



# Union Jack 1 1/2

LIBRARY

WAR  
TIME  
PRICE

## THE MYSTIC CIPHER; Or, THE LONE HOUSE IN THE FOREST.

A Tale of Mystery and Adventure, introducing **SEXTON BLAKE**, **TINKER**, and **PEDRO**, and **NELSON LEE** and **NIPPER**. Specially written by the Author of "Tinker's Case-Diary" Series, the "Nipper at St. Frank's" Series, "The Mount Stonham Murder Mystery," and Many Other Detective Stories.

THE STORY TOLD THROUGHOUT BY TINKER.



## The Mystic Cipher Or, The Lone House in the Forest.

A Tale of Mystery and Adventure, introducing  
Sexton Blake, Tinker, and Pedro; and Nelson Lee  
and Nipper. Specially written by the Author of the  
"Tinker's Case-Diary" Series and the "Nipper at St.  
Frank's" Series, "The Mount-Stonham Murder  
Mystery," and many other Detective Stories. The  
Story told throughout by Tinker.

### THE PROLOGUE.

#### The Secret of Grangewood House.

**G**RANGWOOD HOUSE was a curious old place, and the man who built it must have had queer ideas of his own concerning peace and solitude. For he had placed his residence right in the midst of a tract of dense forest country in Hampshire, and the nearest station was six miles off. There was no other human habitation of any kind at all within three miles, and Grangewood House itself was reached by means of an insignificant by-road which was used, on the average, about three times a month.

I'm going to make it my business to tell a few things concerning this lonely old house and its aged occupant. That's why I've commenced this narrative with a prologue. I'm not altogether in favour of prologues, but they're necessary evils now and again.

Of course, Sexton Blake and I knew nothing about Grangewood House at this period, but it's far better to set down these facts now, because it'll make things so much clearer. I didn't learn them until afterwards, but that's no reason why I shouldn't relate them now.

The man who owned Grangewood House was just about ninety years of age, and his name was Mr. Gowan Temple. He lived quite alone, except for a faithful housekeeper and a butler.

Visitors at Grangewood House were rare—the only callers were tradesmen. Amongst these worthy people it was popularly supposed that old Mr. Gowan Temple was a great deal richer than he pretended to be—and he was not mean. The general idea was that the old man was something very much approaching a miser. Kennard, the butler, shared this view; and he, at least, had a good reason for so doing.

The main cause of Kennard retaining his post was that the salary was liberal and the work consisted of very light duties. The butler, in fact, led a smooth, easy life. Mr. Temple's wants were few, for he was a very simple man in his habits and manner of living.

But, except for these inducements, Kennard was often on the point of giving notice. The lonely life did not agree with him. Week in and week out there was nobody to be seen except an occasional tradesman. And Mrs. Higgins, the housekeeper, was elderly and dull. She had been with Mr. Temple for twenty-five years, at least, and was practically a part of the house itself.

At the end of one particularly dreary winter—in February, to be exact—Kennard

positively decided to give his aged master notice. And he was only deterred from doing so by reason of something he overheard which was not meant for his ears.

Of late Mr. Temple had got into the habit of talking to himself, and Kennard would sometimes find him rubbing his wrinkled old hands together in inexplicable glee.

"I shan't last much longer, Kennard—not much longer," Mr. Temple told the butler one day. "I am just over ninety, and I can't expect to live for ever. But when I go you'll have my grandson here. Yes, Leonard will become the master of Grangewood."

"Why, you're good for another five or ten years yet, sir," said Kennard respectfully.

"Not one, Kennard—not one!" declared the old man. "I shan't last another winter; I don't think I shall even last the summer. You've served me well, Kennard, and I shan't forget you."

"Thank you, sir," said the butler.

And that was another reason why Kennard decided to remain. Until that day he had had no idea that Mr. Temple contemplated leaving him a legacy; but that was evidently the old man's intention.

He was muttering to himself when Kennard left the room. And the servant remained outside the door, listening. He heard his old master stamping up and down in front of the roaring log fire.

"Gad! The boy shall have everything," muttered Mr. Temple audibly. "And it's worth a great deal, too. Bless my soul! The boy will come into millions when I die. Nobody knows it except myself, but it's all here—all under my failing old feet. Mrs. Higgins doesn't know it, and Kennard doesn't know it. I wouldn't let them know it for anything, by gad!"

Kennard crept away wondering. It was the first inkling he had had that Grangewood House contained any secret. And after that day he received many further inklings.

It was only natural, I suppose, that Kennard should get into the habit of listening at every opportunity. The knowledge that he would "come into something" and that the old man's grandson would come into "millions" aroused the butler's greed.

Often enough after that day he heard the old man talking to himself, and it was always in the same strain. He would soon be dead, and his grandson would reap a rich harvest. It was quite clear, in fact, that Mr. Gowan Temple had concealed a great treasure somewhere within the house; it had been there, probably, for many, many years. But, hitherto, the old man had said nothing. Now he was almost entering upon his second childhood, and the knowledge of his approaching death destroyed his former caution.

"The old fellow's a miser, that's as clear as daylight," Kennard told himself. "By

George! I'd like to touch some of that treasure! Perhaps I shall be able to hear the secret if I listen long enough."

It will thus be seen that Mr. Frederick Kennard was not troubled by any particular scruples. He was what is usually called a superior servant. As a matter of fact, he had been in the household of a well-known peer before coming to Grangewood, and he had accepted his present post mainly on account of private reasons of his own. He wished to get as far away from populous centres as possible.

And Kennard was quite a gentleman in his manner and appearance and bearing. At the same time, he was fully prepared to go to considerable lengths of dishonesty if he saw any reasonable prospect of success.

At the beginning of March Mr. Temple made the surprising announcement that a visitor would appear at Grangewood that week. Kennard then made the discovery that the visitor would be Mr. John Crosby, of Bedford Row, London, W.C. This gentleman was a solicitor, and Kennard had sufficient common-sense to guess the object of his visit.

Mr. Crosby, upon arrival, proved to be a stout, elderly gentleman of a breezy, jovial nature, quite unlike the traditional lawyer. He seemed to bring a breath of life into that dull old house with him. And Kennard, having ushered him into the library, took up his station outside the door.

As he had suspected, Mr. Gowan Temple had sent for his solicitor with the object of making his last will and testament. The butler was unable to hear everything, but he gathered that the old man's all was to be left to Leonard Temple. The "all" included Grangewood House and its somewhat extensive grounds, which were practically a wilderness.

One item which greatly interested Kennard, and which made him positively determined to remain at Grangewood, was that the sum of one hundred pounds would become his upon the old man's death. This, considering that he had only been in Mr. Temple's service for two years, was astonishingly liberal.

Mr. Crosby thought so, too.

"If my word is of any weight, Mr. Temple," he said, "I should strongly advise you to modify your generosity towards Mrs. Higgins and Kennard. No doubt they are excellent servants, but, my dear sir, it is surely unnecessary to acknowledge their service by such sums as five hundred pounds and one hundred pounds, respectively."

"You old fool!" muttered Kennard anxiously.

But he need not have been at all nervous. Mr. Gowan Temple gave vent to a wheezy old chuckle.

"Too much—eh, Crosby?" he exclaimed. "Not at all! Mrs. Higgins deserves a thousand, by gad! As for Kennard, he's a good

yellow, and it is my wish that he should benefit to the extent of one hundred pounds."

"But do you realise, Mr. Temple, that this six hundred will seriously reduce your grandson's inheritance?" asked the solicitor. "Your total estate, apart from this property, amounts to a figure just under three thousand pounds. It does not strike me as being quite fair that such a large proportion should be bequeathed to domestic servants—who, after all, have been in receipt of regular and liberal wages."

The old man chuckled again.

"You leave me to plan things in my own way, Crosby," he said genially. "You needn't be afraid that my grandson will be displeased with his inheritance. The young dog will be rich, Crosby—he'll be rolling in money! God bless him! I haven't seen him for years, but Leonard was always my favourite boy. And he'll be rich, Crosby. Ha, ha! You don't know how rich!"

"I must frankly confess that I am somewhat puzzled."

"And you won't get me to satisfy your curiosity, either," chuckled the old gentleman. "I have a letter here, Crosby. As you can see, it is sealed, and I leave it in your care. I have spent weeks over that letter—puzzling and puzzling. But it is completed now. And it must not be placed in my grandson's hand until I have been laid to rest."

"You may be sure that I shall fulfil your trust faithfully, Mr. Temple," said the solicitor.

"Good!" Kennard heard the old man exclaim. "What you must do, Crosby, is to bring my grandson down to Grangewood personally. Having introduced him to his new home, you will hand him this sealed letter, and then leave him to his own devices. Take it with you now, and guard it carefully. I trust you, Crosby—I have every confidence in you."

"You will never have any reason to regret your trust," said the solicitor. "And now, Mr. Temple, perhaps we had better settle down to the work in hand. Mrs. Higgins and Kennard will, I presume, witness your signature? There is no necessity for them to be informed as to the exact nature of the document."

Kennard smiled to himself as he crept slowly away. He deemed it unsafe to remain any longer, more particularly as certain sounds from the rear heralded the fact that Mrs. Higgins was approaching. And Kennard had no wish to be caught eavesdropping by the housekeeper.

An hour later both Kennard and Mrs. Higgins were called into the library in order to witness the old man's signature. It was quite a simple matter, and occupied only a few minutes.

Mr. Crosby was entertained to tea, and he then took his departure, carrying with him the mysterious sealed package which Mr. Gowan Temple had entrusted to his care.

The old man did not actually possess a horse and trap, but he had an arrangement with a man in the vicinity of the station, six miles away, Mitchell, a groom, spent a good deal of his time upon work for Mr. Temple, driving backwards and forwards from Grangewood House—chiefly carrying parcels, and such-like.

Kennard watched the solicitor's departure from the window of his own room, at the top of the house. And the butler was now even more determined in his resolve to stay at Grangewood than ever before.

"The hundred pounds will come in handy, but it's a flea-bite compared to what I can get if I keep my wits about me!" he muttered. "Crosby is taking that sealed letter away with him, and it won't be opened until the old man's grandson comes down."

Kennard drove his right fist into the other palm.

"That letter contains the secret of the old miser's hoard!" he muttered grinning. "That's why it's sealed—that's why it mustn't be opened until the new owner gets into the house. And it's worth a fortune!"

This knowledge caused Kennard to become more cunning every day. At night, too, he would leave his room and prowled about the house. His idea was to gain an inkling of the whereabouts of the treasure. The fact was absolutely apparent that a vast hoard was concealed somewhere within the house.

But Kennard's efforts were fruitless.

And then, barely a fortnight after Mr. John Crosby's visit, the disaster occurred. It happened one day when old Mr. Temple was in one of his particularly gloating moods, as Kennard was in the habit of calling them.

The old man had been talking to himself out in the garden, for that morning was

particularly bright and mild. And when he came in he was rubbing his old hands together gleefully, and passed into the library with audible chuckles.

Kennard was in the hall, and he stole forward cautiously.

"All for the boy!" Mr. Temple was saying. "He shall have every penny. Two or three thousands, eh? It is more like a million! By gad! The boy shall live to bless his old grandfather!"

Kennard stood listening. His constant hope was that Mr. Temple would mutter something which would serve as a clue to the exact hiding-place of the treasure. But, although he had no idea of Kennard's eavesdropping, he never gave away the secret.

And this morning, after Kennard had been standing upon the mat for about five minutes, the library door suddenly opened with a jerk. The butler was taken completely by surprise, and nearly fell headlong into the room. A minute before his coat had slightly rattled the key in the lock, but he had not noticed it. And the old man's hearing was excellent.

"Kennard," he thundered, "what were you doing?"

"I—I was just about to knock, sir," stammered Kennard.

"What for?"

"To—to ask if you required any more logs, sir."

"You are lying to me, Kennard!" snapped Mr. Temple harshly. "You know well enough that you filled the log-basket only an hour since. By gad! You were listening—you were spying!"

Kennard pulled himself together.

"No, sir, I—" he began.

"Do not attempt any denial!" rasped his master. "I know that I talk to myself, but I was not aware that you are a spy, Kennard. You are not to be trusted, and you will leave my service this very day."

"But you are wrong, sir!" protested Kennard, in alarm.

"Fool! Do you imagine that I am so dull?" snapped the old man. "You have done for yourself, you wretched scoundrel! You were to have received one hundred pounds upon my death, but Mr. Crosby shall be instructed at once that—"

"I give you my word of honour, sir, that I was not listening!" panted Kennard, knowing how necessary it was for him to remain. "If you'll only believe me, sir, you'll never have cause to complain again."

Mr. Temple laughed harshly.

"Your words constitute a confession, Kennard!" he rapped out. "It is sufficient. You will leave this house to-day. Do you understand? Enough! I will listen to no further falsehood!"

And Kennard could do nothing. Owing to his carelessness he was turned out, neck and crop. He received a month's wages, and was driven away in the evening.

It was a humiliating finish to his hopes and plans. While occupying the position of butler he had many opportunities of searching the house, and remaining on the look-out for any possible clue. But now he was away, and could do nothing.

Frederick Kennard, however, knew such a great deal about Mr. Gowan Temple and his affairs that he was not prepared to let the whole affair drop. And the dismissed butler was a man of determination and his nature was unscrupulous.

This sudden blow had the effect of strengthening his resolve to carry on. But he knew very well that nothing could be done until the old man died. And it was hardly possible for Kennard to work the thing alone and unaided.

After leaving Grangewood he made his way to London, and lived in very respectable apartments; for Kennard had quite a nice little amount of money put by, and he did not want to accept another post yet.

Only three weeks later he was talking seriously with a visitor. This gentleman was named Henry Grant, and, by profession, he was a commercial traveller. The fact that he had a very shady record was quite favourable in Kennard's eyes.

Mr. Grant was told all the facts concerning the lonely Grangewood House and its aged owner. And Grant was impressed. He realised that a great fortune was to be gained if only he and Kennard played their cards in the right way.

"Well, there's nothing to be done until after the old fellow pugs out, Kennard," said Grant. "It would be a fool thing for us to go messing about down there now. When the young chap gets down it'll be different. He'll know the secret, and it'll be easy

enough for us to get hold of it. By Jove! I'm with you, old man!"

"Good!" said Kennard heartily. "I knew you would be!"

And the precious pair shook hands upon their compact. Nothing was to be done until Mr. Gowan Temple died; and his decease could not be long delayed now.

Various plans were made, but they were all somewhat vague. For nothing could be definitely settled until the new owner of Grangewood came into possession. And then

Well, I've finished the prologue, and so I'll get busy on relating the actual story. This isn't quite the orthodox way of finishing up a prologue, but it's good enough for me.

## The End of the Prologue.

## THE FIRST CHAPTER.

### A Queer Inheritance—The Cryptic Letter—Unknown Enemies!

MR. JOHN CROSBY lay back in his comfortable padded chair, and clasped his fingers.

"Well, Mr. Temple, you have heard your grandfather's will," he said cheerfully. "The old gentleman was somewhat eccentric in many ways, and you must not be surprised at the conditions of the will. In actual money you inherit the sum of two thousand three hundred pounds. Not a vast amount, I will admit, but well worth accepting. Then, of course, there is Grangewood House, and the property attached to it. The grounds are some seventy acres in extent, and the whole property is freehold, and unencumbered."

Mr. Leonard Temple nodded.

"I'm not grumbling," he smiled. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Crosby, I am astonished and delighted. I had no idea that my grandfather would think of me in his will. And yet it seems as though he has left me everything, with the exception of a legacy of five hundred pounds for Mrs. Higgins, his housekeeper. I haven't seen my grandfather for years, and almost forgot his existence."

"He didn't forget yours," said the solicitor. "Why, my dear sir, he was always talking about you, and gloating over the fact that his property would become yours after his death!"

