he had not used since the far-off days when he had punched cattle on the Texas prairie. He pumped Ben Cayterer's hand till it ached.

"Say, ain't that a grand and glorious feeling? The best Christmas present of the lot," he boomed.

A flush crept into the great doctor's cheek's, and Blake, noticing his embarrassment, steered him to a chair.

"Come, Sir Julius. Mrs. Bardell is anxious to show you another instance of manipulative surgery," he said, glancing with twinkling eyes at the turkey.

That dinner beneath the raftered roof of Lyveden Manor, was a momentous and memorable one. The cheery companionship of old and tried friends: the mellow influence of good wine and incomparable cooking; and the fact that the dark shadows had been lifted, all served to make that second Yuletide feast easily the happiest Blake and Tinker had ever known.

The spirit of Dickens with his kindness and humour pervaded the whole meal, and when the speeches came, Mrs. Bardell was toasted till the rafters rang, to the chorus of "She's a jolly good fellow."

The good soul's heart was too full for words, and it was, appropriately enough, little Junior Cayterer that echoed her sentiments when he piped the immortal Christmas benediction of Tiny Tim: "God bless us—every one!"

THE END.

1927 MECCANO

Boys are thrilled!

Have you ever seen great girders, painted red or green to protect them from rust, swung up and fitted into place on some towering building in course of construction? . . . It's like that when you build with Meccano. . . the same thrill of building in steel. . . and now you have the colours too!



This year every Meccano part is coloured! Real engineering colours—green and red. It's wonderfully fascinating to see how the colours give an added beauty to your models.

There's a fine book, printed in colours, that tells you all about the New Meccano. You can have it free by sending a postcard to Meccano Ltd. (Dept. 28), Binns Road, Liverpool, giving your own name and address and the names and addresses of three of your chums. Write to-day.

This fine working model of a Pit Head Gear, in green and red, is built with Outfit No. 5. It's only one of the thousands of equally fine and accurate models that any boy can build with the New Meccano.

PRICES OF MECCANO OUTFITS FROM 3/6 TO 370/-



ALL COLOURED!

MECCANO LTD., Binns Road, LIVERPOOL.

DEAD MAN'S ROCK

By Sir A.T. Quiller-Couch
(Q)



A Tale of Treasure—and Vengeance!

Begin this absorbing serial now!

YOU MAY READ ON FROM
HERE.

MY father was hounded to death by a scoundrel named Simon Colliver. He had been searching for clues which, according to the will of my grandfather, Amos Trenoweth, would reveal the hiding-place of the Great Ruby of Ceylon and other treasure, and I, Jasper Trenoweth, with naught in the world save the apparently useless clues to the treasure which my father had discovered before his death, and a burning desire for vengeance on Simon Colliver, had come to London to seek my fortunes.

With me came my only friend, Thomas Loveday. We were both young, and through the follies of youth and my unquenchable desire to avenge my poor father, we fell on hard times indeed. So hard, in fact, that we were faced with nothing but starvation, and as a last wild chance, we decided to try our luck at gambling.

Accordingly, we went to a strange place known to Tom, over which presided one of the most extraordinary women I have ever seen. After a painfully short time, we found that we had lost all our few shillings.

We were stunned. This, then, was to be the end! Miserably we were about to leave, when I suddenly remembered that I had in my pocket the half of a golden belt-clasp—one of the clues to the treasure on which certain signs, meaningless to me, were inscribed. What use was it to me now?

Returning to the roulette table, I placed the clasp, which was accepted by the strange woman as the equivalent of £5, on the square marked 13. This stake would decide between life and death for me, but I did not feel it. My passion had fallen upon an anti-climax, and I was even yawning when the murmur of many voices, and a small pile of gold and silver at my side, announced that I had won.

"So the luck has changed at last," said the woman. "Be brave whilst it is with you."

In answer, I again placed the clasp upon the number 13.

Once more I won, and this time heavily. Tom laid his hand upon my

shoulder and said, "Let us go," but I shook my head and went on.

Time after time I won now, until the pile beside me became immense. Again and again Tom whispered in my ear that we had won enough and that luck would change shortly, but I held on. And now the others surrounded me in a small crowd, and began to stake on the numbers I chose. Put the clasp where I would, the needle stopped in front of it.

