

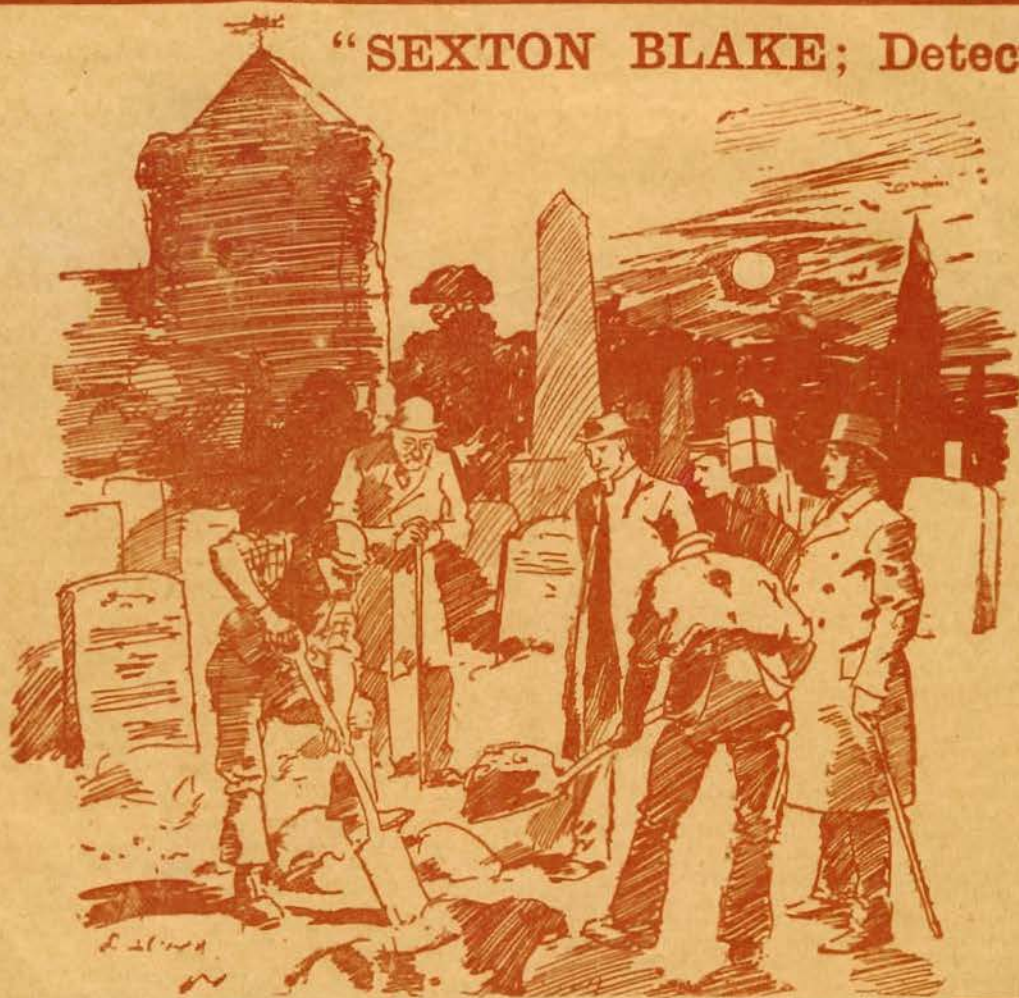
SPLENDID DETECTIVE STORY THIS WEEK.

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"SEXTON BLAKE; Detective."



"The digging proved sore and heavy work."

PUBLISHED EVERY FRIDAY.

AT

TUDOR STREET & PRIMROSE HILL, LONDON, E.C.

No. 2.

SEXTON BLAKE;

DETECTIVE.

THE STORY OF A GREAT
MYSTERY.

Some time ago we arranged with Mr Sexton Blake, the celebrated Detective, to furnish us with the particulars of the most remarkable and sensational cases he has been concerned in. From some of the materials he has placed at our disposal we have formed the following startling and authentic narrative, feeling sure that its strange details will excite a world-wide interest.

—Ed. "UNION JACK" LIBRARY.

CHAPTER I.

THE STRANGE STORY OF A STRANGE MAN—
HOPES AND FEARS—THE NIGHT IN THE
CHURCHYARD—AN ASTOUNDING DISCOVERY—
THE DETECTIVE'S RESOLVE.

"YOUR story is indeed a remarkable one. Your uncle's fate seems to be shrouded in a deep, criminal mystery. Let us once more consider the salient points of your narrative." It was Sexton Blake who spoke, as he leaned back in his comfortable office chair, and studied with his characteristic intentness, the bronzed, handsome face of Harry Armytage, a well-knit, bright-eyed young fellow, whose manner had the freshness of the sea breeze, and whose smile was as sunny as his features could look resolution. "You were left an orphan at an early age," continued the detective, "and your uncle, Mr. Fenton Joyce, adopted you and brought you up as his own son?"

"That is so," agreed Harry. "He was a wealthy man, but of a retiring disposition. He took no one into his confidence, least of all myself. Though he lavished money on me, and I wanted no material thing, we remained mere acquaintances to the end. Ninian Joyce, his daughter, the sweetest maiden that Heaven

ever blessed with a dainty form and a beauteous grace, absorbed all the love that his nature was capable of. Yet

he showed no anger when it was made plain to him that my cousin and myself had each grown into the other's heart. 'Well, well,' was all he said, 'better that you should some day wed her than for a stranger to take her from me.' My nature is an active one, or I might have remained a mere idler under his roof. I chose the sea as my profession. During my absences Ninian proved a most regular correspondent, but it was idle for me to expect any communication from her father. The voyage from which I have just returned kept me from England for two years. For fifteen months I received letters from my betrothed just as often as it was possible for me to get them. Suddenly they ceased, and telegrams I sent from different ports remained unanswered. I



"SO PERISH ALL FALSE FRIENDS, WHO ARE MORE DANGEROUS THAN OPEN FOES."

hastened home filled with a thousand vague but terrifying apprehensions. I discovered that soon after I had sailed my uncle removed to a lonely house in Essex. I made all haste to

reach it, anxious for Ninian's welfare and my uncle's health. To my dismay I found it closed up—deserted! As no other habitations stood at all near to it, it was some time before I could obtain any information about the late owner. Few around there appeared to have known of his existence, and he had interested no one. At last the truth was brought vividly home to me.

"My uncle was dead, and Ninian had gone no one knew whither!"

"I stood in the remote and silent little rustic churchyard where his body lay. I read his name rudely carved on the most paltry headstone in the place, and a chill struck through me, for I felt that I was face to face with some dark crime. This was no grave for a man of such wealth as Fenton Joyce boasted; while Ninian's silence and disappearance suggested nothing but some wild and wicked work, with other tragedies to follow my uncle's strange death."

"I can quite understand how keenly you felt the shock," said Sexton Blake; "and it was natural enough for you to suspect treachery. But the points in this, the first part of your story, needs only an ordinary explanation. It is in the second part of your experiences that crime looms heavily over all your facts. You very properly interviewed the clergyman who had buried your uncle—"

"Yes, and with the most surprising and disappointing results. He could tell me next to nothing. Mr. Fenton Joyce was unknown to him. He had been attended by a doctor from London, who was also a stranger to everyone in that part. Ninian followed him to the grave, accompanied by two gentlemen whose names the minister had not caught, and the dismal funeral arrangements had been carried out by a metropolitan firm of undertakers whose address was forgotten."

"Immediately after the burial, Miss Joyce left the neighbourhood, and she has not been seen there since. Dr. Seven was said to be the name of the physician who attended my dead guardian, but the only one bearing that appellation in the 'Medical Directory,' died some months back. All my inquiries among London funeral furnishers have failed to give me any clue as to the identity of the firm who provided my uncle's coffin."

"When I interviewed his own solicitors, I was more stunned than ever. What they had to tell me was more amazing than anything I had yet heard. Some ten days before Mr. Joyce's death he called on them, and instructed them to realise on every security he possessed—to sell out immediately, even if the haste meant heavy losses. They say that he appeared to be quite calm and rational, but most singularly determined."

"He was alone when he gave them these strange instructions, and no one was with him when he received the cheque, which represented the proceeds of these forced sales. It was odd that he should request them not to cross the draft, and still more unusual for him not to pay it into his own account, but go at once to the bank on which it was drawn, and demand the whole of the great sum in gold. Then he went to his own bankers and withdrew every penny they had standing to his credit."

"You may be sure he was not unaccompanied," said Blake. "The amount of bullion he had in his possession required some handling. It must have been a great weight."

"They say at the bank that his own servant took the money from the porters, and placed it in his carriage. It seems that no one looked inside the vehicle."

"Exactly. You may depend on it your uncle was not alone. Can you give a guess as to who this man-servant was?"

"Indeed I cannot. It surprised me to hear that he had indulged in the extravagance of a carriage and pair, for he was not a man to spend money on himself."

"He could easily have hired the turnout for the day, as far as that goes," said Blake.

"I don't think he would do that, either, for he always professed a great contempt for folks who hired their horses. Well, Mr. Blake, I have told you exactly how the case stands. Within ten days of my uncle receiving thousands of pounds he died mysteriously, and was buried in a hole and corner fashion; his money has disappeared as though it had never existed, and his daughter has been swept off the earth as effectually as if she were buried under it. What do you make of all this?"

"From my point of view it promises well," replied the detective. "You have excited my interest, and already I

feel eager to dissipate the clouds of mystery which certainly envelope the doings and the death of your uncle. I foresee a stiff fight before me, and I am braced up for the encounter. Of course, if we adopt the theory that Miss Joyce has possession of this money in her own right, and has thrown you over, there is nothing further to explain but the eccentricities of an old man, who, judging from your own account, has been a little bit odd all his life."

"I will believe anything except the faithlessness of Ninian!" declared Harry Armytage, a hot flush burning through the bronze on his cheeks. "Besides, even were she tired of me she would have no reason for keeping me in ignorance of my guardian's death, or for hiding herself from me. She was free to break her engagement with me at any time. Again, why should my uncle, who was so careful to keep me well supplied with money during his life, desert me at his death? He never intended to do such a thing—nothing was farther from his thoughts. No, no, sir, the simple solution is not the true one. There is something sinister in the vile secrecy that has been observed. I am sure you think so?"

"I am certain of it. The puzzling thing is that both Mr. Joyce and his daughter appear to have conducted themselves in quite a sane and ordinary way. From what the clergyman told you it is plain the young lady went away from her home in Essex of her own free will—"

"That is the mystery of it!" half groaned Harry. "I cannot understand either my uncle's behaviour, or her own, after my long previous knowledge of them both. I am sure some awful tragedy underlies these events. What can you suggest, Mr. Blake? Do you ever hope to see any light through the deep darkness of this case? I am not a wealthy man."

"Say no more on that score," cried the detective, with unexpected enthusiasm. "I would rather work for nothing for a naval man like yourself, one of the best protectors of our precious flag, the pride and hope of England, than I would take bank notes from those who are careless about the honour of old Britain. Apart from that, your tale has completely roused my sympathies. Do not misunderstand me. I do not despise pecuniary reward; the detective, as well as any other labourer, is worthy of his hire; but I will take my chances in this case, and it will be a strange thing to me if, with all my faculties craving for conquests, I do not succeed in restoring your sweetheart to your arms, and in putting you in possession of as much of your uncle's money as he ever intended you should have."

"You promise bravely."

"And I will perform loyally. Never before have I pledged my word in such a way. I have to-day that within me which prompts me to buoy you up with this great hope, and with Heaven's help, my word shall be kept! The promises of Sexton Blake are written in adamant!"

"Your words dispel my gloomy wretchedness, and my heart beats free again. I feel sure you will succeed in bringing Ninian back to me if it be in the power of mortal man to do so; but none can restore the dead to life. I shall never see my uncle again," Harry cried.

