

FASCINATING TALE OF SEXTON BLAKE. £300 FOOTBALL COMPETITION.

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## The AFFAIR of the BRONZE MONKEY.



## The AFFAIR of the BRONZE MONKEY.

• A Strange and Mysterious Problem from Sexton Blake's Case-  
• Book, introducing SEXTON BLAKE, TINKER, and PEDRO.  
• Specially written for this issue by the Author of "The Clue of the  
• Frozen Knife," "The Case of the Five Hairs," "Hoodwinked!"  
• "Waldo, the Wonder-man," and the "Nipper at St. Frank's" Series.  
•

(The Narrative Related Throughout by Sexton Blake.)

### THE FIRST CHAPTER.

#### The Immaculate Stranger.

**F**RANKLY, the prospect did not appeal to me.

I pulled at my cigarette somewhat irritably as I lolled back in the taxi, idly watching the lighted streets as we sped along. But I had promised Cromer that I would look in, so there was no getting out of it.

But receptions were always something of a bore to me. The only consolation I had was a fixed determination to leave as early as I decently could. Not that I was engaged upon any special work at the time.

Tinker was not with me; I had left him behind at Baker Street. For one thing, he had not been invited (a disgraceful oversight on Cromer's part, Tinker declared), and, for another thing, he complained of mysterious internal troubles. This I set down to over-indulgence at luncheon, and I advised him to spend a quiet evening at home, so that he would be fit for work on the morrow.

I was bound for Richmond, and my actual destination was the residence of Mr. Horace Cromer, the famous poet and essayist. Cromer was a friend of mine; not intimate, but by no means casual. And in a somewhat foolish moment I had promised to attend the reception which was being held to celebrate the engagement of his daughter Sylvia to Gerald Montford, the son of Sir George Montford, Bart.

It was quite an interesting occasion among certain circles, but it did not appeal to me, as I have already mentioned. I had never met Miss Cromer, neither had I met young Montford. And as I sped towards Richmond that evening I certainly did not suspect that I was very shortly to become involved in a case of quite unusual mystery and interest.

When I arrived I found the house alive with activity. Quite a number of motor-cars were standing on the drive, and my humble taxi looked somewhat poor by comparison. However, I had seen no reason why I should trouble to bring my own car.

It is not my intention to go into any details regarding the social side of the affair; I would prefer to leave that to the imagination of those who read this history. My concern is to describe the problem which confronted me.

After having been announced, therefore, I found myself with Cromer in his sumptuous library. We were alone, and I was feeling quite relieved. I had expected to be surrounded by gaily-attired ladies almost from the moment of my arrival, and it was pleasant to have a smoke and a chat with my host.

"Good of you to come, Blake," said Cromer genially. "I'm afraid we can't remain in

seclusion here for long, although I fancy you care as little for receptions as I do myself. But we must let the young people have their own way sometimes, eh?"

"Of course," I smiled. "I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting your daughter, Cromer. I hope this occasion is a happy one for her."

"Happy!" repeated my host. "Why, my dear Blake, this is no arranged marriage. It's an old-fashioned love match. Those two young people are everything in the world to one another."

"I'm glad to hear that," I said smilingly.

"And Gerald is quite a splendid young fellow," went on Cromer. "I could not have chosen a better son-in-law had I searched the country from end to end. I tell you, Blake, this is a time of happiness for us all. I suppose they'll be married before the end of the year."

He probably noticed that I was blandly polite, for he chuckled.

"But these sort of things don't interest you, do they, Blake?" he remarked drily. "You would prefer to talk about mysteries and problems, eh? I'm sorry to say that I am disgracefully ignorant on such matters."

"I'm not always keen upon mysteries, Cromer," I laughed. "One must take a rest occasionally, you know. Just recently there has been a somewhat slack time amongst the criminal fraternity, and I—"

"Ah, here are the young people!" interrupted Cromer, as the door opened.

Sylvia and her fiancé entered. I was introduced, and I must acknowledge that I was favourably impressed. Miss Sylvia Cromer was a very beautiful girl, and she looked radiant at present. Rather taller than the average, perfectly attired, and graceful to a degree. She was a fit companion for the strikingly handsome young man by her side.

For Gerald Montford was no ordinary fellow. Tall, well made, and quite boyish, he was a perfect example of young English manhood. There was nothing of the ordinary type about him. He was a quite exceptional man both in his appearance and in his abilities. And I knew from what Cromer had told me previously that he had always led a clean, honourable life.

"I've often wanted to meet you, Mr. Blake," he said, regarding me frankly. "I hope I shall have the pleasure, one day, of giving you a mystery to unravel. Perhaps Sylvia will be missing, and I shall have to get you to find her for me."

"Don't be so absurd, Gerald!" protested the girl laughingly.

It has been truly said that many a true word is spoken in jest, and Gerald was to remember that remark of his in a startlingly short time. He and his fiancée were perfectly happy at present. But there would be an appalling difference in the course of a few hours.

Well, after that there was little rest for me. I was carried into the hall-room as a matter of course, and Sylvia honoured me by giving me no less than three dances; but I don't think Gerald was jealous.

Dancing, as a rule, bores me rather than otherwise. But this evening I entered into the spirit of the occasion, and enjoyed myself heartily. I no longer desired to escape as soon as an opportunity presented itself.

The whole affair was perfectly managed, and I have seldom attended a reception which pleased me so much. I have already mentioned that I do not intend to dwell particularly upon these comparatively uninteresting matters.

I have the whole facts of this remarkable case before me, all jotted down in my case-book. And my plan is to tell the narrative exactly as it occurred, so far as it is possible to do so. In many instances I was not actually present, but I gleaned all the facts afterwards, and so I can set them down.

And while I was enjoying a cigar in the smoking-room with a laughing crowd of gentleman guests, Sylvia Cromer had a somewhat surprising experience. The hall-room was still crowded, for dancing was in full swing.

The girl had been introduced to a wealthy American named Mr. Earle Kennedy, and she had promised to dance with him. He was waiting promptly when the time arrived, and proved that he could dance quite perfectly.

Mr. Kennedy was immaculately attired, and charming in his manner. But there was a certain suaveness about him which certainly did not appeal to me. I had not met him at that time, but I did so later on.

When the dance was over he begged of her to give him the pleasure of marking the programme for a second dance. But the girl laughingly shook her head.

"Really, I can't, Mr. Kennedy!" she protested. "I don't think I have another dance left."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Miss Cromer," said Mr. Earle Kennedy. "But tell me, I guess you've seen this before?"

He took something from his pocket and handed it to the girl. She took the thing with some surprise, and her charming eyes expressed astonishment as she beheld the nature of the little article.

It was a small bronze monkey, perfectly modelled, and comparatively light. What it could mean Sylvia had no idea, and she turned it over in her dainty fingers, wondering what Mr. Kennedy had meant by suggesting that she had seen it before. She looked up, shaking her head.

"Why, no!" she remarked, "I have never seen— Oh!"

The girl looked round in astonishment. Mr.



Earle Kennedy was no longer by her side; he was no longer in sight. While she had been examining the bronze monkey, he had slipped quietly away.

But why? What on earth could it mean? What reason could the man have had for giving that little article to the girl, and then disappearing? Sylvia, not unnaturally, was very annoyed. And Gerald Montford, when he found her a few moments later, was surprised to see the impatient gleam in her eyes.

"Why, what's wrong, Sylvia?" he asked. "Do you know where Mr. Earle Kennedy is, Gerald?"

"That American gentleman?"

"Yes." "I saw him here five minutes ago," replied Montford. "I thought he was dancing with you, Sylvia."

"And so he was, but when it was over he gave me this curious little thing, and intimated that I had seen it before," said the girl. "And when I looked up, Gerald, he had gone. He didn't even wait for me to make any reply."

"The infernal boor!" growled Gerald. "What is it, anyhow?"

He took the little bronze monkey, and examined it.

"He gave you this?" he asked, in astonishment. "What in the name of wonder for? I suppose you never have seen it until now?"

"Of course not." "Well, it's no good worrying your little head about it," said Montford lightly. "Perhaps your father will know something about it. Another dance is just starting, and I think it's my turn to claim you."

"Oh, Gerald, we needn't dance this time!" interrupted Sylvia. "I should like to ask father what this means. Besides, I mean to find Mr. Kennedy, and get an explanation from him."

"Or an apology," said Gerald grimly. "Oh, here's Mr. Blake! We'll show the monkey to him."

I approached as I saw Gerald beckoning to me.

"I say, Mr. Blake, rather a queer thing has just happened!" he exclaimed. "What do you make of this?"

He handed me the bronze monkey, and I examined it.

"What do I make of it?" I repeated, with a smile. "Why, it is a remarkably well-executed piece of metal-work, and I should say it is quite valuable. Not that these grotesque little images interest me."

Montford explained how Miss Cromer had obtained it.

"Certainly an unusual incident," I agreed. "But, my dear fellow, I shouldn't make a mystery of it if I were you. Mr. Kennedy was beckoned away by somebody, perhaps, and he may shortly return full of apologies. But why on earth he should show the bronze monkey to Miss Cromer is certainly puzzling."

"Deucedly strange, I call it!" said Montford.

I was not inclined to think seriously of the matter. The most probable explanation was that the American had wanted to make the girl a little present, but was nervous of doing so openly. So he had chosen the somewhat doubtful course just described.

"We'll take it to father," said Sylvia firmly.

Her word was law, of course, and Montford readily agreed. Cromer had escaped to his library again, and the young people disturbed him as he was enjoying a cigar before the cheerful fire.

"Don't scold me, Sylvia!" he said smilingly. "You've come to drag me out again, haven't you? I'll come quietly, if you let me take my own time. But I'm not so young as I used to be—"

"But we haven't come to drag you out, father," interrupted the girl laughingly. "We just want to show you something. Mr. Kennedy gave it to me."

"And who, pray, is Mr. Kennedy?"

"Oh, an American millionaire, I believe!" put in Montford. "Quite a gentleman, sir. Middle-aged, and as neat as a new pin. But there are so many guests here, one gets rather mixed up with them."

"I do not pretend to know a tenth part of them," smiled Mr. Cromer. "But why should this American gentleman make you a present, Sylvia? You've never seen him before, have you?"

"Never, father—that's why it was so strange!" said his daughter. "But this is what he gave me, and I really can't understand it; because he walked off before I could make any reply. And he intimated that I knew what it was."

She handed the little bronze monkey to her father, and he adjusted his glasses, and looked at it with smiling interest. And then an abrupt change came in his manner.

He turned deathly pale, his glasses fell off, and a hoarse cry sounded in his throat. To the consternation of Sylvia and Gerald Montford, he stood staring at the bronze monkey with a horribly fixed expression in his eyes.

"The Bethmites!" he muttered hoarsely. "The Bethmites!"

The bronze image fell from his listless fingers, and thudded upon the soft carpet. The next moment Horace Cromer collapsed in a limp heap upon the floor.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

### A Startling Development.

**S**YLVIA started back with a little scream of fright and amazement.

"Father!" she exclaimed, dropping to her knees, and lifting her father's head from the floor. "Oh, Gerald! Help me—"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Montford huskily. "Go and fetch help, Sylvia. I can lift your father on to the couch. Get somebody to ring up for the doctor at once!"

"Oh, but what can it mean?" asked the girl breathlessly. "Father was himself only a minute ago, Gerald! Did—did you see his face while he was looking at that bronze monkey? I was terribly frightened. And now—and now he's fainted! What can we do?"

Montford made no reply. He lifted Cromer's slim figure from the floor, and gently carried it to the big lounge on the other side of the room. He was considerably startled, but he kept his head. He had no wish to alarm Sylvia, but he was convinced that Cromer's condition was more serious than the girl imagined. This was no mere swoon.

"I expect he will be all right before long, little girl," he said gently. "But we must have a doctor at once. You stay here with him, and I will rush to the telephone."

Before she could reply he was off. There was a telephone in the morning-room—Cromer would not be bothered with it in his library—and Montford was soon talking to a doctor who resided comparatively near-by.

"Please come at once, Dr. Henson!" he exclaimed urgently. "Mr. Cromer has unaccountably collapsed, and your presence is vital! Not a soul knows anything about it yet, except Miss Cromer. Please come immediately."

"You may expect me within ten minutes," replied the doctor.

Montford hung up the receiver, and hurried back to the library. But on the way he noticed me, and immediately altered his direction. The very instant I saw him I knew that something serious was wrong.

"Can I speak to you privately, Mr. Blake?" he asked.

"Certainly!" I replied promptly. "I fear that—"

"Mr. Cromer is terribly ill!" he interrupted, in a whisper. "It's perfectly mad, but I believe that bronze monkey has something to do with it!"

He led me away towards the library, but paused outside the door. We were quite to ourselves there, and Montford looked at me calmly and grimly.

"I'm not an imaginative man, Mr. Blake, but I tell you honestly that I have never seen such a look of horror in anybody's eyes as I saw in Mr. Cromer's five minutes ago!" he declared. "We gave him that bronze image to look at, and he stared at it in the most horrible manner, and then collapsed."

"Let me see him," I said quietly.

We entered the library, and found Sylvia on her knees before the couch, rubbing her father's hands, and pitifully begging him to speak. She turned quickly as we entered, and the expression in her eyes was almost alarming.

"Oh, he is still unconscious, Gerald!" she panted. "I—I'm afraid that— Oh, but it's too awful—"

"My dear young lady, you must not alarm yourself unduly," I said quickly. "Your father may have only collapsed temporarily. A doctor ought to be fetched without delay, although I think I may be able to make a fairly accurate diagnosis. I am not entirely unversed in medical matters."

"The doctor will be here within ten minutes, Mr. Blake," said Montford. "I rang him up just before I saw you. I hope to

Heaven. Mr. Cromer's condition is not serious!"

I bent over the couch, and looked at the still form critically. I raised Cromer's eyelids, and examined the pupils; then I felt his pulse. It was weak and erratic, and I pursed my lips.

"I am afraid your father will not recover for some little time, Miss Cromer," I said gravely. "Let me add, however, that there is no reason for you to worry yourself as you are doing. Mr. Cromer is in no actual danger, although his condition clearly proves that he has received a great shock."

"Will—will he recover?" whispered the girl.

"There is no reason why he should not," I replied. "I can only say that his collapse was brought about by the shock I just mentioned. Can you suggest any explanation?"

"We are both staggered, Mr. Blake," said Montford. "Sylvia had hardly put that bronze monkey into her father's hand when he dropped to the floor. I had a terrible thought that there was something wrong with it."

"What do you mean—something wrong with it?"

Montford looked rather uncomfortable.

"Well, I suppose I'm an ass," he confessed. "But I've read about images like that being provided with poisoned spikes. And Mr. Cromer's abrupt collapse seems so unaccountable."

"Poison!" whispered Sylvia, horrified.

"Not really, Sylvia!" Gerald hastened to add. "It was only a foolish idea."

"Not so very foolish, Montford," I said quietly. "The very manner in which the image came into Miss Cromer's possession was suggestive of something sinister, and you cannot be blamed for taking an alarming view. But where is the bronze monkey?"

"It fell to the floor somewhere—yes, there it is!"

Gerald picked the thing up and handed it to me. I did not mention that I, too, had suspected poison, to begin with. But there was nothing in Cromer's condition to suggest poisoning. It was a pure collapse.

"No, this little article is harmless enough," I said, turning the image over in my fingers. "Can you suggest any possible reason, Miss Cromer, for your father's extraordinary behaviour upon seeing it?"

"I am terribly puzzled, Mr. Blake," said Sylvia. "I know nothing whatever."

"You are quite sure of that?" I persisted. "Think carefully, please. Has your father never dropped a hint that he was in fear of something, or—"

"In fear, Mr. Blake?" repeated the girl. "Oh, how absurd! Father has always been so good-tempered and happy. I've never known anybody so serenely care-free as my father."

"What was that he said just before he collapsed?" asked Montford. "I've been trying to remember the word, but I can't quite bring it to mind. Do you recall it, Sylvia?"

I looked at the girl quickly. "Please try your utmost," I said. "I did not know that your father had said anything, Miss Cromer. It may be of the utmost importance."

"There is no need for me to try my utmost, Mr. Blake," replied Sylvia quietly. "I remember the word distinctly. My father said it twice. 'The Bethmites—the Bethmites.' That is what he said."

"Why, yes, of course!" agreed Montford, nodding. "What on earth did he mean, Mr. Blake? What are the Bethmites?"

I stroked my chin thoughtfully.

"I have never heard the word before," I admitted. "But the sound conveys almost anything to the mind. It would be unwise to make any sort of guess. Have you ever heard your father use the word before, Miss Cromer?"

"Never. Oh, no, never!"

"It seems to be a mystery after your own heart, Mr. Blake," said Montford. "And for such a thing to happen on this particular night is appalling. I haven't had time to think of what we shall do or say."

"Let me advise you, then, to give no hint of this sad collapse on Mr. Cromer's part," I said. "It would be most unfortunate if the guests even obtained a breath of the truth. You do not want a sensation caused, Miss Cromer. It would be a wise course to explain that your father has retired to his room, which will be strictly true. The guests need know nothing."

"But how can I face them while I am so worried?" asked the girl in dismay.

"You must take your courage in both

hands and face the ordeal bravely," I said. "You, also, Montford, must keep up appearances. The pair of you ought to be in the ball-room at this very moment. That may sound rather heartless, but your absence will be noticed, and comment will be caused."

The doctor arrived at that very moment, and he lost no time in making a thorough examination of the patient. And when he had finished he rubbed his hands together and smiled pleasantly.

