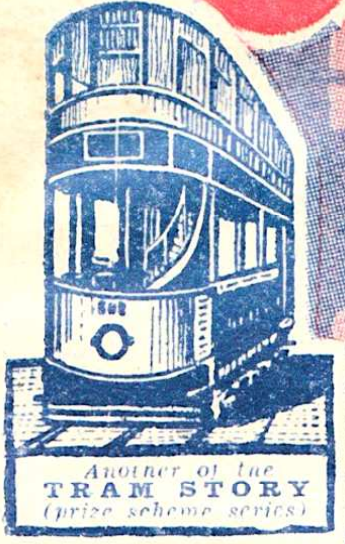


**SEXTON
BLAKE**

and WALDO the Wonder-Man in a stimulating 'tec-mystery story, complete inside. Also, attractive competition with a prize of a

**PEDIGREE
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UNION JACK 2^d



The Mystery of
BLIND LUKE

Featuring WALDO the WONDER-MAN.
No. 1490.

EVERY THURSDAY.

By E. S. BROOKS.
May 7th, 1932.



*"This woman is insane!
Where's a police officer?
Confound it! Why can't
somebody take this raving
creature away?!"*

A Complete Story of WALDO and Sexton Blake.

Chapter 1.

Introducing the Prouds.

"TAXI, sir?"

Julian Vernon nodded in the act of lighting a big cigar. He had just emerged from the foyer of the Royalist Theatre, in Shaftesbury Avenue, and he was glad enough of the smoke. Heavily built, flabby of feature, Mr. Vernon was considered to be one of the most successful Turf accountants of the day. He had just seen the racing play which was doing such big business, and although the play itself had been entertaining enough, its technical inaccuracies had left Mr. Vernon sardonically irritable.

"A perfectly marvellous show!" said another playgoer, with enthusiasm.

"Piffing rubbish!" muttered Mr. Vernon sourly.

A taxi was just drawing up, and Mr. Vernon, in moving across the pavement to reach it, nearly collided

with a shabby, middle-aged woman who happened to be passing the theatre at the moment.

"Sorry!" said Mr. Vernon brusquely.

"I'm afraid it was my fault, sir—"

The woman broke off as she glanced into his face at close quarters—under the glare of the bright canopy lights. Suddenly an extraordinary change came over her face. Every atom of colour fled from her worn and lined cheeks, and an expression of unutterable fear came into her eyes. She clutched at Julian Vernon frenziedly.

"I know you!" she screamed, staring at him in an unearthly way. "Yes, yes! I know you!"

Mr. Vernon backed away under the extraordinary onslaught.

"My good woman!" he protested. "Unless you are quite mad— Good heavens!"

He, in his turn, went as pale as a ghost. But the



Dong! The bell goes for the sixth and last round of the great Tram Contest, fought out during recent weeks by our tip-top team of star authors for your entertainment and—your vote! Read now of Waldo and the mysterious golden charm, plus the recurrent Mr. Alfred Proud and his fireman's helmet. Then, when you have finished this exhilarating yarn, turn back to page 13 and consider your verdict.

next second he recovered himself. He grabbed roughly at the woman's hands, endeavouring to shake her off.

"I know you!" she screamed again. "Oh, why can't I remember? You've changed, but the face—the face—"

"This woman is insane!" shouted Julian Vernon harshly. "Where's a police officer? Confound it! Why can't somebody take this raving creature away?"

With brutal violence he thrust her aside and wrenched open the door of the taxi. The startled commissioner, to say nothing of quite a few playgoers, had watched the little scene in astonishment.

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"Seventy-five, Hedingham Court, Maida Vale!" shouted Vernon to the taxi-driver. "Don't stare, you fool! Drive off!"

"Yessir!" gasped the man.

Vernon climbed heavily in, and slammed the door. The woman, who appeared to be demented, rushed to the taxi and clutched at it.

"Don't let him get away!" she cried. "I know him! But I can't remember—"

"Just a minute!" said a lithe, well-dressed stranger. "All right, commissioner—don't bother about a policeman. Come, Mrs. Marshall, this won't do!"

"You know this woman, sir?" asked the commissioner.

"Known her for years," said the other cheerfully. "She gets these little attacks now and again. You might call that other taxi? Good man! Come along, Mrs. Marshall. You'll be better soon."

Rupert Waldo, known as the Peril Expert—and in the old days as the Wonder Man—had never seen the woman before in all his life. But she was so obviously in distress that he felt impelled to lend a hand. Moreover, he was intrigued; and it was so long since he had had something to do that he regarded this as his lucky night.

The woman, now nearly on the point of collapse, was assisted into the taxi, and Waldo climbed in after her.

"Rum goings-on," said the commissioner, addressing nobody in particular.

And a shabby, blind old cripple, sitting at his pitch near the theatre wall, selling matches, clenched the knob of his stick until his knuckles were white.

"That voice!" he whispered exultantly. "At last—at last! Seventy-five, Hedingham Court!"

WALDO permitted the taxi to drive along at random, and meanwhile his fellow passenger showed some signs of recovery. He had recognised Julian Vernon at once, and he wondered just how this faded woman figured in the bookmaker's past life. Perhaps it was not a very deep problem.

"Better now?" asked Waldo kindly. The woman had recovered some of her colour; confused and dazed, she was looking at her companion timidly.

"Who are you, sir?" she faltered. "How did I get into this taxi? I—I don't seem to remember— Did I faint?"

"I think you had a little attack of some kind," replied Waldo. "Don't bother about it—don't think of it."

She pressed a hand to her head. "It's gone—gone!" she whispered. "I seem to see a face— Yet I can't bring it back. I don't remember anything. Please will you tell me, sir, what happened?"

"Practically nothing happened," replied Waldo. "You came over queer, and seeing that a policeman was in the offing I called you by the first name that came to my mind, and claimed to know you. That's all."

"I don't know how to thank you, sir," she said gratefully. "I—I suppose I must have come over faint."

Clearly, all recollection of that scene outside the Royalist Theatre had vanished from her mind.

"It seems to me that you've been working too hard," said Waldo admonishingly. "May I have the privilege of taking you home? If you will give me your name and address, I—"

"My name is Mrs. Proud, and I live at 20, Maple Avenue, Wood End—that's in North London."

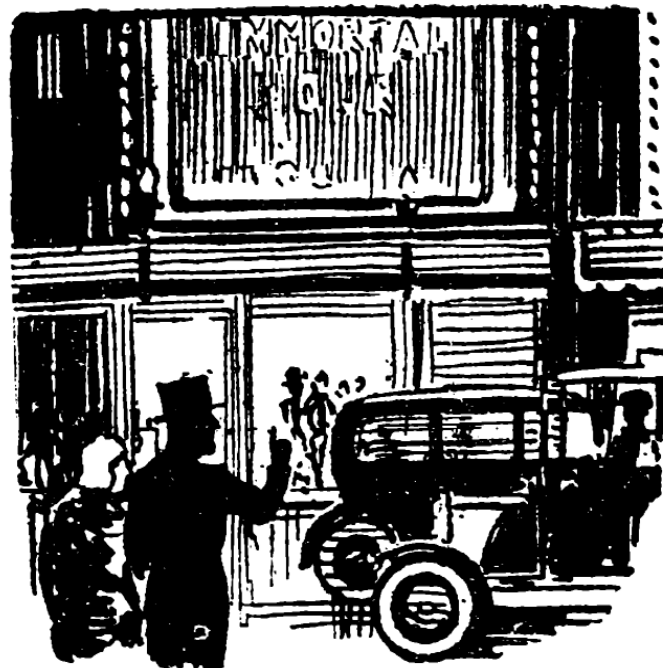
Waldo gave the address to the driver.

"That's better, Mrs. Proud," he said cheerfully. "My own name is—Williamson."

She was perturbed; for as she regained her normal balance, so she worried over the trouble she was causing this kindly gentleman.

"I work at Maxon's, the milliners, sir," she said nervously. "It's not regular work, and it's only in the evenings, and just lately I haven't been feeling too well. I think the strain must have been too great to-night. If you'll let me get out, sir, I can easily take a tram—"

"Dear lady, I won't hear of it,"



interrupted Waldo. "I shall not rest content until I have placed you safely in the bosom of your family—always taking it for granted, of course, that you have a family."

"Yes, sir, I have a husband and a daughter," said Mrs. Proud, a troubled look coming into her tired eyes. "I'm afraid Alfred will be dreadfully upset."

"You must let me have a word with Alfred," said Waldo cheerfully.

They said very little more during the drive to North London, for Mrs. Proud, leaning back in her seat, was obviously still unwell.

The taxi drove through the interminable suburbs, following one of the main tramway routes. At last the trams were left behind; and soon the taxi turned into a long avenue of old-fashioned villas. This was Maple Avenue, and the vehicle, with a jerk, stopped in front of No. 20.

"Oh, are we here?" asked Mrs. Proud, starting up in a flurry. "I don't know how to thank you, sir—"

"Splendid! Then you needn't even try," said Waldo, opening the door. "Come along! I'm going to see you right indoors, Mrs. Proud." He paid the taxi-man. "No, you needn't wait."

As they went up a short garden path, the taxi "chug-chugged" away. Waldo took note of the drab dwelling, with its unlighted windows. There wasn't even a light in the hall.

"You have a key?" said Waldo. "Let me open the door, please."

"Perhaps you'd better not see my husband, sir," whispered the woman. "He might not understand—"

A voice, loud and blustery, came from behind a closed door at the back of the hall.

"That you, Emma?"

"Yes, dear," called Mrs. Proud, taking a tight hold on Waldo's arm. "Please, sir, if you don't mind—"

"Well, why don't you come in?" came the voice. "What are you hanging about in the hall for? Peggy isn't home yet, and I'm supposed to get my own supper—"

It was at this moment that Waldo, taking Mrs. Proud with him, opened the door at the back of the hall. It led into the kitchen; and there, sprawling in a big chair at the table, was a stoutish, clean-shaven, elderly man. His face was florid, and there were bags under his eyes. He was coatless and collarless, and one cheek was bulging with food. Propped on the table in front of him was an evening paper, turned back at the racing page.

"Pardon the intrusion, sir," said Waldo politely. "Mr. Proud, I think?"

Mr. Proud, without altering his position, stared in bewilderment.

"Why, yes, that's my name—Alfred Mowbray Proud," he replied roughly. "What's happened? What's the idea of a toff like you bringing my old woman home?"

"Don't be cross, Alfred," said Mrs. Proud earnestly. "I came over queer, and—"

"Huh! Another of your attacks, eh?" growled Mr. Proud. "I thought you wasn't going to have any more. You haven't had one for four or five years. Took queer, were you?"

Waldo briefly explained—although he said nothing of Mrs. Proud's singular attack on Mr. Julian Vernon.

"I'm mighty obliged to you, sir," said the stout man. "That's what I call a real human, kindly act. Like as not the missus would have been taken to a hospital—an' look at the trouble that would have given me!"

"It wasn't so bad as that, Alfred—" began Mrs. Proud.

"You and your attacks!" said her husband, glaring. "You'll be losing your job next! Then where should we be?"

"Things aren't as bright as they might be, sir," said Mrs. Proud hurriedly, as she glanced at Waldo. "My husband can't find work anywhere. It's dreadfully scarce nowadays."

"Ah, things are bad, an' no mistake," said Mr. Proud, shaking his head. "It's a good thing for me that my daughter can earn her own livin' as a cashier. Starvation wages, though. I tell you, sir, it's as much as we can do to make ends meet. Can't even let our spare room."

"Now, Alfred, you mustn't worry the gentleman with our troubles," said Mrs. Proud hurriedly. "I'm sure he's been very kind. If there's anything I can do to repay you, sir—"

"I may be Proud by name, but I ain't proud by nature," interrupted the master of the house. "And when things is bad, why shouldn't we admit it, free an' open? There's no justice in this life! Some have plenty, an' some are left to struggle on an' the world don't care. And here's my missus, sir, comin' over queer an'—"

riskin' her job. What she needs is a month's rest, but that costs money and——"

"I'm all right, sir—really I am!" said Mrs. Proud, almost desperately. "You mustn't take any notice of what my husband is saying."

"Perhaps I'd better be going," said Waldo gently.

He understood perfectly. Mr. Proud was evidently a gentleman who believed in the golden principle of improving the shining hour. And Mrs. Proud was mortified by his eloquent hints.

"I know a real gent when I see one," said Mr. Proud loudly. "You're too stuck up, Emma—that's what's the matter with you. You know as well as I do that you need a rest, an' with a bit of money——"

"Hallo! Is dad spouting again?" came a cheerful, silvery voice from the hall. "If he's been nagging you, mother——"

The door had opened by this time, and the bright-faced girl who stood on the threshold broke off in momentary confusion at the sight of the immaculate stranger.

So this was Peggy. Waldo thoroughly approved of her. She was slim, extremely neat, and undeniably pretty.

"I'm awfully sorry!" she apologised. "I'd no idea you had a visitor."

"It's a pity you can't control your tongue, young lady!" said her father sourly. "I'm sure I don't know what this gentleman will think. Saying things like that about me!"

Waldo diplomatically beat a retreat. This family interested him greatly, but this was scarcely the occasion to improve their acquaintance. So he bade them a cheerful good-night, and left Mrs. Proud to explain matters to the confused Peggy.

He was shown to the door by Mrs. Proud, and after he had walked some distance down the quiet suburban street, whistling carelessly, he turned into a side road. Then he did a strange thing. Like a shadow he crept back on his own tracks, lurking in the cover of the hedges which bordered the gardens of the other villas. In the gateway of one house he paused, watching.

A figure came across the road, and at the gate of No. 20 it bent down and took careful note of the painted number on the top of the gate. Then it moved down the road again, making a note on an old envelope.

"H'm! Very interesting," murmured Rupert Waldo. "Now I wonder, Mr. Vernon, what interest a wealthy Turf man such as yourself can have in this humble family whose name is Proud? I thought your taxi was following mine! Very curious!"

Chapter 2. Old Luke.

AS Julian Vernon drove back towards the West End he was a vastly perturbed man. An astounding change had come over him, in fact. Fear, stark and dreadful, lurked in his eyes. And

No. 1,490—The Union Jack.



Edwy Searles Brooks.

(Author of "Blind Luke.")

THE present story brings to a reluctant close our six-week Tram-Depot Series; rings the sixth and last change on the theme of Alfred Mowbray Proud and his curious items of property found aboard a London tram.

Newcomers to this series should know that E. S. Brooks is one of a team of half a dozen writers who accepted the challenge to write a story based on the situation narrated on page 24.

Although this climax, with its intriguing accompaniments of fireman's helmet, procession-banner, pawn-tickets, and the rest was required to be embodied in every case, each author worked independently and produced a different story to account for it. The result has been a most fascinating display of our writers' ingenuity, and a collection of first-class stories.

The series is complete in issues dated April 2nd, 9th, 16th, 23rd, 30th, and the present number, and you are now invited to vote your preference as indicated on page 13.

Not only do the foregoing issues contain exceptionally interesting stories, but the full conditions of the authors' challenge are given. An appreciation of the full scheme will greatly increase your enjoyment of the present story.

For the benefit of those who did not order in advance, back numbers can be obtained either from newsagents or UNION JACK, Back Number Dept., Bear Alley, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4, price 3d. per copy, postage included. Please state dates required.

with it there was another look—a look of unbelieving wonder.

"It's impossible!" he muttered, again and again. "Absolutely impossible! Yet——"

Heddingham Court, Maida Vale, was a block of modern flats—sumptuous and exclusive. It was late when Julian Vernon dismissed his taxi. He walked heavily up the marble stairway to the second floor, for after midnight the lifts were not operated.

Letting himself into his flat, he switched on the lights and went into his study. His servants did not sleep on the premises, and he was quite alone.

A stiff whisky, neat, brought some colour back to his cheeks. He sat in an ornate padded chair, staring straight ahead of him.

"What the devil can I do about it?" he muttered, reaching for the decanter. "She's alive! And the shock may have brought her memory back——"

He broke off, appalled at the thought. He would have to do something. It

was a good thing he had kept his head, and had followed that other taxi. At least, he knew where she lived.

Rap! Rap, rap! Rap!

It was a curiously slow and deliberate knocking at the outer door of the flat. The effect upon Mr. Vernon was remarkable. He leapt to his feet with a hoarse oath, and the whole of his big body trembled from head to foot.

"No, no!" he panted. "I must be mad! It's imagination——"

Rap! Rap, rap! Rap!

It came again, and, with a smothered curse, Vernon strode down the little hall and flung open the front door.

On the landing stood the blind old match-seller of Shattisbury Avenue. Ragged, one side of his face horribly scarred, the left arm missing from the elbow, the beggar presented a far from prepossessing sight.

"Well, what the devil do you want?" demanded Vernon harshly.

"A second ghost from the past, eh?" said the blind man, in an even tone. "So we meet again, Briggerson!"

"You old fool, you don't know what you're talking about!" retorted the other. "My name is Vernon—Julian Vernon. I don't know you, and if you think you can pull your crooked tricks on me——"

"I may be blind, Briggerson, but my hearing is as good as ever," said the blind beggar. "Your voice has not altered much, and your manners are precisely the same. So you don't like your old friend Luke to call upon you? Poor old Luke! He's blind and he's helpless, although his tongue is still useful."

Vernon seemed to choke.

"All right, come in!" he muttered. "I can't talk to you here."

A light of diabolical evil had suddenly come into his eyes.

"This way—I'll guide you," he said briefly.

But instead of leading old Luke into the flat, he stepped across and opened the french windows which led directly off the landing on to the fire escape. Vernon had suddenly remembered that repairs were in progress, and instead of a stout guarding rail there was nothing but a rope. Sufficient to ensure the safety of any normal person; but a blind man . . .

"Come right in, Luke!" said Vernon cordially. "It's all clear; no raised threshold, or mat, or anything."

The blind man walked forward confidently, and, Vernon, standing aside, shook as with the ague. If somebody should come up the stairs at this moment! But once it was over there was nothing to connect this ragged old man with No. 75, and it would be thought that he had blundered out . . .

"What a treacherous rat you are, Briggerson!" said old Luke suddenly.

He had halted, a-quiver. And now, with uncanny accuracy, taking five or six swift steps backwards, aided by his stick, he placed his back against the solid wall, near the doorway of the flat.

"I—I don't know what you mean!" panted Vernon.

"You murderous devil!" shouted the blind man. "You haven't changed a bit! You thought you'd lure me through that open window——"

"For Heaven's sake, man, keep your voice down!" urged Vernon desperately. "Here, here! I was mad! I didn't mean to harm you."

He fairly pushed old Luke into the hall of the flat and slammed the door. Fortunately, nobody had been on the

staircase; nobody had overheard that brief scrap of dialogue.

"Why should you come here to-night of all nights!" muttered Vernon shakily. "Your coming is almost beyond belief. This is the second thing—"

"Yet, my old friend, it is part and parcel of the same coincidence," said the blind man. "Perhaps you didn't see me outside the theatre?"

"The theatre!" almost squeaked Vernon.

"But you wouldn't have recognised me then," said the other. "You wouldn't have recognised me at all unless I had called you by your right name. I've had that stand for fifteen years, Briggerson. Oh, yes, I heard her voice!" His own voice became harder. "Her voice! And I heard yours, and I heard this address. It's not so strange, is it? Quite simple now that I have explained."

"It—it was a mistake!" said Vernon impatiently. "That woman was an absolute stranger — a d e m e n t e d creature."

"Do you think I wouldn't know her voice?" asked old Luke contemptuously. "We thought she was dead, didn't we? Did you keep track of her? It's important, Briggerson."

"No, I didn't," interrupted the book-maker harshly. "And don't keep calling me Briggerson. My name's Julian Vernon. You'll get out of here, and you'll get quickly! As for that woman, I tell you you're mistaken. I don't know where she went, and I don't care. She was as mad as a hatter."

By this time they had got into the study, and Vernon was taking another stiff drink.

"You're a rotten host!" said the blind man. "Aren't you going to offer me something—for old time's sake?"

"Here, drink this!"

Vernon thrust a glass into his strange visitor's hand. Old Luke, the beggar, sniffed at it and then sipped.

"It's good whisky," he said. "I haven't tasted whisky for years, Briggerson. Life's funny, isn't it? In the old days we were partners. Now I'm a blind beggar, and you're living in luxury. And why am I blind? Have you forgotten that? You dirty rat! I might have died—"

"You'd better keep a civil tongue in your head!"

"I'm not afraid of you," went on old Luke. "I'm blind, and you can see. But I can see, too—in a different way. For years I've been waiting for this hour—"

"Don't get maudlin'," interrupted Vernon impatiently. "I can't go into any long explanations now. What do you want? Money? You're a beggar, so I suppose— All right, all right! Don't get sore! Here's ten pounds!"

He thrust a little bundle into the blind man's hand, and the gnarled old fingers closed round the notes greedily.

"Yes, yes—they're pound notes!" muttered old Luke. "I haven't forgotten what they feel like. Thanks, old pal! Now that we've come together again we might be partners, just as in the old days, eh?"

"Of course," said Vernon heartily. "Now that I've got in touch with you, Luke, I'll see that you have the best of everything. You can get about all right, can't you? Come here again to-morrow—at three o'clock in the afternoon, say—and I'll set you up properly. But go now. I—I'm expecting some friends, and they mustn't find you here."

"Friends—after midnight?"

"What's the time got to do with it?" retorted Vernon. "They're coming on from a night club. You've got to get out, Luke."

"I thought we'd have a talk over old times," said the blind beggar. "And what about her? You can't put me off—"

"Leave it until to-morrow!" broke in Vernon. "Those friends of mine mustn't find you here. You must go now. After all, you came up all right, so you can find your way out all right, too."

He propelled his visitor down the hall, and fairly thrust him out on to the wide, marble-floored landing.

"There you are—put your hand on the balustrade," he muttered. "You'll be all right now. And, for Heaven's sake, man, don't breathe a word of this to a soul! I'll help you—but only on condition you'll keep quiet."

"I'll keep quiet," said old Luke. "To-morrow afternoon, then? Good-night, Brig— Good-night, Mr. Vernon! You're a real gent, helping a poor old beggar like me!" And he laughed.

Vernon slammed the door with fury, for old Luke's voice had been full of mockery. Chuckling to himself, the blind man went down the noble staircase.

