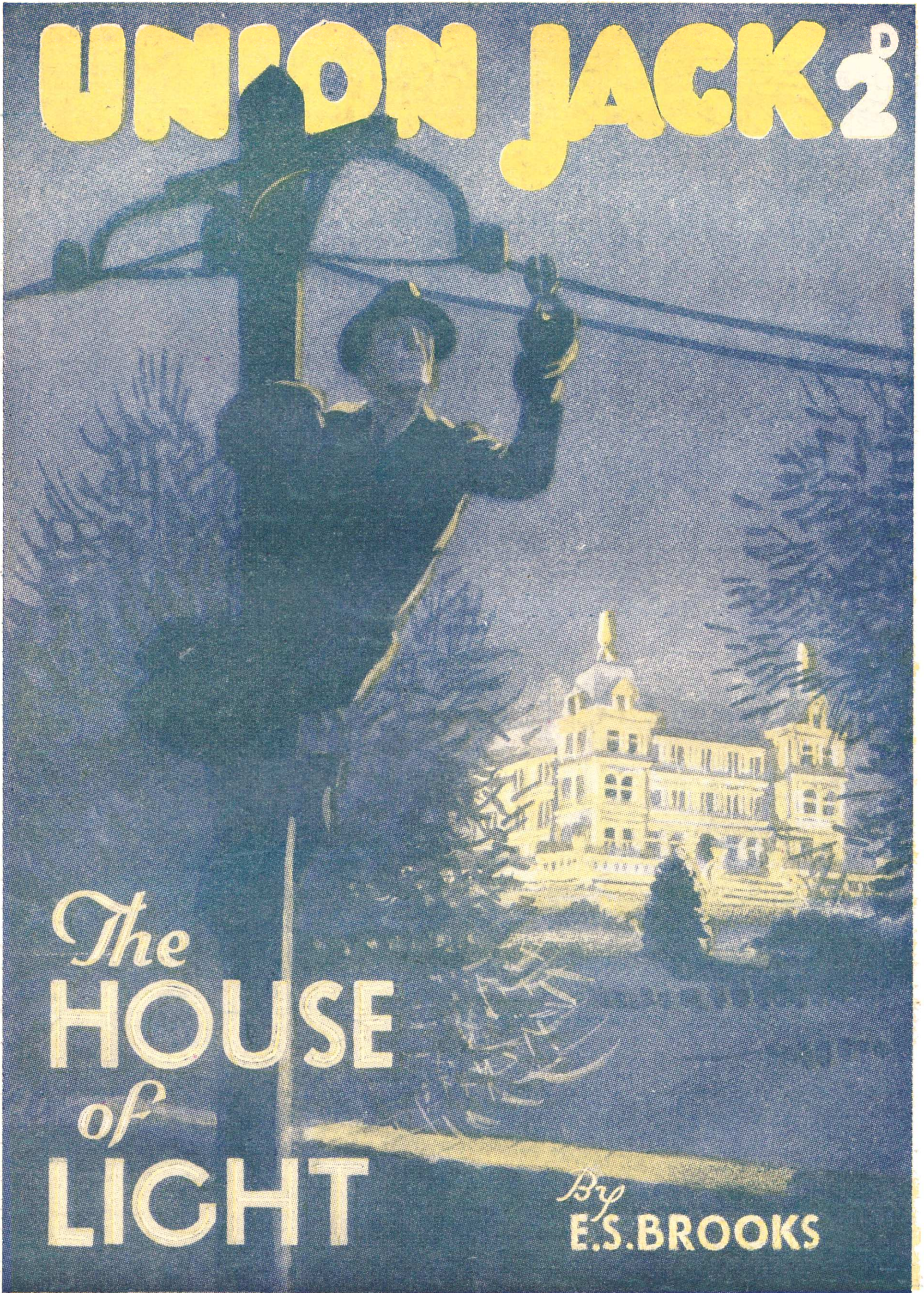


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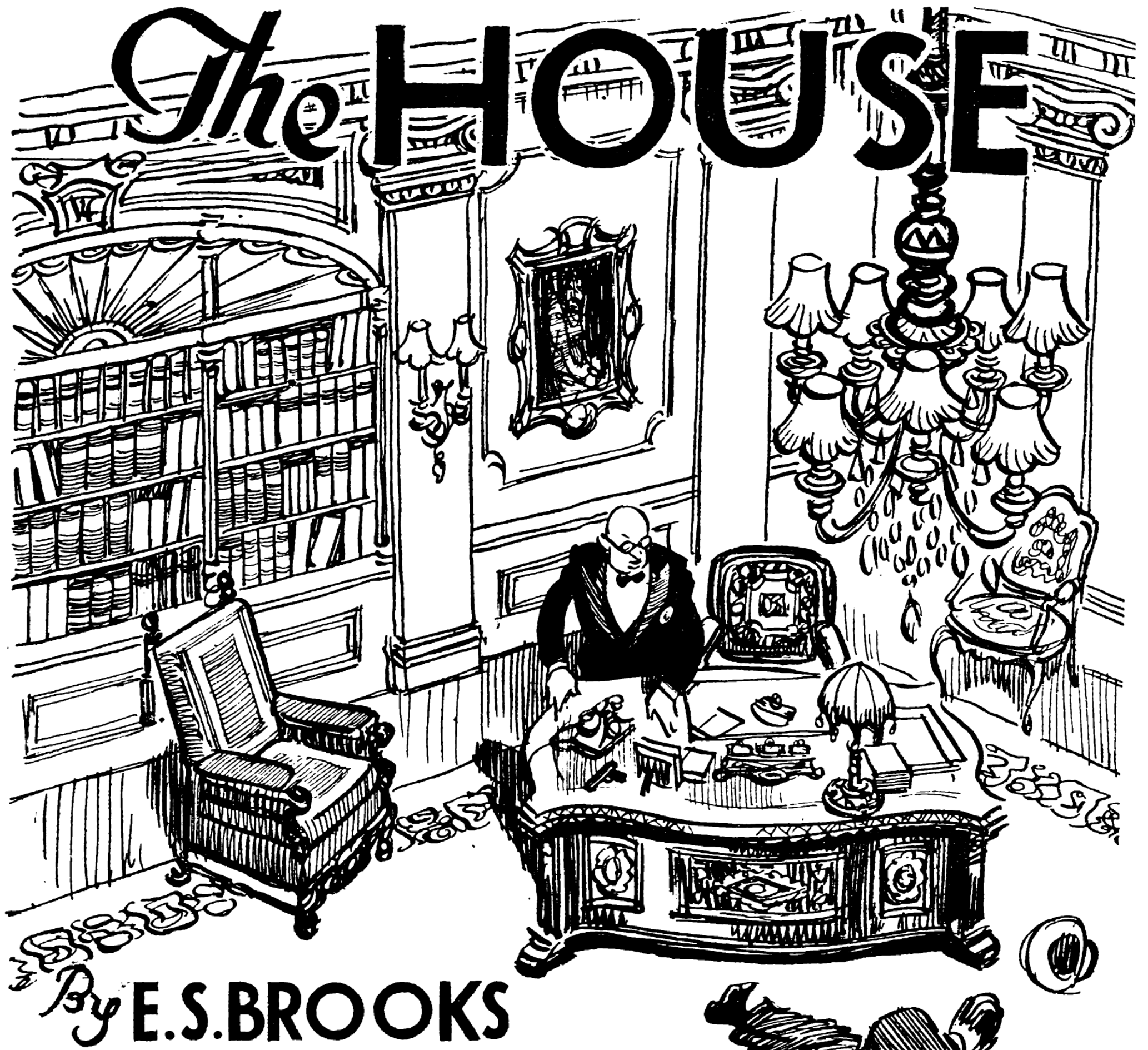
in a long COMPLETE Thrills-and-Adventure Yarn of
Waldo, the Wonder Man.



UNION JACK 2^D

The
HOUSE
of
LIGHT

By
E.S. BROOKS



By **E.S. BROOKS**

The way Waldo treated the two gunmen was a revelation to Mr. van Skyles. One was on the floor screaming with a shattered hand; the other Waldo sent hurtling through the window.

A Complete Story of Sexton Blake and Waldo the Wonder Man.

Chapter 1.

The King of Kingston.

RUPERT WALDO, otherwise known as the Wonder Man, had done many audacious things in his adventurous career; but the most audacious of all, perhaps, was when he installed himself as a salesman in the watch and clock department of Messrs. Belfrage's great West End store.

It is unnecessary to say that Waldo was in no way interested in watches or clocks; and even the jewellery department, which adjoined his own, meant little or nothing to him. But he certainly meant to lay his hands on the famous rubies and emeralds belonging to the Maharajah of Gwalipore.

Mr. Belfrage was an extremely enterprising man, and he had not only arranged for the public display of the fabulous Gwalipore jewels during the forthcoming visit of his Highness to England, but he had advertised the fact for weeks in advance. Waldo did not profess to know much about Indian princes, but it was fairly

common knowledge that the Maharajah of Gwalipore was several kinds of a rogue in his own exalted way.

And Waldo, having decided to relieve the dusky gentleman of certain of his possessions, obtained a job for himself in Belfrage's. His plan was charmingly simple. By the time the "show" came off, he would have cemented himself solidly in the confidence of the various Belfrage department managers; and at the right moment he would help himself to the pick of the maharajah's collection.

As a matter of fact, Waldo was held high in the esteem of his superiors within a week of his appointment. His charming personality, his extraordinary powers of salesmanship, had caused more than one august eye to be turned in his direction, and he was already marked down for rapid promotion.

It was an astonishing fact, but the receipts of the watch and clock department had gone up by leaps and bounds since Waldo had come. People came in to buy a bed-room clock, and when they departed they were the owners of a grandfather clock. Waldo's persuasive



Illustrations by E. R. Parker.

Waldo, most mysterious and muscular of master-crooks, gets a job! An honest job, and as a shop assistant at that. Of course, he had his reasons . . . but the scheme in view didn't work out according to plan. He got sidetracked, and in a way that surprised him no less than it will surprise you. Here's a yarn for those jaded with commonplaces! Let's get down to it!

powers were almost too good to be true. He was particularly successful with the ladies.

He had come with the very finest of references. He knew they were good, because he wrote them himself. Under the name of Arthur Weston he purported to be the son of a West of England clergyman, and he was so certain of his ground that he would have welcomed even closer inquiries—if only to prove how thoroughly he had paved the way.

He had been at Belfrage's for a month, and he was thoroughly enjoying the experience. He was on very friendly terms with his department chief, and his relations with the manager of the jewellery department

were such that they occasionally called one another "old man." This, of course, out of business hours. Mr. Simpson, of the jewellery, was a rather stiff and formal individual. But he was apt to unbend in the restaurant, or on those occasions when he and Waldo, leaving for home at the same time, dropped into a neighbouring hostelry for a quick one.

There were so many friendly people in Belfrage's that Waldo began to look forward with a tinge of regret to his coming resignation. He would miss all these excellent people. Incidentally, they would miss him—to say nothing of the maharajah's jewels. And it is quite safe

to say that nine out of ten of Waldo's new acquaintances would refuse to believe that he had had anything to do with the robbery.

Everything was ready. He had a suburban villa not only furnished, but a housekeeper and a maidservant and a pageboy were installed. Here he was known as Alan Derwent, and this elusive Mr. Derwent always came home for week-ends. In just the same way Mr. Weston was never at his lodgings for week-ends. At the right moment Mr. Weston would vanish altogether, and Mr. Derwent would have finished various business transactions and would remain home permanently.

Waldo believed in doing things thoroughly. And now that the critical hour was approaching he almost regretted his elaborate preparations. It would mean the end of his present life, which he had come to think of as quite good fun.

It was particularly enjoyable to see the Belfrage detectives, most of them ex-C.I.D. men, strolling about the store on the lookout for evildoers; it was even more enjoyable to chat with these good fellows. One and all, they regarded Mr. Weston as "one of the best." And yet Waldo's disguise was negligible. He looked, perhaps, a little younger than his actual years, but he had taken no steps to radically change the facial characteristics that were on file at Scotland Yard.

Waldo did not believe in disguise. Anything but the very finest was far more dangerous than none at all, and that only for short periods. He knew perfectly well that nine film stars out of ten, familiar to the multitude, walking down Piccadilly, would be unrecognised. Even such a famous face as that of Mr. Harold Lloyd is quite different in the flesh from its screen appearance.

THUS matters stood on a certain misty, wintry night within a few days of the proposed exhibition of the Gwalipore collection. The great store was closed, and the assistants in their hundreds were hurrying away to buses and tubes. Waldo himself had just clocked out, and, overcoated and hatted, he was on his way out, walking past "the jewellery" to the exit.

"Tavis Manor?" somebody was saying. "That's over at Kingston, isn't it, sir?"

"You know perfectly well, Bryant, that it's over at Kingston," came the severe tones of Mr. Simpson, of the jewellery department. "I should think everybody knows that Mr. van Skyler lives at Kingston. There's been enough in the newspapers about him lately, in all conscience!"

Waldo paused—not because he was thinking of inviting Mr. Simpson to join him in the now familiar "quick one," but because the name of Mr. Croxley van Skyler intrigued him. It was perfectly true that the name of this American millionaire had been in the newspapers a great deal of late.

Mr. van Skyler and his House of Gold had been putting bread-and-butter into the mouths of journalists for months. What the journalists

did not actually know, they invented. And Waldo, being in the profession he was, was even more interested than the journalists. He had often toyed with the thought of paying Mr. Croxley van Skyler a visit.

"It's no good making excuses, Bryant," said Mr. Simpson impatiently. "These goods have got to be delivered this evening. We can't afford to offend a man like Mr. van Skyler. He's worth millions."

"Well, it's a bit thick, sir," said Bryant, who, as Waldo knew, was an assistant of the jewellery department. "It's pretty nearly seven o'clock now, and I've got the tickets for the show in my pocket, and my fiancée is waiting at the Piccadilly Circus tube station—"

"Confound it, Bryant, business is of more importance than your theatre-going!" interrupted the manager. "This thing cropped up suddenly. The goods have got to be delivered this evening, and you don't expect me to take them myself, do you? If you want to earn promotion, young man, you'll have to show more interest in your work."

Waldo thought it time to butt in.

"I wonder if I could be of any help?" he asked, with his usual charming manner. "Couldn't help hearing what you were saying, Mr. Simpson. It so happens that I am



going out to Kingston this evening. Right away, in fact, and if there's anything I can do—"

"I say, Mr. Weston, that's awfully sporting of you!" said Bryant eagerly.

He looked at his chief with hope.

"Well, I don't know—" began Mr. Simpson dubiously.

"Come along!" interrupted Waldo, giving Mr. Simpson a playful dig. "You never liked disappointing your own fiancée, did you? Or have you forgotten those days? It's no trouble to me, and if you'll just tell me Van Skyler's requirements—"

"H'm! Yes—to be sure!" said Mr. Simpson, with a start. "All right, Bryant; you can go. But don't thank me—thank Weston here. And the next time I want you to do something like this, please don't be so ungracious about it. That's not the way to get on."

Bryant gave Waldo's arm a warm pressure and hurried away. And Mr. Simpson mused. For some little time he had been very jealous of the watch

and clock department; he had even secretly attempted to get Waldo transferred—and had been told that he must wait at least three months. It suddenly struck him that here was a chance to prove to his superiors that he had been right from the first. If Waldo could wangle a whacking big order from Van Skyler, it would be a feather in his—Simpson's—cap.

"Look here, Weston, old man, it's this way," said Mr. Simpson confidentially. "This isn't a parcel that can be trusted to the ordinary delivery. There's ten thousand pounds' worth of jewellery in this attaché-case, and Van Skyler is a new customer. We want to please him."

"I say!" ejaculated Waldo uncomfortably.

"What's the matter?"

"I didn't know I was to walk about with a small fortune," protested Waldo. "I'm not sure that you ought to give me the responsibility. I mean, I don't belong to your department—"

"That's just it," put in Mr. Simpson. "You don't—but I want you to. I've mentioned this matter to you before, Weston. I'd like to help you. In the jewellery department you'll have much better opportunities."

"I've thought the same thing myself," admitted Waldo.

"And Van Skyler is an unknown quantity—he may buy all this jewellery or he may buy nothing," continued the enterprising Mr. Simpson. "Now, you're a good salesman. If you can get hold of this American and talk to him as you talk to those infernal watch and clock customers, you'll do well. It might mean a big contract. Van Skyler doesn't do things like other men. They say that his house is full of gold, and that even the bath-room taps have got jewelled knobs on. If we can get in with a man like that, we're on a good thing. And don't forget I'm in with you in this."

Poor Mr. Simpson hadn't the faintest idea of what he was doing. Waldo liked him, and his reluctance to accept the commission—now that he knew what it actually meant—was caused by a real feeling of friendship. He did not want to get Mr. Simpson into trouble. Still, there was little chance of that. Quite the contrary. Waldo, in fact, would put over a good stroke of business. He had made up his mind to.

The thing that really mattered, from his own point of view, was that he had here a passport into the Croxley van Skyler mansion. And once in, he could use his eyes. It was always of advantage to give a possible crib the once-over in advance. Yes, Belfrage's ten thousand pounds' worth would be safe enough with him; but Van Skyler's riches—well, that was another story!

SO Rupert Waldo set off for the House of Gold.

The firm provided him with a taxicab, and his trip out to Kingston, therefore, was comfortable enough. During the journey Waldo's thoughts were busy. One thought

which struck him was the utter incongruity of this situation—that he, a much-wanted crook, should be entrusted with ten thousand pounds' worth of jewellery to take to a millionaire's home! A lesser man might have been tempted to make off with that prize. But Rupert Waldo had no such thought. To him, the prize was trivial. Furthermore, it would be a dirty trick on Simpson. And Waldo never played dirty.

But he was an opportunist. He was out for the Gwalipore collection; but if Van Skyler offered better opportunities, he would cheerfully abandon his original object.

And he was certainly attracted by this multi-millionaire who had become known as the "King of Kingston."

Mr. Croxley van Skyler was an original man—and bold. He had come to England with his millions, saying he had publicly renounced America, the country of his birth, as a land of crooks and graft and kidnapers. Mr. van Skyler had made no bones about it; he had held a great reception of London newspapermen, and he had told them, in the plainest of plain language, that America was not the much-boasted, "God's own country," but just the opposite. In Mr. van Skyler's opinion, America was—hell!

In England, he declared, he would be safe. He went even further, and stated it as his opinion that England was the only safe country in the world. He had purchased Tavis Manor from the impecunious Marquis of Tavis, and he had transformed it into a palace of wonder.

He had, in fact, gone to extravagant lengths of lavishness in order to prove just how safe England was. It was a sort of gesture to the crooks of his own country. Here, in peaceful Kingston, he could flaunt his wealth with impunity.

But although Mr. van Skyler was eccentric, he wasn't quite mad.

He had turned Tavis Manor into a house of gold, but he provided himself with ample protection. The story went that the old mansion was a veritable fortress. Woe betide any unauthorised person who attempted to trespass upon that property!

It was more difficult to get into Tavis Manor than Buckingham Palace itself. Hence Waldo's secret satisfaction upon obtaining this unexpected passport into the millionaire's home. For, as the accredited representative of Belfrage's, he would be admitted without question. Moreover, he was expected.

Yes, it was a golden opportunity.

During this visit he could get the lie of the land, and he would store the knowledge away in his head. He would do a good stroke of business for Mr. Simpson, and, later, he would lift the maharajah's jewels. When, in due course, he favoured Mr. van Skyler with his attentions, Simpson would be in no way blamed. Waldo hummed a little tune. The future seemed very promising.

WALDO was highly entertained when he reached his destination. He had expected something novel, but he found something fantastic.

The Tavis Manor estate was not situated actually in Kingston, but on the outskirts, some distance out, in a quiet, wooded countryside, and reached only by a lonely private road.

It was at the end of this private road that the estate actually began. Waldo was aware that the taxi had stopped in front of an imposing gate-



way. The gates themselves, of gleaming gold—or, at least, gilded with gold-leaf—were closed, and they were flanked on either side by high stone pillars. And from the top of each pillar flared a great torch of flickering flame, casting a lurid and powerful light for some distance.