"There is no need for alarm, Miss Cromer," he said genially. "Your father is in no danger whatever, and to-morrow, no doubt, he will be himself again. Just a little collapse, that is all."

The relief in the girl's eyes was well worth seeing, and both she and Montford lost no further time in getting away to the reception. Considering that it was being held in their honour, it was most essential that they should be in evidence all the time.

But when they had gone Dr. Henson regarded me gravely.

"I hope I did not do wrong, my dear sir," he said. "I know that this is a very special night, and I wanted to calm that dear girl's fears. But I am very much afraid that Mr. Cromer will not be himself for many a long day. Mind you, I think he is in no danger, but the shock must have been appalling."

"I came to the same conclusion myself, Dr. Henson," I said. "A very queer affair, and I hope that nothing tragic will result. If I can be of any use to you, I will willingly help. Would it not be wise to get Mr. Cromer up to his own apartment as quickly as possible, and without the servants being aware of his condition?"

"A very wise suggestion, Mr. Blake," said the old doctor, nodding.

It was necessary to take Cromer's butler into our confidence, however. He could be trusted not to talk, and his concern when he learned that his master was ill was very deep.

And his knowledge of the house helped us. There was a small private staircase within easy reach of the library, and the butler and I carefully carried poor Cromer up this and gently deposited him upon his own bed.

After that Dr. Henson took his departure, his first object being to send a couple of nurses at the earliest possible moment. For my part, I had no further desire for gaiety, and resolved to get home.

So I made my excuses and left. Sylvia made me promise, however, to call within a day or two, not that I needed any encouragement from her. I was genuinely interested, for this affair of the bronze monkey was exceedingly mysterious, and attracted me strangely.

The bizarre nature of the whole occurrence claimed my attention. First and foremost, there was the somewhat mysterious behaviour of the unknown Mr. Earle Kennedy. For he certainly was unknown, so far as I was concerned. Then the effect of the bronze monkey upon Cromer, and the muttering of the word "Bethmite" by my friend.

I arrived home comparatively early, and found Tinker sprawled in the easy-chair before the fire, with Pedro at his feet. Both of them looked disgracefully lazy and comfortable. The fire was roaring merrily.

"Fed up already, guv'nor?" yawned Tinker. "I thought you wouldn't be home until the milkman came round."

"You thought nothing of the sort, Tinker!" I said, unlacing my boots. "Fetch down that tobacco-jar, and select my big briar from the rack. Cigars are all very well, but one gets more comfort out of a pipe."

Tinker eyed me closely as he followed my instructions.

"You look as if you'd just come back from an investigation, guv'nor," he remarked. "Has anything been happening at Richmond?"

"You are not always dull, Tinker," I smiled. "Yes, quite a deal has been happening, and a very pretty mystery has presented itself. It will probably come to nothing, but I am interested."

"You might let me into the know, guv'nor," said Tinker.

"Do you feel fit enough, young 'un?"

"Fit enough! Is it something horrible, then?" he asked.

"Your stomach—"

"Oh, rats!" growled Tinker. "Just because I had a few pains you chip me to death about it! I'd forgotten all about my confounded tummy trouble. But if you don't want to tell me anything, I'm not a bit curious."

That was a barefaced falsehood, and Tinker knew it. He was very curious indeed, and, U. J.—No. 800.

having donned my dressing-gown, I sprawled in the easy-chair and related to Tinker what had occurred at Richmond.

"H'm! A rummy business," he remarked characteristically when I had finished. "I wonder why the old boy fell into a fit. And what the dickens is a Bethmite? Sounds like a new kind of microbe!"

"I did not ask you to be facetious, Tinker," I said severely. "And Mr. Cromer did not fall into a fit. It was a collapse, caused by an abrupt shock. It was that bronze monkey which started the trouble."

"You might have brought the thing along, guv'nor," said Tinker.

"I did," I replied calmly. "You'll find it in my overcoat pocket. I thought it had caused quite enough worry, and I want to examine it more thoroughly. Of course, I shall return it to-morrow, or the day after."

Tinker fetched the bronze image, and eyed it curiously.

"It isn't handsome," he remarked, "but I can't see why anybody should collapse at the sight of it. What's your idea, guv'nor?"

"There is surely one obvious explanation," I said.

"You mean that the bronze monkey had a significance for Mr. Cromer, but for nobody else?" asked Tinker. "It was a kind of sign?"

"Your wits are not quite asleep, after all," I observed. "Yes, Tinker, a sign—a link with the past. There is really nothing else to think. But I am puzzled, nevertheless."

"It may be nothing at all, really, guv'nor."

"That is quite possible," I agreed. "By the way, fetch me down the reference book 'B' from the shelf."

"I don't think you'll find 'Bethmite' there, guv'nor," said Tinker.

"Nevertheless, fetch it."

He did so, and I turned over the pages slowly as I lay back in the chair, the smoke rising lazily from my pipe. There was one lengthy item in the volume which interested me quite considerably; an article concerning one Mr. Marmaduke Beth. This gentleman's career was most instructive, and I shall probably have something to say about it later on.

I replaced the reference book on its shelf, and was just refilling my pipe, when our front door bell rang insistently. Tinker looked at me, and I looked at Tinker. Then we both glanced at the clock.

"Twenty to twelve!" said Tinker. "Who the dickens can that be, guv'nor?"

"You'd better go and see," I replied shortly.

"But we don't want any hare-brained client at this hour, guv'nor!"

"Go and see, Tinker!"

He went downstairs grumpily, and I heard his voice and somebody else's a moment later. Pedro, on the rug, pricked up his ears and became alert. He was probably wondering what strangers could be doing there at that hour.

But the visitor was not a stranger—to me, at all events. For Gerald Montford hastened into the consulting-room, his face haggard and drawn. I confess that I was considerably startled. The first thought that jumped into my mind was that Cromer had died. But this was not the case.

"Thank goodness I've found you at home, Mr. Blake!" exclaimed Montford hoarsely. "Something terrible has happened. It's awful that all this should take place on this very night. Poor Sylvia—"

"What is the trouble, Montford?" I asked, rising to my feet.

He gripped my arm almost fiercely.

"Mr. Blake," he said, in an unsteady voice. "Sylvia has vanished!"

## THE THIRD CHAPTER.

### The Chase.

"THAT is most distressing!" I exclaimed quietly. "But surely that cannot actually be the case, Montford?"

There are many different ways of interpreting that statement. How has Miss Cromer vanished?"

Montford sank wearily into a chair.

"It's like a nightmare!" he exclaimed.

"Long before all the guests had departed—they haven't all gone yet, even—I tried to find Sylvia, and she was nowhere to be seen. After a bit I began to get alarmed, and made inquiries of the servants."

"Well?"

"One of the maids told me that Sylvia had been seen walking across the terrace, towards the lawn," went on our visitor. "That in itself, was surprising, for it's quite cold to-night, and

I couldn't imagine why she should have gone out into the garden. I searched everywhere, but found no trace."

"And she was last seen in the garden?"

"Yes, Mr. Blake."

"At what time was that?"

"Soon after eleven."

"Then we arrive at the fact that Miss Cromer has not been missing for very long," I smiled. "Indeed, reckoning the time you must have taken in coming here, she could not have been missing for more than ten or fifteen minutes—"

"But she was, Mr. Blake; nobody had seen her for over half an hour," interrupted Montford. "I'm wrong about the time, I expect. It must have been before eleven when she was seen out in the garden. But what does it matter? She's not there now, and not a soul knows a word about her."

"You want me to go to Richmond?" I asked briskly.

"If you don't think it is too much trouble—"

"My dear fellow, what a thought!" I protested. "I will come with you at once."

"Thank you, Mr. Blake; it is splendid of you!" said Montford gratefully. "The taxi I came in is waiting outside—"

"I don't think we'll trouble about it, my dear fellow," I interrupted, pulling on my boots. "Tinker, ring up the garage, and tell them to have our small racer round here, with a full supply of petrol on board, within five minutes."

"Right, guv'nor!" said Tinker briskly.

Montford was looking rather more hopeful; I knew that my prompt compliance with his wishes had come as a relief. But there was a slight suspicion of doubt in his eyes as he glanced at the clock.

"They won't do it, will they, Mr. Blake?" he asked.

"The garage people?" I smiled. "Yes, of course they'll do it. The place is only just round the corner, and they know better than to keep me waiting. I always have a car ready for the road at a moment's notice."

"Jove! That's handy," commented Montford.

"It is necessary," I said grimly. "Ready, Tinker?"

"Why, am I coming, guv'nor?" said Tinker. "Good enough! I'll be downstairs in a couple of ticks if you go at once; you won't need to wait for me, guv'nor. What about Pedro? Shall we bring him?"

"I think not, Tinker," I replied, after a moment. "We want to cause as little comment as possible; Pedro would probably be useful, but his presence at Cromer's house would cause a lot of talk—and that's just what we want to avoid."

A few minutes later we were off. Montford's taxi had been dismissed, and my little racing car devoured the distance in an astonishingly small space of time. When we arrived at Richmond, Cromer's house was still gay with light, and a good many stragglers had not yet taken their departure.

There was some little excitement, too. It had leaked out, somehow, that both Miss Sylvia and Montford had mysteriously disappeared, and all sorts of absurd stories had found credence.

Montford's return, however, upset most of these stories—the favourite one of which appeared to be to the effect that the young couple had eloped—and people asked anxious questions, without being actually inquisitive.

Gerald evaded the questions adroitly, and managed to get me out on the terrace alone, except for Tinker.

"The whole of Richmond will be talking about this to-morrow!" exclaimed Montford bitterly. "Not that that matters a toss. It seems as though ill-luck has befallen this house at one stroke, Mr. Blake. Poor Sylvia has vanished, and her father is lying upstairs, unconscious and helpless. What in Heaven's name can it mean? There's some devilry afoot!"

"Now, now, Montford, don't allow your imagination to run riot," I said gently. "We shall probably find that Miss Cromer's disappearance can be easily accounted for. Her father, as we know, collapsed when he saw that bronze monkey; we shall learn the truth about that later. For the moment we will confine ourselves to the task of searching for your fiancée."

We had already learned that nothing further had been heard of Sylvia. She was still missing. Dr. Henson had returned, however, and had succeeded in obtaining the services of two nurses, who were already installed. Cromer, it seemed, was in about the same condition; no worse, but no better.

"I think you told me, Montford, that you



searched the garden thoroughly?" I went on, pulling out my electric torch. "Was anybody with you?"

"Only Willis, the butler," said Gerald. "But he's just told us that nothing further has been seen of Sylvia. Mind you, we didn't search systematically, Mr. Blake; we just went through the garden."

"This gravel is fairly soft," I remarked. "Mind how you walk, Tinker, and look for Miss Cromer's footprints; they may be visible. She was last seen, I understand, on this terrace."

"That's right, Mr. Blake," said Gerald.

Within two minutes we had discovered definite traces of the missing girl. Montford and the butler, of course, had simply hurried through the garden looking for the girl herself; and not for signs of her.

Had they paid more attention to the ground they could not have failed to observe the clear set of footprints leading from the door of a large conservatory to the lawn. The grass near the edge was very thin, and for a few paces we could see Sylvia's footprints, leading directly across the lawn.

But after that they became invisible, for the grass thickened. There was no actual guarantee that they were Sylvia's footprints, although there could be little real doubt. Certainly, no guest had been upon the terrace that night, and those marks had never been made by a servant-girl.

It was not long, however, before we found a positive indication that Miss Cromer and no other had crossed the lawn, and had passed through the somewhat dense bushes towards the bottom section of the garden.

For Tinker suddenly gave a low whistle and halted.

"Just look at this, guv'nor!" he said tensely.

We all gazed at a small evergreen bush upon which Tinker was casting his light. I directed my own torch upon the bush, and immediately saw what had caused him to whistle. For there, clinging to a sharp, broken twig, was a tiny portion of silky material.

I recognised it instantly as a piece of the evening-gown which Sylvia had been wearing. Gerald recognised it, too, and he looked up into my face anxiously and almost fearfully.

"But what—what can this mean, Mr. Blake?" he muttered.

"It simply means, Montford, that Miss Cromer caught her dress against this bush as she passed," I replied drily. "It is only what we expected, at all events, so there is no need for alarm. I am rather glad, because we now know for certain that Miss Sylvia—"

"Of course we know!" interrupted Gerald. "But what happened to her after this, Mr. Blake? And why did she come out here at all? What earthly reason could she have had for acting so strangely—on this night of all nights, too, when her father was lying unconscious, and when the house was filled with guests?"

"Really, Montford, I'm not in a position to answer all those questions," I protested. "I'm not going to ask you to have patience, for that would be unreasonable; but do try and keep your normal wits about you."

Gerald was not offended at this mild rebuke, and he was eager to press forward. We soon found, however, that our progress was not likely to continue for long. For near the bottom of the garden we came across Sylvia's footprints once more. The girl had obviously passed out of the garden through a small private gateway.

This led into a small, dark lane, which was not a thoroughfare, or public in any way. It was really part of Cromer's property, and was a continuation of the lane which led to his garage.

"There have been a good few cars waiting about the house this evening," I remarked, after we had passed into the lane. "Do you know, Montford, if one of the cars was placed here?"

"I don't know anything about the cars at all," replied Gerald.

"Well, a fairly large car has been in this lane to-night," I said, examining the ground closely. "Here, you will observe, the unmistakable impressions of two Palmer treads. Those tyres, I should judge, were on the rear wheels; the front wheels were fitted with studded tyres, considerably worn."

"But what on earth does it matter?" asked our companion impatiently.

"It might matter a lot," I replied. "Don't you realise, Montford, that everything points to the probability that Miss Sylvia crossed the garden for the express purpose of boarding the motor-car which was standing here?"

"But why should she board it?"

"Why?" I echoed. "Man alive, that's what we're going to find out!"

"Hadn't we better follow these tracks, guv'nor?" asked Tinker. "They seem to lead towards the main road—and that doesn't seem very promising, to start with."

Tinker was right. We simply walked down the lane, and lost the tracks completely as soon as they joined the other numerous tracks at the junction between the lane and the road.

And while we were standing there, rather undecided, a two-seater car hove in sight, and came to a halt. The young fellow who was driving it jumped out and proceeded to give voice to a few choice remarks. These remarks appeared to be addressed to the front portion of his car.

"That's young Hilton, one of the guests," remarked Gerald. "What can he be doing here now? I thought he'd left hours ago."

Tinker looked at me and grinned.

"Mr. Hilton seems to have been in the wars, guv'nor," he remarked. "That off-side mudguard looks a bit wonky, anyhow!"

We walked forward a few paces, and Hilton eyed us curiously.

"Oh, is that you, Mr. Montford?" he said, pulling out his cigarette-case. "I didn't recognise you for the moment. What do you think of this? Pretty sort of mess, isn't it? Just my infernal luck!"

"Skid?" asked Tinker casually.

Hilton snorted.

"Skid be hanged!" he replied. "I was in collision with that fool of a car which was standing up the lane earlier this evening. I knew it at once, because I happened to see it up here on its own—a landaulette, with chocolate-coloured mudguards and wire-spoked wheels."

Hilton lit a cigarette, and glared at his damaged automobile.

"I wouldn't mind so much if it had been a pure accident," he went on. "But the fellow who was driving that car oughtn't to be in control of a perambulator!"

"You are quite sure, Mr. Hilton, that the car you collided with was the one which stood in this lane earlier in the evening?" I asked.

"Quite sure. She had Palmers on the rear wheels."

"Do you know to whom the car belonged?"

"No; I wish I did," replied Hilton. "But I should judge the man to be half mad, according to the way he behaved."

"Was he alone?" put in Montford quickly.

"Well, I couldn't give any positive answer to that question," said the other. "There may have been somebody inside, but I couldn't see, because the blinds were drawn, and the door didn't open."

Tinker and I glanced at one another grimly. "Can you tell me precisely what happened, Mr. Hilton?" I asked.

"Certainly," said the young man. "You see, I left rather early, although that was not exactly in my programme. Mr. and Mrs. Courtney live a good distance out, and they're friends of mine. Mrs. Courtney happened to twist her ankle during one of the dances, and she was properly crooked. Courtney wanted to take her home, and I offered them my car."

"Yes," said Montford. "I remember they left early."

"I was a bit fed up myself," continued Hilton, with a wry smile. "A certain young lady I was expecting to see here didn't turn up, and so I was really glad of the opportunity of getting away for a bit. Well, I landed Mr. and Mrs. Courtney home all right, and then came back easily, taking my time."

"But why did you come back?" asked Tinker.

"Well, hang it all, my pater's inside, I believe, and I expect he's wondering where I've been to," replied the young man. "I've come along now to take him home, but I ought to have been here long ago. It was that accident which upset me. I was just turning an easy bend when that confounded landaulette bore down upon me on the wrong side of the road—"

"Where did this happen?" I asked.

"Oh, quite a decent way down the Ripley road," said Hilton, naming the actual spot. "I tried to avoid a smash by running on to the grass, and I believe I saved my car from being converted into scrap-iron. As you can see, the damage isn't very great," he added, indicating his two-seater. "But the other fellow's car was pretty badly knocked up."

"Then it's still on the road there?" asked Montford eagerly.

"It may be," was Hilton's reply. "Of

course, we had an argument, and I told the fellow exactly what I thought of him. He told me what he thought of me, and it's really a wonder we didn't have a scrap on the spot. The idiot seemed to realise, however, that he was at fault, and he begged me to send him some help. Well, after he'd apologised, I couldn't very well refuse."

"And so you intend to send help at once?" I inquired.