With uncanny sense of direction, he made accurately for the big doorway when he reached the bottom. He was totally blind, but long years of blindness had given him an added sense. He reached the street safely and found it empty.

It was a quiet thoroughfare—a select turning off Maida Vale. Somewhere close at hand there was a railway, for old Luke heard a train thunder noisily over a bridge.

He was walking along slowly, his stick "feeling" the edge of the kerb as he progressed. He went right along, past the lengthy range of buildings comprising Hedingham Court. At the moment he had the entire road completely to himself.

He had reached the corner, which was the far extremity of Hedingham Court, when he suddenly halted. A voice had sounded from somewhere above. The blind man raised his head—not because there was any possibility of seeing, but because it was a natural action, and he could hear the better. It had been Vernon's voice—calling from somewhere high above. Yet old Luke was more than a hundred yards away from Vernon's flat by now—

Without a sound, the blind beggar suddenly sagged at the knees, and fell into a crumpled heap on the pavement. An almost inaudible sound had come, followed by a curiously sharp and thin squeak. A ricochet of a bullet! And then—silence.

A police-constable, moving sedately on the other side of the road, not two minutes later, saw something black and still on the opposite pavement. He crossed over and reached the silent shape.

A man in rags, probably drunk— Turning the man over, the constable caught his breath in sharply.

There was a dark stain on the pavement, and in the centre of old Luke's forehead there was a hole.

Chapter 3.

The Mark on the Pavement.

THE shrill blast of a police-whistle caused Sexton Blake to ease his foot from the throttle of the Grey Panther. The big Rolls glided to a standstill.

"Sounds like trouble, young 'un!" said the famous detective crisply.

"Down this side turning, guv'nor!" exclaimed Tinker. "There you are! There's the whistle again! Shall we go?"

"Might as well," said Blake. "But it'll probably be nothing of importance."

He quickly reversed the Grey Panther, and a moment later it was purring down the quiet thoroughfare. Blake and Tinker, driving in from the country, had come by way of Cricklewood and the Edgware Road. They were both tired, but not too tired to ignore the insistent sound of a police-whistle.

And although they arrived on the scene before any other policemen, quite a little crowd of morbid sightseers had sprung as though from nowhere, and the young constable was hard put to it to keep them back.

"Now, look here, gentlemen," he protested, as the Grey Panther drew up beside the kerb. "It's bad enough for these people—"

"Keep your hair on!" interrupted Tinker. "This is Mr. Blake."

The constable stared, and then suddenly saluted.

"I'm glad you've come, Mr. Blake!" he exclaimed respectfully. "Didn't recognise you at first, sir. This man's dead—murdered, I think."

"Let's have a look at him," said Blake briefly.

He went down on one knee, and, meanwhile, much to the constable's relief, two of his colleagues had come running up. The crowd of people from the flats, which was now growing, was kept back.

"Yes, I think it must have been murder," said Blake, after a few moments. "He was killed instantaneously—and not at close range, either. Did anybody hear a shot?"

The constable explained how he had found the body.

"He couldn't have been dead long, sir—I came down this road myself five minutes ago, and he wasn't here then. Queer-looking old man—a beggar, I should think. Who'd want to kill a beggar?"

"This old man is old Luke," said Blake. "You remember him, Tinker? He's had his stand outside the Royalist Theatre, in Shaftesbury Avenue, for years."

"By jingo, guv'nor, you're right," said Tinker. "He's that blind match-seller, isn't he? I say, what a dirty shame! Who could have been devilish enough to murder a poor old chap like this?"

A police-inspector arrived at that moment, and he quickly took charge. He sent a policeman off to ring up for an ambulance, and also to get through to Scotland Yard. This was a case of murder—and a most unusual murder at that!

The dead man's pockets were searched, and two interesting discoveries were made. Firstly, there were the ten bank-notes—although this was really not such a remarkable discovery. Beggars have often been found to carry quite large sums of money on them. But the discovery of the ten pounds proved, at all events, that the old man had not been killed from motives of robbery.

The second find was really curious—a heavy gold charm, something like a swastika, beautifully engraved on the face, and evidently of great antiquity. It was so tarnished that it looked drab; but Blake knew, by the very weight,

that it was made of pure gold. It had been carefully wrapped in an old piece of black serge, and tied round and round with a shoelace, and it had been found at the bottom of an inner pocket.

With the arrival of the ambulance came a fast Flying Squad car, and the first man to leap from it was Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard, of the C.I.D. An expression of exasperated wonder came over his square-set face as he confronted Sexton Blake.

"Well, may I be boiled for a kippered haddock!" he ejaculated, somewhat confusedly. "What a beggar you are for scenting out these murders, Blake! You've got a nose as keen as Pedro's!"

"My dear man, I happened to be passing, that's all, and I heard the police-whistle," explained Blake.

There was some little delay while the Scotland Yard men made their examination. At last the body was lifted into the ambulance, and it drove off. There was still a considerable crowd, but there were plenty of constables to maintain control.

"Poor old Luke!" said Lennard, pursing his lips. "A thundering funny business, Blake! We've got him registered at the Aliens Office at Bow Street, of course. His name is Luke Cranson, an American by birth. He hung out in a lodging somewhere off Wardour Street—one of those Soho tenements. Quite a respectable old bird, I believe. Anyhow, we've never had anything against him."

Sexton Blake was looking curiously alert.

"This was found in one of his pockets, wrapped up in an old piece of cloth," he said. "What do you make of it, Lennard? Does it strike any chord?"

The inspector took the heavy gold ornament and examined it with much interest.

"A sort of charm," he commented. "Must be worth a bit. Gold, isn't it?"

"It is a fylfot," said Blake.

"A which?"

"A fylfot—and, in heraldry, that means the cross gambrion, or cramp-cross. It is really a form of the Oriental swastika."

"You talk like a dictionary," grumbled the Yard man. "But when you say swastika I can understand. A sort of luck charm, isn't it?"

"This one is a lucky or beneficent fylfot, yes," agreed Blake. "You will notice that the end of each limb of the cross protrudes to the right."

"Supposing they went the other way?"

"In that case it would be a 'black' or evil fylfot," replied Blake dryly. "Old Luke carried this, one would imagine, as a lucky charm. But I wonder?"

"What do you wonder?" asked Lennard, staring. "What's that you said about striking a chord?"

"Nothing—it doesn't matter," said Blake. "I dare say I was wrong, anyhow."

"Mysterious blighter, aren't you?" asked Lennard disrespectfully.

"You should take up the study of heraldry, Lennard," advised Blake. "I can assure you it is quite fascinating—and, indeed, highly instructive."

Lennard gained all the available information about the shooting—and that was practically nil. Police officers had been inquiring of the tenants in



Hands grasped her out of the blackness, and she was pulled violently within. The man on the pavement closed the door.

Heddingham Court who occupied the flats in this particular block. It was quite a different block from the one in which Mr. Vernon's flat was situated. Yet, in a way, all the blocks at Heddingham Court were connected by narrow staff buildings.

"Well, as I can see it, the old man was walking along this pavement, and he must have been shot at about fifty yards' range—and that means a rifle," said Lennard.

"How do you arrive at that interesting conclusion?" asked Blake.

"Because it's fifty yards from this spot to those bushes in the gardens yonder," said Lennard, nodding to some ornamental gardens on the other side of the road. "The murderer must have been lurking amongst those bushes, and he took advantage of the roar of a train passing over the bridge there. That would have drowned the shot all right."

"Quite an ingenious theory, but I'm afraid I shall have to spoil it," said Blake gently.

"And how are you going to do that?" demanded the other. "Your own common sense must tell you that the murderer wouldn't dare to come out

into the open, and there's no other cover near enough. A train passed over the bridge just before the body was found. I've found that out."

"I'm not denying it," said Blake. "I'm only telling you that the bullet which killed Luke Cranson was directed downwards—in fact, from the flat roof of Heddingham Court."

Lennard stared.

"That sounds a bit fantastic, old man!" he protested. "You know perfectly well that Cranson was shot clean through the forehead—and that means that the shot was fired horizontally."

"Unless the old man was looking upwards at the moment of the shot."

"Looking upwards!" repeated Lennard scornfully. "A blind man?"

"It's possible—even probable," said Blake. "Even blind men have ears; and if they hear something from above they instinctively raise their heads. Anyhow, the evidence is quite conclusive, Lennard. Look here!"

He directed Lennard's attention to a curious mark on one of the flagstones, practically in the middle of the pavement. There was a fairly deep indentation, almost a furrow dwindling away to nothingness in the direction of the pavement edge.

"That's where the bullet struck," said Blake quietly. "That proves it came from somewhere up above."

On his hands and knees, Lennard flashed a powerful torchlight on the spot.

"Great glory! I believe you're right!" he admitted. "This is a bullet mark, sure enough—and there's still some stone dust on the edges."

"That means that the bullet passed right through Luke Cranson's head, struck this paving-stone, and then ricocheted off across the road somewhere. If old Luke hadn't looked up, blind though he was, the bullet would have struck him on the top of the head."

"But by turning his face upwards, he received a certain death-dealer," nodded Lennard. "What does that indicate to you, Blake? Surely that somebody must have called him from the roof?"

"That's what it looks like," agreed Blake.

"Man alive! Why didn't you tell me about this before? I could have had that roof searched—"

"I know you'll pardon the liberty, Lennard, but I suggested that search to the police inspector before you arrived," said Blake gently. "I believe at least three officers went up immediately."

This proved to be the case. The officers in question reported that they had found nothing unusual—not even a footprint. The roof was flat, and the leads were clean. It was equally possible, too, that the shot had been fired from one of the upper windows of that block.

Julian Vernon's flat was so far distant that there wasn't the remotest chance of him being connected with the crime. Yet the fact was that Vernon, as soon as old Luke had gone, had armed himself with a powerful air-gun, and had hurried to the roof, passing from one block of flats to the other until he reached the far extremity. He had acted on impulse, scarcely realising the deadly risk he took.

"The murder itself is singular enough," observed Sexton Blake. "But there are other singular features, too. What was this blind beggar doing so very far from his pitch, and his lodging?"

"It's a rum business," said the chief inspector, inevitably.

"By the way, do you mind if I take possession of that fyfot?"

"I wouldn't trust it with anybody else," said Lennard. "You can have it if you like, Blake. But you'll take care of it, won't you? I'm off back to the Yard to report."

"Greater care, perhaps, than you would," replied Blake, and there was a strangely grim note in his voice.

HE was silent as he and Tinker drove to Baker Street in the Grey Panther. Tinker could not quite make him out. It was a strange little problem, certainly; but Sexton Blake seemed to be taking an inordinate amount of interest in it. He could not have been keener if the murdered man had been a multi-millionaire, instead of a blind and crippled beggar.

While Tinker took the car to the garage, Blake admitted himself to his famous dwelling, and, mounting the stairs, was rather astonished to see a light glowing beneath the door of the consulting-room. He walked in to find Rupert Waldo taking his case in the best chair.

"Pardon the liberty, dear old friend," said the Peril Expert. "But as Mrs. Bardell happened to be up, she was gracious enough to admit me—although I must confess she cast more than one anxious glance at the silver."

"You know I'm always glad to see you, and you're welcome, but what in the world are you doing here, Waldo? Are things prospering with you?"

The Wonder Man grunted.

"They are prospering—backwards," he replied. "You behold an embittered man, Blake, a disillusioned man—a fed-up-to-the-teeth man. I give you my

honest word, I have been on the verge during the last month or two of committing a really nice juicy crime. Not because I'm in need, mind you, but because I can't live without an occasional thrill or so."

Blake looked at him very seriously—for he knew that Waldo was not bluffing.

"As bad as that, old chap?" he asked. "I'm sorry."

"As a Peril Expert, I'm a first-class fizzle," said Waldo. "I'm not fooling myself any longer, Blake. I called myself a Peril Expert to be different from you. But, after all, what is the difference? And who'd think of coming to me while you are available? And people know of my past record, too." He shrugged. "However, I didn't come here to howl into your sympathetic ear. I just thought you'd like to know the name of the man who murdered that blind beggar."

Sexton Blake looked at his visitor in surprise.

"How do you know about the blind beggar?" he asked. "Or rather, how do you know that I know?"

"Ah, Blake, you aren't the only one who knows things," replied Waldo, smiling. "The fact is I rang up the Yard a couple of minutes ago on your phone, and got on to Lennard. He told me you were there, and all about it."

"Do you know the name?" Blake demanded.

"Julian Vernon, of 75, Hedingham Court."

"Upon my word, Waldo, you are very positive about it?"

"I'm positive because I'm satisfied that he is the murderer," said Waldo. "I can't prove it—but that's up to you. I just dropped in to give you the tip."

"But how did you know that I was interested in the case?"

"Apart from what Lennard told me, because I was practically on the spot when the murder happened," replied the Wonder Man quietly. "About three hundred yards away, to be exact, up a side turning. I did not hear the shot, but I saw the old man fall. Noticing a policeman I thought it better not to butt in. It was too late then, anyhow."

"Did you see this man Vernon?"

"No."

"Then how do you know that he is in any way connected with the crime?"

"Because Julian Vernon was emerging from the Royalist Theatre to-night at the same time as myself," replied Waldo. "He gave the address to the taxi driver in a loud voice, and I did not fail to notice the manner in which old Luke dropped three of his boxes of matches. Now, that's far too tall to be a coincidence. Old Luke heard that address given, and, what is more, he paid a visit to No. 75. I saw him enter, and saw him depart."

"You are an important witness, Waldo," said Blake earnestly. "Vernon! That name seems familiar— Why, of course, Julian Vernon, the Turf accountant."

But not a word did Waldo say about Julian Vernon's trip to Wood End. He had a certain idea of his own regarding the Proud family.

If, as Waldo believed, there was to be some excitement, he wasn't prepared to share it—even with Blake.

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Chapter 4. The New Lodger.

THE next afternoon there was a new lodger at No. 20, Maple Avenue, Wood End, N.

He was an elderly, shabby-genteel man, giving the name of Mr. Walter Owen—a man with greying hair and a big white moustache somewhat marred by tobacco staining. He appeared to be a gentleman who had “come down in the world,” and, having bargained for Mrs. Proud’s spare room in the morning, he moved in during the early afternoon.

Waldo, for a change, was thoroughly enjoying himself.

Even if this novel masquerade of his came to nothing, he was at least engaged on a job of *some* kind. It did not quite come within his stipulated category. He couldn’t see any perils in the offing. But, these days, he wasn’t very particular. And he really did believe that there was something big behind that strange encounter which he had witnessed outside the Royalist Theatre.

The Wonder Man was sick of inactivity, and this little case, by very reason of his long idleness, assumed an importance which was really out of proportion. Still, there was that feeling in Waldo’s bones—a feeling that he was not wasting his time.

Mrs. Proud, who worked at the milliner’s only in the evenings, was very elated at this unexpected piece of luck, for she had been trying to let that room for weeks. Never for an instant did she suspect that her new lodger was the very man who had brought her home the previous night. Waldo’s make-up was masterly, as was his acting also.

This Mr. Owen was an accommodating gentleman. He was quite agreeable to taking his meals with the family; he made no stipulations as regards food, saying that he would be content with anything that was going, and he urged Mrs. Proud not to make any alteration to the ordinary household menu.

Mr. Alfred Mowray Proud, who was pottering about the garden when the new lodger moved in, made himself exceedingly agreeable. His first suggestion when Waldo joined him was that they should “pop round the corner” for a drink. Unfortunately, Mrs. Proud overheard this, and she promptly scotched the suggestion.

“Now, Alfred, you shouldn’t suggest things like that!” she protested. “Perhaps Mr. Owen isn’t a drinking man.”

“I like my drop of Scotch, ma’am,” said Mr. Owen in a tired, heavy voice.

He professed to be a little deaf—a useful affliction—and Mrs. Proud had purposely spoken loudly.

“Trust the women to interfere!” muttered Mr. Proud sourly.

Waldo affected not to hear. Mr. Proud, deftly emptying the shag out of his pouch so that it was loose in his pocket, produced the empty pouch and prepared to fill his pipe.

“There!” he exclaimed. “I’m out of tobacco. Well, I dare say it’ll do me good—”

“Perhaps you’d like a pipe of mine, sir?” suggested Waldo, producing his own pouch.

Mr. Proud said that it was very kind of him, and, producing a pocket-knife, he scraped out his pipe—so that the bowl would hold more—and rammed as much tobacco into it as it would hold.

This act, Waldo soon discovered, was characteristic of this man. He was a past-master in the art of sponging.

He was equally good at loafing. Whilst professing to be busy on the “bit of gardening,” he actually did nothing but gossip with the new lodger. He was bitter on the subject of unemployment. He regarded himself as a man with a grievance. His conversation ranged from gibes against the Government to the gossip of the saloon bar of the Green Man and the possible chances of sundry horses which were running in that day’s races.

“It’s a rare fight to exist nowadays, Mr. Owen,” he said, as he arrayed himself picturesquely on the garden fence. “Work? Where can an honest, industrious man find a job? My age is against me, too. I’d be willing to take anything—anything. But I’ve tramped



from district to district until I’ve worn out my shoe-leather.”

“Yes, the times are very difficult,” agreed Waldo, sadly shaking his head.

“My missus don’t understand,” proceeded Mr. Proud, with a touch of indignation. “And if she seems mean, Mr. Owen, you mustn’t think too hardly of her. What with things bein’ tight as they are, she has to be careful. Won’t even allow me a box of matches,” he added, as he produced a little “match-book” and tore off a cardboard stick. “I get these free down at the Green Man. If it wasn’t too late, I could give you a first-class tip for the two forty-five,” he went on at a tangent. “Highflyer. She’s an absolute cert, and a good price, too.”

It only took Waldo a few minutes to get the exact “number” of Mr. Alfred Mowray Proud. He was a slacker, a good-for-nothing, a won’t-work, and he was perfectly content to let his wife and daughter have the undisputed monopoly of bread-winning for the family. Before he had known Waldo half an hour he was actually hinting at borrowing money. But Waldo affected to be very deaf on that subject.

Professing that he generally took an hour’s nap in the afternoon, Waldo went to his room, and Mr. Proud, somewhat disconsolate at his non-success, retired into the kitchen, there to get the length of his wife’s tongue. Waldo, who was very much on the alert, heard everything that ensued.

“I’m warning you, Alfred!” said Mrs. Proud angrily. “I won’t put up with your ways much longer! Our last lodger left because you kept borrowing half-crowns from him. Mr. Owen hasn’t been in the house an hour before you start the same game!”

“I never borrowed anything!” protested her husband in a surly voice.

“But you tried. And it’s a good thing

Mr. Owen is deaf!” said the unhappy woman. “Oh, you make me boil! You’re always complaining about the bad state of the country and how difficult it is to get a job. But how often do you try? All you think about is betting and your good-for-nothing friends at the public-house!”

“That’s a lie!” said Mr. Proud hotly. “Look here!” He produced, with triumph, a long list of names and addresses written on a sheet of paper torn from an exercise-book, and with it was a map of the Underground Railway and a map of the L.C.C. tramway systems. “See them? I’ve got ’em all ready.”

“Yes?” said his wife wearily. “Ready for what?”

“Let me have half-a-crown, and I’ll show you!” said Mr. Proud. “I’ve marked all these jobs—took ’em out of the morning’s paper. In all parts of London, they are, but I can’t go round without fare money, can I?”

“If I give you the money you’ll go straight to the Green Man—and spend it on drink!” said Mrs. Proud impatiently. “Haven’t you done the same thing before? Do you think I’m deceived by those silly maps? I know you, Alfred!”

“That’s right—nag away!” said the stout man sullenly. “That’s all you can do—nag. Nag from morning till night!”

“At least I earn some money to keep a roof over our heads!” Mrs. Proud was stung to retort. “What a blessing it is that Peggy is such a good girl! What should we do without her money? How many girls, do you think, give their earnings to their parents? And what do you do? Loaf about, week in and week out—spending your time either at the public-house or parading up and down the streets with a lot of roughs.”

“Now, look here, Emma—”
“I’m sick of it!” she burst out passionately. “I wouldn’t mind so much if you and your friends were genuinely unemployed. But they’re just members of your own crowd; you call yourselves a brotherhood or something, don’t you? And you go about waving banners, asking for sympathy—asking for justice!” She breathed hard. “Justice! If there was any real justice you’d be made to work!”

“You’d better shut your mouth,” snarled Proud with sudden fury. “This is a nice way to go on, the first afternoon the new lodger comes in!”

“I can’t help it,” said his wife. “It’s because of the new lodger that I’m talking like this. You shan’t try to borrow money from him, Alfred! You shan’t drive him away, as you’ve driven the others away. His little bit of extra money is more help than you realise.”

Mr. Proud snorted.
“You’re a fine one to talk about money,” he fumed. “How often do you give me a shilling for tobacco? Every penny I get I have to beg! And yet you buy a new carpet for that old fool!”

“It’s only a small one—a cheap one; I had to put something on the floor for him.”

“And Peggy,” went on Mr. Proud sourly. “What the devil does she want buying a mandoline for herself? A mandoline, if you please! And her poor old father can’t buy a smoke! I’m only a drudge about this house—I’m expected to do all the odd jobs. Is it my fault that I can’t find work?”

“All right—all right,” said Mrs. Proud in a tired voice. “If you’re short of tobacco, Alfred, here’s a shilling. Now do let me get on with some work.”

Mr. Proud, triumphant, retired with the shilling.

AFTER tea, which Waldo shared with Mr. and Mrs. Proud, Peggy came home from work. It was the first she knew of the new lodger, and having inspected Mr. Walter Owen, she passed him with smiling approval. He was elderly, he was a bit dodderly, and he was somewhat deaf. An ideal lodger in every way—since all lodgers, as a matter of course, are necessary evils.

Waldo was more than ever charmed with Miss Peggy. How she could be the daughter of such a man as Mr. Proud astonished him. It was quite obvious that Peggy was contemptuous of her father; she regarded him as a mere nobody. And who could blame her? Since her earliest recollections she had known him to be a good-for-nothing idler. It was for her mother's sake, and her mother's sake only, that she helped so generously with the house-keeping.

A staunch girl—a little brick from the toes of her dainty feet to the crown of her shapely head.

