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Tinker's Lone Hand

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A Dramatic Complete Detective Story, in which Tinker has to Tackle a Case "Off His Own Bat."

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Moonlight on the Marshes—The Deserted Farm—Shot.

IT was half-past eight, and a hot, stuffy summer's evening, with a threat of thunder in the air.

Sexton Blake stood by a table in the sitting-room, filling the chambers of a .360 Smith & Wesson from a box of cartridges in the open drawer. Having filled them, and given the cylinder a twist to see that it worked smoothly, he snapped the breech to, and dropped the weapon into the poacher-pocket of a disreputable old shooting-coat he was wearing, and placed half a handful more of loose cartridges in another pocket.

He was looking ill and drawn and baggard, and his eyes were rimmed with red from lack of sleep.

His whole get-up, too, was sadly out of keeping with the orderly comfort of the Baker Street rooms.

His chin was covered with a four-days' growth of stubble. In place of a collar he wore a disreputable "bird's-eye" handkerchief. His trousers, bagged at the knees and frayed, were mud-stained like his boots, and one of the latter showed bare skin through the toe-cap.

If he wore a shirt there were no outward or visible signs of its existence, and his hands, usually so carefully kept, were begrimed, the nails torn and broken. Moreover, a fresh, half-healed jagged knife scar ran right across the back of the left hand just below the knuckles.

He was rocking on his feet with fatigue, and yawned wearily as he closed the breech of the revolver, his eyelids drooping involuntarily.

He opened them again with a palpable effort, and glanced at the clock. Then he went to a table in the corner, poured himself out a whisky-and-soda, which he drained at a gulp, and picked up a cigarette—a Turkish one—which he selected with care from a tin box of a mixed lot.

He lit it, and inhaled luxuriously.

"That's heavenly!" he said drowsily. "It needs a week of bad black shag and a foul clay to make one really appreciate a decent cigarette. Call me at ten sharp!" he said suddenly to Tinker. "Ten to the minute, mind you! Wake me how you like, but wake me thoroughly. It's fifty hours—no, nearer sixty odd since I've dared to close my eyes, and rest I must have if I'm to pull through things to-night."

He flung himself on the sofa just as he was, and inside of a minute he was fast asleep, and the cigarette was burning a hole in the mat.

Tinker rose quietly, trod it out, and chucked the remains into the fender.

Except for an occasional call on the telephone, a curt wire or two, and three spasmodic visits, two of which had been for steaming hot baths and a change of underclothes, the third for a packet of notes and a lens of a peculiar convex shape and size, Tinker had neither seen nor heard of Blake for seventeen days, and where he had been or what he had been doing during that time Tinker hadn't the vaguest idea.

There was something "big" on, that much he guessed, but having had his head snapped off for asking questions once he hadn't repeated the experiment.

The order to be awakened at ten sharp suggested that the "something big," whatever it was, was due to come to a climax that very night, especially when taken in conjunction with the fact that Blake had overhauled his revolver with special care, and had also pocketed some extra cartridges.

Tinker, who had had nothing to do for the past fortnight, except to kick his heels and dry nurse Pedro, determined that he wasn't going to be left out of it.

He rose silently, fished out his own revolver, which he always kept scrupulously cleaned and oiled, and helped himself to cartridges. Then, knowing by experience that when there was strenuous work on hand things like meals were apt

to be overlooked, he went to the small pantry, and helped himself liberally to ham, biscuits and cheese, and cold coffee.

Then he changed into an old suit, for it seemed likely that there were rough times ahead, and he also discarded his collar and exchanged his clean, boiled shirt for a flannel one of doubtful respectability. For there are many places where a clean collar may be almost the equivalent of a death-warrant or, at the very least, as dangerous as flaunting a red rag in front of an angry bull's nose. Having ruffled his hair down over his forehead, begrimed his face a bit, and rummaged round for a greasy old cap, his preparations were complete.

When he had finished in a leisurely way, and stacked a couple of sandwiches and a small electric-torch into his pocket, it was a quarter to ten.

He sat and waited patiently till the hour was up, for he knew Blake sorely needed every scrap of sleep he could get, and then he woke him sharp on time.

Blake sprang to a sitting position at the very first touch, and his hand dropped instinctively to his coat-pocket, which Tinker regarded as proof positive that the strain of the past weeks had worn Blake's case-hardened nerves to a raw edge.

"Time!" said Tinker, and as he spoke he heard a car draw up in front of the house, and give a warning "hoo!" on its horn.

Blake glanced at the clock and nodded.

"I'm ready," he said, stretching. "Get me that bottle of red stuff marked B, which is on the shelf in my room, and a glass!"

Tinker got them, and watched whilst Blake carefully measured out thirty drops, splashed in some water, and swallowed the dose, with a grimace.

"Beastly stuff!" he said. "Dangerous, too; but it'll keep me going."

Even as he spoke his voice sounded

stronger, and the weary, strained look faded out of his eyes.

He glanced sharply at Tinker, and noticed the alteration in him, hesitated an instant, and then shook his head.

"Better keep out of this, young 'un!" he said. "It's not your show, and it's too risky a gamble."

"I'm coming along!" said Tinker doggedly, for he saw refusal on Blake's face. The latter tapped on his teeth with his finger impatiently, and then shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well. I've no time to argue. Got a revolver?"

"Yes," said Tinker.

"Switch off those lights and come on, then!"

They went downstairs and entered the waiting car. Both car and driver were unknown to Tinker, but the man evidently had his orders, for, without a word, he slipped in his clutch, and the car slid eastwards.

Blake, who seemed lost in thought once more, sat huddled up in a corner of the tonneau, and Tinker, seeing that it would be hopeless to try and get him to talk, contented himself with making mental notes of their route.

They slipped through the heart of the City, absolutely deserted at that hour, eastwards again, past long stretches where the masts of shipping showed dimly against the night sky, across a dismal region of flat, marsh country, with only occasional buildings dotted about here and there, and so eastward once more along a broad, well-metalled road.

"Essex," said Tinker to himself. "We're heading for Southend, or somewhere in that direction."

The car swung inland away from the river, but still held its easterly course; and now and again they flashed through sleeping villages, some of which Tinker fancied that he recognised, the walls of the houses echoing back the roar of the exhaust.