"Dear old chap!" said Temple thoughtfully. "I'm afraid I've been comfoundedly careless. I ought to have visited him occasionally. But how was I to know he thought so much of me?"

"Well, the fact remains that you inherit the old house," said Mr. Crosby. "The conditions, however, are somewhat trying, and I can quite understand your natural alarm."

"The thing I don't like is that I must go down to Grangewood to live for a whole year, and that my profession must be abandoned," said Temple. "That's what I can't understand, Mr. Crosby. You will readily appreciate the fact that this inheritance loses a great deal of its value. I am earning close upon fifteen hundred a year, and my income will cease as soon as I get down to Grangewood. So, upon the whole year, I shall not gain much, in the long run. And after such a long period of inactivity it will be most difficult for me to resume my present position in the journalistic world. Why, hang it all, the game doesn't seem worth the candle!"

Mr. Crosby nodded.

"I am compelled to agree that your argument is perfectly sound," he said. "You inherit this sum of money, but are compelled to relinquish your profession. That condition practically neutralises the benefit you would obtain. And, to be quite frank, it must be acknowledged that Grangewood House itself, and the property with it, is not worth much. It is a very old place, and the land is quite useless for all ordinary purposes. I am afraid you would get a very poor price if you put Grangewood up for sale."

"That's what I've been thinking," said Temple slowly.

The two men were silent for some little time. They were seated in Mr. Crosby's private office at Bedford Row. The genial old solicitor was very pleased with his visitor, for Leonard Temple was a clean-limbed, healthy young fellow of about twenty-six.

He had been summoned by Mr. Crosby the previous day, and had had no inkling as to the reason for the visit. Temple was a journalist, attached to one of London's most important morning newspapers, and he had

met with considerable success in his profession, and his prospects were of the best.

Temple was practically alone in the world, and it was for this reason, perhaps, that his grandfather had made him the chief legatee. The young journalist lived in very comfortable chambers just off Holborn, and he was not sure whether to be pleased or otherwise at this sudden turn of fortune.

Looking at the matter squarely, it hardly seemed worth the candle, as he had himself declared. At the end of a year he would be out of touch with all journalistic matters, and it would be quite impossible for him to continue where he had left off. His position, in fact, would be infinitely inferior; and there was not so much to gain, after all. Two thousand pounds is not a great amount, particularly when a year's income must be sacrificed in order to obtain it.

As for Grangewood House itself, it would scarcely fetch five hundred pounds—and that was a very optimistic estimate. And the grounds were certainly worth no more than two thousand.

It was rather a difficult problem; but, on the general balance, Temple was strongly inclined to accept the conditions of the will. He would be provided with a year's holiday, at least, and he would have ample time in which to prepare and write a novel he had long had in mind. Further, Mr. Crosby urged another matter.

"We must not forget that sealed letter, Mr. Temple," he exclaimed, breaking the silence, "I will not make any positive statement, so, please, do not allow your hopes to run high. But for years past I have had the idea that your grandfather was somewhat—er—miserly, shall we say? I don't mean to be offensive, and I must hasten to add that Mr. Gowan Temple was always most generous. But when I say miserly, I mean that he was secretive concerning his money. I am fairly convinced that Grangewood House contains something of far more value than we know about. That, at least, is my impression."

Leonard Temple was very interested.

"What makes you think that?" he asked, bending forward.

"Well, many things!" was the solicitor's reply. "First and foremost, there is this mysterious sealed packet. Your grandfather was extremely secretive concerning it, but his attitude when giving me instructions was one of absolute gloom. That is the only word to use—gloom. I was greatly struck by the old gentleman's demeanour. I am convinced that you have inherited far greater wealth than we know of, Mr. Temple."

"That's rather a vague statement, isn't it?"

"Admittedly," agreed Mr. Crosby. "At the same time, the evidence is very sound, when one examines it thoroughly. Your grandfather always referred to your inheritance as though it were something of an enormous nature. Yet he would not have done so had it been the somewhat trifling sum we knew of. It was not Mr. Gowan Temple's habit to mislead people, and I can positively vouch for his soundness of mind. Yes, Mr. Temple, I strongly urge you to go down to Grangewood."

"I will," said Leonard Temple promptly. "When do you propose to undertake the trip?"

"Well, you will have certain matters to attend to, no doubt, and there is no necessity for any particular hurry," replied the solicitor. "What do you think of the first day of next month—that is, in about three weeks' time?"

"It will suit me admirably," said Temple.

And from that day onwards for the following three weeks he was busily engaged in winding up his affairs in London. His grandfather's funeral, of course, had taken place some little time before the reading of the will. The old gentleman had died quite suddenly—even sooner than he mentioned in his prophesy to Kennard. It almost seemed as though he had a premonition of approaching death.

Those three weeks were busy ones for Temple, but by the first day in July he was quite ready for taking up his new life at Grangewood House. There was one person in particular who did not care much for the idea of Temple leaving London.

As it will probably be guessed, this interesting person was of the feminine gender; in fact, Temple's fiancée, Miss Dora Bevington. She had been decidedly alarmed at first, but was now resigned—particularly as Temple had forced her mother to promise that she would bring Dora down to Grangewood at once, U. J.—No. 771.

during the hot weather, for a holiday. Temple impulsively proposed that they should all go down together, but this plan was abandoned. It was far better that he should be introduced to his inheritance accompanied by Mr. Crosby only.

Naturally, Miss Bevington was on the platform at the London terminus when Temple took his departure. Mr. Crosby eyed the girl with much approval, and not without reason. For she was dainty and pretty, with deep-blue eyes and dimpled cheeks.

"You've got to come down to-morrow or the day after!" declared Temple decidedly.

"If you fail, Dora, you'll have about twenty telegrams in one day. That's a threat!"

"I'm not frightened," laughed the girl.

"And how are you going to send the telegrams, Mr. Clever? Isn't Grangewood six miles from the nearest post-office?"

Temple was taken aback, but he was not dismayed.

"I shall stay at the post-office all day," he explained. "But, seriously, little girl, you mustn't disappoint me. I shall be frightfully lonely down there for the first week unless I've got somebody with me. I invited Mr. Crosby to stay a few days, but he can't manage it."

"Dear me! I'm afraid I should make a very poor substitute!" said Mr. Crosby, with twinkling eyes. "It was very kind of you, my dear Temple, but I can't possibly spare the time. Well, we're off!"

The solicitor discreetly retired to the other side of the compartment and concealed himself behind his newspaper. Meanwhile Leonard Temple bade his fiancée good-bye as though he were about to start on a mission for the other ends of the earth.

By the time they had finished there was just time for Mr. Crosby to shake Dora's hand, and then the train started. Temple hung out of the window for about three minutes, more or less, and then settled down into his corner.

The day was certainly an ideal one for the trip, the sun being at its brightest, and glaring down upon the green landscapes with fierce heat. It was just the day for a trip into the country when London itself was well-nigh unbearable.

The station for Grangewood House was about the most insignificant affair Temple had ever set eyes upon. It was one of those stations which look as though they are used about once in the course of every six months. The train service was shocking, for there were only about three every day, and none at all on Sundays.

It was evening by the time they arrived, and Mr. Crosby reckoned that he would have sufficient time to drive over to Grangewood, to spend an hour with Temple there, and to get back to the station in time to catch the last up train—which, very fortunately, was fairly late.

Although Temple had never been to Grangewood, he had already engaged a new servant—upon Mr. Crosby's advice—and had made a purchase. The new servant was Mitchell, the groom—the man who had served Grangewood for years past, although he had never been actually employed by Temple's grandfather. The purchase was the horse and trap.

Later on Temple meant to get a motor-car. Traps were too slow for him. But this arrangement was quite satisfactory for the present.

Mitchell was waiting at the station in order to welcome his new master. He touched his cap respectfully to Temple and the solicitor, and very soon the pair were being driven towards Grangewood.

The new owner had gathered, from Mr. Crosby's description, that the drive would be a lonely one. But he had formed no conception as to its almost grim solitude.

The rutty lane led through dense masses of forest. In places the trees were so thick that they seemed to envelop the lane completely, the massive branches joining overhead and forming a tunnel of foliage. These tunnels extended frequently for over a mile. And the breaks themselves were by no means open ones.

Not a soul was met during the journey. It seemed as though the little party were driving away from civilisation and all mankind. And this in the summer-time. Temple had a cold shiver when he thought of the prospects for winter.

Grangewood House came in sight at last, and was visible for some little time before it was actually reached. For the house was built in the centre of about the only wide clearing for miles around. It was akin to a stretch of moorland, rugged and somewhat grand in its wildness.

The house was surrounded by its own trees, and the grounds consisted of a sheer wilderness. No actual garden existed at all, and everything was choked with weeds and rank grass. The building was of grey stone, and severely plain, not even a touch of ivy or creeper giving it the slightest relief.

"H'm! Cheerful-looking place!" said Temple critically.

"I am afraid you are sarcastic," remarked Mr. Crosby. "Grangewood is not a beautiful spot, I will admit. But you will find the interior most comfortable, my dear fellow. Your grandfather was most particular about his comfort, I can assure you."

The solicitor was not wrong, as Temple soon discovered. For the old house was splendid within, being furnished in no mean fashion, and arranged with the most perfect taste.

Mrs. Higgins was there, of course; but nobody had taken Kennard's place. And Temple had decided that a butler was an unnecessary extravagance. A maid-servant, however, had been added to the household, in view of the unexpected visitors.

Temple was quite pleased by the time he had looked over his new property. And then he and Mr. Crosby retired to the comfortable library and partook of tea whilst they talked.

"My trust is fulfilled, except for the delivering of the sealed packet," said the solicitor, reaching for his attache-case. "I will give it to you now, Temple, and you can open it at your leisure."

"I will do so now—"

"That is not at all necessary," interrupted Mr. Crosby. "The letter is a private one, and I have not the slightest desire to pry into your affairs. Really, my dear fellow, I should prefer you to postpone the opening of the letter until you are quite alone. Indeed, your grandfather virtually made me promise that I should instruct you so."

Temple smiled, and placed the sealed letter in his pocket. He was undoubtedly curious, and made no pretence of the fact. Fifteen minutes later Mr. Crosby took his departure, and the new owner of Grangewood House was left alone.

"Well, I don't know what to make of it, I'm sure," he murmured, as he surveyed the well-packed book-shelves of the library. "Thank goodness Dora is coming down! I couldn't possibly exist in this place by myself. And as for the winter—"

He shrugged his shoulders, and strolled out of the library in search of Mrs. Higgins, having failed to find any bell. But he found the house-keeper without much difficulty, and had quite a long chat with her, giving his instructions with regard to household matters, and generally making himself agreeable.

Then he retired to the library once more, and the maid-servant brought a large table-lamp in, and drew the curtains. The French windows she left open, for the night was mild.

For some little time he sat smoking a cigarette, and thinking deeply. The silence of the late evening was only intensified by the faint rustling of the trees outside. Temple felt as though he had left the world behind him. He had not imagined that such a wild, lonely spot as this existed in little England. It reminded him of stories he had read concerning the backwoods of Canada.

There is always something fascinating in a secret, and Temple hesitated several times before taking the sealed letter from his pocket. He badly wanted to open it, but he took a certain amount of pleasure in forming premature conjectures as to what it would contain.

But at last he turned over the strong envelope in his hand, broke the seals, and fore open the flap. On the face were the words, in his grandfather's shaky writing:

"To my grandson, Leonard. Not to be opened until after my death."

The contents, Temple saw at a glance, consisted of a single sheet of thick vellum, and he half expected to see a rough sketch, or plan, giving directions of the whereabouts of the treasure, or whatever the suspected hoard consisted of.

But the vellum contained something quite different. Temple stared at the paper, frowning, and it was little wonder that he was puzzled. For this is what he saw:

#### "THE MYSTIC CIPHER."

"22—5, 17, 63, 11, 4, 18, 44, 110, 26—3, 5, 138, 84, 62, 21, 15, 90, 92, 84—12, 18, 73, 55, 190, 122—40, 88, 97, 134, 67, 185, 201, 150—1, 6, 28, 33, 90, 168, 212, 180—50, 16, 37, 22, 89, 117, 96, 78, 85, 3—5."

Temple was undoubtedly surprised. This queer jumble of figures was not what he had

anticipated at all. In a way, he was not disappointed, for there was something mysterious in this secret message. It's very mystery implied that it was of great value.

His grandfather would not have taken all the trouble to manufacture that cipher unless he had a particular reason for so doing. But apparently the old gentleman had forgotten one point. The mystic cipher, as it stood, was a mere collection of figures. Without the key it could never be fathomed.

Temple turned the paper over slowly, but the other side was blank. The envelope contained nothing more. There was no key whatever. Look at the figures as he would, he could make nothing of them. If he tried for a whole year the result would be the same.

"Oh, it's mad!" he muttered. "A cipher of this sort is obviously hopeless unless one has the key. Some ciphers can be puzzled out by sheer effort of brain, but this isn't one of those fellows."

As it stood, his grandfather's message was a mere fable. Yet it was hardly feasible to suppose the old man had not left the key somewhere. But where? Temple might search for weeks and months without finding the words, or the message, which gave the necessary key.

He lay back in his chair, lit another cigarette, and picked up the cipher message. Practically as he did so a sound came from the French windows behind him. And then two things happened.

A large piece of sacking whizzed through the air, and enveloped the lamp, extinguishing it instantly without overturning it. But before the room was plunged in darkness Temple saw something else.

A hand shot over his shoulder, and made a fierce grab at the vellum. By instinct more than anything else, Temple crushed the paper up and flung it into the far corner of the room. He just caught a glimpse of it as it disappeared behind a heavy cabinet, and then the lamp went out.

It had all happened so quickly that the new owner of Grangewood was taken by surprise; and the fact that he had rid himself of the cipher proved his ability to act with decision at short notice.

"You infernal rogue!" he shouted, starting up.

Hands gripped him from behind, but he could see nothing whatever. Wrenching himself round with an effort, Temple sent the chair flying, and got upon his feet.

The window curtains had been pushed aside, and the young man saw two vague shapes outside against the night-sky. The attack, evidently, had been prepared beforehand, and the idea was to seize the vellum and extinguish the lamp at practically the same moment. The object of the latter was to confuse Temple so much that a safe "get-away" was assured.

"Now, then, come on!" rapped out Temple fiercely. "I can see the pair of you, and—No, you don't!"

The two mysterious intruders had abruptly backed through the opening of the French windows. They knew that Temple was charging to the attack, and fled. Although they were two against one, they were evidently anxious to avoid hand-grips.

Temple dashed out into the tangled mass of bushes and long grass which constituted the garden, but he only heard a faint sound of crackling twigs in the distance. It was very dark now, for the heavy trees which grew close to the house made the night utterly black.

For several minutes Temple searched about, and then he returned to the library. The affair, evidently, had not attracted the attention of Mrs. Higgins or Mary, the maid.

Temple closed the windows, and locked them. Then he struck a match, removed the sack from the lamp, and relit it. Fortunately there was a heavy globe fitted, so the glass had come to no harm.

Temple's first action was to recover the mystic cipher from behind the cabinet. It was unharmed, except for being crumpled, and Temple sat down in his chair and took a deep breath.

"Well, I'm hanged!" he murmured. "Who the deuce were those fellows? This is rather mysterious, Len, my son. Those brutes knew all about this cipher, evidently, and it's valuable. People wouldn't risk an attack of that sort unless there was something big at the end of it."

The new owner of Grangewood was considerably startled. He had come here prepared to lead a life of utter solitude. And yet, during his first evening, he had met with an adventure like those from the pages of a detective novel.

The only positive fact which Temple deduced was that the cryptic message was of great value. And his interest correspondingly increased enormously. If a thing was worth stealing, it was worth keeping. And Temple meant to keep it at all cost. If he could only read the cipher, he felt sure that something startling would result.

