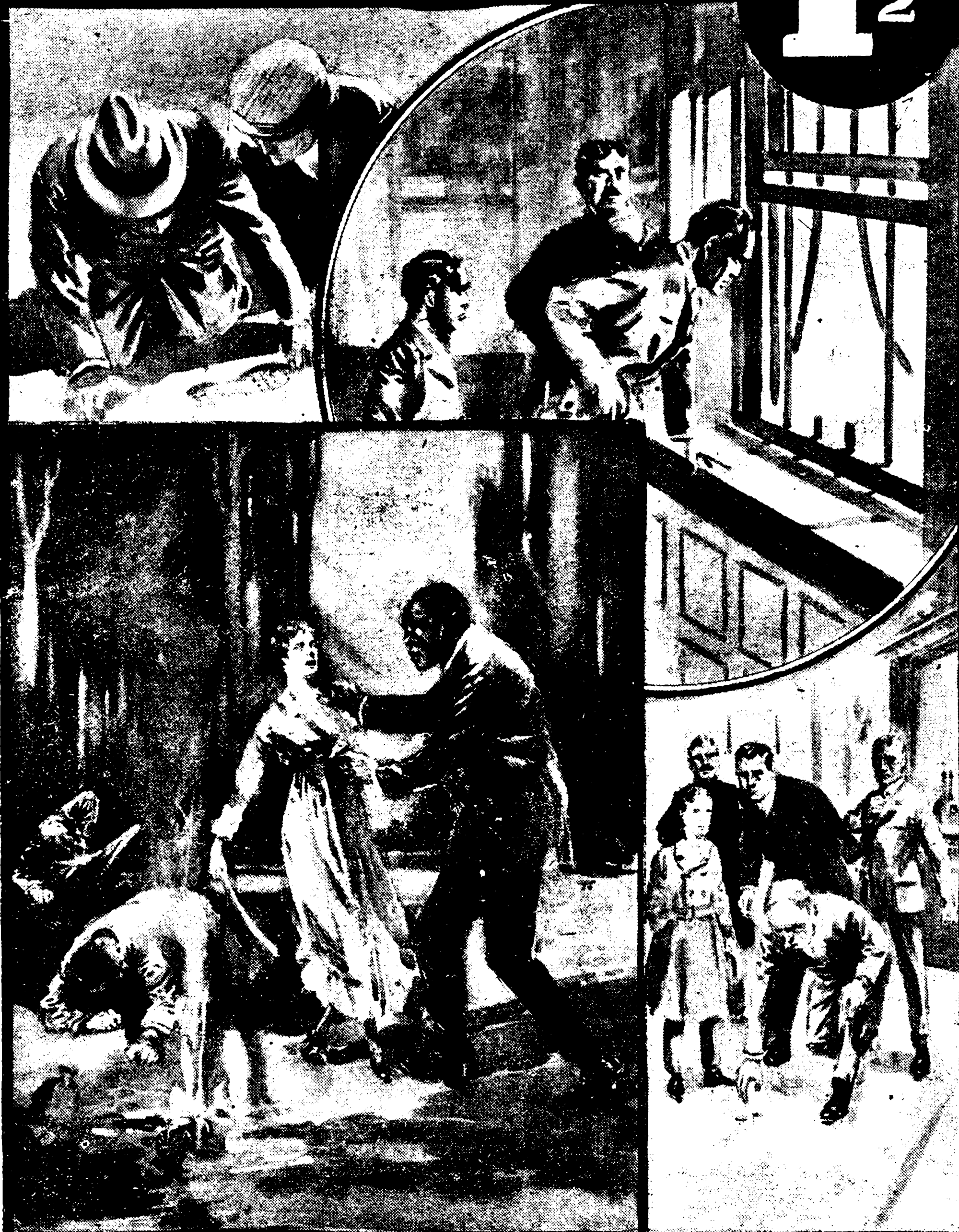


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THE STUDDERED FOOTPRINTS; Or, The Clue of the Blue Dust.

An Absorbing Detective Novel, introducing SEXTON BLAKE and TINKER, and NELSON LEE and NIPPER. By the Author of "The Terror of Trevis Wold," "The Crooks of Rapid Hollow," "The Case of the American Soldier," "The Flashlight Clue," etc., including the "Tinker's Case-Diary" Series and the "Nipper at St. Frank's" Series.



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Series and the "Nipper at St. Frank's" Series.

The Narrative Related Throughout by Tinker.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Burglary at Castle Mount.

LOOKS like trouble of some sort, guv'nor," I remarked, eyeing the portly figure of the country police-inspector with some little curiosity.

Sexton Blake and I had just turned a bend in the beautiful drive which led up from the road to Castle Mount, the modern country seat of Sir Henry Castle, Bart. It was comparatively early in the forenoon of a sunny Friday in late autumn.

The inspector was standing on the top of the wide steps against the noble stone porch, and he was engaged in close conversation with Sir Henry himself. Some little distance away a stolid constable was standing at attention.

"Your supposition is not entirely unwarranted, Tinker," said Sexton Blake, with a smile. "But the trouble may be quite slight; probably a local character has been offending Sir Henry by appropriating a brace of pheasants, or some such trifle."

I shook my head.

"The old chap's looking worried, guv'nor," I said. "It's something more serious than poaching, I'll bet. And perhaps this accounts for the fact that we have been obliged to walk over a mile from the station, instead of lolling in a carriage."

"It is far more likely, you lazy rascal, that our host considered that a brisk walk would do us no harm," returned Blake cheerfully. "However, speculation is pointless, for we shall know the truth in a very few moments."

The guv'nor and I, to tell the truth, were fulfilling a week-end engagement. A fortnight before Blake had met Sir Henry in the Wayfarers' Club, in Piccadilly, and the genial baronet had insisted upon the guv'nor accepting the invitation.

As a consequence we had now turned up, for I had been included in the invitation. Sir Henry Castle was not exactly a close friend of ours, but the guv'nor had met him a good few times, and the hospitable old chap was evidently anxious to ripen the acquaintance with the famous criminologist. I was under no delusions regarding myself. I had come along as a kind of make-weight.

And Sexton Blake and I were naturally rather surprised to find our host engaged in earnest conversation with a leading light of the local police. The presence of the constable in addition hinted that the trouble was not trivial.

As we crossed the stretch of perfectly-rolled gravel towards the steps I noticed that Sir Henry was slamming his right fist into his left with great vehemence, and there was no doubt that he was greatly agitated. The baronet was rather elderly, but straight and athletic for all that—a genial, healthy, quiet-living country squire.

And he suddenly became aware of our approach.

He turned, pausing in his conversation, and then gave a great shout.

"Good gracious me!" he exclaimed, running down the steps. "My dear Mr. Blake, I must tender you a thousand apologies! I quite overlooked the fact that you and your young friend were coming down this morning!"

Sexton Blake shook hands heartily.

"No doubt some other matter has claimed your attention, Sir Henry," he smiled. "I have an idea that—"

"That is no excuse—no excuse whatever!" interrupted our host. "I am absolutely ashamed of myself, and I really find it impossible to express my regret! Ah, this is Master Tinker, no doubt? How are you, my boy—how are you? And you have both walked from the station," added Sir Henry, shaking my hand. "It is perfectly scandalous! I intended giving orders for the landaulette to meet you—"

"Really, Sir Henry, you need not distress yourself," said Sexton Blake. "Tinker and I have thoroughly enjoyed the walk. Our portmanteaux are still at the station, and perhaps one of your servants will fetch them later on."

"I will give orders at once!" exclaimed Sir Henry, who was distressed in spite of Blake's injunction. "There is no excuse for me, my dear sir. I invited you to come. I even urged you to take the early train, so that you could get here in excellent time for luncheon! And then, like a dolt, I forget everything. It is a deadly insult, Mr. Blake, and I am sure you will never forgive me."

The guv'nor laughed.

"I do not value my own importance as highly as all that, Sir Henry," he replied. "I have forgiven you already, if any forgiveness is necessary. No doubt some other matter cropped up and drove all else from your mind."

"That is only too true, Mr. Blake; and it is my sole defence," replied the baronet, clenching his fists. "Scarcely an hour since I made a shocking discovery, and sent for the police. I was just explaining to Inspector Brand—Oh, but—" He broke off abruptly again. "You are an investigator, Mr. Blake," he added, his eyes gleaming. "How extremely fortunate! Will you look into this affair—from a professional standpoint? I beg of you to accept my commission to—"

"No, Sir Henry; I can't do that," interrupted the guv'nor gently. "I came down here as your guest, and not in a professional capacity. But I shall be most delighted to assist you in any way possible—although, I must make clear, I will accept no fee under any circumstances. It will be a friendly investigation—shall we say?"

"It is good of you, Mr. Blake—wonderfully good!" said Sir Henry Castle warmly. "In my agitation I came dangerously near to

offending you a second time. But let me introduce you to Inspector Brand."

The inspector had been left high and dry on the steps, so to speak, and he was not looking exactly amiable at having been deserted so abruptly. As we mounted the steps he bestowed a very unfavourable glare upon the guv'nor and myself.

"Perhaps we shall now be able to continue, Sir Henry?" he suggested coldly. "I have no wish to interrupt your conversation with these gentlemen, but I think it would be as well if we lost no time—"

"You are quite right, inspector!" interrupted Sir Henry briskly. "This gentleman is Mr. Sexton Blake, of whom, no doubt, you have heard."

"Mr. Blake!" ejaculated Inspector Brand, his expression changing very suddenly. "Well, well! I am delighted to meet you, sir! I've often hoped that I should have the opportunity of this honour. How are you, sir?"

The worthy inspector had changed his tone with a vengeance. After the introductions he was painfully anxious to be on his best behaviour. The fact that the tall gentleman in the tweed suit was Mr. Sexton Blake, the world-famous detective, made all the difference. The guv'nor was not a man to be ignored.

"It seems that Sir Henry has suffered a severe loss, sir," said the inspector. "I have not heard the full details yet, and I am quite anxious to do so. So far, I gather that the robbery is of the most serious character."

"It is appalling—quite appalling!" agreed Sir Henry, the agitation reasserting itself in his manner. "But please come indoors; we can talk much better in the library. The whole affair is disastrous."

We followed our host through the wide hall, and were soon seated in the big library, which, in spite of the modern surroundings of the house itself, was decorated and furnished in a rich, old-fashioned style.

"I think it would be as well if I just went over the facts again," said Sir Henry, after he had passed the cigar-box round—which, needless to add, I did not patronise. "The truth is, Mr. Blake, a serious burglary occurred during the hours of the night. The curio-room was broken into, and my whole collection of ancient gold coins has disappeared."

"Then I can indeed forgive any slight pre-occupation on your part, Sir Henry," said Sexton Blake gravely. "I understand that you greatly prized your coins, that you are a very keen collector—"

"My dear sir, I will guarantee that my collection can compare with any in the kingdom—at least, it could do so," said our host. "I have coins of the greatest antiquity, and all of them are rare, some being unique. They have gone completely. The value of the collection does not worry me, for I happen to be rich. But the loss is terrible—from my point of view as a collector. I

would rather have been robbed of my banking account. For many years I have devoted myself to the collection of ancient coins of all types, all of them being gold."

"And what was the collection worth, Sir Henry?" asked Blake.

"It has been valued at twenty thousand; but it is worth more than that by a great deal," replied the baronet. "It is most amazing to me that any theft should have occurred. I have always taken elaborate precautions to safeguard my treasures."

"It was a tempting bait, you must remember," said the gov'nor. "Any enterprising burglar would risk much to get hold of that collection; although it would be quite useless to him in its present form. Your coins, I gather, are famous, and they would be recognised at once if the thief attempted to negotiate them. It is his intention, probably, to melt them down—"

Sir Henry held his hands up in horror.

"Heaven forbid!" he exclaimed huskily. "It would be sheer vandalism, Mr. Blake! Such a possibility fills me with dread. The thought of my priceless collection meeting with such a fate is maddening. Good gracious me! The intrinsic value of the gold itself cannot be above nine hundred pounds—perhaps not so much."

"Even if we put the estimate at a modest five hundred, this would be tempting enough for almost any professional burglar," said Sexton Blake. "It is gold, remember, and men have been murdered for a tenth of that amount. Once melted, the gold coins would be untraceable. But perhaps the police will be able to recover the collection before it meets with such disaster."

Sir Henry nodded, and restlessly tapped the arm of his chair.

"I sincerely trust so, Mr. Blake," he said agitatedly. "Well, I must remain calm. These coins have been secured from all parts of the world—"

"Begging your pardon, Sir Henry," interrupted the inspector, "but wouldn't it be as well to tell us of the burglary? Time is precious, sir, and I gather that you didn't send for me as early as you might have done."

"You are quite right, Brand—quite right," said the baronet. "I did not discover my loss until just after ten o'clock, and then I gave way to panic. I raved. It was foolish of me, of course, but I lost my head. The under-gardener was the first to notice anything wrong; he reported to me that one of the windows of the curio-room had been tampered with, the protecting bars having been severed. I at once rushed to the apartment, and then learned the shocking truth."

"Was anything else touched, sir?" asked the inspector.

"Good heavens! Did the rascal not take enough?" exclaimed Sir Henry. "No, I think nothing is missing except the coins."

"Did you examine the window?" asked Blake.

"No."

"Has anybody else been tramping about outside?"

"No, Mr. Blake," said our host, with a faint smile. "There are some footprints visible, and I thought it just as well to leave them undisturbed; for I have heard that footprints may be of use to the police."

Inspector Brand nodded.

"That was very thoughtful of you, Sir Henry," he said approvingly. "It is quite possible, indeed, that we shall be able to learn much from those footprints—providing they are at all distinct. And now, sir, I should like you to give me a few details regarding your household. It may not be necessary, but I shall feel far more comfortable if I know exactly how the position stands."

"My household is the same as usual," said the baronet. "We live quietly down here, inspector, and, except in the summer season, when Lady Castle generally entertains a house-party, we are somewhat dull."

"You have no visitors at present?" asked Sexton Blake.

"None—excepting yourself and Tinker," replied Sir Henry. "I don't think I need mention the servants—they are all honest, trustworthy people, and except for the housemaids and such-like, they have been in my employ for many years. The maids are all daughters of surrounding countryfolk. Lady Castle and I have one child, our daughter Violet. We three, indeed, comprise the household."

"Mr. Warwick—" began the inspector.

"Oh, yes, of course, there's Ralph!" said our host, turning to us. "Ralph Warwick, Mr. Blake, is my private secretary—a very splendid young fellow. You may judge of

my regard for him when I tell you that Ralph will shortly become one of my own family. He is engaged to be married to my daughter, and both Lady Castle and myself are perfectly certain that Violet will be intensely happy."

"Your secretary lives with you?" asked the gov'nor.

"Well, he does and he doesn't; and I will hasten to explain that somewhat contradictory statement," said Sir Henry. "We have known Ralph for two or three years. Mr. Blake, and he is a most brilliant young man. It is my intention to get him a permanent post, if possible, in one of the big Government departments. With such a chance, I am quite confident that he will rise to be a great statesman in the years to come. The boy's mother, poor soul, is all he has in the world, and she is in very delicate health. They do not live with us here, but occupy the Lake Cottage, down in the hollow, and live in quite a modest way, having but three servants to attend to their needs. Both Ralph and his mother like the arrangement very much indeed," went on Sir Henry. "The Lake Cottage, of course, is by no means a cottage in reality, but quite a charming, old-fashioned house. Just at the moment it is closed, and Mrs. Warwick's servants are up here, at the Mount."

"Ah!" said the inspector. "Then your secretary is away, sir?"

"Yes; he has taken his mother to Hunstanton," replied the baronet. "We are not far from the sea here, Mr. Blake, Castle Mount being, as you know, in the northern part of Cambridgeshire. Hunstanton is the nearest seaside resort—and a charming place, too. Ralph's mother has been somewhat poorly this last week or two, and he thought that a breath of sea-air would do her good. They are staying at the Sandringham Hotel, but I have wired to Ralph this morning concerning the burglary. To tell you the truth, I didn't know what to do."

Inspector Brand rose to his feet.

"Well, Sir Henry, I think I had better have a look round," he said briskly. "You can rest assured that I shall do my very best to capture the rascal—"

"My dear Brand, I don't care whether you catch the culprit or not," interrupted Sir Henry. "Recover my coin collection—that is what I am concerned about. If you can do that you will earn my extreme gratitude. And you must remember that you have Mr. Blake to help you and strengthen your arm."

The gov'nor smiled to himself at this, and I grinned. Inspector Brand was a typical country police-official, and he looked about as intelligent as a gatepost. This is not meant to be a libel on all country inspectors, so I hope I sha'n't receive a few writs in the near future.

"Yes," said the inspector heavily. "Mr. Blake is certainly on the spot, as you say, sir, but this seems to me to be more of a matter for the police to attend to—"

"Then you object to my making a few inquiries?" asked the gov'nor.

"Good gracious, no, sir!" protested Brand. "I shall be only too delighted to have you with me, Mr. Blake! It's an honour, sir. And if I'm not quite so sharp-witted as you are, you mustn't blame me. We people in these country districts don't have many chances, and we're liable to get rather stale."

This was decent of the inspector; he knew well enough that he wasn't a bright specimen, and he didn't pose as one. There was nothing pompous about him, and this was a point well in his favour.

"Would you prefer to go straight to the curio-room first, or take a look at the exterior?" asked Sir Henry.

"Oh, the former, I think!" said the gov'nor.

Brand nodded, and we all passed out into the hall again. There was a slight diversion at this point, for we ran into Lady Castle and a delightful young lady who was introduced to us as Miss Violet Castle. She was attired in a tweed walking-costume, and seemed in no way upset at the appalling catastrophe which had befallen her father's beloved coins. There was a twinkle in her soft grey eyes, and her rosy cheeks were dimpled adorably.

"I hope you'll find dad's silly old coins, Mr. Blake," she said smilingly.

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated Sir Henry. "Listen to the girl!"

"Well, they are silly," insisted Violet. "Some of them are quite dirty, too, and I wouldn't touch them for anything! If you don't find them, Mr. Blake, father will never give us any peace. I believe he loves those

old coins as much as he loves mother and me."

