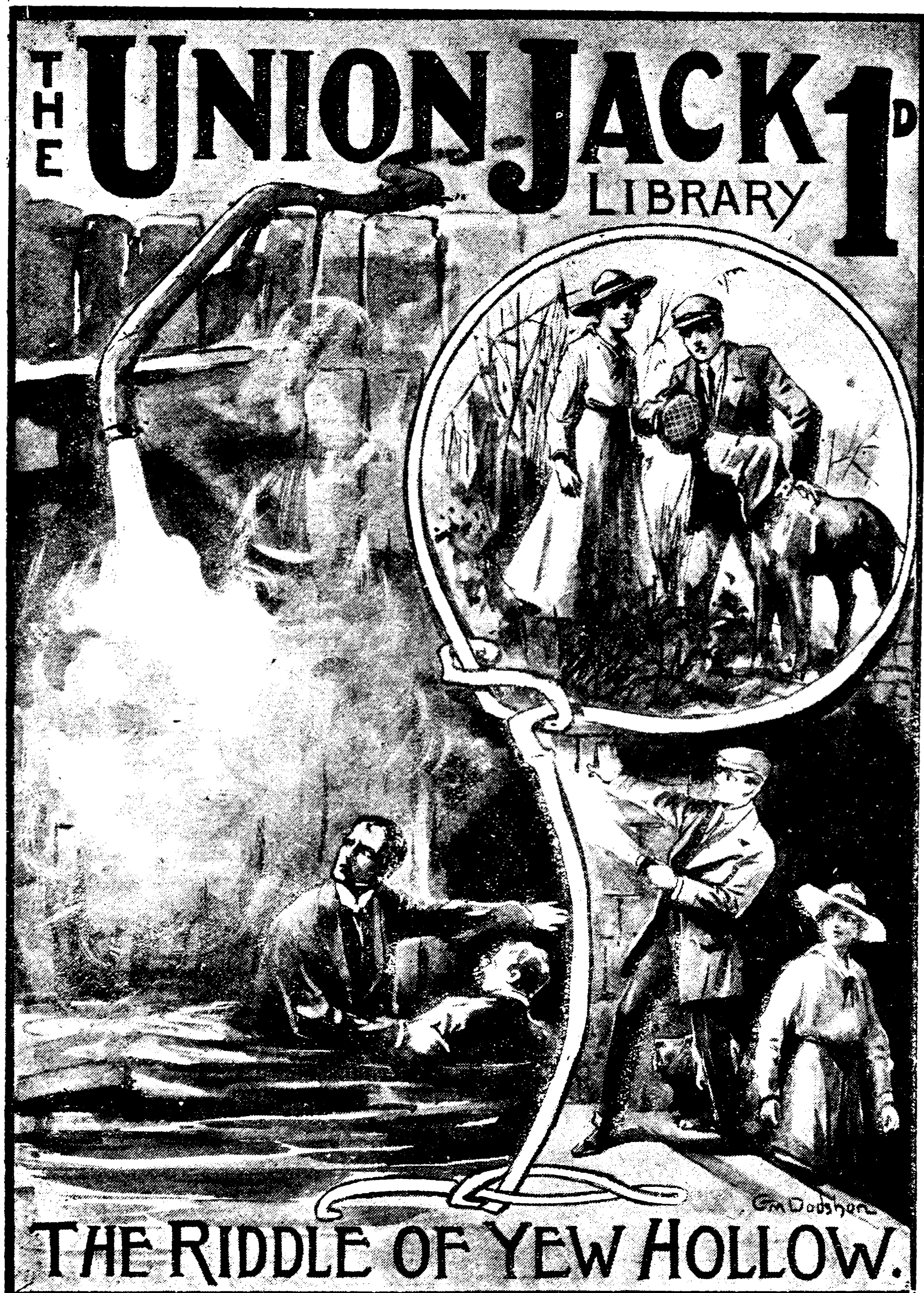


A STORY FROM TINKER'S CASE-DIARY!

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THE RIDDLE OF YEW HOLLOW.

By the Author of "The House with the Double Moat."

No. 726.

EVERY THURSDAY.

September 8th, 1917.

THE RIDDLE OF YEW HOLLOW!



Another Dramatic Record of Mysterious Adventures from "Tinker's Case-Diary."
Written in Story Form by TINKER, and Prepared Expressly for Publication in the **UNION JACK** by the Author of "The House with the Double Moat," "Twixt Sunset and Dawn," etc.

THE PROLOGUE.

The Tragedy of the March Thunder-storm.

ONE usually associates the month of March with biting winds, and all that sort of thing. But on this particular March evening I'm going to describe the air was almost close, and not a breath of wind stirred.

Sexton Blake and I—Tinker, to wit—were in the wilds of Suffolk, or, to be more exact, we were in Ipswich. Pedro wasn't with us because we were only in Ipswich to fetch our motor-car away from a garage. Pedro has his uses, but fetching motor-cars isn't one of 'em.

You see, about a week before we had been motoring up to Yarmouth on business, when the engine developed a bad cold, or an attack of influenza. Anyhow, it wheezed and coughed, and finally fell into a doze just outside Ipswich. So we'd left the car in that beautiful old East Anglian town to undergo a very necessary overhauling while we continued our run to Yarmouth by train.

I forget what was wrong with the motor—nothing very serious—but in less than a week it was as healthy as ever. And we had taken advantage of a slack afternoon to fetch it home.

We were on our way to the garage now, and we meant to be home before nightfall. But then we met somebody, and that meeting caused us to change our plans—at least, it caused the gov'nor to change his plans. I didn't have much voice in the matter at all.

It was in Prince's Street that the meeting occurred.

Sexton Blake and I were striding along, well wrapped up in big overcoats to guard our little chests against the cruel March winds—which were non-existent—when we noticed a beautiful carriage-and-pair coming along. The horses were high-steppers, and were lovely creatures.

"I seem to recognise that turn-out, Tinker," remarked the gov'nor. "There's only one man in the vicinity of Ipswich who is old-fashioned enough to eschew motor-cars altogether and go in for old-style carriages and the finest horseflesh. I'm referring to Sir Humphrey Drexell."

"Never heard of the merchant, gov'nor."

"He's not a merchant, Tinker," smiled Sexton Blake. "He is a big landowner in these parts. I performed a slight service for him years ago, and I've often met him in some of the famous London clubs. By Jove, we're spotted!"

The carriage had drawn nearly abreast, and I saw a solitary figure seated among the luxurious cushions behind. He was an elderly man, with almost white hair and a pristly moustache. He was waving and nodding, and telling the coachman to pull up.

The gov'nor and I stepped into the road.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Mr. Blake!" cried the old gentleman. "We don't

often see you in Ipswich. How are you? How are you?"

Sir Humphrey Drexell shook the gov'nor's hand warmly, and then I was introduced.

Sir Humphrey was equally genial with me, and he seemed as pleased as Punch. His face was wreathed in smiles.

"Not here on business—eh?" he said, when Sexton Blake explained our presence in Ipswich. "Then you are in no particular hurry to return to London? Excellent—excellent! You must come over to Rockwood Towers, Mr. Blake."

"You are very kind, Sir Humphrey, but —"

"Fiddlesticks! You're not going to make any excuses!" interjected the baronet jovially. "It's Friday evening. You won't be busy this week-end. You'll have to spend a couple of days with me."

Sexton Blake laughed.

"Both Tinker and I are quite unprepared for such a visit, Sir Humphrey," he said, shaking his head. "We have no luggage of any sort—"

"Tut-tut! A childish excuse!" cried Sir Humphrey. "Luggage! Who bothers about luggage? There's nothing formal at Rockwood Towers. I am a lonely old widower, and my only son is in India serving his King. I simply cannot allow you to leave Ipswich without having paid me a visit."

I grinned, and looked at the gov'nor. A week-end at Rockwood Towers struck me as being first-class, especially as the weather looked like being fine.

Sexton Blake smiled, and glanced back at me.

"You are so pressing, Sir Humphrey, that it would be discourteous of me to raise any further objection," he said. "Tinker and I will avail ourselves of your generous invitation."

"Generous! Stuff, sir!" laughed Sir Humphrey. "I assure you it is not generosity on my part. It is sheer selfishness. I am quite delighted at the prospect of having such a distinguished visitor at the Towers."

We all laughed, and the gov'nor and I stood chatting for a few moments beside the carriage. Sir Humphrey, it seemed, was going on to an office in the town-hall, and then to the post-office. We arranged to walk to the garage, make arrangements there, and then meet Sir Humphrey outside the post-office building.

The carriage rolled off and we walked on.

"Rather decent of the old boy—eh, gov'nor?" I grinned.

"Well, a week-end at the Towers will certainly be enjoyable, Tinker," replied Sexton Blake. "There are some excellent golf-links on the estate, I believe. If the weather would only keep fine—"

"Oh, we're not going to have any rain!" I interrupted confidently.

"Don't be too sure of that, young 'un!"

The gov'nor looked up at the sky, and I must admit that there was a certain heaviness about it which didn't look exactly healthy.

Whatever the weather, however, I was quite delighted. Rockwood Towers, I'd

heard, was a fine old place, and the unexpectedness of Sir Humphrey's invitation made it all the more pleasant.

"He seemed to be quite a genial old chap, gov'nor," I remarked.

"Oh, Sir Humphrey will keep us alive, Tinker," replied Blake. "I don't know whether he has any other visitors at the Towers. It's quite probable. His son James is away in India on active service."

We soon completed our arrangements at the garage. The car was quite ready, but we left it there until required. For Sir Humphrey wanted us to drive out to the Towers in his carriage.

Carriages are all very well for old fogeys, but give me a fast motor-car every time. Motor-cars may go on strike sometimes, but they're pretty nearly reliable as clockwork nowadays.

As we walked back to the post-office there was a faint, low grumble in the distance.

"What was that, gov'nor," I asked—"guns?"

"It sounded like thunder, my boy."

"Thunder at this time of the year?" I said sceptically. "We don't get thunderstorms until June or July."

Sexton Blake laughed.

"You seem to have a short memory, Tinker!" he chuckled. "Why, only a month ago—in February, mark you—there was a slight thunderstorm! And the feel of the atmosphere to-day is quite suggestive of an electrical disturbance. There! Did you hear that?"

"Yes. That was thunder right enough," I agreed.

The peal was quite distinct, low and muttering in the far distance. I saw one or two people looking up at the sky, and I looked myself. Away to the north-west a heavy bank of black clouds were slowly rising in the evening twilight.

A few minutes later we arrived at the post-office, and found Sir Humphrey Drexell's carriage waiting there. The old baronet was looking somewhat anxious.

"Ah, I'm glad you have come!" he exclaimed. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Blake, I'm anxious. A storm seems to be coming up, and we have five miles to go. I think we shall manage to race the elements."

"It won't be much, sir," I said wisely.

"I hope you are right, my boy—I hope you are right!" exclaimed Sir Humphrey. "But I am doubtful. Thunderstorms in March are not common, but such storms are usually very violent. The air has been heavy all the afternoon."

We stepped into the comfortable carriage, and the baronet leaned forward.

"Now, Jarvis, make all haste!" he ordered.

"Yes, sir," said the coachman, with an anxious glance above.

Another peal of thunder sounded, much louder than the former. It seemed to shake the very street. Evidently the elements were gathering strength for a big onslaught. I realised that now.

We bowled smartly out of Ipswich, the horses going first-rate. My opinion of carriages was slightly modified, I'll confess. The

vehicle ran very smoothly, and the steady beat of the horses' hoofs on the hard road had a certain charm.

By the time we were clear of the town the bank of black clouds had reached the zenith. The dusk had deepened until a premature darkness had settled over the land. And every now and again the dense clouds were ripped asunder by great flashes of forked, vivid lightning.

The thunder boomed loudly. One or two spots of rain fell; they were huge, and one that hit me in the face almost drenched me. That's a bit of an exaggeration, but the drops were certainly big.

"H'm! We're going to get it, I'm afraid," said Sir Humphrey anxiously.

The carriage was an open one, so, if we did "get it," we should be soaked in next to no time. The horses were rather young, and were inclined to be restless. Jarvis, the coachman, had all his work cut out to hold them.

Then, the wind came.

A short, puffy gust struck us first of all. A short period of calm followed. After that a perfect cyclone of wind rushed down. It whistled and roared and hissed. My cap whizzed off, and was only saved from a prolonged flight by catching against the back of the carriage.

"We'll be in the thick of it in a minute!" I shouted.

Sexton Blake replied, but his words were cut short, and I didn't catch them. A flash of lightning rent the sky, and the thunder which followed crashed like a hundred big guns. The storm was amazingly violent.

We were bowling along rapidly now; the horses were going for all they were worth, although Jarvis kept them from galloping. They were frightened, and would cause a lot of trouble if the storm got any worse.

Fortunately, the elements seemed to quieten down a bit during the next few minutes. The thunder wasn't so loud, and the periods between the claps were longer.

Sir Humphrey looked relieved.

"The worst is over, I imagine," he remarked. "We are within a mile of the lodge-gates now. We are lucky, Mr. Blake. It seems as though we are to get home without a drenching."

It must have been the irony of Fate, for about two ticks later the rain swept down in torrents. It wasn't merely a rainstorm of the usual variety. The wetness poured down in blinding sheets.

We were all soaked in no time. The water poured from the carriage in rivulets, and the road became a running sheet of water. The spray from the hissing drops caused a kind of mist a foot high from the surface of the road.

Then, just as the lodge-gates came in sight, the storm made up for lost time.

It was almost as though the lull had been a breathing-space. Now, duly refreshed, the storm redoubled its efforts. The darkness was now almost complete. Jarvis was compelled to lean forward to see the road clearly.

Suddenly the heavens seemed to open. The lightning dazzled us all, and a peal of thunder boomed out which shook the very ground for miles. I honestly think it was the worst storm I had ever experienced—in England, at all events.

The carriage swerved and swayed. Jarvis jugged frantically at the reins, for the frightened horses were getting out of control. Once we nearly went into the ditch—it was a narrow squeak—and then the coachman brought the vehicle to a standstill. He jumped down and ran to the horses' heads.

"I'm real afraid to go on, Sir Humphrey," he shouted anxiously. "They'll never get up the drive, with all them trees—"

"Quite right, Jarvis—quite right!" exclaimed the baronet. "Mr. Blake, we'd better walk the rest of the way. We can't get any wetter, at all events. And Jarvis will take the carriage by way of the Yew Lane."

We all crawled out like half-drowned rats, and stood shivering in the road. I was glad to be on my feet, in fact. The rain was icy, with choice flurries of hail and snow. And the hailstones were as big as marbles.

As Jarvis started off down the road, leading the horses, we followed, bending our heads to the driving storm. The drive was quite close now, and we turned into the wide gateway. The picturesque lodge stood among the trees.

The drive was not so very long, and the tall trees were lashing about furiously. The

hiss of the rain and the howl of the wind drowned every other sound, and at irregular intervals the thunder boomed.

The storm, in fact, was getting worse.

We had traversed about half the distance to the house when the climax came.

It came tragically—terribly.

Without a second's warning, there was a ghastly, blinding glare. It wasn't merely a flash of lightning; it was a flash of lightning a hundred times intensified. That's the best way I can describe it.

I hardly know what happened, for the three of us were flung to the ground in a heap. I was tingling all over, and I was almost stunned by the fearful detonation of the thunder which followed. It was the most appalling crash I'd ever heard.

My ears were drumming painfully, and my nose was bleeding. Every inch of my skin felt as though it had been pricked by a thousand needles. And the rain poured down in a blinding flood.

I sat up dazedly.

The first thing I noticed was a patch of grass close against Sir Humphrey Drexell. It was blackened and scorched—and it was steaming! The lightning must have struck on that very spot!

Sexton Blake was just beside me, and he staggered to his feet.

"Are—are you all right, Tinker?" he asked hoarsely.

"I think so, guv'nor!" I gasped.

I stood up, too, and was somewhat surprised to find that, except for the painful, tingling sensation, I was unhurt. I looked at the guv'nor in a startled sort of way, the rain pouring off my cap and nose and chin.

"We'd better help Sir Humphrey!" I said vaguely.

After that one terrible crash—that one awful flash of lightning—the storm seemed to be lessening in fury. The thunder sounded in the distance, and the lightning wasn't so vivid. But the rain was hissing down in volumes.

Sexton Blake was a little bit more affected than I was, for he was swaying as he stood, and his eyes were closed. And, away over the trees, I fancied I saw a queer kind of glare.

"Some house on fire, guv'nor," I said dully.

"Good heavens! What a storm!"

Sexton Blake shook himself.

"The lightning caught us, Tinker!" he muttered. "It's a miracle we weren't all struck dead! Is Sir Humphrey all right? I—Good gracious, Tinker, what has happened to the poor man? Help me to lift him up!"

I noticed, then, that Sir Humphrey Drexell was still lying in the scorched grass. His position was unnatural, and he lay motionless. Apparently he had received a stronger dose than either the guv'nor or I.

Sexton Blake knelt down beside his still figure, and I turned my face to the sky for a second. There were signs of a break in the heavy clouds. And the glare I had noticed had vanished. But I was sure a house had been struck by the lightning. Later on—I may as well add here—I learned that a cottage had been set on fire by the storm.

"Tinker!"

I looked down, and saw the guv'nor looking at me queerly.

"Oh, you want me, don't you, guv'nor?" I said. "I'm still a bit dazed—"

Sexton Blake rose to his feet.

"No, Tinker, your assistance is not needed," said the great detective quietly. "That flash of lightning performed its dread work only too well!"

"What do you mean, guv'nor?" I gasped, starting back.

"You and I, my boy, were saved by a merciful Providence," replied Sexton Blake. "But Sir Humphrey Drexell is—dead!"

END OF PROLOGUE.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Sir Jimmy Drexell Tells Us the Legend of the Old Yew Hollow.

"THERE'S a gentleman wanting to see you, sir!"