"My dear man, I've finished with that," replied Hilton. "I passed a big garage, and told them to send a repair car at once. The landaulette's near side front wheel was twisted all up, and they hadn't got a spare. So how the difficulty has been overcome, I don't know. Anyhow, the garage people promised to get busy."

And that was really the substance of Hilton's story; he had nothing else of importance to tell us. What he had told, however, was highly significant, and of the greatest value.

There was no doubt whatever that the car he had collided with was the vehicle which had been carrying Miss Sylvia Cromer away. The drawn blinds and the closed doors hinted at foul play of some kind, and the driver's unreasonable fury was undoubtedly caused by his anxiety concerning his passenger. Hilton was absolutely positive that the landaulette was the car which had been standing in the lane.

Nobody seemed to know whose car it was; there had been so many that evening that Cromer's servants were rather confused. People had come by motor, and had left their cars in all sorts of odd corners. This, of course, was only natural.

The accident, it seemed, was to help our inquiry a great deal. For we knew that Sylvia's captors had been delayed, and there was every prospect that we should be able to get on their track.

"But I'm more mystified than ever, Mr. Blake," declared Montford, as we were hurrying towards our own car. "What can it mean? Who has taken Sylvia off? And why on earth did she go so tamely?"

"My dear Montford, I am just as puzzled as yourself," I replied briskly. "Our only course is to overtake that car and find out the actual truth from Sylvia herself. I have no wish to alarm you, but the whole affair seems to be somewhat sinister. And, for the life of me, I cannot help connecting it with that bronze monkey and the strange collapse of poor Mr. Cromer."

"We might not be able to overtake—"

"You leave that to the guv'nor, sir," put in Tinker calmly. "And if you value your life, hang on to the car like grim death as soon as we start! We're going to move!"

Montford was not at all nervous; in fact, he seemed to think that my car might have been more powerful. We tore through the night recklessly, and on more than one occasion we came preciously near to a smash. But a miss is as good as a mile, and my hand was steady, and my head clear.

I knew very well that only speed would enable us to achieve our object. There was just a chance that the landaulette was still a derelict; but it was far more probable that temporary repairs had been effected.

I had obtained full directions from Hilton, and knew exactly which road to take, and where to find the scene of the accident. It was really a most fortunate circumstance that we had happened to see the young man when we did. But for that meeting we should have been helpless.

Montford and Tinker sat beside me. The car was only a two-seater, but there was ample room for the three of us. We tore along at breakneck speed, our glaring headlights piercing the gloom of the night, and minimising many of the risks which would have attended our progress had we possessed only ordinary lamps.

Our first stop was at the garage. This establishment was closed, of course, for the time was well after midnight. The proprietor, however, slept on the premises, and I was just about to knock him up, when I observed a small light in the garage itself. The big double doors were closed, but not locked.

I rapped sharply, and a sleepy-eyed youth appeared.

"Petrol?" he asked listlessly.

"No," I said. "I want to know if your mechanic has returned from a smash down the road. I understand that you sent a car—"

"O' course, we did, sir!" interrupted the youth grumpily. "Bob ought to have been back long ago. I dunno what's kep' him."

And me got to stick here half the night, waitin' up! Sickenin', I call it!"

"What type of car is the mechanic driving?"

"Who—Bob? Why, an old Napier—the old 'bus we always use for takin' out on repair jobs," said the lad. "It's an open car, sir, painted red. If you happen to see it on the road, you might tell Bob that I'm waitin' up for him."

"All right, my lad!" I said briskly. "I'll tell him!"

Within a minute we were on our journey again, greatly encouraged. The non-return of the repair car proved that the job had been a longer one than Hilton had anticipated. Indeed, there seemed to be a distinct chance that we should arrive on the spot before the landaulette was patched up.

But this was not the case.

The spot where the smash had occurred was only three miles farther on, according to Hilton's statement. We had covered two thirds of this distance when the twinkling lights of another motor-car appeared in the distance ahead.

"The repair car!" muttered Tinker.

This was a pure guess, for we could tell nothing at that distance. When we closely approached the other automobile, however, the glare from our own lamps brilliantly revealed the red enamel on the bonnet and metal-work. I applied the brakes at once.

"Hold on, Bob!" I shouted lustily.

The red car jerked to a standstill, and the young fellow who was in the driving-seat twisted round, and stared at us as we tumbled out, and approached him. He was wearing brown overalls, and his face was smudged.

"I never seen you before, sir," he remarked. "How did you know my name was Bob?"

"The lad at the garage supplied the information," I smiled. "I understand that you have been making repairs to a big landaulette—"

"That's right, sir—just down the road!" broke in the mechanic. "Tough job it was, too. Those wire wheels are blighters! The party's just driven off—"

"Party!" echoed Montford. "How many people were there?"

"Three, sir."

"Men?"

"Two men and a young lady, sir," said the mechanic. "Queer lot, too. The lady seemed to be kind of scared, although she never said anything. Kept in the car all the time, with the gent. Tried to speak to me once, I believe, but changed her mind. Anyhow, they've gone now—an' I've been paid decently."

"How long ago did the landaulette continue its journey?" I asked.

"Not more than twelve minutes, sir—or, say, a quarter of an hour."

"Which direction did it take?" panted Montford.

"Oh, straight down the Portsmouth road, sir."

"Thank you, my man," I said briskly. "Here's half-a-crown for you. Oh, by the way, the lad in the garage wants you to hurry up; he is tired, and is anxious to get to bed."

"The young lazybones!" growled the mechanic. "I'll give him bed, the saucy young monkey! He'll get a clip on the ear—that's what he'll get! Thank you, sir! It won't take you long to overtake the landaulette in that spankin' little racer. Good-night, sir!"

Montford and Tinker were already in their places, and we started off with a roar. Luck was with us, but Gerald was inclined to be gloomy.

"We've lost 'em now, Mr. Blake!" he exclaimed huskily. "There's no telling what's happened to poor little Sylvia! I don't suppose we shall find a trace!"

"Nonsense, Montford!" I replied. "We shall be successful."

"I hope to Heaven you are right!" he said. "But what did that fellow mean by saying that Sylvia tried to speak to him? How could she speak? She must have been bound and helpless: she would never have gone willingly. Why didn't she scream for help? Why didn't she try to escape?"

I made no answer, for Montford was talking rather wildly; not that I blamed him for that. He was so worried that he scarcely knew what to say or what to think. The main thing was to overtake the fugitive car.

It had quite a good start, although slight compared to what we had feared originally. The landaulette was comparatively slow: my little racer careered along at an appalling speed.

The roads, fortunately, were quite clear, U. J.—No. 800.

and the surface was dry. There was no fear of a skid or a collision. For, although I drove at a terrific speed on the straights, I always slowed down for bends and corners.

Every minute brought further anxiety for Montford. We rushed on and on, mile after mile, along the deserted main highway. But still we saw no sign of the red rear-light of the landaulette.

It had occurred to me that the fugitive car was possibly carrying no lights at all; but I did not entertain this view. By what we had already seen, it was evident that Sylvia's captors were quite open in their actions.

Hilton had seen nothing of the girl because the blinds had been drawn; but it had been impossible to keep her presence in the car a secret during the mechanic's repair-work. In some way or other the men had kept Sylvia quiet.

We swept round a gradual curve, and far away in the distance a tiny, twinkling red light was momentarily visible before it dropped below the crown of a hill. Tinker and Montford both shouted together.

"Better not be too sure!" I said grimly. "There are other cars on the road, remember. We shall soon know for certain."

I opened the throttle even wider, and we tore along almost at full speed. Down a long, gradual hill we plunged, the wind whistling past us with a deafening roar. Then we swept up the small rise like some charging monster, and I throttled down sharply just in time to take a curve.

After that came another straight stretch, and the red light was again visible. But this time it was much nearer, and we were overhauling it rapidly. The glare from our lamps revealed the back of the car long before we were upon it.

"A landaulette, guv'nor!" yelled Tinker.

"Quite so, my boy—and Palmer tyres, too!" I said grimly.

Naturally, I could not see the tyres themselves—not to identity, at all events—but the road at that spot was rather soft, and the impressions were unmistakable. The automobile just ahead of us was the one which had left Richmond with Sylvia Cromer. The chase was ended.

Buzz-z-z!

I touched the electric-horn switch, and the raucous sound harshly disturbed the steady purr of the racing engine. The car ahead obeyed the summons, drawing to the near-side of the road at once.

I waited until I had nearly drawn alongside, then closed the throttle, and applied the brakes. But only for a moment. My object was to run parallel with the landaulette, and this manoeuvre was accomplished successfully.

The driver of the other car looked at me queerly.

"What's the idea?" he shouted. "Can't you get by?"

"Stop, you confounded rogue!" roared Montford, jumping up. "Sylvia! Stop that car, or we'll—"

"Leave it to me, Gerald!" I interrupted shortly.

The man at the wheel of the landaulette was already trying to increase his speed. At the same time he edged his car nearer and nearer towards my own—his object, of course, being to squash me out, so to speak. The idea was to force me to remain in the rear.

But I forestalled this move by shooting forward while I still had time. Then I occupied the centre of the road, and gradually throttled down. There was not sufficient space for the landaulette to pass, either to left or to right. Either a collision would occur, or the other car would slow down, too. And these people had probably had enough of smashes for some time.

"Stop, Mr. Blake—stop!" shouted Montford suddenly.

I glanced round swiftly. The landaulette had stopped, and one of the doors was already being opened. I acted swiftly. Before my car was stationary, I flung myself out of the seat and raced back along the road. Tinker and Montford were with me.

We arrived just as Miss Sylvia was stepping out upon the road. She was dressed in her evening-gown, the only addition being a light wrap, which was flung over her slender shoulders.

"Sylvia!" exclaimed Montford thankfully.

There was relief in his tone—probably because the girl was obviously unhurt, and in no way upset. I will admit that I was somewhat surprised. I had scarcely expected the chase to end in this manner.

Behind Sylvia, standing with one step on the footboard of the car, was Mr. Earle Kennedy, as immaculate as ever, his face wear-

ing a suave smile. There was something unnatural about the whole business. Mr. Kennedy raised his eyebrows.

"Is anything the matter, gentlemen?" he asked politely.

"Is anything—" Montford paused, breathing hard. "Good heavens, man, what have you got to say for yourself? What do you mean by running off with Miss Cromer in this confounded car? You impudent, infernal—"

"Gerald!" interrupted Sylvia breathlessly. "I—I— You must not insult Mr. Kennedy! He—he is a friend of mine. I left Richmond willingly. Please calm yourself, Gerald!"

Montford looked dazed.

"You—left—Richmond—willingly?" he repeated, in jerks.

"Yes," said the girl almost inaudibly.

There was a moment's silence. Tinker shrugged his shoulders and glanced at me. Mr. Earle Kennedy, still smiling, curled his lip sneeringly.

"Now, perhaps, we shall be permitted to continue our journey?" he suggested.

Montford went red with fury.

"No, by Heaven, you won't!" he shouted thickly. "I'll—"

"One moment!" interrupted Kennedy. "Do you wish to go with me, Miss Cromer?"

"I—I— Yes, I do!" said Sylvia, with an effort.

Gerald gave a hoarse cry, and stood rooted to the ground. His colour fled, and I saw Kennedy smiling triumphantly. The next second something unexpected happened, for Mr. Earle Kennedy gave a sudden yelp, and fell flat upon his back.

The fall was unexpected by the others, at least. I was not surprised in the slightest degree—for the simple reason that it was my own foot which caused Mr. Kennedy's most undignified downfall.

In other words, I had deliberately tripped him.

#### THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

##### A Letter and Some Clues.

**M**ISS SYLVIA ran forward with a little scream, breathing quickly.

"Oh, Gerald!" she panted. "I—I was forced to say—"

"Look out, guv'nor!" roared Tinker desperately.

But I was already looking out. Kennedy had not lost his head for a moment. Even as he scrambled to his feet, a revolver gleaming in his hand, he uttered a shout of fury and alarm.

"Drive on, Becker—drive on!" he gasped.

The car jerked forward, for the driver acted promptly. Before I could grasp Kennedy he had leapt backwards into the open doorway. The car gave a terrific jolt, and gathered speed. My own racer was standing in the way, and I wondered what the next few seconds would bring.

Somehow the driver of the landaulette managed to steer round the obstacle; it was one of the nearest touches I had seen. There was just sufficient room between the bank and my own car for the landaulette to edge through.

Crack!

Kennedy's revolver spat viciously, but the bullet came nowhere near me. A loud hiss, however, told me all that I wanted to know. It also told me that Mr. Earle Kennedy was a remarkably astute individual.

He had fired at one of the tyres of my car—and had hit it. Pursuit was now impossible, and the rascals would be able to make their escape. I came to a halt at once, and stared angrily at the fast-retreating red light.

"The clever scoundrel!" I exclaimed impatiently.

"I reckon it's you who's clever, guv'nor!" panted Tinker, who was by my side. "The way you bowled that chap over was worth quids! The neatest foot movement I've seen for years!"

"I'm afraid we can't give chase just yet!" I exclaimed. "We shall have to unstrap the spare wheel, Tinker, and— But what's the good of it? Those fellows are hardly worth chasing now that we have rescued Miss Sylvia. I think we'll let them go, young 'un!"

I turned as I spoke, and saw that Sylvia was in Montford's arms, sobbing almost hysterically. Gerald himself was attempting to comfort her.

"That's all right, little girl!" he murmured.



"I was a bit bowled over at first, but I knew there was some hanky-panky—"

"Oh, but Gerald, it must have sounded so terrible to you," protested the girl. "I was afraid to say anything else. That awful man's revolver was pressed right against my back all the time!"

"The brutal rascal!" said Montford fiercely. His eyes sparkled as I approached.

"How on earth did you do it, Mr. Blake?" he asked. "I hadn't the faintest suspicion that the brute was armed. And wasn't it risky?"

"Perhaps it was—slightly," I replied quietly. "You see, Montford, I knew very well that Miss Cromer was being compelled to say things which were utterly opposed to the actual truth; she was being forced to act a part. And when Kennedy moved I noticed the position of his hands, and it did not need a very wide stretch of imagination to conclude that he was threatening Miss Cromer with a hidden revolver. I have seen that trick performed before—many times."

"By Jove, you're amazingly keen!" declared Gerald.

"Not at all," I smiled. "A frontal attack would have been dangerous, and so I tripped my man when he was least expecting it. Even if the weapon had exploded, the bullet would have passed harmlessly overhead. Kennedy has escaped, but he has met with no success."

"But what does it mean, Sylvia?" asked Montford.

The girl shivered, and pulled her wrap more closely about her.

"Let me suggest that Miss Cromer should be taken home at once," I put in. "We can easily hear her story afterwards, Montford, when her mind is more composed. This is hardly the time, I imagine, to worry her."

"You're right, Mr. Blake," said Gerald. "It's a good thing you're more thoughtful than I am. Here, Sylvia, let me put my coat round you."

"Have mine, Miss Cromer!" said Tinker eagerly.

I had been about to offer my own, but under the circumstances I considered that such a move would have been superfluous. Needless to say, Sylvia chose Gerald's coat, and I don't think Tinker was very upset about it. The night was cold, and he had great ideas of comfort.

"Never mind, Montford," I said, "there are plenty of rugs."

"Oh, I shall be all right," said Gerald, with a laugh.

Sylvia was placed in the car without delay, and, by all appearances, Montford was intent upon piling the whole supply of rugs round the girl. She was rather more composed now, but still in no fit state to talk.

Tinker and I busied ourselves with the spare wheel. Fitting this was far simpler than repairing the puncture or changing the tyre itself. The change was completed within ten minutes, and we were ready to start.

It was still possible for us to pursue Mr. Earle Kennedy, but there was nothing to be gained by doing so. Sylvia, in all probability, would not prosecute—not because she wished to spare the man, but because such a prosecution would only lead to unwelcome publicity.

So we turned the racer round, and drove sedately home.

We arrived at Cromer's house in the early hours. Everything was still and quiet, although Willis, the butler, and Sylvia's maid were waiting up, to hear the result of our quest. Needless to say, they were both relieved and delighted when they saw the girl safe and sound.

"Look here, Willis," said Montford, taking the butler aside, "there's no need to talk about this affair to anybody. Miss Cromer has had rather an unpleasant adventure, and we don't exactly know the meaning of it yet. But the rest of the servants and everybody else must be made to believe that she simply went off with some friends. I'll talk to you further in the morning."

"Very good, sir," said Willis. "You can rely on me, sir."

"Thank you, Willis," said Gerald. "How is your master?"

"About the same, sir, I think," replied the old butler, a worried frown appearing on his brow. "There's been queer goings on to-night, sir."

Montford nodded, hardly caring to commit himself to words. And very shortly afterwards we were in the library, where a cheerful fire had been kept up, waiting for Miss Sylvia to tell us what had occurred.

The girl was almost herself again now, except for the fact that she was looking sadly worried and troubled. It is unnecessary for

me to mention that we had the house to ourselves now—the last guest had departed long since. And the whole household was in bed except for ourselves, Willis, and Sylvia's maid.

"You want me to tell you what happened, don't you?" asked Sylvia, looking from Montford to me. "But I'm so bewildered; I hardly know what to say, or how to begin. And in the end I shall be able to tell you nothing."

"Oh, come, that can't be true!" protested Gerald.

"Well, I mean nothing that is of any importance," said the girl. "I know no more about Mr. Kennedy than I knew early this evening—"

"But cannot you tell us exactly what occurred, beginning from the commencement, Miss Cromer?" I broke in gently. "What led you to go out into the garden, in the first place? You surely had some good reason?"

