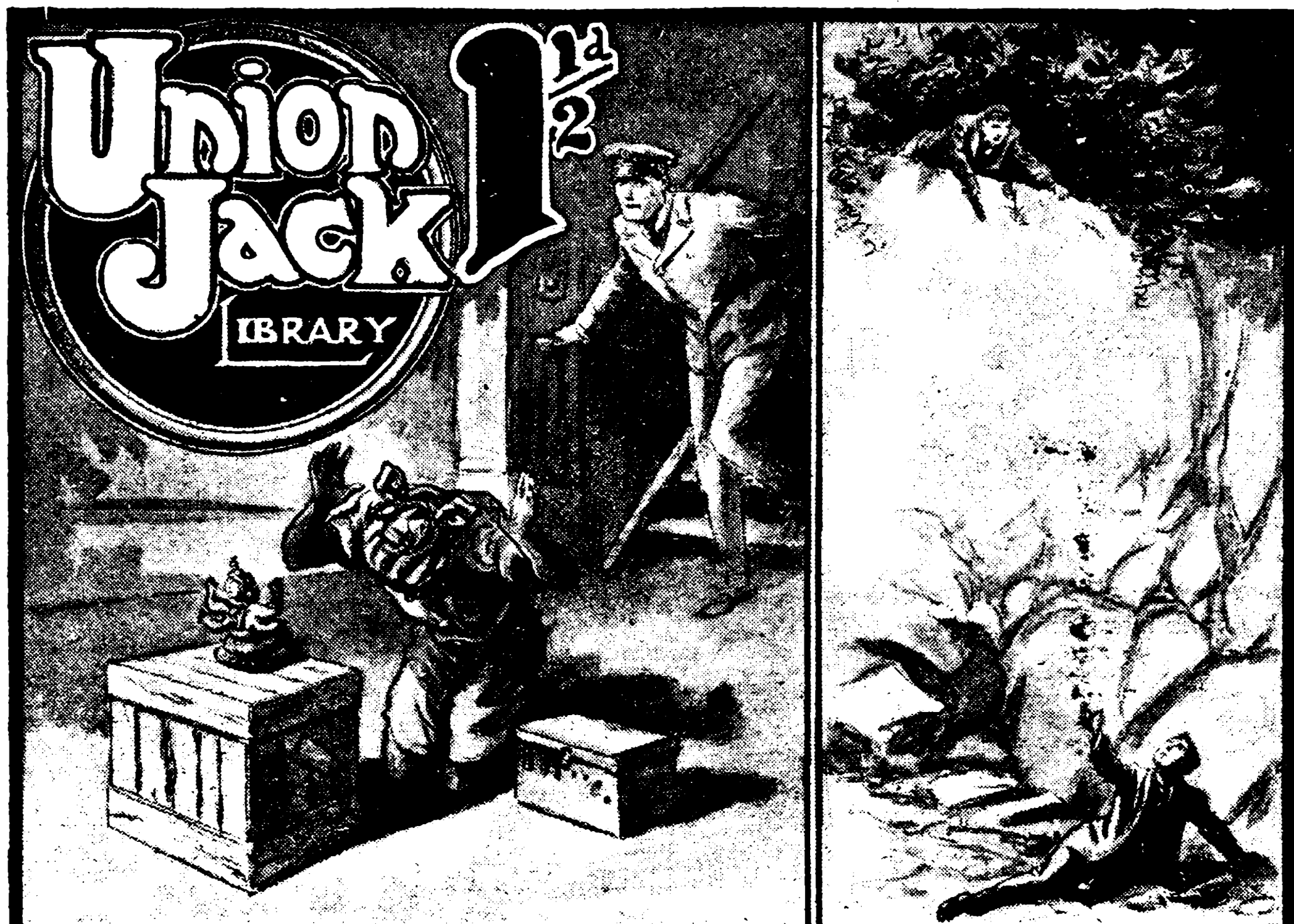


**SEXTON BLAKE and NELSON LEE on a GHOST CASE.
£1,000 FOOTBALL COMPETITION.**



THE TERROR OF TREVIS WOLD.

A Strange and Fascinating Detective Drama, introducing SEXTON BLAKE and TINKER, and NELSON LEE and NIPPER. By the Author of "The Crooks of Rapid Hollow," "The Case of the American Soldier," "The Flashlight Clue," "Nipper at St. Frank's" Series, and "Tinker's Case-Diary" Series.



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The Narrative Related Throughout by Tinker.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Singular Experiences of Mr. Norman Gower.

"QUEER, Tinker—very queer," said Sexton Blake absently.

"Well, it's your own fault, guv'nor," I remarked, as I saw him investigating the interior of his egg. "I warned you that these eggs looked a bit squiffy, and you wouldn't order any from the country. London-bought eggs are often queer."

Blake nodded.

"At the same time, Tinker, it is rather remarkable that this strange monster should appear," he said. "Of course, it may be—"

"A—a monster, guv'nor?" I gasped.

"Exactly!"

"In your egg?" I yelled. "Look here, guv'nor, you'd better take it outside and bury it! It's a bit thick when eggs are delivered from the dairy with monsters inside— Good heavens! You're eating a piece!"

Sexton Blake glared at me.

"What on earth are you talking about, Tinker?" he demanded irritably. "Who said anything about monsters in eggs?"

"You did, guv'nor," I replied. "You said that something was very queer, and you were squinting into your egg with a suspicious eye. Then you mentioned something about a monster, and you gave me a shocking turn!"

Sexton Blake chuckled.

"You young ass!" he said. "I was referring to a report in this morning's paper, and there was utterly no reason for you to assume that I was doubting the quality of these very excellent eggs."

"Oh, well, it's a relief to find that there's nothing wrong," I said cheerfully. "Now then, Pedro, if you stick your nose under my arm again I'll give it a jab. I don't believe in my breakfast being interrupted by a great cold nose like yours."

Pedro shamelessly pushed his nose even further up, and he was rewarded for this disobedience by a chunk of bread-and-butter which I badly needed myself. However, there was plenty more on the plate, so it didn't matter much.

Sexton Blake and I—as will probably be deduced—were sitting at breakfast in our comfortable dining-room at Baker Street. It was a mild October morning, and the sun was shining in at the windows quite brilliantly.

"What's that you said about a monster, guv'nor?" I inquired presently.

"Oh, so you are interested?" said Blake. "There is a small paragraph here, Tinker, which caught my eye. As you are aware, any item of unusual interest—anything bizarre and out of the common—generally attracts my attention."

"What is it this time, guv'nor?"

"The report comes from the little village of Trevis, near Long Melford, in Suffolk," continued the guv'nor. "It seems that a village youth has been found demented—driven out of his mind in a single evening."

"Well, they call it 'Silly Suffolk,' guv'nor," I observed.

"Undeservedly, Tinker," said Blake, frowning. "Suffolk is a perfectly delightful county, with perfectly delightful inhabitants. It is an insult to call the natives silly merely because they are simple and hospitable, and because they have largely escaped the taint of new-fashioned incivility and greed which has ruined the charm of so many other counties."

"All right, guv'nor," I grinned. "I beg Suffolk's pardon."

"A youth, I repeat, was driven crazy on Tuesday evening last," continued Blake. "It seems that the village of Trevis is suffering from a scare just now. Quite a number of people declare that they have seen a horrible monster in the neighbourhood."

"A monster?" I repeated curiously. "That sounds rummy, guv'nor."

"It is certainly unusual," agreed the guv'nor. "Nobody apparently can exactly state what this monster is. There are conflicting stories from different quarters, but all seem to agree upon one point. The strange visitant is an object with enormous horns projecting from its head. That really is the only detail which can be vouched for. Two youths were walking along a dark road together on Tuesday night, and this strange apparition appeared. One boy, unfortunately, was driven out of his mind, and the other did not actually see the thing squarely, and he simply ran for his life—leaving his companion to come along as best he could."

"That was rather mean, guv'nor."

"I hardly think so, Tinker. The youth was terrified, and simply ran blindly. He is in such a nervous condition now that he is compelled to remain in bed. His friend is quite out of his mind—driven so by the sight of this ghastly object. The village of Trevis and the neighbourhood is almost in a state of panic."

"I suppose it's half gossip, guv'nor," I said, stirring my coffee.

"I am inclined to share that opinion, Tinker," said Sexton Blake. "The report is quite reserved in its tone, and it may be one of those affairs which are referred to once, and never crop up again."

We continued our breakfast, and I soon forgot all about the subject we had just been discussing. I was busy with the guv'nor in the consulting-room for an hour afterwards, taking shorthand notes from an old lady, who was most anxious for Sexton Blake to investigate her case. After she had gone the guv'nor smiled at me and shook his head.

"I am afraid I can scarcely accept the old soul's commission, Tinker," he said. "Her story was a mere rignharole, and her fears are quite groundless. In a day or two I shall send her a line of soothing advice—and charge nothing. I really cannot be

bothered with such insignificant investigations."

Of course the guv'nor was always having clients of that sort; people who made appointments, and who came full of their woes. In nine cases out of ten they proved to be nervous individuals addicted to fancies.

Scarcely five minutes after the old lady had departed our bell rang again, and Mrs. Bardell brought in two cards upon a tray and announced that two gentlemen most urgently wished to see the guv'nor.

Blake glanced at the cards, pursed his lips, and nodded.

"Show the gentlemen up at once, Mrs. Bardell," he said crisply.

Our housekeeper departed, and I looked at the guv'nor rather inquiringly. It wasn't often he was so extremely prompt in his decisions to see chance visitors—for these people certainly had no appointment.

"A couple of dukes or something?" I asked.

"My good Tinker, I should be just as willing to see a couple of dustmen if I was interested," said Sexton Blake languidly. "No; the reason for my interest will be obvious to you if you will glance at these cards."

I did glance at them. One read, "Norman Gower, Trevis Wold, Long Melford, Suffolk." The other bore the inscription, "James Woodhouse, M.D., The Elms, Trevis, Suffolk."

I looked up, with my lips in a whistling position.

"Well, Tinker?" smiled the guv'nor.

"Isn't this the village you were talking about at breakfast-time, guv'nor?" I inquired—"where that monster has been scaring people?"

"Exactly! That's why I was so ready to grant an interview."

It was rather curious that these people should come to our humble abode in Baker Street from the quiet Suffolk village, so soon after we had commented upon the report in the paper. Sexton Blake had been interested in that paragraph, so it was only natural that he should be interested in the visitors.

They were ushered in a few moments later—two grave-faced men of totally different types. Introductions were really unnecessary, for Dr. James Woodhouse had his profession written all over him. He was a large, bluff individual, nearly white-haired, and certainly sixty years of age. His wrinkled old face was cast in a kindly mould, and I could imagine that, in lighter moments, his eyes were twinkling ones.

Mr. Norman Gower was quite different, being a young man, upright and bronzed of face. He was attired in a smart uniform, with brass buttons and a white-topped merchant service cap—obviously an officer on a liner. His hair was curly, and I liked him from the very outset.

"You must allow me to thank you, Mr. Blake, for granting us this interview so promptly," said Dr. Woodhouse, in slow, old-fashioned tones. "We gave you no prelimi-

nary warning, but came up on the off-chance, being quite prepared to meet with a refusal. You are a busy man, Mr. Blake, and we appreciate your courtesy."

"I must confess that I already had an inkling of your motive in coming—if, indeed, my surmise is correct," said Sexton Blake, after he had shaken hands. "I was quite interested in a small paragraph in the paper this morning."

"So you saw it, Mr. Blake?" said Norman Gower. "I'm glad you did—because it was almost as good as an introduction for us. But that notice is practically out of date; other events have happened since."

"Terrible events, Mr. Blake—terrible events," put in the doctor gravely.

"Well, gentlemen, I shall be quite pleased to hear any facts which you wish to lay before me," said Sexton Blake. "Please try these cigars—and make yourselves quite comfortable. Tinker, bring over the siphon and a decanter."

"Now that I am here, Mr. Blake, I'm hanged if I know how to begin," said Gower, after the cigars were well alight. "You'll probably think that I have no business here at all. But I shall leave you to judge that for yourself. My father is Sir Robert Gower, the owner of the Wyncaster line of steamships."

Sexton Blake nodded.

"So I assumed the moment I saw you, Mr. Gower," he said. "Sir Robert, of course, is well known to me by repute, although I never had the pleasure of meeting him. I am, however, quite delighted to become acquainted with his son."

"That's very nice of you, Mr. Blake," smiled Norman Gower. "Well, look here, I'm half afraid that our mission here will be fruitless, because I have never heard that you are interested in the supernatural—"

"Come, come!" protested Dr. Woodhouse. "There is no evidence to that effect, my dear Norman. Personally, I positively decline to believe that anything of a supernatural character has occurred. I am not enthusiastic regarding the twaddle about psychic phenomena which is so much in vogue nowadays."

Sexton Blake nodded.

"You will find me an able second, Dr. Woodhouse," he smiled. "But from this little preliminary I gather that the events you intend to describe are so bizarre and unusual that you can think of no normal explanation to account for them."

"You've hit it exactly, Mr. Blake," said Gower quickly. "I will get to the point straight away, because I know you would prefer me to. Yesterday my father was hale and hearty—a remarkably healthy, active man. This morning he is in a condition of babbling idiocy—driven crazy in a single hour by some unutterable horror. In an hour! I think in a minute would be more correct."

Sexton Blake looked grave.

"Dear me, your news is most distressing, Mr. Gower," he said quietly. "I can well imagine the pain you must be suffering at this moment. But will you do me a favour? Will you begin your story at the very commencement, and work along in the natural sequence of events? I shall be able to judge so much better."

"Certainly, Mr. Blake," agreed Gower. "I should have begun in that way without being prompted by you. Well, I think I had better tell you that I have been taking a holiday at Trevis Wold, my ship being in dry-dock for the time being. I am first officer on the Holcaster—probably the best ship of the whole fleet."

"My father started from the bottom rung himself, Mr. Blake, and he did not intend me to be pampered. I was trained on the famous old Worcester, and I had to work my way up to my present position—just like any other young fellow. The pater never believed in favouritism. Well, I don't think there was a happier man in the world than I at this hour yesterday, Mr. Blake. I was spending my holiday at home with my father and mother, and I had the added pleasure of my fiancée's company. She—Miss Joyce Walton—is still at Trevis Wold, because I wouldn't let her take her departure. And then this black shadow came, and a terrible blow struck my poor father. To-day he is an imbecile!"

"I am afraid that I must prompt you once again—" began Sexton Blake.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Blake," said Gower quickly. "Somehow or other, I can't get away from that dreadful fact. Well, for some few days we had heard chance reports about an object being seen by the villagers, but we thought nothing of it—we regarded

it as a mere piece of gossip, unworthy of attention."

"And then?"

"Last night my father and I finished up the evening, as usual, by a hundred up at billiards," said Gower. "My mother and Joyce had retired some little time before, and my father went off at about eleven, leaving me in the library. I was rather interested in a novel, and I had a mind to finish it."

"You were quite alone in the room, I understand?"

"Yes, and I think it would be as well to give you a few details of the apartment," replied Norman Gower. "It was quite in darkness except for the single reading-lamp which I had on the desk close beside me. The butler had made the fire up rather liberally, and as the night was somewhat close I opened the French windows. You will thus understand that I was lolling there with one of the glass doors wide open."

"I follow you exactly," said the guv'nor.

"Well, the night was quite dark, and it was almost impossible for me to see out into the garden," said our client. "Immediately facing the French windows are the lawns, bordered by a paved terrace. Everything was quiet, for the household was in bed, with the exception of my father and myself. The dad had gone off to fasten the skylight in the billiard-room, as we had overlooked it earlier."

"Well, I hadn't been reading long, when something caused me to glance up. I don't exactly know why I did so; certainly there was no sound to attract my attention. But a man generally knows, in some curious manner, when he is being watched. And I saw a most horrible face at the window."

"A human face?" asked Sexton Blake.

"That's more than I can tell you," answered Gower quietly. "I only caught just a glimpse, and I received such a start that the book tumbled from my hands, and my cigarette fell into my lap. When I looked again there was nothing to be seen. Perhaps I was wrong in describing what I saw as a face; it was really scarcely more than two gleaming eyes with a blurred, shapeless surrounding. I started to my feet, trembling, and at that very moment I happened to hear my father passing through the hall on his way upstairs to bed."

"You called him, no-doubt?"

"Yes, and he came at once," said Norman Gower. "He apparently saw that something was wrong, for he came quickly across the library. 'Good heavens, Norman, what on earth is the matter?' he asked me, gripping my arm. 'You are as white as a sheet, my boy!' I quickly told him what I had seen, and I knew that he was sceptical."

"At all events, we decided to search the garden. I was ready to believe that my imagination had played me false, and that the object I had seen was possibly nothing more harmful than a stray cow which had wandered into the garden—cows have done that before now, Mr. Blake, and they can give a man quite a start, too! As it happened, I had been reading a particularly ghastly chapter in the novel; and that, too, may have made me imaginative."

"There was certainly no cow in the garden, or any other animal. My father and I kept together at first, but separated later on, he going down one path and I striking across the lawn to a rockery. But in my haste I overlooked a grass bank which intervened—you know how easy it is to blunder down such a bank in the darkness!"

"I have met with similar mishaps more than once," smiled Sexton Blake. "Pray continue, Mr. Gower. Your narrative is most interesting."

"Well, I pitched down that grass bank heavily," said Norman Gower. "By a piece of infernal luck, my head came into contact with a portion of the rockery—and the rockery got the best of it! I must have been quite stunned for a few minutes, for when I actually struggled up I was dazed, and so dizzy that I simply couldn't walk immediately."

"Your father knew nothing of your fall, then?"

"Apparently not," said the other. "I didn't yell or make any sound at all, and the dad possibly thought that I had returned to the library. Not knowing how long I had been lying there, I staggered across the lawn, and felt stronger at every step. By the time I reached the terrace I had got myself in hand, except for the thudding headache. The French windows were still open, and I entered."

Gower paused, and shivered.

