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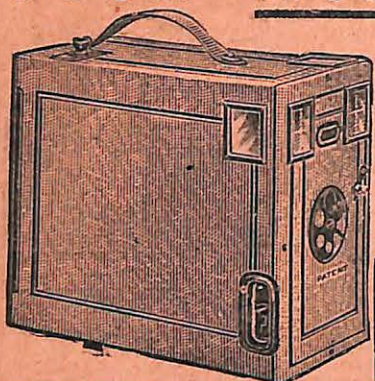
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THE FIRST CHAPTER.

What Will Win the Derby?—A Flat Refusal—The Trial of Pride of Place—The Men in the Ditch.

"MR. HUGH MORETON, Sir Charles!" the footman announced, just the shade of a look of surprise showing on his otherwise expressionless face.

Sir Charles Moreton, ex-Minister of the Crown, lord of many thousand acres in Kent, and a great lover and breeder of high-class horses, dropped the pen with which he had been writing a letter, and looked up sharply. The light of the reading-lamp on his desk fell full upon his face, and its expression was one of surprise, too.

"Show him in here, Henry," he said slowly, "and switch on the other lights."

The footman turned on the rest of the electric lights, then strolled out, leaving Sir Charles Moreton alone in his oak-panelled study, a frown on his high forehead, his long fingers pulling uncertainly at the end of his moustache. This visit was evidently a surprise to him, and not a pleasant one at that.

"Mr. Moreton!" the footman announced, drawing aside to let the visitor enter.

The man who entered the room was tall and of soldierly bearing, well-dressed almost to a fault, and with an unmistakable air of good breeding about him. In fact, it was plain that he and Sir Charles were closely related, for their features were very similar, the only difference being that the older man's were moulded on more certain lines.

A handsome man, this Hugh Moreton, but with something about the dark eyes that detracted from the face. As he entered now there was an uneasy look in them, despite the smile on his lips; and when he put out his hand, it was with a certain hesitation, though Sir Charles showed none in accepting it.

"I thought you would be surprised to see me, uncle," Hugh Moreton said, taking the chair Sir Charles nodded to. "Don't come round this salubrious part much, do I?"

"You never were a country bird," the old man answered guardedly.

"Quite right," Hugh Moreton admitted, with a carelessness that somehow seemed a trifle forced. "Besides, there was that little difference between us, you know."

Sir Charles looked keenly at the younger man, who was the only son of his dead brother.

"I have tried to forget, Hugh," he said quietly.

Hugh Moreton laughed, and it was plain that he was gaining confidence.

"It wasn't such a great crime, after all," he said, with the touch of a sneer in his voice.

"To you—no," Sir Charles answered, his voice rising; "but to me—yes. You knew my aversion to betting; that, though I run horses, I do so solely for the sport; yet you went behind my back, bought—ay, bribed one of my own lads to turn traitor—"

"And won twenty thousand pounds," Hugh Moreton put in as his uncle paused. "What harm was there in that? Other people backed the horse."

"You knew my principles," the old man said sternly; "and that betting is an abomination to me. But let the subject drop; it is distasteful."

Hugh Moreton pulled out his cigar-case, glanced at his uncle for permission, and lit up. He smoked jerkily, as if for something to do rather than for enjoyment. Once or twice he glanced up at the face of the old man, but when he met his eyes he turned quickly away again. Perhaps Sir Charles noticed this uneasiness, for an anxious look came into his eyes.

"What has brought you here, Hugh?" he asked.

"Just to see you, of course, uncle," the young man answered.

"That may be one reason," Sir Charles admitted; "but what is the other. I never knew you to tear yourself away from London for so small a thing as that. What is the real reason for this visit?"

But still Hugh Moreton found no other answer, but smoked away so hard at his cigar that it burnt all down one side.

"Is it money?" Sir Charles suggested; and his manner showed that he thought the solution probable.

"No!" Hugh answered, with surprising conviction.

Sir Charles looked surprised with a vengeance now, and the anxious look in his eyes became more pronounced. He rose to his feet, crossed to the younger man, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Is it anything worse?" he asked.

The young man shook the hand free a trifle impatiently, tossed the end of his cigar into the grate, and rose to his feet.

"I haven't committed a murder yet," he said sneeringly. "Though I dare say there are plenty of people think me capable of it!" He turned to his uncle, and, for the first time, looked him straight in the face. "I may as well own what has brought me down here," he said. "It's to ask a favour."

Sir Charles nodded in silence, unwilling to commit himself. He had already been told that it was not money that his nephew wanted of him, and he wondered what it could possibly be.

"You've got a colt entered for the Derby—Pride of Place," Hugh Moreton went on quickly, his voice a trifle

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unsteady; "and already there is a rumour about that he is a smasher, and stands more than an ordinary chance."

"Well!" Sir Charles queried, in a cold voice, as the young man paused.

"I want to know if it's right, that's all," Hugh Moreton answered; and the eagerness in his tones dispelled the nervousness.

"Why?"

"Oh, the usual reason!" Hugh answered defiantly. "The colt's at a price now—twenties, in fact—and there's no reason one member of the family shouldn't make some money if he's going to win."

Sir Charles drew away sharply from his nephew, and for the moment his hands clenched, as if he would have struck him.

"You dare ask such a thing!" he cried angrily.

Hugh Moreton had taken the plunge, and he was not giving in easily now.

"It isn't a very great thing that I ask," he said coolly. "All I want is permission to wait here and see a trial. It would be easy enough to arrange one even for to-morrow morning, as all your best horses are quartered here."

Sir Charles stepped quickly to his desk, and touched the knob of the bell on it. The footman answered the summons.

"Order the dogcart round," Sir Charles ordered shortly. "Mr. Moreton has decided to go back to town to-night."

The footman bowed and left the room, and Hugh turned angrily towards his uncle.

"There is no train to-night!" he said sharply.

"There is a very good one at five in the morning," Sir Hugh answered coldly; "and I believe that there is a fire in the waiting-room of the station all night."

With a sharp exclamation, the young man turned and swung out of the room.

"It is for the boy's good," Sir Charles muttered.

The wind blew bitterly over the heath, and there was just a suggestion of rain in it, but the early morning—it was six o'clock—was clear and bright enough for the surroundings of the heath to be plainly seen. Away to the right showed the great grey pile of Sir Charles Moreton's mansion, rising up from the midst of a small forest of trees; while nearer lay the modern red-brick stables in which his racehorses, under the charge of John Fullman, his private trainer, were quartered. Every stick and bush stood out clearly, yet there was one thing on the heath that only a very close observer would have seen.

Crouching in a ditch, which was none too dry, were two men. They were muffled up in greatcoats, and wore woollen wrappers round their necks, but even then they shivered with the cold. Their appearance otherwise could be summed up in one word—"horsey."

One of them was tall and lanky, with a beardless face that would have looked innocent had it not been for a pair of small, shifty eyes. This was Jerry Long, known on every racecourse in England as a tout, sometimes a tipster; and when very flourishing, or when he happened to find a few particularly guileless young men, a bookmaker—who did not always pay.

The other man—short and meagre of stature—had been christened George Hall; but a kick from a horse had lamed him early in life, and since then he had been known to all and sundry, on account of his limp, as the Shuffler. Certainly the name suited him in more ways than one.

"Hang me if I'll play this game again!" the Shuffler growled between chattering teeth. "What's the good of a fiver for the job if yer dies o' cold? Next time, I bet, Mr. Hugh Moreton can come an' do his own watchin' fer trials."

"Oh, shut it!" Jerry Long answered impatiently, drawing a foot, with a sucking noise, out of the mud of the ditch into which it had slipped. "I ain't exactly tropical in temperature, but I ain't mooning round for sympathy. You make me fair tired, you do. If they gave yer a job as a crack jockey, yer'd want the 'orse 'andcuffed, so as 'e couldn't throw yer!"

The Shuffler turned angrily towards his companion, for the cold time of waiting had not improved his temper.

"If I was bigger, I'd put it across yer!" he snarled.

Jerry Long laughed—a curiously silent laugh, which he had found useful at times when it was dangerous to be overheard.

"And if I was Solly Joel, or Lord Rosebery, or one o' them nob's, I'd pay ter build a dog's home fer the likes o' you!" he answered.

For some minutes the Shuffler fumed, then he contrived to control his temper.

"Is the trial a cert. for this mornin'?" he asked.

"Jim Creed came down last night," Jerry Long answered, with an air of conviction; "and I guess his nibs the crack jockey don't come down fer less than a Derby trial!"

"They say as 'ow this Pride o' Place is a fair smasher!"

"Lot o' good it'll do us!" the Shuffler growled. "All me fancy sparklers went long ago, an' I don't suppose these 'ere boots would fetch enough ter be worth putting on, even at twenties."

"Twenties!" Jerry Long rolled the word in his mouth. "It's a price enough ter give a cove the staggers!"

"An' if you got twenties, I'd bet a ripe termarter to a pawnticket as the bookie would do a mizzle!" the Shuffler remarked pessimistically. "That kind o' luck ain't fer poor coves like us. All we gets is jobs like this 'ere—yer third return fare, 'bout a dollar fer beer, an' yer death o' cold!"

"What's about the average cost of a foofneral for a chap my size, mate?"

"Free!" Jerry Long snapped.

The Shuffler growled, and dragged his feet out of the mud again; but before he could speak, Jerry Long touched him on the arm.

"The 'osses, Shuf!" he whispered.

The gates of Sir Charles Moreton's private training-stables had opened, and three horses, all heavily clothed, had come out, ridden by stable lads. Behind came three people riding hacks, and as they drew nearer it was quite possible for the touts lying in the ditch to make out their faces.

"That's Sir Charles, 'im with the white whiskers," Jerry Long whispered.

"Pity 'e don't hact square by his nephew," the Shuffler answered savagely, "so as 'e could get his information without—Oh, curse this mud!"

"And that's Fullman, the trainer, next to 'im," Jerry continued; "an' Jim Creed's 'im on the cob. Don't look as if 'e ought to be allowed ter earn a matter o' ten thousand per ann., does 'e?"

"Some people 'as all the luck!" the Shuffler snarled.

"That's so, mate," Jerry Long agreed; "jest as some coves I know does all the grumblin' fer a county!"

The horses were coming nearer, their lads having some difficulty in keeping them from bolting, now that the spring of the turf was under their heels, and the cool morning breeze was ruffling their clothes. It was impossible for the touts to see which of the horses was the Derby colt—Pride of Place—but they knew that there would be no difficulty in spotting him when the trial started, for he was certain to be ridden by the crack jockey—Jim Creed; while a couple of the lads, both good hands at a trial gallop, would be entrusted with the other two.

"Where do they start?" the Shuffler whispered.

"Jest over there," Jerry Long answered, pointing to where a solitary tree rose from the heath about two hundred yards away. "They start 'em from there fer the mile and a 'alf trials, take 'em round over the 'ill, and finish at the tree, so we'll see both 'ow the colt starts, and likewise 'ow 'e finishes."

Jerry Long was obviously right about the starting-post, for the little group of horsemen had reined-in by the tree, and already Jim Creed had taken off his short overcoat, and was looking to the girths of Pride of Place. The stable-lads were busily removing the clothing from the colt and the other two animals, and getting their gear in racing trim.

"Wonder what the weights are?" Jerry Long muttered excitedly, crawling along the ditch, regardless of the mud, to a spot from which he could command a better view of the proceedings.

"Pride of Place will carry the Derby weight, of course!" the Shuffler answered.

"Oh, Jimmy Tatt, what a brain!" Jerry Long said sarcastically. "Did they sell yer a race-card fer this event, or are yer a stooard?"

An exclamation broke from the Shuffler as the clothes were stripped from the three racehorses.

"I can tell yer one thing," he whispered excitedly. "See the chestnut with the four white feet? Well, that's Pretty Dick, the finest five-year-old in training; an' anything that can lick him, whatever the weights, is a pretty safe thing fer this year's Derby."

Jerry Long peered earnestly at the bright chestnut with the white feet.

"It's Pretty Dick, right enough," he agreed. "'E's trained jest the other side o' the 'eath, so I guess that Fullman's borrowed 'im fer this trial."

"Unless 'e's stole 'im!" the Shuffler growled. "So likely, ain't it?"

There was no time for further talk. Already Jim Creed had been given a leg up on to the Derby colt, and was leaning from the saddle to take instructions from Fullman, the trainer. A smart-looking lad was up on Pretty Dick, and another lad on the other horse. So far as the touts could see, they were riding at catch-weights, for they had seen no leads adjusted.

"That means Pride o' Place is being asked ter give away

weight for Pretty Dick," Jerry Long muttered. "Well, if 'e does it, 'e's a wonder."

The three horses were in line now, Pretty Dick standing steadily, but Pride of Place giving a good deal of trouble to Jim Creed, old hand though he was at the game.

"Now, Fullman's got 'em straight!" Long ejaculated; and he proved to be right, for, like one animal, the three horses reared up in the jump off, Pretty Dick gaining a slight lead of the others through getting into his stride at once, but his jockey quickly had him back abreast of the others.

"Can't see much of 'em now!" the Shuffler grumbled.

"Don't want to," Jerry answered. "When yer make bets, it's the finish that worries yer, not the start."

Away went the three horses, the unknown colt leading, Pride of Place and Pretty Dick racing side by side a length behind him. The unknown colt had evidently been put into the trial to make the pace, and he was accomplishing that mission with a vengeance.

Up over the hill they went, and were for the moment lost to view. Four men waited anxiously for them to come into view again. Sir Charles Moreton was anxious because his great ambition was to win the Derby; his trainer's anxiety was through the same cause; and the two men in the ditch wanted to know Pride of Place's powers, so that they might sell and—

"Here they come!" Jerry Long ejaculated, as the horse swept over the brow of the hill, and on to the straight four furlongs that finished the Derby distance.

For a second only one horse was visible; then two others showed behind him, and, coming with a rush, seemed to leave him standing still. The colt who had been making the pace was finished with, and Pride of Place and Pretty Dick were left to fight the battle out.

In a public race, almost any odds would have been bet on Pretty Dick, the famous five-year-old, beating the Derby colt; but as the touts peered out from their hiding-place, they saw that there was going to be a close finish.

On came the two horses, running neck and neck, making the four furlongs look like a hundred yards. There was no huge crowd, no great stake dependent on this race, yet the men who watched it felt excited enough, knowing what the winning of Pride of Place would mean. Even if Pretty Dick beat him in a close finish, he had proved himself a horse worthy of classic honours.

Neck and neck, Jim Creed sitting down and riding hard now, Fullman and Sir Charles Moreton standing in their stirrups, both too excited even to cry out.

"Pretty Dick wins!" Jerry Long cried, in his curiously soft voice; and he was so excited that it was only the Shuffler's hand on his arm that kept him in the ditch.

It certainly did look as if the crack five-year-old was going to win, for, with only a hundred yards to go, he had made his effort, and his fine head was well in front.

Then, for the first time, Jim Creed slipped his whip into Pride of Place, and, for the first time since his two-year-old days, Pretty Dick suffered defeat, the Derby colt passing the winning-post a good neck in front of him.

Jerry Long turned to his companion, his face one huge smile.

"We've got ter get money on that colt some'ow," he said.

"I reckon Pretty Dick was off colour," the Shuffler answered, without enthusiasm.

"Oh, come 'ome!" Jerry said disgustedly. "If they scratched every 'oss but yours, you'd be afraid ter back it!"



Hugh Moreton drew out a pocket-book, and rustled the notes inside. He saw, even in the darkness, that the eyes of the tout sparkled with greed.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Sexton Blake Arrives—Starlight—Hugh Moreton Sees a Trial—The Dark Horse Wins—Who is the Filly?

FOR the Hall, sir?" the groom in the dogcart, which was waiting in the yard of Medsome Station inquired, touching his hat.

"I am Sexton Blake," the man in the long travelling ulster answered. "Did Sir Charles send you to meet me?"

"Yes, sir."

Sexton Blake clambered up into the cart, and took the reins from the groom; but before he could start off another man, carrying a bag, came hurrying out of the station.

"Hi, James!" he cried; and the groom turned round in amazement.

"It's Mr. Hugh, sir!" he said to the detective. "Didn't know he was coming to the Hall."

"I hope you won't mind me sharing the trap," Hugh Moreton said to Sexton Blake, at the same time eyeing the latter inquiringly. "Fact is, my uncle wrote me to come down; but I have been away, so only got his letter this afternoon. Didn't step even to wire, but came straight down."

Hugh Moreton paused, as if expecting the other to say something, and the detective took the hint.

"I am Sexton Blake," he said quietly. "I believe that your uncle has a case for me."

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Hugh Moreton's eyes; then he laughed, and swung up beside the detective.

"I fancy me must have had an attempt on his racing trophies, then," he said lightly.

"Perhaps," Sexton Blake answered, as he flicked the horse with the whip; "but it does not do for men in my profession to indulge in fancies."

The cob swung along at a good pace, and the three miles to Moreton Hall were very quickly covered. Sexton Blake and the man beside him speaking very little on the way. When Hugh Moreton did speak, his manner was forced, and just a trifle uneasy. As a matter of fact, he was rather sorry that he had decided to run down; and it is, perhaps, as well to explain what had brought him.

It was simply this. Sir Charles had decided that he had been hard in refusing to let his nephew know the prospects of Pride of Place for the Derby, and so he had written, saying that if he cared to come down he would arrange for a trial. Little did he guess that the Shuffler and Jerry Long had already informed Hugh Moreton of the kind of horse the Derby colt was; and had he learnt the means that his nephew had taken to know, he would probably have never spoken to him again. Anything underhand he positively abhorred.

The trap swung up through the fine avenue of elms leading to the Hall, and Sexton Blake drew up before the door, which was at once opened by a manservant, behind whom stood Sir Charles.

"Is that Mr. Blake?" he cried excitedly.

"At your service, Sir Charles," the detective answered, stepping down from the trap, and taking the old gentleman's outstretched hand.

"You don't know how relieved I am that you have come!" Sir Charles said enthusiastically. "I have been so afraid that—"

"Business later, if you please!" Sexton Blake interrupted sharply; and stepped aside, to make way for Hugh Moreton.

The old man greeted his nephew without enthusiasm, hesitating a trifle as he held out his hand.

"I wrote that letter only after much thought," he said, in a low voice. "Heaven knows I have tried to stop you gambling; and I have decided that, if you must do so, I will not stop you backing the colt that can win."

"And that's good enough for me!" Hugh answered, with a harsh laugh.

In the hall, Sexton Blake again took the opportunity of requesting Sir Charles not to discuss business until they were alone.

"But before Hugh—my nephew?" Sir Charles said, in surprise.

"Not even before him," the detective answered, wondering what the task before him could possibly be. "The fewer people taken into a secret, however trustworthy they may be, the better."

Dinner was served immediately the visitors had dressed, but it was not a very lively meal. Sir Charles was obviously ill at ease, and though Sexton Blake spoke fluently and well, he found it hard to interest his listeners. More than once, when he looked up, he found Hugh Moreton glancing at him suspiciously. It was after he had caught the man's eyes several times that he remembered where he had met him before. It was in connection with a Turf scandal. There had been suspicions of a horse being pulled when starting a hot favourite, and one of the men who had laid heavily against him was this same Hugh Moreton. Nothing had been proved against him, or any of the others implicated, however.

The moment dinner was over, Sir Charles rose to his feet.

"I know you will excuse me, Hugh," he said; "but I have urgent business to discuss with Mr. Blake."

"Certainly!" Hugh Moreton answered, choosing a cigar with great care. "I might suggest that the library is about the best place for secrets."

Alone with the detective in the library, Sir Charles locked the door, and dropped into a chair with a sigh of relief.

"You will probably think me very foolish, Mr. Blake," he said; "but you must pardon an old man, especially when he is in hopes that in a week he will have accomplished the ambition of his life."

"To win the Derby?" Sexton Blake suggested.

"Yes," Sir Charles answered, a flush of excitement on his cheeks. "All my life I have raced for racing's sake, without ever having backed one of my horses for so much as a sovereign, but until this year I have never had anything good enough to win the Derby."

"Then Pride of Place is a good thing?"

Sir Charles rose to his feet, his eyes shining.

"The colt is a certainty!" he cried; then his face clouded.

"But I fear foul play," he added.

Sexton Blake flicked the ash from his cigar, and the lids were raised from his eyes.

"Your reasons?" he inquired.

"The police have warned me that suspicious-looking men have been hanging round of late," Sir Charles explained. "They may only be trying to see the colt at work; but that may not be all. You must remember that, because I don't back my horses others start as better favourites, the public following the stable money. There are plenty of rogues on the Turf, unfortunately, and if any of them have backed another horse heavily to win I am afraid that an attempt might be made to stop my colt."

"And you want me to guard it until the race is run?"

"Yes!" Sir Charles agreed excitedly. "It may all just be a fancy. But I am a rich man, and if I choose to pay for my fancies, it is my affair. Will you help me?"

"Yes," Sexton Blake answered promptly; "though I would not have given up so much time for any other man just now. I will help you for this reason—there are few men on the Turf like you just now, and you deserve to win. I will wire to Tinker, my assistant, to-night, and to-morrow we shall take up jobs in your stables. You will arrange it with your trainer. You had best tell him the truth, otherwise it will be difficult for me to work."

"Everything you tell me will be done," Sir Charles answered eagerly, "and to-morrow morning you shall see Pride of Place run his final trial. I will have you called at six, for the horses are to be ready half an hour later. What would you care to do now?"

"To go for a stroll—alone," the detective answered. "There is nothing like knowing the lay of the land."

Five minutes later Sexton Blake left the house and strolled away towards the stables. Half an hour later, when he returned to the Hall, he knew the buildings and their surroundings quite as well as many a man who had lived near to them all his life. With that knowledge he went to bed and slept soundly. As a matter of fact, he was not sorry to undertake this case, for of late he had been very hard driven, and this, so far as he could see at present, would mean a rest.

A rest! Little did the detective think of the troubles and trials he was to go through before Sir Charles Moreton led back his first Derby winner.

At six in the morning Sexton Blake was called, and it was only twenty minutes later that, dressed for riding, he descended into the hall, where he found Sir Charles and Hugh Moreton waiting. Brief greetings were exchanged, then horses were mounted, and they rode out on to the heath, where the trial was to take place.

As they reached the open a little group of men and horses emerged from the training-stables, Fullman, the trainer, at their head.

"Good-morning, Sir Charles!" the trainer said, riding up.

"Mornin', Fullman!" Sir Charles answered. "Seems a pity to put Pride of Place through a trial so soon before the race, but I want my nephew to see him go. This gentleman is Mr. Sexton Blake, the famous detective."

The trainer bowed to Sexton Blake, but his face did not wear a very pleased expression. He guessed why the detective was there, and it annoyed him to think that he was regarded as not being capable of guarding his charges after all these years.

"I should have asked you for a trial, anyway, Sir Charles," he said rather shortly. "We've never put the filly Starlight through the mill, and she's still down to run for the Oaks, you know."

"A mile's her distance," Sir Charles answered irritably. "Why didn't you remind me to have her scratched?"

"No harm in trying her first," the trainer persisted. "The public don't stand to lose anything, for she hasn't been backed for a sovereign."

There was something in the trainer's manner that impressed Sexton Blake, but before he could speak to him or question him, the horses to compete in the trial were brought up. Jim Creed, mounted on Pride of Place, was with them. The horse following was Pretty Dick, who had again been called in for the trial, and last came a grey filly. She was short in stature for a racehorse, but long and well let down, with a curiously reaching stride when walking.

"We'll get to work at once!" Fullman said shortly, for these trials for other people's benefit were not much to his liking. "Pretty Dick will carry nine stone, Pride of Place Derby weight, Starlight the Oaks weight."

"It's setting them a hard task," Hugh Moreton said. He knew that Pride of Place had already beaten the crack five-year-old, but he believed that the Derby colt had had a big pull in the weights, or at least weight-for-age allowance.