He remembered Mr. Crosby's words; the hints that a hoard was concealed within the walls of this lonely old dwelling. And his chief anxiety now was to keep the cipher safe.

At first he thought about taking it to bed with him. But he was a somewhat heavy sleeper, and he knew that burglars were light-fingered. Also the sight of a small iron safe in a corner of the room decided matters. He found that the safe was strong, and the lock in perfect order.

So he placed the secret message within, locked the door, and concealed the key in a place where it would never be found. This was within the pages of one of the hundreds of books upon the shelves.

After that he had calmed down, and he lit another cigarette, reopened the French windows, and strolled outside. He made a tour of the grounds immediately 'round the house, but saw nothing and heard nothing.

"Deucedly mysterious!" he decided, at last. "I don't like it, and I don't pretend to. Tomorrow I'll ask Mrs. Higgins a few questions; but I don't want to disturb the old girl's mind to-night."

When he went to bed he found that sleep did not come so easily as usual. And to-night, when he did fall off, his slumbers were not by any means heavy. Yet he could not possibly blame the bed.

Mrs. Higgins had prepared his bed-room in the most complete manner, and the bed itself was as comfortable as any he had ever slept in. And when midnight sounded from the old grandfather's clock in the hall he was still half asleep and half awake.

He had retired just before eleven—a preposterously early hour for him. But somehow one generally keeps earlier hours in the country.

Temple continued to sleep lightly, and just after one he sat up in bed with a start. He had heard a sound from below; and he knew that his bed-room was almost immediately over the French windows of the library. Temple had plenty of pluck, and he slipped out of bed, dived for the door, and crept downstairs.

He arrived in the library just in time to see a dark figure moving near the window. Being a man of action, he sprang forward, and delivered a terrific punch upon a face.

There was a yell, and the intruder shot through the doorway. Temple valiantly tried to follow; but it's no joke running over rough ground with bare feet, and he was obliged to give it up. But he had frustrated a second attempt to obtain the mystic cipher, and his determination was all the greater.

When, on the top of this, the house was burgled even again on the following night, Temple decided that it was time for him to take some action. On this last occasion he had slept through the dark hours, and had been aroused by Mrs. Higgins early in the morning, to find that the library was in a shocking condition, having been ransacked completely. The small safe was smashed open, and quite empty.

But this was of little account, for Temple had transferred the precious cipher to his own bed-room, and it was still there, intact. But he considered deeply that morning, and came to a decision.

And so he wrote an urgent letter to my esteemed gvnor, Mr. Sexton Blake, and despatched it at once by Mitchell, the groom. What the result of that appeal was I'll now relate.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Sexton Blake Responds—Temple's Mistrust—A Surprise.

SEXTON BLAKE left London by the same train as that taken by Leonard Temple and Mr. Crosby three days earlier.

The great detective had decided to run down to Grangewood. And, what is more, he had come to that decision without consulting me, or, in fact, telling me anything about it. For this crime I could scarcely blame the gvnor, for I happened to be spending a day out on that particular Thursday.

Sexton Blake had received Temple's letter in the morning, and he had pondered over it for some little time. He was merely told that mysterious men had attempted to burgle the house on three distinct occasions, and the whole case was a most unusual and singular one.

Temple was rather vague, and Sexton Blake would probably have refused to investigate had it not been for a decision he had arrived at the previous evening.

In short, he decided to take a short trip into the country, or to the seaside. The weather was blazingly hot, and there was nothing on hand which particularly interested the gvnor. And it struck him that a short stay in the forest country of Hampshire would be most welcome. And there was also the prospect of combining business with pleasure.

Blake therefore despatched a wire to Temple, stating that he would run down by the afternoon train. And he also left a short note for me upon the consulting-room table—to give me a shock when I arrived home. The gvnor is rather fond of giving me shocks. On one occasion he went off to America without telling me anything about it! There was a terrific row over that, but I won't go into details here. I don't want to be accused of padding this narrative with matter which doesn't belong to it.

Well, Sexton Blake packed his grip, and took a trip—as the song puts it. And he arrived at the little country station in Hampshire, to find Mitchell awaiting him with the trap. Temple had been delighted to receive the telegram, and was looking forward to meeting the world-famous detective.

The trap started towards Grangewood, and arrived at the old house in due course. The evening had turned very dark, and the dense trees made the scene gloomy when the visitor arrived. Leonard Temple was waiting upon the doorstep, and he ran down to meet the trap as soon as it appeared.

"Awfully good of you to come, Mr. Blake!" he exclaimed warmly. "I hardly thought you'd be interested enough."

Sexton Blake smiled, and climbed down from the trap.

"Your letter aroused my curiosity, Mr. Temple," he said, as they shook hands. "Anything of an unusual nature always attracts me. Your charming residence is somewhat remotely situated," he added smilingly.

"I'm afraid you're poking fun, Mr. Blake," said Temple. "Nobody can truthfully call Grangewood House charming—at least, to judge from the exterior. However, come inside, and I shall have the pleasure of introducing you to my fiancée, Miss Dora Bevington, and her mother."

Blake frowned slightly.

"Oh! You have other guests?" he asked, with obvious displeasure.

"Yes. They arrived only a short while ago," answered Temple shortly.

"But I thought the train service—"

"They came by road—by car," explained Temple.

He led the way into the house, and his first impression of Sexton Blake was not altogether favourable. Being a young man in love, he was naturally touchy, and he did not care for that frown of Blake's at the mention of his other guests. It was rather hard on the detective, but it couldn't be helped.

The big lounge-hall was brightly illuminated by means of several big lamps, and looked cheerful. Sexton Blake was conducted upstairs by Temple, and he indulged in a wash and brush-up. Then he descended, and entered the drawing-room.

Here he was introduced to Mrs. and Miss Bevington. The former was stout and talkative, but a charming woman, nevertheless. Miss Bevington looked perfectly delightful in a light evening frock made of some flimsy material, and her very presence brightened the old place in a wonderful fashion.

A late tea was served, and the talk was confined to ordinary, everyday matters. It was not until the meal was disposed of that Temple referred to the business which had brought Sexton Blake down.

The two men retired to the library, and Leonard Temple was feeling slightly irritated. Blake had been rather offhand with Dora and her mother, and Temple didn't quite like it. As he told himself, however, Blake was at Grangewood professionally.

"Well, Mr. Blake, I didn't give you any actual details in my letter, so I'll just tell you the story now," commenced Temple, after

they had lit their cigars. "The fact of the matter is, I have only just inherited this property."

"One minute, please," interrupted Blake. "From the appearance of this room, I should judge that it has been recently ransacked in a very thorough manner."

Temple started. "How on earth did you know that?" he asked.

"I am right, then?"

"Yes; although I didn't mention the matter in my letter."

"Further, I observe that the small safe in the corner has been forced within the last day or two," went on Blake, looking round him with an expression of concentration. "Ah, these are French windows, are they not?"

He crossed over to them, pulled the curtains aside, and examined the windows with care, even going upon his knees and taking a close look at the threshold.

"Quite so," he murmured, as though to himself. "Yes, two men, I should judge. They broke in by this means. Ah, what's this? Can it be possible that somebody has been walking about with bare feet?"

"Well, I'm hanged!" ejaculated Temple. "There were two men, Mr. Blake, and I, myself, chased them in my bare feet. But your deductions are astounding. This floor was thoroughly washed only this morning!"

Sexton Blake smiled.

"The matter is really quite simple," he said carelessly. "I always like to look round before hearing the story, Mr. Temple. I cannot say for certain, but there is every appearance of a sack having been used for some purpose. I have observed one or two minute fibres—"

"You beat me, Mr. Blake," said Temple. "I knew you were clever at deduction, but I'm bothered if I can follow your train of reasoning in this affair."

"Child's play, my dear sir!" said Blake, shrugging his shoulders. "It would be mere waste of time to explain how I arrived at my conclusions. I have my own methods, and it is very seldom that I make mistakes—very seldom indeed. Was I right about the sack?"

"Quite right!" replied Temple curtly.

He looked at the detective as they both sat down, and his mental opinion of Sexton Blake was that the latter was a somewhat conceited bounder. At the same time, he admitted that Blake was decidedly clever. To have deduced so much without having heard a word of the story was indeed astonishing. Temple had given no details whatever in his letter, so Blake had had nothing to go by.

"I shall now be pleased to hear your story," said Sexton Blake, in a somewhat condescending tone of voice. "I do not promise to be successful, Mr. Temple, but I can safely declare that the odds are in our favour. Let me advise you to be perfectly frank with me. Tell me everything; tell me all your private matters if you think it will help our investigation. You can safely rely upon me to respect your confidences. And my fees, I may add, will be fairly moderate. I judge that your means are not considerable—"

"I don't think we need enter into that just now, Mr. Blake!" interrupted Temple coldly. Sexton Blake shrugged his shoulders.

"As you will," he remarked. "And now for the story."

Temple was silent for some moments. The fact of the matter was—he had come to the conclusion that he wouldn't tell Sexton Blake anything about the cipher message. He didn't exactly know why, but he mistrusted the detective in no uncertain manner. He was clever, no doubt, but his whole attitude was totally foreign to that which Temple had expected. The young man could not be free and easy with Blake, and he wished that he had never asked the detective to come down.

But he couldn't send him away now, having gone so far, and it was very necessary to tell some story. Temple was nervous, and that, possibly accounted for his doubtful state of mind. Temple was nervous because he did not care about trusting the actual secret to Sexton Blake; and he didn't quite see how he could get out of it.

However, he told the story briefly, explaining how Mr. Crosby had accompanied him down to Grangewood House, and how two mysterious men had sprung upon him after darkness had fallen. But he made no mention of the attempt to snatch the precious piece of vellum.

He led Blake to believe that the case was one of ordinary burglary, and that the thieves had come for anything they could snatch. U. J.—No. 771.

And Sexton Blake, accordingly, was not satisfied. He could easily tell that his client was keeping something back.

"You say that two unknown men have attempted to steal something on three separate occasions?" asked the detective.

"Have you no idea what that something was—or is?"

Temple looked somewhat awkward.

"They may have thought that I had a lot of money on me," he replied, evading the question, and trying to give an answer which did not lead to falsehood. "Or possibly the men came with a definite object. That is for you to discover, Mr. Blake."

"Quite so!" agreed the detective. "But surely you must have some inkling as to the truth? Did not the men come for a package, or a letter, or something of a similar nature?"

"They might have done, of course," said Temple.

"Now, look here, Mr. Temple, if I am to conduct this case, you must be perfectly frank with me," said Blake firmly. "I am quite certain that you are holding something back. You did not answer the direct question which I put to you just now. Did these men attempt to obtain possession of a letter or a document?"

"That is what I assumed myself," replied Temple, still evading the question. "The manner in which this room was ransacked proves quite clearly that a search was made; and such a search could not have been made for money. What I want you to do, Mr. Blake, is to lay down here and to protect me from any further violence."

Sexton Blake smiled strangely.

"And you will say no more?" he asked.

"I'm afraid there is nothing more to be said, Mr. Blake," said Temple, rising to his feet. "Will you remain and do as I ask?"

"Of course," was the detective's reply. "But I must be allowed to remark, Mr. Temple, that I am not altogether satisfied with the result of our interview. It would have been far better if you had been quite candid with me. Perhaps you will be of a different mind to-morrow."

Temple made no reply. He was feeling just a little sorry that he had not been frank at the outset. Blake had practically guessed the truth, anyhow. But the young man could not bring himself to the point of producing the cipher, although it reposed in his pocket at that moment.

"I should like to have a stroll in the grounds—if I may?" suggested Sexton Blake, after a short silence.

"Certainly," certainly!" said Temple promptly. "By all means, Mr. Blake. Do just as you think fit. I will come with you if you would care for my company."

"I have no wish to be impolite, but I should prefer to be alone," replied Blake. "There are many points to think over, and I always like to be alone when pondering over my cases."

He walked towards the French window, paused to light a cigarette, and then passed out into the night. Outside, he came to a halt, and watched the library windows for some few moments. He saw the lamplight become dim, and a few minutes later Temple's shadow crossed the drawing-room blind.

"He has gone to acquaint the ladies of our little interview," murmured Blake. "This is just my chance. Confound the infernal young fool! He has upset my plan completely owing to his secretiveness."

The detective walked across the rough grass with rather strange assurance, considering that he had never been in the garden before. He made his way to a small gate, rickety with age, which was set in the midst of a thick hedge. And here Blake came to a halt. The spot was some little distance from the house itself.

A dim form loomed up out of the darkness.

"Well, have you got it?" came an anxious whisper.

"No!" snapped Blake. "The young fool is scared, or something. He won't say a word about that package."

"I expected something of that sort, Grant," said the other impatiently. "The whole idea's mad, as I told you. The only way is to get the paper by force."

"Rot, my dear Kennard! There's a little delay, and the whole success of our scheme relied upon Temple falling into the trap at the outset!" exclaimed Blake. "But you needn't worry, old man. Give me until to-morrow, and I'll have the paper."

"That's all very well, Grant—"

"Man alive! We can't do any more at present!" snapped Sexton Blake. "I've been accepted without suspicion, and there's no reason why I shouldn't carry the thing

through right to the finish. If Temple won't budge, I'll get the paper by force!"

By this time it will probably be concluded that I have gone off my rocker, and that I am setting down all sorts of rubbish. But that's where you're wrong. And it's quite possible that the thing has been guessed all along.

Sexton Blake, in fact, wasn't Sexton Blake at all!

The man who had come to Grangewood House was none other than Mr. Henry Grant, the enterprising commercial traveller friend of Kennard, the ex-buttler. And I must make the awful confession that I have been guilty of telling a lot of barefaced fibs. I didn't want to let the cat out of the bag too soon; but it simply must be let out now.

The situation was an acute one.

And, at the same time, it was filled with very real drama.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER.

#### How it Had Been Done—Kennard's Scheme—Held a Prisoner!

**S**EXTON BLAKE—the real, genuine article, I mean—had met with very real disaster on his trip from the station to Grangewood House. In brief, the poor old guy'nor had been collared, and he wasn't feeling at all happy.

I shall be compelled to go back a bit—return upon my tracks, so to speak—but it's a necessary evil. This case was not so simple as it appeared at the beginning, and Sexton Blake knew that well enough now. If he had had the slightest inkling that treachery was afoot, he would never have been made a prisoner.

The whole thing was Kennard's scheme.

It had been Kennard and Grant, of course, who had made those attempts to obtain the sealed package which old Mr. Gowan Temple had left behind for his grandson. The precious scoundrels were not aware of the fact that the letter contained nothing but a jumble of unintelligible figures. They believed—and had every reason to believe—that the letter contained the secret of the old man's hoard.

The three fruitless attempts had made Kennard rather desperate. He was fully determined to get hold of the paper, by hook or by crook. There was a fortune at stake, and both he and Grant considered that the game was worth a considerable amount of risk.

Mitchell, the groom, had been brought into the compact many weeks previous to the old gentleman's death. He had kept his eyes open, and had sent information to his confederates the very instant old Mr. Gowan Temple died.

Mitchell was not quite so unscrupulous as his companions, but he had been ready enough to join in this attempt to obtain "money for nothing." The greed of gold had gripped them all.

Kennard and Grant had come down to Grangewood without delay, and had awaited their opportunity. Their first attempt had failed—mainly because they were amateur criminals. And their non-success had made them rather desperate.

Just when they had been planning another raid upon the lonely house in the forest, Mitchell had brought the news that a telegram had been received from Mr. Sexton Blake, to the effect that he would arrive by the evening train.

This news had come as a shock, and Kennard, at least, was rather scared at first. He proposed that the whole thing should be abandoned. But Grant was a cunning rascal, and his brain had mapped out a really astute dodge. He pointed out the solitude of this stretch of country, and declared that everything was in their favour.