Standing on duty outside the gate were two impressive figures. They wore uniforms of scarlet, and only differed from real soldiers in that they carried no weapons—at least, no visible weapons.

"Well, well!" murmured Waldo.

He had read of Mr. Croxley van Skyler's "Personal Estate Militia," but he hadn't believed it. It seemed that it wasn't a journalistic invention, however. The Estate Militia really existed.

"Your name, sir, and your business?"

One of the taxi doors had been opened, and a man in red uniform was looking at Waldo with polite inquiry—and at the same time illuminating him with the powerful light from an outsize electric torch.

"What are you going to do next—search me for hidden weapons?" asked Waldo amusedly. "Anything to oblige you, colonel! My name is Weston, and I come with baubles for his majesty from Belfrage's store."

"You are expected, Mr. Weston," said the other.

"I'm glad to hear that," said Waldo. "Mr. Simpson evidently phoned up and gave my name. That's just as well—or I might have been thrown into a dungeon, or something. In case it may interest you, I was born in Somersetshire, of humble but honest parents. As a child I was reputed to be unusually precocious."

"I guess we deserve to be kidded, sir," said the man in uniform, with a

grin. "But Mr. van Skyler is fond of show. I'm only doing my job."

"Sorry," smiled Waldo. "Didn't mean to hurt your feelings, old man. What's the next item? Do you say 'Pass, friend,' and then let me drive on?"

By this time the great gates had been opened, and the taxi-driver, grinning, was driving in. But no sooner had the cab got within the gates than four motor-cycles, each ridden by a man in uniform, fell into pace beside it—two on either side.

"So we get an escort, too!" chuckled Waldo. "Good glory! How these Americans love show!"

He was vastly amused. All the motor-cycles were provided with powerful searchlights, and at intervals, as the taxicab was escorted up the well-kept drive, Waldo caught glimpses of other uniformed figures, evidently on duty. This place seemed to be a cross between the Palace of Versailles and the Wembley Exhibition.

The manor house itself blazed with light. It was a fine old edifice, with two great towers. And from each tower flared an enormous torch—big brothers of the torches at the gateway.

The front of the mansion itself was floodlit—and so cunningly that the source of the lighting could not be discovered. The wide steps, however, were dazzling with light. When Waldo stepped from the cab he exchanged glances with the driver.

"Gaw!" said the latter. "I've heard of this place, gov'nor, but it's the first time I've seen it. Fair takes your breath away, don't it?"

"Well, I've still some left—and I shall probably need it," replied Waldo dryly. "You'd better wait for me."

"Right you are, sir."

Waldo mounted the steps, and he noted that other uniformed figures were standing on duty. Great doors opened as he reached the top. Powdered flunkies met him in the hall. Never had Waldo seen such a glittering, dazzling hall.

Everything was sumptuous. It was a palace of wonder. The floor and the walls and the great staircase—all were of gleaming marble. The banisters appeared to be made of solid gold—and Waldo was quite prepared to believe that they were of solid gold. No Eastern prince, with all his exotic ideas of splendour, could have rivalled this display.

"Will you please follow me, Mr. Weston?" said a gorgeous individual.

He struck Waldo as something between a Lord Chamberlain and a picture theatre attendant. He was evidently a superior servant of some kind, for his manner was extremely deferential. Waldo felt that he was Somebody. Being treated like this gave him rather a nice feeling.

"Anything you say, Admiral," he replied genially. "I'm entirely in your hands."

They went across the hall, and great doors swung ponderously open to admit them into a reception-room as palatial, in its own way, as the hall. Waldo's feet sank deeply into the

carpet, and his eyes were granted a rare feast of soft divans and other comfort-giving pieces of furniture. A great fire crackled in the grate, and hidden electric lights gleamed everywhere. Various fittings about the room shone with the lustre of pure gold.

"If you will wait, Mr. Weston, I will acquaint the master of your arrival," said the Lord Chamberlain.

"Don't hurry back!" said Waldo. "It will take me at least five minutes to recover my breath."

A smile half-flickered across the other's face, but he made no comment. Bowing slightly, he left the room by the way he had come, and the astonished Wonder Man was left alone.

"Well!" he exclaimed, slowly revolving and taking in the sights.

His wildest expectations were exceeded. This place would indeed call for every atom of his renowned skill and daring. This was a crib of cribs to crack. Any burglar who could break this place wide open, and get away, would rank as No. 1 of his profession.

"I'm glad I came!" mused Waldo contentedly.

HE had already seen much more than he allowed the servants to realise. Those ultra-keen eyes of his had taken in many little details; he had stored angles, doorways, distances—he had docketed them away in his brain for future use.

Waldo looked across the room alertly. There had been some pistol-like reports which puzzled him. Immediately following those ominous and unexpected reports came the curt sound of men's voices. Just a murmur—nothing more!

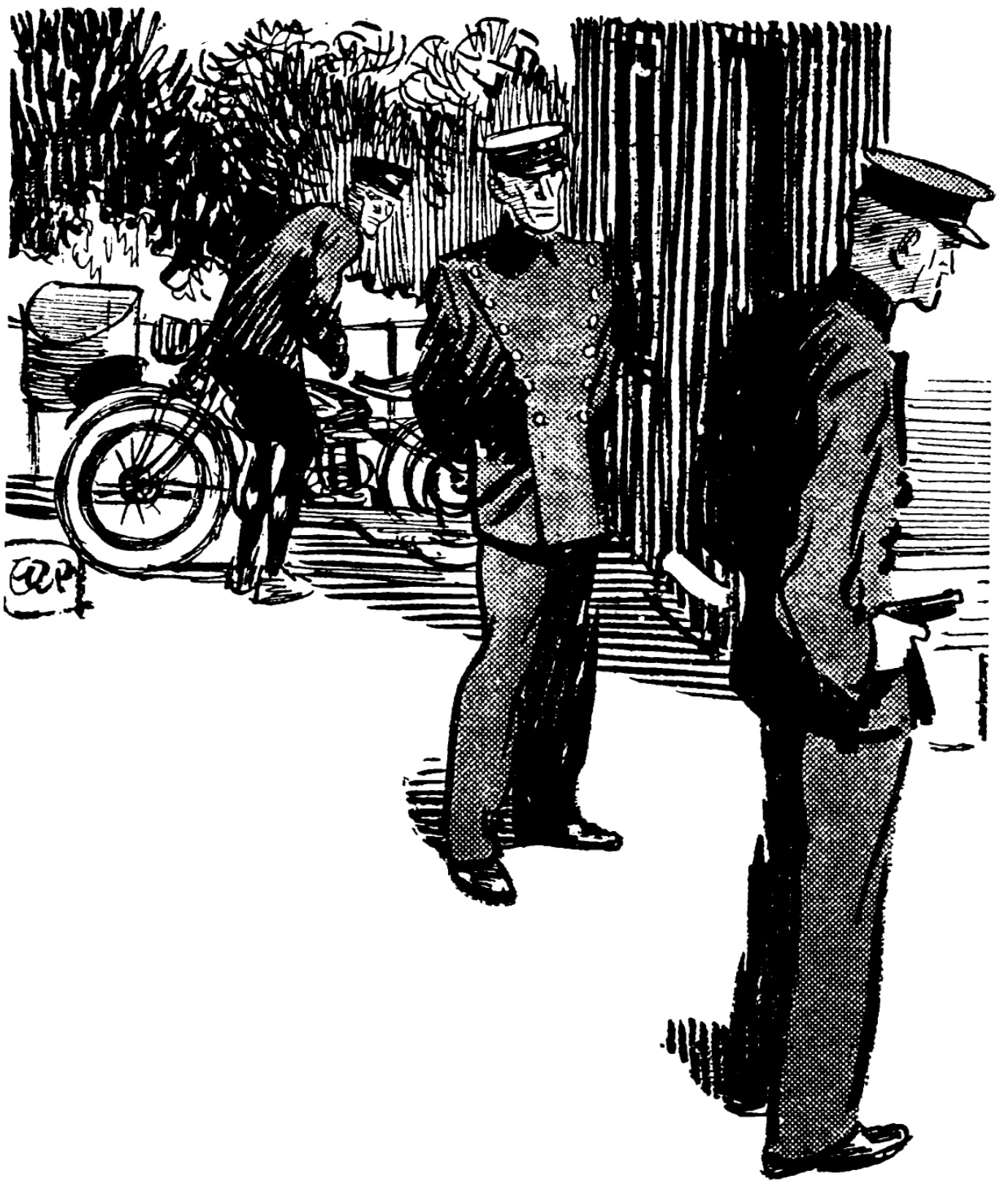
Like a panther Waldo leapt over the yielding carpet. He stood near an ornate door—from the other side of which the shots had come.

"This is where you go out, you rat!" said a voice.

And Waldo knew exactly where "out" was. There was no mistaking the menace in that voice. And it seemed to Waldo that action was required.

He grasped the door handle, turned it, and swung the door open. The picture in front of him was not totally unexpected—after the plain hint he had already had.

The room was evidently a private library—big, imposing, book-lined, and as glaringly ornate as anything else Waldo had seen. Behind an immense figured-walnut desk, which shone like glass, sat a heavily built man in scrupulous evening dress. His hands were raised above his head, and his heavy, clean-shaven face was the colour of putty. His eyes, behind their horn-rimmed spectacles, were aflame with fear. But in spite of these handicaps, he was instantly recognisable to Waldo as Mr. Croxley van Skyler. The multi-millionaire's photograph had been in every illustrated newspaper for months—



although, of late, the nine-days' wonder of his ostentation and activities had been waning.

On the other side of the desk, standing sideways to Waldo, were two other men. They looked gentlemanly, for they were well-dressed and well-groomed; but Waldo knew the type. American gunmen, or he had never seen any. And they both held big automatics. A third automatic was lying on the desk, beyond Van Skyler's reach; and the air was pungent with cordite fumes. Clearly, Van Skyler had fired—and had missed.

"Forgive me for butting - in!" said Waldo crisply.

Mr. van Skyler had seen a few quick things in his life, but the way in which Waldo leapt from the doorway towards those two gunmen was a revelation. Mr. van Skyler really only saw a blur.

"These are nasty things to play with," said Waldo gently.

With a simultaneous movement, he hooked a foot round the first man's ankle, and yanked; and he grabbed the second man's gun. It was an effective move, for although the first man fired, he had been put off his balance, and the bullet went into the ceiling. Waldo already had the second man's gun. And now he turned, bent down, and was just in time to see the fallen man taking aim, on his back, at Van Skyler.

Crack!

But it was Waldo's gun—or the one he had just borrowed—which spoke first. The fellow on the floor screamed in agony, and his weapon went rocketing out of his shattered hand. In one movement Waldo spun round, and picked up the other man. The millionaire had already risen to his feet, his face now flushed.

He saw Waldo lift the man over his head, swing him round, and send him hurtling through the open window. And it was at that moment that another gun spoke—from outside. The whine of the bullet sounded like a scream in that confined atmosphere. There came a sickening "plup!"—and Rupert Waldo, alias Mr. Arthur Weston, sagged to the thick carpet, and on the side of his forehead there was a nasty red smear.

Chapter 2.

"Known as Waldo."

MR. MORTIMER BELFRAGE was quite calm, but worried. "The facts are simple enough, Mr. Blake," he said, bending forward over his desk, and clasping his hands. "In fact, they're too simple. I can't help having a feeling there's something deeper behind it. And that's the real reason why I asked you to come."



Waldo attempted to pass the guards. "Sorry, sir. Nothing doing!" said one of them grimly. "My orders are to prevent you from leaving these grounds."

"To tell you the truth, I was wondering," said Sexton Blake. "For on the face of it, this is essentially a job for the official police."

The great detective had arrived some minutes earlier, and he only knew the bare facts. Mr. Belfrage had rung him up personally, whilst he and Finker had been at breakfast; and as Belfrage's was only a few minutes walk from Baker Street, Blake was in the great man's office within ten minutes.

"The official police, in the person of Chief Inspector Lennard, of the Yard, seem certain that Weston bolted," said Mr. Belfrage. "Anyhow, there's a warrant out for his arrest. The police have been going pretty thoroughly into his credentials, too."

"Weston is the assistant who had charge of the jewels?"

"Yes. And that's the unfortunate part of it," said Mr. Belfrage. "You see, Weston is a comparatively new employee, and he really belongs to the watch and clock department."

That's one of the suspicious circumstances. I've had Mr. Simpson, of the jewellery department, on the mat this morning—and the poor fellow's distress quite upset me. I don't believe for a minute that he's to blame for all this—but he's got to take the responsibility. That's one of the rules of my firm."

"In what way did Simpson do wrong?"

"It seems that the man who was to have taken the parcel of jewels to Van Skyler pleaded an appointment, and Simpson weakly permitted Weston to take his place," replied the store owner. "We have had ample proof that Weston actually arrived at Tavis Manor. So he faithfully accomplished his mission that far. When we heard nothing from him—either last night or this morning—we naturally made inquiries. My first step was to ring up Van Skyler."

"With what result?"

"I was fortunate enough to speak to Van Skyler himself," replied Mr. Belfrage. "Weston arrived, it seems, at the expected time, and Van Skyler went over the various jewels, but did not care for the selection. In fact, he rejected them all, and told Weston to report accordingly. Weston left Tavis Manor within half an hour—and we have proof of that, because the police have questioned the taxi-driver. So it seems

that Weston was seized by a sudden temptation on the way home."

"You mean, he never got home?"

"The taxi-man says that Weston instructed him to drive back to the store. And I've no doubt that Weston's idea, at that time, was to give the attache-case, with its valuable contents, into the care of our strong-room," replied Mr. Belfrage. "He knew that he could gain access to it up till nine o'clock. But when the taxi arrived here, it was empty. Weston had disappeared en route!"

"H'm! It certainly looks clear enough!" agreed Blake.

"The taxi-man, of course, knew nothing of the real facts," continued Mr. Belfrage. "He did not know that Weston had been carrying ten thousand pounds' worth of jewellery. So when he found his fare gone, he assumed that he had been bilked. In the cab he found Weston's gloves and hat and the empty attache-case. Like a fool, he did not report the matter to the police last night, but merely came round to the store this morning to collect his fare. Naturally, his story, when it reached the ears of Mr. Simpson, nearly gave that gentleman heart failure. He came rushing to me with the whole tale. I at once rang up Scotland Yard, and Inspector Lennard was soon here."

"And why do you think I can do more than the police?" asked Blake curiously.

"Because I'm not satisfied that this case is as straightforward as it looks," replied Mr. Belfrage, with characteristic bluntness. "We know that Weston arrived at Tavis Manor; we know that he came to us with the finest credentials; and since he has been with us he has done splendidly. I've met the man personally, and I like him. Keen, active, virile young fellow, with a clear, honest eye. The police immediately say: 'He's bolted with the goods.' But I like to give the man the benefit of the doubt. I can't help thinking that something happened to him on the way home—that he was attacked in some way. In a word, I'm on Weston's side. I don't believe he did this. And that's why I want you to look into the matter. The police are too infernally self-satisfied. They're too apt to jump to the obvious conclusion—and then stick hard and fast to that trail!"

"I'm inclined to agree with you, Mr. Belfrage," said Blake slowly. "At first I thought this was just the ordinary case of a man tempted and falling. It seemed all the more likely when you told me that Weston actually works in another department. Such a man would be more likely to succumb. But why did he leave his hat and gloves in the cab?"

"Exactly," said Mr. Belfrage. "That's the point which I mentioned to the inspector. Why didn't Weston do the job thoroughly while he was about it? There was nothing to prevent him leaving the cab with his hat, gloves, attache-case, and all. Yet he leaves these obvious clues!"

A knock sounded on the door, and Mr. Simpson was admitted. He was accompanied by Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard, of the Yard.

"SURELY not, Blake!" said the inspector, in surprise. "This isn't a case for you. Far too ordinary."

"Mr. Belfrage disagrees with you, Lennard," said Blake dryly. "He is not at all sure that Weston disappeared willingly."

"I'm glad you've said that, sir!" exclaimed Mr. Simpson, almost running to the desk. "I accept full responsibility for sending Weston, but I won't have this man saying that Weston forced himself upon me!"

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Simpson," said the store-owner.

"I mean, sir, that Mr. Lennard has been trying to make me say that Weston overheard me talking to Bryant, and forced me to give him the commission," replied the jewellery chief excitedly. "He as good as told me that I was an accessory!"

"Now, now, Mr. Simpson," said Lennard good-naturedly, "there's no need for you to get angry! And there's no need for you to exaggerate, either! You can't deny that Weston, who has nothing whatever to do with your department, himself made the suggestion that he should carry that parcel of jewels to Tavis Manor."

"But it was only to help Bryant."

"That's your opinion," broke in Lennard. "I prefer to believe that Weston saw his chance to nab the goods and bolt!"

"Then why didn't he bolt on the outward journey, inspector?" asked Mr. Belfrage.

Lennard shrugged.

"Perhaps his nerve failed him," he replied. "And before he could make up his mind to jump out of the cab, he got to his destination. Perhaps the cab didn't slow up sufficiently for him to take the chance."

"That won't hold water," put in Blake. "Weston must have had plenty

of opportunities on the outward journey. And don't forget that there was a very big possibility of Van Skyler keeping the whole consignment."

"Precisely," said Mr. Belfrage, nodding. "That's a good point, Mr. Blake. What have you to say to that, inspector? If Weston meant to steal those jewels, why did he wait until the return journey? That's the fact you're up against."

"Perhaps he didn't think of stealing them until he was on his way back," replied the inspector, somewhat nettled.

"Oh!" exclaimed Mr. Simpson, in triumph. "So that's it! Then what becomes of your theory that Weston deliberately forced himself on me so that he could run away with the jewellery? You're now saying that the idea did not occur to him until he was on his way back."

Blake inwardly smiled at Lennard's discomfiture.

"Well, it's no good going on like this," growled Lennard. "You can't get away from the fact that Weston is missing—with the stuff. After all the inquiries I've made this morning it's pretty evident to me that Weston half-hypnotised everybody he came in contact with. It's the same story, everywhere I go. 'Charming fellow'—'unthinkable that Weston could have done anything wrong'—'the most likeable man in the store.' I always distrust these charming and likeable fellows. They're generally the most dangerous. Show me the confidence man who isn't charming and likeable! It's their stock-in-trade."

Before anybody could make any comment, the telephone-bell rang. Mr. Belfrage took the call, but immediately handed the instrument to Lennard.

"The Yard wants you," he said briefly.

And as Lennard listened, his expression changed.

"Well, gentleman, so much for your charming Mr. Weston," he said, when he had hung up. "Our people have been going into the matter of those references; they've been looking up Weston's lodgings, and a few other things."

"What of it?" asked Mr. Belfrage sharply. "I went into Weston's references myself. At least, I employ responsible men who do that work for me. And Weston's references were as good as any I've ever had."

"I'm not saying anything against your system, Mr. Belfrage," said Lennard. "You inquired into the references, and they were all right. But we've gone farther back than that. We have made deeper inquiries, and we find that the references were forged. You made your inquiries through certain channels, but those channels were prepared in readiness."

"I don't know what you mean," said Mr. Belfrage impatiently. "Weston came to us from Smithenson's, of Bristol—one of the biggest firms in the west. And in answer to our inquiry, Smithenson's told us that Weston had been working for them for five years, and that he was one of the best men they had ever employed—and he was only coming to London because he wanted to advance himself. They were very sorry to lose him."

"Unfortunately, we find, on probing this matter, that the Mr. Arthur Weston who worked for Smithenson's is now in Berlin," replied Lennard calmly. "The man who came here was not Weston at all. He knew that Weston was going to Germany, and he took advantage of the fact. Clear as daylight. The reference looked good, but it was rotten."

"This certainly puts a different complexion on it," admitted Mr. Belfrage, frowning. "Of course, we take every precaution we can—but Weston, after all, was only employed as an assistant in the watch and clock department. We should have been much more careful with a man for the jewellery department."

"But the watch and clock department is next to the jewellery," said Lennard. "I'm telling you, Mr. Belfrage, that this man deliberately obtained a job in your store so that he could lift something worth while when the first opportunity presented itself. And if he is known to us at Scotland Yard, we will soon find his pedigree. There were some very good finger-prints on the attache-case, and our records department and our fingerprint department are going into the matter—"

Again the phone rang; again it was for Lennard.