It was Mrs. Bardell who made that announcement. Sexton Blake and I were seated in our dining-room at Baker Street, partaking of luncheon. The month was August, and the sun streamed in at the windows with uncomfortable intensity. The guv'nor half turned in his chair.

"It is rather inconsiderate of the gentleman to call at this hour," he said, wiping

his mouth with his serviette. "Didn't he give his name, Mrs. Bardell?"

"Yes, sir. It's on this here card."

And Mrs. Bardell thrust a slip of paste-board under Blake's nose. He took it, glanced at it, and then nodded.

"Oh, we'll excuse this particular visitor," he smiled. "Show Sir James up at once, Mrs. Bardell."

I picked up the card, and read it.

"Sir James Drexell!" I exclaimed. "Sir James Drexell, of Rockwood Towers, Ipswich. I'm reminded of that awful storm, guv'nor, last March, when we went up to Ipswich to fetch our car away."

Sexton Blake nodded gravely.

"That was a terrible evening, Tinker," he said. "Sir Humphrey Drexell was struck dead by the lightning—and we were within an ace of sharing his fate. Indeed, I have never fully understood why we escaped. But lightning plays curious tricks. Sir James is the new baronet."

"I thought he was in India—on active service!"

"He was, Tinker, but I think he's been home for a couple of months now," replied the guv'nor. "When the news of his father's death reached him he was just on the point of leaving India, owing to ill-health. He is now established at Rockwood Towers, I believe."

"Married?" I asked.

"I don't think so, Tinker," smiled the guv'nor. "Sir James is only a young man—not above twenty-seven, at all events. We'll ask him to partake of luncheon with us. He's quite an old friend of mine."

Just then the door opened, and Mrs. Bardell ushered in a tall, straight, fair-haired young man with blue-grey eyes. His face was tanned by the suns of India, and he limped slightly.

"Hallo, Jimmy!" said the guv'nor cordially. "Come in!"

"Oh, I say, this is too bad of me!" protested Sir James Drexell. "I'd no idea I should be disturbing you at your feeding, Mr. Blake—"

"That's all right, old man," said Sexton Blake. "I knew you when you were a boy, and we're old friends—eh? Squat down, and have something to eat with us. This grinning young gentleman here is Tinker—my assistant."

We shook hands all round, and then Sir Jimmy, after paying his respects to Pedro, sat down at the table. Pedro had made friends with him immediately, and was already nosing about for what he could catch in the grub line.

"This is a shockin' business," grinned our visitor. "You'll think I came after a free lunch! Still, I'm a bit hungry, I must admit, and this table looks very inviting. What will I have, Tinker? Oh, any old thing—some of that nice-looking salad, for choice."

We were soon busy again, and, although I had never seen Sir Jimmy before, he was quite on pally terms with the guv'nor. Of course, nearly six months had elapsed since his father's tragic death, and the first shock of the affair had passed.

"This is just a friendly call?" asked Sexton Blake.

"Well, no," said Sir Jimmy. "Not exactly. I want your advice, Mr. Blake. There's been something very queer going on down at Rockwood, and I'm a bit concerned. It's not quite in your line, but I've got an idea that you'll be interested. I suppose I ought to have gone, really, to the Society for Psychical Research."

"Dear me!" said the guv'nor. "A ghost story?"

"Hang it all, I don't know what to call it! It's queer—uncanny, in fact," said our visitor. "But before going into that I want to thank you for all you did for the poor old pater at the time of his death."

"My dear fellow, I did nothing," said Blake quietly.

For some little time we talked about the tragedy of the thunderstorm; Blake told Sir Jimmy exactly how his father had been killed, and all the rest of the details. By the time they finished luncheon was over, and we all adjourned to the consulting-room.

This seemed to be the signal for the commencement of Sir Jimmy's story. He and the guv'nor lit cigars, and sat down in big chairs. The sun-blinds were down, and the room was comparatively cool.

"Now, about this yarn I'm going to tell you," said Drexell, when the cigars were going properly. "The whole affair centres

on a bit of my property known as the Yew Hollow. I don't know whether you ever went there, Mr. Blake?"

"I don't remember," replied the gov'nor. "You know, Jimmy, I've only been down to Rockwood once or twice. What about the Yew Hollow? The very name itself seems to have a ghostly ring about it."

"It's a curiously shaped piece of well-wooded ground just on the edge of my estate," said the young baronet. "There is a deep hollow, with yew-trees growing all round it. The hollow itself contains nothing but shrubs and a few stunted bushes and weeds. And just a little way from it stands the Yew House."

"And it's haunted?" I asked.

Sir Jimmy smiled.

"I've always said that ghosts and spirit manifestations were only the fantastic nightmares of a few preposterous cranks," he said. "Perhaps I'm right. But the happenings at the Yew Hollow are very queer. Anyhow, Mr. Blake, I'm anxious to get your opinion."

"Go ahead, then!"

"Well, as a beginning, I'd better tell you that the Yew House isn't on my estate, although the Hollow is—if you understand what I mean," said Sir Jimmy. "It's all my property, of course, but the Yew House stands just outside the Rockwood Towers' grounds. Until quite recently the old house has been tenanted by a writer chap—a fellow named Mayne."

"Hartley Mayne, the novelist?"

"Yes," replied Sir Jimmy. "He's been there for years, and he and my pater were great pals. Well, when I got home from India, I decided that I should make big alterations in a good many ways. The pater had been jolly old-fashioned, and I'm not built that way. I'm modernising the place all round."

"H'm! That's rather a pity," smiled the gov'nor.

"Oh, I'm not spoiling it, if that's what you mean!" went on the visitor. "But I reckon that electric light is an improvement; and I'm having garages built, and telephones installed, and all that sort of thing. Well, I found that Mr. Mayne's lease had run out, and I decided that I'd pull the old Yew House down."

"For what reason?"

"A fad, I suppose. It's tremendously old, and as bare as a prison—ugly and unsightly," said Sir Jimmy. "But when I approached Mayne about it, he didn't quite like the idea—old associations, and all that sort of thing. Only a matter of sentiment, of course. And it happened that a fairly big house on my estate—on the other side of the Towers—was just vacant. I told Mayne he could have it at the same rental as he'd been paying at the Yew House—a concession on my part, of course."

"That, as you'll readily believe, made him change his tone a bit. I'd given him a month to quit, but in the end we agreed that he should get out by the end of August. This happened, of course, nearly two months ago."

"Having settled that all right, I turned my attention to other matters. But after five weeks had elapsed—that is, nearly three weeks ago—Mayne came to me and said that he was going to shift into the new house without a minute's delay. I didn't mind, because this was just what I wanted. And he had a queer yarn to tell. The Yew House, he said, and the Yew Hollow with it, were uncanny. I asked him what he meant by uncanny, and then he told the yarn."

Sir Jimmy paused, and jerked the ash from his cigar.

"What was the queer story?" I asked interestedly.

Our visitor looked thoughtful.

"Before I go into that, perhaps I'd better tell you the main facts of the old Rockwood legend," he said slowly. "Legends, in my opinion, are nothing but peasants' gossip—invented hundred of years ago, and then handed down. This legend is quite straightforward, but a bit unusual."

"It seems that exactly two hundred years ago an old man had been murdered in the Yew House. That's the usual beginning of legends, I believe. The Yew House must have been comparatively new at that time, for it's not much older than two hundred years. Before this old chap was murdered, however, the cheerful knaves who did the trick put his eyes out. Anyhow, the old fellow was blinded, and while dying he had cursed the house and the Hollow with a hearty goodwill, saying that as long as the U. J.—No. 726.

house stood it would, at certain times, be a place of blindness. Those who entered it would have their sight taken away. And the Yew Hollow itself would become bare of all vegetation—everything would wither and die."

"That sounds suspiciously like an old wives' tale," smiled the gov'nor.

"I'm the first to admit that," agreed Sir Jimmy. "But there's no getting over the facts. There's no doubt that they're extraordinary. This curse was made two hundred years ago precisely. That's an important point."

"Why?"

"Because, a hundred years afterwards—that is, a hundred years ago—some strange things happened. There are records to show that the inhabitants of the house went blind, and that all vegetable matter in the Hollow died."

"Merely a continuation of the legend."

"That's what I thought—until the same amazing state of affairs occurred this year," said Sir Jimmy quietly. "As you'll realise, exactly another hundred years have passed. It's rather unusual for ghosts to manifest themselves at hundred-year intervals, but I suppose there have been parallels. At all events, some infernally curious things have been occurring at the Yew House. And now I get back to Mayne's story. You remember I broke off to tell you of the legend?"

"That's right," nodded Sexton Blake.

"Well, Mayne came to me looking rather scared," said Sir Jimmy. "He's a level-headed chap enough, and quite intellectual. That's obvious, because he's a man who gets his living by his brains. I certainly shouldn't accuse him of delusions. Besides, there is other evidence in addition to his."

"And what was his evidence?" I asked.

"He told me, in all seriousness, that on two separate occasions he had been temporarily blinded by some mysterious cause. Mayne's a bachelor, and sleeps alone. The first thing that happened was about three weeks ago. In the middle of the night he was awakened, and when he attempted to light a lamp he found that he was blind."

"Blind?" I exclaimed incredulously.

"For the time being—yes," replied our visitor gravely. "This isn't a legend now, Mr. Blake. It's the absolute truth. Mayne was blind for about an hour, and then he regained his normal sight!"

"Suddenly?"

"No; it was a gradual process, and the effect, he told me, lasted for several hours longer."

"Did this blindness cause him any pain?"

"My dear Mr. Blake, he couldn't open his eyes for an hour!" exclaimed Sir Jimmy earnestly. "The agony was abominable, he told me. He concluded that it was due to some natural cause or other, and he consulted the doctor. But there was nothing wrong with his eyes, and nothing wrong with his constitution."

"The same thing occurred the next night?"

"Yes—only in a bigger dose. He was blinded for near two hours, and then he remembered the old tales about the aged old dwarf."

"Dwarf?"

"Well, the old fellow was supposed to be deformed, or something," replied Drexell. "Mayne was quite startled, and he told me that he wouldn't stay in the house a day longer."

"It's rather a curious story," remarked Sexton Blake thoughtfully. "But I must confess, Jimmy, that I strongly suspect that Mayne's eyesight is defective. It's not the house that's wrong—it's Mayne's eyes."

Sir Jimmy shook his head.

"I thought you'd say that," he remarked. "But it so happens, Mr. Blake, that one of Mayne's maidservants experienced exactly the same phenomenon—and her bed-room, of course, is right on the other side of the house, in the servants' quarters. So Mayne's apartment isn't responsible, either."

"Did you see this girl?"

"Yes, of course, and talked to her. She's the daughter of one of the gamekeepers," said the young baronet. "A respectable, level-headed girl in every way. Her eyesight was affected in precisely the same fashion as Mayne's."

"And that's all you have to tell?"

"By no means!" exclaimed Sir Jimmy quickly. "The most astonishing part, in my opinion, is yet to come. After Mayne had told me all about it, and had stated his opinion that the old curse was working, I said that it wouldn't be a bad idea to go and

have a look at the Yew Hollow. So we went."

"And what did you find?" I asked tensely.

"I don't know whether you'll believe me, but I'm positively serious," said Sir Jimmy Drexell gravely. "In the Yew Hollow there's not a blade of grass or a shrub or a bush left alive! Every atom of vegetation has withered away and died!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Sexton Blake Takes Up the Case, and He and I and Pedro Take Possession of the Yew House—We Have an Uncanny Adventure as Soon as We Get There.

SEXTON BLAKE lay back in his chair.

"The precise details of the old curse have come to pass, then," he said thoughtfully. "Your story sounds 'tall,' Jimmy, but I know you are not piling it on for my benefit. But there must be some explanation."

"I wish I knew what it was!" said Drexell. "I'm worried. I don't like things of that sort to happen on my property. Why, the country folk in the district are all afraid of their lives! They wouldn't enter the Yew Hollow for a hundred pounds in solid cash. I want the whole thing cleared up."

I could tell by the gov'nor's expression that he was keenly interested. Sir Jimmy's story was so weird and extraordinary that the great detective couldn't help being interested. I was wondering what he would do.

"You want the thing cleared up, Jimmy?" said Blake absently. "That's natural. I'm wondering how I can help you. I don't very well see how trickery can be at the bottom of the manifestations. But people cannot be blinded without cause, and weeds and bushes don't shrivel up unless they are poisoned or scorched. What is the vegetation like in the Yew Hollow?"

"It is withered and dead."

"How long has it been in that condition?"

"Just upon three weeks."

"You mean you saw it in that state three weeks ago?"

"That's right."

"Have you been to the Hollow since?"

"Yes; I went there yesterday."

"And the vegetation was precisely the same?"

"If anything, more withered."

"Did you look closely?" asked Sexton Blake. "Were the roots affected?"

Sir Jimmy nodded.

"That's just it," he said. "I thought, perhaps, that some practical joker was having a game. Chemicals of some sort would probably kill the weeds and bushes. But there wasn't a sign of any chemical, and everything was absolutely dead—roots and all!"

"H'm! I can't understand it."

Sexton Blake looked across at me thoughtfully, and puffed at his cigar. His brow was puckered.

"Mayne shifted out of the Yew House three weeks ago?" he asked abruptly.

"That's near enough, anyhow."

"Has anybody lived there since?"

"Not a soul."

"Haven't you been in the house?"

"In the daytime, yes; but not at night," replied our visitor. "But look here, Mr. Blake, I haven't finished my yarn yet."

"Oh, is there some more?"

"A little. And what I'm going to tell you now is the climax of the whole affair," said Drexell. "Two days ago it ceased being merely a case of haunting, or whatever you call it, and became a tragedy."

"Ah, there has been a death?"

"I'll tell you. The day before yesterday a man's body was found lying just on the lip of the Hollow," said Sir Jimmy quietly. "He was recognised at once as Mike Osborne, a village loafer and a well-known poacher. He was quite dead."

"From what cause?"

"It isn't known, but I vaguely suspect foul play. There wasn't a mark on him, and his eyes were wide open and staring with horror. There's going to be an inquest to-morrow. It's been delayed for some reason. After thinking things over, Mr. Blake, I decided to come to you."

"Looks as though the chap was frightened to death," I remarked.

"In that case, then, there's probably something in all these manifestations," said Sir

Jimmy. "Perhaps, after all, that old curse may be taking effect. Anyhow, I'm deucedly worried, and I want some advice. I can't get the Yew House pulled down, even!"

"How's that?" asked the gov'nor.

"There's not a man who'll work near the place," was Sir Jimmy's reply. "The tale has got noised abroad, and the death of the poacher just about settled matters in the minds of the country folk. High wages are no inducement; and I dare say London workmen would refuse to pull the place down, once they heard it's grim story."

"The Yew House is quite empty?"

"Yes. And it looks as though it'll remain empty until it becomes a ruin. It stands there on the edge of the Hollow, a gaunt and stark eyesore," said Drexell. "It's as ugly as sin, and you get the creeps when you look at it. But the house is comfortable enough inside, I will say. And I wasn't quite truthful when I said it was empty. There's a sitting-room and a bed-room with furniture in them—just enough to make it habitable."

"Didn't Mr. Mayne shift all his stuff, then?"

"Oh, yes! I had this furniture put in—some old rubbish from the Towers," replied Sir Jimmy. "You see, I had an idea of living in the place for a couple of days and nights just to test it."

"But you changed your mind?" smiled Sexton Blake.

"Well, Mayne strongly advised me not to risk it," said the baronet, half apologetically. "He's been bitten, you see, and he was quite concerned when I told him of my intentions. It was his idea that I should be blinded permanently, and I didn't fancy that."

Sexton Blake rose to his feet, and paced the consulting-room a few times. I watched him rather anxiously, for I knew that he was debating in his mind whether he should take up the case or not. Personally, I was keen on looking into it. There was an element of deep mystery in Sir Jimmy's story which appealed to me.

Finally, the gov'nor came to a halt before Drexell's chair.

"This affair does not strike me as being much in my own particular line, Jimmy," he said slowly.

"Oh, you're not going to do anything, then?"

"I didn't say that," smiled Blake, as the young baronet's face fell about a yard, as the novelists put it. "You have interested me greatly, and my curiosity is aroused. Moreover, the month is August, and London is infernally hot. Rockwood Towers appeals to me. There is a river near by, and some excellent golf-links are handy. Tinker and I can do with a few days' relaxation."

Sir Jimmy grinned.

"That means you'll come down with me?" he asked eagerly.

"No, it doesn't mean that."

"But you said—"

"My idea is this," interrupted the gov'nor. "You'll go back to Ipswich alone, and you won't say anything about any arrangement with me. And Tinker and I will run down this evening, and we'll take possession of the Yew House. You've got the key, I suppose?"

"No. But that's a detail. I'll leave the back door unfastened."

"That's all right. To-night, at all events, Tinker and I will be there unknown to a soul except yourself," said Sexton Blake. "I have a mind to experience this strange blindness myself. You see, if there's human agency at the bottom of it all, nothing will happen to-night. But if it were known that we were going to spend the night there somebody might get busy. At all events, I'll make a preliminary investigation on the quiet."

Sir Jimmy jumped up, his face aglow.

"It's splendid of you, Mr. Blake!" he said enthusiastically. "But look here, this isn't a friendly affair; it's a professional case. And I want you to treat me just the same as an ordinary client. You'll want fees—"

"Confound you, Jimmy! Don't talk of fees!" exclaimed Blake severely. "It isn't a professional case. I'm coming down just because I fancy to. And, after this first night, Tinker and I will be your guests. So don't make an idiot of yourself by naming fees!"

Jimmy grinned and chuckled.

"Well, you'll let me pay expenses—"

"If you mention financial questions again I'll refuse to lift a finger in the matter!" threatened the gov'nor. "You get back to Ipswich, and keep mum about these arrange-

ments. Tinker and I will come along later on. That's all you need to know for the present."