The silent driver, whoever he was, certainly handled the car magnificently, and the rush of the night air was beginning to make Tinker feel drowsy, when, at last, they drew up about a mile beyond a small hamlet which Tinker fancied was Perlash, and the car came to a standstill.

Blake got out at once, and Tinker followed.

Then, for the first time, Blake addressed the driver.

"You'll pull into the field there, and wait for us until one hour after dawn. That should be, roughly, until five o'clock. If we're not here by then you know what to do!"

The man nodded, mumbled some inarticulate answer, and they strode off down the road. A couple of hundred yards away, however, they left it, and made their way over rough, tussocky grass.

There was no moon, but plenty of starlight, and it was tolerably easy to see their way in the open.

Tinker, sniffing, could smell the tang of salt in the air.

Presently the ground became marshy and the growth underfoot coarser and tougher. They were out on the "saltings," and Tinker could hear a curlew call, and once there was a flurry of wings as a couple of startled red shank went whirling by.

Apart from that there were no sounds, and the silence of it all, more especially Blake's silence, began to get on Tinker's nerves.

Once he stumbled over an unseen depression, the course of a little, dry, muddy rivulet, and Blake seized him by the arm just in time to prevent him from falling.

Again Blake said nothing, but the force of his grip made Tinker feel that he would have been happier if Blake had sworn at him fluently in half a dozen languages.

It would have been more human, somehow. But the night was still, without even a whisper of a breeze; and sound, as Tinker knew, carries a long way over those desolate coast-marshes when there is no wind.

They came to the edge of a muddy, winding creek, sunk deep out of sight beneath the general level of the swamp.

The tide was at three-quarters flood, and the waters looked like a dull, leaden sheet.

Half a dozen paces to their left a boat lay moored to a snag by a piece of sodden rope. It was snugly hidden in a little bay.

Blake got in, treading as carefully as a cat which fears to get its feet wet, and signed to Tinker to follow him and cast off, pointing down-stream as he settled himself in the stern.

Tinker obeyed, took the bow-thwart, and picked up the sculls. He noticed as he did so that the leathers had been carefully muffled with pieces of old sacking, sewed round with twine. The rowlocks, too, had been heavily greased.

The stream was running a fair pace, but he had to keep to the middle of it, for fear of hidden mudbanks, and also because in places it was very narrow.

As he rowed silently and carefully—for the creek wound in and out like a snake with a stomach-ache, and the course needed watching—Tinker puzzled over the extraordinary care with which the preparations had been made.

He remembered the inarticulate reply of the driver of the car, and in a flash it came to him that the man was dumb, and had been specially selected for that very reason. A dumb man can't very well gossip about things which don't concern him. Yet, even so, Blake had left the car a good mile and more from where the boat was moored, and Tinker felt sure that it could have been driven much closer to the spot if necessary.

Then there was the boat in which they sat, so carefully hidden away that even at full-flood she would have been invisible five yards off. The heavily-greased rowlocks, the muffled oars, even the very time and state of the tide, all made for secrecy.

He rowed steadily for as near as he could reckon twenty minutes or so, till suddenly Blake raised his hand as a sign to stop, and pointed to a small inlet on the left.

Tinker shoved the boat's nose into it, and she grounded on soft mud some three times her length from the main stream.

They got out, and here, too, Tinker saw signs of careful preparation. Bundles of tough grass had been pegged down into the mud, making a little causeway, and preventing them from sinking into the soft ooze knee-deep or more. Also, a stake had been driven in, screened by a thick tussock of grass, to which Blake made the painter fast. And Tinker noticed that the stake was a new one.

Another bare stretch of marshland lay in front of them—an islet some two or three acres in extent, Tinker guessed it to be, completely surrounded by water at full-flood. And, a hundred-and-fifty yards or so away there stood a ramshackle, broken-down-looking building—one of the derelict farms common to that lonely region, with some outbuildings, most of them roofless and windowless, clustered round. A more desolate spot it would be hard to imagine, or one more suggestive of ghosts of the bygone smuggling days. It had, in fact, as Tinker learnt afterwards, been a famous

smugglers' haunt in its time, with double floors between which half a dozen full-grown men could lie hidden in case of alarm, and a gruesome history of murders and unspeakable cruelties.

A bit of a moon came out from behind a low-lying bank of cloud as they watched, making the place more ghostly-looking still. And then Blake dropped flat, and began to crawl forward Indian fashion.

Tinker followed suit, and they wormed their way along until they had gained the shelter of an outhouse.

Here Blake paused for several minutes, listening intently and staring steadily up at the house.

Satisfied at last, presumably, that all was well, he rose, and, keeping in the deeper shadows, crept up to the wall of the house itself, with Tinker close behind him.

They were evidently approaching the place from the back, for soon they came to a small door giving on to a grass-grown courtyard.

The door was apparently bolted, and further secured by a stout, rusty chain and padlock, the latter being out of sight inside.

For this, too, Blake was in readiness, and had made his preparations before hand.

He produced from his pocket what looked like a piece of strong steel curved wire, which he slipped through an almost invisible hole in the woodwork. A steady turn of his wrist resulted in a faint grating noise and a fainter click, and Tinker realised that the upper bolt had been shot back. The lower one yielded to the same process, and then Blake fumbled for a moment with the chain. In a matter of seconds the outer end hung loose in his hand, and Tinker guessed that one of the links had been filed through previously, and the gap filled up with putty and rust-scrapings so as to defy any ordinary examination.

A push, and the door swung inwards. It was pitch-dark inside, and Tinker felt rather than saw that they were in a narrow passageway, with broken stone flags underfoot.

Somewhere ahead he could hear rats scampering away into safety, and the whole place reeked of damp and mustiness.

Blake closed the door behind them, without refastening it, however, and, groping in the darkness, caught hold of Tinker's hand to lead him.

A dozen paces further on they came to another door, secured only by a latch. They passed through it, and found themselves in a big room which seemed to run the whole height of the house. There were shutters over the windows, but they were warped and cracked with age and the stress of many winter storms, and a certain amount of moonlight filtered through the crevices.