"WHAT!" he yelled incredulously.

And this time his eyes blazed.

"What did I tell you?" he demanded, turning from the instrument. "Do you know who that man was, Mr. Belfrage?"

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"You'll oblige me, inspector, by gloating elsewhere," said Mr. Belfrage curtly. "I only know the man as Weston, so please dispense with all this melodramatic nonsense."

Lennard went rather red.

"Sorry, Mr. Belfrage," he apologised. "But I couldn't help myself. The man we are after is known as Waldo."

"Nonsense," said Blake sharply.

"Finger-prints don't lie," retorted the inspector. "And the finger-prints on that attache-case are Waldo's. It was he who pulled this job. And all the rest of it is clear enough."

"This is a facer," admitted Mr. Belfrage. "You mean, of course, the fellow they call the Wonder Man?"

"It's impossible," said Mr. Simpson agitatedly. "Why, I've never met a more likeable——"

He hesitated as he saw Lennard's twinkling eye on him.

"Both Mr. Blake and I agree with you," said Lennard dryly. "That's just the point. It explains everything. Waldo is charming and likeable. Confound the fellow, he's one of the nicest chaps I've ever met! He could make himself pleasant to a hyæna!"

"But Waldo wouldn't run off with ten thousand pounds' worth of jewels," said Blake quietly. "Neither would Waldo leave an attache-case, plastered with his own finger-prints, behind in the cab."

"But he did!" persisted Lennard.

"Aren't you jumping to conclusions, old man?" went on Blake. "You may have found Waldo's finger-prints on the attache-case. But it doesn't prove anything beyond the fact that Waldo has handled that attache-case. What evidence have you that Waldo and Weston are one and the same?"

"Don't you think they're one and the same?" demanded Lennard, giving Blake a hard look.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I do," confessed Blake. "Weston's genial personality—his description, his self-possession—everything points to the fact that he may be Waldo. But I believe that Waldo was after bigger game—that he undertook that trip to Kingston out of pure good-heartedness. Or perhaps he was curious to get into Van Skyler's extraordinary home. I don't believe that Waldo would have deliberately played a low-down trick on Mr. Simpson."

"Then what's become of him—and the jewels?" asked Lennard sceptically.

"That's for us to find out," replied Blake. "Hang it, Lennard, you know Waldo almost as well as I do. He's not a cheap crook. He wouldn't be fool enough to leave such obvious clues in the taxi. Neither would he go to all the trouble of getting himself established in this great store for the sake of such a paltry prize."

"Paltry!" repeated Mr. Belfrage. "After all, Mr. Blake, ten thousand pounds' worth of jewels——"

"Are hardly worth more than one thousand pounds to the thief," interjected Blake. "He would be lucky,

indeed, to net a clear thousand, after getting rid of the stuff. No, Waldo wouldn't do a thing like that."

"You spoke of bigger game?" hinted Lennard.

"Of course. What about the Gwalipore collection?"

"Ye gods and little fishes!" ejaculated Lennard, with a jump. "I believe you've got it, Blake! It fits. Those jewels are to be exhibited soon, aren't they, Mr. Belfrage?"

Mr. Belfrage was looking startled.

"Why, yes—next week," he replied. "But you don't think——"

"What a chump I was not to jump to it before," said Lennard, exasperated. "Waldo gets in here with a fake reference; he establishes himself solidly months in advance. He's waiting to grab the Gwalipore collection when it is put on exhibition."

"And he disappears with a few ordinary jewels, and leaves definite clues of his real identity behind him," said Blake. "It doesn't tally, Lennard. It's not Waldo at all. He's smarter than that. May I suggest that we all keep this entirely to ourselves?" he added, looking round.

"What do you mean, Mr. Blake?" asked Mr. Belfrage.

"Well, I think it would be a mistake to let the general public know that Waldo is mixed up in this mystery," replied Blake. "The newspapers would make a first-class sensation out of it, whereas if it is only known that an obscure assistant has disappeared, there'll be practically no publicity at all."

"And we can work in peace," nodded Lennard. "Mr. Blake's right, sir. Far better for us to keep this under our hats. Hope you'll help us all you can."

A little later, when Lennard and Blake happened to be alone for a minute, the chief inspector looked at Blake inquiringly.

"What's the idea?" he asked.

"I'm inclined to believe that our old friend Waldo is in trouble," replied Blake carefully.

"But why were you so anxious to keep Waldo's name out of the papers?"

"Because I have an idea that the publication of Arthur Weston's real identity would land Waldo into even greater trouble," said Blake, looking the inspector straight in the eye.

"You're a mysterious blighter!" grumbled Lennard. "Do you mean that Waldo is in danger of—death?"

"Perhaps."

"But I don't get you," said Lennard, staring.

"No?" smiled Blake, his eyes twinkling. "Yet it ought to be fairly obvious to an officer of your intelligence. Think it over, Lennard!"

And he left the chief inspector writhing.

Chapter 3.

By the Short Hairs.

THERE was a theory drifting about in Sexton Blake's mind; but it was vague, elusive. He had told Lennard to think it over, but, as a matter of fact, he had not yet

thought it over for himself. He wanted to get hold of a few more facts before he settled himself down to a good, honest, concentrated think.

When Blake had arrived at Belfrage's, his interest had been lukewarm. He had fully expected that he would find it necessary to make a polite apology to Mr. Belfrage, and to retire from the case.

But now his interest was at fever heat. The very knowledge that Rupert Waldo was mixed up in the case aroused Blake's keenest and liveliest instincts. He didn't need to think over the known facts. He dismissed the theory that Waldo had deliberately bolted with the jewels which Mr. Croxley van Skyler had rejected. It was incredible. For if Waldo had meant to steal those jewels, he would never have gone to Tavis Manor at all.

And here was the starting point of Blake's elusive theory.

Waldo had gone to Tavis Manor. There was no doubt of that at all. It was equally clear—to Blake—that Waldo had meant to act as a jewellery salesman. He was after the Gwalipore collection. That fact stood out like a beacon. Perhaps he had offered to go to Kingston because he was naturally interested in the Van Skyler mansion.

Guesswork, perhaps; but nothing else was possible at this stage, and the facts easily fitted his probabilities.

But why had he disappeared from the taxi on the return journey? Blake felt that a little more information on that subject would be helpful. So, having obtained the name of the taximan in question, Blake visited a certain neighbouring cab-rank, at which he had been told he was often to be found.

His man, as it happened, was just moving his cab up, and he recognised Blake at once.

"Cab, Mr. Blake, sir?" he asked eagerly.

"I'm afraid I don't want to go anywhere just now, Mitchell," replied Blake, with a smile.

"Just my luck!" said the man gloomily. "Every other blinkin' driver on this rank has had you in his cab except me! Don't you want to be driven home, gov'nor? Gaw, I'd take you for nothing!"

"Well, perhaps I can use you," chuckled Blake. "But, first of all, I'd like to have a few words with you about that affair of last night."

"You on that case of an assistant hooking it with a pocketful of jewellery, sir?" asked Mitchell. "Fair took me in, he did, too. A nice enough gent—bit of a comic, too. I'd like to know how he got out of my cab, though."

"Easy enough," said Blake. "You must have been pulled up for traffic on more than one occasion during that homeward ride."

"Yes, I know, sir; but I was only pulled up where there was a lot of traffic, and the feller wouldn't get out in a place like that, would he?" asked the cabby shrewdly. "I mean, in full sight of the traffic cop, and

other people—and him with stolen goods on him. "Fain't likely! Supposing I had glanced round and seen him?"

"That's true enough," admitted Blake. "Didn't you stop anywhere else? Try to think, Mitchell. Didn't you slow down during the earlier part of your ride?"

"I didn't slow down nowhere, sir," replied Mitchell firmly. "The police asked me the same question. But my memory ain't so bad as that. This Weston chap got in my cab at the foot of the steps, and he told me to drive straight back to Belfrage's. Then we went along the drive, escorted by them same motor-bikes, and the big gates was opened, and out we went. And there wasn't a stop of any kind until I got to Belfrage's—except for one or two hold-ups in the traffic, where there was lots of light."

Sexton Blake thought this out.

"What are these motor-cycles you refer to?" he asked suddenly.

"Oh, them?" grinned Mitchell. "I reckon Mr. van Skyler must be a bit touched."

And he gave a graphic description of the "Estate Militia," and the flaming torchlights, and the guards, and the floodlit mansion.

"Mr. Weston kidded them chaps in uniform, sir," continued Mitchell, with a grin. "Fair took the rise out of 'em. Jokey bloke he was. Never thought he'd do the dirty on me like he did."

"Was he just as jokey on the homeward journey?"

"Why, no, sir. He never said a word after getting in the cab."

"Perhaps he was despondent because he had failed to do any business," said Blake. "Did he look disappointed, or glum, as he came down the steps and got into your cab?"

Mitchell scratched his head.

"Can't say as I remember rightly," he replied. "I didn't see his face particular."

"But I thought you said that the house was floodlit, and that everything was as bright as day?" asked Blake.

"So it was—at fust," said the cabby. "But while I was waitin' them floodlights was put out. When Mr. Weston come back to the cab it was pretty dark, except for the flickering from them big torches on the roof. But they don't give much light, sir—especially on a windy night."

"Oh!" said Blake slowly. "I see. Mr. Weston got in your cab, then, and you didn't have a stop of any kind until you reached the West End?"

"That's right, gov'nor."

"Didn't Mr. Weston 'kid' the guards as you went through the outer gateway—or were you going too fast?"

"He never said a word, sir," replied Mitchell. "We wasn't goin' fast, neither. Them fool guards stopped me and flashed their torches on me—same as they did when I arrived. Wanted to make sure that I was the same driver, I suppose. Queer goings on, if you ask me."

"Well, I'll tell you what you can do, Mitchell," said Blake, as he opened the door of the cab. "You can drive me to Scotland Yard."

"Right you are, Mr. Blake, sir!" said Mitchell eagerly. "You're as good as there!"

DURING that short drive, Sexton Blake had plenty to think about.

Mitchell's evidence was straightforward enough, on the face of it; but when that evidence was analysed, a startling fact emerged.

Mitchell could swear that "Arthur Weston" was driven from Belfrage's to Tavis Manor; but he could not swear that it was "Arthur Weston" who had re-entered the cab.

Mitchell himself did not realise this, but Blake did.

Never for a moment did Blake forget that "Weston" was really Rupert Waldo—and Waldo was a man of infinite resource. He had unquestionably arrived at the millionaire's home. But while there the floodlights had been extinguished, and Mitchell had only dimly seen his fare when he had re-entered the cab. The cab, too, had been stopped at the gates.

Gradually, Blake's theory was taking shape. Everything he had just learned was snugly fitting in to the train of reasoning which had been drifting about in his keen mind. Unquestionably there was something "funny" about all this.

At the Yard he was lucky enough to find Lennard in his office.

"You don't mean to tell me that you're bothering about this case?" asked the chief inspector, in surprise. "It's all very well for you to scoff, Blake, but you can't get away from the fact that Waldo bolted. And ten thousand pounds' worth of jewellery isn't such a bad haul, at that. Perhaps I was wrong in saying that Waldo had deliberately planned to pinch the stuff when he set out. He was tempted on the way home—that's all. Suddenly made up his mind, and did one of his vanishing tricks. He's a slippery customer, though, and I doubt if we shall find him."

"I'm not going to argue, Lennard," said Blake. "You can stick to your theory, and I'll stick to mine."

"You haven't told me what yours is, yet," grumbled the inspector. "All you can do is to make mysterious remarks! I believe you do it on purpose—just to take the rise out of me!"

"Heaven forbid!" said Blake solemnly. "My dear Lennard, what a thought!"

"Darn your hide, you're doing it now!" snorted the inspector.

"There's something wrong with your liver, old man," said Blake, shaking his head. "You're devilish touchy this morning. By the way, have you any objection to my examining the hat and gloves which Waldo left in the taxi?"

"There they are—on that table," said Lennard, with a grumpy nod. "Hat, gloves, attache-case—Exhibits A, B, and C. See what you can make of 'em. Go easy with the attache-case,

though; we don't want those fingerprints disturbed."

"Haven't they been photographed?" asked Blake, in surprise.

"Yes—but go easy, all the same."

Blake was amused. He hardly gave any attention to the attache-case. He dismissed the gloves, too, with similar brevity. But the soft hat he examined with great care, even going to the length of exploring its interior with the aid of a powerful lens.

"What are you looking for—microbes?" asked Lennard sarcastically.

"I'm afraid you only half do your job, Lennard," said Blake, with regret.

"You only came here to make fun of me," grunted the inspector, who had an uncomfortable feeling at the back of his head that Blake had made some important discoveries which he was keeping to himself. "That's Weston's hat, right enough—or, rather, Waldo's hat. Several people at Belfrage's identified it this morning. The gloves, too. What the devil are you looking for, anyway?"

"Confirmation of a sensational theory, my dear Lennard," replied Blake, his eyes twinkling. "No, I'm not making fun of you. You know the facts just as well as I do—and here's the hat, if you care to re-examine it. Would you like the lens, too?"

Lennard took the hat and glared at it malignantly. But he rejected the lens.

"Well, come on—trot it out!" he said. "I suppose you're going to tell me that you've discovered, by squinting through that lens, that Waldo jumped out of the cab in Trafalgar Square, got on bus No. XY 3047, left it at Victoria, and took a train to Halifax!"

"Don't the Halifax trains go from King's Cross?" asked Blake innocently.

Lennard's only reply was an even louder snort, accompanied by something which sounded remarkably like an oath.

"Have you tried this hat on anybody else this morning?" asked Blake.

"Of course not! What do you mean?" asked the inspector. "It's Waldo's hat. There's never been any question of it. Why should I try it on anybody else?"

"Don't get excited. I only asked," replied Sexton Blake. "Well, Lennard, I shall have to be going. Thanks for your help."

He walked to the door, but just as he was going out he turned back.

"By the way, have you seen any red-headed men this morning?" he asked cryptically.

"Red-headed men!" roared Lennard. "No!"

"Thanks, old man—I just wanted to know," replied Blake gently.

He went out, leaving the chief inspector seething. Lennard did not really believe that Blake was kidding him; he knew Blake too well. That was just the devil of it. Blake knew something—and he was keeping it to himself.

The "U.J." Portrait Gallery



No. 6.—Waldo

BLAKE'S theory was taking concrete shape—and it was of a very startling shape, too—for an examination of Waldo's hat had confirmed the suspicion which had come to him when he had been questioning Mitchell, the taxi-driver.

From the very outset, Blake had rejected the idea that Waldo had stolen Mr. Belfrage's jewels. As soon as Blake learned that "Weston" was Waldo, he knew that something unexpected must have happened—something which even Waldo himself had not anticipated. The taxi-man told a clear story of "Weston" driving to Tavis Manor, and leaving Tavis Manor. But that story, under Sexton Blake's spotlight, fell to pieces.

Waldo had entered Tavis Manor; previous to his entry, he had been quite a comic, according to Mitchell. But Mitchell had only seen him dimly when he came out—mainly because the floodlighting had been extinguished. It occurred to Blake very possibly that the man who had re-entered the cab had not been Waldo at all. And that man could easily have slipped out of the cab when Mitchell had been held up by the "Estate Militia."

But this inevitably meant that something had happened to Waldo in the millionaire's home; it also meant

that the millionaire himself had detained Waldo and arranged a substitute for the journey back in the taxi—although there was not the slightest suggestion that Mr. Croxley van Skyler knew the real identity of the supposed jewellery salesman.

Blake's examination of the hat had been profitable. Rupert Waldo's hair was dark—and "Weston's" hair had been dark.

Under the powerful lens, Blake had seen any amount of dark hairs within the hat. They were quite invisible to the naked eye—but they stood out sharply enough when magnified. But Blake had also seen, here and there, a short red hair! Without any doubt whatever, Waldo's hat had been worn by a red-headed man. And this confirmed Blake's theory in a startling way. Waldo had entered Tavis Manor—but another man had emerged. Another man had silently left the taxi, so that Mitchell would believe that his fare had bolted.

But this was almost unbelievable, for it implied that Van Skyler, the millionaire, had lied, and that he had actually kept the "on approval" jewels. And why should a multi-millionaire steal anything?

"I think," mused Blake, "that I'll take a trip to Tavis Manor."

For some months he had had his personal doubts regarding Mr. Croxley van Skyler, and here was an

opportunity for him to have an interview with the eccentric millionaire.

Blake was a man of action. He rang up Tinker at once, and by the time he had walked to the end of Whitehall, Tinker had arrived in the Grey Panther. They set off at once for Kingston.

Chapter 4.

Van Skyler Explains.

RUPERT WALDO was an extraordinary man in many ways. His colossal strength, his highly developed sense of hearing and seeing and smelling—all these things had earned for him the name of the "Wonder Man."

But he was no magician; he was human.

Although he was more or less impervious to pain, his head was made of skin and flesh and bone, like other heads. And when a bullet struck him glancingly on the temple, he was within an ace of ending his earthly existence. It was only by a fluke, in fact, that Waldo had escaped death. As it was, he dropped senseless when the bullet struck him.

He did not recover consciousness, in fact, until mid-morning of the next day. He opened his eyes, he sat up, and he received one or two surprises.

Waldo differed from other men, in so far as his brain was concerned. There was no period of semi-consciousness, of groping about to remember. The instant he awoke, his mind was alert. He knew just what had happened the previous night. For he remembered everything. Everything had gone black just after he had hurled one of Van Skyler's assailants through the window.

The bandage he felt around his head told its own story. He counted himself lucky to awaken at all. He was aware of no actual pain, and his head did not even throb. But there was a dull, numb feeling which was eloquent enough. It was the feeling which other men would have known as pain.

He was tempted to pinch himself, just to make sure that he was really awake. For he found himself sitting up in the most luxurious bed he had ever seen; it was a huge four-poster, and the posts appeared to be made of solid gold. The sheets were of the purest silk, and Waldo himself was clothed in pyjamas of the same material. They were black pyjamas, with gold-coloured ornamentations, and they rather took Waldo's fancy.

"Have I been smoking opium?" he murmured, in wonder.

He had heard of pipe-dreams, but he had never experienced one. He looked about the apartment, and found that everything matched the bed and the pyjamas. The walls were hung with rich, Oriental cloths, the carpet was pure Persian, the furniture, if not of solid gold, was gold plated. Waldo was positively dazzled. This was the sleeping chamber of a prince.

"Can it be that somebody has at last appreciated my true worth?"

asked Waldo, aloud. "This splendour is just about my mark."

He was quite alone, and the weak wintry sunshine was slanting into the bed-room. He pushed the clothes back, stepped to the floor, and swayed slightly. It was a warning that he was not yet himself. But he reached the nearest window without mishap, and found himself looking across a fair parkland, which he at once recognised.

In the distance, between clumps of trees, he could see the high brick wall which marked the extremity of the estate. Beyond that he could glimpse the white, drifting smoke of a speeding passenger train. He was in the home of Mr. Croxley van Skyler.

"How are you feeling, sir?"

Turning, he saw that the door had opened, and his old friend, the Lord Chamberlain, was in attendance.

"I cannot truthfully say that I am feeling good," replied Waldo gravely. "I am puzzled. What is all this?" And he made an eloquent gesture. "Don't think me inquisitive, but surely I deserve some kind of hint?"

"Perhaps you had better get back to bed, sir," said the Lord Chamberlain. "I don't think you are quite yourself. The doctor said that you could not possibly recover until to-morrow."

"Doctors aren't half so clever as they pretend to be," replied Waldo. "They are the world's greatest guessers. With a conscious patient they can consider themselves on safe ground. But with an unconscious patient they are left entirely to their own resources, and more often than not they come a cropper. I wouldn't be a doctor for worlds."

The Lord Chamberlain was clearly baffled by Waldo's amiable chatter. The previous evening, this shop assistant had proved himself to be an unusual man; he was keeping it up.

"I think you had better get into bed," said the man again.

"If it's going to make you happy, I'll do it," replied Waldo, as he tumbled into the silken bed. "By the way, where is the Jinn?"