Sexton Blake would be obliged to drive through the forest to his destination. Mitchell being in the plot, it would be a perfectly easy matter to waylay the trap, and seize its distinguished occupant. Then, while he was held a prisoner, Grant would boldly drive on to Grangewood, and palm himself off as Sexton Blake.

It had to be left to luck whether Temple knew Blake by sight, but it was not probable. At all events, the game was worth trying—for there was a great deal in it for favour.

After a considerable amount of planning, therefore, the daring scheme was agreed upon, and everything was arranged accordingly.

Sexton Blake had started out from the station with no suspicion that Mitchell was

one of the very men he was after. How on earth could he suspect such a thing? The guv'nor is as cute as anybody on this earth, I believe, but he isn't possessed of second sight.

In one of the most lonely parts of the deserted lane, Mitchell brought the trap to a standstill. It was the preliminary move in the kidnapping plot, for this exact spot had been agreed upon beforehand.

"One of the traces come out of position, I believe, sir," remarked the groom, jumping down.

It was nearly dark under the dense trees, and Mitchell fumbled about for some time, as though in a difficulty. Finally he looked up. "Can you lend me a hand for a minute, sir?" he asked respectfully.

"Certainly, my man!" was Blake's good-natured reply.

He stepped down lightly, and bent double as Mitchell pointed to a spot below the shafts. And the next second Grant and Kennard ran out from under the trees, grabbed Blake from behind, and flung him head downwards into the dust. It all happened so quickly that the detective had had no warning, and was quite unprepared.

"The ropes—quick!" panted Grant. Their prisoner was struggling fiercely, and he would undoubtedly have got free but for the fact that they had him pressed down heavily, and all his attempts to rise were defeated. In a stand-up fight Blake would have sent the three rogues flying.

Within five minutes he was bound securely, and his three panting captors then bundled him headlong into the trap, and drove rapidly onwards. A halt was called when Grangewood House lay only about half a mile ahead. Sexton Blake, fuming and helpless, was placed upon the road, and dragged unceremoniously in amongst the trees by Kennard and Grant. Mitchell remained in the trap.

Sexton Blake was heavy, and his captors did not relish the idea of carrying him bodily on such a warm night. So they dragged him beneath the masses of dead leaves beneath the trees, and, after a short journey, came upon an old ramshackle hut in the midst of the wood.

It had been used, years before, by a woodcutter, but had been deserted since. Sexton Blake was taken inside, and a candle was illuminated.

"Well, what's the meaning of this?" asked the detective. "If you hope to gain anything, my friends, you'll be sadly—"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Blake, but there's no time for talking!" interrupted Grant crisply. "We're not exactly desperadoes, and you won't come to any harm. Just a little inconvenience, that's all."

Sexton Blake was not the man to waste words, and he knew that further speech on his part at this juncture would be an expenditure of breath for no purpose. So he remained silent, and missed no details.

His pockets were rifled without ceremony, and everything was taken from him—his card-case, his pocket-book, his papers—everything, in fact, which could be of use to Grant in his deception.

"You remain here, Kennard, until you're relieved by Mitchell," said Grant, speaking rapidly. "Then you'd better come along and hang about that little gate. I'll dodge out at the first opportunity."

"Right," said Kennard. "Everything depends on this move, Grant, so be careful. Skip at the first sign of trouble."

The other man nodded, and went off. He was already attired smartly, and armed with Sexton Blake's suit-case and all his papers, he calmly took his place in the trap, and was driven up to Grangewood House in style. And, as I have already described, he was accepted as Sexton Blake without a hitch.

Henry Grant was tall, slim, and possessed of lean features. His general description—as descriptions go—tallied fairly evenly with that of Sexton Blake. But, of course, Grant could never have passed himself off as the guv'nor with anybody who was acquainted with Sexton Blake. It was not a real case of impersonation, for Grant was disguised in no way whatever.

There was always the possibility that Leonard Temple knew Blake by sight. And Grant was not quite such a fool as to ignore that possibility. He was prepared. He would be able to tell, almost by Temple's first words, whether the trick would succeed or not. If Temple expressed surprise, or doubt, Grant would at once explain that Blake had

been unable to come down, and had sent a substitute.

But Temple had made things easy; he had greeted the new-comer as "Mr. Blake" during the first few seconds, and Grant's confidence had been strengthened. The news that Miss Bevington and her mother were there, however, came as an unpleasant surprise, and he had failed to conceal his feelings. Their presence complicated matters. Once committed to the deception with Temple he couldn't back out. And it would be a fine disaster if one of the ladies had ever met the real Sexton Blake!

However, that ordeal had been passed through successfully, but not without Temple becoming suspicious and irritated. Grant had seen the result later, for Temple said nothing whatever about the secret letter—which had been the sole object of Grant's deception.

And now, having failed at the outset, the position bristled with difficulties. But Grant was not dismayed. He was hopeful of gaining his end sooner or later, and thought it decidedly probable that Temple would produce the letter on the morrow.

"We've got to use diplomacy now, Kennard," murmured Grant, during his conversation with his confederate at the ancient gate. "I shall make myself extremely pleasant, and get young Temple into a good humour. He was rather astonished at my 'deductions,' and, I believe, impressed. But he didn't mention anything about that letter, confound him!"

Those marvellous deductions were now revealed at their true worth. Considering that Grant himself had thrown the sack and had helped to ransack the library, it wasn't exactly surprising that he knew all about the affair! Temple, however, who believed the daring rascal to be Sexton Blake, had naturally felt impressed. And, although he in-

remark. The precious scoundrels had reckoned upon getting the sealed letter that night; and they also reckoned upon having to deal with nobody but Temple and the house-keeper and the maid-servant.

However, the fresh conditions were not altogether serious. With careful handling the scheme could still be carried out. As Kennard had said, Mitchell was with Sexton Blake at that moment. The famous detective, in fact, was guarded constantly, and he had no opportunity whatever of breaking away from captivity. Grant was keen enough to know that it would be madness to leave Sexton Blake alone.

Taking it altogether, it seemed as though Kennard and Grant would succeed in their plans. But then, of course, they weren't aware that other events were happening in London, even at that very moment, which would have far-reaching effects upon this forest drama.

Those events, I needn't add, were connected with myself and a lumbering lump of canine laziness which answered to the name of Pedro.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.  
Just Indignation—Nelson Lee Obliged—A Startling Discovery.

NIPPER grinned cheerfully.

"You're jealous!" he remarked. "That's what's the matter with you, Tinker, my son. What do you say, guv'nor?"

"I fear Tinker's wrath!" smiled Nelson Lee. "I wouldn't dare to state an opinion."

I grinned then.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I am a bit jealous," I confessed. "Who wouldn't be? Blazing weather like this, and I'm doomed to stew in London! I've grumbled at the guv'nor tons of times, but he's heartless; he doesn't consider my feelings in the least. And now I learn that you're going off to Dorset to-morrow. Isn't it enough to make anybody jealous?"

"I dare say you'll be popping off somewhere with Mr. Blake before long," said Nipper soothingly.

"Yes, that'll happen just when the weather turns cold and rainy," I remarked. "The guv'nor generally chooses beastly weather for a trip into the country—or, rather, his clients choose it for him. You'll pop round after you get back, won't you, Nipper?"

"You bet!" said Nipper promptly.

The truth was, I had been spending a few hours—nearly the whole day, in fact—with Nipper. This latter young gentleman, as everybody knows, is the assistant of Mr. Nelson Lee, the very clever detective, of Gray's Inn Road. He and the guv'nor were firm friends, although keen rivals. And Nipper and myself in all professional matters were in a state of constant warfare. Apart from detective work, however, Nipper and I were the best of pals.

As there had been nothing particular to do, I had run out to one of London's suburbs with Nipper on a little matter of business for Nelson Lee. And now we had arrived back at Gray's Inn Road, and I was on the point of buzzing to Baker Street.

I had left fairly early, in answer to a 'phone call from Nipper, and I was in happy ignorance of the fact that Sexton Blake had taken himself off to Hampstead.

I bade my friends good-bye, and then boarded a motor-bus for Baker Street. When I arrived I found the place silent and deserted and hot. The consulting-room was like an oven, from the effects of the afternoon sunshine. I crossed over to the laboratory, but that apartment was empty, too.

"Well, I thought the guv'nor would—" I began; and then I noticed a piece of paper upon the table. I picked it up, read it, stared, went red with wrath, and murmured sweet things under my breath.

Sexton Blake had gone into the country—without me!

"It's the limit!" I exclaimed indignantly, addressing the fireplace. "That's what it is—the giddy limit! Hampshire, too! And he expects me to stay in London until he comes back!"

The guv'nor's note was quite short and to the point. He told me, in a few words as possible, and in a scrawl which would have disgraced a newspaper editor, that he had decided to run down to Grangewood House, in



A reproduction of one of the many striking posters issued by the National War Savings Committee. The danger is that having put a certain amount of money into War Bonds or War Savings Certificates, people may think they have DONE their bit in that direction. The truth is, of course, that we've all got to KEEP ON putting in every penny we can spare. In War Bonds and War Savings Certificates the money is SAFE, and it is OUR OWN. It wouldn't be our own if the Germans won—and we can't afford to give them a chance of winning by holding back money that ought to be buying bombs or guns or Tanks or cartridges.

stinctively distrusted his visitor, he had no suspicions.

"Can't you ask the young idiot point blank for the letter?" asked Kennard impatiently.

"Don't be such a fool!" snapped Grant. "I'm supposed to know nothing about the letter, so how the thunder can I ask about it? All I can do is to wait until he drops a hint of some sort. As I said just now, I'm going to make myself very pleasant, and he'll probably show me the letter in the morning."

"And what then?"

"I'll wait till I get it," replied Grant.

"But we must fix on a plan—"

"Well, I can easily ask him to excuse me while I go for a bit of a walk, and then I'll meet you again. We'll come to some fresh arrangement then. There's only Temple and four women against us, and we can lock 'em all up in one of the upper rooms. The three of us ought to do the trick easily."

"It's risky—"

"Nonsense!" interjected Grant. "Where does the risk come in? This house is miles from anywhere, and we shall be able to do just as we like. Besides, if it comes to that, isn't it worth a bit of risk? Once we've got that letter, and once the whole crowd are locked up, we can follow the old man's directions, and get hold of the board. My dear chap, we can be cleared out of the county before the police know anything about it. We've got a car handy, and the treasure won't be so bulky that a decent motor-car won't carry it."

Kennard became more confident.

"Well, I hope the thing pans out all right," he said. "Mitchell is with Blake now, and he can't possibly get free. But unless you can get hold of that letter to-morrow the game will become too hot."

Grant was quite ready to agree with that



"Your fault, Kennard!" Grant said savagely, and stopped suddenly. For framed in the doorway was Sexton Blake, the man whom they had left bound helpless! (See page 14.)

Hampshire, in order to look into a little affair there. I was to cool my heels at home, and take care that Pedro didn't get too fat.

For about three minutes I raved up and down the consulting-room with wild thoughts chasing through my brain. I dwelt particularly upon boiling oil, and other cheerful methods of slaughter.

Then I realised that the guv'nor couldn't very well have communicated with me, because he didn't know where I was. But that didn't make much difference. He ought to have left me full instructions to go down by the next train. But he was too heartless to think of that.

I made a dive for the time-table, and discovered that there wasn't another train that day. I added quite a new selection of words to my vocabulary, and used them twice over. In the midst of all this worry Pedro stalked in, having evidently been admitted from the rear quarters by Mrs. Bardell.

"Yes, you can look hot!" I growled, glaring at Pedro. "Serves you jolly well right! Why couldn't you come and fetch me?"

This was a most unreasonable suggestion, but Pedro took it all in good part, and wagged his tail with what little energy he had left. His tongue was lolling out about four inches, and he was dribbling in the most disgraceful manner upon the carpet.

"I'll tell you what, Pedro, we're not going to stand it!" I said grimly. "The guv'nor's booked for a week, as likely as not, and I don't see why we shouldn't have a hand in the game. What do you say?"

Not being blessed with speech, Pedro said nothing. Indeed, he evinced the most impolite unconcern, for he strolled over to the one spot in the consulting-room where there was a patch of bare linoleum, flopped himself down upon it, and regarded me calmly.

I searched about, looking for a telegram, and eventually discovered Mr. Leonard Temple's letter. This made me all the more determined to follow the guv'nor down to Grangewood. He would probably call me all sorts of names, but I should survive the U. J.—No. 771.

ordeal. And Temple certainly wouldn't have the heart to give me the order of the boot.

"We're going down by the first train to-morrow, Pedro," I said firmly. "We're going—"

And then I paused, struck by a sudden thought.

"Why didn't I learn geography?" I went on. "Where's Hampshire? Grangewood House isn't far from the Dorset border, I'll bet a quid. Pedro, my son, we'll go one better than the train, after all—and one better than the guv'nor, too!"

I pulled the telephone towards me, and gave Nelson Lee's number. In less than a minute Nipper's cheery voice came along the wire.

"I say, Nipper, I want your guv'nor to do me a favour," I said eagerly.

"It's done," said Nipper. "But what is it?"

"You're motoring to Dorset to-morrow, aren't you?"

"Yes, unless there's an earthquake during the night."

"Have you got room for two little 'uns in that car of yours?" I went on. "Pedro and I want a lift down to Hampshire. It's awful cheek on my part, I know, but your guv'nor's a kind-hearted man, isn't he? Let's hear the verdict, my son."

There was a short silence.

"Hallo!" called Nipper, at length. "Yes, of course you can come, Tinker. Jolly pleased to have you, in fact. What's the trouble? Somebody dying, or what?"

I explained briefly, and when I hung the receiver up I did so with a cheerful grin. Of course, I was disobeying Sexton Blake's orders, but I had often committed that fearful crime, and I'm still alive. But I've never disobeyed the guv'nor in any but unimportant things.

The next point to decide was whether I should send a wire to the guv'nor or not. It took me about five seconds to decide that matter. I should not send a wire; because, if I did, he might reply, telling me to stay in London. And I couldn't go against his orders after that.

I slept quite comfortably that night, and was much cheered in the morning when I awoke to see the sunlight streaming in brilliantly at the window. Motoring in dull and rainy weather isn't at all nice.

Later on, just when I was all ready, a motor-car pulled up outside, and I found Nelson Lee and Nipper, smiling and cheerful, waiting for me. I didn't know what their business was in Dorset—it wasn't anything to do with me, anyhow—but I reckoned they were bent upon having a few days' holiday. I partially deduced this fact from the amount of luggage on the car, to say nothing of a selection of golf-clubs, fishing tackle, and other unbusinesslike articles.

The car was a big, touring automobile, with heaps of room in it, and Pedro and I stowed ourselves away without any difficulty. The run out of London was moderate, but after that we put on speed.

"It's jolly good of you, Mr. Lee," I remarked presently. "I don't want you to take me all the way to Grangewood, of course."

"You'd naturally prefer to walk five or six miles, eh?" asked Nelson Lee, with twinkling eyes.

"Well, no, not exactly."

"Then say no more about it, young 'un," remarked Lee. "It won't take us far out of our way, in any case, and we're in no particular hurry. I shall like to have a word with Blake, too."

After that, naturally, I said no more. Things couldn't have been better. If I had gone by train it would have been necessary to walk five or six miles, or hire a trap of some sort. It was far better to go in Nelson Lee's motor-car. I grinned as I thought of the surprise I should give the guv'nor.

Well, there's no need for me to go into details of that trip—mainly because there are no details. At least, none until we were almost at the end of our journey.

It was growing dusk by the time we found ourselves speeding along the tiny lane which led through the forest to Grangewood. It's rather curious, too, that something should go wrong just when I was congratulating Nelson Lee upon the wonderful reliability of his car.