"Heaven alone knows what we may see ere we are through with this business. The first step I shall take in the case will be the most disagreeable one for me. I can make no safe move until I know whether Mr. Fenton Joyce died a natural death, or was the victim of some murderous hand."

"How do you propose to satisfy yourself on this point?"

"There is only one way," answered the detective. "The body must be exhumed. Naturally you do not like the notion, but believe me, if your uncle has been cruelly made away with, there can be no harm in disturbing his remains with the view of tracking his assassins. In this case I am sure I have sufficient influence to obtain an order from the Home Secretary, which will allow us to open the coffin in the most private way possible, and also with all decorum. Luckily for our plans, the churchyard is a remote one, and under the circumstances the rector himself will aid us in keeping our proceedings quiet. Were they published too freely, the guilty parties—if there be any—would at once take the alarm, and give us more trouble than we want."

"I am in your hands!" declared Harry, "and I will not oppose anything you may recommend. I am anxious to find the girl I love, but I did not contemplate having to disturb the dead."

"It is inevitable," said the detective, "and so long as our work is honest in intent we need not fear reproach."

It took Sexton Blake some little time to procure the permit he desired from the Home Office, for, rightly enough, such things are not granted on slight evidence, or even in obedience to idle clamour; and finally it was issued more because of this detective's earnestness, and the high character he bore, than on account of any evidence he could adduce demanding it.

During this interval of inactivity Harry remained in London, chafing under the delay.

Blake grew restive also, and more than once he was tempted into blaming himself for having applied to the authorities at all.

He might have worked his will in that desolate Essex churchyard safely, and without much fear of after penalties; but then his grave-side evidences, supposing he lit on any, would be heavily discounted, if not quite useless, had he gone to work without the sanction of the Crown.

In this part of the investigation, at any rate, the slowest way was really the quickest one, as well as being the safest.

At last the necessary papers were received, and it was decided that the disinterment should take place at night, and with all the secrecy possible.

The minister of the parish was present, and the sexton who had seen to the digging of the sepulchre was there to witness its reopening.

A clear moon shed a trembling light over the burying-place, making the gravestones stand out so vividly that it required but little imagination to turn them into "pale, sheeted ghosts."

The grey church looked stern and solemn, and the surrounding wall of hewn granite, cast into eerie shadows here and there by clinging moss, was as a glinting and severe stretch of stony reproach to the intruders.

The lunar rays made the light in their lantern yellow, weak, altogether ineffectual; while the digging proved sore and heavy work.

"Come with me," said the clergyman, linking his arm in Harry's. "They are raising the coffin now. You are too agitated to follow these terrible proceedings any further. Let us sit in the vestry for a little. We shall soon know the result of this ghastly investigation."

Harry was far from being unwilling to allow this thoughtful Christian man to lead him away from the spot fraught with so much intense anxiety for him, and so thick with horrors.

He plied his companion with many questions about Ninian, but the rector could give him little information concerning her, he having seen her but once, and then on the sad occasion of her father's burial.

"I have something like good news for you!" cried Sexton Blake to Harry, following him into the church before they had begun to look for his appearance. "One thing is quite clear. Your uncle was never buried here. *The coffin we have drawn up and opened contains nothing but stones!*"

"Then he may still be alive?" exclaimed Harry, starting to his feet, dazed by the shock of this extraordinary information.

"It is highly probable," was the answer of Sexton Blake. "I am not surprised at the result of our investigation," he continued, almost sadly. "Men don't usually realise all their property, as Mr. Fenton Joyce did, and then lay down and die. The discovery we have made should in one way console you, for it opens up a prospect for you of once more seeing your uncle alive. On the other hand it makes the problem we have to solve all the darker, and I fear that the solution of it will prove more bitter for you to accept than I had anticipated."

"But why?" protested Harry. "Surely it must be altogether good for me to be given such strong hope that my benefactor lives?"

"I wish I could feel sure of that," answered the detective, in a low voice. "I fear your uncle and his daughter are keeping out of your way, and have chosen to hide themselves from the world for some dreadful reason, for something which, should we succeed in finding them, will raise an awful barrier between you and them."

"Mereiful powers!" exclaimed Harry. "You lose hope, while mine grows with giant strength within me."

"I have no fear of failing in my efforts to unravel these mysteries, but I am not quite so sure now of landing you in happiness. The first thing to do," he added in a whisper to Harry, "is to make a secret examination of the house in which Mr. Fenton Joyce is supposed to have died."

It is within a mile of this church, and is, I am told, unoccupied. This is an investigation which you and I will undertake alone, and now."

"I am ready for anything," declared Harry. "I never felt more inclined to face danger than at this present moment. I am thankful that we are yet without proof of my generous uncle's death."

CHAPTER II.

"RAVEN'S NOOK"—THE LIGHT AT THE WINDOW—A HOUSE OF MYSTERY—CAUGHT IN A TRAP.

SEXTON BLAKE found "Raven's Nook"—such was the name of the missing man's last residence—more desperately chilling and forbidding than even Harry's description of it had led him to expect.

A belt of alders surrounded it, and a green slime crept up the high, gaunt wall which enclosed its marshy grounds.

A great rusty, iron, clanking gate protected the carriage-way to the forlorn mansion.

Both Harry and the detective carried a lantern; but so long as they were in the open, and had the benefit of the rays from the effulgent moon, they did not need to light these aids. In other ways, too, they were well prepared to face all the contingencies such an expedition as they were now bent on might give rise to.

"It would be easy enough to climb the rails of that gate," said Sexton Blake; "but I expect that ingress into the house itself can best be made from the back. This is the kind of place to send a superstitious man home pretty quickly," he added, as they forced their feet through the tangled grass. "It looks to me like a veritable home for ghosts."

"It is a dreadful place," agreed Harry, in a subdued tone. "Ninian must have suffered greatly here—in health as well as in spirits. Here is a door let into the wall, and so rotten that—See! it breaks away with half the strength I might have used against it."

The two stepped into the rank garden.

"It is evident that this piece of ground has received no attention from any gardener for years. Your uncle never walked here, nor could his daughter ever have sought its shades. Hold back, man! You must keep your eyes open. But for me you would have walked into a stagnant pool, which, if stillness means depth, might easily swallow an army. I suppose its green surface made you think it was grass."

"And strangely firm the treacherous pool looks. I recognise its character, though. I was really bent on securing that thing which glistens among the reeds on its extreme edge. Look, Blake, it is nothing less than my uncle's cigarette. It was the plate with his initials on which, glittering in the beams of the moon, attracted my attention."

"And round about," said Blake, "are most material evidence of a struggle having taken place."

"It is almost certain that my uncle's body lies in that sinister pool," declared Harry, excitedly.

"It is possible," allowed the detective. "Hist. There is a light moving about in the standing out room of that house. Ah! Now it has disappeared."

"It was only the moon's reflection on the glass of the window," suggested Harry, doubtfully.

"I think not," cried Blake. "Come on! The pool can wait. I mean entering that house, and without a minute's delay."

He made a tear towards the building, as though he were chasing a tangible thing, which was just within his grasp, and Harry sprang after him, his blood hot with excitement.

The high, ivy-clad walls of the outbuildings and of the residence itself, threw a dark shadow athwart the sodden grass and over the wet gravel, so that in the dim recesses formed by the jutting out portions they were compelled to have recourse to their lanterns, which they lit.

"Every window is heavily barred," said Blake, "and each shutter seems to be coated with a sheet of iron."

"One would think the place had been designed as an asylum for dangerous lunatics; escape from it appears to be well-nigh impossible. But by all that's lucky! this door, so thickly studded with nails, and so fortified with steel, is neither bolted nor locked. We have but to turn the handle and enter," declared Harry.

"That fact is eloquent in support of my idea that there is someone skulking in the building," said the detective. "We must advance cautiously and watch keenly against being

taken by surprise. We cannot tell what dangers may be waiting for us."

They were in the basement of the building, among the servants' apartments. They made their way along the passages, holding their lights well in front of them, raising a cloud of dust at every careful step they took.

"The house has been left in the same state as when it was occupied," observed Blake; "not a stick seems to have been removed. It must have been deserted in a great hurry, for here are the breakfast things left dirty in the scullery all ready for washing up. Look at these potatoes half pared. A joint of meat hangs in front of the empty grate. A knife is stuck in this loaf as though the wielder of it had been swept away in the act of cutting a slice. It gives one an uncanny sensation to see these signs of busy life where all is now so still and desolate."

Everywhere in that mansion they found evidences of an exceedingly hasty departure on the part of its last occupants.

They ascended the great gloomy stairs to discover the cloth partly laid in the dining-room, and a book lying open on the library table. The sights which met their gaze were sufficient to cause a creepy, superstitious feeling to oppress them, and every minute they expected to be brought face to face with the something the detective believed he had seen moving about in that eerie homestead.

The drawing-room presented such a scene of dramatic confusion as told very plainly its own tragic tale. Tables were overturned, chairs broken, a handsome candelabrum lay shattered on the carpet, and the floor was strewn with cards, decanters, dice, and the wreckage of valuable ornaments.

"It is evident there has been a gambling party here," said Blake, "followed by a hot dispute, and ending in a furious *mêlée*. What a ruin this once beautiful room has become."

"It is strange!" murmured Harry Armytage. "I never heard Mr. Fenton Joyce even allude to cards and dice, much less employ them."

"Ah, here is some dreadful evidence of the awful tragedy which has been enacted."

Both men brought the light of their lanterns to bear on the massive corner of the handsome marble mantelpiece.

A low cry of horror escaped Harry as he saw that dark stains were upon it.

"Murder has been done here, and my uncle was the victim!" he groaned.

"Why, the whole fireplace is bespattered with blood!" cried the detective. "That stain at our feet shows there must have been quite a pool there. Look! we can follow the splashes and drops right to the door. The corpse was carried this way—"

"Yes, yes!" broke in Harry excitedly. "And out into the garden, to be thrown into that ghastly-looking pool!"

"That remains to be seen," said the detective, as he, followed by Harry Armytage, walked thoughtfully back into the disordered room.

"I cannot understand why my uncle's murderers, seeing that they must have had him completely in their power, did not bury him in the churchyard, as they pretended to."

"We have no proof that he is dead at all," returned Blake; "but allowing that he did fall a victim to foul play, no charge of murder can lie against anyone while the body remains undiscovered. We must have this building and its grounds thoroughly overhauled, and in daylight."

Scarcely had these words escaped the detective's lips when both their lanterns were dashed to the further end of the room, which was plunged in Cimmerian darkness. At the same moment Sexton Blake was brought heavily to earth, and he found himself powerless under the pressure of a man of great weight, whose fingers clutched his throat and threatened to strangle him.

"Help, Harry!" he managed to 'gurggle. "Drag this rascal off me."

Harry was guided to the spot where the two men lay by the heavy breathing of the one who had so unexpectedly sprung on the detective.

Making a dash through the hopeless blackness, he managed to seize this assailant by his huge neck, and he was prepared for a desperate struggle with him; but the man was as wily as he was fat. He sprang up at once, and by this unlooked-for movement he succeeded in throwing Harry from him, and some distance backwards. Then he floundered through the lightless room, bruising his shins against

the scattered debris, and reached the door, which he closed behind him as quickly as possible, and double locked it.

They heard him panting and chuckling outside. When he did get his breath he cried out to them with exasperating mirth—

"As that room interests you so much, you shall end your days in it. Raging tigers could not escape from it, and it will be many years before anyone will again visit this house. You have sought your doom; I hope you will enjoy it!"

The man laughed outright as he uttered these words.

CHAPTER III.

JOE TAX—DISAPPOINTMENT—A CLUE AT LAST—AN EXCITING CHASE.

"We are in a nasty fix," whispered Blake to his companion. "But if that ponderous rascal thinks we are to be left here to starve to death he is mistaken. If the pair of us, with our hands and feet free, cannot make our escape from this place, we are not worth much. I think I can soon bring him to reason. Hullo, you!" he cried, standing close to the door. "You are a fool for your pains. We are from Scotland Yard. We have friends waiting for us within a mile of this house, and they know that we have come here. If we are not released soon they will follow us, and then you will know what to expect, whoever you are."