Tinker noted that there was a certain amount of rough furniture in the place—a heavy table, on which stood what looked like the remains of a meal, a lamp, and some bottles and glasses; half a dozen chairs—two of them without backs—a rickety-looking couch, and other odds and ends.

This had evidently been the main living-room of the place when it was a farm. A huge fireplace occupied the greater part of one wall—a fireplace deep enough for half a dozen people to sit in on wintry nights—and four or five doors, exclusive of the one they had come in by, opened off in various directions leading to other parts of the house.

In one corner a rickety ladder-like staircase led to a single door high up in the wall, with a small, railed-in landing

set across the corner, and it was to this that Blake led him.

The door Tinker took to be that of some farm-servant's garret in olden times.

Having gained the landing, they settled themselves down to wait, and Tinker saw that their hiding-place had been well chosen.

They were entirely screened from view from below by the railing, which was of solid panelling, but in the latter there were several knot-holes, either real or artificial, through which they could command a view of the entire room below without being seen themselves. Their position was necessarily a trifle cramped, for the landing was narrow, but that was the only drawback.

Blake touched Tinker's arm and then the pocket in which he was carrying his revolver, and Tinker nodded. Then from somewhere in his disreputable old coat Blake produced a watch with a luminous dial, glanced at the time, and hit it away again, curling his long legs up and making himself as comfortable as he could, evidently prepared for a lengthy wait if need be.

Tinker could just catch the loom of him as he sat there with his back against the wall, but it was too dark up there to be able to distinguish his features.

A quarter of an hour passed—half an hour—and Tinker was beginning to feel as though he had been cooped up there for half the night. Even Blake had once or twice made a slight movement of impatience or anxiety, when, without any warning, there came an imperative knocking at the door.

Tinker had heard no sounds of footsteps outside—no warning sound of any sort—until he heard that thump, thump, thump! And, simultaneously, he heard Blake draw in his breath sharply, as though something had taken him by surprise.

From the far side of the door came a clamour of angry voices, raised in dispute. Then another voice intervened, cool and quiet, though the words, of course, were indistinguishable.

This was followed by the grating of a key in the lock, and the door swung open, showing a little group of figures against a patch of moonlight.

Then the door was closed again behind them, and they were momentarily lost to sight in the gloom.

"Where the blazes are the matches?" said a voice. "Hasn't anyone got a match?"

Then came the scrape of a match on a box, a tiny spurt of flame, and one of the men stepped forward and lit the lamp.

It had no shade, and the naked light threw grotesque shadows of the men on the wall.

There were four of them in all; and one of them who had thrown open his light overcoat was in full evening-dress. The rest were in tweeds.

"Where on earth has that fool Raynes got to?" said the tallest of the four. "He had special orders not to leave the place on any account—especially after that scare we had the other night."

The man in the overcoat pointed to the bottles on the table.

"He has his weaknesses," he said quietly. "Those shouldn't have been left here. He has probably wandered down to the creek somewhere, and fallen asleep like a fool. However, we can do without him, and we have no time to waste."

"We must get away from here, and we must get away to-night—for a time, at any rate. Later on, it may be safe enough, I dare say—and it is certainly convenient. But for the moment we shall do best to avoid it—for several

reasons. The people in the villages round about, for instance, have begun to talk amongst themselves. They're an ignorant, superstitious lot, and one or two of the men who have been out late after eels, or returning from fishing, have seen lights, and imagined ghosts, and nonsense of that sort. Not that they are likely to cause us any real trouble. Wild horses couldn't drag them here after dark.

"But then there is that man Blake. There are not many people whom I allow myself to get disturbed about, but, frankly, he has made me uneasy lately. That man has a brain, and it would give me a great deal of satisfaction to scatter that same brain with a bullet. The fellow is dangerous. Meanwhile, let's get down to business."

He produced a gold-mounted notebook as he spoke, and glanced down a page or two.

"These are the amounts of the various shares due to each of you, in the same proportion as before. I take it that that will be satisfactory?"

"Those shares I will pay you now in notes or drafts on my bankers, as you prefer. I have had a valuation made of the stones and other easily negotiable securities, which will be disposed of from time to time as the markets are favourable."

"They cannot, of course, remain here. We will transfer them to my car now, at once, and to-morrow early I will see to their safe disposal. They are all in specially assorted parcels. These I shall place amongst the silver in the plate-chests which I have in readiness, and they will be placed in the strong-rooms at the various banks at which I keep various accounts."

He broke off with a dry little chuckle. "I have always been an admirer of that system of the banking firms. You go to a bank, explain that you have left your house, or are going abroad, deposit your plate in a sealed chest at your bankers, because you are afraid of burglars. They give you a receipt for the chest—not the contents, mark you!—and you can be perfectly secure as to its safety. Nothing would induce them to examine the contents, and no one can recover the chest but yourself or your executors, on the production of the receipt and proper credentials."

"Amongst the plate you might have the Koh-i-noor, or any of the world's most famous jewels, and no one would be a whit the wiser. We, for instance, have amongst other things, as you know, the Temperley Emeralds, reputed to be worth fifty thousand. Though, of course, there will be a certain loss on them when the collection is broken up and sold piecemeal, as it will have to be. The Savera Pearls I have, luckily, been able to arrange for the disposal of intact through our agent in Bombay. They will eventually realise their full value and a trifle more, and several other of the bigger and more notorious stones Ramorez will take to Rio, where he can find a ready market, and avoid inconvenient questions."

"We will now get the box transferred to my car. It is essential that I should be back in town as early as possible, before there are many people about. You others will disperse as arranged, and enjoy a well-earned holiday until you hear from me. If there is any need to communicate with me you will do so through the usual channels. For my own part, I shall take a rest, enjoy a little trout-fishing, and amuse myself by playing the part of the benevolent squire amongst my particularly dull and foolish country neighbours."

He turned to the tallest of the four. "Here is the key of the outer cellar

door, Morton. The word for the combination of the inner one is 'Silex.' I changed it myself the last time we were here."

"Please oblige me by bringing up the case. It is the third on the left as you go in, and is labelled 'Clay Pigeons,' with the name of some firm of gun-makers, which I have momentarily forgotten. It is quite a light weight."

"Leave the doors open after you as you return, and remove the combination padlock."

"If anyone should be inquisitive enough to examine the place during the course of the next few days—and I fancy that someone will—I wish them to find everything open and above-board, you understand?"

