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THE NEXT MOVE!

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WHAT WILL BE THE NEXT MAN'S MOVE?

No. 1,516. EVERY THURSDAY. November 5th, 1932.

HERE—
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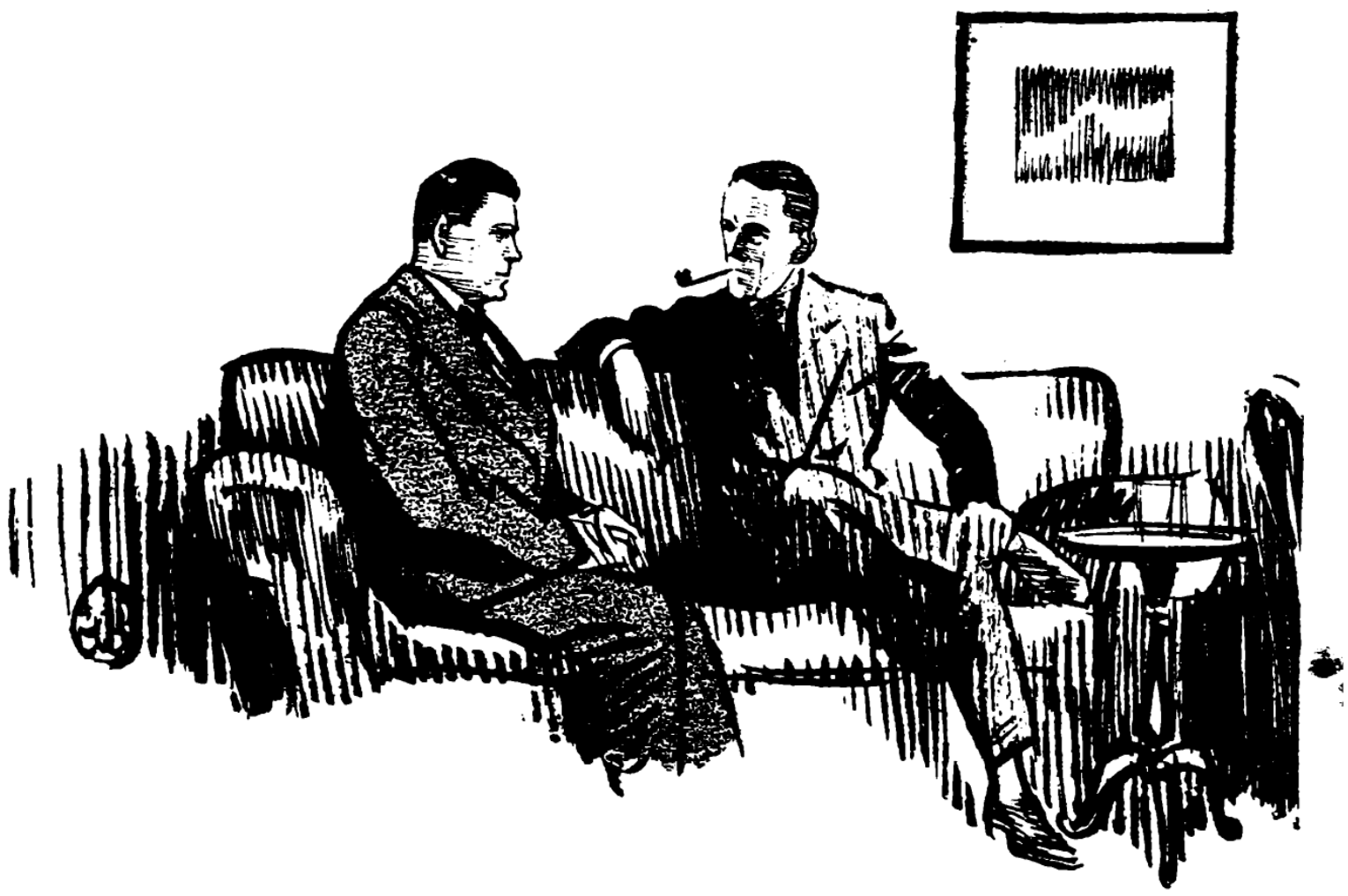
The NEXT



By - - - - - - - Robert Murray, Anthony Skene,— - - - - -

With, as referee of the match—

G. H. TEED

Chapter 1.
The Wakeful Ray.

GILSON was, literally, shocked into wakefulness.

Tap, tap, tap!

Steadily, insistently the tiny flat, metal hammer beat against the inside of his wrist.

Tap, tap, tap!

Three beats to the second. But Gilson was wide awake before the first three had been counted off.

He sat up in the darkness and, using his right hand, unbuckled the band of metal and leather from his left wrist. Carefully he allowed the band to sink to the extent of its connecting flex so that it hung beside the night table.

Next he thrust a hand beneath his pillow and took out a loaded automatic pistol. Then, pushing back the clothes, he swung his legs out of bed, thrust his feet into the soft morocco slippers that stood waiting, found a small flashlight that lay on the night table, and stood up.

Someone had passed across or through the invisible ray that guarded the front stairs, breaking the connection, and thus bringing into play the little contrivance that had been attached to his wrist in anticipation of just such a happening.

The ray had been fixed parallel with the third step and at the height of the banisters. No house-prowling cat or dog could have broken its continuity, even had there been one to prowl—the height precluded that. It had been fixed so that any human being, crouching or erect, who attempted to pass the invisible barrier after it was switched on must break it. And that interruption would bring into immediate action the tiny hammer that was strapped to Gilson's wrist.

He knew just what he had to do to reach the upper hall quickly. Every step of the way had been traversed by him scores of times. He had measured and timed his paces in every possible condition of light and gloom, of haste and deliberation.

There was only one closed door with well-oiled hinges to pass. Then a thickly carpeted hall, and he would command the head of the stairs.

Nor had he any fear that any unauthorised person, having passed the barrier of the invisible ray, would gain the top of the stairs before he could reach a position to command them. The fifth and sixth steps from the top formed a double trap. If an intruder stepped over one he could scarcely miss the other, for they had been built with the precautionary thought that one mounting might be taking them two at a time.

From his dark bed-room Gilson stepped into the equally dark upper hall. But that impenetrable curtain of gloom was rent asunder when he raised his left hand and pressed the switch of the flashlight.

The beam, intensely brilliant, stabbed straight through the banisters, revealing the upper half of the staircase. And, sprawled across the upper six steps, his head chinning the very top, fingers gripped in rods of the banisters, was a man. The trap had not failed.

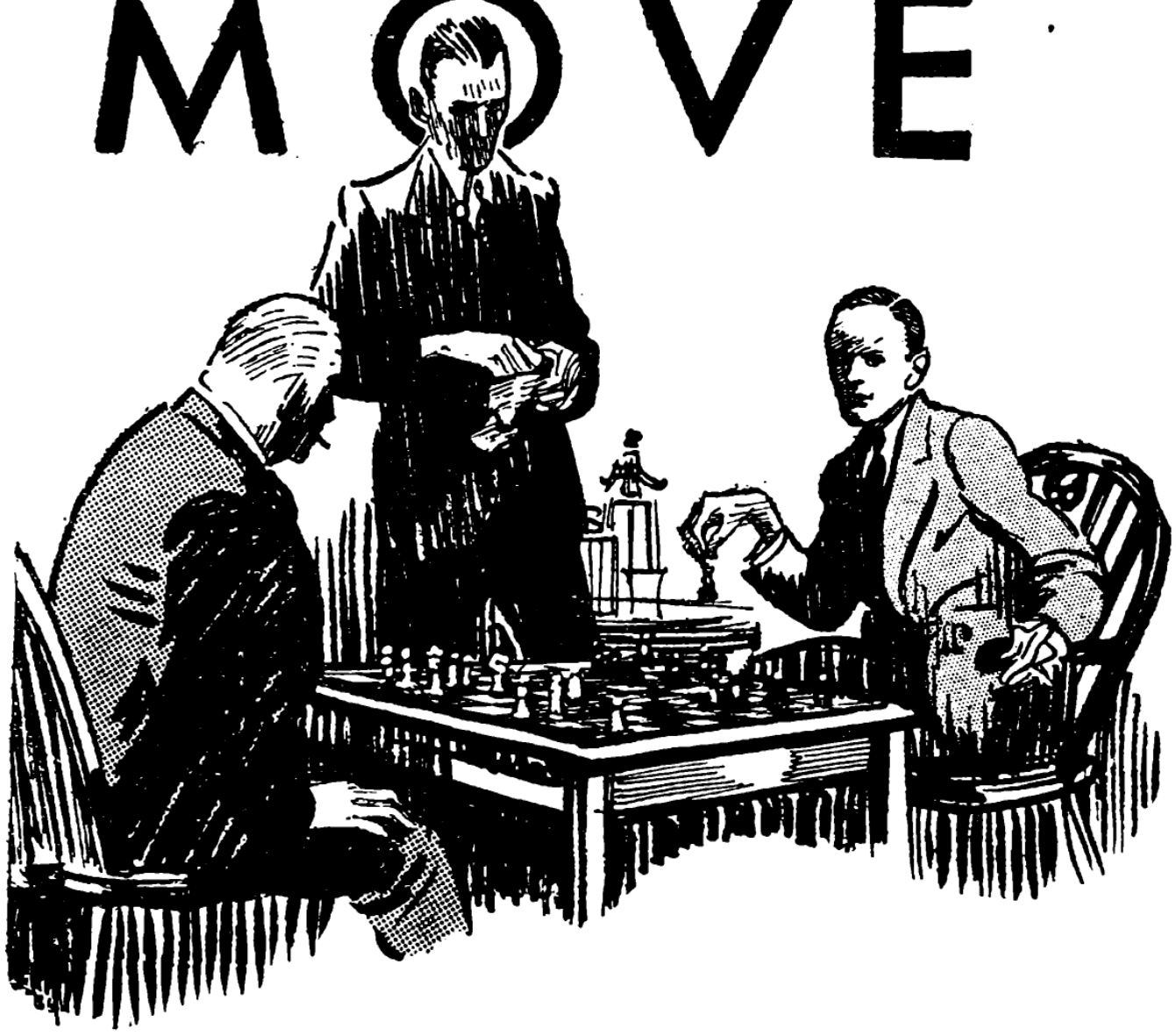
Hidden behind the flash, Gilson studied his catch at leisure. The man was big of frame, his flashy body effectively covering the stairs across which he lay. His face, held up by the pressure of the chin against the edge of the landing, was broad and round, with a short, flattish nose and high cheek-bones.

His clothes were of some dark material. A broad-brimmed black soft hat had fallen from his head and rolled across the carpet until it struck the wall. About a foot from the full stretch of his hand, had he reached out, was an automatic pistol with a clumsy bulk at the muzzle. A silencer had been affixed.

Gilson reached out and pressed a wall switch that flooded the upper hall with brilliant light. He dowsed the now ineffective torch and dropped it into the breast pocket of his pyjama coat. Then he moved forward until he stood in front of his prisoner.

In the baggy pyjamas Gilson's lithe figure did not show in outline. Just over middle height, he looked clumsy, but when he moved, his heels left the carpet with a natural spring that told of immense vitality. The hard light in his grey eyes reflected the same energy

MOVE



FOUR AUTHORS

(each a star) take up the others' challenge!

—G. H. Teed, and - - - - - - - - - - Gwyn Evans.

- - - - - - - - - The Editor

LEADS OFF

with the first instalment of this unique story. It's a mystery-story full of mysteries that mystify even the authors. Nobody knows what's coming next . . . not even the Editor. The authors don't know what problems confront them till they've seen the previous instalment, learned of the puzzles left them to unravel. Their names came out of a hat, and in turn each man will take up the yarn from where the one before left it off. There will be three rounds; each author will write three instalments, challenging the others' ingenuity all the time. Is it going to be interesting? Well, read this opening!

Forecast if you can

THE NEXT MOVE.

of body and mind. About thirty, one would say, but with a mouth hardened to greater years through some terrific experience that had seared him through and through.

He retrieved the pistol on the floor, and, with his own, laid it on a chair. He did not speak. Nor did the man who sprawled in the grip of the staircase trap. Scarcely did their eyes meet. Gilson acted as if he might be dealing with a dummy.

A panel in the wall at the head of the stairs yielded to his touch on a secret spring. From the cavity beyond he took a coil of rope, a pair of handcuffs, a pear-shaped expanding gag, and two lengths of thick black cloth.

The other had not offered to make any outcry, yet Gilson gave his first attention to the gag. Swiftly and brutally he forced the gag between the prisoner's teeth, securing it with one of the lengths of black cloth. Next he hauled both arms round behind the other's back and snapped on the handcuffs.

It took but a few moments to tie the second length of black cloth over the eyes and to secure it at the back by short tapes that had been sewn on for that purpose. Then Gilson rose, picked up his own pistol and, stepping over the helpless man on the stairs, descended to the lower hall.

He did not even glance at the front door. He was satisfied that the intruder had not gained access that way. Nor the window. There was just one means by which one could force an entry without too much trouble, and that had been left as a weak spot deliberately.

Gilson continued into the basement, and went along the short passage there to the area door. Here, as he thought, the intruder had got in. The door was even slightly ajar, in readiness for a quick getaway, if necessary.

Gilson switched on his flashlight again, but just as he was about to swing the door farther open he paused to listen to Big Ben striking in the near distance.

When the chimes had finished he counted the strokes of the hour.

One—two——

No more. Two o'clock.

Then he stepped out into the area—a wide space and deep from street to wall of house, for the building had been built back in the sixteenth century, and still stood between the blank walls of two modern erections, recessed as it were.

Gilson turned on to the iron steps and mounted to the street, regardless of his attire. At the top, close beside a curved iron rail that guarded the old steps that led up to the front door, he paused and looked up and down the short street. Not a soul was in sight. Not a footfall broke the stillness of the summer night.

Chapter 2.
The Waterway.

HE retired to the area and reentered the house, closing the door and locking it after him; though he knew full well that others would find it easy enough to force that lock if they came.

Now his movements underwent a quick change. Where he had moved with leisurely restraint he passed back along the passage with a brisk stride.

He mounted the basement stairs and ran lightly up those from the front hall, giving no more than a glance at his prisoner as he stepped over him.

In his bed-room he dressed quickly. When he had finished, there was little beyond the disarranged bed and a few toilet articles to indicate that it was being used.

When he emerged he knelt beside the man on the stairs and, thrusting a hand into the step trap, released it, dragging the victim's leg loose as he did so. With the release, the step came back into place smoothly, leaving no indication of its hidden purpose.

Standing a couple of steps below his prisoner, Gilson bent down, and, getting his hands under him, heaved him on to his shoulders with no very perceptible effort, despite the other's bulk. He performed the action with the motions of one who has been used to shouldering heavy bales or sacks.

Descending the stairs, he pressed his elbow against a switch on the wall of the lower hall, a two-way switch that

extinguished the light above. But complete darkness did not seem to bother Gilson, for he carried his burden along without stumbling or colliding with anything, and swinging the bend at the end of the hall, went down the basement stairs and along the passage until he came to a closed door on the right.

He opened the door and stepped into darkness. Easing his burden to the floor he switched on the light, revealing a room furnished as a kitchen, and with wooden shutters closed tightly over the windows.

At one end was a wide, deep old fireplace, which was, apparently, no longer used as originally intended, for in the embrasure stood a modern electric cooking range. On the left-hand side of the range were the wires and switchboard controlling the power. On the right, a narrow space unused. Behind it a wide expanse of blackened stone, surviving, it would seem, from the long-ago days when great logs had burned against it and old iron spits had turned above the flames.

Gilson stood just within the door, listening. A clock on the mantelpiece was the only thing that broke the stillness. Then he strode to the electric range, and opening the oven door, reached high up into one corner where he found a concealed switch.

He pressed this. Immediately a startling thing happened. The range swung outwards and around to the left, leaving the whole embrasure of the ancient fireplace quite empty. But that was not all. At the same time, the smooth black stone also began to move, sliding along to the left as if in a greased groove and not stopping until there was revealed an opening some four feet long by five feet high.

Gilson stepped into the alcove, and taking out his flashlight, pushed the torch into the opening. The beam of light fell on a flight of very narrow steps that descended steeply. A brief inspection seemed to satisfy him, for he switched off the torch, turned, and made his way back to the man who lay on the floor.

Again he revealed that easy strength as he hoisted the burden and hung it over one shoulder. Then he re-entered the fireplace alcove, and with some little difficulty, passed through the opening to the top step.

He paused here only long enough to press a switch that caused the panel to slide back into place, and, had one been in the kitchen on the other side, one would have seen that the electric range swung round into normal position, and then, as it ceased its swing, the light automatically went out.

On the other side of the panel a bulb now lit up the stone stairs, going both up and down. Gilson descended, still carrying his burden. About a dozen steps down, the staircase turned into a spiral that wound round and round and round, descending a great distance and confined to a space of relatively small diameter.

Here and there other bulbs gave sufficient illumination for the man's descent, and, after a time, the stone sides oozed moisture.

Then, suddenly, the stone steps ended in a stone-flagged passage along which Gilson walked a few yards until he came to a heavy oaken door that was closed.

It was only held by a simple wooden latch which yielded readily enough. Then Gilson passed through into a wide, vaulted, cavern-like place that, despite its depth below the level of the street above, smelled sweet enough, though damp to the nostrils.

IT was, in fact, a link in the amazing and all but forgotten subterranean streams of London, and through the middle of the place ran a stream of water.

Here and there beneath parts of old Westminster may still be found parts of the watercourses that used to run open to the air in the Middle Ages just as others flow in secret places beneath the great houses that lie between Paddington and Park Lane, beneath the great office mammoths in Holborn and Farringdon Street.

It emerged through an arched opening in the wall and disappeared through a similar arch in the opposite wall. Never had its existence been suspected when the more recent building had been carried out above.

But Morgan Gilson was, apparently, well acquainted with its course and possibilities, for tied to a short stake in the mid bank was a small punt. And in the punt he deposited his burden.

Getting in, he cast off and seized a pole. Gently he pushed the punt along until it was almost entering the arched tunnel through which the stream flowed on its course, either to the greater creek that forms the lake of St. James' Park, or into the Thames itself.

He held the punt back by pressing one hand against the top of the arch. Then he dropped the pole at his feet, reached out and pressed a switch, which plunged the place into darkness, dropped to his knees, and crawled forward, where he pressed another switch that controlled a powerful electic torch that had been fixed in the front end of the craft.

By now the punt was being carried along at a fairly good pace, bumping against the sides of the tunnel as the current sent it along. Gilson corrected the movement as much as possible with his hands against the old brickwork, but he sprang back to the pole when the miniature searchlight revealed another opening in the tunnel.

Almost immediately the punt slid into a cavelike place similar to the one he had left, but here, where wall and tunnel began again, there was a thick iron grid that effectively stopped the further passage of the boat.

But this seemed not to worry Gilson, for he poled into the bank and got out, fastening the craft to a rusty old ringbolt that hung close to the grid.

At the top of the sloping muddy bank, and built against the wall, were two small rooms or cellars. One was doorless, but the other had been fitted with a clumsy affair of rough wood, and this, in turn, showed a shiny bit of steel under the stabbing beam of Gilson's torch where a lock had been sunk. In the lock was a key.

Gilson climbed to this door and unlocked it. The light revealed an interior that was floored with scattered straw. There was nothing in the way of furniture except a new galvanised iron bucket.

When he had filled this at the stream and placed it in one corner of the cell Gilson returned to the punt and once more shouldered his prisoner. Dumping him on to the straw he reached down and removed the gag and eye bandage. Then he indicated the pail of water.

"You can drink," he said tonelessly, "if you can manage to push your face into the pail without upsetting it. You can yell your head off if you want to try. You won't be heard."

With that he stepped out of the cell, closed the door, turned the key, and, removing it, slipped it into his pocket. Next he passed round the end of the cell and climbed to the very top of the bank until he stood just beneath a hole in the brick about three feet wide by a foot or so deep.

It had possibly been built originally to allow for the overflow of flood water. But, at some time or other, it had been used for other purposes, for when he had climbed through Gilson found it possible to get his feet on the rungs of an iron ladder that had been fixed to the brick.

He began to climb, going up and up and up until, at last, his reaching hand came into contact with a round iron trap. He got his shoulders against this and heaved with his great strength until the trap lifted.

A quick hand checked it before it could clang backwards, and Gilson emerged into a small cobbled courtyard that seemed to be enclosed on three sides with a high blank wall, and on the fourth by the wall of a small building containing one window and a door.

He lowered the trap into place and made for the door. When he had unlocked it and stepped inside he brought his torch into play once more.

The light revealed a curious thing. The hall was not more than six feet long, with a door on his right, and one at the other end. There were no stairs, but when Gilson opened the door on his right the light showed a tiny room that was quite bare of any furnishings, with the exception of a window that was covered by a blind and curtains.