"That's my business!" the trainer muttered, but not in so low a tone that Hugh Moreton failed to hear him.

The trainer himself saw to the unloading of the three horses, and Sexton Blake and Hugh Moreton looked on with interest, the latter showing from his remarks that he certainly was not a fool where horseflesh was concerned.

"He's a wonder for build," he said, examining Pride of

Place. "By the way he's filled out he might be at least a four-year-old. Stamina, too."

Hugh Moreton turned his attention to the grey filly Starlight, and laughed right out.

"What's she entered for?" he asked, in a sneering voice. "A polo pony race?"

"The Oaks!" Fullman snapped. "A horse can race without being the size of an elephant."

Hugh Moreton laughed again.

"I'd rather back the elephant in a race that needs staying-power," he sneered.

For a moment Fullman looked angry; then his expression changed, and he laughed, too.

"I suppose you have backed Pride of Place?" he inquired. But Hugh Moreton turned away without answering, and watched Jim Creed finish the saddling of the Derby colt.

"Seems rather rot to start that filly, even in a trial, doesn't it?" Hugh Moreton said, turning to Sexton Blake.

The detective paused in the act of lighting a cigar.

"We shall know soon," he said.

Jim Creed was up, patting the Pride's neck to keep him quiet, for the feel of the turf under him was making him restive. He was already in the best of training, fit to race for his life, and with a heart big enough for two. Up on Pretty Dick was the stable-jockey who had ridden him before, while the grey filly Starlight was ridden by one of Fullman's own lads, who, though he had not yet made his debut on a racecourse, was only awaiting his opportunity to do so.

"Take the inside with Pretty Dick," Fullman ordered. "Get next to him, Creed, but mind his heels. George, bring Starlight closer."

The three jockeys manoeuvred for places just as if they had been facing the starter for an actual race, and Sir Charles and Sexton Blake watched eagerly. Hugh Moreton was interested, too, but there was something in his expression that suggested that he already knew how the affair was going to end.

Suddenly Fullman gave the word, and, like arrows from a bow, Pretty Dick and Pride of Place jumped off the mark. Starlight dwelt badly, however, and was a full ten lengths behind before she fairly got going.

"Don't bustle her, George!" Fullman shouted. "The last furlong's the thing!"

Away went the horses, the grey filly bringing up the rear, and as Sexton Blake watched her he saw that she got over the ground with a curiously sweeping motion, the jockey on her back hardly seeming to rise or fall, and the horses were galloping in this same order when they disappeared over the hill.

"I should have put something better than Starlight in to make the pace, Fullman," Sir Charles said.

Before the trainer could answer the horses came into sight, on the home-stretch now, with six furlongs to go to the winning-post.

"Pride of Place—easy!" Hugh Moreton cried excitedly, levelling his glasses. "Creed isn't riding him yet, and he's running well within himself."

Right back, still four lengths behind, was the grey Starlight.

"Wait," Fullman said quietly; "the trial isn't over yet!"

Another furlong covered, and Pride of Place leading by half a length from Pretty Dick, with Starlight still four lengths behind. Then only two furlongs to cover, and still the order unchanged, save that Pride of Place had crept forward until he was running clear of the five-year-old.

"It's twenty to one on the Pride!" Hugh Moreton cried excitedly, when there was only one more furlong to go.

"It's twenty to one Starlight!" Fullman answered with equal excitement. "Look at her!"

There was no need to tell the others to look, for already they were staring in amazement at the long, low-built grey filly. Suddenly, with a remarkable spurt, with only another hundred yards to run, she had sprinted up level with Pretty Dick. Passed—level with Pride of Place!

A dozen strides neck and neck, then the grey head showed in front, and Starlight passed the group of watchers a good neck in front of the others—in front of the celebrated Pretty Dick, in front of the smashing Pride of Place! Surely something was wrong?

In sheer amazement Sir Charles turned to Fullman, and was astounded to find him smiling delightedly.

"What—what is the meaning of this?" he gasped.

"That we're going to make the double event of it, Sir Charles," the trainer answered, "and win the Derby and Oaks with Starlight!"

Something between a curse and a groan escaped Hugh Moreton, and Sexton Blake saw that the man's face had gone ghastly white.

"It's a swindle!" he cried savagely. "You've let the

public back Pride of Place, thinking he was the stable's selected."

"Swindle?" Sir Charles turned in the saddle, his heavy hunting-crop raised as if he would fell his nephew to the ground with it. "I have only just learnt that Starlight is so good. Besides, what business is it of mine if the public choose to back one of my horses?"

"Curse the public!" Hugh Moreton snarled. "I'm not bothering about them; they can take care of themselves!"

"Then who are you so anxious about?" Fullman asked, a sneer in his usually good-tempered voice.

"Myself!" Moreton shouted. "I have backed the Pride for ten thousand pounds to win the Derby! I have backed him for nearly every penny that I possess, and now I know that he will be beaten by the filly!"

Sir Charles positively reeled in his saddle, but quickly recovered himself.

"Here is another proof of the evils of gambling!" he said, in a stern voice.

"Bah! Don't!" Hugh Moreton cried hoarsely. "I'm in no mood for it! All I want to know is—what are you going to do?"

Sir Charles looked at his nephew, the man who had been a confirmed gambler for years, whom he had helped out of troubles time after time, and his heart hardened against him.

"I am going to win the double with Starlight," he said, swung his horse round, and spurred back towards the Hall, Sexton Blake following him.

"Yes, I shall see this case through," the detective muttered, as he galloped along. "The grey is good enough for the double, and I'll see that she has a fair chance."

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Road to the Stables—Bought—The Shuffler Learns Things—And is Surprised.

THE Shuffler paced up and down the grassy edge of the lane with the peculiar lame action that had earned him his nickname. The hour was ten o'clock at night, and the expression of the man's face suggested that there were many things he would have preferred to pacing up and down wet grass, a keen wind whistling down the lane, waiting for someone.

The hour was ten, but there was no checking it save by a watch, for the sky was one black, pulpy-looking mass, without so much as a vestige of a star to be seen. The extreme darkness, and the moaning of the wind among the trees, gave everything an eerie appearance.

More than once the Shuffler stopped, his jaw setting harshly, and dropped his hand to the pocket where he kept a handy little bludgeon known as a life-preserver, which he had never been without since a day when its absence, or so he thought, had cost him his liberty.

Apparently the Shuffler did not care particularly about his lonely vigil, for he started badly at the shadows when the moon came from behind a cloud and accentuated them so that they looked like men crouching back against the hedges.

"What they wants moons for, I can't guess," he muttered. "Don't know that I was ever took by 'em. Lamps ain't so bad, fer yer can turn 'em out; but moons—bah!"

From some little distance away came the crunch of footsteps on the loose surface of the road. The Shuffler shrank back into the shadow cast by a great oak, and once more his hand was on the weapon in his pocket as he bent sideways—listening.

"If it's 'im, 'e's walkin' fast and skeery like," the Shuffler mused.

The footfalls came nearer, hesitated, then came up the lane, and a low whistle sounded three times.

With a sigh of relief the Shuffler let his grip of his weapon relax, and moved out into the moonlight just as Hugh Moreton, a greatcoat pulled right up to his ears, entered the lane.

"That you, Shuffler?" he whispered, in a hoarse voice. "Yus," the man answered gruffly. "I reckon yer'd better fix yer optics on me 'ard this trip, fer if I ain't caught me death of cold, I'm a non-starter."

"Don't fool!" Hugh Moreton snapped, peering round nervously among the shadows, and drawing a cigar from his pocket. He made a move to light a match, but the Shuffler struck it from his hand before he could do so.

"None o' them illuminations, guv'nor!" he cried. "You may be 'ankerin' after bein' seen, but yours truly ain't—not by a straight mile."

Hugh Moreton laughed nervously, and made no further attempt to light his cigar.

"You'd—you'd think I was here for some shady reason," he said, failing entirely to speak lightly.

"Ho, impossible!" the Shuffler sneered. "Are it likely that a poor cove like me would dare ter think sich a horrible thing about a pillar of the turf?"

Hugh Moreton drew back into the shadow, taking the Shuffler with him, as the lights of a trap came swiftly along the road and past the end of the lane. Only when they were out of sight did he appear to breathe freely again, and then he swung round and faced his companion so fiercely that the man instinctively dropped his hand on to the weapon in his pocket.

"What d'you mean by giving me false information?" Hugh Moreton whispered savagely.

The Shuffler shook himself free, and drew back with the ugly weapon swinging in his hand.

"Ere, come off yer perch!" he growled. "'Oo gave yer false information? If Pride of Place didn't come up to what I told yer when he run the trial to-day, 'e must 'ave gone off colour."

"You fool!" Hugh Moreton snapped. "It's Starlight—the grey filly entered for both the Derby and the Oaks—that is the stable's chosen."

"What?" the Shuffler gasped. "Don't kid me they've got anythin' ter beat Pride o' Place! Didn't 'e beat Pretty Dick, an' ain't that good enough ter go for without blinkers?"

"Listen," Hugh Moreton whispered hoarsely. "I saw the trial this morning, and I tell you Starlight had the legs of the lot of them. The filly's a certainty for the double event—unless she goes amiss."

There was something so suggestive in the last few words that the Shuffler looked keenly into the other's face.

"Then why don't yer back it instead o' the other?" he demanded.

"Because I've got ten thousand on Pride of Place," Hugh Moreton answered, in a shaking voice.

The Shuffler gasped at the magnitude of the sum, then whistled softly.

"You'll 'ave to edge, that's all," he said. "Starlight ain't been backed for a penny yet, so yer ought ter cover easy enough."

"Ought!" Moreton's voice was hoarse and shaking with anger. "Can't you understand that I've got no more money—that practically every penny is on the colt?"

"And yer can't raise it?"

"No," Hugh Moreton answered dejectedly. "I'm not good to raise even a pony."

The Shuffler pushed back his battered hat, and scratched his tousled head.

"What's the game, then?" he asked at last.

Hugh Moreton stood biting his lip, and he peered round nervously before answering.

"The filly might go amiss—lame," he said at last, in a whisper.

"It might," the Shuffler sneered, "but it ain't goin' lame through me. I've bin up again thet kind o' game before, and it ain't good enough."

"Who said that I wanted you to nobble the filly?" Hugh Moreton snapped.

"Jest a little bird, an' a fly one at that, guv'nor," the Shuffler answered with a wink. "Come on, out with it! What's the game?"

"I will give you twenty pounds to find out which box Starlight is in," Hugh Moreton answered, his voice trembling with excitement.

"Twenty quid!" the Shuffler laughed. "Think I want ter buy straw, or what?"

Hugh Moreton drew out a pocket-book, and rustled the notes inside. He saw, even in the darkness, that the eyes of the tout sparkled with greed.

"What'll you do it for?" he asked sharply.

"Jest find the box?" the Shuffler queried cautiously.

"Yes—for the present."

"Undred quid, guv'nor, an' cheap at the price," the tout said.

Hugh Moreton drew five notes from his case, and at sight of each one the face of the Shuffler fairly twitched.

"There are fifty pounds here," Hugh Moreton said. "That is the price I will pay for the job, and no more."

In the darkness the Shuffler thrust his cunning face forward, and he saw that for once Hugh Moreton had made up his mind.

"And the boodle over," he said. "It's fair workin' fer nothin', but what's a poor cove like me ter do?"

The money changed hands, the Shuffler examining each note carefully.

"Afraid they aren't good?" Moreton sneered.

"As if I wouldn't trust yer, guv'nor!" the Shuffler answered, with a laugh. "Why, yer honest, open counting-house is enough for anybody. If I'd 'ave 'ad your dial, I'd 'ave bin a Rothschild by now."

Hugh Moreton drew closer to the man, and the instructions he gave him were in a whisper.

"Remember to wire me," he concluded. "Just put 'third on right,' or wherever the loose box is."

The Shuffler nodded, buttoned his ragged coat tightly over

the notes, and went limping away into the darkness. There was a grin on his face, for in his pocket he had fifty pounds, and he did not reckon that the job before him would be a very difficult one. As a matter of fact, he had had occasion previously to explore the stables presided over by Fullman, and knew that they were easy of access. Even the watch-dog was kept round in the yard of the trainer's house, and now that he was getting old, it was ten to one he would not hear anyone moving softly about the stables. Even if he did, he would probably think it was a restless horse shifting about.

Out on the road the Shuffler kept well to the side, more by instinct than anything else, for there was not a living soul about at this hour of the night. Considering his lame foot, he moved swiftly, once taking to the fields to avail himself of a short cut, and it was only just striking eleven when he halted by the outer wall of Sir Charles Moreton's training stables.

Everything was quiet, not a sound about save the rustle of the wind among the trees; and the Shuffler limped along, his right shoulder brushing all the time against the high brick wall. He carried his bludgeon in his hand now, evidently in case of emergencies.

At the great gates of the stable the man halted, listening intently; but all that he could hear was the occasional shifting of a horse in his stall. He even coughed slightly, just to test whether the dog, chained up by the house a hundred yards away to the left, was very much awake; but no answering bark came.

"This is the kind o' job thet suits me," he muttered, and tested the gates with his shoulder, only to find that they did not move.

Gripping the top of the gate with his fingers, the Shuffler drew himself slowly up until his head was above it, and he was able to look into the great yard. It was very dark there, the boxes on all sides shutting out most of the light of the moon, and he could see nothing to alarm him.

Higher he dragged himself, threw one foot over the top of the gate, clambered across, and lowered himself down the other side, where he squatted down and dragged off his boots—an easy enough matter, as they were innocent of laces.

"Jest yer stop there, mates," he chuckled, as he placed them handily against the gates. "It ain't for the likes o' coves like me ter go disturbin' respectable trainers in their beauty-sleep."

In stockinged feet the Shuffler limped along, always keeping close to the wall, and so reached the line of loose boxes running along the right-hand side of the yard. He stopped before the first, trying the upper part of the door, and finding it locked. Then he looked above it, and a chuckle broke from him as he saw that the name of the horse—Pride of Place—was written there in letters half an inch thick.

"Some coves is thoughtful," he chuckled. "Won't Moreton jib when I tells 'im that I only 'ad ter look over the gate ter read the names over the doors? Still, we'll be honest, an' earn the boodle by findin' Starlight's box."

Moving cautiously, the Shuffler read the name over each of the boxes; but he traversed the whole line without discovering the one he was looking for. He crossed over to the other side, and the first one he came to was the one he wanted, for Starlight was over the door.

He placed his ear against the woodwork, and a shifting of straw inside, then the click of a hoof, told him that a horse was inside right enough. That was good enough for him, and he crept back along the side of the yard, his ambition now being to get away and send Hugh Moreton the information for which he had paid.

Nearly to the end of the boxes the Shuffler had got before he stopped with a cry of alarm—a cry that he endeavoured in vain to choke back.

A lad, dressed as a stable-boy, had stepped quietly out of the end box, and was now barring his way to the gate. He was not a very big boy, and it was only for a second that the tout hesitated. Then, with the heavy life-preserver in his hand, he leapt forward, throwing all the force of his jump from his sound leg.

The bludgeon swung down, but it never struck the stable-lad. Instead, it landed on empty air, and the Shuffler, unable to recover from the force he had thrown into the blow, pitched forward on to his face.

In a second he was trying to struggle up, but even that short time lost meant his finish, for as he scrambled to his knees a pair of hands possessed of a marvellous hold gripped him by the arms, and he was fairly jerked on to his feet.

"A fair cop, sir!" Tinker, who was the stable-lad, remarked, with a grin.

"It is something like that," Sexton Blake answered.

The Shuffler made a frantic effort to break loose, discovered that he might as well have tried to snap chains from his arms, and started to whine.

"Can't a poor cove doss down in a stable without gettin' 'alf murdered?" he whined. "I've done no 'arm, 'ave I?"

"No," Sexton Blake answered; "I took good care of that!"

"Then let us go, guv'nor!" the Shuffler pleaded.

Sexton Blake released one hand, and picked up the dropped life-preserver, examining it critically.

"That ain't mine!" the Shuffler assured him hastily. "I would not be seen with such a thing—straight, I wouldn't!"

"Shall I call Fullman up, sir?" asked Tinker.

"No," Sexton Blake answered. "It will be time enough to let him know about this in the morning."

Half carrying, half pushing, Sexton Blake forced the Shuffler into an empty loose-box.

"Stop there, and keep quiet!" he said sternly. "If you behave yourself, you'll get off more lightly in the morning!"

The Shuffler crouched back among the straw, for he knew the kind of punishment that was usually handed out to men of his breed.

"I meant no 'arm, guv'nor!" he wailed. "Fer 'Eaven's sake, let us go afore old Fullman's about!"

But all the answer he got was to have the door of the box closed and locked upon him. For five minutes he crouched down and trembled, then he touched the fifty pounds in his pocket, and a little confidence returned to him.

"Can't give me more than an 'idin'," he muttered; "and I'd 'ave one any day at fifty quid!"

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

**Fullman Indignant—
Sexton Blake Proves
the Danger—The
Telegram—Tinker
Discovers Something.**

AT five o'clock in the morning Sir Charles Moreton's training-stable woke to life. Stable-boys came sleepily from their quarters to perform the first duties of the day—the dressing-down of their charges and other matters which had to be attended to before exercise-time arrived.

At the door of the loose-box in which the Shuffler was a prisoner sat Sexton Blake and Tinker, the former, his eyes half closed, sucking away at an old black briar.

"Jest about as much awake as the average cop, ain't he?" one of the lads remarked, with a grin, to another as they passed the detective and his young assistant. "Bet they wouldn't wake up if someone pinched all the 'osses!"

Sexton Blake smoked on placidly, his eyelids drooping more than ever, if anything; but Tinker reddened. The boy had good reason to be proud of his master, apart from being fond of him, and he was not willing to allow the smallest slight to pass unnoticed.

Most of the lads got to their work without taking any notice of the detective; but the one who had spoken before seemed bent on annoying him. He was a big, hulking lad of about nineteen, who was already far too heavy ever to become a jockey, and Fullman had only kept him on because Sir Charles was too kind-hearted to throw him out of work. His name was Mat Smith.

"Stick a pin in yer boss," the youth sneered, as he passed with a bucket of water, "an' see if he can detect that!"

This was too much for Tinker, and before Sexton Blake could stop him he had leapt to his feet and faced the hulking youth, although he was nearly a head shorter.

"Come on!" Tinker cried, sparring up to Mat Smith. "I'll teach you to sneer at my master!"

Smith put the bucket of water down, and tried to look very fierce, especially when he noticed that some of the other stable-lads had stopped work to see what was going to happen, Fullman not being about yet.

"What d'you think you're going to do, sparrer?" he asked.

"Lick you!" Tinker answered.

Mat Smith laughed, but not with entire confidence. There was something in the expression of Tinker's eyes, and the way he squared up, that he did not like.

"I'm not going to fight a kid your size!" he sneered, and picked up the bucket.

"I think you are, my lad!" Sexton Blake said quietly, advancing, and his eyes were no longer closed.

The other stable-boys, one being told off to watch for Fullman, drew round, and the detective turned to them.

"Look here, lads," he said, "if you're sportsmen, you'll see that your mate fights, unless he's afraid!"

"That's right!" one of the boys cried. "Go on, Mat; you'll only have to hit him once!"

Sexton Blake jerked the bucket from Mat Smith's hand. "This is where you fight, not brag!" he said sternly.

But still the hulking youth showed no sign of coming up to the scratch, and Tinker, taking a quick step forward, struck him full in the mouth. It was not a hard blow, but it would prove Smith a coward if he did not respond to it.

At last the latter was aroused, his hands went up, and he struck wildly at Tinker, who side-stepped with the neatness that Sexton Blake had taught him, and swung his right on to the bully's jaw with a force that sent him staggering back.

It was a fight, right enough, and the stable-boys gathered round in a circle to see fair play, forgetting their duties for the moment.

With a savage cry, Smith rushed at Tinker, evidently meaning to beat him back by sheer strength; but the boy was prepared for this, and though he gave ground, he was clipping in short-arm blows all the time, while, in return, he was only touched once—a glancing blow off the shoulder.

Down! Tinker had stopped, his right foot well back, and his left hand shot out and landed clean between the bully's eyes, knocking him backwards. He seemed in no hurry to get up again, either.

"Get up," the other lads cried—"get up, and—"

A cry of alarm broke from the lad left to watch for the approach of Fullman, but before the stable-boys could scurry to their work, the trainer had entered the yard.

At sight of Smith on the ground, Tinker standing over him, and the other lads doing nothing, an angry expression came into his eyes.

"What does this mean?" he cried.

"That the lad on the ground insulted me, and Tinker has punished him!" Sexton Blake answered coolly.

"Has he?" The words broke angrily from Fullman. "Well, I tell you what it is—you shift from here or I do! I've managed to look after the horses here for twenty years, and I'm not having any interference now!"

"You would rather have Starlight nobbled?" Sexton Blake asked, and there was just the faintest suggestion of a sneer in his voice.

A straighter man than Fullman never lived, but even his best friends admitted that he was quick-tempered, and he proved it now. He raised the heavy stick that he carried, and shook it threateningly at the detective.

"Out of the yard," he shouted, "or it'll be the worse for you!"

"What does all this mean?"

Sir Charles Moreton had entered the yard, and now stood looking in amazement at his trainer to Sexton Blake.

"It means this, Sir Charles," Fullman cried, before anyone could answer, "that I'm not going to be insulted by having people put here to mind my horses! I've kept 'em safe all the years I've trained for you, and I can keep them safe without interference now! Either Mr. Blake leaves, or you can find a new trainer!"

Sir Charles pulled uncertainly at his white moustache.

"You can't mean that, Fullman," he said, in a low voice, "just when both of us hope to realise the dream of our life!"

"I do mean it, sir!" Fullman answered doggedly. "I thought it an insult to me when you suggested a detective coming to watch over Starlight, and now I won't put up with it!"

Sir Charles opened his lips, but Sexton Blake spoke before he could do so.

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"I am ready to go if Starlight is really safe," he said coolly; "but I will stay if there is danger."

"Danger!" Fullman sneered. "Where is it?"

Sexton Blake smiled, and his eyes were upon the door of the loose-box in which the Shuffler was imprisoned.

"If I prove that there is danger—that Starlight is menaced—will you let me stay—ask me to remain?" he said.

"Yes," the trainer answered, but with the air of a man who feels sure that he will not have to give in.

"Tinker, open the loose-box!" Sexton Blake ordered.

The boy crossed to the loose-box, unlocked the door, and disappeared within. The sound of a scuffle followed, then the Shuffler was fairly thrown out.

At sight of him cries of anger broke from the stable-boys, and a full dozen surrounded him, so that he could make no attempt at escape.

"Do you still say there is no danger?" Sexton Blake asked, in his cool voice.

"Who—who is this man?" Fullman stammered.

"A man who was prowling round the yard here last night," the detective answered meaningly. "I saw him outside Starlight's box, and captured him."

For a moment Fullman stood speechless, then he advanced to the detective, with his hand outstretched.

"I was wrong; I beg your pardon!" he said. "Will you stop—as a favour to me?"

Sexton Blake returned the handshake with a will, for he fully realised what the trainer's feelings at being interfered with had been.

"I will see that Starlight goes untouched to the post," he answered earnestly. "You will see that he wins!"

"It won't be my fault if he doesn't!"

Fullman swung round upon the trembling Shuffler.

"What shall we do with him, Sir Charles," he asked—"send for the police?"

"No," Sir Charles answered. "Let the lads deal with him!"

"Very good, sir! Now then, lads, get the hoses rigged, and we'll give this cur the finest bath he ever had in his life!"

Half a dozen of the stable-boys, broad grins on their faces, ran off to fix the four hoses that the yard boasted. They were big and strong, designed for use in case of a fire as well as for cleaning out the yard.

"Now!" Fullman cried, when he saw that all was ready, and the lads had their fingers on the triggers of the hoses.