They brought a magnet to see if this curious piece of metal had any power of attraction; but our hostess only laughed, and assured them, at any rate, there was no steel in the pointer, as (she added) some of them ought to know by this time. When eight times I had put the buckle down and eight times had found a fresh heap of coin at my side, she turned to me and said:

"You play bravely, young man. What is your name?"

"Jasper Trenoweth."

Again I fancied I caught the gleam in her eyes; and this time it even seemed as though her teeth shut tight as she heard the words. But she simply laughed a tranquil laugh and said:

"A queer-sounding name that—Trenoweth. Is it a lucky one?"

"Never, until now," said I.

"Well, play on. It does my heart good, this fight between us. But you are careful, I see. Why don't you stake your pile as well while this wonderful run lasts?"

Again Tom's hand was laid upon my shoulder, and this time his voice was urgent. But I was completely deaf.

"As you please," said I coldly, and laid the whole pile down upon the black.

It was madness. It was worse than madness. But I won again; and now the heap of my winnings was enormous. I glanced at the strange woman; she sat as impassive as ever.

"Play," said she.

Thrice more I won, and now the pile beside her had to be replenished. Yet she moved not a muscle of her face, not a flash of her mysterious eyes.

At last, sick of success, I turned and said:

"I have had enough of this. Will it

satisfy you if I stake it all once more?"

Again she laughed.

"You are brave, Mr. Trenoweth, and indeed worth the fighting. You may win to-night, but I shall win in the end. I told you that I would readily lose to you, and so I will; but you take me at my word with a vengeance. Still, I should like to possess that clasp of yours, so let it be once more."

I laid the whole of my winnings on the red. By this time all the guests had gathered round to see the issue of this conflict. Not a soul put any money on this turn of the wheel, so engrossed were they in the duel. Every face was white with excitement, every lip quivered. Only we, the combatants, sat unmoved—I and the strange woman with the unfathomable eyes.

"Red stands for many things," said she, as she lightly twirled the needle round. "Blood and rubies and lovers' lips. But black is the livery of Death, and Death shall win them all in the end."

As the pointer of fortune circled on its last errand, I could catch the stifled breath of the crowd about me, so deep was the hush that fell upon us all. I felt Tom's hand tighten its clutch upon my shoulder. I heard—or fancied I heard—the heart of the man upon my right thump against his ribs.

I could feel my own pulse beating all the while with steady and regular stroke. Somehow I knew that I should win, and somehow it flashed upon me that she knew it, too. Even as the idea came darting across my brain, a multitude of pent-up cries broke forth from thirty pairs of white lips. I scarcely looked to see the cause, but as I turned to our hostess her eyes looked straight into mine and her sweet voice rose above the din:

"Gentlemen, we have played enough to-night. The game is over."

I had broken the bank!

I STOOD with Tom gathering up my winnings as the crowd slowly melted from the room, and as I did so, cast a glance at the woman whom I had thus defeated. She was leaning back in her chair, apparently indifferent to her losses as to her gains. Only her eyes were steadily fixed

upon me as I shovelled the coin into my pockets. As she caught my eye she pulled out a scrap of paper and pencil, scribbled a few words, tossed the note to the man with the shovel, who instantly left the room and said:

"Is it far from this place to your home?"

"Not very."

"That's well; but be careful. To win such a sum is only less dangerous than to lose it. I shall see you again—you and your talisman. By the way, may I look at it for a moment?"

We were alone in the room, we three. She took the clasp, looked at it intently for a full minute, and then returned it. Already the dawn of another day was peering in through the chinks in the blinds, giving a ghastly faintness to the expiring candles, throwing a grey and sickening reality over the scene—the disordered chairs, the floor strewn with scraps of paper, the signs and relics of the debauchery of play.

Ghostlier than all was the yellow face of the woman in the pitiless light. But there she sat, seemingly untired, in all the splendour of her flashing gems as we left her—a very goddess of the gaming table.

We had reached the door and were stepping into the darkness of the outer passage, when Tom whispered:

"Be on your guard; that note meant mischief!"

I nodded, swung open the door, and stepped out into the darkness. Even as I did so, I heard one quick step at my left side, saw a faint gleam, and felt myself violently struck upon the chest. For a moment I staggered back, and then heard Tom rush past me and deal one crashing blow.

"Run, run! Down the passage—quick!"

In an instant we were tearing through the open door behind, in the glare of all the candles, the figure of the yellow woman still sitting motionless and calm.