"A few empty wine-cases, some old cartridge-boxes, and odd-and-end litter—just what one would expect to find left behind in a barn of a place like this, which someone has hired as a temporary shelter for the rough shooting hereabouts."

"Raynes must be found, too, and left in charge before we go."

"He knows nothing, and, whatever questions he may be asked, he can merely say that he is paid a few shillings a week and pickings to look after the place."

The man addressed as Morton took the key, and hurried out through a door on the left, switching a pocket-torch as he went.

Tinker, craning his neck till it ached, to get a squint through his bit of a peephole, a jagged oval about an inch long, where there had been a knot in the wood, caught a glimpse of him as he vanished out of range, and above the shuffling and scraping of feet below, he caught the sound of a soft, oily creak, and he knew what that meant, for it came from close beside him, and he had seen Blake oiling the lock-action of his Smith & Wesson only a few hours ago.

He slipped his hand into his own pocket, to make sure that things were handy, and waited, tense and expectant, as a terrier waits at a rat-hole.

It is just at moments like those that things become almost microscopically clear. The light was bad and uncertain, in spite of the fact that the lamp was shadeless, and what light there was was patchy. For instance, he could almost detect the smudgy patterns of the tweeds worn by two of the men, and he could see the glister of the two pearl studs in the shirt-front of the man who seemed to be the leader of the party, as he bent over his little gold-mounted notebook and fiddled with a pencil, for he was in evening-kit.

Then the door was closed again behind them, and they were momentarily lost to sight in the gloom.

He could even see the carefully-kept hands, and note a plain gold-mounted "scarab" ring on the little finger of the left; but, by a trickiness of the light, he suddenly realised that he couldn't see a single one of the faces with any distinctness. This by sheer accident, and not by any design on their part.

One man, for instance, had his back turned fair and square. Of the second he could see little but the curve of the cheekbone, and jaw, whilst of the man bending over his notebook he could see, so far as the head and face were concerned, the top of a soft-felt hat, and precisely nothing else.

He was still worried about this, and peering through his peephole, when the tall man returned.

He was carrying a rough deal case, some two feet square, which looked as if it might have contained groceries. The lid of it even wasn't properly nailed down; in fact, it was about as disappoint-

ing and unsuspecting a looking thing as could well be imagined.

He dumped it down on the table, and the others crowded round as he prised open the loose lid, and pulled out a handful of straw and some old wine-bottle straw cases; from beneath these he pulled out a box of dulled steel, no bigger than an ordinary despatch-box.

The man who was evidently the leader produced another key.

"I wish you to satisfy yourselves that everything is intact," he said. "If you wish it, I will give you a formal receipt before taking charge of it. That makes me responsible. The receipt, of course, will be merely for a deed-box marked 'A,' and entirely non-committal should it fall into anyone else's hands."

He stooped to put the key in the lock, checked himself suddenly, and put his hand behind him, beneath his light overcoat.

"Someone moved up there," he said sharply, and glanced up at the ladder-like stairway.

Someone had moved, but it was neither Blake nor Tinker. The sounds came from behind them, from the little garret-room.

The door was flung open, and a tousled-haired, sleepy-eyed ruffian came lurching heavily out, blinking in the lamplight glare.

Tinker guessed that the man was the missing caretaker Raynes, even as the latter trod on his ankle, missed his footing on the steep stairway, and, with a yelp, went crashing down into the room below.

"There's summat up yonder," Tinker heard him cry out, and instantly a couple of shots came pattering against the woodwork.

"There's summat up there!" yelled the man again, half-dazed by his fall and the crash of the automatics.

The four men by the table had each pulled out a revolver, and the tall man, Morton, with an oath, sprang for the staircase.

Blake rose swiftly and fired on the rise. The man had already reached the third step when the bullet caught him in the shoulder, and he fell back with a dull thud cursing, his automatic escaping from his grip as he rolled along the floor out of reach. The leader, who seemed the least perturbed of the lot, raised his arm.

"Blake," he said sharply, for the light of the unshaded lamp shined upwards full on Blake's face.

He fired as he spoke, and Tinker heard the soft, unmistakable thud of a bullet striking flesh.

Blake reeled a little and drew a quick breath, as a man does when he suddenly pricks his finger, at the same instant his revolver spat venomously.

Tinker saw the spurt of orange flame leave the muzzle, and a splash of red appear on the white shirt-front beneath.

Thud, thud!

Blake reeled again, and gasped, and a third bullet went crashing into the woodwork between them.

Then Tinker fired in his turn, and one of the men cried out; but they were still three against his one, and the advantage of the light was with them, so Blake was supporting himself by clutching the flimsy barricade, badly hit, and making desperate efforts to raise his pistol-arm, which dangled helplessly by his side.

Tinker felt mad. Cooped up there they were an uncomfortably easy target, and there was no time to haul Blake into the shelter of the garret behind them, so he steadied himself, and did the one thing possible—he fired at the lamp and smashed it to smithereens, and instantly the whole place was plunged in dark-

ness, save for a streak of moonlight and a little red tongue of flame, which flickered along the course of the spilt oil towards the heap of straw on the table, and all the while the caretaker Raynes, scared out of his wits, was bawling like a stuck pig. In his other pocket Tinker had a whistle, which he clapped between his teeth and blew shrilly.

"The police!" yelled a voice out of the darkness and confusion below.

"The police—they've trapped us! Take the box, one of you! Don't forget the box, you infernal fools! Leave me alone, confound you; I can manage!"

The door was flung open with a crash, and there was a sound of stampeding feet.

The burning oil had reached the straw by now, and a blaze of red flame shot upwards.

Tinker waited no longer. He emptied a couple more chambers at random into the little knot of men at the doorway. A yelp told him that one bullet, at any rate, had got home somewhere, and he heard a man stumble. Then he grabbed Blake round the waist, and half-slid, half-fell down the rickety stairs, the pair of them landing in a heap at the bottom on top of the caretaker.

He picked himself up, and dragged Blake to his feet, making as fast as he could for the door by which they had entered. A bullet splintered the woodwork to his right just as he reached it, and another crashed through an upper panel of the door as he slammed it to behind him. Luckily, he had just stooped to get Blake on to his shoulders, so it missed them both clean. Then he went staggering down the dark passage, making for the open.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

At the Creek—Blake Explains—The Lone Game Begins.