Something did go wrong, and it was when we were only about two miles from Grangewood House. The petrol-tank, in fact, had sprung a leak. But we didn't know anything about it until the engine began coughing, and then struck work altogether.

Nelson Lee got down, and located the trouble within a minute.

"What an infernal nuisance!" he exclaimed testily. "We're stuck now, Nipper, and it's your fault!"

"My fault!" roared Nipper.

"Certainly."

"Well, I like that!" snorted Nipper indignantly. "How the dickens do you make out that it's my fault, guv'nor?"

"Well, only about fifty miles back you urged me to replenish the petrol-tank," replied Lee. "I told you that it wasn't necessary, but you persisted. Result, our spare four gallons now lies upon the road in a continuous stream for many miles back."

Nelson Lee was quite right. There had been two full cans strapped to the footboard until recently, but Nipper had emptied them into the tank. The petrol wasn't there now, and we were absolutely stuck. Somehow, I felt that I was to blame.

"I'm awfully sorry, sir," I remarked concernedly. "If you hadn't had to come along this wilderness of a road because of me, you would have been within easy reach of a garage—"

"My dear Tinker, please don't apologise in that way," interrupted Nelson Lee. "It is simply one of the misfortunes of motoring, and we mustn't grumble. Do you know if there is a car at Grangewood?"

"I haven't any idea, sir."

"Well, the probabilities are that there is one," said Nelson Lee. "A country house in this deserted locality is almost certain to have a motor-car. And where there is a motor-car there is generally petrol. You had better run on ahead, Nipper, and bring help as quick as possible. We don't want to be stuck here all night."

"Oh, I'll go, sir," I said readily. "Dash it all, you came out of your way because of me, and it's only right that I should have this job. I'll run like the dickens, and be back with help within an hour."

And so it was decided. I yanked Pedro out of the car, and we were soon hurrying along the dark, gloomy forest road. Nelson Lee and Nipper remained with their car, idle until help could arrive.

I didn't exactly run all the way, but I

happened. The misfortune had mainly occurred because of me, and I felt partly responsible. So the sooner I sent help, the better. It seemed a long two miles, and I hadn't passed a house of a living soul.

It was dark as pitch now under the trees, and when I reckoned that Grangewood House was only a short distance ahead, Pedro gave me some little annoyance. He suddenly left the road, and sniffed in the long grass amongst the trees. One glance at him told me that he had smelt something which interested him. He took no notice of my mild orders, and I was obliged to become sharp.

"Come here, you old idiot!" I snapped curtly.

He paused with reluctance, and, at a second command, even sharper, he came to my side. But he cast long glances into the wood, and sniffed the ground eagerly. It was almost necessary to drag him away, but he came at last. And even then he was uneasy and excited.

"Just like you to go and cause a delay when we're in such a hurry!" I snapped, never realising that Pedro possessed more sense than I. "You old fathead, what's the matter with you?"

A minute later I caught sight of a light through the trees ahead. The road took a bend, and I found myself facing a somewhat extensive clearing. In the centre of it, almost surrounded by its own trees, stood Grangewood House. Several windows were gleaming brightly, and I felt that I had reached civilisation again.

I ran that last bit, and presently arrived at an old gateway. I told Pedro to stay where he was, for Mr. Temple would probably object to a bloodhound butting in without warning. Quite a number of people

seem to imagine that bloodhounds are fierce brutes.

I pushed the gate open, and then observed a cheerful light streaming from the open French window of a room within easy reach of me. And a glimpse of well-lined bookshelves was pretty evident proof that the apartment was a library.

"The guv'nor's there, I'll bet a quid!" I told myself, with a chuckle. "I may as well give him a proper surprise, now I'm about it. He'll nearly have a fit when he sees me at the window."

So, instead of going to the front door, like any decently respectable visitor should, I marched across the rough grass towards the French windows. It was a liberty, of course, but that didn't worry me at all. I'm not a formal sort of chap, anyhow.

I could hear voices within the room as I approached, and I grinned. Several bushes grew almost in front of the windows, and it would be necessary to break through these before entering the room. I was rather surprised at the state of the gardens, for they were in a shocking condition, having obviously been allowed to go to rack and ruin for years past.

My surmise proved to be correct, for before I reached the window I distinctly heard the voice of a stranger—Mr. Temple, I presumed.

"Well, Mr. Blake," he was saying, "I can't explain more than I have done. It's curious that these men should have left me alone since your arrival; but perhaps it is because of your presence. You see, Mr. Blake—"

"Quite so—quite so!" interrupted another voice.

At every second I was on the point of bursting through the bushes and entering the room. But I paused, filled with wonder. The second voice was certainly not Sexton Blake's,

although its owner had obviously answered to the name.

I wasn't suspicious, but my curiosity was aroused. I stood stock-still, listening.

"Understand my methods," the strange voice was saying. "Indeed, without boasting, I think I may say that very few people do understand them; Mr. Temple. My methods are unique. I have had extremely highly-placed clients visit me at Baker Street, and they have never had cause to do anything but honour the name of Sexton Blake."

I simply gasped. Not so much because of the strangeness of the voice, but because of the rank conceit of the words. The guv'nor might have disguised his voice, for some reason of his own, but he would never have uttered that piece of flamboyance.

I was very suspicious now, and my whole attitude changed. I became tense and alert, and tiptoed forward until I reached the bushes. Parting two or three branches, I was enabled to see right into the library. And there, seated in two easy-chairs, were two strangers. One was youngish—obviously Mr. Leonard Temple. His companion was tall, lean, and clean-shaven. But he wasn't Sexton Blake. He wasn't even the guv'nor in disguise, for his ears were much bigger than Blake's, and that was a positive characteristic.

"Yes, Mr. Temple," he went on. "I want you to be quite frank with me in this case, and then we shall understand one another better. I cannot understand your secrecy in the least."

I scarcely listened to any more of the conversation. Only one fact dimmed through my head. This man, passing himself off as Sexton Blake, was no more the genuine article than a dustman was. And yet Mr. Leonard Temple was totally unaware of the fact.

He fully believed that he was talking with Sexton Blake in person.



A large piece of sacking whizzed through the air, and extinguished the lamp without overturning it. But before the room was plunged into darkness Temple had just time to see two forms spring towards him. (See page 5.)

**THE FIFTH CHAPTER.**

**Pedro Takes the Trail—Disaster—Grant's Decision.**

SOMETHING was radically wrong.

That fact was absolutely obvious, and I found myself quivering with suppressed excitement and anxiety.

I forgot all about Nelson Lee and Nipper, left upon the road two miles away. I could only wonder what had happened to Sexton Blake.

Who was this impostor? What was he doing in the guv'nor's shoes? What could be the explanation of this extraordinary state of affairs? For the time being I was almost robbed of clear thought.

I realised one thing very forcibly, however. It was a piece of pure, blundering luck which had led me to make the discovery. I was amazed at the trick which Fate had played. All unwittingly, and without the slightest suspicion, I had crept up to the window. And by so doing I had become aware of this deception without the trickster knowing anything of my presence. He still believed himself to be perfectly safe.

Surely Providence had taken a hand in the game. I could hardly bring myself to believe that it was really nothing more than luck. And yet it was foolish of me to waste time upon such thoughts.

The thing had happened.

And it was up to me to get busy in some way or other. Perhaps it was another stroke of Providence that Nelson Lee and Nipper were close handy. They were very business-like people to have on the spot.

I listened for some few minutes longer, and any doubts I may have had were soon settled. Temple positively believed that he was speaking to Sexton Blake; and, what was more, I could see that he didn't display much cordiality. A great indignation swelled up within me. The awful cheek of it! Some low bounder passing himself off as the guv'nor, and giving these good people an utterly false impression of one of the finest gentlemen on earth.

My natural instincts all told me to burst into the room and denounce the rotter—to expose him in his true colours. But the voice of precaution made itself heard, and I listened to it.

I suddenly remembered that strange behaviour of Pedro's a short distance along the road. What trail had he picked up? Great Scott! Could it be possible that the guv'nor himself had been waylaid, and that he had been dragged through the woods?

It must be borne in mind that I knew none of the facts at that period, although I have described exactly what happened in an earlier part of this narrative. It's hardly necessary for me to explain that I gathered all the facts afterwards, when the case was completed; and I have set the events down in their proper sequence.

But at this juncture I knew practically nothing. Of course, I guessed the real truth. But I didn't know it at the time, and was bent upon making sure. Somebody had got hold of the guv'nor, and was keeping him a prisoner. That's what I deduced. I realised that this lonely forest road was splendidly suited to such a sinister purpose, and vague feelings of alarm filled me.

I crept away from the window, retraced my steps, and found good old Pedro faithfully waiting at the gate as I had instructed him. When Pedro has been given his orders, he won't budge for anything, or anybody, until he gets the word.

"Good old boy!" I whispered. "There's work, Pedro—work!"

He was alert in a moment, knowing the meaning of the word as well as I did. I fished a coil of strong cord out of my pocket and secured it to the ring in his collar. Then we hastened back. I meant to put him upon that trail, and see where it led to.

If it had been anybody else's trail Pedro couldn't have done the trick. But he knew his master's scent as well as a rabbit knows its own burrow. And although the scent was twenty-four hours old, it had been absolutely undisturbed, and Pedro was as keen as mustard.

We got back to the spot, and I gave Pedro his head. He was soon off amongst the trees, tugging hard at the improvised leash. And so we plunged into the heart of the forest—into utter blackness. I must again confess that I had completely forgotten the unfortunate Nipper and his good-natured guv'nor.

That glance into the library at Grangewood U. J.—No. 771.

House had altered everything. My trip was justified now with a vengeance. Without meaning to, I had stumbled upon a very pretty little plot.

The only thing which worried me was the uncertainty regarding Sexton Blake. But Pedro was doing his utmost to make matters clearer. If I could only find the guv'nor at once it would be a glorious stroke.

And, just as I was thinking that, disaster came.

Disaster generally occurs suddenly and without warning. This instance was no exception to the rule. Pedro paused whilst passing between two clumps of undergrowth. Very naturally I pressed on, meaning to lead the way for a few yards.

My right foot simply went into space. Just for a second I thought that I had merely stepped into a slight hollow in the ground. But then I went down, crashing through the bushes, and blundered headlong down a steep gully. In daylight I could have negotiated it with ease; but such a thing is scarcely possible in pitch darkness—especially when you commence the trip head first.

I rolled over and over, bruised, shaken, and dazed. And when I came to rest at last I was completely winded, scratched, and torn, and my left knee was giving me the most excruciating agony.

Pedro, who did not suffer from the disadvantage of tumbling down in an inverted position, was beside me almost at once. He licked my cheek to show his sympathy and anxiety.

"Oh, my hat!" I gasped. "Where the dickens are we?"

It took me some few moments to realise what had occurred. And then I guessed at the probable truth. Sexton Blake's captors must have lost their bearings and had nearly tumbled down the gully themselves. Either that, or they had taken him down. But I hardly thought this was the case, for Pedro showed no sign of sticking to the trail now.

My knee was still causing me agony, and when I tried to move it I simply yelled. It was strained severely, and I knew that walking, on my part, was reduced to a farce.

I could have cried aloud with helplessness and disappointment. After all I had hoped to accomplish I had ended up with this! Oh, it was too utterly rotten for words!

And then at that critical moment I thought of Nelson Lee. But what could Lee do? He wouldn't know what had happened, and would be waiting upon the roadside, mentally execrating me for being such a confoundedly long time. No, Nelson Lee and Nipper could do no good.

Pedro licked my face again.

"All right, old boy!" I said softly. "I'm crooked for the time being. Oh, goodness! My knee is tied into knots, I believe! Where's the trail, Pedro? Find it, boy—"

I paused, as the old dog gave a low whimper of eagerness. Another thought had come to me. If Pedro picked up the scent again, he would probably go straight to Sexton Blake.

I made one more attempt to get to my feet; but it was impossible. The effect caused me agony, and I sank back with a sigh of resignation. I took out my notebook and pencil, and fumbled with the pages.

Then I wrote down:

"Have fallen into gully. Sprained my knee. Can't move. Pedro will lead you to me.—Tinker."

I folded the paper up, and tucked it securely into the buckle of Pedro's collar. My idea was that Pedro would rout out the guv'nor, and that help would soon arrive. I didn't want to lay in that gully all through the night.

There wasn't any fear of my note falling into anybody else's hands—an enemy's hands. I mean, Pedro would see to that. And if Sexton Blake was bound up somewhere, a prisoner, Pedro would make himself mighty useful.

"Off you go, old boy!" I said urgently. "Find the trail, Pedro! Find your master! Go on, old fellow!"

Pedro understood my tone. He ran round me about three times, very excited, slopped his tongue on my face by way of good-bye, and then scampered up the valley with more noise than speed.

Pedro was no ordinary bloodhound, and, although I had given him a stiff job, I had an idea that he would make good. At any rate, he was of far more use attempting to bring help than he would have been with me. For I could do nothing in this dark, deserted

I attempted to find out the nature of my position, but this was almost impossible, owing to the darkness. Trees grew round very thickly, and the place was as still as a desert. Not a breath of wind stirred any of the leaves.

I felt my knee very carefully, and came to the conclusion that the damage was not very severe. With luck, I should be able to walk again after a day or two's rest. But the very thought of climbing up the side of this gully made me shiver. It caused me agony to move my knee-joint an inch. I could do nothing but wait—and worry.

I pondered over the situation, and felt rather bitter. It had seemed as though luck was with me half an hour ago; but now things were very different. Where was the guv'nor? What had happened to him? That was the question which was concerning me most.

Nelson Lee and Nipper were all right, of course. But I realised that they wouldn't wait much longer than an hour. They would walk to Grangewood in order to find out what the delay was about, and that would probably spoil the guv'nor's plans completely. For I did not overlook the possibility that Sexton Blake might easily be playing a deep game on his own. Perhaps he wasn't a prisoner; perhaps he had some reason for remaining in the background. Anyhow, Pedro would find him if he was to be found. And I half expected to hear the guv'nor's footsteps approaching.

I was rather curious, but just at that moment I did hear something. I listened intently, and then came the unmistakable sounds of footfalls amongst the deadening leaves. Pedro had been quick.

"This way, guv'nor!" I shouted impulsively. I realised, even as I called out, that I was a blithering idiot to do so. How was I to know that it was Sexton Blake? I'm not perfect, and I make blunders at times. And I had been most incautious on this occasion. I received my punishment!

The footsteps came nearer, and then there was the sound of bushes being pushed aside. "Who's there?" came a sharp, nervous voice.

I clenched my teeth, and said nothing. It wasn't the guv'nor! I had blundered badly, and it was now up to me to keep as quiet as a mouse. There was little chance of my being spotted in such darkness.

But my precautions were useless. A brilliant beam of light appeared, and it searched down into the gully. I knew at once that the stranger was using an electric torch. And it was only a matter of seconds before he located me.

But for my knee I could have avoided the light easily. But, as it was, I was compelled to remain exposed, although I crouched down, and vainly attempted to conceal myself in amongst a few scant bushes.

"Who's that down there?" came the nervous voice again.

I made no reply, and didn't move a finger. But it was useless. The man scrambled down the steep descent, and stood over me. Further pretence was useless, so I looked up. During that first moment the light was not fully in my eyes, and I was permitted to catch a glimpse of the stranger.

He was a powerful man, clean shaven, and with somewhat puffy cheeks. I didn't know it at the time, but the fellow was Mr. Frederick Kennard.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded gruffly, and with suspicion in his voice. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"One question at a time's enough, isn't it?" I remarked. "I happened to slip down, and I should like a hand up, if you don't mind. My left knee is a bit squiffy—twisted it, or something."

For all I knew the man was a mere harmless inhabitant of the district. I had no actual reason to suspect him of being connected with the Grangewood House affair—although, as a matter of fact, I did suspect him. And, what was more, he suspected me.