We gained the door, and plunged into the bright daylight. Up the alley we tore out into the street, across it and down another, then through a perfect maze of by-lanes. Tom led and I followed behind.

Still we tore on, although not a footstep followed us, nor had we seen a soul since Tom struck my assailant down. Spent and breathless at last we emerged upon the Strand, and here Tom pulled up.

"The streets are wonderfully quiet," said he.

I thought for a moment, and then said:

"It is Monday morning."

Scarcely were the words out of my mouth when I heard something ring upon the pavement beside me. I stooped and picked up the Golden Clasp.

(Continued overleaf.)

Dear Father
 Christmas
 Please remember
 that I'd like some
 chocolates at Christmas.
 And if you can bring
 Cadburys I like them
 best of all
 Hopefully
 Bobby
 P.S. Dad helped me with the spelling.
 Couldn't you bring some Cadburys
 every Saturday night?

BRITISH AND
 GUARANTEED



Always
 on
 Time!

"That's her signal—and here she comes round the bend. Dead on time, as usual!"

Whether on passenger service, goods traffic, or carrying out shunting operations, Hornby locos may be depended upon to give the utmost satisfaction. They are British-made throughout, fully guaranteed, and beautifully enamelled in correct railway colours—L.M.S., L.N.E.R., or G.W. You can't help being thrilled when you see a Hornby Loco dashing along the track—smoothly over the points, steadily round the curves, full speed ahead on the straight.

Your miniature railway is exact in every detail when it is constructed with Hornby Rolling Stock and Accessories, which includes Passenger Coaches, Pullman Cars, Trucks, Wagons, Stations, Tunnels, Bridges, Signals and Level Crossings, all made in perfect proportion and all beautifully finished in colours.

Ask Dad to buy you a Hornby Train for Christmas!

Get this 1927-8 Hornby Book of Trains



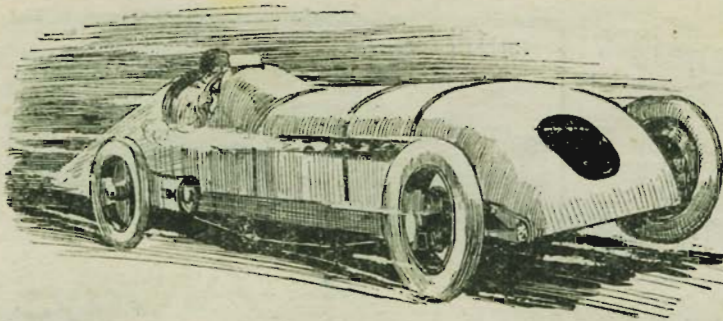
The new Hornby Book of Trains is "the best yet." It tells the wonderful story of the Life of a Locomotive, and also includes beautiful illustrations in full colours of all the Hornby Locos, Rolling Stock, and Accessories. Get your copy to-day (price 3d.) from your dealer, or send three penny stamps to Meccano Limited, Dept. L, Binns Road, Liverpool.

Make friends with your Dealer,
 he can help you!

**HORNBY
 TRAINS**

Prices of Hornby Trains
 from 7/6 to 110/-.

Manufactured by
 MECCANO LTD., Binns Road, LIVERPOOL.



BABS—the famous high-powered racer that was wrecked on Pendine Sands. A coloured metal model of this car, made to stand square and solid on its own four wheels, is given with every issue of this week's NELSON LEE Library. This is a great opportunity to get one of these splendid models. Nothing like them has been given with any other paper. Ask for the

NELSON LEE LIBRARY

On Sale Everywhere.

Price 2d.

"Well," said I, "this is strange."
"Not at all," said Tom. "Look at your breast-pocket."

I looked and saw a short slit across my breast just above the heart. As I put my hand up, a sovereign, and then another, rolled clinking on to the pavement.

Tom picked them up, and handing them to me, remarked:

"Jasper, you may thank Heaven to-day, if you are in a mood for it. You have had a narrow escape."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, that you would be a dead man now had you not carried that piece of metal in your breast-pocket. Let me see it for a moment."

We looked at it together, and there surely enough, almost in the centre of the clasp, was a deep dent. We were silent for a minute or so, and then Tom said:

"Let us get home. It would not do for us to be seen with this money about us."

We crossed the Strand, and turned off it to the door of our lodging. There I stopped.

"Tom, I am not coming in. I shall take a long walk and a bath to get this fearful night out of my head. You can take the money upstairs, and put it away somewhere in hiding. Stay, I will keep a coin or two. Take the rest with you."