"Well, mother, I'm off to Muriel Anderson's," she said, after she had helped Mrs. Proud with the washing-up—during which time Waldo and Mr. Proud gossiped in the untidy garden. "Muriel's a darling. She's just marvellous with the mandoline, you know, and she's teaching me. She thinks that I shall be good enough for the orchestra by the end of next month."

"That's splendid, darling," said Mrs. Proud gently.

"We're going to make some money, too," went on Peggy, with confidence. "It's Muriel's idea. A real ladies' orchestra, mother! And, of course, it will be terribly select. Anything to get a little extra money in, eh?"

"You're a good, sweet girl," said Mrs. Proud, the tears starting to her eyes.

"Don't be silly, mother," laughed Peggy. "I think it's too lovely for words! You'll be gone when I get back, I expect, so I'll kiss you good-bye now. Don't be late, dear. And I do hope you'll get back all right—without bothering kind gentlemen to bring you home in taxi-cabs!"

She was soon off, gay and happy.

Later on, Mrs. Proud went off to the train, to go to her evening work; and Mr. Proud, left in sole possession of the establishment, invited the lodger to pop round to have one. The lodger declining, Mr. Proud next suggested a game of chess—with a trifle on it just to give it an interest.

Here Mr. Proud bought a pup; for he strongly fancied himself at chess, and he cherished sanguine hopes of wiping the lodger off the board. It wasn't long, however, before Mr. Proud found himself in considerable trouble, having lost a castle, a bishop, and so many pawns that even his queen was in deadly danger.

Fortunately, a knock at the door saved him from utter disaster.

"Who can that be, I wonder?" asked Mr. Proud, frowning. "It's too late for the laundry—it doesn't come to-day, anyhow."

"Shall I go?" asked Waldo obligingly.

"Perhaps you'd better; and if it's anybody asking for money, tell 'em the family's out. You know how things are, Mr. Owen."

Waldo went to the door, and he did not turn a hair when he saw Mr. Julian Vernon on the step. It was not in the least remarkable that Mr. Vernon did not recognise the shabby, elderly man as the immaculate



individual who had escorted Mrs. Proud home the previous night.

"Mr. Proud?" asked Vernon, eyeing Waldo doubtfully.

"No, no," said Waldo. "My name is Owen, sir—I lodge here."

"Oh, I want to see Mr. Proud—and my business is important," said the visitor. "It is also private."

"Perhaps you'll come into the sitting-room, sir?" suggested Waldo politely. "I'll tell Mr. Proud you're here."

Having ushered the visitor into the sitting-room, he went back to the kitchen. Mr. Proud was frantic.

"Didn't I tell you to send him off?" he whispered hoarsely. "Some fellow after a bill, I expect."

"He didn't say so, and that's why I let him in," replied Waldo in a mild voice. "I'm sorry, Mr. Proud. You'll have to see him now."

Proud went into the sitting-room, and for some time only a low murmur of conversation came to Waldo's ears. Those ears of his were extraordinarily acute, yet he heard nothing tangible from the kitchen, and he dared not go out into the hall. Those two men in the sitting-room were talking in voices scarcely above a whisper.

Waldo was annoyed—disappointed. Ever since Mrs. Proud had left the house he had expected Julian Vernon to call. The man had not dared to come while the woman was there, lest she should create another scene. As Waldo saw it, she had almost grasped some elusive memory from the past that had slipped through her fingers; some grim secret of Vernon's past. Vernon had

killed Luke Cranson because of that same secret.

Vernon's arrival meant, in fact, that the Peril Expert's judgment was sound. He was not wasting his time here. This case was Big, with a capital B. He tiptoed across the room and put his ear close against the wall.

"No, no—I couldn't! It's madness!"

"Keep your voice down, you fool!"

Those words came to Waldo's ears, for the two men had uttered them in normal tones. A moment later soft footsteps sounded, and in a twinkling Waldo was in the kitchen armchair, his chin on his chest. Mr. Proud peeped in, closed the door, and went back. Waldo heard the sitting-room door close, and in a flash he was at the kitchen door again with his ear to the wall.

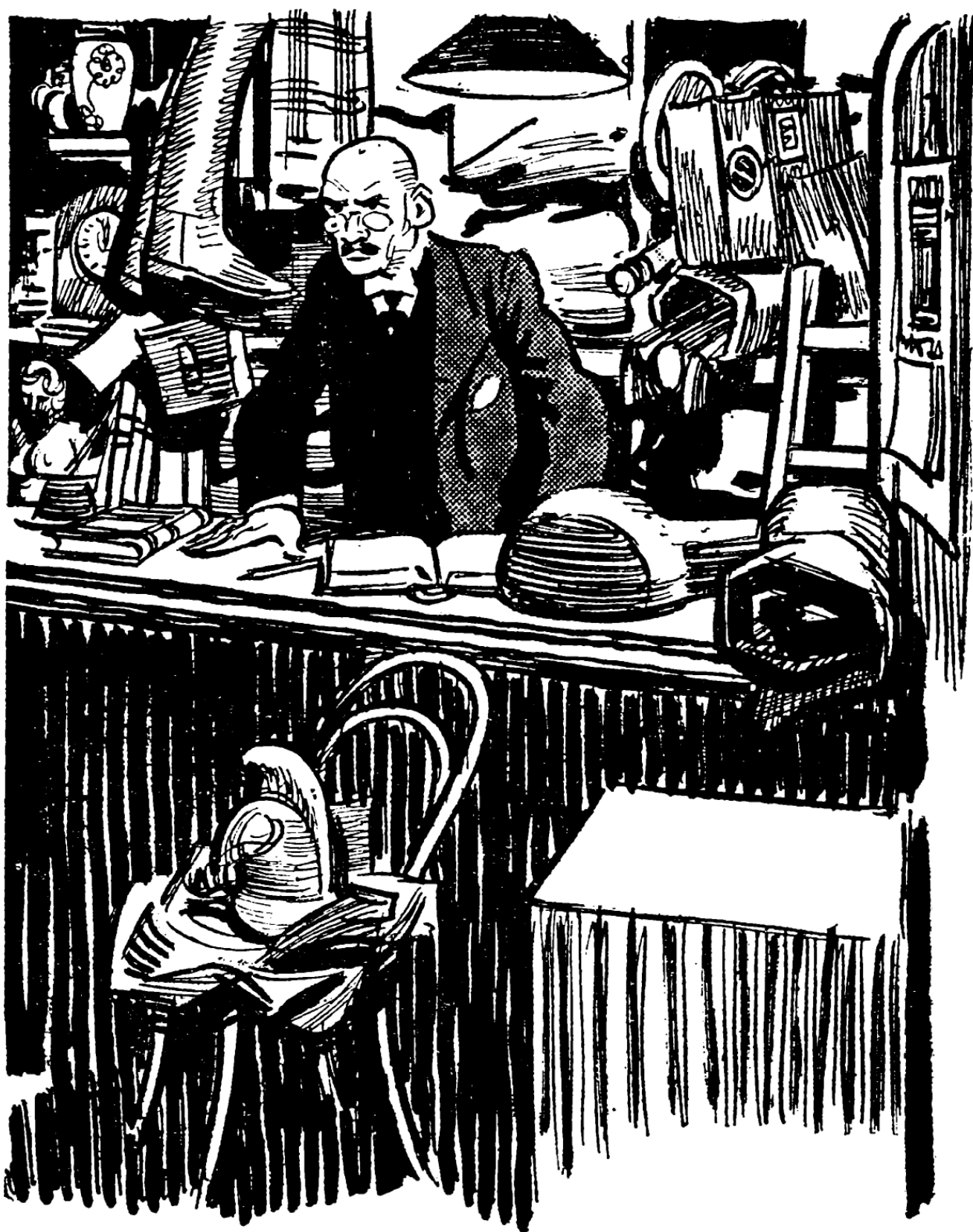
"It's all right—the old fool's asleep," came Proud's shaky voice. "You've knocked me all of a heap over this. We daren't do it. It's too risky. It would mean gaol—"

"You big fool!" came Vernon's voice. "It means money—more money than you've ever had in your life."

Their voices dropped again, and only a dull, monotonous murmur came to the lodger's ears.

Unexpectedly the conversation came to an end. Proud, coming into the kitchen for his coat, tiptoed. But Waldo was again in the chair, and pretended to awaken.

"Warm this evening," he commented. "Must have dropped off. Your visitor gone, Mr. Proud?"



"What about this banner? It's silk——" "Imitation silk and cotton!" said the pawnbroker contemptuously.

"No; just going," said the big man. "Popping round the corner for a drink, in fact."

"I think I'll come with you," said Waldo, rising creakily to his feet. "No objections, I suppose, Mr. Proud?" Amiable and slightly doddering, he forced himself upon them. He had not failed to notice the change in the master of the house. Gone was Mr. Proud's former placidity. He looked shrunken. His face was now haggard and desperately pale. His eyes shone with fear.

"Let the old boy come," whispered Vernon. "It'll look better; and we can shake him off just as soon as we like. Bit deaf, isn't he?"

Waldo heard the words perfectly, and, inwardly, he smiled. Shaking him off would not prove so easy.

They all went out after Mr. Proud had locked the back door. At the end of the road they turned into a main thoroughfare, where the L.C.C. trams were in evidence. The Green Man, with garish lights, stood on a corner. Next to it there was a tobacconist's and news-agent's, then a baker's, then a butcher's, then a sweetstuff shop, and an oil-shop, and a little draper's. A typical suburban shopping centre. It was what is called in best suburban circles, a parade.

Maple Avenue remained quiet for some time. A big limousine was stand-

ing near the end of the road, evidently waiting for somebody. A doctor's car, perhaps.

Twenty minutes elapsed. Then Peggy Proud, carrying her mandoline case, turned out of the main thoroughfare. She reached home, and had opened the front door, and had put her mandoline case on the hall chair, when she heard a voice. She turned in surprise, to find the limousine standing opposite the little gate. A man, hat in hand, was standing against the gate itself.

"May I have a word with you, Miss Proud?" he said politely.

The girl went to the gate rather puzzled, but without a suspicion.

"What is it?" she asked quickly. "Your mother is in the car, Miss Proud," said the man. "I'm afraid she's rather ill——"

"Oh!" interrupted the girl. She ran to the car and half-stepped in. Hands grasped her out of the blackness, and she was pulled violently within. One hand was clapped over her mouth so that no sound could escape.

The man on the pavement closed the door, got in beside the driver, and the limousine glided away.

Chapter 5.

The Golden Fylfot.

SEXTON BLAKE and Tinker had had a busy day, much to the lad's mystification. Blake, for some reason which Tinker could not fathom, had interested himself vastly in the late Mr. Luke Cranson, beggar.

It was a somewhat disappointing quest, for although Blake probed deeply into old Luke's history, he made little or no progress. The blind matchseller, as far as Blake could discover, had led a blameless life. It was his earlier history that Blake attempted to investigate; but, apparently, old Luke had no earlier history. Where he had come from prior to his match-selling days remained a closed book.

"Well, we shall have to turn our attention to Mr. Vernon," said Blake, in the early evening. "And Mr. Vernon should prove an interesting subject."

"But why are you going to all this trouble, gov'nor?" asked Tinker. "It seems so—so objectless."

"You ought to know by this time, young 'un, that I never do things without an object," replied Blake. "And if my object is only to hang the murderer of a blind beggar, it is still a good object."

"Of course," agreed Tinker. "But there's more in it than that."

"A great deal more," agreed Sexton Blake placidly.

He handed Tinker the quaint golden fylfot.

"Have a look at that, young 'un," he advised. "Neither Lennard nor I noticed the inscription last night; but it's quite interesting."

"Inscription, gov'nor?" said Tinker.

He moved across to the window, and now he saw some very faint scratchings on the back of the golden charm. Holding it slantwise, he was just able to decipher the untidy words:

"Ten thousand pounds—or death!"

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "What does it mean, gov'nor?"

"A somewhat grim message—on a luck charm," commented Blake. "A little idea has just occurred to me, Tinker. Run round and fetch the car, will you? I'll take that trinket."

Tinker was away about a quarter of an hour, and when he got back he found an exceedingly shabby individual, a down-and-out in the consulting-room. It was some moments before he recognised Blake.

"What on earth are you up to, gov'nor?" he asked, staring.

"I am going to try a little experiment," replied Sexton Blake coolly. "I want you to take the car to Maida Vale; have it standing in the main road, not more than a quarter of a mile from Hedingham Court. If I want you, I shall know where to find you. You'd better put the hood up, as we may desire privacy later."

Blake went off immediately, and, travelling by bus, he went to Maida Vale. He had already made some discreet inquiries regarding Mr. Julian Vernon's movements, and he had learned that the Turf accountant usually arrived home between six and seven.

Blake was hanging about outside Hedingham Court just before six, and this evening Mr. Vernon was early. He came by taxi, and as soon as he had paid the cab off, Blake hurried forward.

"Hold 'ard, gov'nor!" he said hoarsely.

Vernon, who was about to enter the palatial block of flats, half-turned, frowning.

"I've got nothing for you!" he said brusquely.

"I ain't beggin', sir," protested Blake. "I'm a pal of old Luke Cranson's—the poor blind cove what was done in outside these flats last night."

Mr. Vernon seemed to have some difficulty in swallowing.

"What's that to do with me?" he asked harshly.

"Nothing, gov'nor, of course—no need to get so shirty," said Blake. "But you bein' a prosperous-lookin' gent, I thought you might be willin' to buy something. It once belonged to old Luke—an' he give it me weeks ago to take care of. Seein' as he's dead, there won't be no 'arm in sellin' it—to a gent what might know its worth."

"I'm not buying anything!" snapped Vernon. "Unless you get away from here, I'll call a policeman—"

He broke off suddenly, staring with a fixed, fascinated gaze at the golden fylfot, which Blake had just removed from his pocket.

"There it is, gov'nor—solid gold, too," said Blake eagerly. "I dunno what it is—a sort o' charm, I think. Old Luke said—"

"Never mind what he said," broke in Vernon. "You want to sell this, eh? Huh! It's not worth much."

He reached out his hand for it, and Blake could see that that hand was trembling. And the detective knew that his shot had gone home.

"Let me have it!" said Vernon impatiently.

"You won't try no tricks, gov'nor? I come by it honest—"

"Don't be a fool! Let me see it!"

Vernon took it, and he tried hard to appear unconcerned.

"I don't really want it, but I'll give you a pound," he said carelessly.

"'Ere, 'old 'ard!" protested Blake, with scorn. "None o' them tricks, Shylock! A quid? Why, the gold itself is worth four or five! I could pawn this for four quid!"

"How do I know it's gold?" retorted Vernon. "Look here, I'll take a chance—I'll give you a fiver!"

"Done, gov'nor!" said Blake eagerly.

With a hasty look up and down, Julian Vernon took some notes from his pocket, and counted five. He thrust them into Blake's hands, took the fylfot, and they parted without another word.

Five minutes later Blake stepped into the Grey Panther.

"Drive slowly towards Hedingham Court, and pull up so that we can keep an eye on the main entrance of the end block," he instructed. "If Vernon comes out before I'm ready, follow."

"Right, gov'nor," said Tinker.

He did as he was ordered, and Blake, meanwhile, by performing a few gymnastics—for the space was limited—effected a slight transformation. In a word, he became himself.

"You might let a chap into the secret, gov'nor," complained Tinker, after he had brought the car to a standstill.

"I'll tell you this much, young 'un—I sold the golden charm to our excellent friend, Mr. Julian Vernon."

"What!" ejaculated Tinker. "Sold it?"

"For five pounds cash."

"But you told Mr. Lennard—"

"I'm very much afraid that Lennard would have a very bad fit if he knew what I had done," chuckled Blake. "But what the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve about. The fylfot is perfectly safe with Mr. Vernon—I know where I can put my hand on it at any moment. It is, in a way, a sprat to catch a mackerel."

"Even now I don't understand," complained Tinker.

(Continued on page 16.)

WHO DID IT BEST?

To refresh your memory for purposes of casting your vote in our Tram Series Popularity Contest, we give below a brief outline of the way each of the team of six authors respectively handled the problem of the death of Mr. Proud on the London tram-top.



In GILBERT CHESTER'S story, an agitator named Aske is enmeshed by that crooked couple, the Hales. Into a plot whereby they intend to blackmail him. Alfred Proud, previously victimised by Aske, blunders into the conspiracy, but dies from shock. As the crooks have also the dying agitator on their hands, they dump Proud on a tram with the banner and other articles, including the pawntickets. None of the articles were his. They were left with his body to confuse Blake, and to implicate two of the Hales' innocent catspaws and thus ensure their silence.

In his version, introducing Zenith the Albino, ANTHONY SKENE creates a gang of burglars whose method is to open their victims' safes by means of duplicate keys obtained from the makers. Robberies occur behind the smoke-screen of a curious organisation calling themselves the Crusaders, with an unknown chief. This chief turns out to be mythical, the actual moving spirit being Mr. Proud, whom Blake corners aboard the tram, where it was his habit to meet his gang-members nightly. Proud used the properties of the helmet, banner, etc., as a blind.



G. H. TEED links his tram-problem with the convicts' revolt at Wakehurst Prison. Alfred Proud has a letter from his brother, the convict ringleader, asking him to obtain various articles (the helmet, and so forth) which the brother pawned before going into prison. One of these—the hollow banner pole—is later found to contain money and information to be used to stage a second uprising. Blake accosts Alfred Proud on the tram, but they are both knocked out, Proud fatally, by a gas bomb thrown by an enemy of the convict who wishes to prevent his release.



The Witches' Moon, in DONALD STUART'S yarn, is an abandoned inn where stolen property has been secreted. In this case also Alfred Proud is a brother of another character in the plot, who reveals to him before dying that the key to the location of the loot is written on a certain tram. He locates this, but is tracked by Blake. One of the rival crooks arrives and causes Blake's unconsciousness and Proud's death, but Blake afterwards decodes the cypher by means of an inscription in the helmet and, despite a second attempt to regain it, recovers the loot from the inn.



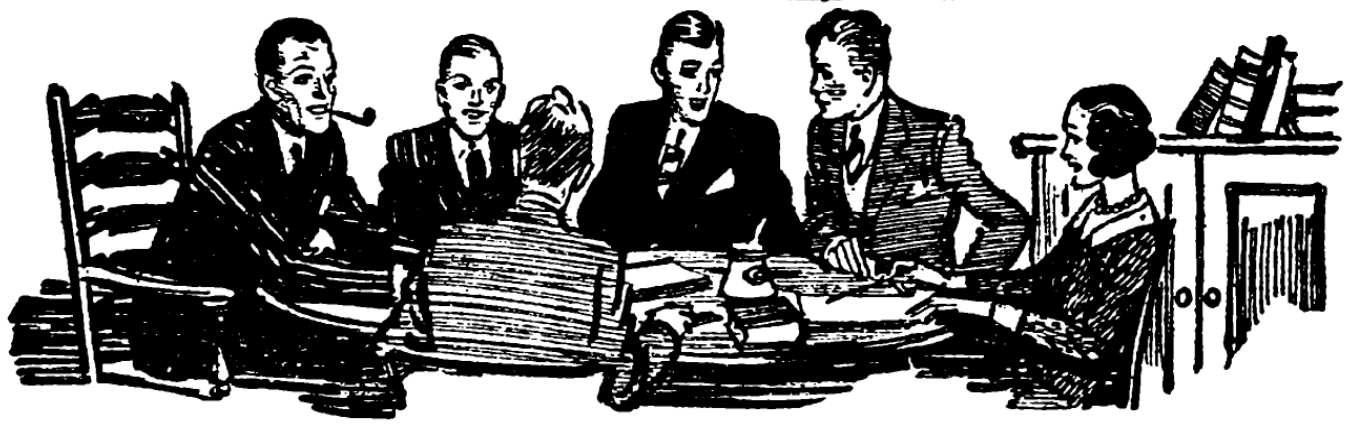
GWYN EVANS combines the Tram theme and his Onion Men Series. Proud murders his wife in Sheffield by striking her with a big iron key used as a poker. On the trail of this key (as of others similar) is a Breton onion-seller, who dogs Proud to London, intent only on obtaining the key, whereas the murderer believes he knows about the murder. Sexton Blake, primarily concerned with the onion-seller, accosts Proud on the tram. The Onion Man knocks Blake out, and Proud dies of fright. The helmet, banner, etc., were connected with Proud's job as a theatrical super.



The Proud Tram Mystery, according to E. S. BROOKS (as told fully in this issue), revolves round the kidnapping of a peer's daughter, since babyhood brought up as the daughter of Proud. The original kidnappers trace her, and prevail on her reputed father to negotiate with the peer for her return. The proof of identity (a gold swastika) Proud loses aboard a tram and, having no money for his fare to the peer's residence, tries to pawn various household ornaments. Confronted by Blake, Proud attacks him on the tram, but dies from heart failure.



THE ROUND TABLE



WELL, here is Alfred Mowbray Proud again, for the last time.

Hail and farewell!

Although he has persisted in cropping up inevitably through the chances and changes of the last half-dozen stories, there is not the slightest reason to believe he has outstayed his welcome.

On the contrary, if I can judge from the plaudits these tales have earned already—they are not all on publication by the time this last of them goes to press—"U. J." readers have learned to like him, and the more they get of him the better.

A figure of speech, this, in a way. What "U. J." readers have really been enjoying are the ingenious twists and turns of the plots woven by Messrs. Chester, Skene, Teed, Stuart, Evans, and Brooks, to account for the man's strange cargo, and his death aboard the London tram.

No doubt whatever about it; this

series has been a success. We expected as much when the idea was originally broached, and eventually worked out. It was quite a novel experiment, and its hundred-per-cent entertainment value provides another proof that the "U. J." is on its toes all the time to keep its readers happily supplied with something better than they can get elsewhere.

When you have read this week's final Tram Story you will inevitably be inclined to compare it and its predecessors with each other; to sort them out and see which appealed to you most, and why. We are catering for that natural impulse, too, as you already know.

It's a simple matter to place the yarns in order of merit, and write out the names of the authors. Go to it, then. There's a coupon provided, and a prize as well—and no reason why you shouldn't have a shot at it.

Can't you imagine what a kick you'd get, being the owner of a real bloodhound! Maybe Tinker has got used to

the distinction of having Pedro to lead about, but think of the thrills of having a Pedro of your own! What would you call him, anyway? You can think up the name in advance, because the better it is, the more chance you stand of winning him, if your coupon is among those which forecast the general run of the voting.