The girl looked rather flushed.

"I don't think it was a good reason, Mr. Blake," she replied. "I was excited, and didn't pause to think, as I should have done. It was all Mr. Kennedy's doing. You know what happened with regard to that bronze monkey, don't you? Well, I badly wanted to see Mr. Kennedy, to ask for an explanation."

"But Kennedy had vanished," remarked Montford.

"One of the maids came with a message from a guest—she didn't say whom—asking me to go into the morning-room for a few moments," went on Sylvia. "Of course, I went at once, thinking that a lady wished to see me. But I found Mr. Earle Kennedy there."

"As I thought," I remarked. "What did you do, Miss Cromer?"

"I immediately asked him what that bronze image actually meant, and told him of the effect it had had upon my father," said our fair companion. "He seemed very concerned, and was mysterious, too."

"How mysterious?" asked Gerald.

"He told me that he had not suspected that the monkey would affect father so greatly, and said that it was impossible to explain matters there. But he promised me that he would tell me the exact meaning of the mystery if I would go to the bottom of the garden."

"But you must have thought that deucedly queer," said Montford.

"Of course I thought it was queer, Gerald," replied the girl. "But I was terribly anxious about father, and Mr. Kennedy said that secrecy was absolutely essential. So I slipped away a few minutes later, and went down the garden. Mr. Kennedy was there, and he led me to the car."

I nodded grimly.

"I was sure that your explanation would be to that effect, Miss Cromer," I said. "Personally, I do not think you acted thoughtlessly at all. It was a simple ruse, and there was no reason why you should suspect Mr. Kennedy of treachery. I judge that the man applied force at once?"

"Oh, Mr. Blake, I was terribly frightened!" said the girl. "Mr. Kennedy pointed a revolver at me, and told me to get into the car. I gave a little shriek, and he threatened to shoot if I made another sound. I was so bewildered that I hardly knew what I was doing, and the next thing I clearly remember is being in the car. And then that accident occurred."

"With young Hilton, you mean?" asked Gerald.

"I don't know who it was, but I thought it was really serious at first," replied Sylvia. "That dreadful man forced me to keep quiet, and I was too frightened to resist. But later on, when the repair car came, he had to let the mechanic know that we were in the car."

"Why didn't you call for help, miss?" asked Tinker curiously.

"I suppose I ought to have done, but Mr. Kennedy had threatened to kill me if I breathed a word," replied the girl. "It was only a threat, I dare say, but he spoke in terribly stern tones, and I almost believed him."

"You were very wise to keep quiet, Miss Cromer," I said. "By doing so, you undoubtedly saved that mechanic from getting into trouble. You would not have helped yourself, and that young man would have been knocked on the head. It was far wiser to wait for us to come to your aid."

"I think you've behaved wonderfully, you brave little girl," said Montford. "But can't you tell us why you were taken away, Sylvia? Didn't Kennedy explain anything? Didn't he tell you anything about that bronze monkey?" Sylvia shook her pretty head.

"He told me nothing, Gerald—nothing whatever," she replied. "All he said was that I should come to no harm, and that I had to keep quiet. I tried to speak about the bronze monkey, but he wouldn't let me."

"I was half hoping that you had made a mistake when you told us that you could tell nothing of importance, Miss Cromer," I remarked; "but it is quite evident that you were right. We know no more than we had already surmised, and the mystery remains more intricate than before. Let me advise you to go straight to bed, and to get as much sleep as possible."

The girl rose to her feet and came towards me.

"Oh, Mr. Blake, you will do your best to find out what it all means, won't you?" she asked earnestly. "We feel so helpless, and it's no good going to the police. I feel sure that you can unravel the mystery—"

"And you can also feel sure, Miss Cromer, that I will do my utmost," I said cheerfully. "Don't worry yourself unduly; your father is in no danger, and will soon recover. Just rely upon me to get to the bottom of this little affair, and I don't think you will be disappointed."

"Thank you, Mr. Blake—ever so much!" she said simply.

A minute later she had gone, after bidding us good-night. Montford pulled out his cigarette-case, and proffered it to me. I selected a cigarette, and we both lit up. Tinker lolled on the lounge, yawning.

"When do we go home, guv'nor?" he asked casually.

"In a minute or two, Tinker," I replied. "Look here, Montford, I want to make you realise that this business is serious. Kennedy would never have gone to such lengths had his game been a small one. I don't pretend to know what it all means, but I do know that your fiancée is in peril."

"Now, Mr. Blake?" asked Gerald anxiously. "In peril now?"

"Isn't there every reason to believe so?" I retorted. "I do not say that there is any danger to-night, but there may be to-morrow. Guard her closely, my dear fellow; on no account allow her to go out alone. Meanwhile, I will see what I can do, although the data at my disposal is extremely scant. Perhaps something will turn up before long; perhaps Kennedy will make another move. If so, I shall be ready for him. What will you do to-night?"

"I shall stay here," replied Montford grimly. "Willis will get a room ready for me—or that lounge will do all right."

"Very well; I will be round in the morning, fairly early," I said. "Until then, Montford, I will say good-bye. Be on your guard, and remember what I said about keeping Miss Sylvia indoors. And if anybody comes to see her—even a woman—do not allow that somebody to be with the girl alone."

"You can trust me to watch over my little girl," said Montford firmly.

There was nothing further to be done at Richmond, so Tinker and I tumbled into our faithful racer, and sped home. Montford, of course, had expressed his gratitude for my help at some length, but I did not think it necessary to set that down. After all, our success had been mainly due to Hilton.

"A jolly rummy business, guv'nor," commented Tinker, when we got home. "What the dickens can it all mean? And how can that bronze monkey be connected with the attempted abduction of Miss Sylvia Cromer?" I yawned.

"I'm not in the mood for riddles to-night, Tinker," I answered. "We will sleep on the little information we have received, and perhaps our heads will be clearer in the morning. I sincerely hope so, for mine seems unusually thick to-night."

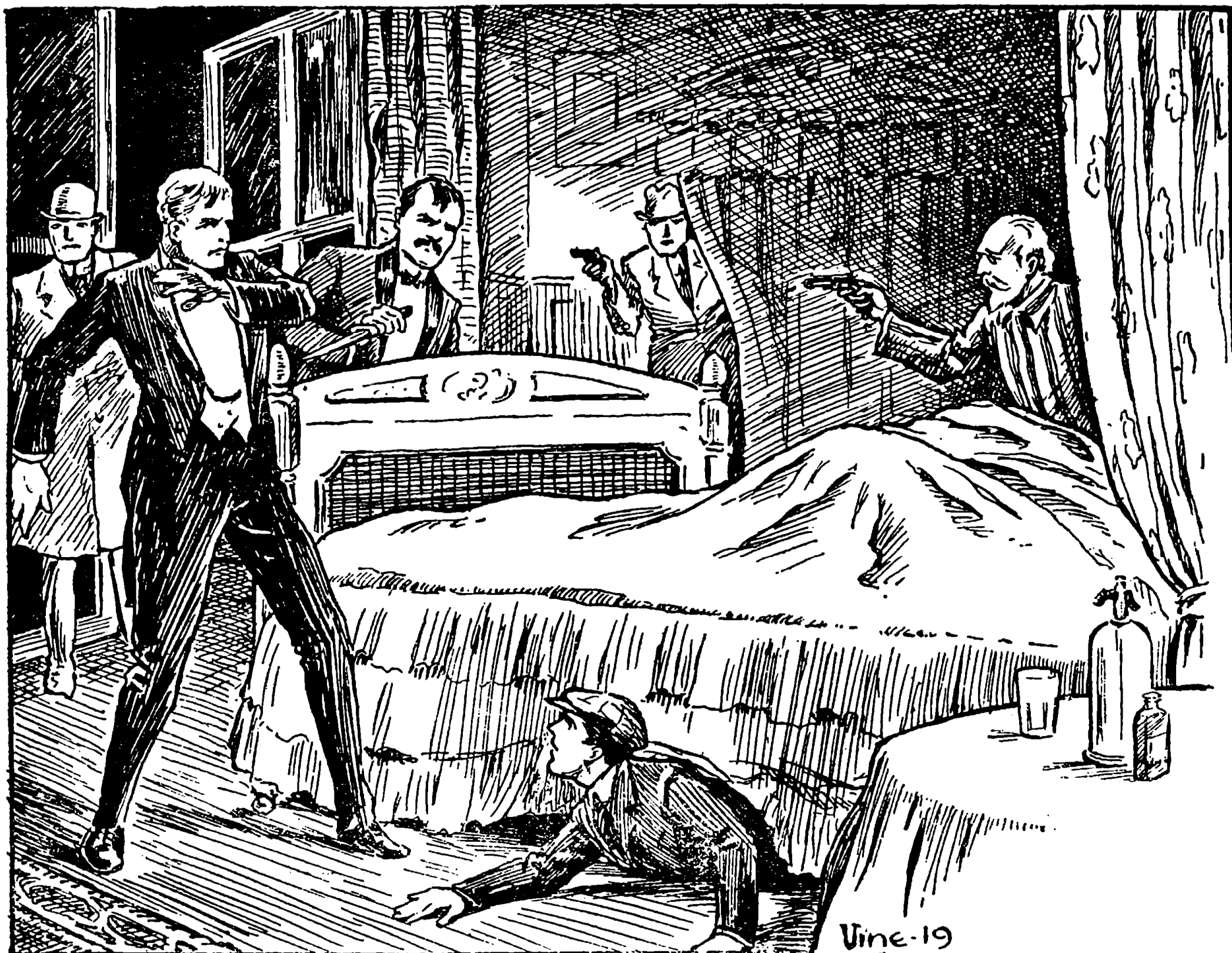
"That's the effect of going to a reception, guv'nor," said Tinker severely. "How many whiskies did you have, by the way?"

I made no reply to that impertinent question, but packed Tinker off to bed at once. I followed within five minutes, and when I awoke the next morning—or, to be strictly true, later the same morning—I was refreshed, but enlightened no further. I could do nothing until I had gathered more material.

Accordingly, after breakfast I set off for Richmond, leaving Tinker behind. When I arrived I was greeted by Gerald Montford. He was looking far more cheerful, but he shook his head gravely.

"Sylvia is as bright as possible, Mr. Blake, but her father is still unconscious, and doesn't seem to be any better," he told me. "Certainly, he is no worse, and I suppose we ought to be thankful for that."

"If Mr. Cromer is no worse the chances are



Vine-19

"And now, gentlemen, I think we will make a little alteration in the programme," said Cromer pleasantly. "Up with your hands, please!" "Who are you?" snarled Kennedy, starting back in surprise and rage. Tinker grinned as he crawled from under the bed. (See page 12.)

that he will soon get better," I observed. "His constitution is fairly strong, I believe, and he will mend rapidly once he gets over the original shock. Has Dr. Henson been?"

"Yes, and he is coming again at mid-day," replied Gerald. "There is a nurse in the old fellow's room, of course, and he will have every attention as soon as he recovers his wits."

"I should like to see the patient, if I may," I said.

There was no objection. Sylvia herself entered the room at that moment, and I could see that the night's rest had done her a large amount of good. Her adventure had only made her more determined, if anything, to find out why her father had collapsed so dramatically, and what the bronze monkey could portend.

I questioned her somewhat closely, but she could tell me nothing. Her father had never made any mention of the bronze image, and the word "Bethmite" was quite a new one to her. She had never heard it before, and was of the opinion that it meant nothing, and that her father had tried to articulate some other word. I knew better, although I said nothing.

Sylvia took me up to Cromer's bed-room, and then softly retired, taking the nurse with her. The apartment was light and cheerful, and a warm fire was glowing in the grate. Cromer lay in bed, still and pale. I examined him, and was quite satisfied that he would show signs of recovery before the day was out.

I was just about to leave the apartment when a tap sounded on the door. I crossed the room and opened it. A maidservant stood there, holding a tray in her hand.

"A letter for the master, sir!" she explained.

"But, my good girl, you shouldn't have brought it here!" I said. "Place it with the other letters in—"

"It came by hand, sir; and the messenger U. J.—No. 800.

said that it was to go to Mr. Cromer at once!" broke in the girl. "So I brought it up."

"All right! I will take it," I said.

I did so, and closed the door. The letter was quite an ordinary one to look at, except for one significant peculiarity. It was addressed in bold handwriting to "Horace Cromer, Esq.," and was well stuck down, and sealed with red wax. The impression on the seal, however, was that of a crouching monkey!

It could not possibly have been a coincidence. This letter had come either from Mr. Earle Kennedy or from someone connected with him. Just for one moment I hesitated, then I tore open the flap and extracted the letter, taking care to hold it by the edges only.

As I read the words it contained I pursed my lips grimly and nodded to myself. Then I slipped the letter back into its envelope and pocketed it. I had no compunction whatever in doing this, since it was necessary to the success of the investigation.

It was a stroke of luck indeed. I had obtained possession of the letter by mere chance, but I was convinced that it would prove to be of astonishing value. It is not my intention to explain the contents of the letter here, although I shall certainly do so later on, when the time is more opportune.

"My visit has not been fruitless, after all," I told myself pleasantly, as I paced across the wide landing to the head of the stairs. "I wonder if I shall be able to deduce any facts from this purloined epistle?"

There was nothing to be gained by wondering, however, and I took my departure almost at once. I went straight home to Baker Street, and called Tinker into the laboratory with me.

"We are about to make a little investigation, Tinker," I said briskly. "There is a sheet of notepaper here which requires to be subjected to close examination. We may

learn nothing, and we may learn much. It all depends."

"Pretty mysterious, guv'nor, aren't you?" said Tinker. "What's this piece of notepaper you're talking about?"

I took out the letter and placed it upon the bench. Tinker was about to pick it up and extract the sheet of paper when I grasped his arm.

"You silly young donkey!" I said severely.

"Eh?" gasped Tinker. "What's up, guv'nor?"

"Do you think I want your confounded finger-prints all over the thing?" I exclaimed. "If you must do something, get the microscope ready, and see that the powder-blower is in working order."

Tinker grunted, and obeyed my orders.

The powder-test was unsatisfactory. I took the little instrument, and gently blew a fine film of the yellow-grey powder over the surface of the paper. When this was removed by a few puffs several smudges were left behind.

"Finger-prints, guv'nor?" said Tinker.

"Undoubtedly!" I replied. "You didn't expect to find foot-prints, did you? But they are shockingly indistinct, Tinker. I'm afraid the most expert man at Scotland Yard would make nothing of these. They are too blurry."

"Done on purpose, I expect."

"No, young 'un; that's hardly likely," I said, shaking my head. "It is just chance. Finger-prints are not always perfect, you know. People don't handle letters in a deliberate fashion. But it was just as well to make sure. We shall have to try some other method."

Tinker shrugged his shoulders. He was not very optimistic.

"What other method can we try, guv'nor?" he asked.

"I'm not quite sure yet," I replied. "There is every chance that we shall be no wiser after this examination has finished. We cannot always rely upon success, Tinker. But we can hope, at all events."



After that I submitted the letter to a careful examination under the microscope. The result was disappointing.

"Well, my boy, I'm afraid we must look elsewhere," I said thoughtfully. "This letter is exceedingly interesting, quite apart from its origin. Personally, I have no doubt that it was penned by Mr. Earle Kennedy."

"Then what's the need of these examinations, guv'nor?" asked Tinker. "Why not go straight to Kennedy?"

"Because, Tinker, I don't know where Kennedy resides," I interrupted. "This communication, as you will have seen, bears no address whatever. It was delivered by a district messenger, and might have been handed in at any office. We can learn nothing by inquiring in that direction. Kennedy is a bit of a mystery, and it's rather surprising how he got himself admitted to the reception."

"On a forged card, perhaps?" suggested Tinker.

"Or it might have been pure bluff," I said. "In any case, that point is unimportant. I want to find out where he is now. There is no doubt that he is an American, but whether he is the gentleman he professes to be is a different matter."

I held up the letter and examined it closely.

"The paper seems rather short," I remarked. "The double sheet is almost square. Why, of course, Tinker! It was originally supplied with a printed heading, and that heading has been cut off, in order to leave the sheet blank!"

"Well, there's nothing in that, guv'nor," said Tinker.

I was not quite so sure about it. I raised the paper to the light and looked at the water-mark. I had already glanced at it, but had taken no particular attention. A water-mark is not often of any great value.

This water-mark was quite small—a mere scroll, with the initials "W. H." within.

Presumably those initials were the manufacturer's. But as I looked at the mark I found myself thinking. Somewhere I had seen that scroll before.

"Do you recognise it, Tinker?" I asked.

He looked at it intently and shook his head.

"Can't say that I do, guv'nor," he replied. "Notepaper of this sort can be bought at any stationers, and there are hundreds of different water-marks. We might search London through before we found—"

"One moment, Tinker—one moment!" I interrupted keenly. "I have just remembered where that scroll with the enclosed initials is to be found. Don't you recollect walking down Fulham Road and seeing that very same design engraved upon a large stone slab in front of a building?"

Tinker stared.

"A water-mark engraved upon a building!" he ejaculated.

"I said the design—not the water-mark," I smiled. "Perhaps you were not observant enough to take note of the thing, my lad. But it is there, and the building is known as the Winfred Hotel."

"The Winfred Hotel!" echoed Tinker. "Why, I've seen that, of course! Rather a swell place for Fulham Road, and it's just this end—not very far from Harrod's Stores."

"We are not talking about Brompton Road," I said. "But this is interesting, Tinker. This sheet of notepaper was taken from the Winfred Hotel, and the presumption is that Mr. Earle Kennedy is staying at that establishment."