Tom looked up at the gleam of sunshine that touched the chimney-pots above, and decided.

"Well, for my part, I am going to bed; and so will you if you are wise."

"No. I will be back this evening, so let the fatted calf be prepared. I must get out of this for a while."

"Where are you going?"

"Oh, anywhere! I don't care. Up the river, perhaps."

"You don't wish me to go with you?"

"No. I had rather be alone. Tom, I have been a fool. I led you into a hole whence nothing but a marvellous chance has delivered us, and I owe you an apology. And—Tom, I also owe you my life."

"Not to me, Jasper; to the Clasp."

"To you," I insisted. "Tom, I have been a thoughtless fool, and—Tom, that was a splendid blow of yours."

He laughed, and ran upstairs, while

I turned and gloomily sauntered down the deserted street.

An Age-Old Story

WHEN Tom asked me where I was going, I had suggested an excursion up the river; though, to tell the truth, this answer had come with the question. Be that as it may, the afternoon of that same Sunday found me on the left bank of the Thames between Streatley and Pangbourne; found me, with my boat moored idly by, stretched on my back amid the undergrowth, and ceaselessly staring upward through a trellis-work of branches into the heavens.

I had been lying there a full hour, wondering vaguely of my last night's adventure, listening to the spring-time chorus of the birds, lazily and listlessly watching a bough that bent and waved its fan of foliage across my face, or the twinkle of the tireless kingfisher flashing down-stream in loops of light, when a blackbird lit on a branch hard by my left hand, and, all unconscious of an audience, began to pour forth his rapture to the day.

Lying there I could spy his black body and yellow bill, and drink in his song with dreamy content. So sweetly and delicately was he fluting, that by degrees slumber crept gently and unperceived upon my tired brain; and as the health-giving distillation of the melody stole upon my parched senses, I fell into a deep sleep.

WHAT was that? Music? Yes, but not the song of my friend the blackbird, not the mellow note that had wooed me to slumber and haunted my dreams. Music? Yes, but the voice was human, and the song articulate. I started, and rose upon my elbow to listen. The voice was human beyond a doubt—sweetly human. It was that of a girl singing. But where? I looked around and saw nobody. Yet the singer could not be far off, for the words, though softly and gently sung, dwelt clearly and distinctly upon my ear. Still half asleep, I sank back again and listened.

"Flower of the May,
Saw ye one pass?"

"Love passed to-day
While the dawn was,
O, but the eyes of him shone as a
glass."

"Flower of the May,
Bird of the—"

The voice quivered, trailed off, and stopped. I heard a rustling of leaves to the right, and then the same voice broke out in prose, in very agitated and piteous prose:

"Oh, my boat—my boat! What shall I do?"

I jumped to my feet, caught a glimpse of something white, and of two startled but appealing eyes, then tore down to the bank. There, already twenty yards down-stream, placidly floated the boat, its painter trailing from the bows, and its whole behaviour pointing to a leisurely but firm resolve to visit Pangbourne.

My own boat was close at hand. But when did hot youth behave with thought in a like case? I did as ninety-nine in a hundred would do. I took off my coat, kicked off my shoes, and, as the voice cried, "Oh, please, do not trouble!" plunged into the water.

The refractory boat, once on its way, was in no great hurry, and allowed itself to be overtaken with great good humour. I clambered in over the stern, caught up the sculls which lay across the thwart, and, dripping but triumphant, brought my captive back to shore.

"How can I thank you?"

If my face was red as I looked up, it must be remembered that I had to stoop to make the boat fast. If my eyes had a tendency to look down again, it must be borne in mind that the water from my hair was dripping into them. They gazed for a moment, however, and this was what they saw:

At first, only another pair of eyes, of dark grey eyes twinkling with a touch of merriment, though full at the same time of honest gratitude. It was some time before I clearly understood that these belonged to a face, and that face the fairest that ever looked on a summer day.

So we stood, she smiling, and I dripping, while the blackbird, robbed of the song's ending, took up his own tale anew, and, being now on his mettle, tried a few variations. So, for all power I had of speech, might we have stood until to-day had not the voice repeated:

"How can I thank you?"