"It's jolly good of you—"

"No, it isn't!" snapped Blake. "Wait until I've done something before you talk about my goodness. In all probability I shall fail miserably. And if you find yourself pulled forcibly out of bed to-morrow don't be surprised. I shall give you an early call, I expect."

"Oh, I'll call round at the Yew House early!" said Sir Jimmy promptly.

"My dear man, I don't want you to do that!" exclaimed the gov'nor. "You just do as I tell you. If you see no sign of Tinker or myself by nine o'clock, then I give you permission to break into the Yew House to find our remains."

"What about Pedro?" I asked. "He's looking anxious."

Pedro wasn't looking anxious at all, really. He was engaged in the entertaining occupation of snapping at flies.

"We'll take Pedro, of course," said Sexton Blake. "He's a splendid ghost-catcher—especially if the ghost happens to be solid. I'm not going to ask you any more questions, Jimmy. We'll let matters remain as they are until I've had a look at this old house myself."

"What's your opinion of the whole case, anyhow?"

"I'm not sure that I've formed an opinion yet," replied the gov'nor. "Two hundred years ago an old man curses the Yew Hollow and the house near it, and to-day the curse is being fulfilled. It looks like some occult demonstration. But I don't believe it is. By the way, did your father believe the legend?"

"Implicitly, I think. He was a bit superstitious, you know."

"Well, I'm not; and I've got suspicions," said Blake. "That's all for the present, my dear fellow."

Ten minutes later Sir James Drexell took his departure from Baker Street. And after he had gone the gov'nor looked at me queerly.

"A wild-goose chase—eh, Tinker?" he smiled.

"I don't know, gov'nor," I said. "It looks rummy, doesn't it?"

"Well, the change will do us good, my lad," he said pleasantly. "Pack a couple of bags, and get yourself ready. We shall have to be off before long. It's lucky I'm slack this week, otherwise I'm afraid Sir James and his precious ghost-story would have received scant attention."

"How are we going, gov'nor? By car?"

"Of course! We can't be bothered with Pedro on a railway train. Pedro has a rooted objection, too, to being placed in the guard's van. He prefers the rear cushions of a motor-car. Oh, and, Tinker!"

"Yes, gov'nor?"

"Pack a bag of grub, too," said Blake. "I'll leave the choice to you. But we shall want some supper to-night, sha'n't we? We shall have to rough it at the Yew House, but we needn't go hungry."

"You leave the grub department to me, gov'nor," I grinned.

It was fairly late in the afternoon when we started out. We were going in the gov'nor's big touring car, and it was glorious weather—hot and sunny. Sexton Blake took the wheel, and I sat beside him. Pedro occupied the tonneau seats in solitary state. He didn't mind a bit. He sat there, fooling himself that he was the lord of all he surveyed.

The run down was enjoyable but uneventful. We halted at Chelmsford for a little liquid refreshment, and I shocked the gov'nor and rendered myself liable to a sentence of ten years' penal servitude by buying Pedro a bag of mixed biscuits. He wolfed them up without realising the awful crime he was committing by devouring such a luxury.

By the time Ipswich was reached the sun had nearly set, and the sky was pink and blue and various other colours. Fine weather was in store, and this was just as well. We didn't want a repetition of our previous stay in Ipswich. I'd had enough thunder and lightning to last me years.

We called at the garage we'd previously patronised, and the owner came along with us to a spot within half a mile of the Yew Hollow. Then we got out, and car was driven back to Ipswich by the garage man.

Sexton Blake and I and Pedro were left on the dusty road. There wasn't a cottage in sight, and the countryside looked rather

worn out. The grass was brown, and the trees were beginning to show signs of wear. Autumn would be along before the summer realised that it had nearly had its innings.

The stately drive leading up to Rockwood Towers lay some distance ahead. But the Yew Hollow was quite close, on the edge of the Towers grounds. The Yew House, however, was just outside the grounds, its garden being only separated from the hollow by a thick hedge.

After walking for about five minutes we mounted a little rise, turned a corner, and the Yew House lay before us in full sight. Trees grew on all sides, but the building was clearly in view.

In the evening light the old place looked rather sinister.

Sir Jimmy hadn't been far wrong in saying that the house was ugly. It was—only more so. Bare and gaunt, with drab walls, it had a cold, forbidding aspect. There was nothing to relieve the ugliness of it.

Not a sprig of creeper, and not a porch or any rustic work. The front of the house was mean-looking. Perfectly flat, with a small front door and several small and poky windows. The chimneys, rising out of the roof, were all irregular, and crumbling with age. The whole place, in fact, was mouldy with age.

"Pretty picture, isn't it, gov'nor?" I remarked.

"The interior, I imagine, must be very comfortable," said Blake. "Mayne wouldn't have remained in this house if the inside matched the outside. But we shall soon see for ourselves."

We pushed open the gate, and carried our bags up the gravel path. Pedro went on ahead, quite interested in everything. I believe he had an idea that another supply of grub was coming his way before long.

Avoiding the front door, we passed round the house to the back. As Sir Jimmy had promised, the rear door was unfastened. We went inside, and found ourselves in a narrow passage.

But this soon widened into a really comfortable lounge-hall. The interior of the Yew House, at least, was decorated well, and had many modern conveniences. The living-room, which was furnished, was a small "den" at the rear, a cosy little apartment in every way.

"It's not so bad, after all," I remarked approvingly.

The furniture was old, and there wasn't much of it; but, of course, Drexell had only had it shoved in as a temporary arrangement. Having set our bags down, we explored the other rooms, and found them very decent, on the whole. Certainly, the only real fault with the house was its ugly, forbidding outward aspect. The inside was all right.

The one furnished bed-room—it was the room Hartley Mayne had occupied—contained nothing but a double-bed and a chair or two. But the bed looked O.K., and that was the main thing. We hadn't expected luxuries.

A supply of candles were discovered on the sitting-room mantelpiece.

"And now for supper!" I said heartily. "I'm hungry after that ride! Jolly good thing you thought of the grub, gov'nor!"

"Supper can wait, Tinker," said Sexton Blake. "We're going out."

"Where the dickens to?" I asked.

"The Yew Hollow. I have a mind to see it in twilight."

"Well, there's no accounting for taste," I growled. "Just as I was thinking of supper, too! Let's get it over, quickly, then. Come on, Pedro, you lazy scoundrel! There's no grub yet."

Pedro looked indignant, but didn't raise any objection to going out.

The Hollow lay behind the house, and it was easily reached. We just had to cross the garden, and get through a gap in the thick hedge which separated the Rockwood Towers grounds from those of the Yew House.

The garden wasn't so bad—quite decent, in fact, with a good lawn and well-set-out flower-beds. Mr. Mayne had done his best to make the place look all right, but it had been a thankless task.

Sexton Blake led the way through the gap, and I followed. Pedro, of course, had gone on ahead. By the time we found ourselves on the edge of the Hollow Pedro had bounded down into its depths. But, quite suddenly, we heard him coming back.

There was a great change in his appearance.

ance. His ears were flat back against his head, and his tail hung between his legs.

"Hallo! What's the matter, old boy?" I asked.

Pedro looked round with an expression which plainly told of fear. This was disquieting. Pedro wasn't afraid of any living thing.

"What's up with him, guv'nor?" I exclaimed curiously.

"Well, if we had the idea of spooks thoroughly settled in our minds, we should assume that this place is haunted," replied Sexton Blake. "All ghostly spots, I believe, are supposed to have a kind of depressing effects upon the spirits; and animals are terror-stricken."

"Well, there's something wrong with Pedro!" I said bluntly.

The old dog was looking up at us almost appealingly.

"He's not frightened like this because of any human presence, guv'nor," I went on. "I'm blessed if I like it!"

"We will go down into the Hollow, Tinker," said Sexton Blake calmly.

We passed through the belt of surrounding yew-trees, and in a very few minutes came to the lip of the Hollow. The ground sloped away steeply before us. Pedro had come with us as far as this, but he refused to go another step. He stood on the edge of the slope and shivered.

Sexton Blake, without a word, plunged down, and I followed him—not without a certain qualm. There was something weird and uncanny about this spot—it was undoubtedly different from any other place I'd ever been near. And as we descended the steep slope we noticed that the vegetation was dried up and withered. Grass was brown and dead, and beds of weeds, which had originally been three or four feet in height, had dwindled down to a dried-up mass of rotten leaves and stalks.

Somehow, the very air seemed to be charged with some unknown, mysterious force. It may have been my imagination, but I felt queer. Something seemed to be stirring inside me—I didn't know what—and I had a keen desire to slink off without wasting a second.

"I—I say, guv'nor," I muttered, "do—do you feel—funny?"

Sexton Blake looked straight at me.

"There is undoubtedly something connected with this Hollow which I cannot, for the moment, explain," he said. "The sensation is most peculiar, and there is no apparent cause. I do not readily accept a theory that this withering up of the weeds is an occult demonstration."

"Then what is it?"

"Really, Tinker, I cannot answer that question."

"How about Pedro, guv'nor?" I asked. "He was nearly frightened out of his wits, wasn't he? Just look at him up there! He won't come down here—"

"Pedro is not frightened, young 'un," interjected the guv'nor. "He is merely uneasy—and there may be a perfectly natural cause for that. He has scented something, or has seen something, which we have missed. It is even possible that he passed over the very spot where that poacher's dead body had lain. Dogs are curious creatures, and Pedro has his own little idiosyncrasies."

I grunted.

"Well, I've got mine, too!" I exclaimed. "I vote we get out of this hole, guv'nor. We'll examine it by daylight—when we can see properly. It's nearly dark, now, and we're simply wasting time."

"Upon my soul, I believe you're getting nervous!"

"I'm not!" I roared indignantly.

But, if the truth must be told, I was just a wee bit uneasy. The twilight was already deep, and down here, surrounded by the dead trees, it was scarcely possible to see a distance of ten yards.

An utter silence reigned over the Hollow, and there was that weird "feel" in the air which made my hair want to rise on end. This, I suppose, was mainly due to my own thoughts.

Sexton Blake stood looking about him frowningly. The scene was one of strange desolation. Almost in the middle of the cup-like Hollow there was a hillock; this, like everything else, was bare of green stuff. The grass beneath our feet crackled as we trod on it. The bushes near by were as dead as imported mutton.

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"What do you make of it, guv'nor?" I asked.

"I don't know, Tinker—I really don't know!" was the great detective's reply. "But Jimmy didn't exaggerate in the least. Everything is exactly as he said. It is most extraordinary."

Blake went down on his hands and knees, and examined some of the dead weeds at close quarters. He sniffed at them, and then placed one of the withered leaves in his mouth.

"Mind you don't get poisoned—"

"Don't worry, Tinker; there is no trace of any foreign matter on these leaves," said the guv'nor. "I had suspected trickery, but these weeds and bushes were not killed by any chemical action. They have just withered and died. Why? Frankly, I cannot believe that the old curse—"

"What's that, guv'nor?" I asked abruptly.

I held up an unsteady finger, and pointed. I'd just seen something on the edge of the depression. There had been a movement among the trees above our heads—for we were, of course, at the bottom of the Hollow.

"I can see nothing, my boy," said Sexton Blake. "I'm afraid your nerves are on edge—"

"Dear me!"

The guv'nor broke off very suddenly, with a little catch in his voice. And, as for me, I know jolly well that I went "goosey" all over.

For there, among the trees, I saw an extraordinary, hunched-up, dwarfish figure. It was fitting about in the most fantastic fashion, and I caught a glimpse of a hideous face, with glaring eyes.

And not a sound broke the stillness until Sexton Blake abruptly commenced running. This broke the spell, and I followed hard at his heels. We scrambled up the steep slope helter-skelter.

But when we arrived at the spot there was nothing whatever to be seen; there was not a sound to be heard. The apparition had completely vanished. Blake looked at the ground keenly, but there wasn't a sign of any footprint.

"That was strange—eh, Tinker?" said Blake quietly.

"I—I don't half like it, guv'nor!" I muttered huskily. "That figure we saw wasn't human, I'll swear! And did you notice what it was?"

"The form of a dwarf, you mean?"

"Yes, guv'nor. Sir Jimmy told us that the old blind man had been a misshapen dwarf, didn't he? We've seen the spectre—"

"Nonsense, Tinker!" interjected Blake sharply. "I am more convinced than ever that there is some trickery at work here. I don't believe in ghosts, and our experience here has not converted me—yet. Come; we will get back to the house, and see what that has in store for us."

We got back without delay, and we were destined to discover before morning that our adventure in the Hollow was nothing compared to the extraordinary happening which took place in the Yew House itself.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

We Have Supper and Go to Bed—Then a Strange Thing Happens, and Our Eyes Refuse to Act—After That We Go Out, and Meet a Very Pretty Girl in the Woods—We are Compelled Against Our Own Wishes to Indulge in a Cold Bath.

PEDRO'S strange behaviour was very significant, to my mind. He was as brave as a lion, and for him to deliberately show the white feather was unheard-of. Yet he had undoubtedly funk going down into the Hollow.

We found him just inside the garden of the Yew House. He looked more comfortable now, and wagged his tail in a sheepish, apologetic kind of way. He was practically telling us that he was ashamed of himself.

"You coward!" I said sternly.

Pedro hung his head.

"Fat lot of good you'd be in a spook-hunt!" I went on. "If you'd been on the spot we might have collared that dwarf-ghost. Pedro, my son, you're in disgrace. You won't get any supper!"

Pedro didn't believe this; he wagged his tail with a little more energy, and cocked his left ear. He knew what "supper" meant all right. And by the time we reached the little sitting-room he was as cheerful as possible.

"Well, guv'nor, what do you make of it?" I asked bluntly.

"My dear Tinker, you mustn't ask me what I think of it at this early stage!" protested Sexton Blake. "I have scarcely had time to look round. If the light had been stronger I should undoubtedly have searched the wood for that strange dwarf; but the task would have been hopeless in the gathering dusk. We shall have to wait until morning."

"Let's hope we're still alive!" I said cheerfully.

The guv'nor was very thoughtful, and, I may as well add, very lazy. He just dropped into a chair and smoked—and let me do all the supper preparation. He didn't even help to lay the table.

This wasn't much of a task, I'll admit. I just spread a big serviette over one corner, and told the guv'nor that we should have to kid ourselves that it was a full-sized tablecloth. Then I threw some knives and forks in a heap, so that we could help ourselves to just what we required. This saved a lot of trouble. The grub was set out daintily on two chunks of grease-proof paper.

There was ham and hard-boiled eggs, and tongue, and bread-and-butter, and four varieties of cake. There was no sense in starving ourselves, and the Food Controller's restrictions don't apply when you're camping in a haunted house. That's how I argued, anyhow.

I'd brought a tiny kettle and a tinner spirit-stove. In less than ten minutes I had boiling water, and then I made the coffee. Coffee and milk all shoved together in one tin; one spoonful make a cup. It's not so good as properly-made coffee with fresh milk and cream, of course; but it's all right in an emergency.

"Come on, guv'nor; all ready!" I said briskly.

Sexton Blake tossed his cigarette-end across the table into the fireplace, missing the tinned coffee by about an eighth of an inch, and drew his chair up. He eyed the grub with approval.

"There's one great point in your favour, Tinker," he said pleasantly. "In all matters concerning the commissariat department you stand pre-eminent. You apparently had the idea that we were going to stand a siege in this place. I'll have some of that ham, a couple of eggs, and bread-and-butter."

"Help yourself, guv'nor!"

We were soon busy, and the meal was really enjoyable. Sexton Blake's appetite was nearly as keen as my own—and that means that he ate a lot. I managed to keep ahead of him easily, though. Pedro squatted on the floor, and waited for tit-bits. When he got tired of waiting he shoved a huge paw on my arm, as a kind of gentle hint.

At least, it was his idea of a gentle hint. Once he jerked a forkful of ham on to the floor, and after that he nearly drowned me by upsetting the coffee just as I was about to drink.

Except for these little diversions, however, the supper passed off splendidly. I'd brought several huge biscuits for Pedro, and he munched at these contentedly, adding to the flavour now and again by sandwiching in a piece of fat ham.

It was quite dark now, of course, and as there were plenty of candles, I lighted six of them. When you're in a haunted house you want plenty of light. One candle's no good at all.

"What's the programme to-night, sir?" I asked, as I sipped my second cup of coffee. "Do we sit up all night, and watch for the spectre?"

Sexton Blake lit a cigarette, and smiled.

"Jimmy mentioned nothing about a spectre, young 'un," he said. "There's nothing to be seen of the ghost, by what I understand. People who live in this house are simply blinded—from no apparent cause."

I grunted.

"That's a rotten kind of ghost, guv'nor," I said. "I'd rather see a spook than have my eyesight taken away. Haven't you formed any theory? It seems a bit tall to me, you know. How can a chap's eyesight be affected when there's nothing to affect it?"

"That is impossible, Tinker," replied the guv'nor. "There can be no effect without a cause—that is a logical fact which no one dare deny. But what is the cause? We have to get at that point. We know the effect; but we don't know the cause. Our stay here may be fruitful."

"That means we shall get no sleep?"

"Not at all. We shall go to bed very

shortly, and compose ourselves for sleep exactly as though the house were a normal one," said Blake. "Before an investigation is possible I must experience this extraordinary 'blinding' phenomenon. But I suspect that the night will pass uneventfully."

"Let's hope so," I remarked. "Get away, you fathead!"

Those last few words were addressed to Pedro. Having finished his biscuits, he had come along for a fresh supply of grub. He was standing beside me, looking up with twinkling eyes.

"You glutton!" I said severely. "Don't you know it's war-time? Before long you'll have to subsist on sawdust and weeds. There's no telling how long the war will last if our glorious Foreign Office doesn't wake up. I reckon you'd manage the blockade better than some people I could name, Pedro. Thank goodness the Americans are showing us how it ought to be done!"

Pedro wasn't at all interested in politics, however; he seemed more concerned about my cup of coffee. I left him some, and he licked it up with a noise like a Prussian drinking lager-beer.