"Scotland Yard, eh?" said the man on the other side, with a complete change of voice. "Well, certainly, that does make a difference. Fancy me taking you for burglars. I'll get a light and have a look at you. But in case you reckon to get the better of me I may as well tell you that I carry a revolver, and that it is a mighty quick firer."

"Open the door at once," cried Blake, sternly, "or revolver or no revolver, I shall consider it my duty to arrest you on the first opportunity I get."

"Steady yourself, sir," answered the man. "I was only doing my duty in protecting my master's property, and there is no arresting for that."

He then threw the door open. High above his head he held a very powerful carriage-lamp, which cast a wide stream of white light for some yards in front of him. His right hand stretched out horizontally, held a revolver, and his finger was on the trigger.

After their eyes had recovered from the first shock of this comparatively brilliant illumination, a short, rotund man, with small, black eyes, heavy florid cheeks, was disclosed to the view of Harry and Sexton Blake.

"Gentlemen," he cried, lowering his lamp and revolver simultaneously, "I see you are not burglars. A look at a man's enough to tell me what he is. Now," he added, addressing Blake, "you may, or may not be connected with the police; but I'll swear that young gentleman knows more about the rigging of a ship than he does of the ropes of Scotland Yard."

"And you," said Blake, with cheerful emphasis, "know more about the tap, tap of an undertaker's shop than you do of any other music in this world."

"No, sir; you have made a mistake. I have been a gentleman's servant all my life. They say I can drive anything, and I have a head for business which makes me equal to a valet and a

private secretary rolled into one. But I should like to know what excuse you have for forcing your way into this neglected but all the same private residence."

"It is a fair question. This marble mantelpiece, this blood-stained carpet, shall be my answer. We believe a crime has been committed here, and we intend to bring the guilty parties to the dock."

"A crime committed here," said the stout man, settling himself comfortably on a broken chair. "Well, between you and me, I should call this a regular home for villainies. I never saw such a dismal, crime-stained place in all my life."



FENTON JOYCE, THE MISSING MAN.

You see, sir, my master bought it, as it stood, without having ever seen it. He got it for next to nothing. The other day he sent me down—I being his confidential man—to look over it, and give him my report. Now he wants it all done up, and made habitable, and I must stay here while these repairs are being executed. My name is Joe Tax, very much at your service. I don't mind having your card, if it's all the same to you, sir. Thanks. Ah, 'Sexton Blake!' Well, well, I have heard of you."

"Who is your master?" asked Blake.

"Mr. Gaspard Sellars!"

"Where can I see him?"

"See him? Why, he is always travelling. The last time I heard from him he was at Milan. Where he may be now I am sure I cannot tell. He always knows where to find me, and that suits both of us."

"Just so," said the detective calmly. "I fear I shall be compelled to insist on making an exhaustive examination of these premises and of the grounds. I thought it would be nothing more than ordinary politeness to ask the permission of the owner before applying for such process at law as would make his consent a matter of indifference."

"I can answer for my master," declared Mr. Tax promptly. "You may consider the place your own until our men commence their work here, and I will help your search in every way I can. If the house contains any ugly secret, it is better that it be unearthed before my master spends another fraction on it."

"We propose to drag that pond at the back of the house," said the detective, watching for any change in Mr. Tax's merry-looking face with great eagerness.

"Ah!" said that gentleman, "I can do better for you than that. I intend having it drained off and the hole filled in. I will set men on that job the very first thing in the morning, and then whatever there is in the place will be made visible to us all. Now, gentlemen, I suppose you intend remaining for the morning light to help you in your search?"

"That is so," said Blake. "Of whom did your master, Mr. Gaspard Sellars, purchase this property?"

"He bought it from Mr. Fenton Joyce, sir—the old gentleman as lies dead and buried in the churchyard."

"Dead and buried," repeated the detective; "and buried, eh?"

For one instant the vivacity fled from Mr. Tax's eyes, but he recovered his serenity immediately.

"Dead and buried, sir," he said. "But it seems to me," he went on, in a confidential tone, "that there must have been something very wrong with the old gentleman, or he would never have wanted to sell out so quick, and at such a ruinous price. It was a queer thing for him to die so soon after. I'm afraid my master has not got the bargain he thought he had in this place."

"Mr. Joyce was incapable of doing anyone an injury," declared Harry, with some warmth. In a more wistful way he asked, "Did you ever hear where his daughter had gone to?"

"I didn't know he had one. The fact is, I don't know any more about the poor old gentleman than I can gather from the state of his house, which, to say the least of it, does not speak much in his favour. Now, gentlemen, there is plenty of wine in the cellar, and I can get you a pleasant cold collation from our larder."

"What do you make of all this?" asked Harry Armytage of the detective, as the two stood alone in the ghastly room, and in the yellow glare of their own lanterns, which had been set in position and re-lit, ere Joe Tax had gone in search of refreshments.

"I make a very bad case of it indeed," was the grave reply; "and I am bitterly disappointed to find that this house will be of small help to us."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, you may rest assured we shall find nothing here likely to be of any service to us, because there is nothing to find. On the other hand our visit is full of profit, for it has introduced me to Joe Tax, one of the most plausible and oily rascals I have ever encountered. Unless I err very deeply, he holds the key to the mystery of your uncle's disappearance, and we must contrive not to lose sight of him. Directly it is light, make your way to the nearest telegraph office, and wait about there till I join you. After the events of to-night, I am confident Mr. Tax will send a message to his employer. I want you to see whether he does so in case

he eludes me. Besides, it will look better for you to have business outside, while I look after the search within. I fear it will be a farce, but I shall go rigorously through with it."

"Have you no hope of making any discoveries in that horrible-looking pool?"

"None whatever now. It is clear to me that we have some very extraordinary criminals to deal with. I realise now that we are coming face to face with one of the most remarkable plots of recent years, and I can't make up my mind yet whether your uncle is a victim or a conspirator. Silence! The heavy Tax is bringing up his viands."

"To think," said the object of the detective's remarks, as he re-entered the room laden with bottles and glasses, and cold meats, "that I should have the pleasure of drinking wine with Mr. Sexton Blake, the celebrated detective. Well, well, sir, it's a wonderful thing to be clever—that it is."

The man chuckled and wheezed, and coughed and laughed, till it seemed from his swollen and congested face that he was in near danger of being carried off by an apoplectic fit.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" he said, when he did again recover his breath, "it's such a merry world I can't help laughing at it!"

"I'll knock all the laughing out of you before I have finished with you, rascal that you are!" reflected the detective, who naturally was considerably galled at this taunting exhibition of triumphant mirth.

Harry and the detective were not sorry to partake of the food placed before them, for their excitement had sharpened their appetites.

After the rising sun, showing itself dull and grey through a thick slaty mist, had glimmered on the oozy ground outside, and Harry Armytage had left "Raven's Nook" to keep a keen watch at the telegraph office, Sexton had once more cause for acknowledging the deep craft of the man he had to deal with.

Quite haphazard he came on Mr. Tax with a pigeon in his hands, evidently taken from a small box well bored with holes lying open at his feet. At sight of the detective Mr. Tax smiled blandly, opened the window, and the bird flew out.

"One of my little hobbies," he explained, his fat cheeks rolling and dimpling. "I was always very fond of feathered things, Mr. Blake."

"A good carrier pigeon is a very useful thing to have," said the detective; "it saves one such a lot of trouble in connection with post-offices and telegraph wires."

"So it does," agreed Mr. Tax, wagging his perspiring head and looking very serious. "But, to tell you the truth, I never thought of that."

"Confound him!" muttered Blake, between his teeth, "I must get even with him, and I will. Talk about your 'lean and hungry-looking villains,' this old fat scoundrel would beat a score of them."

The detective's idea, expressed to Harry Armytage, that nothing leading to the discovery of Mr. Fenton Joyce's body would be found in the dark pool, proved correct. The emptying of it resulted in little more than startling some lazy eels back into its sickly mud.

Save for the disorder of its drawing-room, in which the voice of a dire tragedy seemed still to ring, the blood-stained tapestry and stairs, and the weird suggestiveness of the other apartments, nothing could be found in the house itself that offered Mr. Sexton Blake any clue whatever to the whereabouts of Harry's uncle, living or dead.

Mr. Tax was there, of course; and for a time the detective set great store on him, as being the means through which to get to the truth of Fenton Joyce's affairs. But after all was over at "Raven's Nook," it was found that Mr. Tax did not pay for the watching. As for the new owner of the house in which Harry's uncle was said to have died, a very little inquiry soon established the fact that he, Mr. Gaspard Sellars, was a careless man, of great wealth, and one who took constant visits abroad.

It also seemed to be true that he had never seen the crime-stained property he had bought. The cleaning and the decorations of "Raven's Nook," of which Mr. Tax had spoken with such boasting, were never proceeded with, and of this fact Mr. Blake made a mental note, as he did of some other small matters, which are to blossom into ripe fruit in the sequel.

"We have spent much time and energy in our attempts to unravel the mystery of my uncle's disappearance, but it

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seems to me that we are as far from its solution as we were at the start."

It was Harry who spoke, and in a desponding voice, which well agreed with the dolefulness of his face.

"My leave from my ship, as well as my hopes, are almost exhausted."

He and Sexton Blake were walking along Regent Street one fine afternoon, and arm in arm, when our hero gave vent to this despairing note.

"I cannot work miracles," said the detective, quietly, "and I do not blame you for one throb of your impulsive impatience. Why, we have only been at this business for a couple of months, and such a tangle as you have induced me to face might well take a year's steady work in the unravelling. Why, what's the matter with you?"

"Matter!" answered Harry, with such swift utterance that every word seemed to spring from an electric touch. "In that carriage is Ninian Joyce, looking more beautiful than ever—"

All else he said was lost in the rattle of the traffic through which he plunged, till he clung to the side of a handsome barouche, wherein sat a lovely girl, accompanied by an old man, whose plentiful white hair streamed over his face and hid it.

In addition to this, a heavy muffer completely concealed his lower features, and his soft hat was drawn well over his eyes.

"My young naval friend knows best whether the lady is the missing Ninian Joyce or not," reflected the detective; "but I am sure the driver is my old acquaintance, Mr. Joe Tax. At last we seem to be in full scent of our quarry!"

A temporary block in the crowded thoroughfare compelled the carriage to stop, and Sexton Blake was enabled to observe the effect produced on the young lady by the sudden appearance of Harry Armytage on the step of her coach.

A look of terrible terror overspread her face; she presented the most pitiful appearance of alarm, and moreover, it was evident that she repudiated all acquaintance with the sailor most energetically, and with scorn.

Blake saw Harry plead wildly for some sign of recognition from her, and this made her repulse him with even more determination. The whole incident scarcely occupied a minute, but it was one of those moments when the emotions fly quicker than time itself, and a life's tragedy is crowded into the beat of a pulse.

Harry attempted to open the door of the carriage, but the traffic suddenly moved forward, and he fell back on the road among the plunging horses and glittering equipages insensible.

At the same moment Mr. Tax flicked his horses with the whip, and the high-spirited animals sprang forward in grand style.

Blake plunged fearlessly among the vehicles, and dragged his friend to the pavement, where a policeman chanced to be standing.

"Here is my address," he said hastily to this officer, handing him a card. "See that this injured gentleman is conveyed there, and has every attention, and I will reward you liberally. I must go in chase of his assailant."

Without more ado he left Harry, and dived into an empty "hansom," which, luckily, was within hail. One is always sure of finding a disengaged cab in Regent Street.

"Follow that carriage," he shouted; "that one with a pair of horses just turning into Golden Square. Follow it as though your life depended on your speed. I think I have you this time, Mr. Tax," muttered the detective.