"The gin, sir? You are hardly in a fit condition for alcoholic refreshment—"

"A pardonable misunderstanding," interrupted Waldo gently. "By Jinn I mean genie. The magician—the fellow who worked all these miracles. In other words, the boss. I feel that the occasion calls for a personal interview."

"I will inform the master that you are—er—awake, sir," said the other.

He glided out of the room, and Waldo was left to his thoughts. Why was he being treated as an honoured guest? He very much doubted if a doctor had been to see him. The bandage was serviceable, but amateurish. His host must have known that the injury was superficial.

"My dear fellow! This is sure good!" exclaimed a boisterous voice. "I didn't expect you to come up for air until to-morrow."

Mr. Croxley van Skyler himself came into the room like a northeasterly breeze. Big, healthy com-

plexioned, dressed in loud plus-fours, he was a typical American millionaire.

"I guess it's up to me to explain things, Mr. Weston," he went on, as he came over and sat on the side of the bed. "Feeling pretty good, huh? You look swell. I figured that you would be an invalid for two or three weeks."

"I'm tough," explained Waldo. "Much tougher than I look."

"I'll say you are!" agreed Mr. van Skyler, with enthusiasm. "The way you handled those crooks last night was sure fine. Great work, son! You saved my life. I guess you know that, huh?"

"I think I butted in at the right moment," admitted Waldo.

"Boy, you are the quickest thing on two legs!" declared Mr. van Skyler. "Yes, sir! Those infernal thugs had me on the spot, and I can't figure it out, even now, how you handled them. It was a stray bullet, fired from outside, which got you."

"I take it that the brutes bolted?" asked Waldo. "Did you get in touch with the police? I'm wondering about my job," he added. "Poor old Simpson, of the jewellery department, will be in a rare stew—"

"DON'T you worry your head about that, Mr. Weston," interrupted the other. "That's all fixed. I'm mighty grateful to you for saving



my life. England's a swell place—safe for any honest citizen—but I guess the crooks who held me up last night were Chicago toughs. First time anything like that has happened, and I guess it was a break for me that you were on the scene. Say, where did you learn that strong arm stuff?" he added suddenly, looking at Waldo with curious intentness.

"We shop assistants are not always soft," replied Waldo glibly. "Mr. Belfrage provides us with fine gymnasiums, sports grounds, swimming pools—everything, in fact, to keep us fit. Some of us take every advantage of the facilities. I'm supposed to be pretty good at boxing."

"Won any fights?"

"Two or three."

"What about wrestling?"

"I'm afraid I hold the championship," said Waldo modestly.

"And shooting?"

"Took the amateur prize at Bisley last year. That was with the rifle. I haven't won any revolver championships yet, but I'm reckoned to be pretty good."

"Gee! You're a useful bird!" said the millionaire, gazing at the patient with open-eyed admiration. "You proved that last night—but I like to know the whys and wherefores. Now, Mr. Weston, don't think I'm personal or inquisitive, but I want to ask you a few intimate questions. Feeling all right?"

"I could do with something to eat," confessed Waldo. "Otherwise I'm fit enough."

Mr. van Skyler made himself more comfortable, and Waldo waited with intense curiosity. This interview was becoming entertaining. The Wonder Man had purposely led his host on—and he was quite prepared to lead him on still farther.

"You saved my life—and I'm grateful," said the millionaire, for the second time. "What I want to know, Mr. Weston, is this? How are you fixed as regards family relations?"

"Just what do you mean?" asked Waldo.

"Are you married?"

"No."

"Father or mother?"

"Both dead."

"Brothers or sisters—aunts or uncles?"

"Strangely enough, I have none," replied Waldo glibly. "My father was killed at the Battle of Jutland, and my mother died from the shock. I was the only son. I live in lodgings, and—"

"No, sir! You live here!" interrupted Mr. van Skyler promptly.

Waldo looked at him in amazement—as he imagined Mr. Weston, of the watch and clock department, would have looked at him.

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. van Skyler," he said.

"Then I'll tell you," went on the other. "After what happened last night I'm figuring that I could do with a personal bodyguard. I guess you've seen my toy soldiers, huh? They look good—but they're punk. Just for show, you understand. When it comes to the real thing, I need a man right near me, a fellow who's quick on the draw, who can use his wits, and— Well, a guy who can do just what you did last night. Right here and now I'm offering you the job. I want you to be my personal bodyguard."

The supposed shop assistant looked startled.

"But—but you're joking, surely?" he stammered.

"Not on your life! I mean it."

"You mean I'm to live here?"

"You're to share all the splendours of this fine home of mine," said Mr. van Skyler, with conscious pride. "You can have any bed-room you please. There are some even better than this. Take your pick, son! You'll dine with me and be my

personal companion. And as long as you care to keep the job, I'll pay you five hundred bucks a month."

Waldo's jaw dropped—and he wasn't altogether acting

"Five hundred dollars!" he ejaculated blankly.

"You said it!" chuckled Van Skyler. "That's a hundred pounds. Twenty-five pounds a week at par. I guess it's a raise on your former salary, huh? But, boy, you're worth it to me. I've always had one rule in my life—to pay liberally for the things I need."

"But it's fantastic!" protested Waldo. "I don't know what to say. I couldn't accept the job—not comfortably, anyway. I should be robbing you. It might be years before another bunch of crooks makes an attack on you."

"And it might be next week," said the millionaire grimly. "I want to be sure. And I'm willing to pay for service. But let's get this thing right straight while we're about it. While you're in this house, you must ask no questions. Furthermore, it's a condition of your job that you stay here with me—that you be ready for duty at any hour of the day or night. You'll have the freedom of the estate while we're here, but that's all."

Waldo began to perceive the snags.

"You mean, I'm not ever to go beyond the Tavis estate?" he asked.

"That's what I mean."

"Can't I visit any of my former friends?" asked Waldo. "I haven't many—if any at all. Acquaintances would be a better word. But there are some things of mine at my lodgings. And I'm keen on the athletic club, and the theatre now and again."

"If you take this job, you'll have to cut everything out," replied the other. "I'll have your things fetched from your lodgings, if you like. But I'd rather you left everything there. I have a reason. Now, it's up to you."

"Well, of course, there's nothing to think about," interrupted Waldo. "I'd be a fool to turn down such a soft job, sir. I accept."

"Boy, I knew you were the goods!" said Mr. van Skyler enthusiastically, as he took Waldo's hand. "Consider yourself hired. I'll have some food sent up to you, and then you can dress and join me downstairs, if you're feeling O.K."

He took his departure as breezily as he had entered. And Rupert Waldo sat in bed thinking—thinking harder than he had ever thought in his life before.

One fact stuck out a mile—Van Skyler had not the faintest suspicion that Waldo was anything more than he pretended to be. A shop assistant—a particularly athletic and useful one admittedly—but, nevertheless, a shop assistant. And that offer of "five hundred bucks a month" was supposed to dazzle him. Such a sum was trifling to the real Waldo. But he was in the Van Skyler home

—definitely established as a part and parcel of that household.

And during that singular interview he had made a discovery which almost took his breath away. And any discovery had to be more or less staggering to surprise the case-hardened Wonder Man.

Chapter 5.

"Going to be Trouble."

WHEN Mr. van Skyler left the bed-room he closed the door softly and found the Lord Chamberlain outside in the sumptuous corridor. But the millionaire lifted a warning finger, and they both walked along and entered another room.

"He's fallen for it, Fletcher!" said Van Skyler briefly

"You thought he would," said the other. "But you're taking a big chance, Mr. van Skyler. He's not an ordinary bird. I've met a few cool guys in my time, but he beats the lot. He'll need watching. He's too sure of himself."

"While we have him here, we can

The DOWNFALL of the CONFEDERATION!

The routing of Reece and the final break-up of the infamous Confederation is the theme of next week's yarn. It's ROBERT MURRAY at his best. A further announcement appears on page 24 about this star story out

NEXT WEEK.

watch him," replied Mr. van Skyler. "And I'm telling you, Fletcher, that we couldn't let that man get away. The first thing he would do would be to tell his employers what happened here. Belfrage would probably tell the police. Besides, we've paved the way. Everything's going to look open and above board."

"Well, it's your affair, Mr. van Skyler," said Fletcher dubiously. "I can't say I like the looks of it myself."

"Don't be a fool! There's nothing to worry about," said the millionaire. "You know as well as I do that we can't have the police butting in and making inquiries about last night's affair. That's got to be kept quiet—even at the cost of keeping this man here. We're lucky. He's unmarried, lives in lodgings, and is more or less alone in the world. So there'll be no inquiries—later. He left Tavis Manor last night in that taxicab, and what he did with himself afterwards is no concern of mine."

"Think the police will fall for that dope?"

"What else can they do?" retorted

the millionaire. "Weston left here after staying half an hour. A clear case of a shop assistant succumbing to a sudden temptation. All the police know is that Weston has disappeared. It's up to them to find him—and they never will."

"And supposing this mug gets suspicious?" asked Fletcher. "He may believe this personal bodyguard stuff right now; but when he finds that he's more or less a prisoner, he might turn nasty. I'm telling you, Mr. van Skyler, he's not the ordinary type."

"If he turns nasty I shall know what to do with him," replied Van Skyler grimly. "But as long as we can keep him fooled, so much the better. He's not likely to ask any awkward questions. And remember this, Fletcher—somebody's got to watch him. And if he attempts to get out of the grounds—well, I guess you know what to do."

They went out of the room together, and while Fletcher went off to attend to Waldo's meal, the millionaire retired to his library. He was looking thoughtful.

A buzzer sounded as he helped himself to a big cigar from a box which was built into the walnut desk. He lifted a telephone receiver.

"Well?" he asked shortly.

This was a private telephone communicating direct with the main gates half a mile away.

"There's a guy here who wants to see you, Mr. van Skyler," said a voice. "Says his name is Sexton Blake."

The millionaire suddenly went rigid.

"Let him through!" he replied roughly. "What the heck do you mean by holding up a gentleman like Mr. Blake?"

"Sorry, Mr. van Skyler. But you gave orders that nobody was to be admitted—"

"Forget it!" broke in Mr. van Skyler. "Let that car right through."

He slammed the receiver down and pushed a button. Within a few seconds Fletcher entered.

"Blake's coming—will be here within half a minute," said Van Skyler.

"Blake!" stammered Fletcher, turning pale. "But you don't think—"

"I don't know why he is coming, but I've got to see him," replied the millionaire. "If I didn't see him he'd think it funny. I'll bet this is Belfrage's doing. But everything has got to look open. Fletcher—don't forget that. If Blake gets you aside, and talks to you, your story is pat. You showed Weston in to me, he stayed half an hour, and you showed him out again. You saw him get into the taxi. That's all."

Almost before he ceased speaking they both heard the quiet purr of the Grey Panther. A minute later Sexton Blake was ushered through the palatial hall and shown into a reception-room, the colour scheme of which was red-and-gold. Tinker remained in the car.

"Well, this is certainly one of the greatest pleasures I have had since I came to reside in this wonderful country of yours," said Mr. van Skyler, as he warmly took Blake's hand. "I am delighted to meet you, Mr. Blake. You're one of the great Englishmen I've always admired."

"You're very kind, sir," said Blake, smiling. "When I tell you of my business, perhaps you will realise that my reputation is more legendary than real. I'm here on quite a commonplace matter—indeed a trivial matter."

"You mean that wretched fellow who

(Continued on page 16.)

MAN is an ingenious animal; there is no end to the cleverness of his inventions.

Not the least clever are his ingenuities in the department of getting something for nothing. Easy money, in short. It has been said that if a

EASY MONEY.

Old or new, the trick itself doesn't seem to matter while the mugs are so willing to be divorced from their cash.

toil not, neither do they spin anything but fairy tales, have been getting more and more inventive ever since swindlers first realised the horrors of work.

Sometimes there's humour in their badness, too—humour of a kind that is more noticeable to the onlookers than the victims. Take the affair of Armand Schwob as a case in point.

Schwob was described on the Paris police records as a lavish spender and a born confidence man. But his friends (who knew him under some other name) only knew enough to apply the first part of the description to him. He was a lavish spender all right; he lived in, and up to, one of the huge palaces along the Champs Elysee. To them he was a rich business man; they did not know that his riches had been amassed by bold and numerous swindles.

It was the affair of the amber cigarette holders that brought him fame, money, and a big laugh. He appeared one day in one of the several exclusive clubs he frequented, smoking a cigarette in an amber holder. When one of a group of his fellow members commented on the beauty and quality of it, Schwob replied with an amused laugh that it was not amber at all.

"It's worth two and a half francs," he said. "Or, rather, it would retail at that. They cost about two francs to make." (Two francs were worth 1s. 6d. at that time.) He went on to explain that the imitation amber was based on a certain formula of his own invention, and he produced a dozen or so cigarette holders and distributed them to fellow-members as samples.

Some of the recipients had the curiosity—so much like the real thing did the imitations appear—to have them valued by jewellers. When they came to compare notes afterwards they found that, so convincing were these formula-made amber cigarette holders, that the jewellers had offered to buy them at sums ranging from 50 to 100 francs. The upshot of the affair was a proposal to Schwob that he should open a factory for the manufacture of the articles.

But Schwob had other interests. He said all his capital was locked up in various enterprises. The friends insisted it was too good a thing to miss, however; they offered to find the money themselves.

This they did. Within two months Armand Schwob had, practically forced on him, between two and three million francs—about £60,000. With part of this money he did in fact rent a factory, and pretended to produce his wonderful imitations while more money came in.

But the output was exceedingly small, and stopped altogether when the money stopped. It was then found that the amber cigarette holders were genuine amber, of the purest quality. He had bought them at 150 francs each, and distributed samples as bait.

Meantime, his charm of manner had caused several Paris jewellers to entrust him with stones to the value of half a million francs, whereupon he disappeared,

baby is born on one side of the street who will have money, twins are born on the other side of the street to take it from him.

There's certainly a lot of competition to separate honest, grown-up babies from their own; and those who

From Information

Received

THE WEEK'S PICTURE NEWS.

EVIDENTLY it's risky to be too lucky in the U.S.A. A Mr. D. E. McAllister (third from left in photo) won the Daily Double on the Cicero, Chicago, race-course recently, and needed a police escort to see him safely home. He was one of three people who, with a 6s. ticket, won £390 on the double. Whether the other two winners got a police escort, and what happened to them if they didn't, we don't know.

ON right is Julian Marcelino, with a casualty list of six killed and fifteen wounded. (See "Terse Tales.")



leaving a note to one of his amber-manufacturing dupes to say he was going abroad to take possession of a fortune of seven million francs.

Probably he did, too. He went to America and rang the changes on other varieties of fraud, but none so simple and ingenious as the amber masterpiece.

A SWINDLE does not have to be new or ingenious to succeed. The oldest con-game on earth still pays dividends to its promoters, and that is one probably dating back to the days of the Spanish Armada, or possibly earlier. And still it is worked in just the same old traditional way. They call it the Spanish Prisoner swindle, and there are some people who haven't heard of it yet, for fresh generations of victims are being born all the time.

The method is just this; the prospective victim receives a letter—actually printed by the lithographic method as a rule, but convincingly imitating handwriting with a pen—saying that the sender is in a prison in Spain. Somewhere outside there is a fortune belonging to him, which an agent can recover for him if the recipient of the letter will send a sum of money, usually about £500. If he does this he will be very handsomely rewarded.

It does not seem feasible that such a tale should bring results, but it does, and always has. It is an old-established business and has brought dividends from almost every country in the world, as letters on the files of the Madrid Police show. Furthermore, the books of a Spanish Prisoner gang which was broken up by the police force of that city showed that the average response was a reply to twenty letters in a hundred sent out, and five of those letters eventually brought money.

As recently as last October a Spanish Prisoner victim of Toulouse named Brugdious actually set out for Spain in person with £400 in French notes on his

person for the rescuing of the mythical prisoner. At the frontier the Guardia Civile, who act as Customs guards, asked him the usual questions, but he admitted to having only £20.

Suspicious, they searched him, and found the £400—with the result that the rescuer became a real Spanish prisoner on his own account for importing currency, which is contrary to the law. He had to pay £300 as a fine to secure his own release.

NEARLY as old a trick is the famed Gold Brick Swindle, wherein a genuine-looking miner walks into a one-horse town bank and convinces the manager he must sell the result of his toil in the Klondike or some such place. This is a brick-like slab of gold he has melted down and cast as an ingot. The manager buys it, and finds afterwards, according to schedule, that the thing is solid brass. Or maybe it has a thin coating of gold.

This has been worked so long and so often, particularly in the U.S.A., that even the schoolchildren have heard about it, and it has become a sort of proverb to refer to a Gold Brick. And yet . . .

A simple variation of the old traditional stunt drew real money from sharp New Yorkers only a year or so ago. The usual convincing-looking miner walked into a cafe at Mineola, Long Island, and ordered drinks all round.

He got the confidence of the crowd with his simplicity, opened his carpet bag, and showed them a mass of gold nuggets which circumstances compelled him to sell for £400. To cut the painful story short, various of the onlookers formed a syndicate to supply the money, and the miner left with the £400.

The gold nuggets, at first as convincing as the miner himself, were found to be gilded lead foil—the capsules from bottles of a certain kind of table-sauce, hammered into lumps.

Perhaps it is because they are old that these old-timer tricks succeed. It is

when a twister thinks up a new one that he takes a risk, as happened in the case of "Billy Carter" of New York—although the audacity of his knavery perhaps entitled him to get away with it.

A newspaper account had been published of an aged and poorly-dressed woman, carrying £2,500 in a wallet, who had been found wandering by the police in Youngstown, Ohio. Whereupon the Youngstown police received a letter signed "Billy Carter" saying that the money was his property. The explanation he gave was that he had been travelling through the city on his way to New York when his pocket had been picked, and suggested that the woman was the thief.

The police chief asked him to write back a description of her. Promptly by return came a quite accurate description.

But the police chief realised that the woman had been already described in the newspapers for the benefit of anyone who might know her, so he asked the claimant to give a list of the notes concerned, and mention their denominations. Here the optimistic Billy Carter was more at sea. He did his best, but the answers were so far wide of the mark that the New York police were given the story, called at the address of the alleged Billy Carter, and found him to be a gentleman named Blomm, of whom they had professional knowledge already.

He received no £2,500, but a stiff sentence for attempting to use the U.S. mails to defraud.

Still, he had a good try.



ONE day, within recent months, an usher in the Royal Courts of Justice in the Strand suddenly assumed, as his wandering eye roved the room, a sort of

boiled expression. His face purpled, his eyes became codlike. Low gurgling sounds rumbled in his throat.

The BARE (headed) TRUTH

from a woman shocks some magistrates as much as a bare-faced lie.

in the side gangway near the back of the court, turned to gaze at the debased wretch who was outraging the majesty of the Law, and imperilling the peace and dignity of the realm by wantonly coming into a court of justice with his hat on. As they moved they revealed this person more fully.

It was a girl. She was wearing a somewhat mannish felt hat.

The usher, after having had one shock, bravely braced himself and recovered from this one, tottered towards the girl he had addressed as "You there, sir!" and apologised bewilderedly. He would not now let her take the hat off, even when she agreed to. The thought of that happening almost gave him a third shock, for it was as unthinkable that a woman should *not* wear a head covering in court as that a man *should* wear one.

It's really rather quaint, the bother there has been about this hat or no-hat question, for soon after this incident there was a run of incidents at various courts here and there in which women got into trouble for not wearing hats. The quaintness lies in the fact that it does not seem to matter whether a woman has a hat on or not; justice is justice, with or without a lid, and the law can be administered just as well either way. *Not only that, but it always is in some places where they are not so particular.*

At Coventry, when a young woman went into the witness box, the magistrate snapped out a brisk:

"Put your hat on!"

To which the woman meekly replied: "I never wear one."

"Then you can't give evidence here," said the magistrate.

THE Clerk of the Court got out of the difficulty diplomatically. He suggested that her evidence should be taken unsworn; and it duly was, and probably none the worse for that, from a viewpoint of accuracy.

This incident doubtless left its impressions, for when a hatless woman witness also appeared before the Aldershot Bench, exactly a week later, the chairman of the magistrates was prepared for the "never wear one" alibi.

"Do you possess a hat?" he demanded.

The woman admitted that she was the proprietor of such an article, but that it was elsewhere.