The boys fell away from Shuffler, leaving him free to run the gauntlet, but he stood trembling, and made no attempt to move.

"Go," Fullman shouted, giving him a push forward, "or you'll get six months instead!"

By a mighty effort the Shuffler pulled himself together, ducked low, and dashed forward. As he moved the nearest of the jets of water was let loose.

Smack! it caught him in the face, sending him reeling; but he recovered himself and dashed on, the stream of water playing surely on his back. Five yards he went, then the second jet was let loose, striking him so surely that he reeled and went down under it. He started to rise, but again the jet struck him, and he hastily dropped to full length.

All the four hoses were on him, making him gasp for breath and almost blinding him, and he made no further attempt to rise, but crawled slowly forward on hands and knees, keeping his head well down against his chest.

For five minutes the man crawled on, getting more and more like a drowned rat through each one of them; then at last reached the gate, and made a bolt for it, the two stable-boys sending a final shower after him.

Once fairly clear of the stables, the Shuffler squatted on the ground and tried to squeeze some of the water out of his clothes. He squeezed and cursed, then rose to his feet and limped away, avoiding the roads, and keeping to the fields, evidently not wishing his condition to attract attention.

But along the road someone was moving who never lost sight of him, and that someone was Tinker, who had followed at a sign from his master. Away over the fields went the Shuffler, little thinking that his steps were being dogged, and reached the little railway-station.

There he hesitated, but seeing no one about, entered the booking-office. The clerk, sitting by the door of his office reading a newspaper, grinned at sight of him.

"Been for a swim?" he queried.

"Shut yer mouth 'bout what I've bin doing, an' give me a telegraph form!" the Shuffler answered savagely.

"Going to send for new clothes?" the clerk suggested innocently.

"You'll be sendin' for a noo face if yer ain't careful!" the Shuffler snapped. "Not as yer couldn't do with it, anyway."

He took the form, and wrote a few lines, then handed it to the clerk, who gave him a receipt and a ticket.

"Now, what do you want?" the clerk asked.

"I want to see the manager of the hotel," the Shuffler said.

"The manager of the hotel?" the clerk repeated.

"Yes, the manager of the hotel," the Shuffler said.

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"Yes, the manager of the hotel," the Shuffler said.

The clerk, unable to think of a fresh remark so soon, retired leisurely into his office, and procured the required form. The message that the Shuffler wrote on it was brief, and, having paid, he hurried out of the office, making for the public-house which stood just across the way. Scarcely had he gone, when Tinker slipped from the other side of the office, and marched boldly up to the office.

"Gentleman says, are you sure you've got the name right?" he said.

"Yes—Moreton," the clerk answered innocently; and Tinker, well pleased with himself, hurried back in the direction of the training-stable.

He knew now who it was who had paid the Shuffler to examine Starlight's stable.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Bound for Epsom—The Missing Horse-box—What Followed—Pride of Place for the Derby.

IT was Friday, less than a week before the great race, and everyone connected with Sir Charles Moreton's stables was on the tip-toe of excitement. Everything had gone well with Starlight, no attempt having been made upon her since the Shuffler had been captured by Sexton Blake in the stables. Day and night the great detective had been on the watch, but all to no purpose. Once or twice he had thought of giving the case up, feeling sure that the filly would be interfered with no more, but the anxiety of Sir Charles had induced him to stay on until the day of the race.

The old sportsman, loving sport for sport's sake, had only one idea in his head just now, and that was to win the Oaks and Derby with Starlight. Of the money to be gained by victory he cared nothing, and though he regarded the animal as little short of a certainty, he had made no attempt to back it for so much as a sovereign.

Already the filly had shortened in price, being third favourite for both events, for Sir Charles was making no secret of his hopes, and the story of the great trial with Pretty Dick had been made quite public.

Pride of Place had, in consequence, gone right back in the betting, and now figured amongst the horses quoted at the outside odds of thirty-three to one.

"She'll win the double," Sir Charles told everybody who asked him; and those who knew him well took advantage of the information, knowing that it was not often that he and his trainer Fullman made a mistake in such matters.

And now there was less than a week to the first of the great races, and to-night Starlight was to leave for Epsom, travelling to Victoria by special train, and from there on. Fullman, Tinker, and Sexton Blake were to travel up with her for safety, and now they stood at the siding, waiting for the special to arrive.

Starlight, looking fit and well so far as she could be seen for her clothing, was being walked up and down by a stable-boy, who was obviously very proud of the trust reposed in him.

"Don't believe there's any need for you to trouble further, Mr. Blake," Fullman said, as the special was being backed in. "The capture and punishment of that lame ruffian frightened anyone else off. Besides, it is known that you are guarding the filly."

Sexton Blake lit a cigar, and glanced thoughtfully at Starlight, admiring her great stride as she walked up and down. He, too, thought that no further attempt to interfere with her would be made, yet he could not but remember that the Shuffler had wired to Hugh Moreton, the man who would lose practically all his fortune if Starlight, and not Pride of Place, won the Derby for his uncle.

"I have seen the matter through so far, and I may as well stop on to the finish," the detective answered quietly.

The special was backed in, and the flap of the horse-box was let down. Then Fullman took Starlight's bridle, and led her gingerly up to the box. At the foot of the slope she halted, sniffed daintily at the woodwork, then, to the relief of all concerned, stalked up into her place, where Fullman quickly made her comfortable.

"You will travel with her, Tinker," Sexton Blake ordered. "Mr. Fullman will come with me in the carriage."

The boy stepped obediently into the box, and it was securely fastened. Then Fullman swung up into the solitary carriage next to the engine, and Sexton Blake made to follow him. Just as he was about to close the door of the carriage, Mat Smith, the stable-boy Tinker had thrashed, came running breathlessly up.

"Letter from Sir Charles, sir!" he panted, thrusting an envelope into the detective's hand.

"Wonder what he can want?" Fullman muttered, watching Sexton Blake slit open the envelope and extract the letter.

The detective's brows came together sharply as he read the message, then he handed the paper to Fullman.

"Read it," he said, "and tell me whether that is Sir Charles's writing."

"Come at once," Fullman read. "A curious thing has happened, and I must have your opinion about it. Starlight will be safe with Fullman."

"Is that Sir Charles's writing?" Sexton Blake asked again, as the trainer looked up.

"Yes," the latter answered, without hesitation. "What are you going to do?"

"Obey the instructions," Sexton Blake answered, after a brief pause. "I shall join you at Epsom as soon as possible."

The door of the carriage slammed after Sexton Blake alighted, the signal was given to the driver to start, and the little train moved off on its journey. It looked more like a toy than anything else, for there was just the engine, the coach occupied by Fullman, and the horse-box holding Starlight and Tinker.

Sexton Blake stood watching the little train until the darkness and a bend in the line had swallowed it up. Beside him stood Mat Smith, his face very pale, a shifty look in his eyes, which kept roaming round nervously.

"Do you know why Sir Charles sent this letter, my lad?" Sexton Blake asked.

"Had a telegram, that's all I know, sir," the youth answered. "We'd best be hurrying."

Sexton Blake thought so, too, for he meant to rejoin Starlight as soon as he had finished his business with Sir Charles. He hurried along the quiet road now, wondering all the time what Sir Charles, who had been hitherto so anxious for him not to lose sight of the filly, could want of him. That it must be something important he felt sure, or he would never have been sent for.

The road from the station to Moreton Hall was a lonely, typical country one, without a solitary lamp to break its length of blackness. On either side rose thick hedges, broken here and there by great trees that threw their giant branches over the path. In places the branches of trees planted on either side of the road met in the centre.

Was the letter genuine? That was the question that Sexton Blake kept asking himself, only to tell himself that it must be, or Fullman, who ought to know, would never have sworn to the handwriting.

The detective had not encountered dangers all his life for nothing, and he instinctively kept to the centre of the roadway, so that he could not be attacked on either side; but he was to learn that there were other hiding-places besides the hedges.

Half-way to the Hall Sexton Blake and Mat Smith got, walking at a brisk pace, and the former was so immersed in thought that he did not notice that the stable-boy was lagging behind.

Suddenly, with a suddenness that there was no checking or meeting, a dark body plunged down from the great branch of a tree that stretched nearly across the roadway, a heavy weight struck Sexton Blake on the neck and shoulders, and he was flung heavily forward on to his face. His head struck the ground, but not hard enough to stun him, and dazed though he was, he made a gallant effort to rise and fight his way through the red mist that had sprung up around him.

"Quick!" he heard a hoarse voice gasp in his ear; and something struck him a dull blow on the back of the head, so that the red mist and the voices died away, and all was a black blank.

Consciousness. Sexton Blake woke to a terrible dull pain that started at his head and went down his spine, making it like a line of molten metal to his feet. It had taken possession of his brain, too, so that he was only conscious of his agony, and of nothing else.

Consciousness. Well, it could scarcely be called that. It was just a room of terrible pain in which Sexton Blake lay, the walls of which were so close to him that he could see nothing beyond.

The pain that possessed him was the part and whole of him. What had happened his brain did not try to remember; what was going to happen, the pain refused to let it think. Once the detective moved, partly raising himself on to his elbow, a glimmer of reason coming back to him, but only to drop back again, consciousness mercifully leaving him.

It was still far from the dawn when a lantern showed in the distance, coming from the direction of the station; but Sexton Blake, lying unconscious, saw nothing of it. He did not hear the excited voices of the men who came with the lantern, and he lay so still, his head resting on the grass bank at the side of the road, that he appeared to be dead.

The lantern drew nearer, and the man carrying it stopped short with a cry of alarm as its rays revealed the still body of Sexton Blake.

"There's murder been done here!" the man, who was the local stationmaster, cried. "Feel—feel his heart while I hold the lantern!"

Fullman, whose face was terribly white, behind him standing the grimy driver of the special, came forward and knelt beside the still body.

"Blake!" he gasped; then shook a clenched fist in the air. "A part of the villain's scheme!"

"Pr'aps he ain't dead," the engine-driver suggested hopefully, and drew a small bottle from his pocket. "Try this 'ere on him. It's stuff from the Greyhound, and it'll move him, if anything will."

Fullman took the bottle with trembling fingers, and let some of its contents trickle between the detective's white lips.

"He's alive!" the trainer said thankfully, as the detective's eyelids flickered, and poured more spirit between his lips.

The spirit seemed to have a powerful effect on Sexton Blake, for suddenly he sat up, but only to fall back with a groan of agony.

"What—what are you doing to my head?" he asked, in a hoarse whisper.

"You've been stunned by a bludgeon," Fullman answered, making a guess at the truth.

"Stunned? Ah, yes, I remember!" Sexton Blake said, in a voice choked with pain. "He jumped from the branch; I had no chance."

Then the detective recognised the man bending over him, and despite his pain, which contorted his face so that it was hardly recognisable, he sat up, clutching at the trainer's arm for support.

"Why are you here?" he gasped. "Where is Starlight?" "Stolen," Fullman answered huskily.

Still clutching the man's arm, the detective struggled to his feet.

"Tinker?"

"Gone, too," the trainer answered.

Sexton Blake gave vent to a cry of anger, and tried to take a step forward, as if to go in search of the boy there and then, but the effort was too much for him, and he fell to the ground in a faint.

"Seems ter me," the engine-driver remarked, taking his bottle back and looking at it regretfully, "that the best thing we can do is to take the poor chap up to the Hall. He's not damaged much, just dazed and bruised."

Between them the three men managed to get Sexton Blake up to the Hall, and a frightened servant hurried off to rouse Sir Charles, who came down, wearing a dressing-gown, in less than five minutes.

"Has he met with an accident?" he asked; and though his face was white his voice was firm enough.

"It's attempted murder, Sir Charles!" Fullman answered fiercely. "And they've got Starlight."

For a moment Sir Charles reeled, then he recovered, and showed the fine stuff that he was made of.

"Don't tell me of the filly now," he said sharply; "this man's life may be in danger."

Ten minutes later, however, aided by a liberal use of stimulants, Sexton Blake was able to sit up in a chair.

"You had best go to bed at once," Sir Charles said kindly; "you are not fit to do anything."

"I am fit enough to find that boy of mine if he is in danger," Sexton Blake answered, in a voice little louder than a whisper. "Tell me everything—slowly, Fullman—for my head is going round. But, first, did you write this letter, Sir Charles?"

Sir Charles stared at the letter in amazement.

"No," he answered, with conviction.

"I thought not," the detective muttered. "The story, Fullman; there is no time to waste."

"There is little enough to tell," the trainer answered, in a voice shaking with passion. "It is just a horrible mystery."

"Mysteries have been cleared up before," Sexton Blake muttered impatiently. "Go on!"

"We went off all right after you were called away," Fullman went on, "and travelled at a moderate rate, so as not to shake the filly, and I believe—the trainer looked guilty—that I had a nap. When I woke up I saw that we were nearing London, and something, some instinct, made me get up and look out of the window to make sure that the horse-box was all right. It was gone! Behind my carriage there was nothing."

In his excitement Sexton Blake sat forward sharply, but clapped a hand to his head and leant back again. The blow he had received was no light one, and the slightest movement made him feel sick and giddy.

"What did you do?" he asked.

"Found that the line was clear and ran back, sir," the engine-driver said, taking up the story. "It fair licks me

how they uncoupled the box, an' then—where's it gone? Can't have flew."

The man spoke almost as if he had come to the conclusion that the horse-box must have suddenly grown wings, and he certainly looked distinctly scared.

"There are side lines that it could have been run on to?" the detective suggested eagerly.

"Not one," the man answered, with conviction; "and we searched every siding as we came along."

"It must have been taken back along the line, an engine having been obtained somewhere," Sexton Blake muttered, speaking his thoughts aloud.

"No, sir." The engine-driver shook his head, to show that the matter was entirely beyond him. "We've been on to every signal-box, and not one of the men has seen a horse-box pass."

There was silence for fully five minutes, no one seeming to have anything to say. At last Sexton Blake pulled himself to his feet, but would have fallen had not Fullman caught him by the arm.

"Take me to bed," he said wearily; "my head won't let me work to-night. But to-morrow"—an eager light drove the expression of pain from his eyes—"to-morrow I will find him."

"You mean the filly?" Sir Charles cried eagerly.

"I mean Tinker," Sexton Blake answered, in a shaking voice.

Sir Charles bowed silently, accepting the reproof, remembering that the boy's life and safety came before that of Starlight. By the door Sexton Blake paused.

"Wire to Spearing, Scotland Yard," he said, "and say that I want him to come here at once."

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Spearing Arrives—Searching the Line—A Discovery—On the Track.

"MR. SPEARING has come, sir," a manservant announced, putting his head into Sexton Blake's bed-room.

"Very good. Tell him I will be down in a few minutes," the detective answered.

Sexton Blake felt distinctly better for his night's rest, but when he clambered out of bed he found that his injury had left him weak, and it was all that he could do to slip into his clothes unaided. He accomplished the feat at last, how-

ever, and descended slowly to the library. As he entered Mr. Spearing, looking as official as ever, turned from surveying the grounds through the window.

"Ill!" the worthy official jerked, in tones of real concern, gripping Sexton Blake by the arm and leading him to a chair.

"Only a crack over the head," Sexton Blake answered, contriving to smile. "I am getting better already."

"Who did it?" Spearing snapped angrily, glaring round as if hoping to find the miscreants waiting to be arrested.

"That is only one of the problems that you and I have got to solve, my friend," Sexton Blake answered.

Mr. Spearing drew out his official notebook, and sucked vigorously at a stump of pencil.

"You're not fit for anything," he said, with decision. "Leave case in my hands—see it through."

Sexton Blake shook his head, and with difficulty suppressed a moan at the pain it caused him.

"If only Starlight were concerned I would do so," he answered; "but Tinker has been kidnapped, too."

"Starlight!" Spearing gasped, rubbing up his bristling hair. "Sir Charles Moreton's Starlight—the filly for the Derby and Oaks?"

"Precisely," Sexton Blake answered; "but I should not search for her if I did not think that it meant searching for Tinker at the same time."

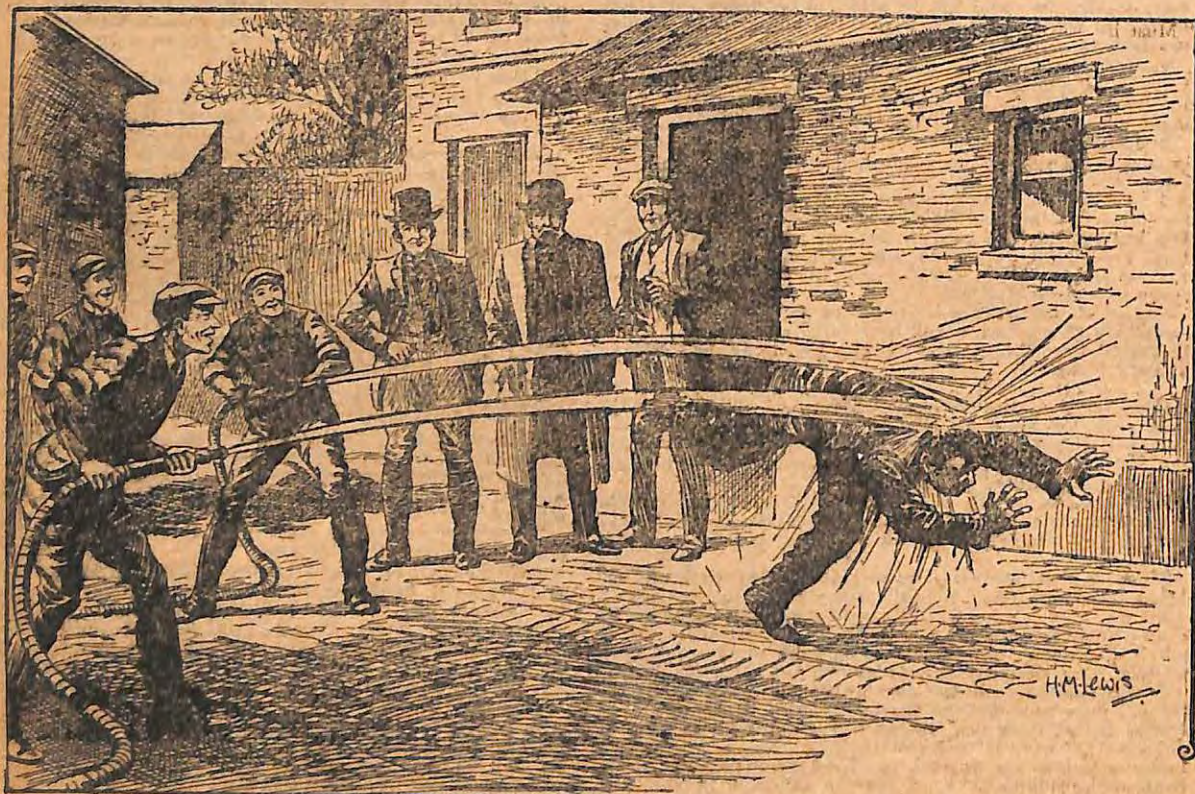
Spearing thrust the notebook back into his pocket.

"Don't understand," he jerked. "Hate riddles—foolish, very."

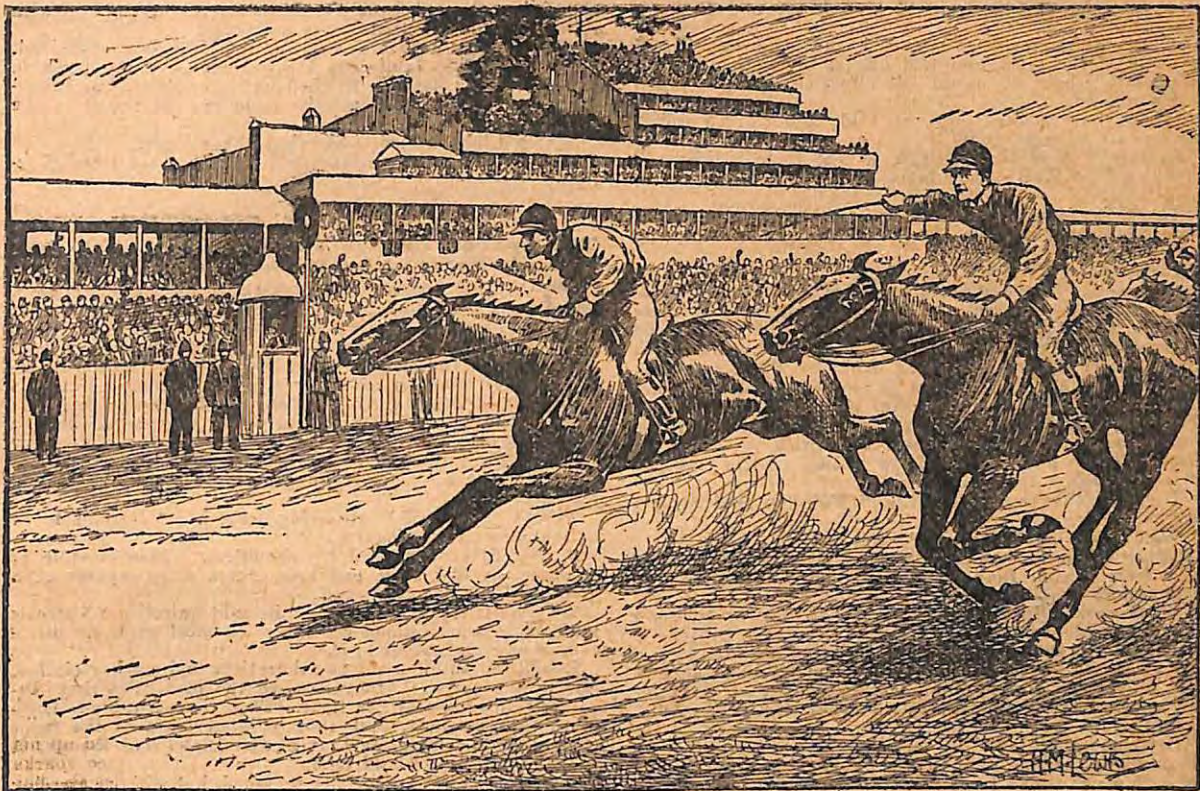
Then Sexton Blake told the worthy official of Scotland Yard what had happened, leaving out his suspicions with regard to Hugh Moreton, for he had a very shrewd idea that Sir Charles would like his nephew to be spared, for the sake of the family name, even should he prove to be guilty. He told him of the man he had captured in the stables, and from thence led up to the forged message that had brought him back along the road to the Hall, and very nearly to his death.

Mr. Spearing's bright eyes blinked, and he rubbed up his hair with an energy that seemed likely to produce sparks from it. Once or twice he opened his lips to speak, but "hummed" and "haed" and closed them again, each time returning to his hair-rubbing with greater energy, as if by that means hoping to rub a solution of the mystery into his brain.

"No doubt have gone?" he queried at last.



Five yards the tout went, then the second jet was let loose, striking him so surely that he reeled and went down under it. He started to rise, but again the jet struck him, and he hastily dropped to full length.



Suddenly the shouting had died down; the whole crowd appeared to have caught its breath in amazement. Suddenly the grey body of Starlight had come up with the leaders. Then, "Starlight w-w-wins!" broke out in a perfect roar.

"No doubt whatever," Sexton Blake assured him. "Must have been taken back along line," Spearing said, with conviction. "Nothing else possible."

"There you are wrong," Sexton Blake assured him. "Fact is, I don't think this mystery will be hard to solve. Somewhere along the line there is a way for a horse-box to leave it, and we have got to find it."

Mr. Spearing snorted, and grabbed up his little felt hat. It was quite obvious that he was annoyed at the way his suggestion had been thrown over.

"So easy, best do it yourself!" he snapped. "Sorry wasted time coming down—thought important."

The worthy official turned towards the door, but, despite the pain that moving sharply caused him, Sexton Blake sprang after him and gripped him by the arm.