We were all quite cheerful now. The house didn't have any depressing effect upon us, and our nerves were pretty strong. Besides, we didn't believe in ghosts at all. There was nothing to be afraid of. Pedro's serene attitude showed that everything was all right.

But why had he acted so curiously in the Hollow?

I didn't worry over the problem, but cleared away the supper-things. Sexton Blake went off somewhere, and he was still away when I had finished tidying up. But just as I was going in search of him the door opened.

"Been exploring?" I asked.

"I have been looking round the house, Tinker," replied the guv'nor. "Really, I fail to see anything unusual. The place is old, but there are no secret stairways or passages. The walls of our bed-room are thin, in fact, and the window is a good distance from the ground. It is quite impossible for any human being to surprise us in the night."

"That's a comfort, anyhow," I said cheerfully.

"If you're ready, young 'un, we'll get to bed at once," went on Sexton Blake. "We shall be up at daybreak, so we shall only get a few hours' sleep. Bring Pedro along; we'll have him in the room with us."

I told Pedro to follow, and collared the half-dozen partially-used candles. They were stuck on a long piece of old planking, in an artistic row. So we went up to bed with plenty of light.

The guv'nor, I found, had been faking things up. The window was open a little at the top, but Blake had fixed up several invisible threads which would break instantly if the window was touched. He had treated the fireplace in the same way.

"You don't think the ghost's coming down the chimney, do you, guv'nor?" I grinned.

"We cannot be too careful, Tinker," replied Sexton Blake. "And don't keep referring to the 'ghost.' There isn't a ghost. Nothing will convince me that the manifestations were caused by a supernatural agency."

Once inside the bed-room, Blake treated the door just the same as the window. He turned the key in the lock, put the key in his pocket, and then stretched four separate threads across.

In addition to this a board was placed against the door. It was just on the balance, and the slightest movement of the door would send it down. It was impossible for us to be disturbed in the night without receiving a warning.

Then, to settle matters finally, Blake drove two long screws into the window-frame, fixing it firmly in its present position. No human being could enter from the outside without smashing the glass—and that would awaken us all right.

I felt more comfortable when I eyed these preparations.

"We're as right as rain, guv'nor!" I said, as I pulled off my boots.

"Don't undress completely, Tinker!" exclaimed Blake. "We may have to get up in a hurry. It is better to be prepared."

So, when we laid upon the bed—which was jolly comfortable—we were still half-dressed. Pedro was given a blanket all to himself, and he went off to sleep without any fuss. He wasn't afraid of ghosts here, at any rate.

I think I must have gone off to sleep pretty quickly, too. Anyhow, I don't remember anything until I suddenly woke up. The room was in pitch darkness, and a low, rumbling growl was coming from Pedro.

"Hallo! What's the matter, old boy?"

"Hush, Tinker, hush!" breathed Sexton Blake into my ear. "Pedro has heard something, I don't know what. Lie quite still."

We couldn't see Pedro, but we knew that he was keenly on the alert. He didn't growl like that without good cause. Outside a breeze was moaning slightly round the house, and, in spite of myself, I felt a creepy sensation stealing all over me.

And then, without any warning, the bed-room became filled with an extraordinary glow. It wasn't a light—just a faint, indistinct glow. I couldn't see where it was coming from, or what was causing it.

Pedro had ceased growling, and all was still.

"Can you see anything, guv'nor?" I breathed.

"Yes, a strange glow," murmured Sexton Blake.

I was rather relieved. I had been thinking that my eyes were squiffy, or something. There was something very curious about the faint light. It was certainly subdued. But yet, at the same time, my eyes ached as though I had been looking into the full noon-day sun.

Then, abruptly, the glow vanished.

The darkness shut down blacker than before.

"What was it, sir?" I asked tensely.

"I don't know, Tinker, I don't know," replied Blake in rather a worried tone.

"I've heard it said that a glow like that appears in haunted rooms," I whispered softly. "I don't suppose—"

"That is the best way, Tinker!" snapped the guv'nor. "Don't suppose at all! The subdued light was bizarre—unreal, almost—but there must be some explanation. Pedro wouldn't growl at a ghost, you young idiot!"

"No, I don't suppose—I mean, of course, he wouldn't!" I said lamely.

We lay quite still for several minutes after that little exchange of words. But no sound reached us except the faint murmur of the wind, and a shuffle now and again from Pedro.

At last Sexton Blake quietly got up and crossed to the window. The blind was up, but the night was as black as pitch outside.

"See anything, guv'nor?" I asked, after a bit.

"Nothing, Tinker," replied the great detective. "I am puzzled. The mysterious glow didn't come from the direction of the window at all. So it couldn't have been the reflection of a fire, or anything like that. Besides, it seemed to be bluey-green in colour. Dear me! My eyes seem to ache, too!"

"That's what I was going to say, guv'nor," I murmured. "I feel as though I'd been looking straight into a thousand candle-power motor-lamp!"

There was a short silence, and then Blake snapped his fingers.

"Come here, Tinker," he said.

I slid off the bed, and felt my way across to the window. I couldn't see a thing, and only went by the sound of the guv'nor's voice. The night was fearfully dark, somehow. I felt Blake's hand.

"You are facing the window, Tinker," he muttered. "Can you see anything?"

I stared before me, and felt the window-frame.

"It's funny," I said, startled. "I—I can't see anything!"

"Yet, on the darkest of nights, it is always possible to see the outline of trees and the framework of the window itself," said Sexton Blake. "I cannot believe the darkness is so dense—"

"Good heavens!" I gasped suddenly. "What did Sir Jimmy say, guv'nor? Anybody who stays in this house goes—goes blind! Are we—are we—"

I stopped short, absolutely horrified.

There had been no ghostly manifestation—there had been nothing but that strange, uncanny glow. And now we couldn't see a thing! I could feel Blake before me, but everything was utterly black before my eyes.

"Have—have you got your electric-torch, guv'nor?" I muttered hoarsely.

"Yes; in my pocket."

"Switch it on, guv'nor!" I said. "Let's—let's make sure!"

"Don't be alarmed, Tinker," exclaimed Blake gently. "I daresay—oh!"

As he was speaking he clicked the switch over, and a shaft of light shot across the

room. But I didn't see it. I only know that a million points of dazzling fire danced before my eyes.

"Turn it off, guv'nor!" I screamed.

I couldn't help crying out like that; my voice rose to a shrill gasp. For the agony in my eyes was almost unbearable. The dancing lights caused my head to throb with the most dreadful pain.

And Sexton Blake was similarly affected. I knew that by the gasp he gave. And Pedro, on the other side of the room, suddenly howled and shuffled about madly. Then Blake switched the light off.

Almost instantly the pain disappeared.

"Oh!" I panted. "Thank goodness!"

"This is amazing, Tinker," said Blake huskily. "It is undoubtedly impossible for us to see anything. Our eyes are incapable of bearing the light from an ordinary electric torch. Jimmy's story was not far wrong!"

"Are we—are we blind, guv'nor?" I asked fearfully.

"There can be no question of that," replied Blake, in grave tones. "Our eyes are useless. They cannot stand even a subdued light. It is far worse than blindness, Tinker. When the daylight comes we shall suffer agonies—unless we mask our eyes completely from the light."

"How—how awful!" I said dully.

Then, suddenly, the full horror of the situation flooded upon me. We were blind! We were useless for evermore! Our stay in the Yew House had ended in sheer disaster.

"We weren't blinded by human agency!" I burst out. "It's impossible, guv'nor! No man on earth could have done it. This house is accursed! The story of the old dwarf was true, and we are maimed and wrecked for life!"

There was a short silence. Then Blake's voice came, softly and smoothly.

"You seem to forget, Tinker," he said in perfectly even tones, "that Jimmy's story was to the effect that the blindness was only temporary. We came here, and we took the risk, so we can't grumble."

I gasped with relief. I'd forgotten that Sir Jimmy had said that the blindness only lasted a few hours. A great wave of joy surged through me, until another thought struck me.

"But suppose—suppose—" I began.

"There you go, supposing again!" snapped the guv'nor. "Upon my word, Tinker, I shall get angry soon! You are fearing that our blindness will be permanent? Dismiss all such ideas. In a few hours we shall be able to see again, I am sure of that. Lie down on the bed, and calm yourself."

"I'm sorry, guv'nor!" I muttered.

We sat down, and I felt Pedro's nose against my hand. The old dog was wondering what had happened, I suppose, and he came to me for sympathy. Blake, I knew, wanted to calm me down. But it was possible we had received a bigger dose of—of what? We didn't know. We had been cruelly blinded by an unknown, mysterious, invisible force.

As we lay on the bed we didn't speak for some time. Our thoughts were too busy for speech. In my own mind I was almost positive that our misfortune had been caused by some superphysical agency. Yet I'd always scoffed at ghosts and spirits. There was something ghastly about this old house. An overwhelming desire to flee from it took possession of me.

"Let's get out into the open, guv'nor," I said suddenly. "If we stay here something else might happen!"

"No, Tinker, there will be no further demonstration to-night," interrupted the guv'nor. "I am puzzled—I am worried. I can think of no possible explanation. This mystery is interesting, young 'un."

"Interesting!" I said bitterly, "and we're blind!"

Sexton Blake didn't reply. And so, for a full hour, we lay still and silent. Then I heard the guv'nor moving.

"Prepare yourself, my lad," he said abruptly. "I'm going to switch on the light again for a second. No, don't bury your head in the pillow. The effect may not be so severe this time."

There was a click, and I saw the beam of light from the torch. I saw it dimly and hazily. And the agony was by no means acute. The dreadful piercing sensation did not trouble me. Strange flashes danced before my eyes.

"There, Tinker," came the guv'nor's voice. "It is exactly as Jimmy described. The



"I can see nothing—" Sexton Blake broke off suddenly, for there, among the trees, was a hunched-up, dwarfish figure, flitting about in the most fantastic fashion!

effect is wearing off already. By dawn, probably, our normal sight will have returned."

"Thank Heaven for that!" I said fervently. A great surge of relief came over me. My fears had been idle, and there was every reason to believe that Sexton Blake's words would come true. We didn't speak for a long while. Hours seemed to pass. I was waiting—waiting for the dawn. Should I see it when it came?

It seemed an eternity before I became aware of a greyish tinge in the darkness. I rolled off the bed and went to the window. Then I uttered a gasp of sheer joy. I could see the trees and the garden! They were dim and indistinct in the faint, light of dawn, but I could see.

"It's—it's all right, guv'nor!" I said chokingly.

Again Blake pressed the switch of his torch; and this time we found it possible to look at the light. Our eyes still pained, but it was as nothing after the dreadful agony of before.

And as the sky lightened our sight returned. By the time the glorious August sun peeped over the horizon we were practically normal again. Our eyes simply ached.

Sexton Blake was quite calm over it all, but I nearly went up the pole with delight. I danced Pedro round the room on his hind feet, and he seemed to like it. He was jolly relieved, too, I imagine.

The guv'nor quite coolly went round the room, looking at the walls and the flooring and the ceiling.

"I am puzzled, Tinker," he said slowly. "It is indeed a strange riddle!"

He came over and examined my eyes. The inspection lasted for fully ten minutes, and

then Blake paced up and down for another ten minutes. Meanwhile, I was dressing. I was feeling light-hearted and joyful now. After my dreadful feelings of the night the whole world seemed bright now.

Sexton Blake suddenly awoke from his reverie.

"Oh! So you're getting dressed, Tinker?" he said briskly. "That's just as well, because we're going out now. I intend to go along to the Towers at once. Sir Jimmy will be in bed, of course, but we'll go and squeeze a sponge of cold water over his face—or something of that kind!"

"What about breakfast?" I asked practically.

"Breakfast, my dear Tinker, can wait," replied the guv'nor. "Besides, I don't feel inclined to breakfast off the leavings of last night's supper. We will rouse Jimmy up, and he'll soon find plenty of breakfast for us. I mean to tell him of the night's events. And, after breakfast, I wish to go on a round of inquiries. There are many things to be done."

Blake was soon dressed, and then we sallied out into the open. Our eyes smarted somewhat, but we experienced no real discomfort now. And, curiously enough, there was nothing wrong with them—no inflammation, or anything like that. The whole thing was mysterious and uncanny, but I didn't trouble myself much. I was fully determined, however, to sleep in some other house in future. One night in the Yew House was sufficient for little me!

We scrambled through the gap in the hedge, and skirted past the Yew Hollow. The guv'nor intended examining that interesting spot after breakfast. There was a lovely

stretch of parkland between the Hollow and the Towers; with tall, stately trees and rich grass. Tiny hillocks and valleys were on all sides, and I spotted a sparkling stream flowing between well-wooded banks. That stream would make great friends with me, I decided.

It was, of course, very early indeed. The sun was now a little way up, the sky being clear and blue. Birds twittered in the trees, and there was every promise of a sweltering day before us.

And then another piece of scenery hove in sight—a piece which I admired tremendously. This was human scenery—in other words, a jolly pretty girl. She was coming towards us from the direction of a little spinney, and I couldn't help noticing the graceful swing of her walk, and the dainty lines of her figure. She was dressed all in white, and looked a perfect vision of summery delightfulness. When we got a little closer I could see, too, that she was as pretty as a picture.

"Who's this, I wonder?" I murmured.

"One of Sir Jimmy's visitors, I presume," replied Blake. "That must surely be the case, since she is wandering about in these private grounds."

"Well, I must say that Sir Jimmy's got jolly good taste in visitors!" I exclaimed approvingly. "Hallo! She's coming right up to us—that means we're going to speak to her. I don't mind a little bit."

While we were still a few yards apart she smiled at us rather shyly.

"I hope I'm not doing wrong in coming to this part of the estate?" she said, with a delightful air of absolute innocence—although I spotted a kind of twinkle in her deep brown eyes at the same moment.

Sexton Blake and I raised our hats as though we were fixed together, and drawn by a wire—it was a simultaneous movement.

"Really, I do not think I can answer that question," smiled the guv'nor. "Surely Sir James can have no objection to your wandering over any part of the estate you choose! Forgive me, but are you—er—a little out of your bearings?"

The girl's eyes laughed, although her face was quite straight.

"I don't quite understand!" she exclaimed softly—although, as a matter of fact, she understood as well as I did. Girls are that way, I've found. They always profess to be totally ignorant of things they know all the time.

"I mean, have you lost your way?" smiled the guv'nor.

"Oh, no! I'm just having an early morning walk—that is all," replied the vision in white. "Thank you so much!"

She smiled at us again, and then tripped off. We were rather rude, I suppose, but we stood and watched her until she disappeared behind a clump of bushes.

"Ripping girl—eh?" I exclaimed enthusiastically.

"Yes. I wonder who she can be?" Blake replied. "Sir Jimmy will tell us, of course. We shall very probably be introduced to her at breakfast-time."

"That's good!" I said heartily.

And we continued on our way. Breakfast was now quite an alluring meal, and I hoped it wouldn't be long in coming—or, rather, I hoped they'd have breakfast early at the Towers.

Very soon after this we saw signs of much activity in the grounds. We were near the Towers now, although the great mansion itself was hidden by the trees. Sir Jimmy was having big alterations, and all sorts of improvements.

The biggest job of all was the cutting of a tunnel from the terrace of one of the lower lawns. I found out all about this later on, but, for the sake of clearness, I'm going to explain it now.

The lower lawn was rather difficult to get at, as a dense plantation of trees lay between the lawn and the terrace of the house. It was necessary to go a long way round—and Drexell didn't like this. So he got the idea of having a wide tunnel made—a tunnel which ran right beneath the trees. The lawn was on a much lower level than the terrace, and so the lawn-end of the tunnel would be flush with the ground; while it would be necessary to provide a deep flight of steps at the other end. When completed, the tunnel would be a distinct novelty—especially as it was to be artistically decorated inside, with hidden electric lights here and there.

The contractors had started the job, and it had been necessary to sink a shaft—only

about twenty feet deep—in a tiny clearing among the trees. At this spot there was to be a big glass dome when the thing was finished.

At present the shaft was rough, for the work hadn't been going on long. And trouble had come along, too. A little stream which wandered through the plantation had broken adrift, or something—anyhow, that portion of the tunnel which had already been bored had become flooded.

Work had been at a standstill for over a week, and the tunnel was filled with water. This wouldn't do, of course, and the contractors had brought a heavy steam-pump along, to pump the tunnel dry—meanwhile, making another flood impossible. Drexell hadn't foreseen these complications, but the job had to be finished.

The steam-pump had been lowered down the shaft only the previous afternoon, I learned. The steam was being supplied by a farm-engine, which, of course, couldn't be taken into the clearing. So the engine was standing beyond the trees, and the steam was carried to the pump by means of a flexible hose—the usual method with this type of pump. The farm-engine in this particular case was merely acting as a boiler, to get the necessary pressure of steam.

Sexton Blake and I, making our way to the Towers, cut across the grounds, and came upon this clearing. There wasn't a soul there, but we could see that work had been proceeding shortly before.

"Hallo! What's going on here?" I asked.

"Excavations of some sort, I should judge," remarked the gov'nor. "There is a shaft there, and a steam-pipe, unless I am mistaken. Evidently the shaft has become flooded, Tinker. The workmen don't seem to be very busy."

"Knocked off for brekker, I expect," I said.

"Probably," agreed the gov'nor.

We walked to the edge of the shaft and looked down. We were hemmed in by trees, and we could see the flexible steam-hose lying in the grass. At the foot of the short

shaft there was a quantity of dirty-looking water. The steam-pump was slung on the end of a heavy chain, and a faint whisp of steam was coming up. A ladder led downwards from the surface.

"Yes, they're pumping, gov'nor," I remarked. "I saw a pump of this sort at work once in a coal-pit—only it was bigger than this—"

I paused suddenly. I thought I heard a sound behind me. Pedro was there, and he gave a little growl. It was his growl, in fact, which made me turn. But before I could look round—or before Blake could look round—something happened.

