

SEXTON BLAKE *versus* WALDO

the Wonder Man. Complete detective-adventure thriller.

UNION JACK 2^D



VILLAGE VENGEANCE

by
E.S. Brooks



A Complete Detective Mystery Yarn, Featuring Sexton Blake and Waldo.

Chapter 1.

A Present for Tinker.

TINKER, Sexton Blake's keen young assistant, was endowed with many fine athletic qualities, but no athlete ever performed the long jump with greater prowess than Tinker as he was crossing Oxford Street.

He saved his life by that masterly effort. There had been no peril when he had started crossing the road. Although it was mid-morning, and although Oxford Street is a busy thoroughfare, there are certain times when the traffic is quite slack. It was nearly opposite Selfridge's, and Tinker had been walking leisurely.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he had seen a smart sports car fairly leaping at him as it gave a wild swerve. It was just then that Tinker reached the pavement in one superb leap. He actually felt

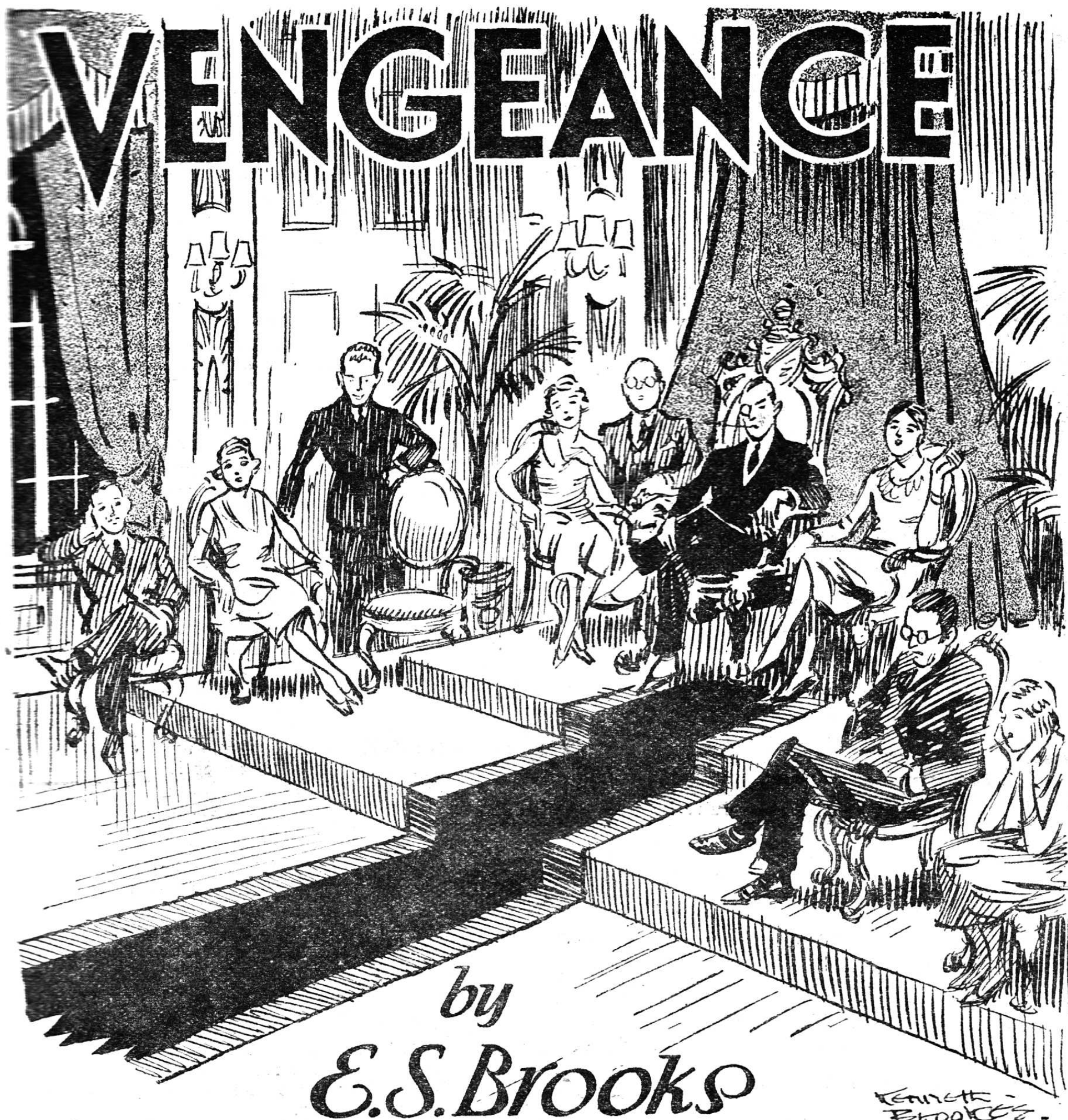
the wing of the two-seater brush ~~his~~ his rear as he reached safety.

"Dash it all!" protested Tinker.

It was, all things considered, a mild enough expression. But Tinker had not yet gathered himself up for the real assault. The sports two-seater had pulled up just beyond, and Tinker already knew why the car had swerved—and the knowledge in no way improved his temper.

There was another car at that spot, and the wheel was in possession of a pretty but somewhat showy girl. She had signalled to the man in the two-seater, and it was this signal of hers which had caused him to swerve pavementwards in defiance of all traffic rules and the good manners of the road.

Without even glancing at the youngster he had so nearly mangled under his wheels, the man hopped out of the sports car and approached the fair cause of the trouble.



by
E.S. Brooks

Kenneth Brooks.
 rewritten as part of...

Escorted by a quartette of flunkies, Blake and Tinker advanced down the length of the vast reception hall. In a great chair at the end sat the tenth Lord Hemsley, surrounded by his courtiers —

—and that was the opening of Sexton Blake's strangest consultation, a consultation as strange as the adventure which followed . . . an adventure with Waldo, the ever exciting.

"Well it's a small world!" he said genially. "The last time I saw you, Mamie, was in Monte Carlo. How's tricks?"

"Why not come with me, Pinko, and I'll tell you all about it?" suggested the young lady. "I've had a perfectly revolting time, and I need somebody like you to buck me up. Hop in!"

"No sooner said than done!" replied Pinko, who was a man of about thirty-five, with dark, sleek hair and sensuous lips. "I'd drive anywhere with you, Gorgeous!"

"Hey, you!" exclaimed Tinker rudely, as he walked up.

He felt very much in the mood for rudeness. It was essentially an occasion for rudeness. A polite protest would obviously be a waste of breath on such a palpable roadhog.

"Who's your boy friend?" asked Mamie, with a glance at Tinker. "And, by the way, what are you going to do about your bus, Pinko? You can't leave it parked here, in Oxford Street."

"Just a minute!" said Tinker coldly, as he leaned against the lady's car. "I hate interrupting this tete-a-tete, but I'd like you to know, sir, that you nearly killed me half a minute ago."

"I do know it," said Pinko gravely. "I apologise. It was this young lady's fascinating beauty which robbed me of all road sense. I wonder if you'll accept my car as some measure of compensation for the fright I gave you?"

"I wasn't frightened," retorted Tinker warmly. "And I don't think this is an occasion for making fatuous jokes—"

"My dear young fellow! I'm not joking," said the other, with a sudden haughty imperiousness. "I nearly killed you. The car's yours. That makes us square, doesn't it? What more do you want?"

"But, I say, look here—"

"Confound it, Mamie, we can't allow this infernal brawl to continue," said Pinko impatiently. "Be a good sort and drive on!"

"Just as you say, big boy!" chuckled Gorgeous.

To Tinker's amazement the car drove off, and he was left standing there with that abandoned two-seater—which, according to Pinko's statement, was now his property. But the thing was fantastic. Tinker felt quite startled.

He expected the pair to come back and laugh at his expense. But the other car drove straight on towards the Park and vanished among the traffic. Tinker had another look at the two-seater. It was an Alvis, and, in fact, a highly expensive proposition. Practically new, too.

"Mad as a hatter!" said Tinker.

He couldn't leave the car standing there; yet when he climbed into the driving seat he knew what it must feel like to be a car thief. He felt that all eyes were on him, and he half-expected a policeman to walk up and sternly ask him what he thought he was up to.

But he drove off without any interference; and he did the most sensible thing in the circumstances. He took the Alvis sports car straight to Scotland Yard, and formally handed it over to the authorities.

"We'll look up the number," grinned an inspector, who knew Tinker well. "Evidently the fellow was either half-drunk or dotty."

Tinker improved the shining hour by going up to Chief Inspector Lennard's office, and regaling that hard-headed individual with an account of the adventure.

"It seems to me that you're lucky, you young beggar!" said Lennard enviously.

"Lucky? How do you make that out?" asked Tinker.

"Unless I'm mistaken, that car's yours—for keeps," replied the chief inspector. "But you'd better wait until the information comes through. They're checking up on the index number, aren't they?"

Tinker failed to understand, and Lennard was exasperatingly mysteri-

ous until a message came through on the phone. Then he leaned back in his chair and gave one of his expressive snorts.

"Why couldn't it have been me?" he asked bitterly. "What the dickens do you want with a car like that?"

"But, you hopeless chump, it isn't mine!" protested Tinker.

"I'll ask you to be a little more polite to your elders, my lad!" said Lennard heavily. "That car's yours, so don't be a fathead. Do you know that 'Pinko' is none other than Lord Hemsley?"

"I seem to know that name," said Tinker doubtfully.

"You ought to! The beggar has been on the front page of the sensational Press often enough lately," retorted Inspector Lennard. "He gave you that car, so it's yours. Do you know that it's the fifth car he has given away to absolute strangers within the past fourteen weeks?"

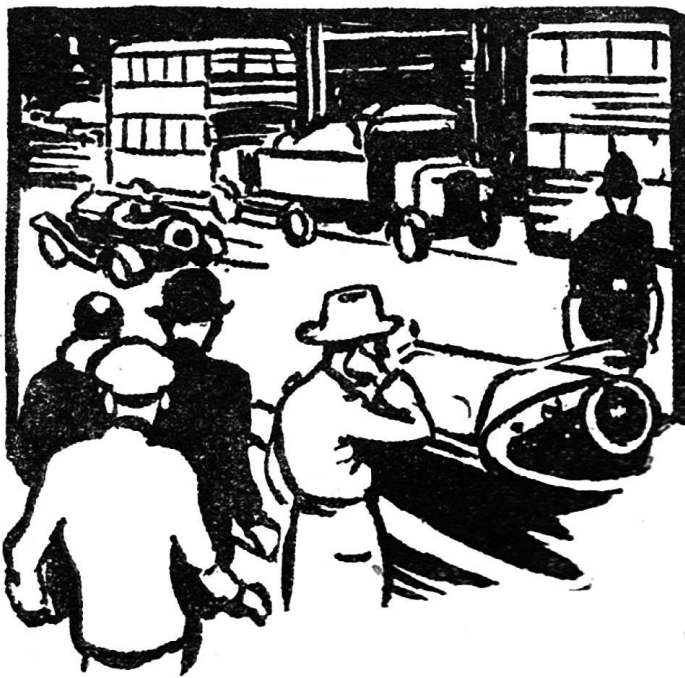
"You're kidding me," said Tinker, staring.

"All right—I'm a liar!" said Lennard. "If you like to give the car to me, I'll accept it with pleasure. But as things stand at the moment, it's yours. Hemsley hasn't claimed any of the others he gave away. The man's unique."

"Well, it's the rummiest present I've ever had given to me!" said Tinker, in wonder. "That car's worth five hundred quid! I still think you're kidding me, Mr. Lennard."

"I wish it had been me, instead of you," said Lennard.

"If it had been, you'd have been dead," retorted Tinker. "You couldn't have leapt five yards in four-fifths of a second."



TINKER was exultant as he drove his prize home to Baker Street. But his satisfaction was short lived.

Sexton Blake, who happened to be in, heard the story with increasing grimness, and when Tinker had finished he was positively bristling.

"All very interesting, young 'un, but you'll take that car off to the garage this very minute," said the great detective. "You'll instruct the manager to put it up for sale."

"But what the dickens—"

"And as soon as it's sold, every penny of the proceeds will go to charity," continued Blake. "You're

not going to touch a penny belonging to that infernal Hemsley. Don't you know that your hands are already contaminated by fingering the same steering-wheel?"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" ejaculated Tinker, in amazement, looking at his hands in comic wonderment.

"Perhaps I'm talking a bit strong—but that's because I feel strongly," growled Sexton Blake, the momentary anger passing. "But whenever I hear that young devil's name mentioned I go hot. Don't you read your newspaper, Tinker?"

"Pretty well," said Tinker. "But I confess I haven't paid much attention to Lord Hemsley. What is he—a leper?"

"You've used the right word," said Blake grimly. "That's just what he is—a leper. A moral leper. He's unclean. He rides rough-shod over all and sundry—and, because of his millions, he gets away with it. You've heard, haven't you, that he is known as the 'Knight of Nonsense'?"

"That's what the newspapers call him, isn't it?"

"The newspapers are uncommonly polite," said Sexton Blake. "Hemsley's nonsense is generally of a kind that's unfit to go into print. During the past year or so he has been mixed up in more crazy escapades than any other Society notable. Hemsley is the avowed chief of a clique which calls itself 'The Brighter Young People.' They're a worthless, feather-headed lot, and they're doing an enormous amount of harm as a bad example of wantonness in these difficult times when so many much more worthy people are in distress. Their main object, it seems, is to defy every convention whilst keeping just within the law. Lord Hemsley is the root cause of all the trouble. He provides the money for the crazy capers, and, naturally enough, he finds plenty of young fools who are ready to help him."

"Can't he be stopped?" asked Tinker.

"Who's to stop him?" said Blake. "He takes care not to transgress the law—and as for the rest, he doesn't care two hoots. He has offended every Society hostess in London; he has been turned out of every decent club. But he goes his own unsweet way, and the more decent people he offends, the better he likes it. His invariable answer is that he's a millionaire, a peer of the realm, and he'll do as he likes!"

"He's bound to come a cropper sooner or later," said Tinker.

"I believe it—but, unfortunately, such young devils generally have a long run before they reach the end of their rope," replied Sexton Blake. "And during that run, they strew their path with the shattered wreckage of once decent humanity. Money in the hands of such men, Tinker, is an appalling curse. He did not earn a penny of it—he inherited millions from his father, who was a good man. His father got the money from the other side of the family."

"Well, gov'nor, there's an old saying that a fool and his money are soon parted."

"I believe I've heard it somewhere before," nodded Blake. "But in this case it doesn't apply. Unlike other such spendthrifts, Lord Hemsley is no fool. He knows just what he is doing, and he is revelling in his infamous behaviour. The swell crooks who hover on the fringe of Society have long since given up Hemsley as a bad job. They can't touch him."

"A hard nut, in fact."

"As hard as granite—cunning, scheming, devilish in his inventive genius," said Sexton Blake. "I can only compare Lord Hemsley with a wealthy noble of the sixteenth century. You've read of such men in history, Tinker—and in romantic novels. Lord Hemsley is three hundred years out of his period. In the old days, of course, he could have been a lord of life and death. As far as modern law will allow him, that is exactly what Hemsley is to-day. Like a noble of the later Middle Ages, he tramples on all and sundry, and his name stinks in the nostrils of decent people. That's the man who gave you his car this morning, Tinker."

"Come to think of it, he trampled on me, didn't he?" asked Tinker indignantly. "He nearly killed me, and then squared things by giving me his car!"

"He has squared lots of people in a similar way—but not always because he nearly killed them," said Blake thoughtfully. "Yet I have an idea, Tinker, that he won't last long. That rope of his is being rapidly shortened."

"What makes you think that, gov'nor?" asked Tinker.

"One day, perhaps, I'll tell you," replied Blake.

Chapter 2.

By Order.

IT was a little less than a week later that Sexton Blake kept his promise; but not until fairly late in the day. Tinker had cause to remember his curious encounter with Lord Hemsley by the receipt of an extraordinary telegram.

It came early in the afternoon, just after Blake and Tinker had finished luncheon.

The telegram was extraordinary for two reasons—firstly because of its length, and secondly because of its tone. Tinker nearly had a fit when he opened the bulky envelope and disclosed sheet after sheet of official forms.

"Great Scott, gov'nor!" he ejaculated. "This isn't a telegram—it's a manuscript!"

"Who's it from?"

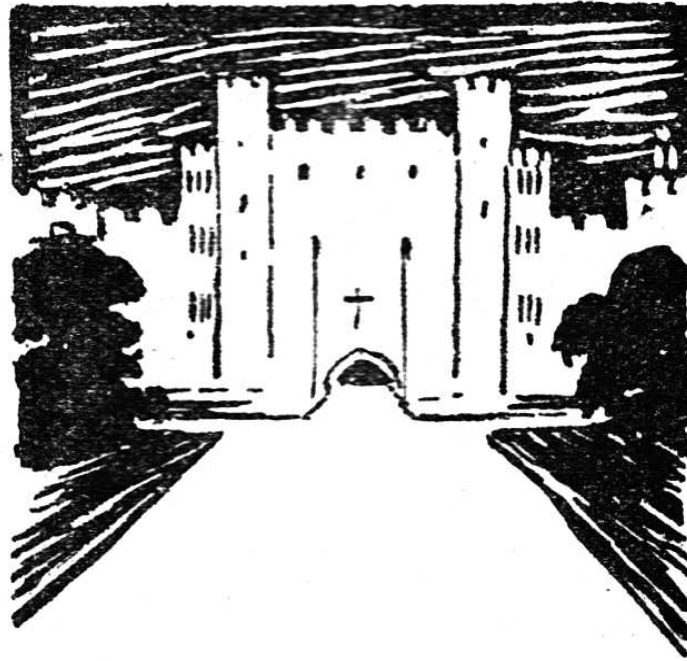
"I don't know yet—I haven't found the last sheet," replied Tinker. "Oh, here we are. It's from— Well, I'm dashed! It's from that man we were talking about last week—Lord Hemsley."

Sexton Blake became interested.

"Let me have it!" he said almost sharply.

They read the telegram together; the remarkable effusion ran thus:

"Immediately upon receipt of this telegram you are to come to Hemsley Castle, Hemsley, Suffolk. I am giving a house-party here, and certain of my guests have been robbed of their jewels. I am not putting the matter into the hands of the police, as I do not intend my guests to be subjected to the crudities of the official mind. I have been told, however,



that you are a man of discretion and, indeed, common sense.

"Therefore, I have decided that you are the man to investigate this robbery, and to hunt down the culprit and recover the stolen property. It is unnecessary for me to add that you are at liberty to name your own fee. I shall expect results. Send me a telegram informing me at what hour your arrival is to be expected. Start at once.

"HEMSLEY."

It took Tinker half a minute to recover his breath; and when he looked at Blake, he saw that Blake was sitting back in his chair, with a light of grim amusement twinkling in his eyes.

"The nerve!" ejaculated Tinker, at length. "I never read anything like it, gov'nor! 'Start at once!'"

"Didn't I tell you that the man was three hundred years out of his period?" asked Blake dryly. "He possesses the mind of a feudal lord."

"But—but it's unheard of!" protested Tinker. "He doesn't even ask if you're free to go. He just tells you!"