"I tell you honestly, Mr. Blake, I couldn't help that shiver," he went on quietly. "I find it utterly impossible to describe the sensation which assailed me when I set foot within the library. In plain words, I was horrified. A feeling of the utmost dread—a feeling of terror—came over me. Why it should do so I can't tell. Heaven alone knows what devilry had been happening. My very skin seemed to grow cold with the horror, and then my attention became attracted towards my poor father. He was there, Mr. Blake—kneeling almost in the centre of the room."

"Conscious?" asked Blake.

"Oh, quite. But he was babbling and crooning, and staring past me at the window with a fixed expression of sheer terror in his eyes. At that moment, Mr. Blake, I felt that I could shriek aloud with the horrible tension. Really, I don't know exactly what I did do, but I knew that the poor old dad had lost his reason."

Sexton Blake leaned forward, and I followed his example. This story had gripped us both, and we were almost fascinated.

"The room?" asked the guv'nor. "Was the apartment itself any different? Had anything been touched?"

"Not that I am aware of. Everything was normal except for my father," replied Norman huskily. "Heaven above! What terrible sight had caused him to go crazy in that ghastly manner? It was as though some nameless creature of horror had come into the room, and had made it foul."

"Foul?" repeated Blake quickly. "Do you mean that the air was tainted?"

"No, Mr. Blake; I did not use the word in that sense," said Gower. "The atmosphere was pure and fresh; the clear night air, you must remember, was entering by means of the open windows. No, the air was as pure as any I've ever breathed. But that feeling of horror was there—subtly present all the time."

"Did you not call for help?"

"Not immediately. I went over to my father and tried to make him understand. But he only stared at me as though I were Satan himself," said our visitor. "It was terrible, Mr. Blake; it was indescribably pitiful. To see a splendid man like my father in that shocking mental state. Somehow or other, I got him out of the library, and he was surprisingly meek. I placed him upon a comfortable lounge in the hall, and then rang up Dr. Woodhouse. I felt extremely thankful that we had a telephone installed."

"But surely some members of the household—"

"Yes, Noakes, the butler, came downstairs in response to a ring from me; there is a bell communicating with his room," said Norman. "I did not awaken my mother, for I knew how terribly she would be affected. I only wanted Dr. Woodhouse to come, so that I could learn the positive truth. Noakes and I watched over my poor father until the doctor's car pulled up outside. Now, Dr. Woodhouse, I think you had better tell the rest."

"Certainly, my dear boy," said our other visitor, who had sat silent throughout the whole narrative. "I have been the family doctor of the Gowers for more years than I can remember, Mr. Blake. Norman's information shocked me more than I could say, and I honestly believed that he was suffering from a ghastly mistake. But when I arrived at Trevis Wold I found that his description of his father's condition was, alas, only too accurate. Good gracious me! Sir Robert was quite crazy, and I could do nothing whatever for him."

"What form of craziness was it, Dr. Woodhouse?" asked Sexton Blake.

"Oh, there was no violence," said the doctor. "Sir Robert was absolutely docile, and only the expression of blank and dazed horror remained in his eyes. Reason had vanished from them, and he had even lost the power of speech. He gabbled at us, Mr. Blake, and I am sorely pained to refer to the affair. He was in the same condition this morning, except that he had become calmer."

Sexton Blake placed the tips of his fingers together, and lay back in his chair.

"And there is no explanation—none whatever?"

"None that we can possibly suggest," replied the old doctor. "As Norman had said, nothing of a material character can account for the awful affair. I may add that the sensation of horror which Norman has described assailed me in no unmistakable fashion as soon as I entered the library. It really seemed, Mr. Blake, as though devils

from the Pit itself had taken possession of the stately apartment. I was immeasurably upset, and am still."

"A most remarkable story, my dear sirs," said Sexton Blake slowly. "I can scarcely blame you for suggesting that something of a supernatural character had occurred."

Dr. Woodhouse cleared his throat to speak, hesitated, and said nothing.

"Please do not hold anything back, Dr. Woodhouse," said Sexton Blake.

"Indeed, I have no idea of doing so, Mr. Blake," said the doctor. "I was just about to comment upon a book I dipped into some years ago—a book which, by the so-called information concerning those apparitions which are known as 'elementals.'"

"My dear sir!" protested the gov'nor.

"You have heard of such things?"

"Often enough," replied Blake. "But I am a confirmed sceptic."

"I think it is necessary for me to apologise for even bringing the subject up for discussion," said Dr. Woodhouse. "But, really, Mr. Blake, the parallel struck me most forcibly. This strange monster—the face which Norman saw at the window—the unutterable horror of the library. They corresponded exactly to the descriptions I have seen of houses haunted by elementals. These horrible manifestations, I have read, are capable of materialising into some monstrous shape. And the effects they produce are exactly similar to those we have just described. But it's nonsense, sir!" exclaimed the doctor fiercely. "I think I must be going mad myself to consider such a possibility for even one second. No, Mr. Blake, I positively refuse to credit such foolery."

"I do not blame you for mentioning the matter, Dr. Woodhouse," said Sexton Blake. "The similarity is indeed striking. But that does not mean to say that Trevis Wold is haunted by anything so impossible as an elemental. May I inquire if you have approached the police?"

"We thought it better not to do so," explained Norman Gower. "What could the police do, Mr. Blake? It would be a sheer waste of time to lay the facts before them. Moreover, I am most anxious to keep the ghastly affair absolutely quiet. It seemed that some investigation was very necessary, however, and that is why we took the early morning train and came straight to you."

Sexton Blake nodded. "I am glad you did so, gentlemen," he replied, "for this problem appears to be something of a most unique character, and I shall certainly accept your commission to make a very close inquiry."

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Horror of the Tudor Library.

MR. NORMAN GOWER looked very relieved.

"This is more than we dared to hope for, Mr. Blake," he said quietly. "Thank you exceedingly for your promise. I was of the opinion that you would consider the mystery too outrageous for serious attention. But I am relieved because I know there is no other man who could handle—"

"I really cannot allow you to say that, Mr. Gower," smiled Sexton Blake. "I make no claim to be a man of exceptional powers. I am not. I simply employ my own methods of investigation, and I am fortunate enough to be successful in most of the cases I undertake. I only trust that this will be no exception."

"There is one point I overlooked," put in Dr. Woodhouse. "I do not claim to be a specialist in cases of insanity, and I may be wrong, but it is my opinion that Sir Robert's pitiful condition will improve. There is a chance, indeed, that he will eventually recover."

"I hope you are right, doctor. I hope to Heaven you are right!" exclaimed Gower fervently. "But this mystery must be cleared up at once. I have no fear for myself, but there is my mother—"

"You must not get into a state of nervousness," put in Sexton Blake softly. "That won't do at all, Mr. Gower. There is no earthly reason for you to suppose that any other member of your household will be affected. I should like to ask you one or two questions, if I may."

"A hundred, if you wish," said Norman readily.

"Well, with regard to this sensation of U. J.—No. 786.

yours upon entering the library. Can you give me no closer description?"

"I'm afraid not."

"You felt no ill effects afterwards?"

"I hardly follow you, Mr. Blake," said Norman. "Ill effects? The instant I left the library the feeling vanished. And you must not mistake my meaning. The sensation was not in the air, it was the room itself. The atmosphere was perfectly pure and sweet, except for the faint odour of my own cigarette-smoke. It seemed to me that the very walls had eyes, and there were faces in every corner of the room—in every shadow."

"H'm! The case is quite unique," said Sexton Blake. "About the face you saw, Mr. Gower? Did you see the colour of the eyes? I mean, did they reflect red, or green, in the light, as the eyes of animals will do?"

Norman shrugged his shoulders.

"I must answer the truth, Mr. Blake, and I don't want to draw upon my imagination," he said. "The face is only like a nightmare to me now; I can remember nothing definite. It was only diabolically horrible."

"There was no sound?"

"None whatever."

"And no indication this morning that an intruder had gained the terrace?"

"I did not look, Mr. Blake. I was too upset and worried," replied Norman. "My mother, brave soul, stood the shock far better than I had believed, but I had no time to think of examining the terrace. And when Dr. Woodhouse arrived we both decided to run up to London by the first train, in order to see you."

Sexton Blake rose to his feet.

"Well, gentlemen, I will not trouble you further with my questions," he said. "I find it necessary to visit the spot as soon as possible to make first-hand investigations. If the affair is supernatural, I can do nothing. I am no ghost-hunter. But I have never seen a ghost in my life, and am quite positive that I never shall. There must be some natural explanation to this very singular mystery, and I am anxious to probe more deeply."

"I think my father must have seen that horrible thing fully," said Norman. "The sight drove reason away, and left him a mental wreck. But what sight in all this world could do such ghastly mischief, Mr. Blake?"

"I will not attempt to answer that question," said the great detective. "If you are agreeable, I will run down to Trevis Wold by the same train as yourselves."

"Nothing would suit us better, Mr. Blake," said the doctor.

"Look up the trains, Tinker," said Sexton Blake, turning to me. "By the way, what do you make of this uncanny affair, young 'un?"

I scratched my head.

"It's beyond me, gov'nor," I replied. "I've been listening to everything, and I've been hugely interested. But it's something different from anything I've ever heard before. We've investigated more than one case of supposed haunting, but this fairly beats the band!"

"Yet we must make up our minds to win, Tinker," said the gov'nor crisply. "We are going down to Trevis Wold to clear up the mystery, and we must not let this case be added to our list of failures."

"As regards fees, Mr. Blake," said Norman, "I shall be only too delighted to accept your own terms."

"In some cases I make a point of fixing the fee beforehand. It is necessary," said Blake. "But not in this kind of investigation, Mr. Gower. You will oblige me by leaving all monetary matters until I have met with some measure of success. Well, Tinker?"

"There's a train in about an hour, gov'nor," I said, consulting the time-table.

Dr. Woodhouse glanced at his watch.

"Of course!" he exclaimed.

"How thoughtless of me, Mr. Blake. I am well aware of all the trains on the service to our little part of the country. That train will suit us admirably. I propose that Norman and I meet you at Liverpool Street. Meanwhile, we can obtain a light luncheon."

"That will suit me perfectly," said Sexton Blake. "I would invite you to take lunch with me, gentlemen, but I am afraid Tinker and I would render such a meal erratic and uncomfortable, for it will be necessary for us to hasten with our packing, and we shall just snatch a mouthful when we can."

Five minutes later our visitors had departed, but we should see them again almost within the hour on the platform at Liverpool Street. Sexton Blake stood smoking a cigar

ette furiously in the centre of the consulting-room when I returned, after escorting our guests to the door.

"What do you think of it, Tinker; somewhat extraordinary, eh?" exclaimed the gov'nor, rubbing his hands with satisfaction. "There is nothing I like better than a problem which represents new and novel characteristics. I shall enter upon this investigation with the utmost zest and determination."

"I hope it will be all right, gov'nor," I said doubtfully. "We should be in a fine fix if we went down to Trevis Wold, and came back dotty!"

"One of us, at least, will be in that sad condition when we arrive," said Blake drily. "But we have no time for joking, Tinker. Pack the two emergency bags, and take care to sling my usual assortment of odds and ends into the gladstone—cord, thread, wax, and all the trifling articles which may come in useful, but which will probably remain uncovered through our visit. It is always better to be prepared. And you might see that a box of cartridges is included—and our revolvers must be examined."

"Sounds like a murderous job we're on, gov'nor," I remarked.

"It might be, Tinker, and we want to be ready," said Blake. "We won't take Pedro; I don't think he'll be required. Bustle about, young'un; there's not a moment to spare."

We bustled about with a will, and finally took our departure, and arrived at Liverpool Street with about two minutes to spare for the train. Mr. Gower and Dr. Woodhouse had already secured a first-class compartment, and we had it to ourselves all the way down.

A motor-car was awaiting us at the other end, and the day was drawing to its close when it came within sight of Trevis Wold. It was a fine old place, standing in its own part on the borders of a wide heath. The surrounding country was delightful, but looked rather melancholy now in the fading light of the autumn day.

Lady Gower welcomed us quietly and cordially. She was a delightful old lady, and the tragedy—for that's what it was—had left its mark upon her. She was bearing up courageously, however, and informed us that Sir Robert had been quiet all day, and was now sleeping. The horror had not left his eyes, and his reason was quite gone.

Miss Joyce Walton proved to be a very sweet girl. Under happier circumstances I could readily understand that she was bright-eyed and joyful. But now there was no smile upon her pretty face, and the expression of worry in her deep blue eyes was very evident.

Tea was served at once, and the gov'nor took care to make no mention of the object of our visit during the meal.

He talked on matter-of-fact subjects with a cheerful, genial air. Before long his personality made itself felt, and everybody was smiling; the dull expressions of worry were vanishing. Sexton Blake believed in making people cheerful, if it could possibly be managed. But there was no reason why this party should sit in the drawing-room with faces as long as a mile. Depression wouldn't help Sir Robert to recover, nor would it improve the general situation.

I was glad to see Miss Joyce smiling very shortly, and Norman was glad, too. Before tea was finished, indeed, the spirits of all those present had improved in a marked degree. Dr. Woodhouse actually found himself relating one or two humorous stories, and these were keenly appreciated.

After that we retired into Norman Gower's comfortable little smoking-den—really his study, an apartment reserved specially for his use when at home. There was a small fire burning in the grate, and the autumn day was drawing to a close, the dusk already being deep.

"By Jove! I'm glad you came, Mr. Blake," said Gower, as he passed round a box of cigarettes. "Your presence has made a wonderful change already. After all, there's no reason why we should despair, and glum faces won't help my poor father to recover. Would you like to see him?"

Sexton Blake nodded.

"I should," he replied. "But I think it would be as well for Dr. Woodhouse to go up first, in order to ascertain the patient's condition. By the way, Mr. Gower, what do the servants know?"

"Well, nothing actually," replied Norman.

"They are in ignorance of last night's mysterious affair?"

"Not exactly in ignorance," replied our client. "They understand that Sir Robert had a stroke of some kind, and that he is

now confined to his bed. We have certainly allowed no hint to drop that the dad's brain is affected."

"That is quite excellent," said Sexton Blake. "It would be distressing for you all if the whole countryside knew the actual truth. And you were most wise in refraining from going to the police. In a case of this sort the police would really be more trouble than they are worth. I have nothing to say against them; they are splendid fellows, generally speaking, but they have their limitations. There has been no actual crime that we can lay our finger upon, and therefore a private investigation is far more satisfactory."

Dr. Woodhouse nodded.

"I agree with you heartily, Mr. Blake," he declared. "If you'll wait a short while I will just run up to Sir Robert. I am hoping that Lady Gower's information is correct—that Sir Robert is peacefully sleeping."

The old doctor bustled out, and Blake made no attempt to sit down.

"I am rather keen to have a look at the library," he explained, when Norman gave him a questioning glance. "There is—or was—a sensation of horror connected with that apartment, Mr. Gower. I should like to experience it."

"We might as well go at once," said Norman gravely. "But, to tell you the truth, I am half scared of entering that room. I don't mind admitting it, either. I don't think I'm afraid of any man living; but that room—"

Norman broke off, and gave a slight shiver. He led the way to the door, and we followed. Sexton Blake, I know, was as keen as mustard on this thing, and he wanted to drag the truth to light at the earliest possible moment.

We passed along the stately hall, and turned into a massive, imposing doorway, over which hung a magnificent stag's head, with superb antlers. The whole hall, in fact, was full of such specimens.

The library was gloomy as we entered, for the lights had not been lit. It was a noble apartment, superbly furnished. Our feet sunk into the soft pile of the costly carpet, and I noted the well-furnished bookcases on every side.

The furniture was all of the Tudor period. The whole library, in fact, was modelled after that fashion, everything being appropriate and fitting. There were French windows, however, and these were fairly modern. Sexton Blake stood in the centre of the library and looked round him. Norman and I remained close by, and waited.

"Really, Mr. Gower, I must confess that the apartment does not strike me in the way you intimated," said Sexton Blake. "It is quite a stately apartment, and there is no suggestion of horror—"

"I do not say there is, Mr. Blake," interrupted Norman quickly. "That sensation has entirely disappeared now. I do not pretend to understand why; but I must say that this room has terrible memories for me."

"I can quite appreciate that point, Mr. Gower," said Sexton Blake quietly.

He walked over to the far end of the room, which was practically in darkness. I stepped forward until I stood in the centre, and watched the gov'nor casually. He was evidently intent upon examining a deep recess, which was partially concealed by heavy tapestry curtains.

Personally, the room looked a jolly fine one to me, and there was nothing rummy about the "feel" of it. I reckoned that I should be quite comfortable, squatting in one of the big chairs, reading a book. As for horror, the very idea of it was quite incongruous.

And then my attention became fixed upon the gov'nor.

He had pulled the curtains back, with the obvious intention of exploring the space behind. He turned his head towards me at the same moment, and I stared hard. For an expression of horror had come into his eyes, and his face had paled.

Not only this, but I swear that he was looking positively scared.

"What's wrong, gov'nor?" I shouted, running forward.

"I don't know, Tinker!" rapped out Blake, his voice as hard as steel. "Stand back, young 'un, there's something devilish about this."

I was by his side now, and although I was firmly determined to keep myself in hand, a mad desire came over me to turn tail and flee from the library like a frightened rabbit. I do believe that my hair actually commenced standing on end. This, of course, is only a saying; the real cause is contraction

of the scalp, I believe, caused by the skin going "goosey," or something. I may not be right, but this is no time for entering upon such matters.

The fact was this, however. As soon as I stood by Sexton Blake's side I felt utterly terrified. I knew he felt something of the same sensation. It was mad—preposterous. Why on earth should we be scared like a couple of kids?

The curtain was slightly held aside, where Blake held it, and I fancied that I saw a horrible face leering at me from the blackness beyond. But this, I was convinced, was merely a trick of my excited imagination.

Swish!

Sexton Blake hurled the curtain aside with a quick movement, and flashed the brilliant light of an electric torch into the deep recess. It was empty—absolutely bare. And the gov'nor gave a short laugh which, however, was charged with uneasiness and uncertainty.

"Well, Tinker?" he said in a husky voice.

"What does it mean, gov'nor?" I panted. "Oh, I'm—I'm scared!"