We were both pushed violently! Being on the extreme edge of the shaft, a violent push wasn't at all welcome. We were totally unprepared for the attack, and the next second we plunged down into the dirty-looking water at the foot of the shaft!

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Sexton Blake and I Find Ourselves in a Terrible Predicament, and for a Time Things Get So Hot that We Fear the Worst.

S PLASH!

The gov'nor and I plunged feet-first into the water almost at the same second. The miracle was that we didn't hit against the pump. If we had done, we should certainly have been gravely injured.

But we just dropped into the water and went under. I felt my feet strike the bottom of the shaft, and when I was able to take a gulp of breath I found that the water was not deeper than five feet.

So we shouldn't drown, at all events.

"What—what happened, gov'nor?" I spluttered.

Sexton Blake was busily expelling a quantity of muddy water from his mouth, and he couldn't answer with any degree of

lucidity. He grunted and gurgled. Then, looking up, I saw something which startled me.

The ladder, by means of which we could have escaped, was being swiftly drawn up. But I couldn't see by whose hands. The ladder was just disappearing. Ten seconds later I heard a crash as the ladder fell to the grass.

"That's done it!" I gasped. "Who the dickens could have played this trick, gov'nor? The ladder's been pinched!"

Blake looked furious.

"A senseless, pointless outrage, Tinker!" he exclaimed harshly. "The workmen will be here before long, and then we shall be rescued. There is no danger. The water is even below your head."

"I can't make it out, gov'nor!" I said amazedly. "A cold bath is all right, but not when you're fully dressed, and when the water resembles the Thames at Wapping! Look here, I can nip up that pump chain!"

"Wait a moment, Tinker—Don't do anything rash," interrupted the gov'nor. "By what I can see, the steam-pipe is disconnected from the pump itself, and the workmen, evidently, have been making some adjustment. We don't want to upset anything. Our best plan is to shout."

"We shouldn't be heard, gov'nor."

"I think so, my lad. In any case, the workmen will be back from breakfast before so very long," replied Blake. "We sha'n't come to any harm here. Did you catch any glimpse of the ruffian who pushed us down?"

"Not a quarter of an inch, gov'nor," I replied, wading through the water a foot or two. "I can't understand who pushed us down, or why we were pushed down. This seems to be a tunnel here," I added, peering into a black cavity, which was three parts filled with water. At this time, of course, I didn't know what the tunnel was for, or anything about it.

"I can't quite understand about Pedro," said the detective. "He doesn't seem to be making any uproar—"

And then, before the gov'nor could get any



Without a second's warning there was a ghastly, blinding flash of lightning, followed by a fearful detonation of thunder. Tinker hardly knew what happened, for the three were flung violently to the ground.

further, the disconnected hose-pipe commenced lashing about of its own accord. We both backed away, and while we were doing so a terrific cloud of steam burst out. I think it was about the most ear-splitting roar I'd ever heard in all my life.

I saw Blake's lips move, but it was impossible to hear what he said. The steam was roaring out in volumes, and the shaft became blurred with it. Fortunately, the guv'nor and I were at the furthest point away from the pump. If we had been right near to it that terrible blast of steam would have scalded us to death instantly. Even as it was the heat was appalling.

All sorts of thoughts rushed through my brain in the space of a second.

I knew that we couldn't survive a single minute. The steam would finish us long before that brief time had elapsed. And the true peril of the whole situation became apparent to me.

We had been cast down the shaft, the ladder had been removed, and the steam had been turned on! There was no escape for us. That tremendous volume of steam was so powerful that nothing could live near it for any length of time.

I'll admit that I was so confused that I should certainly have perished had not Sexton Blake taken matters in hand. He realised well enough that if we hesitated a moment we should be killed by the super-heated steam.

He acted like lightning.

Grabbing me violently, he pulled me clean under the water, and then sent me staggering forward ahead of him. And then I knew that we were plunging up the flooded tunnel. Sexton Blake's idea, of course, was to get away from the vicinity of the pump. To remain there was to die.

Solely owing to the guv'nor's promptitude, we were saved from being cruelly scalded. Another fifteen seconds in the shaft, and we should have been frightfully injured. As we went we stumbled continuously over boulders and rubbish. We struck our heads and arms against projections.

The tunnel led slightly upwards, and so the level of the water became lower as we progressed. But we knew very well that there was no exit, for the tunnel had only been excavated to a certain point. We were trapped hopelessly, and our only chance of salvation was prompt rescue.

The steam had not reached the tunnel yet, except in little wisps. But it was quite obvious that before so very long great, choking waves would come bellowing in our wake.

The noise was deadening. Of course, it was magnified tremendously by the confined walls of the tunnel and the shafting. I've been on a railway platform sometimes, and I've heard an express locomotive blowing off steam from its safety-valve. That's a pretty deafening uproar when you're close to it, as anybody knows. But this commotion was fifty times as loud.

It seemed to numb our very brains. The flexible hose, containing steam at something like ninety pounds pressure to the square inch, was pouring out the scalding vapour with overpowering force.

The hideous roar was so awful that I couldn't think or do anything. But I realised that we were at the end of the tunnel, and that further progress was impossible. The water here was only four feet deep.

Everything was pitch black, for only a tiny proportion of light was able to enter the tunnel at the shaft end—and subdued light at that. But now the end was choked with dense masses of steam.

This was gradually making its way up the tunnel, and would reach us in due course. Escape by that way was impracticable. We could do absolutely nothing until the steam was cut off at the boiler.

I leaned against the rough wall, and pressed my hands to my ears. Then I felt Sexton Blake's face close to mine.

"A bit of a fix, Tinker!" whispered the guv'nor faintly.

That's what it sounded like to me, anyhow. I just caught the words dimly and indistinctly. Yet I knew very well the guv'nor must have bellowed them at the very top of his voice.

"We can't stand this for long, guv'nor!" I roared back.

"We sha'n't have to."

"Do you think we shall be rescued, then?"

"Yes, within a few minutes."

That little dialogue wasn't so easy to say as it looks. We both bawled for all we were worth, and got quite out of breath. And

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all the time the escaping steam boomed and thundered and hissed.

We stood close together, gripping each other, and I could feel the guv'nor pressing my shoulder reassuringly. Yet I was pretty sure in my own mind that he was prepared for death. I don't think I was. I was dazed and stunned.

For one thing, this disaster had been so utterly unexpected. We had never dreamed of such a peril. And our would-be murderer couldn't possibly have planned the affair beforehand. For we had only approached the shaft by chance.

Somebody had taken advantage of that fact, and had acted swiftly. But what was the good of conjecture? We weren't likely to bring the unknown scoundrel to book, anyhow.

It couldn't have been an accident, that was certain.

But, if not an accident, then who had deliberately cast us down to a frightful death? At all events, we had been cast down to die. The fact that we didn't—as my writing of this record proves—was owing to Sexton Blake's quick-wittedness, and the help of some other individual.

We hadn't met a soul during our walk from the Yew House to this spot—except that pretty girl. Good Heavens! It wasn't possible—I cast the thought aside instantly, but it gave me an uncomfortable jar.

She had seen us, and, presumably, she knew all about this pumping business. But for a girl to commit such a vile deed! No, I wouldn't believe it, and I wouldn't consider it.

Indeed, I didn't feel like considering anything except our position at the present moment. Already several puffs of steam had come upon us, and the air of the tunnel was becoming overpoweringly hot.

Meanwhile, the steam continued to pour forth with unabated fury. It seemed a wonder to me that the boiler at the other end of the pipe didn't exhaust itself. And surely that dreadful roar would be heard by the workmen!

"I think we're booked, guv'nor," I bellowed, after a bit.

"Keep your spirits up, Tinker—we're not dead yet!" shouted Blake comfortingly.

"How long do you think we can last?"

"Oh, another fifteen minutes—quite!"

Fifteen minutes didn't sound long! And I had an idea that Sexton Blake had exaggerated a trifle; five minutes was nearer the mark, in my opinion. Even while we were speaking another choking gust of hot steam drove into our faces.

The steam was, in fact, becoming thicker every moment. Soon, of course, the tunnel would become so choked that we should be unable to breathe. We should, to tell the truth, be boiled! That's putting it bluntly.

Only our heads and shoulders would suffer, but it happens that those portions of our anatomy are the most important. Rude people have sometimes told me to go and boil my head—and it looked as though that interesting event was now about to take place!

Because, being steamed is next-door neighbour to being boiled. All this sounds pretty awful, I know; but it's not half so awful as the actual experience was! The steam was choking us, and we were perspiring as if we'd come out of a Turkish bath. But a Turkish bath was nothing to this; and before long the steam would become absolutely scalding.

Then, of course, we should die.

Up till the present we had escaped injury completely. The steam had had no effect save to cause us dire discomfort. But what hope had we of escaping? Certainly, we could do nothing ourselves.

In one direction lay the steam-pump, blowing off boiling vapour and guarding the shaft; and at the other end was a blank wall. It was a complete trap. The scoundrel who had done this dastardly trick had not counted upon us getting up the tunnel. He had assumed, of course, that we should perish during the first few seconds of the uproar of steam.

We had gained a respite—but for how long?

Surely the workmen would hear that escaping steam in time to rescue us? But then I thought of the surrounding trees. A fairly strong breeze had been blowing at the time of our walk through the plantation—and, of course, it was blowing now. The trees were making quite a rustle.

And if the workmen were at breakfast, it was quite likely that they were some respectable distance away. The escaping steam, if heard at all, would be regarded as the noise of the wind in the trees.

Besides, the noise on the surface would be comparatively slight. Down here it was deafening and awful, but the shaft would serve to lessen the sound; and a hundred yards away from the spot there would scarcely be any noise.

That's how I argued, anyhow. I was looking on the worst side, I'll admit. Why, it was quite on the cards that nobody would approach the shaft for half an hour. All we could do was to wait.

Action on our part was impossible.

Quite three hours passed.

I told myself that the expiration of time amounted to three hours, at all events. It must really have been about seven minutes.

Then, with an abruptness which almost startled us, the roaring ceased.

Just for a moment I couldn't quite realise it. My ears were so numbed that I was nearly stone deaf for the time being. I couldn't quite believe that the noise of the escaping steam had stopped. I grabbed the guv'nor's arm feverishly.

"Has—has it stopped?" I shouted.

And then I knew it must have stopped, because my voice sounded like a giant's. In that confined space it echoed and boomed.

"Come, Tinker!" panted Sexton Blake.

We staggered forward through the muddy water and the choking volumes of steam. The heat was absolutely terrific, but we had by this time grown accustomed to it. And we didn't care a jot.

Above all else, we wanted to reach the open air—the open daylight.

And at last, after stumbling and tripping a dozen times, we came to the foot of the shaft. The water must have risen a bit, for I was nearly submerged. Above us, we heard a voice.

"Help!" I gasped. "Lend a hand, for goodness' sake!"

There was a moment of tense silence, then came a voice. We couldn't see anything, of course, because the steam choked the shaft from base to summit. And the heat here was even greater than it had been in the tunnel.

"Is anybody down there?" came the shout.

"Yes! Lower the ladder!" panted the guv'nor.

There was much excited talking, the noise of the ladder being lowered, and then—well, in less than two minutes we were safe and sound under the early morning sun.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

In Which Sexton Blake Makes a Round of Inquiries—Then He and Sir Jimmy and I Examine the Hollow—And Then Something Happens Which We Weren't Expecting, and I'm Left to My Own Devices.

SEXTON BLAKE was looking about half boiled, but all right otherwise.

I was in a similar state, and was conscious of the fact that my face was trying to look like a beetroot—not in shape, but in colour.

It seemed that we had been rescued so promptly—although the time had dragged slowly to us—by the one and only Pedro. Our faithful old bloodhound had saved our lives.

What had actually occurred immediately after our descent into the shaft we didn't know—we could only guess at that. The unknown man who had pitched us down had escaped; but not without a tussle with Pedro.

For, almost at once, the old boy brought the guv'nor a piece of cloth—which, it was very evident, he had torn from the rear portion of the scoundrel's nether garments. Pedro didn't usually attack people—bloodhounds don't do that, as a rule—but on this occasion he had been excited and furious.

There was a slight gash over his left eye, and a bump, showing that he had been hit rather severely. But the man had escaped, and nobody knew anything about him. The workmen had been in ignorance of the whole occurrence until Pedro told them that the guv'nor and I were in peril.

He had done so by his actions, not by words. Pedro is a clever dog, but he isn't capable of speaking. Returning

triumphantly with the chunk of cloth, he had found that we had vanished, and nothing but steam remained.

There was something wrong; Pedro knew that. And, being a clever animal, he had immediately given the alarm. The men in charge of the pumping operations had been partaking of breakfast—as we had surmised—in a summer-house on the other side of the plantation.

They had heard the deep, alarmed bay of a big dog. This had been kept up for two or three minutes continually, and it was clear that Pedro had stood at the top of the shaft, yelling, in his own particular way, for help.

Finding that this brought no response, Pedro had scouted round for somebody, and had finally run the workmen to earth in the summer-house. Here he had barked more furiously, and had constantly run back through the trees.

His obvious excitement had, at last, aroused the foreman to action. Leaving his breakfast, the man had followed Pedro to the top of the shaft. Once there, the foreman had seen that something was amiss.

On the other side of the trees the rear of the escaping steam had been almost inaudible. But here, in the clearing, the noise was considerable, and the uprising volumes of steam told their own story.

The man had run back helter-skelter shouting to his companions as he did so. He had turned the steam off at the boiler—which was standing serenely alone, with a fair head of steam on tap, so to speak.

If the full pressure had been on we should certainly have died. I couldn't imagine what the full pressure would be like—the little lot we had experienced was quite enough for me! Yet, it turned out, the boiler hadn't had anything like its working pressure of steam up.

The foreman was alarmed and furious.

Who had been tampering with the engine and the pump? He hadn't seen anything suspicious, and had had no idea of the true state of affairs. He was full of concern, and was genuinely delighted to see that we had escaped with nothing worse than a wetting and a steaming.

Our faces were tender, and we felt used-up—but that was all. Sexton Blake, after explaining matters to the foreman, decided to go to the Towers at once. He took the piece of cloth from Pedro, and we walked up to the house, still attired in our dripping clothes.

"It was a narrow shave, guv'nor," I remarked. "My ears are ringing still."

"Narrower than I acknowledged at the time, Tinker," said the detective. "I honestly thought that we were doomed. Pedro has earned a double breakfast this morning."

And the old bounder knew it, too.

He was strutting along in front of us, as pleased as Punch. Just before we reached the wide, imposing terrace, we saw a figure in white flannels emerge from some French windows, further along. It was Sir Jimmy Drexell.

"Why, hallo!" he cried, in relieved tones. "I was worrying about you fellows. You got on all right, then? No manifestations—Great Scott! Have you been bathing in your clothes?"

He stared at us blankly as we approached. "Just a little difference with the enemy," said Blake grimly.

"The enemy?"

"Exactly! The unknown scoundrel who is responsible for the Yew Hollow business," replied Sexton Blake. "There's no ghost, Jimmy."

Drexell took a deep breath.

"By gad, you take my breath away!" he exclaimed. "You seem to have found out everything already, and you haven't been on the spot above eight hours! Let's hear all about it, for goodness' sake!"

"We've been nearly steamed to death, for one thing," I put in—"steamed like a pot of potatoes!"

"What the dickens are you talking about, you young idiot?"

Sexton Blake laughed.

"Tinker's not far wrong, Jimmy," he said. "We were taken unawares while standing on the edge of that tunnel-shaft—But I'll tell you all about it after we have had a change. Can you send somebody to the Yew House for our luggage? We've got a complete change of attire there."

"Of course!" exclaimed Drexell. "Come in, Mr. Blake! You'd better strip off those wet things, and get into blankets or some-

thing. I'll send for your stuff at once. By Jove, I'm anxious to hear the details of your adventures!"

We went into the stately mansion, and were soon enjoying a hot bath. This was really necessary, for the water in the tunnel had been muddy. By the time we were clean our fresh clothing had arrived, and we dressed. And when we got down breakfast was all ready.

"Where's Pedro?" I asked.

"Oh, he's made friends with the cook, I believe!" smiled Sir Jimmy. "He's somewhere in the rear quarters."

"If he's made friends with the cook, it's all right," I said. "Pedro saved our lives, and he's got to be treated to an extra large breakfast by way of reward. I'm pretty peckish myself."

We were ushered into the noble breakfast-room by our host, and I saw at a glance that the table was set for three only.

"No other visitors?" I asked.

"Only we three, Tinker," smiled Sir Jimmy.

"No girls, by any chance?"

"Girls!" echoed the young baronet. "Of course not, you young bounder!"

"Not even one?" I persisted.

"Look here, Tinker, what the dickens are you getting at?" demanded Sir Jimmy grimly.

Sexton Blake grinned.

"It's all right, old man," he said. "Tinker and I saw a very attractive young lady this morning. She was obviously of gentle birth, and she was wandering freely about your estate. So Tinker naturally assumed that she was a visitor of yours."

Sir Jimmy looked at us blankly.

"An attractive young lady!" he exclaimed. "Well, I'm hanged! I don't know anything about her. Wandering about my estate, was she? Like her infernal impudence, I must say! If I come across her I'll give her a piece of my mind!"

I chuckled. I could imagine Sir Jimmy doing that. If he suddenly found himself face to face with the delightful girl the guv'nor and I had met, he would be all smiles and politeness. And I was just a little disappointed. I'd been hoping to meet her again.

But I soon forgot all about that piece of feminine daintiness. For, breakfast having started, Sir Jimmy wanted to know all about our adventures. Sexton Blake told him everything from the beginning.

Drexell was startled and worried.

"I don't like it—I don't like it at all, Mr. Blake," he said gravely. "You saw a dwarf, you say? And then, in the Yew House, you were blinded? Do you know how you were blinded?"

"No, I don't know for certain," said Blake slowly.

"That means you've got an idea?"

"Perhaps."

"Well, anyhow, you don't believe in the old curse?"