I looked up. Yes, she was beautiful, past all criticism—not tall, but in pose and figure queenly beyond words. Under the brim of her straw hat the waving hair fell loosely, but not so loosely as to hide the broad brow arching over lashes of deepest brown. I had scarcely spoken to woman before, never to beauty. Tongue-tied and dripping I stood there, yet was half inclined to run away.

"And yet, why did you make yourself so wet? Have you no boat? Is not that your boat lying there under the bank?" There was an amused tremor in the speech.

Somehow I felt absurdly guilty. She must have mistaken my glance, for she went on:

"Is it that you wish—" and began to search in the pocket of her gown.

"No, no," I cried, "not that!"

I had forgotten the raggedness of my clothes, now hideously emphasised by my bath. Of course, she took me for a

beggar. Why not? I looked like one. But as the thought flashed upon me it brought unutterable humiliation. She must have divined something of the agony in my eyes, for a tiny hand was suddenly laid on my arm and the voice said:

"Please forgive me. I was stupid, and am so sorry. But it was odd to swim when your boat was close at hand, was it not?"

I looked, fattered, met her honest glance, and we both broke into shy laughter. A mad desire to seize the little hand that for a moment had rested on my arm caught hold of me.

"Yes, it was odd," I answered slowly, and with difficulty: "but it seemed—the only thing to do at the time."

She laughed a low laugh again. "Do you generally behave like that?"

"I don't know." There was a pause, and then I added: "You see, you took me by surprise."

"Where were you when I first called?" she asked.

"Lying in the grass close by." "Then—with a vivid blush—"you must have—"

"Heard you singing? Yes."

Again there was a pause, and this time the blackbird executed an elaborate exercise with much delicacy and finish. The brown lashes drooped, the lovely eyes were bent on the grass, and the little hand swung the creeper nervously backward and forward.

"Why did you not warn me that I had an audience?"

"Because, in the first place, I was too late. When you began I was—"

"What?" she asked, as I hesitated.

"Asleep."

"And I disturbed you. I am so sorry."

"I am not."

I was growing bolder as she became more embarrassed. I looked down upon her now from my superior height, and my heart went out to worship the grace of her. With a touch of resentment she drew herself up, held out her hand, and said somewhat proudly:

"I thank you, sir, for this service."

I took the hand, but not the hint. It was an infinitesimal hand as it lay in my big brown one, and yet it stung my frame as with some delicious and electric shock. My heart beat wildly and my eyes remained fixed upon hers.

The colour on the fair face deepened a shade; the little chin was raised a full inch, and the voice became perceptibly icy.

"I must go, sir. I hope I have thanked you as far as I can, and—"

"And what?"

"Forgive me that I was about to offer you money."

The hat's brim bent now, but under it I could see honest eyes full of pain.

"Forgive you!" I cried. "Who am I to forgive you? You were right. I am no better than a beggar."

The red lips quivered and broke into a smile. A tiny dimple appeared,

vanished, and reappeared. The hat's brim nodded again, and then the eyes sparkled into laughter.

"A sturdy beggar, at any rate."

It was the poorest little joke, but love is not exacting of wit. Again we both laughed, but this time with more relief, and yet the embarrassment that followed was greater.

"Must you go?" I asked, as I bent down to pull the boat in.

"I really must," she answered shyly. And then, as she pulled out a tiny watch: "Oh, I am late—so late! I shall keep mother waiting and make her lose the train. What shall I do? Oh, pray, sir, be quick!"

A mad hope coursed through me. I pointed to the boat and said:

"I have made it so wet. If you are late, better let me row you. Where are you going?"

"To Streatley; but I cannot—"

"I also am going to Streatley. Please let me row you."

Before my persistency she wavered and was conquered. "But my boat?" she said.

"I will row it behind." And in the glad success of my hopes I allowed her no time for further parley, but ran off to my own boat, tied the two together, and gently helped her to her seat.

(A great love has entered the life of Jasper Trenoweth—a love which is bound up, as events will show, with the rest of the events in this fateful story. Long instalment next week!)

26 DEPOSIT

secures this superb Cabinet Gramophone or a Table Grand or Giant Horn Instrument. Nothing More to Pay for One Month. Carriage paid. 10 Days' Trial. No. 605 model 35/- cash to record buyers. Write to-day for free illustrated catalogue and **FACTORY PRICES**.

Mead Company (Dept. K.2.) Sparkbrook, Birmingham.