THE fresh night breeze was welcome enough after the hot, stale air of the room, and the arid reek of burnt powder; but the going was rough, and Blake, who seemed to be unconscious, was a heavy dead-weight. But Tinker was in a desperate hurry, and that lent him a bit of extra strength.

He knew that his ruse of a police alarm couldn't deceive the men for many minutes, and that the chances were that they would soon be after him hot foot to prevent his leaving the island at all costs.

The dinghy was a hundred and fifty yards away, and the moonlight was painfully bright. Cover of any sort there was none for anyone but a man lying flat, and Tinker had no time for lying down.

He reached the boat at last, though he nearly came to grief, for one foot slipped off the little causeway of grass bundles, and plunged deeply into the mud. He wrenched it clear, however, with an effort, and, panting heavily, lowered Blake into the stern of the boat. The painter he hacked free with his knife to save time, and the tide swept her clear of the bank.

He got out the sculls, and had taken perhaps three strokes when bang went an automatic from the bank, and a bullet sang past his head.

A man was standing amongst the rough grasses not a dozen yards away, and was steadying himself for a second shot.

Tinker noticed that he was using his left hand, his right arm hanging useless, and recognised him as the tall man Morton, who had been winged on the staircase.

Tinker had placed his own revolver on the seat beside him, and, leaving go of

the scull, he snatched it up and fired. His shot and the man's second rang out simultaneously. Both were misses, for the light was tricky, and both of them had been running.

The tall man swore volubly, and leapt down the bank to get to closer quarters, and in so doing he made his last mistake, for the mud there was as soft as butter, ten or twelve foot of slimy ooze. It was for that very reason that Blake had made the causeway at the landing-place.

The man's jump plunged him in mid-deep, and he gave a cry of rage and horror. The moonlight was full on his face, and Tinker could see terror written large on it. His automatic had fallen from his hand, and he began to struggle desperately to free himself. This naturally caused him to sink deeper, and before the tide had swept the dinghy down three times its own length he was up to his armpits.

"Keep still, you fool!" said Tinker instinctively, and started to turn the dinghy upstream, for, however big a blackguard the man might be, he couldn't see him go to such a death without trying to help him. But here a new difficulty arose. The scull which he had let go to snatch up his revolver had been swept away by the tide, and was floating along a dozen paces ahead of the boat, and increasing the distance every second, and to work up against the rush of the tide with a single scull was a sheer impossibility.

The man saw what had happened. Tinker could read knowledge and understanding in his eyes, and then the fellow's nerves seemed to snap, for he was sinking fast, and he screamed—screamed as a wounded horse screams—and tangled up with his screams came a torrent of vile oaths.

The dinghy swept on, and suddenly the screams stopped short. The mud had reached the man's mouth, and as the tide-race swept the dinghy round a bend only his eyes and forehead were left uncovered. Tinker saw those eyes with the moonlight shining full on them, and, shuddering, he realised that he was in a cold, clammy sweat.

He worked the remaining oar frantically. The man was beyond all hope; but his cries might have attracted the others. It seemed hours to him before he reached the little bay from which they had originally set out and ran the boat ashore.

He lifted Blake out and laid him amongst the coarse grasses, and then, with a shove of his foot, he set the boat adrift again, to be swept away by the tide, lest she should advertise their whereabouts unnecessarily.

Having made certain that Blake was as right as could be under the circumstances, he started to run for the car as hard as he had ever run in his life, for he knew that he was too done-up to get Blake back to it single-handed.

He found the driver sitting on the step smoking a cigarette. The man might be dumb—as a matter of fact, Tinker found that his guess had been a correct one—but he was certainly quick to act, for he was on his feet whilst Tinker was still some yards away.

"Come!" gasped Tinker. "Hurry up!"

The man nodded, and ran back side by side with Tinker.

They found Blake just as Tinker had left him, and carried him to the car as quickly as they could.

Tinker got all the rugs he could, and they laid him on the floor of the tonneau. He was still unconscious, but breathing regularly, and didn't seem to be losing much blood.

Tinker moistened his lips with some cold tea, a bottle of which the driver handed to him, and propped his head up with one of the seat cushions.

"Home—quick! Drive like blazes!" he said to the man, who was cranking up his engine, and sprang into the front seat beside him.

There was plenty of moonlight now, and by the sky it would be dawn within an hour.

The car bumped into the road, and they were off, and the driver didn't spare her.

They had been racing along for perhaps twenty minutes, and were back on the main London high-road, where, above the purr and roar of the engine, Tinker's sharp ears caught another sound behind them, faint at first, but gradually becoming more distinct, and presently it resolved itself into the sound of another car going all out with an open exhaust.

It was a still night, dead calm, and sound at such times carries far. Tinker guessed the other car to be a good two miles behind them, and gaining perceptibly, though they themselves were doing close on fifty.

Now, people don't drive cars about the country during the small hours of the morning at fifty miles an hour without reasons of a very urgent nature.

Tinker leant over and shouted in the man's ear.

"There's something behind us. Ease down a bit, pull into the next narrow turning, and stop!"

The man nodded again, and about a mile further on switched off into a little leafy lane, pulled up short, and snapped out the lights, which were electric.

They both leapt out, and Tinker saw for the first time that the driver was armed with an old revolver, which he recognised as one of Blake's.

They hurried back to the entrance of the lane and crouched down in a dry ditch.

They hadn't long to wait, either, for they had barely taken up their positions before Tinker glimpsed the glare of headlights a bare mile away, and in not much more than a minute a big dark-blue car swept by them with a roar and a rush.

It passed so swiftly that they only got a fleeting glance at it, but that was enough.

A man whom Tinker had not seen before was driving, and there were three others in the tonneau.

They all wore goggles and masks, but the three at the back were unmistakable; and Tinker was pleased to see that two of them, at any rate, seemed to be in a bad way.

The man in the dress-clothes, his shirt-front hidden now by his driving-coat, sat huddled up in one corner, half supported by one of the others, who had a bandaged arm, and the third seemed to have all his work cut out to support himself in his seat, and his face looked white and drawn with pain.