"Again, it is an indication of the man's mind," said Blake. "You will notice that he tells me to name my own fee—and he thinks that that liberal offer will do the trick. It is one of Hemsley's pet theories that everybody can be bought. I'm sorry to say that in the great majority of cases, he's right."

"He'll never buy you, gov'nor," said Tinker warmly. "What are you going to do—send him back a stinger of a reply?"

Blake sat forward and wrote rapidly on an odd piece of paper.

"Here you are, Tinker—you can send this telegram," he said.

Tinker read it—and gaped. For the telegram ran: "Expect me at about six o'clock.—SEXTON BLAKE."

"Cheese it, gov'nor!" said Tinker. "You can't fool me with this!"

"I'm not trying to fool you—I'm instructing you to send the telegram," replied Blake.

"But—but you can't mean it!" ejaculated Tinker. "You're not going to obey that—that feudal baron's command?"

"Yes, I am—and I'll tell you why," said Blake. "Fetch me the 'H' file of newspaper cuttings—the pictorial cuttings."

Tinker did so, still bewildered.

"Hemsley Castle should be well worth a visit," continued Blake dreamily. "I understand that his lordship has restored the great moat which entirely surrounds the castle. He has even had the drawbridge fixed, so that it works perfectly. Lord Hemsley lives there like a real noble of the old days."

"But you're not going there out of curiosity—just to see the moat and the drawbridge?" objected Tinker.

"No; I'm going because of this photograph."

And Blake handed his young assistant the cutting file. Pasted on the page was an ordinary newspaper photograph, quite well reproduced, and Tinker immediately recognised Lord Hemsley in a group of people who were collected round an enormous racing car, the body of which was fashioned after the style of a locomotive engine.

"One of Lord Hemsley's crazy notions," said Blake. "He likes doing sensational things of that sort. Hemsley himself, you see, is the 'engine driver.'"

"Yes, I notice that, gov'nor," said Tinker curiously. "But you said you were obeying that telegram because of the photograph. I may be dense—I expect I am—but I'm hanged if I can see the connection."

"Look again—and look more closely at the others."

Tinker did so, but after a while he shook his head.

"Nothing registers," he confessed.

"No? What about Count Ritz?"

Again Tinker inspected the photograph; and this time he saw, by the letterpress underneath, that the bearded man on Hemsley's right—pompous and stately—was described as "Count Sylvanus Ritz, his lordship's favourite."

"Favourite!" echoed Tinker. "That's a real old-time expression."

"And true," said Blake. "Wherever Hemsley goes, you can generally find Count Ritz. Indeed, this astonishing young noble invariably takes his entire 'court' with him. The whole bunch will arrive at a West End night club, and organise the entire evening's programme. Such is Hemsley's influence that he can do these things. He spends money like water, and the night club proprietors dare not offend him."

"What an arrogant, conceited blighter the man must be!"

"He's all that."

"Still, I don't see where Count

Ritz comes in," said Tinker. "I wish you wouldn't be so jolly mysterious, gov'nor. You were the same last week when you made some cryptic remark about Hemsley's rope being shortened."

"All right, young 'un—you'll understand later on—after we get to the castle. Hurry up with that telegram, and then hustle round with the Grey Panther."

HALF an hour later they were off, with Tinker more intrigued than ever, for it so happened that the great detective had some rather important work arranged for the afternoon, yet he had shelved it in order to obey the imperious summons of this "feudal lord."

During the ride down, Blake was looking unusually contented. He seemed to be anticipating the forthcoming interview with real pleasure—which was all the more surprising in view of the character he had given Lord Hemsley. But Tinker knew how useless it was to ask any questions. Blake would clear up the little mystery in his own good time.

It was a blustery, windy spring day, and Tinker was glad enough of this trip into the bright, sunny country; London had been dull and depressing for a week past.

Hemsley Castle proved to stand a mile and a half beyond the village of Hemsley in a rural, forgotten back-water of Suffolk. Hemsley itself was rather more than a village; its inhabitants always called it "the town." It was an old-world, picturesque place, of half-timbered buildings, crooked, narrow streets, and quaint inns.

Indeed, in the old days, the actual serfs of the Hemsleys had been drawn from the town. Round about, for many miles in every direction, the country was purely agricultural, with farms dotted amid the pastureland and tilled fields.

"By Jove, gov'nor, it does one good to get out into the real heart of rural England, once in a while," said Tinker. "Did you spot the Red Lion as we passed it? I couldn't help picturing stage-coaches, and prancing horses, and old-time ostlers."

"Yes, the Red Lion is a famous coaching inn," replied Blake. "I not only spotted it, Tinker, but I mentally marked it down as the place where you and I will dine, later on. A dinner in one of these quaint old country inns is a refreshing experience."

"Lord Hemsley may want us to dine at the castle."

"He may want!" retorted Blake. "I wouldn't sit at his table for a thousand pounds."

They soon arrived at the great, imposing, wrought-iron gates of Hemsley Park. The drive was in beautiful condition, and as they came within sight of the castle itself, which stood perched on a knoll, Tinker could not help uttering an expression of admiration. Hemsley Castle, indeed, was one of the most noble of all England's ancient links with the past. It was a rich stone building,

of graceful towers and turrets, with battlements and quaint, mullioned windows

Entirely surrounding it was a wide moat, with grassy banks on the outer side, leading down to beautifully kept lawns and exquisite gardens. On the castle side of the moat the water was sheer with the walls. And immediately opposite the main bailey an impressive and enormous drawbridge was in the "down" position. Over the great gateway the portcullis was up, but partly visible.

"And to think that a fine place like this is owned by such a blackguard," said Tinker, with some warmth. "It's a sin and a shame, gov'nor."

"Unfortunately, Hemsley is not only the owner, but he has vast wealth in other directions," said Blake. "He looks upon this castle as a plaything. He has no pride of ancestry. He is completely ostracised by all the big families of the county, and he doesn't care a rap."

Blake had timed his arrival well, for as the Grey Panther purred across the drawbridge six deep strokes boomed out from the great clock in the main tower. Even before the pair could get out of the car, powdered funkeys emerged from the great door, and they stood at attention like sentinels. Just inside the stately and lofty hall there were other funkeys, and a man in rich uniform, who looked like an usher, advanced towards them.

"I think I am expected," said the detective shortly. "My name is Blake."

"Yes, sir; if you will kindly come this way and await his lordship's pleasure," said the usher.

They were escorted into a finely furnished reception-room.

"His lordship, at the moment, is playing snooker with Count Ritz," explained the usher, as he prepared to depart. "You will be summoned when his lordship is ready to receive you."

He went out and closed the door, and Blake positively grinned.

"Just to let me know where I stand, Tinker," he observed dryly. "We are, you must realise, dirt beneath his lordship's chariot wheel. His snooker must not be interrupted by such as us."

"I wonder how you stick it!" growled Tinker.

They were left waiting for five minutes—ten minutes—fifteen. Nobody came near them. Tinker became more and more impatient, whilst Blake grew more and more amused. But his amusement was becoming very grim.

"Don't keep jumping up and down, young 'un," said Blake. "This is only being done for effect. In fact, I half suspect— Ah, I think we are about to be summoned into the Presence."

He was right. The usher reappeared, and announced that his lordship would receive the visitors in the Royal Reception-room. Thereupon, Blake and Tinker were escorted not merely by the usher, but by a quartette of funkeys across the great hall, down a noble corridor, and then into another great chamber, on

the other side of which other funkeys stood flanking some big double doors. Tinker was irresistibly reminded of fantastic court scenes he had seen in talking pictures. All this pomp and display was like that of a Hollywood Ruritania at its richest.

The doors were flung open, and Sexton Blake and Tinker were in the Presence.

Chapter 3.

In Conference with the Count.

IT was all so unreal that Tinker felt like pinching himself to make sure that he was awake.

The Royal reception-room was about as big as an average drill hall, with lofty, raftered ceiling and great mullioned windows. At the far end of the room, looking twenty miles away, sat the Tenth Lord Hemsley, in a great chair on a dais not unlike a throne. He was lolling carelessly, and grouped about him on a slightly lower dais, were most of his favourites.

In other parts of the room—some sitting, some standing—were the ladies and gentlemen-in-waiting—in other words, the various members of his house party.

And a neurotic lot they looked. They were mostly young—the men vapid and vacuous; the girls painted, overdressed, and mostly smoking cigarettes. Blake mentally replaced their clothing with the garb of the sixteenth century. And here was a perfect picture of an old-time "blood" and his fawning sycophants.

Everybody was talking, laughing, and taking no notice whatever of the new arrivals. Sexton Blake had never been received at a great country house in such a manner in all his career, and he had certainly never had such a consultation.

At last he and Tinker were standing immediately in front of Lord Hemsley's chair. Tinker had an absurd idea that he ought to bow. Instead, he only glared. This absurdity was getting on his nerves.

"H'm! So you are the great Blake?" asked Lord Hemsley, eyeing the detective with a patronising air. "I must confess that I am slightly disappointed. And what—er—is this?" he added, waving a lazy hand towards Tinker.

"This is Tinker, my assistant," explained Blake calmly. "I think you presented him with a car recently."

His eyes had already taken in the entire gathering, and a whimsical little curl of Blake's lips indicated that everything was exactly as he had expected.

"So you thought it necessary to bring an assistant?" asked Lord Hemsley. "Well, perhaps you were right, Blake. This investigation might tax your ingenuity to the utmost."

"What, exactly, is the nature of your loss?" asked Blake, who was acting his part in the comedy as though this kind of reception was the

most natural in the world. "Before I begin my investigations, Lord Hemsley, I should like a few details. Even an investigator of my reputation cannot achieve much success unless he has the facts at his fingertips. I am, after all, no magician."

A shade of annoyance passed over Lord Hemsley's face. His guests were all looking puzzled. Evidently they had expected Blake and Tinker to behave very differently. They could not understand Blake's calm acceptance of the position.

"The facts are simple enough," said Lord Hemsley impatiently. "Ten of my guests, all ladies, have lost various articles of jewellery. They were missing this morning, and the inference is that one of the castle servants is the thief. That's all I can tell you. It's up to you. You're a detective, so be good enough to commence your investigations, and then let me see some results."

Blake's first suspicions—which had occurred to him even before leaving London—were completely justified. He knew perfectly well that there had been no robbery, and that Lord Hemsley had organised the whole thing as a "rag." If Blake was fool enough to start any investigations, the guests would pretend to have lost this, that, and the other, and would simply lead him a preposterous dance.

Hemsley, with his usual perverted sense of humour, thought it was an excellent joke, no doubt, to bring the great detective all the way from London for the mere pleasure of making a fool of him.

Unfortunately for Hemsley's plan, Blake was not a fool. As a matter of fact, he had come to Hemsley Castle for quite a different purpose—as Tinker was soon to discover.

"I quite appreciate the motive which prompted you to telegraph for my services," said Blake gravely. "But, really, Lord Hemsley, I'm afraid I must decline the commission."

"Decline it?" ejaculated his lordship, sitting up very straight. "What the devil do you mean? I've ordered you to investigate—"

"But, as it happens, I am not one of your paid servants," interrupted Sexton Blake. "Your promise of liberal fees is of no interest to me. I'm already convinced—you will pardon me calling you a liar—that there has been no robbery, and that you brought me here in order to provide childish amusement for your guests. But I am an investigator of crime, Lord Hemsley—not a comedian. I have neither the time nor the inclination to entertain your guests, or you, either."

There was something quietly dignified and inexpressibly cutting in Blake's even tones. He managed to get an expression into his voice which was like the lash of a whip, and Tinker inwardly rejoiced. Lord Hemsley positively writhed—and most of his Brighter Young People were regarding Blake with an awe which almost amounted to respect.



Tinker turned the key and Blake advanced towards Count Ritz. "You surely didn't think I would leave the castle without seeing you?" he said.

"Confound your damnable impudence!" shouted Hemsley, with sudden fury. "You stand there and call me a liar to my face? I'll have you thrown out of this castle—"

"You have already made one mistake, Lord Hemsley; I am quite sure you won't make a second," interrupted Blake, staring straight into his lordship's eyes. "It would be an exceedingly dangerous proceeding to throw me out of this castle."

FOR a few tense seconds they stared at one another, and Blake, with his iron will, won that silent duel with ease. Hemsley's gaze dropped, and he cursed profanely under his breath.

"Get out!" he muttered suddenly. But Blake had already turned his back, and he and Tinker walked down that long room calmly and leisurely. True, Tinker found it something of an ordeal, and he was glad enough when they were outside. No sooner

had the great doors closed than a babble broke out within, and Blake and Tinker could hear many laughs mingling with the angry tones of Lord Hemsley.

"Of all the fiascos—" began Tinker.

And then he gave Blake a second look. A great change had come over the detective. To Tinker's astonishment, Sexton Blake was looking keen, eager, intense. The usher, now somewhat out of countenance, was preparing to escort them back to the front door. But Blake placed a hand on his arm, and brought him to a standstill.

"Here is my card," he said. "Take it to Count Ritz with my compliments and tell him that I should be glad of a few minutes' private chat with him."

"Very good, sir," said the man, after a moment's hesitation.

He left Blake and Tinker in the hall.

"I hadn't realised, gov'nor, until you said that, that Count Ritz wasn't with the others," murmured Tinker. "Why do you want to see him?"

"I think an interview with Count Ritz will be most entertaining—and we haven't come to Hemsley Castle for nothing, Tinker."

A minute later the usher returned, bringing the card with him. Sexton Blake had not failed to notice the exact room from which the usher had emerged.

"Count Ritz expresses his regret, sir, but he is too busy, at the moment, to receive you."

"That's too bad," said Blake crisply. "Come on, Tinker."

And Blake walked smartly out of the hall and down the wide corridor which the usher had just left.

"A moment, sir!" called the usher urgently. "That's not the way out!"

"I know it," said Blake. "But it's the way to Count Ritz's room."

Tinker was beginning to enjoy himself. With the usher still protesting in the rear, Blake unceremoniously opened a heavy, carved door and strode into a dignified apartment furnished as a library. Count Sylvanus Ritz was sitting at the desk, and he looked at the unexpected visitors with quick surprise.

"Come in, Tinker," said Blake. "Turn the key in the lock—our business with Count Ritz is strictly private."

Tinker turned the key, and Blake advanced towards the tall, soldierly man who had now risen to his feet.

Count Ritz was handsome, in a way, with foreign-looking side-whiskers and bristly hair which stood straight up from his head.

"You surely didn't think that I would leave the castle without seeing you?" asked Blake reproachfully.

"I was an unmitigated idiot to think that I could put you off," replied Count Ritz, with an expressive snort. "I might have known you'd barge in, once you were on the premises. How the deuce are you, Blake?"

To Tinker's amazement, they shook hands.

"Great guns!" gasped Tinker, as something in the quality of the count's voice struck a chord in his memory. "You don't mean— Well, I'm hanged! It is! Waldo!"

"Infernally uncomfortable in a starched get-up, but Waldo, just the same," admitted the Wonder Man. "But keep it dark, Tinker, if you please. No raising of voices."

IT was an astounding surprise to Tinker—but now, in this flash, he knew just why Blake had come.

"I did my utmost to put Hemsley off this crazy stunt, but he wouldn't listen," explained Waldo. "All I hope is that it didn't work. But I needn't ask. You're too wise a bird to be caught by any of Hemsley's nonsense, Blake. I've lost a hundred pounds over this, for I bet Hemsley a hundred you wouldn't come."

"You really win," said Blake. "I came to see you."

Waldo stared. "You mean that you knew I was here?"

"I knew it weeks ago—five weeks ago, to be exact," said Blake, smiling. "I recognised you from the various photographs in the Press. Still, it's a good make-up, Waldo, and I congratulate you. I think you're pretty safe from anybody else."

"He was safe from me, anyway," said Tinker.

"Of course, as soon as I found that you were missing from the reception, my suspicions were confirmed," continued Blake. "And I want to ask you, Waldo, point blank, what you're doing."

"Just a minute," said Waldo. "If you twigged me five weeks ago, why didn't you take some sort of action?"

"Because I have a fondness for minding my own business," replied Sexton Blake. "If you are out to rook Lord Hemsley, more power to your elbow. But that's strictly unofficial, Waldo. To-day, upon receiving his lordship's 'command,' I thought it would provide me with an excellent opportunity to drop in and renew old acquaintance without embarrassing you."

"Good enough!" said Waldo cheerfully. "As long as we're not going to talk business, I'm satisfied."

"But we are going to talk business," said Blake. "I don't want to criticise, Waldo, but I rather regret that such a clean-minded man as yourself should mix yourself up with this rabble."

"By glory, that's the right word!" said Waldo fervently. "That's just what they are—rabble! The lowest of the low! I'm eternally grateful to you, Blake, for coming here—just so that I can let off a little steam. Since I've been with Hemsley, I've been going through Hades!"

"Is it worth it? I didn't think you were so fond of money—"

"Money be hanged!" said Waldo sharply. "My aim is to smash this young reprobate completely—to rob him of his power, not his money."

"I think," said Blake carefully, "that you had better not tell me too much. To Tinker and myself you are Count Sylvanus Ritz, and we are here to protest against our treatment at Lord Hemsley's hands."

"I get you," said Waldo, with a smile. "At the same time, I'd like to make it clear to you that I'm not out for pure gain. Neither am I thinking of doing good to humanity. I've undertaken this job because I like it."

"You just said you've been going through Hades."

"I don't care what I just said! I like it," repeated Waldo fiercely. "I can't live without thrills, as you know, Blake—and I'm going through this purgatory so that I can get the big thrill later. I had my eye on Hemsley for a long time before I approached him, and it has taken me weeks and months to get where I am now." He glanced suddenly at the

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door. "By the way, does Hemsley know you've come to see me?" he added.

"Not unless the servants have informed him."

"Well, they will inform him, and as you forced your way in here, you'd better raise your voice if there's any knock on the door," said Waldo. "We'll have 'high words,' and you can threaten to prosecute, and then stalk out in high dudgeon. Just for the sake of appearances, you know. I don't want Hemsley to think I'm a pal of yours."

"No; that would rather queer your pitch."

"I knew you wouldn't fall for this mad stunt, of course," continued Waldo. "It's on a par with everything else this worthless crowd does. Somebody brought your name up at breakfast-time, and in less than a minute Hemsley was cackling like a hyena and saying that he would give his guests a new kick. The wheeze was to get you here, start you off on the investigation, and then muddle you up with all sorts of false trails."

"Some hopes!" muttered Tinker.

"That's what I said to Hemsley. But he's an arrogant fool, and thinks he knows everything," said Waldo. "He promised his toadies he would lead you a great dance; and ever since the wire was sent off they've been making preparations. I expect they're feeling a bit silly now. I bet Hemsley you wouldn't come, and I was positively staggered when your wire arrived. I didn't guess that you were actually coming to see me."

"Well, Waldo, you can reply upon me to continue to mind my own business," said Blake pointedly. "Tinker and I are going now, but if you want to get in touch with us again you'll find us at the Red Lion for the next hour or two."

"I always knew you were a sportsman, Blake," said Waldo gratefully. "It's infernally decent of you to take this attitude. If you'll let me complete this job, there'll be an end to Hemsley's pernicious activities. I'm only waiting my chance. I've got everything in train for the big scene."