Perhaps, though, you'd prefer Ten Pounds in Cash? Well, the choice is yours. We want everyone who has enjoyed these yarns to have the extra thrills of anticipating this fine, unique prize. The bother involved is nil—you know what to do; the simple instructions for entering are printed below.

Nothing to stop you, you see—except that possibly you've missed a stray issue from the series, and therefore haven't read all the yarns. In that case don't hesitate either. The sending-in date has been made late enough to allow you plenty of time to get the missing copies, read the yarn, and still enter.

You'll see how you can get back numbers by referring to page 5.

All right, then—a fortnight from today, Thursday, May 19th. Don't put it off longer than you have to. If you can "Do it Now," go straight ahead and vote.

Get on the track of that bloodhound!

Your Editor



£10
CASH or

A Pedigree BLOODHOUND

(at the winner's option)

In judging the Tram-Depot series, I place the six authors, whose stories are outlined on the opposite page, in the following order of merit.

Note: Write authors' names only.

- 1.....
- 2.....
- 3.....
- 4.....
- 5.....
- 6.....

If I win the Pedigree Bloodhound, I shall name it—

Name

Address

will be awarded to the reader who sends a voting coupon filled in with a list of the six Tram-story authors in the order which most nearly agrees with that shown by the aggregate votes of the whole of the competitors.

In the event of more than one entrant giving a correct list, a final judging of their entries will be made on the names suggested for the Prize Bloodhound. The prize will thus be awarded to the reader who has most nearly estimated the general vote, and in addition suggested the most suitable or novel name for the bloodhound.

You may send in as many entries as you like, but each must be written on the coupon provided.

The last day for receiving entries is Thursday, MAY 19th. Address: UNION JACK "Votes," 5, Carmelite Street, London, E.C. 4. (Comp.)

In entering this contest, it must be accepted as a condition that the Editor's decision is final and binding.

NOTE.—This coupon can be cut out without mutilating the long Sexton Blake story.



(Cut along this line.)

(Cut along this line.)

RUPERT WALDO, who reappears in this issue after a lapse which his admirers will have thought over-long, is labelled by his creator, E. S. Brooks, as the Wonder-Man. He is immune from pain, has phenomenal strength, and possesses in his

THERE ARE WALDO MEN!

Electric men, strong men, painless men—fact has them as well as fiction.

But, on the contrary, sometimes actualities are one jump ahead even of authors' imaginings.

At the headquarters of the Austrian Society of Psychical Research in Vienna, a real-life wonder-man faced a crowd of hundreds of doctors, scientists, and other investigators, and gave them a show which astonished them. His name was Paul Diebel; he was a German miner from Silesia.

Young—he was only thirty—and quite unlearned, he not only completely mystified the throng of witnesses, but every one of his examiners agreed his exhibition was genuine.

Diebel took a dagger and thrust it through his forearm so that the point emerged a good two inches on the other side. No blood came; neither did he show the slightest sign of pain. The dagger remained there during the time he took to slowly walk round the room and allow a close inspection by many of the doctors.

By "concentration of will power"—Diebel's only explanation—he next caused blood to ooze through the skin of his knees. And, as if to show that there was no such trickery as previously scraped skin, he enlarged on the performance more convincingly.

By another uncanny effort of will he caused a large cross to appear on his back, formed by minute blood-drops forced to the surface.

Finally, as a spectacular finish, a wood-and-steel arrangement was brought in—a catapult. In this was placed a metal bolt. Diebel gave a signal. The bolt flew out of the machine and struck deep into his chest.

Again he gave no twinge of pain. He first allowed the doctors to examine the bolt, and then calmly pulled it out. There was no blood either on the bolt or the wound.

Rupert Waldo's enormous strength has often been duplicated, so we will not enlarge on that. Herculean feats such as the holding back, one by each hand, of two aeroplanes taxiing in opposite directions often crop up in the newspapers and the movie news reels. But men with electric bodies are not so common.

FROM Holsworthy, Devon, some time ago was reported the curious case of a man who wears boots with soles of inch-thick rubber, because his body is overcharged with electricity.

For twenty years of his life he has been a puzzle to doctors. At first they diagnosed his condition as St. Vitus' dance; but they were wrong. He himself found the cure to his phenomenal state—rubber-soled boots to insulate him from the earth and short-circuit his bodily static electricity. Until he shod himself with rubber, walking was discomfort. And when, in driving a car, he put his foot on the brake

or accelerator, he experienced a painful throttling sensation in his throat which almost paralysed him. But the rubber insulation cured that.

His electrical body is a nuisance in some ways—he finds it impossible to listen to the wireless with headphones, or to telephone—but it had its advantages. It allowed him to act as a diviner of hidden metals, including gold and silver. Here again a stringent test proved the genuineness of this wonder-man. He had previously located without hesitation small articles such as gold watches, rings, and silver spoons hidden as deep as six feet in a private garden; but the curator of the Plymouth Museum put his powers on a more official footing when he buried gold nuggets, quartz, and jewellery in various parts of the museum grounds.

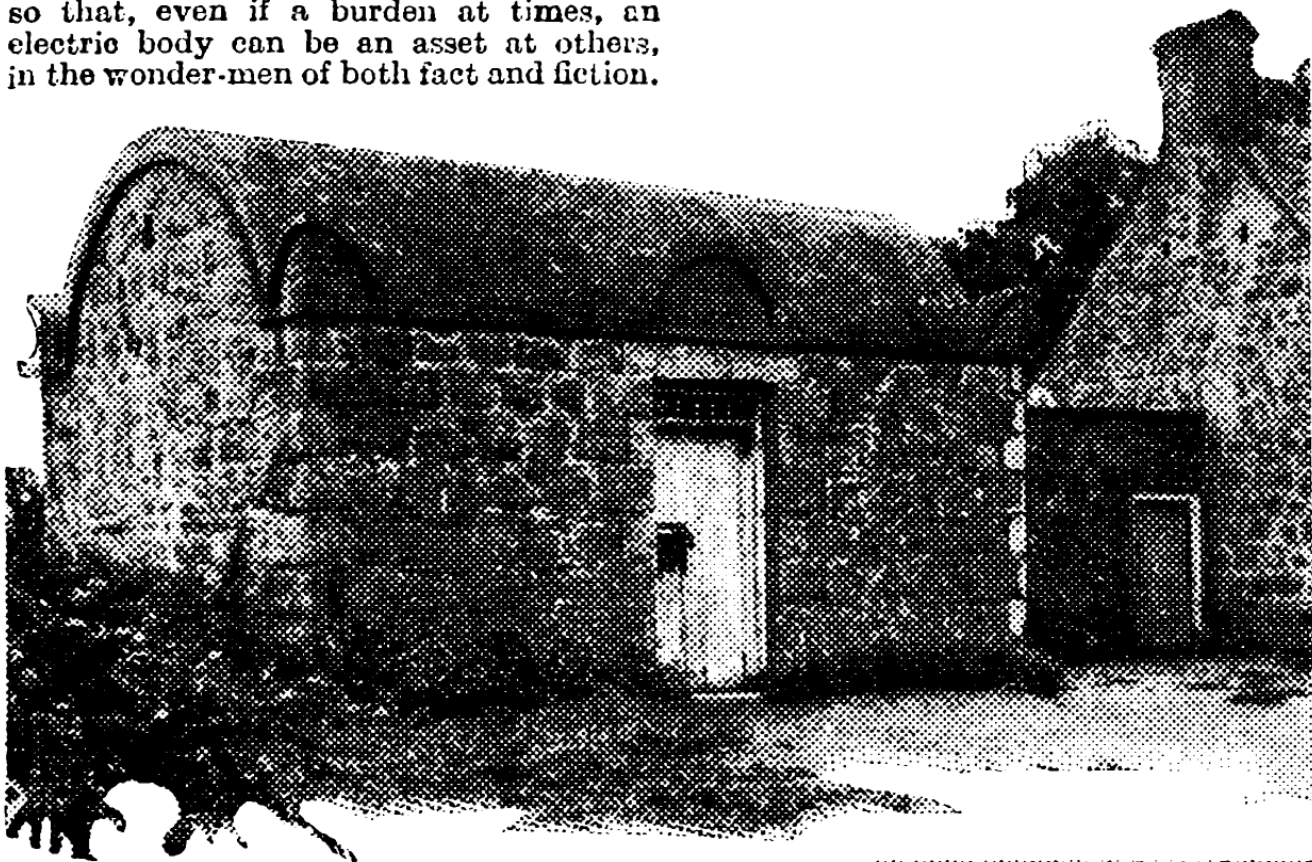
Before witnesses the electric man located even the quartz, which contained only traces of gold. His method is to use a steel clock-spring, which twists when in his hands when he passes over the metal.

It was planned to take him to Rhodesia with the object of locating gold there; so that, even if a burden at times, an electric body can be an asset at others, in the wonder-men of both fact and fiction.

George

Wonder-men of R

Chickens, by the way, got another aged practitioner into trouble at Toledo, Ohio. He acquired, without permission, twenty-two of them, and appeared in court in consequence; but the judge had more mercy on him than the victims of the thefts. He passed sentence of a month in gaol, to be suspended indefinitely while the municipal authorities took care of him. The farmers who had lost the chickens had previously strung him up to a tree to try and get a confession out of him—rather an ordeal at the age of eighty-one.



YOU have to be pretty spry to get a living nowadays. "Too Old at Forty" used to be the slogan, and perhaps in these fierce times the age limit for earning an honest penny has even been brought lower than that.

"—and STILL GOING STRONG!"

Some old-timers of the underworld don't seem to have heard of a retiring age.

The gates of the Pennsylvania State Penitentiary opened not long ago to admit the bent and feeble form of Elgar Thornby, eighty-three. He was beginning a five-year sentence for stealing chickens.

It sounds fairly tough, five years at that age. But the fact is that Elgar has a very spotted past, and his versatile record includes most of the pettifogging peccadilloes like handbag snatching and pocket-picking, and also some of the more serious ones like burglary and attempted murder. He has spent most of his life since forty in the State prison, which has become something of a home to him. The chickens weren't really worth five years, but probably the judge thought he'd be more comfortable inside the walls than out.

It hasn't for earning a dishonest one, anyhow. The age of a man—as reckoned by the Psalmist—is a mere three score years and ten; but the records of crime yield many cases of men who have carried on with the bad work long after they passed that age.



Rather surprising is it to find any of the old brigade trying their luck at picking pockets, which is essentially a game for young and supple fingers, and usually it's bad luck for them.

Two detectives of New York's Pick-pocket Squad picked up an old-timer aged seventy who was "working" the underground railway. He operated in partnership with a younger man, his part mainly being to get in people's way while the other jostled them from behind and lifted the loot. No novice, he had a record that stretched away into the remote past

Information Received

y—Past-masters of Crime—Told with a Snap.

of 1890, and cropped up with painful persistence in the books of Sing Sing and other prisons.

BUT he was only a beginner compared to another "dip" known to a wide circle of professional friends as New Orleans Frenchy. He also worked the subway, and when he was last tapped on the shoulder it was at the Grand Central Station in New York, and in his eighty-fifth year.

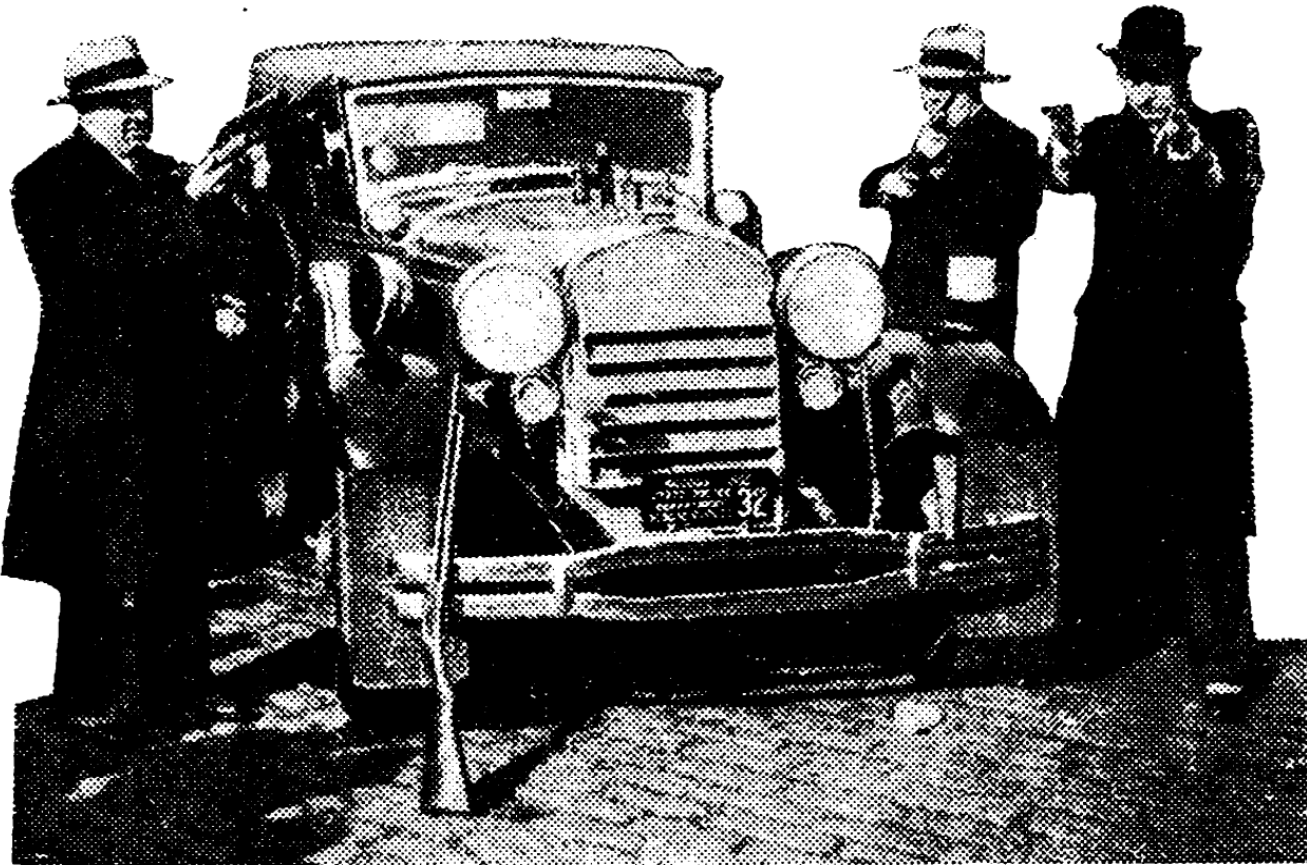
A specially assigned detective was watching the crowds for pickpockets, but when he saw a frail and white-haired old man being pushed about in the frantically hurrying crowds he momentarily forgot his job and went to the oldster's rescue. Before he could quite reach him and prevent his being crushed to death in the stampede, the detective was astounded to see the aged one perform a really slick bit of leather-lifting, as it is called. He was,

claim the record for an aged crook. He was a counterfeiting specialist who made a strictly unorthodox living by raising dollar bills.

His system was to make a one-dollar bill into a ten-dollar by the simple expedient of adding a nought, and then putting it into circulation over a tradesman's counter. He had already served a sentence for this in the past, but confessed he had been doing it since for many years.

When he was arrested on the second occasion his age was—*ninety-two!*

A man who had spent fifty of his sixty-six years behind prison bars pleaded guilty at the London Sessions to stealing a dozen knives and spoons; and a similar old-timer in Pennsylvania with a fifty-nine-year criminal career stated in the dock, when aged seventy-six, that: "For all the crimes of my life I have not realised five dollars."



CURIOSITIES OF THE WEEK.

Secret workshop—church—unwindowed film studio dark-room? No; guess again! The building on the left is a prison—one of the world's smallest. It's in the island of Sark, and until the other week hadn't been opened for thirty years; and then only to accommodate two men for two days.

An "electrocution" in public was staged in New York recently when "Old Man Depression" was put in the electric chair. Crowds cheered the suggestion, gazed with interest at the unusual spectacle in a public procession.

If preparedness can do it, America means to cope with its crooks. This new armoured car of the Michigan State Police is a fortress on wheels. It carries sub-machine guns, tear-gas bombs, and other armaments, and everything about it is bullet proof, including the glass and the headlights. The tyres and radiator are protected by steel plates. It has enormous speed, and carries a wireless transmitter.

in fact, using his age and helplessness to hinder people, and to cover his own sleight of hand.

The watcher stepped back, hardly convinced by his own eyes. But he continued to watch, and saw he hadn't made any error. The eighty-four-year-old made several successful dips in the next few minutes, and the dazed detective arrested him. At the police station his history revealed him as one of the cleverest pickpockets in the country, with a fifty-year reputation as a master of his craft.

It is California which can probably

Apparently wisdom had come to him rather late. Perhaps it's even more difficult for an aging crook to go straight than a younger man, but it is certainly a matter for wonder that, at an age when he might at least be thinking of higher things, and having an unpractised attempt at belated reform, he should be still on the active list.

One would think that the declining days of an accomplished elder in the crime game, head of his profession in his day, might be spent in leisured glory, sitting in the corner and telling his legendary

exploits to an admiring circle of the younger generation.

But no; one doesn't hear much of that. "For all the crimes of my life I have not realised five dollars" seems to be nearer the truth.

Verily, it takes some people a lifetime to see that crime does not pay.

TERSE TALES.

UNPRINTABLE.

IN New York Solomon Prince, negro, got a three months' gaol sentence for begging.

At the gaol finger-printing room he was given the order: "Hold out your hand."

White teeth flashed in a grin.

"Ain't got none, boss."

Surprised, the gaoler satisfied himself it was the truth. "We'll have to take your toe-prints, then," he said.

"Ain't got none, boss."

The truth of this was so obvious. The man had two wooden legs.

Baffled, the finger-print department passed him on, unrecorded.

RELEASED.

IN Albany, New York, a man named Dawsett was taken to the police station on a charge of vagrancy; was released within a few hours.

On his way to the cells, and on his way out, he passed through a corridor. On the wall was a picture which inwardly amused him. Labelled WANTED it was the portrait of a gang-member who had helped terrorise the town of Worcester, Massachusetts.

The man was himself.

SECRET.

IN Paris a hairdresser chatted professionally as he performed his ministrations on a customer's head mentioned with pride the beautiful natural-looking wig he had made for a man client he named.

Interested, another customer listened.

Later, she broke off her engagement to her 58-year-old factory foreman fiancé, whose wig was beautiful, natural-looking but unknown to her till the hairdresser mentioned it.

Before the Civic Tribunal the hairdresser will answer the foreman's claim for damages for unprofessional conduct in babbling of his clients' secrets.

TRAP.

IN Clapham, London, the glass of a shop-front tinkled down to a smash-and-grab raider's blow.

Through the jagged opening the bandit dragged a cumbersome cabinet gramophone, loaded it aboard his vehicle, vanished down the road.

The vehicle; a pony-and-trap

O.K.

IN a North-country town the judge took his seat on the bench on the first morning of the Assizes. Hurriedly the usher stepped forward, removed something prominently displayed on the front of the rostrum where he sat.

Overlooked by the caretaker, it was a boldly lettered card left in position after a meeting held in the room the previous evening. Demanding to see it, the judge ordered it to be displayed afresh.

"I see nothing wrong with those words in a court of justice," said he.

The words: "God is Love."

DAM.

IN a Hampshire police court a woman was accused of using bad language, bound over to keep the peace.

Her name: Mrs. Dam.

(Continued from page 12.)

"You will later," said Blake. "That trinket is of vital importance—and Vernon knows it. He would have been willing to give fifty pounds—Hallo! Something moving already."

A big limousine had driven to the entrance of Hedingham Court, and stood waiting.

"Do you think that is Vernon's car, gov'nor?"

"I don't think—I know!"

The truth of his words was proved a minute later, for Vernon himself came out, jumped into the car, and it drove off. Blake, after a brief interval, followed. He was exceedingly interested in Mr. Vernon's movements this evening. The limousine, making diagonally across the outskirts of London, headed towards the northern suburbs.

At a spot some miles from Maida Vale it pulled up at the kerb, and three respectably-dressed men entered, and the car drove on again.

"An interesting development—but not entirely unexpected," commented Blake. "If we were to look at those men more closely, Tinker, I think we should recognise them as rather unsavoury members of a race gang. In a word, desperadoes of the most pronounced type."

"It looks like being a lively evening," said Tinker happily.

"I have long suspected Mr. Vernon's integrity," went on Blake. "He is not a genuine Turf accountant, Tinker; he uses that office as a blind."

"You mean he's really the head of this race gang?"

"Exactly—but Mr. Vernon is not interested in racing just now."

Blake, knowing nothing of the Proud family, and of Waldo's activities in that direction, was nevertheless getting on exactly the same trail—but by entirely different means. Thus it was that the district of Wood End was reached. The limousine turned into a quiet residential thoroughfare, and drew to a standstill against the kerb. Blake did not turn into that thoroughfare, but drove straight past, stopping the Grey Panther just beyond—out of sight.

"Wait here, young 'un," he said crisply.

He leapt out, walked to the corner of the road, and glanced down. Mr. Vernon had left his car and was going ahead on foot. He went to one of the little villas, entered the gateway, and vanished into the porch.

Then followed a fairly long wait. But Sexton Blake possessed illimitable patience.

The highly respectable inhabitants of Maple Avenue saw nothing whatever suspicious in the circumstances. A limousine quietly standing by the kerb, with the uniformed driver yawning occasionally over an evening paper. And round in the main thoroughfare, another car was parked. It was all very ordinary.

When Mr. Vernon reappeared, he was accompanied by two companions—Mr. Proud, looking rather smarter than usual, and an elderly, white-moustached gentleman who did not even remotely resemble a crook. Blake, at the corner, watched.

Curiously enough, Mr. Vernon and his companions walked right past the waiting limousine, and Vernon gave no indication that the car was his. But he did something else—something which Blake quickly noted,

As he passed the car, he raised his hat, scratched his head, and replaced his hat again. To the detective's alert mind this was obviously a prearranged signal.

The three men turned the corner, went along for some distance, and finally vanished into the portals of the Green Man. The limousine remained stationary, and the chauffeur continued to read his paper.