It was plain Mr. Tax was aware that he was being pursued, for he urged his horses to their utmost speed. But he had unwisely turned into a labyrinth of narrow streets which make up the district of Soho, and at every turn his further progress was in danger of being blocked.

On and on he went, waking up the echoes of quiet roads where such a carriage was rarely seen, arresting the attention of the foot passengers, and drawing the startled householders to their windows.

As he pressed furiously forward, to the complete wrecking of more than one apple stall, it seemed that he must have some hope of giving his pursuers the slip in this maze of greasy thoroughfares.

At first the cab had gained on him, but now it was as much as Blake's driver could do to keep the flying carriage in sight.

"Goodness me!" ejaculated the detective, as he peered

eagerly ahead over the splash-board, "the gray-haired old gentleman who was in that conveyance has disappeared; the young lady is sitting alone. He must have dropped off the vehicle as they turned a corner, and were for a minute out of my sight—a risky, and, one would think, an almost impossible performance for an aged man. I have certainly some very astonishing people to deal with. There is nothing for it now but to stick to Tax till he chooses to go to his home, and that I will do even if he continues to drive about all night."

But this last chase was doomed to end in the most abrupt and painful manner.

Expert driver though Mr. Tax undoubtedly was, his growing excitement led him to take one corner too sharply, the result being that his hind wheel on the near side was brought into violent collision with the iron post erected there, and flew clean away from the carriage, which fell with a crash on its side, leaving the foam-covered horses rearing, striving, and plunging, to the terror and danger of everyone in the little street.

Blake rushed to the scene of the accident in time to see the body of the young lady lying on the pavement in perilous proximity to the hoofs of the frantic animals.

She was fearfully pale, and blood poured from a severe cut on her head. He feared that life had flown from that lovely form, and he stooped low with the intention of raising her to some safer place.

Then he received a crushing blow on his own skull, and he dropped by the side of the beautiful girl as deathlike as herself.

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE TRACK—CRAIG'S CRAFT—GASPARD SELLARS—THE TERROR OF FENTON JOYCE—PLOTS AND PLOTTERS—SHOT DOWN.

"So you are quite sure the young lady you saw in the carriage was really your old sweetheart, Ninian Joyce?"

Sexton Blake and Harry Armytage had recovered from the injuries they had received, and were sitting in the former's private room.

"I have not a shadow of doubt on the point," answered the young sailor. "But why she should deny herself to me is more than I can understand. As the mystery deepens so does it become more painful and appalling. Ah! Blake, I would give much to be able to lift the veil which shrouds the secret of my uncle's fate."

"You are nearer having your desire gratified than you imagine. I have every reason for believing that your uncle still lives."

"Heaven be praised for that assurance!"

"More than that, I am convinced it was he who sat by Miss Joyce in the carriage."

"I had eyes only for her dear face, and ears that heard nothing but her words, cruel as they were. If he does live it is natural enough he should be with his daughter. He must have been well disguised."

"Yes, and he escaped from that carriage in a very expert way. So you see, Armytage, if my theories prove correct, even when we succeed in proving beyond doubt that this gentleman is your uncle, I fear I shall be powerless to compel him to acknowledge his identity, or to receive you as his nephew. As for his daughter, all my inquiries have failed to discover where she was taken to after her removal from the doctor's house to which she was first conveyed from the scene of the accident. She may still live, and I hope she does, but it is far from certain."

"Alive or dead, she seems lost to me for ever," sighed Harry. "Her behaviour almost makes me believe that some evil person has cast a wicked spell over her. Both she and her father must have fallen on bad days and into vile hands ere they would repudiate me."

"Your case is the most perplexing I have ever had to deal with. Mr. Gaspard Sellars, the present owner of your uncle's old house in Essex, and the employer of that fat and crafty rascal, Joe Tax, is now in England, and residing in a rambling house which stands on a wild part of the Cornish coast. You must journey down to this place of Sellars', for there I believe you will find your uncle."

"That sounds too good to be true. In what way shall I approach this Mr. Sellars?"

"Openly, and as though you thought him the most honest

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man in the world. Tell him your tale frankly, and say boldly that you believe he can give you some information about your missing relative. If my conjectures are correct he would immediately guess your errand, and be better prepared to meet you as a spy than if you adopt a straightforward course, which will put him off his guard."

"Have you been able to ascertain anything concerning this man's antecedents?"



HARRY ARMYTAGE.

"Very little, which is itself a highly suspicious circumstance in the case of a wealthy man. I believe him to be one to whom crime is as natural as gentle deeds are to a good woman. I warn you that you will have to guard yourself against murderous hands. You will carry your life in your hands while you are under the evil shadow of that Cornish roof. But you have tact and courage, and will, I trust, come well through the perils which are sure to threaten you."

"And yourself?" asked Harry.

"Oh," was the laughing reply; "I shall not be far from you. You will not know me, and I shall not want you to."

But I shall be able to put my hand on you at any moment. You see I should not be of half as much good in that house as you, for I neither know your uncle, nor is he acquainted with me. Besides, I wish to keep a particularly active eye on that man Tax. I'll teach him a lesson before I have done with him!"

"Ah," said Harry, with an air of satisfaction, "this looks like a start at work in real earnest, and I welcome it."

"Of course you do. There are pirates ahead, and you must consider that you are in full chase of one."

"Who shall be promptly boarded and sunk without quarter."

"That's all well enough," said Blake; "but before sinking the ship you must take care that your uncle is rescued from it. Goodness knows what surprising discoveries are awaiting us."

A few days after the foregoing conversation took place in London, another and an equally important one occurred in the library of "Craig's Craft," Mr. Gaspard Sellars' romantic seat in Cornwall, whose very foundations swayed before the Atlantic gales.

The owner himself was a tall, yellow-skinned man, with long, claw-like hands. He wore a profusion of jewellery, and his cunning eyes had a way of dwelling with open approval on the gems which sparkled round his fingers.

Seated near to him was the same gentleman the detective and his friend had seen seated in that carriage next to Miss Joyce.

It was a painful thing to gaze on his countenance, which was so expressive of internal agony, and it had the terror-stricken look of a hunted animal.

"Since that unfortunate encounter in Regent Street, I have known no rest day or night," said Mr. Sellars.

"I have trembled every hour for your safety, my dear friend. It would be a terrible thing if, after all our precautions, you should be captured. My fear is that now your nephew knows you were not buried in the place where your headstone stands, and he has seen Ninian, he will leave nothing undone to find you. Once he succeeds, the police will not be far behind him, and then you will inevitably have to face the gallows."

"I know, I know," cried Mr. Fenton Joyce, quickly, but in a weak way, and like a man whose faculties were held in thrall by some mastering, awful fear. "What you say is true, very true. What do you advise, Gaspard? What do you recommend me to do, my friend?"

"You must clear out of the country without delay," was the prompt reply; "and you and I must not be together for some time to come—"

"But my daughter—my poor injured Ninian? I cannot go without seeing her. I sometimes fear, Gaspard, that out of mistaken kindness you do not tell me the truth, and that she is dead."

"She is not dead," replied the other, gravely. "She will

recover from her injuries, and you may safely trust her to me—I, who am to be her husband—I, who hold your very life in my hands. Tax has already told you," he continued in harsher tones, "that young Armytage is assisted in his search for you by the Scotland Yard people. They are sure to pay me a visit before very long, because your nephew suspects me. If you are found here your doom is sealed. So you must go, and at once. A portion of the fortune you have placed in a bank under your new name of 'Wilton Reid,' will give you a start, and the rest can be left with me. I can't help thinking that when you made that absurd arrangement with its present custodians, that it was never to be delivered up except to you personally, that even your signature was not to be honoured without your presence, you had but small faith in my honesty of purpose."

"It was not that, Gaspard, it was not that. I was anxious for the welfare of my child. I did not trust myself. And even now, my dear friend, if I refuse to agree to your request, it is because I think of her before my own wretched self."

"Refuse to agree to what I demand?" roared Sellars, with a scornful laugh. "Why, you foolish old man, it is more than your life is worth to dare me. I have humoured you too long. I have submitted to your whims and oddities till you fancy you are the master and I the slave. Hark ye, Fenton Joyce, now called 'Wilton Reid,' be ready to journey with me to Bristol to-morrow, and be prepared to draw out your money from the bank there, or by the sky above me, I'll hand you over to your rightful owner—the hangman!"

"Have mercy on me, Gaspard! show me some mercy. You will need much shown you on the last dreadful day. I have been good to you; have a little consideration for me in my helplessness. Do not rob me and my poor child of all we possess. If you meant to deal well by us, you would be content to let the wealth rest as it is, for I have never refused you money; do not be so grasping as to crave for it all. You know I never intended to kill that man. Heaven is my witness, it was a pure accident!"

"Accident or no accident," jeered Sellars, "the jury declared you to be 'guilty of wilful murder,' and the blood-hounds of the law are still on your track. Mercy? Yes. You shall have as much mercy as you choose to pay for. I am sick of this shilly-shallying. Now then, Joyce, my terms are all your money, or I shall hand you over to the police without any more nonsense."

"Oh, this is terrible, most terrible."

"Hullo, Tax," broke in Sellars, his face dark with passion, "what do you mean by entering this room without permission?"

"Well," replied Mr. Tax, twirling his hat in his two hands, and regarding both gentlemen with a smile. "What I mean is bad news—desperate bad. News as will make both of you look grave."

"Out with it, then," commanded Sellars, angrily, "and don't stand grinning there like the idiot you are."

"Well, then, Harry Armytage has arrived at Belton Station, and he is on his way here. I saw him leave the train, and I borrowed Sam Pixie's fast mare, so as to get here before him. He's alone, but he may be armed with a search warrant for all that; and, at any rate, I expect there is plenty of power behind him. Now, if he finds you here, Mr. Joyce, we shall all be in a pretty mess."

"It means ruin, and nothing less," growled the perplexed Mr. Sellars.

"It means death to me," groaned the unhappy fugitive. "Save me, I beseech you both. I will agree to any terms you may suggest, only save me!"

The wretched man trembled in every muscle, and dropped on his knees before them as he raised his quivering hands in prayerful agony.

"It's too late and too dangerous to move him out of the house now," said Gaspard, addressing Joe Tax.

"To take him out of here at this moment would be to court discovery," was the scornful reply. "There's nothing for it but to put him in the tower of the ruined wing, which old Squire Heaton, as was hanged at Exeter for all manner of crimes, had walled up. There's a secret passage to it, which will baffle the cutest detective Scotland Yard can send here. I defy anyone to discover him if we once get him there."

"Yes, yes," gasped the terrified man. "Let us go there at once, for my nephew may arrive at any minute."

Our next number will contain a stirring story of the sea, entitled "Neath England's Flag."

"You run on, sir, to the grounds at the back," said Mr. Tax, "and I will follow you in half a minute. It's such a secure place," Joe added in an ominous, crafty way to Mr. Sellars, "that if we forget to visit him when he is there he might starve to death, and the world never be a whit the wiser."



"THE REPORT OF A GUN RANG OUT, AND HARRY LOST HIS HOLD AND FELL THROUGH THE AIR."

"And that fate should be his," said the master harshly, "were it not for the precious money waiting his presence at the bank in Bristol. That must be secured at the first opportunity."

"I believe you," muttered Joe Tax to himself, as he went after Mr. Fenton; "but it's time I played my own game. The crisis is at hand, and I am not quite so soft as to trust to your word, or your sense of gratitude, Mr. Gaspard Sellars. I've got Mr. Fenton Joyce in my own hands now, and it will be a queer thing if I don't soon finger his money."

When Harry did arrive at "Craig's Craft," he was received by its owner with as much cheerfulness as that scheming gentleman could assume.

"Ah, Mr. Armytage," he said, "I have heard of you before. You are the young gentleman who was found prowling about my Essex property in the dead of night. Your anxiety about your uncle's fate may easily excuse that trespass, but surely you do not expect to learn anything concerning him here?"

"And why not?" Harry replied boldly, "when only a few days back he and his daughter were driving through fashionable London in your own carriage."