"What big scene?" asked Tinker eagerly.

"With your permission, I'll keep that to myself," replied Waldo dryly. "I have had to be mighty diplomatic, I can tell you. I writhe every time I am in Hemsley's presence; I've grown to loathe him more and more as the weeks have passed, and it has been a man's-sized job for me to act as an obedient 'yes' man and conceal my real emotions. But I've succeeded. I've got Hemsley so that he'll eat out of my hand. He trusts me to such an extent that he has made me his confidential secretary—with full powers."

"I think I can guess what's coming," said Blake softly.

"If you can, you're a magician!" said Waldo, his face aglow with intensity. "I think I shall surprise even you, Blake. It has taken me five months—even with my magnetic personality, which, you will confess, is unique—to gain Hemsley's full confidence. If he were a fool it would

have been easy. But he's not. He's as wide as they make 'em, and his ideas of pleasure revolt me. The orgies that have taken place in this castle are the scandal of the county. And only whispers have gone abroad."

"As bad as that?" asked Blake quietly.

"Worse!" snapped Waldo. "I'm not exaggerating when I tell you that this young devil has wrecked the lives of dozens of fine young men and women. His influence is one hundred per cent evil, and it's only his tremendous wealth which permits him to get away with it. The number of innocent youngsters he has initiated into the use of dope would stagger you; and when the vile stuff has gripped them in its spell he continues to provide them with it. I could tell you of at least three suicides which can be directly traced to Hemsley's influence. He's clever enough to keep away from the dope himself, though—and that makes his offence a million times as bad."

"His father was a real aristocrat, and poor; these estates were going to rack and ruin until the late peer married the daughter of an American millionaire. Do you remember the case? That American millionaire turned out to be the genius behind a vast bootlegging concern. So you can imagine what kind of blood the present Lord Hemsley has in his veins. On his father's side he is a true noble, but with a kink; he's a 'throw-back' to the Middle Ages. On his mother's side he has the mind of an American gangster. A pretty combination."

"A regular robber baron, in fact," said Tinker.

"Exactly!" grunted Waldo. "And if I could defy convention as Hemsley does, I'd take one of the old swords from the hall and run him through. But under modern conditions that would be murder; so the next best thing will be to rob Hemsley of his power of evil."

Sexton Blake thrust out his hand. "I think we'd better be going, Count Ritz," he said deliberately. "Tinker and I are not at all inquisitive."

Chapter 4. Trouble Brewing.

HEMSLEY village was nodding drowsily in the dusk when the Grey Panther purred, like some intruder, down the straggly, picturesque High Street and just beyond the village where the thoroughfare straggled off into a country lane. Blake drove it on to the greensward which faced the Red Lion, and a man in leggings and breeches came hurrying up, touching his cap as he did so.

"Anything I can do, sir?" he asked respectfully.

"No thanks," replied Blake. "We are going inside for dinner, but I don't think the car needs any attention."

"Water in the radiator, sir?" suggested the man.

"No; she's quite all right," replied Blake, as he stood looking round. "You have a fine old-world village here, as peaceful as it is charming."

A curious look came into the man's face.

"Mebbe it won't allus be so peaceful, sir," he said darkly.

"What do you mean?" asked Blake.

"Nothing, sir!" said the man, and he moved away abruptly, as though conscious of a slip.

Blake and Tinker entered the old inn. They had got away from Hemsley Castle without arousing its owner's suspicions. Blake had had "high words" with Count Ritz, and the count had threatened to have him thrown off the premises unless he went peacefully of his own accord.



There had been quite a little row—after which, presumably, Waldo had gone to Lord Hemsley with a pretty tale of Blake's confounded impudence.

The landlord of the Red Lion proved to be a stout, jovial, bustling man who rejoiced in the name of Josiah Broadribb—a name which seemed to have been selected because of its appropriateness. He ushered his guests into a quaint oak-panelled dining-room, where a fire was blazing cheerfully in the open grate, and where the windows were hung with bright little casement curtains.

"This beats all your lavish West End glory," remarked Blake lazily, as he stretched himself in a comfortable old leather chair. "We'll take things easily, Tinker. There's not the slightest hurry, and I've a mind to rusticate for a bit."

"You mean, you're going to stay the night?"

"I shouldn't be at all surprised," replied Blake, as he lay with half-closed eyes. "A day or two in quiet Hemsley will do us both good, young 'un. We need a simple rest cure."

"Rats! You're curious to keep your eye on the 'goings on' at the castle," said Tinker shrewdly. "You can't bluff me like that, guv'nor."

"I never thought for a moment that you would be bluffed," retorted Blake, as he filled his pipe. "Strictly speaking, there's nothing further for us to do, Tinker. There's been no case at all. But I never thought there would be, and now we can cheerfully take our places as disinterested onlookers. Quite a novel experience for us."

"Not so disinterested at that, gov'nor," said Tinker. "We're both on Waldo's side."

"Not so free with names," warned Blake, lowering his voice. "We'd better be mighty careful what we say, for there's no telling who may overhear us. We must not aid and abet a criminal conspiracy."

"Come off it, sir! We're spectators—you just said so."

"And I repeat it," said Sexton Blake. "How on earth should we know that a wanted crook is working the old, old confidence trick on the Lord of the Manor? I told his precious lordship that I was a detective and not a comedian; I might add I'm not a prophet either."

"No, we can't foresee the future," agreed Tinker.

"I'm afraid we're both singularly dense this week, Tinker," continued Blake sadly. "In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that we are purblind. Added to that, we have a perfectly idiotic fondness for minding our own business."

"It amounts to a craze," declared Tinker stoutly.

"Having made that clear, we'll lie at this old inn for a spell, and soak the local gossip into our pores," continued Blake. "I'm not doubting our old friend for a moment; but the local gossips might add to our general store of knowledge. And between you and me, young 'un, I've half an idea that Rupert will force that big scene he referred to—just to make our journey worth while. He's an obliging fellow."

Tinker was looking thoughtful.

"I wonder if you noticed the landlord?" he asked. "I mean, he seemed cordial enough, but it was a sort of forced cordiality. He can't afford to offend any of his customers."

"I think I know why he gave us a suspicious eye," replied Blake. "He knows that we came from the castle, Tinker—and I imagine that Hemsley Castle is unpopular in this district. I think we had better stroll out into the tap-room to correct the bad impression. We shan't hear much gossip if the people are suspicious of us."

When they crossed the low-ceilinged passage towards the tap-room they heard a murmur of animated conversation; but it ceased abruptly as they appeared in the tap-room doorway. The place was as old-world as the dining-room, and its inhabitants fitted the picture perfectly.

Blake and Tinker, in fact, looked quite out of place in their well-cut lounge suits. The floor was sanded, a fire crackled in the open hearth, the blue haze of strong tobacco hung in the air, mingling pleasantly with the odour of country ale. The old-fashioned oil-lamps were already burning, and sending down a glow of warm light.

There were six or seven men in the room, either standing at the bar or sitting at the stout, thick-topped tables. Two of them were burly giants in gaiters and Bedford cord—farmers of the district, in all proba-



bility. One or two of the others were apparently local tradesmen, and the rest were horny-handed farm workers.

Blake and Tinker could understand why these people looked upon the newcomers as "furriners" for they were so widely separated. But Blake had come here to bridge that gulf.

"Good-evening, gentlemen all!" he said pleasantly, as he advanced towards the bar. "My name's Blake, and my friend and I have a fancy to stay in your village for a day or two. I wonder if you'll do me the honour of finishing your drinks and having your glasses refilled at my expense?"

There was a complete silence for a moment.

"Thankin' ye all the same, sir, no," said one of the farmers, at length. "Tain't our custom to drink with strangers."

A murmur of approval arose from the others.

"Oh, come!" said Blake. "That's not very friendly, is it?"

"Mebbe we don't want to be friendly," replied the farmer bluntly.

"We're pertickler in Hemsley, let me tell ye. We don't have no truck with folks who are on visiting terms at the castle."

"I see," said Blake, with one of his most charming smiles. "I'm glad you have been so frank, sir—for it enables me to correct a false impression. It is my pleasure to inform you that my friend and myself were virtually kicked out of Hemsley Castle less than an hour ago."

"What for?" asked the farmer, with new interest.

"For the simple reason that I told Lord Hemsley just what I thought of him—and only my good breeding prevented me from knocking him down," replied Blake. "He brought us here by a trick, thinking to amuse his guests at our expense. I don't want to give offence to anybody in this district, but I feel compelled to say that I regard Lord Hemsley as a blackguard."

The change in the room was remarkable. Faces brightened, murmurs of



There was a silence after Blake's invitation to drink, then: "Thankin' you all the same, no. 'Tain't our custom to drink with strangers!"

satisfaction went round, and the big farmer who had acted as spokesman clapped Blake on the back with hearty enthusiasm.

"You ain't giving offence to nobody, sir," he replied. "Come on, boys—up with your glasses! If this gent has sized his bloomin' lordship up as a blackguard, he's one of us!"

"Ay, sure enough!" said one of the others.

THE constrained atmosphere had vanished. Glasses were filled to the foaming brim, and amid much hearty approval the tenth Lord Hemsley was consigned to perdition. It appeared to be the practice of the village to drink, not to Lord Hemsley's health, but to his eternal damnation.

It was an eye-opener, even for Blake. Obviously, this lordling did not possess one redeeming quality. Even the simple rustics of his own countryside, who had been brought up from childhood to touch their caps to the Lord of the Manor, unconsciously spat at the very mention of his name.

Blake and Tinker heard plenty of gossip after that. The villagers opened out like spring flowers under the influence of the morning sun. They told of the scandalous "goings-on" at the castle, and although Blake was prepared to take most of these yarns with a pinch of salt, he knew that there was a background of truth behind them all.

Lord Hemsley had succeeded in antagonising the district pretty thoroughly. The whole countryside, in fact, was seething quietly, and was ready to boil over if he committed one more outrageous act of folly. For months the feeling had been growing, and Blake received the irresistible impression that he and Tinker had arrived in Hemsley village at a crucial hour.

"We are on the lip of a crater, Tinker," said Blake, when they returned to the quietness of the smoking-room. "This district may be likened to a volcano. It is seething and rumbling inwardly, and it only needs one little explosion to cause a mighty eruption."

"But what could the people do?" asked Tinker sceptically.

Mr. Broadribb, the landlord, told Tinker what the people could do.

"I'm telling ye straight, gents," he said, as he looked in to see if the table was set to his satisfaction. "If Lord Hemsley oversteps the mark once more, there'll be no holdin' the folks hereabouts. They'll take the law into their own hands."

"That would be risky," said Blake.

"Don't you believe it, sir," said the landlord quickly. "Two can play at his game! He struts about the county like one o' them rakes of the old days, trampling everybody underfoot for his own amusement. But one of these days he'll trample once too often—and then the honest people of this district will rise up and march on the castle and burn it down."

"That would be a criminal offence," said Blake gravely. "Two wrongs don't make a right, you know, Mr. Broadribb."

"Ay, it's all very well to talk like that," growled the landlord. "We folks have stood as much as we can stand, and we don't take no count of the law in a case like this. Mebbe you don't know that everything's ready?" he went on, lowering his voice. "Ay, fully organised! There's a couple of hundred men waiting—with torches all ready prepared. If the right word goes round, there'll be a march on Hemsley Castle at an hour's notice. And nothing will save it from destruction. And Lord Hemsley himself will be lucky if he escapes with his life."

"What do the police say to all this?" asked Blake curiously. "Surely the police know of these 'secret' preparations?"

"Between you and me, sir, the police are as deaf as posts," said Mr. Broadribb, with a knowing wink. "Ay, and as blind as bats. And if anything happens up at the castle, the police will be busy looking for poachers five miles away. When they do hear about what's happening, they'll be too late, and they'll say how mortal sorry they was."

"Hot air," commented Tinker, after Mr. Broadribb had gone.

"Some of it, perhaps," agreed Blake. "But for once, I imagine, village gossip is a true index of the people's feelings. In nine cases out of ten talk remains merely talk. This is the tenth case. Talk will take a back seat and action will follow."

"Wonder if it'll happen while we're here?" said Tinker, his eyes sparkling. "I say, can't we stop a week—just on the off-chance?"

"Perhaps we shan't need to stay a week," replied Blake thoughtfully. "And let me tell you this, young 'un; if anything happens while we're here we'll take a hand in it—and on the side of law and order."

Tinker stared.

"Against the people?" he asked.

"Certainly."

"You mean, you'll go to Lord Hemsley's help?"

"That's just what I mean."

"But, gov'nor, he deserves——"

"Just a minute," interrupted Blake quietly. "I've no doubt that Lord Hemsley deserves boiling oil and similar forms of punishment. But you and I have a tradition to uphold, Tinker. We have always used what abilities we possess to bring transgressors of the law to justice—and, when possible, to prevent unlawful acts."

"That's all very well——"

"Let me finish," said Blake. "Our position, at this moment, is unique. In private we may keep up the pleasant fiction of knowing nothing of the real identity of Count Sylvanus Ritz. But we mustn't forget that he is probably at the back of much of the countryside's discontent. In just the same way, it's a moral certainty that he is doing his best to urge Lord Hemsley on to further follies—in order to precipitate the very explosion our friend Broadribb has hinted at."

"I can see all that," admitted Tinker. "But still I don't see why we should interfere. The man's a human plague. Hemsley, I mean."

"Well, I do," said Blake gruffly. "Who the deuce is this puppy Hemsley? Because of his black-guardism, why should one of England's noblest castles be destroyed? It is quite on the cards that one day it may become the property of the people—the people you are so eager to champion. There's an uncommonly ugly atmosphere of revolt in this village—revolt against law and order. And that's always dangerous, Tinker. I fancy we can make ourselves useful—and yet remain conveniently blind to Rupert's main activities. For I suspect that this 'mob rising' will prove to be a mere stepping-stone to the real issue."

Tinker grinned with relief.

"Why didn't you say that before, gov'nor?" he asked. "In other words, you'll do your stuff as an upholder of the law, and satisfy your conscience, but actually you will let Waldo get his man."

"How can you say such a thing, Tinker?" asked Blake, with stern disapproval. "I never said anything of the sort."

But Tinker did not fail to see the twinkle which lurked in the corners of the great detective's eyes.

Chapter 5.

Waldo Has a Plan.

LORD HEMSLEY was in a foul humour.

Most of his guests, who knew their host far too well to have any respect for him, had left him flat. They liked Hemsley well enough when he was in his gaily boisterous moods; he was entertaining then, and often quite witty. But when the reaction set in, he could be the most miserable and depressing of mortals.

Some of the guests had gone to the billiards-room, others were already dressing for dinner; a few were hatching up some sort of "lark" to perpetrate later in the evening. All of them were more or less fed up.

Sexton Blake was the cause.

"The impudent blighter!" snapped Hemsley, as he sat on a corner of the desk in the library, glowering at Count Ritz. "I wouldn't mind so much if he hadn't made me look such a fool."

"Well, I warned you," said Waldo, shaking his head. "Blake's a tough customer, Hemsley. You can't pull wool over his eyes and make him believe there was a robbery when there wasn't."

"I'll make him suffer for what he said to me to-day," declared Hemsley vindictively. "A cheap detective! I go hot when I think of it."

WHAT IS SEXTON BLAKE'S SECRET?

(See page 27.)

He was so unaccustomed to rebuffs that when he did get one his thick hide was penetrated, and he was stunned. To-day's affair had been particularly humiliating, for he had boasted so much of the fun he would provide, and his feather-brained guests had eagerly looked forward to the promised "kick." The anticlimax had been positively pitiful.

Like most sensation seekers, Lord Hemsley was unutterably bored by all healthy and normal forms of amusement. They had long ceased to interest him. He was for ever trying to think up something different—something more bizarre. His wealth had given him so many pleasures that they had ceased to be pleasures.

"I'm sick of this infernal place," he said impatiently, as he heaved himself off the desk and paced up and down. "Can't we do something to-night, Ritz—something different? This party's getting as flat as ditch-water. Can't we all go to London and—— But what's the good of that?" he went on sourly. "There's nothing in London worth seeing."

Waldo eyed him calculatingly.

"Feel desperate?" he asked, with a chuckle.

"Yes, I do!" retorted Hemsley. "And I'm in no humour for your beastly laughs, Ritz!"

"Sorry," said Waldo. "An idea has just come to me—something that might appeal to you. After dinner we might start something really amusing—and something that will involve that Blake person."

"Gad! Let's have it," said Hemsley eagerly.

"Blake's still in the village, I understand—having dinner at the Red Lion—and my idea is to fetch him hot-foot up here on a murder case. He'll fall for murder right enough, if he didn't for jewels."

The mere suggestion was enough.

"Ritz, old boy, you've got it!" gloated Lord Hemsley, his unhealthy face flushed with excitement. "We could wangle it easily. One of the crowd can hide somewhere, and we'll pretend that he's murdered. We'll leave horrible bloodstains all over the place, and footprints, and all that sort of thing. We'll get the police into it, too. Gad, what a rag! If only I can get my own back on Blake I shall be satisfied."

"Well, forget about it until after dinner," suggested Waldo. "We don't want to start the thing too early, or he might smell a rat. You know what a wide-awake brute he is. I suggest we discuss it during dinner—or, better still, later, after the servants have gone. It is necessary that everybody should be present, because everybody will have a part to play."

Lord Hemsley went upstairs to dress in such a good humour that two of his guests, passing him on the great staircase, were startled at the change in him.

"What's brought the sun out again, Pinko, old dear?" asked one of the guests, in wonder.

"You'd like to know, wouldn't you, Glorious?" asked Lord Hemsley, giving the young lady a pat on her exquisitely painted cheek. "All in good time. Wait until after dinner!"

His valet, who had been expecting curses and grumbles, had never known his lordship to be more sweet-tempered. Everything was right. He even sang as he fashioned his own dress-tie.

When he left his bed-room he was chuckling, for, during dressing, he had been turning over all sorts of possible clues. The thing would have to be done properly. Blake had failed to be caught at the first attempt; and this second one must necessarily be fool-proof, or Blake would again refuse to accept the bait. But a murder case was ten times better than a mere jewel robbery.

Hemsley was feeling reckless, or he would not have been so enthusiastic. In a jewel robbery there was no need to call in the police—which was a risky enough proceeding. But in a murder case the police would come whether they were called or not. Well, hang the police! There would probably be a fuss when the truth came out, but they couldn't do any more than fine him. And who cared?

As he walked down the broad

(Continued on page 16.)



News of Our Author Explorer.

READERS who are interested in our Lobangu stories and the man who writes them will certainly not have forgotten—whatever may be the case with such few others who are *not* interested in them—my promise of some weeks ago to let you have some news, some time, of Rex Hardinge.

Here, at last, is the news: You will remember that, when I last mentioned him on this page, I revealed that he was about to start for Africa on an exploring expedition on which he expected to be absent for about six months, and that he would communicate with me from various points so that I could duly hand on the bulletins to his "U.J." admirers.

The two map-diagrams below indicate roughly the route of the expedition as originally planned. It was organised for the purpose of taking a party across Africa from west to east, and to secure sound-pictures of native life—war-dances, ju-ju feasts, and so forth. From the starting point on the West Coast, Dakar, the line of march was to traverse French Guinea and the Ivory Coast; Ashanti, Nigeria, and the Cameroons; the Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, and Tanganyika.