"This is rather unexpected," murmured Blake. "But let us be patient. There may be some developments."

There were.

The minutes slipped by. A girl, trim and neat, turned into Maple Avenue carrying something. Blake felt a little quiver pass through him. He was beginning to understand. Yet he could not be sure. This girl might live in any one of the other houses—But no! No sooner had she passed the limousine than it slowly glided forward. It came to a halt opposite the gateway of the house into which the girl had gone.

Sexton Blake was too far off to take action—even if he had so desired. He saw the girl come to the gate; she crossed the pavement, and the next second she was in the car and it was moving rapidly away.

Like a hare, Blake ran to the Grey Panther.

"Did you see that, young 'un?" he snapped. "If that girl wasn't kidnapped before my very eyes, I'm a flat-foot! You may not believe it, but I was anticipating something of the sort."

"Where are we off to now, gov'nor?" asked Tinker breathlessly.

"I haven't the faintest idea—but I can tell you that Mr. Vernon is congratulating himself far too soon," said Sexton Blake grimly.

And the Grey Panther sped off into the dusk.

Chapter 6.

The Cottage on the Hill.

MR. JULIAN VERNON was annoyed, but not worried. Mr. Proud's elderly lodger was an intolerable bore, but he served his purpose.

In the saloon bar of the Green Man, Mr. Proud introduced his new paying guest to various cronies; and Waldo, entering into the spirit of the thing, expressed rare pleasure in meeting Mr. Proud's friends. They were priceless specimens—gentry of Mr. Proud's own colourless type. In a word, birds of a feather—and a very drab feather at that.

Vernon was satisfied. The time was passing agreeably.

"You'd better be getting back home, hadn't you, my friend?" he said, after about half an hour and various drinks. "Your daughter will be returning soon."

"Oh, she's back long ago, I expect," said Mr. Proud. "She don't mind bein' alone in the house. I never get in much before closin' time—I mean, until about ten."

"You know where she's gone, of course?"

"Why, yes—to a friend's."

"Then it would be a fatherly act upon your part to go and meet her—and escort her home," said Vernon, smiling. "Or you might consider that other suggestion I made."

They went out, and Waldo followed them.

"Good-night, Mr. Owen!" said Vernon pointedly.

Waldo accepted his dismissal amiably. He pattered off into the dusk.

"It's just as well that old fossil was with us," said Vernon, in a low voice. "Now, Proud, you're going to do as I tell you. Come with me."

He walked to a saloon car which was standing empty a little farther along the main road. As Vernon halted alongside, a man, standing with a newspaper under a street lamp a little farther along, folded his paper and walked off.

"This is my car," said Vernon. "You're coming with me, Proud."

The stout man, now that his lodger had gone, was revealing his perturbation.

"But look here, about Peggy—" he began.

"By this time the girl has been taken away," interrupted Vernon calmly. "Oh, yes! When you told me that she was out, and was expected back within half an hour, I made my arrangements."

"But—but I don't understand!" protested Proud. "I've been with you all the time. You made no arrangements. Where is she? You can't go through with this—"

"We're not going to talk here," interrupted Vernon sharply. "I know of a good place where we can talk, and you'll be quite ready to fall in with my plans when you know everything. The main point, now, is to make sure that your wife won't do anything foolish."

"I'm glad you've thought of that," said Proud. "She'll be off to the police station in two minutes if Peggy doesn't get back home to-night. You don't know what she's like. I tell you, the whole thing's mad!"

"I'm taking no chances," replied Vernon. "Your wife nearly got her memory back last night, and anything might happen now. Have you got any paper on you?"

"No."

"Go into that shop, then, and buy a postcard," said Vernon. "Any postcard will do."

Proud obeyed. But as he entered the shop a cunning light came into his eyes. He bought not one postcard, but a packet of twelve—picture postcards, views of London.

"Sending pictures to all your friends, Mr. Proud?" asked the shopkeeper amusedly.

"Yes, just took a fancy to," replied Mr. Proud. "I—I may be goin' away for a few days."

He was glad that another customer came in at that moment, for he was saved from making further explanations. He was looking quickly through the views, and, selecting one, he now did a curious thing.

He took a blue pencil from his pocket, and made a tiny circle almost in the middle of one of the views. Then he went out of the shop, having stuffed the other postcards, with the paper band still round them, into his pocket.

"You've been long enough," said Vernon sharply. "Yes, that will do. Get in!"

They both got into the car.

"What do you want me to do with this?" asked Proud.

"Have you got a lead pencil or a fountain-pen?"

"A pencil."

"Then write a few words on that postcard, telling your wife that you are taking Peggy away."

"But she won't believe—"

"Do as I tell you!" ordered Vernon. "Say that you are sick of her nagging, and that you're taking your daughter



Proud leapt forward suddenly. Crash! The knuckle-duster struck Blake on the head; a fearful, stunning blow.

with you to teach your wife a lesson. You don't think she'll go to the police after she's had that postcard, do you? She'll be angry and worried, but she'll take no action. And that's all we need."

Proud wrote as he had been directed, using the back of the front seat as a temporary desk. He had produced a little electric torch, in the shape of a fountain-pen, which Vernon held for him while he wrote.

"How's that?" asked Proud huskily, when he had finished.

He watched eagerly. Vernon read the message, but he did not turn the card over. The view of London was of no interest to him.

"That's all right," he said, at length.

"I don't see the good of it," muttered Proud, who was all of a tremble. "If you post it now she won't get it until the morning—"

"This postcard will be delivered by hand, within a few minutes from now," said Vernon briefly. "You don't think I'm quite a fool, do you?"

He flashed the headlights on and off for a moment. To Proud's surprise a man came across the road, after waiting for a tram to pass. He came to the driver's door of the saloon, and Vernon spoke to him in a low voice and handed him the card.

"That's settled!" said Vernon, as the

man walked off. "Now, Proud, you're coming with me."

Alfred Mowbray Proud made no reply. His mind was in a whirl. He was a placid, lethargic individual, and all that had happened during the past hour had shaken him to the very marrow. It was so utterly different from his usual humdrum life.

Vernon drove rapidly. The outer suburbs were soon left behind, and the saloon, with headlights blazing, was pelting away into the open country.

Proud had not the slightest notion where he was being taken. As a matter of fact, the car passed through Royston, and then turned off into a secondary road, and finally drove through the gateway of a picturesque, low-built cottage which stood in its own grounds, on a wooded hill. Friendly lights were glowing from some of the windows.

It was really more than a cottage. It was, in fact, Julian Vernon's summer retreat. There was a wide veranda all round, the stucco walls were creeper-covered, and at the rear was a beautifully appointed swimming-pool. During the summer months Mr. Vernon regularly came here for the week-ends, bringing with him, more often than not, questionable guests.

But there was only one guest just now, and no ordinary servants.

Within the lounge sat Peggy Proud, pale of face and tight-lipped. There

were two men with her—one near the front door, and the other close to the windows. Poor Peggy had been very frightened at first, but now she was proudly disdainful and full of cold fury.

"You shall suffer for this!" she said, clenching her little hands. "How dare you bring me here against my will?"

The man near the door was apologetic.

"You can't say that we haven't been respectful, Miss Proud," he said. "We were forced to be a bit rough when we took you in the car; but that was all. Everything will be all right soon. The boss will explain everything when he arrives."

She was too angry to reply. It was perfectly true that these men had been quite deferential after that limousine had moved off, carrying her with it. But the girl was not only bewildered, but passionately angry. She had read of such things in books, but never in her wildest dreams had she ever imagined that such an adventure would come her own way.

What could it mean? Why had these men done such an amazing thing? The girl's brain was dizzy with attempting to puzzle it out.

"Better get near the young lady," said the man near the door suddenly. "I think they're coming!"

The other man moved nearer to Peggy. She gave him a disdainful glance, but she gripped the arms of her chair more tightly.

The door opened, and the first figure she saw was that of her father. She was so astonished, so joyful, that for a moment she could scarcely speak. Never had she believed it possible that she could be so glad to see her good-for-nothing father!

"Daddy!" she cried, suddenly recovering her voice and running forward. "Oh, daddy! I'm so glad you've come!"

"There, there, child! It's all right!" said Mr. Proud, and then he paused helplessly. "Isn't it, Mr. Vernon?" he added.

Vernon, who had now entered, closed the door.

"Of course it's all right," he said cheerfully. "I hope your father's methods of getting you away for a short holiday did not startle you too much, Miss Proud?"

"My—my father's methods?" she faltered.

"He wanted to give you a little surprise," said Mr. Vernon glibly. "You are to stay here for a few days—both of you. This is my country cottage, and I shall be glad if you will regard it as your own for the time being."

With quick perception, Peggy saw that her father was in mental agony. The change in him was startling. She saw, too, that the other men—hard-faced men at that—were grinning as though at some hidden joke.

And Peggy suddenly clung to her father's arm—and a feeble arm it was.

"Daddy!" she said quickly. "What does it mean? You didn't tell these men to bring me here, did you? You're as much in their power as I am! Oh, tell me the truth!"

"Nonsense, Peggy!" said Mr. Proud, with an attempt at jocular. "It—it's all a kind of joke. We're to stay here for a few days—Mr. Vernon has kindly lent us his house."

"Oh, how can you think me such a child?" broke in Peggy angrily. "Do you think I don't know that these men are—are crooks? All of them! What have you done, daddy, to get into their hands like this?"

"You're tired, Miss Proud," said Vernon smoothly. "Your father will take you to your bed-room; he will sleep

next to you, so you may feel quite secure."

But when she got to the bed-room she found that the window outside was heavily shuttered.

Chapter 7.

The Blue Circle.

WELL, upon my word, Tinker, that's a facer!" Sexton Blake was momentarily baffled. He and Tinker, arriving at the cottage on the hill in the wake of the limousine, had left the Grey Panther in a quiet side lane, and had finished the journey on foot.

Blake's object was to make a forcible entry into this picturesque cottage and effect a charming rescue of the damsel in distress. It had seemed the obvious thing to do.

But before they could take any action a second car had arrived. Vernon had alighted, accompanied by one of his two companions of Maple Avenue. And no sooner had the front door been opened than Peggy's voice sounded clearly—and, beyond any doubt, she was addressing her own father!

Then the door had closed, and Blake and Tinker were left, so to speak, in the air.

"It's a rum go, gov'nor!" said Tinker, scratching his head. "I thought you said that Miss Proud had been kidnapped? How can she have been—with her own father here? Are you sure—"

"I'm sure that there's something infernally crooked going on," interrupted Blake. "Yet I'm puzzled. This girl's father must be in the plot—either willingly, or by coercion. In any case, it is quite impossible for us to take action now."

"Why?"

"Because if we attempted any rescue of the girl's father would simply send us about our business, saying that he was responsible for the girl, and could do as he liked," replied Blake. "The ground is completely cut away from under our feet. Still, we know where she is, and—"

He broke off, and his muscles became tense. For, like a ghostly shadow, a figure had suddenly materialised, as though out of nothingness. They were in the meadow, on the opposite side of the lane, and from here they had been able to watch in safety.

The figure had come up from behind. And even in the gloom Blake recognised the second man who had walked down Maple Avenue with Julian Vernon.

Quick as a flash, the detective threw himself upon the other's legs, and they both went down. Tinker leapt upon the man's chest.

"Steady—steady!" came a chuckling murmur. "When you've done, Blake—and you, too, Tinker—perhaps you'll listen to a few words of wisdom?"

"Waldo!" breathed Sexton Blake.

"Waldo in the flesh—and living again, if only temporarily," said the Peril Expert, as he sat up. "Where did you learn your Rugger, Blake? That was a remarkably fine tackle."

"In Heayen's name, Waldo, what are you doing here?" demanded Blake.

"I might ask you the same question," said Waldo pointedly. "May I remind you that this is my own particular case? I ought to be seriously annoyed with you for butting in like this."

"I wonder just how much you know—and how much you suspect?" murmured

Blake. "How did you get here, anyhow?"

"I'm afraid I took the liberty of riding on Mr. Vernon's luggage grid," explained Waldo. "It was a most undignified proceeding, and it required considerable agility on my part at the commencement of the journey—for I had to do some pretty rapid running. I couldn't very well leap on the grid in the main road, in view of the populace."

"But what are you got up like this for, Mr. Waldo?" asked Tinker.

"My name," replied Waldo gravely, "is Mr. Walter Owen, and I am the new lodger in the humble establishment of Mr. Alfred Mowbray Proud. I came here because Mr. Proud came here—and



I am vastly interested in his movements."

"Perhaps you are also interested in the movements of his daughter?" asked Blake. "Miss Proud is also here."

"So I gathered," nodded Waldo. "A most curious situation. It seems that we can't make any further move. Mr. Proud has done the dirty on us."

"It seems to me that everybody's mad," grumbled Tinker. "Here's a man who kidnaps his own daughter, and he's hand-in-glove with a murderer! What do we do next?"

"In the circumstances, I think we had better quietly go home," whispered Sexton Blake. "The girl is safe enough now—until to-morrow, at all events."

"I'm anxious to get home, too," said Waldo. "As Mrs. Proud's kindly-disposed lodger, it will be my duty to console the poor woman. I fancy she has already been informed, for a letter of some sort was handed to a man before the car set off on its journey—and it's a cert that he delivered it at No. 20, Maple Avenue."

"I'll come with you, Waldo—I'd very much like to see Mrs. Proud," said Blake suddenly.

"Don't think she's mixed up in any of this roguery," said Waldo. "Mrs. Proud is a thoroughly good woman—or I'm no judge."

He gave a brief account of what had really happened outside the Royalist Theatre, and he explained how the incident had intrigued him—so much so, in fact, that he had renewed Mrs. Proud's acquaintanceship in a new guise.

"There's some secret between her and this man Vernon," said Waldo grimly. "He knows who she is—but she can't place him. I think she must have suffered some severe shock in the past. This man is a link with that past."

"You're right," said Blake. "Her husband is another link. Yes, I'd very much like a chat with that woman."

They went off without any further delay—since it was obviously useless to

remain. Blake was satisfied that no harm could come to the girl whilst her father was present.

Blake drove fast, and the journey seemed quite brief. As the Grey Panther pulled up in Maple Avenue, Mrs. Proud came running out of the house.

"Is that you, Alfred?" she asked anxiously. "What have you done with Peggy? Oh, it was wicked! Why, Mr. Owen, I—I thought—"

"I've brought some friends, Mrs. Proud," said Waldo apologetically. "I think these gentlemen may be able to help you."

They all went in, Mrs. Proud showing them into the sitting-room. She was looking ill with worry.

"Please tell me," she pleaded—"do you know anything about my daughter, and my husband?"

Before they could reply, before Waldo could even introduce Blake and Tinker—she showed the scribbled postcard.

They read it.

"You need not worry regarding your daughter's safety, Mrs. Proud," said Blake quietly. "No harm has come to her, and no harm will come to her."

"This gentleman is Mr. Sexton Blake," said Waldo gently. "He is a detective, Mrs. Proud, and he is going to help you."

"Oh!" said the woman, breathing more rapidly. "A detective! Then—then Alfred has been doing something dreadful—"

"Your husband has done nothing—yet," said Blake. "Even if he contemplates an unlawful action I think I may persuade him to abandon the project."

Blake was idly turning over the postcard as he spoke, and now he suddenly held the card still. He was looking at a little blue circle.

"Hallo! What's that?" asked Waldo curiously.

Blake showed him the card. It was a view of the Thames Embankment at Westminster, and that circle in blue pencil, faint though it was, proved significant. For the building within the circle was Scotland Yard.

Fortunately, Mrs. Proud had not seen that circle, and even if she had seen it it is doubtful if she would have understood its significance. But Waldo slightly readjusted his opinion of Mr. Proud. That was quite a clever little stroke of his. Had he intended his wife to take the hint, and go to Scotland Yard for Peggy's sake? And then Waldo had another thought. In all probability Mr. Proud had been thinking of himself—as usual. Sexton Blake's presence, fortunately, made it unnecessary to pursue that line any farther.

"I am going to ask you a few personal questions, Mrs. Proud, and I hope you will not be offended," said Blake quietly. "I can assure you I have an excellent reason. In the first place, could you tell me how long you have been married?"

"Just upon twenty years," said the woman wearily.

"And your daughter?"

"She is mine—but Proud, thank Heaven, is not her father!" she replied fervently. "I do not even know who her father is," she went on in a low voice. "Perhaps I'm not even married to Alfred Proud; perhaps I'm a bigamist! Oh, it's so dreadful when I think of it all!"

"Try to be calm, Mrs. Proud," said Blake gently. "I want you to tell me just why you married Alfred Proud."

"Twenty years ago, Mr. Blake, I was found wandering, a demented woman, with a baby of eighteen months in my arms," she said almost in a whisper. "I was taken into hospital, practically a mad creature. For days I raved in delirium, and the doctors said that I must have suffered some terrible shock. I only seemed to know that my name was Emma. My surname was not discovered; nothing on my clothing, or the baby's clothing, gave a hint of our identity. Nobody ever came to claim us."

"And Proud?"

"This hospital, I believe, was in Eltham, on the other side of London," continued the woman. "Alfred Proud was a fireman, attached to the brigade somewhere in the district. He came to the hospital to visit a comrade of his. He saw me. It's all very hazy now, but I know that he forced his attentions on me. When I was well enough to leave the hospital, he offered me marriage." She shrugged. "I knew nothing of myself, I was destitute, and I agreed—mainly for my baby's sake. How I have regretted that step since! For Alfred Proud proved to be a worthless, good-for-nothing scamp!"

"When did he leave the fire brigade?"

"Even before we were married," replied Mrs. Proud, with a sigh. "Yet, at first, he seemed generosity itself. He bought this house with his savings, and furnished it. But in order to come here he resigned from the fire brigade. For the first few months he obtained jobs now and again, but then he didn't seem to care. He let me do the work—he allowed me to earn the money."

"I understand," said Blake kindly. "Well, Mrs. Proud, I think I can promise you that your future will be much brighter. Don't worry about your daughter—she is safe, and to-morrow I will restore her to you."

The poor woman was in deep distress, and she was grateful, indeed, for the kindly companionship of her supposedly elderly lodger.

Blake and Tinker, driving back to Baker Street, were thoughtful. So Alfred Proud, knowing nothing of the history of that young woman and child, had taken them under his care? It did not fit. Proud was not that kind of man. Perhaps he was the child's father, and it was for that reason—But no! Blake shook his head. That fine, lovely girl was no daughter of Alfred Mowbray Proud.

It was towards tea-time that Julian Vernon arrived, quite openly, in his limousine.

Proud viewed his arrival with apprehension. For Proud had not forgotten that picture postcard, with the blue-pencilled circle. He had acted on impulse then largely, as Waldo had suspected, for the safety of his own skin. All day he had been torn by doubts. Would his wife grasp the significance of that blue circle? Would she go to Scotland Yard? Well, it didn't matter much, for it was impossible for her to know where Peggy had been taken. Thus Mr. Proud consoled himself. A weak man, with a character as shallow as any man's can be, he blew hot and cold from one minute to another.

"Well, Proud!" said Vernon briskly. "Everything all right? Have you and your charming daughter spent a pleasant day?"

"Isn't it about time you explained?" asked Alfred Mowbray Proud complainingly. "I don't believe what you told me last night. It's too fantastic—"

"You'll believe it," interrupted Vernon. "Come in here with me."

He nodded to the other men. Peggy, at the first sight of Vernon, had gone to her room and had purposely closed the door with some violence.

"She'll be all right for a bit," said Vernon, as he and Proud faced one another in a comfortable little room which was Vernon's own den. "Now, see here, my friend, you and I must have a heart-to-heart talk. You're going to tell me just how much you know about that child."

"Child?" repeated Proud, with a start. "You know to whom I'm referring."

"Oh! You—you mean Peggy?"

"Now, Proud, you're a rotten actor!" said Vernon contemptuously. "Do you think I don't know who stole a thousand pounds twenty years ago, just before you married—"

"No, no!" panted the big man, with fear in his eyes. "I didn't! I—I mean— Well, what about it? You can't prove anything!" he went on hoarsely.

"I don't want to prove anything," said the other. "Man alive, why can't you be sensible? I'm planning to take you into this game as a partner, on equal terms. Sit there for a minute, collect your thoughts, and then tell me your side of the story. Tell me just what happened twenty years ago at that fire in Brockley."

Proud looked at him fearfully.

"I don't need to think. It's as clear in my mind now as it was then—as it always has been," he muttered. "Do you think I could ever get rid of it? I was a young man then. I hadn't been long in the Brigade. One night we had a local call at the station, and when we got to the fire, which was in an old-fashioned road, we found an empty house ablaze. Not badly. The fire was on the second floor, and seemed to be limited. It struck us as being queer, because there were 'To Let' boards in the front garden, and there wasn't a sign of a living soul."

"But you were the one fireman who went up the escape and broke through a window of the second floor?"

"Yes," said Proud hoarsely. "I went up the ladder while some of the other firemen broke the front door down and tried to get up the stairs. They couldn't get up because the stairs were ablaze. It wasn't until some time afterwards that a back staircase was found, and that had caught alight by then, too."

"We won't bother about that yet, although it's important," said Vernon keenly. "Tell me what happened after you broke through the window?"

"The first thing I saw was a great blaze in the middle of the room," muttered Proud. "The flames were leaping up, the floor was well alight, and there didn't seem to be any way round. But I saw, to my amazement, a baby lying in an old soap-box against the wall. Not exactly lying, either. The kid, too young to be badly frightened, was watching the fire with a sort of hypnotised fascination. Then I saw something else—something which made me jump. On the table, which was quite near to me, was a big pile of golden sovereigns."

Vernon nodded.

"And you forgot the baby, eh?" he asked scornfully.

"It's no good denying it," muttered Proud, his voice sinking to an abject whisper. "I'd never seen so much gold in all my life. The sight of it startled me. And the first thought that came into my head was that I could put the money in my pockets, and nobody would ever know." He stared at Vernon with sudden fire. "I swear to you I didn't mean to leave that kid there," he went on. "I was mad for the minute. I stuffed that gold into my pockets. And there were some other things on the table, too. A pair of baby shoes, some socks, and little bits of clothing. I

Chapter 8.

Two Sides of an Ugly Story.

PEGGY, although she was allowed the freedom of Julian Vernon's country cottage, nevertheless remained a prisoner.