Tinker shook his head rather dubiously.

"Dash it all, guv'nor, the fellow wouldn't make a bloomer like that!" he protested.

"A bloomer like what? to use your own expressive term."

"Well, guv'nor, Kennedy must have known that that water-mark is in the paper, and cutting off the heading—"

"But do not overlook the true situation,

Tinker," I interrupted. "Even supposing that Kennedy did notice the water-mark, he was not aware that this letter would be submitted to expert examination. It was intended for Cromer's hands only, and Cromer would have made nothing of it. Kennedy had no suspicion that the epistle would find its way into my possession."

"And so he risked it?" asked Tinker. "That's feasible, of course. And what's the programme now, guv'nor? Do we get busy?"

I glanced at the clock.

"Yes, I think we do," I replied quietly. "At all events, Tinker, you may be sure that I shall lose no time in getting on the track of Mr. Earle Kennedy. For I am convinced that he alone can give a full explanation of the mysterious circumstances connected with the bronze monkey."

## THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

### The Appearance and Disappearance of the Aged Chinaman.

FULHAM ROAD was rather foggy.

Tinker stamped his feet on the cold pavement, and made several remarks in a discreet undertone concerning the personal character and habits of Mr. Earle Kennedy. Tinker had been on the watch for hours, and, in his own language, he was fed up.

All that afternoon he had watched the Winfred Hotel, in accordance with orders which I had given him at lunch-time. Half an hour after he went on duty he rang me up and supplied the information that our man was staying at the hotel.

This was quite satisfactory—so far as it went. Kennedy, according to Tinker, was wearing a moustache now, and this was



Kennedy uttered a shout of fury and alarm, and a revolver gleamed in his hand. "Stand back!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Drive on Becker—drive on!"

obviously false, for the American had been clean-shaven the previous evening.

He was not known by the name of Kennedy at the hotel, and he had been staying there for exactly a week. I had given Tinker a very close description of Kennedy, and I was quite sure that the lad had made no mistake.

I told him over the phone to shadow the man continually, and to make his report to me later on.

And Tinker was sick of the whole business.

This was not altogether surprising, for he had been led quite a dance during the afternoon. Kennedy had been out no less than three times, and Tinker had stuck to him faithfully. He had followed the man into shops, restaurants, and saloon-bars; and Kennedy had met nobody, and had acted above suspicion the whole time.

And now he was back in the hotel, and Tinker was just wondering where he would go to next time. Tinker was hungry and cold; he would not have minded so much if his vigil had been fruitful.

As the dusk increased, and the fog grew rather thicker, Tinker found his attention diverted. Quite unobtrusively a stranger had appeared. There were people passing to and fro constantly, but this man appeared to be hanging about the vicinity of the hotel—in exactly the same manner as Tinker.

The lad strolled down the pavement carelessly, in order to obtain a closer look, for there was something about the new-comer which seemed to be unusual. He was dressed in loose-fitting clothes, curious boots, and an aged slouch-hat.

"A Chink!" Tinker told himself, pursing his lips.

The man was undoubtedly a Chinaman. His face was lined like old parchment, and yellow. His eyes appeared to be listless, and they did not even glance at Tinker as he passed.

The Chinaman's presence there was possibly of no significance; it was quite likely that he was waiting for somebody—a friend who was making a purchase. But the minutes passed, and still the old Oriental remained.

Tinker began to get interested, but did not forget that his real work was to watch the Winfred Hotel. There was a bit of a crush at the hotel door—several people were entering and several leaving—and Tinker found it necessary to devote all his attention to the building for a few minutes.

When he had another opportunity of looking round, the aged Chinaman had vanished. Tinker grunted. There was nothing in the man's presence there, after all. But then the lad pursed his lips, and whistled.

The Chinaman was on the other side of the road, and it was only too obvious that he was keeping an alert eye upon the Winfred Hotel. This wouldn't do at all. Tinker's own activities would soon become noticeable.

So he cautiously retired into the doorway of an empty shop. He was unseen himself, but yet he could watch both the hotel entrance and the Chinaman. And, as it happened, he would not find it necessary to wait much longer.

For very shortly afterwards a man strode briskly out of the hotel. It was Mr. Earle Kennedy, and he was attired as immaculately as ever, and was smoking a large cigar. Tinker cheered up at once.

"He's going to walk," he told himself. "Good!"

The deduction was a simple one—and not exactly reliable. Tinker merely arrived at the conclusion that Mr. Kennedy was intent upon walking by the fact that he carried a stout cane. On the previous occasions Kennedy had carried nothing.

Tinker remained in his doorway until his quarry had almost got out of sight. And then Tinker noticed that the Chinaman was shuffling along in Kennedy's rear. So he, too, was shadowing the American.

This was decidedly interesting, and Tinker had an idea that events would now wake up. And he was further pleased by the fact that Kennedy walked down the Fulham Road in the direction of Putney, and not towards the West End.

"There's going to be dirty work!" declared Tinker grimly. "A crook with a giddy Chink on his track! There'll be knives in this, I'll bet! It's up to me to keep my peepers skinned!"

He was rather glad of the fog; it helped him considerably. It was more of a mist than a fog, to be exactly truthful, and was cold and damp.

Tinker found it impossible to keep both Kennedy and the Chinaman in view. Had he done so, he would have been right on the U. J.—No. 800.

heels of the latter, and that would not have been satisfactory.

But after he had made sure that the Chinaman was closely shadowing Kennedy, it was only necessary to keep the Chink in sight. So Tinker fell back, and walked on steadily.

The course continued down Fulham Road, well past Walham Green, until Putney Bridge was almost within sight. Then the Chinaman turned down a quiet road, and crossed to the other pavement.

Tinker followed suit.

He instinctively felt that the journey was nearing its end. In some vague way he believed the Chinaman to be a Bethmite—whatever that happened to be. Probably a member of some sinister Chinese secret society.

The mist was thicker here, and Tinker found it necessary to creep nearer. His quarry, however, never once looked round; he was intent upon his own man. And Mr. Earle Kennedy came to a halt opposite a wide, dimly-lit doorway, and threw his cigar-end away.

Another man emerged from the doorway.

"Exactly on time, old man!" he said pleasantly. "Guess you always were a punctual feller! Come right up—I'm on the third floor. We'll need to talk a piece to get this thing clear."

"It's a cinch, Becker!" said Kennedy. "Old man Cromer is in it up to his neck—and he's got to obey! If he doesn't—"

Kennedy went in without finishing the sentence. And the Chinaman, hidden by the fog, remained outside. There was a glint in his eye which looked almost sinister as he edged away into the road.

Tinker had been unable to approach, and he now watched the Chinaman's actions. The queer old man walked round the building, down a small alley, which presumably led to the rear-quarters. The place was obviously a block of flats.

It was difficult for Tinker to keep his quarry in view without being seen himself. But he managed to stick fairly close, and he was mildly astonished when the Chinaman wriggled over the wall like a human eel.

"My hat!" said Tinker.

He did not waste a second. He jumped lightly at the wall, and hung there, with his head just projecting over the edge. All was dim and misty. The place was an enclosed yard, and was quite deserted—save for the Chinaman.

This mysterious individual was in the act of scrambling up a narrow iron stairway which clung to the wall of the building. It was an emergency fire escape, and at each floor there was a small gallery.

A window on the third floor had become illuminated a moment before, and Tinker had no doubt that the room was occupied by Kennedy and the other man, Becker. And the Chinaman was creeping up steadily.

What grim purpose had he in mind?

Tinker scrambled softly over the wall, and stood undecided. Should he follow up the stairway? He decided not to do so—yet. He would watch from below. To mount the iron stairs would be to give the game away completely for the Chinaman would undoubtedly see him.

At the third-floor balcony the Oriental came to a halt. For a full minute he remained still, close against the lighted window. Then he fell upon his hands and knees, and passed below the window.

His next move was to stand in front of another window—a much smaller one, which was dark, and which probably belonged to the pantry of the flat. As Tinker watched he saw the Chinaman squirm his way through the window. In the mist the whole thing looked ghostly and mysterious.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" muttered Tinker. "What the dickens shall I do now?"

He was still undecided. If he went up the stairs he might meet the Chinaman coming down. He was not afraid of the encounter itself, but he had no desire to make a mess of the whole affair.

And while Tinker stood below there, in the yard, the Chinaman crept through the pantry, and found himself in a long passage. A light streamed from beneath a door just near-by.

The intruder shuffled along until he was outside the door.

Then he stood there, crouching down. He was listening to the voices of the two men within. And for ten minutes he remained motionless, as though turned to stone. Inside the apartment Kennedy and Becker continued their talk.

And it was then that disaster occurred. There was a quick movement within the

room—a chair being pushed back—and footsteps. The listening Chinaman awoke to activity.

"It's in the other room," came Kennedy's voice. "I'll fetch it."

All would have been well but for one thing. As the Chinaman attempted to slide silently down the passage his coat caught on a projecting nail—a nail from which a picture had once been suspended, in all probability.

The cloth held, and the Chinaman was checked. He caught his breath in with a hiss, and exerted his strength. The nail came out and clattered to the floor—at least, the noise resembled a clatter in that still passage.

The door was torn open, and Earle Kennedy strode out, switching on the light at the same time. The sudden flood of illumination revealed the Chinaman just as he was about to dive into the pantry.

"What the thunder—"

Kennedy paused, startled and amazed. The Chinaman, instead of making a direct attempt to escape, turned about and smiled benevolently upon Kennedy, his lined old face creasing itself up, and his eyes almost disappearing amidst the folds.

The Celestial, no doubt, realised that escape was impossible by ordinary means. By attempting to get through the pantry window he would lay himself open to a rear attack; and the window was so small that he could not hope to wriggle through in time to avoid capture. The only course was to await his time.

"Who the blazes are you, and what are you doing in this flat?" demanded Kennedy roughly, seeing that the Chinaman was aged and weak-looking. "Come here, you yellow hound! Do you hear me?"

The Chinaman smiled blandly.

"Me no does harm!" he murmured. "Me Sing Yan!"

"Who are you talking to, Kennedy?" came a voice from within the room.

"Come here, Becker!" shouted Kennedy hoarsely.

Becker emerged into the passage, and stared in amazement at the Chinaman. There was alarm in his eyes, too; and he swore.

"Who's this fellow?" he demanded.

"How do I know?" snapped Kennedy. "You told me the flat was empty, and I find this yellow brute standing right here, out in the passage! I guess he must have got in within the last minute or two."

"Sure!" said Becker. "But how?"

"He was listening—the infernal spy!" declared Kennedy furiously. "He'd have got away if that nail hadn't caught in his coat. Say, Becker, we'd best keep the feller here, and learn what he has to say!"

The Chinaman hunched his shoulders up.

"Me no savee," he said mildly. "Sing Yan velly peaceful. Me go."

"No, you don't go!" exclaimed Kennedy harshly. "You've got to tell us how you got into this flat, and what— Look out, Becker!"

The next second a wild struggle was taking place. The old Chinaman, in the midst of Kennedy's sentence, had darted forward. His fist struck the American full on the jaw, and Kennedy heeled over.

Becker received a body blow and fell. The Chinaman, with freedom seemingly his, attempted to rush towards the front door. But Becker just managed to grasp his foot, and the intruder was pulled up short.

Kennedy was on his feet by this time, and he lurched to the attack. Old as he was, the Chinaman seemed to have plenty of agility and muscular power. Again and again he struck out, and all his blows went home.

But Sing Yan's enemies were grim, too. They fought like demons, and in that narrow passage there was not much room for a real, straightforward fight. The Chinaman, in spite of his game resistance, was defeated in the end.

And even then he would not have been beaten had his foes acted squarely—had they used only their bare fists, as he was doing. But Kennedy brought the butt of his revolver down upon Sing Yan's head, and the old Chinaman collapsed.

"Great snakes!" panted Becker. "Is he down?"

"Sure!" gasped the other. "We've beat him, Becker!"

"Gee! What a fight!"

Becker wiped the blood from his nose, and stared down at the still figure upon the passage floor. It lay there huddled and dreadfully silent. Just for a moment Becker thought that the Chinaman was dead.

"I guess he's out, Kennedy—right out!" he said huskily.

"And a good thing, too!" said Kennedy. "We can't keep him here, Becker. We shall



have to get rid of him somehow. I guess he'd been listening for a whole piece before we found him. And he's learned our secrets—our secrets which must be kept to ourselves at all costs. We must get rid of him, I say!"

"Yes. But how?" exclaimed Becker nervously. "See here, old man, we've got to look at this thing straight. This guy has butted in, and he's only got himself to blame for what's happened. I reckon we'd better search him."

Kennedy made no reply verbally. He bent down, and commenced turning out the Chinaman's pockets. He found nothing except one or two scraps of paper bearing Chinese characters, and some loose change.

"Nothing here!" he exclaimed. "I don't like it, Becker. We don't know who this feller is, or what his game might have been, but I fancy he just looked in to grab what he could lay hands on—a kind of sneak-thief."

"Then it's up to us to kick him out—"

"Say, talk sense!" snapped Kennedy. "How do we know what this feller heard? Do we want him to go with a whole heap of knowledge in his head? He's only a Chin, anyway, and we'd best see that he's finished with. There's a heap of fog about, and it ought to be easy to get the job done."

"At the back window—" began Becker.

"Well, go on!" said Kennedy. "What were you saying?"

"I guess it won't do," said the other slowly. "But from the back window, Kennedy, there's a real grand view of a stretch of backwater. We could get the yellow brute down the fire-escape, and pitch him in. But it's risky."

"In this fog? Not on your life!" declared Kennedy grimly. "We'll do it, man—we'll get busy right now."

It was very evident that the two Americans were enormously anxious to safeguard the secrets they had been discussing, and they were even ready to go to the length of pitching this intruding Chinaman into the water to drown.

They lost no time.

While Becker went out upon the narrow balcony to make sure that all was quiet and still, Kennedy found some rough cord and bound the Chinaman's hands and feet. He did not know whether Sing Yan was badly stunned or not, but it was better to take precautions.

Becker returned to say that the fog was as thick as ever, and that there would be no danger in casting the unconscious Chinaman into the river or canal. These men only knew that a deep stretch of water flowed past the bottom of the enclosed yard. The Chinaman's body would be found later on, but there would be no clue to explain how he met his death, or where he was placed in the water.

It was just as well to get the thing over at once, and Becker and Kennedy quietly and carefully carried their victim down the iron stairway to the ground. They were sublimely unconscious of the fact that two very sharp eyes were watching their movements. Those eyes belonged to no less a person than Master Tinker.

The lad was very pleased with himself for not having acted rashly. For he was now able to watch what was going on, without his presence being suspected. He knew well enough that the Chinaman had met with disaster.

To attack these men single-handed would have been madness, so Tinker remained in the background, watching, and ready for action when necessary. He saw Kennedy and Becker carry their burden right down the yard to the end wall.

One or two windows which had to be passed on the way were illuminated, but the mist effectually screened the scoundrels from view.

Only Tinker was able to see what occurred. He was near at hand, and could pierce the mist. And he took a certain amount of risk in creeping up until he was fairly close behind the others.

But Tinker was well accustomed to this sort of thing, and he slipped down in the cover of a projecting buttress, and waited there, listening. What he heard caused him to wonder.

Kennedy and Becker were obviously exerting themselves, for they breathed heavily, and occasionally grunted. And then, with startling suddenness, came a dull but distinct splash.

Tinker gave a start, and half rose to his feet.

"We'll get inside, Becker, right now!" whispered Kennedy huskily.

The two men passed almost within a couple of yards of the crouching Tinker. They saw nothing and heard nothing. Tinker, afraid to move for the moment, listened to the slight sounds of the two men mounting the iron staircase.

Then a window closed, and Tinker awoke to life.

He rushed to the bottom wall, and leapt at it. Reaching the top, he pulled out his electric torch and flashed it down into the blackness on the other side. There was water there—a black, slowly-flowing stream enclosed by high walls.

And, clinging to the slimy brickwork almost beneath Tinker's overhanging body, was Sing Yan, the Chinaman. He was by no means dead, and he looked up into Tinker's eyes quite intelligently.

"Great Scott!" gasped Tinker. "I thought they'd done for you!"

The Chinaman gave a soft, musical laugh.

"The fact is, Tinker, I knew you were hanging about, and I waited for you to lend me a hand," he said calmly. "I can't quite reach, you see."

"The—the guv'nor!" yelled Tinker amazedly.

"Exactly!" I agreed. "Look alive, young 'un; I'm getting cold!"

## THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

### The Story of the Bethmites.

TINKER nearly tumbled off the top of the wall.

"You—you awful boulder!" he gasped. "I've been following you ever since we left the Winfred Hotel, guv'nor, and I never suspected—"

"You can tell me all that, Tinker, after I am out of this water," I interrupted. "I can assure you it is not at all comfortable. I never cared much for taking a cold bath at this hour of the evening."

"Hang on tight, guv'nor," said Tinker briskly. "Can you grab my hand?"

He leaned right over—so far, indeed, that I thought he would pitch down on the top of me. He knew what he was about, however, and I succeeded in grasping his outstretched hand.

By dint of scrambling up the rough wall, and by Tinker pulling with all his strength, I succeeded in reaching the top. Once back in the yard I did not pause for a moment, but made straight for the outer wall, and got into the road.

"You can't go about like that, guv'nor!" panted Tinker. "You'll catch a frightful cold—"

"I shall catch a cold if I stand about, young 'un," I broke in. "We must reach Fulham Road as quickly as possible. Unless my memory fails me, there is a garage not a hundred yards from the end of this street. We can obtain a car there—if your money will run to it. I have practically none on me."