Sir Henry looked very severe. "How dare you utter such a gross libel, Violet?" he demanded, his angry tones belied by the amused twinkle in his eyes. "It is perfectly scandalous! You had better be off, young lady, before I reveal my temper."

Miss Castle laughed merrily, and tripped along the hall. And the inspector and I, grinning, followed Sexton Blake and Sir Henry to the curio-room. This proved to be a large, museum-like apartment, with two windows facing the superbly-kept lawns, and a long skylight.

The room was filled with art gems of all descriptions, for Sir Henry Castle was a collector of no mean order. He was enthusiastic, and any little oddment which was of great value, and which had a thrilling history, always attracted him. The curio-room was filled with valuables of all descriptions. But the apple of Sir Henry's eye had always been set on ancient gold coins.

These had been displayed in long glass cases which lined one whole wall of the room. But now the cases were open, and the expanse of rich velvet empty, except for the little tablets which briefly described each coin. Not a single one was left, for the thief had made a clean sweep.

"One moment, Sir Henry, please!" said Sexton Blake sharply.

The baronet turned in surprise. He had been about to walk across to the show-cases, but the gov'nor's quickly-spoken words stopped him.

"Anything the matter, Mr. Blake?" he asked.

"No, nothing," said the detective. "But there are several footprints visible on the carpet, and I should like to examine them before they are disturbed further. I perceive that the thief did not trouble to wipe his boots before entering—a foolish oversight. Do you see, inspector?"

"I can see some blurry marks," said Brand cautiously.

"The man was wearing golf shoes, apparently," went on Blake, staring at the floor.

"Dear me! Your eyes are remarkably keen," said Sir Henry. "You are quite right, Mr. Blake. The rascal was, indeed, wearing golf-shoes—at least, shoes with rubber or leather studs on the soles. The tracks are quite distinct on the pathway outside. But I confess that I can see nothing definite here."

I was looking at the carpet, too. The marks were slight, but the gov'nor's keen eyes had read them correctly. He went down on one knee, and remained so for some few moments. When he rose the inspector addressed him.

"I forgot to mention, Mr. Blake," he said, "that I've already telephoned through to local headquarters, giving the bare facts of the theft. The police of the whole county are on the alert, and I expect Scotland Yard knows by this time."

"That is just as well, inspector," nodded Blake. "The probability is that the thief made for London, and it is quite likely that Sir Henry's property will be recovered before we can even commence operations here."

"I sincerely trust so!" said the baronet fervently.

Sexton Blake walked carefully over to the window, followed by Brand. The sash was raised, and both men looked out. Immediately beneath the window was a flower-bed, with a soft gravel path running parallel. The window itself was protected by means of three heavy iron bars, two of which had been cut through at the base, and then wrenched forcibly aside.

"Filed," remarked Blake, indicating the bright base of one of the bars. "No; I am wrong," he went on. "The man used a hack-saw, standing upon a couple of upturned flower-pots in order to gain full purchase upon his tool. Considering that the window is comparatively near the ground, I judge the thief to be a man of short stature."

The inspector nodded.

"I agree about the hack-saw, sir," he said. "But I can't quite see how you get the rest."

"Yet it is obvious, surely?" smiled Sexton Blake. "Immediately below the window here there are two circular marks to be seen in the soft earth—deeply imprinted, proving that a heavy weight rested upon the articles which made the marks. And just across the gravel path is a little collection of large flower-pots, two of which I can see, even from here, have been recently disturbed."

"Yes, I suppose you're right, sir," admitted Brand thoughtfully.

"It is really astonishing that the plunderer displayed such a lack of caution," went on the gov'nor. "His footprints stand out all over the path yonder. They could not be plainer if he had deliberately made them there for exhibition purposes. I am inclined to believe that this affair is not the work of a professional burglar."

"It certainly seems a bit amateurish, sir," agreed the inspector.

"Amateur or not," growled Sir Henry, "he got away with my treasures, confound him! Shall we go outside, gentlemen?"

Sexton Blake adopted the suggestion, and we all made our way through the hall, and emerged upon the wide steps. And just at the foot of them, on the gravel, stood Miss Violet, in animated conversation with a tall, athletic-looking fellow of about twenty-seven. They both looked round at the sound of our voices.

"Ralph's come, father!" called the girl.

"So I see, my dear—so I see," said Sir Henry. "Well, Ralph, what do you think of this—eh? All my precious coins gone! A nice how-do-you-do!"

Ralph Warwick was looking grave. He was dressed in blue serge, with a heavy tweed overcoat, and a soft-felt hat. His clean-shaven face displayed much agitation, and he seemed to be more upset than his prospective father-in-law.

"It's a terrible affair, Sir Henry!" he said, as we arrived at the foot of the steps. "I hope you'll get the coins back again. After spending twenty years getting such a collection together, it is rather staggering to lose them in a single night!"

"You're right, my boy!" said Sir Henry feelingly, as he shook hands.

I saw Ralph looking at Sexton Blake inquiringly—he was acquainted with the inspector, of course—but the gov'nor was pre-occupied. And I noticed that he was staring at the new arrival's shoes.

Then I gave a little start. Ralph Warwick's shoes were heavy brown ones, and obviously intended for golfing. And on the gravel in his rear, and all around him, were the tracks he had just made.

And they were exactly similar to those made by the thief!

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Story of the Studded Footprints.

RALPH WARWICK was not aware of the scrutiny which Sexton Blake had bestowed upon his studded golf-shoes. And when he was introduced a moment later, he shook the gov'nor's hand warmly, and with obvious pleasure.

I was rather bewildered for a minute. It was absolutely startling to find that Ralph's footprints were exactly like those of the burglar. But, after the first little shock, I rapidly adjusted my focus, so to speak.

Golfing-shoes are not exactly rare, and there was really no reason why Ralph Warwick shouldn't wear a pair. At the same time, the similarity of design was striking. As I could see by the footprints, the studs were arranged in a most unusual manner, forming a kind of design upon the sole of the shoe. And the other footprints bore precisely the same peculiarity.

At the same time, there must have been more than one pair of such shoes made, and it could be nothing but a mere coincidence. The most likely explanation, to my mind, was that the shoes had been purchased locally—both pairs, those of the thief and those of Ralph Warwick. This was the only way to argue, and if it turned out to be true, the field of investigation would be narrowed.

"It's splendid, having Mr. Blake here!" said Warwick. "Perhaps we shall get on the track of the thief at once."

"I shouldn't be at all surprised," said the inspector grimly.

Something about his tone attracted my attention; and I observed that he, too, was looking down at the marks on the gravel. He would have been a dullard indeed if he had failed to observe those obvious imprints.

But Inspector Brand was looking rather uncomfortable, although the expression was mixed with a certain grimness. I couldn't see how Brand could actually suspect Ralph Warwick, for all the facts, baring the footprints, were against such a thing. He was Sir Henry's private secretary—and more, since he would soon be married to the baronet's daughter. His position was a good one, and his prospects were splendid. Far more to the point, however, was the fact

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that Ralph Warwick had been in Hunstanton at the time of the robbery. So I dismissed the supposition as absurd.

"Come indoors, my boy!" said Sir Henry briskly. "I'll tell you all about it while Mr. Blake and the inspector are examining the pathway. They are hoping to find some clues, and I wish them luck."

"Will you be coming out again shortly, Sir Henry?" asked Blake.

"Yes; I may bring Ralph out to you—"

"Then you will please be careful not to confuse the trail of footprints on the path?" asked the gov'nor. "They may be of use, and by careful walking you can easily avoid them."

"I shall be most careful, Mr. Blake," declared our host.

We parted, and Sexton Blake and the inspector led the way round the house, while Sir Henry, Violet, and Ralph went indoors.

"Did you see, Mr. Blake?" asked the inspector.

"Yes; but we mustn't make any mistakes," replied the gov'nor. "I have no doubt the similarity is merely a coincidence; although I will grant it was rather startling just at first."

Brand said no more, and we arrived opposite the window of the curio-room which had been opened. We took care to avoid the path, walking on the lawn, which came right up to the pathway at this point.

The story told by the footprints were quite obvious. One set came along the path straight from the window, and another set returned; these latter being superimposed upon the "coming" footprints in several places, thus proving that the burglar had walked to the house, and then away from it.

Immediately beneath the window itself the soil of the flower-bed had been trampled about in the most haphazard fashion. The thief had certainly taken no precautions whatever to conceal his movements.

"No professional burglar alive would have done this," observed Sexton Blake critically. "It is plainly the work of a mere novice; and, moreover, the man knew exactly which window to approach, for he has not deviated a yard. He came down this path, broke into the curio-room, obtained his booty, and then returned on his own tracks. The whole thing stares us in the face."

The inspector nodded.

"Hadden't we better see where these tracks lead to, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, of course," was Blake's reply. "But I expect we shall merely find ourselves upon the hard road, and the prints will then be invisible, since there has been no rain for two days, and the surface of the road is tarred, and perfectly dry."

"Still, we'd better have a look, gov'nor," I said.

"Hallo! Are you there, young 'un?" asked Sexton Blake, turning on me. "You've been so unusually quiet that I had almost forgotten your existence."

"That's all right, gov'nor!" I grinned. "Don't mind me!"

The gov'nor smiled, and we all made off down the edge of the path, still keeping to the lawn. The path, strictly speaking, divided two lawns, and there were borders of small fruit-trees on either side. In spite of these, however, there was ample room for us to walk on the edge of the path.

The path itself was of gravel, and the footprints were never sharply defined, although their character was obvious in every instance. At one point, where another path crossed, the trail was slightly confused, proving that one of the gardeners had been that way.

Farther on, however, the burglar's footprints were undisturbed, and we followed without pause. Having left the ornamental gardens behind us, we proceeded down a much wider pathway, and here we found it necessary to walk in single file in order to avoid treading on the trail. The next thing we came to was a high gateway of rustic design, set in the wall, with masses of ivy overhanging it.

"This leads out into the park, Mr. Blake," said the inspector, pausing. "If the fellow cut across to the road he must have turned sharply to his left here. But it seems rather queer, sir. He could have got to the road by a much quicker route than this."

The gate was unlocked, and Sexton Blake paused for a moment to examine it.

"The head gardener has the key, I believe," remarked Inspector Brand. "He locks up at night, and goes round in the morning—"

"Quite so!" interrupted Blake. "In the middle of the night, therefore, this gate was locked. I have no doubt the burglar used a key of his own—it is a common lock, and

almost any key would open the gate—or even a piece of bent wire."

We passed through, and before us stretched a wide expanse of rolling grassland, with clumps of trees dotted here and there. A few Jersey cows were grazing some distance away, and the scene was peaceful in the extreme. A narrow pathway led straight across, but all else was grass.

"By gum!" said the inspector. "He went along the path, sir, and that doesn't lead to the road at all. See, the tracks are more distinct than ever here!"

Sexton Blake nodded, walked forward a few paces, and then bent down. As the inspector had said, the footprints were very plain. This path was not of gravel, but merely trodden earth. In the height of summer it was probably dusty, and in winter a sticky mass of mud. But just at present, after some rain four or five days previously, it was just in that perfect state to take footprints with perfection. The surface was hard, and yet soft—if you can understand what I mean? A man walking along the path would leave a track of clear impressions on the clayey surface.

We all paused together and looked down. The footprints were as clear as though they had been moulded, and the impression of each stud was perfect. And Sexton Blake was frowning somewhat as he examined them.

"The man must have been a fool to have come along this path!" he remarked. "I don't quite accept it, inspector. Why on earth should the man walk here when there is so much grass on either side, where his trail would be hidden?"

"Perhaps he was afraid of losing his way, sir, in the darkness."

"Possibly. But I do not accept that theory," said the gov'nor. "There was a moon last night, inspector, and this path must have been quite distinct, even allowing for the fact that the sky was clouded. Either the burglar was criminally thoughtless, or he left this trail deliberately."

"I can't see that, Mr. Blake," objected the inspector. "Why should the man deliberately leave his trade-mark behind him? It doesn't seem feasible. I reckon he was careless."

"Where does this path lead to?" asked Blake. "It is apparently little used, for there have been no other wayfarers along it. I should imagine, for at least a week—not since the rain, at all events. Our man left his footprints isolated, so to speak, for there is no confusion whatever."

The inspector nodded.

"That's right, sir," he said. "The only man who uses this path regularly is Mr. Ralph Warwick, and he's been away for about a week, so that accounts for the absence of any other footprints. The path leads to a private road across the estate—and, incidentally, to the Lake Cottage, Mr. Warwick's house."

Sexton Blake looked at the inspector thoughtfully.

"And these footprints coincide with Warwick's own," he observed. "H'm! It's queer, my dear Brand—it's very queer!"

"Very significant, I think, sir."

"Very!" agreed the gov'nor shortly.

But I was almost sure that Sexton Blake saw quite a different significance to the inspector, although he made no mention of the fact. We walked briskly along now, and kept to the coarse grass alongside the path.

The fact that this track led to the Lake Cottage was very striking. Even supposing that Ralph's golf-shoes were a mere coincidence, the fact couldn't be overlooked that the burglar had come from the Lake Cottage, and had gone back to it. Why? The road was comparatively close at hand from that rustic gateway, and yet the thief had walked in almost the opposite direction—and he had come from that direction, too.

Taking all these facts into consideration, I seriously began to suspect that Ralph was not so innocent as I had first believed. I remembered, too, the obvious signs of weariness upon Ralph Warwick's face. It was almost a certainty that he had had no sleep during the night. There were lines round his eyes, and his whole face was pale and haggard. A young man so healthy should not have displayed such symptoms.

It proved beyond question, to my mind, that he had some great worry, and had not had the rest his body demanded. This, taken in conjunction with the robbery, only added to the growing cloud of suspicion.

"That's the Lake Cottage, sir," remarked Inspector Brand, pointing.

We had topped a little rise, and down in the hollow which lay before us a very pretty scene was spread out. The private road the

inspector had referred to wound its way between graceful lines of poplars, and we could catch glimpses of a big stretch of water away to the right, immediately ahead, however, and opposite the spot where the pathway joined the road, was a picturesque old house, half concealed amongst stately trees. In the rear a dense thicket stretched away.

"Quite a nice-looking place," remarked Sexton Blake. "Mr. Warwick is lucky to have such a splendid home for his mother. I understand it is closed up at present?"

"That's what Sir Henry said, Mr. Blake," replied Brand. "It's only temporary, of course. Mrs. Warwick will be back in a day or two, I expect, and then things will go on as usual—at least, they will if—"

The inspector broke off, and left his sentence incomplete. But I knew what had been in his mind, and so did the gov'nor.

We did not pause until we reached the gateway of the Lake Cottage. The studded footprints were not visible on the road, for the surface was dry and hard. But here, against the gate of the old house, they were to be seen again. We had instinctively crossed over, and we were all impressed by this silent indication that the thief had entered the garden of Ralph's house.

"It looks bad, sir—mighty bad!" said the inspector quietly. "It'll give me a real pain to take any action against Mr. Warwick, but I'm afraid it'll be my duty, and it'll have to be done. Mr. Ralph is well liked about here, and I've always found him a real gentleman, too. I'm worried, sir, and that's a fact."

Brand was a good-hearted man, and both the gov'nor and I knew that he was sorely troubled. Every step we took entangled Ralph further and further, although we had tried to dismiss the thought of his guilt from our minds.

But the evidence could not be ignored.

We walked up the path, seeing that the studded footprints led right up to the front door. And there, clearly imprinted upon the white steps, were several other unmistakable marks.

"The thief went into this house, sir," said the inspector. "He went in by the front door, too."

"So it seems," agreed Sexton Blake. "I am afraid—Dear me!"

The gov'nor broke off, and bent down suddenly. He picked something up from a corner of the steps, where it had been nearly hidden by an old-fashioned hoot-scraper. Both Brand and I craned forward.

"An old sovereign, sir?" said the inspector sharply.

"No. It is a Charles the Second guinea, dated 1663," remarked Sexton Blake. "There is one exactly like it, I believe, in the British Museum. It is probably one of Sir Henry's most-prized possessions. We have, at least, recovered a portion of the collection, inspector," added the gov'nor drily.

"Good gracious, sir!" ejaculated Brand. "This is proof—positive proof!"

"Undoubtedly!" agreed Blake. "The thief brought his loot here, and, apparently, took it into the house. All this, of course, points to the fact that Ralph Warwick took the stuff. But I am not satisfied, Brand. Are you?"

"Nearly, Mr. Blake!" replied the inspector grimly. "I can't be anything else but satisfied. If Mr. Ralph can't explain where he spent the night I shall have to take action. I only hope that he will be able to prove an alibi. Nobody would be better pleased than I."

"They're coming now," I said suddenly—"Sir Henry and Mr. Warwick."

Sexton Blake and Brand glanced round, and the former nodded. I felt that a crisis had been reached, and something dramatic would soon happen. The gov'nor mounted the steps and closely examined the keyhole. When he turned round there was a preoccupied expression in his keen grey eyes.

"Queer, Tinker," he murmured—"very queer!"

"What is it, gov'nor?" I asked curiously. "Oh? Nothing much," said Blake shortly.

The gov'nor's often like that. He says something, and then leaves me guessing. Before I could ask anything more, the front gate opened, and Sir Henry and Ralph came up the path.

Our host was grave-faced, and his private secretary looked so uneasy that we could no longer doubt that something was seriously wrong.

"We've been following the footprints, Mr. Blake," said Sir Henry. "We knew you would be along here somewhere. So they

lead right up to this front door, eh? It is very remarkable—"

"You suspect me—I know you do!" burst out Warwick passionately, his face hot with emotion. "You're wrong! I swear I haven't touched the coins!"

Sir Henry turned.

"I have not shown by word or action that I suspect you, Ralph," he said quietly. "I am certainly surprised at this outburst, however. My own opinion was that the thief visited your house, too."

Ralph made no answer, and Blake handed Sir Henry the coin he had found.