Her father—or, rather, her stepfather—was there, but when she suggested a walk in the garden he vetoed it. He was watching her anxiously, furtively. There were those other men, too—three of them. They were very polite, but never for a moment was Peggy deceived. She had but to make the smallest attempt to escape and she would be roughly handled.

She had slept very little during the night, and throughout the next day she remained coldly and proudly aloof. She even held her father at arm's length, knowing within her that he was entangled in this vicious net also.

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stuffed them all into my pockets with the gold.

"And then something happened. The floor, in the middle of the room, collapsed with a terrific roar of flame and sparks. The soap-box, in the far corner, was still safe, but I couldn't get across to it. I was crazy with fear. The flames were leaping at me, and I never knew how I got back to the window. But I was scorched pretty badly, and half suffocated, too. The open air revived me, and by the time I got to the ground I felt a bit better. I—I reported to my chief that the room had been empty."

He shuddered, his face haggard, the cold sweat streaming down it.

"Go on!" said Vernon. "You thought you had left that child to burn to death?"

"What else could I think?" said Proud. "Yet in the morning, after we'd got the fire in hand, there was, naturally, a search. I was nearly off my head when no remains were discovered."

"Why, wasn't it possible that the child could have been completely consumed?"

"No," replied the ex-fireman. "The fire wasn't fierce enough for that. It was certain that we should find the remains—if there had been any. But we didn't. And that scared me horribly. I knew that the baby had escaped. But how? And there were other things. Why had nobody come forward to claim the child or the money? Can't you imagine my feelings? My chief, of course, thought nothing of the fire. He put it down to some mischievous boys, believing that they had broken into the empty house and had started the fire by accident. Don't you see? Nobody came forward at all."

"You'll understand that soon," said Vernon grimly. "Get on with your own story."

"Well, next day I was feeling a bit better, and I had that money," continued Proud. "Then I read a little paragraph in the newspaper telling of a demented woman who had been found wandering in Eltham with a baby in her arms. That gave me a shock. I couldn't rest until I had had a look at that baby. Eltham's not a great distance from Brockley, you know. Well, it happened that there was a fireman in that hospital, and I pretended that I wanted to see him. But, by a pretext, I gained admission to the women's ward—looking for a friend of my sister's. I've forgotten just what excuse I made, but I got in. And I saw that kid! Yes, the same kid!"

"A pretty nasty shock, eh?"

"I nearly died," admitted Proud. "You see, I thought the woman would start talking. She must have saved that kid after I'd gone, and I was the only fireman who went into that room, and there would have been an inquiry, and—and— Well, you can guess what would have happened to me, particularly as she would have known about that gold. Then I heard that her memory was gone."

He drew a long breath.

"During those weeks I lived in torture," he continued. "I kept going to the hospital. I got friendly with the girl—she was only a girl then—and all I knew was that her name was Emma and that she was destitute. And it suddenly came to me that if I married her I should be safe. Even if she recovered her memory it wouldn't matter—then. For I would be her husband, and she wouldn't give me away."

"A cunning enough plan!" said

Vernon. "So you married the woman, and everybody thought how good you were!"

"I needn't have married her!" muttered Proud. "That was twenty years ago, and she's never recovered her memory. At least, not until the other night; then, when she met you, she must have had some sort of brain-storm. You told me about that—"

"And now I'm going to tell you something else," said Julian Vernon. "I'm glad you've cleared up this twenty-year-old mystery, Proud. Now I'll give you my side of the story. There were three of us in that empty house that night—Luke Cranston, his sister Emma, and myself. And the child, of course. That makes four."

"Old Cranston's sister!" breathed Proud, in wonder. "My wife is the sister of that blind beggar—"

"Don't interrupt," said Vernon. "The baby was asleep in the box; Luke's sister was in the next room, and she was sleeping, too, for we had left her for twenty-four hours without any relief. Well, Luke and I had a thousand pounds in gold, and, to cut it short, we quarrelled. Luke demanded two-thirds of the money—saying that the third share was for his sister. But I knew that he wanted to keep it for himself."

"No need to go into details. Luke, in making a grab for the gold, upset the paraffin lamp. It crashed to the floor and exploded. But the point is this—a lot of the burning paraffin splashed on to Luke's chest, and, screaming like a madman, he ran about blindly. I forgot the child, I forgot everything—except Luke. Somehow I dragged the door open, and got into the bath-room, just along the passage."

Vernon became more serious.

"I got the poor devil out of his misery, but by that time he was blinded. And his face. I can't even think of it. I left him there, and tried to get back into the room, for the kid. But when I opened the door a wall of flame met me. Panic-stricken, I took hold of Luke, carried him down the back stairs, and got into the garden. There was an old car we had used, and I was away long before the alarm had been given."

"I'm not boasting of what I did—but I was mad with fear. Luke was unconscious, and I thought he was dead. I stopped the car near Chatham, and I left Luke there. I went on to the docks, and managed to get aboard a ship that was sailing within an hour or two. I never knew what happened to Luke—until I met him the other day."

"And you killed him!" said Proud, trembling with fear.

"I had to!" snarled Vernon. "But you needn't think you've got any hold over me because of that, Proud! Your word's no good. Well, I thought that Emma and the kid were both killed in the fire, too. What else could I think? But now I realise that she must have broken through the wooden partition from the next room—and this must have been just after you had gone. She must have taken the kid and got down by the back stairs, and out through the garden without anybody seeing her. That would have been quite easy, for there was no fire at the back—and no crowd."

"And it all happened because of that money—the money I took!" muttered Proud.

"That was the first instalment of the ransom," said Julian Vernon. "Ten thousand pounds was the price we

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demanding, and Lord Hodland agreed. Yes, Proud, what I told you last night was the absolute truth. The girl your wife has always thought of as her daughter is really the Hon. Cynthia Bray, the child of Lord Hodland. Perhaps you'll believe it now? We got the kid into that empty house, we took all her own clothes away, and dressed her in plain, unmarked things."

"And I've got those other baby clothes," said Proud, with wonder in his eyes. "Yes, locked away in an old trunk. I never let Emma see them—I daren't. I was always afraid to destroy them."

"You don't know how lucky it is that those things are still intact," went on Vernon. "They will be of vital importance now, Proud. But here's the most important link of all."

He produced the golden fylfot, but did not trouble to explain how he had obtained it.

"Old Luke carried this about, as a sort of lucky charm, for twenty years," he continued. "Its production at any time would have started immediate inquiries. For this is the famous fylfot of the Hodland family. It was used by the baby as a kind of plaything—a non-rattling rattle. Your supposed daughter cut her first teeth on that thing, Proud."

He bent nearer.

"Lord Hodland is one of the richest landowners in Scotland," he continued. "He and Lady Hodland never had any other children. Don't you think they'll be willing to shell out if they hear that their daughter is still alive, and can be restored to them? My good Proud, just imagine their joy! They'll give anything—anything!"

"You mean that you're goin'—"

"No; it's you who are going to tell this interesting story to Lord Hodland!"

"I? No!" gasped Proud. "I daren't! I couldn't go through with it—"

"You flabby fool!" snarled Vernon savagely. "What have you got to fear? You did nothing criminal—at least, nothing that Lord Hodland can ever prove. You were the fireman, and your story is as clear as crystal. You found the baby clothes on the table—you saw the child, but couldn't rescue it because of the flames. Now, after all these years, you've just discovered the truth. You won't go into these details at first, of course. You'll tell Lord Hodland that you can restore his daughter to him if he makes it worth your while. When you get used to it, Proud, you'll see that I'm right, and you'll be able to handle the thing well."

Alfred Proud took a deep, deep breath.

"But why can't you go?" he asked, "You're cleverer than I am."

"Because I've taken years to build up my present position, and the risk would be too great," replied Julian Vernon. "Besides, I was one of the kidnapers—and if Hodland turned nasty it would mean penal servitude for me. You've got everything to gain, and nothing to lose. And you can get a small fortune without even resorting to extortion. You'll get the ten thousand without any trouble at all, and we'll split fifty-fifty."

And so they talked; and as they talked Proud became calmer. He saw the thing in a different light. His confidence returned. Weak in character, he gradually assumed an enormous importance. He swelled visibly. Of course he could do this thing! What a fool he had been to even doubt it!

"Your chief line of talk will be that Lord Hodland mustn't make anything public," said Vernon shrewdly. "For your wife's sake, you've got to keep it out of the newspapers. You understand? Hodland won't make any trouble. He and his wife will be only too glad to get their daughter—after thinking her dead for twenty years. And it won't be necessary to rely on the baby clothing and the fylfot as proof. The baby had a birthmark on the left ankle, and this was widely advertised at the time. It's a funny thing that nobody ever suspected that baby in the Eltham hospital. But then, the child was roughly dressed and the hospital people took it for granted that it was the woman's own baby."



They talked on, and more and more did Alfred Mowbray Proud regard himself as a man of vast importance.

"There's one point," he said, after a while. "You say you don't want to be mixed up in this. But Peggy has seen you; she knows that you brought her here by force."

"That's nothing," said Vernon. "There's nothing to connect me with the original kidnapers; I'm a friend of yours; don't you see? You hadn't the money to get Peggy away, so you asked me to help you. I'm just your pal. And the girl herself, when she finds out why we have done this—when she comes into her rightful inheritance—will be ready enough to forget. I tell you, Proud, it is all plain, straightforward sailing."

He took out some money.

"Now, here's some loose change to be getting on with," he said crisply. "Here's a ten-pound note to cover your return fare to Scotland. You'll go straight home now, you'll get those items of evidence, and you'll take this fylfot. And guard it closely, Proud! You'll take the night express for Scotland, and to-morrow you'll see Lord and Lady Hodland and arrange the whole thing."

Chapter 9.

The Misadventures of Mr. Proud.

IT must not be supposed that Sexton Blake had been idle. He had made a promise to Mrs. Proud, and he meant to keep it.

The plotters would have been somewhat upset if they could have known that Blake, that day, had dispatched an extraordinarily long telegram to Lord and Lady Hodland. Later, Blake, Tinker, and Waldo travelled down to Royston in the Grey Panther. On the way Blake was perfectly frank; he told of his deductions and conclusions.

"It was the golden fylfot which gave

me the direct clue," he said. "The very instant I saw it a chord in my memory was struck. Twenty years ago that charm had been widely advertised. When I returned to Baker Street I looked up my records. I read all the available accounts of the Hodland kidnapping case. As soon as Vernon murdered old Luke I knew that I was on the right track; and when Vernon engineered Peggy Proud's abduction yesterday it was the final link. I was certain, then, of her identity. She is the long-lost baby—the Hon. Cynthia Bray, believed dead."

Sexton Blake had been very thorough. He had taken great care to look up Proud's past life, and he had had no difficulty in finding that the man had once been a fireman. This corroborated Mrs. Proud's own statement.

And now the detective was determined to take swift, decisive action.

In Royston he and his companions were met by a strong force of police, waiting in cars. Blake's plan was to surround Vernon's country cottage at once, and to take Proud and the other men by force. Blake had not the slightest doubt that Proud, being the man he was, would crumple up.

Unluckily for this programme, it so happened that Proud himself was passing through Royston at that very time. He saw the police cars—and his conscience smote him. He thought of that postcard with the blue circle. In sudden fear he hurried to the nearest telephone and got through to the house and Vernon.

And when Sexton Blake and the police arrived they found the cottage empty. The birds had flown! There was not an iota of evidence.

It was an unexpected set-back.

"This is ugly," said Blake grimly. "Somehow the crooks were warned of our coming. And I had promised the girl's parents that I would restore her to them this evening. We shall have to get back to London, Waldo."

"You think that Vernon has taken the girl in Hedingham Court?"

"I don't know—he might have done," said Sexton Blake. "There's Proud, too. There's just a chance that Proud will go back to Wood End. We don't know. We shall have to keep a careful watch in both places. Sooner or later the crooks will make a false move—and then we shall have them. But one thing is certain—the girl, being who she is, will not be harmed."

MEANWHILE, Mr. Proud, a much-disturbed man, arrived at Wood End. He did not know what had happened at the Royston cottage. But after careful thought he came to the conclusion that his warning had been unnecessary. Those police officers were probably going on a different errand altogether. Still, he had given Vernon the tip.

By the time he reached the end of Maple Avenue he was his own complacent self again. He had got over his temporary scare. He was thinking things out. If his wife started questioning him, he would soon shut her up. The chances were she wouldn't be in the house at all. As for that doddering old lodger, he didn't count.

He was passing the Parade, and an object in a small second-hand shop caught his eye. It was really a pawnbroker's—but the proprietor was discreet enough not to display the symbolic brass balls. Wood End was quite a select neighbourhood.

The object that caught Proud's eye

was an old-fashioned knuckle-duster! And its price was three shillings.

Obedying an impulse, he entered the shop and bought it. He felt safer with it in his pocket. He wasn't much of a hand with his fists, and if Vernon got nasty—Proud was thinking of that twenty-year-old fight, and he knew that Vernon was an evil man. Just as well to be prepared—in case of trouble.

The shopkeeper knew him, and they joked a bit over the knuckle-duster, which Proud declared he wanted as a curio.

"I might as well take one of these while I'm here," he said, indicating a pile of break-back mousetraps on the counter. "Wrap one up, will you, Mr. Perkins. The wife's always complaining about the mice in the pantry. I like to please the old girl with such trifles."

It was the man's arrogant conceit which impelled him to buy that mousetrap. He liked to reveal himself to his acquaintances as a generous husband. It was perfectly true that there were mice in the pantry, and he did have a dim, momentary idea of coping with them.

He left the pawnbroker's shop leisurely. He had plenty of time—the whole evening, in fact. He needn't leave for King's Cross until ten, at the earliest. All the same, the sooner he could get home the better, if only to find out if his wife had noticed that blue-pencilling on the postcard.

Bad luck was against him. Passing the Green Man, he ran into a bunch of his old cronies. They greeted him noisily.

"Why, Alf, what become of you to-day?" demanded one. "Thought you was goin' to walk at the head o' the procession?"

"I've been away," said Mr. Proud. "Everything go off all right, Sam?"

"Pretty well," replied the other. "What about comin' in for a quick one?"

"I'll stand treat," said Proud promptly. "They're on me. 'Ad a bit of luck, I have."

They all laughed, for Mr. Proud was not celebrated for his generosity in the matter of drinks. However, they got a big surprise, for Proud not only stood one round of drinks, but two; and the more he drank, the merrier he became. He was extraordinarily elated.

Presently his ready cash ran out, but that was only a detail. It was characteristic of the man for him to flourish his wallet, and to produce, with the air of a magician, a real ten-pound note.

"I've got money now," said Mr. Proud, looking round in a superior way. "And, what's more, I shall have lots more soon. Come into a little fortune, see?"

"Gaw!" said his cronies, awed.

It was exceedingly unfortunate that a sneak-thief should be in the saloon bar at the moment, and the sight of that ten-pound note was tempting. It all happened in a flash. A hand came from nowhere, the ten-pound note was snatched, the swing door opened and closed.

"Here, that's my money!" gasped Proud, his heart giving such a thump that a spasm of acute agony shot through him, doubling him up. "My money! I—I can't— Oh!"

He sank against the bar, as white as a sheet. Several of the other men, running out, were too late. The snatch-and-grab expert had disappeared as though into smoke.

The fact that Mr. Proud had practically asked for this bit of trouble did not make it any the less disastrous.

He hardly remembered getting out of the Green Man. Some of his friends

offered to escort him home, but, his mind in a whirl, he rejected them. He wanted to be alone. His heart was better now, but his mind was in torment. He had spent his loose money, and he had lost the tenner. And that was his fare to get to Scotland. Like the weakling he was, the obvious course did not occur to him. He was afraid to ring up Julian Vernon and tell him. He could get money in some other way.

He got home at last, and there, pale and ill, he found his wife. She was alone. The lodger was out.

"Why, Alfred, you look dreadful!" said the woman, gazing at him in fear.

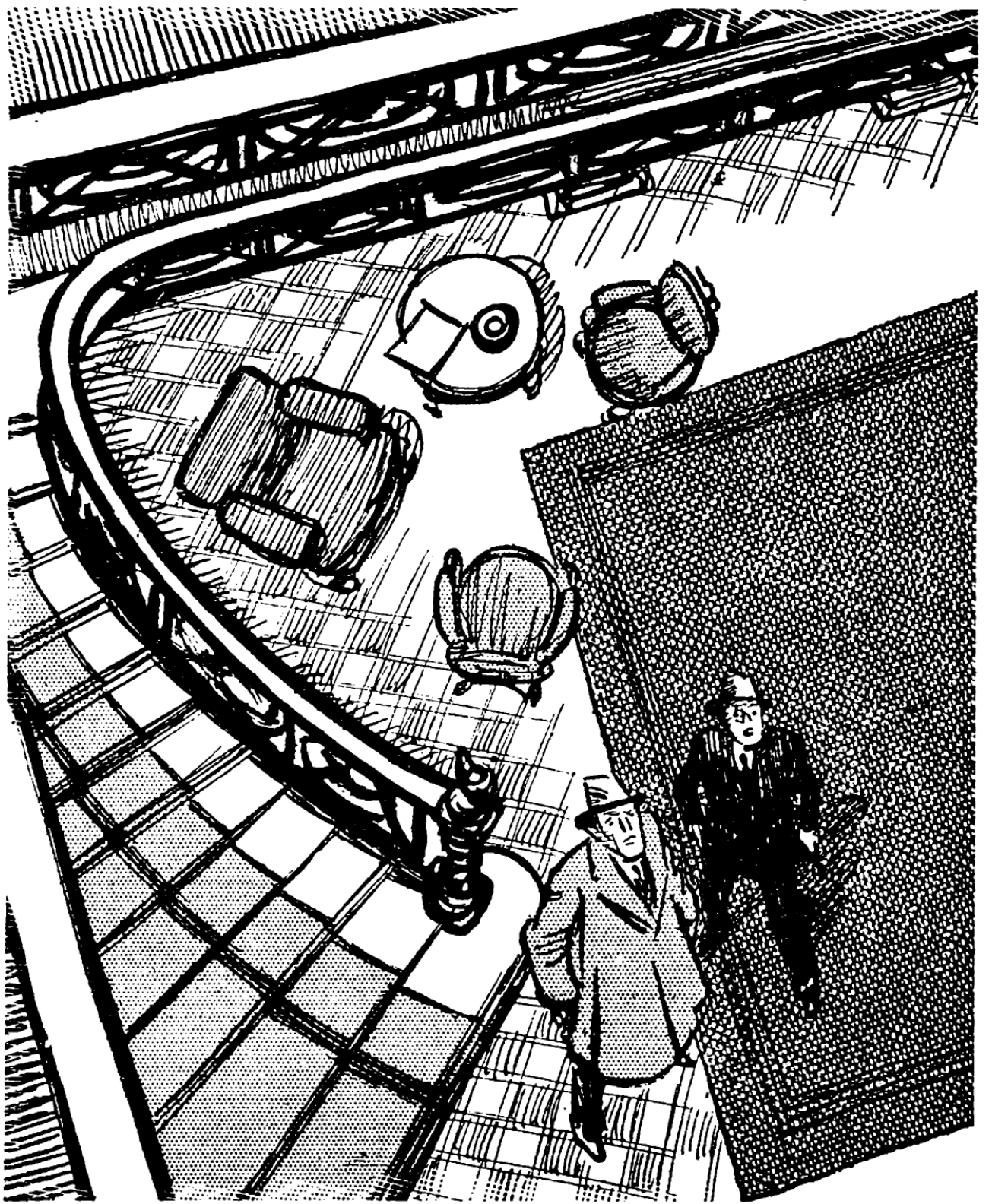
Emma, I want some money—all you've got."

"But I haven't any money, except a few coppers!" she faltered. "I've paid some bills to-day—"

"Don't lie!" he shouted, seizing her with cruel violence. "I must have money! I—I've lost some. I want seven or eight pounds—"

"There's not even a sixpence in the house!" faltered Mrs. Proud. "Oh, Alfred, you're so different! You—you look so changed."

"You make me sick!" he panted. "I can't waste time on you. Here, get inside! And don't make any noise, or I'll



"Has anything happened to Peggy? Tell me!"

"Peggy's all right, and I'm all right," said Proud roughly.

"You're not! What have you done with my girl?" demanded his wife. "She's not yours, Alfred, and you know it! She's mine—mine!"

"Yours, is she?" taunted Proud. "That's all you know!"

"Why, what—what do you mean?" she asked, horrified by his tone.

"I can't waste time answering your silly questions!" said the big man, pushing her aside. "Peggy's all right; she's staying with friends. Haven't I told you? Didn't you get my card?"

She clung to him.

"Oh, Alfred, if you're doing anything wrong, stop before it's too late!" she urged earnestly. "You've never been a wicked man. You've been lazy, but not wicked! Think, Alfred! Don't do anything against the law! I've had a dreadful feeling all day that you're getting yourself into trouble—"

"I can look after myself!" snarled Proud, with sudden fury. "Look here,

come down and show you that I'm in earnest!"

He had flung open the cellar door, and he roughly pushed the sobbing woman down the steps into the darkness. Then he closed the door and locked it. His heart was troubling him again. He leaned against the wall, breathing heavily.

Everything was going wrong. Pulling himself together after a while, he left the house. She was right. There was no money.

What could he do? How could he obtain enough cash— His fingers were on the knuckle-duster in his trousers pocket. He thought of the pawnshop. Why, of course! Easy!