"Let me tell you," said the magistrate, "that this is the first time any woman has presented herself before me without a hat. It is an insult to the court and a disreputable proceeding. If you come to the court again you must appear properly dressed. I hope you are thoroughly ashamed of yourself."

It is to be hoped that she wasn't. She need not have been. With due deference to the magistrate, he was the victim of a confusion of ideas; he was thinking of the traditional ruling about women entering churches, particularly Roman Catholic churches—with their heads covered. In many Protestant places of worship, Westminster Abbey, for instance, women sightseers are commonly allowed to enter bareheaded, though hats are required if they take part in the services.

And as regards the law and the law-courts, there isn't any order one way or the other. The Perjury Act, which seems to bear most directly on the question, disposes of this and one or two other fallacies by saying that all forms and ceremonies used in administering a witness' oath are immaterial, provided that the oath had been administered in such a way that the witness has accepted the procedure without any objection.

Thus a woman can, if she desires, give her evidence bareheaded without any suggestion of insulting the court—as happens every day in all the London police courts, which impose no restrictions—and she need not, as some suppose, remove her glove while holding the Testament with the right hand. In the same way there is no obligation for a Jew to be sworn with his hat on, which is another widespread belief.

It's illogical, anyway, this woman-and-hat business. A woman giving informal evidence over the back-garden fence to her neighbour about the peculiarities

of other neighbours does not feel that it gives her utterances the importance of being on oath if she wears a hat at the time; neither does a woman praying at home instead of at church cover her head to give her prayers more power.

"The Law is a ass," as one of Dickens' characters remarked, but it hasn't been asinine enough to definitely demand hatted oaths for women; it has left the hat question severely alone.

But, stay! There's one little exception. In Belfast the police drag-net gathered into court a number of cab-drivers whose crime it was to have worn caps at the wheel, and not hats, as laid down by a city by-law in far-off 1898.

They were fined a shilling each, a magisterial way of saying:

"Go ye, and sin no more."

TERSE TALES.

INTERESTED.

IN a New York court-room a man interestedly listened to a gang-murder trial.

Suddenly he remembered, roused himself, and hurried off to another court-room in the same building. He was the defendant there in an action brought by his wife for divorce.

The court was just emptying. It was all over. The judge, hearing the husband was not present, had awarded the wife £150 costs, and £5 a week allowance.

APPRENTICES.

AT Borstal Institution, Kent, a safe was moved by burglars who tried unsuccessfully to open it. Room-doors were forced and cupboards ransacked. Nothing was missing.

Baffled, the burglars had retreated over the twelve-foot wall, using ropes and ladders taken from the yard.

The theory: that they are ex-Borstalians, apprentice burglars.

AMOK.

IN Seattle, Washington, a Philippino named Julian Marcelino called on a friend in an hotel and stabbed him in the chest.

Unhurriedly he walked out into the street. Unhurriedly, but at a trot, he proceeded along the pavement, stabbing anyone who got in his way.

Panic seized the onlookers in his murderous wake, communicated itself to those ahead. Screams rent the Seattle streets; fugitives fled helter-skelter from before him.

A policeman tackled him. Marcelino, undersized and slight, fought like a maniac. A general police alarm brought officers speeding to the spot. Finally, three of them subdued him as ambulances cleared up his victims: six killed, fifteen badly injured.

Marcelino's reason: "I felt funny in the head."

SEVENTY-FIVE.

AT San Quentin prison, California, Jack Kramer resigned his ten-year job of prison hangman on the grounds of fear.

Said he:

"I became afraid. I will never spring a trap again. I dream about the men I have hanged. Every night the whole seventy-five of 'em parade before me in ghostly array."

GAME.

AT Scotland Yard a telephone message notified the theft of a woman's handbag containing £6.

The message was by order of Judge Turner, who, at Westminster County Court, had listened to the complaint of a witness that, while she was in the box giving evidence, her bag had been stolen from her seat.

Said Judge Turner: "This is a nice new game; I shall have a notice put up: 'Carry your handbags.'"

(Continued from page 13.)

ran off with Belfrage's jewels?" asked the millionaire. "Yes, Mr. Belfrage himself rang me up this morning, and he assured me that he wouldn't have me bothered with the police."

"And now I'm bothering you?" asked Blake dryly. "But I'm not the police, Mr. van Skyler—and you mustn't blame Mr. Belfrage for my visit. He was rather worried about Weston, and I promised to look into the matter for him. And it occurred to me that there might be some clue obtainable here at this end. Of course, I may be wrong—"

"I'm afraid you are," said Van Skyler. "I wish I'd never asked Belfrage's to send me those infernal jewels! The man came, as instructed and I found the jewels to be far inferior to those I required. So I sent the whole lot back, and Weston was gone within half an hour. That's all I know. So why you expect to get any clue here is more than I can imagine. Hasn't it been established that Weston bolted with the stuff?"

"Yes," replied Blake. "My only object in coming to you, Mr. van Skyler, was to ask you a few questions about Weston himself. I've always found that the only way to obtain facts is to go after them yourself."

"True enough," admitted the other.

"I'd like to know if Weston was quite normal when he got here," continued Blake. "Did he seem anxious that you should buy?"

"Gee! That's a good point of yours, Mr. Blake," said the millionaire admiringly. "Now that you come to mention it, Weston did seem—well, off-hand. While he was showing me the jewels he belittled them. I think he was rather impressed by his surroundings. He was after a bigger order. He thought I could do with very much better stuff, and promised to come again to-day with a finer selection."

"In other words, he put you off the deal," said Blake crisply. "That looks as though he already thought of bolting with them himself. Thank you, Mr. van Skyler, that's all I wanted to know."

The interview was apparently ended. But, as a matter of fact, Blake had learnt precisely nothing. He had been "stalling"—as Van Skyler himself would have described it. But Blake was a careful man. And he had seen something since he had entered the house which had made him more careful than usual.

"You have a wonderful place here, Mr. van Skyler," he said admiringly as he rose to go. "No Eastern prince, with all his ideas of magnificence, could rival this."

Mr. Croxley van Skyler was glad that he had so promptly admitted Blake. Blake was satisfied. And the "evidence" against Weston was strengthened. When Blake went away there was not a chance in a thousand that there would be any further inquiries. So Mr. van Skyler gave himself up to his favourite hobby—boasting about his House of Gold.

Which was exactly what Blake required.

Blake soon found that there was nothing brilliant or intelligent about this American millionaire. He was, in fact, a common man, with a common mind. Money had bought him these lavish surroundings, and they fitted him. They were garish, like himself. There was no

real beauty in this transformed old mansion. Gold, silks, colours—yes. But Blake was more than once inclined to shudder as he beheld the hideous clashings. This was the home of a man who was out for every bit of show he could get for his money. Of taste there was none.

But Van Skyler himself was confident in his belief that he had created a palace of wonder. He was ridiculously proud of it. He took Blake from room to room, showing him the marvels of each. But, as yet, Blake had not been admitted into the room he most wanted to see.

"They tell me you have a marvellous library, Mr. van Skyler," said the detective casually.

"You can bet on it!" said Van Skyler. "Finest library in England! Every book bound in the costliest leather, and ornamented with pure gold!"

Blake was inwardly amused. The binding of the books evidently counted more to Mr. van Skyler than the books themselves. Blake was admitted into the library, and once there, he used his eyes. If his theory was right, this was the most likely apartment that Waldo had been shown into, and if Waldo had never left Tavis Manor, as Blake believed, something happened to him here.

It was a long shot, perhaps, but Blake scored a bullseye. He hadn't been in the room three minutes before his keen eyes noticed various minor details about the room and furniture were suggestive of some funny business having taken place.

And while pretending to admire Mr. van Skyler's books, Blake's gaze wandered round every inch of the walls and the ceiling—and the furniture. Nothing escaped his scrutiny, but he did it so cleverly, so unobtrusively, that his host noticed nothing.

There was a score mark in the ornamental ceiling, and Blake did not doubt that it had been caused by a bullet. He saw, too, two long scratches on the mirror-like surface of the walnut desk. Efforts had been made to obliterate them.

When Blake took his departure Mr. van Skyler was very effusive, very friendly. Yet he seemed to sense that Blake had had an ulterior motive in wishing to see the library. If the millionaire had raised any objections Blake might have been suspicious. From first to last Mr. van Skyler had been frankness itself.

As the door closed on Blake Fletcher glided across the hall.

"Well?" he asked anxiously.

"I don't know!" said the other, his eyes full of suspicion. "He seemed satisfied—"

"You can't go by that," broke in Fletcher, who seemed suddenly to assume command. "Blake's one of the cleverest men on this side. He'd fool anybody. Why did you take him into the library?"

"I don't like your tone, Fletcher—" began the millionaire.

"Forget it!" snapped Fletcher. "Blake's after you—and when Blake gets his teeth into a case, he hangs on. Think I don't know? If you hadn't taken him into the library—"

"He wanted to see my books," growled Van Skyler. "Aw, heck! What's the difference? There was nothing in there that he could see, and if I hadn't taken him in he'd have thought it funny."

"I guess you'll think it funnier when Blake figures this thing out," retorted

Fletcher. "He's not satisfied about that Weston bird, and if Blake sniffs out the truth there's going to be trouble. And you know exactly what kind of trouble, Mr. van Skyler!" he added, in an ugly tone.

TINKER said nothing until the Grey Panther had glided out beyond the big gates of the Tavis estate.

"Any luck, gov'nor?" he asked at length.

"Plenty," replied Blake grimly.

The change in the great detective was remarkable. Tinker knew the signs. Blake's eyes were like cold steel, and his lean face had set into that hard expression which meant that he was up against something exceptional.

"You don't mean that you know what happened to Waldo?" asked Tinker.

"That's just it, young 'un—I don't know," replied Blake. "But I'm worried about him. I gave you the outline of the affair on the way down, and I told you of my theory. Well, I'm satisfied that Waldo never left Tavis Manor. There was a fight of some kind in the library last night."

He told Tinker of the signs he had seen.

"But what do you make of it, gov'nor?" asked Tinker in wonder. "Why should Van Skyler attack Waldo?"

"There's no evidence that Waldo was attacked by Van Skyler," interrupted Blake. "But something queer happened in that house last night. Was it an accident? Was Waldo shot? And, if so, why should Van Skyler go to such lengths to hide it up? That fake trail of the taxi may satisfy the police, but it doesn't satisfy me. Waldo is either in that house—or he's dead. And I'm going to find out which!"

And so determined was Blake's tone that Tinker looked at him in sudden astonishment.

"You rather liked Waldo, didn't you, gov'nor?" he asked.

"Don't put it in that way, young 'un—don't assume that Waldo is dead!" growled the detective. "In some ways I regard him as a friend. Before he went crooked again he was a friend. And whatever Waldo's contempt for the law, and defiance of the police, he is inherently honest. That may sound a contradiction, but I think you understand."

"By jingo, rather!" said Tinker. "Waldo wouldn't play dirty for any amount of money."

He said little more as they drove homewards. Tinker knew that Blake was keeping something back. Blake had learnt something else at Tavis Manor—and something big, too. And Tinker sensed that the detective was burning with animosity against Mr. Croxley van Skyler. The discovery he had made was somehow connected with the millionaire.

"Strange!" muttered Blake abruptly.

"What's that, gov'nor?"

Tinker found the detective staring at a big closed car which had overtaken the Grey Panther. It was going at high speed, for Blake's Rolls was moving, too. The closed car swung in front of a motor-bus, cut round a tramcar, and vanished into the distance ahead.

"Do you know that car, sir?" asked Tinker.

"No," replied Blake absently. "But I'm just wondering—Tinker, I think we shall have to be careful. Yes, deucedly careful!"

Tinker looked at him sharply. And if Blake's expression had been grim before, it was now positively dangerous. That cold steel light in his eyes was even more pronounced.

Tinker was puzzled, but not for long. They drove into Baker Street, and just as Blake was about to slow up in front of their own door he apparently changed his mind. For suddenly he trod on the throttle.

"Hold tight, young 'un!" he snapped.

For a second Tinker thought that he and his guv'nor were "on the spot." He heard a deafening roar, not unlike the rattle of a machine-gun; but he realised that it was only caused by a number of pneumatic drills in operation opposite their house. The Grey Panther leapt forward like a live thing, streaked between a bus and a lorry without an inch to spare on either side, and went hurtling down Baker Street on the wrong side of the road, followed by the furious imprecations of various drivers.

"Guv'nor" gasped Tinker. "Have you gone dotty?"

Even as he spoke Blake eased up. But still he said no word. He swung the Grey Panther into a side-street, and, leaving the car parked there, he and Tinker made their way home by the rear.

"Don't go near the windows, young 'un," said Blake sharply, as they entered the consulting-room. "It wouldn't be healthy."

But Blake himself went. For two minutes he stood behind the curtain, making a close, careful scrutiny. Then he walked across to the telephone and sat down.

"Whitehall 1212," he said grimly.

In one minute he was through to Lennard, at Scotland Yard.

"I want you to pick up two gunmen who attempted five minutes ago to riddle me with bullets," said Blake. "If you can get in touch with a Flying Squad unit at once, Lennard, you'll nab them easily. They're in Baker Street here, opposite my place."

"Are you serious?" demanded the amazed inspector.

"I was never more serious in my life," replied Blake. "Tinker and I had a hairbreadth escape. One man is dressed in a fawn macintosh and a soft felt hat. The other is wearing a grey tweed overcoat and a bowler. They are apparently watching the road-mending operations. If you're going to pick them up you'll have to go easy. They're both armed."

As Blake rang off Tinker looked at him with a rather pale face.

"But I didn't know a thing, guv'nor!" he exclaimed, aghast.

"I was suspicious when that closed car overtook us on the way from Kingston," replied Blake. "But I really suspected no actual danger until I was about to pull up. I saw two things in the same second—the closed car parked down a side-turning, and the workmen operating the pneumatic drills. A very fine 'cover,' Tinker, for revolver or machine-gun shots. Before you and I could have left our car we should have been riddled—and with all that din going on nobody would have known where the shots came from. It was only by driving straight on that we escaped."

Five minutes later an innocent-looking van pulled up abruptly. Half a dozen men leapt out, and two prisoners were taken. Not a shot was fired, fortunately, but both prisoners were carrying miniature machine-guns strapped to

their waists and operated from the hip—scarcely bigger than ordinary automatics.

"By thunder! You were right, Blake!" said Lennard, after the arrest. "Know who they are?"

"I'm leaving that for you to find out," replied Blake. "Quite a lot of crooks would be glad to see me out of the way, Lennard. They may be just a couple of old enemies. What fools they were not to clear off after I had driven past. They might have known I had spotted them."

"I dare say they were waiting for you to come back," replied Lennard. "Smart work, Blake! Jolly glad you came through it unharmed."

Later Blake learned that the two men were entirely unknown to the British police. They gave palpably false names, and refused to give any addresses.

But Sexton Blake knew they had both come from Tavis Manor.

Chapter 6.

Not in Chicago.

SOMETHING fresh in that Weston affair," reported Lennard, during the afternoon. "I'll admit I'm puzzled, Blake. Weston's overcoat has been found by a policeman on Waterloo Bridge, on the outside of the parapet of one of the piers, lying on a wide cornice, and in one of the pockets we found all the missing jewellery."

Blake looked grave and worried. "I don't like the sound of it, Lennard," he said. "It looks almost as though our mutual friend, Waldo, has come to a nasty end."

The inspector had dropped in, and he was rather surprised to see Blake looking so serious. He stared at the detective now with undisguised incredulity.

"But you don't mean that," he said. "Why don't I?"

"Isn't it obvious that Waldo was anxious to do the disappearing act?" asked Lennard. "First, he leaves those things in the taxicab—all definite clues—and then we find his overcoat, but no body, mark you. And bodies don't easily get out of overcoats."

"I wish I could believe you!" said Blake slowly. "But you're not going to tell me, Lennard, that a man of Waldo's ingenuity would adopt such a threadbare expedient. It's crude—so crude that it smacks of the real thing. I'm afraid you will find his body."

"Well, I'll admit it's upset all my calculations," growled Lennard. "Everything would have fitted if we hadn't found the jewellery in the pocket."

"And everything would have fitted if you didn't know that Weston is Waldo," added Blake.

"What do you mean?"

"Weston might conceivably have bolted with the jewels, being a mere shop assistant, and after he had bolted with them he got frightened," said Blake. "He was so frightened, in fact, that in remorse he jumped into the water. That would fit Weston, but it doesn't fit Waldo."

"But where does this lead us?"

"It leads us to the possibility of somebody who got the better of Waldo, either by accident or design, and who doesn't know his real identity," replied Blake shrewdly. "This somebody has no idea of the real truth, and he has sought to explain away Weston's disappearance by

dropping his coat and jewels on to a ledge on Waterloo Bridge to make it look like suicide. Perhaps Waldo was dropped in, too. This is bigger than you believe, Lennard, and before long I'll prove it to you."

"And I believe you will," grumbled Lennard. "I've heard that you questioned that taxi-man, and you've been pottering about somewhere else, haven't you? Can't you let me in on it?"

"I'll let you in on something to-night, Lennard, if everything goes as I expect," replied Blake. "Are you game to take a chance? Instead of going home to-night, will you stay at the Yard, ready to receive a call from me? If it comes off it'll be a big catch. If it doesn't come off you'll lose a night's sleep."

"I'll be there," said Lennard promptly.

TINKER was mystified by Blake's subsequent activities. The detective not only cleaned his automatic, but he filled the magazine, routed out a pair of thick rubber gloves and some hefty pliers. He also prepared a small coil of stout copper wire. All these things he stowed away in his overcoat pockets. After that he donned a pair of silent rubber boots and told Tinker to do the same.

"Getting a bit misty," said Blake, as he looked out of the window. "I wish



night would come, Tinker. I'm impatient. I hope this mist turns into a regular pea-soup fog."

"That's a funny thing to wish, guv'nor," said Tinker.

"Fog will mean that Van Skyler's floodlights will be useless," explained Blake. "You've guessed that we're paying Mr. van Skyler another visit, haven't you? But this time it's got to be a secret visit, and it will be attended by considerable risk. I'm not sure that I ought to take you."

"Now, guv'nor, if you're going to be funny—"

"All right, we won't argue," interrupted Blake. "You can come, young 'un. I may need you. I'm not going to wait until a late hour. As soon as it's dark we'll get to Kingston, and we'll get into the Tavis estate."

"But why worry about the floodlights?" asked Tinker. "They only light the house, don't they? They're only for show."

"Don't make the same mistake as the journalists," said Blake. "Those lights are there for a very definite purpose, and at a moment's notice they can be turned off the house and on to the park. I've no doubt that there are special searchlights on the roof. Mr. Croxley van Skyler is prepared for any emergency. That's why we shall have to be extraordinarily careful."

"What do you expect to do there, gov'nor?"

"I could tell the police a lot; but before I do that I want to make certain about Waldo," replied Blake. "Either Waldo was murdered last night—and, somehow, I reject that theory—or he is being kept a prisoner at Tavis Manor. If the latter, I want him to have a chance to get clear before the fireworks start going off."

"It's not like you to help a crook, sir, although Waldo's different, of course."

"I'm not thinking of that," replied Blake. "Waldo can take his chance; but if Van Skyler gets a hint that the police are coming down on him, he might fill Waldo with lead out of mere spite. That's what I want to save him from."

"Van Skyler!" ejaculated Tinker. "But he—he's—"

"He's one of the greatest rogues who ever came out of America!" broke in Blake grimly. "There's just a chance that Waldo is fooling him; that our old friend is in no need of help at all. I think it's very likely that Waldo recognised Van Skyler, just as I recognised him. And that was probably the cause of all the trouble. But I'm only guessing."

"And I'm in a mess," said Tinker helplessly. "You said something about recognising Van Skyler. Who is Van Skyler, then?"

"Did you ever hear of Tony Scarvak?"

"Who hasn't? He was as great a racketeer as Al Capone himself," replied Tinker. "But Tony Scarvak was killed in an explosion five years ago, when rival gangsters bombed him."

"That's what I thought," replied Blake. "But that man in Tavis Manor calling himself Croxley van Skyler, is Tony Scarvak?"

"Great Scott!"