Unfortunately, as is often the case with expeditions requiring all sorts of factors to fit into the scheme, there was a hitch that would have meant several months' delay—a delay which did not in the least suit Rex Hardinge. Thereupon he decided to start independently, taking with him only one companion, the entomologist of the trip.

"From Dakar" he wrote to me before the start in November last, "the programme is that we immediately set off on foot along the route marked on the accompanying sketch-map. Our job is to prepare the way for the rest of the bunch and to discover the feasibility of the trip, now that the year is so far advanced and the rains imminent. The others are supposed to follow us within a month. In any case we push on to the Ashanti border. When we reach the railhead north of Port Buet we shall know whether the expedition is really going to make a start this year. If they don't, we have to decide whether to return home to report on conditions and complete arrangements for next year, or else



Rex Hardinge.

push on *alone* with porters and complete the trip. Most likely we will do the latter, having got so far."

The funds of the expedition were not such as to allow an indefinite sum to be spent on this preliminary survey. Greatly daring—for it is an amount that ordinary travellers would find quite inadequate for such a long journey, our author undertook to limit himself to the sum of £50 for the entire trip from England to the African jungle.

At the moment of writing he is probably miles from civilisation in the deeps of some primeval forest, for my one and only bulletin is dated from Dakar, whence it was despatched by air mail. It is written on flimsy paper, and consists of many pages of Rex Hardinge's neat, close written lines describing in detail his journey up to the moment when he left the coast and was preparing to plunge inland. If considerations of space and other things prevent my printing the 7,000 words of it in full here—and anyway this is not a travel-paper—our consolation

is that much of it is bound to come out later in his stories.

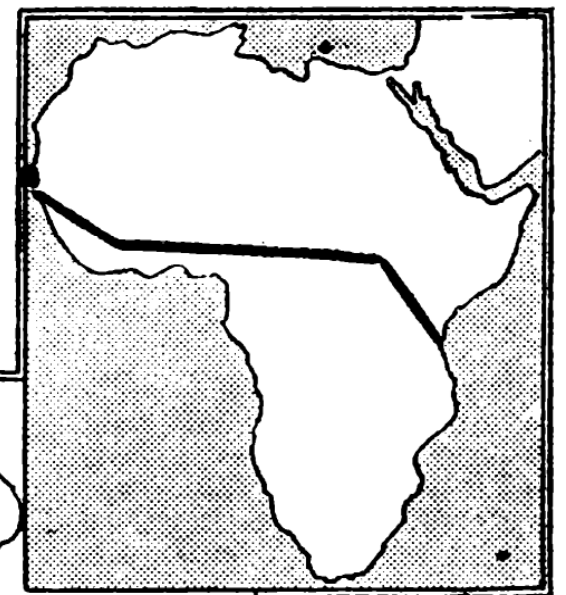
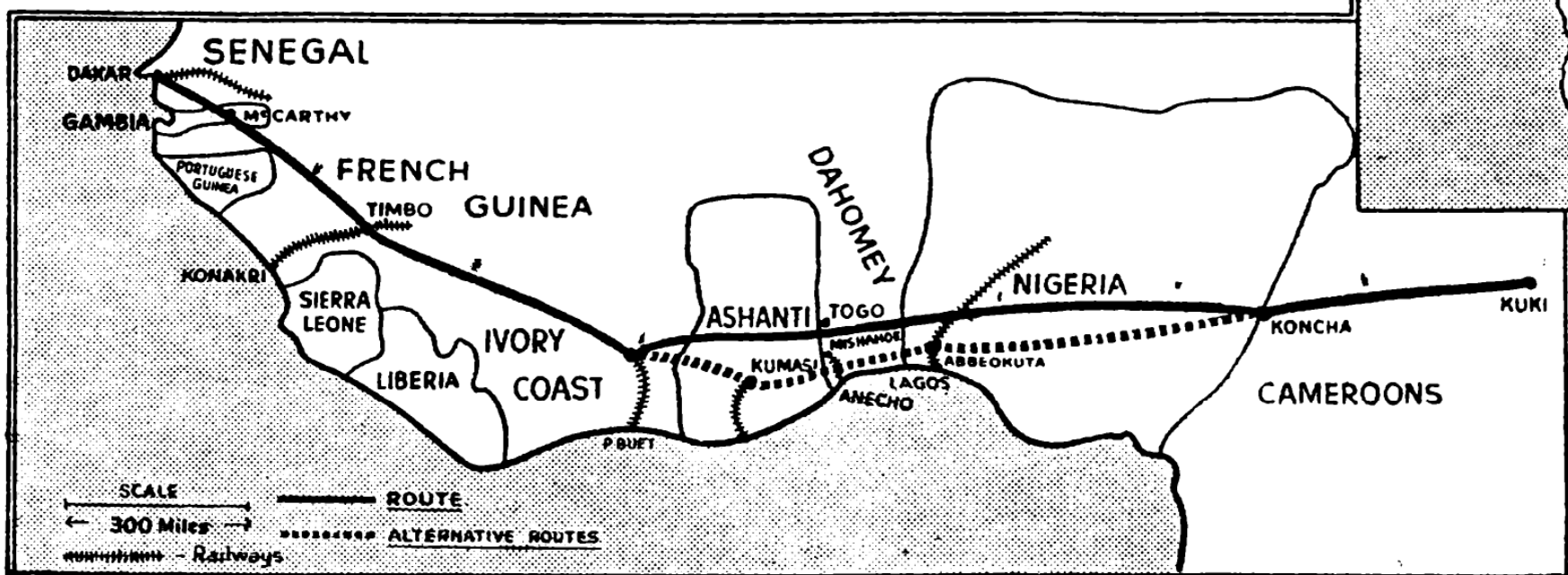
However, we may briefly summarise his adventures.

HARDINGE and his entomologist companion started from Nowhaveru and crossed to Paris, where it was necessary to obtain official visas for their passports because a large part of the journey would be in French territory. They eventually reached Marseilles, the jumping-off place for Africa. Here, owing to official prohibitions that had not been disclosed in Paris, the pair found that they would not be allowed to sail. Every shift and appeal known to the seasoned traveller was tried, and for two days they were in despair at ever getting nearer their objective than the shipping offices of Marseilles. And then, after days of hotel bills that threatened to eat away their limited resources, they found a friend who succeeded where officialdom had failed.

But it meant travelling on an inferior boat, and in conditions of actual discomfort that none but the most determined would have accepted. Still, it took them towards their goal, and moreover it was cheap—which at least suited the pair.

And then, just as everything was fixed up, a telegram from England came to Hardinge's fellow-explorer to say that his wife was gravely ill. He could not refuse to obey the summons, and Hardinge himself was faced with the alternative of turning back too, or going on alone with a journey, the rigours of which would have been halved in the company of a friend. Hardinge decided to go on alone.

(Continued on page 28.)



MAP showing the route of the expedition's first stage. Above, the complete itinerary as projected.

IF there is one sort of law-case more than another in which judges need the wisdom of Solomon, it is the sort in which somebody claims something already in the possession of another. Possession is nine points of the law on the one hand, and on the other

JUSTICE GETS A JOLT

when it has to decide the question: "Who is the Man?" and to find the owners of massed-up millions.

The classic Tichborne affair, for instance, in which Arthur Orton, the impostor butcher from Wagga Wagga, Australia, aspired to the lands and titles of the Dukes of Portland, took one hundred and eighty-eight days to decide, and cost many thousands of pounds before his fraud was uncovered. Since that affair made legal history—in the 1870's—a very similar case has more recently seized on the imagination of Italy.

The Italian Tichborne case—as it was called—dragged on almost as interminably as the British one, and was about as complicated and picturesque. The gist of the thing, however, was this: nine years after the War, a man who stated he had been suffering from lost memory arrived at the Villa Canella, the home in Verona of the wealthy widow of Professor Canella, believed lost in the War, and claimed to be the husband she believed dead.

Without hesitation the widow identified and welcomed him back to his palatial home. He lived there for some months, until, in fact, the police turned up and claimed him in their turn. They said he was not the lost Professor Canella at all, but an escaped convict named Brunieri. The man himself, who pleaded he was still suffering from loss of memory, would not say which of the two he was.

After a series of court hearings which mightily perplexed the judges, it was at last decided he was the convict, and he was ordered back to prison to finish his unexpired term. But then a series of appeals began, and finally he was given the benefit of the doubt and allowed to rejoin the Canella family.

A year passed, and then the matter came up again in the shape of a civil action which involved the identity. Relatives of both the escaped convict Brunieri and the professor each swore equally emphatically in turn that he was their own kin.

The State Prosecutor, Brunieri's mother, His son, His brother, His sister, And other witnesses claimed him as Brunieri.

Signora Canella, Her two children, Her brother, Her brother's wife, And other relatives, And professional colleagues claimed him as Professor Canella.

The case dragged on to a verdict which was quite unsatisfying to half of the parties—and to the public which had followed it from the beginning and formed its own conclusions—the man was finally decided by the court to be the convict Brunieri, and sent back to prison to finish his sentence.

BUT such cases as these are relatively rare. Much more often do the courts have to puzzle over the claims of people who believe they are entitled to old-time fortunes which have accumulated, not only fantastic increases of value due to the lapse of time, but a tinge of romance also.

A little while ago a crowd of people invaded the grounds of Lauriston Castle at Cramond, near Edinburgh, and stated they would remain there, in relays, till the Edinburgh Corporation, trustees of the castle, resorted to legal means to remove them—when they would promptly lay claim to the £36,000 castle and estate.

They were all members of a family named Law, lineal descendants, as they claim, of the original John Law who lived in the seventeenth century and owned the castle. This John Law was a sort of Ivar Kreuger of his time, and was involved in some even more colossal financial swindles—a long story in itself—before he faded into a deserved oblivion and left a progeny from which the thirty-three modern claimants to his castle assert they are descended. They say that, after many years of searching, all the documents necessary to prove their case have at last been unearthed; but whether a judge will ever be persuaded to allow it is a different matter. The Law is very slow to alter a state of affairs that has lasted for centuries.

But £36,000 is actually only pocket-money, compared to some of the staggering amounts which have been laid claim to at times. No less than seven millions sterling was the prize fought for some years ago by a syndicate of people with variations of the name of Taylor in this country, Germany, and Holland, who alleged descent from one Pieter Teyler van der Hulst, a merchant prince of Haarlem in the 1700's.

AS in similar cases, there is a romantic history attached. Pieter Teyler van der Hulst was originally Peter Taylor, who left his home in Scotland two centuries ago and, thriving as Scots do on an alien soil, scraped together the respectable fortune of £3,500,000. This money he divided into two, one part of which was to be used in endowing thirty-two almshouses and the museum he founded in Haarlem, and the remainder to



be invested, the revenue accumulating for one hundred years, when it was to be divided among his living heirs on his father's side. The will also mentioned four steel chests, deposited in the Teyler Institute, which were to lie untouched for the same period, when, said the testator in his will: "I shall be present to see them opened and the money handed out to my heirs on the male side."

During the intervening century all sorts of fantastic stories grew up around the old merchant's riches.

But after a century of accumulated interest—both financial and human—anti-climax ruined this romance of piled-up treasure and dashed to disappointment the hopes of hundreds of people in three countries.

The Supreme Court at the Hague rejected the claims of all the applicants to Pieter Teyler's seven-million-pound inheritance, and all the satisfaction any of them can get now is to obtain a copy of his will from the archives of Haarlem at a cost of £2—a big price to pay for a

THE WEEK'S PICTURE NEWS.

ANOTHER "EMPTY."

Britain's diminishing list of prisons is again lessened by the news that the City Corporation of Plymouth bought the local lock-up and will convert it into a house for the Fire Brigade and Police. Ipswich, New Reading, and many other towns have, with relief, seen their prisons close, and the prison population for the whole country has decreased by about 70 per cent since pre-War results, due, not to less crime but to more convicted criminals having been put on probation.

PLAYING FOR LOVE.

The picture (below) of a card-game in progress is unique of its kind inasmuch as it was taken in the death row—"Killers' Row"—of the County Gaol at Seattle. Seated, from left to right: a man charged with first degree murder, under sentence of death for killing a woman, held as murder-suspect; and sentenced to a life term for homicide. Standing on left: a man charged with first degree assault in a shooting case; and (on right) Marcelino, who ran amok and killed six, injuring many, as reported in an earlier issue.

tantalising glance for proof that one is still poor after all.

Another will in the multi-millions class is that of the Hobbs Estate. That, too, drags on in a slow-motion fashion towards its final scene of triumph or disaster. Robert Hobbs, say his three hundred descendants, left property now worth £6,000,000. He was a convict in Australia in the far-off days of Botany Bay, to which penal settlement he was transported for life in 1790 for a small offence.

The will has been recently admitted to

nation Received

Thierry, who has spent years of his life in trying to prove a watertight claim, now comes forward to try and succeed where others, long dead, have failed.

Whether he will do so is problematical. Twenty-nine million pounds is quite a lump for even a Government to hand over in these hard times. And besides, the Law always wants time to think these things over. After all, it has waited since Shakespeare's time, so what's the hurry?



probate in Australia after having been lost for two centuries and finally found in a solicitor's ancient deed-box. When English probate has been granted the heirs hope to be able to split up between them at least two millions—nice little windfalls of nearly £7,000 each.

But the probable world's record, and most like a story-book, is the claim of a retired naval officer of France named Nicholas Thierry for £29,600,000. This colossal sum, sufficient to wipe out some nations' War debts, represents the accumulated value of a fortune left by a Venetian merchant, allegedly an ancestor of Monsieur Thierry, in the time of Shakespeare.

The story, synopsised, goes like this: Jean Thierry, the ancestor, went to Italy as a boy and entered the service of one Athanaso Tipaldi, a rich Greek merchant. The boy, in the best manner of story-book romance, saved his master's life during a shipwreck, and was rewarded when the old man died in Venice in 1675 by being made his heir.

Young Thierry increased the inheritance, and in his turn left a will bequeathing over five million ducats to his brothers and their children." The official bank of Venice was given the task of tracing these persons, of whom Thierry had never heard since he left home, and a responsible executor was forthwith sent to France to seek them out.

Revealing his business to certain French officials, a group of three of them plotted to obtain the money for themselves, to which end they destroyed all the papers and replaced them with forgeries naming themselves as the legatees.

But their plot was discovered, and for the attempted crime they were sentenced to death. They managed to escape to Holland, however, and the job of tracing the real heirs was somehow dropped.

Many years later it cropped up again, and most of the very numerous Thierrys in the length and breadth of France put in a claim. Seven thousand of them hoped, but were all disappointed when the courts decided against them.

Meantime, the inheritance had been real enough. It was still in the care of the Venetian Bank, and was, in fact, handed over to the French Government after the Revolution. In the Government's hands, with intermittent attempts on it by first one and then another, it has remained since then, so that M. Nicholas

ONE of the few really authoritative books in the world on scientific detective work is "System der Kriminalistik," by the great criminologist Dr. Hans Gross. Here is an instance from it of a bit of pure 'tec work in the laboratory manner:

REAL 'TEC STUFF

This little real-life job of detective work eclipses many of the fabrications of fiction.

for the interviewed—had lured the bailiff to some spot on the edge of the river, and there thrust him in.

There were no marks of violence on the body, and no other clues whatsoever connecting him with the suspect, or indeed any other cause for his death, as for instance a suicide note. A button was missing from his coat, however, which might mean anything or nothing.

All that was known were two things: his floating body had been seen by a night watchman at a paper mill as it passed downstream at exactly 10.45 at night. And the watch on the body had stopped at 10.30.

Assuming the watch to have been correct, it was thought that if it could be shown how long it would take to stop when submerged in water, the answer would indicate, taking the rate of flow of the river into account, at what point the body had entered the water. Perhaps, if that place could be located, there might be a further clue there.

Dr. Hans Gross tackled the problem in the true scientific manner. First he called in two expert witnesses, watchmakers of long experience. He asked them how long a good watch such as that on the body would continue working when under water. One said it would go for hours, but only if protected by a good case of the "hunter" pattern. The other thought it would run for a short time only, unless rendered waterproof with special rubber washers.

The scientist-detective then proceeded

by experimentation. He submerged half a dozen watches under water, and noted the results. Four of them stopped within a matter of seconds. The other two, placed in double cases and greased, lasted for twelve and fifteen minutes respectively.

Then the dead man's watch, having been cleaned and put in order, was likewise dipped in water. It stopped almost at once, as it must have done even when in its owner's pocket, for another experiment with his suit showed that water quickly penetrated it.

THE reasoning from the experiment was this: a similar watch, greased and protected, took twelve to fifteen minutes to stop; but if the unprotected watch on the bailiff had indicated 10.30 (having stopped immediately on entering the water) when passing a certain spot at 10.45, it must therefore have been floating for about fifteen minutes at that time, assuming it to have been approximately correct. Therefore, if it could be discovered how far the river would float the body in fifteen minutes, the place where it entered the water could be discovered.

The body was weighed and measured and a sack of the same weight and bulk filled with sand and hay was prepared to correspond to it. Then this sack was launched on to the river, and its drift carefully timed. At last the investigators found a position from which it took just fifteen minutes to float to the paper mill from which the body had been seen at 10.45.

A search of both banks at this point was begun, and soon, within a few yards distance downstream, was found a patch of grass that had been flattened and disturbed by struggling bodies and feet—and found also was the button from the dead man's coat.

The suggestion now amounted almost to proof that the suspected man whom the bailiff had had to interview had indeed lured him to the river; and, once this was half-proved, the other proof was not long in finding. Various other clues more directly concerning him backed up the results of the detectives' experiments, and, despite a carefully framed alibi the murderer had ready prepared, his story was exposed as a lie and he was eventually executed.

But in all probability justice would not have been done, and the case against him could not have been fully proved, had it not been for the painstaking ingenuities of the scientist-detective in experimenting with the watches, and so completely clinching the case.

TERSE TALES.

ACE.

AT Zagreb, in a cafe patronised by beggars, a group of men were playing poker at a table by an open window.

One player, dumb, and for years a recipient of kindly citizens' charity, held a flush royal to the ace, repeated the bids on his hand to the extent of all his money.

"Four aces!" overbid his opponent, showing the cards.

"Impossible!" yelled the man. "I've got an ace!"

The dispute went no further. A policeman, hearing the mute's unsuspected voice through the window, had arrived to arrest him for obtaining alms under false pretences.

STOPPAGE.

AT Parkhurst Prison, Isle of Wight, the last days of Joseph Wild's sentence of three years approached.

Eager with the prospect of imminent freedom, Joseph Wild's heart began to palpitate wildly, fluttered, stopped.

Reason for his death, according to the prison Medical Officer; strain due to over-excitement.

(Continued from page 12.)

corridor he caught a glimpse of a trim maidservant as she entered the linen-room with an armful of fresh washing. She half glanced over her shoulder at him, and there was a flicker of a smile on her pretty face. Lord Hemsley needed little encouragement.

He had already noticed this girl, and he believed she had covertly smiled at him once or twice before, but there had always been third parties present. This looked like a good opportunity.

He paused in the doorway of the linen-room when he came opposite. It was quite a big apartment, lined with great cupboards on two sides, and with open shelves on another. The girl was placing the clean linen on one of the shelves.