Here, too, there was a short wooden ladder that gave to a trap in the ceiling, and had one climbed this one would have found an exactly similar room, or miniature room, unfurnished but for blind and curtains over the window. It was like a big doll's house.

Apparently satisfied with his brief scrutiny, Gilson closed the door and went along the short hall to the door at the end. This was secured by an ordinary Yale spring lock, which, after dowsing the torch, he turned.

Then he opened the door and stepped once more into the warm summer night, just as Big Ben chimed the three-quarters.

Chapter 3.
The Dead Monkey.

GILSON walked out of the impasse of which the dummy house formed the end, into an alley which brought him into the thoroughfare just off Victoria Street, which is known as Petty France.

From here he made his way to Victoria Street and along to an all-night taxi rank, where he found a cab. At ten minutes past three he was standing on the steps of Sexton Blake's house in Baker Street pressing the bell-push.

Within the dark house a deep, ominous baying was the first answer to his ringing. Then the man at the door saw a gleam in the fanlight, above the door, and a moment later a sleepy youth in a vivid crimson dressing-gown was staring at him suspiciously.

"It's Morgan Gilson, Tinker."

"Oh, come in, Mr. Gilson. I couldn't see at first. I'm half asleep, I guess. What's up?"

"I must see Mr. Blake at once."

Tinker spoke sharply to Pedro, the big bloodhound, whose bloodshot eyes were fixed somewhat ominously on the late caller. Then:

"Come along to the consulting-room, Mr. Gilson. But I warn you, the guv'nor isn't going to be any too pleased

The current carried the punt into a cave-like opening, but where the tunnel began again was a thick iron grid that stopped further passage.

at being hauled out at this hour of the night. He had the dickens of a hard day, and didn't turn in till two."

"I'm sorry; but you know what he said—to wait until something happened, and then get in touch with him at once."

"And has something happened?"

"It certainly has. Will you tell him?"

But there was no need. As they entered the consulting-room by one door Sexton Blake, in his famous worn old dressing-gown, came in at another. He was frowning irritably, for Pedro's deep bark had awakened them. But the frown passed when he recognised his visitor. He eyed him keenly as he crossed the room.

"So it has come, Gilson?"

The visitor nodded.

"Just as I anticipated."

"When did it happen?"

"As near two o'clock as may be."

"Any warning?"

"Only that at midnight, when I tried to use my telephone instrument, I found it dead."

"Well, you appear unharmed. Are you sure it is what you expected?"

"Dead sure. Only one got as far as my trap, but I've trussed him up safely."

"Tell me just what occurred."

Blake sank into his desk chair and lit a cigarette. He smoked without interrupting the other's tale. When it had finished, however, he shook his head.

"It's a pity about that telephone. I wish you could have got word to me without leaving your house."

"But no one saw me. I made sure of that. As I told you, I came through the dummy cottage in the blind alley."

"I'm not thinking of whether you were seen or not. I'm thinking of what may be happening while you are away from the place. It is easy enough for others to get in by that area door."

"I couldn't do anything else. The phone was dead. I couldn't call a constable. Nor did I dare risk sending a message by a taxi driver. I might have gone to a public telephone at Victoria Station, but that would have taken about as much time as coming myself."

"Quite true. I think we had better go back as quietly as possible. If the thing has happened that you have been expecting, then it looks as if the game was starting. And we've got to be on hand for the next move."

"I was hoping you'd come back."

"I will."

Blake turned to Tinker.

"Get into some duds, my lad. Then get the car. I'll dress. Help yourself to cigarettes, Gilson. And perhaps you'd like a drink?"

With the efficiency of long practice, both Blake and Tinker were dressed and ready in short time enough to please even the impatient Gilson. While Blake examined pistols and loaded a couple for himself and the lad, Tinker went for the Grey Panther, which was kept ready at all times in a mews garage at the back of the house.

With no traffic and no speed limit to restrain him, Tinker burned the asphalt as he cut across town on his way to Westminster.

HE reached Petty France by a series of short, winding streets from Buckingham Palace Road, then he slid into the alley off Petty France and brought the big car to a stop in front of the dummy house in the blind alley.

He waited only long enough to turn the patent lock of the magneto, then he followed Blake and Gilson into the little place that the uninitiated believed to be a real house with real rooms, and, because of the curtains at the windows, real occupants.

Gilson waited to close the door after him. Blake had already opened the other door that led into the cobbled yard, and by the time Tinker and Gilson reached him, had managed to lift the iron trap.

But Gilson went first down the ladder. Tinker followed, with Blake bringing up the rear, his powerful shoulders easing the iron trap into place just before he began to descend.

He found Gilson and Tinker waiting on the other side of the hole in the wall. When he had dropped beside them, all three moved down the gradually sloping mud bank that hadn't seen the sun for more than four hundred years.

No words were spoken. They knew what to expect, and the two detectives allowed Gilson to go first while he held the torch in one hand and felt for the key with the other.

But the moment they turned the corner of the cell and were in sight of the door, they knew that the key would be useless. For the door which had been locked was now lying back on one hinge, the lock smashed as if a heavy sledge had demolished it. And it was only a perfunctory glance they gave inside. They knew already that the prisoner was gone.

Upon the realisation of this, Gilson stumbled and raised a hand as if in baffled despair. Sexton Blake reached out quickly and caught his shoulder.

"The story is plain to read," he said quickly. "We've got to move quickly. How could they get here?"

"Only through the tunnel."

"But—a boat?"

"They could wade. It isn't more than three feet deep."

Blake jerked out his own torch and flashed it towards the water. He could see the punt still tied to the ringbolt as Gilson had left it.

"Then they've gone either up through the dummy cottage or back into your house."

"Not the cottage," responded Gilson wearily. "They would return to the house. They are probably searching now for the——"

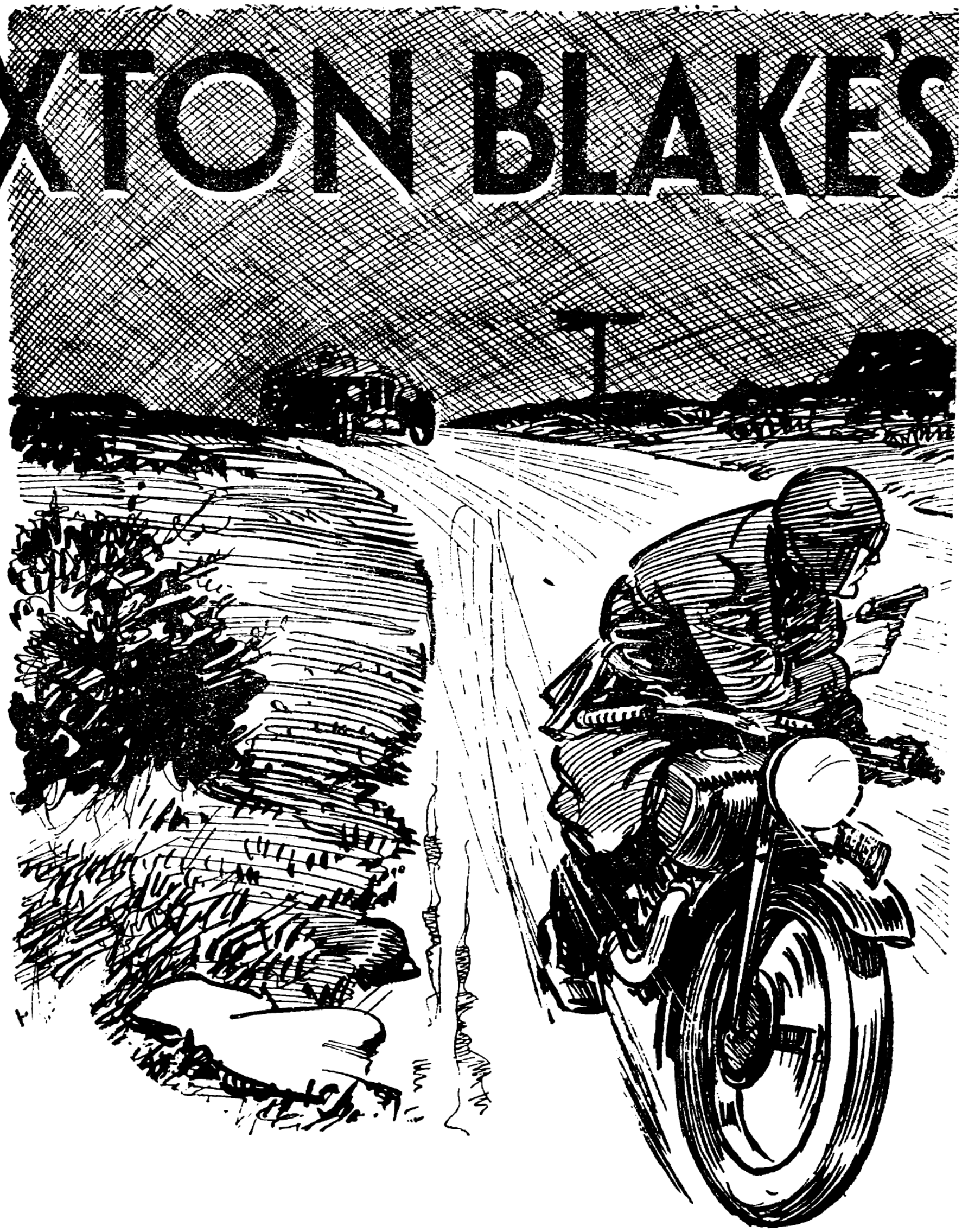
"Come on!"

At Blake's crisp command Gilson pulled himself together. They ran down the bank to the punt.

(*Continued on page* 26.)

SEXTON BLAKE'S

Illustrated by Kenneth Brookes.



As he drew level the motor-cyclist fired almost point-blank at Blake.

A Complete Detective Story of Sexton Blake and Waldo.

Chapter 1.
A Damsel in Distress.

MR. HENRY FAVERSHAM was a lawyer of the old school; he was old-fashioned in his manner, old-fashioned in his speech, and old-fashioned even to his severe black clothing and white side whiskers. As he sat facing Sexton Blake, in the latter's consulting-room, he looked nervous and ill at ease.

Blake was inwardly puzzled, for old Faversham was usually so genial and so completely master of himself. Blake had known him for some years; was rather fond of him, in fact, for the old boy was as honest as the day and he generally had a fund of entertaining anecdotes which he was wont to deliver with much quiet wit. For many years he had conducted the legal business of a number of wealthy county families, and many were the strange secrets which came into his possession.

"My business with you to-day, Blake, is really something of an impertinence," he said definitely. "In a word, I'm in a most infernal dilemma, and I want you to help me out of it."

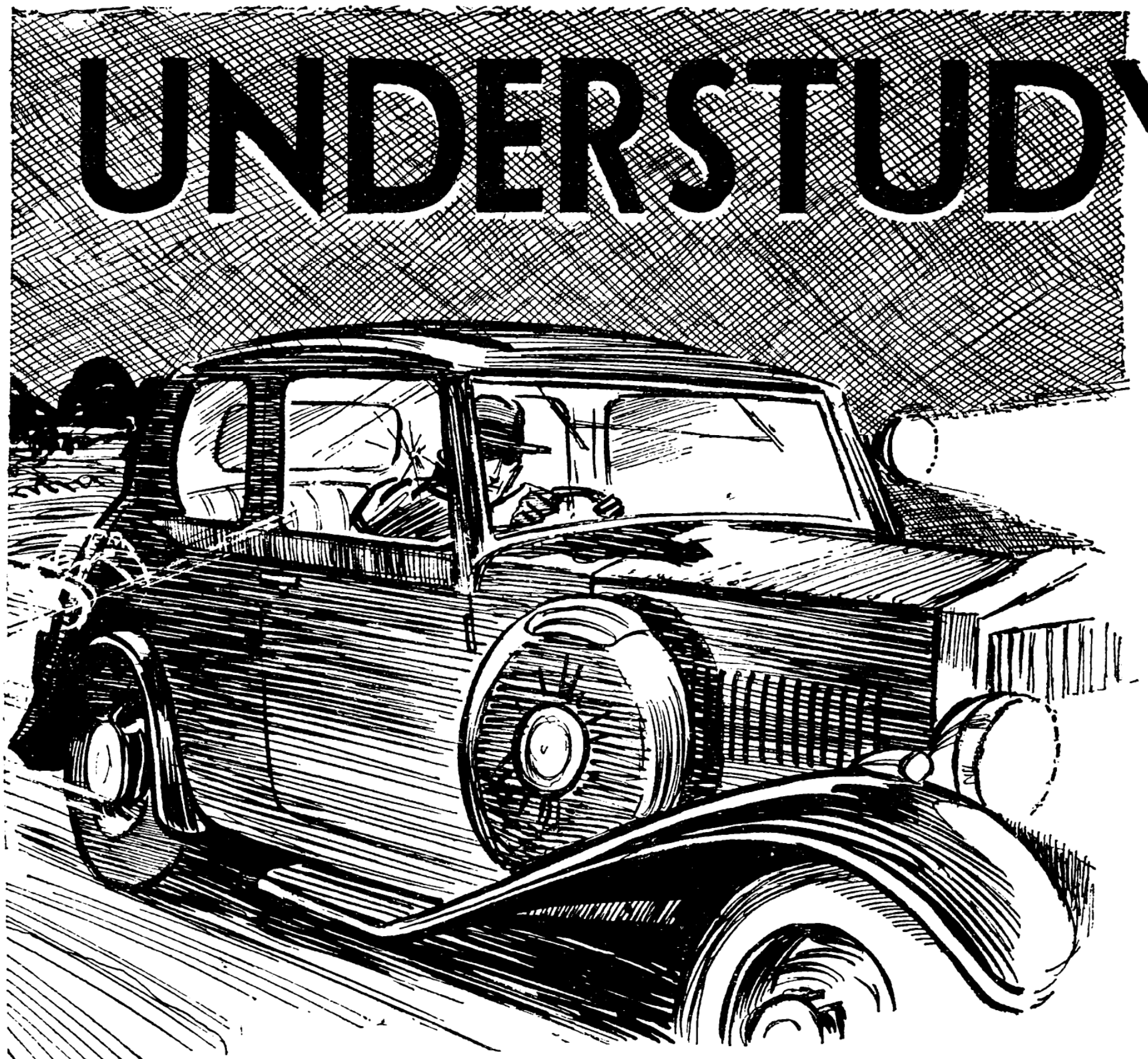
"We're old friends, Faversham; I'll do the best I can," promised Blake.

"In a nutshell, a client of mine—or, to be more exact, the daughter of that client—wants me to go on a mysterious midnight expedition to Suffolk," continued the old lawyer awkardly. "What I want you to do is to go in my place."

"It sounds quite intriguing," commented Sexton Blake.

"I can assure you I am completely mystified," went on Mr. Faversham. "In ordinary circumstances I should have undertaken the commission myself, and only the gravity of my wife's illness, and the apparent urgency of Miss Tracey's message, prompted me to come to you. For you are the one man in London whom I can safely trust with a professional secret which, normally, I would never dream of sharing with a third party. But I am

UNDERSTUDY



By E. S. Brooks

Sexton Blake had to go to the house at midnight, and creep in by the back way. But Waldo didn't know that, and when he took on the job and acted in Blake's stead, he breezed right in by the front door and—that was where the complications began. Also the excitement! We'd like to know whether, in your opinion, this isn't about the best yarn of the kind that E. S. Brooks has ever written around his popular hero.

quite sure Miss Tracey will understand and be willing to accept you as my deputy."

Blake began to understand the old lawyer's nervousness, and he knew the reason for the haggard lines on his usually serene old face.

"It is astonishing how often two vitally important things happen on the same day, and one is in a grave quandary, not knowing which path to take," continued Mr. Faversham. "In my own case, to-day, I received this most alarming letter from my client's daughter this morning—and you will understand the adjective after you have read the letter—in which she asks me to be in Little Budeley at midnight. And less than an hour later a telegram comes to me from Genoa, informing me that my wife, who is wintering there, has contracted a dangerous illness."

"Naturally, you must go at once," said Blake quickly. "I am grieved to hear this, Faversham. And you can rely upon me——"

"Wait until you hear what you have to do," interrupted the old lawyer, with a faint return of his old twinkle. "As you know, my practice is a purely private one, and I employ no confidential assistants. So in this emergency I have come to you.

"I *must* leave for Genoa this afternoon, and I can't go and leave that poor girl in distress. I can't even write to her and tell her that I am unable to come. That's another point you'll understand soon. Somebody must keep the appointment at midnight. The whole affair is most disturbing, and for the life of me I cannot understand what Sir John is thinking about."

He took from his dispatch-case a letter which seemed to be fairly long, judging by the number of sheets of notepaper. Blake caught a glimpse of the firm, neat, feminine handwriting, as old Faversham adjusted his spectacles and glanced over the sheets. The detective watched him curiously. This business must indeed be uncommonly urgent for an old-fashioned stick like Faversham to entrust it to a man who was not even a legal colleague.

"Before you read this letter, Blake, I'd like to tell you something of its writer," said Faversham suddenly, looking up. "She is a fine girl, not quite of age, and on my all too infrequent visits to the Manor House I have found her to be a creature of joy and laughter. Moreover, June Tracey is a girl of character—fine, loyal character. In a word, a real little brick. That makes this present business all the more astounding.

"Her mother died about two years ago, and the shock almost killed poor Sir John, for they had been a devoted couple all their lives, and June, their only child, was their sole interest. They lavished all their love upon her, and she's one of those girls who don't take advantage of that sort of thing.

"After her mother's death she loyally stuck to her father, and has done much to alleviate his great loss. Most girls of her age would want to be gadding about in London, or on the Continent, mingling with youngsters of their own age. But not June. She's too fine a girl for that. If you could see some of the letters Sir John has written to me in confidence, you would appreciate the true gold of this girl."

"Your own account of her, Faversham, is sufficiently eloquent," replied Blake, with a smile. "If she is as pretty as she is good——"

"My dear man, June Tracey is one of the loveliest girls you ever saw," declared the old lawyer. "You'll see that to-night, when you meet her. You see, I am assuming that you'll do me this great service."

"By the sound of it, it is you who are doing me the service," said Blake dryly. "Even I, with my life of out-of-the-common adventures, seldom get asked to meet charming girls secretly at midnight."

"I hope you're not thinking to treat this matter lightly," said Faversham quickly. "June must be in very deep distress to write to me as she has done. Before giving you her letter, I will add that Sir John Tracey is a landowner of considerable wealth—the Traceys have owned all the land round and about Little Budeley for three centuries—and a man of refinement and culture.

"One of our real old aristocrats; a county gentleman with a noble ancestry. I cannot imagine Sir John doing a dishonest action, or having a secret in his past which has caught up with him. I have known him since he was a youngster, and I have known him to be a man of unimpeachable integrity. Now, having given you these details, I want you to read the letter."

Sexton Blake was conscious of a sense of eager anticipation as he took the neatly written sheets. Faversham had hinted at so much, but had said so little.

The letter was dated three days previously, and there was a pencilled note beneath the date: "Don't take any notice of this, as I may not be able to post this letter at once. Must await my chance." It was a strange enough prelude to the letter itself:

Dear Mr. Faversham,—You have often told me to bring my troubles to you. I know that you never expected me to have any troubles that dad could not easily solve, and that you spoke more or less in fun; but dad cannot help me now because he is the cause of the whole dreadful situation, and when I speak to him about it he only tells me to be patient. And I know that he is suffering as greatly as I.

It is three weeks, now, since Mr. Smayle and his friends came to stay with us at dad's invitation. I was pained and startled when they first came, and since then I have become afraid—so dreadfully afraid that I cannot express myself in this hastily written letter. The horror grows upon me daily, and at night I cannot sleep because of my terror. Why dad should have invited these dreadful men to the Manor House is a mystery. Matthew Smayle is a coarse brute of a man, and the other two, who seem to be known as Wally and Bert—I believe their names are Dring and Foster—are even more repulsive.

At first they tried hard to behave themselves and did, indeed, almost blind me to their real characters. Although rough, they acted like gentlemen. But gradually they changed; and now, after three weeks, they no longer keep up the pretence, but order my dad about, use the servants roughly, and make free of the house as though it were their own. And when I speak to dad, he looks at me patiently, but with a world of misery in his eyes. He tells me that everything will be all right. There is some dread secret here which terrifies me more and more.

These men make use of our cars, they come home drunk, they sit playing cards until the small hours, they get up at any hour which pleases them, and have their meals taken upstairs. They use dreadful language and they become more and more familiar with me.

I hardly dare move about the house, for fear of meeting them, and I even fear that they will force their way into my own room.

It is becoming a nightmare. Smayle even censors all the letters which come and go, and if I am to post this one I shall have to slip out in the dead of night. I do not even know, yet, whether I can post it.