AEROPLANES AND RACING CARS

What could be more attractive for the decoration of your den, or as a Christmas Present for your friend, than REAL BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTOGRAPHS of the WORLD'S MOST WONDERFUL AEROPLANES AND RACING CARS? Send a 1/6 P.O. for a specimen half-plate enlargement of either the 5-MILE-A-MINUTE AEROPLANE that won the Schneider Cup or the 1,000 H.P. RECORD-BREAKING SUNBEAM CAR, whichever you prefer. At the same time you will receive a complete list of the excellent photographs now obtainable. List only on request.

REAL PHOTOGRAPHS, 29, WAKEFIELD ROAD, DEWSBURY.

HUGE CHRISTMAS OFFER FREE!

I have decided to give all applicants this month an extraordinarily fine GIFT with my best wishes for a happy Xmas. It is a grand collection of 115 DIFFERENT STAMPS including such SEASONABLE VARIETIES as ICELAND, POLAND, NEWFOUNDLAND, SCANDINAVIA, splendid sets of FINLAND and of RUSSIA, SWITZERLAND, and such countries which speak of SNOW AND CHRISTMAS. A POSTCARD WILL DO! But if you would like, IN ADDITION TO THE COLLECTION, A FINE MAGNIFYING GLASS IN GOLDING METAL FRAME, just send 2d. for POSTAGE. Ask for Approvals, and GET YOUR CHRISTMAS GIFTS FROM MATLOCK! My latest lists crammed with BARGAINS AND GIFT OFFERS. YOUR ORDER IS SENT BY RETURN ALWAYS!—VICTOR BANCROFT, MATLOCK.

MAGIC TRICKS, etc.—Parcels, 2/6, 5/6. Ventriloquist's Instrument. Invisible. Imitate Birds. Price 6d each, 4 for 1/-.—T. W. HARRISON, 239, Pentonville Rd., London, N.1.

HOME CINEMATOGRAPHS

Machines from 5/- to £16. Lighting Sets, Rewinder, Spools and all accessories. Films all lengths & subjects. Sample Film 1/- post free.



ILLUSTRATED FREE PRICE LISTS

Agents for "Campro" Cine. Camera-Projector.

FORD'S (Dept A.P.), 13, Red Lion Sq., London, W. C. 1. Entrance Dane Street.

HEIGHT INCREASED 5/- Complete Course 3-5 inches in ONE MONTH.

Without appliances—drugs—or dieting. THE FAMOUS OLIVE SYSTEM NEVER FAILS. Complete Course 5/- P.O. post free, or further parties, stamp. P. A. CLIVE, Harrook House, COLWYN BAY, North Wales.



STOP STAMMERING! Cure yourself as I did. Particulars Free. FRANK B. HUGHES, 7, SOUTHAMPTON ROW, LONDON, W.C.1.

"MYSTERY" PACKET OF 200 DIFF. STAMPS 6d. (Price 1/- to Customers Overseas) All good copies and no rubbish! With each packet I give you an extra **"MYSTERY" STAMP**. What this stamp will be I cannot print here, because nearly every customer will receive a different kind. They are too scarce for all of you to get the same! Ask to see my famous Discount Approvals.—W. A. WHITE, Engle Lane, LYE, Stourbridge, England.

POCKET "X RAY"

Wonderful Novelty. Bewilders and amuses. Enables you to read, or to see anything in front of you even though coins or other articles be placed in line of vision. Post Free. 1/-.—R. DILNOT (Dept. T), 125, Chiswick High Road, London, W.4.



HEIGHT COUNTS

in winning success. Height increased—health and physique improved. Wonderful results. Send for particulars and our £100 guarantee, to—GIRVAN SYSTEM (A.M.P.), 17, Stroud Green Rd., London, N.4.

FINE STAMP PARCEL FREE!!

Actually contains: Metal Watermark Finder, B.C. Stamps, 56 Different Stamps (25 Unused), 250 Finest Mounts, Combination Perforation Gauge and Pocket Case, etc. Send postcard only requesting Approvals.

LISEURN & TOWNSEND, LONDON ROAD, LIVERPOOL.