"Well, well!" said Lord Hemsley. "So this is what goes on in here? Do you know, Susan, I've often wondered what this room contained—but I never knew, before, how pretty its contents really were."

"My name's Alice, my lord," said the girl, with a smile.

Lord Hemsley came nearer, and regarded her with new interest. Yes, she was confoundedly pretty.

"And to think I've never spoken to you before, Peaches!" he said, with self-reproach.

"I'm mostly in the kitchen, my lord."

"Which is a defect which must be quickly remedied," said Lord Hemsley promptly. "I'll see the housekeeper about it. You'll have to have a job where you're more generally on view. There's no mistake about it, Alice, you add to the charm of the place."

He went even closer; and Alice, now nervous, backed away slightly, frightened. It was the very movement which Hemsley had expected. He laughed goodnatureedly.

"What's wrong? Afraid of me?" he chaffed.

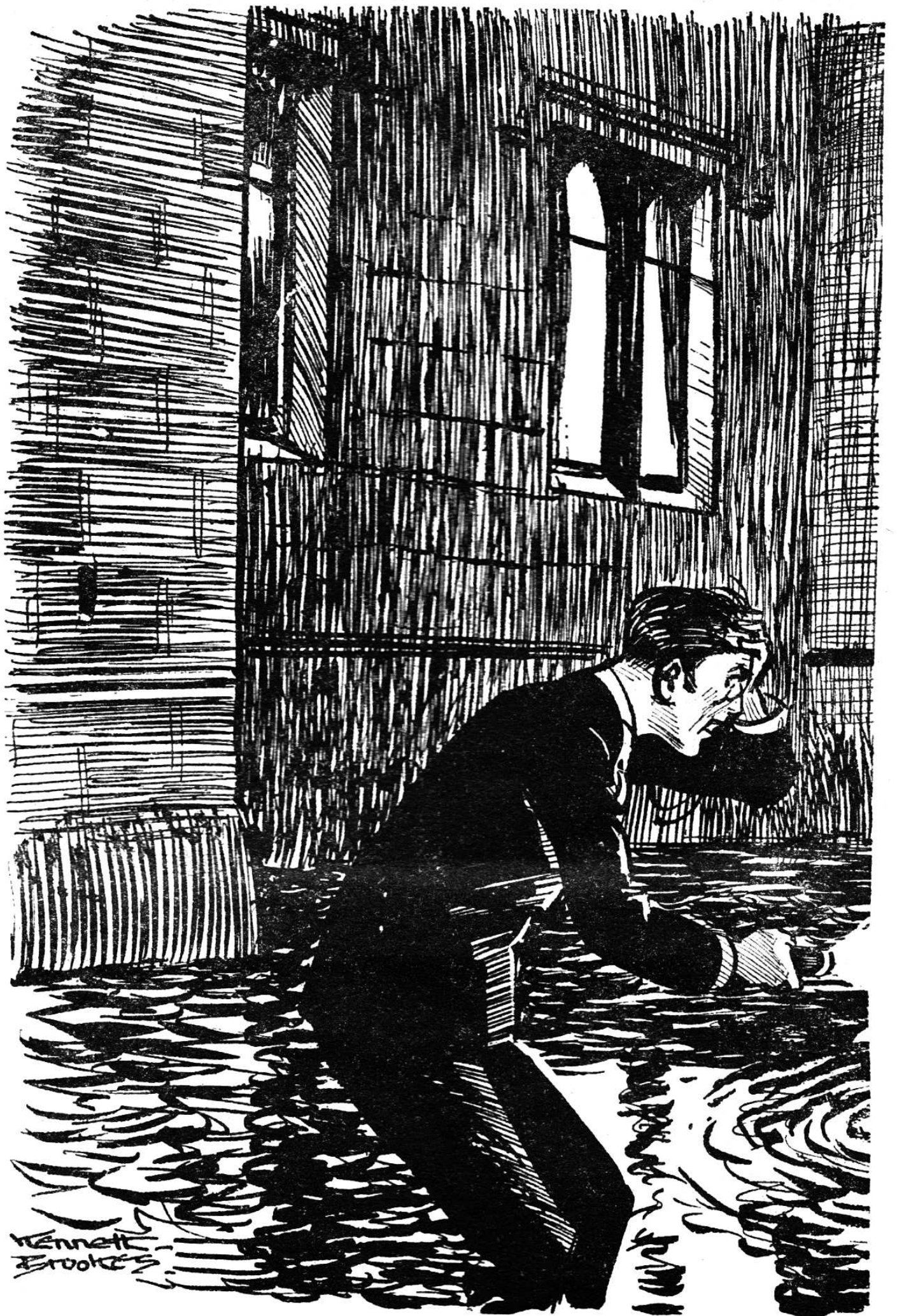
"No, my lord," said the girl, in a faltering voice. "But—but if Mrs. Woodhouse should happen to see me—"

"What's it got to do with Mrs. Woodhouse?" interrupted his lordship. "She's only the housekeeper—and she can mind her own infernal business. Before I go out of this room, I'm going to kiss you."

He reached forward, but the girl shrank back, uttering a little gasp of dismay.

"Don't be a fool!" said Lord Hemsley, changing his tone. "You can't bluff me with that 'shy-maiden' stuff. Never been kissed, eh? Well, it's about time."

It was the most trivial of incidents, for Lord Hemsley had kissed practically every good-looking maidservant who had ever entered service at the castle. Such conduct on his part was the talk of the servants' hall—to say nothing of being the talk of the village. His lordship's fondness for kissing the maidservants—which was, after all, one of his most harmless amusements—



was the cause of much bitter resentment in the district.

"Please, my lord—please!" whispered Alice.

This time Lord Hemsley took hold of her firmly and tried to force a kiss on her. He rather liked them when they resisted. But this one was more difficult than usual. The scream she uttered was one of real terror, and she wrenched herself away and backed across the room, panting hard.

"Shut up, you little idiot!" snapped Hemsley. "Do you want everybody in the castle to hear you? I wasn't going to hurt you. Look out, there! You'll be through the window!"

"You shan't come near me!" shrieked the girl hysterically.

He had really frightened her, and as he moved forward to prevent her from backing through the half-open window, she misunderstood his motives, apparently. For she backed more rapidly, and then stumbled.

"Look out!" shouted Hemsley frantically.

A terrified scream, awful in its intensity, rang out. The unfortunate girl had overbalanced over the sill of the low window, and, to Lord Hemsley's horror, she vanished. Another scream came from outside as she fell.

"Good heavens!" gasped Hemsley, leaping forward.

He was just in time to hear a loud splash from the moat below.

It was far too dark for him to see anything. There were no illuminated windows on the ground floor level on this side of the castle.

"Is anything wrong here?" asked a sharp voice. "What has happened, Hemsley?"

Count Ritz, looking very startled, ran into the linen-room. He had heard the scream from the far end of the corridor—for Waldo's ears



were a great deal sharper than most men's. At the first sound he had merely shrugged, then he had turned abruptly and run.

He found Lord Hemsley at the window, staring down, breathing hard, apparently paralysed by what had happened.

"What was that scream?" asked Waldo roughly, as he seized the young peer. "Pull yourself together, Hemsley!"

"It—it wasn't my fault!" stammered the other. "She—she backed into the window by accident, and— Confound her for a young fool! There'll be a whole fuss over this in the servants' hall!"

From the moat below came a splashing of water.

"Help!" came a thin, frightened cry. "Help!"

"Come!" said Waldo curtly.

He turned from the window and ran quickly across the room, down

The disguised Wonder Man had lifted the girl from the moat. "This is not a question of a ducking," he said. "The girl is dead!"

the corridor, and then down the great staircase. Lord Hemsley, instinctively knowing that this man was his intellectual superior, was at his heels. One or two of the guests in the hall wondered what was wrong, and shouted inquiries. Apparently the screams had not been heard in this part of the castle.

"It's all right—back in a minute!" shouted Hemsley, over his shoulder.

When he got outside he found that Waldo had already crossed the drawbridge and was racing round the grass bank towards the left wing. A big electric flashlamp was somehow in Waldo's hand, sending its bright beam slashing through the deep gloom of the windy evening.

"Hey!" he gasped suddenly. "She is there!"

He halted, pointing. By this time Lord Hemsley had worked himself up into a fine rage. He considered that the girl was to blame for the whole unfortunate incident. What was more, he would dismiss her as soon as she was fished out of the moat.

But his rage fizzled out as he saw the still, floating form.

"What's—what's the matter with her?" he asked hoarsely.

"Better lend me a hand, Hemsley," said Waldo, his own voice charged with concern. "She seems to be in a bad way. Here, hold this torch!"

Not a second was wasted. Waldo, with his usual presence of mind, had taken complete command of the situation. While Hemsley held the light, the disguised Wonder Man reached over the bank of the moat, drew the girl's figure towards him, and then lifted it out of the water.

By this time quite a few of the guests had turned up, and were standing round, either startled or amused. Many of them were under the impression that it was a joke of some kind.

"Steady on, Pinko, old thing!" said one of the men reprovingly. "We know it's one of your little habits to chuck the girls under the chin, but when it comes to chucking them into the moat—"

"Keep quiet, you infernal fool!" shouted Hemsley savagely.

"Here, I say—"

"It was an accident!" went on Hemsley, his voice rising. "Do you hear me, everybody? It was an accident! I wasn't touching the girl! She fell out of a window!"

"No need to go into hysterics!" interrupted the man. "A ducking won't do her any harm!"

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is not a question of a ducking!" said Waldo grimly. "The girl is dead!"

THERE was a moment of horrified silence. Waldo had dragged the maidservant to the side of the moat, and by this time she was lying limply in his arms, her face waxen, her wet hair streaming back pitifully over Waldo's arm.

"Dead!" whispered Hemsley incredulously. "But—but it's impossible! It's not a long fall, and the water isn't particularly cold. You're out of your mind, Ritz! Somebody fetch a doctor!"

"He would be helpless!" broke in Waldo, his voice full of command. "I know what I'm saying, Hemsley. This girl is dead. You'll have to fetch a doctor, of course, and the police must be informed!"

"The police!" whispered Hemsley, his face changing colour.

"I say, what a frightful bore!" complained one of the others. "You don't mean to say we're going to have the police messing about round here? What about that stunt of ours?"

"I'm afraid there'll be no stunt," said Waldo. "Rather a coincidence that we should be talking of staging a fake murder, so that Blake would be tricked—"

"What do you mean—a coincidence?" asked Hemsley, his eyes lighting up with savage resentment. "Are you hinting that there has been a murder? I tell you, I wasn't touching the girl—"

"Well, we won't stand here and argue," said Waldo gruffly. "Let's get indoors—and let's hope that the other servants haven't found out. The longer we can keep it from them, the better."

Grave-faced, Waldo carried his burden across the drawbridge. But instead of entering the castle, he turned into a paved, arched passage, which ran alongside the grey wall, and he whispered something to Hemsley. The young peer went in advance, and opened a metal-studded door.

"This is the best place for her," said Waldo quietly.

"But—but supposing she isn't really dead?" asked the other, still clutching at that feeble hope.

"Examine her yourself, man!" said Waldo harshly. "Do you think I don't know a dead person when I see one? She must have caught her head on a part of the masonry as she fell. There's a horrible gash in the skull. Where's my torch? I'll show you."

"No, no!" panted Hemsley, shuddering.

This place was the armoury, and was seldom, it ever, entered. The main doors led into the interior of the castle, and these were always kept locked. There was this other door too. The grim apartment served excellently as a temporary mortuary.

Waldo took Hemsley by the arm.

"Better come inside," he said, and his voice was imperative. "You need a strong drink, Hemsley. You'll need to get into action, too, if I'm not mistaken."

When they reached the main hall the guests were standing about idly, talking in low voices, and all of them were more or less frightened. Waldo saw two footmen in the background, and in spite of the stolidity of their expressions, he knew that they were fully aware of the truth. They were not quite so wooden as usual.

"The library!" muttered Waldo, pulling Hemsley by the arm.

His quick ears heard something which escaped Hemsley—a rising and falling of many voices which sounded from beyond the great baize-covered doors which shut off the servants' quarters.

In the library, Waldo did not say a word until Hemsley had gulped down a half-tumbler of neat brandy. Then it was Hemsley who spoke first.

"It wasn't my fault!" he said eagerly. "I tell you, Ritz, I didn't go near the girl. When the police come you'll have to support me—"

"When the police come you won't be here—if you're wise," interrupted Waldo.

The young peer stared.

"What do you mean?" he asked angrily. "Do you think I'm going to run away? That would be madness, Ritz!"

"Call it what you like—but it'll be the only way of saving your neck."

Hemsley clutched nervously at his throat.

"But—but the police can't arrest me!" he muttered huskily. "You know it was an accident, Ritz! You're talking like an idiot! I tell you, there's no danger—"

"No danger from the police, I grant you," said Waldo grimly. "Yes, it was an accident, and, at the worst, a coroner's jury can do no more than censure you for frightening the girl



and causing her to fall out of the window."

"Then what the devil do you mean?" panted Hemsley. "Why should I run away?"

"I'm thinking of the country people hereabouts—not of the police," said Waldo earnestly. "In Heaven's name, Hemsley, don't you realise your danger? The servants' hall is already seething; the story had fled on its way to the village by this time. You know how quickly these things spread."

"But I'm not afraid of the wretched rustics—"

"Then you'd better be," cut in Waldo sharply. "There's been a good deal of scandal about here of late, and you're not particularly loved, Hemsley. In fact, the country people hate you, and you know it. You have deliberately gone out of your way to offend them, to trample on them—"

"I don't care," said Hemsley impatiently.

"All right—stay here, and see what happens," said Waldo, with a shrug.

"I'm only warning you, Hemsley. Here's a girl, one of the maid-servants, dragged out of the moat, dead. Do you think the people of Hemsley village will believe that she fell out of an upper window by accident? The people know your reputation, and there'll be a very ugly story manufactured in connection with this trivial incident. A servant-girl killed—by your action. Why, man alive, within an hour from now the whole countryside will be inflamed. There'll be a mob at the castle almost before you know it—and that mob will be after your blood."

Lord Hemsley was as white as paper; Waldo's gravely spoken words had impressed him immeasurably. He could picture the scene—the mob marching on the castle, shouting for him to be handed over.

"No, no!" he muttered, shrinking. "If you leave at once you'll be safe," continued Waldo. "But I believe it's your only chance, Hemsley. Leave me here, to deal with the situation. You can trust me, can't you? Look here, I've been thinking hard during these past few minutes, and I have a plan."

And Lord Hemsley listened while Count Sylvanus Ritz, alias Rupert Waldo, precipitated him into an act which was to lead to his own ruin.

Chapter 6.

"Up With Him!"

"WHAT'S that?" asked Tinker, cocking an ear curiously.

He and Blake were just finishing their dinner—and a most enjoyable dinner it had been—in the cosy dining-room of the old-fashioned inn.

From somewhere outside, dim and vague at present, came the murmuring of many voices, the sounds rising and falling peculiarly. Sexton Blake, who was in the act of filling his pipe, rose abruptly to his feet.

"By James! I wonder?" he muttered.

"I say, you don't think that—"

Tinker paused, for the same startling thought had crossed his own mind. Blake was already at one of the windows, pulling the neat casement curtains aside. At first he could see nothing, so he unlatched the window and leaned out. Tinker joined him, kneeling on the cushions of the window-seat.

"Ye gods and little fishes!" ejaculated Tinker.

What they saw was ominous. A number of men were running down the quaint old High Street; two others came out of a lane, and it was significant that they carried heavy wooden stakes. Women were appearing at the doors of the cottages, and some at the windows, all of them talking excitedly.

Right down the street, at some distance, there was a glare. It flickered and eddied mysteriously. And on the air, borne by the wind, was the unmistakable sound of a chorus of angry, excited voices.

"This looks uncommonly bad, Tinker," said Blake sharply.

"You really think it's a rising, gov'nor?" asked Tinker, the excitement blazing in his eyes. "But what a coincidence! I mean, on the very night we're here—"

"Coincidence nothing!" broke in Blake. "Come on—we'd better go outside and get the strength of this."

He was thinking of Waldo. Waldo knew that the Baker Street pair would be in the village this evening, but Blake had not mentioned that he would be staying for a day or two. So Waldo had, in some extraordinary way, staged the big act for to-night. Blake was not unconscious of the compliment, but he had no intention of remaining a mere onlooker.

When he and Tinker passed the tap-room door, a moment later, they saw

that the apartment was empty. Even the landlord himself was absent. Clattering feet sounded on the cobbles outside. Blake and Tinker, emerging into the night, saw an astounding procession.

It was just coming into sight round the bend in the High Street. There were scores of men, many of them carrying great, flaming torches, held aloft. Most of the men were young—farm labourers and similar sturdy yeomen. Quite a few were middle-aged, and some elderly. All of them were carrying improvised weapons of some kind, and every face was grim and set.

"It looks like business!" said Tinker breathlessly.

Keeping pace with the ragged column of men, on either side, were large numbers of women. They were all shouting with excitement, and the babble was increasing in volume. From cottages, from side lanes, other men came hurrying out to join the main procession.

"To the castle! To the castle!" went up the cry.

"Ay, we'll burn it down!"

There was no misunderstanding the temper of the mob. Seldom, indeed, had Sexton Blake seen men in such an ugly, dangerous mood. The majority of them were honest sons of the soil, righteously indignant, believing themselves justified in their wrath. But there was another element, too.

Blake, with his trained eye, quickly picked out the riff-raff—the young hooligans of Hemsley. Every town and every village has its quota of such hotheads. They were making as much noise as all the rest put together, and their threatening shouts were wilder.

"We'll lynch him!" went up a shout.

"Ay, we'll string him up, the murderer!"

By this time scarcely a house or a cottage was without its figures at doors and windows. Even the aged and infirm had come to look—and, mostly, approve. It was significant that no policeman was to be seen.

"There's nothing we can do, gov'nor," said Tinker helplessly. "I mean, against a crowd like this, we shouldn't stand an earthly. For two pins they'd turn on us and—"

He did not finish, for Sexton Blake was running. The detective headed for the leaders of the procession, and his tall, lithe, athletic figure stood out impressively amongst the sturdy, stocky countrymen.

"Wait—wait!" shouted Blake earnestly. "What's the meaning of all this excitement?"

"Ye'd best not interfere, stranger," said one of the leaders, a big, powerful farm-hand who was carrying a pitchfork, as the front ranks of the procession came to a straggling halt and those behind piled up noisily behind them.

"But this thing is rank folly!" shouted Blake. "Think well before you break the law—"

"We're the law!" thundered the man with the pitchfork.

"Ay!" went up a roar.

The mob showed signs of restiveness, but Blake, and Tinker, who had run up, stood their ground.

"Better keep out of this, sir," said one of the other men, with respect. "We've no quarrel with you, and we don't want to hurt ye. It's Lord Hemsley we're after!"

"What has Lord Hemsley done that you should take the law into your own hands?" asked Blake.

"Haven't ye heard?" said the other. "He's killed a lass—and maybe that's not the worst! Threw her from one of the upper windows into the castle moat, and they picked the poor thing out, dead! It's the last outrage he'll be allowed to commit! We're going to drive him from the country!"