"What's your name?" he demanded. "Haven't I seen you before?"

"There are plenty of good-looking chaps about," I remarked calmly.

"I don't want any impudence!" snapped the man. "I could swear I've seen you somewhere—"

He paused abruptly, and then bent closer to me. "I know now!" he went on, a note of alarm sounding in his voice. "By thunder! I know you!"

"Seems to have given you a shock," I observed. "But you're wrong, aren't you? At any rate, I don't know you—"

"You're Tinker!" snapped out Kennard

hoarsely. "You're Sexton Blake's infernal young assistant!"

"Thanks for the compliment!" I said, maintaining my appearance of calmness, although I was feeling somewhat alarmed.

Under ordinary circumstances I should have enjoyed this encounter; but now I was practically helpless. All the odds were against me.

"Yes, you're Tinker," went on Kennard, as though he were imparting a piece of startling news. "I remember seeing your photograph in one of the illustrated weeklies."

"That's the worst of taking notice of flattering reporters," I sighed. "If that photograph of my dial hadn't been put in you wouldn't have known me from Adam. But what's the trouble? There's no harm in my being Tinker, I suppose?"

Kennard scowled at me. "This has altered everything!" he muttered, as though speaking to himself. "Is there anybody else with you?" he added roughly.

"Oh, a hundred or two!" I replied sarcastically. "Can't you see 'em? You might lend me a hand, instead of—"

"I'll soon settle you, my boy!" snapped Kennard.

He took a length of cord from his pocket, and proceeded to bind my ankles, with painful, and quite unnecessary, tightness. I resisted at first, but I soon found that the game wasn't worth the candle. Kennard had the best position all round.

My wrists were treated in the same way, and, although I appeared to be quite calm and indifferent, I was inwardly boiling. What a fine mess I had made of the whole business!

And, if it came to that, the guv'nor—to judge from appearances—hadn't done much better. But I didn't forget that good old Pedro was prowling about somewhere, and Nelson Lee and Nipper were within easy distance. So, upon the whole, I didn't worry.

"You'll stay here, hang you!" panted Kennard, when he had finished his binding operations.

"Well, I don't think I shall move far," I remarked. "Quite apart from all this string, my knee's pretty well useless, and I couldn't have shifted much. I hate to see people wasting energy."

Kennard didn't say another word. He picked up his electric-torch, and scrambled up the side of the gully and disappeared amongst the trees. The fact that I was bound and helpless annoyed me, but I wasn't at all alarmed.

I just waited for the next thing to happen. This unexpected visit of mine was leading to the most surprising results. My only real worry was concerning Sexton Blake. What had happened to him? Would Pedro find him?

Even whilst I was lying there helpless the guv'nor was becoming extremely active. And so, for that matter, was Leonard Temple. And Pedro, and Nelson Lee and Nipper—Well, as a matter of fact, all sorts of things were happening at the same time.

It is quite impossible for me to describe everything at once, and so I shall have to take the events one by one, and relate them in a manner which will lead to a general climax.

I may not describe what Nelson Lee was doing until quite a long time; but that won't mean that Lee was idle, or that half the night was passing. It wasn't. Comparatively little time elapsed, but a regular series of adventures was being passed through by various people.

Regarding myself, I pondered over the whole situation—as I knew it at that time—and decided that conjectures were worse than useless. The only thing was to wait.

As it happened, I didn't wait long.

After barely ten minutes had passed voices sounded, and then Kennard reappeared, and he was accompanied by the man I had seen in the library of Grangewood House.

"You must be mistaken, Kennard!" he was saying sharply. "The fellow can't be Tinker. If Tinker had declined to come down I should have received a letter or a telegram—intended for Blake, of course. This chap must have been kidding you."

"I recognised him, Grant—I recognised him!" protested Kennard. "You will see for yourself in a moment or two. It was lucky I met you. By the way, won't Temple wonder if you are absent for long?"

"He thinks I am in my bed-room," replied Grant. "I told him that I wished to retire early."

"How did you get out, then?"

"By the window," said the other. "There's

a low roof just beneath it, and I was outside within a couple of minutes. The door's locked, so the fools will think I'm still in the room. I'd like to wring that Temple's neck! The young idiot won't say a word about that letter—not a word!"

The impostor spoke with a savage vehemence, which gave me much pleasure. The plotters, apparently, were not having things their own way. This was all to the good, for defeat would probably come before they succeeded in their designs.

"By thunder! You're right, Kennard!" muttered Grant, after he had flashed his torchlight into my face. "This fellow is Tinker! Confound you, boy!" he snapped harshly.

"What have I done?" I asked, looking innocent.

"You've done nothing, fortunately!" snarled Grant. "And, by George, you won't do anything, either! You'll be kept a helpless prisoner, like your precious master!"

Those words gave me relief.

Sexton Blake wasn't hurt; he was merely being kept a prisoner, as I had originally surmised. This little plot was quite entertaining, for I felt positive that it would pan out in our favour.

"Why did you come down here?" demanded Grant furiously.

"Well, I meant to give the guv'nor a surprise; and I got one myself," I replied, with perfect veracity. "I don't know what your game is, but it strikes me that you fellows are highly efficient candidates for a choice lunatic asylum!"

"It's all right, Kennard!" said Grant, with relief. "There's been no harm done, as it happens. It's a good thing Tinker came down alone. We can go straight ahead with our plans."

I nearly grinned. My apparent frankness had had the desired effect. The rascals believed that I had come down alone, and they would not trouble to do any scouting.

"We've got no plans!" growled Kennard sourly.

"Yes, we have!" was Grant's reply. "I've decided to act to-night—immediately, in fact. This game is getting too hot for me, and there's only one thing to be done."

"And what's that?"

"We'll use force—the three of us!" said Grant grimly. "It's our only chance, man! Temple's determined to keep the secret, and I can't mention the subject while I'm pretending to be Blake. Drastic measures are necessary, and we'll take 'em!"

"Where's Mitchell?"

"With Blake," said the other. "We'll fetch him at once."

"It won't be safe to leave Blake alone—"

"There's nothing else for it," interrupted Grant curtly. "But we shall tie him up securely, so you needn't worry. We've got to get that sealed letter to-night, Kennard, and the treasure as well!"

I was more interested than ever. So that was the game—treasure! Grant and Kennard were highly optimistic, but they didn't know that Fate, in various ways, was working it's hardest against them.

## THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

The Secret of the Cipher—Temple is Captured—A Frost.

LEONARD TEMPLE tossed a cigarette-into the empty grate, with an impatient movement.

"You're angry, Leonard," said Miss Bevington softly.

He turned to her with a quick smile.

"Not with you, little girl," he said, shaking his head. "I'm angry with myself. I was an idiot to send that letter to Blake! Thank goodness he's gone off to bed! I can let off steam now."

"Is it quite right to talk like this behind his back?" asked Dora Bevington, with slight concern in her pretty eyes.

Temple shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't help it," he said. "I'll tell Blake the same things to his face, probably. I don't trust him. I detest the fellow!"

"I can't understand it," said Dora. "Oh, it is so strange! I always pictured Mr. Sexton Blake as a gentleman to his finger-tips. But he isn't, Leonard. And I don't trust him, either."

Temple nodded gloomily. He and his fiancée were seated in the old library, and the big table-lamp was sending a soft glow over the sombre apartment. One or two

moths were fluttering round the lamp, for the French windows were wide open, although the curtains were partially drawn.

Supper had been finished for some little time—there was no formality at Grangewood House—and "Sexton Blake" had gone up to his bed-room almost at once. Temple wasn't aware that the impostor had already stolen off the premises.

Mrs. Bevington had thoughtfully remained in the drawing-room, deeply interested in a novel, and the two young people were alone in the library. Temple was worried and irritable. He didn't know what to do about his unwelcome visitor.

Dora decided to change the subject. "Don't worry, Leonard dear!" she said softly. "Perhaps Mr. Blake isn't so bad as you think. Shall we try to puzzle out that queer cipher thing? We might be able to find out what it means."

Temple smiled.

"There's no harm in trying," he replied. "But I'm afraid we can't make anything of it, Dora. I stayed down here for two solid hours last night, after everybody else had gone to bed, but I couldn't make head or tail of it. Granddad has set me a puzzle, and no mistake!"

"Oh, but two heads are better than one!" laughed Dora. "We've just got a nice half-hour now, dear. Wouldn't it be simply splendid if we could find out what all those figures mean?"

Temple withdrew the letter from his pocket-book and placed it upon the desk. Dora came forward and leaned over his shoulder. For some few moments the conversation did not run upon cryptograms or ciphers at all; the subject was quite different.

"We shall never get on at this rate, you old silly!" laughed the girl at last. "I shall have to sit on the other side of the table, Len—"

"No, you don't!" interrupted Temple, seizing her arm. "Now, then, we'll get to business. I feel in a better humour now. 'The Mystic Cipher.' That's clear enough, isn't it? But what's the good of telling us that without giving any clue to the key?"

"Perhaps the clue is hidden somewhere?"

"I've searched everywhere—"

"No; I mean amongst all those figures," interrupted the girl. "It begins with '22,' doesn't it? Then there's a dash before the next figure, but only commas afterwards for quite a long while, and then there's another dash. What can it mean, dear?"

"That's what I want to know," said Temple. "Those dashes are put there for something, of course—some reason we've got to fathom. But there's no key; not a sign of one."

They looked at the figures intently. Not that this served any purpose. It was all very well for the old man to call those figures a "mystic cipher," but it was one of those ciphers which are impossible of solution without a definite starting-point. But here was no starting-point at all.

For five or ten minutes they continued puzzling, and Dora was the first to speak.

"Have you searched through any of the books?" she asked suddenly. "Perhaps your grandfather left another message?"

"It would take weeks to look through all these books," said Temple. "He left a slip of paper on the desk, giving a selection of choice books to read. There it is, over there. Either he made it for his own use or for mine."

Dora picked up the slip of paper and read it interestedly.

"Have you glanced through all these books?" she asked.

"Every one of them!" replied Temple. "I thought, perhaps, that my grandfather had left that list as a sort of hint. But there was nothing doing. I'm hanged if I know how to start!"

"Oh, let me look through these books, Leonard!"

Temple smiled.

"You can look through them if it'll give you any satisfaction," he replied. "I'll just fetch them down if you'll read out the titles."

"No; you sit there and work," said Dora. "I love taking the books off the shelves myself. It's awfully interesting."

While Temple continued to ponder over the cipher Dora took the list of books, and walked lightly over to the massive, deep shelves. Apparently she judged by the appearance of the covers more than anything else, for she turned up her pretty nose at the first two on the list, and sought out the third. Temple was not looking, but was in the act of lighting a fresh cigarette.

"Oh!" cried the girl suddenly. "Look at this!"

Temple turned round in his chair. "You nearly frightened me out of my wits!" he exclaimed. "What's the matter? Have you found a spider, or something?"

"Don't be so silly!" protested Dora. "There's a book here which isn't on the list at all—a novel, I believe!"

"Just like you!" grinned Temple. "Thinking about novels when there's serious work to be done!"

"Oh, but the title of it is so striking!"

exclaimed the girl, pulling the volume out and laying it down upon the desk. "I'm quite sure it is a clue of some sort!"

"Oh, come!" laughed Temple amusedly. But the next moment his smile vanished, and an expression of intense interest entered his eyes, for the novel which Dora had placed upon the table was certainly of exceptional interest and significance. For this is what Temple saw upon the front cover:

**"THE MYSTIC CIPHER."**

A Romance.

By Merrick Carey."

It was the title which attracted the attention of both man and girl. The author's name was of little moment. Temple had seen books of his before, for he was a fairly popular novelist, generally writing stories of the mysterious variety.

"The Mystic Cipher!" exclaimed Temple, taking a deep breath. "It's the key, Dora! I'll wager a fiver that the key to this cipher is contained in this volume!"

"How splendid!"

"The cuteness of the old bonnder!" exclaimed Temple admiringly, and without any intention of disrespect. "That's why he wrote that list of books—so that I should go to that particular shelf and spot it!"

"But you didn't!" exclaimed Dora severely. "No; but I gave all my attention to the other books," replied Temple. "You, being a girl, allowed your attention to wander. Now, let's have a look inside it!"

"They turned the pages over, but there was nothing slipped between any of the leaves, and the cipher which gave the novel its title was of a totally different character to that left by the old man. So the clue was not there."

"Do you think that the book itself is the key?" asked the girl shrewdly. "Oh, I've got it! Those first figures—'22'—must name the page, and all the following figures mean words on the page, counting from the top! And the next page is 36, and so on until the finish."

Temple rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "We'll try it, anyhow," he said, with caution. "Help me to count."

He turned to page 22, and the fifth word on the page, according to the cipher, was "lad," the seventeenth word was "you," the sixty-third word proved to be "to," and the eleventh was "luck." At this point Temple shook his head slowly.

"No, there's no sense in that," he said. "Lad you to luck." That doesn't read sense, does it, little girl? We shall have to try something else."

"Well, and what do you think you're doing?" came an inquiry from the doorway. "It's time you came up to bed, Dora!"

Mrs. Bevington entered the room smilingly, and Dora and Temple explained what was on the board.

"My dear Dora, you can't sit up all night trying to puzzle out that jumble!" exclaimed Mrs. Bevington firmly. "I suppose you'll stop down here for some little time, Leonard?"

"I'll spend an hour at it, at least," replied Temple. "Perhaps you'll have a surprise in the morning, Dora."

Mrs. Bevington bade him good-night, and retired. He was somewhat longer in saying good-night to Dora. Indeed, the next five minutes were fully occupied in that little ceremony.

The girl having gone, Temple lit a fresh cigarette, and settled himself down to work. He gazed at the words already upon the page, and puckered his brow.

"It's hardly possible to judge by these few," he told himself. "I'll go through the whole cipher, anyhow, and then see what I can make of the result. But it doesn't seem very hopeful at present."

He took the whole list of figures from beginning to end, continuing from the point where he had broken off. Having finished with page 22, he passed to page 36, and from that to 84. It was a somewhat tedious job, although he accomplished it fairly quickly. But he was certainly not impressed by the

C. J.—No. 771.

result. The jumble was far worse now than it had been before.

"Oh, it's perfectly hopeless," he murmured. "Yet there are certain words which look interesting. 'Riches,' for example, or 'concealed.' Hang it all, I believe there's something in it!"

He gazed at the words he had written, puckering his brow, and smoking his cigarette furiously. And although he vaguely suspected that he was on the right track, the deciphered message was certainly wrong somewhere. It did not read sensibly at all:

"Lad you to luck good yours are they below concealed are riches vast appear will opening hard push hook from hangs which spike iron long insert and out nail pull wall left from projecting nail rusty see will you descending cellar to go instructions these follow."

"It's wrong," murmured Temple. "I can't make sense of it any way. But there's more in it than meets the eye. By what I can judge, there are 'riches vast' concealed in the cellar. But what's that about 'spike iron long insert'? It's all backwards way, confound it!"

And then he gave a jump.

"Backwards!" he exclaimed tensely. "That's it! By Jove! What a cute dodge! The old boy wrote the message, then put it into cipher the wrong way up. Let's see how it reads, anyhow."

Three minutes later Temple's eyes were shining with excitement. He had solved the riddle. The message, rewritten backwards, read with perfect sense, although the punctuations were missing. Temple supplied them, and the message now ran:

"Follow these instructions. Go to cellar. Descending, you will see rusty nail projecting from left wall. Pull nail out and insert long iron spike which hangs from hook. Push hard. Opening will appear. Vast riches are concealed below. They are yours. Good luck to you, lad."

"Splendid!" muttered Temple, rising from his chair, and standing just near the table, gazing down upon the paper. "I'll go and make investigations at once, hanged if I don't! What a surprise for Dora in the morning. Vast riches, eh? So old Crosby wasn't wrong, after all!"