"It sounds incredible, and yet the instant I recognised him everything connected with the House of Gold became clear," went on Blake. "In Chicago, Scarvak lived like a prince. He loved show. His funeral was the most staggering affair ever staged. Such a man may change his appearance, his name, his mode of living, but he can't change his character. Here, in Croxley van Skyler, is the same love of show; but even more exaggerated, as befits a reputedly honourable millionaire. The audacity of the man is startling. He's not even clever; but it is that very audacity which sees him through."

"But you were talking of Scarvak's funeral."

"I don't know how it was managed," said Blake. "Perhaps Scarvak's associates really believed that he had been killed, and the funeral was held in good faith by the widow. Oh, yes, Scarvak was married. The bomb that supposedly killed him, killed seven others. And those victims were—well, it's not easy to identify such victims. I remember that one or two of the badly injured gangsters were smuggled away. But everybody believed that Scarvak had died."

"And why are you so sure that he's Van Skyler?"

"His ears, Tinker," replied Blake grimly. "And the human ears are the only portion of the physiognomy which cannot be easily disguised. Van Skyler's ears are Scarvak's ears. Not one man in a thousand would notice anything peculiar about them; but, as you know, I have made a very careful study of ears. And Scarvak's interested me greatly, owing to certain unusual peculiarities. Something like a miracle



has been performed with the man's face, for it is totally different, and does not even appear to be scarred. It was this change in him, no doubt, which prompted him to start life afresh under a new name. You may remember that Scarvak's colossal fortune proved to be a fable. There wasn't any. Nobody could ever understand it. But now it is becoming clear that Scarvak took it with him."

Tinker shook his head.

"It's—it's gigantic!" he exclaimed. "I can understand you twigging his ears, gov'nor, but I can't see Waldo doing it."

"That's one of the most interesting features of the whole case," replied Sexton Blake. "I suppose you would call it a coincidence. Some time after Tony Scarvak's supposed death, Waldo was in this very room, chatting and smoking. That was when he was running straight, and conducting that Peril Expert Agency. The subject turned on Chicago crime kings, and we naturally got talking of Scarvak. I showed Waldo some photographs in my records—photographs of Scarvak's ears."

"We discussed every line of those ears. And Waldo has a remarkably retentive memory, Tinker. That's why I think Waldo recognised this man last night. He went there as an ordinary jewellery salesman, thinking to meet a harmless, but eccentric, American millionaire, and he found himself face to face with one of the greatest human reptiles of history. At least, that's my guess, for what it's worth; but it may be miles out."

"A good enough guess, gov'nor," said Tinker admiringly. "I mean, you've

built this up out of a few chance clues—"

"Nonsense!" said Blake. "There's a very solid foundation for my theorising. To-night I want to make certain of my facts."

"It looks like being a picnic!" murmured Tinker, in a hopeful voice.

ANTONIO SCARVAK, alias Mr. Croxley van Skyler, was pacing up and down his magnificent library in a tearing fury. Fletcher, his right-hand man, stood by impassively. He knew, from experience, that the storm would soon be over. Scarvak's tantrums were always brief. He inherited his quick temper from his Italian mother, and his murderous propensities from his Polish father. He was a bad mixture, and made doubly bad by his veneer of culture.

"They're hellava fine lot!" he burst out, swinging round on Fletcher. "I send them to put Blake out, and they get themselves juggled! In Chicago, the thing would have been easy—"

"But we're not in Chicago," broke in the other. "That's what you're always forgetting, Mr. van Skyler. I don't think our men were particularly careless. It was Blake who was particularly careful. His escape means that he must have had his suspicions as soon as he left here."

"But he didn't recognise me," said Scarvak, in alarm. "He couldn't! It's impossible! You know that, Fletch."

"Blake's uncanny," replied Fletcher



Scarvak flashed his torch into the faces of Waldo's prisoners. "So we meet again, Blake! I'm going to treat you just as I'd treat two ordinary housebreakers."

uneasily. "I think we can trust those mugs to keep their traps shut, Mr. van Skyler. They won't squeak. Still, Blake will guess, and when a man like Blake guesses, it's as good as a certainty."

It was a rule of the house that every member should address Tony as "Mr. van Skyler." But they all knew his real identity. Not one of them had accompanied him from Chicago, for such notorious gunmen as Scarvak's old mob would never have been admitted into Great Britain. He had spent over a year on the Continent, and there he had picked up a number of crooks whose misdeeds were unrecorded at Scotland Yard. Many of them were British, and all were having a soft time. Scarvak paid well.

"What had we best do, Fletch?" asked Scarvak suddenly. "If Blake's going to give me trouble—"

"He can't prove a thing," interrupted the other. "In my opinion, you made a mistake when you sent that car after him. Don't make another mistake. Leave Blake alone. You wouldn't deliberately take a drink of arsenic, would you?"

"Aw, you're too nervy, Fletch! You've got this dick on the brain. He's got no cause to connect us with those two guys."

Chapter 7. "Guards!"

WHILE Mr. Croxley van Skyler and his henchman were talking in the library the new bodyguard was taking a stroll round the grounds. Mr. Arthur Weston was duly impressed.

He came to the conclusion that Tavis Manor, and its walled estate, was a formidable stronghold. The "Militia" was not much in evidence during the day-time, just a stray uniformed man here and there.

Waldo was enjoying himself. This was quite a novel experience. He wondered what story had been told at Belfrage's regarding his non-arrival, that morning, in the watch and clock department. He had put one or two pointed queries to Mr. van Skyler, but he had obtained no satisfaction. And he was slightly annoyed. He knew perfectly well that if he attempted to get out of the estate he would be stopped, and that it would lead to trouble. And Waldo, being an adventurous individual, had made up his mind to put the thing to the test.

He would not have done so thus early in the game but for one fact. From his bed-room window, whilst concluding his toilet, he had witnessed the departure of the Grey Panther, complete with Sexton Blake and Tinker. Admittedly, Waldo had experienced a small jolt. It was queer how Blake consistently cropped up whenever he got hold of something unusually promising. Here he was, established in a millionaire's home, with gold all round him, and Blake had to butt in!

Of course, the hand of the great Mr. Belfrage was visible here. Evidently Weston had mysteriously disappeared, and Blake was making inquiries. What sort of story had Van Skyler told? Waldo wanted to know. He was particularly curious to know, too, why a big closed car had sped forth from Tavis Manor immediately after the departure of the Grey Panther.

"I shall have to start something," Waldo told himself. "My excellent boss is very amiable, but he is infernally uninformative. We shall have to remedy that."

And he walked casually to the great closed gateway at the end of the drive where the uniformed guards were on duty. They watched his approach with ill-disguised uneasiness. This was a new man, and although Mr. van Skyler had informed them that he was "quite all right," they were not quite sure how he would take things.

"So we meet again, colonel," said Waldo genially, recognising the man who had inquired his business overnight. "Still on duty, then? Don't you ever get any leave?"

"Glad to see that you're looking so well, sir," said the guard, ignoring the question. "After that bit of trouble last night you're lucky to be on your feet."

"I was born lucky," explained Waldo. "Well, who do you think you are—Horatius at the bridge? Kindly stand aside and open the portal. Mr. van Skyler's new one-man bodyguard craves tobacco."

"Anything you require, Mr. Weston, will be sent for," said the guard.

"I wouldn't dream of putting anybody to so much trouble," replied Waldo. "My legs are quite sound—and I'm going out. You don't think I really believe that bunkum—"

"My orders, sir, are to prevent you from leaving these grounds," said the other firmly. "Please don't take it the wrong way. Don't force me to start any unpleasantness. I'm only doing my job."

"That's what you said last night," nodded Waldo.

He was quite good-natured, and he attempted to pass the guards. For a moment he even thought of doing some of his characteristic stunt work. But he decided against it, for he had no wish to give Mr. van Skyler any hint—yet—as to his real identity.

"Sorry, sir—nothing doing!" said the guard grimly.

And this time forcible hands were laid upon him, and he felt the unmistakable touch of a gun-muzzle in the small of his back.

"Here, I say—" he began in pretended alarm.

"That's enough from you!" snapped the guard. "March, Mr. Weston—march smartly! You're going back to the house!"

"But—but— Really, I mean—"

Waldo seemed incoherent. He did it well. And by the time he and his captor reached the house he was looking shaky, and anger was mingled with his terror.

"All right, leave him with me," said Mr. van Skyler, after Waldo had been taken into the library. "No need to make a long story of it. He tried to get out, and you brought him back. Good enough! I was expecting something like this, and the sooner it came the better!"

Waldo was left alone with his employer.

"Hang it all, Mr. van Skyler, this is a bit thick!" protested Waldo in his best shop-assistant manner. "I accepted the job, but I don't see—"

"There's a lot you don't see—and a lot more you won't see!" broke in Scarvak harshly. "I told you the terms of your employment, and you agreed to those terms. See here, Weston. I'm not in the mood to beat about the bush! You've burned your boats—and you're staying here."

"I suppose you mean that you've burned my boats for me?" asked Waldo hotly. "What have you done?"

"I'll tell you what I've done," retorted the other, leaning back in his chair and moving his big cigar adroitly from one side of his mouth to the other. "To the outside world, you're dead. Your body is presumably floating somewhere down the Thames."

"What!" shouted Waldo, aghast.

"Thought that would convince you!" chuckled Tony. "But I'm your friend, Weston—don't forget that! You saved my life last night, and you're just one hellava fine guy with your hands. I need you right here. But no funny business."

"I suppose funny business is your own monopoly?" asked Waldo hotly.

"Keep your shirt on!" said Scarvak. "What difference does it make to you? Didn't you tell me that you're alone in the world? You'll collect your dough regularly, you'll lead a gentleman's life, and you've got a soft job. What more do you want? I had to safeguard myself."

And he coolly told Waldo of the steps he had taken.

"And that means, my friend, that if you put your nose outside these grounds, you'll be arrested," said Scarvak. "There's a warrant out for you right now—but I thought it would simplify things a whole heap to make the cops think you committed suicide. So that's that. Now you can get out! And remember—keep in the house!"

Waldo went away apparently chastened. He was very subdued, and his attitude was just what Tony Scarvak had expected. The man would be all right from now onwards. This show-down had to come, anyway.

Alone, Waldo permitted himself to smile. He had achieved his object. He knew just why Sexton Blake had been. The situation was becoming more piquant every hour.

"Good glory! What an arrant fool the man is!" mused Waldo, in wonder. "He deliberately leaves all those clues behind, and it's a cert that Scotland Yard knows my real identity by this time. Blake knows, too. But they haven't told my esteemed boss, and he, poor sap, still thinks I'm just a store salesman!"

The Wonder Man saw, with crystal clarity, that his game at Belfrage's was up. He would only be able to gaze upon the Gwalipore collection, as it were, from afar. Still, there were compensations to be had—here, right on the spot. But with Blake on the job, and Blake knowing everything there was to be known, Waldo came to the conclusion that he would have to get into action rapidly.

When he saw Van Skyler again the latter was as breezy and boisterous as ever.

"Looks like being misty," he said. "I'd like you to put a big coat on, Weston, and wander around the grounds this evening. My guards are active, but I'm taking no chances. I don't want a repetition of last night's affair—those toughs smashing in here and staging a stick-up. Think you're fit enough to go on duty?"

"You're the boss," growled Waldo sullenly. "I suppose I've got to do as I'm told."

And he walked away, leaving Scarvak chuckling.

THE mist did not descend so completely as Sexton Blake would have liked. It was only a thin, patchy mist. Down by the river, which was only a comparatively short distance from Tavis Manor, as the crow flies, the pall was fairly dense. But on the higher ground it lay in illusive and constantly moving drifts.

When Blake and Tinker arrived at the far extremity of the high wall which bordered the park there was practically no mist at all. This side of the house was clear. The flaring torches on the tower-tops burned luridly in the distance, and the floodlights cast an eerie radiance over the mansion.

"It's going to be a ticklish job, guv'nor," murmured Tinker, as he and Blake clung to the top of the wall and peered over. "There's no chance of getting near the house without being spotted, particularly if they switch searchlights on."

Blake dropped to the ground again and Tinker followed.

"Searchlights, young 'un, need current," said the detective calmly. "We must see if we can't do something about it. This is essentially an occasion where darkness, and the confusion resulting from the sudden extinguishing of lights, will be of great benefit."

Tinker whistled, and he began to understand the reason for the heavy rubber gloves, the pliers, the wire, and the other odds and ends Blake had stuffed into his overcoat pocket. For the detective was looking up at a great pole which stood near by.

Two high-power wires were carried into the private grounds of Tavis Manor. In the other direction, those high-power wires connected up, in the vague distance, with the main supply. If Blake cut the two wires, or shorted them in some way, Tavis Manor would be plunged into instant darkness, and the cunningly devised searchlights would be useless. Tinker was thrilled. This was going to be a real adventure!

And it was all the more breathless when he realised that it was mainly being done for Waldo's sake. If Waldo was still alive he was to be given a chance to get clear. Blake, knowing what he did, could have informed Scotland Yard, and that would have meant a spectacular raid. But Blake was worried about Waldo.

Tinker watched the detective as he adroitly shinned up the pole. A patch of mist rolled over and hid him. It was just as well. There was no telling where Tony Scarvak's guards were lurking.

Zzzzzzz!

Tinker heard a crackle and saw a bluish flash. At the same instant Tavis Manor was plunged into darkness. Blake came slithering down the pole, much to Tinker's relief, for monkeying with high-power cables was a tricky business.

"All right, Tinker, now for it!" said Blake crisply.

They leapt at the wall, swarmed over, and commenced a stealthy advance towards the house. Voices could be heard in the distance; some angry, some alarmed. There was evidently a good deal of confusion. It was just as Blake had planned.

"Down!" hissed the detective suddenly. "Behind these bushes!"

They crouched motionless while two

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men, coming out of a film of mist, plunged past, near them. Then they ran on again, getting nearer and nearer to the darkened house.

Again Blake's highly trained ears and eyes warned him. Again the pair avoided the "Estate Militia." They flung themselves flat in the grass, and a man ran past within a yard, and they could see him, outlined against the sky, with an automatic pistol in his hand.

"You saw that?" whispered Blake. "If they twig us, Tinker, they'll shoot. Come on—this way!"

They ducked through a rock garden and came out on a soft lawn beyond. Blake meant to get to the house, and, if possible, to enter in secret. There wasn't a soul near them now. The detective's keen senses told him that he and Tinker were alone.

But they told him a lie. For, apparently out of nothing, a silent figure materialised. It rose up from the surrounding darkness and leapt upon them with the incredible speed of a human panther.

"This way, guards!" yelled a familiar voice.

And two hands, like steel grips, fell upon Blake and Tinker. Strong and active as the pair were, they were helpless in that vice-like clutch.

"Well, Waldo, I'm glad you're alive," said Blake evenly. "It seems that I've been mistaken, Tinker," he added, in a bitter voice. "Our old friend is hand-in-glove with this crowd."

A startled exclamation sounded from their captor, and at the same time answering shouts came from various quarters. Figures in the distance came running up.

"May I be scissored!" ejaculated Waldo in disgust. "I thought you were a couple of cheap gunmen, after Van Skyler's blood. Honestly, Blake, I'm devilishly sorry!"

"You can let us go, can't you?" hissed Tinker.

"Too late!" whispered Blake. "Better hang on, Waldo. If not, you'll sign your own death warrant. I'm not afraid of these vermin."

"Then you'd better be," said Waldo. "This man isn't Van Skyler. He's Tony—"

"Scarvak!" completed Blake, nodding. "I was sure you knew!"

"And I was perfectly certain you knew, too," agreed Waldo. "Well, well! The situation becomes alluring. Remember the talk we had on ears, some years ago? My memory is a reliable one."

He suddenly changed his tone.

"Hold still, you rats!" he shouted.

SEVERAL armed guards had arrived, and they roughly seized Blake and Tinker and held them. They were astonished, too. For "Weston" had dealt with the pair with apparent ease.

Sexton Blake had been right in his judgment. If he and Tinker had broken away—and Waldo would have let them go as soon as he knew their real identity—the other guards would have fired at almost point-blank range. The pair had to thank Waldo for their capture—and the irony of it was, Waldo had no desire to nab them.

Blake had been clever enough to elude the ordinary guards. But Waldo, with his catlike gift of being able to see in almost total darkness, was in a class of his own. Tony Scarvak had

been quick to appreciate the difference between his bodyguard and his militia, and he appreciated it again.

"You blind fools!" he said harshly, as he came hurrying down from the terrace. "So these rats got past you, did they? It was left to Weston to spot them—and hold them! Well done, Weston! You're sure earning your salary!"

"I made a mistake," said Waldo gruffly. "And so have you, Mr. van Skyler. I undertook to act as your bodyguard against crooks. These gentlemen are Mr. Sexton Blake and Mr. Tinker; I've made a mistake."

"What!" shouted Scarvak exultantly. He flashed an electric torch into the faces of the prisoners.

"So we meet again, Blake!" he went on. "What's the idea of cutting my



power cables and trespassing on my property? I'm going to treat you just as I'd treat two ordinary house-breakers! Bring them in, boys!"

Blake and Tinker were quickly forced into the house. A few candles were burning here and there, casting a feeble, flickering light. The prisoners were taken into the library.

Scarvak gave rapid orders. Two or three men were to hurry off and locate the severed wires—and, if possible, effect a repair. Others were told to prepare a fast car. Fletcher remained in the library, and both he and Scarvak were handling big automatics. Blake and Tinker had already been relieved of their own guns.

"You've walked into a trap, Blake," said Scarvak, throwing the mask completely aside. "You escaped this afternoon, but this time I guess I'll make sure of you."

"So you admit that you are responsible for that attempt to murder me?" asked Blake pointedly.

"Aw, heck! I've got you here, and it's no time for fooling," retorted Scarvak. "You're too interested in my affairs, Blake. I'm going to make certain of you—right now! Fletch, open the strong-room."

Fletcher moved forward, touched a hidden spot on the desk, and the great desk itself swung completely round, revealing a flight of stone steps which led steeply downwards.

"Down there—both of you!" ordered Scarvak curtly. "You first, Blake! And if you try any tricks, I'll fill your spine with lead!"

"Look here—" began Waldo, in a frightened voice.

"Keep out of it, you!" snarled Scarvak.

"Yes, you'd better, Weston," said Blake. "Mr. Antonio Scarvak is re-

sorting to his old Chicago methods, and I'm afraid that he holds the trump card."

And as he spoke, Blake gave Waldo a swift, straight look—a look which said, as plain as any look could say—"Tinker and I are expecting you to get us out of this, Waldo!"

And Waldo did not move a hair. Whilst thoroughly understanding, he pretended to be shaky with consternation. And he knew that Blake was right. But for him, the pair would not be in this fix.

"What did I tell you?" panted Fletcher. "Blake's 'on.' He knew you from the first. Better think carefully, boss! He may have wised those mugs at the Yard—"

"It's the last time he will, then," retorted Scarvak, who was almost insane with fury. "He's butted in, and he's going to get what's coming to him. Down those steps, Blake!"

It would have been madness to resist, for Tony Scarvak was ready enough to loose his gun at the first sign of disobedience. He was desperate. That chance happening of last night had brought complete exposure, but, luckily, Blake and Tinker were the only ones who had recognised him.

"Follow me, Fletch!" he said briefly.

Blake and Tinker were forced down, each with a gun in his back, rammed home hard. And Blake was sensible enough to accept the inevitable. He knew the methods of Chicago gunmen.

At the bottom of the steps there was a little concrete chamber, the farther wall of which was completely filled by a steel door. Reaching round, Scarvak twirled the knob of the combination lock, and a moment later the door swung open. A great steel safe was revealed. The sides of it were lined with shelves, some of them fitted with drawers. There was just sufficient room in the centre for Blake and Tinker to squeeze in.

"Inside!" ordered Scarvak. "I'd plug you now, only I don't want any marks on you. Twenty minutes in this airtight strong-room, and you'll be dead. Then you're going for a long ride. I'm figuring to dump you both somewhere in Hampshire—in the New Forest, say. Maybe you'll not be found until next summer, and then it'll be too late for your bright cops of Scotland Yard to find any trail."