"The Charles the Second guinea!" exclaimed the baronet, seizing it eagerly. "Good gracious, Mr. Blake, you don't mean to say that you have recovered—"

"Only that one coin, Sir Henry," interjected the gov'nor. "It was lying on the steps, here—a most remarkable circumstance."

"Why remarkable, sir?" asked the inspector.

"Well, the thief evidently went to Castle Mount with the fixed intention of stealing the coin collection," said the gov'nor. "That being so, it is safely feasible to imagine that the man carried a stout bag with him. Why should he have been so careless as to drop a coin here?"

There was a short silence. Sir Henry stood examining the coin, but I could see that he was thinking deeply of other matters. Ralph Warwick leaned against the stone pillar at the bottom of the steps, pale now. And the inspector was staring down at Ralph's shoes.

"You'll pardon me, sir," he said, "but can you tell me where you bought these shoes?"

Warwick started.

"These—these shoes?" he repeated. "Why,

Ralph evasively. "I came away this morning."

"Quite so; but were you in the hotel last night?" persisted Brand, his tone changing to a sterner note. "Please save me the trouble of telegraphing or phoning, Mr. Warwick. The hotel people will know, I dare say."

Ralph seemed to swallow something. "Yes—yes, of course they know," he replied hoarsely. "I went out last night, inspector—"

"When did you get back?"

"About half-past two or three," said Ralph. "I was away three or four hours."

"Where were you during that time?" asked the inspector.

"I can't tell you," replied the young man, speaking deliberately. "It's no good your asking, Brand. I was away from the hotel, that's all. I swear to you positively, though, that I didn't come to this place—"

"There's no need for you to say that, sir," put in the inspector. "I'm sorry you can't be quite open on the subject; it might lead to awkward misunderstandings. Can you tell me—"

"No, I can't tell you anything—anything at all!" broke in Ralph doggedly. "I know that Sir Henry thinks well of me, and he will accept my word when I tell him that I know nothing of this miserable affair."

Our host made no reply, but I was fairly certain that he was in a state of doubt. It was rather a tall order to expect that Sir Henry would believe Warwick's bare statement in face of all the evidence before him.

"I hope he will accept your word, Mr. Warwick," said Inspector Brand grimly. "I'd like to, but I've got to do my duty, and thrust all personal inclinations and opinions aside. I needn't say any more just at present."

The inspector glanced at his watch. "Well, if you'll excuse me, gentlemen," he went on, "I'll just hurry along to the town. There are several little matters that need my attention, I dare say. I'll see you later on in the day, Sir Henry."

"I hope you will bring some good news, Brand," said the baronet.

"I hope so, too, sir."

The inspector nodded to the rest of us, and walked briskly down the garden-path, and was soon lost to view. Ralph Warwick was breathing more freely, and there was an expression of great relief in his eyes.

"Well, we can do nothing here!" exclaimed Sir Henry, shrugging his shoulders. "I propose an immediate return to the Mount, Mr. Blake. We shall just have time for a smoke and a chat before luncheon."

The climax had not arrived yet, although I was fairly certain that it would soon come. Ralph Warwick evidently had no idea why Inspector Brand had hurried off so abruptly: perhaps Sir Henry was in ignorance of the official's motive. But both Sexton Blake and I knew the truth well enough.

Brand had gone to obtain a warrant for Ralph Warwick's arrest.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

An Astonishing Revelation!

SIR HENRY scarcely said a word during our walk back to Castle Mount. He was thinking over the situation, probably, and it could not have given him much pleasure. Ralph walked with him, and the gov'nor and I brought up the rear.

"What do you think of it all, gov'nor?" I asked, when we had reached the Mount garden, and were crossing the lawns. "A bit off-side for Master Ralph, isn't it?"

Sexton Blake nodded.

"I am afraid he is in a tight fix, young 'un," he replied. "Brand won't waste any time over his errand, you can be sure. And I do not blame him for the action he is taking. He could hardly do anything else. The young fellow's guilt is obvious."

"But that doesn't mean to say he's the thief, gov'nor," I remarked.

"No," said Blake, with a slight smile. "The obvious, Tinker, is not always the truth. And in this case I find it hard to believe that Warwick would be such a fool as to burgle his employer's house, and leave behind him a trail almost clear enough for a blind man to see."

"He's not a professional thief, gov'nor," I said. "Perhaps he forgot—"

"I can't accept that, Tinker," interrupted the gov'nor. "When a man commits larceny



I got them in Hunstanton, a few days ago. They seem to be very much like the boots worn by the thief, to judge by the footprints. That's rather rotten—for me," he added, with a forced laugh.

Sir Henry looked up sharply. Perhaps he hadn't noticed Ralph's shoes; they had both been walking on the grass, and the baronet had had no opportunity of seeing the impressions made by his young companion's footwear. But he said nothing.

"Can you tell me the name of the shopkeeper in Hunstanton?" asked Brand.

"Yes, of course. But why?" said Warwick huskily.

"I want to ask him if he has sold another pair—"

"He hasn't, inspector," put in Ralph. "These aren't ordinary golf-shoes. He hadn't got any in stock, and so I chose a pair of stout walking shoes, and told the shoemaker to fix the studs on. This is the only pair like this in existence, I believe; the man fastened the studs on according to his own ideas."

Both the inspector and Sexton Blake looked astonished. This statement from Ralph Warwick was most convincing. And the young fellow didn't seem to realise that he was actually condemning himself beyond recall. If these shoes were the only ones in existence—if there was no other pair of a similar pattern—then it was absolutely obvious that Ralph must have made the footprints during the night.

Inspector Brand delayed no longer.

"Can you tell me where you spent the night, Mr. Warwick?" he asked quietly. "I feel that it is necessary to ask that question, if only for your own safety. And I want you to answer me frankly."

"I have been staying with my mother at the Sandringham Hotel, in Hunstanton," said

his natural instinct compels him to be cautious. And if we adopt the theory that Warwick broke into this house during the night, we must face the fact that he did everything he possibly could to incriminate himself. And Warwick is not a fool. I should judge that he is a very clever young man. The most hopeful point, to my mind, is the fact that Ralph came here wearing those studded shoes."

"Hopeful, guv'nor?" I repeated, staring.

"Precisely," smiled Blake. "It indicates that he knew nothing of his peril, or he would surely have destroyed the shoes before coming near this place. As the thing stands now, assuming that Warwick is guilty, he has done his very best to get himself locked up. Just think things over, Tinker."

"That's what I have been doing, guv'nor."

"And what conclusion have you arrived at?"

"Well, none, guv'nor," I admitted. "But I can't believe that Warwick is guilty, unless he is mad. His career is at stake. Why, if it's proved that he took those coins, Sir Henry will pitch him out, neck and crop. His engagement to Miss Violet will be over, and—oh, it's preposterous. And all for a paltry five or six hundred pounds!"

"It seems absurd, doesn't it?" smiled Sexton Blake. "It is still more absurd when we remember that Ralph possesses well over a thousand pounds in ready money at this moment, to say nothing of shares to the value of ten thousand in two rock-steady concerns in London. Sir Henry gave me that information, indirectly, some little time ago, in the course of a little chat. It is preposterous to think that the young man would sacrifice everything for the sake of those gold coins. But there are the facts to consider; and the facts, Tinker, declare that Ralph is guilty. The police are bound to act upon hard facts."

"Perhaps Mr. Warwick will explain things soon," I suggested.

"It is to be hoped that he will—for his own sake," said the guv'nor. "If he doesn't—Well, Tinker, the affair will be ugly."

We couldn't say anything further, for we had reached the steps, and a moment or two later we were in the big hall. Sir Henry invited us to go straight to his library, and we had just hung our hats up when Miss Violet appeared.

"Why, you're all as solemn as owls!" she declared severely, standing on the stairs, and looking at us all in turn—a very charming picture, indeed (Miss Violet, I mean, not us). "And you're not well, Ralph," she went on. "I told you so as soon as I saw you this morning. Hunstanton doesn't seem to agree—"

"There, there, Vi darling," interposed Sir Henry gently. "You don't understand things yet, little sweetheart."

"I'm sure I don't want to!" retorted Violet, tossing her head. "What a fuss about those silly old coins, to be sure!"

Sir Henry bit his lip, and we passed on.

"Poor little girl!" muttered the baronet, as we entered the library.

"What do you mean, sir?" asked Ralph huskily.

"I mean that Violet is in happy ignorance of the true state of affairs," said Sir Henry. "Come, Ralph, we are alone now. You need not be afraid to tell me the truth before Mr. Blake and Tinker. They are to be trusted implicitly. What is the meaning of all this mystery?"

The atmosphere had suddenly become tense. Sir Henry's tone was cold and calm, but there was no anger in it. Ralph Warwick had not taken a seat, but stood on the hearth-rug, pale and agitated. I took a good long look at him, and I must admit that my impression was favourable.

He was a well-built fellow, and looked even younger than twenty-seven. His eyes were brown and absolutely frank—although, at present, they had an expression of misery and alarm in them. His hair was fair, and rather curly. Certainly Ralph Warwick was good-looking—even handsome.

"It would be foolish for me to pretend that there isn't any mystery, Sir Henry," he said, speaking slowly and quietly. "There is one, and I know that appearances are dead against me. It's not my fault; I swear that I did not come here during the night. It was somebody else, sir—"

"Do you know who?" interjected Sir Henry sharply.

"Yes; I think so."

"Ah, that is better!" said our host. "Let us hear the rest, Ralph."

"I'm afraid I cannot say anything further, sir," said Ralph quietly. "I shall have to rely upon your generosity—"

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"Come, come!" interrupted the baronet. "That won't do, Ralph. I am an easy-going man, but you must not try my patience. This affair is black; and you know full well that you are hopelessly incriminated. It is your duty to explain everything to me at once, before the inspector returns."

"I am sorry, Sir Henry, but I can't say any more."

"You cannot?" demanded the elder man. "Do you mean that you are shielding somebody—that you have given a promise that you will not speak?"

Ralph shook his head.

"Not exactly that," he replied.

"Then your refusal to speak is incomprehensible," said Sir Henry curtly. "It simply means, Ralph, that you have no explanation to offer me. You told Brand that you were out last night for three or four hours. Where did you go to?"

"I did not come here—"

"That is an evasion!" snapped our host angrily. "Where did you go to?"

Ralph was paler than ever now.

"I went on my bicycle to a place this side of King's Lynn," he replied. "I met somebody there, Sir Henry, and that's all I can say."

"Let me advise you to reconsider your decision, Mr. Warwick," said Sexton Blake quietly. "You have stated that you met somebody last night. Surely you realise that that constitutes an alibi, if this somebody will give your story the necessary corroboration? Even if the matter is intensely private, it is absolutely essential to your own safety that you should be frank."

"Your advice is good, Mr. Blake, and I know that you are anxious about me," said Ralph. "But I can't say another word."

"You mean that you won't?" snapped Sir Henry, his temper quite lost.

"Yes, sir, if you like to put it that way!" retorted Ralph. "Oh, you don't know the position as I do! If you will only believe me—"

"Tut-tut!" rapped out Sir Henry. "How can I believe you when you take up this insane attitude? If you are in any trouble I will help you out willingly. Don't be afraid to speak up, Ralph. This obstinate silence is creating an ugly impression in my mind. and—Good gracious me! Can't you realise, boy, that you are making your position an impossible one? For Heaven's sake have done with this mystery!" burst out Sir Henry appealingly, his voice softening. "Tell me everything, Ralph, my dear lad."

"Oh, I can't—I can't!" muttered Warwick huskily, turning away.

"Shall I ask Mr. Blake to retire?"

"No, Sir Henry; it would be just the same," said Ralph, sinking into a chair, and keeping his face bent to the floor. "Please, please don't question me any more. I shall go mad if this goes on much longer!"

Sir Henry looked across to us, and his expression had become grim again—so grim that I was rather startled. Our host's kindly manner was absent, and he had turned a shade paler under the stress of his emotion.

"I suppose you realise, Ralph, that this conduct of yours only points to one conclusion?" he said, with deadly quietness. "You refer to a meeting with a 'somebody,' but refuse to state who that 'somebody' is. Why? Because there is no such person in existence!" went on Sir Henry, his voice rising dangerously. "It is incredible to me that you should invent a tissue—"

"It's the truth, sir—I swear!" shouted Ralph hotly.

"Then tell me the whole truth—not a mere inkling of it!" retorted Sir Henry, clenching his fist, and hammering the table. "I will believe you then, boy, but not before. Have you not proved, by your own words, that those shoes you are wearing made the foot-prints leading from your own house to this one? Do you wish me to believe that somebody else was wearing your shoes? Do you take me for a fool, Ralph? Mr. Blake found one of the missing coins on your doorstep—on your own doorstep! How did it come there? Tell me that, Ralph!"

The young man made no reply, and both the guv'nor and I waited for a fresh outburst on Sir Henry's part. He was certainly getting ready for it, but a welcome interruption came. Somebody had tapped upon the door.

"Who is that?" snapped our host irritably.

The door opened, and a scared-looking butler appeared.

"Inspector Brand is waiting, sir!" he announced.

"Oh!" said Sir Henry, looking over at

Sexton Blake quickly. "All right, Denny! You had better bring the inspector here at once."

"Yes, sir."

The butler retired, and there was a complete silence in the library. Ralph had risen to his feet, and he was now at the window, staring unseeing out over the lawns. Sir Henry stood motionless, pale and haggard.

Inspector Brand was ushered in, and I saw a quick look of satisfaction enter his eyes as he beheld Ralph Warwick. Much as the inspector disliked his duty, his professional instinct was uppermost at this moment.

"Well, Brand?" said Sir Henry grimly.

"I'm afraid I have a very unpleasant duty to perform, sir," replied the inspector. "You have placed this case in my hands, and I find that an arrest is absolutely necessary. There can be no shadow of doubt that Mr. Warwick is the man who broke into this house last night, and—"

"It's a lie!" shouted Ralph furiously.

"I wish I could believe so," said Sir Henry, turning round. "But your attitude, Ralph, is self-condemning. And you had better not shout in that way, either. The inspector is only doing his duty."

"I'm sorry, sir," muttered Warwick, his eyes hopeless in their expression. "But Brand can't arrest me, can he? He must have a warrant—"

"I have already got it," interrupted the inspector grimly. "It is a terrible business, and I wish with all my heart that I was out of it. But I shall have to arrest you, Mr. Ralph."

"One moment, Brand," said Sir Henry. "This matter can be adjusted even now, perhaps. I may not be willing to prosecute. I would give ten thousand pounds this moment if I could be certain that Ralph is innocent. But I am compelled to believe otherwise, and I intend to give him a chance."

"What—what do you mean, sir?" asked Warwick huskily.

"Just this, my boy," replied the baronet. "Return my property at once, and I will allow you to go free. You will leave this house, of course, and you will never see Violet again."

Ralph clenched his fists desperately.

"I can't return the coins!" he exclaimed, his voice quivering. "I didn't touch them! I don't know where they are! I am innocent, Sir Henry! I swear before Heaven that I am innocent! Don't you believe me?"

"Have you given me any encouragement to believe you, Ralph?" asked the baronet coldly. "No, I cannot bring myself to credit that you are innocent—Wait! You have acted all through this affair in the most suspicious manner, and the evidence is positively conclusive. If you had offered some explanation it would have been different. But you refuse to say a word—and I can draw my own conclusions. I am disappointed, Ralph—shocked and grieved beyond words."

And Sir Henry's voice faltered as he sank into his chair. The anger had left him again, and he was inexpressibly sad. His attitude now had far more effect upon Ralph than his previous anger. The young man went over to Sir Henry, and stood before him breathing quickly.

"I don't know what to say, sir!" he exclaimed almost in a whisper. "Will you give me a chance? Will you accept my word?"

Sir Henry looked up.

"You are asking too much, boy!" he muttered. "How can I accept your word when every shred of evidence goes to prove that it was you, and nobody else but you, who plundered this house last night?" The baronet rose, and went on: "Ralph, you have asked for a chance. I will give it to you. Tell me where you have hidden the coins, and I will allow you to walk out of this house—"

"You still believe me guilty!" shouted Warwick despairingly. "I'm not! I'm not! Heaven help me! Won't any of you believe that I am the victim of a foul plot? Won't you, Inspector Brand?"

"The facts are too conclusive, sir," said the inspector gruffly.

"Won't you believe in me, Mr. Blake?" pleaded Ralph.

Sexton Blake nodded.

"Yes, certainly, Mr. Warwick," he said calmly. "I do believe in you!"

We all stared at the guv'nor in amazement—including Ralph. He started forward, and a tinge of colour returned to his cheeks in an instant. His eyes shone with a new hope.

"You—you don't think I am guilty?" he asked hoarsely.

"I am quite certain that you are innocent, my dear fellow," said Sexton Blake, smiling. "Perhaps I shall have the pleasure of proving it later on."

Warwick clasped Blake's hand feverishly. "Heaven bless you!" he muttered, with a gulp.

"This won't do, sir!" said the inspector, in a shocked voice. "It doesn't seem quite fair to my mind, either. You know that Mr. Ralph is guilty, and it won't do any good to soothe him in this way—"

"I don't understand you, Mr. Blake!" broke in Sir Henry angrily. "The boy is responsible for this theft. You must be mad to think otherwise. Heaven knows that I would be glad to give him the benefit of a doubt; but there can be no doubt in this affair. He stands guilty before us—his crime proven to the hilt!"

Sexton Blake nodded. "The evidence is black," he agreed. "But I do not always rely upon evidence, especially when it is purely circumstantial, as this is. You will probably consider that I am a fool for expressing these views, for I know no further facts than you know yourself. It is just my conviction. Mr. Ralph asked me point-blank if I believed in him, and I was compelled to answer as my common-sense dictated."

"Your common-sense!" echoed Sir Henry, amazed. "But your common-sense must tell you that Ralph is guilty—positively, unquestionably guilty! Good gracious me! I would give a fortune to agree with you, Mr. Blake! But I can't! It is impossible for me to doubt. The whole wretched story is obvious."

"You will forgive me if I differ, Sir Henry," said the gov'nor quietly. "And may I make a little suggestion? Before the inspector executes his warrant let us visit the Lake Cottage and have a look round. If Ralph is guilty he will not welcome that suggestion."