"You have been strangely misinformed," was the grave reply. "I do not possess a carriage, and I have not been in London for many months."

"At any rate your servant, Joe Tax, was driving the conveyance in which Miss Joyce was sitting."

"Really, Mr. Armytage, your imagination prompts you to make the oddest statements. Since my return to England, to again take up my residence here, Tax has not left this neighbourhood for a single day. He is about the premises now, and will soon be able to answer for himself."

"Am I to disbelieve the evidences of my own senses—of my own eyes?"

"Most decidedly when they play tricks with you, and as Tax has been here all the time, you could not have seen him in London. But come, Mr. Armytage, tell me what you

suppose I can have to do with your uncle, a man I have never seen, and one believed by the world to be dead?"

"That is precisely the mystery I am so anxious to clear up. I feel certain that you can give me the solution to it if you chose, and I entreat you to take pity on my keen anxiety for the old man's safety. What can you have to gain by keeping us apart? I have strong reason for believing that my uncle is even now on these premises. I have come here for the purpose of satisfying myself on this point. If you oppose the examination I propose to make of this building, I shall invoke the law's aid; but I am hopeful that I may yet win you to my side."

"After my explicit statement that I know nothing of your uncle, your remarks are as insulting as they could well be," returned Mr. Sellars with darkening brow, "and I should be quite justified in having you kicked off this estate. But I will have some regard for the rash obstinacy of headstrong youth, and I will let you have your own way. You shall remain here as my guest for as many days as you choose, and you shall search my house in any fashion you may think best. Then, Mr. Armytage, when you find how vain has been your quest, you shall apologise to me for your impertinence or submit to the chastisement I shall administer to you."

"When I am satisfied that I have wronged you I shall be very glad to ask your pardon. At present the very stones in the coffin supposed to contain his body cry aloud, and point to you as being the one in whose power he is!"

"Ah!" This accusation brought a sudden flush to Gaspard's cheeks, but he quickly recovered his serenity. "If your uncle is alive and driving about London, as you declare," he said, with warning emphasis, "and does not seek you out, it must be because he does not want you. Take care that if you ever do find him, you have not cause to curse the hour of the discovery, and he reason for heaping the bitterest reproaches on you for your meddlesomeness."

"Now you talk like one who could say more if he would. Tell me, I implore you, what dark secret it is which hangs over my uncle's life?"

Gaspard Sellars turned away with an assumption of haughty disfavour.

After this, and for some days, this gentleman acted the part of an agreeable host, leaving his guest to wander about the mansion and the grounds as freely as he chose.

"I think our young friend begins to tire of the wildness of 'Craig's Craft,'" said Gaspard, with a chuckle, to Joe Tax a few days later. "He seems to be pretty satisfied by this time that there is no chance of finding Fenton Joyce here, and he will soon return to London as empty as he came. Directly he has gone we must rush the old gentleman off to Bristol, secure his money, and leave him to such solace as his nephew and Sexton Blake may be able to afford him. Of course, I shall give you the couple of hundred I promised you."

"It is quite a luxury to serve such a generous master," said Joe, in dubious tones. "And what about Miss Joyce?"

"She shall accompany me abroad as my wife. I daresay, in a few days, she will be well enough to be removed. I am anxious to marry her, for you see if the worst came to the worst her father would not care to prosecute his daughter's husband."

"You're a perfect genius at planning and plotting," said Mr. Tax to himself, "but when it comes to the last deal I think I can go one better than you."

Harry had commenced his examination of that frowning, jagged house eagerly and full of hope, but as one fruitless day succeeded another he began to despair, and the fear grew stronger and stronger that Sexton Blake's instincts had for once led him astray.

The old, ruined wing had naturally attracted his first attention, but it was plain that its walling up had been done years and years before, and there appeared to be no possible approach to it, even were there any portion of it habitable.

The great tower was heavily mantled with the strongest ivy Harry had ever met with, and here all kinds of wild birds made their homes, and there was much fluttering and screaming round about it.

Night was his favourite time for wandering over the shadowful grounds, when he could by the moonlight watch every window and opening in the old walls.

It was likely, he thought, that if anyone were in hiding in that place he might emerge from his place of concealment

when the household slept, and the recesses of the building had the blackness of caverns.

But neither his activity by day nor his keen watching at night had so far met with the smallest reward, and he had at last most reluctantly decided to leave for London on the following morning, carrying his disappointment with him as best he was able. He marvelled what Sexton Blake could be doing, for so far that gentleman had made no sign. Yes, he must go away and look elsewhere for his uncle, who was so strangely hidden from him. He cast what was to have been a last look on the green-clad tower, and—

He stopped abruptly in his slow pacing. His eyes were riveted on a spot among the thick climbing foliage so high above him. His limbs quivered with excitement. He seemed to hear the beating of his heart against his ribs. He saw the ivy, where it drooped loosely downwards, slowly parted as though by the opening of a casement. Then a man's head showed itself through the leaves, and rested there as if its owner were enjoying the still, scented air.

Harry rushed towards the foot of the tower. The head was at once withdrawn and the casement closed.

"I have found my uncle at last," murmured our hero, as he clasped the thick branches of the ivy, "and if I can reach him no other way, this trusty plant will help me to scale the lofty tower."

Exercising such caution as his excitement would permit, he commenced his perilous ascent, finding a foothold where he was able, but often being compelled to adopt the more trying mode of hand-over-hand progression. Tough as the growth was, he had many narrow escapes of being precipitated to the earth. Once, many yards of the ivy gave way, and he was hurled through space as though his doom were surely sealed.

Suddenly his descent was stopped by the small stem he had trusted to reaching a main branch from the trunk, and for a few seconds he swayed helplessly in mid air.

With difficulty he succeeded in securing another firm hold, and he once more set about his giddy task.

Finally he attained the height where he had seen the casement open, and the head protrude.

Peering through the small window, a little dimly-lighted room was revealed to him, and in it, to his ineffable joy, was the form of his uncle, bent in the attitude of prayer!

"Uncle, uncle!" he cried, tapping the glass. "It is I—your nephew—Harry Armytage!"

"A young eagle in the ivy!" he heard a voice below him exclaim. "I am in luck's way. I'll soon bring the bird to earth!"

The report of a gun rang out, and Harry lost his hold and fell through the air, like a shooting star through the sky, to strike the earth with a dull thud, and to lie there as though he would never breathe again.

CHAPTER V.

CAPTAIN HOOK—A PRETTY SCHEME —THE WRECKING OF THE TOWER —THE FLIGHT OF FENTON JOYCE.

WHILE Harry had been so eagerly employed in his endeavour to discover his uncle events had occurred in the adjacent village of Craigsfoot which had better be detailed now.

This old-fashioned hamlet had grown to its present dimensions in a haphazard, higgledy-piggledy way, till the quaint cottages, with their overhanging roofs and twisted chimneys, looked, as they straggled down the gully in the cliff, as though they were tumbling over one another in an effort to be first to dip into the Atlantic.

It was a wild, tempestuous coast, whose numerous creeks and secret places in the rocks had given shelter to many a score of old-time smugglers; where even now a hard

criminal might easily baffle such pursuers as were not native to their land.

Its one inn—brown, scarred, seared—resembled for all the world the weather-beaten face of some giant buccaneer. Its two windows were fiery red in the falling sun, as his eyes would have been, and its door was not unlike a gashed mouth.

The principal room reminded one of the cabin of an out-of-date sailing vessel, and its tarry, rosy odour struggled with the fumes of rum-soaked tobacco for supremacy.

The "Corsair's Bride" had heard strange, blood-curdling stories. It had witnessed many a thrilling scene of desperate outrage, and it was well its smoke-grimed walls could tell no tales, and that it was impossible to awaken the echoes of the past from its rafters.

In these present and more peaceful days it was a hostelry where Mr. Tax best loved to "smoke his pipe," which was his euphemism for at least three glasses of hot brewed brandy.

"I wonder where that brig's come from, as anchored in the bay last night?" observed another "pipe-smoker," one dull afternoon, when the usual company were assembled in the snug bar parlour. "I don't like the looks on her."

"Well," cried a little man, chuckling as he spoke, "she's not a Revenue cutter, that I'll be sworn."

"Ah, James," sighed the first speaker, "the Revenue never did any good for Craigsfoot, that it didn't. I mind the time when a bit of lace, a pound of tobacco, or a keg of brandy might have been had for the asking, in a manner of speaking; but now, why, we has to pay through the Governmental nose for everything. A fast craft was



"THEN A TERRIFIC EXPLOSION BENT THE AIR, AND A SHOWER OF STONES FROM THE OLD BUILDING MADE THEM RUN FOR THEIR LIVES."

None but pure, healthy stories will ever find their way into the "UNION JACK." Mention this fact to your friends.

dancing easy on the rising tide; I reckon she has seen a bit of smuggling, and may be something—"

"Keep your tongue still," said Mr. Tax, who sat smiling and rosy near the window. "Here comes the skipper, and bless me if he don't look just like one of the old-fashioned salts one sees in picture-books come to life again."

The man who had drawn this observation from Joe puffed and blew as he came rolling towards the tavern. His cheeks were a flaming red, and his girth of body prodigious; but for this his duplication of clothes was probably responsible.

Before entering the room he stood for a moment wheezing and choking at the door.

"Shipnets all!" he cried, in a voice that made the walls tremble, at the same time treating them to an awkward bow. "Mistress," he continued, "brew a bowl of your best punch. Me and my friends will bring ourselves to anchor, and enjoy an hour or so's sociability."

Had there been anyone in that room disposed to decline the captain's hospitality, he would have thought twice before doing it, so terribly stern and so fiercely determined did this tough old warrior of the sea appear to be.

But the frequenters of the "Corsair's Bride" had never been known to refuse such hospitality, and soon there was a merry party within that salt-flavoured tavern as was possible, where the host monopolised all the conversation.

Mr. Tax appeared to take a great fancy to this blustering sailor, and it was not long before they unconsciously, as it seemed, separated themselves from the rest, and confided to one another tales of their own prowess in matters of evil, to the accompaniment of hearty laughs, the clanging of glasses, and high compliments from one to another.

"You must have seen a lot in your day," grinned Mr. Tax. "A lot, and of all sorts, I'll be bound."

"Nothing ever came amiss to Captain Hook, of the bouncing *Shark*. A tight craft, shipmate, and with a master as knows how to handle her for any sort of trade."

"Any sort of trade, eh?" repeated Tax, pushing himself nearer to the hardy sailor, and lowering his voice. "Do I understand you to mean any sort of trade?"

"Why, do you want me to drive a broadside into you to make you open your ears so as you can understand me? Any sort of trade—them's my words, and what Captain Hook says he means."

"Why, my clever ship has carried gold, and she's carried fish; she's done a deal in ivory, and ain't been above a freight of coal. It's as the luck goes."

"Good, good!" chuckled Mr. Tax. "I daresay you wouldn't mind a sail to Bristol if you were paid for it?"

"Bristol?" returned Hook, scornfully, "that's no voyage at all, but if you want to trim sails for that port I'm your man."

More conversations and more exchanges of confidences followed this first meeting, till finally one night when Tax had remained carousing at the tavern far later than was his habit, he very freely opened up his plans to the captain, feeling sure this deep-lunged man would not be shocked at the detailing of any villainy he could suggest.

"The fact is," he said, "I have an old gentleman I want taken to Bristol safe and secret. See? safe and secret. I shall go with him, and when we have had a couple of hours at Bristol, I shall bring him back to the *Shark*, and I shall want you to keep him out at sea for at least a month. Then you can land him anywhere you like—"

"Or drop him overboard? Ah, that's it! I like plain talking. Now, when do you want me to be ready?"

"At any moment," answered Tax, in an anxious whisper.

"How am I to get hold of the old gentleman?"

"If I bring him down to the jetty you and your men can do the rest."

"I warrant we can. What is the signal? How am I to know when to expect you?"