"I want you to stay, old friend," he said simply. "Even if we can clear this part of the mystery we are still dealing with desperate men, who will not give in easily. What good should I be against them as I am now?"

Spearing grinned, his anger all vanished, and felt the great biceps bulging under his sleeves.

"Might hit one," he jerked; "try two—have a shot at a dozen!"

"Good!" Sexton Blake said. "I will order breakfast, and after that—to work."

Breakfast was not a very long affair, for Spearing had had his on the way down, while the blow over the head had robbed Sexton Blake of any great pretensions to an appetite. He contrived to eat something, however, and felt all the better for it.

Sir Charles, his face very white, great shadows under his eyes, came into the room just as they finished.

"Nothing has been found," he said wearily. "The line has been searched without result, every station and signal-box has been telephoned to, but no one has seen Starlight's box. What can have happened to it?"

Sexton Blake rose to his feet carefully, for every movement still jarred his head.

"This morning we shall find that out, Sir Charles," he answered.

"You will find the filly?" Sir Charles gasped, his face lighting up with hope.

"I do not say that," Sexton Blake answered guardedly. "The thieves have got nearly twelve hours' start of us, and it may take some time to track them. There is no reason

why we should not succeed, however, once we have discovered how they managed to get the horse-box unobserved from the line and hide it. I shall be obliged if you will order a trap round."

Ten minutes later a trap spun down the drive of the Hall, Sexton Blake holding the ribbons, Spearing beside him. Sir Charles had pleaded hard to be allowed to go with them, but Sexton Blake had refused. He wanted to work quietly and without interruption.

At the station the detectives found quite an animated scene. On the up platform stood the stationmaster, the solitary porter under his command, a very important-looking man, dressed in blue, and a dozen or so idlers who had heard of the theft of Starlight and had dropped in to see what was doing. Standing at the platform was an engine and one carriage, Fullman by the door of the latter. At sight of the new-comers he hurried to meet them.

"All is ready for the search," he said excitedly. "Inspector Gunn wanted to start without you, but—"

"Without us?" Spearing jerked, his hair fairly bristling with indignation. "Ha!"

Inspector Gunn, who was the man in blue, stalked across majestically.

"Sexton Blake?" he queried.

"Yes, Gunn," the famous detective answered.

"Inspector Gunn!" the local dignitary snapped.

"Mr. Sexton Blake," the detective retorted.

"Well, Mister Blake," Inspector Gunn continued, with a sneer, "I just thought I'd tell you that you can come with me if you like, but I won't stand interference. You can watch me at work, but no more."

"Can I come?" Spearing jerked, in a curiously meek voice.

"No!" Inspector Gunn snapped. "Don't want you with me."

"Very good!" Spearing's voice had taken on its old tone of command. "Shouldn't like to trouble you with my company. You search along line, Mr. Gunn, and I use train."

Some of the loafers sniggered, for they were not over fond of the very important inspector, and the sound of their mirth fairly roused Gunn.

"Who are you?" he growled.

"Spearing—Scotland Yard!" the official jerked, and

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swung into the waiting train, Sexton Blake and Fullman following him.

Inspector Gunn fairly staggered back at the mention of the name of the most powerful official of Scotland Yard, a man with whom he would not intentionally have fallen out for worlds.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said humbly. "I didn't know—yours to command."

"Exactly!" Spearing snapped, as the train commenced to move off. "Wait orders here—keep your men in readiness."

"There is only one other—besides myself," Gunn answered, having to run along the platform to keep up with the train.

"Inspector, too?" Spearing jerked.

The driver of the engine had been given orders to proceed slowly, and the train travelled along at a pace of no more than ten miles an hour. At the left-hand window stood Sexton Blake, peering at every yard of the line that was passed, while Spearing did the same on the other side. Fullman, his face twitching with excitement, looked first over the shoulder of one, then over the other.

For two hours the little train crawled on, the detectives never moving from the windows, and twice it had to be switched on to a siding to allow trains on the regular service to pass.

"They can't have left the line!" Fullman said at last despairingly.

"Wait!" was all Sexton Blake answered.

Another five miles was covered, then a sharp exclamation broke from Sexton Blake, and he called to the driver of the engine to stop.

"What seen?" Spearing jerked excitedly, as he followed Blake and Fullman from the train.

"That!" the detective answered, pointing ahead.

Spearing stared in the direction indicated, but at first could only see a row of dilapidated-looking wooden buildings, on the front of which hung a much-battered "To Let" board.

"Don't see anything!" he jerked.

Back along the line went Sexton Blake, the others following, and a cry broke from Sexton Blake as he pointed to a spot where the line had evidently been cut for a siding.

"No siding, though," Spearing said shortly. "Can't have laid lines."

"Here!" It was the engine-driver, who was bending from the cab of his engine. "See them empty works," he continued, "they used to be a factory, and there was a line run from 'em to the line where you're standing. When the firm went smash part o' the line was took up. It was only one o' them handy, shiftable affairs."

Sexton Blake dropped to his knees, and his eyes shone.

"Look!" he said, pointing to the ground. "What do you make of that?"

Spearing examined the spot indicated.

"Been a board there," he jerked.

"Look at each end of the mark," Sexton Blake ordered.

Then a cry broke from Spearing, for he saw that at each end of the indentation made by the board were toe marks, such as would have been made by men forcing something along. He moved on a few yards, and there again were the same marks.

"We've got it!" he cried excitedly.

"We know where the horsebox was taken from the line, that is all," Sexton Blake answered quietly, and followed quickly along the track. Fifty yards he went, then stopped at a spot where the marks led to what had been left of the line. It was nearly covered by dirt, but beside it showed the marks of the toes of boots.

"We shall get Starlight back!" Fullman cried, and ran on ahead of the others, following the line to where it led into the dilapidated buildings by way of a broken door. Through this doorway he went, then looked out and waved his arms excitedly, beckoning the others to come to him.

In a couple of minutes Sexton Blake and Spearing had also entered the building, and there before them was the missing horsebox.

"It's locked!" Fullman cried excitedly. "Starlight is still there!"

The trainer pulled a key from his pocket, and with trembling fingers unfastened the lock. He swung the door open, but only to stagger back, with a cry of despair breaking from him.

"Not here!" he gasped.

But Sexton Blake pushed past him, and the next moment was kneeling beside the still form of Tinker, who lay gagged and bound on the floor, a slight cut over his right eye.

"The curs!" the detective growled, as he cut away the cords and removed the gag.

Tinker rose stiffly to his feet, helped by his master's arm.

"Have you found Starlight?" he cried eagerly.

"Not yet, my lad," Sexton Blake answered, anxiously

examining the cut over the boy's eye, and sighing with relief when he saw that it was not serious.

"It was just before the dawn, sir," the boy explained. "I pretended to faint, but I saw them shift the portable rails, and they had not finished until the dawn was breaking. One of the men was the lame one we found in the stable."

Sexton Blake smiled, and calmly lit a cigar.

"Just at dawn," he murmured; "then we shall find Starlight!"

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

The Search Begun—The Horsehair that was Found—News at Last—The Rat-tailed Mare.

FULLMAN had been sent back to the training-stables, much against his will, Sexton Blake realising that in his excitable state he would be more than useless in the search for Starlight. His one fear seemed to be that the filly had been killed; but the detective did not share it, thinking it unlikely that the thieves would have done away with so valuable an animal. It appeared to him much more likely that they would keep it out of the way until the Derby had been run, and then try to get a heavy ransom for it from Sir Charles, who was not likely to lose any opportunity, however costly, of getting the filly back.

"Can't be far off!" Spearing jerked. "Daren't move animal like that in daylight."

Sexton Blake shrugged his shoulders. Men capable of stealing the filly as it had been stolen were capable of a good deal, he decided.

"We must try and track it," he said quietly. "There is no need to search along the line; the most probable direction is at right angles to it."

Round the building the two detectives and the boy circled, but it was not until they reached the back that they discovered any trace of Starlight. Then it was just one hoof-mark in the dust, and that pointed towards the fields beyond, in the direction that Sexton Blake had thought it probable the men would take.

Yard by yard the detectives searched, but without meeting with success, for the ground was hard through want of rain, and if the filly had passed over it she had left no trace.

"Best go straight ahead," Spearing jerked. "Reach nearest village, circulate description from there."

Sexton Blake clapped the Scotland Yard official on the shoulder.

"You're right!" he said.

"Sometimes!" Spearing jerked sarcastically. "Brains outside Baker Street."

At a brisk pace, and keeping well apart just on the chance of striking a trail, the three hurried straight away from the line. A mile they covered—two—then Sexton Blake suddenly turned towards the left.

"See anything, sir?" Tinker asked eagerly.

"There is smoke rising from that ditch," his master answered.

Spearing laughed boisterously.

"Expect find 'em camping out?" he snapped. "Likely—very!"

Sexton Blake made no answer, but strode swiftly in the direction of the thin line of smoke, which, there being no wind, was rising up almost perfectly straight. Much of the pain had left his head, and he was able to think with all his accustomed clearness and quickness. The sight of the smoke had suggested something to him, but he did not tell the others what it was.

In the ditch they found the fire, or, rather, the smoking ashes of one, and Sexton Blake dropped on his knees beside it, stirring it with a piece of stick. A slight smile curled the corners of his lips, and when he picked up something from the ground that the others could not see, that smile had grown broader.

"Found Starlight?" Spearing asked sarcastically.

"A part of her, my friend," Sexton Blake answered coolly.

"Killed and burnt her!" Spearing gasped, in tones of horror.

Sexton Blake held out his hand, and in the palm of it was a long grey hair, which curled at the end.

"What part of a horse do you think that came from?" he asked.

"Don't fool!" Spearing snapped. "Not a thought-reader."

"Or a horse-dealer," Sexton Blake replied, "or you would know that that hair is from a mane."

"They've clipped Starlight's mane short, so as to disguise her, sir!" Tinker cried excitedly.

"Exactly, my lad!" the detective agreed. "The thieves halted here, burnt the filly's clothing, and cut her mane. It is more than likely that they docked her tail, too."

"Not much of a disguise," Spearing growled, in an unbelieving tone.

Sexton Blake shrugged his shoulders, and turned over the ashes of the fire again.

"It is as good a disguise as a horse can have, especially a racer," he answered.

"What next, then?" Spearing jerked.

"To the nearest village, and telephone from there to the police of everywhere around," Sexton Blake replied.

Half an hour later the detectives and Tinker entered the little village of Arrowfield, and Sexton Blake at once hunted up the nearest telephone, which proved to be at the Star Hotel, the largest inn in the place. For nearly an hour he was in the box, the telephone number book open before him, and when he emerged there was a satisfied expression on his face.

"I think we shall have them," he said quietly. "I have phoned every village within twenty miles, offering a reward of fifty pounds for news of a grey mare, hough-maned and short tailed. I think we may as well have another breakfast; I did not feel much like it earlier."

There was an eager expression in Sexton Blake's eyes as he took the telegram from the landlord of the inn.

"Any answer, sir?" the man inquired.

Sexton Blake tore the envelope open, read the message it contained, and smiled.

"How far is Littleworth from here?" he asked.

"Ten miles, sir."

"Then there is no answer, but you can get a trap ready for us at once."

The man left the room, and Sexton Blake tossed the telegram to Spearing. It ran:

"Two men with grey mare stopped here for food this morning.—GREEN, Dragon Hotel, Littleworth."

"Got 'em!" Spearing jerked enthusiastically.

"Not yet," Sexton Blake answered quietly, "but it's a trail; and there are few trails to which there are no ends."

Ten minutes later a trap drove away with the detectives and Tinker, and the old horse between the shafts hustled along at a pace that he had not known for years, the driver urging him on to earn the sovereign that Sexton Blake had promised him if he succeeded in reaching Littleworth inside the hour.

The money was earned, for it was five minutes under the hour when the steaming horse was pulled up before the Dragon Hotel. In the doorway stood an abnormally stout man, with a face so red, that it seemed to have been recently painted that colour.

"You Sexton Blake, sir?" he asked, in a wheezing voice, as the detective alighted from the trap.

"Yes; I have come about the grey mare," Sexton Blake answered; and for all his customary coolness, he could not keep the eager note out of his voice.

The fat man chuckled and rubbed his hands, as if enjoying a great joke.

"How long have they been gone?" Sexton Blake demanded sharply.

"They ain't gone!" the man answered, with a series of chuckles that seemed in danger of choking him. "That's the lark—I gets the fifty!"

Spearing stepped forward excitedly and gripped the grinning man by the arm, fairly shaking him backwards and forward.

"Out with it!" he jerked. "Where are they?"

"H-hero!" the fat man panted in between gasps for breath.

Sexton Blake pulled Spearing away and confronted the man.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

The fat man started to chuckle again, but stopped hastily as Spearing looked threatening.

"They stopped here drinking," he answered; "and was still here when you telephoned. I've took care they're here now."

Something was too much for the fat man, and this time he simply could not restrain the chuckles.

"C-come and see 'em!" he gurgled.

Sexton Blake was amazed, and even his usually immobile face showed it. That men who had been clever enough to steal Starlight in the manner they had, should make such fools of themselves just for the sake of drink, fairly staggered him. He had known criminals do silly things many a time, but never such a one as this. To have got as far as possible before the alarm should have been their game. Why had they not done it?

"Show me the men!" he ordered.

"Right you are, sir—this way!" the fat landlord chuckled. Waddling along in front of them, the landlord led the way to a stable-yard that lay at the side of the inn, and

round the gate of which a group of open-mouthed village loafers were hanging, craning their necks to see inside.

"Make way for the gent what gives rewards for finding crocks!" the fat man chuckled; and the crowd fell back.

Into the yard went the landlord, and Sexton Blake could not refrain from smiling as he saw two burly stablemen, armed with pitchforks, standing guard before the door of the stable.

"Popped 'em in here, gents!" the landlord explained. "This is the guard"—he waved a huge hand at the two stablemen—"they gets a quid each if I cops the reward."

"Let them bring the prisoners out," Sexton Blake ordered; and Spearing thrust a hand into his pocket and jingled the handcuffs.

One of the men with a pitchfork threw the door open.

"Come out o' that—you!" he roared.

With surprising readiness the men inside obeyed. First came the Shuffler, his cunning face wearing a look of righteous indignation, and behind him followed Jerry Long, whose right eye looked as if it had got the worst of matters in a recent fight.

"It's the man, sir," Tinker whispered; and Spearing stepped forward, the handcuffs ready in his fingers.

"Best come quiet!" he jerked. "Worse for you if don't. Might get hurt, likely—very!"

Strangely enough, however, the Shuffler did not appear in the least disturbed. Possibly his pluck came from strong drink, for he was not entirely steady on his feet.

"Now then," he said defiantly; "what's the meanin' o' this 'ere? I lodges an objection, an 'there ain't no chance o' me payin' forfeit."

He turned and waved a hand at Jerry Long.

"This is Mr. Long, an' we wants ter know why we've bin assaulted an' kep' prisoners!"

If it was a bluff, it was a mighty good one, and Sexton Blake's amazement increased.

"You are going to be arrested for stealing a grey filly," he said sternly.

"Stealing?" The word broke from the Shuffler almost in a sob, and he turned and gripped Jerry Long's hand as if for support. "Ear 'im, Jerry; arter all these years of our 'onest lives they call us thieves. It's 'eart-breakin', that's what it is!"

"Think of me poor mother if she 'eard it," Jerry Long answered. "Don't cut up so, we'll 'ave 'em fer reformation of character."

The Shuffler broke away from the grasp of his friend and faced the detectives defiantly.

"What 'ave we stolen?" he demanded.

"A grey filly!" Spearing jerked, for he had not been moved by this exhibition.

"The old grey mare?" The Shuffler laughed hugely.

"Er what we've 'ad and cherished for fifteen year, and was goin' ter try an' sell, 'cause times is so 'ard?"

"Is the mare here?" Sexton Blake broke in with.

The fat landlord, whose chuckles were fairly doubling him up, pointed to another door of the stable, for he was quite unable to speak.

"Fetch her out!" Sexton Blake ordered; and one of the stablemen entered the box.

The animal that the man emerged with was certainly not Starlight, the thoroughbred racing filly, the only likeness between them being the colour. This animal was old, so ancient, indeed, that she scarcely seemed able to drag one leg after the other; one eye was a stone-waller, and her ribs were sticking out as if they would burst through their hide. As for her tail, it was devoid of hairs as a bald man's head.

"There you are," the Shuffler cried defiantly, "that's Polly, what 'as bin with us ever since she was a kitten—a yearlin'. As kids we played tergether, sharin' each other's joys an' sorrows, and now—"

Sexton Blake stepped forward and gripped the man by the arm.

"Come with me," he said quietly. "I admit that this is not the horse we have lost. Come into the inn, and we'll see if we can't arrange matters."

The Shuffler fairly beamed, and made a drunken grab at the detective's hand.

"Now yer speakin'!" he cried. "Come on, Jerry!"

"What's the game?" Spearing whispered excitedly, as he followed behind Sexton Blake and the two men.

"They're not such fools as we thought, that's all," the detective answered, so that the others could not hear.

Into the hotel went the men, the chuckling landlord leading the way, and winking at any one of the little party he could catch the eye of.

"What shall I bring you gents?" he managed to wheeze.

"Whisky!" the Shuffler answered readily. "An' the same for Jerry—our tastes in drink is twin-like."

A minute or so later the drinks were on the table, and the Shuffler, who was obviously very pleased with himself, raised his glass.

"Ere's luck!" he said.

"Make the most of it," Sexton Blake said in a hard voice, "it is the last you will taste for some time. I should think you will get three years—not less!"

The glass dropped from the Shuffler's hand and splintered on the floor, and the man suddenly became very sober. His eyes darted swiftly towards the door, but just in time to see Tinker, who had not gone to the stables, enter. By the window stood the burly Spearing, so that retreat was barred that way, too.

"What—what does this mean?" the man cried, with a very poor attempt at bluster.

Sexton Blake seated himself by the table and lit a cigar.

"It means that you have been just a little too clever," he answered.

By an effort the Shuffler pulled himself together, but Jerry Long looked thoroughly cowed.

"Just you tell us what we've done!" he snarled.

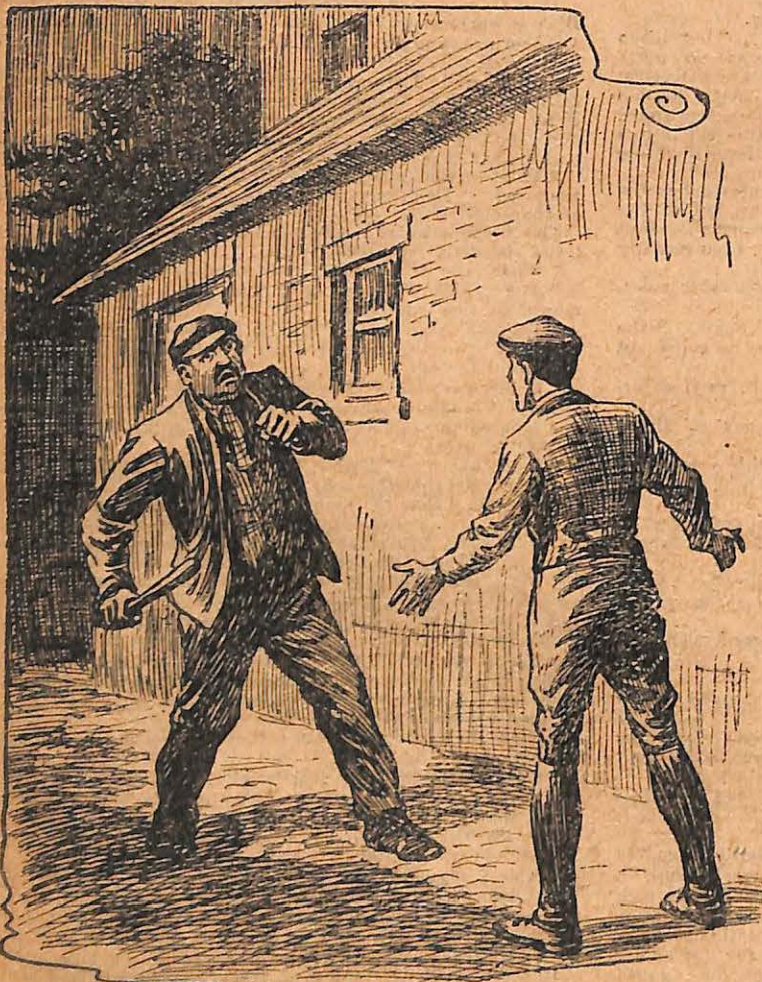
"Sir Charles Moreton's Starlight has been stolen," Sexton Blake answered, "and we can prove that you two stole her."

"How?" the Shuffler managed to ask, but his cunning eyes held a frightened look as they turned towards Tinker.

"Precisely," the detective remarked—"that boy recognises you."

Then all the fight died out of the Shuffler, and he became as abject as Jerry Long.

"It's right, sir," he whined, "we've bin on the crook, sure. But don't be 'ard on us, it weren't our fault. It was 'Ugh Moreton paid us ter do it, because 'e's backed Pride o' Place, and don't want the filly ter run."



A lad, dressed as a stable-boy, had stepped quietly out of the end box, and was now barring the Shuffler's way to the gate. The tout hesitated for a second, and then leapt forward, bludgeon in hand.

"Moreton—Sir Charles's nephew!" Spearing gasped. "Yus, that's the cove what led us into wrong-doin'," the Shuffler agreed eagerly. "We was innocent as babes unborn afore we met 'im."

Sexton Blake took Spearing by the arm and led him aside. For nearly five minutes he whispered in the worthy official's ear, evidently pleading with him to consent to something.

"All right," Spearing agreed at last. "Against principles, but do it if you think best."

Sexton Blake turned back to the touts and eyed them sternly.

"I am willing to let you go free," he said quietly.

"What?" the Shuffler gasped.

"On conditions," the detective corrected.

"Do time first, I suppose," Jerry Long suggested dejectedly.

Sexton Blake flung the end of his cigar away and lit a fresh one. Not until he was quite sure that it was burning to his satisfaction did he speak, and the waiting seemed to get on the nerves of the two touts.

"It comes to this," the detective said at last. "You know where the filly is. Well, you give me the information, and I allow you to go free if you swear to tell no one, including Hugh Moreton, that she has been recovered."

"Want it ter be a kind o' surprise fer him?" the Shuffler suggested, with a knowing look.

"Precisely," Sexton Blake agreed. "Will you do it? Remember this—if you break your word I will hunt you down, however long it takes me, and punish you for stealing Starlight."

Jerry Long stepped forward, and something like a look of determination was in his eyes.

"Don't yer think we'll go back on yer, sir," he said.

"We don't love this Moreton over-much, for 'e'd sell us as

easy as a 'oss casts a shoe."

"Where is Starlight?" Spearing jerked.

"Mile back along the road there's a large empty 'ouse with stables at the side," the Shuffler answered. "She's quartered there. We reckoned ter keep 'er there till the Derby was over, then let 'er loose so as someone could find her."

Half an hour later the men proved their words by leading the detectives to the stables in question, and there they found the missing filly, apparently none the worse for her experience. And a few minutes after that Tinker led her away, Sexton Blake whispering certain directions that even Spearing could not overhear.

"We 'ops it now?" the Shuffler suggested, in a tone that rather implied a doubt about the detective keeping his word.

Sexton Blake nodded, and the two men lost no time in hurrying away.

"Chance lost to punish two rogues!" Spearing jerked, staring regretfully after the disappearing men, and clinking the handcuffs in his pocket.

"It is kinder to Sir Charles to let them go," Sexton Blake answered thoughtfully. "He would have been bound to prosecute had the scandal been made public."