And with a curse he slammed the heavy door, and twirled the knob. He and Fletcher mounted the stairs again—and at the top they found Waldo.

"I say, look here!" protested the Wonder Man, in a very excited voice. "You didn't mean that just now, did you? You were only bluffing, weren't you?"

"You make me sick!" retorted Scarvak, glaring at him. "You're a useful bird, but you're too darned inquisitive. I'm paying you to do your job—and ask no questions."

"And do you expect me to stand here and see you kill people?" asked Waldo shrilly. "I won't! I'll get out of here and tell the police! I'm not going to be a party to—"

"That's enough from you!" broke in Fletcher, jamming his gun into Waldo's side. "I've been expecting this, Mr. van Skyler. What shall I do with the fool? He'll cause trouble unless we're careful."

"Lock him up!" retorted Scarvak. "He'll come to his senses later. He's useful. I've broken better men than him. We'll get this other thing off our minds before we bother with Weston."

Waldo was ready to go into action at once. But he changed his mind. Protesting feebly, shivering, he marched with Fletcher to the rear of the house, propelled by Fletcher's gun.

He was thrust into a near-by cellar, and he heard the key turned in the lock. Almost before Fletcher's footsteps had died away, Waldo had withdrawn a tiny picklock from the invisible "flesh pocket" he always wore. And his skilled fingers made short work of the lock.

Within one minute the door swung open, and he was out. He needed all the time he could get. The work in front of him was going to be tricky.

Chapter 8.

Entrance and Exit.

TAVIS MANOR remained in absolute darkness. When Sexton Blake had cut off the electricity supply, he had done the job thoroughly.

Waldo was grateful. His task was rendered the easier; for he found no difficulty in avoiding an occasional servant who carried either a candle or an electric torch. He knew that he would have to work rapidly. The car would soon be at the door—that car which was detailed to carry the dead bodies of Blake and Tinker to a remote spot in the New Forest.

Waldo reached the great hall without raising any alarm. He found the library door unlocked, and with the silence of a ghost, he slipped into the room. Tony Scarvak was pacing up and down alone. The man was looking at his watch.

"This is easy," said Waldo calmly.

As Scarvak swung round, reaching for his gun, the Wonder Man leapt. There was no time for Scarvak to yell. Something invisibly quick and hard struck him on the chin. He turned a back somersault, crashed over a big chair, sprawled on the polished oak beyond the carpet.

Waldo walked back to the door, closed it, and turned the key. He was only just in time. Somebody was trying the handle. Fletcher's voice sounded.

"Go away!" exclaimed Waldo, in a startling imitation of Scarvak's tone. "See if there are any dicks lurking about the grounds. And make it snappy, Fletch!"

"Just as you say, Mr. van Skyler," came Fletcher's voice.

Waldo returned to Scarvak, lifted him into a chair, relieved him of his gun, and tore down a silk rope from one of the hangings. With this he bound his prisoner in the chair. The task was just completed when Scarvak came back to life.

"You—you cursed fool!" panted Scarvak. "Who let you out of the cellar? What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm here to prevent you from committing murder," replied Waldo. "Blake and Tinker are in that strong-room, and they're coming out. What's the combination of that lock?"

Scarvak laughed insanely.

"I'm asking you!" retorted Waldo, advancing on the man.

"Go to blazes!" said Scarvak. "You sap! You may be strong, but you can't open that strong-room! I'll have you shot for this! I was a fool to keep you alive this long!"

"You never said a truer word," agreed Waldo, nodding.

He knew how to operate the desk, for

his keen eyes had followed Fletcher's manipulations. The great desk swung round, and Waldo descended the stone steps.

Scarvak's taunting invective followed him down, and his voice rose higher. Waldo changed his mind, ran up again, bound a scarf round Scarvak's face, and wheeled the chair to the top of the steps.

"I thought you might like to see me at work," explained Waldo cheerfully. "I can assure you I'm a snappy safe-breaker."

There was no cleverer safe expert in the world. For years Waldo had made a study of every known safe and strong-room—of every lock. He had trained himself so that his fingers were as delicate as tempered steel. And his hearing was such that he could recognise different shades of sound which were inaudible to the normal ear.

He crouched before the strong-room door, one ear to the steelwork, one hand on the dial knob. And Tony Scarvak watched in contempt. He believed that this idiot was merely trying to bluff him.

But Waldo had never been more in earnest. He was prepared to half-throttle Scarvak in order to choke the safe combination out of him; but he had decided to try his own skill first. He could have laughed. This great safe, in spite of its formidable appearance, was ordinary. It was a familiar make, and Waldo knew every trick of it. He listened with his highly sensitive ear, and he heard the whispering little sounds from within the steelwork which told him that he was conquering.

He had been prepared to allow himself five minutes, and then he would have concentrated on Scarvak. But within three minutes the safe door, in response to his touch, swung open. An inarticulate sound came from the amazed and dismayed Scarvak. Waldo glanced up at him.

"That's the worst of installing these cheap sardine cans," he remarked. "Far better have a real safe while you're about it."

He was not surprised when Blake and Tinker staggered out, more or less unharmed. They had begun to suffer from the lack of oxygen—but only just. The fatal ten minutes would have been the second ten, for Scarvak had given them a limit of twenty.

"Thanks!" began Blake.

"Don't thank me, you dirty 'nose'!" interrupted Waldo contemptuously. And, at the same time, he deliberately treated Blake to an elaborate wink which was beyond Scarvak's vision. "Out of here—both of you! This is my game, and I'm not standing any interference from you! I'm only letting you out now because I draw the line at killing."

Blake and Tinker, breathing heavily, passed up the steps into the showy library. Scarvak was staring insanely. Waldo ignored him.

"Now quit!" said the Wonder Man harshly.

"I don't understand you, Weston," said Blake, adroitly falling in with Waldo's unspoken game of bluff. "I came here to help you. Mr. Belfrage commissioned me—"

"I don't need your help, or anybody else's," broke in Waldo deliberately. "Get this, and let it sink in. I'm not Weston, and I didn't come here to sell jewellery. Call yourself a detective? Don't you know who I am?"

Blake gave a violent and realistic start.

"Good heavens!" he ejaculated. "You're Waldo!"

"That's better!" said Waldo, nod-

ding. "You can go to the top of the Form. Waldo it is. Did you hear that, Mr. Tony Scarvak? Or are you so ignorant that you've never heard of me?" He spun round on Blake. "Get out!" he said fiercely. "Get out to your pals at Scotland Yard while you've got the chance!"

And Blake understood. Waldo was telling him two things. Firstly to go and fetch the police, and secondly to leave him—Waldo—to take any pickings which were available at Tavis Manor. This was his game, and he was intimating to Blake that he had a right to play it in his own way—as a return for saving Blake's life.

"You think you can get away with this, Waldo, but you're wrong," said Blake sternly, with his face as solemn as a judge's. "I'm unarmed, so you have the advantage. Tinker and I are helpless. We must go."

And with calm dignity Blake and Tinker went. And no sooner had they got outside than they streaked across the park in the darkness; and Blake was gripping the automatic which Waldo had secretly thrust into his hand at the last moment.

Tinker was feeling a bit bewildered by the time they had scrambled over the wall, and were in the open, healthy street.

"I don't understand, gov'nor!" he panted. "You're not going to leave Waldo there, are you? They'll murder him!"

"Waldo has looked after himself so far, and he can carry on," replied Blake. "It's a ticklish situation, Tinker. We mustn't side with Waldo, or we shall be against the law. But, by Jove, I'm with him, heart and soul, just between ourselves. That man is a sport. He paved the way for us to get away, and he means to deliberately delay things so that Scarvak's guards won't know the truth, and so that we can have time to get back with a strong police force."

"And they call Waldo a crook!" said Tinker disgustedly.

Within two minutes they arrived at a telephone box. Blake quickly got through to the Yard, and he was connected with Chief Inspector Lennard's office.

"Hallo! That you, Blake?" came Lennard's sleepy voice. "Well, anything doing?"

"A lot," replied Blake. "I want you to bring out the entire Flying Squad to Kingston—to Tavis Manor."

"Van Skyler's place?" ejaculated Lennard.

"Not Van Skyler, but Tony Scarvak," replied Blake. "I can provide you with all the proofs. Rush here with all speed, Lennard!"

"I believe there's a couple of Squad vans in the neighbourhood of Kingston at this very minute!" said Lennard excitedly. "Hang on, Blake! I'll get in touch with them. I say, you're not fooling me, are you?"

IN the library of Tavis Manor, Rupert Waldo had relocked the door, and once again he had sent people away who came demanding admittance. And to Scarvak's horror Waldo had again used Scarvak's own voice. The American racketeer could guess what it meant. Waldo was after loot. The very instant Scarvak had known the real identity of his "protege" he felt physically sick. For Waldo's name, it appeared, was known even in America.

"I hate being disturbed," said Waldo softly, as he stepped over to his bound

victim. "Now, Mr. Scarvak, rumour has it that you are a rich man. In the guise of Croxley van Skyler you have been spending money like water. I'll trouble you to tell me where you keep the guilty hoard."

Scarvak shook his head and glared.

"I dare say you keep a tidy section of your blood money in various Continental banks," continued Waldo. "But a man of your stamp, Scarvak, always keeps a healthy wad close at hand—in case of a sudden alarm. I'm after your emergency pile."

The startled look in Scarvak's eyes told Waldo that he had scored a bulls-eye. But again the cornered ex-racketeer shook his head. He was not great on brains, but he was obstinate.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," pursued Waldo, in that same calm, conversational voice. "I'll lock you in this strong-room of yours, and I'll keep you there until you thump on the door, as an indication that you have changed your mind."

And then Waldo experienced an unexpected thrill. For as he made the threat a light of evil cunning leapt into Scarvak's eyes. It was only an infinitesimal flash; but it told Waldo, plainly enough, that the strong-room which was to have been the tomb of Sexton Blake and Tinker had no terrors for Scarvak.

"That gives you a fright, doesn't it?" asked Waldo, giving no indication that he had seen that brief look. "Your own medicine, Scarvak. How does it appeal to you?"

He tore the scarf aside, and Scarvak took a deep, hoarse breath.

"Lock me in!" he panted, with far too much eagerness. "I'm not frightened of your threats! I'm telling you nothing, you double-crossing cur! You won't last long!"

"I'm willing to bet that I shall last longer than you," replied Waldo calmly. "Have you thought what it's like to be cooped up in an air-tight strong-room? I can assure you, Scarvak, it's an infernally nasty business. The air gets more and more foul, and you find that breathing becomes horribly difficult. Later, madness gets you in its grip, and you mangle your knuckles on the hard steel. Don't you think you'd better tell me where I can find that loot?"

Scarvak remained adamant, and Waldo pictured an even more terrifying scene of the interior of an air-tight strong-room. Twice he was interrupted by Fletcher, who demanded admittance; twice he clapped a hand over Scarvak's mouth, and told Fletcher, in Scarvak's voice, to go to a hot place. Exactly what Fletcher thought of all this, Waldo did not know—or care.

He was achieving his object; he was wasting time.

And while he talked with Scarvak his thoughts were busy. There could be only one reason why Scarvak wanted to be locked in the strong-room. And when Waldo thought the thing over, the solution was as obvious as daylight. He almost made the mistake of grinning openly.

And then suddenly his acute ears caught some sounds which were denied to Tony Scarvak. The faint, distant purring of cars! Waldo even heard the vague shouting of men. And unmistakably came the staccato reports of automatic pistols.

Scarvak himself heard the latter sounds.

"Time we were moving," said Waldo briskly. "I hate doing this. Scarvak,



The safe door swung open. "Out of here, both of you!" said Waldo, as Blake and Tinker staggered forward. "This is my game and I'm not standing any interference from you!"

but I didn't come to your house for my health. I'll lock you in the safe, and give you ten minutes to change your mind."

He yanked Scarvak's bulky figure to his feet, and with a few deft movements he unfastened the ropes. But if Scarvak thought of making a break for liberty, this thought was rudely shattered by the amazing grip on his shoulder.

"You first, Scarvak," said Waldo, indicating the stairs. "I hope I know my manners!"

And he dug his gun thoughtfully into Scarvak's back. The ex-racketeer lurched down the steps with frantic haste.

"Chicago. That's the combination word, isn't it?" asked Waldo. "Shockingly unoriginal, Scarvak. Surely you could have done better than that? 'Scaffold' might have been a better word—or even 'chair.'"

Scarvak turned a pair of blazing, foolishly triumphant eyes on him.

"Lock me in!" he taunted. "I'll never give way!"

"Poor sap!" said Waldo, shaking his head.

And as he was thrusting Scarvak into the safe and slamming the door, he heard the sound he had expected—the smashing of the library door above. Already there had been shots out in the hall. Now a number of men flooded

into the library, and they were only dimly visible in the weak light cast by the candles on Scarvak's desk.

Sexton Blake was foremost, and behind came a number of uniformed policemen and an inspector. Blake's torchlight flashed down into the stone stairway.

"I'm just in time, it seems!" shouted Waldo. "So-long, Blake. I'd like to stay, but I don't think it would be wise."

With a wrench he opened the safe door and flung himself inside.

"Stop him!" yelled the police inspector. "That's Weston, and he's Waldo! What's the fool done?"

"Locked himself in Scarvak's strong-room," replied Blake in astonishment. "Scarvak's gone, and Waldo's game is mystifying."

WALDO'S judgment was uncanny. He had given Tony Scarvak the right amount of time to a second. For as the Wonder Man swung open the safe door he saw the entire back section disappearing, and Scarvak was going with it. Ten seconds later and Waldo would have missed his man. He had given Scarvak just the right amount of time to open the second strong-room door which was cunningly concealed at the rear,

"Not just yet, Tony," said Waldo, and his voice was now like a whip-lash.

He darted through the passage, gripped Scarvak, and hauled him back. And Scarvak screamed in his rage and terror. Waldo's guess had been accurate. The "strong-room" was really a passageway leading to a secret escape route. A cunning enough device, for in the event of a surprise Scarvak had only to shift his desk, run down the steps, and lock himself in the strong-room and pursuit would be completely baffled. It would take experts hours to force that strong-room door. And during that period of grace Scarvak could have got miles away.

Waldo held his man with ease, and he had clapped one hand over Scarvak's mouth.

"Blake!" he yelled. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," came Blake's faint voice.

"I must have been mad to lock myself in here!" roared Waldo. "The combination word is 'Chicago.' If you let me out I'll promise to go quietly."

As he spoke he gave Scarvak a push, stepped backwards, and then thudded the second door into place. The first one opened, lights were flashed in, and Blake received something of a staggerer.

"Scarvak!" he ejaculated.

Scarvak was inarticulate. The police-inspector was nearly in the same condition.

"But—but Scarvak and Waldo must be one and the same!" he managed to gasp at last. "It was Waldo who went in, and—and—"

"And Waldo is one of the trickiest, slipperiest men under the sun," interrupted Blake. "Don't you understand, inspector? There's a second door at the rear—and that's going to baffle us. I'm afraid Waldo is going to get clean away."

And Tinker grinned contentedly.

On the other side of the secret door Waldo found himself in a low tunnel. He had half-expected to find an inner strong-room, but he was wrong. The tunnel sloped downwards, and it was narrow and slimy and old. He recognised it, in fact, as a disused sewer.

He was right. Sixty years earlier the Marquis of Tavis had put his own drainage into Tavis Manor, and this master sewer ran right down to the Thames. Later, it had been condemned by the authorities, and more modern drainage had been installed. Waldo, for the first time, gave Tony Scarvak the credit of possessing a few brains. This "getaway" exit was clever.

It was even cleverer than Waldo first believed. For when at last he came to the end of it, he found a second strong-room door—and when he tried the word "Chicago," the door at once opened. And he found himself within a very ordinary-looking boathouse—one which contained a powerful motor-boat, floating placidly, and ready for instant departure. An examination of her lockers was entirely satisfactory; for that boat was stuffed with tens of thousands of pounds in American dollars and golden coins of all descriptions. There was a vast hoard here. Tony Scarvak's personal cash, in readiness for a quick getaway.

And when Waldo tried the doors which led to the open river, he found them to be of steel. Scarvak was taking no chances. This boathouse, incidentally, was supposedly owned by a man named Drayton, who had no connection whatever with Mr. Croxley van Skyler.

Waldo opened the doors, started up the engine, and glided away to freedom—with enough cash to last him for many a long day. Not that it would. Waldo's make-up was peculiar, and it was any odds that he would spend the major portion of that money on charity.

Tony Scarvak's frantic directions

were incoherent at first. Knowing that he could not escape himself, he sought to prevent Waldo's. And at last he made Blake and the police understand. Blake, of course, had been purposely obtuse.

When an armed force went to the boathouse of Mr. Drayton, the boat was gone, and not a trace of it was ever found, either up or down the river. Blake had a suspicion that Waldo had deliberately sunk the craft not a great many miles from Kingston—after which he had walked off with his booty, and had then gone to earth.

Antonio Scarvak, blackmailer, murderer, woman-torturer, was formally arrested, and charged, amongst other things, with using a forged passport, and residing in England under false pretences. Even if he escaped the other charges, he was certain for deportation to America. And that meant that his enemies would soon put him "on the spot."

"It's a death sentence!" he screamed to Blake, who interviewed him in the bare barrenness of his quite unsumptuous police court cell. "It's a death sentence! They'll take me for a ride and bump me off! That man Weston—Waldo—I oughta croaked him while I had the chance, the cheap crook! I—"

But Blake butted in. To him the difference between this debased killer and the chivalrous Wonder Man was too obvious to need emphasising.

"Waldo might be a crook, in the technical sense," he said; "but he's got no greed of gold, or brutality, either. He's not like you, Scarvak; all he is really out for is excitement—and he doesn't need a bodyguard, either."

And with that contemptuous remark Blake took his departure from the cell, leaving the King of Kingston to British justice—and Chicago's.

THE END.

DOWNFALL OF MR. REECE.

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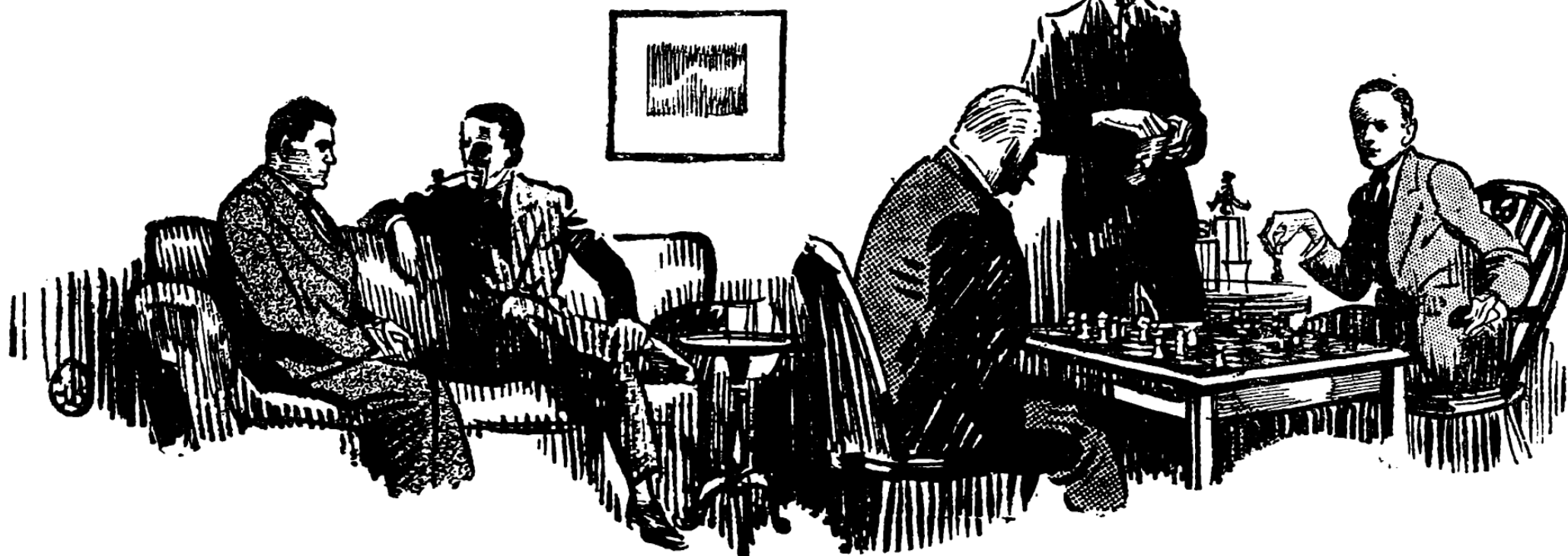
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Also—Waldo fans please note—another Wonder Man yarn will be appearing two weeks from now.