But it wasn't so easy. When he went back to the house and looked round for something to pawn, it proved to be a problem. There weren't any small trinkets; his wife possessed nothing worth pawning. But wait a minute! There was that little carpet in the

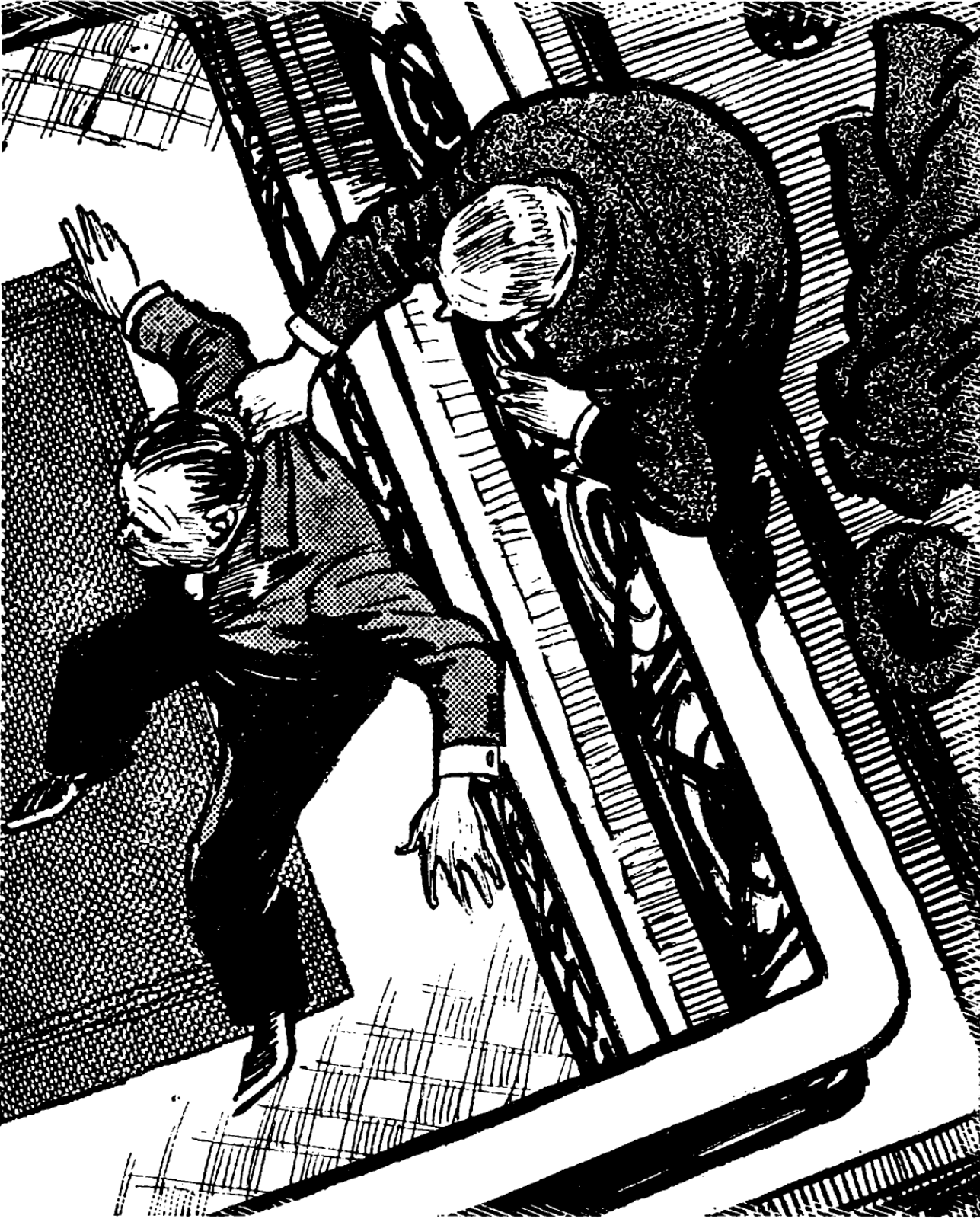
lodger's room. That was new. That would fetch something.

Yes, and Peggy's mandoline. He went round now in such a condition of mind that he was not quite responsible for his actions. He got down his old fireman's helmet, tarnished and dented. He roughly wrapped it up. That ought to fetch something. And the big banner he sometimes carried at the parades. It was made of silk, and it was worth two

Wood End—he got down. He could see the sign of the three golden balls just along the busy street. He arrived in the nick of time—almost as the shutters were being put up.

Then came another shock—a staggering blow between the eyes.

The pawnbroker accepted the mandoline and the lodger's new carpet, but he refused to loan a penny more than fifteen shillings on the two. Proud,



"Spill it, my friend," said Waldo. "Confess that you are one of the original kid-nappers of Cynthia Bray!"

or three pounds. It didn't belong to him, but what did that matter? He could redeem it easily enough.

There was nothing else that looked likely, and now, in any case, he was getting more frantic than ever. The shops would be closed. He daren't go to Mr. Perkins, anyhow; it was too near home.

He set off, slamming the front door behind him, just to let his wife know that he had gone. His parcels hampered him, but his heart hampered him more. Now and again in earlier years his heart had sometimes troubled him; but never like this. The intense excitement of the last hour, inflamed by the whisky he had drunk, affected the fatty, diseased organ very seriously.

Alfred Mowbray Proud by this time was in no fit condition to be out at all. But he managed to get on a tramcar, and he took a twopenny ticket.

Reaching another North London district—a much more populous one than

who had been thinking of pounds, was nearly inarticulate.

"But—but this helmet!" he panted.

"It's worth something—"

"Old brass," said the pawnbroker.

"No good to us at all."

"There's my watch—"

"Couldn't even take it," said the pawnbroker, after giving the old silver watch a glance.

"What about this banner? It's silk—"

"Imitation silk and cotton," interrupted the pawnbroker contemptuously.

"And what do you think I could do with a thing like that? Sorry!" He looked at Proud more closely as the big man stood in the gloomy cubbyhole. "Seems to me, my friend, that you're ill. I know it's pretty hard on some of us—"

"I'm all right—give me the money," muttered Proud dully.

He got out of the shop, carrying the banner and the helmet—the latter now half emerging from its rough brown-paper wrapping.

He got on another tram. He paid his twopenny to get home. Fifteen shillings and some odd coppers! Maybe he could borrow some from the landlord of the Green Man.

If Mr. Proud had been normal he

might have acted sensibly; but his heart was erratic; his brain, answering, was semi-paralysed.

He took out the golden fylfot, which he had not dared to pawn. It was a pity. He could have got several pounds on it with ease. But it was one of the vital pieces of evidence which he had to present to Lord Howland—

Looking at it, he suddenly slumped back in his seat. This new heart attack was far more serious than it looked. His heavy breathing gave no indication of his real condition; his fellow-passengers on the upper deck of the tram thought that he was sleeping rather heavily—or it was more than likely that he was half-drunk. For all around him there was an aroma of stale shag and liquor.

At the end of the line the conductor came along and gave him a kindly shake. Mr. Proud looked up dully.

"All change here, mate," said the conductor.

"It's all right—I'll ride," muttered Proud. "Leave me alone"

"H'm!" said the conductor doubtfully.

He didn't want any trouble; he took it for granted that Proud was half-drunk. Better to take him back on the return journey, and in the course of it the man would become sobered down. The conductor had had experience. So he left Mr. Proud there—and the tram set off on its long, long journey to the heart of London, and through to the farther suburbs.

ALFRID MOWBRAY PROUD slept, and that sleep was beneficial. He awoke much calmer. Looking out of the windows, he saw that the tram was passing through North London, getting towards Wood End. It was very late. Proud tried hard to recollect what had happened.

He felt in his pockets. He had four-and-ninepence now—and a ten-shilling note, as he knew, in his wallet. He must have spent some more coppers on fares. He looked at his watch—

"No!" he muttered, horrified. "It can't be past eleven! What about—"

His heart gave him a warning signal again, and he forced himself to be calm. His brain was very lethargic now, anyhow. He couldn't possibly catch that night express to Scotland, so what did it matter? All he wanted to do was to get home—yes, and get to bed and sleep. Sleep. That was what he wanted. Lots and lots of sleep.

"Here we are, mate—you'll have to get off here."

It was the conductor, and he spoke brusquely. Proud tried to pull himself together.

"We're not at the end of the line," he said, looking dully out of the window.

"We're at the depot—don't go any farther," said the conductor. "Want a hand with your baggage, mate? Seems to me you ain't as well as you should be."

As Proud got off the tram, he noticed, subconsciously, a big dent just beneath the painted number. He forgot it a second later.

He walked away unsteadily, but, after a while, he felt himself growing stronger. He was perfectly fit now, and his heart was behaving itself. He was resigned to the inevitable.

And as he walked slowly, with dragging footsteps, towards Maple Avenue, he knew nothing of the man who followed him.

Chapter 10.

At the Tram Depot.

AFTER the fruitless raid of Vernon's country cottage, Blake and Tinker, with Waldo, had gone back to London.

Waldo had volunteered to watch Vernon's flat, and Blake and Tinker had concentrated their attention upon the Wood End villa.

And during the evening Vernon had arrived, and soon afterwards he had departed—taking Mrs. Proud with him. That good lady, having been rescued from the cellar by Vernon, had been in a highly excited state.

It was an interesting problem. Would



she dimly recognise him again, as a ghost out of the past? Would she attack him as she had done outside the Royalist Theatre? Vernon, as a matter of fact, was determined, if possible, to restore her memory. Her evidence might be required. She was Proud's wife, and she wouldn't be awkward.

Blake, seeing the pair go, instructed Tinker to follow, telling Tinker, further, to be at Baker Street, if possible, at a fixed time—when Blake would ring up.

Blake did this, and learned that Mrs. Proud had been taken to the Hedingham Court flat. It confirmed Blake's earlier suspicion. The girl had been taken there; and Mrs. Proud had been fetched so that she could look after her. Julian Vernon, confident that there would be no police activities, was taking a chance.

If the police came to the flat, Mrs. Proud would be immediately presented—as certain proof that Peggy was not under any compulsion. Thus the police would be baffled. By to-morrow Proud would have completed his negotiations with Lord and Lady Howland, and after that there would be no more risk at all.

The unfortunate part about Mr. Vernon's plan was that he knew absolutely nothing of Sexton Blake's interest in the case.

Blake was certain that if he got face to face with Alfred Proud that worthless man would talk—and talk a lot. For the woman's sake, Blake was anxious to save this man from committing a punishable crime. Moreover, Proud would be able to fill in the gaps.

It was with some astonishment that Sexton Blake noticed a startling change in the man he was following. Proud got about half-way home when he came to a sudden stop in the middle of the pavement. He dropped the rolled-up banner, and he dropped the tarnished helmet in its rough wrapping. And, like a man possessed, he searched his pockets.

Pawntickets, pipe, pouch, pen-knife— He searched his waistcoat; watch and pencils—

His trousers, too. His possessions were

trivial. Like a thunderbolt he realised his appalling loss.

The fylfot, the golden swastika!

It was no longer on him—and that age-old charm was the vital piece of evidence, the very sight of which would cause Lord and Lady Howland to credit the story.

"Gone!" panted Proud hoarsely. "But where? I remember I had it on the tram—"

The tram! Yes, of course! The tram! He had come over queer. It was all very hazy and dim. Yet he did remember—he had had the fylfot in his hand at the time. Of course! It must have dropped out of his hands, and rolled to the floor—probably near the seat. It was there now. There wasn't a chance in a thousand that anybody would have picked it up. It was dull, and nobody would notice it—

But the tram was on its way back. No, of course not! It had gone into the depot!

Grasping his parcels, for it was impossible to leave them lying on the pavement, Alfred Proud went hurrying back, and Sexton Blake, on the other side of the road, watched wondered. What was the reason for the big man's sudden panic? This was awkward. Blake had wanted to face the man in his own home. Where was he going now?

The detective soon knew. Proud, arriving at the L.C.C. tram depot, hurried in. It was a great, rambling place, and there were endless trams. Nobody seemed to be about.

Proud halted, his heart paining him afresh. What was the use? All these trams looked alike.

"By Heaven!" he muttered exultantly.

There was one tram, parked only just within the entrance, with a dent against the number. As though in a dream, Proud remembered it. He had seen that dent as he had got off the car. Yes, that was the very tram! An amazing piece of luck!

He reached the vehicle, looking about him furtively. There were some men right in the depot, gathered round another car. A discussion was going on. Something was evidently wrong, and the cleaners and other officials had been attracted.

Proud was not anxious to be questioned. He got on the tram, mounted the stairs, and a moment later he was searching. He remembered that he had been sitting, earlier, at the very back, on the curved seat over the conductor's platform.

The banner dropped to the floor, and he put the helmet on the seat. Then, with his little electric torch, he searched. And as he searched he became more frantic.

For the gold charm was not there!

He knew this was the tram now. There was a mark on the seat, close to where he had been sitting, and he remembered it. In greater agitation than ever he continued his search.

A footstep sounded on the stairs.

With a sharp intake of breath, Proud put the little torch back in his waistcoat pocket and turned. Quite a good deal of light came into the tram from the standards outside. Proud saw a tall, lithe, keen-eyed man—not a tram-cleaner, as he had expected.

"What—what do you want?" muttered Proud feverishly.

"I want to have a little talk with you, Mr. Proud," said Sexton Blake.

"How do you know my name? Who are you?" asked the big man, as his heart bounded in sudden alarm. "I'm not doing anything wrong here—"

"Not here; but I think I am right, Mr. Proud, when I say that you are contemplating something very wrong indeed," said Blake gravely. "Don't misunderstand me. I want to help you if I can. I know that you are not a criminal, and in all earnestness I tell you that you will be well advised to tell me the whole truth."

"You're a detective?" said Proud, with stark fear in his eyes.

"Yes; but not an official detective," replied Blake. "I am not obliged to make any report—"

He got no farther, for suddenly Alfred Mowbray Proud leapt forward.

"Come, come!" said Blake sharply. "This sort of thing won't do—"

Crash!

Something struck the detective on the head—a fearful, stunning blow. Blake had not been prepared for it; he had expected a mere half-hearted punch.

But during those tense moments, as the two men had stood face to face, Proud had slipped his fingers through the knuckle-duster in his pocket—and that blow had been deadly.

Blake collapsed to the floor, unconscious.

The shock to Proud's heart, after all he had passed through that evening, was severe enough. But circumstances, conspiring evilly together, now proved too much.

For it was at that very moment, as Proud stood staring down at the man he had felled, that two motor-cars, passing the tram depot, collided.

The splintering crash caused Proud to stare round, just as he was dropping the knuckle-duster from his nerveless fingers into his pocket.

He saw one car half on the pavement; the other, in the middle of the road, on its side. Three men were staggering to their feet. There were shouts. There came a sudden blaze, a roar of flame. Proud gulped. The sight of a fire affected him strangely. He felt himself swaying.

Boom!

There was a loud, curious, puffing explosion. The petrol-tank of the blazing car suddenly blew up, the flames shot thirty feet into the air. A fragment of the wrecked car hurtled against the glass of the tram, within a foot of Proud's head. Some fragments of glass fell inside.

And Alfred Mowbray Proud sank limply down on to the seat, and the only sound that came from his lips was a long-drawn-out sigh.

His heart had been unable to stand that final shock; it had beat for the last time.

THAT car collision outside the depot caused quite a little disorganisation amongst the tram-cleaners, until they were shooed back to their work by the foreman. Outside, policemen took charge of the situation.

Cleaners, mounting to the top deck of a tram which had a broken glass, then made a startling discovery.

Officials were sent for, and it was soon established that the man sitting on the seat was dead. Apparently, he had died from heart failure, for there was no mark of violence on him.

But the other man had an ugly wound on his head, and an examination of his card-case elicited the astonishing fact that he was Mr. Sexton Blake, the famous detective.

The conductor of the tram, who lived fairly close by, was fetched. He arrived soon after a doctor, who was

making efforts to restore Blake to consciousness.

"These men weren't on the tram when I signed off, sir," said the conductor to one of the higher officials. "I'll swear to that! I had a look up here, and the top deck was empty. Besides, this big man was travelling on my tram half the evening. I saw him off before we came into the depot."

"Then how did he get here?" asked the official. "It's a puzzling affair altogether. And why should Mr. Blake be up here? Seems to me the man must be a crook, and Mr. Blake was after him."

One of the cleaners had unfurled the banner, and the inscription could be seen:

"We Demand Justice for our Fellow Sufferers!"

"One of those crank banners, by the look of it—what they use in processions," said the cleaner. "Lumme! It's a rum go!"

And then Sexton Blake recovered consciousness. He had had an ugly blow, but his skull, fortunately, was not fractured.

His information cleared up a lot. The big man was named Alfred Mowbray Proud, it seemed. Sexton Blake knew that much, at all events. And Blake easily deduced what had caused Proud's death—when he heard of the car collision outside.

"The man died from shock," said the detective. "Yes, I was on his trail, and he came to the depot and got on this tram. I think he was looking for something—and I believe I know what it was. A little gold charm, something like a swastika—"

"Why, I've got something like that in my office, sir," said an official quickly.

"May I see it?" asked Blake.

"Certainly," said the other. "It was handed in by a passenger earlier in the evening. You say that this man dropped it? It must have been picked up after he left the tram."

Sexton Blake went to the office. Yes, it was the golden fylfot—and the reason for Proud's return to the depot was explained.

IN the Grey Panther Blake sped towards the West End. His head ached abominably, but things were clearer now. He had made up his mind as to his course of action. Proud was dead, and Mrs. Proud must be informed at once—and by Blake himself. He did not want that unfortunate woman to learn the truth through the medium of a hardened police-officer.

Blake made a brief halt at Baker Street, where he picked up Tinker. And during the short drive to Maida Vale, Blake gave his young assistant all the latest details.

"By Jove, gov'nor, you've been having a time!" said Tinker. "So Proud's dead! I don't think anybody will be particularly sorry."

"I hope not—but I have my doubts," replied Blake. "Such men as Proud, worthless as they are, more often than not enjoy the love of good women. It's a queer world, young 'un."

They arrived at Hedingham Court in time to witness a somewhat unique scene.

As they entered the big foyer they heard frantic sounds from above. Running forward, they stared upwards.

And there, hanging in mid-air, was Mr. Julian Vernon. He was suspended, in fact, over the balustrade of the second floor—Rupert Waldo leaning over and holding him in this position with one hand.

"You fool—you fool!" Vernon was screaming. "You'll drop me! I shall be killed!"

"You won't be killed," retorted Waldo coolly. "My fingers are quite strong—I've got a good hold on your jacket and waistcoat. Spill it, my friend! Confess that you are one of the original kidnapers of Cynthia Bray."

Blake and Tinker ran up the stairs at top speed.

"Oh, hallo, you two!" grinned the Peril Expert. "I'm fed up with the ordinary methods; I like action. What's the good of waiting for this murderous snake? A little rough stuff, and he'll save us an awful amount of trouble."

"All right—all right!" shrieked Vernon. "I confess, curse you! You'll kill me! It was I who took the child."

"And you kidnapped her again last night, didn't you?" demanded Waldo.

"Yes, yes!"

"You'll sign a written confession, won't you?"

"Yes."

Waldo yanked the man over the balustrade, and Vernon nearly collapsed. He was a big man, and Waldo's feat of strength had been amazing.

"You can't get away with that!" snarled Vernon, nearly choking. "I'm not going to sign any statement."

"No?" said Waldo. "Well, we'll give you another dose—"

"No, no! I'll sign!" croaked Vernon.

HE did, too. He wrote a full statement in the presence of Sexton Blake, Tinker, Waldo, Mrs. Proud, and Peggy. And by the time he had signed it Chief-Inspector Lennard was on the spot, ready to take his prisoner away on a charge of murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy.

Waldo had forced Vernon to make an addition to that confession—the murder of old Luke Cranston. Not that any such confession was really necessary; for Blake, searching the flat, found the gun which had expelled the fatal shot. That, alone, would have been sufficient to send Vernon to the gallows.

Mrs. Proud received the news of her husband's death calmly and bravely. She had been expecting it; for some years he had suffered with his heart.

Then came the other news—the wonderful news that the girl she had always regarded as her daughter was the long-lost, kidnapped child of Lord

(Continued on page 28.)

THE day dragged wearily on. Blake and his companions recovered something of their strength, but there was nothing to do except talk, and call reassuringly to the kafirs in the cage across the way. They had achieved their purpose; they had got to the centre of the Forbidden Territory; discovered the secret of the voices; and it looked as though that was to be the end.

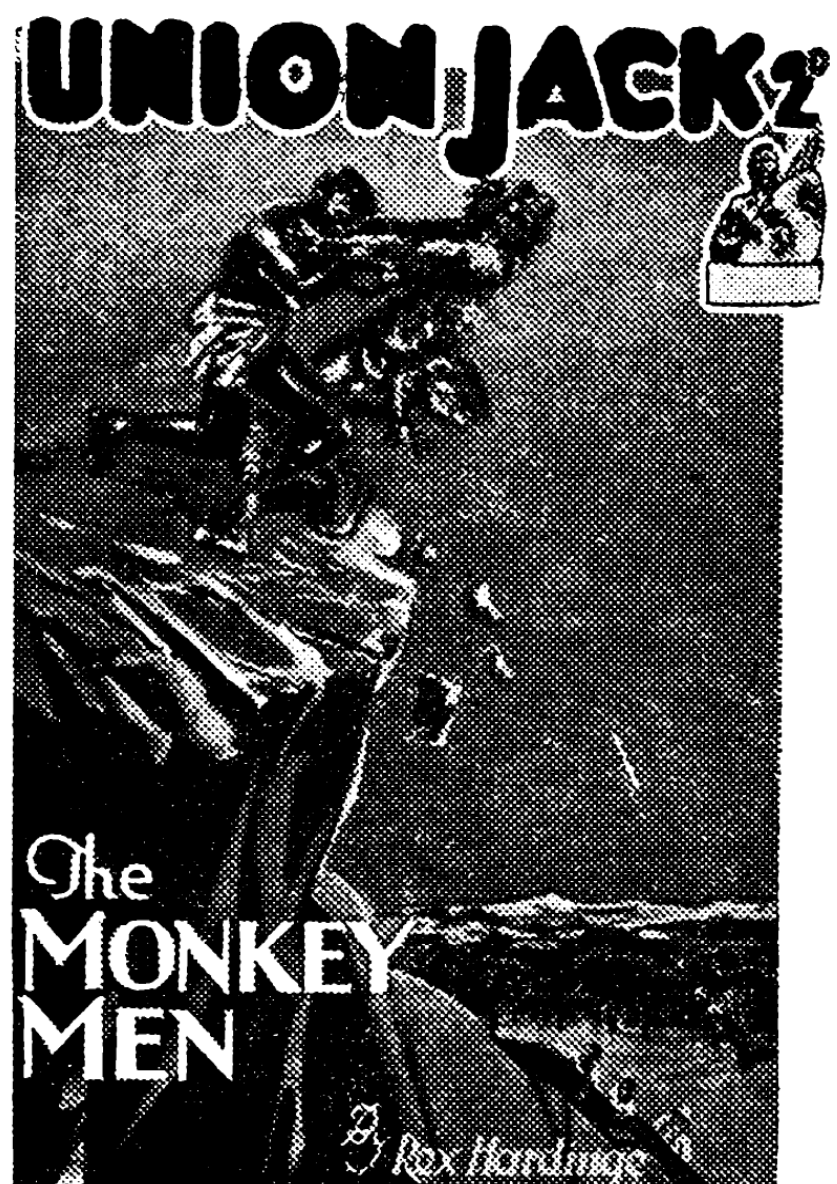
Lobangu paced his cage like an impatient animal, Sixpence trailing behind him. The porters sat and watched them listlessly. They had nothing to talk about, for they dreaded to put their worst fears into words. With native apathy they waited for death.