"Oh, I've got quids, guv'nor!" said Tinker.

Fortunately, we were able to carry out the programme. A closed car was obtained without difficulty—once Tinker handed over the payment in advance. The driver of the car no doubt wondered what a soaking Chinaman should be doing in Fulham, but he was at perfect liberty to wonder all he liked.

"I didn't know what those rotters were intent upon, guv'nor, when I saw them carry you down the yard," said Tinker breathlessly, when the car was speeding on its way.

"I got a fearful shock when I heard you splash into the water. But I thought you were a Chinaman, guv'nor."

"And so do those rascals, my boy," I replied grimly. "And, what is more, they think that they have got rid of him. Well, that is certainly the actual truth, for the Chinaman will disappear at once."

"But weren't you unconscious, guv'nor?"

"Not quite," I replied, tenderly feeling the back of my head. "It was a nasty blow, Tinker, but I shall survive it. The cold nudge did me a lot of good, and, in any case, I am inclined to think the game was well worth the candle."

"Why, have you discovered anything?" asked Tinker eagerly.

"Quite a lot," I replied.

We said little further until we arrived at our journey's end. The evening's adventures had been very satisfactory, on the whole. The blow I had received during the fight in the flat-passage had not been at all serious. I knew, however, that escape was impossible, and I had crumpled up. The ruse was successful, for Kennedy and Becker had molested me no further.

They had thrown me into the river to drown, certainly, but I had been in no danger. And now they fondly imagined that the unknown Chinaman was dead, and that their secrets were safe.

I had adopted the disguise after Tinker had rung me up, stating for certain that Mr. Earle Kennedy was to be found at the Winfred Hotel. And Tinker was rather inclined to be angry with me.

"You might have given me the tip, guv'nor," he said, in an aggrieved tone, when we had reached our journey's end. "I hadn't the faintest idea that giddy Chinaman was you. It was a marvellous get-up, guv'nor."

"Thank you for the compliment, Tinker!" I said gravely. "As for my little deception, I thought it would be far better if you did not know. I was well aware of your attentions, and I felt quite secure. The investigation has been very pleasing, my boy, and I am hoping that we shall soon see the end of this bronze monkey business."

"I can't get the hang of it, guv'nor," he confessed. "Who are those Yanks?"

"They are a pair of fanatics, one would imagine," I replied. "But we will wait a while, Tinker, and see how things develop. I have an idea that we shall not find it necessary to wait long."

My prediction was not far wrong, for after I had made a complete change of clothing, and had removed all traces of my disguise, Tinker came in to me with the information that Gerald Montford was inquiring for me on the telephone.

"He says it's important, guv'nor," added Tinker.

I went at once into the consulting-room, and picked up the instrument.

"Well, Montford?" I said cheerily. "Anything fresh?"

"Yes, by Jove!" came Montford's voice, rather shaky with excitement. "Mr. Cromer has recovered, and he's quite rational. Dr. Henson has given us permission to talk freely with him, and we want you to come at once."

"Is there any particular reason?"

"Of course there is," said Montford eagerly. "Sylvia's father refuses to say a thing until you arrive. He wants to tell you all about it, and he wants your advice. He's enormously grateful for what you did last night—"

"Oh, nonsense!" I interrupted. "All right, Montford, I'll be with you as soon as possible. Let me see, it's just about seven o'clock now. You may expect me by half-past."

"You can't do it in that time, Mr. Blake!"

"Can't I?" I smiled. "Well, expect me."

I hung up the receiver, and turned briskly to Tinker.

"Make yourself lively, young 'un," I said crisply. "We're off to Richmond at once. See that the racer is ready within five minutes."

"Right, guv'nor!" said Tinker.

We started off well within the five minutes, and journeyed over to Richmond at the sedate pace of about thirty miles an hour. We arrived in good time, and both Gerald and Sylvia were waiting eagerly to welcome us.

"Jove, Mr. Blake, I'm glad to see you!" exclaimed Montford, wringing my hand. "Have you made any further discoveries?"

"Oh, Gerald, you mustn't be so impatient!" put in Sylvia. "Mr. Blake was only here this morning, and he hasn't had time to discover anything. Have you, Mr. Blake?"

"To tell you the truth, Miss Cromer, I have been fairly busy," I replied easily. "I may not have accomplished much, but you will know all about it before long. The most important event of all is the recovery of your father."

"It's wonderful, Mr. Blake," declared the girl, with shining eyes. "I had been having such dreadful fears. And now, this evening, father has come to himself, and is able to talk as well as ever."

"But he looks amazingly scared about something," said Montford gravely. "I don't quite like it, Mr. Blake. He's always been so calm and serene; it's not natural for him to be otherwise."

"Well, we will hear what he has to say!" I exclaimed quietly.

"And with that we went upstairs, Tinker accompanying us. He was not invited, but the young beggar managed to slip into the sick-room somehow. I can always trust Tinker to be on the scene, whatever it may be."

"Ah, Mr. Blake, you find me in a pitiful plight, eh?" exclaimed Cromer weakly, as I stood by his bed. "But you don't understand—you can't realise what an appalling shock I had!"

"Perhaps I can realise it," I replied smoothly. "It was the sight of that bronze monkey, Cromer. It has a special significance to you, but let me urge you to remain calm."

Perhaps the situation is not so grave as you imagine."

Cromer shook his head.

"Good of you to comfort me, Blake, but in this matter I think I know best," he said. "I intend to take you into my full confidence, and then you'll know the reason for my cowardly collapse."

"Cowardly, father!" exclaimed Sylvia indignantly.

"Yes, little girl—cowardly," replied Cromer, his eyes gleaming strangely. "I was weak—I was afraid. But I have recovered now, and while I am capable of speech I will tell you all. Perhaps I shall be gone before long—"

"Come, come," I interrupted. "I can't allow you to talk in that strain, Cromer. You were never a pessimist, so why have these gloomy forebodings now. Just make yourself comfortable, and tell us quietly all you know."

Cromer nodded.

"You are right, Blake," he agreed. "To tell you the truth, I hardly know how to begin. But let me warn poor Gerald that he will receive a terrible shock, and it will be no less terrible for you, Sylvia dear."

"I—I don't understand you, father!" said the girl, half nervously.

"I am ready for your shock, Mr. Cromer!" exclaimed Montford steadily.

"I know you are, lad; but this will be far greater than anything you can now anticipate!" exclaimed the patient, shaking his head sadly. "Heaven knows that I had no suspicion that this awful trouble would arise! For years and years I have believed the Bethmites to be extinct. And now, like a thunderclap, this blow falls upon me—and upon the night of your engagement—"

"You must pardon me for interrupting, Cromer, but you must remain calmer," I said gently. "You are working yourself up into a state of excitement, and that won't do. Moreover, it will be far better if you begin at the beginning."

Cromer smiled faintly.

"That's right, Blake; pull me up," he said. "I will do as you say; I will begin my story where it ought to begin. But I merely wanted to prepare Sylvia and Gerald for the blow which is to come."

The situation was rather tense. Cromer was sitting up in bed, and Gerald and Sylvia were seated on one side, and I on the other. Tinker had unobtrusively settled himself upon a corner settee; and I noticed, with approval, that the lad had his notebook and pencil ready. He was making himself useful, after all.

The light in the apartment was dim. Only one of the electric lamps had been switched on, and this was delicately shaded; the bed itself remained in partial shadow. Dr. Henson had ordered things so, I believe.

"In order to make myself quite clear," commenced Cromer, "I must tell you of my earlier days, when my fame as a poet was perfectly nil. At that time, Blake, I was a bit of a dreamer; I had fantastic ideas. I suppose there have been plenty of young men similarly cursed. It is not until later years that they realise the folly of those fantastic dreams."

"I was in the United States, and there I married my wife. As Sylvia knows, her mother died while she was still a tiny mite. It was a terrible blow to me, for I loved her with all the passion of my soul. I had nobody but Sylvia, my tiny baby girl. I was poor, for my writings generally found their way back to me. I suppose all beginners in literature go through such an experience to begin with."

"The death of my young wife had the effect of making me more fanatic than ever. My poverty, too, preyed upon me. Perhaps it was only natural that amidst all that sadness I should return to religion for comfort and guidance. But I pray that Heaven has forgiven me for turning in the direction I did."

"You joined the Bethmite Temple?" I asked quietly.

"Yes, Mr. Blake," replied Cromer, almost in a whisper. "Do you know about that fantastic cult?"

"I have dipped into a reference book which tells me that the Bethmite Temple was founded by a man named Marmaduke Beth," I said. "The religion is a most extraordinary one, I believe, and it binds its devotees down to fixed and somewhat harsh rules."

"By Heaven, Blake, you are right," said Cromer feelingly. "Yes, I joined the Bethmites. I did so with the full knowledge of what I was doing. I make no excuses for myself, except that I was half insane with

religious mania. Had my wife lived I should never have given way as I did."

"Oh, but, father, all this happened years and years ago!" protested Sylvia.

"Yes, little girl, and I believed that the past was dead," said Cromer, with a sigh. "I think I am a good man now, and fairly religious. But during my more mature years I have learned sense, and have cast aside the wild, fantastic ideas of my youth. Well, I must tell you that I signed a binding document, and this was given into the possession of the high priest of the Bethmite Temple."

"Beth himself?" I asked.

"At that time, yes," replied Cromer. "I quite realise that all this sounds absurd, but you must try to be patient with me. After joining the Temple I attended the services regularly, and was a strict devotee of the cult. This went on for some months, and then I received a letter from England, enclosing a cheque. An essay of mine had been accepted by a British review, and I was requested to send in further contributions. Naturally, I did so, and soon after that I decided to return to my Motherland."

"And what about your religion?" I asked.

"When I left America I was determined to found a Temple in England—a British branch," said Cromer, with a wry smile. "But my associations in London, and my work, knocked a great deal of the nonsense out of me. Before I had time to commence any preparation, I began to realise that I had been a young fool."

"And you dropped everything?"

"Naturally. The British people are not quite so gullible as some of the excitable Americans, although our cousins across the sea may not admit that fact," said Cromer. "At all events, it is an undoubted fact that there are far fewer fantastic religious cults in England than in America, and that fact speaks for itself."

"And did you hear nothing from Beth, Cromer?" I asked curiously.

"At first he wrote to me occasionally, but his letters dropped off," was the reply. "And as the years passed, I began to forget the whole wretched business. More recently I have been led to believe that with Beth's death the cult died out. All my inquiries pointed to that conclusion. And so I lived in peace, knowing that no harm could come to my daughter."

Sylvia clasped her hands, and her face was rather pale.

"But, father, what harm could come to me, even if those terrible Bethmites were still in existence?" she asked.

"My dear little girl, I will tell you," replied Cromer sadly. "One of the principal laws of the Bethmite religion affects you far more than it does me. I told you that I signed a binding document—not that that matters so greatly. The law I particularly fear is one concerning marriage."

"Marriage!" echoed Montford, rather startled.

"Yes, my poor boy," said Cromer, with a deep sigh. "Listen. Although I did not know it until yesterday, I am still a Bethmite. And this terrible law ordains that all children of the faith shall marry those of the same religion. That is to say, my daughter must marry a Bethmite."

"Oh, but that's preposterous!" exclaimed Montford huskily.

"Of course it is; I'm well aware of that," said the old man. "It is not only preposterous, Gerald, but madly insane. Yet there are other religions which have the same restrictions and laws. But with the Bethmites the penalty for disobeying that law is appalling."

"What is the penalty, Cromer?" I asked quietly.

"It is this: If Sylvia marries Gerald my life will be sacrificed," said Horace Cromer. "If my daughter disobeys that law, whether knowingly or unknowingly, my life must go as a sacrifice to atone for the sin."

"Oh, father!" exclaimed Sylvia, with a sob.

Montford sat quite still, staring straight before him with a look of incredible amazement in his eyes. I saw quite plainly that he could not—would not—believe in this nonsense.

"Is there no way out?" he asked. "Great Heaven, there must be! They can't harm you, Mr. Cromer! You're in England, free, and at liberty! I shall never consent to become one of those infernal—"

"My dear boy, do not talk so wildly," interrupted Cromer. "Do you think for one moment that I would allow you to repeat

my folly? You must get married to Sylvia; my madness of the past must not interfere with your happiness. I will take what risks may come."

"Perhaps they won't be quite so perilous as you imagine, Cromer," I said quietly. "I can quite believe all that you have told us. It sounds rank absurdity, but these religious cults are frequently insane. And the Bethmites themselves would no doubt go to great lengths to make you pay the price—they would even kill you, as you have hinted. But you may be quite sure that your life will be protected, and these fanatics will be dealt with before they can do any harm."

"It is good to hear you speak in that way, Blake," said Cromer, taking my hand. "I know that you will do your best. But I have heard of cases similar to my own, and I know that men have been murdered by those maniacs. Well, I must pay the price for my own insanity."

"Father, Mr. Blake will see that you are kept safe—oh, I know he will!" exclaimed Sylvia, her cheeks streaming with tears. "And Gerald and I are not going to be married yet, and so you are in no danger."

"Nevertheless, the warning came on the day of your engagement," said her father. "It came just when we were happy and—"

"Do you mean the bronze monkey?" interrupted Montford.

"Yes. It was given to Sylvia by the Bethmite emissary," said Cromer. "That man, Mr. Earle Kennedy, is probably one of the priests of the Temple. He does not look it, I will admit, but the Bethmites wear no robe. To all appearances they are rational human beings. Actually, they ought to be placed in an asylum."

"But even now I don't quite see how the bronze monkey comes in, sir," said Gerald.

"It is the sign of the Bethmites," replied Sylvia's father. "It is the sign that a sin has been committed against the religion, and that that sin must be made good. It was only natural that the bronze monkey should appear on the day of the betrothal. And when I saw the accursed little image I realised that I am not free, that I am still bound hand and foot to the Bethmites, and that my daughter is bound also. You now understand what a ghastly shock I received."

"Quite so, Cromer," I said gently. "And now I think you have had quite sufficient excitement for the present. Try to get some sleep, so that your mind may be composed; and do not worry yourself."

Three minutes later we had left the old man's apartment. Gerald and Sylvia were still looking half scared; but Tinker gave me a grin as we descended the stairs. He did not seem very affected.

"What a lot of tommy rot, guv'nor!" he whispered.

I shook my head.

"You are wrong, my boy," I said. "It is not tommy rot. There is a grim meaning behind all this, and I sympathise heartily with our friends here. At the same time, I am inclined to think that Cromer's fears are somewhat exaggerated."

"Of course they are, guv'nor!" said Tinker, with a sniff.

We joined the young couple in the drawing-room, and Gerald looked at me rather queerly as he faced me.

"Do you think the old chap is quite—well, quite right?" he began.

"My dear fellow, you may rest assured that your future father-in-law is in full possession of his wits," I said. "At the time he joined the Bethmites the movement was gaining strength, I believe; although, like all such movements, it boomed only to fall rapidly. And let me tell you to remain calm. Just wait, and you will have no cause for worry."

Meanwhile, Mr. Cromer was alone in his apartment. Although he did not know it at the time, he was not to be alone for long.

For five minutes after we had left the French windows leading to the picturesque balcony opened, and two silent forms entered the dim apartment. To all appearances, the strange visitors were gentlemen of refinement. They were immaculately attired in evening-dress. One was Mr. Earle Kennedy, and the other Becker.

They approached the bed, one on either side.

"We greet you, Horace Cromer!" said Kennedy gravely.

The patient started, and sat up with a faint cry. He stared from one to the other of his visitors.



"Who are you?" he asked. "How did you gain admittance?"

"We entered from the balcony," said Kennedy. "Allow me to introduce myself to you, Cromer, as the high priest of the Bethmite Temple. My companion is one of my faithful followers, and our mission in England is one which concerns you and your daughter. Do you not understand?"

Cromer sank back on to the pillows.

"Heaven help me, I do!" he muttered.

"It is not my desire to exact the penalty," went on Kennedy. "If your daughter marries Gerald Montford, the most sacred law of the Bethmites has been broken. You are still a member of our glorious cult, Cromer, and you must obey the laws. You took the oath, and there is no escape—except death."

"But does this law permit you to act like common hooligans?" demanded Cromer, with spirit. "Does it permit you to kidnap a girl?"

"You are mistaken," interrupted the high priest. "We attempted to take your daughter away because we feared that she and her lover would seek safety in flight. We feared that they would obtain a special licence and get married. Our thoughts were for you, Cromer. We wished to spare your life. And so we endeavoured to take the girl away, where she would be safe, and where she could not break the sacred law of the Bethmites. You must surely understand."

"I do—I do," murmured Cromer wretchedly. "But do not consider me; strike me down now, if you wish! Never will I consent to be the cause of ruining my little girl's happiness. She shall marry Montford, and you can exact your price!"

The high priest laughed softly.

"There is no hurry for that," he said. "Your life is safe until the girl is married. At all events, you have that respite. But what of the other channel, Cromer? Have you no answer to give—no answer to my letter?"

Cromer looked surprised.

"I have received no letter," he said weakly. "I have been ill, and have had no letters at all. Doubtless it is waiting for me amongst my other correspondence. Why did you write?"

The two Bethmites glanced at one another, and Kennedy nodded.

"We will tell you what our communication contained," he said. "There is no reason why you should not know of our great generosity. The Bethmites are not the less strict than they were, but I am the chief—the high priest. It is within my power to make a concession, if it so pleases me. And I am disposed to make a concession in your case, Cromer."

"Do—do you mean that?" asked the old man feverishly.