The NEXT MOVE



By . . . Robert Murray, Anthony Skene G. H. Teed . . . and . . . Gwyn Evans.
With, as referee of the match . . . The Editor.

The 13th and FINAL ROUND—by G. H. TEED.

(To be concluded next week.)

Back from the Shadows.

DARKNESS! Complete, impenetrable darkness, and ominous silence, but for the intermittent roll of loose stones and earth that soon died away as the last dislodged fragments trickled their way to a resting-place.

There was something terribly awesome in the swiftness with which everything had been blotted out in that sudden, catastrophic fall of the roof in the tunnels under the old houses in Petty France. The struggling Blake and Brank, the anxious Tinker and Splash Page, and the toiling Dirk Dolland—who throughout the battle at his back had grimly stuck to his job of drilling the safe with the sweat pouring from him as he strove to get the drill-point through the steel door and admit air to the suffocating Roxane before it was too late—all alike were appalled and momentarily stunned by the crash of the world collapsing, as it seemed, into chaos.

It was an eternity of time before there was any movement in the place, except that faint pattering of stone and earth sliding from top to bottom of the roof-fall, but actually it was only a space of less than a minute before a voice came from somewhere indefinite and unlocatable in that blackness—a faint and feeble groan.

From another direction came, at first, an indistinct scuffling sound, a fresh pattering of falling earth-clods, and one or two dragging footsteps.

"Is that you, Tinker?"

"Yes. Is it you, Splash?"

"Yes; you all right?"

"I—I think so." But the voice obviously indicated pain or difficulty in breathing. "Held by the legs. Wait

Foreword.

LOCKED in a safe to which she alone knows the combination, is Mlle. Roxane. Grouped round the outside of the safe which is situated in the catacombs beneath Petty France, London, are Sexton Blake, Tinker, Splash Page and Dirk Dolland.

These four are joint allies with her of Morgan Gilson, escaped from Devil's Island, whose innocence can only be proved by documents in the safe. The four are in the power of the master criminal Brank, with whom they have been fighting a ruthless campaign for possession of the safe and its contents.

Brank, too, wants the safe open. Inside are the proceeds of his colossal bank frauds. Under the threat of Brank's gun, and knowing that to save Roxane the safe must be opened, Dolland starts to work on the steel door with his old cracksman's tools.

Blake seizes a chance to throw himself on Brank. Whilst the two are fighting the tunnel collapses, and the two are cut off from the rest, but they continue to fight frenziedly until they both fall into an underground stream.

The fall of the tunnel roof not only isolates Tinker, Splash Page and Dirk Dolland from the struggling crook and detective, but buries them in a cascade of earth and debris.

After the catastrophe, darkness and sinister silence fall on the catacombs and the safe in which Roxane is still a prisoner.

The final round by G. H. Teed now follows.

a minute. Got to crawl out. What's happened? Where are the others?"

"I'm here." It was Dirk Dolland's voice.

"Where's the guv'nor? Guv'nor! Where are you? Guv'nor!"

Tinker had dragged himself to his knees, and as he called to Blake in the solid blackness, his voice echoed and re-echoed within the confines of the narrow, vaulted passage.

But no Blake answered.

The three of them—Tinker, Dirk

Dolland, and Splash Page—groped and guided each other by voice and hand towards the bottom of the heap of debris, and, halting there, held hurried consultation.

"Who's got a light?"

"What's become of Blake? And Brank—where's Brank?"

"What's happened, anyway? The roof—"

"Roxane! Gosh, she's still in that safe!"

"The way's blocked. We—"

"A light! Who's got matches? Quick, somebody—"

The exclamations came tumbling from one and another of them, jerked out with anxious, urgent concern, as they stood gripping each other's arms or shoulders with an intensity that each was quite unaware of in the tension of the moment.

"Not a torch amongst us!" snapped Splash. "Where's the torch Blake had before Brank started shooting?"

"Under this cursed heap of dirt!" growled Dirk Dolland.

The ominous words struck a chill to the hearts of everyone, and even of Dolland himself, when he realised their significance; that if the torch was buried under that mass, Sexton Blake was, too.

"Here, I've got a match!"

There was a quaver of hope, or anxiety, or both in Tinker's voice as he exclaimed the words. Then came the scrape of a match-head and a burst of brilliance that made them screw up their dirt-rimmed, staring eyes. It was only a feeble match flame, but after that darkness the light was almost overpowering in the first second or so.

But before it burned out they saw what had happened. The pile of fallen earth and stones completely blocked the floor of the tunnel, and, so far as they could see, reached up to the roof. There was no sign of

Blake or Brank—no hand sticking up out of the heap, or visible portion of any clothing.

The light flickered out.

"My gosh; I—I——"

Tinker's exclamation trailed away into an uncomfortable silence as his heart almost stood still with a wrench of cold fear for his beloved master.

"Blake!" yelled Splash. "Bla-ake!"

Silence. Each could hear his own heart throbbing in his throat.

Another of Tinker's matches flared up.

"Only two more in the box," he said, as he held it up and they stared at the grim, immovable barrier before them.

Splash Page scrambled up the sloping front of it, wedged himself in the narrow space by the roof, groped about feverishly, tossing lumps of clay and stone behind him down the slope.

"Pretty solid up here!" he gasped. "No way through that I can see."

The light faded a little as the match burned down. Tinker reversed it in his fingers, held the hot, dead end while the flame, taking a final lease of life, brightened as it consumed the last bit of wood on the stick. Then the match went out.

For some moments more stones and clods came rolling down. Then Splash himself followed, and stumbled to his feet at the bottom in the darkness.

"Can't find a way through!" he muttered. "Gosh, if we only had spades and lights!"

"Can't one of us go back——"

"No. It's all hands on deck! By the time we could get things he'd be—— We've got to dig with our hands in the dark! Come on, no time for anything now!"

"Hey!"

It was Dirk Dolland's voice that made that sudden exclamation. They heard his footsteps stumbling back towards the safe.

"Carry on, you two!" he called back. "I'll be there in a minute. I think——"

The newspaperman and Tinker began to scabble at the heap of dirt without stopping to ask what he was doing. But in less than half a minute Dirk Dolland had groped his way back to them.

"Where's your matches, Tinker?" he demanded. "Quick, now! Let me get close to you. I've got a bit of candle."

"Candle!" they both exclaimed, with a burst of relief.

"Yes. Suddenly thought of it. In my tool kit. I use it for lead-soldering sometimes." Tinker felt his arm gripped as he tugged the matchbox out of his pocket, then Dirk Dolland's fingers on his hand as the ex-cracksman steered the candle to where the light would be.

"Two matches left!" was the thought in Tinker's mind as his fingers groped in the box.

"Ready?" he said aloud.

"Yes. Here's the candle. The wick's probably squashed down a bit.

Been knocking about loose in the tool-bag."

Tinker scraped the match on the box.

Nothing happened.

"Wrong end!" he muttered, and reversed it. The same thing again.

He felt it carefully. There was no head to the match. It was one of those duds that often intrude into a box of matches.

His heart sank as he realised how much depended on the other—the last match. Supposing that were a dud, too?

But that flared up noisily and brightly without fail, its effect exaggerated by their intensity upon it. Even Splash had stopped clawing at the heap of rubble to look on, and their faces were illumined in Rembrandtesque relief as they surrounded the feeble light that began to sputter from the candle wick and then burned up steadily in a clear flame.

Dirk Dolland bedded the candle safely on a lump of soft clay that had rolled to the floor, and by its light they set about their colossal and perhaps hopeless task against time. Only a bare inch of candle was between them and the onset of darkness once more. If they did not find Blake by the time it went out. . . .

DURING these few crowded minutes they had almost forgotten the peril of Roxane, immured in the airtight safe, and whose safety depended on Dirk Dolland's boring a hole through the tough steel in time to admit air.

"I'll keep on at the safe!" ejaculated Dolland, as the thought of the girl came back to him. "You two carry on here! No time to lose!"

But already the other two had thrown themselves at the roof-fall. They needed no urging.

Tinker set a pace that even the agile Splash found difficult to follow. Driven by frantic dread for Blake, the lad tore at the rubble, caring nothing for broken nails or bleeding hands.

So short a time before, he had seen Blake on that very spot, locked in desperate struggle with Brank. Now he had been wiped out just as if an invisible hand had swept him out of existence, and in his place was this barrier of dead earth and stone.

Could it be possible that Sexton Blake, the one who had been everything in the world to him, had been blotted out in this manner?

The thought drove Tinker nearly mad. Splash guessed what the lad was thinking easily enough. He turned his head to speak a word of comfort.

"Steady on, old son. If he's here we'll get him!"

Something that sounded like a sob broke in Tinker's throat.

"Here—under—this!" he panted.

Then he went at the heap again with a fury that was amazing. Splash said no more. He, too, held

a deep affection for Blake, and it galled him to the soul to think that he had to pass out under such circumstances. Yet, in his heart of hearts, he could not tell Tinker that he thought there was little hope. He could only keep the lad company in his frantic endeavours until they uncovered—what?

In front of the safe, Dirk Dolland was drilling as never before. He had some faint hope that the holes he had already pierced through the heavy steel would admit sufficient air to keep Roxane alive, though those holes looked woefully small for such a purpose.

Never in his palmiest days as the slickest safe-cracker at large had Dolland worked with greater will. Never did safeguarded prize urge him to energy as did the prisoner who lay behind that door of battleship steel—dead or alive, none could tell.

Those three strove with no thought of self. There was something more than heroic in the way in which each had tackled his allotted job and was giving everything he had to it.

And all the time the bit of candle end was growing smaller and smaller. Dirk, who could watch it out of the corner of his eye, was first to see a tell-tale flicker.

He said nothing to the other two. It might hold out for a minute or so yet, and every second was precious.

He kept on grinding away at the drill, the sweat dripping in great beads from his forehead.

The sputtering became almost constant now, and caught the attention of Splash. But he said nothing to Tinker. The lad was almost up to the top of the pile of debris, clawing away close to the vaulted roof of the tunnel, tearing at the rubble as if he would drag the whole heap away bodily.

There seemed to be a silent conspiracy between Splash and Dirk not to tell him what was threatening. But it served only for a few moments. For, after a violent sputtering that caused the flame to grow brighter for a few seconds, the wick of the candle subsided into the pool of its own grease and, with a wet sizzle, vanished.

IT was a cry from Tinker that broke the silent chagrin that seized Splash and Dirk.

From where they were they could not understand what caused the excitement in the lad's voice. They believed that it was only angry disappointment at the loss of the light. But when he shouted a second time, Splash went scrambling up the heap of debris until his hands came in contact with Tinker's legs.

"A light! A light!"

Tinker's voice was muffled, for his head and shoulders were thrust through an opening he had clawed between the top of the heap of rubble and the broken roof of the tunnel—an opening that Splash Page himself would have made had the glimmer of Tinker's first matches lasted a little longer.

Splash was trying to get higher, and now he could see a gleam of light over Tinker's shoulder.

"A light, I tell you!" came back Tinker's voice. "I believe it's the torch. Guv'nor! Guv'nor! Give me a push through, Splash!"

Splash was quite as excited as Tinker now. Getting under the lad's buttocks, he gave a heave that sent Tinker slithering through the opening, carrying a heap of small rubble with him as he went.

He vanished from Splash's ken, but there came a confusion of sound as he rolled down the other side of the heap.

Then Splash could see through the hole, and caught sight of the light that had attracted Tinker's attention. He waited only long enough to withdraw his head and shout down to Dirk.

"Can you work in the dark, old man?"

"You bet I can! I'll stick to this. You go with Tinker!"

Splash scrambled through and rolled down the slope to fetch up with a thud at the bottom. Tinker was already on his feet racing towards the light. Splash came up and followed him. He found Tinker with a torch in his hand—the same, he knew, that had been there when Blake and Brank were fighting.

But where were Blake and Brank? Now, with the aid of the torch, they could see where the ground of the tunnel had caved in, but it still seemed that the first fall must have smothered the two struggling antagonists.

Tinker swung the light this way and that. The glare fell on water close to them, a pool that lay at the bottom of a slope revealed by the cave-in.

Then they both saw something at the same moment, something that caused Tinker to give a great cry and Splash to spit out a sharp imprecation—a human face almost submerged by the black water.

Reckless of his footing, Tinker slithered down the slope to the edge of the water. From this point he could throw the light right on to the area of water where that white face seemed to float, and another cry broke from him. There could be no mistaking the features of Sexton Blake—pallid, dead-looking.

Splash caught at the lad's arm, but he was already plunging into the water. Holding the torch in one hand, he began swimming towards that white mask that floated ahead.

Splash followed. Together they reached the spot, and now Tinker sobbed audibly and unashamedly as Splash got his arms under Blake's shoulders.

Only then did they see that something else was more submerged beside Blake. They knew it for Brank; but, in that moment of terrible dread, they had no time for anyone but Blake.

Somehow they got him to the edge and up the bank. It was useless to go back after Brank now. He was beyond aid, beyond paying any

penalty in this world for the long, cold-blooded string of crimes he had committed.

But Tinker had even forgotten his existence. It was Blake, only Blake, that filled his whole consciousness.

Leaving the torch on the ground, they went to work. Both had had plenty of experience in reviving persons who were apparently drowned, and now they had cause to bless the fact.

Every possible thing was done. Slowly, patiently, steadily, they applied artificial respiration, pausing



only long enough to try and discover if even a tiny spark of life still remained in that still form.

Never in his life had Splash Page looked as grim as now. Gone was all his laughing, care-free insouciance. He was as racked with dread as Tinker, and only his own admonition, spoken aloud, kept him from becoming feverishly impetuous.

"Mustn't panic, old son, mustn't panic!" he kept saying, and Tinker kept nodding dumbly.

But at the end of many minutes they could not keep their eyes from meeting. Each read the same dread in those of the other. It was hopeless.

"I tell you it can't be, it can't be!" Tinker groaned at last. "The guv'nor can't go under this way! We've got to try something else. There must be something! You haven't any brandy, I suppose?"

"Good grief, old son, if I had I'd have got it out long ago! This is awful. He can't be gone. I can't think of a thing. If I could get out of here to get a doctor."

"No time for that. We've got to think of something! Got to, do you hear me, Splash?"

They were at work again, but suddenly Tinker paused and grabbed Splash's arm until it hurt.

"Listen, Splash! You know that bag of Dirk's?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"He carried a full kit of safe-breaking stuff. He might have some

nitro-glycerine. I'll keep on here. Be quick, Splash! Take the torch."

Splash looked at the lad as if he had suddenly gone mad. But he did not pause to ask or argue. Rising, he made a dive for the heap of debris and scrambled up.

He crawled through the hole and tumbled down to the bottom. Dirk was still sweating at the door of the safe, the circle of holes being almost perfect, so delicate was his touch and so true his sense of distance.

Quickly, Splash told him what had happened, and what they wanted. Dirk grabbed the kitbag.

"I don't know what he wants it for, but here is a small bottle of the stuff. I use it for jolting open safe doors. For the love of Mike, handle it carefully, Splash! What the devil does he want it for, though?"

"Dunno. Do you think there is any hope here?"

"I don't know, but I'll cut this combination clean out before I finish."

"Good luck to you! I'll tell you about Blake when I come back."

He was gone again, scrambling up the heap. When he was back beside Tinker, he thrust forward the phial of explosive.

"What are you going to do with it, Tinker?"

"Listen, Splash! I remember the guv'nor telling me once about nitro-glycerine being a powerful heart stimulant. He told me about a case where he had seen it used; but that was in the form of an injection. Well, we haven't any syringe, and I don't know how it would act if we gave a few drops internally. But I've got a plan."

"Yes—yes?"

Splash was growing more and more excited.

"I'm going to make an incision in the guv'nor's arm and start a few drops into his blood stream. We'll massage after that and watch. It's the only hope left, Splash. It's his life at stake."

"Tinker, it's a terrible risk, but if you think—"

"I do think, Splash! The guv'nor would wish it. He wouldn't flinch if he knew."

"That's enough for me, old son."

They worked fast, then. Splash got out his knife, and they opened a vein, for, if the blood stream was moving at all, the vein must take it coursing back to the heart.

Then, very gently, with his own hands, Tinker forced a few drops of the nitro-glycerine into the cut. It was a rough-and-ready operation at best, but it was a forlorn hope.

They bound the wound hastily, and set to work once more. Minute after minute went by, and still that form lay dank and dead; still those pallid features were like chalk.

Then suddenly Tinker gave a great cry. He bent lower and worked more feverishly than ever. A second cry broke out, but this time it was Splash.

"His eyelids, Tinker! They moved!"

It was true. Slowly—ever so slowly—a faint tinge of colour came into

the waxen cheeks. The lips that had been blue turned pink again. The lids fluttered once more, and then the eyes opened wide.

Sexton Blake had come back from the very deeps of the Valley of the Shadow.

IT was many more minutes before Blake was sitting up.

But, when he did, his first words were for Roxane. Tinker and Splash glanced furtively at each other. They did not want to tell Blake their dread while he was in such a weak state.

But the man's will was dominating even this great weakness that had seized upon him. Somehow he managed to force his mind to sort out the confusion of ideas until he remembered what had happened up to that terrible moment when he had been flung headlong in the midst of a roar of falling roof.

He insisted on scrambling to his feet, and then, supported by the two of them, staggered towards the heap of debris.

At the bottom he paused. For the first time he seemed to remember Brank.

"Brank!" he muttered. "Where's Brank?"

"Gone, guv'nor; gone for good! He's finished. We'll attend to him presently."

"I remember. Nev' mind now. Mus' get Roxane."

The same indomitable will carried him over that heap of rubble and down the other side.

He swayed as Tinker flashed the light on Dirk, who was still grinding away at the drill. He took one look at Blake, and seemed to understand all that had happened.

"Hallo, Blake," he said. "Glad you pulled through. 'This won't be long now. We'll be through in another quarter of an hour."

Blake frowned, and pushed forward.

"What're you doin'?" he asked, in the same thick tones.

"Getting through to Roxane," returned Dirk patiently.

"Crazy—crazy fellow! You've got holes, haven't you?"

All three were now looking at Blake. Dirk was turning back to go on with his drilling, when Blake lurched forward and grasped his arm.

"Use your voice," he said, in tones that were more his own. "If she's alive she'll hear you now."

"My sainted aunt!"

The exclamation burst from Dirk.

"Of all the chuckle-headed idiots, I'm the prize goat!"

He dropped the drill, and, putting his mouth close to the steel door, began to shout Roxane's name.

Quite as excited, Tinker grabbed up the drill and began to hammer on the steel. The pair of them continued to shout and listen, and then Blake's last remnant of haziness vanished as, seemingly from a great distance, they heard a faint answer.

The excitement grew more and more intense as Dirk shouted once more, and this time they heard Roxane's answer, faint but perfectly clear.

Tinker was jumping up and down like one gone mad.

"She's alive! She's alive, guv'nor! The air that was going in must have revived her!"

"I'll tear that combination off bodily!" snapped Dirk, but again Blake gave him pause.

"Tear nothing! Don't be a fool, man!" exclaimed Blake. "We can hear her, so she can hear us. Shout through the holes; ask her to give you the correct numbers."

For a moment Dolland looked almost sheepish. The obvious had just not occurred to him. Next second, though, his lips were within an inch or two of the clustering drill-holes.

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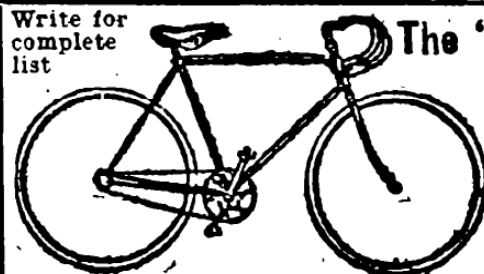
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