"Good job, too!" Spearing snapped. That evening the London papers had a good line for their bills. It was:

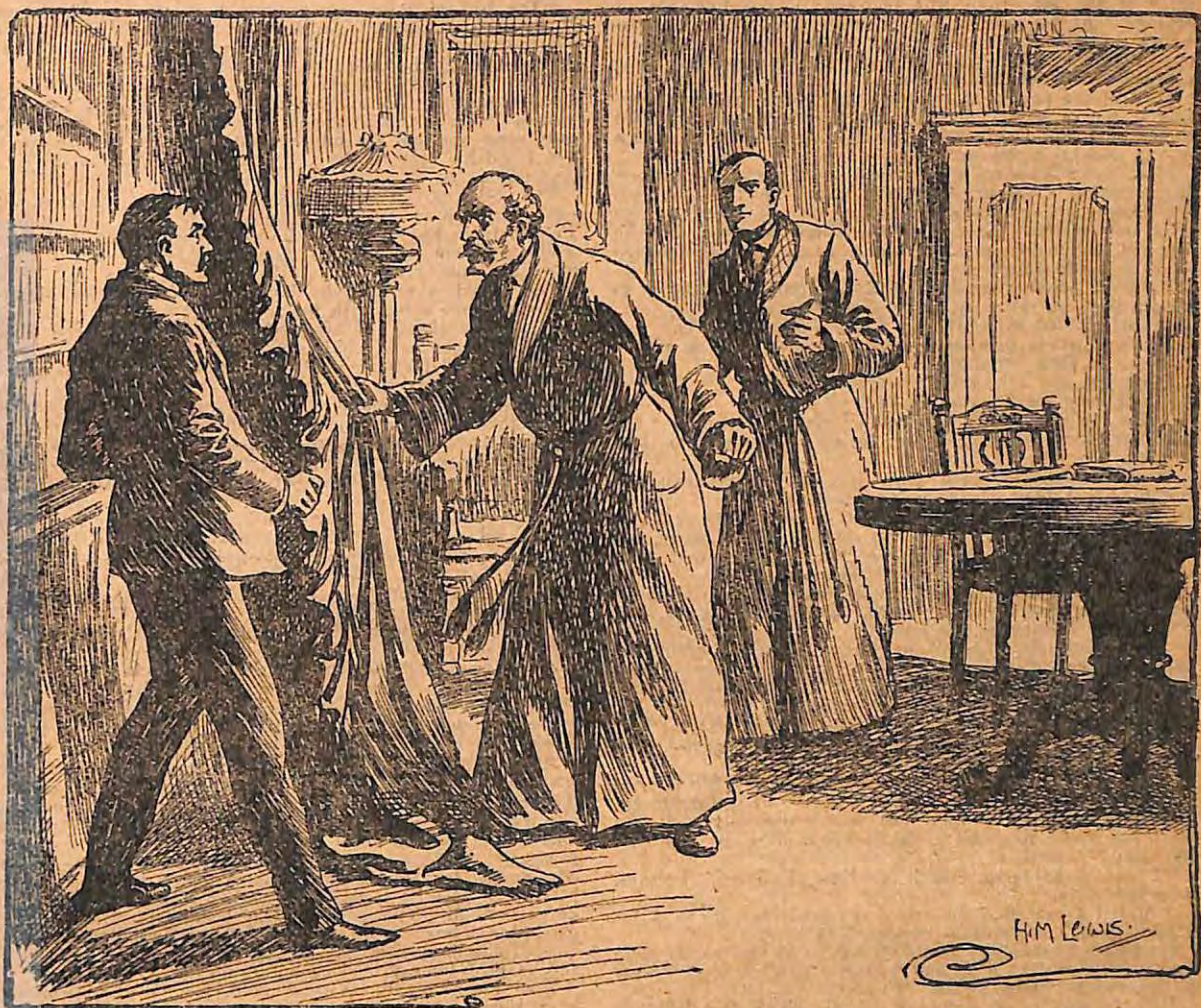
**"FAMOUS RACEHORSE STILL MISSING!
LATEST DETAILS!"**

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

Derby Day—Sir Charles is Anxious—Hugh Moreton Laughs—Starlight Arrives—The First Win of the Double.

DERBY DAY! Crowds of people flocking into Epsom Town by train, brakes running backwards and forwards to the course, always with their full complement of passengers and a few over, thousands of men and lads tramping it along the road; coaches, drags, motor-cars by the score, cyclists in plenty—all going to see the most popular race of the year.

The old stagers were there, the men who more or less lived on racecourses and made fools of themselves by backing horses that



There was a faint rustling sound, and Sir Charles leapt at the bookcase. He gripped the curtain, tearing it from the rings, and leaving Hugh Moreton revealed.

very seldom won; but they were far outnumbered by those who made this one day, Derby Day, the only occasion on which they visited a racecourse in the year. This was the non-betting brigade, who went just for the sport of the thing, to see the great crowds, join in the fun on the hill, and watch the sweep of the colours as they dashed round Tattenham Corner into the home stretch. These were the men who would be ready to cheer the winner, whatever its name, whatever the odds—for they would be there for the fun of the thing, not to gamble.

Old men standing by the wayside, their dim eyes gaining lustre through excitement, nodded their grizzled heads and said it was "loike ter be a record Derby Day. Never see such a crowd. Good luck, sir, an' thankee!" It certainly looked as if they were to be right, for as the day wore on the roads leading to the course became more congested, blocks in the traffic were more and more frequent, and it was really a marvel how the mass of vehicles and pedestrians pushed their way on at all.

Along the road boys were selling papers, on the placards of which was printed:

**"IS STARLIGHT FOUND?
WILL SHE RUN?"**

The disappearance of Sir Charles Moreton's filly had been a favourite topic in sporting circles for a week, especially as even now, on the very day of the race, the mystery had not been cleared up. Eager reporters had interviewed Fullman and Sir Charles, but all that either of them would say was that she would not be scratched, as they hoped she would be able to run. Even Sexton Blake was interviewed, it having leaked out that he was interested in the case, but he had refused to give an answer of any kind.

Would she run? The question was still being asked. Not that many of the public cared about it, for in this case

there was no stable money to follow, and very few believed that the filly had really beaten the famous Pretty Dick in a trial over the Derby distance.

The scene from Tattenham Corner Station was much the same. From an early hour in the morning trains had been arriving one after another, each letting its load loose on to the Downs to swell the crowd, and the vendors of whelks, fried fish, and other delicacies known to the humbler race-goer, did a roaring business, and dreamed dreams of putting their earnings on a long-priced winner for the great race. Even they, although day after day they saw others disappointed and ruined, working men going home to their wives minus the week's money, with only the prospect of pawning some of the furniture in view, believed that they were bound to be luckier or wiser than the rest.

"Racecards—racecards viv pencil chucked in!" The cry was everywhere, and thousands were searching the names and weights and colours for the horse to which they eventually meant to entrust their money.

By twelve o'clock the hill opposite the grand stand looked like a solid mass of people, broken here and there by the rows of coaches, and the soiled white of the tents and booths. The latter were having a good time, for the first race was still distant; boxing-booths, coconut-shies, shooting galleries, all doing their share of the business.

Down by the rails the bookmakers were shouting prices for the Derby itself, but they were doing little business yet. Your cautious race-goer, all-wise where it does not much matter, likes to see the number and jockey of his horse up in the frame before he puts his money on.

Even in the grand stand and enclosure, the places of the privileged, their patrons seemed to be arriving earlier than usual, and long before one o'clock both were black with shining silk hats, broken here and there by the grey head-

gear of the men who had followed in the footsteps of Royalty. At one o'clock a great cheer broke out, and the hoisting of the flag over the grand stand confirmed the report that King Edward, the most popular sporting king who has ever lived, had arrived.

Most of the people in the paddock for the first race were in the best of spirits; the day was fine, and sport promised to be good, but there were two at least who did not share in the general lightheartedness.

Sir Charles Moreton, white-faced, his fingers trembling on his racecard, stood by where the horses for the first race were being walked round. Not that he saw them, for his eyes saw beyond. Near him was Hugh Moreton, but he had not spoken to him, though once or twice he had moved as if he would do so.

Fullman, looking anxious, and not quite as tanned as usual, came hurrying to where his master stood.

"Starlight has arrived?" Sir Charles asked eagerly.

Hugh Moreton overheard, and drew nearer to hear the answer, his face twitching.

"Not yet, sir," the trainer answered.

"You have seen Sexton Blake?"

"Not for two days," the trainer replied bitterly. "He told me then that there was every hope of the filly starting."

Hugh Moreton laughed. Two days ago he had seen the Shuffler, and the man—true to his bargain with Sexton Blake—for once—had assured him that he and Jerry Long held the filly safe, though he had refused to say where.

"You'll have to make Pride of Place your chosen after all, uncle," Hugh Moreton remarked.

"In five minutes I shall do so, and strike the filly's name out," Sir Charles answered, in a shaking voice, "if only out of fairness to the public."

"Can't say that I shall be sorry," Hugh Moreton remarked, some colour coming back into his face. "You know how I backed the colt on what I was—on what I heard, and I haven't been able to hedge a penny."

Sir Charles turned on his heel, and walked away. The loss of Starlight was enough without anything else, and Fullman went with him.

The bell clanged for the first race, but neither Sir Charles nor his trainer made any effort to see it. The former appeared to be in a kind of dream, and it was only when the steaming horses returned to the paddock after the race that he roused himself.

"I am not going to scratch Starlight, Fullman," he said, in a low voice.

"And if I ever find the cur that's made you do it, I'll—I'll kill him!" the trainer answered savagely.

Sir Charles turned to go away, but as he did so someone touched him on the arm, and he turned to find himself face to face with Sexton Blake.

"There will be no necessity, Sir Charles," the detective said, with a reassuring smile. "The filly is fit as she can be, and will run. You had best declare to win with her."

Sir Charles staggered back, his face whiter than ever, and Fullman gripped him, fearing that he was going to faint. He quickly recovered himself, however, though his voice shook badly when he spoke.

"Where is she?" he asked.

"Where she has been for three days, Sir Charles," Sexton Blake answered. "It wasn't safe to return her to your stables after what has happened, and so I have taken charge of her, without denying the rumour that she was still missing."

Sir Charles gripped the detective's hand and wrung it.

"But she can't be fit," Fullman objected doubtfully.

"Wait till you see her," Sexton Blake said. "Don't fear; Tinker has given her her gallops, even before the early touts came out. She's been walked miles every day, too."

For a moment longer Sir Charles stood hesitating, then he squared his shoulders.

"I will go and declare to win with Starlight," he said firmly.

When he returned from this task it was to find Sexton Blake no longer there, and again fears possessed him as he walked nervously about the paddock. These reached their pitch when the horses for the great race commenced to be brought in, Pride of Place, looking fit and well, with them.

"It'll be a scandal!" he said shakily to Fullman.

"Sexton Blake has failed us—no!"

Tinker, leading a grey horse, had entered the paddock, and in a second Sir Charles was by Starlight, patting her rapturously on the neck.

"Get her clothes off!" Fullman cried excitedly. "I must see how she strips."

The trainer need have had no fears. The filly stripped in as fine fettle as she had ever been in her life, her coat glistening like a grey lake.

"Where's her mane and tail?" Sir Charles gasped.

"The loss of them won't stop her winning," Sexton Blake answered with a smile, as he strolled up in time to overhear the remark. "I am like you, Sir Charles, a non-betting man, or I would risk a fortune on her."

Hugh Moreton had also seen Starlight arrive, and he stood biting his nails and looking on savagely. He stood to win or lose all, and it seemed as if it was to be lose. His only hope was that the filly was no longer fit, but he could not blind his eyes to the fact that she looked tuned-up to perfection.

The saddling-bell rang, and the jockeys came trooping out. Most of them looked nervous, as well they might. Few of them had ever won the great classic race, and they knew well enough that to do so would be to set a hallmark on their career.

Jim Creed, a trifle pale, but with his mouth set determinedly, came along with his racing pad over his arm. He had already taken off his overcoat, and the halved pink and blue jacket and gold cap sparkled in the sun. In silence he and Fullman saddled Starlight, and he was given a leg-up by the trainer. A crowd was round the filly now, the mystery with regard to her making it a large one, and more than one good judge of a horse said that she was going to have something to say about the finish of the race.

The paddock gate was open, for the horses to be led out for the parade, and Fullman gave Creed his final instructions. "Keep her back, Jim," he said earnestly, "or she'll race her legs off before she reaches the straight. Remember her speed, and make use of it a couple of furlongs from the post."

Creed nodded, and Tinker, who had pleaded to be allowed to do it, led the grey out into the open. Once or twice she reared slightly, but there was no temper in it, nothing but fitness and lightheartedness.

"She'll win!" Sexton Blake said, with conviction. "Best come up on to the stands."

Sir Charles, Fullman and the detective made their way to a good place from which to see, and Hugh Moreton followed, though he did not go with them. He felt that his doom was sealed, but he still tried to hope that Pride of Place would reverse the home running and beat Starlight.

As the horses came past in the canter the roar of the book-makers was like the beating of a heavy sea on the shore. The King's horse, Kelhur, came first, and was rapturously cheered. Next to him came a rather weedy bay, full of speed, but looking as if he had little stamina; then the favourite, Stanton; and close behind him Pride of Place, who moved superbly, a very capable jockey named Fane on his back. The Lark and Half-a-Chance followed, Starlight at their heels. The grey scarcely seemed to rise from the ground, but burnt it up with great, far-reaching strides, Jim Creed holding her hard. Last came Snowball, a powerful black, the Nameless, and Mountain Dew.

Nine horses in all. A small field, but one that promised excitement, for everyone of them had been tried, and their connections were confident of victory. The odds were cramped in consequence, and though Stanton was favourite for money, there was not much in it, several others running him close in the betting. Starlight was quoted at sixes, while Pride of Place, naturally, was amongst the ruck.

Now followed the most trying time of all for those most interested in the horses—the trainers and owners—for the weariest time of waiting, when the nerve-strings are tautened to bursting tension, is when the horses are walking soberly down the hill, and so round to the hill on which the starting-gate for the Derby lies.

To Sir Charles, whose fingers gripped and ungripped continually the rail before him, it seemed that the horses had walked miles, and when he did think that they were all at the gate, it was only to find that the favourite, Stanton, was still a long way off, he having stopped to try and buck his jockey out of the saddle.

"They're at the gate," said Fullman, in an unsteady voice. "Let's hope that Starlight gets away!"

Every glass was turned towards the distant starting-gate, and more than once a false cry of "They're off!" was heard.

Five minutes passed—minutes of agony for Sir Charles Moreton.

"They're off!" There was no mistaking the yell of conviction that broke loose this time, and the bell that clanged out immediately confirmed it. The great race had started.

Only one horse had been left, and that was the outsider of the bunch, the Lark, so no one bothered about him, but turned their attentions to the others, who were sweeping along the top of the hill in a bunch.

"Both off all right," Fullman cried excitedly, "and the pace is hot enough to suit even Starlight!"

On swept the field, disappearing behind the bushes, and when the horses came into sight again it could be seen that the field was already tailed out.

"Kelhur leads!" a bookmaker cried, and others saw that the colours in front were the purple and gold of the King.

But so far there was nothing in it, and when the horses

swept round into the Tattenham Corner descent all of them were in the running save the Lark, Half-a-Chance, and Snowball.

"Creed's holding her well," Fullman said, in a low voice. "Don't speak!" Sir Charles panted in answer, and the trainer understood. He was just as excited, but his temperament made him feel that he wanted to shout.

Round Tattenham Corner, all in such a bunch that a spill seemed certain, safely into the straight, and the time had arrived when riding counts, when horses begin to show ahead, when the non-stayers tire.

"Pride of Place!" the crowd yelled, as the brown colt shot ahead clear of the others, and a cry of excitement broke from Hugh Moreton. He raised his glasses to look, but his hands shook so badly that he could make out nothing through them. Sexton Blake saw it, and smiled slightly. He reckoned that the man was soon going to be punished enough without being prosecuted for stealing Starlight.

Up the straight the horses came, the jockeys riding with a vengeance now. Pride of Place still led the way, a clear length out by himself; then came Kelhur, racing for his life without touch of whip; then Stanton, his jockey hugging the rails ready for a rush. Next came Starlight, Jim Creed sitting still on her; and, last of all, Nameless and Mountain Dew, who were obviously beginning to feel the pace.

Another furlong, and every whip out, and still Pride of Place led, the others seeming to be unable to cut him down. "Pride of Place! Pride of Place!" The bookmakers were shouting him home frantically, for if he won there would be mighty little taken out of their pockets.

"Kelhur!" the crowd yelled, as the King's horse came with a rush, but was unable to pass the leader.

"He's leaving it too late!" Sir Charles gasped. "No—look!" The words broke from Fullman like pistol-shots.

Suddenly the shouting had died down; the whole crowd appeared to have caught its breath in amazement. Suddenly the grey body of Starlight had come up with the leaders, though a few seconds ago he had been a clear length behind. Leading! The horse was a marvel!

Creed was riding now, but though he used the whip, it was only to give Starlight a gentle reminder of what was expected of her.

"Starlight!" broke out in a perfect roar. "Starlight w-w-wins!"

The grey had come away from her field, and, running straight as a gun-barrel, was racing for the post. "Starlight's won!"

A great gasp of emotion broke from Sir Charles Moreton, and he had to grip hard at the rail in front of him to keep on his feet.

Starlight had won right enough, Kelhur being second, Pride of Place hunting them home for third place.

"Come down and lead her in, Sir Charles," Sexton Blake said, taking him by the arm.

Sir Charles raised his head, colour came back to his face, and he squared his shoulders.

"Yes, I must go down," he said; "but you shall come with me."

Five minutes later Sir Charles led in his first Derby winner, and the crowd cheered, despite the fact that hardly one of them had backed the filly, for they knew that its owner was one of the finest and straightest men on the Turf. Friends crowded round to congratulate him, and the first to do so was the King.

"I have been beaten by a good sportsman and a good horse," he said.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

After the Races—The Man who Lost—Hugh Moreton Seeks Revenge.

DERBY DAY was over, and the crowds on the Downs were fast growing less, though the booths and shies were still doing a roaring business with those who evidently meant to make an evening of it. But the bookmakers had already packed up their stands and left rejoicing, for the day had been a bad one for backers, and so they were going home with their pockets well lined. As a matter of fact, that was no unusual circumstance for them.

The stands had emptied long since; the King had driven away through avenues of his loyal subjects, and along the course, and the road at the back of it; the horses that had run in the last race were being led to their quarters.

In the paddock, however, a few people still remained, and amongst them were Sir Charles Moreton, looking mightily pleased with himself, and Sexton Blake. The two were watching Fullman carefully adjusting Starlight's clothing, Tinker helping him.

"What do you propose to do with her, Mr. Blake?" Sir Charles asked.

"Take her to the stable where she has been all along," the detective answered. "It belongs to the Crown Inn, which lies just outside the town."

"And you?"

Sexton Blake raised a hand and touched the back of his head gingerly.

"I shall have a few days' rest," he answered. "I can still feel the effects of that blow, you know. I would stop and watch Starlight, but Fullman and Tinker will be enough. Besides, there is no reason for anyone to stop her winning the Oaks."

Sir Charles's eyes glistened, but a shadow darkened them almost immediately, and he looked round to see that no one was near enough to overhear.

"Who was it stole Starlight, or had her stolen?" he asked, in a low voice.

"A man who had backed Pride of Place to beat her," Sexton Blake answered hesitatingly.

"Hugh?" the old man groaned. "I thought so. The curse of gambling—that makes a man a criminal like that!"

"He has been punished," Sexton Blake observed. "I know to what an extent he had backed the colt, and he must be ruined."

"Ruined?" Sir Charles turned an anxious face towards the detective. "Is it as bad as that?"

"Yes."

For some minutes the old man stood still, and for the time being he had forgotten his recent triumph, that he had at last accomplished the ambition of a lifetime.

"Let us go home, Mr. Blake," he said at last. "I want to talk with you about what to do for my neph—for this man."

Inwardly, Sexton Blake decided that the best thing to do was to let Hugh Moreton go to the dogs, as he reckoned that he was bound to go that way sooner or later, but he said nothing.

After giving final instructions to Fullman and Tinker, Sexton Blake walked with Sir Charles out of the paddock, and they made their way silently up the course towards Tattenham Corner Station. All the light of excitement and pleasure had gone out of Sir Charles Moreton's eyes, and men who recognised him as he walked along, wondered why he looked so downcast after the victory of Starlight. Some of them wondered whether it was really true that he never had a bet, and whether he had backed Pride of Place, believing him to be the better horse.

"Ere you are, Sir Charles!" a vendor of whelks cried. "Only a brown! Ain't much out o' yer winnings!"

Sexton Blake tossed the man a shilling, but Sir Charles apparently did not even hear him, but walked straight on towards the station.

Suddenly Sexton Blake halted, and looked hard at a man who was seated on the bank of the road leading up to the station. He was dressed as a workman, but very neatly and cleanly, and a carefully-tied handkerchief was round his neck.

He sat there, his work-worn hands hanging down limply between his knees, his eyes staring straight ahead. There was something terribly pathetic in the attitude, something appealing.

"I will catch you up, Sir Charles," Sexton Blake said, and crossed over to where the man sat.

The man looked up listlessly as the detective halted in front of him.

"Lost?" Sexton Blake queried.

The man nodded without speaking.

"Much?"

"Everything!" the man said bitterly. "Not a stiver left to pay me fare home. Hoof it, I reckon!"

"That won't hurt you," Sexton Blake said sharply.

"Hurt me?" A little animation returned to the man's face, and he clenched his great right fist and hit at the palm of his left hand. "I've walked twice as far to look for work, many a time when jobs have bin scarce. Don't you think I'm afraid o' the walk?"

"Of what, then?" Sexton Blake queried, though he could guess, for he had seen many a case like this before.

"It's the kids and the missus," the man answered, with a groan. "She never knew as how I was comin' here to-day. I was goin' ter make money. I thought, an' go home an' chuck it in her lap." The man laughed harshly. "When I go home now, it'll be to tell her I've bin a fool, an' that some o' the sticks must go if the kids are to have grub this week."

"You fool!" Sexton Blake said sharply. The workman rose angrily to his feet, his eyes gleaming.

"Easy!" he growled. "It's bad enough ter lose without havin' it chucked in yer face by people it ain't nothin' ter do with. If I calls myself names, that's my business; but I don't take it from no one else."

The man jerked angrily at his scarf, as if half inclined to choke himself.

"Advice is more plentiful than help," he sneered.

"But I do mean to help you," Sexton Blake said quietly.

"How much have you lost?"

"Two pounds," the man answered sullenly.

Sexton Blake drew two sovereigns from his pocket.

"What will you do if I give you these?" he asked.

The workman threw up his head defiantly, and there was a look of determination in his eyes.

"Go home, sir," he said eagerly, "and never go to a race again—I swear it!"

That the man meant what he said was obvious, and the detective handed the money to him.

"Go home," he said sternly. "Tell your wife what a fool you have been, and of the promise you have made."

Something very like a sob broke from the workman as he dropped the coins into his pocket.

"I will, sir," he answered huskily, "and Heaven bless you!"

Sexton Blake turned and hurried after Sir Charles Moreton, the two of them being just in time to catch the train for town. It was a silent journey up, for the glamour of Starlight's win no longer held Sir Charles, and all his thoughts were of his nephew whom gambling had turned into a criminal.

It was eight at night before they arrived at Moreton Hall, and the groom who met them with the trap was amazed to see how glum his master looked. He had had a modest sum on Starlight, and was pretty well as pleased and proud as if he owned the filly.

Dinner was ready when the Hall was reached, and it was the butler's turn to be surprised at the glumness of his master. It was a depressing meal, Sexton Blake, despite his powers as a conversationalist, being quite unable to rouse Sir Charles from the gloom into which he had fallen; and he was not sorry when the meal was over, and they adjourned to the library. The detective lit a cigar, but his host sat moodily in a chair, answering briefly the remarks put to him, and at ten o'clock he rose and said that he would go to bed.