For me to make an admission of that sort was rather remarkable. I've been scared on other occasions, but I've generally kept it to myself. Just now I couldn't control myself, and felt like bolting.

The brilliant light made no difference; it did not dispel that awful sensation. Yet there was nothing to be seen—there was nothing tangible. The air itself was sweet and pure—indeed, the French windows were wide open at that very moment, and had been open all day. And the feeling was not in the air at all—it was the room itself.

I must confess that I am quite incapable of describing the actual experience. It was just too horrible for words. The strange dread of the library was something beyond our ken, so to speak.



It was as though the mysterious Thing of the night before had entered the apartment and had befouled it. But why only in that quarter of the room? The case was more like one of "haunting" than I had ever experienced.

We left the library, Norman Gower pale and shaky.

"Well, Mr. Blake, you've felt that terrible dread yourself now!" he said, as we stood in the hall. "What do you make of it?"

Sexton Blake shrugged his shoulders.

"I make nothing of it," he replied frankly. "It is most extraordinary, but there is probably a commonplace explanation—although I confess it does not seem very obvious at the moment."

"Haven't you any inkling, gov'nor—" I began.

"I prefer to say nothing, Tinker," interrupted Blake. "The whole matter needs careful thought and very close investigation. I may as well tell you, though, that I suspect devilry of some sort. The theory of supernatural agency I positively refuse to credit. Ah! Here is Dr. Woodhouse!"

The old doctor was just descending the stairs, rubbing his hands with satisfaction. He paused, however, when he caught sight of our faces.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed. "Has anything happened?"

"We've been in the library, sir," I said huskily. "It's—it's ghastly."

In a few moments Dr. Woodhouse heard of our experience from Sexton Blake, and he looked very grave and worried. Then his expression cleared, and he smiled.

"After all, there is nothing new in what has happened," he said. "And you are now

on the spot, Mr. Blake. I have absolute confidence in your powers of investigation and implicit faith in your ability."

The gov'nor smiled.

"You are exceedingly complimentary, Dr. Woodhouse," he said. "I guarantee no satisfactory solution, but I will do my best. I judge, from your expression a few moments ago, that Sir Robert is showing signs of improvement."

"I would go so far as to say that, Mr. Blake," replied the doctor. "Sir Robert, however, is certainly no worse—and that is quite satisfactory. He is not asleep now, but laying comfortably in an easy-chair. Would you like to come up, Mr. Blake?"

"Please," said the gov'nor.

I followed him upstairs, as a matter of course, half expecting him to order me down at any moment. But this unfortunate event did not occur, and we were ushered into Sir Robert Gower's stately bed-chamber, Norman following closely behind.

The room was illuminated by means of a shaded lamp, and Sir Robert reposed in the depths of a big easy-chair. Close by a small table sat an elderly woman in the uniform of a nurse. She had been procured by Lady Gower that morning, and was a trusted servant of the family, having attended the Gowers in cases of illness for years past.

Sexton Blake walked over to the chair, and stood looking down at the famous shipowner—yesterday a man in the prime of health, and to-day a pitiful object with his mental powers utterly disorganised.

Sir Robert was quiet, and this was a cause for great relief; there was no necessity to have him conveyed to a convalescent home—or, in plainer language, a lunatic asylum. He was completely passive.

He sat there with his eyes wide open, and he was muttering to himself continuously, although there was nothing coherent in what he said. In his deep eyes there was an expression of fright—horror!

"Poor Sir Robert does not understand anything that is said to him," remarked the nurse softly. "He cannot even answer any questions, and he has not spoken a rational word since I arrived. Oh, Mr. Norman, wouldn't it be better to send for a brain specialist?"

"I am content to leave the matter in Mr. Sexton Blake's hands," replied Norman quietly. "Indeed, I believe Mr. Blake to be every bit as clever as any two brain specialists put together."

The gov'nor made no sign of having recognised this compliment. He was too busily engaged in examining the patient. After about five minutes he stood upright, his expression very thoughtful.

"Thank you, Mr. Gower," he said.

"You have formed a theory—"

"Not yet," interrupted Blake. "Sir Robert betrays symptoms which are decidedly interesting. He had received a great shock, resulting in the temporary derangement of his mental balance—"

"Temporary?" said Norman quickly.

"Then—then you hope for a recovery?"

"I think it highly probable that Sir Robert will eventually be restored to his normal health," said Sexton Blake. "It will be a slow process, and you must not be unduly optimistic, my dear sir. Your father has received such a shock that a quick recovery is quite out of the question. It will be many months before he is fully restored. At the same time, there is just a chance that rational thought will return to him for fleeting intervals quite soon."

Norman was greatly gladdened by the news. Dr. Woodhouse had intimated something of the sort, but Blake's corroboration was most welcome. Down in the young man's study the gov'nor thoughtfully lit a cigarette.

"The library puzzles me," he said, as he sank into a chair. "Honestly, Gower, I can't make head or tail of it. Nobody is to be blamed for conjecturing all manners of wild theories."

"The library has rather a sinister history," remarked Dr. Woodhouse, as he was preparing to leave. "There are stories told of murder galore in that apartment, Mr. Blake—this is a very old house, you must remember. Dukes and other aristocrats have met their fate within these ancient walls."

Sexton Blake smiled.

"That is quite interesting," he said, "but I do not accept any explanation which includes the supernatural. No, gentlemen, this mystery is capable of being elucidated, and I intend getting to work without a moment's undue delay."

"How?" asked Norman eagerly.

"That, my dear Gower, is a question which I cannot answer for the moment," replied Sexton Blake. "I am mystified, but careful inquiries will probably clear away the fog, and enable me to see the light."

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Amazing Disappearance of Sexton Blake.

DINNER was a very quiet meal. The ladies were certainly more cheerful than they had been. Norman had reported to them the glad tidings that Sir Robert would probably recover. And this, as can be readily understood, was most welcome. It would be absurd to say, however, that the feeling of gloom had been dispelled. Not only was there the shock of Sir Robert's condition to worry over, but there was also a general air of uneasiness, occasioned by the mysterious nature of the previous night's occurrence.

What awful sight had Sir Robert seen? And what guarantee was there that the monster, whatever it was, would not return? It was only natural that everybody should feel uneasy, and that they should have a dread of what might occur.

After dinner Blake suggested a game of billiards, and soon we adjourned to the billiard-room, and the gov'nor attempted to steady his host's nerves by playing several games. Dr. Woodhouse had been persuaded to stay to dinner, and he also remained for a game of billiards.

It was rather late when he finally took his departure, and when Norman adjourned to the drawing-room, where his mother and fiancée were sitting. Sexton Blake and I did not accompany him, as the gov'nor had expressed a wish to take a walk. And so he and I ventured out into the darkness of the autumn night.

"Well, Tinker, we have a somewhat mysterious affair to deal with," said Sexton Blake, as we paced along the terrace. "The most worrying feature is that we have no actual starting point for an investigation. What was this extraordinary thing which Norman saw last night? Did he actually see anything at all?"

"He seems very positive, gov'nor."

"I think we may take it, then, that somebody was prowling about the grounds last night," continued Blake. "As to the identity of that somebody, we are quite in the dark—and must remain in the dark at present."

"What do you make of the library, gov'nor?" I asked. "I've never felt such an awful sensation of horror. I almost thought that I saw a dreadful face in that beastly recess."

"Really, Tinker?" said the gov'nor. "That is rather curious, because something of the same character occurred to me. I saw no face, but everything was distorted and ghastly. Yet, as we know, the recess was empty."

"I don't believe in ghosts, gov'nor—"

"Then don't mention them!" snapped Blake sharply. "There is no ghost here, Tinker, so you needn't allow your mind to run riot. And have your revolver ready in case of emergency. Don't shoot unless we are attacked."

That remark of the gov'nor's made me look round into the gloom rather uneasily. I had overlooked the point, but it was quite on the cards that we ourselves should encounter the strange monster which had haunted the grounds the previous night. I felt for my revolver, and rubbed the butt of it affectionately.

The night was very dark, and the drive, down which we were now walking, was very black indeed. Statary trees arose on either side, and hemmed in our line of vision to a considerable extent.

Just beyond the trees on the left the heath stretched away into the distance, as I had noted upon arrival. The drive did not run through the centre of the park to Trevis Wold, but practically skirted its edge. Thus, on one side of the drive the park bore away for a mile or two, and on the other side of the drive lay the bare, deserted heath.

"I really think our best course will be to—" Sexton Blake paused abruptly, and stood staring into the undergrowth near by. At the same moment a curiously sickly odour assailed my nostrils—something which was disgusting and unearthly. And I shivered involuntarily.

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"What's up, gov'nor?" I breathed. "I thought I saw something!" muttered Blake. "A squirrel, perhaps, or—"

He paused again, and this time the reason was obvious. A figure had silently moved among the trees, and I stared at it with a fixed gaze. It was a mere blob—shapeless in the gloom—but I seemed to note two enormous horn-like projections from the head. And I felt immovable with dread.

"Who are you?" shouted the gov'nor sharply. "Come out here and show yourself!"

There was no reply, but the figure continued moving.

"Don't be alarmed, Tinker," whispered Blake. "A poacher, probably. Ah! He is moving away! Quick, Tinker!"

Sexton Blake dived into the trees, and I followed him blindly. By this time I had my gun in my fingers, but it wasn't of much use to me, for my hand was shaking badly. We managed to get through the strip of woodland, and then the heath came into view beyond the low fencing which divided off the Trevis Wold property.

The gov'nor leapt over the fence, and I followed.

The mysterious Thing was moving across the heath ahead of us, and Sexton Blake gave chase at amazing speed. I followed, but couldn't keep pace. I don't mind admitting that I was nearly scared out of my wits during those first few moments. But then, abruptly, my coolness returned, and I angrily called myself a funk.

Pressing my elbows into my sides I rushed forward with a burst, intending to catch up with the gov'nor—who was now within measurable distance of his quarry. But disaster overtook me.

I failed to see a projecting root near the ground, and the toe of my boot caught against it as I was running full tilt.

Crash!

I went down with a terrific jar, which shook every bone in my body. But I was up again within five seconds—I'll swear that. I stared into the gloom ahead, wondering if Sexton Blake had outpaced the fugitive.

And then I gasped, forgetting all my aches and pains.

The heath was bare—neither Sexton Blake nor the thing he was following were to be seen! Both had disappeared within the space of ten seconds at the most! I jumped to my feet, swaying, and started dizzily forward.

I believed that Blake had caught the Unknown, and was even now struggling on the ground. But I rushed forward and saw nothing but the bare heath around me. I was absolutely alone!

The keen night wind beat against my cheek—which, I have no doubt, was ashen pale. I tried to gather my scattered wits together, and succeeded in partially doing so. What did this incident mean?

What was the object which we had seen, which the gov'nor had chased, and what was the cause of that uncanny odour on the drive? All these things, happening so swiftly one after the other, drove me nearly to distraction.

And now Sexton Blake had vanished as though into thin air!

I still thought that he might have stumbled down, just as I had—but that he had knocked his head. I scouted round erratically at first, wandering about haphazard, in a state bordering upon panic.

But then I pulled myself together, and worked upon a system. Fighting down the wild desire to look over my shoulder every second, I worked round in circles, widening the field of radius every time.

My electric torch showed up the ground immediately ahead as clearly as daylight. But in spite of all my efforts, there was not the faintest trace of the gov'nor. And I began to get scared more than ever—horribly scared.

For there was no place where Sexton Blake could have vanished to. The heath was bare, no trees being within four or five hundred yards—and these were the trees of Trevis Park, which had been behind me as I ran after Blake. Everywhere else the ground was level and unbroken, except for occasional patches of gorse and heather.

There was no hollow or gully into which the gov'nor could have stumbled. Straight ahead, in the direction he had been taking, the heath went straight on, and there was scarcely cover for a rabbit.

And yet both Sexton Blake and the Unknown had vanished into thin air!

My alarm was terrible, for the whole thing was uncanny. A creepy feeling stole over

me, although I strove hard to thrust it aside. I was like a kid in the dark, who suddenly feels frightened by the surrounding gloom; I wanted to rush away, helter-skelter, blindly and madly.

I seemed to feel that awful thing just behind my back, and I turned like lightning on several occasions, only to see the heath before me.

"Pull yourself together, you idiot!" I snapped between my teeth.

I did so, and realised that my best course would be to hurry back to Trevis Wold and get help. What else could I do? To remain here was useless, for I was simply wasting time. And as I hurried back I had an idea that I should be wasting time in searching again. Sexton Blake wasn't there, so how could I hope to locate him—even with a hundred helpers?

The whole incident was amazingly mysterious, and I was so worried that all thoughts of danger to myself were cast aside. Sexton Blake had gone without leaving the slightest trace. And I fiercely blamed the gov'nor for not having brought Pedro down. The old dog would have settled the point without delay.

I found Norman Gower in his study, waiting for us to return. Lady Gower and Miss Joyce had already gone to bed, and the great house was still and silent. Yet the hour was comparatively early, ten-thirty having only just struck.

"What on earth's the matter, Tinker?" demanded Norman sharply.

"The gov'nor's disappeared!" I panted, clutching at the table.

"Disappeared!" echoed Norman, aghast. "Here, hold up, Tinker! You're as white as a sheet, and—"

"I'm all right!" I interrupted. "Listen!" As quickly as possible I told him what had happened. Norman heard me out without a word, and then he looked very grim.

"Are you sure you were only on the ground for five seconds?" he asked.

"Less, if anything!"

"If you're absolutely positive, the whole thing's uncanny," said Norman. "But when a chap falls like that he's liable to lose count of time—and you might have been on the ground dazed, for two or three minutes—just as I was. You thought only five seconds elapsed, but it might have been five hundred. And by that time, of course, Mr. Blake had disappeared naturally—chasing that queer thing you saw."

I shook my head impatiently.

"No, it wasn't that," I said. "I didn't catch my head on anything—I wasn't even dazed, Mr. Gower. I just flopped over, and was up again immediately. I'll swear to that. The gov'nor vanished in some other way."

"All right. We'll go and look," said Norman briskly.

He went and secured a couple of big lanterns, and with these alight we hurried down the drive, worked our way through the trees, and reached the heath. I was vaguely hoping to see Sexton Blake at any moment. But he didn't appear.

Well, we searched. The result was more disquieting than ever. For, just against a low-growing patch of gorse, we found Sexton Blake's cap! Not only this, but his fountain-pen and a couple of pencils. These, no doubt, had been jerked out of his pocket in some way or other.

"Perhaps he's somewhere near by?" suggested Norman huskily.

We searched again. We even looked into the gorse itself, but our quest was fruitless. Sexton Blake was not to be found.

"I don't know what to do—I don't know what the dickens to do!" I exclaimed helplessly. "Oh, this is awful! What's happened to the gov'nor? I wouldn't mind so much if any feasible explanation was possible. But there isn't one; we're facing a thing which is absolutely impossible!"

"What do you mean, Tinker?"

"Why, no man—no human being—could have gone out of sight on this bare, level ground in less than five minutes," I replied grimly. "And yet both the gov'nor and that awful Thing went like a puff of smoke. They couldn't have done it, Mr. Gower—and yet they're not to be found."

"It's rather ghastly, Tinker," said Norman, in a shaky voice.

"And what can we do?" I went on. "If Pedro was here, he'd soon settle the point. I might send a wire to somebody in London, but that's impossible until the morning. One of the gov'nor's friends—Mr. Lee, for example—wouldn't mind bringing Pedro down, but I can't communicate with him."

"Who's Mr. Lee?"

I looked at Norman impatiently in my anxiety.

"Mr. Lee?" I repeated. "He's a detective—lives in Gray's Inn Road with Nipper, his assistant. Two of the best, and they'd come to my help in a second if they knew. Mr. Lee could fetch Pedro from Baker Street in next to no time, and he'd be down here in about a couple of hours."

"But there's no train—"

"Nelson Lee's racing-car is quicker than any train," I broke in. "But what's the good of talking, Mr. Gower? We can't do anything till the morning. We're done—we're absolutely helpless."

"There's the telephone, of course—"

began Norman. "Telephone!" I yelled, clutching his arm. "Great Scotland Yard! That's better than all the telegraphs in the world! Where have my brains got to? I'd forgotten that you were on the 'phone here! We'll ring up at once!"

Gower caught some of my enthusiasm, and we raced back to Trevis Wold at the double. The finding of Sexton Blake's cap, pencils, and fountain-pen proved beyond doubt that he had met with some disaster.

But to search for him on that heath was an impossible task—it would be like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. But if Pedro could only be brought to the spot he would follow Blake's train as true as a die. What awful idiots we had been to leave him behind!

I found that the telephone was installed in the hall, and within two minutes I had got through to the Exchange. It was a trunk call to London, of course, and during the daytime the process of getting through would be somewhat lengthy. Between eleven and twelve at night, I received a reply within six minutes.

"Hallo!" came a faint voice.

"Is that you, Nipper?" I shouted eagerly.

"Can't you see it's me?" said Nipper humorously. "What's up with the 'phone, Tinker. I can recognise your sweet voice in spite of the buzzing. You sound as if you were a hundred miles away, instead of at Baker Street. The guv'nor and I have just got back from a theatre—"

"Is Mr. Lee there?" I asked quickly.

"Yes."

"Then let me speak to him, for goodness sake!" I said rapidly. "Don't be offended, old son—something alarming has happened. I'm not in London, but in Suffolk, and I want you to buzz down for all you're worth!"

"We're the fellows for you!" said Nipper promptly. "Hang on!"

There was a moment's silence, during which I shot a triumphant glance at Norman Gower, who was standing close beside me. I had hardly dared hope that Nelson Lee and Nipper would be at home—but I didn't count my chickens before they were hatched. Nelson Lee might not be able to grant my request.

"Hallo!" came a voice over the wire, which was now clearer.

"That you, Mr. Lee?" I asked quickly.

"Yes, Tinker. You appear to be in trouble."

"I am, sir, terrible trouble," I replied. "And I want you to do me a tremendous favour if you will. The guv'nor has disappeared under queer circumstances, and we haven't got Pedro with us."