I have asked dad why he does not go to the police, but there is such dread in his eyes when I make that suggestion that I no longer attempt it. And in this great trouble I have thought of you.

Please, please come down to see me—

and to see dad. Perhaps he will tell you what it all means. But don't write, or Smayle will surely open your letter before I could even see it. Can you come late—say, at midnight? I shall have retired by then, and you can get in by the old door at the end of the chapel ruins.

You know the one, don't you? We used to play there, you and I, when I was quite a child. There is a passage which leads straight to the old armoury.

Smayle and his friends never go there, and from to-morrow night onwards I shall slip down to the armoury at midnight and wait there for an hour. Do please come, Mr. Faversham! Unless I can talk to somebody I shall go mad. Think of me waiting there, in the darkness—waiting for you to come.

To-day, the man Bert actually tried to kiss me, and he would have done so if Smayle had not knocked him down, and the look in Smayle's eyes terrified me even more than Bert. Poor dad is dying by degrees. In these three weeks he has aged ten years. Please, please come!

In desperation,

JUNE.

There was a pencilled postscript beneath the signature: "The wretched men are all out together for once, and it is now past eleven p.m., so I am going to slip out across the park and put this letter in the wall box at the corner."

SEXTON BLAKE looked up gravely.

"Now I can appreciate your concern, Faversham," he said quietly. "Something must be done about this, of course."

"I can't go!" exclaimed the lawyer, leaning forward. "As I have already told you, I must leave for Genoa this afternoon, and I may not be back for two or three weeks. Imagine that poor girl waiting, night after night, alone in the darkness——"

"I cannot imagine it," interrupted Blake, almost sharply. "My dear Faversham, you should not have doubted for a moment. I will go down to-night, and you can rely upon me to do everything in my power to help this maiden in distress. You must, of course, give me a letter of introduction, assuring the girl that I am an old friend of yours, and that I am to be trusted."

"Naturally—naturally," said Mr. Faversham. "I had thought of that, too, Blake. Thank you a thousand times. It is very good of you. Of course, we must remember that this is a girl's letter. She may have exaggerated the whole situation——"

"I am inclined to think that she has understated it," said Blake grimly. "The whole letter breathes terror. And you have already told me that June Tracey is a girl of strong character—plucky, self-reliant, unselfish. No, this is not the letter of a highly strung, hysterical child. There's something infernally wrong at the Manor House."

"Upon my soul, Blake, you make me tremble," said the old lawyer. "I feel that I am failing in my duty——"

"Nonsense!" put in Blake. "This job appears to be more in my line than yours, Faversham. Whatever devilry is going on in Sir John Tracey's home will be checked to-night. Trust me for that."

"You're a good friend, Blake—you always were," said Mr. Faversham warmly. "You have taken a great load off my mind, for I can now go abroad without this matter haunting me. I'll write you that letter of introduction, and I'll give you a rough plan of the Manor House, too, so that you'll be able to easily find the old door at the end of the chapel ruins."

He was a much relieved man when he took his departure, after giving Sexton Blake the necessary letter, a roughly drawn plan, and very full verbal directions, which the detective memorised.

Blake looked forward to the evening with a curious elation.

For him the promise of excitement was sufficient recompense for the favour he was doing.

Chapter 2.
Blake—Knight Errant.

RUPERT WALDO sang as he drove. He was happy. He had just robbed a man of ten thousand pounds in solid golden sovereigns, and it was an occasion for singing.

The Wonder Man's car was purring powerfully as it spun along the smooth, main road between Chelmsford and Brentwood. It was a sports M.G.—entirely his own property, by the way, bought for cash, for Waldo was no car thief. Exactly where the cash had come from, however, is another matter.

Waldo had graced the ancient town of Colchester that night with his presence. The man he had robbed bore the prosaic and respectable name of Reginald Gordon Smith, and he lived in a fine old house on the outskirts of the town of Lexden. He was a man who had made lots of money by organising bogus charities, and he was something of a miser. Waldo had selected Mr. Smith as a promising victim—the type of unclean scamp who was not exactly an habitual criminal, but who thoroughly deserved to have his hoarded gold pinched.

So Waldo pinched it. He had left Mr. Smith, bound and helpless, lying in his own coal-cellar. And there he was likely to remain until his daily servants came in the morning—for Mr. Smith lived alone, and he would have no servants sleeping on the premises. After to-night he would probably change his mind about that.

As Waldo was slowing down to pass through the long, narrow main street of Ingatestone, he mentally reviewed his recent job. He had deliberately taken action at an early hour, whilst Mr. Smith sat reading in his library. It was safer, and easier. With the corporation omnibuses and lots of traffic passing to and fro within hearing, Waldo's task had been simplified. He did not believe in working at dead of night unless he was obliged to.

He was wearing no disguise now; but, attired in plus-fours, with a bag of golf clubs projecting from the seat beside him, he looked a typical well-to-do sportsman. When Mr. Reginald Smith's terrified eyes had beheld him, he had been wearing a close-fitting garb of scarlet, which covered even his feet, his hands, and his face. Waldo was sure he would not be connected with the job.

Waldo's motto was "live and let live," and he saw no reason why the newspapers should not have a nice little scoop. There would be quite a hue and cry after the "man in scarlet" as soon as Mr. Smith started talking. But the police would find no finger-prints—no clues of any kind. Waldo was satisfied that he had covered his tracks perfectly. He had not been obliged to indulge in his celebrated "strong man" stuff, for that sort of thing was calculated to give the police a hint. True he had picked the patent lock of the door at the bottom of the garden. He had also picked the lock of the back door, and, in front of Mr. Smith's eyes, he had opened Mr. Smith's safe, as though it were a refrigerator. But there were plenty of expert safebreakers known to the police who could have performed these simple tasks.

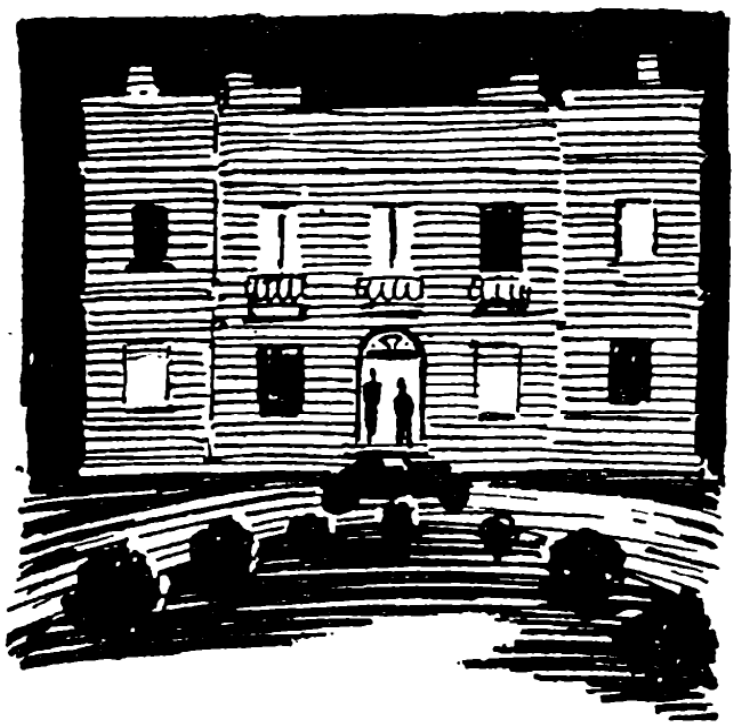
Then it was that the complacent Wonder Man received a jarring shock.

He was about midway through the narrow main street of Ingatestone, when he beheld another car, low and rakish, approaching from the direction of London. Any kind of speed here, of course, was out of the question. And both Waldo and the other motorist had switched off their headlights. Thus there was no dazzle to hamper Waldo's keen eyesight.

He not only saw that the approaching car was a Rolls-Royce, but he recognised it instantly as the Grey Panther.

"Ten thousand lurid curses!" muttered Waldo.

He saw that Sexton Blake himself was at the Grey Panther's wheel, and Blake was alone. Waldo bent forward, so that Blake could not see his face, and thus



the two cars passed. There was a young lady on a bicycle just in front of the Grey Panther, and Blake scarcely saw the sports M.G. Certainly he did not give a single glance at the driver.

"This," muttered Waldo, with annoyance, "is devilish!"

He had jumped to a conclusion, which is always risky. Still, he could hardly be blamed. Here was Sexton Blake, speeding down from London on the main Colchester road. And Blake was the one man in all the world whom Waldo really feared. They were on the friendliest terms, aside from business; but Waldo had no keen desire to have Blake on his track, and to have that ten thousand pounds taken from him.

He came to a quick decision, and he turned into the first side road, quickly reversed, and a moment later he was hurtling out of Ingatestone back on his own tracks.

There was only one thing to be done—overtake Blake, have a quiet talk with him, and dissuade him from his purpose. Obviously Blake knew nothing of Reginald Smith's character. Smith, owing to some unforeseen circumstance, had got free, and he had not only informed the police, but he had rung up Blake, and here was Blake, speeding hotfoot to Colchester in answer to the appeal. Quick work, of course; but then, was Blake ever slow?

Waldo was all the more convinced that he had hit the nail on the head, because he had had an idea for some weeks past that Blake was quietly keeping an eye on him.

Twice during the last fortnight in London Waldo had spotted Tinker, and although Tinker had been apparently unaware of Waldo's existence, Waldo suspected otherwise. He had changed his address three times within a week. This sort of thing was getting annoying.

"I was going to call on Blake, anyway," Waldo told himself. "This will save me the trouble. I'll tell him frankly that he can't work for a rat like Smith."

He was back on the open road now, and he had his foot hard on the throttle. The sturdy little M.G. was doing her sixty. Midway between Ingatestone and Chelmsford, Waldo recognised, in the glare of his headlamps, the rear view of the Grey Panther. But between him and Sexton Blake there was a man on a motor-cycle, and it was not long before Waldo noticed that this man was deliberately keeping at a distance behind Blake. He made no attempt to pass, although the Grey Panther was merely pottering along, and the motor-cycle was a powerful one, and capable of high speed.

"I'm afraid I've got an evil, suspicious mind!" muttered Waldo. "I'll swear that motor-cyclist is 'tailing' Blake! Confound the fellow! He's going to be a nuisance!"

They were just entering Chelmsford over the new concrete bridge across the railway, and it was difficult for Waldo to take any action yet. He decided to wait until they were through the town.

Then a doubt came into his mind; for Blake, instead of taking the by-pass, turned into the town itself. And when he got into the town, instead of taking the Colchester road, Blake went under the railway bridge near the station, and then turned to the right and went off on the little-used highway which leads through the small towns of Braintree and Halstead and Sudbury to Bury St. Edmunds.

"H'm!" grunted Waldo. "Perhaps I was wrong."

But if he was wrong about Sexton Blake's mission, he was not wrong about the motor-cyclist. Unquestionably, that man was sticking to the detective's trail.

IT was only a little after eleven, and Sexton Blake was taking things easily. He was timing his journey so that he could arrive at Little Budeley—which lay between Sudbury and Bury St. Edmunds, well back from the main road—shortly before midnight. This would give him time to find a place to conceal the car, and then take a survey of the house.

He knew that a motor-cyclist was keeping behind him, and he had an idea that there was another car not far from the motor-cyclist. But Blake, keen as he was, saw nothing suspicious in the circumstances. Other people had as much right to the road as he. And the obvious assumption was that the motor-cyclist was taking advantage of the Grey Panther's headlights.

Another obvious assumption in Blake's mind at that time was in connection with Sir John Tracey's singular guests. At first glance this was a case of blackmail.

But against that theory there was the old lawyer's emphatic declaration that Sir John was incapable of a dishonest action, and that it was almost unthinkable that a secret in Sir John's past had caught up with him. And Henry Faversham, of all men, knew Sir John Tracey, for he had always been the family adviser, and, as far as he knew, no secrets had been kept from him.

Yet the girl's letter proved that Matthew Smayle and his unsavoury friends had gone to the Manor House at Sir John's invitation, and it was equally clear that they remained there by reason of some hold they had on their host.

Blake was looking serious as he reviewed these possibilities. He knew all the arts and wiles of the blackmailer; he knew how such moral lepers fastened

themselves upon their victims—frequently enough upon the slenderest of excuses. Perhaps Smayle knew something which, if made public, would besmirch the Tracey honour—something which had no personal connection with Sir John at all. Yet so jealous was he of the family name that he was suffering this blackmail.

Yet Blake, as always, refused to theorise to any extent, for by doing so he was in danger of having his mind prejudiced in a wrong direction.

Better to wait and see June Tracey and hear her story.

So Blake reached Braintree, and, passing through its narrow streets, continued onwards towards Halstead. The motor-cyclist was still in the rear, and by this time he had little doubt that his quarry was making for Little Budeley. The man would have taken action, but he knew that there was another motorist behind him, and that fact worried him.

After passing through Braintree he glanced back once or twice. Yes; there were the lights of the other car. Some infernal fool of a fellow who was afraid to pass!

Halstead was reached, and as the motor-cyclist roared up the hill through the town he could just see Blake's tail-light as the Grey Panther went straight on up the Sudbury road. The mysterious motor-cyclist was hoping that the second car would stop here, or turn off. But he didn't. He came on.

And so on to Sudbury. Now the motor-cyclist was becoming anxious—even scared. Perhaps he would not have an opportunity to do the thing which was on his mind! For if anything happened on the road, that following car would be on the scene within a minute or so.

And then, beyond Sudbury, the motor-cyclist breathed with relief. No longer were there any lights behind him.

By the time Blake had passed through Long Melford, the motor-cyclist believed that he and Blake had the long, lonely country road to themselves. There were many desolate stretches between Sudbury and Bury St. Edmunds.

The man could not guess that Waldo was taking a chance—that the Wonder Man, in fact, had switched off all his lights, and was relying on his extraordinarily keen eyesight to keep him on the road. Waldo now had a shrewd suspicion of how matters stood. Blake was booked for a spot of bother, but the motor-cyclist had not dared to take action because of the car in his rear. So Waldo obligingly gave the impression that there was no longer any car in the rear.

Sexton Blake was doing a comfortable forty-five along a straight, level stretch when he became aware of an engine alongside, and, glancing sharply to the side, he saw that the motor-cyclist was intent upon overtaking. Blake pulled slightly over to give the man more room.

Crack!

At almost point-blank range the motor-cyclist pulled the trigger of an automatic pistol—just as he had drawn level with the Grey Panther. He had a momentary vision of Blake collapsing over the wheel, then the man opened wide his throttle and roared ahead.

Only once did he glance back.

He saw the Grey Panther swerving, and then a clump of trees hid the car from view. But the motor-cyclist, with his heart thudding like a sledge-hammer, had a mental picture of the Grey Panther piling up in utter

wreckage, with Blake dead amidst the debris.

But Sexton Blake was lucky.

As he had collapsed over the wheel, his foot had slipped from the throttle control, and although he was quite unconscious, his feet automatically depressed the clutch and brake pedals. The Grey Panther, with scarcely decreased speed, ran on for over a hundred yards, and then swerved off the road and, as luck would have it, there was common-land on either side. No hedges, no banks, no ditches. The car plunged on, heaving over the grassy hillocks, and three times escaped overturning by inches.

When Waldo drove up, not twenty seconds later, he found the powerful Rolls practically undamaged, with its front jammed into a great tangle of gorse-bushes. Those bushes had acted as a brake.

"Fool!" exclaimed Waldo savagely. "Dolt! Imbecile!"

He was referring to himself. Not a couple of minutes earlier he had been rather amused. He had thought himself quite clever. But when he had seen the motor-cyclist draw level he had also seen the unmistakable flash of an automatic pistol, and he had even heard the sharp, staccato crack. And he might have saved Blake from this disaster!

He could scarcely believe the evidence of his eyes when he noted that the Grey Panther was virtually unharmed. Then he saw Blake—sprawling helplessly, blood streaming from his head. A quick examination, and Waldo gave a little murmur of relief.

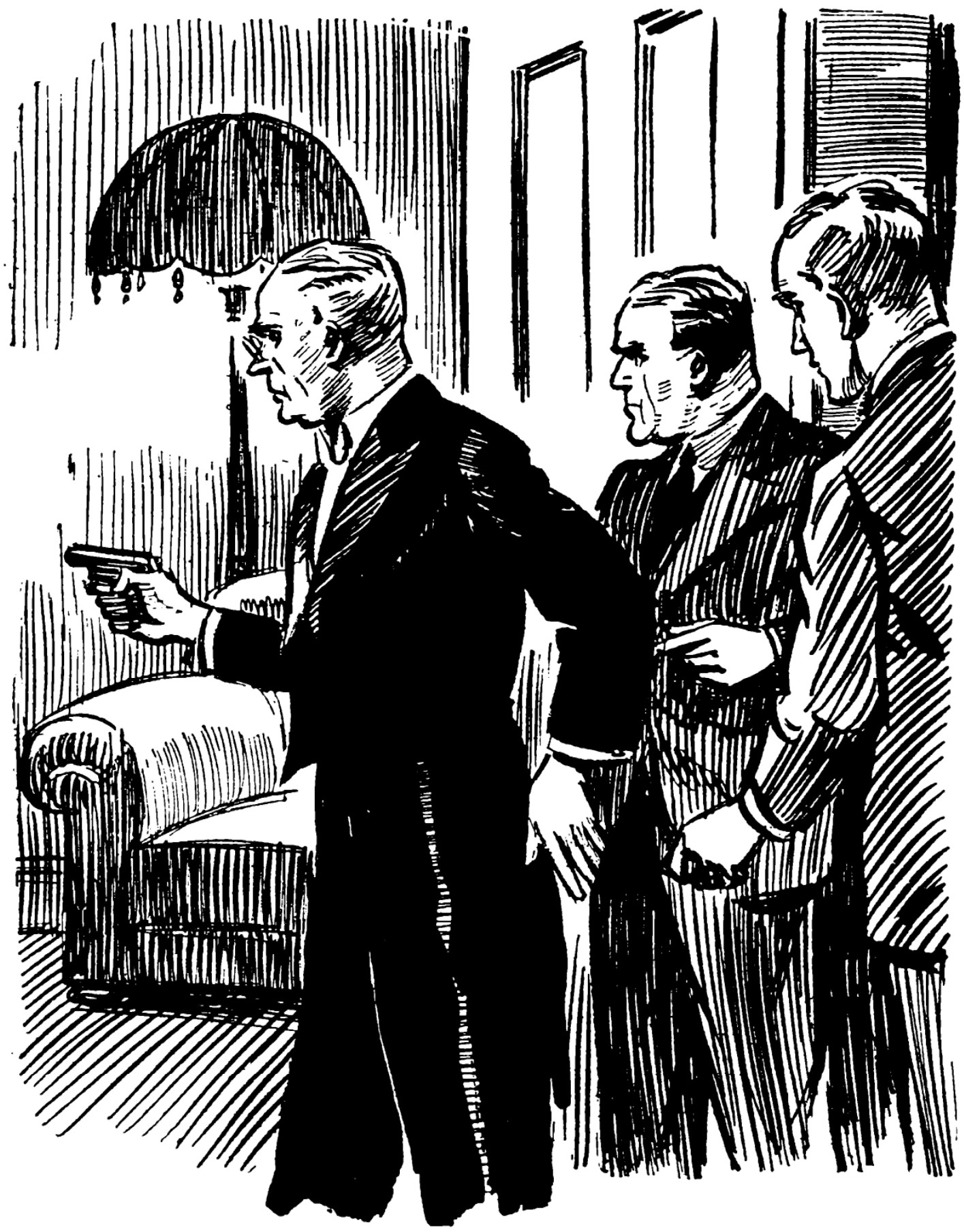
Blake was hurt—badly, it seemed. The bullet had glanced off the skull, and there was an ugly scalp wound, bleeding copiously. Blake was "out," and he was lucky to be alive. If that bullet had gone half an inch farther to the left, the top of Blake's head would have been blown off.

With quick fingers, Waldo fashioned a temporary bandage, and having made Blake as comfortable as possible, he forced some brandy between the detective's pale lips. But there was no response.

Waldo thought rapidly—shrewdly. What was Blake's real mission out here in Suffolk? Something vital, obviously, or that gunman would not have trailed him so grimly. Yet there was a flaw in this reasoning—as Waldo quickly saw. If Blake's mission was so desperate, he would certainly have been on the alert for enemies. But Blake had never had a suspicion against the motor-cyclist. In a word, Blake had never appreciated his peril. That indicated, surely, that his errand was not desperate.

A thought came to Waldo. He quickly searched Blake's pockets, and almost at once he found a letter with the flap unsealed, and it was addressed to "Miss June Tracey, the Manor House, Little Budeley Suffolk."

Here, perhaps, was a clue to Blake's destination.



"Stand just where you are, Blake!" ordered Smayle. His revolver covered the surprised Waldo.