Temple was excited, and he knew it. Hadn't he good reason to be? Old Gowan Temple had left him Grangewood House and grounds, and everything they contained. And it now seemed that a considerable treasure was concealed in a secret chamber leading out of the cellar. Mr. Crosby's opinion that the old man had been a miser was apparently justified.

Temple was just about to pick up the message when he was rather startled by a sound at the window. His first thought was that his strange attackers were upon the scene again, and he could now fully understand their eagerness to obtain the message.

But the new-comer proved to be Mr. Henry Grant, although Temple fondly believed him to be Sexton Blake. The young man attempted to conceal his annoyance, but scarcely succeeded.

"Why, Mr. Blake, I thought you'd gone to bed!" he exclaimed. "I've just been amusing myself by doing a little writing," he added carelessly, picking up the sheets of paper and putting them into his pocket.

"The night was so still that I thought it a pity to go to bed," said Grant smilingly. "I hope I'm not interrupting? Seeing your light, I wondered if you would care for a little chat. Have one of these?"

He offered his cigarette-case, and Temple took one of the Virginias, and lit it. While he was in the act of doing so Grant stepped behind him. And the next second Temple received the surprise of his life.

"Sexton Blake" picked up a cushion from one of the chairs, clapped it over Temple's face, and pulled him backwards forcibly. The young man's confusion was increased by the fact that the sparks of the lighted cigarette scorched his cheeks severely.

"Lend a hand!" gasped Grant in a hissing whisper.

Two figures entered by the window—Kennard and Mitchell. They had been lurking there for some little time, and Grant had seized his chance at precisely the right moment.

Before Temple could struggle free—and he certainly would have done had there been nobody but Grant—he was held down firmly. Ropes were passed round him, and the

cushion was removed and a heavy muffler substituted. And during all this encounter no alarming noises of any sort were made. The servants and Mrs. Bevington and her daughter had not been disturbed.

"Phew! Warm work, but we've done the trick!" murmured Grant, with satisfaction. "What shall we do with him?" asked Kennard nervously.

"You know best, don't you?" said Grant, giving him a meaning glance.

Kennard, who had been butler at Grangewood House for several years, did know best, and he nodded.

"There's a cupboard in the hall," he said. "Bring him along."

"Rather startled, eh?" inquired Grant, looking down at the prisoner. "You see, Mr. Temple, we were obliged to act drastically. Oh, but you still believe that I'm Mr. Sex."

"Don't tell him anything!" interrupted Kennard sharply.

And so Grant said no more. But the words he had already uttered were sufficient to enlighten the astounded prisoner. All Temple's confusion vanished in a second. He knew the truth now. The man he had honoured as his guest was not Sexton Blake at all, but an enemy! The realisation of that fact brought a clearer understanding to his mind.

But it was too late now for him to take any action. The disaster was of the first magnitude. It wouldn't have mattered so much earlier in the evening, when the cipher was still unsolved. But now the scoundrels had stepped in at the very right moment; luck favoured them in the most astounding manner.

Grant removed the papers from Temple's pocket before the latter was removed from the room. And an oath escaped his lips when his eyes fell upon the cipher. He was startled.

"We're done!" he exclaimed savagely. "The message is in cipher, and we can't—Oh, but what's this? By George!"

His eyes gleamed as he unfolded the sheet of paper containing the solution. Kennard and Mitchell, impressed by his tone, looked over his shoulder.

"Don't you understand?" gloated Grant. "Our young friend has kindly deciphered the message for us, and here it is. Our destination is in the cellar, and the instructions are as simple as A B C."

"Vast riches!" muttered Kennard, with shining eyes. "I knew it! I told you the game was worth the candle. Grant. We shall find sacks of gold, I expect. I heard the old man mention millions dozens of times!"

The three precious rascals were in high glee, but they did not allow their satisfaction to interfere with their plans. It was a cunning scheme, for Temple had been captured and no alarm had been given. In all probability, the whole coup could be effected without disturbing the other members of the household. If the women interfered, however, they would be dealt with promptly. Those three men were strong, desperate, and grim. And they were firmly convinced that they had the whole forest to themselves.

Temple was carried out into the hall without ceremony, and bundled into a big cupboard. The door was strong, and the lock effective, and it was quite impossible for Temple to create any commotion.

"He'll be safe enough there," declared Grant. "We'll go down the cellar at once. Got those sacks? Good! You lead the way, Kennard!"

The ex-butler knew the house as well as he knew the palm of his own hand, and led the way down several passages until the servants' quarters were reached. Then he unlocked a stout door, and the three men descended some worn stone steps, and found themselves within a small cellar.

They were all supplied with electric torches, and Grant flashed his upon the left-hand wall. There, sure enough, was a large, rusty nail projecting. There was nothing in the appearance of the cellar to suggest that it was anything but what it seemed. And the left-hand wall was apparently of solid stone slabs, with no noticeable crevice.

Grant seized the rusty nail after glancing at the directions, and tugged at it. For a moment nothing happened, but then the nail came out in his hand. He glanced at the end curiously. It was bright, and showed traces of having been oiled.

"No trickery about this!" he exclaimed exultantly. "Now, where's the iron spike? It's hanging from a hook, according to these instructions."

"Here it is!" exclaimed Mitchell hoarsely. The whole thing was dead easy. The iron spike proved to be a long affair, and its circumference was exactly the same as the big nail. This, too, was oiled, and the end was flat and smooth.

"I don't see how it works," remarked Kennard.

"Why, there must be a secret catch, or a button," explained Grant. "But it isn't on the surface of the wall, like most of these secret buttons. The old man was cute. He put it a foot into the brickwork, and concealed the hole with that old rusty nail, which nobody would suspect."

The idea was, indeed, novel and decidedly clever. Old Mr. Gowan Temple must have spent a considerable time—years, perhaps—in planning and constructing his secret receptacle. And he had done it without the knowledge of another soul. In his young days he had been keen upon engineering, and this explained, perhaps, his thoroughness in the construction of this hidden chamber.

Grant slipped the end of the iron spike into the hole left by the nail, and it went right in almost to the hilt, and then struck something hard. Grant pushed, but nothing happened.

"It says 'push hard' in the directions," remarked Kennard, husky with excitement.

"That's what I am doing," grunted the other.

He pushed with all his strength. Suddenly the spike went clean in, and Grant was nearly flung upon his face, for a portion of the wall had swung back with astounding silence and rapidity. Grant only saved himself from pitching forward by clutching at the two walls which formed the doorway.

"By George!" he exclaimed. "Talk about cute! I could have sworn there was no door here. Follow me!"

He flashed his light down, and saw a number of rough-hewn steps and a low tunnel cut out of the solid ground. The three men descended, quivering with eagerness and excitement. From the start they had believed themselves to be on the right track, but the nearness of their complete triumph unsteadied them.

There were only a few steps, and the passage was no longer than six feet. And then a low, small chamber was entered. It wasn't bigger than eight feet square; although it is hardly possible to describe it as square, since it was nothing but a rude cavity cut in the solid ground, with jagged rock walls and a rough floor.

And there, upon the opposite wall, hung a placard of cardboard, with a faded ink message upon it. The three intruders stared at it with a kind of dazed fascination. For this is what they read:

"To my grandson. You are welcome to all the treasure here.—GOWAN TEMPLE."

And the place was bare—utterly bare! "The gold must be hidden behind these rocks!" panted Kennard hoarsely.

They searched frantically, and examined the place from its low roof to the uneven floor. But the rocks were solid, and any further secret receptacle was impossible. The three rogues paused at last, breathless and nearly mad with fury.

"It's a hoax!" snarled Grant. "By thunder! And we've risked our liberty for this! There's no gold here—there's nothing!"

Kennard and Mitchell had nothing to say. They were too dismayed and flabbergasted for speech. They could only realise that the deceased Mr. Gowan Temple had perpetrated a cruel practical joke. But it had missed fire. It was they, the would-be thieves, who had received the shock.

All their scheming had been for nothing.

## THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Sexton Blake at Liberty—The Silent House—Three to One!

**M**EANWHILE, Sexton Blake was getting busy.

As I mentioned before, all sorts of things were happening at once. And the gov'nor wasn't idle during this very vital hour. His opportunity had come, and he seized it.

The poor old gov'nor, of course, hadn't any idea as to what was going on. He didn't know that I was somewhere fairly close, or that Nelson Lee and Nipper were waiting upon the lonely road for help which was destined never to arrive.

And it mustn't be supposed that I have overlooked Pedro. This isn't the place to tell what happened to him, however, so I shan't say any more at present. "Everything in its right place" is my motto—or one of them.

Sexton Blake's position was not exactly gratifying.

He had come down here to help Mr. Leonard Temple, and, incidentally, to treat himself to a short holiday. He wasn't doing much to help Temple, and his holiday couldn't possibly be called a success.

The gov'nor hadn't been kept a prisoner for long, however. Let me make it clear that only a short amount of time had elapsed since Sexton Blake's arrival. He had scarcely been in the neighbourhood of Grangewood for thirty hours. The whole affair was rapid, and necessarily so. Kennard and his confederates knew that time was very valuable to them, and they couldn't afford to lose a minute.

Sexton Blake had been seized, and had been kept a prisoner in the old woodcutter's hut. Until this present climax he had not been bound very securely, for either Kennard or Mitchell had remained constantly on guard. But now Grant had called the pair of them in to help, and it had been necessary to leave Blake to himself.

He was, therefore, bound up with extra rope, and left within the hut to worry over his position. Grant & Co. were quite certain that their victim could not possibly escape. At least, they felt satisfied that the detective would be helpless until the morning.

They made a mistake.

Sexton Blake got busy the very instant he found himself alone. Although he knew nothing of the plot, he was fully aware of the fact that these men were not professional crooks. They were amateurs at the game, and as such they had been fairly easily deceived.

For the detective had adopted a little ruse of his own. Whilst he was being bound he had held himself as rigid as possible. Thus, although the ropes were very tight at the time, as soon as he relaxed his muscles they became comparatively loose—the ropes I mean.

He couldn't have worked that dodge on experienced old hands, for they would have spotted it at once. But in all probability this was the first time that Kennard and Grant had ever bound a man.

They did their work well, though. Sexton Blake wasn't able to give about three twists and then find himself free. Slightly loose as the ropes were, they needed very careful manipulation, and steady, untiring effort. The gov'nor had freed himself from bonds far more difficult than these, and his experience stood him in good stead.

Furthermore, he was furious, and irritated to such an extent that he made extra special efforts. It was ridiculous—preposterous! Not only that, but it was humiliating. To be held a prisoner in this fashion by a trio of rank amateurs!

Sexton Blake felt that his reputation was at stake, and he was doing his utmost to set things right in as short a space of time as possible. He hadn't even seen his client yet, and didn't know what the trouble was. He guessed, of course, that it was connected with these three scoundrels, but the position was altogether maddening.

But the gov'nor did not make the mistake of blaming himself for what had occurred. No sane person could declare, with a shred of truth, that Blake had been guilty of carelessness or laxity. The gov'nor always knew when he had blundered—(Oh, yes, he does blunder occasionally!)—and he was always ready to acknowledge the fact.

But at present he was only filled with a very wholesome antagonism towards these rascals, and his determination made him extra agile and active. After an hour's strenuous labour he succeeded in slipping the rope from his wrists, and the rest was a matter of minutes.

He knew, from the very fact that he had been left alone, that the plot—whatever it might be—had come to a head. There was, therefore, no time to waste. Quite possibly it was just as well that he had been kept a prisoner until now. For he would be able to step in at the last moment and foil the whole thing.

His pockets had been stripped, and he didn't possess a weapon of any kind. His fists, however, were quite handy in an emergency, and he preferred them any day to an improvised club or stick. He passed out of the deserted hut grimly, and full of determination.

It was black and dismal under the silent

trees, and Blake had no positive indication of the route. But he was as clever as an Australian tracker, and, in spite of the darkness, he made his way without fault through the trees until he arrived upon the road.

He had seen no sign of Pedro or of me. I, of course, was still helpless in the gully, whilst Pedro had got ideas of his own about how things should be done.

The gov'nor set off at the double along the gloomy road, feeling quite certain that he would come within sight of Grangewood House almost immediately. He wasn't wrong in his surmise.

After only a short run he spotted a light through the trees, and presently came within full sight of the lonely old house in the forest. The light he now saw was proceeding from one of the lower windows. It wasn't particularly late, but he had believed that the house would be black. Something was happening, he was sure of that.

It would probably be a mistake to go boldly to the front door and seek admittance, as a respectable gentleman should. This was an occasion for more subtle methods. And the fact that the French windows of the library were standing wide open led him to adopt that informal entry.

He moved cautiously, but saw no sign of anything suspicious. The old place was as silent as the grave. Was he too late? Had the three rascals decamped?

"H'm! Rather queer!" he murmured softly.

Stepping lightly forward, and wondering slightly at the shocking condition of the garden, he neared the French windows, and peered through the bushes—exactly as I had done earlier.

What he saw caused him to push forward and enter the library.

The apartment was empty, and the door was closed. The lamp stood upon the table, burning at full power, and there was the unmistakable odour of cigarette-smoke still in the air. Blake listened, but heard nothing.

He glanced round curiously, and noted one of two significant points. There was an ash-tray standing upon the desk, and in the centre of it the remains of a cigarette. It had been placed there alight, and had burned itself completely out. That accounted for the smoke still in the air. Possibly the room had been deserted for fully twenty minutes.

The heavy rug was rucked up in several places, and that could never have happened unless somebody had deliberately kicked it, or unless a struggle had taken place. Most significant of all, however, was a number of short ends of rope. These had obviously been cut.

"I'll wager that Mr. Temple has been seized!" murmured Blake shrewdly. "He was surprised as he sat at his desk, bound up, and taken away or bundled into another room. I don't quite like the look of things."

Blake supposed that the cigarette had been Temple's. In that he was wrong, for it was Grant who had placed it there. Temple's cigarette had been squashed against his own face, and had fallen from beneath the cushion when that article was removed.

The detective found it when he moved round the table, and he was somewhat puzzled. Passing out of the library, he found himself in the hall. This was quite dark, and as silent as a tomb.

"Hallo!" called Sexton Blake softly.

He listened, but there was no reply.

The whole experience was somewhat unusual. Here was a lonely house in the centre of a lonely forest. To all appearances it was quite deserted. Yet the library windows were wide open, and a lamp was burning upon the table. Obviously, Temple had not gone up to bed leaving the library in this condition.

Blake came to the conclusion that he had been kidnapped, and that he was now right in the forest, in the hands of his captors. Certainly all the evidence pointed in that direction.

The best thing to do, under the circumstances, was to rouse the house, and institute a search-party at once. Lanterns would be required. Blake was certain that the servants were in bed, and they would be able to tell him a few details concerning the recent events, in any case. But just at that point something else happened.

Faintly, but distinctly, the sound of wrangling voices came from the very ground itself, so it seemed. It was as though some men were quarrelling amongst themselves, and their raised voices—due to loss of temper—made themselves audible.

The detective listened intently.

**THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.**

**Nelson Lee to the Rescue—Just in Time The Truth.**

**N**IPPER gave vent to an expressive snort.

"It's all very well for you to make excuses for him, guv'nor!" he exclaimed wrathfully. "It's a dirty trick—the limit in dirty tricks, in fact! Leaving us here three-parts of the night, while he's having supper!"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"There is utterly no evidence to support your theory that Tinker is partaking of supper," he said pleasantly. "And you are altogether premature in accusing Tinker of perpetrating a dirty trick, as you call it."

"Then why hasn't he come back?" roared Nipper warmly.

"My dear boy, how on earth do I know?" asked Lee, taking a seat upon one of the foot-boards of the big touring-car. "You happen to be somewhat hasty, however, and are liable to jump to conclusions. I think we know Tinker well enough to be quite sure that he would not deliberately leave us stranded in this predicament whilst he partook of supper."