"But where do I come in?" asked Nelson Lee. "Do you want me to fetch Pedro—"

"That's it, sir!" I said rapidly. "I'm at Trevis Wold, near Long Melford, in Suffolk, the home of Sir Robert Gower. Long Melford is only just over the Essex border, and you can get down here between one and two, if you come in your racer. And the matter's terribly urgent, sir."

"Blake has disappeared, I understand?"

"Yes, sir, and only Pedro can be of any use," I replied. "We didn't bring him down with us—but that's always the case. When we have taken him somewhere he's never been wanted, and now that we haven't got him I want him more badly than I've ever done before. I'm half off my head with—"

"All right, Tinker," came Nelson Lee's crisp voice. "Nipper and I will get down to Trevis Wold the instant we can—we'll start at once, and, barring accidents, I'll guarantee to get down there by one-thirty. Just be patient. I'll hear the full yarn when I arrive."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" I gasped. "You're a brick!"

"Not at all. I'm quite keen to lend a hand," replied Lee. "Good-bye!"

"Good-bye, sir!"

I hung up the receiver, and turned a flushed face to Norman Gower.

"Mr. Lee's coming down!" I exclaimed, breathing hard. "Nipper's coming down as well, and they're going to bring Pedro. It's miles better than ringing up the police, and Mr. Lee's promised to be here by half-past one."

Norman glanced at the stately hall clock.

"Impossible!" he exclaimed. "Why, it's twenty minutes to twelve now, and Mr. Lee will have to go to Baker Street to fetch Pedro. It'll be three o'clock before he gets here, Tinker, or later."

I smiled grimly.

"You don't know Mr. Lee," I replied. "That car of his is practically as good as the guv'nor's own racer, and it can shift like express trains. If Pedro isn't delivered here by one-thirty, it'll be because of a mishap of some sort."

We had done all that lay within our power, and now nothing remained but to wait. A startling adventure was to occur, however, before Nelson Lee and Nipper arrived upon the scene.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

In the Stillness of the Night.

SLEEP was out of the question—at least, I thought so at first. Norman Gower and I sat in his cosy little study. The night was rather chilly now, and the cheerful fire made us feel all the more comfortable.

Lady Gower and Miss Walton knew nothing of what had happened, and this was all the better. There was no need for them to be worried, as we were. I tried to read, but couldn't concentrate my thoughts for a moment.

Norman attempted to soothe me, and, although I appreciated his efforts, they were quite useless. The guv'nor had met with some terrible fate, and I was wildly restless. I wanted to be on the move the whole time, but knew that nothing could be done until Nelson Lee arrived with Pedro.

At last, tired out, I flung myself into a chair and sat gazing into the fire. I suppose the flickering flames, and the comfort of the chair, lulled me off. At all events, I was soon dozing.

Norman sat opposite to me, and he smoked away in silence, his nerves on edge, and listening intently for any slight sound—although he knew what to expect, or what he was listening for.

Meanwhile there was another member of the household very wakeful. This was Miss Joyce Walton, who knew nothing of the recent events.

She had extinguished her light and attempted to sleep. But she lay in bed with open eyes and thought of Norman. Truth to tell, she was worried about him, fearing that something would occur to harm him.

At last, unable to sleep, she decided to relight the lamp and to get a book. But while she was sitting up in bed she started slightly. The window was wide open, and she fancied that she heard a slight sound upon the terrace outside. Her heart beating quickly, she slipped out of bed and softly crossed to the window, pulling aside the heavy curtains.

The ledge was low, and she was able to bend over and gaze down upon the terrace. Everything was quiet, and the night intensely dark. For some few moments the girl stood there, the night wind fanning her face, and she told herself that what she had heard must have been some ordinary, commonplace sound.

But just at that moment she started and stared downwards.

It seemed to her that something had moved down upon the steps; as though a part of the blackness, more intensely black than the other, had moved along. And a faint sound, as of a stone being shifted, came to her ears.

The girl was quite certain now that she had not been mistaken. There was somebody outside. Further, the gleam from a window further along proved that a light was burning in Norman's little study. Joyce concluded that her fiancé was still chatting with Sexton Blake and me.

And she was vaguely alarmed.

What was that she had seen? Who had caused the slight, mysterious sound? It was a time for action, and Joyce was a girl who believed in prompt measures. She could not

forget what had occurred in the library the previous night, and the dreadful thought came to her that the strange monster was again prowling about.

Without lighting her lamp, she quickly wrapped a thick woollen dressing-gown round herself, and donned a pair of silk slippers. Then she crossed to the door, opened it, and passed out on to the great landing.

A single light was still burning at the end, and Joyce moved forward to the head of the staircase. Norman Gower, at the same moment, appeared down in the hall. Sitting in his room, listening intently, he had heard the slight sounds caused by the girl overhead, and he had come out to investigate.

"Why, Joyce, what on earth are you doing?" he asked, gazing upstairs in astonishment. "I thought you were fast asleep—"

"Come here, Norman—quickly!" called the girl.

Gower rapidly mounted the stairs, and gazed at the girl in wonderment.

"Anything wrong, darling?" he asked, seeing her troubled look.

"I don't know, Norman," she replied. "I believe I heard something outside on the terrace—"

"What nonsense!" laughed Gower. "You are nervous, little girl, that's what's the matter with you. Go back to your room and get straight to sleep. There's nothing whatever the matter."

Even as he uttered the words, he felt that they were not convincing. And this was because he, himself, was considerably startled. Joyce was not a girl of fancies, and if she had heard something outside, it was pretty certain that something was there.

But he had no intention of telling her anything about the disappearance of Sexton Blake. By the morning, if fortune smiled, Blake would be back again, and then there would be no need to worry anybody. But if he told Joyce now she certainly wouldn't get any further sleep during the whole night.

"Oh, but Norman, I am positive I heard something!" she protested. "Would you go to Mr. Blake's room and tell him—"

"There's no need to worry Mr. Blake at all," said Norman soothingly. "He may be asleep by this time— Oh, by George!"

This explanation was occasioned by my appearance at the bottom of the stairs. I had only been dozing, and Norman had left the door open. The voices aroused me at once, and I had come out to investigate.

"Anything wrong up there?" I inquired.

"Why, it's Tinker!" exclaimed the girl. "I believe you've been telling me a fib, Norman. Mr. Blake isn't in his room at all!"

"I didn't say he was," smiled Gower. "My dear little girl, go back to bed and don't worry your head. If there's anything wrong—and I don't believe there is—you can rely upon us dealing with it. What do you say, Tinker?"

"Rather!" I agreed. "But what's the trouble?"

"Miss Walton thinks that she heard something on the terrace—"

"I did hear something, Norman," insisted the girl. "I saw something, too—close by the library window."

I laughed heartily.

"Why, can't I stroll outside to take a breath of fresh air?" I asked, grinning. "Fancy you mistaking me for something awful, Miss Walton! There's no need to be alarmed in the slightest."

Norman stared down at me, but didn't give the game away. And Joyce gave a short laugh and half turned.

"How silly of me!" she exclaimed. "I thought— Oh, I don't know what I really did think. Good-night, Tinker—good-night, Norman!"

"Good-night, you little silly!" laughed Gower. "Get straight to sleep."

She hurried away, and we heard her door close. Then Norman came slowly downstairs and faced me in the hall. I noted at that moment that the clock was pointing to twenty minutes past one.

"That was rather a good idea of yours, Tinker," said Norman softly. "It has made Joyce easy in mind, at all events."

"I didn't say I'd been out on the terrace, but she took it to mean that," I remarked. "I say, it looks as though something's afoot, Mr. Gower. Or do you suppose that Miss Walton fancied it?"

"She never fancies things, Tinker, she's not that sort," said Norman grimly. "No, she heard something outside against the library. What do you think we'd better do? I'm hanged if I care for the job of explor-



Gower was kneeling in the centre of the room when I staggered in, and he was staring at the window—at me, it seemed—with an expression of the utmost terror in his eyes. (See page 8.)

ing. I'm not nervous, but that room gives me the shudders."

"I think we'd better have a look," I said. "It's a rotten job, but we've got those two lanterns, and this revolver isn't such a bad companion. We're in charge at present, and it's up to us to get busy."

Norman Gower nodded. "You're right, Tinker," he said briskly. "Light the lamps!"

They were soon burning, and then we went to the library door and opened it. We entered, holding the lanterns level with our faces, and peering forward intently into the black shadows of the great room. I had my revolver in my hand, and I was in grim earnest.

But the library was as silent as the grave, and the only sounds we heard were caused by the splutter of the lamps and our own breathing. The "feel" of the library was quite normal, and I didn't seem to be at all scared—as I had expected to be.

This was rather curious. During the daylight I had felt simply awful in that mysterious apartment. But now, in the stillness of the night—when one would naturally expect to be on the jumps—the room had no terrors. It was just an ordinary apartment.

"Nothing here!" I murmured. "How do you feel, Mr. Gower?"

"Quite all right," replied Norman.

Just to make sure, we went completely round the room. I hesitated before having a look into the deep, curtained recess, but I plucked up my courage and did so. There was none of that dread sensation now, and I began to wonder why on earth it should have assailed the gov'nor and I earlier.

This thought reminded me of Sexton Blake's amazing disappearance, and all my anxiety for Nelson Lee to arrive was revived. I swung the lamp round and walked towards the door.

"If Miss Walton heard something it must have been somewhere else," I remarked. "Let's go back to your room, Mr. Gower, and get our overcoats. I vote we stroll outside and wait for Mr. Lee. He ought to be here very soon—if he's going to keep to his schedule."

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Norman nodded, and we both left the library.

"Blow the lamps out and put them down on the floor," said Gower, handing me his. "I'll be in my room."

He went off down the hall, and I very soon turned the lamps out and carried them across to the place where they had been resting. Then I turned and walked down to Norman's little "den."

I pushed the door open, thinking deeply at the same time. And then I gave a sheer gasp of horror. It wasn't what I saw, but what I felt. That same sensation which the gov'nor and I had experienced in the library came over me now—terribly intensified.

I was almost rooted to the ground with absolute terror. Loathsome creatures seemed to dance before my eyes, and everything in the room was distorted and horrible.

And there, in the very centre of the apartment, stood Norman Gower—transfixed. His face was towards the window, which was now wide open, with the curtains pushed completely aside.

Something had entered during our short absence!

That awful monster had come in from the black night outside. Its presence had polluted this room exactly as it had polluted the library. What was more, Norman must have seen it!

With a terrific effort I pulled myself together, and clenched my fists.

"Mr. Gower!" I gasped hoarsely—"Mr. Gower!"

But he took no notice of me; he remained in the same position, staring—staring out into the blackness.

And then sheer, unreasoning terror took possession of me. I was absolutely beside myself, and I dashed forward with a husky scream of horror. It was almost stifled in my throat, and the sound itself was insignificant. I staggered across blindly, caring nothing for anything or anybody. In that terrible moment of panic I would have left Gower to face certain death unaided.

That's just the simple fact. I was unable to control myself, and all I thought about was fleeing from that horrific room. I fell headlong through the window out on to the

terrace. It was no ordinary exit; I blundered out blindly and desperately.

For a full minute I lay stretched upon the ground—or, perhaps, it wasn't a minute, but a mere fraction of one. I do know, however, that it seemed hours to me. And the ghastly sensation left me shivering and icy, as though cold water had been flung over my trembling body.

A sense of insufferable shame came over me, and I staggered to my feet. What had I done? I had left Norman Gower in that room, and I had not lifted a finger to aid him! I had been a coward, and—

Then I happened to glance into the lighted apartment. A fresh horror seized me, but this was quite different. My brain was clear now, free from the distorted visions which had so benumbed me before.

Gower was kneeling in the centre of the room, almost exactly as he himself had described his father's plight. And he was staring at the window—at me, it seemed—with an expression of the utmost terror in his eyes.

I took a grip on myself and moved forward. But at that precise moment I heard the steady beat of a motor-car coming upon the wind. As I turned round two points of light twinkled among the trees of the drive, and then a powerful car came booming up towards the house.

"Nelson Lee!" I panted excitedly.

Help had come, and I dreaded going back into Norman's room more than anything in the world. I rushed along the terrace and came to a halt exactly opposite the car as it pulled up. Pedro came bounding down upon me, but I pushed him aside.

"Mr. Lee—Mr. Lee!" I choked.

"Good gracious, Tinker, whatever is the matter?" shouted Nelson Lee, leaping out of the driving-seat, and clutching my arm. "Why, you're shivering as though with ague! Quick, Nipper—help me!"

I wrenched myself away.

"Mr. Gower—he's in that room!" I gasped, pointing a shaky finger. "I daren't go in—I daren't! Rescue him—for Heaven's sake, rescue him! That room is bewitched!"

"He's mad!" exclaimed Nipper quickly.

"I'm not!" I said, clutching my throat. "Don't waste time—"

"Come along, Nipper!" snapped Nelson Lee crisply.

Utterly bewildered, they dashed along the terrace, and I followed in their wake. They hadn't the faintest idea of the actual trouble, but they certainly knew that something of a terrible nature had occurred, and that it was necessary for them to act without a second's delay.

Nelson Lee reached the window first, and he stared into the lighted room.

"Good heavens!" he muttered.

Then he dived in, with Nipper close behind. With this support I followed, but it was only with a great effort that I brought myself to the point of doing so. All this may sound terribly strange, but that room caused such a feeling of ungovernable fright, that I find myself quite incapable of describing it in adequate language.

Nelson Lee and Nipper were no exceptions. One glance at their faces told me the truth; they had paled, and they were both shivering visibly. But Norman Gower was seized and dragged forcibly out into the great hall. I was the last out of the study, and I closed the door sharply behind me.

Norman was laid upon the big lounge, and Nelson Lee took out his handkerchief and wiped the cold beads of perspiration from his brow.

"What devilry is this?" he asked hoarsely. "Never in my whole life have I experienced anything so horrifying. Were you affected in the same way, Nipper?"

Nipper looked round him uneasily.

"Let's—let's get out of this house, sir!" he muttered. "It's—it's haunted, or something. Oh, my goodness!"

He sank into a chair, shaky and as pale as death. In fact, we were all in the same boat, but rapidly recovered. It was most astonishing how the colour returned to our cheeks, and how we regained our normal composure. Nelson Lee was the first to give himself a thorough shaking.

"This is absurd!" he said sharply. "Tell me, Tinker, what is the meaning of all this? Who is this young man?"

"Mr. Norman Gower, sir—Sir Robert's son," I replied. "Last night Sir Robert was driven crazy in the library, and now Norman has suffered the same fate. Oh, it's too dreadful for words."

"I don't pretend to understand you, Tinker," said Nelson Lee. "The whole thing is beyond belief. I have never been scared in my life in precisely this manner, but I was scared a few moments ago. I have heard of people suffering from a spasm of unreasoning terror, but I have never fully understood the sensation until now. I am lost in amazement."

"Same here, sir," exclaimed Nipper. "But I'm better now, thank goodness!"

"I'm awfully sorry, sir," I put in chame-faciously. "I'm afraid I made a pitiful exhibition of myself. I was frightened out of my wits, and I don't know why. I meant to keep myself in hand, but couldn't. That room simply froze the blood in my veins. It was worse before you came—a lot worse!"

"There is no necessity for you to apologise, Tinker," said Nelson Lee quietly.

"Having experienced the horror myself, I can fully appreciate what you say, and I can sympathise with you, too. I am most anxious to hear what all this means, for, I confess, I am bewildered to a point of confusion."

I passed a hand over my eyes.

"I don't know, sir," I said hoarsely. "It's like some nightmare, and I'm filled with all sorts of distorted thoughts. The gov'nor's vanished, and now poor Mr. Norman has—Oh, but where's Pedro?"

"Good gracious! I completely forgot him!" exclaimed Lee. "We left him outside, I believe."

He started moving down the hall, but I dragged at his coat.

"Don't go back to that room, sir!" I panted. "It's—it's evil! That's the only word to describe it. I'll call Pedro from the front door."

But this wasn't necessary. As soon as I had opened the door I heard a scamper, and Pedro came rushing in. There was something about him which attracted my attention at once. His tail was curled beneath his legs, and his ears hung flat against his head. He crouched at my feet, his back bristling.

"He feels it, too!" I said. "Good old Pedro—it's all right, old boy. He must have gone into that room after us, and then bolted out again," I added. "Oh, Mr. Lee, I wish to Heaven I knew what it all meant!"

There was a sound from the couch before Nelson Lee could reply. We turned, our hearts beating fast. Norman Gower was sitting up, and he was staring at us dazedly and unseeingly, his lips moving, but no sound coming from between them.

He was insane, too—driven mad by the sight of some ghastly thing which seemed as though it had come from the Pit itself!