Waldo extracted the letter without a thought of spying. He felt that the situation justified it. In the light of one of the headlamps he read the letter:

> My dear June,—This will introduce you to my old friend, Mr. Sexton Blake. I have confided in him, and I can assure you that he will be able to help you far better than I. Mr. Blake will explain to you why I cannot come in person, but although he is a stranger to you, he is a personal friend of mine; and if any man in the world can help you in your strange trouble, he is that man. I want you to trust Mr. Blake implicitly. I am deeply distressed, my dear child, to hear of your singular dilemma, and I can only hope that Mr. Blake will, in his own inimitable way, solve the problem. We have not lost a minute, as we know that your distress is so great, and your need for immediate help so urgent.
>
> Your old friend,
>
> HENRY FAVERSHAM.

Rupert Waldo was no hardened crook at that moment. He was angry with himself for having been suspicious of Blake—for having believed that Blake was on his own trail, or, at least, bent upon investigating the "job" he had pulled that night.

This was a fine mess! Here was Blake, helpless—and the letter proved, clearly enough, Blake was acting as knight-errant to a lady in deep distress. She was probably waiting for Blake even now—waiting in vain.

Waldo was a man of quick decisions. He made up his mind, then and there, upon his course of action. It was only an act of common humanity to go to the Manor House, Little Budeley, and inform Miss Tracey that Blake could not arrive.

The one thing which Waldo did not know was that Blake's entry into the Manor House was to have been in secret!

Chapter 3.
Cross Purposes.

WITHIN a minute of having come to his decision, Waldo had taken Sexton Blake into his phenomenally strong arms, and had carried him to the little M.G.

He did not fail to appreciate that he was in an awkward position. Here was Blake, with a palpable bullet wound in his head—and he, Waldo, was a wanted man. The police of the entire country were on the look-out for him. But Waldo's conscience was clear, and he did not flinch from his obvious duty.

Blake needed medical attention—and he should have it.

Very soon the little sports car was humming powerfully along the road, and the lights of Bury St. Edmunds twinkled pleasantly in the distance. It was characteristic of Waldo to pull up opposite the first policeman he saw. He could generally rely upon his cool audacity to see him through.

"Accident," he said briefly, and with curt anxiety. "My friend's hurt. Where's the hospital?"

The startled officer took one look at Blake's bound head, and he quickly gave directions.

"Perhaps I'd better come with you, sir," he went on. "If you could give me a few details——"

"My dear man, my friend's very life may depend upon speed," interrupted Waldo, engaging his gears. "Thanks very much. But, really, you needn't bother. The extra weight——"

He was off before the constable could collect his wits. And within a few minutes he was at the hospital. He carried Blake in, in his own arms, and, fortunately, a doctor was available.

He was a very concerned young man after he had made a brief examination of the wound.

"This is serious, sir," he said, looking at Waldo in a very straight way. "I suppose you know that this gentleman is suffering from a bullet wound?"

"I know it's serious—and I know it's a bullet wound," replied Waldo. "The gentleman in question is Mr. Sexton Blake——"

"Gad! I thought his face was familiar," said the doctor, with a start.

"He was motoring just in front of me, and a motor-cyclist overtook him and fired point blank," explained Waldo. "Luckily enough, his car did not overturn. But what's the damage? Is the skull fractured?"

"There is no actual fracture, but I think it will be three days, at least, before Mr. Blake can recover consciousness," said the doctor. "It is a very ugly wound. If you can let me have your name and address——"

"If you don't mind, I'd rather not," said Waldo coolly. "I am just a fellow-motorist, and I really don't want to be dragged into a lot of inconsequential inquiries. You'll understand, doctor. It doesn't make the slightest difference, really. Oh, Blake's car is on the common, several miles outside the town. You might let some garage know about it, so that the car can be fetched in the morning and safely looked after."

And, with a nod, and before the doctor could question him further, Waldo had gone. The Wonder Man had not forgotten the police-officer in another part of the town. That police-officer knew that Waldo had taken the unconscious man to the hospital.

"Hi! Just one minute, sir!"

Waldo had not been wrong. As he drove off he heard the hail; he caught a glimpse of a helmeted figure. But he took no notice. He was not at all anxious to have an interview with the police. He realised, too, that there would be all sorts of warnings sent about, and it would be virtually impossible for him to cover many miles before his car was stopped.

Well, it didn't matter. He wasn't going many miles. Little Budeley was not far away—and the police would not be on the alert there. Not that Waldo had the slightest fear of the police. If it wasn't for the stolen gold in his car, he would have been perfectly happy. But he certainly did not want to lose that prize.

HE found a small side road some miles back on his own tracks, towards Sudbury. It said "Little Budeley—3 miles," on the pointing arm.

Having covered half the distance along a narrow, deserted lane, Waldo selected a great oak-tree of distinctive shape, and behind this tree he concealed his Colchester booty. He quickly cut out a square of turf, pressed the gold into the soft earth beneath, and replaced the turf so neatly that there was no sign of any disturbance. He motored on more comfortably after that. Now he could give his whole mind to the matter in hand.

It was bad news about Blake. That wound was more serious than Waldo had thought. By the look of things, the detective would not be able to leave the hospital for over a week.

"Well, it's more necessary than ever that I should call upon this Miss Tracey and give her the facts," Waldo told himself. "I might even be able to help—if she'll accept me in Blake's place. And, by the Lord Harry, I shall be as safe as a rock in this out-of-the-way hole of a village. The police will never think of looking for me at the Manor House—or for my car in the garage of the Manor House. Quite an idea!"

The more he thought of it, the better he was pleased.

He was certain that the police had visited the hospital and had seen Blake—and had discovered about the bullet wound. There would be a hue and cry for the M.G. sports car. But Waldo could be at the Manor House within a few minutes, and if he could persuade Miss Tracey to accept his services, he would be safe. When Blake recovered consciousness, and talked, the police would be assured that the unknown driver of the sports car had had nothing to do with the outrage.

Waldo was perfectly honest in this matter. He was tempted, once, to use Blake's name, for it was apparent, from the letter, that Blake was a stranger to the girl. But why do any such thing? He could tell Miss Tracey that Blake had met with an accident, and he could rely upon his own personal charm to see to the rest.

Thus Rupert Waldo walked head first into the most colossal blunder of his career.

He knew nothing of the real facts; he had not seen the plan of the Manor House which Blake had tucked into another pocket. He knew nothing of Blake's instructions to enter secretly.

It was a unique and dramatic situation.

Waldo found the Manor House with singular ease—although he had been afraid that he would have some trouble in locating it. But even before he got to the village itself he happened to see a white finger-post pointing down a narrow, private road, and his headlamps revealed the words—"To the Manor House." It was a splendid stroke of luck, for it obviated the necessity of entering the village and making inquiries.

He had not passed a soul on this side road, and now he turned into the drive with a sense of great comfort. Rounding a bend, he saw the old mansion vaguely outlined against the night sky. It stood on a little rise, with dense shrubberies on one side and gardens on the other. There were many lights in the windows—and some in the lower windows, too.

It was natural that Waldo should fall into the mistake of thinking that Blake was expected—for the hour was after midnight, and it was hardly likely, in normal circumstances, that the occupants of the old country house would be active at that hour.

But within that house an anxious girl waited in the darkness of the armoury—waited bravely, hopefully, listening to every little unfamiliar sound.

She heard the purr of the M.G., and she wondered. And there was Rupert Waldo driving openly up to the front door! And in his pocket he had that letter from Mr. Faversham, all ready to present.

He stopped the car, lightly mounted the steps, and gave a strong peal at the bell. He could hear it booming deeply somewhere far within the mansion.

And June Tracey, waiting in the armoury, dared not remain there—in case she should be wanted.

The great front door swung open, to reveal the typical hall, wide and calm and comfortable, of an old English country mansion. A tired-looking butler stood in the doorway.

"I hope I am not too late," said Waldo politely, as he walked in.

"Were you expected, sir?" asked the butler, eyeing him at first with suspicion, and then, as he noted Waldo's gentlemanly bearing, with respect.

"Yes. I think Miss Tracey is expecting me."

"Oh! Miss Tracey, sir?" said the butler, with a change of voice. "I didn't know, sir. I'm afraid the young mistress has retired, but if you will give me your name——"

"Just tell her that Mr. Blake is here," replied Waldo.

He did not feel inclined to explain matters to the butler. Miss Tracey was expecting Sexton Blake—— No, by gad, she wasn't! Waldo suddenly remembered.

"Tell her that I am here on behalf of Mr. Faversham," he added. "She will understand."

"Oh!"

It was a startled little exclamation, and Waldo raised his eyes. A girl was standing at the head of the great staircase, under a group of soft electric lights in the ceiling.

Waldo's last words had startled the girl immeasurably, and she had been unable to keep back the exclamation. After all her careful planning and plotting, this stranger had come and was openly using Mr. Faversham's name! She ran quickly down the stairs, and Waldo admired her at every step.

June was a small, slim, graceful girl, exquisitely pretty, and looking all the prettier because of the simplicity of her evening gown. Her face was strikingly pale, however, and Waldo did not fail to note the light of absolute terror in her eyes—particularly as she cast a quick glance down the great hall towards a closed door at the end.

"All right, Ward," she said, in a low voice, holding one hand to her breast.

"Very good, miss," said the butler.

"Please come in here," said the girl, darting across to a door on the other side of the hall and opening it.

Again she cast a frightened look towards the rear of the hall, and Waldo was more than puzzzled. He had the feeling that he had put his foot into something—but he did not know what. He followed the girl into the room, and she had switched the lights on. It was a quietly furnished drawing-room, and a fire was still burning cheerfully in the wide grate.

"Oh! Who are you?" asked the girl breathlessly, regarding him with open eyes. "And why did you come to the front door?"

Waldo looked his astonishment.

"Should I have come elsewhere?" he asked mildly. "Is it not the polite thing to come to a front door? I have a letter here from Mr. Faversham, but I must explain——"

"Oh, let me see it—please, please!" panted June Tracey.

He hand it over at once, and he was freshly bewildered by the terrified light which leapt into the girl's eyes as she scanned the letter of introduction.

"Yes, yes; I understand," said the girl suddenly. "But, Mr. Blake, why did you come openly like this? Didn't Mr. Faversham tell you? Didn't he warn you——"

She broke off, with a little catch in her voice; and she was staring over Waldo's shoulder with such an expression upon her exquisite face that the Wonder Man spun round abruptly.

The door had opened, and a man stood there. He was in evening dress, and behind him Waldo caught a glimpse of two other men. And at the first glance he experienced a thrill. These were queer people to find in a quiet, sedate country house! Everybody was queer. The butler, the girl, these men——

"I hope we are not intruding, Miss June?" said the man in the doorway.

His manner was polite, but his voice was full of insolence and dangerous meaning. And to Waldo's further amazement, the man suddenly moved rapidly forward and snatched the letter out of June Tracey's hand.

"No, no, you shan't——"

"My dear child, don't you think it's absurd to make a scene?" interrupted Matthew Smayle. "It's high time you were in bed, my dear. Perhaps you had better leave us."

He glanced at the other two men, and June, now white to the lips, made no attempt to move. She was, indeed, petrified with terror—at the utter failure of her plan.

Waldo said nothing, but he was very alert. He realised that he had blundered into a house where, as he mentally expressed it, there was something damnably funny going on. The girl hated these men; and one of the men, at least, hated the girl. This man who had snatched the letter; the light in his eyes was little short of demoniac.

Matthew Smayle was in evening dress, and he possessed, indeed, the veneer of a gentleman. But Waldo saw through that veneer as though it did not exist.

He saw a man of medium height and slim build—a man with a lean, angular face, clean shaven, with deeply sunken eyes—eyes of a flat, pale blue. There was something repulsive, something loathsome in those eyes.

The man's hair was grey at the temples. It was well brushed, and he wore pince-nez, which lent him a sort of scholarly air. But to Waldo's experienced eyes this man bore the indefinable but unmistakable mark of the "old lag." Waldo saw "penal servitude" written all over him, and the mental picture of Dartmoor arose before the Wonder Man's mind.

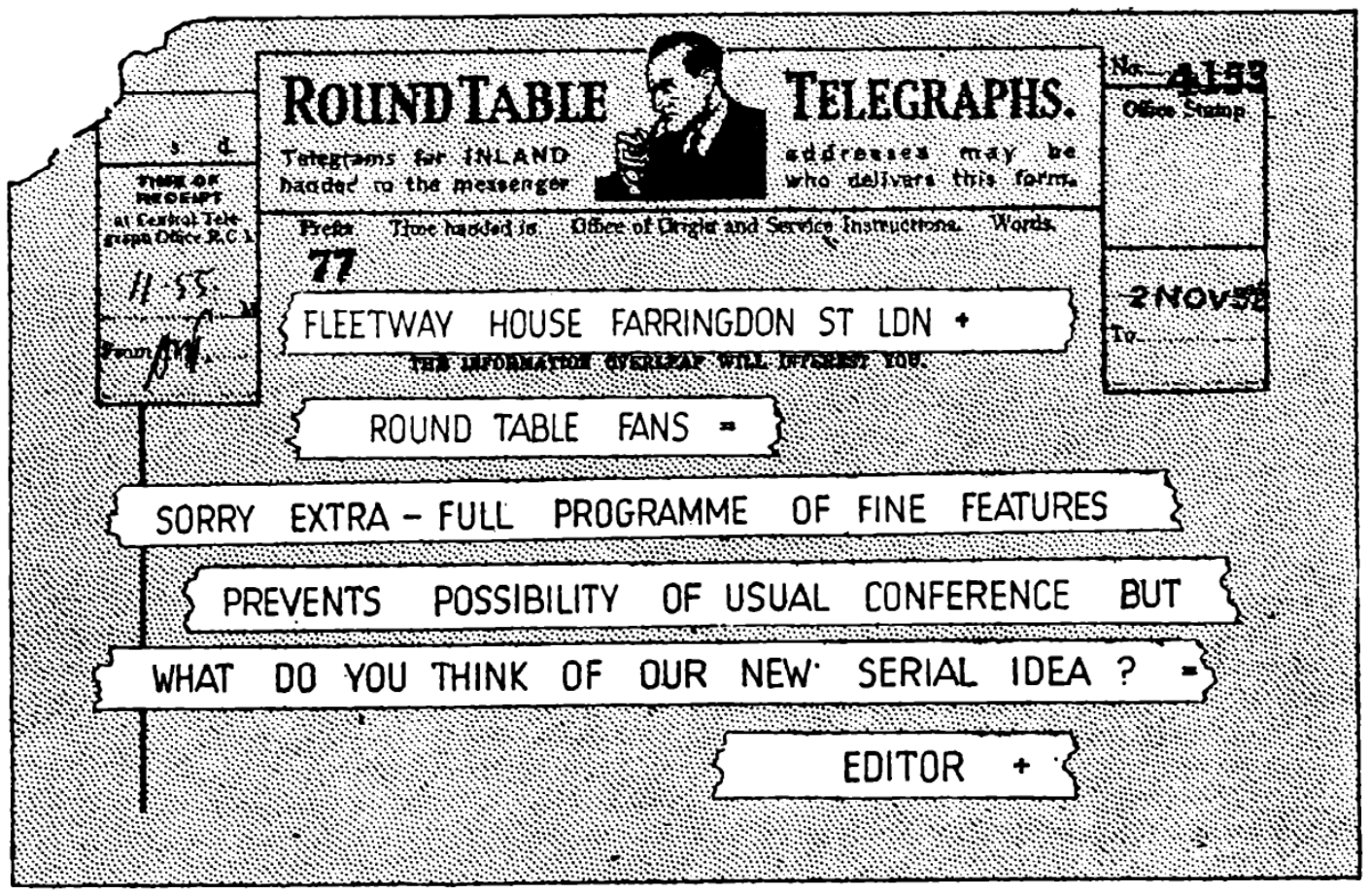
The other two men, although younger, were of similar type. Wally Dring, with a hardened, foxy face, looked, at first sight, to be a gentleman, too. But it was easy for Waldo to cast that cloak aside, and see the real man beneath. Dring, in fact, was a racecourse

crook—a man who usually lived well, and spent big money.

Bert Foster was the youngest of the three, and when he spoke he had a decided Oxford accent, and his manner was unquestionably aristocratic.

In his earlier days he had been a servant at the great University, and he had acquired a certain style. Later he had served as valet to a young peer, and he could easily be passed off as a member of the smart set. He had been of great use to more than one gang as a decoy. He was a "con" man, and he had spent a number of years at Monte Carlo, Deauville, and in the smoking-rooms of Atlantic liners.

Such were the three men Waldo found in Sir John Tracey's home. And he was beginning to get a vague inkling of the "strange trouble" which had been hinted at in that letter of introduction. He knew, moreover, that Blake was to have come to this house privately, and by some sort of secret method. Waldo cursed himself for a fool, and then and there he swore that he would repair the damage he had caused. He would serve this sweet girl who was in such terror.



"YOU will stand just where you are, Blake!"

Matthew Smayle's voice was sharp with alarm, and when Waldo looked at the man he saw a small automatic in his hand. June Tracey caught her breath in with a little sob. And Waldo, in that second, made up his mind. These men mistook him for Sexton Blake, but they could not remain long in that error. In his plus-fours he looked a typical sportsman, and he saw that it was necessary for him to act a part.

"Look here! I say!" he protested. "What on earth——"

"Put your hands behind your back!" ordered Smayle curtly.

"But, hang it, you've got it all wrong!" said Waldo indignantly. "I'm not Blake. I can easily explain how I got hold of that letter, and——"

"Bert—Wally!" said Smayle. "Come up behind him, and hold his arms! See that he doesn't make any tricky move. Unless we're careful, we shall find ourselves in a hot spot."

"But this is idiotic!" bleated Waldo. "If I've butted into anything that isn't my business, I apologise. Say the word, and I'll clear out."

His acting was perfect. Inwardly he writhed. The girl's eyes were upon him and they were full of contempt and scorn. But Rupert Waldo possessed great patience. He could bide his time. It would pay him well to delude these three rascals. He could have annihilated them all had he chosen. But he felt that it would be more profitable for him to mark time.

"You'll clear out when I tell you, my friend, and not before," said Smayle deliberately. "Now, Miss June, what have you to say about this?"

And he turned to the girl, and indicated the letter in his other hand.

"I think I made a bad mistake," said June wearily.

"You wrote to Faversham, the lawyer, didn't you?" asked Smayle. "Well, young lady, I warned you what would happen if you played any tricks. You're going to suffer for this."

There was nothing violent in his manner, or in his words, but the girl shrank back. Smayle's vile eyes were hideous with hatred.

"You'd better go to your room, and stay there," he continued. "I'll talk to you again in the morning. Yes, and I'll talk to your father, too. You can rely upon me to persuade Mr. Blake that Sir John is in no need of his services."

The girl did not give Waldo a glance; but the very manner in which she turned her shoulder to him was eloquent. He was beneath her contempt. With a brave show of dignity she walked to the door. Only once did she falter, and it was a pitiful little exhibition. Then she reached the door and passed out. Not until she had got upstairs, and the soft thud of a closing door came to the ears of the men, did Smayle close the drawing-room door.

"Now, Blake," he said, in a changed voice, "you'll find that you have blundered——"

"Wait a minute, Matt!" interrupted Wally Dring excitedly. "This man isn't Blake. I've seen Blake. I know him well."

"Not Blake!" snapped Matthew Smayle. "What do you mean? This letter——"

"I don't care anything about the letter," interrupted Dring. "This fellow told us the truth. He's not Blake."

Waldo made a little gulping sound.

"I'm glad that one of you has got some sense," he said, with a nervous laugh. "My name's Hutchings—Mr. Hutchings. I was motoring to Bury St. Edmunds when there was an accident in front of me. I found an unconscious man. There was a letter, and as the flap wasn't fastened I read it. I took the man to hospital, and——"

He spoke confusedly, his words tumbling over one another. And at the back of his mind, all the time, was the knowledge that he had hurt that charming girl. Until he found out the real secret of this extraordinary household he must go warily.

"Oh!" said Smayle. "So you thought you would deliver the letter?"

"That's it."

"And you came all the way from Bury St. Edmunds, after midnight, to carry a letter to a perfect stranger?" went on Smayle. "How could you possibly know that anybody would still be up?"

"The letter seemed urgent, and after what had happened to that other motorist——"

"What had happened to him?" interrupted Smayle sharply.

"Well, he was badly hurt in the smash, and——"

Waldo broke off, for at that moment there came to his ears the sound of a pealing bell. Smayle and his companions heard it, too, and the three men looked at one another significantly.

"Police!" whispered Foster.

"Don't be an infernal fool!" said Matthew Smayle. "Why should the police come here? In any case, we're in no fear of the police. We are Sir John Tracey's guests, aren't we?"