"I do," replied the high priest in solemn tones. "You have been in England for many years; you have brought your daughter up ignorant of her religion. In effect, you have dropped our cult completely. Well, Cromer, if you are willing to pay the price, I am ready to release you from your oath—I am ready to free you from every bond. You will see no more of the Bethmites if you pay."

"Our letter concerned this point," put in Becker.

Cromer raised himself on his elbow.

"And what is your price?" he asked hoarsely.

"Some months ago the Bethmite congregation completed a magnificent new temple," said the high priest. "Cromer, you ought to have seen it! It was superb—wonderful! A temple fit for the followers of our glorious faith."

"But what of the price—the price?" said Cromer anxiously.

"I am telling you even now," said Kennedy. "That beautiful temple was wrecked a month after completion by a terrible cyclone. The place was razed to the ground, and my grief was almost uncontrollable."

"It was a fearful blow," said Becker sadly.

"For years and years the funds had been contributed to build that glorious tribute to our faith," continued the high priest. "It will be ten years before we can hope to build another anything like its magnificence. It is for you, Cromer, to decide what shall be done."

"I?" said Cromer in surprise.

"Yes, you!" said Kennedy gravely. "You are rich, we are poor. The Bethmites have always been poor. We need one hundred thousand dollars to build a palatial temple—in English money, about twenty thousand pounds. You are rich, Cromer, as I just said, and if you pay us that sum I will cast

you free from the Bethmite religion, and you will be free. That is our price."

There was a gleam of hope in Cromer's eyes.

"And my daughter can marry Montford?" he asked.

"She can marry whom she pleases."

"I will pay the price," said Cromer steadily. "It will seriously diminish my fortune, but what is that compared to my daughter's happiness? What is that compared to my own life? I thank you for this concession."

"And we thank you, in our turn, for agreeing to this noble proposition," said the high priest. "Say, that temple will be the finest ever! Later on, Cromer, you must come across and be an honoured visitor. You will be a stranger to the faith, it is true, but you will be welcome."

Cromer waved his hand impatiently.

"I am thinking of the present," he said. "You see that small desk yonder? There is a cheque-book within, and pen and ink are handy. I will write you a cheque for the amount now—at once!"

Mr. Earle Kennedy shook his head.

"I cannot accept a cheque!" he said firmly.

"But you will be able to cash it in the morning—"

"I cannot accept a cheque!"

"What else can I do?" asked Cromer anxiously. "You did not expect me to have such a vast sum in the house?"

"Can you not obtain it?" asked the high priest. "You must do so, Cromer; you must obtain it within two hours from now. Do you understand? The hour is only just after eight—"

"The bank is closed!" exclaimed Cromer huskily.

"No matter," said Kennedy. "If you fail us your life will be forfeited, and no power on earth will protect you. I will give you until ten-thirty, but not a moment longer. The money must be obtained!"

Cromer plucked at the bed-coverlet feverishly.

"Very well—very well," he said. "I agree. I will send a special letter to my banker. I have money deposited, and I can obtain the sum you require. Yes, I will have it ready by half-past ten."

"In cash—in currency notes?" said Kennedy.

"Yes."

"Very well; we accept your promise," said the high priest, bowing. "At ten-thirty, Horace Cromer, we will return. We shall expect to find you alone, as now, and woe betide you if you fail."

The two visitors walked silently to the window, and passed out upon the balcony. And Cromer fell back upon his pillow, breathing heavily. But there was a light of grim determination in his eyes.

By hook or by crook he must obtain the money in time!

## THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

### Scotland Yard Takes a Hand.

TEN-THIRTY chimed out musically from the little clock on the mantelpiece of Horace Cromer's sleeping apartment. The room was empty, save for Cromer himself, who lay in bed.

The dim light from the electric-lamp was brightened occasionally by a flicker from the fire, and almost before the chime had died away the French windows softly opened, and two forms silently entered the room.

Cromer looked round quickly.

"You have returned?" he asked in a faint voice.

The high priest and his follower approached the bed, and gazed down upon the old man. Becker held a long, glittering dagger in his hand, and Cromer gazed at it in a fascinated kind of way.

"You—you intend to kill me in spite of—" he faltered.

"Have you fulfilled your promise, Horace Cromer?" demanded Kennedy coldly.

"Yes, yes! The cash is here!"

Becker withdrew the dagger, and slipped it beneath his coat. His eyes were gleaming triumphantly, but he left the talking to his superior. The high priest of the Bethmites nodded gravely.

"It is well," he said. "You have escaped from your well-earned punishment lightly, you traitor to the faith! You are the only follower of the Bethmite cult who has ever escaped—except by death. Yours is an easy price."

Cromer waved his hand testily.

"Since your departure, two hours ago, I have been reviewing this matter," he said. "It is apparent that you are intent upon conducting this affair on a business basis, very well! You require money; I have it to give. Do you not think twenty thousand is an excessively high figure?"

"It is the sum you agreed to pay."

"I am aware of that," said Cromer. "But would not ten thousand pounds build you a sufficiently noble temple?"

"It would not," replied Kennedy grimly.

"We will have the full sum, or you will die before we leave this house. Brother Becker, produce your sacrificial knife, and hold it over the heart of this traitorous wretch!"

Becker revealed his dagger once more, and Cromer sighed.

"Since you have chosen to adopt this course, argument is evidently useless," he said resignedly. "You are threatening me and I am not in a position to refuse. You will find your money under this coverlet, against the foot of the bed."

Kennedy switched the coverlet back with a jerk. And there, upon the bed, lay several neatly-tied bundles of currency-notes.

Both Kennedy and Becker picked them up greedily.

"You are saved the necessity of counting them!" said Cromer bitterly. "There are ten bundles, each containing two thousand pounds. I now require you to give me a receipt for this sum."

Kennedy regarded his victim closely in the dim light.

"How are we to know that this money will not be stopped?" he asked. "These are new notes, numbered consecutively, and I guess it will be easy for the Treasury to stop payment!"

"There is no other way," said Cromer.

"I guess he's right," remarked Becker. "We've got to take them as they are, and trust to luck."

"But remember this, Cromer," said the high priest. "If there is any foolery with regard to these notes, you will pay with your life within twelve hours. That is no idle threat!"

"I have carried out my instructions," said Cromer quietly. "It is now your turn to complete the bargain. I am to be released from your religion, and you are the high priest of the Bethmite temple. Sign me a document giving me full liberty. It is my due."

Kennedy hesitated for a moment.

"Very well," he said, at length. "I will do so."

The notes, having been stowed away in various pockets of the two men, Kennedy produced a fountain-pen and a sheet of blank paper. He retired to a small table at the foot of the bed, and Becker looked on.

There was a movement from the bed, and both men looked up.

"And now, gentlemen, I think we will make a little alteration in the programme," said Cromer pleasantly. "Up with your hands, please!"

There was a sudden flood of light in the room, and Kennedy and Becker, half dazzled by the abrupt glare, saw that the man in the bed was pointing a revolver at them steadily and calmly.

"Damnation snakes!" gasped Becker. "A trap!"

"Exactly!" said Mr. Cromer, slipping from the bed to the floor. "And you have no doubt noticed a difference in my voice. The removal of this wig will enlighten you further. My friends, the game is up!"

"Who are you, you blamed hound?" snarled Kennedy.

"My name is Sexton Blake," replied "Cromer" pleasantly.

And this, of course, was the actual truth. It was I who had taken Cromer's place, and I hope I shall be forgiven for having kept up the little deception. Kennedy and Becker were certainly surprised.

"Say, we'll quit!" gasped Becker. "The guy won't fire—"

"Perhaps not," I interrupted. "At the same time it would be a pity to make a fuss. There is no avenue of escape for you, gentlemen!"

"Not to-night, my beauties!" added a gruff voice.

It belonged to Chief-Detective Lennard, of Scotland Yard, and he had just emerged from behind a curtain at the window.

"Not a bad little trap, is it?" grinned Tinker, appearing from under the bed.

"Gee!" muttered Becker dazedly. "We're sure beat, Ken!"

Kennedy looked dazed, and said nothing.

U. J.—No. 800.

"It may interest you to know," went on Lennard, "that I hold warrants for the arrest of the pair of you. The charge will be one of conspiracy, and your best course will be to throw up the sponge."

"And all those notes are duds!" put in Tinker cheerfully. "They were supplied by the Yard, and they're worth about as much as handbills. It takes better men than you to beat the gov'nor!"

"Does it?" roared Kennedy violently. "By gosh, we'll beat these cops, Becker!"

As he spoke he whirled up a chair. I shouted out a warning, and Lennard and three detectives dashed forward simultaneously. But they were just a shade too late. The chair shot from Kennedy's hand, and struck the electrolier with terrific force.

Crash!

There was a tinkle of glass and an appalling smash. The room was plunged into pitchy darkness, except for the dull glow of the fire. Confusion reigned in that tense moment, and I roundly abused myself for having allowed such a thing to happen. Although, strictly speaking, the fault was more on the side of the police. They should have gripped their men at once.

"Guard the window!" I shouted.

"I'm at the door, gov'nor!" gasped Tinker, from the darkness.

It was impossible to tell where the prisoners were. The room reverberated with stamps and shouts and sundry crashes, as furniture and other articles were upset.

And then a direct move was made.

There was a sudden yell from the two C.I.D. men at the door. What actually happened was this: Kennedy and Becker kept close together after the first moment, realising that their only chance of escape lay in united effort.

And their one object was to get to the window. Hands grasped at them from the darkness, but they managed to make a bold, sudden dash for the balcony. What happened afterwards was somewhat thrilling.

The two crooks hurled themselves at the window—and met the two Scotland Yard men, who were unprepared for the rush. The detectives staggered back through the open doorway with considerable force, totally incapable of pulling themselves up. The full weight of the charge sent them against the outer rail of the balcony with a force which overcame everything.

The four men, locked together, went clean through the rail, as though it had been made of cardboard. The noise was terrific, and was instantly followed by a tremendous smashing of branches.

"Good heavens!" gasped Lennard hoarsely.

He rushed to the window, and I was at his side. We knew well enough what had happened, and we feared the worst. It was a considerable drop to the ground, and groans came up to us, accompanied by sundry curses.

"We must get down!" I shouted sharply.

"Open the door, somebody!" bawled Tinker.

He had left his post at the doorway a minute before, but now charged across the room, which was still in darkness. Barely twenty seconds, indeed, had passed since the commencement of the uproar.

Tinker went over beautifully, having failed to observe an overturned chair full in his path. But he picked himself up, bruised and grazed, but as enthusiastic as ever.

"The rotters might be escaping!" he panted. "After all the trouble we took, too! Oh, my hat! What a frightful mess these police make of things, gov'nor!"

I heard the chief-inspector grunt, but there was no time to make any comment; and Tinker's remarks were certainly rather unkind. He arrived out in the passage first, and found Gerald Montford there with Sylvia. They were considerably startled, and, incidentally, Tinker nearly bowled them over.

"What's wrong?" shouted Montford.

"They've escaped!" I exclaimed grimly. "But I don't think they've got much further than the ground, Montford. You'd better not bring Miss Sylvia outside—the sight won't be pleasing."

I said all this as I was hurrying along, and I didn't hear what Montford replied. And a minute later I hastened round the terrace towards the back of the house. Even as I was doing so I realised that I must cut a most ludicrous figure, for I was wearing Cromer's pyjamas over my ordinary attire.

In the gloom we saw a tangled heap in front of us. There was no mistaking the spot, for a light had been obtained in the

room above, and we could plainly see the smashed balcony.

"That you, Mr. Lennard?" gasped a painful voice. "There's a fine mix-up here, sir! I believe Smith's arm is broke—"

"It's a wonder you're not dead, the pair of you!" interrupted the chief-inspector. "You sound all right, Webster. Where are the prisoners?"

"In that tree, I think, sir."

And then we saw why the four men had not been badly injured on the spot. Right beneath the balcony stood a thick evergreen-bush. It was large and quite high. The four men had fallen into the middle of it, and it had broken their fall considerably.

My torch was already at work, and I felt rather sorry for Detective-Sergeant Smith. This unfortunate man was lying on the ground, bleeding from several places, and he was too dazed to do anything but groan. I really thought he was mortally injured. But it was later learned that he had escaped with a broken arm and a few superficial flesh-wounds.

Close beside him lay Becker, quite unconscious. His head had struck the ground, and there was little prospect of him recovering his wits until many days had passed. The other Scotland Yard man, Webster, was hardly scratched.

"But where's the other brute?" demanded Lennard sharply. "Good gracious! You don't mean to say that one of 'em got away?"

"There he goes, sir!" shouted Tinker suddenly.

He pointed with an excited finger, and I dimly saw the figure of a man staggering drunkenly across the lawn towards the bottom of the garden. Kennedy evidently had escaped almost as lightly as Detective Webster.

"After him, you fellows!" shouted the chief-inspector.

He set the example, but Tinker and I were first. And Kennedy, who knew that we were on his track, shouted out a string of defiant execrations, and tore away. Once he turned, and I distinctly heard a click.

The man had tried to shoot, but his revolver had failed him. And as the effort cost him the loss of four or five yards, he made no further attempt. He put forward all his energies into an endeavour to escape.

He knew the ground, of course, having waited in the lane which ran below the garden for Miss Sylvia on the previous night. He arrived in the lane just as we were upon him, and we should probably have got him at once, only Tinker and I both attempted to dive through a gap at the same second.

In the few moments of confusion Kennedy obtained a fresh start, and when we emerged into the lane he was fifteen yards ahead. But he was a fool to try this game; capture was inevitable sooner or later.

And the end came in a rather startling manner.

The fugitive rushed out of the lane into the road at the top of his speed. There was a great shout, a shrieking of brakes, and then a scream. When Tinker and I arrived in the roadway we found a motor-car standing there, with Kennedy lying stretched in front of it, motionless.

"It was his own fault, the fool!" panted the driver of the car, climbing out of his seat, and trembling violently. "He came rushing out before I could see a thing! How was I to know—"

"That's all right, sir!" interrupted Lennard, arriving at that moment. "You weren't to blame in the least, and you needn't look scared. I'm a detective-officer, and that man was being chased. Webster, take the gentleman's name and address, and the number of his car."

"But—but that's not fair!" protested the motorist.

"My dear sir, you won't be troubled at all. It's just a formality," said Lennard crisply.

"Well, Blake, what's the damage? Dead?"

I had been examining Mr. Earle Kennedy, and now I straightened my back and smiled.

"You'd better get the bracelets on, old man," I said. "The man is practically unhurt—just a bit dazed."

The motorist looked very relieved.

"I knew he couldn't be hurt much," he said. "I pulled up practically in my own length, and he was only hit by the radiator—the wheels didn't touch him. Who the deuce is he, anyhow?"

"An escaping criminal," said Tinker obligingly. "The police ought to be grateful to you for lending a hand. You've saved us a lot of trouble, anyhow."

Kennedy was handcuffed, and by the time he had sufficiently recovered to get to his feet the other C.I.D. men were on the spot, and all hope of getting away was at an end. It had been at an end from the start, as a matter of fact.

"Well, it's been rather exciting, but we've made a good job of it," said Lennard.

"This is another good mark for the gov'nor, inspector," said Tinker. "If it hadn't been for him you wouldn't have laid fingers on these two beauties, at all events."

"No need to remind me of that!" growled Lennard. "Kennedy and Becker—as they call themselves here—are rather badly wanted in New York. The police department of that city will be decidedly pleased."

"Well, I think I'll leave everything to you now, Lennard," I said. "Don't forget I'm in the public highway, and my attire—"

"Disgraceful!" said the inspector severely. "Have you no shame, Blake? Besides, they're not your pyjamas at all!"

I chuckled, and accompanied Tinker back down the lane, and we entered the garden by the same method as we had left it. I paused for a moment, and peeled off the pyjamas. I was coatless, but that was better than walking about in Cromer's night attire.

And that, in a manner of speaking, was the end of the affair.

"I am amazed, Blake—frankly amazed!" said Cromer. "Until you told me the actual truth I was positively certain that those men were Bethmites. But for your help I should have been swindled completely."

I smiled, and pulled at my cigar.

We were in the library, and all was quiet once more. The police had departed with their prisoners, and Cromer's house was as peaceful as ever. Sylvia sat with Gerald Montford on the settee, and Tinker lounged in an easy-chair.

It was pleasant to spend an hour in comfort after all the excitement. And it did us all good to see the really astonishing change which had come over our host. Cromer was recovering far more rapidly than I had ever imagined possible. He had insisted upon sitting up to hear all the details.

"It was a most daring game of bluff, Cromer," I remarked. "I don't say that my efforts were the means of frustrating the plot, but I think I may claim to have done something—"

"What nonsense, Mr. Blake!" interrupted Montford. "You've done everything—right from the start. Hasn't he, Sylvia?"

"Of course!" said the girl happily.

"My suspicions were first aroused acutely when I read that letter which I purloined when I called this morning," I explained. "As you know, that letter contains an offer, Cromer, to release you from the Bethmite bonds for the sum of twenty thousand pounds. I smelt a rat at once. Kennedy was after money, and that smacked of a fraud of some kind."

"It was wonderfully lucky you took that letter, Blake!" said Cromer. "I should have fallen into the trap like the veriest booby. My fears with regard to the Bethmites would have overpowered all reason."

I smiled.

"We cannot be sure of that, so we will not discuss the matter," I said. "I learned from that letter, by a very simple process, that Kennedy was staying at a hotel in Fulham Road. Of course, I only assumed that Kennedy was the writer, but it was a fairly safe assumption."