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

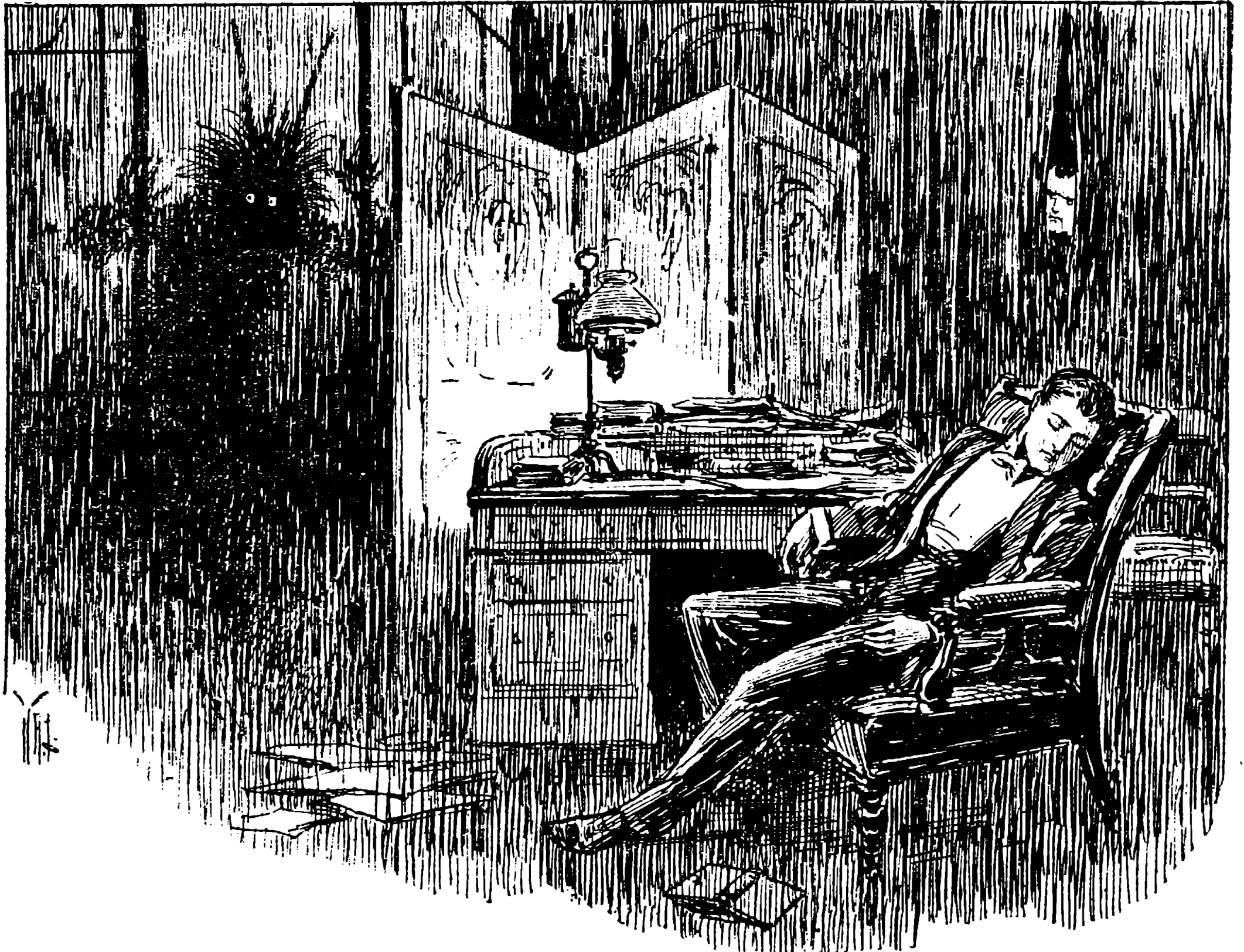
The First Tangible Clue.

NELSON LEE bent over the afflicted man concernedly.

"It's all right, Mr. Gower," he said. "There's nothing to fear now. Come, pull yourself together."

But Norman showed no sign of having heard, and made no attempt to speak.

"It's no good, sir," I said. "He's just like his father—driven out of his mind. Oh, I wish the gov'nor had been here; it wouldn't have happened then—I know it wouldn't have happened! Poor Miss Walton



The terrifying figure which appeared was hairy from head to foot, and two great horns projected from its head. Of its features only two staring eyes were visible. (See page 13.)

will be mad with worry in the morning, when she knows."

"I hope not, Tinker—I sincerely hope not," said Nelson Lee. "We don't want a third mad person, and I judge from your remarks that we already have two. Can't you give me some inkling of the truth?"

"Mr. Blake is missing—" interrupted Lee. "Tell me about Sir Robert. Tell me exactly what has happened."

Norman had laid back upon the lounge, and was quiet, his eyes having closed. And, then and there, I related to the wondering Nelson Lee and Nipper all that had happened since the arrival of the gov'nor and I on the scene. I also gave them Norman's account of the previous night's tragedy, and they listened with grave faces and intent ears.

"A most extraordinary narrative," said Nelson Lee when I had finished. "It is apparent, Tinker, that Norman saw this unknown thing before you entered his room. It must have escaped before your arrival."

"But what about that terrifying sensation, sir?" asked Nipper.

"I can form no opinion, young 'un," said Nelson Lee. "It really seems that we must engage all our attention upon setting Pedro on Sexton Blake's scent. He must be recovered at all cost. But I think we had better carry this poor young man upstairs to his bed-room straight away."

We turned to the couch, and Lee gently took Norman by the shoulder, and motioned to Nipper and I to help him. But Norman opened his eyes, and I gave a little cry. His expression was no longer blank, but intelligent.

"Hallo!" he muttered wearily. "That you, Tinker? What the deuce has happened? Who are these good people—"

"Oh, Mr. Gower, you're not insane!" I gasped out.

Norman started. "I hope not!" he exclaimed, shaking himself. "Insane! Why, of course not, Tinker. But I'm feeling confoundedly queer. Oh, I remember now—that room! I—I saw something—and then I was overcome—"

He paused, as though trying to collect his thoughts. "I suppose you are Mr. Lee?" he went on dully. "We were expecting you to arrive at any minute. Good of you to come, Mr. Lee; I'm pleased to meet you. Great Scott! What's the matter with my head?"

He stared at us in turn, and then sundered violently. "It came to my room!" he muttered. "I—I felt—felt— Oh, I can't talk about it, Tinker. Did you see? Did you feel it? I'm dazed—I'm feeling sick and ill, and everything is swimming—"

He paused, and lay back limply. His eyes were round and scared-looking, and they turned uneasily this way and that. Nelson Lee pulled out his brandy-flask and held it to Norman's lips.

"Have some of this, Mr. Gower," he said softly. "Come, pull yourself together."

Norman made an effort, took the flask, and practically deprived Nelson Lee of his whole supply. There was only about an eighth of the spirit left, although the flask had been full up.

"Have the lot!" I said cheerfully. "No good leaving that drop, Mr. Gower."

Norman smiled weakly. "I'm better now," he said, the shaking of his hands less perceptible. "Thanks awfully, Mr. Lee. That brandy was just what I wanted. What on earth is the matter with me? I seem to be as weak as a rat."

He rose from the lounge, walked forward a pace or two, and then swayed dizzily. Nipper and I grasped his arms, intending to hold him, but he shook us aside.

"That's all right. I shall be steady enough in a minute or two," he said. "Let me walk up and down for a bit. I want to get these horrible shadows out of my brain. I seem to see shapes in every dark corner."

Just for a few minutes we suspected that Gower had had a relapse, for he quickened his pace up and down the hall until he was actually running. Then he proceeded to dash about for all he was worth, waving his arms like mill-sails.

"Great Scott!" gasped Nipper. "He's got 'em again!"

Norman came to a halt, panting, and with his face flushed.

"No, I'm all right now," he announced. "I was just getting my limbs into action again. I felt as though my whole body had become numbed. Don't look at me like that, Tinker; I tell you I'm all right."

I was inclined to believe him. But he was still nervous, shaky, and rather weak. His

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reason was as sound as ever, and it was quite obvious that there was no danger of his being affected in a similar manner to Sir Robert.

"I don't remember you coming, Mr. Lee," he went on, turning to the Gray's Inn Road detective. "In fact, I'm all hazy about what happened."

"You left me here in the hall," I explained. "I was blowing out the lamps. Don't you remember?"

"Oh, yes," said Norman. "That's quite right. I went along to my den, and—and— Now, what the deuce happened after that?"

"That's what we want to know," I said eagerly.

"I went into the room, and I was instantly seized by that same horror which I experienced last night in the library," replied Norman, speaking slowly. "But this was worse, Tinker—a lot worse. And I saw something, too—something at the window. I was transfixed. I tried to move, and I tried to yell. But I couldn't do either. I just stood there helpless, and utterly frightened."

"But what did you see, Mr. Gower?" inquired Nelson Lee.

"Why, nothing—nothing at all."

"But you just said that something was at the window!"

Norman started, and then nodded.

"My mind's all mixed up," he confessed. "Yes, there was something there—out in the night. But if you were to offer me ten thousand pounds on the spot I couldn't tell you what I saw. You can't possibly understand what I felt, Mr. Lee. I believe that I really saw nothing except a figure of my own imagination—something inexpressibly awful. It wasn't human, and it wasn't animal— Besides, there were other things all round the room creeping towards me— Oh, I don't know!"

Norman covered his face with his hands. "Sounds like the D T's!" muttered Nipper into my ear.

"You silly ass!" I said severely. "I'm not sure that that description isn't near the mark, after all. I saw a lot of queer things when I was in that room, and they could only have existed in my own imagination."

Norman looked up rather awkwardly.

"I'm not usually a weak idiot like this," he apologized. "But I can't help it, Mr. Lee. I can't prevent myself. What were we talking about?"

"Your adventure in the study."

"Oh, yes, of course," said Norman. "Well, I've told you all I know. I was utterly terrified, and have only a vague recollection of you coming into the room and taking me out. I thought you were horrors from Satan's own region."

"Thanks awfully," said Nipper. "I never boasted about being handsome, but I didn't think we were quite so picturesque!"

Gower smiled.

"I didn't mean to be offensive, Nipper," he explained. "My brain was unhinged at that time, and everything was distorted and gnastly. Thank Heaven I have become sane again. I want you to understand, Mr. Lee, that it wasn't anything I saw that made me in that condition. It was the very room itself."

Nelson Lee nodded his head.

"Let me advise you to go up to bed without a moment's delay, Mr. Gower," he said briskly. "I intend to search for Mr. Sexton Blake with the help of these youngsters—and Pedro. Sleep is what you require—"

"But I shan't get any yet awhile," put in Norman. "If you think I'm going to skulk off to bed, Mr. Lee, you're on the wrong track. Sleep isn't what I require; fresh air will do me more good than anything else. Besides, I'm as anxious as anybody to help in this enterprise."

"Right!" said Nelson Lee. "You may do as you wish, of course, my dear sir. Your decision, no doubt, is really the better one. Now, Tinker, get your coat on, and we'll hurry off straight away."

I made a wry face.

"My coat's in Mr. Gower's room," I explained.

"Well, we'll go along there and fetch it," replied Lee. "As a matter of fact, I'm rather curious to have a look round. You stay here, Mr. Gower; and you, too, Nipper. We shan't be long."

Frankly, I didn't much care for the idea, but I wasn't going to back out. And Nelson Lee and I walked down the hall and opened the door of Norman's study. The light was still burning, and the fire had sunk low. But everything in the room was exactly as we had left it, the window still being wide open.

"Can—can you feel anything, sir?" I asked.

"Yes, an absurd desire to flee!" replied the detective grimly. "What is this strange fear, Tinker? I have never experienced anything of this nature before. But the sensation is not so apparent as it was formerly."

In this Nelson Lee was right, but the room still gave me the horrors. I seized my coat, and Norman's in addition. Then, after another look round, Lee and I went back. We found Gower and Nipper waiting anxiously.

"Everything seems all right," I remarked. "There's still a rotten 'feel' about the room, and I wouldn't stay an hour in there for all I could see. It reminds me of some ghost stories I read some months ago."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Your remark is quite fitting, Tinker," he said. "There have been many cases of haunting recorded where nothing was visible, and nothing apparent to the sense of smell or touch. This case appears to be one of that character—"

"But you don't believe in ghosts, Mr. Lee?" asked Norman quickly.

"By no means," replied Nelson Lee. "If you will remember, I said this case appears to be one of that nature. But appearances are not always reliable. No, Mr. Gower, I share Blake's view, and positively decline to consider any supernatural explanation. The truth is somewhere, and it is our task to bring it to light."

Norman and I donned our overcoats, and then we opened the big hall door and sallied out into the night. There had been more delay than I cared about, for it was now within a minute or two of two o'clock. But, considering the startling adventure which had preceded, a delay of some sort had been unavoidable.

"I haven't had time to thank you yet, Mr. Lee," I said suddenly. "It was splendid of you to come down so promptly. And you must have broken all records, too."

"And nearly broke the car as well!" grinned Nipper. "I thought it was my last journey on earth. The way we swung round corners was worse than all the haunted rooms in—England! I thought we were doomed!"

"And is that all the trust you impose in me, Nipper?" asked Lee smilingly.

"Well, sir, I wasn't thinking much about trusting anybody," replied Nipper. "We were going at such a rate that I mistook all the milestones for a continuous fence—"

"That will do!" cut in Lee. "I am surprised at you, Nipper. I'm surprised that you should have the audacity to give voice to such an aged chestnut—to say nothing of gross exaggeration. We only passed one milestone every minute!"

"Well, that's fast enough, I should think," I remarked. "You got down here safely, and that's the main thing. Come along, Pedro."

I had Sexton Blake's cap with me, and Pedro only needed one sniff to make him intensely eager. He had got over his uneasiness by this time, and loped off down the drive, with the bunch of us in close attendance.

I led him over the ground which Sexton Blake and I had covered during our walk. Then Pedro dived in amongst the trees, and soon emerged upon the open heath. It was fortunate that I had a leash to hold him back, or he would have streaked off ahead and outdistanced us hopelessly.

As it was, we all hurried on, and now our interest increased with every second that passed. We arrived at the point where I had tumbled down, and it was here that the real search commenced.

For I knew that Sexton Blake had been at that spot, but had no trace of him after. Pedro, being blessed with a keener sense of smell than mine, pressed on, and achieved a result in a few minutes which might have taken us whole days. That's just where Pedro came in. He relied upon his nose, and we were obliged to rely upon our eyesight. And in a case like this the nose was an easy winner.

Pedro pressed on, but not for many yards. He went straight towards a big clump of gorse—one that stretched for several yards in each direction. And he attempted to climb right into it, failed, and stood barking.

"Mr. Blake must have jumped clean across," I said quickly.

"I don't think he could have managed it, Tinker," replied Lee. "At the same time, we'll take Pedro round the other side."

This was done, but Pedro sniffed about in vain, and made eager attempts to get back

to the opposite side of the gorse. We stood flashing the light of our lanterns—for we had brought them with us—over the gorse.

"This is jolly queer," I said. "We looked into this clump, didn't we, Mr. Gower?"

"Yes—and there's nothing there," replied Norman. "You can see for yourself, Mr. Lee, that the whole spot is bare. Blake couldn't have become entangled in this growth; it's not deep enough."

Norman was right. This particular gorse-clump only stood about a foot from the ground, and was so thick that a cat couldn't have penetrated. But Pedro was quite positive that Sexton Blake was there, for he made continual efforts to jump into the stuff.

"Guv'nor!" I shouted anxiously.

Even while I was doing so I realised that it was useless. Sexton Blake had vanished utterly, and—

"Hallo! That you, Tinker?" came a sepulchral call.

Pedro barked furiously, and Lee, Nipper, Norman, and I gazed at one another with startled expressions. It was the guv'nor's voice, but it seemed to come from a tomb right beneath our feet.

"Great goodness!" I gasped. "What—what was that?"

"Blake!" shouted Nelson Lee.

"Well, upon my soul!" came Sexton Blake's voice again. "What next, I wonder? Is that Lee, or am I still asleep?"

"Are you all right, guv'nor?" I yelled.

"My dear Tinker, you have disturbed me in a most refreshing nap," exclaimed Sexton Blake, to our amazement. "However, I do not object, and shall be most obliged if you will lend me a hand."

"But where are you, guv'nor?" I shouted amazedly.

"To the best of my knowledge, almost beneath your feet, in a most uncomfortable crevice," replied Blake. "Be very careful when you plunge into that gorse. It wouldn't be pleasant for either of us if you tumbled down on the top of me."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" I exclaimed. "There must be a cavity or something underneath these bushes, and we can't see anything of him."

Without wasting further time, I plunged forward into the gorse whilst the others held the lights over. Then I discovered something which had been quite hidden until viewed at close quarters.

In the very middle of the clump there was no ground—only a black gap. Gazed at directly overhead the gap would have been apparent, but from all sides of the clump nothing could be seen but the bushes themselves, and these were thick and stunted. Sexton Blake must have attempted to leap the clump in his race, and had gone hurtling downwards.

It didn't take me long to find the edge of the solid ground, and then I stood there, and flashed my electric torch down into the cavity. The guv'nor was right below me, about ten feet beneath the level of the heath. The sides of the crevice were utterly sheer, thus making it impossible for Blake to get up.

The mystery of his disappearance was now explained. He had fallen down practically at the same second as I stumbled. Consequently, when I got to my feet, he was nowhere to be seen. And repeated searching had been in vain.

"Thank goodness we've found you, guv'nor!" I exclaimed breathlessly. "It was Pedro who did the trick—"

"Pedro! We left him in London!"

"I phoned to Mr. Lee, and he brought Pedro down," I exclaimed.

"Dear me! What a lot of trouble I have caused!" said the guv'nor. "Well, it is somewhat difficult to carry on a conversation under these circumstances, Tinker. Have you got some rope with you? I should greatly welcome a hoist up."

We hadn't brought any rope, but Nelson Lee had a length of tremendously strong cord upon him, and by the aid of this we at length succeeded in hauling Sexton Blake to the surface. He was in a shocking state.

Several tears were visible in his clothing, and there were quite a number of blood-stains, proving that he had been scratched and grazed. Moreover, an ugly bruise on his head, almost concealed by the hair, told of a nasty blow.

"How are you, Lee?" said the guv'nor, shaking hands with Nelson Lee and Nipper in turn. "I dare say you're wondering what the deuce— Why, hallo, Gower! You're looking rather pale."

"And no wonder," said Norman. "Things have been happening in your absence, Mr.

Blake. But I don't care a jot now that you've been found. Poor Tinker's been nearly off his head, and half believed that you had vanished into a puff of smoke."

The guv'nor smiled.

"I don't altogether blame him," he said, patting my shoulder. "I must have disappeared in the most startling manner. But we must sort things out when we get back to Trevis Wold. Just now I feel that a dose of brandy wouldn't do me any harm."

Nelson Lee produced his flask, and handed it over.

"You must make do with this, Blake," he said. "There's only about a tablespoonful, but Mr. Gower has already been there!"

"Did I drink all that?" asked Norman. "Oh, I'm awfully sorry—"

"There is ample here," interrupted Blake, with a smile.

"But why didn't you take any notice of us when we searched the first time, guv'nor?" I asked. "Mr. Gower and I came out here with lanterns hours ago—soon after you fell in. We went all round this clump two or three times, and you must have heard us."

Sexton Blake pointed to the bruise on his head.

"That is the reason, my dear Tinker," he replied shortly.

"You were stunned?" asked Lee.