"I believe in the legend itself—I mean, I don't think it was invented for my benefit," smiled the guv'nor. "But as for the rest—well, our adventure at the tunnel-shaft tells its own story. Ghosts don't throw people down shafts or turn boiler-taps on!"

Sir Jimmy smiled.

"No, I suppose not," he said. "That was a terrifying experience, Mr. Blake. Thank Heaven you've come through it safely! It's a wonder to me you're not both scalded in a frightful manner."

"We should have been if the guv'nor hadn't taken prompt action," I said. "And then, of course, Pedro gave the alarm before we were properly cooked. We seemed to be down there for hours, but it must have been only a few minutes, really."

"And didn't you see who pushed you down?"

"We saw nothing," replied Blake. "But, in a way, I am glad it happened, Jimmy, for we are enlightened on several points."

"I can't see any light!" grunted the young baronet.

"For one thing, we know that we are up against a desperate criminal—or a gang of criminals," went on the guv'nor. "The enemy has shown his hand, and that makes my position much easier. For I shall be on my guard constantly; and I don't think I shall be caught napping again."

"What about the Hollow?"

"I mean to make a thorough examination there before the morning is out," replied Sexton Blake. "I am very puzzled about that phenomenon. But there is some explanation, Jimmy. And as for our adventure at the shaft, it is clear that the un-

known enemy took advantage of a sudden opportunity."

"You don't think the attack was planned beforehand, then?"

"How could it have been? Tinker and I only went to the shaft by chance. We were followed and watched, of course. The man stole up behind us and pushed us down. But he must have known that the steam-pipe was disconnected from the pump; and that proves that he has been about here for some little time. He knew, also, that by turning on the steam at the engine he could most probably kill us. He tried it, and failed. But that wasn't his fault."

"You don't suspect one of the workmen, surely?"

Sexton Blake sipped his coffee.

"I don't know whom I suspect, Jimmy," he said slowly. "I know, however, that there is some pretty ingenious trickery going on, and the object of that trickery is evidently a criminal one. That poacher, for example—the man who was found dead on the edge of the Yew Hollow. The inquest was adjourned, I understand?"

"Yes; for a week."

"Well, I hope to bring fresh evidence before long," said the great detective. "After breakfast we will go and have a look at the body. And I'm anxious to interview Mr. Mayne. He'll probably help me in some ways."

"What about that girl we saw?" I asked, looking at Sir Jimmy sideways.

He glared at me.

"How do I know anything about her?" he demanded. "Look here, Tinker, you're searching for a thick ear! Girls don't interest me, and if I find this particular specimen trespassing on my property, I'll soon send her about her business!"

I grinned.

"I hope you find her!" I said cheerfully.

Breakfast was soon over. In spite of all our trials and troubles, we had enjoyed the meal tremendously. My face was very tender, and I suppose the guv'nor's was the same. It looked tender, at any rate. But, except for a certain discomfort, we were all right. Some people, I suppose, would have gone to bed, and would have had a dozen doctors buzzing round. But Sexton Blake and I were hardened cases, so to speak, and we could stand a good deal of knocking about.

At the same time, we were far from being comfortable. Our eyes weren't quite normal yet, either. And the mystery of how we had been blinded was as obscure as ever. And then there was the Yew Hollow riddle. What had caused the vegetation to die? I had a bit of an idea in the back of my noddle that Sexton Blake had already formed a theory. But, if so, he stuck to it like glue; he wouldn't tell me anything.

Well, the first thing after breakfast we set out for Hawarden Cottage—Mr. Hartley Mayne's new residence. It wasn't a cottage, Sir Jimmy gave us to understand, although it was called one. But a lot of country houses are called cottages nowadays for some reason or other. I suppose it sounds rural.

I was quite interested in having a chat with my rival. For, don't you see, he was an author, too. I'm not trying to make out that I consider myself capable of Hartley Mayne's literary attainments; but still, I can sling the ink fairly well. While Mr. Mayne got all his ideas out of his head, however, I pinched mine from the guv'nor's record of cases.

When we started out across the estate, cutting across the park and the golf-links, the sun was shining with fierce intensity. The August day was perfect. Fortunately, our fresh clothes were flannels, and so we were seasonably attired.

But we weren't destined to reach Mr. Mayne's place without a diversion. We were now going in the opposite direction to the Yew Hollow, for Hawarden Cottage lay on the other edge of the estate.

Turning round a belt of high trees, we saw a pretty little dell before us, with the river flowing serenely between high, grassy banks, on which grew willows and other trees. It was a delightful spot, full of beautiful, subdued colour and charm.

And there, seated on the river-bank, was the girl!

She was sitting on a little folding-chair, and there was an easel before her. Obviously, she was painting, and her profile was towards us. We all stopped a few seconds.

The girl was dressed, as before, in filmy white stuff, with a saucy Panama hat set at a delicious angle on her head. Her feet

were encased in little white shoes, and she wore white stockings. One ankle peeped out from the filmy folds of her frock. Altogether, the picture was ripping.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Sir Jimmy blankly. "This is your private property, isn't it?" I asked.

"Ye-es, I suppose it is."

"Then you've got to go and order this trespasser off—to send her about her business, to use your own words," I grinned. "Rather lucky we came this way, isn't it, Sir Jimmy?"

"By Jove!" exclaimed the young baronet again.

Sexton Blake chuckled.

"You'll have to do it, old man," he smiled. "You can't let people overrun your property in this way, you know."

"After all, the fact that she's a girl doesn't make any difference," growled Sir Jimmy uncomfortably. "Anyhow, I'm going to ask her what she means by wandering about the Rockwood Estate just as she chooses. I—I suppose you'll come with me?"

"Oh, rather!" I said promptly.

The girl had heard our voices, and I had seen her look round. But then, after that one casual look, she calmly went on painting. The cool manner in which she disregarded us made me smile. This girl was interesting.

We all marched down the hillside and approached the river. As we came up to the vision in white she looked up and smiled. It was a shy smile, and her eyes were looking a little concerned. And, if she had looked pretty at the time of our first meeting, she looked ten times prettier now.

"Er—you'll—er—pardon me, I'm sure—" began Sir Jimmy.

"Yes?" she said questioningly.

The young baronet turned red. How the dickens could he order this delightful creature off his estate? It wasn't to be thought of! I'll bet he wished with all his heart that he had spoken in less decided terms at breakfast-time.

"I—er—don't like to say anything," stammered Sir Jimmy, "but—but this property is—er—private. If you'll forgive me, you are trespassing."

The girl nodded and smiled.

"Yes, I know that," she said serenely.

"You—you know it?"

"Yes, of course," she laughed. "That's not a terrible sin, is it?"

"No, of course not," gasped Sir Jimmy. "It's nothing—nothing at all!"

"Sir James won't mind, I'm sure," went on the girl. "I haven't asked him, of course, but I'm doing no harm here, am I?"

The question was so frank and naive that there was only one possible reply to give. And her eyes looked simply glorious. Sir Jimmy, I know, was tremendously struck. He was only a young man, after all, and he wasn't engaged, so far as I knew. And we could all see, as plainly as possible, that there was nothing affected about this girl. She was artless and ingenuous.

"Doing harm?" repeated Sir Jimmy confusedly. "Of course not! You—you can stay here just as long as you like. I sha'n't interfere—"

"Are you one of Sir James Drexell's agents, then?" she asked simply.

I nearly exploded, and I heard the gov'nor chuckle.

"The—the fact is," said poor Jimmy, "I—I am Sir James Drexell!"

A look of consternation swept over the girl's face, and she flushed deeply. Then she sprang to her feet and stood before us—only a little thing, but beautifully proportioned. She wasn't a minute older than nineteen.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed gravely. "I hadn't the least idea—I really apologise for treating you so shamefully. You do forgive me, Sir James, don't you?"

There wasn't the slightest touch of humility in her tone. I mean, she didn't seem to regard Sir Jimmy as a superior being, now that she knew whom he really was. But the sincerity of her apology was evident.

"Oh, it's nothing!" said the young baronet quickly. "No need to—er—ask me to forgive you, Miss—Miss—"

"My name's Dorothy Lennox," she said smilingly.

"Then I hope you'll continue to wander about my property just as much as you like, Miss Lennox," said Sir Jimmy, with a considerable show of eagerness. He seemed to be anxious that she should wander about his property, somehow. "I—I say, that's a rippin' painting you're doing!"

She sat down again and gave a silvery laugh.

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"Why, I've only just started it!" she cried. "How can you say it's ripping?"

We all laughed then, and Sir Jimmy suddenly seemed to realise that we hadn't been introduced. He had been paying so much attention to this girl—who was to have been "sent about her business"—that he'd completely forgotten us.

"Oh, I'm awfully rude!" he exclaimed. "This is Mr. Sexton Blake, the famous detective, you know. And Tinker—Tinker's Mr. Blake's assistant."

We smiled and bowed, and Dorothy Lennox smiled too.

"We met this morning, didn't we?" she asked laughingly.

"I believe we did," said the gov'nor. "But we mustn't keep you from your painting, must we, Miss Lennox? Come, Jimmy, we shall have all the morning gone!"

We raised our hats and went on our way. Our companion was looking a little uncomfortable. And, as soon as we'd got completely out of hearing of the charming girl, he turned to me.

"Why the dickens didn't you tell me she was a real little lady?" he asked. "I thought you were talking about a 'cheeky' village girl—a mere child! Nearly made me make a hash of things, you young bouncer!"

"Well, that's nice!" I retorted. "I gave you fair warning, and this is all the thanks I get. I told you she was a ripping girl. I wonder who she is, and where she comes from?"

"I'll soon find that out!" declared Sir Jimmy firmly. "Not that I'm—er—interested, of course."

"But you'd like to know, all the same?" I grinned.

After that we didn't refer to Miss Dorothy Lennox again. And very soon we came in sight of "Hawarden Cottage." It was quite a big, modern house—a gentleman's residence which was ten times better than the Yew House.

We walked straight up the path, between well-laid-out flower-beds, and rang the bell. Our ring was answered by a neatly-dressed maidservant, who politely informed us that Mr. Mayne was at home, and in his library.

After Sir Jimmy's card had been taken in we were asked to enter, and we found the famous novelist seated at his desk in his library. We had apparently disturbed him at his story-writing, but he was quite genial.

"Come in, come in, gentlemen," he exclaimed as we appeared. "You've brought some friends with you, Sir James."

"Yes, Mr. Sexton Blake and Master Tinker," smiled our host.

We were introduced, and then we sat down. Hartley Mayne was a man of about forty-five, clean-shaven, and airily attired in white flannel trousers and an alpaca coat. He was smiling good-naturedly.

"Morning is my golden time for work," he explained. "I'm always busy for three hours in the morning, and then I laze about for the remainder of the day. I suppose you have come, Mr. Blake, to question me about that Yew Hollow business?"

The gov'nor nodded.

"Tinker and I slept in the house last night," he replied. "From what Sir James has told me, you experienced a similar adventure to that which befell us. I am anxious to gather all the information I can."

"I'll answer any questions you like, Mr. Blake," replied Mayne. "But I can't offer any explanation of the phenomena. Honestly, I believe that there is something in that old curse of the legend."

"You're wrong," declared Drexell. "Something happened this morning, my dear Mayne, that clinches the thing. Mr. Blake and Tinker were deliberately attacked on my property, and they only just escaped a frightful death."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the author, in a startled voice.

He was told briefly of our adventure with the steam-pump. And when he had heard all he sat back and puffed at his cigar thoughtfully.

"This certainly puts a different complexion on the matter," he remarked. "But the mystery of the Yew Hollow still remains unsolved. I can't for the life of me think of any feasible solution."

"When did the first manifestation occur?" asked Blake.

"Why, it must have been about the beginning of July," replied Mayne. "Certainly not before. The first I knew of it was from one of my maidservants. She came to me one morning and said that something had

affected her eyes during the night. I told her not to be fanciful and sent her away. Then, two nights afterwards, I had a strange experience myself. I woke up, and seemed to be aware of a curious glow in the room. And when I struck a match I nearly fainted with the dreadful agony which assailed my eyes. Before morning, however, the acute effect passed."

"Did you take any action?"

"What could I do?" asked the novelist, shrugging his shoulders. "I looked all over the room, of course, but there was nothing to be seen. Then I suddenly remembered the old Rockwood legend. The first thing I did was to go to the Hollow, and you may imagine my consternation when I found that all the vegetation was practically dead. I'm not superstitious, but, frankly, I was startled."

"And then?"

"Well, nothing further happened for three days," replied Mayne. "Then I again experienced that 'glow.' My eyes were affected more seriously this time; and I decided, then and there, to shift into this house. It was all ready for occupation, and so my furniture was conveyed here the very next day. I stayed with Sir James at the Towers until everything was got straight by my servants."

Sexton Blake nodded.

"You haven't been to the Yew House since?" he asked.

"Not inside. I took Cullum and Lady Dolly to see the outside of it yesterday," said Mayne, with a smile. "They were interested—"

"Lady Dolly!" ejaculated Drexell suddenly.

"Yes. I meant to bring my visitors along to the Towers this afternoon," smiled Mayne. "Earl Cullum and his daughter are staying with me for a week. Didn't I tell you, Sir James?"

"I'm hanged if you did!" growled Jimmy.

"We met Lady Dorothy Lennox this morning, and I called her 'miss'! Too bad of you, Mayne! I've put my foot in it properly now!"

We all laughed heartily.

"She won't mind," chuckled the novelist. "Lady Dolly's a bright little girl."

He needn't have told us that. So she was an earl's daughter! No wonder she had looked a perfect lady! Sir Jimmy, after the first flush of consternation, was looking as pleased as old Pedro with half a dozen bones.

"She was trespassing," he said, with a grin.

"That's not surprising," smiled Mayne. "Cullum tells me that he is at his wit's-end to manage her. She's nearly twenty, but she's as lively and as cheeky as a girl of fifteen. She's off painting this morning, I believe. The earl's in the garden, reading—while I work," he added. "That's the worst of accepting a commission to write a weekly article. My time's not my own."

"That, I take it, is a gentle hint," laughed Sexton Blake, rising to his feet. "We won't bother you any longer, Mr. Mayne. Thank you for your information."

"You'll bring your visitors round this evening, won't you?" asked Drexell anxiously. "This is a formal invitation, Mayne. There'll be quite a merry party of us. I shall be delighted if you'll come."

He ought to have said that he would be delighted if Lady Dolly would come. It was as plain as a pikestaff—Sir Jimmy had succumbed to Dolly's charms. I wasn't surprised. He was tremendously anxious to meet her under less embarrassing circumstances.

"To dinner, of course," he added.

"It's good of you!" said Mayne. "Thanks! Cullum and Lady Dolly will be delighted, I'm sure."

We took our departure soon after, and Sir Jimmy walked with a springy step. He didn't seem to take any interest in the gov'nor's investigation now. It's a funny thing how a chance meeting with a slip of a girl could make all that difference in a chap. But I must say that this particular "slip of a girl" was one in a thousand. I'd noticed, too, that she wasn't engaged. Anyhow, her third finger on the left hand was innocent of any ring.

From Hawarden Cottage we went down to the village, and there we had a look at the remains of the poor dead poacher. Sexton Blake was convinced that the man had died from heart-failure, brought on by sheer fright.

"He has certainly not met with any violence," said the detective. "Apparently,

he penetrated into the woods surrounding the Yew Hollow, and came upon that spot by chance. He remembered its sinister reputation, and, being a superstitious country yokel, he became nervous. Then, probably, he saw that strange, dwarfed figure. It may have been quite close to him. At all events, he died, and I am not surprised. A post-mortem examination would reveal the fact that he suffered from a weak heart, I believe. A sudden fright would cause death under certain circumstances."

By the time we left the village it was getting near the luncheon-hour, so we walked back to the Towers. The sky was overcast a little now, and a low bank of black clouds promised rain. But the air was as hot as ever, and the wind had died down.

Sexton Blake and I were by no means fit—that is, we weren't in our usual robust state. That experience in the flooded tunnel had used our strength somewhat. But we demolished a hearty lunch, all the same.

Sir Jimmy looked out of the window moodily.

"Rain comin', I believe," he growled. "That'll upset things. I was goin' to show Lady Dolly round the gardens—I mean, I was goin' to show her father round. But I expect she'd come, too."

"Well, I feel like having a snooze," I said, yawning.

"Go and have one, by all means, Tinker!" exclaimed Sexton Blake. "I am going to the Yew Hollow, in order to make a thorough, minute examination. I am still in a fog, and I cannot rest until I have arrived at some solution. Will you come, Jimmy? We'll take Pedro with us—"

"Hold on!" he interrupted. "If you're going to work, guv'nor, I'm there, too."

The guv'nor smiled, and told me to go and rout out Pedro. I found him in the rear courtyard, lying asleep before a huge pile of bones and other delicacies. He'd gorged until he couldn't stand.

"You lazy glutton!" I said, digging him in the ribs. "Get up at once!"

Pedro lifted his head and winked at me. His tail wagged feebly.

"That's no good!" I said sternly. "There's work to be done—work!"

He was up in a tick, looking as lively as a cricket. He knew what "work" meant all right. And, ten minutes later, we all started off for the Yew Hollow. The sky seemed to have cleared a bit, but the air was very heavy.

Arriving at the Hollow, we stood on the lip of it for a few minutes, gazing down. It looked very much the same as it had done in the twilight. The place seemed to cast a gloom over us. Everything was dead, except at the outside edges. And the surrounding trees looked droopy and melancholy.

"Rotten hole, isn't it?" I remarked.

"There's something queer about it, certainly," said Drexell.

We went down the slope, over the dead grass and weeds. Just then a few spots of rain fell, and, looking up, I saw a mass of bluey-black clouds mounting to the zenith. Then a rumble of thunder came to our ears.

"Hallo! A storm!" said Sir Jimmy. "We'd better take refuge in the Yew House if it comes on seriously."

I looked round.

"Where's Pedro?" I asked. "Didn't he come down?"