"I disguised myself, and followed Kennedy to a block of flats near Putney," I continued. "Tinker was with me, but he did not overhear what I overheard. I will not go into details, but I will tell you that the plot was briefly outlined, and I knew almost all the facts. It was very pleasing when Montford phoned to me that you had recovered, for I was convinced that the climax would soon arrive."

"It has been most startling—particularly towards the end," said Cromer. "My dear Blake, when those rascals came in to me and made their demand I was completely hoodwinked. I did not know that you were listening outside the door—that you were fully acquainted with the infernal plot."

"I knew that the whole thing was fishy," I said. "There is no need for us to go over what we already know, is there? You readily understood the true state of affairs after Kennedy and Becker had gone—when I explained to you."

Montford chuckled.

"That was a ripping idea of yours, Mr.



Blake, to take Mr. Cromer's place!" he said. "And with those Scotland Yard people in the room—yes, and with Tinker under the bed—it was fairly safe to reckon that the brutes were trapped. It took us all by surprise when they fell over the balcony."

"Thank Heaven it is all over!" said Cromer fervently. "My fears were groundless, and the bronze monkey is of no significance whatever."

"Why, my dear Cromer, the Bethmites have been extinct for upwards of fifteen years!" I said. "You are in no danger, and you never were in any danger. A man of great strength of will, however, was liable to a shock when that bronze monkey appeared. You need not blame yourself for being startled."

"But who are the men, really, Mr. Blake?" asked Sylvia.

"They are two notorious New York crooks," I replied. "I forgot to mention that I handed that letter of yours, Cromer, to Scotland Yard. They identified the handwriting after very little difficulty, and I then knew that the whole game was worked. It was a pure bluff from start to finish."

"And it would have succeeded from start to finish if you had not attended the reception," said Cromer grimly. "I don't know how to thank you, Blake, for what you've done. And I am sure Sylvia is just as grateful."

"Mr. Blake knows I am," said the girl, rather shyly.

"Don't leave me out, Sylvia," said Montford. "I really think we shall all owe Mr. Blake a big debt as long as we live. The affair was so rapid and so confusing that I can't make out how you managed to finish it off so quickly, Mr. Blake."

"If you'd known the gov'nor longer, you'd understand all right, sir," put in Tinker, with a grin. "Mr. Blake doesn't let the grass grow under his feet once he starts work. In this particular case he diddled me beautifully when he was got up as that Chinaman. And I don't think I've forgiven him yet."

"You must not be cruel, Tinker!" I said mockingly.

I can really think of nothing further to set down in order to complete this record. It

was never actually discovered how Kennedy and Becker had got to know the facts concerning Mr. Cromer's connection with the Bethmites.

But I assumed that they had become acquainted with a man in America who had been a follower of Marmaduke Beth at the same period as Cromer. It was known that the crooks had come to England on a job which had failed; so the chances were that they had seen an announcement of the reception to celebrate Miss Sylvia's betrothal, and they had decided to work the "stunt."

It had come dangerously near to succeeding, but as it had failed, and as it had provided me with a most interesting case, I had no objection to offer. Kennedy and Becker managed to get themselves locked up—and that was about the net result of the whole adventure.

As for the two young people—well, they eventually got married, and I don't think there is the slightest fear of their ever being troubled by the Bethmites, or by a bronze monkey!

THE END.

## New Short Serial.

# FROM SCHOOL TO SEA.

By CHARLES HAMILTON.

## INTRODUCTION.

Between DICK TREVELYAN, a boy of fifteen, and MR. GADSBY, his stepfather, there is bitter blood. The boy's real father has died, suspected of murder, and Gadsby takes any opportunity of taunting his stepson with this unpleasant fact.

Should Dick die a small fortune is to come into the hands of Gadsby. The latter concocts a scheme with a schoolmaster named CARKER, and the result is that Dick is transferred to the school of that gentleman, where he has an unpleasant time.

Dick runs away from the school, and, after an exciting pursuit, escapes in a small boat. SAMUEL CARKER, son of the headmaster, and an enemy of Dick's, manages to jump into the boat as it leaves the shore.

They are picked up later by a vessel. Several of the sailors on board mutiny, and are joined by young Carker. But Dick is left helpless in his bunk.

(Now read on.)

## After the Mutiny—Blow for Blow—Adrift on the Pacific.

THE sun rose from the bosom of the waters. The Pacific glimmered wide and blue.

Dick opened his eyes. For a minute he could not realise where he was, or what had happened.

He looked round wildly. He was lying upon canvas on the Boadicea's deck, the blue sky above him, the white seagulls skimming the azure depths.

What had happened?

The memory of it rushed upon him abruptly. He shuddered.

But how came he unbound and on deck?

"I am glad to see you awake, Trevelyan," Daniel Yorke was by his side. Dick could not help a movement of repugnance.

A bitter smile crossed Yorke's face.

"What? Have you already forgotten that I saved your life?" he said, with a sneer.

Dick coloured. This man was no doubt a villain, but what he said was true. He had saved Dick's life, not without risk to his own.

"I do not forget it," Dick said, in a low voice. "I am grateful. But why did you save me?"

Yorke looked at him gloomily.

"Let that pass."

"What have you done to the captain?"

"He is a prisoner—wounded."

"And Mr. Llewellyn?"

"The same."

Dick did not ask about Stoke. The splash he had heard last night had told him what was the second mate's fate.

"It was easily done," resumed Yorke. "Carker had abstracted the captain's pistols, and that made all plane-sailing."

"The hound!"

"The son of his father!" said Yorke, with a shrug. "Samuel is worthy of Elisha. But

now, what are you going to do? Join us, or—"

"I will never join a gang of mutineers!"

"I tell you plainly that the alternative will probably be death. We cannot keep aboard the Boadicea any but our friends."

"Does that mean—"

"It means that we are going to give a boat to the captain, and to those who choose to go with him."

"I shall be one," said Dick resolutely.

"Better think over it."

Yorke walked away and joined Bjornsen at the wheel. Dick rose and looked about him.

The sails were set. The seamen were at their posts, somewhat less orderly than usual, Dick noted. Several of them were already the worse for drink.

The captain sat at the foot of the mizzenmast. His hands were tied, and there was blood upon his face. Mr. Llewellyn lay close by him. The chief-mate, more severely wounded was not bound.

Dick saw three or four gloomy faces among the crew. He guessed that these were men who had not been in the secret, and who had acquiesced in the new state of affairs in fear of their lives.

Bjornsen and Yorke were talking earnestly at the binnacle. From their tones Dick expected that a dispute was imminent.

"Hallo, you cub!" It was Samuel's voice. He fixed a leering look of triumph upon Dick. "We have our ups and downs, don't we? I'm up now and you're down."

And Samuel, with the idea that he could now play the bully with impunity, drove his fist into Dick's face before the boy could elude it.

Never was he under a greater mistake.

Dick was less inclined than ever to knuckle under to the cowardly bully. He staggered under the blow, but recovered himself immediately.

"You hound! You treacherous hound!" he panted.

And he went for Samuel like a tiger. A right-hander in the chest, closely followed by a left-hander in the eye, sent Samuel reeling; and, as he reeled, a perfect tattoo of blows rained upon his face and chest. He yelled and fell to the deck, half-blinded and wholly beaten.

"Get up, you cur!" said Dick, standing over him, with clenched fists and flashing eyes.

But Samuel was wise in his generation. He did not get up. He lay on the deck, and howled for breath. But the mutineers, instead of helping him, only laughed at his discomfiture, and jeered at him to get up and fight. Samuel would just as soon have jumped into the Pacific.

Dick turned contemptuously away; and Samuel, as soon as his back was turned, scooted away, and took refuge in the galley.

Meanwhile, the argument between Bjornsen and Yorke had ended. Yorke's hand had gone to his revolver, and then the Swede gave in. Yorke came over to Dick.

"It's settled," he said. "Captain and his friends are to have a boat and provisions. Bjornsen wants to send 'em adrift without grub or water. He wants them dead."

"The scoundrel!"

"He's in the right," answered Yorke moodily. "If we let them live, they'll hang us as like as not later on; but I can't agree to it." An almost wild look came over his face. "There's blood enough upon my hands."

"You did not kill Mr. Stoke?"

"Last night? Oh, no. That was Bjornsen's doing. I was thinking of—"

He paused, and looked strangely at Dick. "Nine years ago I shed blood, and I've never had a moment's peace since."

Then, as if he regretted saying so much, he turned abruptly away.

It was not only to Yorke that the villainous Swede had yielded.

More than half the mutineers, now that they were cool, were opposed to inflicting death upon the prisoners.

A quarter-boat was prepared for them. Yorke saw to the placing of provisions and water-kegs in it, and a sail and oars.

"Now, captain, are you ready?"

Captain Mitford rose. He did not speak. He appeared to be stunned by the terrible misfortune that had befallen him.

He was placed in the boat. Llewellyn, who had become unconscious, was laid there gently enough. Then Yorke looked round at the crew.

"Whoever chooses to go with Captain Mitford is at liberty to do so."

It was Dick Trevelyan who spoke, and he sprang lightly into the boat. Yorke glanced at him with an indefinable expression.

"Any more?"

Denton, the boatswain, followed Dick, then two seamen. And they were all.

"Cast loose."

The boat slid down to the sea. The mutineers lined the side to watch it push off.

"Good-bye, Dick Trevelyan!" called out Samuel. "I hope you'll be drowned."

To this charitable valediction Dick made no response. He looked along the line of faces, and he caught the eyes of Bjornsen. There was a grin of evil mockery upon the Swedish seaman's face. He made an ironical salute to Captain Mitford.

"Adieu, captain, and a pleasant voyage to Davy Jones' locker. Hard-a-port, there!"

The boat rocked upon the Pacific—a speck upon the boundless blue.

The Boadicea, with bulging canvas, flew on, and the abandoned boat's crew watched her white sails sinking lower and lower upon the horizon.

They watched and watched, with haggard eyes, and faces drawn with despair.

Adrift upon the boundless Pacific, five hundred miles from the nearest known land, what were their chances of life worth? Little—very little, and they knew it.

A strange, horrible sound drew their attention from the vanishing sails of the Boadicea. It was the death-rattle in the throat of Llewellyn. The chief mate was at his last gasp. They gathered round him, with scared faces; but he was past all human aid.

"Dead," muttered the skipper. "He was a true shipmate. Heaven rest his soul!"

He was dead—the first to perish of the abandoned six—the first, but not the last!

**The Open Boat—The Skipper's Fate—  
"A Sail!"—Breakers Ahead—Oast  
Ashore.**

**S**KY and sea—sea and sky! Burning blue above, glimmering blue around. The boat a dot in the centre of immensity.

There was a hush upon the five men. Dick had thrown a piece of canvas over the body of Llewellyn. The captain sat in the stern, his face in his hands. The boat drifted idly. Blood was still trickling down Captain Mitford's bronzed cheek. But he appeared to have forgotten his wound.

The Boadicea had vanished. The boat rocked in solitude, alone on a wide, wide sea. Captain Mitford roused himself abruptly. It was necessary to give poor Llewellyn a sailor's burial.

The skipper repeated a portion of the usual service from memory, and the body was committed to the deep, "till the sea should give up its dead."

The mast was stepped and the sail shaken out! The boat glided over the heaving waters. Captain Mitford fixed the course for the coast of Southern Australia, the nearest land by his reckoning, but with little hope of reaching it.

A day of sad silence—a night of grim, heavy sleeplessness—a morning of horror!

Dick first noticed something wrong with the captain. He had asked him twice about the wound without receiving a reply. In the glimmering dawn he saw that the skipper's face was strangely flushed, and that his eyes glittered with unnatural brightness.

"Are you ill, sir?" Dick asked him anxiously.

The skipper looked sharply at him and started to his feet.

"All hands on deck!" he shouted. "Tumble up, there!—tumble up!"

The sailors looked at each other in dismay.

"Good heavens!" muttered the boatswain. "He's mad!"

The shock of losing his ship, grief for the death of Llewellyn, and the untended wound in the head had combined to unhinge the poor skipper's brain. He was delirious.

The seamen, frozen almost with horror, heard his wild ravings in silence. But suddenly Dick cried:

"Hold him, or he'll be overboard!"

The insane skipper was grasped just in time to prevent him from leaping into the sea.

"What, you mutiny?" he vociferated, struggling wildly to break loose.

"A rope—quick!" panted Denton.

But it was not needed. The skipper's paroxysm ended as suddenly as it began. He sank into the bottom of the boat insensible. There was foam upon his lips and a gush of blood crimsoning his face. The boatswain was very white.

"He's dying!"

Dick could not restrain his sobs. The brave, kindly sailor was close to death. And ere the sun reached the meridian, the skipper, without recovering consciousness, passed silently into the land of shadows.

Like a black dream it all seemed to Dick Trevelyan.

At sunset they buried the skipper. Dick watched the rigid form slide into the heaving sea, and he was blind with tears.

Another night upon the ocean. Snatches of sleep and hours of dull wakefulness. Morning overcast. Dark clouds hung over the southern rim of the ocean.

"A gale coming on," said Denton dully. "It will end it the quicker. What are you looking at yonder, Flaherty?"

The sailor turned round, his white face ablaze with excitement.

"A sail, mates! By the holy mother of Moses, it's a sail!"

"A sail!"

They bent eager eyes towards the speck upon the western waves. It was a sail! The sudden revulsion from despair to hope unmanned them.

They shouted, wept, hugged one another in transports of frantic joy.

(To be continued.)

**FOOTBALL COMPETITION No. 9.  
£50 WON.**

In this Competition no competitor succeeded in forecasting the results of all the matches. The Prize of £50 has therefore been divided among the following seven competitors, whose forecasts each contained nineteen correct predictions:

E. W. Sudbury, Cheynehurst, Hartswood Road, Brentwood, Essex; A. Devonport, 75, Hall Street, Burslem, Stoke-on-Trent; Thos. Trevett, 43, Hambalt Road, Clapham Common, S.W.; R. Hillyer, L.G.O.C., Buss Works Road, Seagrave, Fulham; Violet Hercliffe, 9, Arthur Street, Lincoln; Victor Wm. Tucker, 22, Marsh Street, Warminster, Wilts.; Thos. Dalziel, 28, Gordon Terrace, Meanwood, Leeds.

(Next week's story of **SEXTON BLAKE** and **TINKER** is entitled

**"THE SHANGHAIED  
DETECTIVE;  
Or, The Coup of Waldo."**

*It is one of Tinker's Popular Narratives, and finds the Baker Street Detective again at the heels of Waldo, the Wonder-Man. Please order your copy in advance; the only way to be sure of getting it.)*

**OUR FOOTBALL COMPETITION OFFER.  
£300 MUST BE WON!  
ONLY TWELVE MATCHES.**

**SCOTTISH AND IRISH READERS MAY ENTER. NO ENTRANCE FEES  
£300 will be Paid for Correct Forecast or NEAREST.**

Below you will find a coupon giving twelve matches which are to be played on **SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 8th**. We offer the sum of **£300** for a correct forecast of the results of these matches. No goals are required.

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 **£300**. If no one forecasts the results of the twelve matches correctly, the money will be paid to the reader whose forecast is nearest. In any case the full amount of **£300** must be won.

Coupons, which must not be enclosed in envelopes containing efforts in other competitions, must be addressed to:

**FOOTBALL COMPETITION No. 12,  
Gough House, Gough Square,  
LONDON, E.C. 4,**

and must reach that address not later than **THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 6th**.

This competition is run in conjunction with "Answers," "The Family Journal," "Home Companion," "Woman's World," "Marvel," "The Butterfly," and "Answers' Library," 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," "The Family Journal," "Home Companion," "Woman's World," "Marvel," "The Butterfly," "Answers' Library," and "Union Jack," dated February 1st, or the issues of those journals dated February 8th, 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. The prize of **£300** will be paid to the competitor who sends in on one coupon the correct results of all the matches. Should no competitor succeed in doing this, the prize will be awarded to the one

sending a coupon showing the nearest number of correct predictions. In the event of ties, the prize will be divided. In any case the full amount of **£300** will be paid, even should any of the matches be abandoned. If that should happen, such matches will not be taken into consideration in the adjudication.

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 condition 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, FEBRUARY 6th**. Any received after that date will be disqualified. No responsibility can be undertaken for any effort or efforts lost, mislaid, or delayed. Proof of posting will not be accepted as proof of delivery. Unstamped or insufficiently stamped efforts will be refused.

**Football Competition No. 12.**

**Matches Played SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 8th.  
Closing Date, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 6th.**

<b>BRENTFORD</b>	<b>v. MILLWALL</b>
<b>TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR</b>	<b>v. CRYSTAL PALACE</b>
<b>CHELSEA</b>	<b>v. ARSENAL</b>
<b>BRADFORD</b>	<b>v. COVENTRY CITY</b>
<b>LINCOLN CITY</b>	<b>v. BRADFORD CITY</b>
<b>NOTTS FOREST</b>	<b>v. LEEDS CITY</b>
<b>BOLTON WANDERERS</b>	<b>v. ROCHDALE</b>
<b>PORT VALE</b>	<b>v. EVERTON</b>
<b>AIRDRIEONIANS</b>	<b>v. CELTIC</b>
<b>HIBERNIANS</b>	<b>v. DUMBARTON</b>
<b>QUEEN'S PARK</b>	<b>v. PARTICK THISTLE</b>
<b>RANGERS</b>	<b>v. MORTON</b>

I enter Football Competition No. 12 in accordance with the Rules and Conditions announced above, and agree to accept the published decision as final and legally binding.

Signed .....

Address .....

U.J. ....