"Exactly. I dare say Tinker has already told you that I was chasing an interesting object across the heath," went on Blake. "I don't know what it was, but I was firmly determined to get hold of it. I saw the thing leap clean over this clump of gorse, and I foolishly assumed that I could perform the leap also."

"And so you chanced it?" I asked.

"It was very dark, remember, and I could not see distinctly," replied the guv'nor. "That fellow—or whatever he was—could leap like a grasshopper. I fell short, and simply crashed straight down into that cavity. I can't tell you what happened immediately afterwards, because I became unconscious on the second."

"That accounts for your disappearance, guv'nor," I said. "But what about the thing you were chasing?"

"I have not the slightest doubt that it plunged down immediately after me—deliberately," replied Blake. "Thus, when you looked round, we had both vanished. The thing simply crouched there until the coast was clear, and then made off. Possibly he thought that I was dead—which was most fortunate."

"And when did you come to yourself, old man?" asked Lee.

"Oh, about an hour ago, I suppose," said Blake. "It was rather a slow process, but would have been quicker if my brandy flask had not become broken with the fall. I should have taken a dose, and my brain would have cleared at once. Instead of that, I lay in a dazed condition for quite a long time, and then, knowing that I couldn't escape unaided, I fell into a sleep. I am thankful I did, because that sleep did me far more good than any amount of brandy would have done."

"And do you feel all right now, guv'nor?" I asked.

"I wouldn't make any positive statement on that point, Tinker," smiled Sexton Blake. "My brain is clear enough, although my head is aching—and there is no need to mention numerous aches and pains in every portion of my body. I dare say I shall recover in time," he added drily.

The events of the night had now altered their aspect. Everything was coming right, and I didn't care a jot now that Sexton Blake was with us once more. He keenly appreciated Lee's generous action in hurrying down from London so promptly; for without Pedro there was no telling when the guv'nor would have been rescued.

A thought struck me, and I looked at Blake queerly.

"I say, guv'nor, you didn't fall down this crevice by accident," I exclaimed. "That thing must have jumped over on purpose to lead you into the trap."

"Undoubtedly, Tinker," said the guv'nor. "I arrived at that fairly obvious truth soon after I recovered my wits. Had I been wary, I should have taken more precaution. But I confess that the possibility of a trap never entered my head. But I suggest that we lose no time in getting back to Trevis Wold."

"You haven't heard what happened to me, Mr. Blake," put in Norman Gower. "Tinker and I waited—"

"I really think it would be far better if we left all discussion until we arrive back at Trevis Wold," interrupted Sexton Blake.

"I am quite prepared to hear the story now if you wish it, but this heath is not exactly cosy."

The chill wind, indeed, was blowing against us in no uncertain manner, and there was certainly no fun in standing about in the cold; neither was there any object to be gained by remaining. So we commenced the journey back without delay.

It was close upon three o'clock when we removed our overcoats in the hall. Sexton Blake had heard nothing concerning the adventure of the little study, and he entered the apartment in ignorance.

But he displayed no sign of having noticed anything unusual. And we, too, were somewhat surprised to find that the room was now as it had always been. That dreadful sensation no longer assailed me when I entered.

The window was closed, and a few pieces of wood were thrown on to the dying embers of the fire. Before long the apartment was looking quite cosy, and Norman lost no time in relating what had taken place.

Sexton Blake lounged in the big armchair, Norman sat opposite, Nelson Lee stood with his back to the fire, and Nipper and I yawned on the settee. Now that the excitement was over we were beginning to feel sleepy.

"I am extremely thankful that you escaped the fate of your father, Gower," said Sexton Blake. "Apparently your escape was a narrow one, and we have every reason to congratulate ourselves."

"How on earth do you make that out?"

"Surely we have progressed a step in the right direction?" went on Blake. "Personally, I am distinctly pleased with the events of the night, and shall sleep comfortably. At the same time I shall insist upon either Mr. Lee or myself sharing your bed-room, Gower. You must not be left unguarded."

Norman Gower was greatly astonished.

"But am I in danger?" he asked.

"Assuredly."

"I thought the whole affair was just chance—that my father fell a victim by a sheer accident—"

"I am inclined to believe that you are right in that respect," said Sexton Blake smoothly. "However, we will not pursue the point. You are in danger, Gower, for we can be practically certain that the enemy—we will call this unknown thing by that term for want of a better one—came back to-night with the fixed intention of either driving you insane or killing you. The latter is the most probable."

"But why?" asked Gower blankly. "Who on earth wants to kill me?"

"You are in a far better position to answer that question than I," replied the guv'nor. "Have you no inkling of any sort? Is there nobody that you can suggest who has a grudge against you? An enemy of some kind—"

"It's no good talking like that, Mr. Blake," interrupted Gower. "So far as my knowledge goes, nobody would gain a farthing by my death, and as for enemies, I've never had one—except, of course, scamen and such like who have caused me to lose my temper. But no seaman would perpetrate such a thing as this—he couldn't do it. It seems to me to be beyond all human powers."

Sexton Blake nodded.

"Quite so," he agreed. "But things are not always what they seem. What is your idea, Lee? You know practically as much of this business as I do now. Can you suggest any explanation?"

"My dear man, it's no good asking me anything," replied Nelson Lee, tossing his cigarette-end into the fire. "I'm hopelessly puzzled, and I must confess the fact. I heartily agree, however, that human agency is at the bottom of the astonishing phenomena. And your adventure on the heath is most significant."

"Ah! You have observed that point, then?" asked Blake.

"What point, guv'nor?" I put in curiously.

"Well, Tinker, there has been some talk about ghosts," remarked Nelson Lee. "Your master was trapped by something human—by something cunning, too. That demolishes the supernatural theory once and for all. Moreover, it is quite certain that the enemy is acquainted with the neighbourhood."

"That is my line of reasoning exactly," agreed Sexton Blake. "But there is something else, Lee. It is quite apparent that the enemy seized the chance to enter this room while Gower and Tinker were absent. Miss Walton undoubtedly heard something on the terrace, and while this apartment was

empty that something came in. I am not going to make any conjectures, but will leave matters as they stand for the time being. You, Gower, remain in danger—for the enemy returned to-night for the purpose of finishing you off. It is almost certain that he will come again when he learns that you escaped."

"That's very cheerful," remarked Norman, sitting up.

"Well, there is certainly no need for you to worry yourself," smiled Blake. "And now I really think that it would be the essence of wisdom for us all to get to bed. We shall be fit for nothing to-morrow unless we do so."

"I'm ready, anyhow," I said, getting to my feet.

"And Nipper and I must see about returning to London," said Nelson Lee. "We shall just be able to get home—"

"What nonsense!" exclaimed Norman sharply. "Do you think that I shall allow you to leave us, Mr. Lee? I shall be most delighted if you'll make Trevis Wold your home for the whole week—for a fortnight—for just as long as you wish to stay."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"That is very kind of you, Mr. Gower," he said. "I shall certainly take advantage of your hospitality."

"Capital!" declared Sexton Blake. "And you must see this thing through with us, Lee. I shall not let you depart until we've arrived at the truth. You see, you may come in useful—so I have a selfish motive in urging you to stay."

Nelson Lee needed no urging, however. He was most interested in the whole case, and Nipper was overjoyed. A week at Trevis Wold wouldn't come amiss, and this singular mystery added to the charm.

Well, Nipper and I got to bed in next to no time, and the guv'nor made arrangements for guarding over Norman Gower. I think he and Nelson Lee took it in turns—for Blake meant to leave nothing to chance.

Of course, nothing happened. That is generally the case when every preparation is made. And in the morning we were all feeling refreshed and very much better in spirits. Gower himself looked quite bright.

It had been arranged that neither Lady Gower nor Miss Joyce should be told of the adventures of the night—they would only worry themselves needlessly. They were certainly surprised to find Nelson Lee and Nipper at the breakfast-table; but Norman easily explained this by saying that they had come down to help in the investigation.

Dr. Woodhouse arrived soon after breakfast, and he, of course, was told the facts in the privacy of the library—which, at Sexton Blake's suggestion, was now being used again, a cheerful fire burning brightly.

"Dear me!" exclaimed the old doctor, starting up in his seat when he heard the news. "You must let me examine you, Norman, my boy. No, no! I will take no excuses!"

Norman was subjected to an examination, but Dr. Woodhouse announced that he was as strong as a horse, and that the only ill-effects he suffered were a slight nervousness and a certain twitching of the muscles. This latter symptom, no doubt, was an outcome of the nervousness, and would soon disappear.

Daylight had steadied our nerves, and the mystery of the unknown enemy seemed more inexplicable than ever. After Dr. Woodhouse had gone upstairs to have a look at Sir Robert, we tried to map out some programme for the day.

"There is really no starting-point," said Sexton Blake thoughtfully. "We can, of course, closely examine the heath, but I do not think that will lead us far. I also intend to examine your study, Gower. You gave orders that it should not be touched?"

"Yes," replied Norman. "But I must say that I can't see how a search of that room will reveal any—"

The door opened and Dr. Woodhouse entered. One glance at his face told us that he had some fresh news, for he was smiling, his eyes were twinkling, and he rubbed his hands together with every evidence of satisfaction.

"The first flash, my dear Norman," he announced triumphantly. "Your father is progressing well—far better than I thought—and directly he saw me he recovered his reason for just a couple of seconds. Then he lapsed back into the blank state you have already witnessed."

"That's fine—about him recovering his reason for a moment I mean," exclaimed

Norman. "But how do you know, doctor? Did my father speak to you?"

"Yes, he muttered eight or nine words—rational words," replied Dr. Woodhouse. "I must acknowledge that they were entirely irrelevant, and in no way connected with my visit or anything of a commonplace nature. Indeed, he referred to the museum."

"The museum?" repeated Sexton Blake curiously.

"Yes, Mr. Blake."

"Can you tell me exactly what Sir Robert said?"

"Easily," replied the doctor. "It will sound absurd to you, my dear sir, but I do not regard that point as an important one. It is the fact that Sir Robert was able to voice a sensible remark that gave me satisfaction. He simply said, 'The museum—the little idol—is it there?' in a short, jerky manner. I have been wondering—"

Sexton Blake leapt to his feet.

"An idol!" he exclaimed tensely. "Do you know anything of an idol, Gower?"

"Why, yes," replied Norman, in surprise. "There's one in my father's museum—a little bronze thing. I got hold of it in a curious way some months ago."

"Can you direct me to the museum, Gower?" asked Blake crisply. "I should like to ascertain if that idol is still in its position. Sir Robert's remark, perhaps, was not so irrelevant as it seemed."

Norman made for the door, with Blake close at his heels. And the rest of us, suddenly excited, followed close behind. The museum was on the other side of the house—a great room filled with curios of all descriptions, collected by Sir Robert during years of travel in his earlier life.

Norman Gower went straight over to the glass-case at the far end. He gazed into it, and then turned, his face expressing astonishment and bewilderment.

"Zahir's idol is missing!" he exclaimed, in a low voice.

Sexton Blake smiled grimly.

"I think, my dear Norman," he said, "that the history of this idol will probably be worth hearing."

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

A Story and Some Deductions.

DR. WOODHOUSE raised his bushy eyebrows.

"But how can this idol be connected with the strange events which have occurred at Trevis Wold recently?" he inquired. "Sir Robert showed me the idol, and it was certainly of little value, being roughly made of bronze."

"Nevertheless, I should like to know how it came into Sir Robert's possession," said Sexton Blake. "You do not object, Gower?"

"Certainly not," replied Norman. "I'll soon tell you the story—but I can't see how it will help. Suppose we return to the library?"

We did so, and we were all looking rather thoughtful. As for myself, I couldn't quite understand where the idol came in, and I thought it quite possible that it didn't come in at all. However, it would be just as well to hear what Norman Gower had to say.

"The fact that the idol is missing may have no significance at all," remarked Nelson Lee slowly. "It is quite possible that Sir Robert removed it himself, or lost it. There is really nothing to connect the thing with this grim business."

"I am inclined to disagree with you, Lee," said Sexton Blake. "And I will make a shot and suggest that the idol either came from Ceylon, or was obtained from a native of that island. Am I right, Gower?"

"Perfectly right," said Norman. "How on earth did you know?"

"I didn't know—it was a surmise."

"But you must have had some foundation, and there had been no hint dropped as to the idol's origin," persisted Gower. "How did you guess, Mr. Blake?"

Sexton Blake smiled.

"I'd rather tell you that later on, my dear fellow," he replied. "My eyes have not been entirely closed since I commenced my investigation—No, you needn't think that anything happened on the heath. What I have arrived at is the result of careful thought and concentration. When I heard that mention of the idol, I was keen in a second."

"Well, you've gone one better than I, Blake," said Nelson Lee. "I'm frankly puzzled—"

"You have not had the opportunities which have been placed in my way," said Sexton Blake, with a smile. "Now, Gower, let's have the yarn."

We all waited rather curiously. What the guv'nor had in his mind I couldn't imagine, but I was pretty certain that he was on the right track—I knew what that gleam in his eye meant.

"I got hold of the idol under rather curious circumstances," said Norman, laying back in his chair. "I never thought that it was connected with this affair, and cannot understand it even now. Still, you want the story, and I'll let you have it. Several months ago—eight or nine, I should think—I was second officer on one of my father's smaller ships. I think I have told you that I have gone through the whole game exactly as though I were trying to earn my living? As a matter of fact, my father could supply me with an income which would keep me in luxury for life. But I like the sea, and he insisted upon my working my way upwards by my own ability—or confess myself to be a failure. I think I've done fairly decently, on the whole. Well, the boat I was on is a comparatively small one, and at that time plying between Bristol and the Eastern ports. The skipper was a good man, and so was the first officer. We got on well together, and I spent quite a decent time on the old tub."

"But you don't want to hear all these details, do you? We were homeward-bound, and the passage was a quiet one, the sea being in a good temper. There was nothing particular to do, except the usual routine work. One day the bo'sun reported that the ship's cat had disappeared, and the men were rather annoyed about it. The cat couldn't have been washed overboard, because the sea was calm, and it certainly had more sense than to dive over the rail of its own accord. One of the forward hands, named Zahir, was suspected of monkeying with the animal."

"This fellow was a Cingalese?" asked Sexton Blake.

"Exactly. He hadn't attracted my attention until I heard the bo'sun's complaint, but I gave him a certain amount of attention afterwards," replied Gower. "He was a queer specimen, and thoroughly disliked by all the other men—many of whom, of course, were Lascars and others of their tribe."

"This Zahir was exceptionally dark, and unusually tall, standing fully six-feet-six on his bare feet. He was so tall, in fact, and thin, that he closely resembled a lamp-post—'Lamp-post,' indeed, was his nickname for 'ard. I didn't like him at all, being a sullen, treacherous brute. On one occasion he tried to knife a fireman, but got knocked flat himself for his pains."

"Well, after the incident of the missing cat, I watched Zahir, as I just said. He seemed to be behaving in a very strange manner, and I came upon him kneeling upon the deck on more than one occasion—kneeling and crooning some rot to himself. One night I went below for something amidships, and I found out the cause of all this queer business."

"The night was still and quiet, and we were steaming steadily. Zahir should have been in his bunk, but I found him in this deserted part of the ship, engaged in some confounded tomfoolery which fairly enraged me."

"What was he doing?" asked the guv'nor, bending forward.

"Well, for one thing, he had got a little bronze idol propped up on an old box, and he was kneeling before it, and muttering something in his own lingo. He hadn't seen me in the rear, and I watched for some few minutes. Then the mystery of the ship's cat was revealed."

"For this black beggar fished out a rabbit from a box, and held it in his fist. One of the hands was rather fond of rabbits, and he kept a couple of pets. Zahir had got them here, and he proceeded to wring the neck of the first one before my eyes. The thing was done before I could interfere."

"But you did interfere after that?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Yes—promptly," said Norman grimly. "The brute was offering a sacrifice to that rotten idol of his—offering a sacrifice on board one of my father's ships! I was boiling, and simply kicked him out neck and crop."

"Didn't he resist?" asked Blake.

"He was too scared; he went howling up the companion, and I rescued the second

rabbit. The skipper was furious, too, when he learned that that heathen beast had been torturing animals as a sacrifice," continued Norman. "Zahir kept very quiet after that, and we had no trouble with him whatever."

"Yes, but what about the idol?"

"Oh, I seized that, and took it to the skipper," replied Gower. "He didn't want it, so I kept it for myself, as a curio. Besides, I paid the rabbit-owner a fair price for his murdered animal, and I reckoned that I had a perfect right to the idol."

"You brought it home, I presume?" asked Blake. "Or did you post it?"

"I brought it, and gave it to my father for his collection—"

"You must allow me to point out that it was a most unwise action on your part," said Sexton Blake. "Indeed, to take that idol was a foolish thing, and extremely dangerous. You were most rash."

"But why?" asked Gower.

"My dear sir, you ought not to ask me that question," said Sexton Blake. "The recent events at Trevis Wold are the direct outcome of your action. I am positively convinced upon that point."

"You mean that Zahir is responsible for this ghastly mystery?"

"Undoubtedly."

Norman Gower stared in amazement.

"But I don't understand why," he exclaimed. "Surely to goodness, the fellow wouldn't persecute me because of that idol?"

"He has been doing so—"

"But it wasn't a valuable thing, such as an idol out of a temple," protested Norman. "I know, of course, that it is dangerous to monkey with heathen temples and such like. But this was only a common sailor, messing about with some tomfoolery of his own. How could that be dangerous, Mr. Blake?"

"Well, I should think that you would know quite a lot about that sort of thing—but you have evidently paid no attention to it," replied the gov'nor. "This man Zahir no doubt belongs to some little-known religious sect, and his particular form of worship demands that he shall carry an idol about with him, pay homage to it, and make sacrifices at certain periods. That idol was just as sacred to him as any of the famous idols of India. What happened to him afterwards?"

"I don't know," replied Gower. "He was paid off at the end of the voyage, and I never set eyes on him again. As a matter of fact, I haven't given the incident a thought until now. I brought the little bronze god home to my father, and dismissed the whole thing from my mind."

"And that is all?"

"I can tell you no more, at all events."