"When you see a big red light at the great house on the cliff, 'Craig's Craft,' look for us."

"Good. And what do you propose to pay for the use of the *Shark* and her captain?"

"I thought if I gave you fifty pounds when we got to Bristol—"

"Fifty what?" roared the skipper, in a furious and menacing voice. "So you thought that, did you? You thought you'd some half-bred land lubber to deal with, eh? Look you, I must have one hundred pounds paid to me on that jetty ere I ship you or your precious old gentleman either. I've named my terms. You may take them or leave them."

"If it must be, it shall be," said Tax, somewhat dolefully, and the two men shook hands. "Keep a sharp look-out for the red light at 'Craig's Craft,' skipper."

"Ay, ay! and see that you are ready with your gold!"

With these words they separated, and Joe sought the rambling mansion on the hill.

"It is a good thing for me," he reflected, as he climbed the rising ground, "that I know where old Sellars keeps his money, or my pretty plan would fail entirely. I'm certain that drinking, villainous Captain Hook will not agree to abate one pound of his exorbitant demand. If I can get some of it back from him during the voyage I will; and I think I know as many tricks as he does. Ha! ha! ha! indeed I do, and a few more! Hullo, sir! what are you doing on the ground there? What has happened?"

The old tower of "Craig's Craft" faced the sea, and, journeying the near way to it, Joe had almost stumbled athwart his master, who was kneeling over something that lay upon the ground.

"Harry Armytage climbed the ivy and discovered his uncle. I arrived just in time to bring him down with my gun. I fear I have killed him!"

"Then you are as good as hanged," declared Joe, now quite sobered, and full of rage. "I tell you he has the police behind him, and we shall all suffer for the plot we have been engaged in. Fool that you are! your stupidity has destroyed our every chance."

"Silence, you old rogue! lest I serve you as I have him. I cannot hang more than once, whatever I do to you. Why don't you help me to revive him? If we can keep him invalided here for a little it will give me time to take old Joyce to Bristol, and to secure his fortune."

"Hush!" whispered Tax, "he has opened his eyes. Consciousness has returned."

"Where is my uncle?" Harry demanded, springing to his feet, and then emitting a cry of pain. "I am only shaken," he said, as they attempted to support him. "I can move about to-night well enough. To-morrow I may be too stiff to do so; and to-night I am determined to rescue my uncle from that tower, if I have to raise the whole village to help me."

"You are mad to suppose that Mr. Joyce is there—mad enough to be confined in an asylum," said Sellars, harshly.

"I thought you were one of those rare young eagles which occasionally seek shelter in that tower, or I would not have fired at you. It seems, though, that I have done no more than graze your wrist."

"It was sufficient. It brought me to earth," said Harry. "You have a ladder which reaches to the very roof of your house. Let me have that here, so that I may show you that my uncle is in the tower, or I will excite such a commotion about you as will most certainly lead to your speedy imprisonment."

Gaspard was ready with some violent reply, but Joe Tax tugged his arm, and said, with his usual smirk, to Harry—

"You shall have the ladder by all means, and shall do what you like in the old tower. But come inside first with me and refresh yourself."

"No. I will remain here lest there be more treachery at work. Produce the ladder at once."

"I shall have to rouse the house up to do it," grumbled Tax; "but if you insist, so it must be."

He went off in the direction of the mansion, and Gaspard ran after him.

"How can we let him into that tower?" he gasped.

"We must," was the calm reply. "You go and keep him easy. Leave the rest to me, and all will be well."

"I doubt it," muttered Mr. Sellars; but he returned to Harry, and did his best to soothe him during the long interval which elapsed before two of the outdoor men servants brought the unwieldy ladder and placed it against the tower. But Harry made them place it on the opposite side of the tower this time, as the window was larger there, and made haste to mount to it, although he found that his ankle gave him a considerable amount of pain.

As he, step by step, got nearer and nearer to that small window, his excitement became overwhelming. He felt sure that the hour of his meeting with his uncle had, indeed, come, and that he was soon to hear news of his beloved Ninian.

Just as Harry was about to force open the casement and jump into that mysterious room, an explosion occurred in

the tower, which shook its walls, and made his ladder tremble under him.

Then a thick volume of hot, pungent smoke poured out of the window, half choking him, and, for the moment, wholly blinding him. This was followed by a wide sheet of hungry flame, which completely drove him back, and compelled him to slide down the ladder to the ground.

As soon as he touched the earth he ran round to where Gaspard Sellars stood. Then a terrific explosion rent the air, and a shower of stones from the old building made them run for their lives.

"My uncle, my poor uncle! there can be no hope for him now. He cannot have escaped from this awful outburst."

"If any man was in the tower he is certainly dead by this time; but I tell you your uncle was not there." Mr. Sellars appeared to regard this unexpected destruction of his property with remarkable equanimity.

"Tax has proved himself no fool," he reflected. "Of course he has conveyed old Joyce away by the secret passage. I don't quite understand these explosions, unless it is true that the oldquire, who was hanged, had stored a quantity of powder in that tower, and it has been accidentally ignited. At any rate, the shattering of the old ruin is no great loss."

Even as these thoughts passed through his mind the gaunt and heavy walls crumbled, and fell with a crash which went rolling over the sea above the ocean's roar, and echoed wildly among the distant hills.

Harry watched the fiery havoc as one spell-bound—awestricken, and with despair crushing his heart, while Mr. Sellars thought it wise to seek the shelter of the safe part of his house, and regale himself with brandy.

Meanwhile two figures were creeping cautiously down the side of the cliff, and following the rarely-used path to Craigsfoot.

The agitation of the one, who was no other than Mr. Fenton Joyce, was so great that he progressed slowly and with difficulty, Mr. Joe Tax being compelled to lend him frequent assistance.

The crimson glare from the burning pile was on them; it lit up the side of the hill, and made their journey easier.

"You see, sir, we were only just in time," said Tax. "But who would have thought that place was a regular powder magazine? It's been a narrow escape for both of us. Never mind, we are all safe now, and it won't be long before you are at Bristol, and able to claim your own. Then I'll see you and Miss Joyce nice and snug in some safe place where Mr. Sellars will never find you. I couldn't stand by, sir, and see you robbed, as he means to rob you."

"You speak well, Tax—you speak uncommonly fairly, and I pray that I may safely trust you."

They had reached the jetty now, and there stood Captain Hook, waiting for them. His ship's boat was lying alongside.

"May hurricanes shiver the *Shark*!" roared the old seaman, "but you have shown a red light at 'Craig's Craft,' and no mistake! I was looking for a lantern, or something of that kind. I did not suppose you were going to set fire to the whole country side."

"You could not very well overlook that blaze," grinned Joe.

"I see you have brought my passenger down with you. My service to you, sir! And I suppose, Mr. Tax, you are prepared with the passage money?"

"Here you are—a clear hundred, notes and gold."

"Good. Now, sir," he added, addressing Mr. Joyce, "step gently; keep hold of my arm. Now, my lads, take care of him. Sho! There you are, nice and comfortable."

"I'll get in now," said Tax, moving towards the boat.

"I think not," declared the captain, in a strangely altered voice, which made Tax's jaw drop with amazement. "I think not, Joe Tax, because I've got all I want, and I intend leaving you behind. When Sexton Blake means to get even with a man he generally succeeds, and I am even now with you."

"Sexton Blake!" repeated the astounded and beaten rascal.

"Yes; Sexton Blake!" cried the detective, springing into the boat. "It's a name you won't forget as long as you live. Now, boys, pull for your lives, as that baffled scoundrel may be foolish enough to fire on us."

But Tax was too dazed to attempt anything of the kind. He stood there like a man suddenly struck idiotic, repeating in an imbecile way—

"Sexton Blake! Sexton Blake! Sexton Blake!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERY OF FENTON JOYCE—THE MOCK FUNERAL—A HAUNTED MAN—SEXTON BLAKE'S PLAN.

SEXTON BLAKE, having cast aside his nautical disguise, sat in the roomy cabin of the old *Shark*, with Mr. Fenton Joyce opposite him, the light from the swinging oil lamp above them falling on the latter gentleman's worn and haggard face, and showing how he had lost flesh even during the last few days.

"I know," he said, "that both you and my poor nephew have been animated by the best intentions in your determination to find me; but alas! for the goodness of your purpose, its success means putting a rope round my neck."

"Nonsense," cried Blake, cheerfully, "you are labouring under some delusion."

"I would it were so. My escape from 'Craig's Craft' will infuriate Mr. Sellars; he will hasten to the police to denounce me, and I shall soon be captured, my condemnation will follow as a matter of course, and my darling child will have the shadow of the gallows cast over her young life, which should be all joy and hope and brightness."

"What power has Sellars over you? How can he consign you to the hangman?"

"Easily. I am wanted by the police on a charge of wilful murder—a murder which Sellars and his man, Tax, can swear they saw me commit."

"There must be something very wrong in all this," said Blake, reflectively. "Both your nephew and myself have instituted the most minute inquiries concerning your goings and comings, and your whole system of life, and we have heard nothing of any charge of murder having ever been brought against you."

"That only shows how cleverly Sellars has contrived to shield me. As for all my doings, none except ourselves could know what took place in that dreadful house in Essex, called 'Ravens' Nook.'"

"I am your friend," said Blake, considerably perplexed by the other's words, the more so as the unhappy gentleman, though wearied almost to death, was obviously perfectly sane, "and you had better make a clean breast of the whole affair to me. If such a man as Sellars has succeeded in saving you so far, I'm certain I can in the future."

"Ah! You do not yet know the terrible position I am in. You shall have my story, and even if you are powerless to aid me, I shall have your pity. Doubtless my nephew has told you that for many years I lived the life of a recluse, caring little for society, and taking but small interest in the current topics of the day. Well, after his departure my disposition changed in a most unaccountable way. I enjoyed the gaiety of London, and I sought excitement on the Stock Exchange. During this period I met Gaspard Sellars, and he took a keen interest in my speculations, which, oddly enough, turned out exceptionally successful. We became inseparable companions, and so well had he established himself in my good opinion that I watched his attentions to my daughter without uneasiness. I knew that she was engaged to my nephew, Harry Armitage; but it was easy for me to bring myself to believe that a marriage between cousins was not a desirable thing. She, dear girl, remained firm and fixed to her heart's first choice, and my friend, Gaspard, was repulsed in a way which cut him to the quick. It was he who advised me to purchase 'Ravens' Nook,' in Essex. It was a most retired place, and yet was

under an hour's ride from London. He suggested that several of his Stock Exchange friends would be glad to ride down there at night and form merry card parties, which, as he pointed out, must prove highly profitable to me, as my 'luck was in.' I will offer no excuse for falling in with his views. The gambling fever held me in its wicked thrall, and at this time Sellars exercised a most astonishing influence over me. Play ran high at 'Ravens' Nook,' but the house preserved such a quiet exterior that had there been people in the neighbourhood to observe the place, no suspicion would have been excited. Mad though I was, I took good care to keep my dear Ninian free from the taint of the cards.

One night, a night never to be forgotten by me, Sellars brought a young fellow to the house named Fred Dudley. He was reputed to be wealthy, and at first I found him to be an agreeable companion. He and I commenced playing. Gaspard looked on, and Joe Tax acted as butler. To my mortification I lost continuously, and just as dawn was beginning to break, and my brain was burning with excitement, I had good reason for accusing my opponent of cheating. As the words left my lips he sprang at my throat, and as terrible a struggle as ever took place between two men occurred in my drawing-room. In our frantic efforts to win mastery tables were overturned, chairs broken, and ornaments shattered. At last I got clear of him, and I hit him a violent blow between his eyes, which sent him reeling towards the marble mantelpiece. His head caught the edge of it, blood spouted all round, and the unfortunate young man dropped down dead.

"I was led away, and Gaspard Sellars remained with me until I recovered some of my composure. 'I suppose you know what you have done, Joyce,' he said to me. 'You have brutally murdered my friend, and it is my duty to see that you hang for your crime.'