Waldo knew that the words were being spoken for his benefit. Out of the corner of his eyes he had seen Smayle make a motion to his companions. Waldo himself knew that it was quite on the cards that the police would come here. Perhaps they had trailed his little M.G. car.

The next move took him rather by surprise; for Smayle suddenly raised a hand, and, without warning, he crashed the butt of his pistol down upon Waldo's head. The Wonder Man, owing to his peculiar constitution, felt no actual pain—only a dull kind of numbness where the blow had been struck. And his first impulse was to turn upon Smayle and rend him. Then he remembered the part he was playing, and, with the faintest of moans, he sank to the carpet.

"We're not taking any chances," said Smayle curtly. "This man saw something of what happened to Blake, and he'll probably turn out to be a nuisance. Quick! Behind that lounge with him."

Waldo was half dragged, half carried behind a great lounge, and left there. Smayle straightened his clothing, went out into the hall, and when he opened the front door he was master of himself.

The others heard voices. Waldo heard them, too—for Waldo was scarcely hurt. He knew that he could get away at any moment he pleased, but he preferred to remain. And this situation might be of advantage to him.

When Smayle came into the room he was accompanied by a hard-featured man in motor-cyclist's overalls.

"It's Varley!" exclaimed Bert Foster, with relief.

"I'm afraid you gave my friends a bit of a fright, Varley," said Smayle contemptuously.

"I want a drink," said Varley. "Something strong—and big."

"We don't keep drinks in the drawing-room," retorted Smayle. "What's the matter, Varley? You look shaken."

"I could have been here earlier, only I thought it wiser to ride about for a bit, so that I should get here after the servants were in bed," said Varley.

(*Continued on page* 16.)

These black ballot boxes contain thousands of voting-slips; and if more than one slip was inserted by one voter, he's liable to two years' imprisonment.

ONE VOTER—ONE VOTE!

—that's the rule. To exceed that limit is Personation; one of Britain's rarest crimes.

THIS is the season for the municipal elections. Will it also be the season for that somewhat rare crime, personation?

Personation, according to the law books, occurs when a person at a county or borough or municipal election applies for a ballot paper in the name of some other person, whether that name be of a person living or dead or fictitious. Or, having voted once in the election, he is guilty of personation if he applies again for a ballot paper in his own name.

It doesn't often happen nowadays. Elections are not the riot of bribery and corruption and general rowdyism that they used to be. The Municipal Elections Act of 1884 put a distinct damper on the orgy of lawlessness that accompanied the election of law-makers previous to that time. Treating, threatening voters in order to influence their votes, and bribery are subject to various penalties, and are not at all a paying game. Personation itself is a felony, and punishable by two years' imprisonment.

In spite of that, there are over-enthusiastic people who will try it on. Some of them do it wholesale, too.

There was a case in Belfast when twenty-five voters, six of them women, got into trouble for a too frequent use of ballot papers. Some of the twenty-five, it was said, had voted twenty or thirty times.

In a municipal election at Birmingham a man of thirty asked for a voting paper in the name of his father-in-law. As the father-in-law's age was given on the records as forty-one, and he had a son of the same name aged twenty, the polling clerk asked him whether he was the elder man or the younger.

The thirty-year-old applicant took a chance and replied, "The elder." But he didn't look more than his age, which let the cat out of the bag and the would-be voter into trouble. When charged, he said his father-in-law had given him his voting card and asked him to go to the poll for him. The probability was that he had erred in ignorance, not knowing that there was a two-year sentence for that apparently innocent deception.

Another man, this time at Bury, was also charged with impersonating his father-in-law in the same way. The only possible motive in these cases seems to be excess of political zeal, but all the same it is rather mystifying. One vote more or less can hardly have been important enough to justify the risk of even a police-court fine, let alone a two-year sentence.

In America, of course, things are very different. Elections there are normally run with the help of the gangsters. Kidnapping and coercion are commonplaces of election days, and multiple voting (unless things have been changed everywhere very suddenly) a recognised money-making stunt for tramps and hoboes. Generous political workers distribute dollars and instructions where to vote and how, and the hoboes put in a highly pleasant and profitable day accordingly.

Apparently the same system seems to have been imported into Canada on at least one occasion, for Mr. R. B. Bennett, a former Minister of Justice, alleged that at the Rimouski by-election a woman voted forty-six times, and a man from New England, U.S.A., a hundred and six times.

ONE of the most uncommon cases of impersonation was revealed a few weeks ago at the Old Bailey when two men were charged with conspiracy.

It appeared that one of them, in business as a fruiterer, was committed to prison for a month because of arrears of rates. The sentence was duly served, but again the unfortunate fruiterer got behind with his rates and a second prison sentence was ordered. Again the ex-prisoner turned up to serve his "time."

But for some reason the prison authorities smelt a rat. Their instinct was right, for it was discovered that the prisoner was not the rate-defaulter who had been ordered to prison, but another man instead. He had served the first term and was ready to serve the second—not for payment, he claimed, but "to help the other man's family."

The rate defaulter wished to continue at his business because he had to contend with keen competition.

Both of them, as a result, stood in the Old Bailey dock, the man who had managed to keep out now going "inside" for four months, and the man who had taken his place being bound over.

From the legal viewpoint this going to prison by proxy is not impersonation, but conspiracy to defeat the ends of Justice. Personation is a quite distinct offence, and confined to fraudulent conduct in elections. Even with millions of persons voting this week, it is doubtful if there will be many instances—if any—of personation. Voting in Britain is conducted on straighter and stricter lines than, probably, any other country on earth.

* * *

56 YEARS BEHIND the BARS!

When he died at 73, Jesse Pomeroy had never known a moment's freedom since boyhood.

WHAT is the longest prison sentence ever served by one man?

History is full of names of lifelong prisoners—men who were thrown into dungeons and never again emerged into freedom. And doubtless the same sort of thing is happening in the more obscure or uncivilised parts of the world to-day.

But such captives do not survive very long; the brutal conditions of their confinement undermine their health, and they die. They do not get the care that prisoners in ordinarily civilised countries receive, so that it is to modern gaols that we must look for long-term records.

If this is so, the man who served a longer sentence than any other prisoner in the world's history was Jesse Harding Pomeroy, who died a week or two ago after having spent fifty-six years continuously behind prison bars. He forfeited his liberty in his teens, and died at the age of seventy-three without an hour of freedom. *Forty-one years he spent in solitary confinement!*

Pomeroy's life was the tragedy of his diabolical instincts. He was possessed of the soul of a fiend. Psychologists could probably explain his murderous make-up, but it is almost certain that he himself could not be held responsible; he was just such another as the monster of Dusseldorf, Peter Kuerten, who killed for the sheer delight of killing.

He was the son of a butcher, of Boston, U.S.A. As early as twelve years of age his murderous nature demonstrated itself, and as the result of his cruelly torturing little children he was sent to a reformatory for a short term.

But no reformatory could reform this born monster. Hardly had he been released than a boy of ten was found murdered and mutilated. This was followed by the similar death of a girl, and then another boy.

The horror aroused by these crimes throughout the whole of the United States

mation

R WEEKLY BUDGET OF ARTICLES AND WS ITEMS CONCERNING CRIME AND TECTIVE WORK IN ALL VARIETIES FROM ALL ANGLES.

by the unknown man who was supposed to be the murderer was doubled when it was found that the killer was a mere boy. He was Jesse Pomeroy, then aged fifteen.

Such was the detestation at his crimes that the judge at his trial unhesitatingly acted on the jury's verdict of Guilty by sentencing him to be hanged, despite his youthful age. The State Governor, however, torn between the public clamour for the death of this young monster and the fact of his youth, reprieved him and sentenced him to life imprisonment.

This he began in 1876, fifty-six years ago, and never knew a moment's liberty till he died.

HE was no model prisoner. He had almost a mania for trying to escape. No less than a dozen times he was within hand-grasp of freedom, but never quite succeeded. He once made a file from a large nail and with it tunnelled

e late JESSE POMEROY, the world's long-prison-sentence record holder.

to the outer wall of the prison at Charlestown, where he had been sent. But a trail of dust carelessly left behind gave his plan away in time.

He almost got away when, on another occasion, he sawed some bars from his cell window and fitted dummy bars to replace them. But, emerging through the window one night, he trod on a cat, whose howls raised the alarm.

From the age of fifteen, through the years of youth to early manhood, to the prime of life, and on till he had passed his fiftieth year, Jesse Pomeroy, the wanton child-killer, saw no other faces but those of his guards. Not even a glimpse of any other convict was he allowed. He spent his days and his nights—and his years—in solitary imprisonment, cut off from the world outside and all that was happening in the world.

And always he needed watching. He had fits of brooding sulkiness, alternating with spells of violence and fresh attempts to escape.

In the dead monotony of his living death there were but one or two landmarks. Four years after he had entered Charlestown he was removed to the prison at Concord, handcuffed and manacled; six years after that, in 1886, he was similarly returned to Charlestown.

IN 1917, in his forty-first prison year, his period of solitary confinement came to an end. In 1925, as a result of his efforts to obtain a pardon, a woman wrote a letter to a newspaper charging him with cruelty to a cat in the prison, and he sued her for libel, getting the nominal damages of one dollar; and four years later, in August, 1929, the greatest thrill of his life came when he was transferred from his almost lifelong home at Charlestown to the prison farm at Bridgewater.

He travelled in a motor-car—a vehicle which to him was strange and terrible. He quailed and flinched at sight of the crowd and the open street after his fifty-three years of stone walls. His face bore the imprint of long suffering; he was bewildered and looked neither to right or left.

During the two-hour ride at terrifying speed to his new prison Pomeroy saw commonplace, everyday sights, but so astounding were they to him that he was almost stricken dumb. The enormous height of the buildings—he had never seen or imagined a skyscraper—the cars on the roads, an aeroplane overhead, a steam-roller—these glimpses of a new world came as an overwhelming shock to this human survivor from another age suddenly hurled headlong into the twentieth century.

"Aren't there horses any more?" he gasped, of his guards.

Dazed he arrived, after being allowed to sample the unknown taste of ice-cream and ginger-beer, and moodily sulked in his discomfort at being uprooted and flung into new quarters.

A man who seldom spoke and never smiled, Jesse Pomeroy remained three years at the prison farm at Bridgewater. His leisure he had spent in learning foreign languages and in following the fluctuations of the New York stock market.

By the world he was forgotten, and even to his fellow convicts his long-past crimes were only rumoured hearsay. They called him Grandpa, but the name carried nothing of affection or toleration.

This silent, unsmiling man, whose bestial, inborn nature was proclaimed in what has been described as the most brutal face in human physiognomy, and whose queer, unmatched eyes—one albino-pink and blind—glowered in sullen hatred at his little world, died recently at the age of seventy-three of heart disease, having endured the longest known period of consecutive imprisonment.

TERSE TALES.

RETURNED.

AT Croxley Heath, Herts, two men planned a shopbreaking raid.

The leader told his assistant to go to the shop, buy a packet of cigarettes, spy out the land.

The assistant went there, bought the cigarettes, told the shopkeeper of the intended raid.

Returning as planned the same night, the raiders were caught by the waiting police.

The leader went to prison for fifteen months; the assistant went back to the lunatic asylum from which, unknown to the leader, he had escaped.

* * *

PEACEFUL

IN Massachusetts, U.S.A., a man classed as a dangerous homicidal lunatic escaped from the State Asylum, vanished for ten days, threw the whole countryside into terror.

Then he was found, peacefully working.

He had got a job in a barber's shop, shaving the faces (and throats) of unsuspecting customers.

* * *

ADOPTED

IN the West End of London a man and a boy walked into a high-class barber's shop. Telling the boy to wait, the man had a shave, a haircut, singe, shampoo, friction, massage—piled up a big bill.

Seating himself, he then ordered a haircut for his son.

While waiting, he said he would buy some cigars at the tobacco department, and return.

Time passed; the boy was shorn, his father remained absent.

Questioned, the boy said:

"That's not my father. I've never seen him before. I met him outside and he offered to pay for a haircut."

* * *

INCIDENTAL

IN Hungary, Anton Kozarek, public executioner, got up early on a raw morning to hang a robber and murderer, one Tichy.

A chill caught that morning turned to influenza, which in three weeks killed Anton Kozarek, hangman.

* * *

AVENGERS

FROM Vienna came three applications for the position of public executioner in the place of Anton Kozarek, deceased of influenza following an execution-contracted chill.

The applicants: three women. Their reason: a desire for revenge against men.

* * *

HYBRID

IN the Prome District prison, Burma, a warder claims to have caught a large rat, twelve inches long and having two horns and tusks like an elephant.

The warder is stated to be a total abstainer.

* * *

PERSISTENT

AT Hamburg, Germany, a privileged prisoner, sentenced for counterfeiting, was allowed to occupy his leisure making a ship's model.

An additional twenty-one months' imprisonment was the punishment for what the warders found inside the ship's hull.

Their find: dies and tools for making more counterfeit money.

* * *

HOBBY

AT Pebble Beach, San Francisco, is a millionare with a curious hobby.

He goes in his chauffeur-driven car to railway stations, waits for incoming trains.

The chauffeur, imperturbable, then hands him a half-brick.

The millionaire heaves the half-brick through a carriage window, dusts his hands, steps in his car, is imperturbably driven back to Pebble Beach.

(*Continued from page 13.*)

"Curse you, Smayle, let me have a drink——"

"You'll have a drink soon," said Smayle. "What have you got to report?"

"I got him—that's all," muttered Varley. "You told me to watch Faversham's office, didn't you?"

"I told you that because I once heard the girl telling her father that she was going to write to the old lawyer," replied Smayle. "He was the only man she would be likely to appeal to. Well?"

"Well, when Faversham went to see Sexton Blake I was a bit worried," said Varley. "And when Blake motored down to Suffolk to-night I was certain that he was coming here. I got him, I tell you. Fired at him point-blank as I was passing—and I'm a good shot. I'm telling you, Smayle, it was a hellava risky thing to do, and you've got to pay me big."

"I didn't tell you to gun anybody," said Smayle curtly.

"How else could I stop a man like Blake? Look here, you're not going to double-cross me over this, are you?" Varley was getting excited. "I did what you told me——"

"Don't yell at me," interrupted Smayle. "It's no good arguing over the thing. It's done. Are you sure you finished Blake?"

"I'm pretty sure," replied Varley. "I daren't go back to see, of course. For some time there was another motorist not far behind, and I was afraid to act. But I dropped him in Sudbury, or somewhere about there, and then I overtook Blake, and let him have the works."

Smayle nodded thoughtfully, but he made no comment. He motioned to Wally and Bert, and a moment later Waldo, still apparently insensible, was dragged from behind the lounge.

"Do you know this man?" asked Smayle abruptly.

Varley stared down with sudden fear and amazement.

"He's the motorist who was behind me—on the same road!" he ejaculated hoarsely. "I never saw his face distinctly, but that suit——"

"All right—there's no doubt about it," said Smayle. "He's the man. So, you see," he added, turning to the others, "this fellow, Hutchings, told the truth. He's only a butting-in fool. He found Blake on the road, he found that letter, and he came here to deliver it. Now we're saddled with him. We daren't let him go after what's happened."

"I don't understand," said Varley in some apprehension.

"You don't have to understand," retorted Matthew Smayle. "Take him to the smoking-room, Bert, and give him a long drink. And, while you're out, see if you can find some stout cords, or ropes. This fellow will be coming to himself soon."

"But we can't tie him up and keep him here—on the premises!" protested Bert Foster.

"What are we going to do, then, you fool?" snapped Smayle. "Revive him, apologise, and then let him walk out?"

Bert Foster winced under the biting sarcasm in Smayle's tone. He went out of the drawing-room with Varley.

"As soon as I get other people to help me things go wrong," said Smayle harshly. "There was no need for Varley to use his gun. And now he expects me to pay him big money! And we're saddled with this other nuisance! Until to-night we were as safe as a rock—and on the right side of the law. Now look where we stand!"

"But Varley was only doing what you told him, Matt," said Dring. "And with a man like Blake coming here——"

"Blake could have done nothing!" broke in Smayle. "You don't think I'm afraid of Blake, do you? I tell you we were safe. Well, the whole thing needs thinking out—and that will take time. There's something else to be done first."

With Dring's help he dragged Waldo out, and he proceeded to pour some brandy from his flask into Waldo's mouth.

"What's that for?" asked Dring.

"I'm kind-hearted—and don't like to see him suffering," said Smayle bitingly. "Don't you understand that this man found Blake? He can tell us how seriously Blake was plugged."

Waldo was enjoying the comedy. After a reasonable time he gulped, choked, and opened his eyes. And a light of fear leapt into them as he saw the two men bending over him.

"Don't hit me again!" he whispered hoarsely. "I'll—I'll have the police on you for this——"

"Don't get excited," said Smayle. "This is just bad luck for you, my friend. I understand that you found Blake on the road?"

"Yes, yes!" faltered Waldo. "And there was that letter, and I brought it here——"

"We know that," said Smayle. "That's where you were unlucky. But about Blake. What happened to him?"

"I don't know," said Waldo. "I think he must have lost control of the car. I found the car off the road, half buried in the gorse, and Blake was lying across the wheel with a terrible wound in his head."

"What kind of a wound?"

"I think he must have struck his head against the wheel, or the facia board," replied Waldo. "I did all I could; I bound his head up and took him to the hospital. The doctor said there's practically no chance of him recovering. I expect he's dead by now."

He deliberately gave the men the impression that he had no knowledge of the real truth; he was just a passing motorist, and he believed that an accident had happened. It was good news for Matthew Smayle, for if neither Waldo nor the hospital doctor suspected foul play, there would be no police activities. Smayle began to think that he had blundered in treating "Edgar Hutchings" so roughly. However, it was too late now.

"Well, I'm sorry, my friend—but you'll have to stay with us for the night," said Smayle. "I'm not entirely satisfied with your story."

"What—what do you mean?" asked Waldo, with a blank expression.

"I mean that you took unlawful possession of a letter which was not your property—and you used it to get into this house," replied Smayle sternly. "It may be a matter for the police to handle, and, in order to be on the safe side, I'm going to rope you up and put you in the cellar. And there you'll remain until the morning."

It was the best tone to adopt—the tone of a righteous householder. Not that Smayle ever expected it to "get over." He must have time to think—to plan.

Waldo whimpered and protested, and earned the contempt of his captors. He was quickly roped—and very securely

roped, too. Then he was carried down the hall, into a dimly lit passage, and finally a heavy oaken door was unlocked. He was carried down some stone steps into the cellars. He was placed in a deep inner cellar, which had a door of its own, and this was locked, too.

Waldo heard Smayle and his companions leaving the cellar; he heard them ascending the steps, and he heard the upper door locked.

Within exactly ten seconds Waldo was free of the ropes. He burst them like cotton. And he was laughing softly to himself—for he was enjoying this adventure immensely. Never for one moment had he forgotten that here, in this house, was a girl in sore trouble. He would carry out his original plan, and act as Sexton Blake's deputy.

There was no more skilled locksmith in the world than Rupert Waldo. He took some delicate instruments from a secret pocket, and then it was only a matter of seconds before he had conquered the first lock. He tiptoed up the cellar steps, and the second lock succumbed as easily.

Waldo locked both doors after him. Then, as silently as a shadow, he made his way back to the hall. Through a closed door he heard a murmur of voices, but he did not pause. He reached the stairs, mounted three at a time, and paused on the landing.

His phenomenally quick ears caught the unmistakable sound of sobbing from a door farther along. He reached the door and listened more intently. A troubled look came into his eyes. He tapped gently on the panels.

"Who—who is that?" came a startled inquiry—and the voice was June's.

Waldo tapped again. He heard a faint rustle of sound, a light footstep, and the door opened. June Tracey stood there, just as he had seen her before, except for the fact that her eyes were swollen.

"You!" she exclaimed in a whisper.

"May I come in?" asked Waldo gently "I have had a little trouble with the—er—gentlemen downstairs, but I have managed to give them the slip. Let me assure you, Miss Tracey, that I am your friend, and that I am here to serve you as faithfully as Mr. Blake himself. In three words—what's the trouble?"

Chapter 4.
On the Balcony.

THE hospital doctor was frantic.

"But I tell you, Mr. Blake, it's out of the question!" he said, in agitation. "You can't leave the hospital to-night——"

"What do you bet me?" asked Sexton Blake mischievously.

The doctor could only stare at him. Admittedly, he was young, and he had not had a great deal of experience. He certainly knew nothing of Blake's iron will power—that will power which was capable of combating and conquering bodily hurts. The detective's head was throbbing with agony, but he was capable of clear thinking, and he was hoping that it would not be too late, even now, for him to accomplish his mission.

That bullet wound was not so serious as it looked. It had cut the skin badly, making an ugly, jagged scalp wound. But with a long piece of plaster on his head, and his hair brushed carefully over it, there was little in Blake's appearance to show that he had been "winged."