The precious box was invisible. Probably it was hidden away in the bottom of the car.

Tinker waited a full five minutes to let them get well ahead. It would have been useless to attempt to follow them along country roads at that time of night. They would have been spotted in the first couple of miles. Then they backed the car out of the lane and headed westwards once more.

Tinker was well satisfied. The men had not separated according to their original plan. The shooting had upset their arrangement. Also, they were heading back to London as hard as ever they could go.

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It was a bright, warm summer's dawn when they reached Baker Street once more. London was still asleep, and they passed no traffic except some belated market-carts.

Tinker opened the front door with his key, and between them they carried Blake up and laid him on the sofa.

Immediately this was done the driver vanished, having refused to accept anything but a handful of cigarettes.

Tinker got on to the phone at once, and, after a little delay, succeeded in getting through to a doctor who lived close by—a friend of Blake's, and a close-mouthed Scotsman who could be trusted to say nothing, and who would have shown no surprise if he had found a couple of murdered bodies in the room.

He turned up in ten minutes or so, gracefully attired in an ulster over his pyjamas and a pair of brilliant red morocco slippers; but, having had an inkling from Tinker as to the nature of the trouble, he had brought a bag with everything necessary in it.

The first thing was to carry Blake to the bed-room at the back. This they did, and stripped him. Then Tinker left the doctor to his own devices and went back to the sitting-room.

He was dog-tired and very hungry; so he helped himself to some dry biscuits—the nearest thing handy—and stood at the window munching them absent-mindedly enough, when suddenly he heard the hum of an approaching car.

It was still unreasonably early, and, blinking sleepily, he peered out.

As he did so a long, low-bodied, dark-blue car swept slowly by, and in the tonneau sat a solitary figure all huddled up in a heavy motor-coat, with a soft hat drawn well down over his eyes, and as he went by he stared up at the windows.

Tinker could not see the man's face, but he realised who it was in a flash—the man in the dress-suit and the blood-stained shirt.

He leapt back, but instinctively he knew that he had moved too late, and that the man had recognised him; and Tinker said a little swear-word all to himself, for he had undoubtedly given away a point in the game.

At the same time he couldn't help feeling a certain sneaking admiration for the man's grim tenacity of purpose.

Wounded though he was—presumably badly—and certainly in pain, having got rid of his two companions, he had still had grit enough to order himself to be driven past Blake's house in the hope of discovering something, and he had succeeded.

He had seen Tinker at the window, and would know for certain that if Tinker was there Blake must also have got away and managed to reach home. In which case, and after what had happened, it occurred to Tinker that those rooms of theirs might become extremely unhealthy in the course of the next few hours.

Just then the doctor came in.

"I must get back," he said cheerfully, "or I'll be taken up by the police as a wandering luny if they find me hopping about in these pyjamas."

"He'll do," he went on, with a backward jerk of his thumb towards the bedroom door. "I'm asking no questions; but he's managed to get himself considerably shot up."

"I've taken out two bullets. The other wound was merely a nasty graze in the fleshy part of the arm. But it will be days before he can think of getting about again—weeks, perhaps. There's no fever, and he's got the constitution of an ox, though he does play

the fool with it by not getting a proper amount of sleep. I've given him an opiate which will keep him quiet till mid-day, anyhow. You're looking like a pretty bad imitation of a ghost yourself! Get to bed, confound you! I'll be round between twelve and one."

Tinker locked the door after him, yawned desperately, toppled over on the sofa, and was fast asleep before the doctor had slammed the front door to. Pedro was roaming about somewhere in the place on his "lawful occasions," and was an extremely effective and reliable burglar-alarm.

By the time the doctor returned Tinker had wallowed in a tub and was dressed and cleaned-up once more. And Blake had just woken up with a villainous taste in his mouth, the result of the opiate, and in a still more villainous temper, because his plans had accidentally miscarried.

"During all the time I've been watching that place," he said bitterly, "not one of the crowd has ever entered that infernal garret at the top of those stairs. I've spent hours in it myself. Once I was there for a whole day and a night. How was I to guess that that drunken villain Raynes would crawl up there last night, of all nights, to sleep off his liquor? It just shows one the importance of never neglecting any detail, however small. I did glance into the room as a mere matter of form, but the light was bad, and I suppose the fool had rolled under the bed. I ought to have searched the place thoroughly, and hit him on the head, or roped him up into a neat parcel and gagged him. Then we should have bagged the whole crowd of them. Instead of which he came blundering over our feet, fell on his silly head, and gave the alarm by squealing as if he was being murdered. I wish someone had murdered the idiot!" he added viciously.

"I don't know what you're raving about," said the doctor; "but if you don't shut up and keep quiet I'll wash my hands of you. You'll be down with a bad go of fever, with a temperature chart like a bad sketch of the Italian Alps, and you won't be able to murder anyone except yourself for a couple of months to come! Don't be a bigger fool than you can help, and let's feel your pulse. Humph! I thought as much. I'll give you another dose of morphia unless you behave with moderate decency, and then you'll wake up with a nasty, dark-brown taste in your mouth, and a tongue like a mangy cat's skin, and feel sorry for yourself."

"One moment," said Tinker. "There's something I must tell him. He's got to know it—it's important—and after that I'll be as silent as an oyster, if you like."

"Fire ahead, then!" grunted the doctor disgustedly.

"You know the man in the dress-clothes—the chap you potted, and who seemed to be the leader?"

Blake sat up in bed with a start and a grunt of pain.

"Brandt! Yes. What about him? Quick!"

"He knows we're back here," said Tinker. "He looked in a pretty bad way himself. But he had himself driven past the house in his car—the same car he was using last night—and, by bad luck, he spotted me standing at the window, staring out; and, of course, seeing me, he'll guess that you are back here, too."

Blake whistled silently.

"I might have guessed it," said he. "That man's the devil! When was this? Give me details!"

"It was when the doctor was in here tidying you up. I was looking out of the window, feeling pretty well done up,

when I heard a car coming along being driven very slowly. I wondered who could be indulging in joy-rides at that unearthly hour, and peered out. It was him right enough, all by himself in the tonneau. He was huddled up in a big coat, and a hat pulled down over his eyes so that I couldn't see his face; though he stared straight up here, and he saw me right enough before I could spring back. And a moment later he made a sign to the driver, and the car shot off down the road like greased lightning."