"Well, it's jolly queer, anyhow!" growled Nipper.

"I agree with you there, young 'un," said Lee, lighting a cigarette. "Tinker has had ample time to go treble the distance, and I can only conclude that he has been unavoidably delayed. It is quite idle to attempt any conjectures—"

"Haden't we better be walking on, sir?"

"And leave the car to look after itself?"

"Nobody will touch it; there's nobody here, anyhow," said Nipper. "What about all our plans? I don't mind doing anybody a good turn, but this is a bit too thick. Supposing I walk on?"

"A mere waste of energy, Nipper," said the detective. "We will wait another half-hour, and then—"

"Why, it's Pedro!" exclaimed Nipper, jumping up.

Pedro had just lumbered along the road, and now came within the zone of the headlamps. The dog seemed strangely excited, and he evidently had been running hard.

"Where's Tinker, old boy?" asked Nipper curiously.

Both he and his master stared up the road, but it was soon evident that Pedro had returned alone. And there was something in his manner which caused Nelson Lee to vaguely suspect that all was not right.

As a matter of fact, Pedro had been having quite a little game on his own. The poor old beggar was worried in his own way, for things had not been going at all right.

So far as I can judge—for an exact account of his movements is impossible—I gather that Pedro left me in the gully with the full intention of finding Sexton Blake.

Probably he followed the trail until it came to an end. For I afterwards learned that the guv'nor had been carried during the latter part of his journey, and Pedro, of course, lost the scent.

The old dog, no doubt, wasted some little time in scouting round, and finally he made up his canine mind to make a bee-line back to the starting point—to Nelson Lee and Nipper.

At all events, that's what the sagacious old bounder did. And barely a minute elapsed before Lee caught sight of my little note sticking in the buckle of Pedro's collar.

"What's this, Nipper?" asked the detective sharply.

Pedro was held firmly while the slip of paper was removed. Nelson Lee and Nipper read the words easily.

"Have fallen into gully—sprained my knee—can't move—Pedro will lead you to me.—TINKER."

"Well, I'm figgered!" exclaimed Nipper.

"There you see reason for the delay," remarked Lee. "Your suspicions were most unjust, Nipper. But really I can't quite see how Tinker persuaded Pedro to come back to us. I didn't think the old boy was so smart. We'll get off at once."

Lee did not know that my message was actually intended for Sexton Blake. However, it had fallen into good hands, so everything was all right.

"What rotten luck!" said Nipper sym-

pathetically. "Poor old Tinker! We'll soon have him out of that fix, if Pedro can lead us to the spot."

"He'll do that easily enough!" declared Nelson Lee.

And two minutes later they started off. The car was pushed right to the side of the road, and two lights were left burning. There was no danger of anybody walking off with it while it was deserted. I'd defy anybody to run a motor-car without fuel.

Pedro eagerly led the way along the road; he needed no urging. The ground was covered rapidly, and at last the edge of the gully was reached. My rescuers did not make the mistake of tumbling down, for they were both carrying their electric torches. As to the exact spot where I was located, this was clearly indicated by Pedro, who rushed up to me, licked my face, and gave a joyous bay.

"This way, guv'nor!" I shouted.

Nelson Lee and Nipper scrambled down to me, and then I discovered their identity.

"Well, I'm blessed!" I ejaculated. "I thought Mr. Blake was coming. Have you seen anything of him?"

"No, nothing," replied Lee. "You seem to have had bad luck—Why, good gracious! You're bound up, Tinker!"

"Yes, and so is the guv'nor, I believe," I said grimly.

And while they were releasing me I rapidly explained what had happened. They were rather startled, but ready enough to get straight to business. Nelson Lee was very keen, in fact.

"We must make all haste," he said briskly.

"These men, apparently, are after a sealed package, and they intend to take it from Mr. Temple by force. Your master, too, is in trouble, Tinker. It will be better, I think, to go straight to Grangewood House."

"That's the idea, sir," I said. "I don't know whether I shall be able to come with you—Whew! My knee's giving me beans! It's not so bad as it was, though."

I hobbled about, and discovered that the sprain wasn't so bad as I had first supposed; or perhaps the excitement, and my anxiety to accompany Lee and Nipper, made me ignore the pain. The enforced rest, too, had done heaps of good.

"I'll try it, anyhow," I declared. "If I can't keep up the pace, you'd better leave me behind. There's not a second to chuck away."

We started off, and Nipper thoughtfully gave me his arm. We made fairly good progress, and cut off towards the road through the masses of heavy trees. We were unaware of the fact that Sexton Blake had passed that way only a few minutes before. Nelson Lee and Nipper, in fact, had only just missed him.

But Pedro found it out quickly enough. He suddenly sniffed the ground, gave a series of joyous bays, and set off through the trees.

"The guv'nor's got free!" I exclaimed tensely. "That's a fresh trail, and Pedro's sniffed it out. By Jupiter! We'll follow it!"

Nelson Lee nodded, and we hurried on after Pedro. I had a little difficulty in making him keep only just ahead, for he was intensely eager. Unfortunately, he was travelling in the wrong direction—towards the wood-cutter's hut. Pedro knew that he was on the track of his master, and that was good enough for him.

We came upon the hut presently, and found it deserted. Pedro was in a state of considerable excitement. The hut was bare, except for a selection of ropes which told their own story.

"Blake's managed to release himself, as you said, Nipper!" exclaimed Lee. "We ought to have gone the other way. But never mind. Only a few minutes have been lost. The position is improving rapidly."

"Rather, guv'nor!" I agreed excitedly.

Pedro readily took the trail again. We didn't really need it, for we knew well enough that Blake had gone to Grangewood. Pedro, however, led us in a bee-line, and much time was saved.

We came within sight of the old house, and found it in exactly the same condition as the guv'nor had found it, about fifteen minutes before. The library lamp was still burning.

"That's the best way in!" I exclaimed, hobbling down the weed-crown path. "No need to knock at the front door. Come on!"

We hastened along, and burst into the library. It was perfectly empty, but various cries of alarm, in feminine voices, were proceeding from the hall beyond the closed door.

"By James!" muttered Nelson Lee grimly. He crossed the room rapidly, flung open the door, and yanked his revolver out. Nipper and I followed, and Pedro attempted to squeeze through before any of us.

"Oh, thank Heaven!" somebody exclaimed. "Help has come! Please, please, see what is the matter—"

"Do not concern yourself, my dear lady," interrupted Lee soothingly.

We passed through into the hall, and I discovered that the speaker had been Mrs. Bevington.

She was attired in a costume which consisted, mostly, of blankets and silk slippers. Near her stood Miss Bevington, looking quite entranced. She was flushed, and her eyes were shining with excitement. She was wearing a long, satiny dressing-gown thing—what are ladies dressing-gowns called?—and it suited her to perfection.

"There is a dreadful fight going on!" she exclaimed quickly. "Oh, please do something! I was just going myself—"

"Stay here, Dora!" ordered her mother in alarm.

We needed no telling that a scrap of some sort was proceeding. Shouts and thuds and yells, all mixed together, made a considerable din. We didn't wait to hear any more from the ladies, but just sailed down the passage in search of the trouble.

We found it.

Oh, rather, Grant & Co. found it. Owing to my wonky knee I couldn't skip about quickly, so I thought I should do better by casting a light upon the subject. I cast two lights, in fact, for I grabbed Nipper's torch—its beam and the beam from my own upon the combatants.

"Go it, guv'nor!" I yelled excitedly.

Nelson Lee and Nipper were already using their bats. Sexton Blake, I could see, was nearly done. He had been putting up a terrific fight, and Grant & Co. had received heavy punishment. They were quite unable to withstand the rush of the reinforcements.

There was a short, hot fight. Kennard went down with a thud which shook the whole passage, Nelson Lee's right being responsible. Nipper, not to be outdone, did his utmost to smash Mitchell's face to pulp, and nearly succeeded, too.

Grant, like a wise man, surrendered, and within five minutes the three rascals were tied together in a nice little bundle. Grant, although furious, kept his wits about him.

"You'll find Temple in the hall cupboard!" he panted. "We've got no grudge against him. He's not hurt."

"Go, and release the gentleman, Tinker," said Blake briskly.

There was no need of this, however. Dora had heard Grant's words, and by the time I had arrived in the hall Leonard Temple was

well on the way towards being set free. He was quite unhurt, except for a couple of slight burns on the left cheek.

"I don't care a jot about what's happened!" he declared. "Those infernal rogues are collared, and that's all that matters! Thank goodness you arrived in time!"

We hurried to the other passage, and Grant laughed jeeringly.

"You'll get no treasure, anyhow!" he exclaimed, with vindictive joy. "There's nothing there except rocks! I hope you'll be able to buy a steam-yacht out of the proceeds!"

"Our friend is inclined to be humorous," said Sexton Blake smoothly. "It would be as well if he and his companions were taken to the lock-up without delay."

"I'll take them, old man!" offered Nelson Lee.

"Good! There's a car in the back-quarters," said Blake. "I don't pretend to know how on earth you got here, Lee, or how Tinker got here, but I'm dencely glad you turned up. We'll have a pow-wow when you get back, and clear up the details."

"I think there is a lot to clear up, Mr. Blake!" exclaimed Temple. "I have been harbouring an impostor in my house, thinking that he was you! By Jove! What an unholy mix-up!"

Nelson Lee and Nipper had gone off in Mrs. Bevington's car with the three crestfallen prisoners, and Temple had been explaining the position, as he knew it. Then I had my turn, and the guv'nor his. Between the three of us we gathered up all the threads.

"Upon the whole everything has turned out all right," smiled Sexton Blake. "But I think, Tinker, that we may set this affair down as one of our failures."

"Failures!" echoed Temple.

"Precisely!" nodded the guv'nor. "Tinker, perhaps, has performed some useful work, but I have spent the bulk of my time in a dirty woodcutter's hut!"

"Oh, come! That won't do!" protested Temple. "If you hadn't arrived when you did, Mr. Blake, those brutes would have got clean away. Oh, and what about the treasure? Grant declared that the cipher was a hoax. I don't believe it!"

"Neither do I," said Blake. "If you are willing, Mr. Temple, we will go down the cellar and have a look for ourselves. Tinker, no doubt, will prefer to remain up here."

"Oh, will he?" I said indignantly.

"Your knee—"

"It's good enough for another short trip," I said. "I'm always keen on treasure, even if it belongs to somebody else."

We went down without delay. Miss Beving-

ton and her mother had gone off to bed again at the conclusion of all the excitement, but we should have the pleasure of their company at breakfast.

The secret chamber was entered, and Temple and I looked round eagerly. We were searching for a second hidden opening. Sexton Blake, on the other hand, seemed very interested in the rocks, even going to the length of examining them with his lens.

"No, there's nothing here," I said at last.

"It was a hoax, after all!" said Temple gloomily. "It was rather mean of my grandfather—"

"Please do not be so hasty!" interrupted Blake. "Your grandfather, Mr. Temple, said that Grangewood contained vast riches. He did not make a misstatement!"

"But—but—" Temple paused, staring.

"What do you mean, guv'nor?" I asked breathlessly.

"I mean that the treasure is contained within the very ground itself," was Sexton Blake's smooth reply. "There is no hoard of gold or jewels, as you supposed—"

"Then what is it?" asked Temple huskily.

"I do not profess to be a mining expert," replied Blake, "but I am quite positive that this house stands upon one of the most valuable mineral reefs in the whole of England. Look here! Do you see? This is a portion of a wolfram reef, from which the extremely valuable metal known as tungsten is obtained. My dear Mr. Temple, your property is a veritable mint of money! You are worth hundreds of thousands!"

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Temple blankly.

Sexton Blake was right.

Grangewood House stood upon an astoundingly rich wolfram reef, and it extended the whole length of the Grangewood property. Leonard Temple was worth piles of money. The old man had known of it, but he had said nothing, leaving it for his grandson to discover.

If Kennard and his confederates had known the actual nature of the "treasure" they wouldn't have made any attempt to get it, for they would have known that such an attempt would have been a farce.

As it was, they each received a nice term of imprisonment for impersonation, conspiracy, and assault. They certainly deserved their sentences.

Leonard Temple was married to Dora Bevington shortly after our trip to Grangewood, and I'm perfectly sure that there's not a happier couple in the whole of Great Britain—or, for that matter, a richer couple.

Old Gowan Temple's "hoard" was a strange one, but nobody could deny that it was the real goods!

THE END.

## THE RED RAIDERS!

A THRILLING NEW STORY OF BUFFALO BILL'S BOYHOOD.

By the Author of "The King of Scouts," etc., etc.

Specially written for the "Union Jack Library."

### THE OPENING INSTALMENTS.

Bill Cody, or Buffalo Bill, whilst on a tone-some trapping expedition in the wildest parts of North America, rescues Sylvia Farrell from the clutches of an Indian trader, Gideon Starke, with whom, against her will, she is engaged to be married. Cody takes her under his protection, and they make for a path through the Big Horn Mountains. The pair have many exciting adventures with warlike tribes of Pawnees and Sioux, but at last seek refuge in the cabin of an old prospector.

(Now read on.)

### A New Arrival—The Siege of the Cabin—The Only Chance.

THE young fugitives had suffered so many hardships, and were so badly in need of rest, that they concluded to remain with the prospector for a week. Two days passed uneventfully. Assisted by the lad, Bob Derrick continued his labours, cradling small nuggets of gold from the gravel soil of the stream, and adding them to the store which he had already accumulated.

Towards the close of the third day, as the

three were seated at supper, they were startled by the muffled sound of approaching hoofs. Springing to his feet, Bob Derrick snatched his rifle from the wall. Bidding the girl not be frightened, he peered through a loophole at one side of the doorway; and then, unbarring the door, he threw it open.

"It is all right!" he exclaimed, as Bill Cody and the girl were waiting in suspense. "It is no Redskin that is coming! I just got a glimpse of a uniform through the foliage!"

The pattering hoof-beats drew nearer, and round a curve of the shady forest aisle, between the trees, appeared a tall, lean man in Army blue, leading by the bridle a weary-looking horse.

"By ginger, if it isn't Sandy Mason!" declared Bob Derrick.

And he hastened forward to meet the soldier, who greeted him in surprise. The horse was tied to a sapling by the doorway, and the two men came into the cabin, where Sylvia and the lad were introduced to the Trooper Mason of the Ninth Cavalry by the prospector, who had known him for some years.

"They've had a bad time of it, these young people," he continued. "The boy is Isaac

Cody's son, and he fell in with the girl after she had escaped from Black Snake's village, where her father would have forced her to marry Gideon Starke, that villainous Indian trader. But how did you get here, Mason? What are you doing in this part of the country?"

"I want to find my way to Red Gulch," the trooper replied. "Do you know where it is?"

"Yes, I reckon I do. It is about thirteen miles to the north of here, as well as I can calculate. But why do you want to go there?"

"It is like this, Derrick. The Sioux have been murdering settlers down in the south, and a patrol from our regiment, thirty or forty in number, were sent up to punish them, and to drive them out of the neighbourhood. We had a long chase, and last evening, having failed to overtake the fleeing Redskins, we pitched our camp at Red Gulch. After supper the captain sent me out alone to see if I could discover any trace of the enemy in the locality. And as ill-luck would have it, I lost my bearings, and couldn't find my way back. After riding all night I found myself in the valley yonder, and it was the smell of smoke that guided me up here. I half-expected to find an Indian camp-fire. I had no idea that you were in this region."

"I don't suppose you had, Mason. I have been living here for a number of months, cradling for gold in the little stream down in the valley, and finding enough to make it worth my while to stay on. And what are you going to do now? You had better stay here for a time, hadn't you? You must be dead tired."

"Yes, Derrick, I am. I can't ride any farther until I've had a rest and something to eat."