Sexton Blake didn't answer; he was on his knees, looking at the dead grass. Pedro wasn't to be seen anywhere. So I climbed the slope again, and plunged through the trees.

"Pedro!" I called sharply.

A low whimper came to my ears from further back, and I went through the thick bushes—which here were quite alive and well. And there, lying against a tree, was Pedro. He looked miserable and uneasy. His ears were flat against his head, and he eyed me almost nervously.

"What's the matter, old man?" I asked.

He looked up at me with an expression of fear. And then, as I was bending down, I heard something. It seemed to be a shout of alarm and pain—and it came from the Hollow. Several other sounds followed—gasps and grunts. Then came utter silence; broken, after a second, by a rumble of thunder.

"Something's happened!" I muttered quickly. "Come on, Pedro!"

I pelted through the trees without waiting to see if Pedro followed. And when I arrived at the edge of the Hollow I paused, and looked down. Everything was still. A few drops of rain pattered down. But Sexton

Blake and Sir Jimmy Drexell had utterly vanished.

"Guv'nor!" I shouted, with sudden alarm.

But only the dim echo of my own voice came back to me.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Pedro Leads Lady Dolly and I Upon a Queer Expedition—And a Terrible Experience Follows—But Fate Steps in Just at the Right Time.

I BECAME filled with deep anxiety.

I had only been away a minute, and the guv'nor and Sir Jimmy couldn't possibly have got out of earshot in that space of time. Yet there was no answer to my repeated shouts.

The Yew Hollow seemed to be trebly sinister now; but this may have been because of the deep gloom caused by the approaching thunderstorm. Then I heard the crackling of twigs among the trees behind me. I turned, my heart beating rapidly.

But the next second I was relieved—and pleased.

For Lady Dolly Lennox appeared. She had changed her dress, and was now attired in a pale blue frock made of voile, or something. She looked lovelier than ever, and her eyes were serious and questioning.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked. "I thought I heard you shouting—"

"Yes, I was," I replied. "Mr. Blake and Sir Jimmy have disappeared. I believe they've met with foul play of some sort."

The girl lost some of her colour.

"Oh, what do you mean?" she asked. "I have taken advantage of Sir James' offer, and I came here to have a look at this dreadful Hollow. But the storm started, and I was hurrying away when I heard you calling. Can I do anything?"

"Well, I don't know," I replied quickly. "I'll tell you what happened."

She already knew the history of the Yew Hollow, so I was saved a lot of trouble. I just explained what had occurred within the last five minutes. She listened eagerly and attentively.

"Hav'n't we better look for them?" she said, when I had done. "Oh, and there's your dog! Pedro will find his master, won't he?"

"By jingo! I'll set Pedro on the trail!" I ejaculated. "Where the dickens is he? Pedro! Pedro!"

I ran back, and found him among the trees.

"What's up with you—eh?" I demanded. "The guv'nor's gone! Do you understand that, old boy? There's something happened to the guv'nor!"

"I took hold of his collar, and led him to the edge of the Hollow, where Lady Dolly was waiting. Why didn't Pedro want to go down? It was very curious, and I was a bit wild now."

But he seemed to realise that something was wrong. He inspected Lady Dolly, and approved. Under ordinary circumstances I might have been a bit embarrassed at being all alone with this jolly pretty girl. Not that I'm a bashful chap. (Ask the guv'nor!) But Lady Dolly was, so refined, so dainty and sweet, that I felt rather nervous in her presence.

The disappearance of the guv'nor and Sir Jimmy, however, had driven everything else out of my mind. And Lady Dolly was going to help me. That was splendid, at any rate. This rotten Yew Hollow didn't seem so dismal with her there. She dispelled the gloom almost completely.

We descended to the bottom of the Hollow, the girl giving me her soft, little hand. And almost the first thing I saw, close against the big hillock in the centre, was Sir Jimmy's cap!

"That settles it!" I said grimly.

"Is that Mr. Blake's cap?" asked Dolly.

"No; Sir Jimmy's," I replied. "This proves that something's happened, Lady Dolly. I don't know what. It's mysterious. Where can they have disappeared to, anyhow? I'm pretty sure they didn't go out of the Hollow."

Pedro was close beside us, looking about him uneasily. I thrust the cap under his nose.

"Find him, boy!" I said tensely.

Pedro livened up instantly. He sniffed at the cap, and then commenced running round with his nose to the ground. He forgot to be uneasy, and picked up the trail in less than a minute. Then he pelted off towards

a clump of bushes which grew on the side of the Hollow. They were dead, their leaves being shrivelled up.

"Oh, where is he going?" asked the girl.

"He's hit the trail," I said. "We'll follow him."

Lady Dolly was ready enough, and she almost raced me to the bushes in her eagerness. She could run like a deer. That wasn't surprising, because she was a deer! Her petticoats rustled deliciously as she ran—I remember that all right.

Pedro had dived behind the bushes, and had disappeared. Sir Jimmy had gone that way, it was certain; and so, of course, had Sexton Blake, and anybody else who might have been with him.

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Dolly. "How can we get through these bushes? They're full of nasty prickles, and my frock will be dreadfully torn!"

"You leave it to me, Lady Dolly!" I panted.

"You stay here—"

"Indeed I won't!" she declared instantly.

And, to show me that she meant it, she bent down nearly double, and dived through. I just caught a vision of dainty heels and ankles, and then she had gone. The girl had entered into the chase eagerly and quite naturally.

"Well, my hat!" I gasped.

I simply rammed my way through those bushes, and found Lady Dolly just behind, hastily pinning up a tear in her frock.

"Never mind!" she said breathlessly. "Oh, look! There's a cave here, or something like it. Pedro! Pedro! Come here, old boy!"

I'm jolly certain Pedro wouldn't have come back to me once he had fairly got on the scent. But he came now, his eyes gleaming and his ears eager. Somehow or other he had taken to Dolly instantly. The girl seemed to be taking the blessed lead in the whole business, too!

That wouldn't do at all!

I looked before me, and saw a black cavity in the face of the steep bank. The bushes had completely concealed it. By the aged brickwork, the cavity was obviously the end of a tunnel.

And it was on the side of the Hollow nearest to the Yew House.

"Why, this must be an underground tunnel leading to the Yew House!" I exclaimed intently. "It couldn't lead anywhere else, could it? There's nothing particularly remarkable in the tunnel being here, of course, for the Yew House is as old as Adam, and in those far-off days they often made secret exits, so that traitors or johnnies of that sort could skip, unknown to a soul. The guv'nor and Sir Jimmy have been taken up this tunnel."

"Oh, how exciting!" exclaimed Lady Dolly, with a catch in her breath.

"I'm going up," I went on. "I—I don't think you'd better come, Lady Dolly. There is sure to be danger—"

"Oh, but I am coming!" said the girl firmly. "But I suppose I shall have to let you lead the way."

"I've got a torch," I replied, fishing it out as I spoke. "Now, Pedro, you get behind, old boy. You've done your bit for the present, but if we come to any cross-passages, we'll put you on the scent again. Behind, old chap!"

Pedro didn't like it at all, but he obeyed willingly enough.

I was not only excited, but filled with a keen sense of alarm. What had happened to Sexton Blake and Sir Jimmy Drexell? How could those two strong men have been spirited away? Surely they should have put up a tremendous fight! But they couldn't have done, for they had vanished in less than a minute.

Lady Dolly, of course, couldn't feel as I felt. Why, she was almost a stranger! And yet, because she realised that something terrible had happened, she was helping me like a—like a man. Yet she was only a dainty girl! Of course, I oughtn't to have allowed her to come with me on that perilous trip. But how could I stop her? She said she would come, and that was an end to it. Lady Dolly had a will of her own. And she was plucky, too.

We proceeded up the passage fairly swiftly, I leading the way. Lady Dolly came just behind, and Pedro brought up the rear. The old dog had recovered all his good spirits by this time, and I could hear him puffing excitedly. If he hadn't been well trained by the guv'nor, he would have dashed past us, and I didn't want that.

I had no idea of what lay ahead, but there was no time for conjecture. Sexton Blake

and Sir Jimmy had passed this way, and that was good enough for me. The tunnel was old and damp. It must have been built hundreds of years ago, but was in a wonderful state of preservation.

Soon after we started we heard a deep boom behind us, and I knew that the thunderstorm must have burst with full fury. A few yards further on, however, we lost all sounds of the outside world.

We were, of course, passing right under the hill. In a direct line, the Yew House wasn't far, and I reckoned the tunnel wouldn't be long. And, as it didn't slope upwards, I was on the look-out for steps or stairs.

And, sure enough, within a minute or two I found myself facing a narrow flight of aged stone steps. They went up in a spiral, and were extremely narrow and extremely steep.

I thought that Lady Dolly wouldn't be able to mount them. But as I waded up I heard her coming right at my heels the whole time. She was as agile as a trained athlete, and the whole staircase shaft was filled with the rustle of her dress.

Various grunts from the rear came from Pedro. The stairs were dry and dusty, and fairly whole. Only one or two cracks showed here and there. It was lucky I had my electric torch with me.

"Oh, Tinker, will they never end?" came a breathless inquiry from behind me, accompanied by a delightful little gasp.

"Yes, in half a tick!" I panted, although, for all I knew, the staircase might have been double the length. But, as it happened, we came to the end of them almost at once.

If I had had time to think clearly, I believe I should have done my very best to persuade Lady Dolly to remain below. For I didn't know what danger I was running into, or what danger I should bring upon her.

I paused at the top of the staircase to wait for my fair companion. But she was right behind me, and the light of my torch revealed that her face was flushed with her exertions, and her hair had become somewhat untidy. But this only added to the charm of the picture.

"Where have we got to?" she asked, breathing quickly. "Oh, what an adventure!"

"We'd better go cautiously now," I said. "We must be right under the Yew House; and Mr. Blake and Sir Jimmy are evidently here. I don't know what the dickens has happened, but we've got to rescue them!"

"I'm so glad I came!" said Lady Dolly, her eyes shining. "I wouldn't have missed this for worlds!"

I moved forward along an arched passageway. A half-open door stood before me, and I pushed it. It moved with a slight creak, and I found myself in what appeared to be a big cellar.

Lady Dolly came close after me. And then, quite suddenly, she uttered a little cry.

The next second the heavy door slammed, and I heard Pedro give a furious bay. He had been shut out, for the door was now tightly closed.

"Did you push it to?" I asked quickly.

"No!" replied the girl. "Something—something seemed to touch me!"

Before I could switch my light round there was a swift patter of feet. I caught a glimpse of something, and then the torch was knocked flying from my hand. I made an instinctive grab at Lady Dolly. I knew that danger was present, and I was furious with myself for having allowed her to come.

I took hold of her by the arms without ceremony, and held her tightly. Some instinct seemed to warn of what was to come, and I placed my mouth close to one of her ears, nearly getting a mouthful of hair in the process. But the situation was too tense to take any notice of this.

"Cover your eyes," I exclaimed in a low whisper. "Hold your hands over your eyes tightly!"

Fearing that she would not understand, I placed my own hands on her wrists, and forced her palms upwards. Then, just as I had succeeded, that same strange glow appeared in the cellar.

I couldn't see where it was coming from, but I instantly clapped my hands to my own eyes. Not a sound broke the stillness, except our breathing, and the situation was an extraordinary one.

At last, as the position was intolerable, I looked up, and there was nothing but black-

ness before me. That innocent-looking, but deadly, glow had vanished.

"What is happening, Tinker?" asked Lady Dolly, under her breath.

But before I could answer there was the scratch of a match, and on the second an intense shooting pain darted through my eyeballs. Lady Dolly gave a little gasp of agony, and I felt terribly enraged. That sweet girl was being made to suffer this horrible torture!

I simply couldn't stand the light, and clapped my hands to my face again. I was still quite close to Dolly. I could feel her dress against me, and her soft breathing was right in my ear.

"Does it hurt very much?" I asked between my teeth.

"Not—not so much as I thought!" she whispered.

Either she was making light of it, or she had escaped the full force of the rays by putting her hands to her eyes so promptly. And I don't suppose I received the full dose either. For the pain, this time, was not so intense as it had been during the previous night.

"You can't see, eh?" came a harsh voice suddenly.

Clenching my fists, I opened my eyes. I just caught one glimpse of a queer dwarfish form, and then I was compelled to close my eyes again. Flashes of lurid fire seemed to dance before me, and I could scarcely bear the pain.

Then I felt myself pushed from behind, and Lady Dolly was treated in a similar fashion. We went forward helplessly, and I had an idea that we passed through another doorway. And I distinctly heard Sexton Blake's voice.

"Guv'nor!" I ejaculated hoarsely.

"Great Scott! Here's Tinker!" came a bellow in Sir Jimmy's voice.

"I don't know what you'll say to me, guv'nor," I exclaimed wretchedly, although I couldn't see a sign of the detective. "I've brought Lady Dolly with me, and she's having to suffer this awful—"

"Good Heavens!" I heard Blake exclaim.

"Tinker didn't bring me," said Lady Dolly quickly. "I came of my own accord, and I'm quite ready to suffer the consequences."

"By gad! That's the kind of girl!" I heard Sir Jimmy mutter admiringly.

Further conversation was not allowed, for the dwarf's harsh voice broke in.

"The whole bunch!" he exclaimed angrily. "This is more than I bargained for. But I am prepared to deal with you all effectively. I am sorry the girl has been brought into this affair. She will have to suffer needlessly, and that is a pity. You are not at all hurt, and your eyes will recover their normal powers within an hour. But you can do nothing at present. You're helpless, you are at my mercy!"

He chuckled with evident glee.

"This is the triumph of my theories," he went on. "A practical demonstration has proved the amazing qualities of my invention. You are not only blind, but you are incapable of action. For, with a strong light in the room, you can do nothing but press your hands to your eyes. To attack me is impossible. First, because you cannot see me; and secondly, because you are in too much agony."

"You—you dastardly scoundrel!" I burst out.

"If I am one, you have made me so," returned the dwarf fiercely. "Left alone, I should not have harmed a soul. It is this interference on your part that has brought about such a calamity. It is not my desire to harm you, it is a necessity. And, since you have been so rash, you must be punished."

"Who are you, and why are you tormenting us like this?" asked Lady Dolly bravely. "Oh, you are a monster!"

The words, somehow, seemed to enrage our captor to a terrible pitch. I realised that Dolly's words, indignantly spoken, had fired the fuse. For this strange man was, indeed, a monster—a misshapen, dwarfed caricature of a man. He had been touched upon a raw spot.

"You shall all be punished!" he repeated, his voice rising high with fury. "You shall all suffer to the utmost! You will not regain your sight at the end of an hour—or at the end of a day, or a month, or a year! I am going to blind you. Do you understand? I am going to render your eyes utterly use-

less for evermore! That shall be your reward for interfering with my concerns!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Dolly, with a catch in her voice.

There was a short, tense silence. And during that brief space, the very cellar seemed to quiver, and a low rumble distinctly sounded. I knew that it was thunder. The storm above was raging intensely.

"You cannot mean to carry out that threat," said Sexton Blake quietly. "We are helpless now. We must admit that. We are in constant pain. But you will not allow your fury to gain such possession of you that you will commit such a diabolical act!"

"You do not know what you are saying!" snarled the dwarf. "The matter has gone so far that I cannot draw back. I must be safeguarded, and my Z-rays will render you helpless for evermore. Prepare yourselves for the ordeal!"

"Oh, he's going to cause that glow again!" I muttered huskily. "Guv'nor, hadn't we better do something? Can't we rush him blindly?"

"You may rush as much as you like, but the Z-rays will be playing the whole time, and you will do no good!" exclaimed the dwarf. "You have looked your last upon daylight. I am not taking your lives, I am merely taking your eyesight!"

"Let the girl go, then!" gasped out Sir Jimmy thickly. "For the love of Heaven, don't practise this devilry on—"

"The girl shall suffer as you suffer!" rasped out the voice. "It was she who called me a monster, and she shall pay! I have you all at my mercy!"

Exactly what happened then I don't quite know.

But all of a sudden there was a most appalling crash, followed by a scream and the rushing swirl of water. The next second my feet and ankles were covered, and the water was swirling all round me. Lady Dolly had fallen, and I couldn't see what was happening. For I opened my eyes and found that the cellar was now in utter darkness. Consequently, the pain had vanished.

And confusion reigned supreme.

I heard several shouts from Sir Jimmy, and moans of pain from the dwarf. And all the while the water continued to flood the cellar at an appalling rate. Already it reached the level of my knees.

"Guv'nor!" I bawled, staggering away.

"I'm here, Tinker," I heard Blake call.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, guv'nor. What's happened?"

"Where's Lady Dolly?" roared Sir Jimmy suddenly.

"Isn't she with you?" I asked in alarm. "I—I thought—"

"Oh, please help me!" came the girl's low cry. "I am down—on the floor. Something caught my—my dress, I think. Oh, do come! The—water is nearly up to my chin! Oh, oh!"

Her voice ended in a gurgle, and I knew that the water had submerged her. For it was rising with awful speed. I waded forward, groping with my hands. Then I stumbled, staggered, and my head crashed against the wall.

"Steady, young 'un—steady!" I heard Blake's voice, as though through a mist. "It was lucky you fell near to me. Jimmy, for Heaven's sake look after Lady Dolly! I don't know where she is!"

"I've got her!" panted the young baronet huskily.

It was the most confused business one could imagine. We were floundering about in a flooded cellar, in pitch darkness. Every second the water was rising higher. But, whatever this new danger, we were saved from the diabolical brutality of the man who had trapped us.

And how did it all end?

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THE SEVENTH CHAPTER. In Which the Riddle of Yew Hollow is Solved, and Everything is O.K.

LADY DOROTHY LENNOX lay upon the floor, with her head propped against an old box. The poor girl had fainted, and she presented a pitiful sight. She was soaked to the skin, and her flimsy summer attire clung to her closely, revealing the neat, delicately-cut lines of her perfect figure.