"I may as well do the same," Sexton Blake answered. "Rest will do me a world of good just now."

He held out his hand to his host.

"Don't worry, Sir Charles," he said earnestly. "Hugh Moreton has come his cropper, and, who knows, it may make a new man of him if you give him a chance to start life afresh."

"He shall have his chance," Sir Charles answered, in a shaking voice. "Thank Heaven no one but we two know of his disgrace."

Up in his bed-room Sexton Blake undressed; but, feeling that he could not sleep, he sat by the open window, the cool night air easing his head, which still ached unpleasantly. He thought over the events of the past few days, but felt no triumph in them, for he, too, was depressed by the thought of Hugh Moreton, though he had not the same sympathy as Sir Charles for him.

Thinking sent the detective into a doze, which developed into sleep, and when he awoke it was to hear the clock of the training stables sounding the hour of midnight.

"Time to get to bed," Sexton Blake muttered; but when he turned in, it was to find that sleep would not come to him again. Instead, his head throbbed violently as soon as he laid it on the pillow, and he decided to get up and have a cigar.

"Hallo!" he said, as he felt in his coat. "Where the dickens has that case gone? Ah, I remember, I must have left it in the library."

Slipping his dressing-gown on, Sexton Blake opened the door of his room quietly, so as to arouse no one else in the house, and stepped out into the corridor. He found the stairs with some difficulty in the darkness, and descended them cautiously until he reached the great hall. Then he turned to the right to grope his way to the library.

Under the door of the library shone a ray of light.

Sexton Blake stopped short with a start. What did the light mean? Had burglars broken in? Then he smiled, telling himself that Sir Charles had been unable to sleep, too, and had come down again. Of course, that was the explanation.

The detective's thin slippers made no sound as he moved towards the room, and as the handle of the door turned easily, he opened it without even making a click.

"You!" Sexton Blake gasped, then stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

At the right-hand side of the room lay a safe, an old-fashioned affair that Sir Charles had never troubled to replace, though he often kept large sums of money in it; and before it knelt Hugh Moreton, a key in his right hand, which he had evidently been trying on the lock.

With an oath, the man rose to his feet; but the window

of the room was placed close to the door, and he would have had to pass Sexton Blake to escape that way. That he had entered by that means was obvious, for it was open wide.

"Quite a surprise visit," Sexton Blake observed quietly. He had no fear of this man, despite the fact that he himself was unarmed. "I fancied that your career of crime was finished."

Hugh Moreton, his face a dirty-white, licked his dry lips.

"What are you going to do?" he asked, in a husky whisper. "Give me up, I suppose?"

"It is no more than you deserve," Sexton Blake answered coldly.

"Isn't it?" Hugh Moreton said, trying to bluster. "Whose fault is it that I am ruined? My uncle's. If he'd have given me the straight tip, I should have made a fortune instead of losing one." The man's manner changed, and his voice was almost whining when he continued: "I wanted money to back Starlight for the Oaks. She's a certainty, and I'd have made all back that I—"

"And so you try to rob the man who has always been like a father to you."

Then Hugh Moreton regained something of his courage, and, with an oath, he leapt towards the window. He was as big a man as the detective, and he reckoned that he would be able to fight his way past him and so escape through the window.

Sexton Blake had expected something of this kind, and as the man came within range, his right shot out and caught him between the eyes. The force of the blow sent him reeling back against a heavy chair, and it fell with a crash to the ground. He was up on his feet in a second, but the blow had dazed him and knocked the fight out of him.

"Don't you try that again," Sexton Blake said coolly, "or I'll thrash you before I let you go!"

"Let me go?" Hugh Moreton gasped, in amazement, an eager expression in his eyes.

"Yes," the detective answered. "Nothing would please me better than to get you five years' imprisonment, but I am thinking of your uncle. I shall let you go, but—"

The sentence broke off sharply on Sexton Blake's lips, and he bent sideways, listening. The sound of a footfall coming along the hall had reached his ears, and he guessed that Sir Charles, aroused by the fall of the chair, was coming down.

At all costs he must not let him see Hugh Moreton—he had had trouble enough already.

"Quick—behind the curtain of the bookcase!" he ordered, in a whisper. "I will give you a chance to escape later."

Hugh Moreton needed no second bidding, but slipped behind the heavy curtain that hung before one of the bookcases with which the walls were lined. He was none too soon, for as the curtain fell in front of him, the door opened, and Sir Charles, a revolver in his hand, entered.

Sexton Blake was just selecting a cigar from his case, which had been lying on the table.

"What is wrong?" Sir Charles asked.

"Wrong?" Sexton Blake echoed, looking beautifully surprised. "I could not sleep, Sir Charles, so came down to fetch my cigar-case, which I had left here. I am sorry that I knocked over the chair and disturbed you."

Sir Charles looked relieved, and dropped the revolver into the pocket of his dressing-gown.

"I thought it might be burglars," he said. "There is a large sum of money in that safe, and—"

Sir Charles stopped, his eyes fixed on the floor at a spot near the safe. Sexton Blake looked in that direction, too, and noticed something that he had not seen before.

Just in front of the safe lay a soft green felt hat.

With a quick movement, he stepped forward; but Sir Charles was before him, snatching it up and looking into it.

"Hugh's!" he gasped wildly. "What has he been doing here?"

"I—"

"Where is he?" Sir Charles cried. "There was reason for the upsetting of the chair. Where is he? I say."

There was a faint rustle, and Sir Charles leapt at the bookcase. He gripped the curtain in both hands, tearing it from the rings, and leaving Hugh Moreton revealed.

For a moment the two men faced each other, the old and the young, then Sir Charles leapt fiercely at his nephew's throat, showing a marvellous strength for a man of his years. Back he pulled him, tripped, and went to the floor.

Sexton Blake sprang forward, dragging the men apart, and helping Sir Charles to his feet. The latter stood trembling, his burst of fury over.

"Go!" he cried, in a shaking voice, pulling his revolver from his pocket. "Go, before I forget that you are of my flesh and blood!"

Hugh Moreton hurried towards the door, but the revolver covered him and held him back.

"By the way you came—the window—you thief!" Sir Charles cried.

Hugh Moreton lost no time in obeying, but with one leg across the window-sill he paused.

"You have ruined me," he snarled, "and I shall not forget!"

Sir Charles's anger blazed out again, and he levelled his revolver, but only to have it wrenched from his hand by Sexton Blake. The loss of the weapon seemed to kill his anger.

"Help me upstairs," he said, in a shaking voice. "I can stand no more!"

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

Hugh Moreton Followed—The Purchase of a Revolver.

FOR half an hour Sexton Blake stopped with Sir Charles in his room, but at the end of that time he rose.

"Stay with me," the old man pleaded. "Why need you go?"

Sexton Blake knew well enough, yet he hesitated to tell Sir Charles.

"Well, I have," the detective said sharply. "I undertook to see that Starlight should go fit to the post, and I am going to keep my bargain."

Sir Charles shrugged his shoulders wearily.

"As you will," he answered. "But remember this, at all costs this villain of a nephew of mine must not be exposed."

Sexton Blake shrugged his shoulders in turn.

"I cannot agree with you there, Sir Charles," he said; "but your wish shall be law. Besides, some day, a man of that kind is bound to fall into the hands of the police."

"I will wait for that day," Sir Charles answered, with determination. "My hand shall not be the one to give him up."

Once out of the window Hugh Moreton hurried across the grounds, with which he was so familiar, as rapidly as any common thief would have done. His heart was in his mouth still, for he feared that Sir Charles might repent of having let him go. But by the time he had reached the road some of his fear had left him, and he thought of his last words to the old man.



The animal that the man emerged with was so ancient that she scarcely seemed able to stand.

"You think that Hugh will do something desperate?" the old man asked, in a low voice.

"I fear for Starlight," Sexton Blake answered, realising that there was nothing for it but to own to the truth.

"Hugh Moreton knows by now where she is stabled, and in his half-mad state he may make an attempt to injure her."

"He dare not!" Sir Charles gasped.

"He has dared a good deal already," Sexton Blake answered. "He said that he would have revenge, and what other way has he of getting it? He knows that your great ambition is to win the double event with the filly."

"It was," Sir Charles answered sadly. "I don't think I have any ambitions now."

"I meant it!" he muttered fiercely. "I'll have my own back somehow!"

By instinct the man walked towards the station, not remembering until he reached it that there was no train until eight in the morning. He cursed, and started to tramp about the roads, for the night was chilly. Later it came on to rain, and he crouched behind a hayrick for shelter. The man who had moved in some of the best society, was as glad of the shelter as a tramp would have been.

And all the time he crouched under the rick his brain was full of thoughts of vengeance. He did not think of the grievous wrong that he had tried to do his uncle, but only of the fact that gambling had cost him a fortune, and for

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that he blamed the man who had always been so kind to him. His own folly did not enter his brain. Perhaps it was too full of thoughts of vengeance for that.

At six in the morning Hugh Moreton left the shelter of the rick, the rain having stopped, and hurried once more in the direction of the station. He entered the inn that lay opposite, much to the amazement of the landlord, who was sweeping out the bar.

"Fine morning for a walk, sir," the man said respectfully.

"Yes," Hugh Moreton answered shortly. "Give me a brandy, I'm cold."

The landlord hurried to supply the drink, and stared as he saw the other gulp it down.

"Same again!" he ordered.

Something was wrong, the landlord told himself. Hugh Moreton must have had a row with his uncle. They never had been on the best of terms.

"Fine win of Starlight's, sir," he remarked.

"Yes," Hugh Moreton growled, his eyes blazing.

"Ought to have meant a tidy pile for you, sir, if I may say so, seeing as you saw the trial," the landlord continued innocently.

Hugh Moreton's eyes positively looked murder, but he kept back an angry answer.

"Pretty good," he managed to say, with a show of indifference. "That brandy of yours is weak stuff. Give me another."

"It's stronger'n you think for, sir," the landlord ventured to remark, as he obeyed. "P'raps you'd like a little breakfast—or are you going back to the Hall for it, sir?"

"No, I'm going to town!" Hugh Moreton snapped. "Bring me anything you've got."

Just in time for the first train, Hugh Moreton left the inn, and when he did so his face was flushed with drink and excitement. The brandy had roused his numbed brain, and he no longer sought a way of having vengeance on his uncle.

He would stop Starlight from winning the double. There should be no uncertainty this time. He would shoot her.

The thought that he might be captured after carrying out his mad intention entered his brain, but it did not trouble him. He was ruined, anyway, so what did the future matter? Besides, it would give him a certain satisfaction to bring his uncle's name into such a case.

Another early traveller left by the train for London, but he slipped into it absolutely as it was moving out of the station.

Sexton Blake had waited through the night, too, and now he was following his man.

In London Hugh Moreton did not stop long, and it was only a little after noon that he reached Epsom. The town was a-bustle with excitement, for every day of the Epsom meeting is little short of being as popular as Derby Day, and the usually quiet streets were overflowing with people. Perhaps it was the crowds that prevented Hugh Moreton from noticing that everywhere he went another man followed. Not that he would have recognised Sexton Blake, anyway, for the latter had taken the precaution of disguising himself, while in the train, by means of a false moustache.

At a hotel in the town Hugh Moreton had lunch, though it might have been said to consist more of drink than food, and at the next table sat the disguised detective, placidly eating a very fair meal.

Then out into the town again, and along the road to the Downs just in time for the third race of the day, and still Hugh Moreton was dogged by Sexton Blake.

Two horses Hugh Moreton backed, but only to the extent of a sovereign each, and then it was with outside book-makers. Both lost, and, cursing under his breath, he walked back moodily to Epsom Town. Up the principal street he went, stopping at last outside a pawbroker's. Surely he had not got so hard up that he would have to sell anything, Sexton Blake wondered.

After a brief hesitation Hugh Moreton entered the shop, and a look of understanding came into the detective's eyes as he saw a heavy, second-hand revolver moved from the window by an assistant.

Was Hugh Moreton going to take a desperate way out of his troubles? Sexton Blake was convinced that that was not the case, and that whatever he wanted the weapon for it was not for the purpose of turning it against himself.

When Hugh Moreton emerged from the shop he looked round sharply and guiltily, as if imagining that everyone in the street had watched his purchase. His hand was pressed against the outside of his right-hand pocket, as if to make sure that the weapon was still there. Then he hurried away, just a trifle unsteadily now, making for the outskirts of the town. On the opposite side of the pavement walked Sexton Blake, who looked to the life a man who was busy wasting time, but though he stopped to look in shops he never allowed his quarry to get out of sight.

In this way the two men left the town, and Sexton Blake knew that he was right in thinking that Hugh Moreton was making for the Crown, in the stables of which Starlight was stabled, resting for the great race that she was to run on the morrow. That she would win it very few people had the slightest doubt, for the filly had won the Derby in such decisive style that it seemed to be any odds on her for the double event.

It was quite dark, with a threatening of rain in the air, and out here, outside the town, there were very few people about. True, the Crown Inn was full enough, but the people inside its doors kept there. So it was that Hugh Moreton was able to make his way to the back of the stables without risk of being observed.

Sexton Blake saw him climb the fence of the field that adjoined the stables, and crouched in the shadow of a wall and watched him. He saw the man look over the fence, then turn and enter the inn by the front way.

"He's not such a fool as to make the attempt now," Sexton Blake mused; "but he's made quite certain where Starlight is stabled."

Into the inn went Hugh Moreton, but this time Sexton Blake did not follow him, but remained hidden in the shadow of the wall.

In the saloon-bar Hugh Moreton quickly became popular, for what money he had left he spent freely, treating anyone and everyone who would allow him to pay for their drinks. Nor did he stint himself, as his flushed face and thick speech testified.

"Must've backed Starlight for the Derby," the landlord remarked, with a wink, to a customer. "Wish there was more like him about."

"Can't all be born in the know," the other answered sulkily; for, so far, the Epsom week had been a disastrous one for him. "I reckon it's the fools who have all the luck."

The landlord suppressed a grin, and looked as solemn as an owl.

"You've won?" he asked innocently. "Had a good week?"

"Drop it!" the other snapped. "Chaps as funny as you ought to be stuffed and kept in glass cases."

The landlord grinned, well pleased with his little joke, and pulled out his watch.

"Time, gents," he cried—"time!"

Drinks were finished hastily, and the inn quickly emptied, most of the men who had been in its bars hurrying away towards the town for the night. But one man slipped round the corner of the inn, and stood there in the shadow.

Hugh Moreton was not sober, yet the strong drink had left his brain clear, and so he hid away until all the others had gone. His resolution was stronger than ever now, and as soon as the coast was clear he meant to shoot Starlight and make a bolt for safety.

Like many a man of his type, Hugh Moreton could argue himself into believing anything, and he was quite convinced that he was a grievously-wronged man. He blamed all his losses, his very downfall, to his uncle, and he felt that he had a right to take this chance of vengeance. In his drink-muddled brain was the notion that such an act would be one of justice.

The last of the men from the inn walked off down the road, but not until his footfalls had entirely died away did Hugh Moreton move. Then he slipped unsteadily from the shadows, clambered over into the field, and made his way round to the back of the stables. At the gate he paused and listened, heard nothing, and pushed at it with his shoulder. It opened easily and noiselessly, and he passed in.

Softly he crept across the yard, and he held the heavy revolver that he had purchased in his hand.

Where was Sexton Blake, the man who had sworn to keep Starlight safe for to-morrow's race? There was no sign of him anywhere, and it seemed that Hugh Moreton was to accomplish his foul design unchecked.

The latter already knew where the filly's box was situated, and he made his way round unhesitatingly to the side of the stables, where a small window enabled anyone to look into the box.

Under this window Hugh Moreton crouched, listening intently, and he was rewarded by hearing the click of a hoof and the rustle of straw. Slowly he rose up, until his head was above the sill of the window, and peered into the box. There was no light in there, and as the moon was behind a bank of clouds, there was little to be seen.

But there was enough visible to suit Hugh Moreton. He could make out the dim figure of a horse shrouded in thick clothing.

Just for a second the man hesitated, then the hammer of the revolver went back with a click, and the hand that held the weapon was steadied on the window-sill.

Crack! The glass of the window shivered, a groan came

from inside the box, and Hugh Moreton saw the dark object fall.

That was enough for the man. Round on his heels he spun, dashed out through the gateway, and off over the fields. His heart was beating with exultation. He had had vengeance at last; but even then he had no desire to be captured.

Scarcely had the man run more than a hundred yards before a light showed in the box, as Sexton Blake entered with a stable-lamp in his hand. With him was Tinker.

On the floor of the box lay a heap of clothing, padded with straw, that had been held in place by a string. In Tinker's hand was a knife, with which he had cut the string immediately Hugh Moreton had fired the shot.

"Our little scheme has really been quite successful, my lad," the detective said, with a smile, examining the hole that the revolver had bored through the horse-clothing. "I think we need fear nothing more from Mr. Hugh Moreton."

"He ought to be lynched, sir!" the boy answered, with his eyes gleaming.

"It would almost be a waste of rope," his master answered.

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

Oaks Day—A Bad Debt—Brought to Her Knees—A Win that Made History.

OAKS DAY is very different to Derby Day, though it may not appear so to the unobservant. In the first place, many of the booths have been removed, notably the boxing ones; secondly, it is a more orderly crowd, for women are always there in ladies' numbers. It has for many years been known as Ladies' Day, and with good reason. Well-to-do shopkeepers drive their wives to it, artisans who can spare the time bring their womenfolk by the humbler train; while some couples even walk in from the neighbouring towns and villages.

Oaks Day is the day for the wives of racegoers, and the women enjoy it none the less because most of them go to no other race-meeting in the course of the year. Many of them have their small bets, and get wildly excited about them; but very few of them really possess the gambling fever, which is as well for the homes of England. Enough money is lost that way by the men, without the women adding their share.

This particular Oaks Day was brilliantly fine, the threatening weather of the previous night having entirely cleared away, and so it was that the crowd was well up to the average.

Among the crowd on the hill was Hugh Moreton. His face was haggard and drawn, and there were shadows under his eyes that showed plainly that he had not slept after killing—or so he believed—Starlight, the filly who had been favourite for the great race of the day since she had won the Derby.

If the truth were known, he had made no attempt to sleep, but had walked restlessly about the Downs all night, having breakfast at a little village quite five miles away from the course. He had been unable to obtain a paper there, and even if he could have done so, it was scarcely likely that a report of the killing of Starlight would be in it.

On the course, however, there were plenty of early editions of the evening papers to be bought, and as Hugh Moreton opened one his fingers trembled so badly that he tore the flimsy paper. The type swam before his eyes, but even when he steadied himself enough to read he could see no mention of the death or injury of Starlight.

Yet he had seen the filly fall after he had fired the shot through the window.

He bought a second paper, only to find it equally blank, and to learn that every important paper gave Starlight as their "nap" for the day.

What did it mean? Surely the truth must have leaked out by now? Why, the bell was already going to clear the course for the first race.

Hugh Moreton crossed to a temporary saloon, and fortified himself with a drink; then he moved along the hill to where most of the bookmakers were gathered. They had stopped calling the prices for the Oaks, especially as very few people were plucky enough to back their fancies against such a filly as Starlight, and were devoting their energies to the race just about to take place.

"Four to one the field!" Ben Simmonds was shouting. "Four to one—any price outsiders! Ain't anyone got no money to-day? Here you are! Five to one the field! Sixes Bluebell, eights Never Mind, tens—no, twelves Glacier!"

Ben Simmonds was a good bookmaker, one of the soundest who betted out of the ring, and Hugh Moreton crossed over to him.

"What's the 'oss, sir?" Simmonds asked at once. "Got to give long prices nowadays."

"How about the Oaks?" Hugh Moreton queried.

He had known for some time that a filly called Elixir was very much fancied by the small stable who owned her, and had intended to back her until seeing the performance of Starlight. Well, that filly was out of the way now, so he would be able to follow his original fancy.

"Two to one on Starlight," the bookmaker answered, "and a good price at that. I reckon it's picking up money, bar accidents."

Hugh Moreton started; he could not help it. He was amazed that this man did not know of the accident to Starlight, for his profession was usually very well informed on such matters.

"She's—she's a starter, then?" he managed to say.

"Bill," Simmonds shouted to the bookmaker on the next stand, "ere's a gent wants to know if Starlight's a starter."

"Been in the sun," Bill answered, with a grin. "Wish she wasn't going. I booked her more'n I like now afore she won the Derby."

Ben Simmonds looked down from his stand at Hugh Moreton, and something in the latter's manner made him look curious.

"What made you think she wasn't going?" he asked.

Hugh Moreton felt very much inclined to run away, feeling as if his guilt showed on his face, but he stood his ground.

"I heard something about an accident to her," he said huskily.

"Accident be blowed!" the bookmaker exclaimed. "She'll fair eat the race if she don't come down. She's a stone better than the rest of 'em, an' that's putting it mild."

Hugh Moreton hesitated. Could he have failed, after all? he asked himself. The memory of seeing the filly fall came back to him, and he laughed softly, fully convincing the bookmaker that either he was mad, or had been drinking.

"Come on!" he said sharply. "Is this just afternoon tea, or do yer want to back anything?"

"What price Elixir?" Moreton asked, pulling himself together.

"Tens," Simmonds answered promptly.

Hugh Moreton drew two sovereigns from his pocket, and none but he knew how very little money that left him.

"To win," he said shortly.

"Twenty pound to two," Simmonds said to his clerk, and handed a ticket to Moreton. "Wish you luck, sir, but I'd back Starlight at tens on."

The horses for the first race—a five furlong scramble—were just going past to the post, and Hugh Moreton moved to a good place on the hill from which to see the race. He fancied a horse for it, but he could not back it without leaving himself absolutely penniless. Even Sir Charles could not guess to what straits the loss of Pride of Place had brought his nephew.

The bell rang, proclaiming the start of the race, the silk jackets of the jockeys came flashing down the hill in a bunch, a few seconds later they spread out, and the bookmakers rapturously cheered a rank outsider home, to see him score from the favourite by a bare head. Disappointed backers promptly tore up their betting-tickets, and turned to their race-cards to find another certainty for the second race.

Hugh Moreton, with the excitement of racing burning in him again, began to feel more at his ease. He moved over to the stands of the bookmakers, and stood biting his lip as he saw that Starlight still figured in the list of runners for the Oaks. A little more of his slender funds went on drink, and the spirits restored his confidence.

Let these fools wait until the numbers for the great race went up, then they would see who was right. He laughed. He ought to know.

Right through the time between the first and second race odds were being shouted on Starlight, and people were taking them freely. The second race was run, then came the real event of the day—the Oaks.

"Now we shall see," Hugh Moreton muttered.

Minutes that seemed hours to him went by before the men at the number-board started to put up the runners and jockeys. Hugh Moreton stood with his card and pencil in his hands, ready to check them off.

"Number one, Freda, goes," he muttered, as the number went up; "number two, Elvira; three, Fly-by-Night; four and five don't go; six, Starlight!"

The name broke from Hugh Moreton in a gasp, and people round him turned and stared, wondering what was the matter. Other numbers went up, bringing the total to twelve runners in all, but Moreton did not see them. A mist had come over his eyes; his brain was reeling; he felt that he should faint.

"Ere, 'old up!" a gruff voice said, and a hand gripped

Hugh Moreton by the arm. "Too much sun, that's what it is. Ought ter bring a sunshade with yer."

Hugh Moreton shook his arm free almost roughly, and made an effort to control himself.

"I'm all right," he said; but he was not all right enough to see that the good Samaritan had taken his watch, and was making quickly for a distant part of the crowd.

What had happened? Hugh Moreton asked himself the question a hundred times, but his brain was in too much of a whirl for him to be able to find an answer to it. All he knew was that he had failed to injure Starlight. Yet if he could believe his own eyes he had seen her fall.