"But I do welcome it, Mr. Blake!" said Ralph eagerly.

A gleam of hope sprang into Sir Henry's eyes.

"By George, we will go down, then!" he exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "We will see what the Lake Cottage has to show— No, Brand, I am in earnest. All this may not be exactly legal or official, but we know one another. I hope to Heaven that it will not be necessary for you to execute your infernal warrant!"

"I hope so, too, sir!" said the inspector fervently.

Within five minutes we were all striding through the grass alongside the path which led across the park to Ralph's house. The studded footprints seemed to stare at us from the path accusingly, and I was frankly astonished at Sexton Blake's attitude. But the gov'nor generally does the thing a fellow doesn't expect.

"I can't quite see how you get at it, gov'nor," I remarked softly as we walked.

"No, Tinker; I do not expect you to see," replied Blake. "Perhaps I do not quite see myself, either. But Ralph's attitude is not the attitude of a guilty man. He breathes innocence from every pore, so to speak. The evidence, I will grant, is overwhelmingly against him; but, in this instance, I prefer to be guided by my own judgment, leaving the evidence to be disposed of later. If I am wrong I shall begin to believe that I am no longer a judge of human nature and character."

"Dash it all, gov'nor, I think he's innocent, too!" I said loyally. "He seems to be a splendid chap. But—but— Oh, well! What about these footprints? What about that ancient guinea? What about—"

"Yes, Tinker, there are quite a number of obstacles to be surmounted," interrupted Sexton Blake. "Perhaps we shall find more when we get to the Lake Cottage. We shall see. If so, I am afraid Sir Henry will tell the inspector to go ahead."

I nodded. And we all walked on in silence for a time.

And Blake's fears were realised. Arriving at the quaint, old-fashioned house, Ralph took out a key and fitted it into the lock. It turned stiffly, and Ralph had some little difficulty in unlocking the door.

"It never went stiff like this before!" he remarked impatiently.

Sexton Blake smiled, and gave me a little nod, although I couldn't for the life of me understand why.

At last Ralph succeeded in turning the key, and we all entered the neatly-furnished, trim hall.

"The house is empty," said Ralph. "You can go where you like, inspector."

"Which is your own study, sir?" asked Brand.

"The third door on the left."

The inspector made for it, and we followed. Entering the room, we found it dark, for the

blind was drawn. Brand walked across and jerked it up, and the room became flooded with light.

It was a comfortable apartment, furnished in a careless kind of way, and essentially a man's room. Two big easy-chairs adorned the space on either side of the fireplace, tobacco-pipes and cigarette-boxes littered the mantelpiece, a writing-desk filled one recess.

"H'm!" grunted the inspector significantly.

He was staring down at the dark carpet. There, as clearly imprinted as though done deliberately, were several footprints—the footprints of a curiously-studded shoe or pair of shoes. And Sir Henry suddenly bent down, drawing in his breath with a sharp hiss. When he straightened he held in his hand two gold coins.

"Both Brazilian!" he exclaimed. "What does this mean, Ralph?"

Warwick stared at the coins almost fearfully.

"I—I don't know, sir!" he said, in a dazed voice.

"Come, my boy, you cannot keep this attitude up any longer!" said Sir Henry roughly. "Every step we take convicts you further. Speak up now, and I will be merciful. Remain obstinate, and I will make you pay the full penalty!"

Ralph said nothing. He stood before us as pale as a ghost. And the inspector, having picked a piece of paper from the fireplace, compressed his lips.

"I think this is the last link, sir—if any last link had been necessary," he said, handing the paper to Sir Henry. "This is a receipt for a pair of walking-shoes, bought several days ago in Hunstanton, and the price included the fixing of leather studs to the soles and heels."

Ralph started forward.

"I—I didn't leave it—" he began desperately.

"By Heaven, boy, do not say another word!" interrupted Sir Henry, his voice harsh and angry. "You have uttered sufficient lies this morning! This receipt, found in this very room, proves beyond a shadow of doubt that you were here last night. No other man would have possessed this document, and no other man but you would have left it here. You apparently thought that your very position would render you immune from suspicion. Inspector, you must do your duty— But stay! I will give you one more chance, even now, Ralph. Where are those coins?"

"I don't know! I don't know!" said Ralph hopelessly. "I didn't touch them—"

"You are determined to bluster to the last—eh?" snapped the baronet, his eyes blazing with fury. "My patience is entirely exhausted, Ralph! I was willing, eager to give you every chance. But your attitude has hardened my heart. You need expect no mercy from me now. Take him away, Brand!"

Ralph Warwick turned to Sexton Blake in despair.

"I suppose you'll turn against me now—" he began.

"Not yet, Ralph," said Blake gently. "This discovery does not perturb me in the least—I rather expected something of the sort, in fact. It merely confirms my original theory that you are innocent."

"You must be mad!" shouted Sir Henry, his anger getting the better of him.

"I will merely say, Sir Henry, that it is truly a remarkable thing for a thief to leave such a trail behind him as Ralph seems to have done," said Blake quietly. "Only a madman would have worn those studded shoes; and only a maniac would have left that receipt in this room, in full view, inviting inspection. And Ralph, I am quite sure, is by no means a madman. He is merely the victim of a plot, although I will admit I can see no daylight so far."

"You're splendid, Mr. Blake!" said Ralph huskily. "I don't blame Sir Henry for thinking I am guilty, and I wish with all my heart that I could tell the whole truth. But I can't—I daren't!"

"You have succeeded in working upon Mr. Blake's feelings, but not upon mine; that is the simple truth," said Sir Henry harshly. "I am sick of it all! It is sordid, disgusting! I thought more of you, Ralph! I pray to Heaven that you will repent one day!"

Five minutes later Ralph Warwick was accompanying Inspector Brand to the lock-up, or court-house, in the little neighbouring town of Mountcroft, barely a mile from Castle Mount. He was allowed to walk freely, for the inspector was almost as uncomfortable as his prisoner. But his duty had to be done.

Meanwhile, Sexton Blake, Sir Henry, and I walked back across the park. We were all

silent and thoughtful. The baronet was walking with bent back now, and his whole attitude was one of care and misery.

"You have amazed me, Mr. Blake," he said suddenly. "How can you think that Ralph is innocent is utterly staggering. I would believe the same if I could. I have been searching for a loophole ever since the first suspicion attached itself to the boy. But I cannot ignore the obvious."

"That is just where we differ, Sir Henry," said the gov'nor quietly. "I do ignore the obvious. There is something deeper—"

"It is all very well to take that view, Mr. Blake," interrupted the baronet, "but I cannot do so. Ralph is not a professional rascal. He undertook this affair in a mad moment of jealousy, I presume. He has always admired my coins; and has often expressed the hope that he will, some day, possess a collection as fine. The boy is not in want of money. I know that. I put the crime down to a warped covetousness on his part. And he did his work clumsily and badly."

"You are fully justified in holding that opinion," said Blake. "But I think I shall prove your mistake, sooner or later, Sir Henry. Under the circumstances, you could do nothing but give Ralph in charge, unless you liked to ignore the matter altogether. Ralph's guilt is apparently established."

"But you said—" began Sir Henry.

"Apparently established," Sexton Blake reminded him. "Apparently, Sir Henry."

"I cannot possibly agree— Good gracious me!" ejaculated the baronet, his voice almost hoarse. "Violet is coming! Poor girl! Poor little Vi!"

Sir Henry's daughter had appeared from the gate which led to the Mount gardens. We were quite near them. And the girl was running, and as she came up we could see that she was labouring under great excitement and anxiety.

"Father!" she called. "Where—where is Ralph?"

"My dear little sweetheart," said Sir Henry gently. "Ralph has gone. You will not see him again, I am afraid."

"Oh, but it is cruel—cruel!" she cried, her voice quivering with emotion. "You must forgive him, dad! Ralph couldn't have known what he was doing, and—and— Oh, but I don't believe he stole the wretched coins! I don't believe it! And you are a monster for giving him in charge!"

"There, there!" said Sir Henry soothingly.

The girl was terrified, and her distress was painful to witness. She must have heard a suspicion of the truth—from one of the servants, probably. And now she knew that Ralph had indeed been arrested.

Sexton Blake gave a significant glance. Violet, it seemed, was almost ready to believe in Ralph's guilt, for she had asked her father to forgive him. This was rather queer. Certainly the girl had altered her tone almost at once, but we knew that she believed the worst. Why? Had she any reason for believing it? She, of all people, would know Ralph's secrets, if he had any.

The gov'nor and I allowed the father and daughter to walk on ahead, so that they should be alone in their grief. And Sexton Blake nodded thoughtfully towards the footprints on the path beside us.

"What do you notice about them, Tinker?" he asked.

"Well, for one thing, gov'nor, they are too plain," I replied. "The chap who was wearing those shoes evidently chose the softest part of the path, so that the impressions should stand out clearly."

"Excellent!" nodded Blake. "Now, we can't conceive of Ralph doing a thing like that. He would have taken the grass, as we are, if he had actually committed this theft. Do you notice anything else, young 'un?"

"No, sir," I said, after another long look.

"Observe the stride, and remember Ralph's height," went on Sexton Blake. "A man of Ralph's height would have a longer stride than this—eh, Tinker? I conclude that the actual thief was a fairly short man."

"Wearing Ralph's shoes?" I asked wonderingly.

"Exactly."

"But Ralph didn't say anything—"

"No; he evidently has an excellent reason for remaining silent," interposed the great detective. "But we must be patient. Sooner or later we shall arrive at the truth. I intend to press my investigations vigorously."

We found Sir Henry alone when we reached the wide steps in front of Castle Mount.



"We came to the small clearing in the wood.. And there, lying face downwards, was William Lambert." (See page 11.)

Violet had gone in to her mother, and they were both crying their hardest now, probably. This shocking affair had come as a great blow to them.

"Luncheon will be served within a few minutes, Mr. Blake," said Sir Henry. "Will you come to the library meanwhile?"

We accompanied our host to the library, and there he and Blake lit cigars and sat down.

"I am afraid I shall be a poor host," said Sir Henry sadly. "This is a house of sorrow, Mr. Blake. Ralph, as you know, was not merely a private secretary. He was engaged to my little girl, and I am afraid her heart will be broken. And the shock— Oh, what a nuisance!"

The telephone-bell was ringing.

"Excuse me a moment," went on the baronet, rising and seizing the instrument. "Yes? Who is that?" he went on. "Oh, Inspector Brand! Well, what— Eh?" An expression of amazed horror came into Sir Henry's eyes. "Good heavens! You must be mistaken, Brand! It is impossible! Proved to the hilt, you say? Dear me! What a shocking revelation! No, no, inspector! Keep it as quiet as you can, for mercy's sake!"

Sir Henry continued talking for a moment or two longer; then he hung up the receiver, and turned to us with a dazed, dull kind of expression in his eyes.

"Your theory is wrong, Mr. Blake," he said sadly. "I have just heard a most appalling piece of news. Ralph Warwick is an assumed name. His real name is Ralph Douglas.

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and he has already served a term of imprisonment!"

"What!" I gasped, starting forward.

"That cannot be true, surely?" asked Sexton Blake sharply.

"The inspector tells me it has been fully established," replied Sir Henry Castle, staring before him unseeing. "Ralph was private secretary to a Mr. Austin Goodall five years ago, and he was convicted for burglary, and sentenced to three years' penal servitude!"

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

A Story of Crime and Suffering.

SEXTON BLAKE looked at me rather queerly.

"This is rather a knock—eh, Tinker?" he said. "So Ralph is an 'old lag'! I will admit that the news has taken me by surprise."

"And he has done 'time' for burglary, too, guv'nor—just like this case—while he was somebody's private secretary!" I ejaculated. "I say, it looks rotten! Perhaps he's guilty, after all, guv'nor!"

"My dear lad, of course he is guilty!" said Sir Henry heavily. "This piece of terrible information leaves no room for doubt. Your theory is wrong, Mr. Blake, and I am more shocked than I can say. To think that I should have harboured a convicted criminal in my home! Good gracious! And little Violet— The thing is staggering, Mr. Blake! I have never been so deceived in a human creature in all my life before!"

Sexton Blake smiled.

"I don't think you have been deceived, Sir Henry," he replied quietly.

"Upon my soul!" ejaculated the baronet. "You still believe in the rascal?"

"I am not quite certain that Ralph is the man who—"

"But Brand was most emphatic!" declared Sir Henry. "He told me that there can be no doubt. The police records prove the identity. Ralph is the man who robbed Mr. Austin Goodall, and who served penal servitude for the crime. It is only natural, perhaps, that he should repeat his performance with me."

"I have no doubt that somebody else thought that, too," said the guv'nor grimly. "I am obstinate, Sir Henry. I will not willingly abandon the theory I have formed. Ralph is innocent, and you will find that I am right before long. Everything points to the fact that the young fellow is innocent."

Our host stared wonderingly.

"Everything points to the fact that he is innocent?" he repeated. "You are talking very strangely, Mr. Blake."

"My words sound strange, no doubt," agreed Sexton Blake. "Perhaps I am viewing the case from a different standpoint. Can you tell me what Ralph's position was before he came into your employment?"

Sir Henry nodded.

"Ralph had been private secretary to Lord Stockmore," he replied. "That was about eighteen months ago. His lordship died, and I thought that Ralph was the soul of honour, and as honest as the day. I am quite certain that Lord Stockmore had no inkling of the young man's real character. And I, until this morning, was completely deceived. I am more shocked than I can express, Mr. Blake!"

"Yet you do not think that Ralph is actually wicked?"

The baronet looked grave.

"That is rather a difficult question to answer," he said. "He has certainly been very wicked in the past, otherwise he would not have served punishment in a convict prison; and he has been wicked over this affair now. But I must, in all fairness, admit that the boy has always been a delightful companion, a faithful helper, and a thorough gentleman. I almost loved him; and Lady Castle, I know, is overcome with grief. As for my dear little Violet, I am afraid she will fret terribly!" Sir Henry's eyes grew grim. "But we must steel our hearts," he went on. "Ralph has revealed his true colours, and he deserves no pity. I am deeply angered by his refusal to give up the stolen property."

"He can't sir," I remarked. "He doesn't know where it is."

Sir Henry shook his head gravely.

"So you, too, are of the opinion that Ralph is innocent?" he said. "I wish with all my heart that I could share your view. But there goes the luncheon-gong. We must go, Mr. Blake."

When we arrived in the dining-room we found it occupied by Lady Castle only, except for Denny, the butler.

"Poor Violet is upstairs," explained her ladyship, regarding us with red, sorrowful eyes. "I am grieved for the child. Oh, Henry, isn't there some awful mistake? I can't believe that Ralph—"

"My dear, there is no doubt whatever," interjected our host gently. "You are upset, of course—we are all upset. But we must not discuss the matter now. All the talk in the world will do no good."

And so we fell to conversing on general topics while we partook of luncheon. But it was all make-believe. We were all thinking of Ralph Warwick, and the dreadful shadow which had fallen over Castle Mount. For it was a terrible blow, indeed—more particularly on account of Sir Henry's daughter.

The butler had been out of the room for a time, and when he returned he announced that Inspector Brand was waiting on the telephone, and that he wished to have a word with Sexton Blake. The guv'nor rose at once, making his excuses.

"What is he bothering about now, I wonder?" growled Sir Henry.

Blake went to the library, and picked up the instrument.

"You want to speak to me, inspector?" he asked.

"Ah, is that Mr. Blake?" came Brand's voice. "Can you come down here—to the court-house? Mr. Ralph is anxious to see you, he says. He wants to have a talk to you about something. I'm allowing him as much freedom as possible while he's here, you know."

"Very good of you, Brand," said Sexton Blake. "Yes, I'll come down within the hour. Tell Ralph to expect me, and also tell him to cheer up. You won't hold him long, inspector; he's not your man at all."

Blake heard the inspector laugh. "Afraid there's no doubt, sir," he said. "Has Sir Henry told you that Warwick is really a convicted criminal named Douglas?"

"Yes; but that doesn't alter my view." "Well, I can't understand you, sir, that's all I can say," declared Brand. "If you weren't who you are I should be disrespectful, I believe. You seem to ignore all the evidence in favour of your pet theory."

Sexton Blake chuckled. "That's right," he replied. "You'll understand later on, Brand, if you have patience, and if you live long enough. I'll wager you a fiver I haven't made a mistake!"

"It's tempting, sir, but I won't take you on," said the inspector. "It would be like robbery. Warwick is positively guilty, and why he sticks out that he's innocent is beyond me. I thought he had more sense."

"And you thought I had more—eh?" laughed Blake. "Well, Brand, expect me down there with Tinker before three. Good-bye!"

The gov'nor was looking quite cheerful when he returned to his interrupted luncheon. He briefly told us why he had been wanted; and when the meal concluded, he and I donned our hats, and sallied out.

The court-house was a very small place, and we found Inspector Brand waiting for us outside. He led us within, and escorted us down a passage to a private room, which was Ralph's temporary prison. Unlocking the door, the inspector entered, and we followed.

"Mr. Blake's come," said Brand kindly. Ralph Warwick, who had been sitting dejectedly in a chair, rose at once, and came eagerly forward.

"This is splendid of you, Mr. Blake!" he said. "I—I feel that I can talk to you freely," he went on earnestly. "You think I'm innocent, don't you? I want to get your advice, if you'll be patient with me."

"My advice is at your disposal, Ralph," said the gov'nor quietly.

The inspector, with a nod, withdrew, and closed the door after him. And the prisoner sat down once more, and eyed us uncertainly, a light of doubt appearing in his troubled eyes.

"I don't know how you will take it, Mr. Blake," he said, in a low voice. "Perhaps I shall be doing myself harm by telling you the whole miserable story. But I must—I must tell somebody. And you— Well, you stood by me when even Sir Henry believed the worst. I'm going to be absolutely frank."

"I could ask for nothing better," said Sexton Blake. "You need not tell me that you are innocent, Ralph. I was quite sure of it almost from the start. But there is a deal behind this affair—and both Tinker and I shall welcome your statement. Please let it be absolutely frank, as you say; keep nothing back."