"Is—she all right, Blake?" asked Sir Jimmy huskily.

"Don't worry, old man," replied Sexton Blake. "Lady Dolly has only fainted. She will be herself again before long. Thank Heaven, we managed to get out of that whirlpool safely!"

About ten minutes had passed since the catastrophe—or, rather, the accident which had spelt deliverance for us.

Sexton Blake had discovered a door, at the top of a short flight of steps, leading from the cellar into a rear scullery. This scullery was only dimly illuminated, for a cotton blind was drawn in front of the window. And we found that we could use our eyes, although the pain was still intense.

I was leaning against the wall, near the door. A pool of water had formed at my feet, and my head was singing. That crack against the wall had been a heavy one, and I was still somewhat dazed. The gov'nor had helped me up. And Sir Jimmy had rescued Lady Dolly.

As for the dwarf, we had almost forgotten him in the excitement. At least, I had. I believe Blake had attended to him, in some way or other.

I walked across the room, and stood with Sir Jimmy, looking down at the unconscious girl. Somehow, she looked very lovely, lying there. Her cheeks were pale, and her bosom was rising and falling regularly. What a crying shame it was that she should have been subjected to this terrible adventure!

I looked up at Sir Jimmy. He was dripping, too, and his left arm was bleeding. And there was a look of grave concern and anxiety in his eyes. Outside, the rain was hissing down relentlessly, and the three were swaying in the high wind.

"I—I don't know what happened, yet," I said dully.

Sexton Blake looked up.

"After you had gone for Pedro, Tinker, Sir Jimmy and I saw the dwarf against a clump of bushes. We gave chase, and followed him through the tunnel to this cellar. It was a trap, of course. He used that strange 'glow,' and we were helpless."

"But how did we escape from him now?" I asked.

"There can be only one explanation, Tinker," remarked Sexton Blake. "We were saved from that dwarf's devilry by a stroke of Providence. As we know, the contractors who are doing that tunnelling job have dammed the stream at one point, to avoid the tunnel filling again. This sudden storm, with its torrential rain, must have caused the stream to burst its banks near this spot."

"But there was a sudden crash," I put in.

"Exactly. The water, rushing down a gully, which extends from the rear of the Yew House almost to the river-bank, struck the wall of the cellar with terrific force. The wall, being old, couldn't withstand the shock. Consequently, it collapsed, and the cellar became flooded."

"And what about Lady Dolly?" I asked.

"Why, she was bowled over right at the first!" explained Sir Jimmy. "Her dress was caught by some of the falling bricks, and she was held down. Then, as the water rose, she found herself on the point of drowning. Fortunately I found her, and pulled her free. I'm afraid her pretty dress has suffered, though!"

There was no doubt about that point. In fact, I noticed that a large piece of Dolly's frock was missing altogether; but as it was a part of the hem, it didn't matter much. The dress was ruined, anyhow.

"I didn't see what happened to that horrible dwarf-chap," I said. "Well, I couldn't see, of course. Was—was he drowned?"

"Nearly," replied Blake. "His left leg is broken, and he was pinned down by the masonry. He seems to have caught the full force of the disaster; and he certainly deserves no pity. I just hauled him on to the steps, and left him. Perhaps we had better go and fetch him up here."

Scoundrel though the man was, we couldn't leave him there, injured. So, while Sir Jimmy watched over Lady Dolly, Blake and I descended the steps into the flooded cellar. We found the dwarf groaning on the stairs.

Very gently we carried him up into the scullery, and laid him down near the window. He was conscious, and in great pain. Sexton Blake removed a pair of very peculiar goggles from his eyes.

We now saw that the man, although dwarfed, was somewhat refined-looking. His hair was grey, and he must have been fully

fifty-five. His brow was intellectual, and his eyes glittered with a feverish light.

Just then there was an exclamation from Sir Jimmy.

"She's coming round!" he said eagerly. "Quick, Blake!"

Sexton Blake went to Lady Dolly's side. Our eyes were better now, and in the subdued light of the scullery we could see fairly well. It was the sharp, acute light of a candle or a lamp which caused us such torture.

"Feeling better, Lady Dolly?" asked the gov'nor gently.

The girl looked up with big, round eyes.

"I—I don't know—" she began. "Oh, what has happened? It's—it's Mr. Blake, isn't it? Oh, yes! That dreadful cellar! I was caught by my frock, wasn't I? The water—"

She recovered very rapidly as she remembered the circumstances. With an anxious, alarmed look in her eyes, she gazed down at her dress, and was relieved to find that it was still fairly whole.

"Oh, don't I look awful?" she asked, her voice becoming stronger. "I—I feel so dreadfully untidy! Please let me get up—please do! I can't possibly stay here like this!"

Naturally, Lady Dolly was sensitive, and she seemed quite alarmed about her appearance. She was recovering quickly—after all, she had only fainted. She got to her feet, Sir Jimmy helping her splendidly. He seemed to like it. At all events, he half carried her across to a big box, and sat her upon it.

"Are—are we all saved?" she asked huskily.

"Everything's as right as rain, Lady Dolly!" said Jimmy. "What a shame, you having to go through this experience! I shall have to see you home in a minute or two—when you've recovered a little more."

Sexton Blake went over to the injured dwarf.

"Are you badly hurt?" he asked quietly.

"My leg—my leg!" muttered the man, between his teeth. "It is shattered. The accident happened in the nick of time to prevent me committing the foulest act a man could conceive. I was mad—mad! Thank Heaven, I was stopped!"

This was a change, at all events.

"What is your name?" asked the gov'nor.

"The truth must come out now, of course," said the dwarf. "My name is Walsh—Simeon Walsh. It is a pity the game has ended in this way. Mayne will be glad, however; he has been against it all the time."

"Mayne!" echoed Sexton Blake quickly.

"Hartley Mayne is my employer," said Walsh, in a weak voice. "It was he who instigated this affair. But he wanted me to drop it. Oh, Mayne is not to blame! It was I who persuaded him—"

"Hartley Mayne!" cried Lady Dolly, in amazement. "Oh, how dreadful!"

We were all astounded. Mayne, the sedate novelist, was responsible for all this villainy. But the dwarf would say no more; indeed, he could not do so, for he lapsed into a state of semi-consciousness.

"I'm hanged if I can get the thing clear!" said Jimmy. "What are you going to do, Blake?"

"Well, Lady Dolly must be taken to the Towers; she can't go to Mayne's place, in the face of this revelation," the gov'nor said. "And, after we have changed, we will go along to Hawarden Cottage and interview Mr. Mayne."

One hour later much had been accomplished.

Lady Dolly had been taken to the Towers by Sir Jimmy. There she had been given into the gentle care of the old housekeeper. And the girl couldn't very well send for fresh clothing from Mayne's place until we had interviewed that gentleman.

Pedro had been found mooning about outside the Yew House.

Our eyesight had almost recovered its full strength by now. Simeon Walsh had been placed in the bed at the Yew House. The fracture of his leg was only a simple one, and he could come to no harm. A doctor would attend him shortly.

One of Sir Jimmy's grooms was sent to look after the prisoner. The storm had quite passed now, and the sun was shining again. When Sexton Blake and Sir Jimmy and I set off for Hawarden Cottage we were attired in dry clothing, and we were all grim.

"I can't believe it!" exclaimed Drexell, time after time.

"You can't believe what?" I asked at last.

"Look here, Tinker, I've known Mayne for years; he's one of the best chaps breathing!" declared Sir Jimmy uncomfortably. "At least, I've never known him to do anything in the least degree shady. Man alive, he's got an earl and an earl's daughter staying with him. We can't go and hand him over to the police!"

"I suppose that will be for you to say," remarked the gov'nor.

"How do you mean?"

"Well, if Mayne has been up to any criminal trickery, it remains with you to prosecute—since you are the affected party," replied Sexton Blake. "But I have an idea that Mayne isn't altogether to blame. If he was in any way connected with that foul attempt upon our lives in the flooded tunnel, he shall certainly be handed over to the police—I will see to that!"

"I don't believe he knew anything about it," said Sir Jimmy doggedly. "Don't you remember how startled he was when we told him? Anyhow, Blake, I'm jolly glad you haven't brought the police in it, so far. It's only fair to hear what Mayne has to say for himself."

Upon the whole, I agreed with this policy. It would have been a bit awful to go and arrest a man like Hartley Mayne, especially as he had Earl Cullum and his daughter staying at the house.

As it happened, we saw Mayne as soon as we got into the garden. He was strolling on the damp lawn, having evidently been brought out to inspect the damage to his flowers caused by the heavy rain. We all marched right up to him.

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come!" he said, with a smile. "Have you by any chance seen anything of Lady Dolly? Her father's rather anxious. She went out before the storm, and hasn't returned—"

"It's all right!" said Drexell coldly. "Lady Dolly is at the Towers."

The novelist saw at once that something was amiss. He eyed us curiously, and we eyed him grimly. Sexton Blake pointed to a little rustic summer-house near by. It was quite dry in there, and absolutely private.

"Can we speak to you—confidentially?" asked the gov'nor.

There was something in his tone which changed the request into a command. And Hartley Mayne led the way into the summer-house and sat down. His face had paled, but he still smiled.

"Well, Mr. Blake?" he asked.

"I'll get to the point straight away," said the gov'nor. "There has been an accident at the Yew House. A man named Simeon Walsh attempted to blind Sir James, Lady Dolly, Tinker, and myself. He was foiled by a sudden flood, and his leg was broken. He then made a statement to the effect that he was employed in a criminal capacity by you!"

Hartley Mayne sat quite still.

"You deny it, of course?" asked Sir Jimmy anxiously.

The novelist laughed hoarsely, but with a touch of relief.

"What is the good of denying it?" he asked bitterly. "The man told the truth! I am mainly responsible for the whole business. In more ways than one I am very glad the climax has come. I'm sick to death of everything, and it is a positive relief to tell you the actual facts."

We said nothing, and he suddenly bent forward.

"But haven't you told the police?" he asked quickly. "You're a detective, Mr. Blake. I suppose you are going to arrest me?"

The great detective shook his head.

"I have no power to do that," he replied. "I have no warrant. And it will depend largely upon your story, Mr. Mayne, whether Sir Jimmy prosecutes. If I am any judge of character, I have an idea that you have not been at all happy in your criminal dealings. It is useless for me to say anything further until I know the truth."

Mayne flushed with emotion.

"I don't deserve this kindly treatment," he exclaimed, in a low voice. "But, whether you believe me or not, I had made up my mind to tell Sir James the whole truth this very evening. It was that dastardly affair of the steam-pump that decided me. I swore that I would have nothing more to do with Simeon Walsh, and my best course was to be open. It is cruel that this blow should have fallen now!"

"The story is a strange one, and I trust

you will listen to me patiently. Mr. Blake, you, no doubt, remember that extraordinary thunderstorm which, incidentally, killed Sir Humphrey Drexell? Well, at that time I was in occupation at the Yew House, as you all know. To be brief, a meteorite fell in the Yew Hollow during that storm—a huge, glowing mass of white-hot substance.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Sexton Blake, taking a deep breath.

"I remember!" I ejaculated. "Don't you, guv'nor? There was a queer glow, and I said a house must have been on fire. It wasn't that cottage, after all, but this meteorite."

"Undoubtedly," said Hartley Mayne quietly. "I saw the thing fall, and I was startled. It dropped right into the centre of the Yew Hollow, and as soon as the rain had stopped I investigated. The terrific downpour had prevented the trees and the grass from catching fire. I found a dull, glowing mass in the Hollow, and I knew what it was. But, having once read that meteorites often contain valuable minerals, I said nothing. Nobody else had seen the meteorite fall, and the Yew Hollow was a spot never visited."

"A few days later I examined the thing, and found that it was nothing but a mass of black rock. So I took no notice of it. Weeks passed, and then, one day, I noticed that the vegetation in the vicinity of the meteorite was shrivelling up and dying. This struck me as being very curious, for the effect had not been caused by the original heat of the mass. The very trees were dying."

"I had occasion to go to London, and while there I visited Simeon Walsh. He is deformed, but extremely clever in all scientific matters. At that time he lived mainly by writing articles for scientific papers."

"Well, I brought Walsh down here with me—at night, and by my car, because I had no desire for him to be seen in the district. He examined the meteorite, and made a most astounding discovery. That black mass, he declared, was mainly a kind of pitchblende, and was amazingly rich in radium deposits. The radium to be obtained, according to Walsh, is worth nearly half a million."

"Great Scott!" breathed Sir Jimmy.

"The news is staggering," said Hartley Mayne. "I assure you, Sir James, I was equally staggered at the time. More so, indeed, for I knew that the meteorite was on your property!"

"By Jove, that's true enough!" said the young baronet. "You infernal blackguard, Mayne! Do you mean to say that you've been trying to get that?"

"I'm a blackguard; I know that!" said Mayne bitterly. "I was tempted, Sir James—I was tempted, and I fell. At that time, remember, you were not here, and I didn't know when you'd return. So I decided to remove the meteorite, little by little, for it was quite impossible to shift it at once."

"But then you returned from India, and I was told to leave the Yew House within a month. Walsh had said that nothing could be done with the meteorite for at least five weeks. In addition, a month would have to pass before the work could be completed. So I received permission to remain two months. But then workmen had appeared on the estate, and some had wandered dangerously near to the Hollow. If you got to hear of the meteorite, my plans would be ruined. So I concealed the thing by covering it with earth. And then Walsh made a suggestion."

"This was that I should leave the Yew House at once, and that a rumour should be put about that the Hollow and the house were haunted. That yarn of the old legend was invented by me. I told you, Sir James, that your father had often spoken about it; but that was a falsehood. I invented the legend to fit in with the facts, and I took good care to spread the story, my object being to make workmen refuse to enter the house."

"All this time I was growing more uneasy every day. But Walsh was enthusiastic. By a process of his own he used some of the radium and some other element of his own discovery to produce a light which caused temporary blindness. Radium, of course, is deadly in many ways, and is quite capable of blinding any human being under certain conditions. I am no scientist, so I cannot speak with any certainty. Walsh lived in the cellars of the old house after I had abandoned it, and he had continued with the work of removing the meteorite. The poacher, I believe, died of sheer fright because he happened to see Walsh in the moonlight."

"When I learned that Mr. Blake was to come down I became alarmed. I told Walsh that everything must be done, that I meant to tell the truth. But he swore that he would

blind me if I turned on him. The threat, I knew, was no idle one. Walsh used that light—which he calls the Z Rays—by means of a ventilator in the bed-room. He wore special goggles himself to protect his own eyes. And he only used the rays slightly; their full power would cause immediate blindness."

"That was to have been our fate this afternoon," said Sexton Blake quietly. "Now, Mr. Mayne, what about the affair of the steam-pump?"

"I swear that I had no hand in the ghastly business!" declared Mayne tensely. "Walsh is a murderous scoundrel, and I was under his thumb. Having brought him here, I could not get rid of him. Although I had repented, I was forced to go on. I swear before Heaven that I have told you the absolute truth in every particular. It is for you to say what action is to be taken."

Mr. Hartley Mayne escaped the clutches of the law. We knew that he had been sincere, and Sir Jimmy refused to prosecute. Simeon Walsh, however, would have to pay dearly for his scoundrelism. But, as it happened, he never stood his trial, for he died before recovering from his fractured leg.

And thus the facts were not made public. The withering of the vegetation in the Hollow had taken place owing to the strange properties given out by the meteorite. And Pedro had been afraid to go near it because he felt instinctively that there was danger. And radium, no doubt, is curious stuff to fool with.

The plot having been revealed, Sir Jimmy got the benefit of the radium, which, of course, was rightfully his. If Hartley Mayne had only been straightforward at the very beginning, he would have reaped a rich reward. As it was, he left the neighbourhood, and went to the West of England.

And, not so long afterwards, I noticed an interesting item in the "Times." It was a short announcement to the effect that a certain young man named Sir James Drexell, Bart., and a certain young lady named Lady Dorothy Lennox had become engaged. I wasn't surprised a little bit—in fact, I'd expected it all along.

THE END.

(Look out for our new serial.)

"THE PEARLS OF SILENCE."

FOREWORD BY PROFESSOR LAWRENCE HASWELL.

IT is with diffidence that I, who now lie but the broken wreck of a man, under the heavy and blighting hand of paralysis, attempt to place in narrative form some of the strange and adventurous cases which have occupied the attention, have brought into play the extraordinary keenness of mind, and have tested under the most rigorous conditions the nerve of the man whom I am proud to call friend and comrade; the man who, by his cheerful visits and kindly words, has enlightened many long hours of my suffering—Sexton Blake.

When we came down from Oxford together Blake sought a career in one direction, while I went in another, and for some years I did not see him. But I heard of him from time to time, and perhaps the nature of my profession—I am, or was, a professor of mathematics—caused me to take more interest in the different cases which he solved from time to time; more interest in a study of his methods than perhaps the ordinary layman felt.

After all, the analytical and deductive elements of the science he has developed are closely interwoven and correlated with mathematics.

At my earnest insistence he has brought to me several of the earlier volumes of his "Case Index," and the reading of his notes therein has served to make me forget for a time the blight which holds me in its grip, and which will make of my body a helpless lump of clay until it pleases Heaven to release me. But my mind is abnormally active, and, in order to find surcease during the long hours while I lie here and gaze out upon the park—the park which is now green with the fairy mantle of summer and is filled with the happy voices of children—I am attempting to put in narrative form some of the cases which struck me with particular force.

If I fail to interpret without flaw—if my pen stumbles at times—if I fail to weave as coherently as I should—I ask your patience and indulgence. And because it struck me as a case remarkable in many ways—because it is of the East, which I know, and whose colour and mystery have always fascinated me—I have chosen first to narrate what I have called "The Pearls of Silence," which, to my mind, reveals in a remarkable manner how Sexton Blake, by sheer control of the ego, subordinated the inheritance of generations of Occidental ideas and the point of view of the West to necessity, and met and fought the subtle Oriental on his own ground.

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