"I will not weary you, Mr. Blake, with a description of the terror which all his words now thrilled me with. Nor shall I repeat all the protestations I made. 'But,' Sellars went on, 'I like you, and I will try to save you. We have at least a week before us, because I will put it about that Fred Dudley, the man you have killed, has gone to Paris. But after that his friends will grow restive, a search will be instituted, the police will come to this house first, for it was here he was last seen alive.' 'What can I do,' I cried in my dismay, 'to escape from the awful doom which threatens me?' 'There is only one thing possible,' he answered. 'Fenton Joyce, the murderer, must die, and quickly; but Mr. Wilton Reid, which shall be your new name, may live, and flourish as an independent gentleman. Leave all the details to me, and you shall be saved. During such breathing time as we have you must see your legal people and realise every particle of property you possess. Your death shall be so properly managed that even your assurances, which you must assign to me, shall be paid.' All this, I believe, was done, but exactly how Gaspard contrived it I cannot tell. Though I appeared to be calm and reasonable to my bankers and lawyers, I was paralysed with terror, and yet I had the sense, when I appeared at Bristol, and lodged my wealth there in my new name, to make it impossible for anyone but myself in person—Wilton Reid then, and now—to withdraw a fraction of my money. I took this precaution to make my life precious in the eyes of Gaspard Sellars, for I saw now that he was an unscrupulous man, and would use the advantage he had over me to the utmost in his own favour. My dear daughter Ninian had to be taken into our confidence, and the terrible tale wrung her heart. She declared her willingness to sacrifice everything to save me. So under our false names we lived in remote spots here and abroad, our great terror being lest anyone who had once known us should see us and recognise us. Sellars showed us a cutting from a newspaper in which the finding of Fred Dudley's body at 'Ravens' Nook' was detailed at length, and then another cutting giving the proceedings at the coroner's inquest, at which both Sellars and his servant, Joe Tax, had to give evidence and tell the truth, so far as the events of that fearful night were concerned. The verdict of this jury was one of wilful murder against me, and the coroner said that it was fortunate I had died so soon after the crime, and had spared my family the disgrace of seeing me condemned to the scaffold. Since then you can easily understand how completely my daughter and myself have been at the mercy of Mr. Gaspard Sellars, and how terrified we have been at my nephew's efforts to trace us. The opening of my grave at Essex occasioned us the greatest con-

sternation. We supposed that Harry had joined his ship, or we should never have entered on that memorable drive through Regent Street. I was sufficiently disguised, and there was no one to notice Ninian except Harry, for she had always lived in great retirement."

"I suppose you did not read the accounts of the finding of the body of Fred Dudley, and the subsequent inquest, in any recognised paper?"

"Mr. Sellars showed me cuttings from the *Times*. It was thought better that neither my daughter nor myself should see any of the daily journals. Sellars said he wanted us to forget all about the tragedy."

"Just so. But I may remind you that anyone can get a column or so of matter set up in newspaper form, without that matter having appeared in any periodical whatever. I believe you have been tricked into a terror you need not have endured, and all to fill the purse and satisfy the purpose of an ingenious swindler. Your tale is sufficiently serious though for us to go warily to work. We will put into the nearest port, take train to Bristol, where you must secure your money—"

"Why," interrupted Mr. Joyce, "that's exactly what Gaspard wanted me to do. So did Tax, and now you—"

"Oh, yes," laughed Sexton Blake, "we all think of the money first. But the difference between the other two and myself is that I want to preserve it for you, and they wanted to swallow it themselves."

CHAPTER VII.

JOE TAX AND HIS MASTER—A STRUGGLE FOR LIFE—GASPARD'S CRIME.

It was not until Joe Tax had managed to give vent to a blustering and useless fit of vituperative rage, that his mind became steady enough to decide what he should do in the strange fix in which he now found himself. Like many another thief, his mental processes were quick enough to compensate for the enforced slowness of his other movements.

"I must make as good a tale of the fiasco as I can to Sellars," he reflected. "Old Joyce goes to Bristol by boat; we can easily be there first by train, and in spite of Sexton Blake, who as yet cannot know the real state of affairs, we may intimidate the precious old idiot into giving us a good share of his money. But Gaspard will have to knuckle down to me this time, and I shall want my half of all that's got. Whatever happens, they can't get over the fact that I did save Mr. Joyce from being burned to death in that tower. Lor! what an escape it was for me too. Who would have thought it would have gone off bang like that? I suppose I must have dropped a match somewhere."

It was in his private room that his servant found the master of "Craig's Craft," and in a very furious temper.

"You rascal!" cried Gaspard, as Joe entered. "You have broken open my desk and taken every penny it contained."

"A paltry hundred or so, and that to help you. As for being a rogue, all I say is ditto repeat. But I have something more serious to tell you than the loss of a few sovereigns. Fenton Joyce is in the hands of Sexton Blake, the detective."

"You villain, you have played the traitor!"

"Not a bit of it. There was a likely looking brig in the bay, whose captain seemed game for any sort of work, so I arranged with him to carry old Joyce secretly to Bristol, should the occasion suddenly arise. I knew we could easily get there first by train. The need happened to-night, and I took the old gentleman down to the jetty, paid a hundred pounds for his passage, and was just stepping into the boat after him, when the captain suddenly changed himself into Sexton Blake, and said, 'Oh, no you don't. I've got all I want.' And he rowed away, leaving me keel upwards, as it were."

"It is a misfortune," said Gaspard, with unnatural calmness, "but we can get over it. We can easily be first in Bristol, and if we fail there, I still hold a trump card which they can't take from me without paying heavily for it."

"What's that?" asked Tax, eagerly.

"The address of the place where I have hidden Ninian Joyce. No one knows that but myself."

"Good!" cried Joe, with a show of admiration.

"Let us go outside and discuss our plans," said Gaspard,

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rising; "while young Armytage is prowling about the place even the walls have ears. He has the vitality of a dozen cats. That fall should have killed him, but he has only a sprained ankle, and he defies the pain of that. As he believes his uncle to be dead he will not trouble us by watching our movements."

Tax followed his master readily enough into the open, but when the latter led the way in the direction where the cliff dropped sheer to the sea, he expressed his surprise.

"We shall be away from the smoke of that burning tower, and hidden from the gaping villagers who have gathered round it," said Sellars.

Joe glanced nervously about him, as though he had no particular desire to be altogether concealed from the view of the crowd.

"I'd rather go the other way," he said, at last. "I don't like this road at all."

"What's the matter with you? What's wrong with the road?" demanded Gaspard, harshly—anger and hate gleaming in his eyes.

"I tell you I don't like this way, and I don't like your face, Gaspard Sellars. You mean to do me some mischief. When you look as you look now, I know there is murder in your thoughts."

Joe Tax stopped abruptly. The redness had flowed from his face, leaving it an ashen pale. Heavy beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead, and as he looked in the hollows under his eyes, which remained fixed on the other's face, fascinated as by some snake-like influence.

"Mean to do you a mischief!" hissed Sellars. "Why you traitor, of course I do. I mean to kill you, and to let the sea swallow your treacherous body."

He sprang on his servant with the frenzy of a madman, and the two fell to the ground, where they lay writhing and struggling.

"You fool! do you think I have not seen through your rascality?" panted Gaspard. "You thought to sell me, and have been finely tricked yourself. Down the cliff you shall go, and the sharp rocks shall silence your false tongue for ever."

"If I go you shall go also," gasped Tax; "while I live I will not release my grip of you. Have mercy, Sellars," he whined, "life is very sweet, and why should we leave it now? I am not ready to die. As you hope for pardon hereafter, have mercy now."

"Mercy!" laughed Gaspard, wildly. "Yes, yes, you faithless knave, you shall have mercy; tiger's mercy—the mercy the wolf showed the lamb."

Sellars continued to make the most desperate efforts to thrust Joe nearer and nearer to the edge, where the cliff showed a terrific descent to the sea. These attempts were resisted with all the tenacity and power of one fighting for dear life. The men battled with one another so closely as to seem like one breathing mass. Gaspard's mad strength was beyond Joe's capacity, and, bit by bit, straining over every inch, they drew closer and closer to the extremity of that giddy height, ending in the awful drop which was certain and dreadful death.

But, though he did succeed in pushing Joe forward, Gaspard could not by any device he tried set himself free from the vice-like clutch of his antagonist.

It seemed that the doom of one must be the fate of the other, until Sellars paused in his striving, having no fancy himself for being dashed to pieces against the rocks and swallowed by the angry sea.

With great difficulty, and after many ineffectual tries, he at last succeeded in drawing a knife from his pocket, and the long blade of this he plunged into Joe's heart without compunction. Even then it was some time before he could set himself free from the entwining limbs of the dying man.

When he did so his evil face wore an expression of diabolical exultation.

"So perish all false friends, who are always more dangerous than open foes," he muttered, as he rolled the heavy body over the top of the cliff, and watched it strike every projection in its way till it sunk in the trembling ocean.

"His death will be attributed to an accidental fall over the cliff; I need trouble myself no further about him. This has been an eventful night. Now to see how quickly I can get to Bristol, and then to discover what terms I can make there!"

Gaspard Sellars lost no time in booking by train to Bristol, and as Sexton Blake and Mr. Joyce had sailed, it followed inevitably that he reached the West of England seaport first, but all he could do was to wait in the neighbourhood of the bank for their arrival.

CHAPTER VIII.

FACE TO FACE—THE PLOTTER FOILED—AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL—FREEDOM OF FENTON JOYCE—A DIRE THREAT—GASPARD SELLARS IS BAFFLED BY FATE—HE MAKES HIS ESCAPE.

SELLARS' appearance at Bristol was not unlooked for by his anxious victim, Fenton Joyce.

"He will be there," said this gentleman to the detective, "and very likely with the police at his side ready to arrest me."

"You need have no fear on that score," was Blake's confident reply. "Even if he holds the power he pretends to, your imprisonment would not benefit him. You may be sure that he would rather have a share of your money than see you in the cell. I shall be glad to meet him, and let me again repeat that I feel sure you have been the victim of a clever and audacious plot."

"I wish I could believe so!" cried the aged man, as he clasped his hands together. "Oh, merciful powers! if it could be only proved that I am free from the awful crime of murder, all my days should be devoted to praise and thanksgiving."

"Take heart; have courage. I trust to succeed in helping you to many years of happiness. If we find that you have been shamefully imposed on all this long time we will take care that Gaspard Sellars is severely punished."

"If I am freed from this load which has crushed me to the earth I shall be too elated to think about revenge. Besides, I should shrink from having the details of my terrible bondage exposed before a callous court. A public trial would be an ordeal from which my poor daughter would naturally shrink. But, alas! it is folly to indulge in this idle talk. I shall never be able to shake off the fetters which bind me."

"One thing is clear. That rascal Tax and his villainous master have fallen out, and you know the proverb about rogues' quarrels benefiting honest men."



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"It is only lately I realised that Gaspard was a scoundrel," said Mr. Joyce. "Recently he certainly has shown the cloven hoof, and evinced a determination to make himself master of all I possess. I shall be glad when the weary fight is over, and the eternal sleep ends my woes."

The old man insisted on driving to the bank in a closed conveyance.

On the steps of that establishment they were confronted by Gaspard Sellars.

"Well, gentlemen," he said with great nonchalance, "you see I am before you. You have served your old friend, your preserver, a nasty trick, Mr. Joyce, and you deserve to suffer for your ungrateful behaviour."

"You, I presume," he added, addressing the detective, "are Sexton Blake, a sort of amateur Bow Street detective. I don't know what particularly bad turn Fenton Joyce has done you that you should be so anxious to place a noose round his neck."

"If anyone in this company is in danger of the gallows," replied Blake, emphatically, "it is not Mr. Joyce."

It was a chance shot, but it struck home. For an instant the tragedy of the cliff was again enacted before Gaspard's eyes.