He had recovered consciousness very shortly after Waldo's departure—thus proving the young doctor to be a bad prophet.

"I can't keep you here against your will, of course—if you mean to be obstinate," said the doctor, with a helpless shrug. "But I think it's next door to madness!"

Blake chuckled.

"It's a relief to know that you don't think I am quite mad," he said dryly. "And don't look so surprised, doctor."

"But I am surprised. I don't even know how you can stand on your feet."

"Well, I'll be frank; it's not so easy as it looks," said Blake. "My legs, at the moment, have an objectionable propensity to sag. But I have experienced that sensation before, and when I get out into the night air, it will pass off. And if, instead of giving me another dose of that tonic of yours, you could conjure up a large-sized brandy——"

"Why, yes, of course!" said the doctor.

"I'm wondering if I can get hold of a car," said Blake, after he had

swallowed half a tumbler of neat brandy. "I understand that my own car is some distance away, and possibly damaged——"

"That's what the man said," interrupted the doctor. "As I told you, I was suspicious of him. It seemed infernally queer, that fellow bringing you here with a serious bullet wound, and clearing off so hurriedly. The police thought it funny, too. It seems that he asked directions of a constable——"

"Yes, I shall have to call into the police station and put matters right," said Blake. "We can't have that excellent fellow victimised. I wish I knew his name. He did me a very good turn."

"Well, look here, since you insist upon going—and I am still against it—I'll run you out in my own car, if you like," said the doctor. "I'm off duty now, and, to tell you the truth, I'd like to keep my eye on you for a bit longer."

"Good enough!" smiled Blake. "You're a stout fellow."

Blake's first task was to call at the police station; and here he made it quite clear that the man in the sports model M.G. was a Good Samaritan—a mere passing motorist who had rendered valuable first aid.

"Well, I'm glad you've told us this, Mr. Blake," said the sergeant. "We've been putting out inquiries for that car, and we were going to have it traced. But it seems to have vanished."

"The man who shot at me was on a motor-cycle," explained Blake. "I don't know who he was, but I imagine he must have tailed me from London. As you may guess, I have plenty of enemies—and although most of them are only bluffers, at times one will do something really ugly."

They were soon off again, and when they located the Grey Panther, Blake was delighted to find the car practically undamaged. By now, too, Blake's head had ceased its pneumatic-drill throb, and he was feeling more his own man.

"I am grateful to you, doctor, for your good services," said the detective, as he shook hands. "You need not be worried about me. I am feeling very fit again."

"And, by Jove, you look it!" said the young doctor. "That head of yours must be a remarkable piece of work, Mr. Blake!"

"I'd match it against any nigger's!" replied Blake cheerfully.

It was after they had parted, and he was driving along the empty road, that he lost his cheerfulness. He was very grim. Never for a moment did he believe the story he had told the police-sergeant. The man who had shot at him was no chance gunman—but somebody who knew of his journey to Little Budeley. The shot had been fired to prevent Blake reaching his destination.

It was an alarming theory, for it meant that June Tracey's precautions had been of no avail. Those strange men who were using the Manor House as their own had got to know of—or, at least, they suspected—Blake's activities. Furthermore, there was a plain hint here that the men were even more dangerous than the girl supposed.

But Blake appreciated, with lively satisfaction, that he held a distinct advantage. His enemies believed that they had put him out of action, and it was for this reason, indeed, that Blake had forced himself to get out of bed. Even the young doctor had not quite realised that only the detective's iron will had made the effort possible.

During the first five minutes Blake had felt physically sick from the effort. He felt so much better now that his brain was crystal clear, and he knew how important it was for him to reach the Manor House whilst his enemies were still under the impression that he was hors de combat.

Like Waldo, he saw the finger-post; but, unlike Waldo, instead of entering the drive, he drove straight on. And finding a handy gate two or three hundred yards farther up the road, he opened it, drove the Grey Panther into a meadow, and left the car, with all lights out, completely concealed behind a little spinney.

The time was one-thirty—which, considering everything, was good. Perhaps the girl would still be waiting in the armoury. But whether she was or not, Blake was determined to get in touch with her somehow or other, even if he had to be so very unconventional as to climb through her bed-room window.

He broke through the hedge, and then made his way across the trim parkland. He could see some lights glowing warmly in the distance. A bleak wind was blowing across the park, and overhead the sky was clouded. But the chill wind was serving Blake well.

While he was still some distance from the house he felt for the plan which old Faversham had given him. Then it was that he made the uncomfortable discovery that the letter of introduction

had gone. He searched his pockets again and again.

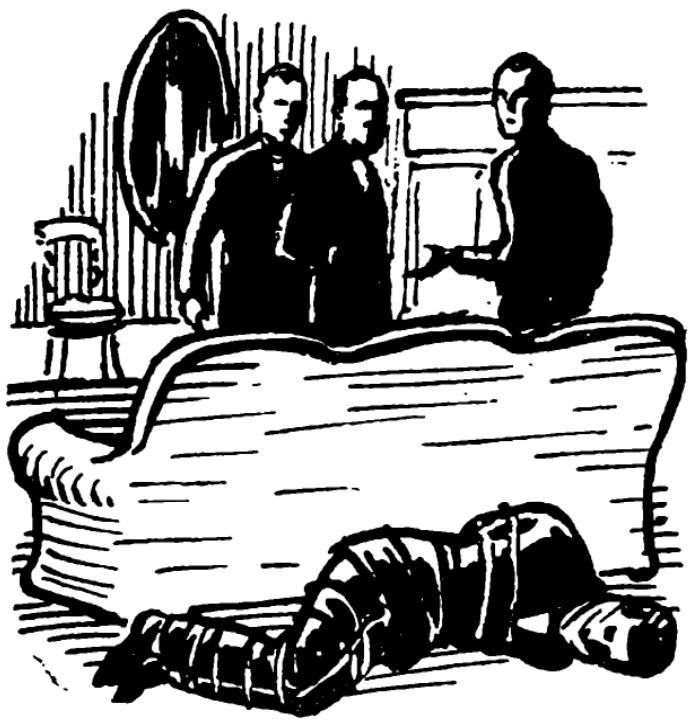
It was awkward. Without that letter he had no evidence of his credentials. He came to the conclusion that it must have fallen from his pocket while the unknown motorist had been transferring him from the Grey Panther to the little M.G. It was a pity. Some unauthorised person would probably find the letter. But Blake realised the hopelessness of returning now and searching the road and the common. But his very knowledge of the situation would be sufficient to assure June Tracey that he was Mr. Faversham's accredited messenger, he reflected.

After one close look at the sketch plan in the carefully shaded light of his electric torch, Blake had no difficulty in getting his bearings. He picked his way silently across the deserted gardens, and at the farther end of a lawn he found the chapel ruins. They practically adjoined the northern wing of the old house itself. He found that the door opened readily, although, when he pushed upon it, it gave forth an uneasy creak, proving that it had not been used for some time.

Blake was aware of a little thrill, and it was seldom enough nowadays that he experienced any such sensation. For he was hardened. Yet this old house fascinated him; the mystery of that young girl and her father intrigued Blake immensely.

Well, perhaps he would soon have a grip on the case; perhaps he would come face to face with the mysterious Matthew Smayle! Blake did not doubt that the name was an assumed one.

At the farther end of the passage he found another door, just as the girl had said in her letter. But when Blake tried this door it was fast. He tapped gently



upon it, but there was no response. Blake was not surprised. June Tracey, of course, had given up hope for to-night, and had gone to bed. It was natural that she should lock the armoury door before leaving.

Blake thought of picking the lock, but he decided that it would be a waste of time. There would certainly be another door in the armoury which communicated with the interior of the house. In any case, he discovered that the door was not only locked, but bolted on the inside. He would have required a battering-ram to smash it down.

Well, he would have to try another method.

Retracing his steps, he left the chapel ruins, and then he cautiously made a survey of the house. Lights were still glowing in some of the lower windows. But the windows were closed and heavily curtained. It would be a waste of time to creep up to them. Furthermore, there was not one chance in a thousand that the girl was still up.

So Blake concentrated his attention upon two lighted windows on the first floor. One of them was at the angle of the building, and the window itself was closely curtained. Only a dull glow showed in the night. But the other window gleamed brightly. There were curtains here, too, but they were not drawn close. And Blake noted, with satisfaction, that a balcony ran along the face of the building. And below this balcony creepers clung affectionately to the old wall, and extended upwards to the balcony itself and beyond.

The detective made up his mind at once, and like a shadow he moved forward, reached the terrace, and found that the creeper was old and substantial. It would easily bear his weight. He did not hesitate. That room above might be the girl's bed-room. In any other circumstances Blake would have hesitated, but now he did not scruple.

With the agility of a Red Indian he wormed his way up the thick creeper, and soon his fingers reached outwards and grasped the stonework of the wide balcony. He let himself swing. Then, with a heave, he was up and over. He was at the extreme end of the balcony now, where all the windows were dark, and, having regained his breath, he moved forward stealthily.

He passed one or two unlighted windows, and now, just in front of him, the lights flashed out from the occupied room. He heard the murmur of voices, and he was reassured.

That apartment, then, was not the girl's bed-room. Yet he was sure that one of the voices was feminine, and it was a hushed voice. He reached the window itself, and, squeezing himself into the recess, he peered cautiously round the edge of the parted curtain.

And then Blake received a considerable shock.

He could see right across the room, which was evidently a boudoir or sitting-room, and opposite him was a door. A girl stood with her back to Blake; she was straight and graceful, and even in the set of her head there was a hint of scorn. And facing her—facing Blake—was no less a person than Rupert Waldo! Blake recognised the Wonder Man on the instant.

A sense of keen disappointment swept over the detective. So "Matthew Smayle" was merely another name for Waldo, and he was the man who had audaciously taken possession of Sir John Tracey's home! It was a natural assumption on Blake's part. Yet he could scarcely believe it, for he had never known Waldo to victimise women before.

The girl half turned, as though in sudden anger. She was speaking, but owing to the wind, which swept past Blake's ears, he could not hear any word that was spoken.

He saw the exquisite beauty of the girl's face, and there could be no mistaking the contempt in the curl of her lips and the anger in her fine eyes.

"Waldo—Waldo!" sighed Blake. "I thought better of you!"

And then in that moment another thought came to him. Waldo was dressed in plus-fours—and the motorist who had rescued Blake had been dressed in plus-fours! A mere coincidence, perhaps, but—— Then another thought followed naturally in the same train. The missing note of introduction! That motorist had been Waldo, and Waldo had taken the note and had come here!

Sexton Blake lost his sense of disappointment; he became interested.

Chapter 5.
Blake Understands.

WALDO was in no way abashed by the girl's contempt. Here was a little misunderstanding which could be quickly cleared up. He had just entered the room—in fact, he had virtually forced his way in, and had closed the door. It was essential that this interview should be conducted in private.

"If you will give me just three minutes, Miss Tracey——" he began.

"I cannot prevent you from talking," interrupted the girl, with tight lips. "I cannot even call for help, or those other men will come. But after your behaviour downstairs, Mr. Blake, you cannot expect me to have any faith in you. Mr. Faversham sent you, I have no doubt. The letter proves it."

"The letter proves that Mr. Blake promised to undertake a certain commission on Mr. Faversham's behalf," said Waldo gently. "I confess that I blundered; but I did so in ignorance. Look at me again, Miss Tracey. Surely you have seen Mr. Blake's photographs in the papers? I will admit that newspaper photographs are not speaking likenesses, but Blake is a famous man."

She was looking at him closely now, with new interest. He could see her breast rising and falling rapidly, and her eyes were wide open.

"Of course!" she whispered. "I was so confused that I did not think of that before. You are not Mr. Blake."

"That's better—that's a lot better," said Waldo easily. "Now we're getting somewhere. My name is Edgar Hutchings, and it so happens that I know Blake fairly well. Exactly what Blake intended to-night I do not know, but I can tell you that he is in a hospital in Bury St. Edmunds, rather badly hurt from a bullet wound."

"Oh!" said June, regarding him with new interest and increased concern.

"I found that letter on Blake—unsealed—and I was impertinent enough to read it," continued Waldo. "Having taken Blake to hospital, I came here, believing, in my folly, that I could be of assistance. Evidently I blundered somewhere."

"I think I am beginning to understand," said June breathlessly. "Mr. Blake was coming down with that letter. Mr. Faversham had told him to come in by the chapel ruins, and meet me in the armoury. But you, of course, knew nothing of that. And so you came to the front door, and——" She broke off, and regarded him with renewed doubt. "But downstairs you did not cut a very bold figure."

Waldo laughed.

"Merely a ruse to fool the enemy," he explained coolly. "They roped me up and locked me in the cellar; but I broke the ropes, picked the locks, and here I am. In all earnestness, Miss Tracey, I urge you to believe me. I am anxious to help—and I am no cringing cur, as I appeared downstairs."

He went into details. He explained how Blake had escaped death by a mere inch. And gradually the girl became convinced. Waldo had a wonderful way with him. It was impossible to

doubt his word. His sincerity was obvious.

"So that's the position, Miss Tracey," he concluded. "Unfortunately Blake is out of the running; but I'm here, and I'm a useful fellow. Just say the word and I'll go into action. I'll pitch Smayle and his friends out of the house——"

"No, no; you cannot do that!" interrupted June, in alarm.

"But you don't want them here, do you?"

"Heaven knows that's true!" she said fervently. "But Smayle seems to have some dreadful hold over my father. It was he who invited the men here, and he allows them to remain."

She told Waldo just what she had written in that letter to Mr. Faversham, but at much greater length. And as she told the story her face became flushed, her eyes flashed with anger and indignation. Waldo became grim as he listened to the long series of indignities which had been heaped upon her during the past few weeks.

"It seems that there is only one thing to be done," said Waldo, at length. "I must go to your father and try to reason with him."

"Don't you think I have tried to reason with him?" asked the girl helplessly. "It's no good, Mr. Hutchings. My father will not speak. He stays in his own room, practically day and night. He is like a drugged man. The change in him is pitiful. I'm frightened."

"It smacks of blackmail," said Waldo, unconsciously clenching his fists. "And blackmail, Miss Tracey, is the filthiest crime in the calendar."

June sank into a chair, her limbs trembling.

"I am forced to the same conclusion," she whispered pitifully. "But think what a dreadful conclusion it leads to! If my father is being blackmailed, it means that—that he must have done something wicked. He is afraid of exposure. And I refuse to believe that," she added, with some fire. "My father is one of the gentlest, kindest men in the world. He has never done a wicked thing in all his life. It can't be blackmail—it can't!"

"There are many kinds of blackmail, Miss June," said Waldo significantly.

She looked at him with quick eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that your estimate of your father's character is probably accurate—that he is suffering for the sake of another," replied Waldo cautiously. "Why don't you let me see him?"

And then, before she could answer, another idea came to him.

"No!" he went on. "There is another way of getting at the truth. Smayle and his friends know what this secret is, or they would not be here. I'll get the truth from them."

A new look had entered his eyes—a look of joyful anticipation—and he had unconsciously moved towards the door, as though eager to get into action.

"Please!" pleaded June, looking at him in fear. "You cannot tackle those men single-handed. They will kill you! Smayle would kill anybody. Sometimes I've thought that he would kill me. Those dreadful eyes of his——"

"Forget them," advised Waldo. "And don't worry about me, Miss June. These devils are hurting you and your father, and it's got to stop. It will stop tonight. And, incidentally, I'm going to have a picnic."

And without giving her time to protest further, Waldo quietly opened the door, glanced up and down the wide landing, and slipped out. He had the whole position clear now, and he realised how he had blundered—quite innocently—by coming openly to the Manor House. Well, that error should be rectified.

June Tracey had taken a step towards the door, thinking to dissuade her strange champion from his purpose. But something in his manner made her pause. She was suddenly confident—hopeful. She was hot with excitement. An absurd thought came into her mind that Waldo was like a knight-errant of old—bold and fearless, and ready to face impossible odds.

With a little cry the girl turned. A tapping had come from the window. Her thoughts instantly flew to Smayle, and she even uttered a startled little scream as she saw a face on the other side of the windowpanes. But she was plucky, and she quickly pulled herself together. For her eyes had fallen upon a sheet of paper which was pressed against the glass, and written in heavy blue pencil on that paper were three words: "I am Blake."

After what Waldo had told her such a thing seemed impossible. Gathering her courage, the girl moved to the window, and quickly she slipped back the fastening. Sexton Blake stepped into the room with a finger cautiously raised to his lips. He had taken the chance, remembering Mr. Faversham's estimate of June's sterling qualities. And the girl had come through the test.

"Yes—yes!" she whispered, looking at him with such a searching gaze that Blake felt uncomfortable. "You are Mr. Blake. I have seen your photographs and—— Then Mr. Hutchings lied to me!" she went on in tragic bewilderment. "Oh, and I trusted him—I believed him! He told me that you were badly hurt, and in hospital——"

"Mr. Hutchings told you the simple truth, as he knew it," explained Blake, inwardly amused by Waldo's latest name. "It was the doctor's fault. He told Mr. Hutchings that I should not recover consciousness for at least three days. But I'm a tough customer, Miss Tracey. That doctor is not the first one I have surprised."

His easy manner reassured her. So here was another champion! The girl was growing more and more excited. Here was Blake himself—Mr. Faversham's accredited deputy! It took Blake only a few minutes to explain just why he had come—to tell her that Mr. Faversham had been compelled to dash hotfoot to Genoa, to the bedside of his stricken wife.

Blake peered cautiously through the parted curtain. A girl stood with her back to him, and facing her was no less a person than Rupert Waldo!

As for Blake himself, he was extraordinarily lighthearted. A sense of elation had swept over him. He was rather surprised, indeed, to experience these emotions, for they proved to him how sincerely he regarded Rupert Waldo's character. Waldo had not failed. He was not the despicable Matthew Smayle—but, in fact, the Good Samaritan who had assisted Blake on the road, and who had undoubtedly taken Mr. Faversham's letter, thinking to act in Blake's stead. Now that the truth was clear, Blake knew that such an action was entirely characteristic of the Wonder Man.

So once again June told her story, and Blake listened in silence. At the end of it he knew little more than June's letter to Mr. Faversham had told him.

He understood that it was a waste of time to see Sir John, but he succeeded in learning, without letting the girl realise that he had obtained the information, that Sir John slept in the room at the end of the balcony.

Blake had already made up his mind. He was more cautious than Waldo. He said nothing of his intentions; he made no promises. He devoted himself entirely to making the girl comfortable.

"Let me advise you, Miss Tracey, to go to bed and to get some sleep," he said earnestly. "You have two helpers in the house now. I am very well acquainted with Mr. Hutchings, and I know him to be a good fellow. I think he is earnest in his desire to help you."

"I am afraid he is in great danger," said the girl, troubled. "He said he was going downstairs to face Smayle and the other men. Oh, they will harm him——"

"Mr. Hutchings is far more likely to harm them. And don't forget that I am in the game now," said Blake. "Leave everything to us, Miss Tracey. And do, please, get some sleep."

HE left immediately—not by the door, but by the window, as he had come. And he was more satisfied when the light within the room was extinguished and another light sprang into life behind an adjoining window. This window was heavily curtained. It was the girl's bed-room.

Blake himself tiptoed along the balcony until he reached the end. Here, without scruple, he forced the window, stepped in, and quickly passed through the curtains. The only way to deal with Sir John Tracey was to take him by surprise.

A fire burned low in the grate, and near it stood a table, with a reading lamp, heavily shaded, upon it. The bed was not disturbed, and a figure sat in a great armchair before the fire. At first Blake thought that Sir John was sleeping, but as a board gave forth a little creak Sir John roused himself and looked round the chair.

Then, with a startled exclamation, he struggled to his feet. Blake saw a fine upright man, but his distinguished-looking face bore the haggard lines of premature age. He was a man in torment.

"How dare you enter my room in this fashion!" he said, controlling himself with difficulty. "Who are you?"

"My name is Sexton Blake."

"What! Blake—of Baker Street?"

"Yes."

"Yes, I see you are," said Sir John, as he seized the reading lamp and tilted the shade and allowed the light to shine fully upon the intruder's face. "I have

always understood, Mr. Blake, that you are a man of honour. May I ask why you come stealing into my bed-room at dead of night like a sneak-thief?"

"You don't mean that, Sir John," said Sexton Blake quietly, as he advanced. "I am here because your daughter, in her despair, wrote to Mr. Henry Faversham, the lawyer. Faversham is a friend of mine, and he asked me to come."

"It's no good—it's no good at all!" said Sir John, his voice fierce with fear. "You can't do anything, Mr. Blake. I apologise for what I just said. But you must forgive me; my mind is greatly unsettled."

"And your daughter's mind?"

"Don't!" almost sobbed Sir John, sinking back into the chair. "Do you think I cannot understand her distress? But I cannot lift a finger to help her. I am bound hand and foot; my lips are sealed. And she must continue to suffer until—until——"

He broke down, and, holding his head in his hands, he sobbed like a child.