"H'm! I consider that the story is most significant, and I will wager my reputation that Zahir is responsible for this extraordinary state of affairs at Trevis," said Sexton Blake. "Your father, I presume, recognised the intruder as a Cingalese, and connected him with that idol. That is why he referred to it during his fleeting period of sanity."

"I'm not quite sure that I agree with you, Mr. Blake," said Dr. Woodhouse. "How can you be so positive that Zahir is the culprit? I would not presume to state my opinion against yours, but you have surely overlooked the fact that it was Sir Robert who suffered, and not Norman?"

The gov'nor shook his head.

"No, I had not overlooked that point," he replied. "And I will further suggest that the father's fate was intended for the son. As I look at the case, it was quite accidental that Sir Robert suffered."

"How do you make that out?" asked Norman.

"Well, it is surely an easy matter," said Blake. "This Cingalese, thirsting for revenge, and being determined to regain his idol, discovered that you lived at Trevis Wold—and that you were at home on holiday. Zahir came here with two intentions in his mind. One was to kill you, and the other to recover the god. Both objects had to be achieved. As we know, he succeeded in one case, and failed in the other."

"But how did my father suffer in place of me?"

"You will remember that you were sitting alone in the library," continued Blake. "You saw something at the window, and happened to hear your father at the same moment. You called, and Sir Robert came into the library—thus upsetting Zahir's plans. He concealed himself, and you and Sir Robert searched the garden."

"That's quite right," agreed Norman. "I stumbled over—"

"Exactly. The Cingalese intended killing you—or possibly it was his main intention to drive you insane. While the library was empty he entered, and performed certain actions which, at present, I cannot definitely state. By sheer accident your father entered the room first, with the result that he fell a victim to Zahir's devilry. You stumbled over the rockery, and saved yourself from a similar fate."

"It's too much for me, Mr. Blake," confessed Norman helplessly.

"You must remember that Zahir made a second attempt last night. It failed because you were taken from the room so promptly by Mr. Lee and Nipper—they having been warned by Tinker," said the gov'nor. "This Cingalese is probably bound by his religion to take his revenge—and I think it almost certain that he will come for a third time, and he will be grimly determined."

Norman sat up abruptly.

"You're making me feel very comfortable, Mr. Blake," he said, with a wry face. "If you really think that you are on the right track, I'll accept the theory without question. But can you tell me this—what sent my father crazy?"

"Well, I have my suspicions, but they are only suspicions," replied Sexton Blake. "Until I gain more conclusive evidence, I can make no statement. The village youth who went off his head was apparently driven into that condition by the sight of the Cingalese. I have learned that the youth was one of very weak intellect, and only a minor shock was sufficient to drive him crazy."

"But, my dear Mr. Blake, my father wasn't a man of weak intellect!" protested Gower.

"No, certainly not," said the gov'nor crisply. "I was not suggesting that, Gower. There is another factor to be reckoned with, unless I am greatly mistaken. At present we must confine ourselves to the facts we know."

I noticed Nelson Lee giving Blake a searching glance. He, as well as I, had not overlooked the fact that the gov'nor had deliberately slurred over the subject of the "other factor." What was it? Apparently, Sexton Blake surmised things which had not entered our heads.

"And what do you propose?" asked Lee. "Mr. Gower's life, it seems, must be protected. You believe, Blake, that the Cingalese will return to-night—or, at least, when the first opportunity presents itself?"

"Exactly!" agreed the gov'nor.

"That's splendid news!" said Norman blandly.

"It is, indeed," was Sexton Blake's prompt remark. "Really, the most splendid piece of news we have struck so far—if, indeed, my surmise is correct, as I believe."

"I really fail to see anything splendid in the suggestion that Norman goes about in danger of his life," remarked Dr. Woodhouse mildly. "Surely you are joking, Mr. Blake?"

"By no means," smiled the gov'nor. "You have missed the significance of the point. If Zahir still threatens Gower's life, it means that he will come back. And that, in turn, means that we shall be able to lay our fingers upon him. I suggest that we give the fellow every chance."

"Eh?" said Norman, staring.

"You, Gower, must be prepared to undergo an ordeal," continued Blake. "Put bluntly, we must set a trap, and you must be the bait."

Our host rose to his feet, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't mind me!" he said, with a grin. "I don't count in the least. But when it's all over you'll see that I'm decently buried, won't you? Or I might be shoved into a lunatic asylum. I think I prefer the former!"

Sexton Blake laughed.

"I don't think we shall allow the game to go as far as that, my dear fellow," he said. "Since we are on the subject, we may as well complete our plans at once. It will be very dark to-night, and there is no reason for delay."

"Not at all," said Norman. "Get it over as quickly as possible."

"Well, we will refrain from doing anything unusual to-day," said Blake. "After dinner we will play billiards, and at about eleven o'clock Mr. Lee and I will go to our bedrooms—Tinker and Nipper will do likewise.

Everybody, in fact, will be upstairs except you, Gower."

"It's getting nicer than ever," said Norman calmly.

"You will remain in the library," continued Blake. "The French windows will be left invitingly open, and you will sit down in full view, reading. This will almost certainly ensure the entry of the enemy—when you will apparently be at his mercy."

"Apparently!" echoed Gower. "I think it'll be pretty certain, Mr. Blake. If everybody's in bed except me—"

"I did not say that we should go to bed," put in the gov'nor softly. "Mr. Lee and I will be concealed in that recess yonder. Tinker and Nipper will be concealed in some other place. Thus you will be in no actual danger."

"I don't know how you're all going to be in two places at once, but I suppose you'll manage it somehow," said Norman, with a touch of good-humoured sarcasm. "Two or three minutes ago you said you were going to bed—"

"We shall go up, and we shall see that the lights in our rooms are burning for perhaps half an hour," said Blake. "After that they will be extinguished, and any watcher from the outside will conclude that the household is asleep—with the exception of yourself. In reality, the four of us will creep down, and will enter our hiding-places unobserved. You will have ample protection, my dear Gower."

Norman grinned.

"I was born dense, otherwise I should have cottoned to the idea at once," he explained. "I hope the trap will be successful, Mr. Blake. What's going to happen if we all sit up for nothing?"

"The experiment will be repeated to-morrow night."

"I have an idea that we shall meet with success straight away," commented Nelson Lee. "This heathen fanatic will certainly take advantage of the opportunity we shall provide. But don't you think it would be better to add even more to the effect?"

"In what way?" asked the gov'nor.

"Well, at about eleven o'clock, say, Mr. Gower could pretend to doze off in his chair, and remain apparently asleep for some time—until he either receives a signal from us, or until something else happens."

Sexton Blake nodded.

"A great improvement, Lee," he said.

"Yes, we will certainly adopt that suggestion. It will give the enemy more confidence than ever—and Gower will be in no further peril."

"Well, gentlemen, I must uphold your actions, since you have the case in hand," remarked Dr. Woodhouse. "But I must be allowed to point out that the whole thing seems infernally risky. Have you not thought of the possibility of this scoundrel shooting a poisoned dart, or something, in at the open door? What chance would poor Norman have then? He would perish before you could move an inch."

"I'd thought of that," said Gower. "But I'm willing to place myself in Mr. Blake's hands, doctor. I don't think he'll let me die."

"It is good to learn that you have such faith in me, Gower," smiled Sexton Blake. "No, Dr. Woodhouse, I had not overlooked the possibility you suggest, and shall prepare against any disaster of that nature."

"But how can you, my dear sir, considering that Norman will be lying in a chair, affecting sleep, with the French windows wide open?"

"I shall take particular care to have the chair placed in such a position that it is not in direct line with the window," replied Blake. "Consequently, the intruder will find it necessary to enter the room before he can do any possible mischief. He may only enter a few feet, but he will be instantly covered by at least four revolvers, and at the first sign of any quick movement, those revolvers will not hesitate to speak. But I don't fancy Zahir will adopt such measures, although, of course, it is just as well to be prepared against any eventuality."

"I shall certainly feel safer," remarked Norman. "But there's another point. If I can't be seen from the open window the beggar may not act. He might be wary and keep away altogether. You know, I ought to be in such a position that he can see me from outside."

"Dear me!" exclaimed the doctor. "It would be too risky, my boy."

"I'll tell you what!" I put in brilliantly.

U. J.—No. 786.

"How about that big mirror over there? Couldn't we tilt it a bit so that Mr. Gower's reflection is visible in it from outside the door? This blighter will see the reflection when he comes, will think that Mr. Gower is asleep, and will march in as bold as brass."

Sexton Blake nodded approvingly.

"Three or four hints are better than one," he observed. "Yes, Tinker, that idea is well worth adopting. I think we will settle our scheme finally, and then venture out upon the excellent golf links which I observed from my window this morning. What do you say, Lee?"

"Quite an alluring prospect," smiled Nelson Lee.

"But, gentlemen, pray consider!" protested Dr. Woodhouse. "Are you suggesting that Norman should accompany you?"

"That is for Mr. Gower himself to decide."

"But the danger—"

"Will be nil," interrupted Blake. "This Zahir is a creature of the night, and he will be skulking in some retreat during the daytime. Gower will be quite safe until darkness falls."

"Well, I'll chance it. I wouldn't think of doing anything else," declared Gower. "I'm hanged if I'm going to skulk out of the way of a miserable heathen! And now that I know my father isn't permanently affected, I'm feeling wonderfully 'bucked.' Besides, the mystery is almost solved now."

"I utterly fail to see it," said the doctor. "Mr. Blake has very cleverly gone over some of the ground, but what about that ghastly sensation we have all experienced? No Cingalese could bring such an atmosphere with him—unless he were possessed with the powers of a devil."

"I think I can promise you that the whole mystery will be cleared up as soon as Zahir chooses to show himself again," said Sexton Blake. "At all events, I have formed a certain theory, but cannot voice it until I have some corroborative evidence. When I am uncertain of a thing I never speak. And I am uncertain now."

And that's all Sexton Blake would say—for the time, at all events.

We spent quite an enjoyable time on the golf links. I played Nipper, and the young bouncer beat me hollow. It was luck, of course, although he insisted for weeks afterwards that he had whacked me by superior play.

At the time of this adventure, by the way, Nelson Lee and Nipper were still at Gray's Inn Road, and had not adjourned to St. Frank's College, where they are at present located. I put this in, in case there should be some confusion.

At luncheon Lady Gower noticed that we were all in better spirits. In fact, the gloom of yesterday seemed to have disappeared. Miss Joyce revealed herself as a girl of singular charm, and it was splendid to hear her silvery laugh about the house. Norman was quite another man, and didn't seem to dread his coming experience in the least.

I puzzled my head over the mystery of the ghostly feeling which had prevailed, both in the library and in Norman's den, but I couldn't arrive at any satisfactory conclusion. The guv'nor had an idea of what it meant, of course, but it wasn't his habit to talk of his theories—unless he was fairly convinced of their accuracy. And in this case he had a doubt.

The night, possibly, would settle the point, and I found myself extremely anxious for the hour of bed-time to arrive. I wanted to see this thing through—to get at the root of the problem.

As it happened, there was to be plenty of excitement!

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

A Signal Success—and an Explanation.

"SPLENDID!" said Sexton Blake.

It was evening, and the great detective was standing outside the library window on the terrace. I was beside him, and I nodded.

"Can't mistake that, guv'nor," I remarked.

We were looking in at the open French window, and could distinctly see Norman Gower reclining in a big armchair. Actually, we were gazing into the huge mirror, for Gower himself was well out of line of the window itself.

It was nearly dark, and dinner would soon be served. There was no chance that Zahir

would be prowling about yet awhile. We entered the library and announced that the mirror was set to perfection.

"Be very careful about the chair," said Sexton Blake. "If that is moved the reflection will be invisible from outside. What about those curtains, Lee? You'd better not mutilate them too much, or you'll have Lady Gower on your track."

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"I have her ladyship's permission to cut them to shreds if necessary," he replied. "But I don't think I'm doing much harm."

Lee was engaged in the task of snipping some neat eye-holes in the curtains, so that he and the guv'nor could stand concealed behind them, and yet witness everything that happened in the room. Nipper and I would be behind a heavy lounge which was placed across a corner. We should be quite comfortable and well out of sight.

Dr. Woodhouse was not present, for, of course, he had departed in the morning, having other duties to attend to. He had promised to be at Trevis Wold the first thing in the morning, to hear the result of our experiment.

"Now, there's one thing I wish to warn you against, Gower," said Sexton Blake seriously. "Be prepared for any emergency, but take particular care not to sit too near the fire, or to even approach it. Further, I should advise you to have your handkerchief in readiness to clap over your mouth and nostrils the moment I give the word."

Norman stared.

"Why, you don't think that this confounded black fellow will use a drug of some kind?" he asked.

"There is no telling," replied Blake. "At all events, please do as I say. I shall not have much opportunity of speaking to you later on, because Lee and I will not enter this apartment after dinner, and we can't very well discuss the matter before the ladies, who are in ignorance of the plan."

"Yes, of course," said Norman, colouring.

Sexton Blake looked at him sharply.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "So that's the game, is it?"

"What game?" asked Gower weakly.

"My dear fellow, you needn't try to get out of it," said the guv'nor. "You have already told Miss Wakton of the whole plan—am I right?"

"Well, there's no reason why she shouldn't know," said Norman obstinately. "Hang it all, she kept asking me what we were going to do, and I couldn't tell a pack of lies. I tried to put her off, but she wasn't taking any excuses."

Sexton Blake chuckled.

"I expected it," he said. "And now, of course, Lady Gower knows also. Well, there's no particular harm done, but they mustn't stay up to see the result of the affair. It's quite possible nothing will happen, and we don't want the ladies to be awake half the night for nothing."

The result of Norman's confidence was apparent as soon as we sat down at the dinner-table. For both Lady Gower and Joyce were looking quite anxiously and worried. Personally, I thought it was better that they should know, because there was no real reason why they shouldn't.

As I pointed out to the guv'nor, they would have to know if our scheme went as we expected, and then they might get a terrific shock in the middle of the night. It was just as well to have them prepared.

The whole subject was tabooed at the dinner-table, for the butler was present, and we didn't care to trust the scheme to his discretion. It would have been all through the servants' hall within ten minutes.

But later on, in the drawing-room, Sexton Blake assured Lady Gower that his plan entailed no risks for Norman, and would probably result in the capture of the cunning rascal who had been responsible for poor Sir Robert's distressing condition.

"I do hope you will succeed, Mr. Blake," said the old lady. "Poor Joyce is terribly worried, and I shall be indeed thankful when all this anxiety is over. To think that silly little idol could cause so much trouble!"

"Idols have caused far worse trouble than this, Lady Gower," said Blake grimly. "I am hopeful of settling the whole matter before the morning, but you must not be surprised if no result is achieved to-night. I cannot guarantee that the enemy will play into our hands as we desire."

Joyce, who was near by, smiled confidently.

"I'm quite sure that you will be successful, Mr. Blake," she said. "Norman has been telling me how wonderfully you conduct your cases, how many successes you have gained, and—"

"Really, I shall have to remonstrate with Mr. Gower," smiled Sexton Blake. "I want you to worry as little as possible, for, I assure you, the only man to worry in this affair is the rascal we are hopeful of capturing."

Blake soon had the ladies in a state of complete tranquillity, as I've had occasion to explain before; the guv'nor had a wonderful way with the fair sex. From the way he talked, it was quite possible to imagine that we were making every preparation for a most enjoyable picnic.

But it was far better to deal with the affair lightly. We played billiards until about ten-thirty—at least, Sexton Blake and Nelson Lee did. Norman was conspicuous by his absence, and it wasn't necessary for me to indulge in half a dozen guesses as to his whereabouts. Naturally enough, he was in the drawing-room, seated on the same settee as Miss Joyce—with Lady Gower discreetly buried in a magazine on the other side of the room. For the old lady was not so worried as she had been, and the faithful nurse upstairs was taking good care of Sir Robert.

At about a quarter to eleven Norman brought his fiancée into the billiard-room, and after watching the play for a few minutes, she bade us all good-night. She appeared to be light-hearted, but there was an expression of concern and anxiety in her eyes.

At eleven o'clock we all retired, and Sexton Blake's plan was carried out in every detail. The guv'nor himself only remained in his bed-room for about two minutes, leaving me there with the light burning.

He went straight downstairs and entered the library. It will be supposed, perhaps, that any watcher from outside would be able to see Blake's entry. But the furniture had been so arranged that the guv'nor could reach the table completely in concealment, pass underneath it, and then arrive at the recess without showing an inch of himself. Norman, who was sitting reading, knew all about it, but he didn't move a hair.

Ten minutes after that Nelson Lee repeated the manoeuvre, and Nipper and I did not waste much time arriving on the scene. Pedro, by the way, was in one of the other rooms, in case he should be wanted in a hurry. We knew that we could trust him to be quiet.

The situation was now rather intense. Norman Gower lolled lazily in the big armchair, smoking cigarettes, and idly turning over the pages of a novel. Considering that there were four of us watching him all the time, he acted his part wonderfully well, betraying no sign of awkwardness.

He yawned occasionally with great realism, and more than once closed his eyes for a few moments. Nipper and I could see nothing of our two guv'nors, but we knew that they were only just behind the curtains of the recess.

Both Sexton Blake and Nelson Lee, too, had their revolvers in readiness. Blake's in fact, was trained upon the doorway all the time. He meant to take no chances.

"What's your opinion of things?" breathed Nipper, as we crouched behind the big lounge.

"I'm blessed if I know what to think," I replied. "It's quite likely this heathen blighter will turn up to-night, but we can't count on it. And we'd better not talk, my son. We shall have the guv'nor raving if we do."

"Rats!" said Nipper. "We sha'n't be heard."

"Can't be too cautious," I insisted.

So Nipper subsided into silence, and then we waited. At about a quarter to twelve Norman Gower dropped off to sleep in earnest, the book slipping down to the floor, and his head resting amongst the cushions.

I don't mean that he actually slept—it was all part of the plan. But he did it so well that I had my doubts. Afterwards he told us that he couldn't have slept for anything in the world just then—when he was expecting the entry of a black man who had murder in his heart.

Certainly everything was favourable.

The night was black as pitch, and a gentle wind rustled the dying leaves on the trees outside. The French windows of the library stood wide open, and Norman Gower lay seemingly fast asleep in full sight.