All applications for Advertisement Space in this publication should be addressed to the Advertisement Manager, UNION JACK SERIES, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

MAGIC FOR XMAS

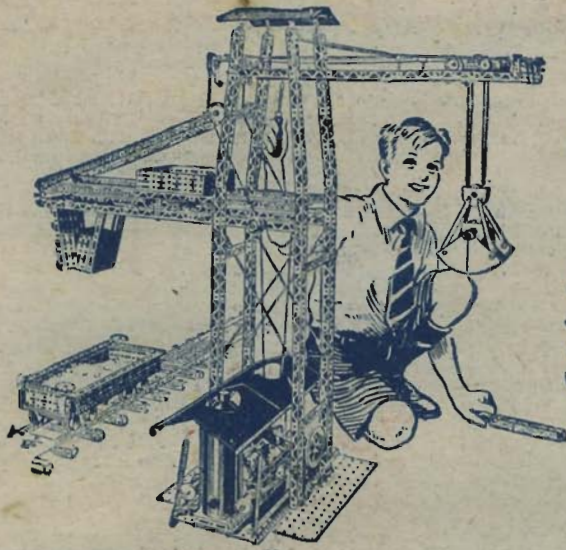
Then learn how to Conjure with coins, hats, bats, balls, glasses, and liquids. Listen! A Box of Apparatus. A Book of Secrets Explained! with Illustrations! And A Happy Magical Xmas! Send for this Box of Wonderful Tricks and this Book of Oriental Illusions, the whole an Ideal Present.

From the Maker and Professor 5/- post free. P. BRISTOW, 47, Oriel Rd., Portsmouth.

CUT THIS OUT

"UNION JACK" PEN COUPON. VALUE 3d. Send 5 of these coupons with only 2/9 (and 2d. stamp), direct to the FLEET PEN CO., 119, Fleet Street, E.C.4. By return you will receive a handsome lever self-filling FLEET FOUNTAIN PEN with solid gold nib (fine, medium, or broad), usually 10/6. Fleet Price 4/-, or with 5 coupons only 2/9. De Luxe Model 2/- extra.





BOYS!
 When you are asked
 'What do you want
 for Christmas?'
 Say "ERECTOR"

Nothing delights you more than to possess a real good mechanical model, but no matter how wonderful that one model may be you get tired of it eventually. But with a set of "Erector" parts you can never tire, for models can be built and taken to pieces again, and there's always something different. And as you build each model you will be proud of it. For "Erector" now has innumerable new parts which make it possible to build more realistic models and bigger and better ones than ever before. Besides, many complete units are now included according to the size of the set, and such items as a boiler, 3-drum hoist, car hood, steering-wheel, disc-wheel, truck body, digger scoop, clam shell bucket, tip bucket, and reverse switch attachments must surely convey to you how truly wonderful "Erector" is. The new solid brass perfect gear standardisation adds another useful feature, and the new Udylite finish on the bright parts and electrically baked enamelled colour parts ensure that your "Erector" set will remain new in appearance always. There is certainly no other constructional toy to beat "Erector" and you must certainly have a set even if you have to wait until Christmas. But get a set before if you can.

It may be dad, or mother, or an uncle or aunt—it matters not who asks the question—make sure of an "Erector" set this Christmas. In the meantime there's a very interesting little book that you can have free. It tells all about these wonderful sets of "Erector" parts with which you can make innumerable models—cranes, bridges, motor cars and steam engines for instance. And they work too! For there's a powerful electric motor with some of the sets to drive the models. Send for the free book now, look through it, mark the set you fancy in pencil. We suggest No. 4, it makes 500 models and has a motor. Keep the book handy, wait for the question—'What do you want for Christmas?'—Say "ERECTOR" and hand the book over for inspection. The chances are you'll get the very set you've marked. So don't forget, but send for the free book now.

ERECTOR

Prices and Particulars of ERECTOR Sets.

No.	Parts.	No. of Models.	Price.
1	104	278	5/-
3	169	381	10/6
4	235	500	21/-
7	473	533	42/-
7½	627	554	63/-
8	922	593	105/-
10	2000 parts unlimited number of models, price 210/-.		

Sets No. 4 and upwards contain an electric motor and build increasingly larger models.

The famous No. 4 ERECTOR Set illustrated, contains 235 parts—some in colours—with which 500 models can be made. A powerful electric motor is also included to work some of the models. A 60-page book of instructions makes everything clear. And the price is only **21/-**



Fill in and post this coupon NOW.
 To the A. C. GILBERT CO., 109, KINGSWAY, LONDON, W.C.2
 Please send me my free copy of the ERECTOR booklet

NAME.....
 ADDRESS.....

Manufactured by the A. C. GILBERT Co., 109, Kingsway, London, W.C.2