Blake smiled grimly.

"In that case these rooms are about as healthy as if they were packed tight with a brand-new consignment of cholera bacilli. Doc, you're pretty lavish with your advice, take a dose of mine. Stuff your blessed thermometers and things into your bag and hop it, and when you've hopped it just forget that you've ever been here or ever heard my name, or you'll be hitting up against trouble too big for the average-sized man; and it wouldn't be fair to drag you into it. The only medicine or tonic I have any immediate use for at present is a loaded revolver tucked nice and handy under my pillows. They've put my right arm out of action temporarily, but I can shoot tolerably decently with my left."

The doctor scowled.

"If you weren't a sick man I'd punch your head for that," he said. "You're an obstinate mule, and when you die I'm looking forward to a chance to examine your brain! When do you expect—er—visitors?"

"I don't think they'll have the cheek to show up before dusk."

"You'll have papers to destroy, and things to see to?"

Blake nodded, and the doctor glanced at his watch.

"Couple of hours be enough? Good! I run a private nursing-house just outside town as well as my practice here. I'll send a closed car and a couple of attendants to fetch you at half-past three sharp. I'm not going to have my patients interfered with by any pack of blackguards in the country. So that's settled! Tinker and that four-legged lump of gluttony you miscall a dog can shift for themselves, I suppose? Anyway, I'm not going to be bothered with them. Confound it, I'm half an hour late on my rounds! Half-past three sharp, mind you, and my men will have orders to cart you off whether you're ready or not. So-long!"

"Heap good man, that," said Blake. "Start the fire going, Tinker! There are a lot of things to be burnt."

"Yes," said Tinker drily; "and there are a heap of things I want to know before I'm turned loose all by my lonesome on a cold and unfeelin' world. Who's the blighter with the big car and a weakness for shooting first and askin' questions afterwards, to begin with? Who are the crowd of beauties he was preparin' to hand out a few stray millions to in cheques which might or might not be honoured? And why has he got agents in Bombay and Rio—and Upper Tooting into the bargain, so far as I know? It seems to me that whilst you are guzzling on chicken-broth and invalid port, or iced bubbly-water, in a select nursin'-home amongst the pine-trees—they always advertise them like that—that man and his pals may be worrying quite a heap about my postal address, and trying to send me pretty little presents of the explosive order. For the past few weeks you've been about as talkative as a hen lobster, and as full of information as a gramophone with a broken needle. My ears are open, Lord High Muck-a-Muck!"

"Then if you shut your mouth you won't feel such a draught," said Blake, with a twisted grin.

"Ever heard of this man Brandt?"

"Nope!" said Tinker cheerfully.

Blake looked over him carefully from head to foot.

"Then you are as big a fool as you look! I was quite peevish once when a man told me so. I'll stand him a dinner and apologise when I can get about."

"I'm glad the doc is fetching you at half-past three," said Tinker. "I hope he'll put you in an asylum. You've just two hours more to be insulting in—fire ahead! Pedro and I can bear it."

"Otto Brandt," said Blake, "is, I think, the cleverest man on both sides of the Atlantic in many ways—and that's saying quite a great deal in his favour—and mentally, if not physically, he is a big man. The nearest approach to the ideal criminal I've come across since Marston Hume's time. He does things in a big way, pays his men liberally, and doesn't bother about the small fry except to see that they are decently treated. If one of them gets into trouble, a sharp

grounds, where he goes in for fishing, local charities, and is regarded as a pillar of the Church. The countryfolk swear by him, in fact.

"His real name—and it took me months to find it out—is Otto Baptiste Voltrek, and by birth he is a mongrel of curious mixture. He was born in Chicago, with a German as a father and a Finnish mother, and was educated at a German-American University. His habits of method come from his father, but his brains and his infinite patience and capacity for waiting come from his mother, and are purely Oriental. A Finn, as you know, is a Mongolian."

"There's a strong strain of the Chink in them, and a Chink with a grudge or a grievance will spend ten happy years planning out exactly how he is going to kill a man with most satisfaction to himself."

"Palaver done set' for the time being. Get busy with that fire. Burn all the notes and papers in the drawers of the writing-table, except those in the little box marked 'A,' and a bundle which are packed away between the



Tinker moved towards the open door, his automatic ready.

solicitor is paid a high fee to defend him. If the solicitor fails to get his man off, the family is well looked after, and when the fellow comes out of prison he gets a good lump sum to help him along. If he is injudicious enough to talk, he—well, he meets with a surprisingly sudden fatal accident, so sudden that he has no time to explain the why and the wherefore, and also he has no idea of where or from whom his punishment or reward really come. He has probably never seen Brandt; or if he has, knows him only vaguely as Mr. Smith, or Robinson, or some equally useful name.

"Brandt—Otto Brandt—is a man of fifty or thereabouts, who would have made an excellent chief of police for Mexico, say, because he has no scruples, and is not in the least particular about the methods he uses.

"Here he calls himself Brand—Lucius Brand—and, apart from a comfortable house out Hampstead way, he has a small country place, an old Elizabethan farmhouse, with a stream running through the

leaves of an old salmon fly-book in the creel in the wardrobe. Those are the really important ones, and I'll take them along with me. Smash up the ashes of the burnt papers thoroughly, and as soon as you're through come back."

Tinker spent a busy half-hour. It isn't easy to destroy a number of papers so thoroughly that no tell-tale fragments remain, and to make assurance doubly sure he poured some concentrated nitric on what was left.

He was barely through with the job, and it was barely a quarter-past two by the clock, when the doctor returned and flung open the sitting-room door without ceremony.

"You're a nice pair of thieves," he said angrily, "and my professional reputation will go to the dogs if I'm seen talking to you!"

"We don't pretend to be respectable," said Blake meekly. "What have we stolen this time? Please tell us!"

"A lot of my valuable time, for one
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thing, and my peace and quietness for another!