Our companion rose from his chair again. "I can't keep still—I'm restless!" he said huskily. "Oh, Mr. Blake, this affair is terrible—ghastly! I don't know what little Violet—" He pulled himself together. "But I'm a weak fool!" he went on fiercely. "Why should I make an exhibition of myself like this? I have nothing to fear—nothing at all! I am as innocent of this crime as you are yourself!"

There was a certain pride in his tone now, and he was calmer.

"It's your advice I want, Mr. Blake," he continued. "I am afraid to tell the police, because I fear they won't believe me. But you are different. I can talk freely to you, and I know that you will understand, and that you will treat my confidence with respect. I will give you a shock to start with, and perhaps deprive myself of your support. I have been in prison, Mr. Blake; I have served three years' penal servitude for robbery!"

Sexton Blake nodded, and smiled.

"Well?" he said. "What of that?"

"You—you still believe me innocent?" asked Ralph hoarsely.

"Of this crime—yes. I know nothing of the other, for which you were sentenced—"

"I was innocent then—I swear before Heaven I was innocent!" declared Ralph, his voice quivering with emotion. "Listen! I will tell you the story of my rank, insane folly. You will know what a fool I have been, Mr. Blake."

We waited with interest. Ralph evidently was unaware of the fact that his secret was already known to us. He believed that he had taken us by surprise, and was somewhat astonished at our calm attitude.

"The first trouble only occurred just over five years ago, when I was little more than a boy," said Ralph slowly. "I was a few months older than twenty-one—and inexperienced. It seems to me as though I must be forty now, Mr. Blake. At that time I was secretary to Mr. Austin Goodall, the well-known London banker. He had known my father, and took me into his house when the dad died. My mother—" Ralph paused for a moment, and despair crept into his eyes. "What will become of my poor mother if I am again convicted—"

"My dear fellow, you mustn't anticipate trouble of that sort," Sexton Blake interjected. "You won't be convicted; I will see to that! Be easy in mind, Ralph. Before three days have passed you will be free!"

"It seems too good to be true, Mr. Blake," said Ralph sadly. "You don't know the facts as I do. But I'm going to tell you everything. Well, as I was saying, I was Mr. Goodall's secretary five years ago, and my prospects were splendid. I was living with my mother in a nice house at Richmond, and we were both very happy. Perhaps I was allowed too much freedom—although all my interests in life were centred round my work and my home. I had a motor bicycle, and occasionally went out for spins into the country at week-ends. On one of these jaunts I met a fellow who had broken an exhaust-valve, and I, to oblige him, lent him one of my

spares. This led to a visit one evening, when Lambert—his name was William Lambert—returned my valve. I was a mere youngster, and he was about thirty, and we became very friendly—discussing, mainly, motor-cycles, and such-like topics. I went to his place now and again, and before a couple of months had passed we were like brothers. Lambert was a thorough gentleman in upbringing, and his manners were pleasant and genial. In my folly I did not see through him, as I did later on. I thought he was one of the best fellows breathing, and became not only friendly, but intimate."

Sexton Blake nodded.

"Your case is by no means unique," he said drily. "A plausible scoundrel getting into the good books of a young fellow who might be of some use. I judge that Lambert talked a good deal about your employer, Mr. Goodall?"

"Not at first," said Ralph. "Later on, however, he chatted with me about my work, and I was frankly communicative. I told him all sorts of things, even mentioning one or two private matters—which, of course, was very wrong indeed. But I trusted Lambert completely, and never had the slightest suspicion that he required the information for evil purposes."

"I was a young idiot, and my only excuse is that I knew no better at the time," went on our companion. "I talked to Lambert on the subject of my employer freely, with never an inkling that he would use the knowledge as he ultimately did. Everything that passed between us—on my side, at least—was com-



"I gave a terrific yell as the negro seized me, and the gov'nor no doubt thought I had been seriously injured. He drew his revolver and fired." (See page 15.)

pletely innocent. And then the terrible blow fell."

"Mr. Goodall was robbed?"

"Yes, Mr. Blake," replied Ralph, his eyes gleaming. "By Heaven, it makes me feel desperate even now! To think that that smooth-tongued scoundrel should have so blinded me! There's no need for me to go into details of that robbery. Mr. Goodall suffered to the extent of about two thousand pounds, and there was every indication that I had betrayed my trust—that I was the thief. The crash found me absolutely unprepared, and I was so dazed by the shock of it all that I no doubt appeared guilty. At all events, I was arrested. Every scrap of evidence was black against me, and all my efforts to extricate myself were useless."

"Of course, Lambert was the thief. I knew that at once, as soon as my wits returned. The devil had used me like putty in his fingers, and had then revealed himself in his true colours. He had deliberately committed the theft, leaving positive indications that I was the culprit."

"Did you not tell your story to Mr. Goodall—to the police?" asked Blake.

Ralph smiled bitterly.

"You may be sure I did; but what was the use?" he asked. "My story sounded a mere fabrication—it seemed like the futile invention of a young fool who had been caught out. The police made inquiries, I believe, and Lambert actually appeared as a witness at my trial. But he had covered up his tracks so cleverly and so thoroughly that he was perfectly safe. You must remember that I had no actual proof against him, and I am in the same position to-day. But I know that Lambert was guilty—I know it as well as I know that you are in this room, Mr. Blake. I dare say my sentence would have been less severe if I had held my tongue, for the judge naturally assumed that I was trying to lay the responsibility of my crime upon innocent shoulders. And so I was sentenced to three years, and Lambert went scot-free. He was not only guilty of the robbery, but of a far greater crime. He had conspired against me, and had made me the only sufferer."

"Was the property recovered?"

"No; there was no trace of it," replied Ralph. "I was advised to deliver up my secret," he went on bitterly, "just as Sir Henry advised me to reveal the hiding-place of the coin collection. Great Heaven above! I feel so utterly helpless, so hopelessly trapped. I don't know where those coins are, and I shall be tried and convicted as I was before. And Lambert—Lambert—"

Ralph paused, nearly choking, and stood before us helplessly.

"Don't excite yourself, my dear fellow," said Sexton Blake smoothly. "Continue your story from the point where you broke off. What happened to you after you had served your sentence?"

"I'll tell you in a minute," replied Ralph. "But there's one thing I want to ask, Mr. Blake, and I want you to give me a straightforward reply. I've told you of that five-year-old affair, and of William Lambert's duplicity. Do you believe me? Do you believe that I was innocent?"

There was appeal and anxiety in Ralph's earnest tone.

"Yes, I believe every word of what you have told me," said Sexton Blake quietly. "I know well enough that I must accept your story, uncorroborated as it is, but it is none the less convincing for all that. My dear Ralph, have no fear at all. I have dealt with similar cases to yours, and I can sympathise with you with all my heart. The police, of course, go by facts, and the apparent facts said that you were guilty. You were sentenced, not because of your youthful inexperience, but because of Lambert's cleverness and cunning. I recognised the type as soon as you described him—a plausible rascal of the swell-mobster tribe. There are many such vultures to be found in London at all seasons of the year, often in fashionable circles in the West End. You were caught in the net, Ralph, and found it too tight for you. Well, please continue your story. Tinker and I are most interested."

"Rather, gov'nor!" I agreed. "Go on, Mr. Ralph."

Our companion's eyes shone.

"There's—there's a kind of lump in my throat," he muttered. "I don't know how I shall ever express my gratitude. When everybody else is against me, you both sympathise, and give me fresh courage. Oh, it's splendid of you! But there was somebody else who extended friendship to me, Mr. U. J.—No. 788.

Blake—somebody else who believed in my innocence. And this was Lord Stockmore, one of the finest gentleman who ever lived on this earth. Alas, he died all too soon. At the time of my trial Lord Stockmore stood by me, and did everything in his power to get me acquitted. But the prosecution was too strong."

"How did you become acquainted with his lordship?"

"He was one of Mr. Goodall's most intimate friends," replied Ralph, "and frequently met me at my employer's house. Mr. Goodall himself turned against me. He thought the very worst; and this, I believe, incensed Lord Stockmore greatly. The dear old gentleman was the only friend I had in the world at that time—always excepting my mother. She, of course, was as true as steel, and never doubted my innocence for a second. It was Lord Stockmore who cared for my mother during the time I was in prison; and when I came out, hopeless and disgraced, it was Lord Stockmore who befriended me. In order to prove his absolute faith in me, he took me at once into his employ as private secretary. God bless him! I shall never cease to respect his memory, Mr. Blake. I called myself Warwick—my mother's maiden name—and the past was allowed to die. Six months had only just elapsed, however, before Lord Stockmore passed away."

"That was a sad blow."

"It was, indeed," said Ralph. "Nobody in Lord Stockmore's household knew who I really was; he had kept that secret. And then Sir Henry Castle asked me to become his secretary, and I was only too glad to accept. You know what has happened since I came here. A month ago my prospects were bright and glorious. Violet was to have become my wife next—But I cannot bear to speak of it," went on our companion huskily. "I shall go to prison—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Sexton Blake briskly. "Tell me when you met Lambert again."

"How did you know I met—"

"My dear fellow, it is quite obvious that your former persecutor is connected with this present affair," said the gov'nor. "I can easily see that he found you—perhaps by accident—and then made you serve him, under the threat of exposing your secret to Sir Henry. Am I right?"

"Yes, in the main," said Ralph. "But Lambert did not try to make me serve him in any way. I met him quite by chance in King's Lynn one day last month. He was as surprised to see me as I was surprised to see him."

"But you didn't speak to him?" I asked, staring.

"No," said Ralph. "I felt like knocking him down, Tinker. All my pent-up rage blazed out, and I should have lost my head, I believe, if Lambert hadn't entered a shop on the instant. I am sure that he saw the danger in my eyes, and dodged away in a fright. I kept myself in hand and walked straight past."

"He followed you, no doubt?"

"He must have done," replied the young man. "I was worried and uneasy by the meeting, and hoped that nothing bad would come of it. But when I arrived here, in Mountcroft, I found Lambert waiting. He evidently travelled by the same train as I did, and then got ahead of me."

"He addressed you?"

"Yes, and I threatened to knock him down if he didn't get out of my way," said Ralph, breathing hard. "But he had me in his power, Mr. Blake. He threatened to go to Sir Henry and expose my secret unless I accepted his friendship. I felt like letting him do his worst, but I hadn't the courage. What a fool I was!"

Sexton Blake shook his head.

"I can't blame you for submitting, Ralph," he said quietly. "You had a great deal at stake, and you probably thought that Lambert would soon tire."

"Yes, that is exactly what I did think," agreed Ralph. "And I was afraid of Sir Henry knowing about—about that ghastly prison affair. I was thinking of Violet, and my future. Oh, you don't know how dreadfully helpless I was! I was forced to accept Lambert's suave, detestable overtures. The man's a reptile, Mr. Blake—a loathsome, crawling reptile! I know that more than ever now."

Ralph paced up and down restlessly for a few moments.

"He didn't show his hand to begin with," he went on. "I met him several times, and he tried to make himself agreeable, declaring that he was sorry for the old affair,

and expressed pleasure at seeing me so comfortable. Like a mad fool, I was almost deceived by his lying, false statements. I began to tell myself that Lambert had repented, and was now living decently—as he made out. I don't try to excuse myself, Mr. Blake. I've been a fool, and I almost deserve this ordeal. Not a sign did Lambert give me that he was contemplating further trickery. At last, a day or two ago, he intimated his intention of going up to Leeds on business, and I breathed a sigh of fervent relief."

"A day or two ago?" put in Sexton Blake. "But you were in Hunstanton—"

"Exactly," Ralph explained. "Lambert had rooms at a King's Lynn hotel, and King's Lynn, as you probably know, is nearly midway between here and Hunstanton. So Lambert was just as near to me, and actually went over to Hunstanton on two occasions. It was on this last meeting that he told me of his plans. After I had parted with him I thought the nightmare was over. But on Thursday morning—yesterday morning, that is—I got a letter from him."

"The first step of the plot," commented Blake, nodding.

"Of course; although I didn't realise it then," said Ralph bitterly. "I suppose I'm a simple, unsuspecting fellow, Mr. Blake. Lambert requested me to meet him at a spot this side of King's Lynn at eleven-thirty at night—last night. He did not state the reason, and I was forced to go. The request was actually an order; I couldn't ignore it, for I feared that he would take revenge by writing to Sir Henry. If I'd had an ounce of courage I should have stayed in Hunstanton; but I was in a fever of terror, Mr. Blake. I was thinking of little Vi, and—"

"I quite understand," said the gov'nor gently.

"I kept the appointment, and found Lambert in a little cottage on a quiet part of the road," continued Ralph. "It was a deserted place, and very lonely. Lambert was alone, and he greeted me cordially. I asked him why he wanted me, and he replied that he was anxious to make some amends for his trickery five years ago. 'I ought to have made the appointment for a later hour,' he told me. 'There's something I want to fetch, Warwick, and I'm afraid I shall keep you waiting about an hour. But you'll get a splendid surprise then, so it's worth waiting for.' Naturally, I was puzzled, as he no doubt intended. Then he complained that his shoes pinched him badly."

"Ah!" I said, leaning forward. "Now we're getting to it!"

"How was I to guess at the vile trick?" asked Ralph, clenching his fists. "It was such a simple thing, Mr. Blake. Lambert asked me to change shoes with him for an hour, so that he could gain some ease. I consented mainly because I didn't want any argument, and I was anxious to get back to Hunstanton. He went off—wearing my shoes—and didn't return until fully two hours had passed. By that time I was impatient and angry, but Lambert returned full of apologies, and returned my shoes, saying how comfortable they were. He asked me for the address of the maker, and I gave him the receipt for the shoes themselves—this being the easiest method—" Ralph paused, and passed a hand before his eyes wearily. "But I'm wrong," he went on, with a faint smile. "Lambert asked about the shoemaker before he left me. I'm getting muddled with all this talking; you must be patient with me, Mr. Blake. Of course, Lambert had the receipt before he went away—the cunning scoundrel! How was I to guess that he meant to make use of both the shoes and the receipt?"

"You were rather careless, perhaps," said Blake gently.

"Careless!" echoed Ralph. "I was a madman not to suspect! When Lambert came back he jumped out of his car, changed shoes with me again, and then said that he had been unable to do what he wanted, and would write to me again. I was angry and tired, and went off almost without a word, still puzzled and impatient. This morning I got a wire from Sir Henry, and, as you know, I came over. Within half an hour, of course, I knew the whole ghastly truth."

"Lambert had a motor-car?"

"Yes; a big touring one."

"He went straight to the Mount, and broke in—"

"Leaving every sign that I committed the theft!" said Ralph hotly. "Oh, the vile rogue! How was I to suspect it, Mr. Blake? Lambert must have had his plans cut and dried to the last detail; and I, like a lunatic,

fell into the trap! Now it's too late. The crime has been placed on my shoulders, as he placed the other crime on my shoulders. I was dazed this morning, when Inspector Brand and you were making investigations. I was mortally afraid to speak out, because I knew that the old affair would be raked up; and that was what I wished to avoid before all else. I could only protest my innocence, and knew all the time that I was hopelessly involved. I could offer no explanation, and I could not account for my movements during those hours last night."

"That, of course, is why Lambert tricked you away from Hunstanton," said Sexton Blake. "The shoe-changing episode was possibly an afterthought. Lambert meant to make sure that you should have no alibi. Your story is an interesting one, Ralph, and it is a simple tale of a callous rascal taking advantage of an honest, unsuspecting, upright young man. You have been cruelly victimised, but you need have no fear. I can positively promise you that you will be at liberty before you can be brought before a magistrate. Trust in me, Ralph."

"Heaven bless you, Mr. Blake!" said our companion huskily. "You have given me new hope already. But how can you establish—"

"I can make no statement on that subject yet," smiled Blake. "Just remain calm, my dear fellow, and your ordeal will soon be over. William Lambert shall be made to pay for this fresh villainy; and it will not be a hard task to trace him now that I know the exact facts."

"But, if you catch him, the story of the old affair—"

"Sir Henry already knows, Ralph," said Blake quietly.

"He knows!" gasped Ralph. "Good heavens!"

"But you need not despair," went on the guv'nor. "Indeed, it is just as well, perhaps, that this fresh plot has been hatched. For the whole truth will be exposed, and you will be pardoned, and your name finally cleared. My dear boy, have faith in me, and I will not fail you. Everything will be all right very shortly."

"I pray that it will, Mr. Blake!" said Ralph fervently.

Two minutes later we left him—a very different man now. There was hope in his breast, and I wasn't surprised. Sexton Blake had a wonderful personality, and he simply forced Ralph to be cheerful.

"Well, Tinker, we have progressed far," smiled the guv'nor, as we walked down the passage in the rear of the constable who had answered our summons. "The mystery is a mystery no longer. We know the exact truth, and our immediate task is to get on the track of Mr. William Lambert. It ought to be easy."

It was easier than we had supposed. For, as we entered the little lobby of the court-house, Inspector Brand came hurrying in at the doorway. In a second we knew that something fresh had turned up. The stout official was puffing and blowing, and he was labouring under great excitement.

"A terrible business, Mr. Blake!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "A shocking, appalling business! This case is ten times graver than we supposed."

"What do you mean, Brand?" asked the guv'nor.

"A ghastly discovery has just been made, sir!" gasped the inspector. "The dead body of a man has been found in the dense thicket behind the Lake Cottage. It's a clear case of murder, and the victim's name, it appears, is William Lambert!"

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

The Clue of the Blue Dust.

INSPECTOR BRAND'S announcement was startling.

"Lambert!" I gasped, staring. "A case of murder—"

"Don't get excited, Tinker!" snapped Sexton Blake, giving me a sharp, warning glance. "Are you sure of this, inspector?" he went on rapidly. "Why do you suppose that murder has been done?"

Brand mopped his heated brow.

"I was just coming for you, sir," he said. "Some village boys made the discovery, and they ran in a panic to Constable Mullins, who immediately investigated. He has just come with the news, and I'm now going up. I thought that you would like to come, too."

"Very thoughtful of you, inspector," said

Sexton Blake. "Yes, I shall be very pleased to come. This is a most unexpected development, and the case is indeed more serious than we supposed. We must lose no time. Have you sent for the doctor?"