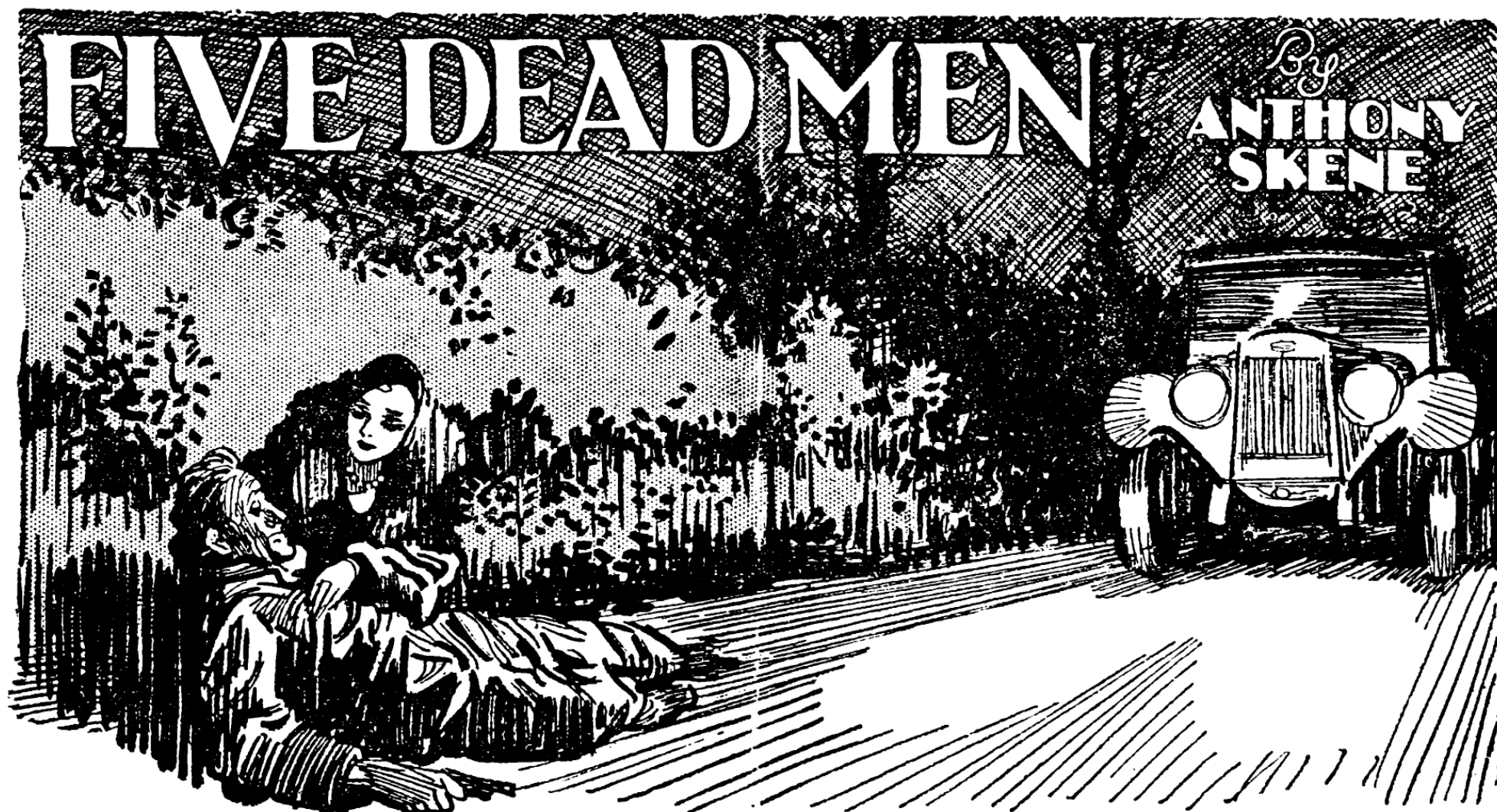
The white men, on the other hand, forced themselves to discuss the possibilities calmly. There were still mysteries that remained to be solved. One of them was Toni Desmond's interest in this place; another, the presence here of her mother; still another, the motive behind it all—why had Professor Pallister shut himself within this fence and set up his inhuman zoo? Why had he seized the women of the Etbaia tribe? There were no native women in the cages. Where did the Baboon-man and his horde fit into the problem?

From

THE MONKEY MEN

Come with **REX HARDINGE** on the trail with Blake and **LOBANGU** into the heart of Africa's dark and sinister Forbidden Territory; read of the strange race of Monkey Men who shut up their prisoners in cages in a kind of topsy-turvy zoo; of the mysterious work of the vanished Professor Pallister. It's one of Rex Hardinge's best yarns of African adventure, and one that'll give lovers of Lobangu the treat of the week. Take the hint on page 19, and your pleasure's sure.





Get Down to This Fine Yarn of Action-Thrills.

To Remind You.

FIVE men from different parts of the world were killed at Harrogate in mysterious circumstances. Privately commissioned to discover the identity of the killer, Max Sutro has got on to the trail of an underworld boss known as Pardoe, who has headquarters in an East-End cinema.

Sutro suspects that Pardoe is the King Receiver, a master crook long wanted by the police, and believes he caused the death of the five men because they witnessed his escape from arrest, and would have been able to identify him.

Numerous traps have been set by Pardoe to get Sutro and put a stop to his investigations, but luck and keen wits have kept Sutro alive and on the offensive. His chief concern is for a girl, Jessica Hardy, also a witness to the Harrogate escape, who has been tricked into marriage with her employer, Ralph Olland, an eccentric jewel collector.

A startling theory has suggested itself to Sutro that Olland is yet another alias of Pardoe, the King Receiver. He goes to the Cosmos cinema and observes Olland's housekeeper enter the cinema for a protracted stay. When Sutro tries to enter the place, he is refused admission by the commissionaire.

Vendetta.

SUTRO walked out to the edge of the kerb outside the show and waited for a chance to signal a taxi.

He was cursing Fate and himself. He had failed, was failing, and was destined to fail. What did it matter? Jessica married to Olland. That mattered. Jessica—

For some reason he turned round. The commissionaire had been staring at his back. As Sutro turned, the man deflected his glance towards a window on the other side of the road, and Sutro instinctively looked in the same direction.

There was a movement of the window curtains.

Sutro made a quick movement sideways. It saved his life. The window which he had noticed burst outwards,

and bullets sprayed across the pavement where he had been standing.

He rushed for shelter among the columns of the portico. The bullets followed him, swept across the facade of the show and back again—ricochetted in all directions from the face of the column behind which he was standing.

The commissionaire had gone down on his knees and face. He was saying: "Oh my! Oh my!" with a shocked accent. The girl in the cash desk was screaming.

Sutro found that his knees were trembling. He knew that he had been very near to death.

He rushed across the road. A man was coming out of a side entrance. Sutro recognised him as one of the men who had assisted to overpower him in the warehouse near Batavia Wharf.

He shouted: "Stop! I want you!"

The man swung round and fired. He had evidently been carrying a pistol in his hand. Sutro himself was armed on this occasion, and he returned the man's fire. Apparently both shots went wide.

The gunman started to run.

In the street behind there was shouting and the shrilling of police-whistles, wild excitement. Men were following Sutro.

The fugitive gained another street, at the far end of the passage, and managed to board a passing motor-bus.

Sutro sprinted and shouted; but could not make it. He did, however, succeed in boarding a second omnibus going in the same direction. He hoped that the one would overtake the other. In the meantime, he contented himself by getting a front seat on the top deck and closely watching the omnibus into which the fugitive gunman had disappeared.

There wasn't a lot of traffic, and the two vehicles were travelling fast. After they had gone for two hundred yards, the man whom Sutro was following took him by surprise by appearing on

the conductor's platform and jumping from the moving vehicle.

Sutro's surprise increased when he observed that the man was looking towards his own bus, evidently intending to board that.

Sutro understood the manoeuvre completely, or thought that he did.

It was probable that the police had commandeered a car in order to follow, and, in the circumstances, it was dangerous for the fugitive to remain upon the bus which he had boarded. His change to the one on which Sutro was riding made him comparatively safe, except so far as Sutro's presence was dangerous to him, and of Sutro's presence he presumably knew nothing.

"A bit of luck," Sutro said to himself.

The two buses were following different routes, and the time had been near when those routes would diverge, giving the gunman an excellent chance to evade the pursuit of the police. His change of buses had, however, made Sutro's task of keeping him under observation much simpler than before. Now that he had actually boarded Sutro's own bus, it was going to be easy to watch him.

Sutro shifted into the rear seat from which he could see the edge of the conductor's platform.

The man whom he was following had not climbed to the upper deck; and it seemed likely that he was travelling in the inside, as he had travelled on the vehicle which he had boarded first.

There were only two or three people on the top of the bus, and they had shown merely a casual interest in Sutro's movements. He half-turned in his seat, so that he could look downwards at the spot from which the gunman must leave the bus, and took no notice of anything else.

Hearing someone climbing the stairs of the bus immediately behind him, he decided that it was the conductor; and,

without turning his head, offered twopence by way of fare.

The bus was travelling to Romford via Bow and Stratford Broadway. Sutro did not think it likely that the man whom he was following would go far in that direction.

The footsteps hesitated beside him, and then a man slid into the adjoining seat.

It was the gunman!

The man's left hand was thrust into his jacket pocket, and the skirts of his jacket raised, so that the hard barrel of an automatic which he was carrying in that pocket pressed into Sutro's ribs.

The gunman said, out of the side of his mouth:

"Start anything, and I'll shoot you where you sit."

Sutro had a good look at the man and believed it. The face was powerful without being intelligent. The eyes expressed a frigid ferocity.

During his chequered career Sutro had more than once come into contact with professional killers. He knew, beyond any question, that this man was not bluffing. If he, Sutro, reacted by trying to grab that gun or strike a blow, then a bullet from that automatic would crash into his middle. After that the gunman would stand an excellent chance of getting clear. Whether the police did, or did not, get him in the end for a crime of such unparalleled sensationalism would not interest Sutro. He would be dead.

This, he thought, was the end. He did not have to be told that his disadvantage was to be prolonged until that fatal shot could be fired in safety. The thing has happened in the States often enough. In this country it is, happily, otherwise; but it is just as possible in one country as another. Retribution is here more certain. That is the only difference; but this was no consolation to the prospective victim.

Nothing of Sutro's fear showed itself in his face.

"Would you mind," he said, "not pressing that thing into my ribs with quite so much force? It's uncomfortable."

The other man grinned; but there was nothing of good-fellowship in his grin, only the snarling nervousness of a highly wrought man.

"You take it pretty coolly," he said in a low voice.

"And," he added, "you had better be careful not to make too much of a song about this, because if anybody hears you—"

He did not finish the sentence in words, but a momentarily added pressure of the pistol muzzle explained what he meant.

"You're going for a ride," he went on. "You've been marked with a cross for some time, my brave boy. Now you had better kiss yourself good-night. Do just as I tell you, and I'll let you live for a little while. Start anything, and you go phut."

"With that tempting programme in front of me," replied Sutro, "I shall naturally make things as easy for you as possible."

But the gunman appeared to have no sense of humour.

"You'd better," he said.

The conductor climbed the stairs to collect the fares, and Sutro's companion asked for two twopennies.

"As it happens," he explained, when the conductor had departed, "this bus

just suits me—and you—for where we're going to."

Sutro asked where that was.

"You'll find out!" snarled the other, and relapsed into silence.

SUTRO knew now what it was like to be summoned to the tumbrils. He understood now, as never before, the sensations of the poor wretch who takes the eight o'clock walk from the condemned cell to the scaffold. He estimated his danger with great exactness and calculated his chance of life at one in twenty.

This criminal who sat beside him had already earned a long term of penal servitude, perhaps even hanging, if the commissioner died in the attempt at ambush which had been made. It was possible that, for other crimes, his life was already forfeit. In any case, there was no doubt whatever that he was desperate. It was written all over his face—implacable determination and a total disregard of consequences. Clearly the taking of life was nothing to him. The life of a man mattered no more to him than the life of a fly, except that the killing of a man was more dangerous; and he would meet that danger, when it came, with a brutish courage and ferocity.

The bus jogged along, slowing because of the traffic, stopping to drop or take up passengers.

Sutro again asked a question as to where they were going.

The gunman replied that he would find out soon enough. He was watching Sutro's every movement, every expression. He had evidently made up his mind that even the possibility of escape should not arise.

When the bus had passed Bow Bridge the gunman prepared to make a move.

"What you've got to do," he said, "is to go downstairs and get off the bus. I shall be close behind you. Don't try to get clear, because you can't. I'm fingering my trigger. Anything unexpected, and you go out. Do you get me?"

Sutro appeared to have developed an unusual vein of humour.

"You've taken a liking to me," he said. At which the gunman grunted and prodded his pistol suggestively in the small of Sutro's back.

Sutro began to descend the stairs, the other man only a pace behind him.

It was one of the older type of buses, and the stairs were not enclosed.

Merging his downwards movement from step to step into one sudden effort, Sutro vaulted over the back rail and dropped six or eight feet into the road.

The bus was travelling at a considerable speed, and he rolled over and over.

The gunman, who had swung off in a matter of seconds, turned and ran back.

While Sutro, still dazed and dishevelled from his fall, was picking himself out of the roadway, the gunman fired. His bullet seared across Sutro's thigh. Sutro himself drew and fired in return in one swift movement; then he staggered forward.

The advantages were now with him, since every one of the hundred individuals who had witnessed the pistol duel was the gunman's natural enemy.

The man knew it. He turned and ran. He must have known the locality well, for he headed straight towards the door of an apparently disused shop, thrust it open, and disappeared.

Somewhere a police whistle was blowing. A man, whose courage was greater

than his intelligence, stepped into Sutro's path and made an effort to seize him around the shoulders. He started to ask where Sutro was going to. Sutro dropped his shoulder, and the man went head-over-heels.

A moment later Sutro was clattering down a wooden staircase into darkness. Two shots crashed in the confined space of the basement passage below. Something hit Sutro in the chest and knocked him sideways.

He continued blundering forward. A door opened, and he had a glimpse of the man whom he pursued passing out on to a path which ran beside muddy water.

Sutro recognised the water as one of the tributaries of the Winchelsea River, that almost unknown streamlet which plays a part in draining Hackney Marshes.

The gunman was ahead of him, running.

On the other side of the narrow stream men were working upon a building. They turned and shouted.

The gunman swung round and fired. Sutro heard the whine of his bullet, but did not attempt to return it.

Where the narrow path ended, the retreating crook climbed a fence and disappeared.

Had Sutro been sensible he would have abandoned pursuit at this point; but the ability to take account of risks had temporarily deserted him. His clothes were torn and dirty from his fall upon the road. His hands and knees were cut from the same cause, and he had been wounded twice by pistol bullets. This running duel between himself and the crook, who had sought to shoot him, had become a personal matter, almost a vendetta. His face was as grim as that of a hanging judge. His own eyes were as ruthless as the eyes of the killer whom he followed.

He knew that in climbing that fence from whence the other had gone he was offering himself as an easy target. He escaped because of his athletic training, which enabled him to vault clean over the obstruction and continue, like the practised hurdler that he was, in a staggering forward rush.

The gunman had waited coolly for the moment when Sutro would show above the fence top. He had not reckoned with this headlong progress. His pistol exploded almost in Sutro's ear; but somehow the bullet missed completely.

Sutro drove a right-handed punch at the man's face, which, if it had connected, would have ended the pursuit definitely. It was, however, not his fist but his forearm which struck the jaw of the other.

The gunman was knocked over, but remained in possession of his senses. Sutro sprawled face downwards on the ground for a valuable second or two, jolted by the force he had put into the missed punch.

Without firing again, his enemy picked himself up and rushed across a large area of reclaimed land, which had been used as a dump for tremendous heaps of rusted iron and pyramids of empty casks. Sutro scrambled up and followed him.

A North-Eastern Railway train, upon a raised embankment, went slowly past, crowded with passengers. Thousands of faces appeared to be turned, following the running fight across the marshes; but the locality where the duel was taking place appeared to be quite uninhabited.

The man in front had begun to stumble. He was evidently in poor condition for such a continuous strain

Sutro, battered as he was, and with his underclothes wetted by blood, was still conscious of a certain ascendancy.

"I'm going to get this chap," he told himself.

At the far side of the large yard, and against one of the canals or streamlets which intersected the main groynes in all directions, there was a high, narrow building, bearing upon the front and upon each side large notices to the effect that these desirable business premises were to be let as a factory or warehouse.

It became clear that this building was the gunman's objective. It was clear, also, that he was following a path more or less familiar.

It is probable that if Sutro had remained his prisoner they would still have followed this path together. Just as he had known, after leaving the motor-bus, that the apparently locked door of that shop would give him access to the banks of the Winchelsea River, so now he appeared to be in no doubt that he could obtain admission to the derelict warehouse.

He went right in; and again Sutro followed, covering the twenty yards which still separated him from his quarry at great speed.

Once more his good fortune, or the sheer impetuosity of his movements, saved him from paying the penalty of his rashness.

The gunman stood there, half-way along an underground passage; and when Sutro burst in he twice pulled the trigger of an empty gun.

"I thought," said Sutro, between his teeth, "that your magazine was empty."

The gunman turned and ran towards the stairs which led upward.

He was still moving as fast as he was able to move when Sutro fired at his legs. The first shot appeared to have missed; and Sutro fired again.

The gunman stopped, banged down on his kneecaps, then collapsed backwards, turning completely over and falling in a heap almost at Sutro's feet.

A GAINST a whitewashed wall, Sutro reeled back, the smoke from his automatic still upon the stagnant air in front of him. He was sore from his fall upon the roadway.

The man whom he had shot was breathing heavily. He appeared to be unconscious. Apart from this, the building was extraordinarily silent.

A slanting beam of afternoon sunlight from the murky windows fell athwart the head of the staircase and immersed Sutro waist-high in warm light.

This silence and inaction after noise and effort had a peculiar effect, not of peace but of pent-up energy, like the calm which precedes a typhoon.

Sutro found that he did not like it. He shook himself, felt for his cigarette-case. He had some difficulty in getting the case out of his waistcoat pocket.

As he went to spring it open, he stopped.

Near the hinges of the cigarette-case there was a ragged hole. Sutro knew it for the hole made by a bullet. He knew now why the shot which had had the effect of a blow in the chest had wounded him across the ribs. Looking at the cigarette-case he could imagine exactly how the shot had been deflected. It had been a near thing.

The wound across his ribs which that bullet had made was sore and sticky. Looking down at his trouser-leg, he could see a dark stain spreading upon the cloth.

Behind each murderous attack on Sutro is the same secret, sinister power. Pardoe—King Receiver—Olland, these names are symbols and a mask which Sutro has to tear away. From this point onwards to miss any chapters is to spoil the effect of a rising climax packed with thrills.

The Mystery of BLIND LUKE.

(Continued from page 25.)

and Lady Hodland. It was wonderful news because Mrs. Proud was so unselfish that her chief thoughts were for the girl's happiness.

For herself, the revelation was in the nature of a terrible shock. Peggy was bewildered by it all; but, like the true little aristocrat she was, she vowed that she would never part with the kindly woman who had been a mother to her since her babyhood.

Sexton Blake established the full proof that the girl was the missing baby; she was restored to her parents. And Mrs. Proud, now a widow, was taken into Hodland Castle as companion to her lost daughter.

Thus, Lord and Lady Hodland recovered a daughter, and Mrs. Proud did not lose hers. Peace and happiness had come to her after all the years of toil and struggle. Incidentally, she never recovered the memory of her association with Vernon during the earlier kidnapping episode. But Vernon's statement made it quite clear that she had been in complete ignorance of her brother's and Vernon's villainy; they had used her as a tool.

Sexton Blake did not regard it as one of his great cases, but it was interesting in the fact that he had had the collaboration of Rupert Waldo; and something in Waldo's bearing hinted to Blake that this might be the last time.

For Waldo was very obviously sick of life—his present humdrum life. To Blake's shrewd mind there was the early rumbling of a coming eruption.

THE END.

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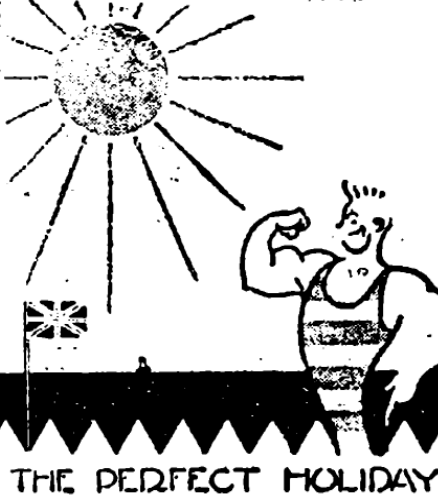
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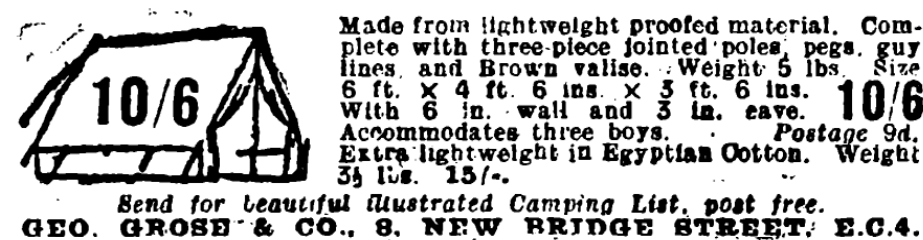
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