The course had already been cleared, and policemen were chasing the last few loiterers from it, as the first of the fillies had been led out for the canter past the stands.

Out they came, each one at the end of a long lunging-rein. Some walked demurely, as if they had been accustomed to this kind of thing all their lives; others reared and plunged, anxious apparently to start the race at once and get it over.

Hugh Moreton made an effort to steady himself, and when he looked he made out Starlight plainly enough, her colour being so different to that of the others. Besides, if he had any doubts, there were his uncle's colours to assure him that he had made no mistake.

Past the stand the fillies went, then back, one after another, pulling to get their heads; and as Starlight passed, a great roar of cheering broke from the stands, for most of the people there had seen her win the Derby. Even those who were interested in other horses cheered, unable to restrain their enthusiasm for so fine a type of the thoroughbred.

Starlight was not to have it all her own way, however, for Freda, belonging to Mr. Sidney Lambert, had been tried both against good horses and the watch, and both had made her out to be more than ordinarily smart.

The faith of her connections had possibly been shaken by Starlight's Derby performance; but even then they refused to entertain the possibility of defeat. Rosette, too, was fancied, having been kept since a two-year-old specially for this event.

About Elixir, the filly that Hugh Moreton had backed, little was known, and as she came from an unfashionable stable she was certain to start at a longish price. The rest of the competitors all had some pretensions to form, but none stood out in startling relief from the others.

"Three to one on Starlight! Any price outsiders!" That was the cry that sounded everywhere, and good judges of horses even took that price after seeing the manner in which the favourite galloped past the stand. A few of the very clever contingent had expected to see signs of staleness after her Wednesday's race, but they could not find them when they saw her.

"Four to one Starlight!"

The tic-tac men in the ring had signalled that the filly was still being backed, and the odds on her were becoming even longer.

"Five to one against Freda; twelve Elixir!"

The bookies were trying every other horse, continually lengthening their odds, but they had few takers. A horse at four to one was too much to go against, and the people who did back others to beat it, only did so in a gambling spirit. Their motto was "accidents may happen."

Hugh Moreton heard the cries of the bookies, and knew that Starlight was going to start a record favourite, when only a week or so back a long price could have been got about her. He inwardly cursed himself, and also the Shuffler and Jerry Long for giving him the information about Pride of Place, though he himself had paid them to get it.

As he thought of the two men, his eyes gleamed angrily, for they had led him to believe that they had succeeded in getting the filly out of the way. He would settle with them some day.

As the horses walked up the hill to the starting-gate most of the bookmakers had stopped shouting the odds. Starlight was unbackable, and punters would touch nothing else. Even then the race lost none of its interest, for it is not often that racegoers have a chance of seeing such a filly as Starlight.

Up in the grand stand stood Sexton Blake, his glasses levelled, and beside him was Fullman. Sir Charles, entirely knocked up by the shock of discovering his nephew trying to burgle his safe, had been unable to leave his bed, so

that if the filly won, it would be Fullman who would lead her in.

"She'll do it!" Sexton Blake said quietly.

"If she doesn't, there'll be some groaning!" the trainer answered. "I reckon there isn't a hundred pounds of public money on all the other runners put together."

"Trouble at the post!" Sexton Blake remarked.

"And likely to be!" Fullman answered. "You can't get a dozen fillies off in a line without a bit of trouble. What's that rearing up and refusing to join the others?"

"Elixir," Sexton Blake said, making out the colours through his glasses. "She'll kick some of the others, if they're not careful!"

Sexton Blake watched the horses closely, and saw them gradually brought into line, the starter exercising the utmost patience.

Straight at last.

"Off!"

The horses had broken away from the gate, right enough; but it was not that that forced a cry from Sexton Blake.

"Elixir's crossed the favourite, and brought her down!" someone cried.

"Only on her knees! She's up again!" another answered.

As the tapes went up Elixir had swerved right across Starlight, just as she was jumping off the mark, and bumped her so severely that she had come to her knees. But Creed had kept his seat somehow, and recovered her, but at what a cost!

Fully a dozen lengths now divided Starlight from the rest of the field. Even Elixir, who had caused the trouble, had suffered nothing, and was up with the rest.

Hugh Moreton saw the accident, and when he saw the way Starlight was left he grinned. His one ambition was to see the filly lose.

"It's all over," Fullman groaned up on the stands; "she can never make that up!"

"Jim Creed evidently isn't of your frame of mind!" Sexton Blake answered. "Look, he's going after his field, and he may wear it down!"

Fullman shook his head dejectedly.

"She might if it was her first race this week," he said; "but not after Wednesday!"

A strange silence had fallen over the vast crowd. Many had seen the incident, many who had backed Starlight, and the distance she was left behind held them dumb. It wasn't so much the money they would lose, but the thought that the filly should be robbed of her chance in such a manner.

Along past the bushes the horses swept at a hot pace, Freda, Elvira, and Elixir in the van, the rest close behind them, with Starlight right out by herself behind.

To most it seemed that she had not caught up a foot, but Sexton Blake, watching every stride through his powerful glasses, was certain that she was gaining slowly but surely.

Round the bend now, the horses in the same order, and others cried out that Starlight was making up ground.

"What if she is?" Fullman said bitterly. "The effort at that pace is enough to kill her!"

"I doubt it!" Sexton Blake answered hopefully. "She's made up ground without a touch of the whip, so she can't have been forced so very much!"

Down the hill at Tattenham Corner, and round into the straight, and the crowd lining the rails began to cheer.

Rosette had come up with the leaders now, the whole four of them racing abreast. Fly-by-Night was out of it, and the same could be said of Daisy Queen and Boulevard.

"She's gaining!" Sexton Blake cried, and his voice was shaking with excitement.

Jim Creed knew his work well, and despite the way he had been left, he had not given up hope, knowing, as he did, the marvellous powers of the filly palpitating under him.

Wide at Tattenham Corner he took her, causing the know-alls to groan at what they called his bad riding. But there was good, sound judgment in it, for it gave him a field clear of the other horses, and if he was to win he would need every bit of it.

Under him Starlight was moving like a piece of machinery, holding well to her nit, and at present she showed not the slightest sign of flagging.

Six lengths had been made up, six or more; but Jim Creed knew what the remaining four or five meant. With any other horse, he would have considered victory impossible, but not to Starlight.

Down the straight the horses thundered, a cloud of dust rising from the dry course, and Creed was glad that he had pulled Starlight right out.

Two furlongs were covered, and it was not until then that Creed made his effort. There were few better judges of pace-riding, and he knew that if he made his rush too soon it would give the others a chance to catch him again.

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Now! The whip just flicked Starlight's flanks, and, almost imperceptibly, her great stride lengthened, and she drew nearer to the field.

"On, lass—on!" Creed cried to her.

And the filly, as if understanding, raced as she had never raced before.

Nearer and nearer came the winning-post, and Freda and Elvira, tiring, came back level with Starlight. Only a length ahead galloped Elixir, her jockey riding her hard to make sure of victory. He did not notice Starlight as yet.

"Starlight!"

The name broke from the crowd in a great roar of enthusiasm, and Elixir's jockey turned his head for a second, and saw the favourite at his horse's flanks.

It was a race with a vengeance, and only a length to go.

Would the favourite make up this last half length?

Creed was riding for all he knew now, but on his hands only. He knew that Starlight was doing her best, that to use the whip would be sheer cruelty. Low on her neck he crouched, filly lifting her, and beside him was the red jacket of Elixir's jockey.

"Starlight!"

Creed sat up, his efforts leaving him so weak that he felt as if he would fall out of the saddle, and it was only the shouting of the crowd that told him he had won. Later he was to learn that Starlight had just got home from Elixir by a short head. A fine finish to a remarkable race.

As the horses were led back, Starlight was fairly mobbed by a cheering crowd anxious to get a glimpse of her at close quarters. Fullman's face was one large smile as he led her in.

Sexton Blake was at the telegraph-office, wiring Sir Charles news of the victory. His message explained the race. It ran:

"Left a dozen lengths, but won by a short head. Best horse in training.—BLAKE."

And before the other races were over an answering wire came to the detective. He smiled as he read:

"News has cured me. Come down with Fullman to celebrate.—MORETON."

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER.

Broke to the World—Bound for London—The Threat and What Followed—Flight.

AS Hugh Moreton stood on the hill he pulled his remaining money from his pocket, and counted it. Eight shillings in all, and where he was to get more he did not know. His name was already on the black-list of people who lent money, and he was fully aware that it would be of no use applying to them any more.

His uncle? Hugh Moreton remembered his attempts to lame or kill Starlight, and guessed that his uncle knew that he had been behind all the attempts. Under those circumstances, it would hardly be much good applying to him for help.

He might raise four or five pounds on his watch, he decided; but, when he slipped his fingers into his pocket, he found that it was gone, and cursed under his breath. Everything seemed against him now.

The racing for the day was over, and most of the traps and carriages and coaches had already left the course. On the hill the crowd was thinning, too, anxious to catch the specials back to town, especially as the evening was settling in gloomily, with every sign of being wet. On the Epsom Downs only a rabbit could find shelter from the rain.

Hugh Moreton sank into a state of dazed indifference, and followed in the wake of the crowd. True, he had a dim idea that he was making for Tattenham Corner Station, but he soon found that he was walking down towards Epsom Town. He hesitated, then decided that it did not matter, and went on. He was long a man in a dream, and a bad dream at that.

All around him was laughter. Youths and girls were blowing shrill cardboard trumpets, others were throwing streamers of paper about, all were enjoying themselves after their own fashion. What did it matter if that fashion did happen to be a bit noisy?

A tooting motor-car nearly ran Hugh Moreton down, but he never even heard the angry remarks yelled at him when the chauffeur had to pull up dead. He was beyond taking notice of anything just now, even the future no longer troubling him.

Down in Epsom Town, Hugh Moreton made something of an effort to pull himself together, the walk from the Downs having cleared his brain a trifle. What should he do? he asked himself. He searched his pockets again, but still found that he had only eight shillings and a revolver. It

was the same weapon with which he had tried to shoot Starlight, and as his fingers touched it a quick, eager look leapt into his eyes.

"It is the only way!" he muttered.

With his head held higher, the man passed through the busy streets, only stopping once for a stiff drink of brandy, and for a short distance followed the stream of traffic moving back towards London. Then he branched off into a quiet country road, and walked along it swiftly.

Hugh Moreton had decided to give up the fight. In his pocket was the revolver that he had bought to kill Starlight with. Well, it was going to serve a useful purpose, after all, he told himself bitterly; it was going to take him the only way out of his troubles.

Even in this side-road, however, Hugh Moreton found people, and so he had to hurry farther afield. It did not occur to him that he might just as well shoot himself openly. He was like an animal who creeps into a hole to die.

Round to the left he went, into a place little more than a lane, leant his back against a tree, and drew the revolver from his pocket. He clicked back the chamber to make sure that the barrels were loaded, and shivered at sight of the neat brass ends of the cartridges. He noticed the little darker spot in the centre, where the cap that fired the cartridge lay, and shivered. It looked inexpressibly evil to him.

Ah, well, what was the good of hesitating? There was no other way.

He raised the weapon slowly, but dropped it again as footfalls sounded only a short distance away. He hastily dropped the revolver into his pocket, with something very like a look of relief on his face, and hurried further down the lane. Only for a short distance did he hurry, then his pace dropped to a crawl. Somehow he did not seem to be in such a hurry now to find a place where he could quietly do himself to death.

The end of the lane was reached, and Hugh Moreton discovered that it stopped dead at a stile, beyond which stretched a track leading to a little clump of cottages.

He would finish his life behind the wall of one of them, he decided, and clambered over the stile and walked slowly along the track. His hand lay always on the revolver in his pocket, but the fingers no longer gripped it with determination.

The cottages were reached, and Hugh Moreton could not see a person about. He moved to the back of a shed, and drew the revolver from his pocket again. He jerked the hammer back with his thumb, so that there should be no pause while the trigger went up and down again. He wanted death to come swiftly.

He looked round, with eyes that held a hunted, frightened look, and raised the weapon. The cold lip of the barrel touched his forehead, then a cry broke from him, and the weapon fell to the ground. Hastily he snatched it up, and, uncocking it, dropped it into his pocket.

The touch of the steel against his head had told him the truth—he feared death, and was too much of a coward to keep to his determination. Sneakingly he went back the way he had come, reached the main road, where the traffic was already thinning considerably, and slowly made his way to Epsom Town. Arriving there, he went straight to the nearest inn and called for drink.

Two hours later he was still there, and all but two shillings of the eight had gone.

More than one man who entered the bar of the inn glanced curiously at the sullen-faced man who sat in a corner drinking by himself, but no one cared to speak to him; and at nine o'clock he rose and made his way, a trifle unsteadily, towards the station. But in the booking-office he received a shock. He had not enough money to carry him to London.

A train was already in the platform, but there were very few people in it, the majority of the racegoers having returned to town long since.

The determination to reach London somehow cleared Hugh Moreton's brain, and he was able to think. He saw the guard raise his flag, and the train started to move. At the same moment the man who had been taking tickets lounged away from the gate, imagining his work to be done.

That was Moreton's opportunity. At a run he went through the gate, wrenched open the door of the nearest carriage, and fairly tumbled in. He tripped over someone's feet, and fell on to the seat.

"Ere, where you comin' to?" a hoarse voice growled.

Hugh Moreton gathered himself together, panting, and turned in the direction of the voice. Then his jaw dropped, and a wild, angry look came into his eyes.

The only other occupant of the carriage, the man sitting opposite him, was the Shuffler, the man who had sold him, who had fooled him over the kidnapping of Starlight.

It was a very different Shuffler, however, to the man Hugh Moreton had employed on more than one occasion to do

dirty work for him. He was no longer almost in rags, but in a very horsey suit, with a check waistcoat that positively shouted. A diamond pin was in his red scarf, and another diamond blazed on the little finger of his right hand. Evidently the Shuffler had struck oil.

The Shuffler dropped the large cigar that he had been smoking as he recognised the man who was alone with him in the carriage, and his face paled.

"Well—well, this 'ere is a pleasant surprise, guv'nor!" he managed to say, in a shaking voice.

Hugh Moreton's eyes were full of hatred as he looked at the man.

"Yes," he said, between his teeth, "I wanted to see you." The Shuffler moved sideways; but if his intention was to get near to the alarm, he did not succeed, for Moreton seated himself there first, and there was an ugly little grin on his thin lips.

"So you sold me, Shuffler," he remarked, in a curiously steady voice.

The Shuffler fumbled with a fresh cigar, and his fingers shook badly as he lit it.

"Me?" His voice was full of pained surprise.

"Yes, you, you cur!" Moreton cried savagely, his anger blazing out.

The Shuffler dropped his hand into the pocket where his life-preserver lay, for even in the days of his prosperity he was not without it, and felt distinctly more at his ease. Even Moreton's superior strength would not stand a chance against a crack from that, he decided.

"Look 'ere," he growled, "there ain't no need ter call a cove 'ard names. Besides"—the man was gaining confidence, and a cunning look had come into his eyes—"ow do you know I let yer down?"

"Starlight started and won!" Hugh Moreton snapped.

"Admitted, guv'nor," the Shuffler answered; "but 'ow was I ter answer for a black-hearted scoundrel like Jerry Long?"

Hugh Moreton laughed harshly, for he knew well enough that the Shuffler was lying, and that he had sold him. A gleam of hope entered his drink-muddled brain. This man had won, that could be seen plainly enough. He must be made to hand over some of his gains.

Even a week back Hugh Moreton would have scorned to take money from the tout, but he was in such desperate straits now that nothing was too low for him to do.

"Anyway, you won!" he said, in a careless voice, lounging back in his seat.

The Shuffler chuckled, all his confidence returned, and patted his breast-pocket.

"Not 'alf, guv'nor!" he agreed, with a grin. "We ain't all mugs, yer know!"

Hugh Moreton examined the tout with his eyes, noting the narrow shoulders and the thin chest. If it came to trouble, he would be able to beat him easily enough, he decided.

"Give me a cigar," he said quietly, "I am out of smokes."

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The Shuffler produced a richly-mounted case, and Hugh Moreton helped himself.

"Now, this 'ere is sociable!" the Shuffler remarked, getting friendly. "Suppose you 'as a snack with me when we gets ter town?"

Hugh Moreton's face clouded angrily, but he recovered his composure.

"I don't think so," he answered; "I shall have plenty of money by then."

"Ho!" The Shuffler laughed, as if highly amused. "Didn't come orf so bad, after all, then?"

Hugh Moreton glanced above his head, to make sure that he was placed right under the handle of the alarm, and that the other man could not get to it, and it was his turn to laugh.

"How much have you cleared?" he inquired.

"Jest over a thousand," the Shuffler answered hastily. He spoke the truth, for every halfpenny that Moreton had given him had gone on Starlight for the double event before the odds were too cramped by the filly's first win.

"Call it five hundred each," Hugh Moreton said slowly, throwing the match with which he had lit his cigar out of the window. "There is no need to argue about odd pounds."

"What?" The Shuffler allowed the ornamental cigar-case to fall to the floor of the carriage. "Ere, come orf it!"

"I am not aware that I am on it yet," Hugh Moreton answered coolly, "but that I am going to be I can assure you. Just you remember this, my friend—you've let me in for every penny I've got"—the man's voice grew hard and his eyes flashed—"while you have won. Well, I can't share my losses with you, curse you, but you can share your gains, and you are going to."

A frightened look crept into the Shuffler's cunning eyes, and he moved further away along the carriage.

"Chuck it, guv'nor," he whined, "an' talk 'orse-sense!"

"I am talking"—Hugh Moreton carefully flicked the ash from his cigar—"the greatest sense that I have ever talked in my life."

"Then you've gone barmy!" the Shuffler snapped.

"Neither have I gone barmy, as you poetically put it," Moreton assured him. "I simply require money from you. That should prove my sanity."

The Shuffler buttoned his coat up tightly, and drew out his life-preserver. The feel of the weapon between his fingers seemed to give him confidence.

"There's yer answer!" he growled.

Hugh Moreton laughed, with a mirth that was not pleasant to hear, and quietly pulled out his revolver.

"I think that settles your answer," he sneered.

The train was whirling on rapidly now, for it was fast to London, and both men in the compartment knew that they could not be interrupted before their destination was reached unless the alarm-cord was pulled. The knowledge frightened the Shuffler, so that perspiration came out in beads on his forehead; but Hugh Moreton smiled. Never before in his life had he been so cool and determined. Before him was a man who had money, and he was going to get some of it, by whatever means, before London was reached.

"It—it ain't loaded!" the Shuffler tried to bluster.

Hugh Moreton clicked the revolver open, showed the ends of the brass cartridges, and clicked it back into place again before the other could move.

"Does that satisfy you?" he asked coldly.

"It's—its playin' the game low, guv'nor," the Shuffler whined, trying to appear not to be frightened. "It ain't as if I've refused to 'elp yer, either."

"I didn't think you would," Hugh Moreton remarked, with a chuckle.

The Shuffler drew one banknote from his pocket, and tossed it across the carriage. Hugh Moreton took it up, and saw that it was a five. He drew out his pocket-book, slipped the note into it, and laid it on the seat beside him. "I should pay in bigger notes, my friend," he said, "otherwise it will take such a time. Quick—five hundred to come in all!"

The Shuffler drew another note out, hesitated, then tossed it after the first.

"That's better!" Moreton grinned, as he saw that it was a fifty. "I fancied that you would see reason."

Apparently, however, the Shuffler had come to the end of his reasoning. He buttoned his coat tightly again, and his eyes gleamed savagely as he gripped the life-preserver.

"You've got all you'll get out o' me!" he snarled.

Hugh Moreton saw that the man meant what he said, but he was none the less determined to wrest the money from him. In his brain formed the idea that he would get all the thousand, instead of only half of it. It would enable him to clear out of the country, which was too hot for him now.

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"Suppose I take it all?" he said between his teeth, putting his thoughts into words.

But the Shuffler was back against a wall now, and his fear had left him.

"Suppose you try!" he answered coolly.

The life-preserver swung suggestively in the man's hand, but against it was pitted Hugh Moreton's revolver. The latter raised the weapon quickly, an angry cry breaking from him, then hesitated.

Murder! He wanted the money badly, but he shrank from a deed that might put his neck in a noose. Unconsciously he shuddered, and the barrel of the weapon no longer covered the other man.

The Shuffler laughed, but almost before the sound had crossed his lips Hugh Moreton had dropped the revolver and sprung at him with empty hands. The attack was sudden and violent, to such a degree that the life-preserver was wrenched from the Shuffler's hand, and he was left to fight Hugh Moreton on even terms.

The two men grappled round the body, gripping like wrestlers, and the Shuffler managed to struggle to his feet. His arms were locked to his sides, and he fought to get them free to attack the other's throat.

"Swear to give me the money," Moreton hissed, "and I'll let you go!"

"No!" the Shuffler snarled, all the fight in him roused. He had never been a fighting man, his size and his lameness being against him, but now he felt that nothing would induce him to give in, and that he would fight on if it meant his death.

Backwards and forwards along the carriage the men swayed, and the Shuffler forced his arms free and gripped the other's throat, but only to have his hands torn away and to receive a jarring blow between the eyes. Like a wild beast he sprang as he recovered from the shock, and together he and his opponent went to the floor.

Not a word was spoken now, neither of the men willing to waste his breath. Both knew that the fight was to be a long one. Hugh Moreton was astounded at the strength that his lama antagonist was displaying, and fight though he would, he could not yet get a hold that meant victory. He wanted to stun his man, so that he could take the money from him without trouble.

By a mighty effort, using all his remaining strength, the Shuffler scrambled free of his opponent and leapt to his feet. He glanced round quickly, and leapt straight to where the handle of the alarm hung down.

Hugh Moreton saw the movement, and realised that if the handle were pulled it would mean capture and disgrace, and at the same moment his eyes fell on the revolver that lay on the seat beside him.

The Shuffler's fingers were already on the handle, and with a sneering laugh he turned towards Hugh Moreton.

"Who wins?" he snarled.

If he had not spoken the Shuffler would have succeeded in giving the alarm, but those few words proved his undoing. They just gave Hugh Moreton time to raise the revolver and fire.

Crack! A shriek of agony broke out, and when the smoke from the cartridge floated out through the window, the Shuffler was lying quite still on the floor, face downwards, an ugly little trickle of blood coming out from beneath his body.

The revolver fell from Hugh Moreton's hand, and he staggered back against the door. His eyes started from their sockets, and he tore at his collar as if it choked him. He suddenly realised what he had done.

Murder! The man moved forward from the door, stepped towards the still form, but drew back with a shudder. He could not touch him. The blood coming from beneath him looked so horrible, and he lay so suggestively still. Surely none but a dead man had ever lain in such a way?

A minute passed, and during that time Hugh Moreton stood staring at the body as if it held a terrible fascination for him. His brain was numbed, paralysed, by the knowledge of the thing that he had done. "Murder!" was the word that kept floating through his brain, forcing itself upon his attention, throwing all other thoughts and notions into the background. He was a man possessed of a knowledge of one thing only, and that a thing that would bring him to the gallows.

The train rocked and rattled over a cutting, shaking Hugh Moreton so that he slipped forward, and only with difficulty kept himself from falling on to the body. With a shudder and a gasp he dropped to the seat, picking at the cloth with his fingers.

"Shuffler!" The cry broke from him in an agonised whisper, but the man on the floor did not move.

Then the lights of a station flashed by, and instinctively Hugh Moreton crouched down so that he should not be seen, though the body would have been invisible to anyone

standing on the platform. Already the knowledge of his awful guilt and its consequences possessed him.

He moved a hand sideways, and it touched the cold barrel of the revolver. He snatched the weapon up and thrust it into his pocket. Slowly the fumes were clearing from his brain, and dimly he asked himself what other men in his position had done.

Escape! Yes, that was it.