Blake waited patiently. It was better that Sir John should get this out of his system. He had been too long alone—brooding over his trouble, nursing it, avoiding his daughter. Blake knew the signs. Matthew Smayle's victim was nearly ready to talk.

"Why do you come here—to talk to me?" asked the broken man at length. "Am I not suffering enough?"

"Tell me one thing, Sir John," said Blake quietly. "Are you pledged to silence?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Did you give any promise to a dying person that you would never disclose a certain secret?"

"I don't remember—— No, no, I gave no pledge," said the other. "But what do you know of June? Who told you——"

"I know nothing of your daughter, except what you have told me yourself," said Blake gently. "Come, Sir John, pull yourself together! I am here to help you. You have already unwittingly disclosed that this secret is connected in some way with your daughter. Unless you talk to somebody you will go mad."

"Ay, that's true!" said Sir John, a wild light in his eyes. "Sometimes I think I am mad already." He looked at Blake with sudden hope. "Yes, yes, perhaps I can trust you," he went on feverishly. "You wouldn't betray me, would you, Mr. Blake? But no, I daren't!"

"Think of your daughter—virtually alone in this house with those three unbidden guests!" said Blake sternly.

"In Heaven's name, man, do you think I can ever forget?" groaned Sir John. "I think of nothing else! My daughter's happiness, her future—her very life itself. If she ever knows the truth, her whole life will be shattered."

"Your fears may be groundless, Sir John," said Blake. "You have nursed them so much that they have become exaggerated in your own mind."

There was something in Blake's face which made the old man rally. And suddenly he squared his shoulders; he seemed to become stronger. An expression of untold relief came over his haggard features. In that moment he had taken the plunge.

"Sit down, Mr. Blake!" he said, with a new dignity. "I will tell you. Yes, I will give you the story. And then, perhaps, you will understand the tortures I have suffered—and am still suffering."

Chapter 6.
Waldo's Picnic.

MATTHEW SMAYLE, his face dark and troubled, sat in the comfortable smoking-room. In other parts of the apartment, silent and uncomfortable, were the other three men. They had learned not to talk whilst Smayle was thinking.

"We needn't worry about him now," said Smayle abruptly. "He's in hospital—and likely to die. You did your work too well, Varley."

"I thought it was what you wanted——" began Varley.

"It's no good making excuses now!" broke in Smayle. "Perhaps it's all for the best. Blake had this coming to him, anyway, the cur! It's the other man we must think of. He's just a blundering fool who butted in without knowing what he was doing. He knows so much that we daren't let him go. Yet it's risky to keep him here."

"Why?" asked Dring. "He's down in that cellar. The servants need never know—we can keep the keys, and one of us can take him food."

"That's true enough," admitted Smayle. "It might be the best way. It is the simplest, anyhow. One of you can take his car to-night, and drive it a hundred miles away, and abandon it. Yes, we can keep the fellow here, I dare say. He couldn't be traced to Little Budeley."

"Wouldn't it be better for us all to clear off?" suggested Foster uneasily. "I mean, after what's happened——"

"I'm not going to have my plans ruined by the first fool who chooses to butt in!" snapped Matthew Smayle. "I haven't finished with the girl yet. I have other plans."

His companions looked at him with frightened eyes. His voice contained a diabolical threat which none of them could understand. Matthew Smayle did not care two straws for June Tracey—in the usual way that men care for women.

"We may be here for another week—another month—another year," continued Smayle. "I like the life. It's peaceful—it's luxurious. And it's safe."

"The old man might get desperate and tell the police," said Dring.

"He'll not tell the police," replied Smayle, with an evil smile. "He'll tell nobody. Do you think I don't know what I'm doing? I've never told you fellows just what my hold over Sir John Tracey is; but you can take my word for it that he's like this in my grasp."

And he held out a lean hand and clutched his fingers together in a grimly suggestive way.

"Just like that!" he said gloatingly. "I've got him! Yes, and I've got the girl! If the police come here, Sir John will be frantic with terror until they have gone—for he knows what one little word from me can accomplish. We are his guests, and we can laugh at the police. We can get what money we require. He's rich—and he'll pay. There's only that fool in the cellar——"

"He may be a fool, but he's not in the cellar," said a voice.

The men spun round in alarm, and there, just within the doorway, stood "Mr. Edgar Hutchings." He had entered so noiselessly that the men knew nothing of his presence until he spoke.

"The cellar was locked!" ejaculated Smayle, his hand diving for his gun. "And so was the door of this room."

"It's still locked," said Waldo mildly.

"How did you get in?"

"I unlocked the door," explained Waldo. "That's an easy one."

He strolled nonchalantly into the centre of the room, and Smayle and Dring and Foster surrounded him. They were thoroughly alarmed. Varley was

at the door, and, to his amazement, it was securely locked.

"Who let you out?" demanded Smayle harshly.

"I let myself out."

"You're a liar! I've got both keys of the cellar doors."

"You've probably got the key of this door, too—but the door's still locked, isn't it?" asked Waldo. "I got tired of being alone in the darkness. Very ungentlemanly of you to leave me there like that."

His inanity exasperated Matthew Smayle more than any violence could have done. Never for a moment did Smale believe Waldo's story. Somebody had let him out—and Smayle's thoughts instantly went to the girl. She probably had duplicate keys——

"Either you are an absolute fool, my friend, or a tame lunatic," said Smayle, taking a tight hold on one of Waldo's arms. "Yes, that's right, Bert, keep his arms behind him."

"All this is quite useless," said Waldo indulgently. "You're just wasting your strength. Did you ever hear of a man named Rupert Waldo? He has some reputation, I believe, as a crook."

"The Wonder Man!" exclaimed Bert Foster incredulously.

"That's me!" nodded Waldo. "I'm quite a remarkable fellow. People tie me up, and I burst the ropes in no time. I can get past locked doors, too. And when people try to hold me—I get away. And in getting away I am quite likely to do lots of personal damage."

Smayle looked at him in alarm for a moment; then, as Smayle beheld the plus-fours, and the serene, gentlemanly face, he laughed with contempt.

"Do you think you can bluff me?" he asked sourly. "Hold him, you fellows! We'll get some more rope——"

"This," said Waldo, "is a pity."

He gave his shoulders the slightest of heaves, and Dring and Foster staggered away.

With a lightning-like movement, Waldo's right hand smashed down, and he held Smayle's wrist in his grasp. Smayle uttered a gasp of agony.

"You fool!" he shrieked. "You're breaking my wrist!"

"No; only getting your gun," explained Waldo coolly.

As he dropped the weapon into his pocket, he saw Bert Foster and Wally Dring leaping at him. He let them leap. He caught one man round the waist, and lifted him high above the shoulders, and took three rapid steps backwards.

"Look out!" he sang out. "Coming over!"

The man screamed in fear as he was sent hurtling through the air. He struck the others full force, and they all went crashing to the floor in hopeless confusion.

Waldo turned, with apparent unconcern, but his movements were like those of a cat as he sprang upon Varley. He had the gunman's weapon in a flash. Then he stepped amongst the others, and took possession of their guns, too.

When they staggered to their feet, dishevelled and frightened, they were amazed to see the intruder calmly helping himself to a whisky from the decanter.

"Well, here's a rope round your neck, Smayle!" said Waldo, holding up the glass.

Matthew Smayle went livid.

"What do you mean by that?" he panted, lurching forward.

"I'm thinking of Blake—probably dead by now," said Waldo. "It's your neck they'll get, my friend. You paid for the job, didn't you?"

That reference to a rope had shaken Smayle more than anything that had gone before. For some moments he could not speak. But his eyes were like those of some hell-hound.

"Have I convinced you, gentlemen?" asked Waldo, dropping some of his former nonchalance. "Do you still think I'm bluffing?"

"No; you're Waldo!" panted Dring, in fear.

"Of course I'm Waldo, and that explains how I got out of the cellar," went on the Wonder Man. "Further, it may interest you to know that I came to this house because I had an idea that I might get hold of some cash. That's why I used that letter. I thought I could get in and gain the confidence of the innocent yokels. But it seems that I've dropped into a thieves' kitchen. Well, it suits me—if you're willing to let me in."

"What, exactly, do you mean?" demanded Smayle.

"This is what I mean!" replied Waldo, leaning over the table, and his tone changing so much that his words cut through the air like a whip-lash. "I heard everything Varley said—I wasn't unconscious when you put me behind that lounge in the drawing-room—and unless you are reasonable I shall get you all jugged for killing Blake! There's some game on here—and it seems to be a profitable game. I'm desperate—I need money! We're birds of a feather, and I'm going to have my split. Have I made myself clear?"

The overwhelming strength of his personality filled the room like something tangible. These cheap crooks were stricken—they were terrified. Waldo was master of them. Matthew Smayle was the only man who attempted to resist.

"You may be Waldo—I don't doubt it now," he said harshly—"but I'm running this racket, and——"

"You mean, you *were* running the racket," interrupted Waldo. "I'm here now!"

He stared straight into Smayle's eyes, and he looked into pale pools of unthinkable evil which sickened him. He thought he was hardened, but he was wrong. There was something in the quality of Smayle's eyes which tempted him to take the man by the throat and choke the life out of him. The man was more beast than human. Even Waldo had never seen such vileness in human eyes before. But he continued to stare, steadily, relentlessly. And Waldo won. Matthew Smayle suddenly uttered a choking cry, and he lowered his gaze. He was beaten.

"It's no good kicking," said Waldo coolly. "I'm here—and you can't get rid of me. Better be friends."

He knew that he had nothing to fear from Dring and Foster and Varley. They were, indeed, looking at him with open admiration. They admired a man of strength. He handed back their guns.

"Now that we understand one another we mustn't keep up any unfriendly spirit," said Waldo. "Here's yours, too, Smayle."

He did not trust Smayle, but he was certainly not afraid of him. Smayle took the weapon, fingered it for a moment, and then, with a shrug, he dropped it into his hip pocket.

"You win, Waldo!" he said. "You're in with us!"

"Don't say it so grudgingly," protested Waldo. "You ought to be pleased. I'm a celebrity. And I'm a useful chap, too—in case there's any trouble. Incidentally, I might mention that I'm suspected of gunning Blake, and it would be only common decency on your part to give me shelter until the hue and cry is over."

"You mean that the Bury police know who you are?" asked Foster.

"No; but it was I who took Blake in, and the circumstances were a bit peculiar," said Waldo. "But who cares? I've landed on my feet here. You must have obtained a fairly strong half-Nelson on old man Tracey."

And he looked at Smayle inquiringly.

"I shall have to talk with you, Waldo," said Smayle.

He turned abruptly to the others.

"Well, the problem has solved itself," he went on. "No need for you fellows to stay up any longer—you can all get to bed. You can sleep with Bert, Varley."

The men had a final drink, and soon they went off. Their relief was tremendous. Waldo had made them feel very comfortable.

SMAYLE sat smoking silently for some minutes after the others had gone. Waldo put some coal on the fire, then he switched off most of the lights, leaving only a standard lamp glowing under its crimson shade.

Matthew Smayle made no comment. But now, as Waldo seated himself in

Waldo caught the man round the waist and lifted him high above his shoulders. "Look out!" he shouted. "Coming over!"

another comfortable chair, he could see Smayle's profile silhouetted clearly against the light. A slow, inscrutable smile came over Waldo's face—and it was grim, too. But he said nothing. He waited patiently.

"I'm not going to pretend I'm glad you're here, Waldo," said Smayle, breaking the silence at last. "I doubt if there is room for both of us. Those others don't count—I only brought them here for companionship, and to obey my orders. But you're not the kind of man to take orders, and unless we're careful we might come to a clash!"

"In that case, we must be careful," said Waldo.

"It is partly my own fault that you are here, and, of course, you are welcome to remain."

"Do you think Sir John will extend me the same generous invitation?"

"Sir John will do as I tell him," replied Smayle with decision.

"May I know why he is so submissive?"

"You may not," retorted Smayle curtly. "I share my secret with nobody. The others know nothing—and you'll know nothing."

He seemed to be aware that Waldo's gaze was fixed upon him, and his curtness was adopted to mask his uneasiness. He suddenly became irritable.

"Well," he snapped, "isn't that good enough? While you're under this roof you're safe—I guarantee it!"

"At the same time, my friend, I would remind you that I am not the same as the others," said Waldo. "And Nature cursed me with an insatiable curiosity. Better tell me what the game is. You seem very confident, so I suppose it is unnecessary for me to hint that blackmail is a dangerous——"

"It is not blackmail!" interrupted Smayle hotly. "I know what I'm doing." He broke off, and Waldo did not fail to see the cunning light which came into his eyes. "Well, perhaps it is blackmail, in a way," he admitted. "I'm not going to give you any details, but I'll satisfy that curiosity of yours."

"That's better," said Waldo.

"Some years ago Sir John dabbled in high finance," said Smayle carefully. "There was a mine in South America, and Sir John, innocently enough, put his name to certain documents. As a matter of fact, the mine was an absolute fake, and, although the whole thing fizzled out, Sir John himself was liable to prosecution—and still is. If I liked to give certain information he would have his name in all the newspapers, and he would be branded as a swindler. In all probability the Public Prosecutor would take action and have a warrant issued for his arrest. And he is very jealous of his good name."

"My curiosity is still unsatisfied," said Waldo smoothly. "In other words, Smayle, you're a pretty rotten liar!"

Smayle started forward.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded, with heat.

"I mean that you're nothing better than a fool to invent such a story for my benefit," said Waldo. "You invented it as you went along, and I don't think much of it. You're going to tell me the truth!"

Smayle lost control of himself. He sat forward in his chair, and his face was distorted with fury.

"I'll tell you nothing!" he snarled. "Who do you think you are, to come here, ordering me about, telling me what I'm to do, and what I'm not to do?"

"I'm Waldo—and when I start a thing, I finish it."

And with the utmost calmness Waldo rose from his chair, went across to Smayle, and he sat on the arm of Smayle's chair. One hand reached for the man's throat, and closed over it.

"You infernal fool!" choked Smayle. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to throttle you—unless you tell me the truth," replied Waldo evenly.

And there was such a note in his voice that Matthew Smayle trembled with sudden terror. He clutched at Waldo's hand, but it felt like tempered steel. He struggled, he kicked, but all his efforts were useless. With one hand Waldo held him there, pressed back into the chair, as though he were a mere child.

"You'll tell me the full truth, Vincent Bevan, and I shall know if you are telling me the truth," said Waldo grimly.

The man uttered an inarticulate cry, and Waldo relaxed his grip slightly.

"You—you know me?" gasped Smayle.

"I know that you are Vincent Bevan, and the knowledge does not incline me to friendliness," said Waldo contemptuously. "I recognised you after I had put the main lights out—when I saw your profile."

"Release my throat—and I'll come clean!" panted Vincent Bevan, those eyes of his bloodshot with terror. "I'll tell you everything."

And the two men sat there, in opposite chairs, by the fireside, and the story was told.

It was just at that same time that two other men, upstairs, were sitting by another fire, and the same story was revealed.

But there was a world of difference in the telling.

Chapter 7.
The Twice Told Story.

SIR JOHN TRACEY was looking at Sexton Blake with such earnestness, such intensity, that the detective felt uncomfortable. The scrutiny was searching into the very recesses of his being.

"I am trusting you with a secret, Mr. Blake, which no man knows of but myself—and that hell-hound, Smayle," said Sir John, his voice trembling. "I know that you are a gentleman, and a man of honour; but you must swear to me now, before Heaven, that you'll never breathe a word to a living soul of what I am going to tell you."

Blake demurred.

"Will you not leave the matter to my judgment, Sir John?" he asked gently. "I can see your life being wrecked—and the life of your daughter. If I take

that oath, my hands will be utterly bound, my lips everlastingly sealed. And there may be a loophole——"

"There is no loophole, Mr. Blake," interrupted the other. "Have I not thought and thought, week after week, seeking some way of escape? I shall tell you this story under no other conditions. If, however, you can convince me later, that there is some way in which I can rid myself of this blackguard, I will release you from your oath."

"Then I will give you my word, Sir John," said Blake quietly.

"You must swear it—here, on this Book," said the baronet.

Blake did as he was bidden—and he was impressed. His trust was, indeed, a sacred one—and he vaguely wondered at the nature of the imminent disclosure.

"I will tell you the worst first—so that you may know at once, of my torture," said Sir John, his voice unsteady with emotion. "This man under my roof, who calls himself Matthew Smayle, is none other than Vincent Bevan, the Camberwell murderer!"

Blake started.

"I see!" he said gravely. "Bevan was released from prison just six months ago. I remember reading a resume of his case at the time of his release. I believe he killed his wife——"

"He was released just six months ago, after a so-called life sentence of eighteen years. I wish it had been a real life-sentence," repeated Sir John deliberately. "And he took five of those months to find his daughter."

"Good heavens! You don't mean, Sir John, that——"

"That man has been in this house just a month."

"But what you are implying is incredible—unbelievable," said Blake sharply. "What are you trying to tell me, Sir John? I have seen your daughter, and I know that she is a girl of purity, and that she possesses, a heart of gold."

"Nevertheless, she is no more my daughter, Mr. Blake, than you are my son," said Sir John Tracey tragically. "Heaven help her, she is the daughter of Vincent Bevan, murderer! Her own mother was killed by that man's vile hands. His daughter!" Sir John raised his hands and clenched his knuckles until they were white. "Can you realise that, Mr. Blake? His daughter—his daughter!"

"MY daughter!" gloated Matthew Smayle, his eyes aflame with triumph. "Now what do you say, Waldo? That girl upstairs, who believes herself to be the child of Sir John Tracey, is mine! She's my flesh and blood—my own child."

Rupert Waldo was aghast.

"I know that you are telling me the truth, Bevan; but it's hard to believe," he said. "The girl is gentle, refined——"

"Bah! She takes after her mother, curse her—and she has had a gentle upbringing!" snarled Vincent Bevan. "But she's mine, all the same. Are you beginning to understand?"

"I have finished understanding," replied Waldo.

"Now I'll tell you how it comes about that my daughter is to be found in this old country house, living like a lady," continued Bevan. "A murderer's daughter—yes, you know who I am, and you know what I did—a murderer's daughter, masquerading as a lady of breeding! Her mother was a lady of breeding. She was Cynthia Waldon, the only child of Sir George and Lady Waldon, of Buckinghamshire. Oh yes! A fine old county family, with a great mansion, and lots of servants. I know—because I was one of the servants. That was twenty years ago, and I was a fine looking young fellow, I have no doubt. Yes, I was the coachman, and I used to drive my employer's daughter into the village here, there, and everywhere. She fell in love with me, and one night we ran away and got married."

"THEY eloped, Mr. Blake," said Sir John. "This infernal coachman and Cynthia Waldon. There was a terrible scandal about it at the time, and it broke her parents' hearts. They were never the same afterwards. Their tragedy was all the more poignant because the girl was too proud to appeal to them when, too late, she learned that she had ruined her life."

"You were on terms of friendship with the Waldons?"

"Not at all," said Sir John. "My wife and myself knew nothing of them. We were absolute strangers. Well, in much less than a year that poor child was disillusioned. She found that the gallant of her dreams was nothing but a worthless drunkard, a waster.

"He dragged her down until they were nearly starving.

"Then there was the child, and even that slender little life failed to conquer the mother's pride. In her misery she would not appeal to her parents for help. Heaven alone knows to what depths of degradation that cur dragged her!"

"SHE dragged me down," said Vincent Bevan savagely.

"Oh, yes; I know what you're thinking. Like everybody else, you think that it was I who dragged her down. But you're wrong.

"Her stinking, rotten pride was too much for me. I was only a coachman, and I was always trying to live up to her—to get better jobs than those for which I was suited.

"We drifted. Things went from bad to worse. The child came, and Cynthia lived only for that child. And that maddened me more than ever, because the kid took after its high-toned relations."

"HEAVEN be praised, Mr. Blake, that helpless little child was unquestionably a Waldon," said Sir John fervently.

"In no single respect did the child inherit anything from her father. She had her mother's eyes, her mother's colouring, her mother's pure soul. I found out many things later, but even now I do not quite know what caused the quarrel.

"But Bevan and his wife were starving, and there could be no doubt that it was the child who came between the two and widened the already wide rift.

"It was that innocent little baby which caused Vincent Bevan to strike his wife down with a murderer's hand."

"WE were practically at the end of things—starving, helpless," said Vincent Bevan. "Then I got an offer of work. A coachman's job, in Sussex. I was fitted to be a coachman, and I could have the job if I could bring my wife as housekeeper. But there were no children allowed."

"Go on," said Waldo grimly.

"Cynthia and I had it over a dozen times," said Bevan. "I told her that she would have to put the baby into a home. It would be well cared for there, we could get that job, and—and——

"But what's the good of telling you all this? She refused. She swore that she would not part with her baby.