Even Blake was startled at the revelation; and he understood the temper of the people. But he made a last effort.

"If Lord Hemsley has committed murder, there is a law in this land which will make him pay the penalty!" he shouted. "Every man, whether he be bad or good, is entitled to a fair trial!"

"He ain't a man—he's a devil!" shouted somebody. "We're going to get him! Ay, we're going to string him up to the nearest tree if we lay hands on the cur!"

Blake was about to expostulate further when one of the younger men, angry and excited, thrust at him recklessly with a long pole. The detective was caught unawares, and the pole jabbed cruelly into his stomach. Blake doubled up, completely winded, and, staggering

with it. It's been coming to Hemsley for a long time, anyhow!"

Blake dragged himself out of the ditch, and he and Tinker started hurrying back to the Red Lion. Whilst talking with the leaders of the mob, they had almost reached the outskirts of the village.

"What's the hurry?" asked Tinker.

"I'm not denying that Hemsley is a thoroughly nasty piece of work, and he probably deserves lynching!" said Blake grimly. "But somebody has got to stop this madness, and we seem to be the only people in the village with level heads. Come on, Tinker! We've got to get the Grey Panther out and reach the castle before the mob. I think we can do it if we cut across the park."

MEANWHILE, reinforcements from all sides were joining the main body of enraged people. They came from side lanes, from footpaths, from across the meadows. They came from the outlying farms, for the news had spread like wildfire, with uncanny swiftness. And the temper of the country folk was such that it boded ill for Lord Hemsley if he should be caught.

The volcano was in full eruption.

For weeks, for months, this quiet, rural countryside had been seething beneath the surface, and now that the outbreak had come, it was terrifying in its violence.

The thing which had happened this evening was calculated, better than anything else, to drive the people to drastic action. A pretty maidservant was dead—killed because of Lord Hemsley's autocratic and arrogant pride.

The majority of the demonstrators had no real intention of breaking the law when they set out; their main object was to congregate at the castle and give vent to their enraged feelings. But during the march they became more excited, they lost their discretion, and were ready enough—now—to burn the castle to the ground.

The wilder element, with the mob spirit run riot, was ready for even more desperate action. They were after Lord Hemsley himself—and if they got hold of him he would receive but short shrift.

It seemed that Fate took a hand in this grim drama.

For while the main party kept to the road, with the intention of advancing towards the castle along the drive, the hotheads broke free, and took a different route. It was natural, perhaps, that the two elements should separate.

The hotheads, led by a hulking, blue-jowled man, opened a narrow gate at a corner of the park. A rough track led straight across to the castle outbuildings. It was, in fact, a short cut—a sort of backway.

"We'll get there first, chaps!" shouted Blue-jowl. "We'll get into the castle, and drive them swells clean out!"

"Chuck 'em in the moat!" shouted one of the others.

"Ay, women and all! They're no good, none of 'em!"

Blue-jowl was an unemployed

FREE GIFTS

—really useful;
really attractive

ARE
ON
THE
WAY!

(See page 27.)

back, he went slithering and sliding into the wet ditch. He rolled to the bottom, and Tinker was by his side in a moment.

"Guv'nor, are you hurt?"

"What do you think?" groaned Blake. "How would you like to have a scaffold pole jabbed into your vitals? Confound the fellow!"

"It's no good—we can't do anything against such a mob!" said Tinker, relieved to find that Blake was only winded. "The only thing we can do is to let them carry on

labourer named Andy Watts—a worthless sort of scamp, who was always getting into fights, drinking himself to a stupor when he had enough money to do it, and exerting a bad influence generally. He was just the type of man to take a prominent part in such an affair as this.

"String him up—that's what we'll do, boys!" bellowed Andy Watts. "And why not? He's a murderer, ain't he?"

"Ay, and worse!"

"Lynchin' is what they calls it in America," went on Andy. "I've seen it on the pictures, over at Storton Market. They don't 'ave no truck with murderers in America. They lynch 'em!"

And as he led his unruly band forward he goaded them on, excited them, made them forget that they were, at heart, law-abiding young citizens. In such an hour as this the excitement was hectic, and anything was likely to happen.

Then came the hand of Fate.

The mob was less than half-way to the castle when the headlights of a car appeared on the track ahead. A big automobile was lurching and swaying over the ruts and slithering in the loose, sticky earth. Speed was impossible.

There were thirty or forty men in this party, and most of them were lit up by the car's headlights already. A startled cry came from the man who sat behind the wheel, and he tried frantically to turn the car off the track, and to send it over the grassland. But in his terror he stalled the engine, and the next moment the mob was rushing up.

"It's him!" went up the wild cry. "It's Hemsley himself!"

"Drag him out!"

The wild-looking, dishevelled figure of Lord Hemsley stood up in the open car. He had switched off the headlights now—thinking, perhaps, that he could escape in the darkness. But it was too late. The car was surrounded. Men were clawing at the doors, climbing over the footboard, and even over the radiator.

"Wait—wait!" came Lord Hemsley's sobbing voice, cracking with fear. "Give me a chance! I didn't kill the girl. It was an accident!"

"Liar!" thundered Andy Watts, and he spat into Lord Hemsley's face.

"I tell you it was an accident!" shrieked the terrified man. "Let me go—let me go! Help! Help!"

"Ay, ye can scream for help as much as ye like—but we've got you!" jeered Watts. "Tryin' to escape, was ye? Thought you'd slip out by the short cut. But we're ahead of ye, Lord Hemsley!"

"String him up, boys!"

"Ay, here's a tree—and here's a rope!"

"No, no!" screamed Hemsley. "You can't do that! Don't kill me! Help! Help!"

But the next moment he was overwhelmed.

The excitement of the mob was the excitement of transient madness. There were no level-headed men here to take command—to put a stop to the hanging.

Fighting madly, shrieking for help, panting and gasping like a wild thing, Lord Hemsley was seized by many rough hands.

The whole thing was done within a minute or two—while the crazy excitement was at fever pitch.

A rope was flung over the bough of a neighbouring tree, and a noose was forced over Lord Hemsley's head. The only light on this grim scene was provided by one or two luridly flickering torches.

"Up with him!" went up the cry. "Let him swing!"

"Stop—stop!" sobbed Lord Hemsley. "I'll give you a hundred pounds each if you'll let me go!"

"We don't want your filthy money!" shouted Watts.

At any other time, perhaps, these men would have listened to such an offer. But in their present excitement money did not tempt them. The blood lust was upon them—and they were out to see Lord Hemsley swing.

They saw him swing, too.

Many of the men, with Andy Watts in the lead, hauled on the rope, and with a horrible gurgling cry the unfortunate victim was hoisted ten feet from the ground. And there he dangled, twisting and turning as he struggled—and those struggles became more and more feeble.

The rope was secured round the tree-trunk. Many of the hot-heads had taken no part in this final act—and were, indeed, standing back, suddenly sobered—suddenly frightened.

"That's finished him!" shouted Watts exultantly. "Come on, boys—on to the castle! We've settled with his bloomin' lordship, and now we'll set fire to his castle!"

And on the mob went, leaving that now still figure dangling starkly in the chill wind.

"O P E N that gate, young 'un, and look lively!" said Sexton Blake crisply.

For the second time it seemed that Fate was taking a hand in the game. For Blake, instead of taking his car to the main drive, had stopped at the little side gate. He had seen it earlier in the evening, and he knew that the track was a short cut across the park to Hemsley Castle. There was little chance of reaching his destination the other way—for, in the distance, the lurid flickering glow could be seen, arising from the many torches carried by the mob.

Tinker nipped out of the Grey Panther, and had the gate open in a moment. Blake drove through, and as he did so, Tinker jumped back on the footboard. The great car accelerated. Bumping and jolting, it made good progress.

"Great Scott!" yelled Tinker suddenly. "Look there, gov'nor! What's that?"

"By heavens, Tinker, I believe we're too late!" said Blake, in a startled voice.

In the vague light ahead, in the beam of the Grey Panther's headlights, something was dangling

ominously from a great tree branch which almost overhung the track. And both Blake and Tinker knew the truth in a flash. The thing which dangled was a human body—and it was at the end of a rope.

"But who did it, gov'nor?" asked Tinker, horrified. "The crowd's gone the other way—along the drive!"

"Another crowd must have taken a short cut!" snapped Blake, as the Grey Panther jolted over the uneven road, ever nearer to the body. "Look at that car! The whole story is easy enough to read. Hemsley was trying to escape—and he was intercepted. They lynched him. Oh, the fools!"

Tinker looked at Blake quickly.

"But Waldo isn't responsible for this—" he began.

"Waldo is!" interrupted Blake harshly. "Didn't he precipitate the entire thing? I'll never forgive him for this night's work. I was an arrant jackass to sit idly by— But what's the good of talking? Quick, Tinker! We'll cut him down. This dreadful thing can only have happened a few minutes ago, and there may still be life in him."

By this time the car had arrived at the tree which bore such gruesome fruit, and they leapt out, standing for a moment looking up at the corpse.

"He's dead, gov'nor!" said Tinker, with a gulp. "How can we cut him down, anyhow?"

"Don't bother!" said the corpse. "I'll save you the trouble!"

The apparently lifeless hands went upwards to the neck, and to the amazement of Blake and Tinker the noose was pulled out with ridiculous ease, and the "corpse" slipped its head free. Then, as springily as a trained acrobat, the figure landed on the soft turf.

"You would come along and mess everything up!" said a disgusted voice.

"Great guns! Waldo!" breathed Tinker.

"I might have known it," growled Blake, and the relief in his voice was very apparent. "Upon my word, Waldo, what a fellow you are for springing sensational surprises! What on earth is the meaning of this fantastic game?"

"Fantastic nothing!" retorted Waldo in exasperation. "Dash it, Blake, I thought you would at least have enough commonsense to stay out of this business. I staged the whole thing to-night so that you would have a treat as spectators; but I didn't ask you to butt in and come up on the stage, did I? I understood that you were going to remain conveniently blind and deaf."

"Look here, Waldo, a crowd of two or three hundred people is marching on Hemsley Castle," said Blake grimly. "Their object is to burn the castle to the ground, and something drastic must be done if that disaster is to be avoided. I want the truth from you—all of it. And I want it quickly."

"Well, I've got Hemsley on the run—and that's what I was aiming for," said Waldo complacently. "At the present moment he is speeding across the countryside, more or less disguised, and his destination is a little seaside bungalow of mine—the whereabouts of which I will keep to myself, if you please—on a particularly lonely part of the coast, about eight miles from any other human habitation. I've decided that Lord Hemsley requires a week or two of complete solitude, where he can ponder over his misdeeds."

"But why on earth did you impersonate Hemsley?"

"It's not much of an impersonation—and wouldn't bear the light of day," said Waldo. "It wouldn't even bear the light of the car's headlights. But I knew the mob would be excited, and wouldn't look too closely. And I was half-expecting that there would be a lynching. I thought it would delay matters a bit—and give Hemsley a greater chance to get away. You see, by the time the mob found they had got the wrong man—and that the wrong man had somehow escaped—it would be too late to get on the track of the right man. Nothing wrong with that arrangement, is there?"

"Go on!" said Blake, compressing his lips.

"As for the mob, it's not likely to do much harm now that Hemsley has been apparently lynched. You see, I thought of that. I thought the 'lynching' would cool the populace down and then the whole thing would fizzle out."

"Well, for once your reasoning is confoundedly unsound," said Blake. "Only a small percentage of the mob knows anything about the lynching, and an incident of that sort is far more likely to excite the crowd's worst emotions. I'm going to put a stop to it, Waldo."

The Wonder Man gave him a straight look.

"I thought there was a sort of understanding——" he began.

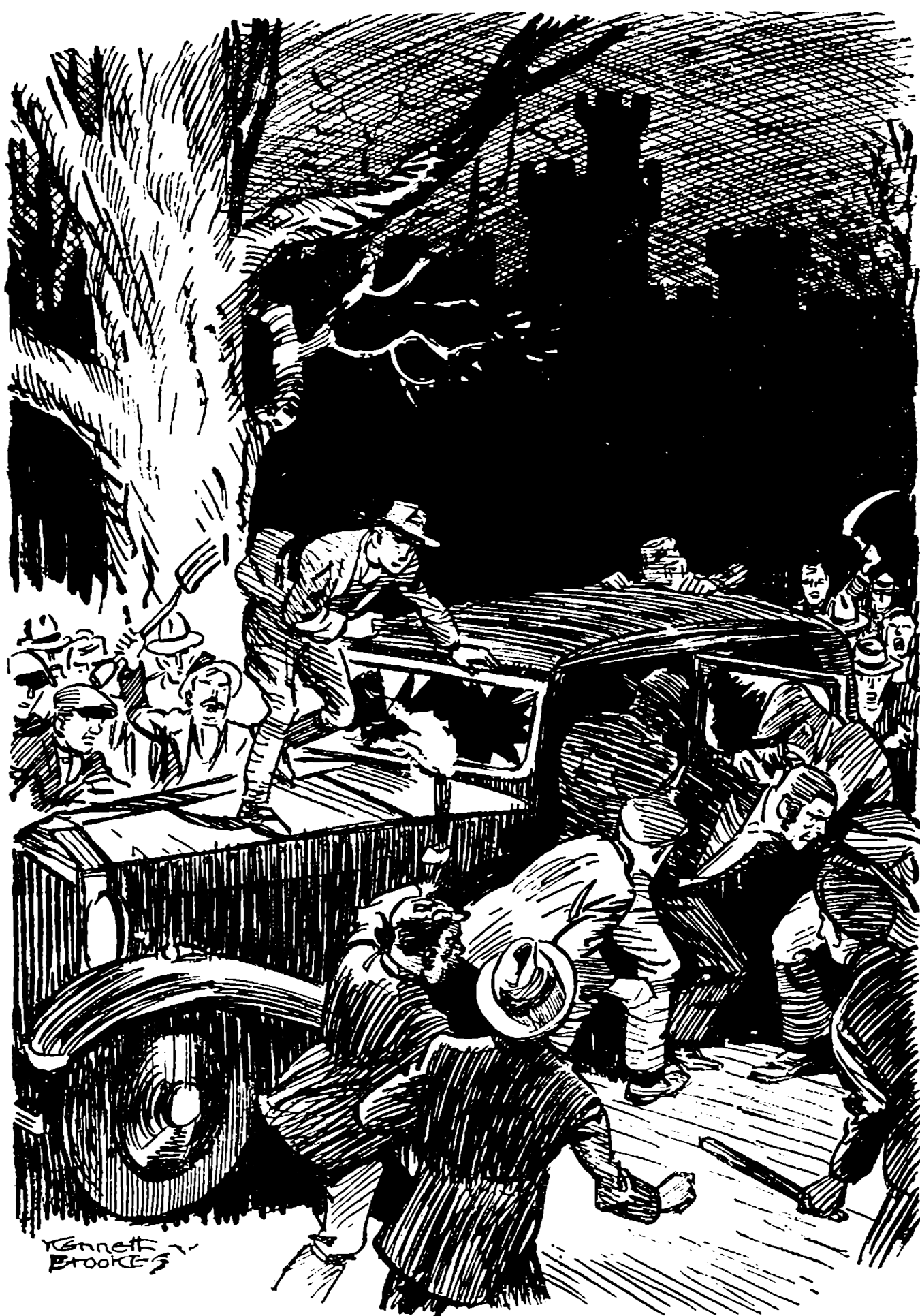
"Then you thought wrong!" cut in Blake. "I've made no bargain with you, Waldo, and I don't intend to make one now. If I choose to be obtuse in certain directions, that's my own look out. But I'm telling you candidly that I won't stand by and see property destroyed by the wanton and senseless rage of an infuriated mob."

Waldo looked genuinely upset.

"I didn't mean to rub you the wrong way," he said earnestly. "I'm sorry if I made this stunt too realistic."

"You succeeded in getting the countryside thoroughly aroused, at all events," said Blake. "Am I wrong in suggesting that the maidservant is no deader than you were supposed to be five minutes ago?"

"You've hit it," said Waldo promptly. "She's very much alive. It was all done to bring about this crisis—in a word, to get Hemsley into a screaming panic and make him bolt



The car was surrounded. Men climbed over the footboards, even over the radiator. Fighting madly, Lord Hemsley was seized and dragged out.

for cover. I've got him just where I want him now. That's why I'm keen on you fading gracefully out of the picture. If you start hunting for Hemsley I'm finished."

"We'll forget Hemsley for the moment," said Blake. "What about this girl? I thought you always worked alone, Waldo?"

"So I do. This girl doesn't know who I am," said Waldo. "I paid her twenty pounds to do the dive. She's an expert swimmer, and she had a complete change of clothes ready in the armoury—so that she could change as soon as I locked her in. You see; I didn't allow anybody else to examine her, and I knew that the rumour of her 'death' would spread to the village in a couple of shakes. The whole wheeze has worked like a charm."

"Well, I'm still minding my own business," said Blake; "but only to a certain extent. There's been no hanging, and there's been no acci-

dental death at the castle. I wonder you got this girl to help you."

"You wouldn't if you knew what happened to her sister, six weeks ago," replied Waldo grimly. "The less said about it, the better. Hemsley has bolted, and he won't hear the news that the girl is not dead until I choose to tell him. For he won't get hold of any newspapers, and he'll be afraid of his life to show his head outside the bungalow door. I want to keep him there for a week or two while—— However, that's another story."

"And one we won't discuss," agreed Blake. "What a fellow you are, Waldo! Allowing yourself to be hanged!"

"That was nothing," grinned the Wonder Man. "Just another thrill—and not much of a thrill at that. I knew I could free myself at any moment. The rope didn't hurt much, and the muscles of my neck are pretty hefty. I was just going to let myself down when you happened along. I

only allowed myself to hang there in case there were some stragglers."

Blake looked across the gloomy parkland, to the ruddy, ominous glare in the distance.

"Tinker, we must be going," he said sharply. "I advise you, Waldo, to become Count Ritz again as quickly as you can. Leave the rest to me. As I told you before, I'm not going to allow Hemsley Castle to be destroyed. And if your precious plan goes west, I don't care a hoot."

Chapter 7. Siege.

TERROR reigned in Hemsley Castle.

Lord Hemsley himself had fled at Waldo's behest—he had left his guests without a thought. If they suffered at the hands of the mob it would not disturb Hemsley's conscience in the slightest. Any man with a scrap of decency would have first seen to the safety of those who enjoyed the hospitality of his roof. But Hemsley had no decency. He thought only of his own skin.

To make matters worse, the servants had left in a body, immediately after the story of the girl's "death" had spread abroad. It was known that Lord Hemsley had bolted; and it was also known that the mob was on its way to the castle to give vent to its wrath. The servants had no intention of being trapped.

So they cleared out.

Waldo, in the guise of Count Ritz, strongly advised the members of the house-party to seek other shelter. Being a spineless lot, they flew into a panic and decided to quit forthwith. But they wasted so much time in making plans, and in packing, that they found themselves cut off.

There had been a great deal of delay, too, because there were no servants to help. Young men who owned cars, but who had never put in a minute's work on them, were obliged to go round to the castle garage and get the cars out themselves.

By the time everything was in readiness, with the cars standing in the central courtyard, engines running, the sounds of the mob came floating ominously upon the night air. To add to the confusion of these frightened rabbits, Count Ritz, who was a tower of strength, had vanished.