"Mullins has gone for him now," panted Brand, as we passed out. "Good gracious me! I'm perspiring from every pore. To think that Mountcroft should have all this excitement in one day!"

Sexton Blake again gave me a warning glance. The inspector, of course, knew nothing of Lambert's connection with Ralph Warwick—if, indeed, the murdered man proved to be Lambert. To the guv'nor and me the news was extra startling. We had received a shock of the fifty-horse-power variety.

My mind was in a whirl. William Lambert murdered! Who had committed the terrible crime? Just for a moment I had dreadful thoughts, but dismissed them at once. Perhaps Lambert had committed suicide, after all.

We arrived in the thicket at last, Constable Mullins and the doctor having joined us by this time, coming up in a trap just as we neared the Lake Cottage. The scared-looking rural policeman led the way through the dense trees.

It was gloomy and still in the wood, and nobody said a word. This tragedy had bowled the poor old inspector over, and he was shaking visibly, although he tried to hide his emotion. Murders were uncommon in this quiet district. Probably it was the first one Brand had had to deal with.

"That's the clearin', sir—just ahead," said the constable fearfully.

"Go on, then!" snapped Brand.

Mullins had been inclined to hang back, but he walked on at the command. And we found ourselves in a small clearing in the wood. The trees met overhead and only a subdued light filled the place. And there, lying amidst a litter of dead leaves, was the figure of a man, face downwards.

"Let me come, please!" said the doctor sharply.

He bent beside the body, and made a quick examination.

"Dead, Dr. Cooper?" asked Brand.

"Hours ago," said the doctor shortly. "I can't say for certain, but I should say that he was killed in the early hours of the morning—probably between one and three. Must have died on the instant, too. There's a shocking amount of blood."

Sexton Blake was bending over the body now.

"Stabbed in the back," he commented. "Dear me! The murderer must have dealt an appalling blow. Just look at this, doctor! The very haft of the dagger—for it is obvious that a dagger was used—penetrated beneath the skin. The murderer is a man of abnormal strength, evidently."

"Is the dagger there?" asked Brand.

"No."

"You'd better search round, Mullins," said the inspector.

The constable was rather glad of something to do, and he commenced a diligent search in the immediate neighbourhood of the clearing. Meanwhile Blake and Dr. Cooper continued their examination. Papers on the body proved beyond doubt that the dead man was William Lambert. He had been stabbed to the heart from behind.

"Look at this!" said the guv'nor grimly.

He indicated the dead man's right hand. There was a smear of blood across the knuckles.

"He must have fallen in some of his own blood," remarked the doctor.

"I think not," said Blake. "The death-wound is behind, and he fell on his face, remember. No, doctor, it is fairly obvious that he struck his murderer in the struggle which preceded the tragedy. This diamond ring caused the gash, no doubt—Yes, it is smeared, too."

"Great goodness!" ejaculated Inspector Brand, in a startled voice.

We turned. The inspector was standing perfectly still, staring down at the ground. And there, imprinted upon a soft patch of trodden earth, were several studded footprints!

"Mr. Ralph's!" gasped Brand huskily.

We knew differently, of course. But the presence of the footprints here was rather startling, nevertheless. How had they come there? The dead man's shoes were not studded, although he had worn Ralph's earlier. Even supposing that Lambert had returned to the wood after parting with Ralph, how was it that these impressions were present?

The only explanation was that Lambert must have made them himself during an earlier visit to the spot. But this seemed improbable, and I noticed a queer expression on Sexton Blake's face.

Had Ralph Warwick told us the truth? Was the fellow innocent, as we supposed? Or had he perpetrated a huge bluff? Remembering his earnest, eager, boyish eyes, I simply couldn't believe him capable of such black duplicity.

"This is frightful!" said the inspector hoarsely. "What do you think, Mr. Blake? Mr. Ralph was here—the footprints tell us that. And we know that nobody else would have been present at this spot during the night. Good heavens! It is perfectly clear what happened."

"I fail to see it," said Dr. Cooper.

"Why, sir, Mr. Warwick must have had a confederate," replied Brand. "They had a quarrel—over the coins, I suppose—and then a fight took place. I can't believe that Mr. Ralph murdered the man in cold blood. It must have been the result of a bitter fight—perhaps he did it in self-defence. At all events, he'll have to be shifted from the court-house at once. And I must telegraph for help. Scotland Yard will see to this affair, I'll warrant."

Sexton Blake said nothing, but stood thoughtfully silent. I knew well enough that the evidence against Ralph was overwhelming. There seemed no loophole for him. He was abroad in the small hours of the night—he had admitted it. He had visited the Lake Cottage, to all appearances. And here, just at the rear of the cottage garden, lay this dead man—with Ralph's footprints round him! Moreover, it would soon be established that Ralph had known Lambert years before; it would be recalled that Ralph had accused Lambert of being responsible for the old crime. This would indicate that Warwick hated William Lambert—and the rest was obvious. To my mind it seemed that the hangman's noose was already about Ralph's neck.

"Come, Tinker, we will go for a stroll," said the guv'nor suddenly.

"What for, guv'nor?" I asked.

"We must have a chat about this matter at once," answered Blake. "Ralph is in a tight corner—an appallingly tight corner."

We broke through the trees, and I led the way. As we went I saw something dark lying amidst some dead leaves to my right, and I crouched down to see what it was.

"Only an old bowler," I remarked.

"Let me see it, Tinker—quickly!" said the guv'nor.

I picked the hat up, and passed it to Sexton Blake rather wonderingly. It was a battered old bowler, and had apparently been left in the wood by some tramp or other. Blake glanced inside, and then chuckled.

"A find, Tinker," he remarked—"a splendid find indeed! This hat, I will guarantee, is the property of the real murderer!"

"What?" I ejaculated.

"Not so loud, young 'un!" said Blake cautiously. "I intend to take a great liberty. We will take this hat and submit it to a careful examination before handing it over to Brand. If he saw it now he would want it—and, by rights, we ought to surrender it. But we're not going to."

"You can't learn anything from that hat, guv'nor!" I protested. "And how can you be sure that the murderer—"

"I'll explain presently, Tinker," interrupted Blake. "For the moment we will hurry to the Mount. If my memory does not fail me, there is an excellent microscope in Sir Henry's library. It will be very useful, I fancy."

We hurried straight off, having no wish to encounter the inspector again just yet. Nothing further could be done by us in the wood. This new discovery had been made, and Ralph's position was now a terrible one.

"He'll be found guilty by the coroner's jury, guv'nor," I said grimly. "I suppose they'll hold the inquest to-morrow, won't they? Ralph will be found guilty of wilful murder."

"I'm afraid you are right, my lad," agreed Sexton Blake. "With so many facts—or apparent facts—to go upon, the police can do nothing but hold Ralph as the culprit. For that reason we must work our hardest this evening."

"But we've got nothing to start on, guv'nor," I protested.

"Indeed!" retorted Blake. "What about this hat, Tinker? I have an idea that we shall be able to obtain quite an amount of information from it. A man's hat often tells the truth regarding its owner—although one

has to know exactly where to look. We shall see very shortly, in any case."

By the time we arrived at Castle Mount we found that the shocking news had preceded us. Sir Henry himself was distracted, and Violet was with her mother, crying hysterically—indeed, they were probably both in the same condition.

"This fresh news has almost stunned me, Mr. Blake!" said Sir Henry hoarsely. "Is it true? I have been told that a dead man has been found behind the Lake Cottage, and there are terrible rumours that Ralph is the murderer."

"I am afraid the rumours will turn out to be correct—at all events, the police will assume that Ralph is guilty," replied Sexton Blake. "But you need have no fear, Sir Henry. The boy is as innocent of this crime as he is of the other. It was Lambert—the murdered man—who broke into this house last night. I can positively assure you that Ralph had no hand in the affair."

Our host looked at us with shining eyes.

"By gad, sir," he muttered—"by gad! I'm beginning to believe that you're right, and that I've been an infernal old fool! I was ready to think Ralph capable of theft. But murder—No, not that! And if he is innocent of the one crime, it is quite probable that he is innocent of the other."

"I'm glad to see that you have recovered faith in the unfortunate young man," said Sexton Blake quietly. "Now, Sir Henry, I want you to let me use your microscope. I have here the hat belonging to the murderer, and I am quite hopeful of gaining a little information from it."

The baronet looked astonished.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed. "What information can be obtained from a mere hat?"

"We will lose no time in commencing our investigations," said Sexton Blake crisply. "The hat, as you can see, is a somewhat ancient specimen of the bowler pattern, although quite an excellent article originally. It is by Lincoln & Bennett, and that is sufficient indication of its quality."

Both Sir Henry and I regarded the bowler with dubious interest. I knew the gov'nor's powers well enough, but it seemed rather optimistic to suppose that he could gain any real data from this dilapidated article of headgear.

The hat was not less than five years old, and was stained and grimy.

"Made by Lincoln & Bennett—eh?" I remarked. "Then I should say that the owner was a smart chap, gov'nor. By the way, this hat isn't Lambert's, I suppose? If so, we shall look a nice set of idiots!"

"My dear Tinker, please speak for yourself," said Sexton Blake. "I made quite sure that Lambert's hat was on the spot. And I have another reason for being convinced that this bowler was worn by the murderer. Your suggestion that the hat's owner is a smart chap is obviously wide of the mark."

"But it's made by a famous firm—"

"No doubt. But it is in a condition which clearly indicates that its late owner cared little for appearances," said the gov'nor. "No, Tinker, I figure that this hat originally belonged to some well-to-do gentleman. In the course of time it was discarded in favour of a newer hat, and probably fell into the hands of the well-to-do gentleman's valet. He, as is usual in such cases, sold the hat with some other article of apparel, to a second-hand clothes' dealer. We may assume, therefore, that this particular hat was bought at a second-hand shop by its recent owner. We have to establish who that man is."

"I have been able to follow you so far, Mr. Blake," said Sir Henry with great interest. "Indeed, I am quite excited. But I shall be intensely astounded if you gain any information of real value."

"I shall be intensely disappointed if I do not!" retorted Sexton Blake. "Look inside here, Sir Henry. Come closer, Tinker. The leather band within the hat, as you see, shows distinct smears of blood upon the front portion—that part of the band which came in contact with the wearer's forehead."

"He must have been cut—" I paused. "Why, one of Lambert's hands was smeared with blood!" I went on. "So that's why you were so certain about this hat being the murderer's, gov'nor?"

"Precisely. The thing is too striking to be a mere coincidence," said Blake. "We already knew that Lambert had gashed the man who attacked him, most probably on the face. And here, in this hat, we see traces of blood upon the band which had come in contact with its wearer's forehead. There-

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fore we shall not be making a wild guess if we say that this hat belongs to the assassin. He and Lambert evidently engaged in a struggle, Lambert was stabbed, and his murderer fled, his hat being torn off by some tree-branch, probably."

"But we don't know anything further, even now, gov'nor," I observed.

"But we shall know, Tinker," said the gov'nor quietly. "Now, this hat is a stiff one, and it's present shape, therefore, corresponds to the shape of its late owner's head. It is, in fact, a kind of mould. Do you notice anything peculiar about the shape?"

"The man evidently had a longish head," remarked Sir Henry. "Long and narrow."

"Precisely!" agreed Blake. "We will now investigate further."

He took from his pocket a thing which looked like an ordinary pearl-handled pocket-knife. But it contained no blades, only various tiny implements of the gov'nor's own designing. He slipped his thumbnail into a groove and opened a tiny pair of forceps. Then he took the hat over to the window, gazed into it searchingly, and then probed about with the forceps.

"Get the microscope ready, Tinker," he said over his shoulder.

This was soon done, and then we understood what the gov'nor was driving at. He had fished a hair out of the hat—black, curly, and rather short. It was coarser than ordinary human hair, and I was rather puzzled.

"Ah!" exclaimed Blake, applying his eye to the microscope. "I thought so. What do you make of this, Sir Henry?"

The baronet had a look.

"Why, it's a hair!" he exclaimed. "It seems very coarse, and appears to be almost flat and ribbonlike. A most remarkable hair, Mr. Blake."

"It looks like a watch-spring," I remarked.

"Exactly!" agreed Sexton Blake. "In fact, there is not the slightest doubt that it is a hair of a negro."

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated Sir Henry.

"The shape of the hat is quite sufficient corroboration," went on the gov'nor. "In the black races, as you are probably aware, the skull is long and narrow, and the hair is flat, and usually very curly. In the white races the skull is oval, and the hair generally slightly oval in section. And in the yellow races the skull is round, and the hair is straight and circular in section. There are exceptions, of course, but there is no shadow of doubt that this hat has been recently worn by a negro, and it is just as certain that this negro murdered William Lambert."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" I exclaimed blankly. "And you've discovered all that out of this dirty old hat!"

"I hope to discover more, Tinker," said Sexton Blake grimly. "We have only just commenced our examinations. There are many more hairs within the hat, but we need not trouble about them. In any case, we must leave some for the police. They must be granted every facility for finding out what they can."

Sexton Blake took the hat and fixed it under the microscope. He was inspecting a dull stain upon the brim of the hat—or, rather, a blotchy patch of some foreign matter. There were two or three stains, indeed.

"Ah, what is this?" murmured the gov'nor keenly. "It is not ordinary grease, or—Why, of course, rubber! I should judge that this is an old patch of rubber solution, the spirit having dried out, leaving this deposit. There is another stain here which is obviously one of oil—thick motor-oil, I should say."

Blake disengaged the hat and sniffed at it. "A distinct odour of stale petrol fumes, smoke, and oil," he remarked. "What does that suggest, Tinker—in conjunction with the patch of rubber?"

"Something to do with motors, gov'nor, I should imagine."

"Precisely!" said the detective, with great satisfaction. "The inference is that the negro was employed—and is probably employed at this moment—in a large motor-garage. And the presence of these L.C.C. tram-tickets behind the leather band indicate that the garage is situated in London—most probably in the East End, since the tickets are punched for that district."

"This is really remarkable, Mr. Blake," commented Sir Henry. "But do you think it is wise to take so much for granted?"

"I am taking nothing for granted, Sir Henry," replied Sexton Blake. "We have positive proof before us. There can be no other explanation than the one we have arrived at. I dare say an examination of the

dust of this hat would be quite instructive. As you can see, it is most decidedly dusty."

"My dear sir!" protested our host.

But the gov'nor knew what he was up to, and so did I. This was not the first time, by any means, that he had gleaned information from an article of apparel. And hats, particularly those which have been worn a lot, are always highly instructive.

Blake managed to beat out some of the dust, and this was collected upon a large sheet of white paper, and then carefully shaken into a minute heap in the centre. It was so minute, indeed, that without the microscope the dust could scarcely be seen. Blake neatly cut out a square of paper in the centre of the sheet, and carefully placed it on one of the slides of the instrument.

He gazed at the paper for quite a long while, and then turned to me.

"What do you see, Tinker?" he asked.

"By jingo! It looks like a mole-hill now!" I exclaimed, applying my eye to the microscope. "There's plenty of dirt, gov'nor, particles of some straw substance, and some specks that seem to be quite blue—a sort of blue dust."

"The first-named is merely the ordinary dust of London," remarked Sexton Blake.

"But what do you make of the blue, Tinker?"

"Why, it looks like ultramarine, gov'nor," I remarked. "There's quite a lot of it, too. About a fourth of the dust on this paper is the blue stuff."

"Not so much as that, Tinker," corrected Blake. "There is sufficient, however, to clearly indicate that this blue dust permanently hangs about the neighbourhood of the garage. To the naked eye it is quite invisible in the atmosphere, I should say. It cannot be seen, or felt, or tasted. But its presence in the dust of this hat proves that the blue is quite a quantity to be reckoned with. The microscope has told us the story, and I am intensely pleased with the success of our little investigation."

"But I don't understand about this blue dust, gov'nor."

"No, Tinker," smiled Blake. "Yet it is really the most important discovery of all. It provides us with a positive clue, a certain fact. Blue particles of this character floating in the atmosphere—for there is no other explanation—can only be accounted for in one way. The garage at which the negro is employed is adjacent to a factory which produces common laundry 'blue.' That is how I work it out."

"Most astounding!" declared Sir Henry in surprise.

"Now, there cannot be many big garages in London which are situated next door to a 'blue' factory," continued Sexton Blake. "Indeed, it is highly probable that there is only one such garage. This, as you will realise, is of enormous significance. For we have narrowed down the search to a very restricted area. There are hundreds of garages in the metropolis, and it would be a hopeless task to make the round of them all. But now we know, with a fair measure of certainty, that our man is employed in a garage, most likely in the East End, with a 'blue' factory in close proximity. Our data is instructive. The owner of the hat is undoubtedly the murderer; he is a negro; he has recently been employed in a motor-garage. We have but to find this garage, and then we shall have the murderer of William Lambert!"

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Nelson Lee and Nipper Get Busy.

EVEN after Sexton Blake had fully explained the methods of his investigation to Sir Henry Castle the latter was not fully convinced. He couldn't quite see how the gov'nor had obtained such a lot of information from that dilapidated bowler.

"It's all very clever, of course, but I must remark that it seems like mere guess-work to me," declared our host. "I shall be very surprised if your deductions turn out to be correct, Mr. Blake. They seem rather—well, wild. I hope you won't mind my frankness."

Sexton Blake smiled.

"Not in the least!" he replied easily. "You see, Sir Henry, I am well aware of the fact that my inferences may be all wrong. But, on the other hand, I am quite convinced that they are all right. And the next thing is to act. It is rather late in the afternoon, and it will be necessary for Tinker to go to London straight away."

"Aren't you going, guv'nor?" I asked.
 "No, my boy; there is work for me to do at this end—work which claims my immediate attention," said Blake. "Ralph is innocent. I was positive before, and now I have proof of it. And we shall have to work our hardest to obtain his release. Whilst I am getting busy here, you will run up to London—"

"There's no train until after seven, Mr. Blake," put in Sir Henry.

The guv'nor frowned.