"I went out. I had a few coppers left, and drink was cheap then. I came back again—with more than I could hold.

"We quarrelled again.

"I struck her. I hit harder than I intended, I suppose, because when people came into the room she was dead."

"AND this precious husband of hers," said Sir John Tracey tragically, "in his drunken fury, had killed her. Perhaps you remember the trial?"

"Yes, I remember about it," replied Blake. "I remember, too, that the poor girl's parents, already broken, soon died from the shock. A whole family wiped out by the villainy of that fiendish coachman. And because the crime had been committed in a fit of drunken rage, Bevan's death sentence was commuted to one of penal servitude for life. That was eighteen years ago."

"Yes; he earned some little remission, I believe," said Sir John. "Well, my own wife was a tender-hearted soul, and for long we had bemoaned the fact that we were childless. A thought came to us—or rather, to her. I claim no credit for it. There was that helpless little baby, left motherless—with her father imprisoned for life, with her grandparents dead. Lady Tracey and I plotted—and we were gleeful in our plotting. My Heaven, Mr. Blake, how we revelled in that harmless little conspiracy!

"Without even disclosing our real names, we adopted the little baby, and it so happened that we were going for a world cruise, to last over four years, in my own yacht. We took the baby with us, and she grew up to know us as her mother and father. At this very minute June thinks that I am her father. If she were to find out her relationship to that hound downstairs—well——"

He paused, and Blake saw his body tremble with the intensity of his feeling.

"THERE you are. That's the long and the short of it. I'm the girl's father," said Bevan, with an evil grin. "He daren't tell her. He's afraid of pegging out."

"You're a dirty liar!" said Waldo. "Sir John is not thinking of himself;

he's thinking only of the girl, and you know it. If she were to learn that she is the daughter of a murderer, she would——"

"Well, what would she do?" snarled Bevan. "I'm her father. She's mine! That's where I've got the old fool! He never adopted her legally and I can claim her at any minute I choose—yes, and take her away.

"She's under age, and she's my own child, as I can prove to any magistrate in the country. Do you realise that for eighteen years I was suffering hell, and that I had no knowledge of what had become of my daughter?

"I didn't know that Sir John and Lady Tracey had brought her up their own child. They took her away to sea, and when they came back everybody believed that Lady Tracey was the mother. Even the servants in this house thought so. I've heard all about it, and I've had many a chuckle. How these rustics were fooled!"

"IT was one of our greatest joys, Mr. Blake, that everybody hereabouts really believed that the child was our own, born during our absence abroad," said Sir John gently. "That made things so much easier, and it seemed to us that the girl was safer.

"Never did we regret our action, for June was one of the most delightful children imaginable, and she has grown up into a fine, sturdy, honourable girl—a girl of beautiful character. A Waldon, from head to foot.

"I read of Bevan's release, of course, but I was not in the least worried. I never dreamed for a moment that he would trace her.

"I actually gloated over the fact that I had covered all the tracks. June was mine now, and that murderous brute should never have her. Since her mother's death she has been the very light of my life, and I have never ceased to thank Heaven for the great gift of her love and companionship."

"And then—Bevan turned up?"

"Yes, Bevan turned up. And by the mercy of Providence, June was out at the time, or she would surely have known," replied Sir John. "When I think of that interview my blood runs cold through my veins. The unthinkable thing had happened. Bevan had found her! And it wasn't long before I discovered that he meant mischief."

"DURING all those years in prison I nursed my hatred, I did so deliberately," said Bevan, his eyes aflame with a light which was akin to madness. "It was the baby which had caused the quarrel, the baby which had prompted me to strike my wife. That baby sent me to serve a life sentence of hell! And I swore that she should suffer. Yes, when I came out I would devote my life to finding her; and when I found her I would take my revenge."

"Yet that child has done you no harm," said Waldo scornfully.

But he could appreciate Vincent Bevan's state of mind. During those years of prison life the man had become obsessed with that one aim.

"I'll confess that I changed a bit after I had been free for a month or two," continued Bevan. "Freedom was good. You don't know what it's like, do you, to come back to the world after being out of it for half a lifetime?

"But I had to work in order to live—and I hated work. I went on the tramp. I devoted myself to the one task of finding my daughter. Well, I found her.

"I got on the track of an old servant of the foundling home where the baby had been placed after my arrest. I followed up that clue, I heard about the people who had taken the kid away to a ship. You can guess the rest.

"And when I came here and found my daughter living amid luxury—the supposed daughter of a wealthy man—I began to see that I should cut off my nose to spite my face if I told her that I was her real father. For that would get me nowhere."

"HE came here with the one object of claiming his daughter, and, I believe, wreaking his vengeance upon her, doing her some bodily injury," said Sir John. "But I argued with him—pleaded with him. And he began to see that he would only get himself in prison again if he persisted.

"Well, he told me, coolly enough, that he would keep the secret, but he was going to live like a gentleman. I offered to make him a handsome allowance, but he would not hear of it. No, he would come here to live with us, so that he could keep his eyes constantly on his own child. Think of my dreadful predicament!"

"It was indeed terrible," agreed Blake sympathetically.

"I could do nothing—for he threatened to tell June the truth. He wanted the good things of life, and he had some friends who could share them. Yes, he would bring them down, and they would all be my guests. And if I objected, if I breathed a solitary word, he would take June aside and tell her, and then claim her."

"I TOLD him I would take her away," jeered Bevan. "That shut him up quickly enough! Don't forget that I had had years of prison life, and the luxuries of this place acted like a drug upon me. There wasn't the slightest risk—for even if the old man complained to the police, he could do nothing. I wasn't breaking any law. I had him in the hollow of my hand—I hold him there yet. He can't escape. That girl thinks that Sir John Tracey is her father, and you know as well as I do that if she ever finds out the truth, she'll be broken. Her life will be wrecked."

"THAT man has the upper hand, Mr. Blake—and I am helpless," said Sir John brokenly. "In a way, I can understand the man's viewpoint. It is a kind of psychological reaction from his years of prison life. He is determined to live here, like a country gentleman. If I could persuade him to go away the evil would be lessened. I can afford to make him a liberal allowance. But he won't go.

"There must be a way out," said Sexton Blake, rising to his feet. "I thank you, Sir John, for your confidence. This man must be dealt with—and in such a way that June will never know the truth."

Chapter 8.

The Way of the Wonder Man!

SUDDENLY Waldo stiffened—but so imperceptibly that Vincent Bevan saw nothing. Neither did Vincent Bevan hear anything.

But Waldo's hearing was phenomenal—like most of his other faculties. And through the closed window of the room came a sound to his acute ears—the soft, gentle purring of an engine. Moreover, Waldo thought he recognised the actual engine.

It was the voice of the Grey Panther!

It was curious that a rural constable, who happened to be an expert car-driver, should be the instrument of Fate chosen to solve this strange problem! Yet the mere fact that this officer had discovered Blake's car gave Waldo the inspiration he needed. At least, it led up to that inspiration.

The constable had found the Grey Panther quite by chance, and as the car was on Sir John Tracey's property, he had driven it up to the Manor House—after noticing that lights were glowing in some of the lower windows. And it was so unusual for those lights to show at such an hour of the night that the officer had decided to go up to the house to make inquiries.

"Just a minute," said Waldo casually.

He left Bevan and went to the door. As he passed out into the hall he saw a figure on the landing, at the top of the stairs. Here was a fresh surprise—for Waldo recognised Sexton Blake! Who, then, was driving the Grey Panther? Tinker, perhaps—yet Tinker had not been in the car at the time of the smash.

It was at that second that Waldo had his inspiration. He saw clear daylight. His mind was made up.

"Hands up, Blake!" he shouted, in a loud voice. "One move out of you, and I'll drop you! Stick 'em up!"

Blake was astounded. He had come out with a twofold purpose—firstly, to discover who had driven the Grey Panther up to the house, and, secondly, to find out what Waldo was doing.

"Are you mad, Hutchings?" he demanded.

"I'm not Hutchings—and you know it!" retorted Waldo, his gun in his hand. "I'm desperate! Hi, Smayle! Varley!" He made a tremendous noise, and Matthew Smayle, alias Vincent Bevan, came running out of the smoking-room, utterly shaken.

"What are you doing, you fool?" he demanded breathlessly.

Waldo side-stepped rapidly. With one movement he had relieved Bevan of his automatic, and he jammed the muzzle of the weapon into his back. His own gun he kept trained on Blake.

"One word out of you, you rat, and I'll drill you!" he hissed into Bevan's ear. "Get back—and let it sink in! You're not going to blab now! One solitary, single syllable, and you'll arrive in Hades within a split second!"

And Vincent Bevan knew that Waldo spoke the truth. The murderer was terrified. He stood there, with that gun muzzle rammed into his back, like something petrified.

And by this time the whole household

(*Continued on opposite page.*)

THE NEXT MOVE

(*Continued from page 5.*)

Tinker cast off and took the pole. Under his short, steady strokes the punt made good headway against the easy current of the stream, though it was difficult work pushing through when they were in the arched tunnel.

But the lad brought them into the other cavern beneath Gilson's house, and was tying the punt to the stake while Blake and Gilson were already running along the stone-flagged passage.

Tinker overtook them on the staircase and kept at their heels during the long climb to the top.

There was a pause while Gilson found and pressed the switch that permitted them to enter the fireplace alcove in the basement kitchen.

And then, as they emerged into the room, all three drew up in dumbfounded amazement. What they saw here was even more of a shock and a puzzle than the discovery that the prisoner had vanished.

On the floor, almost in the very centre of the room, was a small, dead monkey, clad in a little ridiculous red coat, blue tights, and tiny peaked blue cap, with gold braid about it—the sort of little, fantastically dressed monkey one sees sometimes on the shoulder of an Italian organ-grinder.

How it had come there, how it had died, were questions which Blake did not pause then to attempt to answer. With his automatic in his hand, he leaped for the door and into the passage. As he wheeled towards the stairs that led to the floor above he noticed that the area door was closed.

But he did not wait to discover if it was locked. Up the stairs he went, two at a time, until he reached the hall. He did not need his torch here, for the place was brightly lighted, and as he swung round the newel post of the main stairs he called over his shoulder:

"Guns, you fellows! There's something on the stairs!"

Gilson and Tinker followed him up, but were brought to a stop as Blake bent over the figure that lay huddled against the topmost steps.

It was the figure of a girl, whose russet hair gleamed like red gold against the mahogany that, in its turn, was in sharp contrast to the green silk of the flimsy evening dress she wore.

It was Roxane Harfield, better known as Mademoiselle Roxane, the beautiful and wealthy young Canadian girl with whom Bake had trodden the adventure trail in the past in various parts of the world.

"Roxane!" he exclaimed. "What does this mean?"

But before he could find any answer the door leading to Gilson's bed-room flew open and the place was filled with the staccato racketing of automatics!

The man on the stairs—the secret underground stream—the appearance of Roxane and, of all things, the dead monkey! What's it all about? What's going to happen next? Well, we don't know. Nobody knows; not even Gwyn Evans, whose job is to continue from here. It's up to him; it's his Next Move! And he'll have the answer ready and waiting for you in next Thursday's UNION JACK; and so will the others, turn and turn about. In all confidence of many weeks of really thrilling reading to come, you can cheerfully PLACE THAT STANDING ORDER!

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TOPICAL for ARMISTICE DAY!

ON the night of November 15th, the Cobra struck again. Nor was that third killing the last. There were others spread over a period of six days. Blake tabulated the sequence of deaths, which occurred while the shadow of the Cobra was over England.

Each man was found somewhere in the vicinity of a War memorial; each man's chest was punctured many times by a thin blade that had been driven home with superhuman force; by each body was a wax model of a cobra.

Of clues there seemed to be none. But stories began to get round. People talked of hideous figures, long and thin, dressed in black. Nervous people locked themselves in after dark: while others ran at sight of a shadow. It seemed nobody was safe from the deadly knife of the assassin. Some maniac must be killing indiscriminately. That was the theory Elliott put forward in the "Telegram."

But Blake disagreed with it. He held to the conviction that there was method in these killings, a definite connected motive behind them. It remained to find the link.

You'll See How He Found It In

"THE WAR MEMORIAL MURDERS!"

—the story of the murder-scare that plunged all Britain into a panic—and was left to Sexton Blake to solve! Tense with drama and the suspense of uncertainty, fascinating with the thrill of the manhunt, this yarn represents popular REX HARDINGE in a new light. If you have enjoyed his African yarns, you'll like this, too—for sure. It's a topical tale of next week's great event, Armistice Day. Book it now!

was a-move. There came a thunderous knocking at the front door—for the police-officer outside knew that something was badly wrong. Dring, Foster, and Varley appeared, and so did Sir John Tracey and June.

Blake's presence here—and Waldo was frankly amazed to see him—was of incalculable use.

Blake himself knew in a flash that Waldo was deliberately working some kind of stunt. And Blake, like the shrewd, sensible man he was, "stuck 'em up." He knew Waldo. He knew that the Wonder Man was seeking to help June Tracey. And Blake fell in with Waldo's plans, though he did not know what those plans were. Blake did his part by appearing submissive.

"Great Heavens! What does all this mean?" demanded Sir John hoarsely.

He was in terror lest Bevan should blurt out the dread truth. But Sir John need not have worried. Bevan was tongue-tied.

"Miss June, you now see me in my true colours," said Waldo sadly. "I am not Mr. Blake's friend, and my name is not Hutchings. I am Waldo, the criminal, hunted by the police."

"Oh, it's not true!" cried June. "Mr. Blake, what does this mean?"

"I am sorry, Miss June, but this man is Waldo," said Blake steadily.

"Oh!" murmured the girl, bewildered.

"I did not want to show myself to you in my true colours—but it cannot be avoided," continued Waldo. "I am the leader of this pretty little gang. Smayle and his friends are my assistants."

Dring and the other two men stood listening in absolute mystification. Waldo had precipitated this thing on the spur of the moment, and his estimation of Bevan's associates was dead right. They were dumb and helpless with shock.

"I can only add, as an excuse, that I did not know the character of my victims," continued Waldo. "I sent these men here to act for me; but as soon as I arrived to-night, and saw the unutterable misery I was causing, I decided to clear out. I will mention, incidentally, that Blake's presence rather hastened my decision. Blake and I are not comfortable under the same roof."

"Is this man mad, Mr. Blake?" panted Sir John. "Why don't you do something?"

"He cannot, or I'll drop him as he stands!" flashed Waldo. "I'm desperate, and I'm going to get away. Don't move, Blake! Sir John," he added deliberately, "I have been bluffing you. My hold over you was purely imaginary. I made you believe that you had signed your name to some documents in connection with the South American mine, which made you liable to criminal prosecution. That was a lie. I have no hold over you whatever—neither has Smayle."

And Waldo dug the muzzle of his gun more firmly into Bevan's back as a reminder.

Blake warmed towards the Wonder Man. All this was being said for the girl's benefit, so that she should have some plausible explanation of her father's action. And Sir John himself, too, seemed to appreciate that fact, although he was far too bewildered to realise it fully now.

"We'll say good-bye, Blake!" shouted Waldo. "You haven't got me, and you won't get me! This is where Smayle and I make our exit."

And, with a sudden swing, Waldo dragged Vincent Bevan to the door. Waldo cared nothing for the other men, the underlings. He judged that they would bolt, and that, perhaps, would be all for the best. They knew nothing of the secret, for Bevan had never told them. They could never be a menace to June Tracey's happiness.

And the girl now had an explanation, and Waldo could trust Blake and Sir John to amplify that crude story which he, Waldo, had borrowed from Bevan. They would satisfy the girl somehow.

And there remained—Bevan. His silence had to be secured. And there was only one way. Waldo, who was no killer, did not flinch.

"Outside!" he hissed into Bevan's ear.

He swung the door open, and the excited police officer, outside, fairly blundered in.

"Run!" yelled Waldo. "They're after us! It's our only chance, Smayle. We've got to get away."

He succeeded in driving Bevan into a panic, as he had intended. They rushed out down the steps, and Smayle was now in terror of Sexton Blake, for he had not failed to recognise his danger. With Blake alive, he was likely to be arrested on a charge of attempted murder, for Varley would surely squeal.

"Here, get in this car!" snapped Waldo. "Drive—drive like blazes!"

Bevan was in the driving-seat of the M.G. sports car before he could realise it. Waldo made as if to climb in beside him, and then Waldo staggered and fell.

"They've got me!" he gasped. "I'm finished! You get away, Smayle, while there's still a chance."

The engine roared to life, and Vincent Bevan, his mind confused, with terror urging him on, raced the engine with a roar. A moment later the car was leaping down the drive.

Waldo had acted like lightning. He was in the driving-seat of the Grey Panther, and he was there long before Blake could get to the car.

"Look out, Smayle!" yelled Waldo. "Blake's after you!"

And in the same moment the Grey Panther leapt forward. And then Blake had an inkling of the grim and terrible thing which was in Waldo's mind. Waldo did not intend Vincent Bevan to finish that ride alive!

And Bevan himself was stampeded into believing that Blake, in the Grey Panther, was on his track. But it was Rupert Waldo who sat at the wheel of the famous Rolls.

Bevan could drive. Waldo had not expected it, and he was surprised. He had thought that this adventure would end quickly.

The M.G., having reached the end of the drive, turned into the country road at such speed that two wheels left the ground. The engine roared, and the small but powerful engine throbbed on the night air. And in the rear, with its headlights blazing, came the smoothly running, comparatively silent Grey Panther.

Waldo had made his sacrifice cheerfully. He had forever condemned himself in the girl's eyes; but he was a philosopher. The end, he considered, would justify the means. And in any case he had no reputation to lose. He was a crook, and he was doing something which Blake could not possibly do.

Before long they had reached the end of the quiet country road, and were now on the main highway. The road was broader here, and a greater speed could be obtained. Waldo knew that it would only be a matter of minutes now before he came up close behind the little car.

And it was Waldo's deliberate intention to fire at the M.G.'s rear tyres when he got within range. At such a high speed—between seventy and eighty miles an hour—there could be only one result.

If, at odd moments, doubts crept into his mind, he thought of that charming girl and her fair name. And he steeled himself for the thing which had to be done.

There was no other way out.

With Bevan alive, he could talk. And one sentence from him would wreck two lives. Bevan had killed the mother, but he should not kill the child! Waldo, in these grim minutes, felt that he was an instrument of justice.

He trod on the Grey Panther's throttle, and the great racing car surged forward with glorious, unleashed power. The gap was closing up visibly. Waldo was getting nearer and nearer on to the tail of the fleeing M.G.

Bevan, thinking that Blake was at the wheel of the pursuing car, was in a greater panic than ever. He drove madly. Waldo had not given him one second to recover his mental balance. That was the brilliance of the Wonder Man's plan. If Bevan had had even one minute in which to think clearly, he would not have indulged in this crazy flight.

A bend showed ahead, and the M.G., hurtling along at eighty miles an hour, skidded broadside. The tyres shrieked on the road surface. By a miracle Bevan managed to keep control.

But straight ahead there was another bend—sharper. And there was a high brick wall bordering the road. Bevan wrenched at the wheel, a wild scream sounded in his throat.

Crash!

The M.G. hit the wall. The wall, for a space of twenty yards, simply vanished. It seemed to explode. Bricks and debris hurtled in every direction. There came the scream of the Grey Panther's brakes, and it was only Waldo's brilliant driving which saved him from sharing Bevan's fate. Waldo, too, had the advantage, for he had seen the M.G.'s first skid, and he had been able to apply his brakes in time.

He leapt out of the car, ran across to the heap of wreckage, and his nostrils were assailed by the reek of brick dust, petrol fumes, and hot oil.

One flash of the Wonder Man's electric torch was enough.

Vincent Bevan was no more. What remained of him could scarcely be recognised. Providence had stepped in, and had saved Rupert Waldo from using his own hand. What had happened was a real accident. It may be said that Waldo had conspired to cause that accident. But he had shared the same risk.

WHEN Sexton Blake and Sir John Tracey arrived in one of the latter's cars, they found the Grey Panther undamaged. And they found that other thing, amid the pitiful wreckage of the M.G.

"He's dead, Sir John," said Blake quietly. "The other man—Waldo—has evidently escaped."

"But he did not know Bevan's secret!" whispered Sir John, a great light coming into his eyes. "May Heaven be praised! This is the end of my torment. My little girl will never know!"

But Sexton Blake knew. He knew just what Waldo had done, and never had the great detective felt so warmed towards the quixotic Wonder Man. Waldo had cheerfully allied himself with those dirty criminals, and he had damned himself for ever in the girl's eyes—for her sake. It had been the act of a brave man, and a good man.

* * *

Waldo, recovering the gold he had buried, wandered away into the darkness. He felt that it had been a very successful night.

THE END.