"Good gad! We'll never do it!" stammered one of the young men, as he came running back from the drawbridge. "The bally place is surrounded!"

"What!" went up a general squeal. "They're coming from all directions," went on the other. "Hundreds of 'em—armed with torches and pitchforks and rakes and goodness knows what else. They're after our blood!"

"But we've done nothing!" faltered one of the girls.

"It's a case of the innocent suffering for the guilty," put in a man who was made of sterner stuff than the rest. "They're after Hemsley—but

they won't be too particular. If that mob gets hold of us we'll be pretty badly manhandled. We'd better stay here."

"They'll catch us just the same." "Not if we pull up the drawbridge," said the other quickly. "Here, who knows how to work the infernal thing? It's our only chance! If we pull that up, the mob will be cut off. The police are bound to come soon, and then we shall be safe. I never knew anything like it in all my life—in sleepy Suffolk, too! What the deuce is the world coming too?"

Nobody knew exactly how to raise the drawbridge, but there were plenty of willing hands. With their own safety at stake, these Brighter Young People discovered, suddenly, how to make themselves useful. The grim march of the oncoming mob added speed to their efforts.

It was significant that the police were still conspicuous by their absence. It seemed that old Broadribb, of the Red Lion, was a true prophet. Yet it was quite on the cards that the police had not yet been able to gather sufficient forces to come to the rescue. There were only two or three officers in Hemsley village, and at the time of the rising they had been out on their beats. For a handful of police to have interfered would have been worse than useless.

Inside one of the great stone towers which flanked the main arch, some machinery was found. More by luck than knowledge, one of the young men discovered that the drawbridge was electrically operated. After pressing various switches, it was found that something hummed. And shouts from the others announced that the drawbridge was slowly lifting.

"Gad! It'll be touch and go!" yelled one of the young men. "Look! They're running for it now! They've spotted our wheeze!"

Standing there, in the great arch, the group of panic-stricken guests saw an amazing sight. From all over the park, from the lawns and gardens, men were running at the double, advancing like shock troops on a fortress. Such a scene as this had not been witnessed at Hemsley Castle since the old feudal days. It was almost too startling to be true.

"Run!" cried one of the girls, in terror.

They left the machinery working—the drawbridge slowly raising itself. And helter-skelter they fled indoors, slamming the great door and bolting it. There was some talk of getting into the armoury, so that they could arm themselves with the clumsy old swords which were hung about the walls. But there was something else in the armoury—at least, so they believed. And none of them dared enter or attempt to force the doors.

From outside came the shouting of the mob. It was terrifying in its fury. Some of the young men had raced upstairs to the upper windows. The bolder spirits, these—fellows who saw a real thrill of excitement in the adventure, and who meant to miss nothing.

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"Great Scott! They're after somebody!" went up a shout.

It was true. In the flickering light from the torches, a figure, staggering as it ran, could be seen racing towards the drawbridge, which was now more than three parts up—so far up, in fact, that the mob's original intention was frustrated. Behind the fleeing figure came two score of shouting, enraged men.

The fugitive was in evening dress, muddy, collarless. And now it could be seen that he was Count Sylvanus Ritz. Terror showed itself on his face. And only the strength of desperation allowed him to keep ahead of his pursuers.

"The've got him!" exclaimed one of the watchers. "By Heaven! They'll throw him into the moat, or something!"

"Look!" shouted another.

Count Ritz had reached the very lip of the moat, and, with one apparently superhuman effort, he had launched himself outwards and upward in a futile attempt to gain safety. It was hopeless. No living man could expect to—

But not so hopeless! For Count Ritz, by some kind of magic, actually bridged that gulf, and clutched at the edge of the drawbridge. He maintained his hold, and, with a last despairing effort, as stones and clods of earth were hurled at him, he hauled himself over the top, and went rolling and sliding down the steep slopes of the nearly perpendicular bridge.

"He's in! He's done it!" shouted one of the watchers. "Good old Ritz!"

SOME of them ran down to open the great door. Waldo, meanwhile, was doing a very effective, staggering run across the courtyard. That jump of his had called for all his celebrated energy, but he was really as fresh as paint still. But he thought it advisable to show some kind of exhaustion. He hadn't bargained for the mob spotting him and chasing him. But he revelled in it, all the same.

"Brandy!" he muttered feebly, as he collapsed on the steps.

Willing hands dragged him inside, and the door was again closed. He was helped into the library, where a stiff dose of brandy had its due effect. He explained that he had been helping Hemsley to escape, and had then been cut off. Inwardly, he congratulated himself upon his forethought in providing himself with make-up in his pockets.

"I'm glad you're here, Ritz!" said one of the young men. "What are we going to do? This is all Hemsley's fault, curse him! We're in a fine mess! If these country louts get hold of us, they'll skin us alive!"

"I'll go and talk to them!" muttered Waldo, pulling himself together with an effort. "Glory, what a night!"

He ran his fingers through his bristly hair, shook himself, and took

command. But if he expected his personality to subdue the rioters, he was doomed to disappointment.

No sooner had he shown himself at an upper window than a roar of fury went up. The sight was impressive. All round the moat, five or six deep, men were standing, some holding the flaming torches, others still gripping their improvised weapons. More and more men were running to the scene from across the park—for reinforcements were arriving from every remote part of the district. The signal had gone forth! Hemsley Castle was besieged! Grouped in the background, and only dimly visible, were numbers of women—frightened now that matters had actually come to a head.

Stones came hurtling at the castle walls and windows, and there was a great crashing of glass. Two stones struck Waldo in the chest, and another grazed his forehead.

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The WHITE RIDER

"Are you mad" he shouted. "Hemsley is not here!"

"But you're here, you foreign scum!" yelled somebody. And another stone sailed through the air.

"Ay, we'll treat you as we treated Hemsley!" shouted Andy Watts, pushing his way through the excited men. "We've strung him up!"

Waldo was not allowed another hearing. More missiles came, and he was obliged to back out of range. For the first time, perhaps, he realised that he had bitten off more than he could chew. The people would not listen to him. He was one of Lord Hemsley's friends—in fact, Lord Hemsley's "favourite"—and that, in itself, made him the object of the mob's anger.

Just as Blake had prophesied, the news that Lord Hemsley had been "strung up" acted as a dangerous stimulant to most of the demonstrators. The excitement ran wilder and wilder, and men were shouting for the castle to be overrun—for Hemsley's guests to be thrown out. The more unscrupulous rioters were eager to get inside, so that they

could sack the place. Yes, and they would burn it afterwards! Lord Hemsley was dead, and his home should be destroyed. Loot and fire! Nothing else would satisfy the wilder element. As for the rest, they were easily swayed, and in their present humour they were ready for any grim mischief.

Ordinarily level-headed men—honest farm workers—were keyed up to such a pitch that they scarcely knew what they were doing. Certainly, they did not realise the gravity of their offence. The fever for destruction was upon them. It was only the existence of the water-filled moat that had prevented that destruction already.

There was little or no defence.

A few things were thrown out of the windows by the besieged party. But this only added fire to the mob's wrath. Within three minutes all the lower windows were smashed by stones, and some of the flaming torches were actually thrown at the windows, the attackers hoping that the torches would fall inside, and so ignite the curtains.

Fortunately, they all fell short. Then somebody got the bright idea of swimming the moat. Among the rioters were several men who had been dismissed by Lord Hemsley—sacked at a minute's notice without any real cause. It was one of Hemsley's favourite tricks, in fact, to take offence at some fanciful affront, and to discharge a servant summarily.

Two such men, who knew the working of the drawbridge, were in the forefront of the battle now. They called for volunteers, and presently a dozen men plunged into the moat, and started swimming across the strip of cold, black water.

They were encouraged by the cheers of the others. There was a wild rush, and the main force of the attackers gathered round where the drawbridge would descend.

More cheers as the swimmers reached the other side. They were active men—six of them altogether—and they climbed nimbly up the bridge, for there were many useful projections. It was impossible to get over the top of the bridge itself, for the portcullis barred the way. But by climbing from the bridge to one of the towers, it was possible to reach a stone parapet, and then work along to the inner side.

Man after man performed the manoeuvre, until they had all vanished. It was a comparatively easy task to climb down on the inner side of the wall. One or two fell heavily, bruising themselves, but in the excitement they scarcely took any notice. They were inside—and the power-house was close at hand.

"Come on, chaps! We'll have the drawbridge down in a minute!" panted the ringleader.

"I think not!" said a calm voice.

THE six men, so exultant at their success, received a shock. A figure, tall and straight, was standing against the closed door of the little power-house. Another figure, smaller,

near by, had switched on a powerful electric torch, and that little scene was brightly illuminated.

Sexton Blake and Tinker had wasted no time.

Unseen in all the confusion and excitement which had been happening farther along the moat-edge, they had swum the moat first, and it had been easy enough for such athletes to get inside. Blake knew that as long as the drawbridge was in the "up" position, the mob could do no vital damage to Hemsley Castle.

"You'd best stand aside, mister!" said one of the men truculently. "We ain't taking orders from the likes o' you!"

"No fear, we ain't!" said one of the others.

"You're making a big mistake, my friends," said Blake quietly. "I'm not one of Lord Hemsley's guests, and my opinion of Lord Hemsley coincides with your own. But I have made up my mind that you're not going to lower this drawbridge."

"Oh, you 'ave, 'ave you?" said the leader savagely. "Well, look here, mister, if you don't want your 'ead knocked off, you'd better stand aside!"

Blake put his hands behind his back.

"Go ahead! Try to knock my head off!" he said coolly. "You'll probably say that I am butting into something which does not concern me; but I want to stop you men from making fools of yourselves. Never mind Lord Hemsley. Do you want to go to prison for malicious damage to property? Do you want to disgrace yourselves in the eyes of all decent men?"

His words had some effect. The men were not ruffians.

"We won't go to prison!" said one of them roughly. "We're justified in what we're doin', ain't we? Look at the crowd outside! We're no worse than them! There's hundreds of them—honest people from twenty miles round. Why don't you go and talk to them?"

"I'm going to—soon," replied Blake. "First of all, I want to bring you fellows to your senses. In case you don't know it, my name is Sexton Blake, and I was brought into this district to-day by the idiotic folly of Lord Hemsley. I think he's a fool and a wastrel, and, in fact, a thoroughly bad lot. But Lord Hemsley's worthlessness gives you no right to take the law into your own hands and destroy his property."

The six men were greatly calmed now. Blake's words, as much as the mention of his own name, had wrought this effect.

"You—you mean you're Mr. Blake, the detective?" one of them asked, in awe.

"Yes," replied Blake. "I do not pretend to represent the law. I am not a policeman. For your own good I am advising you to drop this folly and go quietly back to your homes."

"That's all very well, sir," said the ringleader. "The people out there

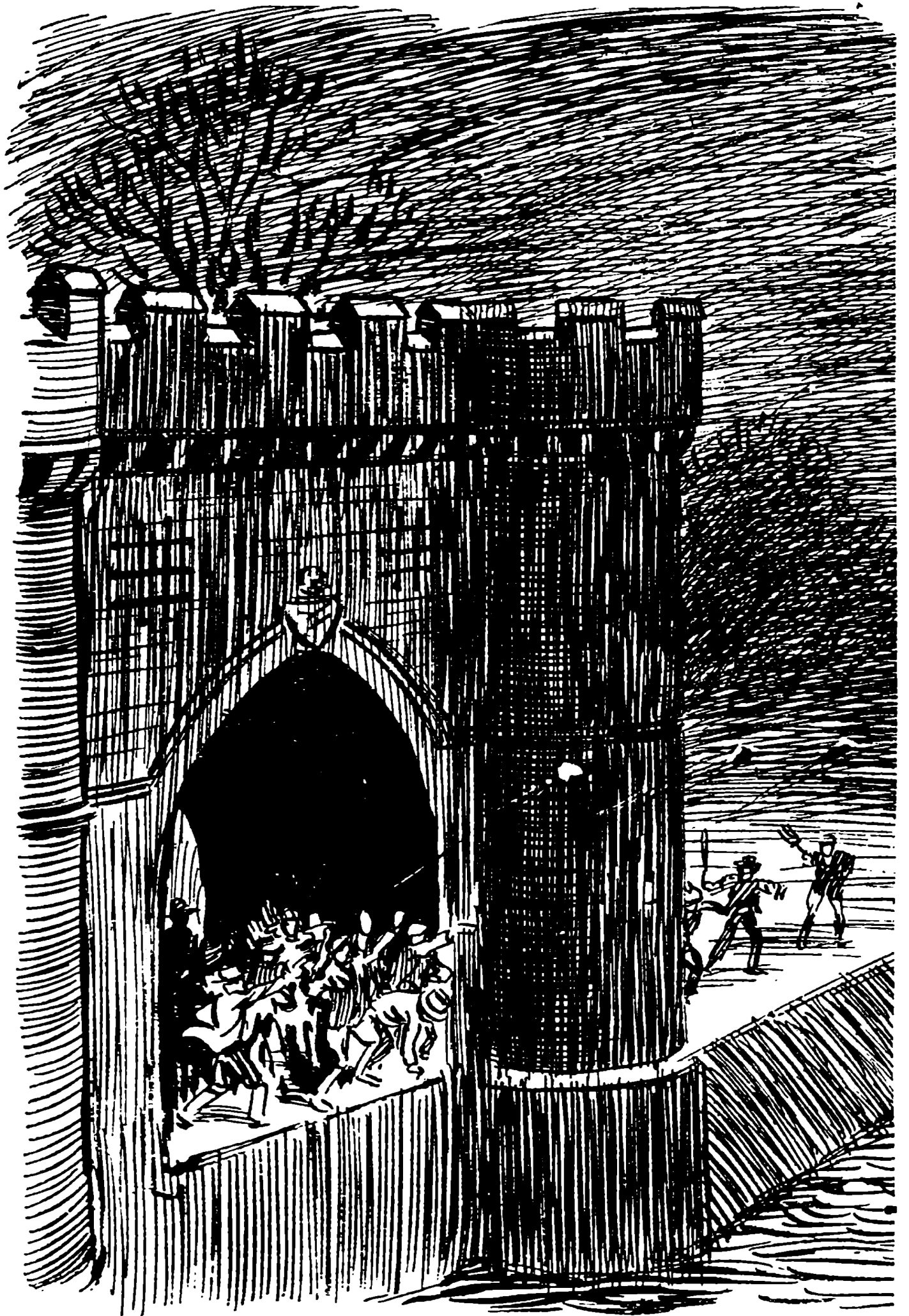
are expecting us to lower the bridge—"

"I'll talk to them," interrupted Blake. "If the bridge is lowered, and the mob is let loose in here, there'll be irreparable damage done."

"The more the better!" said one man.

The authoritative note in Blake's voice had its effect. The men had lost their anger now; they were beginning to look sheepish. From outside came the impatient shouting of the crowd. The delay was making the mob angrier and more impatient.

"I reckon he's right, you chaps,"



"It is the duty of every honest citizen to protect property—not to destroy it," said Blake sternly. "This castle has stood for many centuries; it is a fine, noble pile, and it has seen many gracious masters. Because one man behaves like a blackguard, is that any reason for you to vent your wrath upon these historic stones? No, my friends—you're wrong. And to-morrow you will thank me for having stopped you. Now, be sensible, and go quietly into the castle."

"How long do you think the authorities are going to leave you in control here? You know this can't go on. When the police arrive there'll be inquiries—and arrests."

said one of the younger men hesitatingly. "We don't want to get ourselves wrong with the police, do we?"

The others agreed—and then it was that Blake took his hands from behind his back, and the startled men saw that he held in his grip an automatic pistol.

"I'm glad you didn't force me to threaten you with this little object," said Blake approvingly. "But, you see, I was quite ready for you if you had proved stubborn."

The men straggled away towards the castle. The drawbridge remained up.



The count launched himself outwards and upwards, and by some kind of magic, actually bridged the gulf. His fingers clutched at the end of the drawbridge.

Chapter 8.

Five Per Cent.

SEXTON BLAKE had decided upon a plan of action, and he proceeded to put it into operation without a second's delay.

In reply to his thunderous knocks upon the main door, an agitated voice from within shouted a warning.

"Open this door!" called Blake. "You have nothing to fear. I am Sexton Blake, and I have come here to help you."

Many of those feather-brained young people inside, hearing Blake's calm, steady voice, reversed their opinions of him. They were glad

enough, in this crisis, to lean upon his strength. Eager hands pulled back the bolts, and Blake and Tinker were admitted. Behind them came the six men who had been brought to their senses.

"I'm going to trust you fellows," said Blake, looking at them earnestly. "You're not ruffians; neither are you hooligans. Will you give me your promise that you will remain quietly inactive if I leave you to yourselves?"

"Yes, sir," they chorused, looking more sheepish than ever.

"All right," said Blake, nodding. "You'd better go straight through to the kitchen quarters and warm yourselves in front of a fire. If you don't you'll catch cold in those wet things."

Lord Hemsley's guests stood about the great hall, gaping in wonder. To see those would-be rioters obeying Blake so meekly startled them. And then Waldo arrived on the scene—and he was Count Ritz.

"Himmel! What is this?" he asked haughtily. "You come here again, Mr. Blake?"

"I have come to help you," said Blake curtly. "Where is the girl who was killed this evening?"

"She is locked in the armoury," replied Waldo, secretly wondering at Blake's object.

"Has she been seen by a doctor?"

"No."

"Then permit me to tell you, Count Ritz, that you ought to be ashamed of yourself," said Blake sternly. "What proof have you that the girl is really dead? Take me to her at once. Tinker, stay here, and if there is any development outside, come to me immediately."

"Yes, gov'nor," said Tinker.

Blake and Waldo, unaccompanied by any of the others, went to the armoury. And when they were out of earshot, Blake caught hold of the Wonder Man's arm.

"There's only one way in which this mob can be subdued," he said, in a low voice. "That girl must show herself."

"I thought the same thing."

"Well, you've been pretty slow about it!" growled Blake. "In any case, my entry into the castle will serve you well—for I can give out the story that the girl was not badly hurt, and that she has recovered. What have you told her?"

"Nothing—except to wait in the armoury until I let her out."

They unlocked the heavy inner doors, and Blake entered. He switched the lights on, and Alice, the maidservant, started up from a chair.

"This gentleman is Mr. Blake," said Waldo stiffly. "He thinks it better, young lady, that you should show yourself at once. There is much excitement outside the castle."

"I know it, sir," said the girl, in a frightened voice. "I've been terrified. I never thought that there'd be anything like this—"

"Well, never mind—and say as little as you can," interrupted Blake. "Come with me, please."

At the door he turned to her again.

"You had better make some pretence of being weak," he added, in a low voice. "I don't approve of the trick you have played, but for your own sake we had better keep up the fiction. I don't think you realised that you were doing something very wrong."

"I didn't, sir—I swear it!" said the girl. "The gentleman told me—Count Ritz, I mean, sir—that it was only a harmless joke."

"I am afraid the count deceived you," said Blake curtly. "Come with me, and be ready to show yourself when I call for you."