"Possibly," he said, with an acid smile on his white face, "you do not know Mr. Joyce's story?"

"He has told me what you have told him."

"Pardon me. He knows quite well that he did strike that man down in the Essex house, and he does not deny that he saw him lying dead at his feet."

"Hush! for Heaven's sake, hush! Let us go to some private place, and discuss matters. We must not talk in this busy street."

It was Mr. Joyce who spoke, and he shook with fear.

"It is a wise suggestion," agreed Gaspard, with a sinister smile. "If you will permit me to enter your cab, we will drive to my hotel, where we can be accommodated with an apartment suited to our purpose."

"Now," said Blake, when they had seated themselves at the oval table in the centre of the room, "granting that a most unfortunate scuffle did take place in Mr. Joyce's drawing-room, what evidence have you to show that the other man was really killed in the struggle; and what proofs have you that any verdict of wilful murder was ever brought against this long-suffering gentleman?"

Gaspard rose from his seat with great dignity.

"If that is the tone you intend adopting towards me I shall at once summon the police, and they will soon support my story in the most practical way possible."

"Stop him! Do not let him ring the bell!" cried Mr. Joyce, piteously. "I told you, Sexton Blake, that you would ruin me."

"Sit down, Mr. Sellars. I don't think you are the sort of man who should be too anxious to call in the officers of justice. Let us for a moment allow that Mr. Joyce's position is as critical as you declare it to be—what do you demand from that gentleman as the price of your silence? You must remember that you have already fattened prodigiously on his wealth, and have so terrorised over him that his reason has come perilously near being unhinged."

"As Mr. Joyce's future son-in-law, I demand to have complete control of him and his affairs, and further I require that you immediately retire from this matter, into which you should never have thrust your meddling fingers. Mr. Joyce does not require either you or his house-breaking nephew to help him."

"Just so," said Blake, blandly, "but you overlook one rather important fact."

"Pray what is that?"

"Now that I am master of the details of this melancholy case, I am in as good a position as yourself to demand hush money. I can call the police as easily as you, and where then would be the wealth you so crave for?"

An oath escaped Gaspard, and he bit his lower lip till the blood came.

"Confusion," he muttered, "I had forgotten that."

"Just now I asked you to name your terms, Mr. Sellars. Don't you think you had better ask me what mine are? As a matter of fact, I am better placed than you. According to your own story you have for some time past shielded a murderer from justice, which is in itself a serious offence, so when I send for the police they will take you both."

A look of fiendish malice distorted Gaspard's face, and

there was a moment when it seemed that he would spring on the detective, and endeavour to tear him to pieces.

"Well," he said, with a growl, "what are your terms?"

"Two-thirds of Mr. Joyce's wealth."

"Am I to be left penniless?" groaned Mr. Joyce.

"Were I as great a rascal as this fellow that indeed would be your position," answered Blake. "You shall make no terms with him. No terms are possible with one of his class. Let him do his worst. You are defied," added the detective, laughing in the face of the astounded rascal.

"By my honour!" he shouted, again rising in a mighty passion, "you shall rue this insolence. Your friend Harry Armytage shall have all his days embittered by the knowledge that his uncle suffered the shameful penalty of the gallows."

"What are you doing, Blake, what are you doing?" wailed Mr. Joyce. "He will surely carry out his threat, and there will be no hope for me!"

"Have no fear," said the detective, smiling on both of them, "he has too much regard for his own precious liberty ever to denounce you, even if he had the power."

"I will punish you yet," snarled Sellars, clenching his fists.

Poor old Mr. Joyce fell on his knees, begging for mercy, and making a most piteous exhibition of terror. He was in this position when the door opened, and a youngish man burst in on them.

"Hullo, Sellars!" he cried, "I didn't know that you were engaged. I just heard by accident that you were staying here, and that this was your room. Of course, I ought to have knocked, but you know my impetuous way. How are you?"

Gaspard suddenly looked very sick indeed. He sank on to a chair which was near him, and his face assumed a variety of disagreeable hues.

"What ill wind blew you here?" he said, in a hoarse whisper.

The effect of the appearance of this visitor was electrical on Mr. Joyce. He sprang to his feet, and a shriek of gladness escaped him. He put his arms about the newcomer, and fondled him as he might have welcomed a long-lost son.

"Why," cried the delighted old man, addressing the amazed detective, "this is Fred Dudley—good Fred Dudley—the man I am supposed to have murdered. Fred Dudley alive! really and truly alive!"

"Of course I am," exclaimed that gentleman.

He was far from being the least surprised of the party.

"But what are you doing walking about in the flesh again? You certainly did knock me about a bit, Mr. Joyce, and I was laid up for a little. The first news I heard on my recovery was about your death and burial. I'm glad to see it was a false report, and as it is never too late to apologise when you know you are in the wrong, let me now express the deep regret I have all along felt for having so wrongly charged you with dishonourable conduct at cards. The wine was stronger than my head, or I should never have committed so grave an offence."

"Thank Heaven you are alive!" was all the joyous old man could say.

"Your cunningly erected edifice of fraud has now collapsed," said Sexton Blake, addressing the crouching Gaspard Sellars, "and you stand a good chance of being involved fatally in its ruins."

"Fate has baffled my immediate expectations," returned Sellars, passion lending a terrible light to his vengeful face; "but I am not yet beaten. None of you know the abiding place of that old man's daughter, Ninian Joyce. Nor does she know that her father is freed from the terror which has haunted him. Within a few hours we shall be man and wife, and I shall then see how much that aged imbecile will allow me to support his daughter in comfort on, and to ensure gentle treatment for her."

"You villain!" commenced Blake.

But ere he could say more, or do anything, Sellars made a dart through the open doorway, and was soon lost in the maze of small streets in the midst of which the hotel stood.

You can tell your friends that the "UNION JACK" is already a pronounced success.

CHAPTER IX.

BACK IN LONDON—THREATENED WITH DEATH
—GASPARD SELLARS MAKES A BOLD LEAP FOR
LIFE—A TERRIBLE END.

It was early evening when a hansom scattered the wolfish-looking children who were playing in the mire on one of the dirtiest streets to be found in the neighbourhood of the gloomy Euston Road. It drew up at a particularly shabby house, which indeed bore the outward aspect of being uninhabited, and the crowd of ragged urchins which immediately gathered round it watched with unconcealed surprise a bright, good-looking young fellow alight, and with difficulty, for his ankle seemed to be injured. He knocked loudly at the door, and when it was at last opened, he expressed his desire to have an immediate interview with "Miss Joyce."

"There is no such person here," declared the woman who had responded to his summons, and she would have banged the door in his face had he not quickly cried—

"Nonsense! I come from Mr. Gaspard Sellars. We received your telegram—"

"Come in," was the sharp reply, "and glad I am you have arrived. That girl has been making more fuss than a cage full of monkeys. It's a wonder her cries ain't been heard by the police."

"Take me to her," cried Harry Armytage, for it was he, "and I promise you she shall not trouble you much longer."

"That's right," said the woman; "I don't grumble at Mr. Sellars, nor his pay, which is handsome and gentleman-like, but no money would pay me to have any fuss or bother here. I don't want any more police courts so long as I live."

"Harry!" cried Ninian, when our hero entered the room in which his long-lost love was caged. "Thank heaven you have come! Even to save my poor father I could not endure the misery of this place any longer. I will not repulse you now. A little more of this, and I should have been driven mad!"

"I don't know what you hoped to save your father from, nor what madness possessed you, when you were in that carriage, to spurn me and deny your own identity, but, alas! Ninian, your father's concerns need trouble you no more. I grieve to tell you that he is dead!"

"Dead! No, don't tell me he is dead!"

"It pains me to say so, dear; but it is the truth. Soon after we saw you in Regent Street my friend, Sexton Blake, detective, discovered the whereabouts of Gaspard Sellars, the man who was said to have purchased 'Raven's Nook' from your father. He owned a place in Cornwall called 'Craig's Craft,' and I went down there to see if I could discover anything about you and my dear uncle. Every possible obstacle was thrown in my way by this Sellars, although he professed to sympathise with me in my loss."

"At last, at the window of an isolated tower belonging to Craig's Craft, I thought I saw the face of Fenton Joyce. I climbed up the ivy, and had just reached the casement and called to my uncle when I was shot—brought to the earth by Gaspard Sellars. He said he mistook me for an eagle, but I vow he did it on purpose."

"Then I called for a ladder, for I was determined to solve the mystery of that strange tower. Gaspard Sellars' servants brought the ladder after a long delay, but I had scarcely reached the casement when volumes of dense smoke coming from it forced me to descend. I had only just reached the earth when a terrific explosion within the tower shook the earth for miles around."

"I am sure your father was in that tower, Ninian, and an awful death must have been his. Escape was, I feel sure, impossible."

Ninian burst into tears, convulsive sobs shaking the whole of her frail form.

"My dear Harry," she said, as she lay in his arms, "Providence has indeed been kind in sending you in this hour of dire need. Anguish has torn at my heart ever since I last wrote to you. Surely some happiness will be mine now?"

They sat together and exchanged confidences, she telling him the same story that Sexton Blake had heard from Mr. Fenton Joyce's own lips, neither of them, of course, being aware of the detective's adventures with that gentleman.

"But how came you to find me?" Ninian asked at length.

"After Gaspard Sellars left 'Craig's Craft,' and Tax had disappeared, a telegram arrived for the master of the place. Something impelled me to open it. The sender of it was the woman of this house, and so, by lucky chance, I obtained a knowledge of your address. I did not lose a moment in coming here," said Harry.

"My darling one!" sobbed Ninian, "how thankful I am to have you in this great crisis of my life. If anything can relieve the pain I feel at my father's sad ending, it is the knowledge that I am at last freed from the persecutions of that horrible Mr. Gaspard Sellars. You do not know how he has terrorised over both my poor father and myself. His power, at any rate, is now at an end, for even his malice cannot reach the dead."

"Nor shall it ever touch you, dearest. If you have lost a parent, you have found a husband, who will be staunch and true to the end of his days. Come, let me take you from this dreadful place."

"That you never shall," roared Gaspard Sellars, rushing suddenly into the room, and presenting a revolver at our hero's head; "you shall die ere you cheat me of my promised bride! Crawl into that cupboard, where I can secure you, or I will lodge half-a-dozen bullets in your brain!"

"Never!" returned Harry, making a dash at his foe. "Never will I yield to you!"

"Then meet your doom!" shouted Sellars, who bore the wild look of insanity on his face. He would have fired, and undoubtedly Harry would have been killed, but at the critical moment a posse of police burst into the grimy apartment and overpowered him.

"I arrest you," said the inspector in charge of the attack, "for the murder of your servant, Joe Tax."

Gaspard Sellars had left the knife with which he had stabbed his servant, and thus it proved a witness of the ugly deed.

With a sudden and unexpected effort, Gaspard threw off his captors, and made a clean dash through the window of the room, alighting safely on some leads a few feet beneath. From here it was easy to spring on to an adjacent building, and so he went on, climbing roof after roof, with the police in hot pursuit of him, till at last he mistook a blackened skylight for firm slates.

Crashing the fragile glass, he fell, whirling right through the air to the bottom of the house he had been on.

There he lay on the stones of the hall a crushed, bleeding, and unrecognisable mass of depraved humanity, his fate resembling in all its essential elements the one to which he had so wickedly consigned Joe Tax.

Ere the body had become cold, Sexton Blake and Mr. Fenton Joyce arrived on the scene, for the detective had been in full chase after the miscreant, and had never lost track of him from Bristol to London.

The joy and thankfulness which prevailed when happy father and gladdened daughter were once more in one another's arms, surely needs no enlarged description from us.

Harry Armytage, too, found his cup of joy filled to overflowing, and to this day Sexton Blake says he never experienced more satisfaction with any case he has had through his hands than he did in connection with the strange disappearance of Mr. Fenton Joyce.

THE END.

We shall issue a complete novel EVERY FRIDAY.