If Zahir didn't come to-night it would be remarkable. Indeed, it would almost prove that he had cleared out of the neighbourhood, possibly believing that he had succeeded in his object the previous night.

But all our plans were not in vain.

Just after midnight a slight sound came from the gravel on the terrace. It was so insignificant that we should not have heard it had we not been on the alert. As it was, I felt myself grow rigid at once, and knew that the others were in a similar condition.

Had the moment arrived?

There was a kind of fringe at the back of the lounge, and Nipper and I had provided ourselves with two little spyholes, through which we could see the French windows quite distinctly. And we stared into the black gap of the night intently.

For several minutes nothing happened, and then came another slight sound—unmistakable this time. Somebody was there, but, for all we knew, the somebody might be nothing more formidable than an inquisitive cat. And then I felt myself shiver.

In the opening of the doorway a dim figure had appeared—vague at present, for it stood some way back on the terrace. Gradually, cautiously, it approached, and stood there in the dim light reflected from the shaded lamp.

I felt horrified. The thing was awful, unearthly, and for one ghastly second I wondered if Sexton Blake's theory was all wrong. Was this thing a human being, or some loathsome creature from another world?

For, in very truth, it was uncanny.

Enormously high, the figure was hairy from head to foot—long, coarse matted hair of a reddish-brown hue enveloped the thing. The face was unrecognisable as a face, the only familiar features being two staring eyes. As for nose and mouth, there appeared to be none, only a horrid blank.

More terrifying than all, however, two great horns projected upwards from the head, and as the figure crouched there I found myself almost unable to move, so transfixed with sudden fright did I feel. Nipper, close beside me, clutched my arm.

Was this Zahir, the Cingalese? Such a thing seemed impossible, although I remembered that the fellow was of great height. This thing appeared to be close upon eight feet, towering up like a lanky giant. But the horns, no doubt, lent this effect.

It moved slowly into the library, and advanced for two or three feet before turning. Then it faced round towards Norman, who was in such a position that he now saw the awful apparition for the first time.

For Gower had heard those slight sounds, and was peeping out from beneath his eyelashes, although pretending to be asleep. I distinctly saw him start, but just at that second the visitant was turned in another direction.

Norman had nearly given the game away, but, really, he wasn't to be blamed. Sexton Blake, as cool as a cucumber, covered the horrible-looking thing with his revolver, and there was no chance whatever of treachery from that quarter. At the first sign of any murderous movement, Blake would pull the trigger.

But the apparition acted in a manner which completely surprised me. He made no attempt to go nearer to Gower, but softly stepped over towards the brightly burning fire. He was in the full light now, and all my original apprehension had vanished. For I saw, quite distinctly, that this was no spectre.

It was Zahir, sure enough, daubed and painted up until he resembled a horror from the lower regions. The coarse hair which covered him was a kind of skinned coat, probably made especially for the occasion.

I watched, intensely curious.

With a sudden movement the intruder brought one of his hairy arms round and flung it out towards the fire. I saw a cloud of reddish powder settle upon the glowing coals, and the orange-red embers changed their hue to deep purple, tinged with green. And at that same second other things happened.

"The handkerchief, Gower—the handkerchief!" shouted Sexton Blake hoarsely.

The spell was broken, and after that confusion reigned. I took that shout of the guv'nor's to mean that it was up to us all to make a capture. Nipper thought the same, and we sprang up like a couple of Jack-in-the-boxes.

"Outside, boys—the door, the door!" yelled Sexton Blake.

I couldn't make out what the dickens he was driving at. Norman had jerked up—

right, pressing his handkerchief to his mouth and nostrils, as instructed. And the visitor uttered a scream of surprise and fear.

He twirled round, intending to dash for the French windows. He was standing on a skin rug, which, in turn, was laid upon the highly polished floor. The result of that quick spin was inevitable.

Zahir went down full length, his feet simply doubling under him. I believe he caught his head on the massive brass fender. At all events, he lay there, unable to move an inch.

I sprang out and staggered back horrified. That same ghastly sensation came over me like a cloud of incredibly awful vapour. Terror seized me, and everything in the library became distorted.

How I reached the hall, I don't know; I think Sexton Blake assisted me, and Lee bundled Nipper out. Norman was out first, being nearest the door, and he had sunk to the floor, as pale as death, his eyes staring and awful to look upon.

Blake slammed the library door, and hung on the handle.

"I anticipated something of the kind, but I had no idea that the effect would be so extraordinarily instantaneous," he said hoarsely. "How are you, boys? How has it affected you, Lee?"

"I'm all right," said Nelson Lee, with a shudder. "Good heavens! What an infernal sensation came over me in that room. And you, Gower?"

Norman was getting to his feet.

"I took a full breath before I stuffed the handkerchief to my face," he panted. "What happened last night was nothing compared to this. Just for a moment I felt mad—I felt that every horror of a nightmare had come to me in a flash. My brain reeled, and it's a wonder I didn't shriek aloud."

"You couldn't," said Blake simply. "You were physically incapable of uttering any sound, Gower, and it's a wonder you were able to get out at all. I must apologise for having placed you in such danger. But we must re-enter the library, Lee—you and I."

"I am ready," said Nelson Lee steadily.

I protested, but the guv'nor took no notice. He and Nelson Lee wrapped thick woollen mufflers round their faces and plunged into the polluted room. Within two minutes they were out, dragging the intruder between them. The door was closed sharply in their wake, but not before sufficient atmosphere had escaped to convert the hall into a place of horror.

Sexton Blake examined the creature closely.

"He is dead!" he exclaimed quietly—"killed by his own vile devilry!"

The autumn sun was streaming brilliantly in at the windows of the library, and the air was pure and sweet. Morning had come, and with it a clearing away of all the horrors of the night.

There was quite a party of us present—Sexton Blake, Nelson Lee, Nipper, and myself, Lady Gower and her son, and Miss Joyce and Dr. Woodhouse. So far Sexton Blake had made no explanation, but he had promised to do so.

"Our investigation has ended successfully," he declared. "We have now but to prove to the coroner that the Cingalese met his death whilst attempting to deal out murder."

"But how, my dear sir?" asked Dr. Woodhouse.

"I will tell you," replied Sexton Blake. "I received the first clue—or inkling, I'd better say—when I entered the library for the first time. You will remember, Tinker, that when we pulled the curtains aside which covered the recess we were both assailed by a strange feeling of dread."

"I should think I do remember it, guv'nor," I replied.

"The air was apparently pure, but I knew that it could not be so," went on Blake. "Although nothing was apparent to the sense of smell, the impurity was there all the same. And I guessed that the pocket of air behind the curtains was charged with some foreign vapour, which had been unable to disseminate with the general atmosphere of the whole room. But what was this vapour? How could a gas or fumes produce such terrible effects upon the mind without doing any actual harm to the body?"

"I confess I am bewildered," said Dr. Woodhouse.

"I lost no time in dipping into several books upon India and Ceylon which are included in this very complete library," went on Sexton Blake. "Unfortunately, I

achieved no result, but my suspicions were aroused. I had heard of a remarkable weed which grows in certain remote districts of Ceylon, and, I believe, in parts of India. The name is unpronounceable, but the English equivalent would be 'Satan's weed.' It is used, dried and powdered, by a few religious fanatics in Ceylon, and it has most remarkable properties.

"The powder, when thrown upon a hot fire, gives forth certain fumes. Zahir, without a doubt, threw some of this powder on the fire on each occasion of his visits. The fumes are odourless, tasteless, and invisible. They do not affect the physical health of a person unless they are breathed in their full strength. It is the brain which is affected—the brain and the nervous system, causing a sensation of the utmost horror to grip one, and creating wild visions in the mind's eye."

"Oh, how dreadful!" exclaimed Joyce.

"Indeed, you are quite right, Miss Walton," said Sexton Blake. "This ghastly vapour causes death very quickly if inhaled neat, so to speak. Zahir himself tripped near the fireplace and so received the full charge, and collapsed on the instant. A comparatively weak mixture causes insanity—so you will readily understand that this Satan's weed powder is something of the most horrible character."

"But what about our own sensations, Blake?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Well, my dear fellow, we only inhaled a few traces of the fumes, intermixed with the pure atmosphere—and that caused the terrible feeling of horror which we have all experienced. Norman had a narrow escape two nights ago, and he was probably saved from insanity by the fact that a keen draught was blowing through the room at the time, sending most of the fumes out of the window."

"Dear me! I can hardly believe it!" exclaimed the old doctor.

"It is certainly a revelation to our Western minds," smiled Sexton Blake. "But the mysteries of the East, Dr. Woodhouse, are great and impenetrable. This weed is, after all, not exactly unique, for there are other tropical growths which exhibit similar qualities, although not in precisely the same manner. Zahir was bound by his religion to recover the idol, and to kill the man who had stolen it. His plan, no doubt, was to stand at the window after his victim was rendered incapable of action. And that is why Sir Robert was found staring out into the night. Once this vapour grips a man his muscles are paralysed, and he is unable to move. I am thankful that the only tragedy occurred to the scoundrel himself."

Norman Gower took a deep breath.

"Well, I've had enough of heathen idols!" he exclaimed grimly. "No more monkeying with bronze gods again! If it hadn't been for you, Mr. Blake, I should have been dead by this time, and I shall never be able to thank you for your good services."

Happily, the unfortunate village youth recovered after a few weeks. It was quite certain that he had lost his wits by accidentally meeting the horrible-looking Zahir in one of the country lanes.

The Cingalese himself, it was eventually discovered, had made his headquarters in a remote part of Trevis Park, for his retreat was found by Sexton Blake. Here also was the bronze idol which had been the cause of so much trouble.

The guv'nor didn't want it—Nelson Lee didn't want it—Norman Gower didn't want it. In fact, it went begging, and it was finally sent to a museum in London, where, I suppose, it remains to the present day.

Two other events will possibly be of interest to those who have followed this narrative of singular events. Sir Robert Gower, after going for a long sea voyage on one of his own ships, recovered his reason and his full health; and so there was no tragic result.

The other event is even more interesting—although quite obvious. Mr. Norman Gower was married to Joyce in the quaint little village church at Trevis, and I particularly remember the ceremony, because Sexton Blake and I were present, and Nelson Lee and Nipper came down for the occasion, too.

It was a most joyous event, for Sir Robert had recovered by that time, and the old house of Trevis Wold was now freed from that awful taint which had polluted it during the short but strenuous period of our investigation.

And that, of course, is where I finish.

THE END.

The Red Raiders!

A Thrilling New Story of
Buffalo Bill's Boyhood.

Awaiting Relief—(continued).

They could hold out that long where they were, and they could keep Red Beard and his men at bay. On the other hand, if the hope of rescue were to fail the fugitives, lack of food would ultimately compel them to retreat, and they would be pursued and captured by the bandits at some spot where they would not have a chance of defending themselves.

That their enemies would raise the siege and go back to their camp in the mountains was so improbable that it was not worth considering. The capture of Caleb Farrell would mean a lot of money to them, and they would not relinquish such a prize unless they should be forced to do so by the arrival of rescuers.

It was drawing near to the middle of the day. The sun was not yet visible above, but the air was close and sultry in the Red Canon, deep though it was, and shut in by the lofty cliffs.

The lad felt the heat as he crouched by the dead horse, watchful and alert. What were Red Beard and his comrades doing, or planning to do, around the bend of the trail?

For half an hour there was no sound except the hissing glide of the stream in its sunken channel. Then a head was thrust into view from the jutting spur of rock behind which the bandits were lurking.

Like a flash Bill levelled his revolver, and as the weapon cracked the head vanished.

There was a screech of pain and a burst of angry yells. The lad chuckled with grim delight. He had killed one of the desperadoes, or mortally wounded him.

When he had watched for another half-hour his revolver cracked again, but it was not a head that he had fired at this time. To his chagrin he saw a cap spin in the air, and saw a hand grab for it and snatch it.

"Consarn them!" he muttered. "That was done to see if I was still here, and to make me waste a bullet! They won't fool me with any more of their tricks. Maybe I'll be the one to do the fooling."

The sun was now directly overhead, blazing into the gorge, and its rays shone straight on Bill Cody. The heat scorched him, and there was no escape from it. He writhed and panted, with perspiration dripping into his eyes. He longed for the shady nook where his companions were sheltered, but he dared not leave his post.

He was in torments, burning with thirst, when Sylvia crept to him and forced a wet ball into his mouth. He sucked it, and cool water trickled down his parched throat.

"I needed that badly," he said. "How did you get it?"

"I tore some strips from my skirt," the girl replied, blushing, "and made a rope of them, and tied a handkerchief to it, and lowered it to the stream."

"That was a fine idea. Have you and your father had a drink?"

"We have had plenty. Shall I fetch you some more, Bille?"

"No; I have had enough. Go back to your father, Sylvia. It isn't safe for you here. Don't be frightened if there should be shooting. If anybody is hit it won't be me."

Sylvia left him with reluctance. She would rather have been with him than with her whining, fretful parent.

The sun moved on its way, passing beyond the summit of the cliffs, and the air grew cooler. Again and again, at frequent intervals in the course of an hour, there was poked into view what looked like a man's head.

It was only a cap, however, and it did not deceive the lad. He wasted no ammunition on it. He knew what the object of the bandits was. He was playing a shrewder game than they were, and he was fairly confident that it would succeed.

He lay flat by the body of the horse in the purple shadow that now filled the canyon, and when he ventured to peep beyond his bulwark, which he often did, his enemies could not get a glimpse of him.

"Pretty soon they'll begin to think we've all gone," he said to himself. "Then they'll come streaking after us, and I'll let them have it hot!"

He had an aversion to bloodshed. He had not been reared in the reckless, lawless spirit of the West. But he felt that in this case he would be more than justified in taking human life. He had to deal with men who were worse than Redskins, as ferocious as wild beasts, and if he could kill several of them he might discourage the rest, and thus have a safe opportunity of taking to flight, with Sylvia and her father, in the event of Tom Davis not coming to the rescue.

(Space permitting, an EXTRA-LONG instalment of this thrilling serial will appear next week. Next week's magnificent complete story of Sexton Blake and Tinker is entitled "THE SILENT PARTNER; or, The Case of the Stolen Heirlooms." Introducing that popular character, the Bat.)

£1,000 Cash Prize for a Simple FOOTBALL FORECAST

NO ENTRANCE FEE!

NO GOALS REQUIRED!

SCOTTISH AND IRISH READERS MAY ENTER.

On this page will be found a list of the football matches in the London Combination, the Midland Section, the Lancashire Section, and the Scottish League, to be played on SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 2nd. All that competitors have to do is to strike out, in ink, the names of the teams they think will lose. If, in the opinion of the competitor, any match or matches will be drawn, the names of both teams should be left untouched.

The competitor who succeeds in accurately forecasting the results of all the matches on one coupon will be awarded the sum of £1,000. In the event of no competitor succeeding in doing this, the sum of £50 will be awarded to the competitor who sends in on one coupon a forecast nearest to the actual result. In cases of ties, the prize will be divided. Coupons, which must not be enclosed in envelopes containing efforts in other competitions, must be addressed to:

FOOTBALL COMPETITION No. 5,
GOUGH HOUSE, GOUGH SQUARE,
LONDON, E.C. 4,

and must reach that address not later than THURSDAY, OCTOBER 31st.

This competition is run in conjunction with "Answers," "Answers' Library," "The Marvel," "The Family Journal," "The Home Companion," and "The Woman's World," and readers of these journals are invited to compete.

RULES WHICH MUST BE STRICTLY ADHERED TO.

1. All forecasts must be made on coupons taken from "Answers," "Answers' Library," "The Marvel," "The Union Jack," "The Family Journal," "The Home Companion," and "The Woman's World," dated October 26th, or the issues of those journals dated November 2nd, and it is essential that the names of teams shall be struck out in black ink. The undertaking at the foot of the coupon to accept the Editor's decision as final must also be signed in black ink, and the address clearly given.

2. Any alteration or mutilation of the coupon will disqualify the effort.

3. If any match or matches in the list should be abandoned or full time is not played for any reason, no competitor shall be entitled to claim the prize of £1,000, but the prize of £50 will be paid to the competitor sending a forecast on one coupon nearest to the results of the matches actually played.

4. The Editor reserves the right to disqualify any coupon for what, in his opinion, is good and sufficient reason, and it is a distinct con-

dition of entry that the Editor's decision shall be accepted as final and legally binding in all matters concerning this competition.

5. No correspondence may be enclosed with the coupons, and none will be entered into. Neither will interviews be granted.

6. Entries will be accepted until THURSDAY, OCTOBER 31st. Any received after that date will be disqualified. No responsibility for any effort or efforts lost, mislaid, or delayed can be undertaken. Proof of posting will not be accepted as proof of delivery. Unstamped or insufficiently stamped efforts will be refused.

Football Competition No. 5.

Matches Played SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 2nd.

Closing Date, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 31st.

WEST HAM UNITED	v. BRENTFORD
TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR	v. FULHAM
CHELSEA	v. MILLWALL
ARSENAL	v. QUEEN'S PARK RANGERS
CRYSTAL PALACE	v. CLAPTON ORIENT
BRADFORD CITY	v. NOTTS FOREST
GRIMSBY TOWN	v. LEEDS CITY
LINCOLN CITY	v. SHEFFIELD UNITED
NOTTS COUNTY	v. COVENTRY CITY
ROTHERHAM COUNTY	v. BRADFORD
SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY	v. LEICESTER FOSSE
BLACKBURN ROVERS	v. BURY
BOLTON WANDERERS	v. BURNLEY
EVERTON	v. STOKE
PORT VALE	v. LIVERPOOL
ROCHDALE	v. MANCHESTER UNITED
MANCHESTER CITY	v. STOCKPORT COUNTY
AYR UNITED	v. HIBERNIANS
CLYDEBANK	v. CLYDE
DUMBARTON	v. FALKIRK
HAMILTON ACADEMICALS	v. MORTON
PARTICK THISTLE	v. QUEEN'S PARK

I enter Football Competition No. 5 in accordance with the Rules and Conditions announced above, and agree to accept the published decision as final and legally binding.

Signed

Address

U.J.