The thought of escaping drove the remainder of the numbness from his brain, and he turned and looked out of the window. Ahead showed the lights of a station, and nearer still the red light of a signal at danger. In response to the latter the brakes were already throwing out showers of sparks from the wheels of the train.

Now was the time to escape, and Hugh Moreton cautiously opened the door of the carriage and stepped on to the foot-board. It swayed under him, making him feel dizzy; and it seemed to him as he looked down at the ground still whirling past, that the train must be travelling at a furious pace. Then he looked into the carriage, and his eyes fell full upon the body of the Shuffler.

With a groan, Moreton swung round sideways and jumped into the darkness, as far away from the train as possible. He struck the ground with his feet, pitched forward, and went rolling down a grassy bank, landing shaken, but otherwise unharmed, at the bottom of the slope.

Shaken with fright, Hugh Moreton rose to his feet, just in time to see the tail-lights of the train disappearing. He watched them keenly, heaving a sigh of relief as they vanished from sight.

It would be some time still before London was reached, he told himself, and by then he would have been able to reach Croydon. There he would stop for a few days, and he remembered that he had left the money on the body of the Shuffler, and cursed under his breath. But, anyway, he had fifty-five pounds that the man had handed over before the fight.

He put his hand to the pocket where he kept his case, and a great cry of fear broke from him as he realised that it was not there, but left on the seat of the railway carriage.

It would mean proof—proof positive—that he had committed the murder.

Down on to the bank Hugh Moreton sank, his brain swimming again, and buried his face in his hands. Only now did the real awfulness of what he had done occur to him, because he had left something behind that would identify him as the murderer. The police would be after him as soon as the body was discovered, and then—

With a terrible cry Hugh Moreton leapt to his feet, and stood staring round into the night as if he already heard his pursuers closing in upon him.

Then he stumbled off in the darkness, and ran on blindly, rushing into fences, scrambling through them, to go on again. Into ditches he slipped, but only to leap out and rush on.

He wanted to get away—away from the spot where he had committed the murder. Beyond that he knew nothing.

THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER.

Moreton Hall—A Surprise Visit—"Help Me to Escape!"—Spearing Arrives—Mercy.

SIR CHARLES MORETON sighed as he lit a cigar. He and Sexton Blake had dined alone this Saturday after Starlight's victory in the Oaks, and Sir Charles certainly had not shown the cheerfulness that might have been expected from him under the circumstances. The detective had done his best to rouse him, but all to no purpose. He was like a man possessed of a sorrow that rose above all other considerations.

"I am afraid I am poor company for you, Mr. Blake," he said in a low voice.

"Perhaps I can guess how you feel," the detective answered quietly.

"It's Hugh!" The name broke from Sir Charles almost in a sob. "I know the poor boy's been a bad lot at times, but that's no reason I should have let him get into the mess over Starlight."

"Is it as bad as that?" Sexton Blake asked, though he had good reason to know that the man was absolutely ruined. He had no great particular sympathy for him, and would have had no compunction in handing him over to the police.

"Yes!" Sir Charles said shakily. "All to-day I have been making inquiries—that is why I went to town—and I hear that he has been badly hit."

"What is he doing?" Sexton Blake asked, though the matter did not interest him.

"He has disappeared."

The lids were raised sharply from his eyes, and there was an eager light in them.

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"Surely he would have come to you, if things had been as bad—"

A footman entered the room, a startled expression on his usually wooden face.

"Mr. Hugh Moreton, Sir Charles," he said.

The old man rose tottering to his feet, his limbs twitching, and it was only by an effort that he contrived to speak.

"Show him into the library," he said.

The door closed behind the footman, and Sir Charles collapsed into a chair. Sexton Blake poured brandy into a glass and held it to his lips, and he recovered somewhat.

"I must go to him," he said falteringly. "I must not forget that he is my dead brother's son. It is my duty to stand by him whatever he has done."

"Then I come with you!" Sexton Blake answered firmly. "You are not fit to be alone."

Sir Charles nodded silently in assent, and, leaning on the detective's arm, walked towards the library. As they entered Hugh Moreton rose from a chair, his hands gripped the back of it, as if ready to use it as a weapon. His face was dead-white, his clothes were muddled from head to foot, and his collar was gone.

"Hugh!" Sir Charles gasped, the pitiable spectacle before him seeming to restore something of his strength.

But Hugh Moreton was glaring at Sexton Blake, and now he swung the chair from the floor.

"You shan't take me without a struggle!" he cried fiercely.

"Take you! What do you mean?" Sir Charles cried in amazement.

"Don't tell me that you don't understand!" Hugh Moreton answered, with the laugh of a madman. "Why have you brought that man here if it is not to arrest me for the murder of the Shuffler?"

"Murder!" Sir Charles swayed back against the detective, who kept him from falling. "You have committed—murder?"

Hugh Moreton looked round with eyes full of terror, and passed his tongue over his dry lips.

"I—I didn't mean to do it," he said in a shaky whisper. "I was desperate, and he robbed me. He had a thousand pounds on him, and he wouldn't share with me, though through him I had lost ten thousand!"

"Go on!" Sexton Blake commanded, in a hard voice. In that morning's paper he had seen a report concerning the finding of a wounded man in a carriage of a train from Epsom, and that Mr. Spearing, of Scotland Yard, was already following up an important clue. At the time he had no reason to connect the crime with Hugh Moreton, but now he understood. There was the man's rage at seeing the tout who had sold him, the sight of money, and—

"I never meant to kill him," Hugh Moreton wailed again. "He threatened me, and we fought. He broke loose, and made for the alarm, and I—I—"

"Shot him," Sexton Blake put in coldly, as the man hesitated.

Hugh Moreton dropped into the chair, and buried his face in his hands.

Then it was that Sir Charles showed the stuff of which he was made. He pulled himself free from Sexton Blake's support, and faced him.

"Mr. Blake," he said in a steady voice. "there must have been times in your career when justice had to be put aside."

"I have always done what I thought right," the detective answered simply.

Hugh Moreton rose to his feet, and held his hands out pleadingly.

"Give me enough to get away!" he gasped. "I swear I never meant to kill him!"

"Silence!" Sir Charles ordered sternly, and turned again to the detective.

"You have helped me loyally," he continued, "to achieve the ambition of life, the accomplishment of which is, after all, but dust and ashes; and now I want you to do an even greater thing."

"Yes?" Sexton Blake queried, though he knew well enough what it was that the old man was going to ask him.

"Through my folly, this man has committed a grievous sin," Sir Charles continued falteringly, "and it must not be through my hands that he is brought to justice. I must give him a chance to escape—if you will let me."

Sexton Blake stood silently considering. He knew that Hugh Moreton was a blackguard of the worst type. What good would it do to bring him to justice? It would mean the dragging of a fine old name through the mud, a scandal that—

There was a sharp knock on the door, and Sir Charles placed himself between it and Hugh Moreton just as a footman looked in.

"Mr. Spearing, of Scotland Yard, is here," the man said in a frightened voice.

"Show him into the dining-room," Sir Charles answered steadily; "and tell him that I will be with him in a minute."

The servant left, and, as he did so, Hugh Moreton leapt to his feet, his hunted eyes turned towards the window.

"Give me money—quick!" he gasped. "If I get away from here, I will try to leave the country and start a fresh life abroad. I swear it!"

Sir Charles turned to Sexton Blake, a world of pleading in his eyes.

"Shall he have his chance?" he asked.

"Yes," the famous detective answered simply.

Sir Charles dropped on his knees before the safe, and fairly wrenched it open. He snatched out a bundle of notes and a bag of gold and thrust them into his nephew's hands.

Hugh Moreton stood dazed. But he was not permitted to do so for long; Sexton Blake gripped him by the shoulders and thrust him towards the window.

"Go, you fool!" he said sharply. "Make north, don't attempt to ship from any of the southern ports."

Hugh Moreton disappeared through the window, and Sexton Blake fastened it behind him. As he turned away, the door of the room was thrown open, and Spearing, very red in the face and excited, dashed in.

"Got warrant for arrest of Hugh Moreton!" he jerked.

Sir Charles Moreton was fighting for his nephew's life, and the control that he exercised over himself was remarkable.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he asked, in a cool voice, "but what are you doing here?"

"Already told you!" the worthy official jerked.

"May I ask what he has done?" Sir Charles inquired.

"Attempted murder!" Spearing snapped. "Man nicknamed Shuffler—shot in train from Epsom, but not killed!"

Something between a sob and a sigh broke from Sir Charles, and he gripped the edge of the table hard.

"I am more than grieved to hear that," he said in a low voice. "If you think there is any likelihood of—of the accused being here you are at liberty to search the house."

Mr. Spearing glared, looked from Sir Charles to Sexton Blake, and back again.

"Will take your word not here if give it!" he jerked.

Sir Charles bowed in acknowledgment of the compliment.

"You have my word, sir," he answered quietly. "May I have the pleasure of offering you any refreshment before you leave?"

"No!" Spearing snapped. "No time to waste. Can't have left London, after all. 'Night!"

Out of the room went Spearing, then the front door banged. As the sound reached the library, Sir Charles dropped limply into a chair.

"Thank Heaven it is not murder!" he whispered.

"And that he may get away and have a fresh start abroad," Sexton Blake answered, with his hand on the old man's shoulder. For five minutes they were like that, then Sir Charles sat up, a look of determination in his eyes.

"I had thought that there was no harm in the way I race," he said huskily; "yet it has brought about one man's ruin. To-morrow I will give orders for all my racehorses to be sold; and should Hugh get abroad and let me know where he is, all the proceeds shall go to him."

"And Starlight?"

Just for one moment a triumphant look came into the old man's eyes.

"No, not Starlight!" he said. "I shall always keep her. It is not her fault that the accomplishment of my ambition has turned to bitterness."

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Sitting by the seashore of the little fishing village of Pelling, Frank Fenton, a sturdy lad of about fifteen, sees a boat manned by Navy men swiftly approaching the land. He realises that it is the dreaded pressgang, and rushes off to warn the male inhabitants of the village, who are successful in hiding from the King's men. In his anxiety to warn his friends, however, Frank is himself captured.

The pressgang is under the command of a bullying boatswain's mate named Gummel, who treats Frank in a brutal manner. This is alleviated, however, by the friendship shown him by a good-natured seaman named Jenkins.

A storm suddenly arises, and Frank is the means of rescuing a shipwrecked crew of Frenchmen.

On board a man-o-war Lieutenant Travis is pacing the quarterdeck, waiting for the captain to come aboard. He is very much concerned when he hears that the men sent out under Gummel are believed to have perished in the storm.

The French Prisoners.

"That's bad news!" said Travis gravely. "Perhaps the storm of last night has something to do with their disappearance."

"It's a poor consolation, anyhow," replied the second lieutenant. "In either case we lose the men, and at the present moment we need men more than anything."

"Ay, we do," assented Mr. Travis, "for I'm hanged if we need boys!"

At that moment the midshipman whom Lieutenant Travis had sent aloft hailed the deck with the information that a boat was putting off from the shore.

"But it's not the captain's gig," he added, a moment later.

"Perhaps my lads, after all!" cried Lieutenant Haldane, bringing his glass to bear shoreward. "Yes," he continued, "so it is! A nice boatload of fellows they seem to be bringing us!"

"But the captain's gig?" asked Travis impatiently.

"Oh, she's safe enough. Still moored snugly to the quay," replied the second lieutenant.

"Mr. Cartwright, oblige me by firing the stern-gun once more!" bawled Lieutenant Travis.

Bang! A puff of white smoke fled from the stern, and carried right away over the dancing wavelets; but, like the previous signal, this was also passed unnoticed, and the captain's gig remained fast to the shore.

Mr. Travis looked at his chronometer.

"In ten minutes we shall lose the tide!" he exclaimed. "If we lose it, we lose it. I cannot help it. If the Government thinks I'm going to play the role of nursemaid in my old age, and look after all the little boys it sends to sea, it's confoundedly mistaken!"

In the meantime not one boatload, but two had put off from the shore, and were nearing the Fearless.

Each boat was filled with men, so that she sank gunwale deep in the water. There could not have been less than forty in the two boats.

"That's something like!" exclaimed Mr. Haldane jubilantly, as he surveyed the approaching boats. "But, by George, what confoundedly strange-looking fellows most of them are! Where could Gummel have picked them up?"

"Come aboard, sir!" said the boatswain's mate a few minutes later, as he saluted Mr. Haldane on the main-deck.

"So I see. I was beginning to fear that you were not going to return at all."

"It were the storm, sir. A terrible bad storm it were, sir, and a awful night we ha' had, to be sure!"

"Poor fellows!" said Mr. Haldane compassionately. "You seem to have succeeded very well, though, in your mission. Tell me, how many volunteers have you brought aboard?"

"One, sir; and a terrible difficulty we—"

"One!" repeated Mr. Haldane, in amazement. "One!"

Why, you have brought about five-and-twenty aboard. What do you mean, sir?"

"Twenty-two there be, sir—French prisoners!"

"French prisoners!" repeated Mr. Travis, who had descended to the main-deck. "Where have you been to take French prisoners?"

Before Gummel could reply, little Hilton hailed the deck again.

"Captain's gig put off, sir!"

"Very good," replied Mr. Travis; "you can come on deck. Muster your men and prisoners on the main-deck, Gummel. You may tell your story to the captain. It may amuse him," growled Mr. Travis under his breath, as he stalked away.

Captain Montagu Displays Some Ignorance and the Goodness of his Heart—The Shipwrecked Frenchmen—Frank Reaps his Reward.

Captain Montagu mounted on deck in a manner very unlike the usual formal method of boarding their vessels practised by commanders of a more sober age.

"Here we are, Mr. Travis! A little late, eh? Awfully sorry! But, you see, the Bath coach was late, and I expected several things to come down by it. Here—there! Sam, be very careful of that package. Take it down to my cabin. Now, Mr. Travis, if you please, we will weigh anchor."

There was something very like a smile of triumph on the Lieutenant's face, as he replied:

"I exceedingly regret to say, sir, that we cannot weigh anchor."

"Eh—what? Can't weigh anchor, eh? Stuck, I suppose? What a confounded nuisance! We shall have to cut the cables, then."

"The fact is, sir," said Mr. Travis, "we cannot weigh anchor, because the tide no longer serves. We have missed the ebb, and could never clear the river mouth."

"How came we to miss the tide?" demanded the captain.

"Waiting for you, sir!" returned the lieutenant maliciously.

Captain Montagu was silent.

"It's a confounded nuisance!" he said at length. "By George, it is! But I suppose that there is a—h'm!—another tide of some kind some time or other?"

"Yes, sir, I believe the tide is very regular in these parts," said Mr. Travis, with a twinkle in his eye.

"I'm glad to hear that. When is the next?"

"The tide will suit us, sir, in, I should say, about six or seven hours."

"Good gracious! Are you sure there is not one before?"

By this time all the crew, who were assembled on the main-deck, were sniggering behind their hands.

"There is not one before, sir," said Mr. Travis coldly, casting, meanwhile, a stern, authoritative look towards the men which quieted their merriment instantly.

"Then I suppose we must grin and bear it. But who are these fellows?" exclaimed the captain, as for the first time he became aware of the presence of Gummel's prisoners.

"Why, Mr. Travis, where in the name of goodness did you collect these curiosities?"

"I was about to ask Gummel, the boatswain's mate, whom we sent in charge of a boat on impressment duty, where he found these men, when you came on board, sir. With your permission, I will now ask Gummel to give an account of himself."

"Certainly!" said the captain.

Then Gummel, looking very abject, came forward, and pulled his forelock in a humbly respectful manner. In reply to the questions Mr. Travis put to him, he briefly narrated his experiences at Pelling, until he came to the storm, when he got confused, stopped, and finally retreated, to make room for Jenkins, who took up the thread of the story.

"It were blowin' great guns, yer worship, as yer worship

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is perhaps aweer, and it was as much as we could do to stand up agen the wind, which was that violent as ye seldom see in these parts, and the sea, it was somethin' terrific. But that young lad who was with us, the volunteer, which his name is Frank Fenton—which is a good name—he bends the cable to himself, and sees he, 'I'll swim for it.' 'It can't never be done!' cries Bill Hardin'. But the lad, he sees no more, and afore we could lay hold on him he was in the ragin' water.

"Naf'rally, me and my mates gives him up for lost, certain sure; but afore he went off the jetty, the lad, 'e ses to us, 'Ye meet me at the 'stremity o' the Devil's Finger—beggin' yer worship's pardon. So we weighed anchor, and bore down the jetty, the wind a-howling down on our star-board side, so it was a mercy we weren't blown out to sea—"

"Cut your yarn short, my good fellow!" said the captain. "Some of the wind you encountered last night seems to have been retained in your lungs, and you are giving us the benefit of it now. You, I presume, went to this place, the Devil's Finger, and waited in the bar for your young friend. Is that not so?"

"Lor' love yer honour, the Devil's Finger ain't a public-house! It's jest a stretch of sand pointin' out to sea, like nothin' so much in life as a thunderin' great finger. There we waited, a whole crowd o' us, for some of the fishermen had come out o' hidin' to lend a hand to some ship in distress. Never for a blessed minute did we 'spect to see the youngster alive again. But he gained the Finger, arter all, and the rope he carried wi' him saved the lives of the crew o' the vessel that had gone to pieces on the Leeward Rock."

"It was a French vessel, I presume?" said Mr. Travis.

One of the Frenchmen now came forward, and bowed to the captain of the Fearless and to the assembled officers. He was a tall, fine-looking man, with a pair of shoulders that might have stood the burden of an ox.

"May it be permitted zat I speak a few vords?" he asked, in very fair English.

The captain bowed in assent, although the Frenchman had addressed himself to Mr. Travis, thinking, no doubt, that he was the commander.

"I am ze captain of ze barque La Belle Susanne, which vas wreck upon your coast las' night. My name is Jules Fournier; of age I have tirty-tree. Ve vas bound for ze port of Calais viz a cargo of rhum and spice from ze Vest Indies, but ze storm it so break out gouvernail—vat you call helm, ruddair—zat ve become unmanageable, and soon, ma foi, ze mast, over he go by ze board; zen anozair, and ve are voutout help."

"Zen it vas zat we drift upon your shore, and ze petit garcon, ze little English boy, he risk himself so that ve are saved. To him, my crew and I, we owe our lives, ze brave boy. And so, monsieur, it come about zat ve are your prisonaires."

And the French captain concluded with another low bow to the English commander.

"Well, monsieur," said Captain Montague, "you have my sympathy for your great misfortune, and my congratulations for your narrow escape. I cannot regard you and your men in the light of prisoners; I consider you rather as guests, whom an adverse fate has thrown temporarily on our hospitality. The English Government would not, I feel sure, wish to take advantage of your misfortune, and I will so far take it upon myself to tell you that you are free, and that on the first opportunity I will restore you to your countrymen."

Now, while Jack Tar hates Johnny Crapaud with a healthy hatred, he yet loves, as he always will, a noble and generous sentiment like that uttered by Captain Montague. And no sooner were the words out of the captain's lips, than a hearty cheer went ringing and echoing up to the tops of the lofty masts of his Majesty's ship Fearless.

As for the French captain, he was profoundly touched, and the tears started to his eyes as he thanked Captain Montagu for his humane treatment of himself and his men.

"You are my guest for the present, Captain Fournier," said the young captain. "Your men will be well cared for forward. But before I conduct you below, I would like to see the lad who was fortunate enough and brave enough to be of service to you. Gummel, bring forward the boy who saved the crew of the Belle Susanne."

Gummel sulkily obeyed. He had taken an intense dislike to Frank, for a cowardly nature like his was as opposed to a nature such as Frank's as fire is to water, and Gummel had not forgotten the blow Frank had dealt him. Now, Frank was going before the captain, perhaps to receive some words of kindness and encouragement, or some mark of favour that would be gall and wormwood to him (Gummel); but the order had to be obeyed.

"Wanted by the captain!" said Gummel gruffly. "Come, hurry yourself! Who the blue blazes are you that you should keep the captain waitin'?"

Frank made no reply, but followed Gummel from the fore-castle, where he had been put immediately upon boarding the Fearless. Frank had not yet acquired the sailor's method of obeisance, the scrape of the leg and the tug at the forelock, so he bowed, and by a lucky intuition, he bowed to the right man, and did not make the mistake the French captain had fallen into.

"What is your name?" the captain demanded.

"Frank Fenton, sir."

The young captain smiled in so kindly a manner that Frank, who had been trembling with awe, at once took fresh courage.

"Do I understand that you willingly volunteered to serve the King, or were you impressed?"

"I was a willing volunteer, sir," replied Frank, speaking in a high, clear voice.

"Good!" said the captain. And he turned to Mr. Travis, with whom he had a short conversation in an undertone.

"Yes, sir, you have a right to do so, if you wish," said Mr. Travis. Then Captain Montagu turned again towards Frank.

"Mr. Fenton," he said, "in recognition of your courageous act of last night, I have decided to put you on my quarter-deck; you shall be rated as midshipman. Mr. Cox, my third lieutenant, will instruct you in your duties. You may go below to the cockpit and make the acquaintance of your future messmates."

Then, taking the French captain's arm, without giving Frank the opportunity to stammer his thanks at this unexpected slice of good luck, Captain Montagu went below, followed by a lusty cheer from his men.

Frank, with his new rank on him, went below to the cockpit. He was still clad in his accustomed dress—a knitted blue jersey, a cap of the same material, and a pair of rough serge trousers. Hardly the style of dress for a midshipman on board a smart frigate.

The cockpit was screened off by bulkheads, and a small apartment was thus formed, which went by the name of the midshipmen's quarters.

It was a dark, sparsely-furnished place, reeking most villainously of oil, and alive with rats and cockroaches. Its light emanated from a porthole during the daytime, and from a small swinging oil-lamp in the hours of darkness; but in both cases the illumination was most inadequate, and the whole place was in a constant state of twilight. At a long deal table four young men—or, to speak more accurately, boys—were seated on as many sea-chests. They had a greasy pack of cards, with which they were playing some game of chance, the stakes of which comprised a miscellaneous collection of personal property, such as knives, brass buttons, books, insignificant articles of jewellery—real and imitation—and even a few shirts, well folded-up on the table, ready to change ownership if fortune so willed it.

They looked up as Frank entered, conducted by the pimply-faced surgeon's assistant, by name Sumpter, who had been told off for the duty.

"Hallo, what's up?" cried one. "Who's your mate, Sumpter?"

"Mate of yours, not of mine," said Sumpter superciliously. "This, gentlemen, is your new messmate, Mr. Frank Something or other, who, having saved a parcel of Johnny Crapoos from an untimely death, has been rewarded for his services by being allowed to share this sumptuous apartment with you."

"That's rather prettily said!" cried one of the midshipmen. "Let's have it again, my worthy knight of the pestle and mortar!"

"Shut up, Carstairs! That's my Jack of hearts you're sitting on."

"I should advise you to sit on the rest of the pack as well," said Sumpter, "because old Cox'll be heaving in sight in a moment."

The cards were instantly whisked away, and the stakes swept from the table just as a step was heard outside.

However, it was not their enemy, the third lieutenant, but their messmate Harry Hilton, who entered.

"I congratulate you, Fenton," said Hilton, walking straight up to Frank and holding out his hand. "You deserve your luck, and the captain's a brick to recognise your plucky behaviour."

The cordiality of Hilton's welcome, and warm shake of the hand revived Frank's drooping spirits.

"Thank you very much," he said.

"I say, Hilton," interposed the youth who had been addressed as Carstairs, and who was the son of a wealthy draper in London, "you don't mean to say that we've got to associate with that chap, do you really?"

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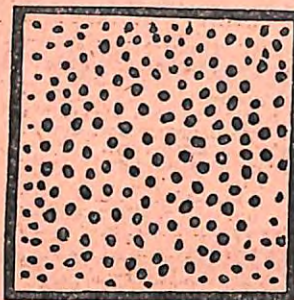
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