"What a nuisance!" he exclaimed. "That would be too late; Tinker would not arrive until close upon ten o'clock, and he could make no inquiries then. Yet time is everything in a case like this. Somebody ought to search for that garage now at once—"

"Why not wire to Scotland Yard, guv'nor?" I suggested.

"I am afraid my information is too scanty and too problematical," said Sexton Blake. "No, we must think of—"

"What about Nelson Lee?" I put in, interrupting again.

The guv'nor looked at me thoughtfully.

"Ah, now you are talking, Tinker!" he said. "Lee is the very man. Lee and Nipper are in London just now, as you know. It will have to be a long telegram, but that will not matter—" Blake paused, his eye on the telephone. "By James, I'll ring up!" he added. "A trunk call ought to get me through within twenty minutes, at least. But Lee might be out, so we'll have two strings to our bow. While you are trying to get through, Tinker, I'll draft out a telegram."

As it happened, luck was with us, for I got through to London within twelve minutes. And luck again revealed itself in the fact that it was Nelson Lee himself who answered the call. His voice sounded a mere ghost of itself over the great distance of wire, and there was a most intolerable buzzing. But I managed to hear the words all right, and he heard me, so we couldn't grumble.

Sexton Blake took the receiver from me, and was soon talking slowly and earnestly to his friend and rival at Grey's Inn Road, in London. He briefly stated the facts, and told Lee what was required.

"I want you to find that nigger, old man," said Blake. "I'm afraid it will entail a good deal of uncongenial work, and my information may be quite wrong. But what you've got to look for is a motor-garage with a blue factory close to it—most probably in the East End. If you succeed in locating the negro, please wire at once, or ring up, whichever you like."

Nelson Lee, at the other end, chuckled.

"You've given me a queer task this time, Blake," he said. "Still, I'll do my best for you. Nipper and I were just planning out a round of disgraceful gaiety for the evening—a theatre, supper, and all the rest of it. However, we'll willingly postpone our pleasures until another evening."

"Oh, will we?" growled Nipper, who was standing near-by.

It will be noticed that I have transferred the scene to London, but this is necessary. I've got to relate what happened to Nelson Lee and Nipper, so I might as well start straight away.

The famous Gray's Inn Road detective hung up the receiver at last, after having learned exactly what was required of him. He found Nipper regarding him with a very unfavourable expression upon his usually good-natured face.

"Well, guv'nor?" demanded Nipper ferociously.

"My dear boy, you needn't eat me!" said Nelson Lee. "We are to go in search for a negro, who is probably engaged in a garage."

Nipper snorted.

"What do you think we are?" he demanded fiercely. "I'm surprised at you, guv'nor! Anybody might think that we were Mr. Blake's giddy servants, or something! He calmly rings up from some outlandish place, and tells us to abandon all our plans, and search for some beastly nigger! I call it a piece of giddy nerve!"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"Your emotions, Nipper, are always very well displayed," he said genially. "In this instance you are greatly disappointed, and your disappointment is taking its usual form. You are abusing a man you highly respect."

"Perhaps I do, sir!" growled Nipper. "But he oughtn't to ask us to do all his dirty work—"

"Mr. Blake has done nothing of the kind," said Nelson Lee. "The case is a most urgent one, and there is not a minute to be lost. Neither Blake nor Tinker can get to London

in time to do any work this evening. We are on the spot, and must be off without delay. Mr. Blake asked me to grant him a favour, and I am only too willing to oblige. You must not make the mistake, Nipper, of putting pleasure before business."

"It's not our business!" grumbled Nipper.

But his disappointment soon wore off, and his growls were by no means sincere. As a matter of fact, he was only too willing and eager to do everything in his power to help Sexton Blake, and he listened with interest while Lee explained what was required.

"It's a tall order, sir," remarked Nipper, at length. "We might have to search half London before—"

"I think there is a shorter way," interrupted Nelson Lee. "Just fetch me the Post Office Directory, young 'un."

They were both poring over the directory within a few moments, looking up all the manufacturers of laundry blue in the metropolitan area. There were not a vast number, and it was far simpler to go to work this way, instead of finding up the garages.

"It's a bit doubtful, you know, guv'nor," said Nipper. "Mr. Blake only deduced the thing from an old bowler-hat, according to what you told me. It's quite likely that he's all wrong. That blue may be from some other—"

"Hold on, Nipper!" said Lee. "I think we have struck oil even now. What is this? 'Messrs. Reade & Co., Limited, makers of laundry blue, starch, and toilet soaps, Stepney, E.' They seem likely."

"Yes; but there are other firms just as likely, sir."

"I think not, Nipper. The address of the firm's factory, you will see, is Blossom Grove, Stepney—"

"I'll bet there are a fat lot of blossoms in that grove!" grinned Nipper.

"Don't interrupt!" said Nelson Lee. "Messrs. Reade & Co., Limited, are located in Blossom Grove; and here, we find, is a Mr. Robert Watkin, also living in Blossom Grove. He is the proprietor of a large motor-garage."

"Oh!" said Nipper. "That's queer, isn't it?"

"Not at all. It merely indicates that Mr. Blake's deductions were correct," replied Nelson Lee. "But we will go through the rest of the names."

It was not a long job. And Nelson Lee satisfied himself that there was no other combination similar to that of Reade & Co. and Mr. Watkin—that is to say, there was not other blue factory in the same street as a garage.

Over in the Greenwich district there was a small soap factory in a street very close to a garage, but the distance between the two establishments was probably considerable.

The Stepney factory was about the only "likely" proposition.

"Come, Nipper, we'll lose no time!" said Nelson Lee briskly.

They donned their overcoats and hats, and sallied out into Gray's Inn Road. Striding down that busy thoroughfare, they reached Holborn, and here chartered a taxi. It was now evening, and the light was failing. By the time they reached Stepney darkness had almost completely descended.

The taxi was dismissed at the corner of Blossom Grove. As Nipper had suggested, there was no indication that many blossoms flourished in that dingy street, even in the height of spring or early summer. It was a back street, and by no means pleasant. At this time of the evening it was quiet, for the buildings on either side were mainly factories or warehouses.

"Messrs. Reade & Co., Limited," remarked Nelson Lee.

He read the sign on the big double gates of a factory opposite. The building itself was some little way back, and there was no sign of a garage. A hundred yards farther on, however, Mr. Watkin's place was discovered.

"It's a long way off the factory, sir," remarked Nipper.

"I don't think so, young 'un," said Lee, as they turned into the open gateway of the garage. "As you see, there is quite a long alley-way here, and the garage itself probably backs on to the very wall of the factory."

This, indeed, proved to be the truth. A large paved yard opened out from the alley, where several big commercial cars were standing, some of them being cleaned, others undergoing repairs. Six or seven men stood about in overalls, and the garage buildings were alight with many electric lamps. A fairly high wall divided the yard from an ugly building close by, and a tall smoke-stack lifted its grimy head into the dark sky. The blue factory was within a few yards of the

garage! Again, it seemed as though Sexton Blake's shot was true.

"Anything I can do, sir?" asked a man, coming forward.

"Yes, I want to see Mr. Watkin, if he is in," replied Lee.

"You'll find him in the office, sir," said the other, jerking his thumb vaguely in the direction of a little outbuilding which stood in the yard. "You'd best be sharp, though. He'll be goin' home in a minute or two. It's past his usual time already."

They hurried over, and encountered Mr. Robert Watkin as he was emerging from the little office. He was a big man, stout and elderly, and carelessly attired. His face was red, and indicative of excellent living. He regarded the two visitors with a welcoming smile.

"Just caught me in time, sir," he remarked genially.

"Yes, Mr. Watkin, I am anxious to have a few words with you, if you will grant me the favour," said Nelson Lee. "This is my card, and I wish to ask you some questions regarding a man I believe to be in your employ."

Mr. Watkin read the detective's card, and then looked up.

"Why, bless me!" he exclaimed, extending his hand. "Mr. Nelson Lee! I've often heard of you, sir, but I never hoped to meet you. Come in, sir—come in! I'm at your service to any extent you like!"

This was most gratifying. Nelson Lee had often experienced great difficulty in dealing with strangers of this type; but Mr. Watkin was evidently a very good-natured gentleman.

"Is there anything wrong with one of my chaps?" he asked.

"Well, I don't know," said Lee cautiously. "I have reason to believe that you employ a negro—"

The garage proprietor snorted.

"The impudent rascal!" he said, with emphasis. "He deserves kicking!"

Nelson Lee and Nipper exchanged glances. So Mr. Watkin did employ a negro! This was the last piece of evidence necessary. Sexton Blake's reading of the old bowler hat was obviously correct in every detail. It was a most excellent state of affairs, and Nelson Lee was very pleased.

"Now, Mr. Watkin," he said smoothly, "don't want you to think that I'm prying into your affairs. This negro is suspected of a very serious crime, and I am looking out for him. Is he in your establishment at the present moment?"

"A serious crime, eh?" repeated Mr. Watkin. "Well, I'm not surprised at that. The fellow's a rascal, Mr. Lee; although mind you, until just recently I was very well satisfied with him. He's always been a good worker, and I've had him in my employ seven or eight years. His name's Robinson—Sam, we always called him—an' I believe he's a native of Georgia, in the States. He came over eight or nine years ago with some nigger minstrels, and got stranded in London. Then he came to me, and he's worked in this yard ever since, at last, until this morning."

"Why, you haven't sacked him, have you?" asked Nipper quickly.

"Fired him on the spot," was Mr. Watkin's grim reply. "I always trusted the rascal, an' I'm not saying that I'm not sorry to lose him. I'll find it difficult to get somebody in his place as good. But after what happened last night I can't keep him on. He's not to be relied on."

"I am sorry to learn that Robinson is no longer here," said Nelson Lee. "But perhaps you can tell me where he lives, Mr. Watkin? And I dare say you won't mind letting me know why you sacked him?"

"Bless you, I don't mind!" said the other. "Yesterday morning I went away for three days—at least, that was my intention then. But I came back early this morning, unexpected, and found that that black rogue had taken out one of my best touring-cars. What do you think of that, Mr. Lee? He took it last night, and was out all night with it, and I caught him fair and square this morning. The rascal must have had an accident, too, because his forehead was patched up. I kicked him out on the spot—without wages, too!"

Every item of Mr. Watkin's story corroborated Sexton Blake's theory. William Lambert had used a car—obviously the car which Mr. Watkin had referred to. Lambert had been murdered by a negro; and this negro, Sam Robinson, had been out all night with a car. As the last conclusive item, the black man's forehead had been gashed; and Sexton Blake had already arrived at that conclusion. There was no coincidence here.

The whole train of events was fully established.

"Of course, you were fully justified in pitching the man out," said Nelson Lee. "I may as well tell you, Mr. Watkin, that your late employee is now wanted for murder."

"Good heavens!" ejaculated the garage proprietor, startled.

"He evidently committed the crime while he was out with your car," continued Nelson Lee. "The police are not on his trail as yet, but I am. And if you can give me the man's address I shall be very grateful."

"Why, of course—of course!" said Mr. Watkin. "He lives at a house in Birch Lane—No. 67, I think. You'll find Birch Lane about five minutes' walk away. Go straight to the end of this grove, turn to the left, and Birch Lane is the first turning on the right from there. Murder! Well, well! I shouldn't have thought of it! Thank goodness I fired him this morning, Mr. Lee! I hope I shan't be mixed up in the affair!"

"It may be necessary for you to appear as a witness—I don't know," said Lee. "In any case, Mr. Watkin, it is for the police to decide. But you may be quite sure that you will not be put to much trouble. I am very deeply obliged to you for your generosity in giving me this information—which is of the utmost value. Thank you, Mr. Watkin! Nipper and I will hurry off without delay, if you will excuse us."

The garage proprietor readily consented, and he was left in a state of some anxiety. He didn't like the idea of being called upon as a witness by the police. But Sam Robinson had been in his employ, and Mr. Watkin would naturally be compelled to give all the information he could. It was indeed essential that the events of the Thursday night should be made clear.

"We have met with far greater success than I anticipated, Nipper," remarked Lee, as they walked briskly down the grove. "Mr. Blake made some wonderful deductions, didn't he? He was right in every detail."

"Rather, sir!" agreed Nipper. "And all from an old bowler hat! It seems almost impossible, doesn't it? But yet Mr. Blake's reasoning was easy enough to follow. It only shows what can be done with an old hat and a microscope."

"To say nothing of excellent brains, Nipper," observed Nelson Lee. "But I'm afraid that Robinson will have made himself very scarce. He possibly thinks himself safe, but it will be rather strange if he is still to be found in Stepney."

"Oh, you never know, sir!" said Nipper.

They arrived in Birch Lane, and here they experienced a stroke of wonderful luck which corresponded with their former luck. For when they were still thirty yards away from No. 67, the gate opened and a man emerged. He was well over six feet high, huge and brawny—and he was black!

"Well, I'm jiggered!" muttered Nipper.

They walked right past the negro, and Lee observed that a patch of plaster was fixed upon Robinson's forehead. He was certainly their man, and they turned after a few paces and followed him.

"Now what's to be done, sir?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"Well, I don't know, my lad," said Lee. "There is no direct evidence against the fellow so far, and we can't call upon a policeman to arrest him. The only thing we can do is to follow, and see where he goes to."

After a short walk Robinson mounted a motor-omnibus, and Nelson Lee and Nipper managed to slip inside—the negro had gone on top. The bus was bound for Liverpool Street, and Robinson went the whole distance.

He was on the steps before the bus had stopped, and more than once he glanced at his watch. He leapt to the ground, and ran quickly towards one of the many entrances to the Great Eastern Railway Company's terminus.

"He's trying to catch a train!" exclaimed Lee quickly. "We must be sharp, Nipper. By Robinson's attitude, it seems that there are only a few minutes to spare. Follow me, young 'un!"

They got off the bus as quickly as possible, but were delayed by a stout individual with several parcels who got wedged in the doorway. This was a most unfortunate circumstance, and Lee and Nipper felt very helpless. And when they reached the pavement there was no sign of their quarry.

But they knew that Robinson had gone

down to the station, and so they hurried along in pursuit. Lee decided that the best thing was to inquire at the booking-office; the clerks would instantly remember if a black man had applied for a ticket.

Remembering that the murder had occurred in Cambridgeshire, Nelson Lee went straight to the booking-office of the Cambridge main line. And the clerk promptly replied that a black man had taken a ticket for March, in Cambridgeshire. Moreover, he had attempted to catch the train which had just been about to leave—the last train of the day to that town.

Five minutes later Nelson Lee and Nipper knew that Robinson had been successful, for one of the platform inspectors clearly remembered him jumping into the main-line train at the last moment.

"Oh, how rotten!" exclaimed Nipper disgustedly.

"I think we have done very well indeed," replied Lee. "We know where Robinson is making for, and it is only necessary to communicate with Mr. Blake at once. I am quite sure that he will be well satisfied."

And Sexton Blake was.

Nelson Lee, following his friend's example, rang up in preference to telegraphing, and he told Sexton Blake of his success. Sir Henry Castle and I were in the library at the same time, and we could tell by the gov'nor's tone that everything was O.K.

"Splendid, Lee!" exclaimed Blake eagerly. "Upon my word, you have done remarkably well! I'm grateful, but I shan't be able to thank you fully until I meet you. And we needn't go into details now. The information you have given me is sufficient. Thanks, old man! Without your help I should have been greatly handicapped."

A moment later Sexton Blake hung up the receiver.

"Well, gov'nor?" I asked quickly.

"I am glad to say, Tinker, that the old bowler hat has not failed us," said the gov'nor smoothly. "The information I gleaned from it has turned out to be correct in every particular."

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated Sir Henry. "How extraordinary!"

"What is more," went on Blake, "the murderer—a negro named Sam Robinson—caught the evening train to March, and will arrive there in about ninety minutes' time from now. We have ample time for preparation."

"March!" exclaimed Sir Henry. "Why, March is only six miles from here, Mr. Blake! Why on earth is the man returning to this district? It seems to point to the fact that he is not the murderer."

"On the contrary, Sir Henry, I should judge that Robinson's object is fairly apparent," said Sexton Blake. "He is the murderer, and he was foolish enough—in a moment of panic, perhaps—to leave his spoils near Castle Mount. His object in coming this evening is to obtain his booty, and make off with it."

"Good gracious me!" said Sir Henry excitedly. "Then—then we may be able to recover the coins—"

"That is my express intention," interrupted Sexton Blake. "Tinker and I will meet this train at March, and I think Ralph's release will then only be a matter of a few hours."

Sir Henry looked at us with gleaming eyes. "By gad! I owe that boy a profound apology!" he exclaimed fervently. "I'm convinced at last, Mr. Blake—I'm convinced that he's innocent. When all this trouble has blown over I shall make amends. Thank Heaven you were hero to clear away the horrible shadow!"

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Much Excitement—and Joy.

"THAT'S him, gov'nor!" I said in a whisper.

Sexton Blake and I were standing just outside March Station in the gloom of the late evening. A big man had just emerged from the booking-office, with some other passengers, and we knew at once that he was Sam Robinson, the negro.

He strode away towards the town, and we followed him. He was quite unsuspicious, and did not even once glance back. But, even so, he would have learned nothing, for we were strangers to him.

"This is one advantage of having a black

chap to chase, gov'nor," I remarked. "We couldn't possibly make a mistake about him; and he couldn't disguise himself, either. But why the dickens did he come to March? He might have gone to Mountcroft just as easily; the very train he came by goes on there."

"Robinson considers himself safe, but he is cautious," replied Blake. "The appearance of a nigger in this town does not cause much comment, but it would certainly do so in a small place like Mountcroft. And our dusky friend, I have no doubt, is very anxious to avoid the curiosity of the natives. I expect he intends to walk the distance."

"Six miles!" I grunted. "How cheerful!"

But we didn't mind, really. To have got on the track so promptly was a splendid achievement. Poor old Inspector Brand was still grappling with the problem. Indeed, he was quite sure that Ralph Warwick was the culprit. The inspector had possession of the bowler hat, but he had made nothing of it. To our amusement, he had suggested that it had been probably left in the wood by some stray tramp. It had certainly nothing to do with the murder. The worthy inspector would soon learn how wrong he was.