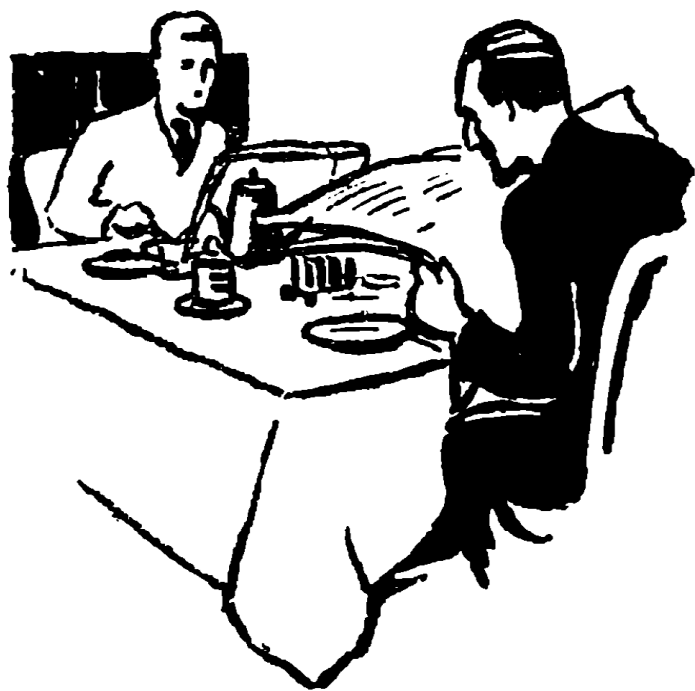
Sexton Blake went straight upstairs, and, going out on a wide stone balcony in front of the castle, he stood looking down upon the excited throng. Great shouts went up as he was seen.

"Men!" called Blake, in a loud, powerful voice.

"Don't take any notice of him!"

"Down with Lord Hemsley and all his blinkin' friends!"

A roar followed; and for some minutes there was such a tremendous



noise that it was absolutely impossible for Blake to make himself heard. Indeed, there seemed no chance for him. The mob, expecting every moment that the drawbridge would be lowered, regarded this interruption with anger. But the delay—as Blake had realised—had had its effect. The first insane excitement was passing.

Crack!

Deliberately, Sexton Blake fired his automatic pistol into the air. The report had no sooner rung out than there was an absolute silence. The mob, in fact, was shocked into this silence.

"I am not one of Lord Hemsley's friends," said Blake, speaking in a clear voice that carried to his farthest listener. "You may know my name quite well. It is Blake—Sexton Blake. I have some reputation as a defender of the law."

In uncanny silence, the crowd stared upwards. But that little trick of Blake's had succeeded. He was granted a hearing.

"Whatever your animosity against Lord Hemsley, you are acting very foolishly in coming here with the intention of burning the castle," continued Blake sternly. "I sympathise with you in your feelings against this man, who has made himself such a thorough pest. I, too, have suffered at Lord Hemsley's hands. But in madly desiring to burn down Hemsley Castle, have you thought of the grave consequences? By such an act of folly you will deprive many innocent people of their jobs; you will destroy an edifice which has braved the storms of four or five centuries. I urge you to disperse—to give up this foolish adventure, and to return to your homes."

There were some growling voices of discontent. But, unmistakably, Blake had made a big impression. Already, the majority of the men were recovering their wits. The fever was leaving them; they were cooling off.

"Let me add something which will prove to you that your action is a mistaken one," continued Blake. "It has been said that a young maid-servant was accidentally killed in this castle to-night."

"No, no! Lord Hemsley killed her!"

"You are wrong!" shouted Blake. "The girl is not dead—but she is alive; she has made a remarkable recovery."

IT was a sensational item of news, and when Alice, pale and trembling, appeared beside Blake a moment later, a tumult of cheering arose. It was the one dramatic move which was certain of success.

"So, you see, the whole affair has been a false alarm," went on Blake, when he could again make himself heard. "To-morrow, when you are calmer, you will learn that this girl accidentally fell out of an upper window. Lord Hemsley, bad as he undoubtedly is, did not harm her. I repeat, the affair was an accident, and but for the foolish rumours which went about, there would have been none of this rioting. Now, will you all be sensible, and return to your homes?"

"Ay, to be sure, sir!" shouted one man. "The gent's right, boys! We been actin' like a lot o' fools!"

"Ay, Josh, and so we have!"

"Let's be getting home!"

"There's something else that you should know—particularly a number of you who laid yourselves open to a charge of murder," said Blake gravely. "You were mad enough to seize Lord Hemsley and to hang him. You may count yourselves lucky that I happened to come along a minute afterwards with my assistant. We cut Lord Hemsley down and we found that he still lived."

The crowd received this news with mixed feelings.

"Lord Hemsley has now left the district—for an unknown destination," said Blake pointedly. "The sooner you good people get back to your homes, the better. I think you can rely upon Count Ritz to see that no complaint is made to the police. Let this unfortunate incident blow completely over."

Sexton Blake's calm voice, his sensible words, acted magically. Already many of the men were slinking away from the castle. Others followed. Some of them even raised a cheer. Andy Watts and his hot-headed cronies had now definitely backed out. Truth to tell, they had been in mortal fear for some little time—remembering, as they did, the enormity of their crime. For after the excitement had left them, they realised that their act had, indeed, been one of murder. They had received a shock which would act as a lesson to them for many a year.

The badly-scared guests swarmed round Blake, thanking him, congratulating him, and expressing their regret for the foolish way in which they had treated him during the early evening.

Blake looked at them with a tinge of contempt. They were young yet.

This adventure, perhaps, would do them a world of good.

"It is not my business," said Blake quietly, "but I hope you won't resent my suggestion that you should immediately cease your friendship with Lord Hemsley."

"Gad, sir, we don't resent it!" said one of the young men. "You've saved us to-night, and we realise, for the first time, what idiots we've been. We owe you an apology, sir, for our behaviour earlier."

"Yes, rather!" chorused the others, eager to show their repentance.

"I accept your apologies very pleasantly," said Blake, smiling. "Well, the excitement is over, and I dare say the castle servants will return—looking very sheepish—before long. I think you'd better shake the dust of this historic pile off your feet as early as possible to-morrow."

Tinker came in from the balcony, grinning.

"The police," he said, with an eloquent gesture. "Happily, they've arrived when everything's all over."

The police, in charge of a flustered superintendent, were in great force. It appeared that they had been gathering from neighbouring towns for some time, expecting a gory battle.

And instead of that, they found Hemsley Castle undamaged, and they were startled to learn that Sexton Blake, single-handed, had suppressed a riot which had promised to be the most sensational in the recent annals of the county.

Before they left the castle, Waldo succeeded in having a private word with Blake.

"Good work!" he murmured. "May I rely upon you to continue to—er—mind your own business?"

"I ought to be very angry with you," said Blake gruffly.

"But you'll admit my stunt was a good one?" asked Waldo.

"I will admit nothing," replied Blake, eyeing him steadily. "I will merely say, for your information, Count Ritz, that Tinker and I will be very busy on important work for some weeks to come. I will trouble you, therefore, not to communicate with me in any way."

"Herr Blake," said Count Sylvanus Ritz, bowing stiffly, "I get you!"

THE next morning, in Baker Street, Sexton Blake opened his papers with a smile.

They were full of the sensational happenings in Suffolk. The story of that raid upon Hemsley Castle was emblazoned across the front pages.

"I wonder what the end of it will be, gov'nor?" asked Tinker.

"Well, there's just a hint here," said Blake dryly. "I see that Hemsley Castle has been shut up. His lordship, acting through Count Ritz, has issued a statement that he has decided to dispose of the property."

"What-ho!" said Tinker. "I'm beginning to twig."

"Well, if you do twig, you had better keep your thoughts to yourself, young 'un," said Blake. "We are not even going to discuss Lord Hemsley's affairs. The incident is over, and we must devote ourselves to other work."

There was a good deal of speculation in the papers as to Lord Hemsley's present whereabouts. Nobody could possibly guess that he was hiding in an isolated little bungalow, somewhere on the coast.

Hemsley himself was not allowed to see these papers. The day after the sensation, Waldo visited his lordship—and Waldo, needless to say, told a pretty tale. The girl, it seemed, was not only dead, but the police had issued a warrant for Lord Hemsley's arrest. At this information, Lord Hemsley crumpled up completely, and he begged, almost on his knees, that Count Ritz would continue to help him.

Count Ritz generously promised to do his best.

And he certainly did. While Lord Hemsley skulked in hiding, believing himself to be hunted by the police, many things happened. Waldo, with his full power of attorney, put through some extraordinarily quick transactions.

It was just about three weeks later when Sexton Blake and Tinker sat at breakfast, once again in their Baker Street rooms. During this interval they had seen

practically no mention of Lord Hemsley and his affairs in the newspapers. The matter had been less than a nine days' wonder. It was forgotten inside of a week.

This morning, however, Sexton Blake whistled softly as soon as he opened his newspaper.

"This is very interesting, Tinker," he said, with a twinkle in his eyes. "I see that Lord Hemsley is on the front page again—and he is making quite a noise."

"By Jove! What's happened?" asked Tinker.

"It seems that Lord Hemsley is frantically protesting that he has been robbed," said Blake, shaking his head. "His confidential secretary, Count Ritz, has vanished into thin air. And it appears that Hemsley Castle has been sold—together with some thousands of acres of rich property in other parts of the country. Furthermore, every penny of Lord Hemsley's fortune has been mysteriously converted into cash, and that cash, my lad, has disappeared—like Count Ritz!"

"Isn't that too bad?" asked Tinker sadly.

"Hemsley says that he has been duped—that Count Ritz is a thief and a trickster."

"What an idea!" said Tinker, with a not-too-convincing indignation.

"Anyhow, Hemsley says that he was fooled into remaining in hiding for three solid weeks," said Blake. "He

also says that while he was in hiding his fortune was taken away from him. And who could have done that but Count Ritz? In any case, the count's disappearance is significant."

"Here's something else, gov'nor—equally significant," said Tinker, with a sudden note of joy in his voice. "Did you spot it in your paper? It seems that all the great London hospitals have had extraordinarily large donations this week. My paper says that it is an astonishing windfall for the hospitals. An anonymous philanthropist has been lashing out in hundreds of thousands."

"I wonder if there could be any connection?" asked Blake solemnly. "Poor Hemsley! It really seems that he will have to go to work—and work, perhaps, will knock some of the nonsense out of him and make him a decent citizen. Certainly, he was a worthless scamp while he had money. Perhaps it's all to the good, Tinker."

"There's no 'perhaps' about it, gov'nor," said Tinker stoutly. "I'm jolly glad we minded our own business."

A chuckle came from Blake, and when Tinker looked at him, the great detective pointed to an item in the personal column of "The Times." It was brief, but very, very informative.

"S.B.—How's that? Only kept five per cent for myself. And they call me a wicked man.—R.W."

THE END.

NEXT WEEK'S ISSUE—

A VERY IMPORTANT NUMBER!

FIRST FULL ANNOUNCEMENT OF IMPENDING IMPROVEMENTS

New Programme—New Gifts— New Blake Stories

NEXT Thursday's issue will contain a long, complete story of Sexton Blake and Lobangu written by Rex Hardinge, whose African journeyings are described on page 13. Of that, more later. Meantime—

It will contain also the First Full Announcement of the "U.J.'s" imminent and altogether unprecedented programme which will begin with the February 25th issue.

It will be premature to anticipate anything of the details of this big announcement here; but, as an earnest that this is no catch-penny cry of "Wolf!" it may be stated that, from the date mentioned, our paper will be BIGGER AND BETTER

—that useful and attractive FREE GIFTS will be presented to every reader; that a new serial will appear by a writer whose name is always a sure guarantee of an excellent thrills-story—LESLIE CHARTERIS, who will begin his mystery masterpiece, "The White Rider," and that the new programme opens with a story of Sexton Blake with a theme and plot such as you have never read before, even though you have had the paper from No. 1.

This is something

ENTIRELY DIFFERENT!

The story of Sexton Blake's Secret is going to hold you like nothing before—and you know how good our stories can be!

AND now for next week's routine attraction, Rex Hardinge's African story—featuring, besides Blake and Tinker, a trio of favourite, familiar characters: Sir Richard ("Spots") Losely; Lobangu, Chief of the Etbaia; and Detective-Inspector Coutts of the Yard.

This is the plot; see how it appeals to you as likely to provide a great yarn combining detective work and African adventure.

Britain is puzzled and amazed by the disappearance, one after another, of engineers, motor specialists and others of supreme eminence in their own lines. There is even an attempt to kidnap the most eminent of all detectives, Sexton Blake himself. When it fails he half solves the mystery of the other missing men—they have been abducted and taken to the interior of Africa by a native chieftain whose ambition is to rule over a kingdom of civilisation in the depths of the Dark Continent.

With "Spots" Losely, Tinker, and Lobangu, Blake sets out in search of them—and that's where the action begins after the mystery finishes. It's fine reading! Rex Hardinge knows Africa; he knows how to write a real thrills-and-action story. If you've enjoyed anything he ever wrote before, you'll enjoy

THE LAND OF LOST MEN.

So, because of the story and because of the great news in store—

IF YOU'VE NEVER BOOKED AN ISSUE BEFORE—BOOK THIS!

THE ROUND TABLE.

(Continued from page 13.)

IN a steamship packed with the most motley assortment of human beings probably ever to find themselves within the confines of one vessel, he made the twenty days journey to Dakar, the only Britisher aboard.

Syrians, Hindus—the only ones to speak a language which he understood—and native African soldiers returning to the Ivory Coast, and other types, were Hardinge's fellow voyagers; men, women, and children of many shades of colour and assorted dialects, all packed together in the 60-foot-square hold of the ship, and without any of the refinements of civilisation which a European thinks necessary to existence.

Food and sleeping accommodation were of the most primitive. It was, he says, much worse than his worst expectations. But, as he also says, it is wonderful how one can adapt oneself to any conditions, and before land was sighted he had become inured to the rough fare—ladled out of one great bowl and for which the whole company lined up plate in hand—eaten seated on his bunk, which was the only equivalent of a cabin, and the rough-and-tumble of existence among the polyglot passengers.

And at last—Cape Guardafui, the entrance to the harbour of Dakar, and Africa's hinterland and mystic jungles looming beyond! He ran the gauntlet of the Customs, and the horde of fighting "boys," who seized upon him and his luggage, spent a day or two buying maps and—an official requirement in that region of swift diseases—a "sanitary passport," and other preliminaries, and wrote the last letters home for an indefinite period.

"My present plan," he says, "is to leave Dakar to-morrow. The next batch of notes should concern the journey, and will be written up on my return. What they will contain—Heaven knows!"

And so, for the time being, we leave Rex Hardinge in his search for, amongst other things, the fascinating stories of African life and European detective work which you have come to associate with the names of Sexton Blake and Lobangu.

If you are inclined to think that you will have to go without any of his stories until he returns to civilisation once more, I will remark that in the very next issue of "U.J.," there will be waiting for you one of the finest yarns he has done—"The Land of Lost Men."

It's a Blake—Lobangu story of a quite novel type, set in both London and Africa; and as to which setting has the more unexpected incidents I will leave you to judge next Thursday. For a story

combining both detective work and strange adventure it's Hardinge at his best; so, after referring to the notice about this and my impending Big News on page 27, it's to be hoped that you have it already on order.

READING about Rex Hardinge's jungle trip will probably have made you a bit envious—I know I wished that an extra place could be wangled in the "safari" for an assistant bottle-washer (white) or some other light duty which would have left me free to enjoy some of the fun and excitement which is coming Rex Hardinge's way—still, the rest of the world's work has got to be carried on, and so you and I will have to be content to stay where we are and to receive what news opportunity and the fauna of Africa permit our Lobangu author to send us.

As a consolation for travel missed, let's pick out the envelopes with the foreign stamps and see what some of our distant Round Table pals have got to say.

From Rae Town, Kingston, Jamaica, Gerald Jones writes:

"I count myself among the admirers of Sexton Blake who have pledged him their undying loyalty. Under the blue sky and blazing sunshine of sunny Jamaica, Sexton Blake is as well loved and respected as in any other part of the world."

From Colpetty, Colombo, Ceylon, Ronald de Soysa sends a word of commendation:

"I am writing you for the first time to congratulate you heartily on being the Editor of such a fine weekly paper as the 'U.J.' When I have finished it I exchange it at college with any one of my chums. They all praise it even more than I."

Here is now an Australian stamp, and the typed envelope looks like one of Reader Eric Copeman's epistles.

"I notice lately," he writes, "that the colours of the covers have been more varied. It makes me feel that you ought to attach your old slogan, 'The Paper with the Distinctive Covers,' once more. Variety of colour seems to mark a freshness which is not possessed by any other weekly paper."

Mr. W. Davies, of Garfield Street, Parnell, Auckland, N.Z., in the course of a very interesting letter which I am afraid is too long to quote in full, mentions that:

"U.J. costs threepence out here in New Zealand, but it's worth it. I would pay a pound rather than miss it. I shall be buying it when I'm an old man with a 'beaver.'"

Rhodesia is our next halt in this all-Empire Round Table trip. Mr. T. A.

Blyth, of Winyon Mine, Gwanda, greets all comers to the Round Table and then hands on this idea:

"The reason I write is because I have a nice plot for a story. I'm sure Robert Murray or E. S. Brooks would make something of it."

"A pretty girl marries. The morning after the wedding the husband is seen leaving by the first train without giving a reason, and is never seen again. After a time the girl marries again and the next morning the husband also disappears, and is never seen again. Then the girl marries for the third time, and the same thing happens. What is the reason?"

Well, you've got us beat, T. A. B. It sounds more like a conundrum than a plot. One question: Didn't the girl marry a fourth time?

Stanley Sivan, of Lord Street, Perth, Australia, would like to see more stories by Lewis Jackson and C. Malcolm Hincks. Both these wishes are to be gratified—the first very shortly, as you will be seeing from next week's issue. He adds:

"I used to amuse myself trying to discover your authors when they were anonymous, and by a comparison of styles I found out G. H. Teed, Robert Murray, and others, long before their names were appended to their stories."

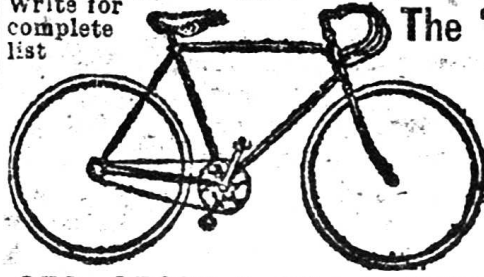
I suppose to all regular readers the styles of our various authors are distinctly recognisable. I wonder, if the instalments of the "Next Move" had been anonymous, whether readers would have guessed the identity of the authors as easily as from the long Blake yarns?

"I have been reading the UNION JACK for six years. I only regret that I am not a reader of longer standing. Previous to six years ago I must have been missing wonderful stories."

That regret is from Reader J. Liddane, of Oburry Street, Limerick, Irish Free State. "The moving finger writes—" J. L., and when it's writing "U. J." stories you want to be there waiting! However, though you've missed a goodly number of yarns, you can console yourself that the quality of to-day's yarns is every bit as good and, according to the majority of readers and my own opinion, better than the yarns of "U. J.'s" early days. Maybe you will be able to pick up those old numbers from a friend, or from a second-hand bookshop.

Your Editor

Write for complete list



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