Sexton Blake had not been idle during the evening. He had established beyond question that Ralph could not have made the footprints upon the path. Not only was the stride shorter, but there were other indications which could only lead to the certainty that William Lambert was the actual culprit. But Blake had reserved his discoveries for the present. He wanted to capture the murderer first. He had also proved that the lock of the Lake Cottage had been opened during the night by force, and not by means of the ordinary key. This was a further proof that Ralph had not been near the place himself.

All things considered, we were progressing splendidly. And it seemed as though our case was to be brought to a triumphant conclusion within the next hour or so. Considering that we hadn't arrived at Castle Mount until late that morning, this was rather in the nature of a record for quick work.

As Sexton Blake had imagined, our quarry walked through the town without pause, and took the Mountcroft Road. We were glad that the night was dark, for we were able to track him without trouble. And at last we arrived at a spot near Sir Henry's estate. And we dimly saw the negro break through a gap in the hedge and make his way across a wide meadow towards a clump of trees on the other side.

"Where's he going to, gov'nor?" I whispered wonderingly.

"What has become of your sense of direction, Tinker?" murmured Blake. "Those trees we can see in the distance are those which comprise the little wood at the rear of Lake Cottage. Only we are now approaching the wood from the rear, instead of the front. It is quite plain that Robinson hid the stolen property quite near to his victim. We must be cautious now."

We crept across the meadow very carefully, and it was necessary to draw a little nearer to our quarry, or we should lose him once he plunged into the wood. But our task, we found, was not nearly so difficult as we had anticipated. For Sam Robinson was a most obliging individual.

He paused as soon as he got inside the wood, and proceeded to light a small bullseye lantern. He fondly believed that he was absolutely alone, and he could certainly be excused for holding that view, for he had received no indication that we were on his track.

The negro had not hurried himself during the walk from March, probably because he wanted to make his visit here as late as possible. Well over two hours had passed during the six-mile walk from March Station, and another half-hour was being spent in this journey across the meadows and into the wood. For the nigger was now displaying great caution, and only moved forward slowly.

It was quite late now—approaching midnight, in fact. The whole countryside was asleep, and Robinson was quite satisfied that he had the wood to himself. He was possibly still ignorant of the fact that the body had been recovered. There had been no report in the evening newspapers, and the first news of the murder could not be published until the morning.

Owing to the bullseye we were able to follow our quarry with the greatest ease,

and without exposing ourselves to undue risks. At last the man reached the brow of a little hollow; and this, the gov'nor and I knew, was quite close to the road—the private road across Sir Henry's estate.

The negro made his way down into the hollow, and was almost lost amongst the trees. We could not see what he was doing, although he had come to a halt. But, gradually and cautiously, we edged our way forward, until at length we were able to obtain a view between the trees.

"As I thought, Tinker!" breathed Sexton Blake into my ear.

The lantern was on the ground, and its beams of light revealed a great pile of dead leaves, which had just been burrowed out of a hole in the ground. And the negro was fingering a leather bag. As we watched we heard the clink of coins, and knew that Robinson had obtained the prize he had come for.

I am quite certain that no sound came from the gov'nor and I. But Robinson suddenly turned his head and looked straight at us. Possibly his instinct had warned him that he was being watched. He sprang up, and Sexton Blake acted on the instant.

"On him, Tinker!" he shouted, plunging forward. "Hands up, you scoundrel!"

Blake had wrenched his revolver out, but he did not intend using it unless absolutely compelled to. And his initial spring down the side of the hollow carried him right up to the murderer.

Robinson attempted to get away, but it was too late. Sexton Blake was already grappling with him, and I told myself that the whole show was over, bar shouting. But I was mistaken. The negro fought like a tiger.

"You ain't got me yet, you se hounds!" he snarled.

He exerted all his strength, and threw Sexton Blake aside. I dashed in at that moment from the rear, intending to pull the man over on his back, but he twisted like lightning, caught me up, and literally pitched me four or five yards away. I fell with a shocking thud, half-stunned, dazed, and badly bruised.

The man's strength was abnormal, and at the present moment he was absolutely insane with fright and fury. Even Sexton Blake, magnificent fighter though he was, was unable to withstand the brutal onslaught. Robinson's strength was like that of a wild elephant.

I had given a terrific yell as the negro seized me, and Blake no doubt thought that I had been seriously injured. He waited grimly, and once more called upon Robinson to surrender, this time threatening to shoot.

He did shoot, too. The shot rang out like a crack of a whip on the still air, but the bullet went wide, as the gov'nor had intended. He thought that the negro would be scared, but he wasn't.

Before Sexton Blake could pull trigger a second time the bestial negro was upon him, for Robinson in his present state was like a wild beast indeed. The gov'nor was flung over by the sheer force of the rush.

But that revolver-shot had been heard by other ears than mine, and curiously enough, those were the pretty little ears of Miss Violet Castle. But how came it that such a sweet girl was abroad at this hour of the night?

The explanation was simple.

Violet knew all about the negro. Sir Henry had told of Sexton Blake's investigations, and the girl was naturally wild with hope and anxiety. Sleep was quite impossible—at least, until the gov'nor and I returned.

But we hadn't returned, and Sir Henry, Lady Castle, and Violet had been sitting up, waiting to hear the first item of news. Quite naturally, the girl was the most impatient of all, and she had managed to slip away, her intention being to visit the little courthouse in Mountroft. She hoped to find Sexton Blake and I there—or, at least, glean some fresh information. Anything was better than sitting still, waiting.

And so it came about that Violet was hastening down the private road at this time. She heard the revolver shot—immediately following a faint yell—and the girl was startled almost out of her wits.

A dead silence followed those sounds, and she hurried on almost fearfully. And then fresh sounds came—loud shouts in a strange voice, and she knew that the commotion was taking place just within the wood, where it bordered the road, a few hundred yards from the Lake Cottage.

Violet breathed quickly, and paused in an

undecided manner. She remembered that the murdered man had been found in this wood, and she was naturally disinclined to enter. But then she heard a wild, husky cry for help. It was I who uttered that cry, because the infuriated negro had got Sexton Blake down, and the gov'nor was in terrible danger. I shouted out in sheer desperation, and not because I thought anybody would hear the cry.

It decided Violet, however. She had recognised my voice, and she pushed her way through the trees, and came upon the scene in the hollow almost at once. And what she saw filled her with momentary terror. The huge negro was kneeling upon Sexton Blake, and a terrible-looking knife was upraised, ready to strike.

Afterwards, Sexton Blake never blamed himself for having got into that position. Robinson would have beaten two or three men during that first flush of insane fury. And there was murder in his eyes now. He had killed Lambert, so what did it matter if he killed another man?

Violet only saw Sexton Blake's danger. And she saw me, too, lying further on, still too dizzy to walk. A large piece of wood was almost at Violet's feet, and in a second she seized it and rushed forward.

Crash! The tree-bow descended upon the murderer's head with fearful force. But Robinson was a negro; his head was as thick as a cannon-ball. The blow would have been sufficient to stun any ordinary man, but Robinson was only dazed for a second, and, undoubtedly, half the fight was taken out of him.

But for the first few moments his fury was terrible. Roaring at the top of his voice, so loudly that we were almost deafened, he jumped to his feet and turned like lightning. At the same time he gave a backward kick, and his heavy boot caught Sexton Blake a blow in the pit of the stomach. It wasn't serious, but the gov'nor was utterly helpless for the time being. When a man's winded—and badly winded—he's no good for anything.

Robinson was quite beyond control now, although his strength was not what it had been. He seized Violet in his strong arms, and swung her round, screaming with terror. The girl was brave enough, but this horrible adventure unnerved her. To be in the clutches of this black brute was terrifying.

She screamed and screamed, and I don't know what would have happened if help hadn't arrived in the nick of time. Violet had saved the gov'nor's life, that was certain, but she would have paid for it with her own if others had not intervened.

Sexton Blake and I, both temporarily knocked out of the fight, made supreme efforts and tried to get to the girl's side. But before we could do so there was a sound of crashing twigs, and several hearty shouts.

And then, to our surprise and joy, Nelson Lee and Nipper burst into view, dim and shadowy, but unmistakable. They grasped the situation in a moment—and, incidentally, they grasped the negro as well. Lee was taking no chances, and he used the butt of his revolver with great effect. The weapon was brought down upon Robinson's already bruised skull with great force, and the man collapsed.

But both Nelson Lee and Nipper instantly fell upon him, and were not satisfied until his feet and hands were securely bound. Violet, during this time, was standing by, regaining her composure. The whole adventure had left her bewildered and frightened.

"We thought we'd come along, Blake," explained Nelson Lee. "Nipper and I ran down by car, in my racer, and we were going serenely along when we heard this young lady's screams. We seem to have arrived just at the right moment."

"You've saved Miss Castle's life, old man," said Sexton Blake painfully. "And she, by an act of wonderful bravery, saved mine. But the brute is captured, and I think this case is just about finished."

"Well, I'm in at the death, so I've got nothing to grumble about," said Nelson Lee pleasantly. "You fellows need mending, by the look of it."

The negro fell to pieces, so to speak, as soon as he was captured, and confessed everything like a babbling baby.

There's no need for me to give Robinson's statement verbatim. If I attempted the task I should fill up several pages, for Robinson's story was rambling, and he told it jerkily and intermingled with violent fits of rage or terror.

The gist of it, however, was exactly as Sexton Blake had surmised. The negro had

been acquainted with Lambert for many years—indeed, Lambert, we learned, had been somehow connected with the promoters of the minstrel troupe which Robinson had belonged to when he first came to England.

The nigger had taken part in this affair, at Lambert's instigation. He had brought the car from London, and there was no doubt that Lambert had had the nigger with him so that he could get completely away from the scene in a car which was not his own, and which had no connection with him. If his trickery against Ralph failed, then it would be Robinson who would receive attention from the police. Lambert had been extremely careful of his own skin.

The negro had waited in the car while Lambert met Ralph near King's Lynn. The pair had then gone to the Lake Cottage, and Lambert had committed the theft, using Ralph's boots to make evidence. Afterwards he and Robinson had gone to the wood, owing to an argument they were having, and had stood there, thus accounting for the studded footprints near the body. The negro had remained in the wood while Lambert went back to Ralph in the car. When Lambert returned he found that Robinson had concealed a number of the coins, and a fierce quarrel had resulted, during which Lambert had struck his companion, gashing his forehead. The ensuing quarrel had concluded with the negro stabbing his confederate. Robinson's hat had fallen off, and he had been unable to find it in the darkness.

In a blind panic he had hidden the loot, and had fled back to London in his employer's car, only to be sacked upon arrival. During the day he had realised his folly in leaving the booty in the wood, and had decided to fetch it during the hours of darkness. Of far more importance, however, was the negro's added statement regarding the five-year-old robbery at Mr. Austin Goodall's house. The nigger had helped Lambert in that affair, too, and his confession included the information that Ralph had nothing whatever to do with the affair, and that he had been wrongfully convicted.

Under the circumstances, Ralph Warwick was allowed to see us all without delay. He was, in fact, given his complete freedom. It would be necessary for him to appear at the inquest, and there would be other formalities. But he was a free man, without a stain upon his character.

Violet's joy was so overwhelming that it took the form of many tears, but that stage soon passed, and it was a merry crowd who walked up to Castle Mount in the small hours of the morning. Even the gov'nor and I, bruised though we were, shared the general gaiety.

The next day, of course, the whole story was retold, and Nelson Lee was full of admiration for the gov'nor's masterly handling of the case. As for Sir Henry, I verily believe he was more pleased over the recovery of his beloved coins than anything else.

Horrible though Lambert's fate had been, he had certainly deserved it, for he had been a vile rogue. And the negro, too, would pay the full penalty in the course of time. Nobody would mourn his death, for he was almost as bad as his white confederate.

"Well, Lee, old man, I'm very glad you decided to run down that night," declared Sexton Blake, several days later. "Both Tinker and I are fit again now, but things would have gone badly with us if you hadn't turned up."

"And with Violet, too," said Ralph, who was with us. "I think we all owe you a debt of gratitude, Mr. Lee—"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"Come, come!" he protested. "It is Mr. Blake who deserves all the credit. In this particular case I was nearly a pawn. In my opinion, Mr. Blake was wonderfully successful. The police were at sea from the start, but Mr. Blake wasn't."

"Rather not!" I said enthusiastically. "Why, if the gov'nor hadn't got hold of that old bowler hat you might have been hanged, Mr. Ralph! All the really important facts were deduced from that battered old article of headgear."

"Wonderful!" said Sir Henry smilingly. "Wonderful!"

And everybody present was in full agreement with him.

As for what happened to the young people afterwards—well, I think that's fairly obvious, so there's no reason for me to go into any details. You can guess just what you like, but you're bound to guess the right thing!

THE END.

The Red Raiders!

A Thrilling New Story of
Buffalo Bill's Boyhood.

The Bandits' Flight.

There were more shots, and a chorus of lusty cheers; and then, riding along the narrow canyon pathway, came Tom Davis and a score of bronzed and bearded men. They reined in their frothing steeds, and the prospector, swinging from the saddle, gripped Bill Cody's hand.

"Well, youngster, here we are!" he cried. "I told you I'd pull through, didn't I? Don't turn on the waterworks, Miss Sylvia, as plucky as you've been all along. Stop trembling, Mr. Farrell, and try to look pleased. By Jupiter, what a ride we've had! And we didn't get here any too soon, I guess. There were two of the rascals up on the brink of the cliff, and one was in the act of heaving a stone over. We plugged him with lead, and his pal took to his heels."

Sylvia and her father embraced in their joy, and for a moment the lad felt a queer sensation. He had been very near to death.

"I had a sort of an idea that you would come," was all he said to Tom Davis.

Red Beard had met with such a fate as he deserved, and the other man who had been above had been put to flight. The rest of the bandits had taken alarm, and they, too, were in full flight, already astride of their mustangs. They were not pursued. It would have been useless, for their horses were in better condition than those of the rescuers.

Bill Cody and his companions mounted behind three of the men, and at a trot the whole band rode southward, threading the red canyon in the pale dusk of the evening. A star brightened in the sky, and winked cheerfully down into the purple gloom.

"I've been thinking, Billie—" said the girl, and stopped.

"What of?" asked the lad.

"Of how much father and I owe to you."

"To Tom Davis, you mean. He saved us, Sylvia. Don't you wish it had been Jim Railton?"

"Oh, if only it had been! But poor Jim is dead. I'll never see him again!"

And tears crept into Sylvia's eyes as she rode on.

A Little Hitch.

Rattlesnake Fork was reached before day-break. The little party of four, including the prospector, rested here for twenty-four hours. On the second day they resumed their journey, and at nightfall they arrived at the populous settlement of Painted Rock, where they put up at the Palace Hotel, as the modest frame-building was called.

They were to separate on the morrow. Sylvia and her father were to go on to Canon City in the morning by a coach, and later in the day the lad was to travel homeward in a different direction in another coach. As for Tom Davis, he had not stated what his intentions were.

He left the hotel early in the evening, remarking that he wanted to buy some things; and an hour afterwards, as Bill Cody was at supper with Caleb Farrell and the girl in a room which they had to themselves, the door was opened, and a tall, clean-shaven man walked in. Sylvia sprang to her feet,

staring incredulously, her eyes shining with rapture.

"Jim!" she gasped. "Oh—oh, Jim!"

"Yes, little girl, here I am!" said the man, in a husky voice.

Caleb Farrell stepped quickly between the two, his face dark with anger. He raised his fist.

"Don't you touch her!" he cried. "She's not for you!"

"Why isn't she?" asked Jim Railton.

"You know why. I have other plans for my daughter. I'm not going to have her marry a poor man who will never be worth his salt. How many times have I told you so?"

"You still refuse, Farrell?"

"Of course I do, confound your impudence!"

"I reckon if I was that chap Davis I've been hearing about, and he wanted to marry Sylvia, you would let him have her because of what you owe to him."

"Oh, no, I wouldn't. Not from gratitude."

"What if he was a rich man?"

"If he was rich! Well, in that case, Railton, I would give my consent, and would give it gladly."

Jim Railton laughed.

(The concluding words of this fine serial will appear next week. Next week's magnificent Story of Sexton Blake and Tinker is entitled "FOES IN THE DARK; Or, The Curious Case of Anthony Bassett." Written with great power by the Author of "Behind the Lines," "The Case of the Mysterious Book," "The Clue of the Food Card," "The Shrike," "The Baker Street Mystery," etc.)

£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 16th. 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. 6,

GOUGH HOUSE, GOUGH SQUARE,

LONDON, E.C. 4,

and must reach that address not later than THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 14th.

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 those 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 November 9th, or the issues of those journals dated November 16th, 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, NOVEMBER 14th. 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. 6.

Matches Played SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 16th.

Closing Date, THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 14th.

TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR	v. WEST HAM UNITED
CHELSEA	v. BRENTFORD
ARSENAL	v. FULHAM
CRYSTAL PALACE	v. MILLWALL
QUEEN'S PARK RANGERS	v. CLAPTON ORIENT
BIRMINGHAM	v. COVENTRY CITY
GRIMSBY TOWN	v. SHEFFIELD UNITED
HUDDERSFIELD TOWN	v. LEICESTER FOSSE
LINCOLN CITY	v. BRADFORD
NOTTS COUNTY	v. BARNSELEY
ROTHERHAM COUNTY	v. HULL CITY
BOLTON WANDERERS	v. SOUTHPORT
MANCHESTER CITY	v. LIVERPOOL
OLDHAM ATHLETIC	v. STOCKPORT COUNTY
PRESTON NORTH END	v. MANCHESTER UNITED
ROCHDALE	v. STOKE
AIRDRIEONIANS	v. RANGERS
CLYDEBANK	v. CELTIC
HEARTS	v. FALKIRK
KILMARNOCK	v. AYR UNITED
QUEEN'S PARK	v. MOTHERWELL
ST. MIRREN	v. DUMBARTON

I enter Football Competition No. 6 in accordance with the Rules and conditions announced above, and agree to accept the published decision as final and legally binding.

Signed

Address

U.I.