"I went back home to catch some luncheon, and found a man waiting in my consulting-room, who explained at some length that he was extremely ill, and gave me a beautiful text-book description of his symptoms—had 'em off as pat as a medical student cramming for an exam. But he was a rotten bad liar, as I found out after asking a question or two. Said 'Yes' to every suggestion I made, and by doing so owned up, if he had been speaking the truth, to being in an advanced stage of arthritis, cerebral meningitis, and a tinge of loco-motor thrown in. No; not being exactly a fool, I didn't tell him that he was a direct descendant of Ananias. I examined his reflexes, gave him a lot of trouble, and packed him off with a prescription a yard long, which he probably tore up as soon as the front-door was closed behind him. His real disease was an unholy curiosity as to the easiest way over the wall of the little strip of garden which the consulting-room overlooks, and the exact position of the window-fastenings. On the opposite side of the street was a man pretending to sell bootlaces and collar-studs. He might possibly succeed in selling an penn'orth in a year in a quiet by-street like that, but his main interest seemed to be centred in the front of my house; and further along there was a man, dressed up like a fashion-plate, spending a happy morning staring into the window of Herbert's, the printer-seller."

Blake gave a dry chuckle.

"They're not losing any time, are they? I told you to run away and forget all about us. Seriously, this is our trouble, and I'm not going to have you dragged into it. It wouldn't be playing the game."

"Trouble be hanged!" said the doctor. "I've plenty of my own without asking for a fresh supply. I've two men waiting down below and a closed car, and they're coming up now to fetch you, and a pretty object you'll look if there's anyone watching, which I suppose there will be. Wait a minute whilst I get three bandages on you, and one round your head as well. That's it! Now take a swig of this stuff. It'll knock you out for twenty minutes or so, and when they hoist you into the car you'll be the best imitation of a dying man you've ever seen!"

"I'm not going to your house with the probability of getting it wrecked for you inside the next twelve hours!" said Blake firmly.

"Who said you were? You're going straight from here to St. Sophia's Hospital. It's the handiest. They take surgical cases, and the house-surgeon is a pal of mine. I've just been speaking to him on the 'phone."

"You will be carried in by the front door, looking like two penn'orth of nothing, straight down a corridor, and out by a private door at the back, where another car will be in waiting, and in that you will be driven straight to the nursing-home."

"If anyone calls and makes tender inquiries after you at the hospital they will be given ample information, which will be entirely composed of lies, and visitors will not be allowed. Now, buck up, and swallow this!"

Blake did so, with a wry face.

"Pretty beastly mess, isn't it?" grinned the doctor. But Blake couldn't answer. He had fallen back amongst the pillows. Three minutes later he was in the ambulance.

"Ring me up between eight and nine U.J.—No. 849."

to-night," said the doctor to Tinker. "Give me an address that will find you for the next few days, and I'll let you know the news."

"Right-ho!" said Tinker. "I shall be out of this in an hour. This man Brandt's methods seem a bit too thorough and comprehensive to be wholesome."

Left to himself, he completed the destruction of any loose notes or papers of importance, packed a couple of bags, which he sent in a cab to the cloak-room at Victoria, made certain that he had plenty of ready-money, and left the room in charge of the landlady, with directions to keep all letters and telegrams till sent for, and the gratuitous information that he was going down to Devonshire for a holiday.

As soon as the messenger returned with the cloak-room luggage check he left the house with a suit-case and Pedro, and as soon as he left the house and saw that two men at the corner broke off a heated argument to follow him, he realised that an outside dog like Pedro was a distinct embarrassment under certain circumstances. He was lucky enough to secure a wandering taxi, drove to Victoria, and took a train to Mitcham. There he left Pedro with a friendly butcher, whom he had once done a good turn to, took a roundabout country walk, returned via Charing Cross, and left by way of the hotel annexe, which is the other side of Craven Street. Blake having told him that Brandt had a house at Hampstead, Tinker betook himself to Chelsea, considering that under the circumstances it was as well to be particular about his neighbours. He found some rooms over an empty shop, with a private side-entrance. The previous tenant had been an artist, who had considerably left his furniture behind him in lieu of rent. About the only thing capable of standing the strain of being sat on with comparative safety was the model throne, always excepting the floor. But Tinker wasn't particular, and the fact that there were three separate ways of getting in and out of the place in case of need settled it.

One could leave either by the side-door, through the empty shop, or by a kitchen door at the back, across a small yard, over a wall, and through a strip of ground at the back of a block of studios.

There was a shilling-in-the-slot gas-meter, a public telephone-office close by, and a shop where one could buy things ready-cooked, so Tinker decided that it was homely. By the time he had done a bit of shopping it was dusk. He rang up the doctor, and left word that his address was 1A, Bowerton Street, and went back to his new home, tired and hungry, for he had had a long day.

He was munching cold ham and glancing at the evening-paper when he remembered, with something of a shock, that Blake had had no time to give him any instructions, or to tell him anything beyond the barest facts about Brandt, whilst as to the rest of the crowd he knew practically nothing.

"It can wait till to-morrow," he said to himself philosophically, with a yawn, and promptly fell asleep over his paper.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Messenger in the Night—The Cipher Book—Further Information—An Urgent Summons—Murdered.

TINKER woke in the darkness. There had been sufficient twilight to read by when he dropped off, and he hadn't bothered to light up. He was chilly and stiff and sore, and he had a crick in his neck where his head had lolled over sideways. But

those minor details didn't worry him. The fact that did was that when he woke up he woke so suddenly that he found himself already standing on his feet, and grasping for the nearest thing handy in the shape of a weapon, which happened to be a revolver in his pocket. His surroundings were unfamiliar—he had forgotten for the moment that he had started housekeeping on his own account—and, above all, the room had an unfamiliar smell.

To a sensitive nose every house—in fact, every room—has its own individual smell. Some reek of stale tobacco, not always necessarily a man's room; some of scent, the scent of flowers, or otherwise; some of escaping gas, or stale water, or cooking, or faulty drainage, or furniture-polish. This particular room smelt of emptiness, for want of a better term—emptiness and shut-upness—in spite of the fact that the window was wide open at the top.

Tinker remembered having been told by the agent's clerk that the erratic artist-man had shaken the dust of the place off his feet some three weeks before, and that no one had bothered to go near it since, which might possibly account for the "emptiness" of the odour, but certainly did not, for the fact that he was instinctively standing erect on his feet, fumbling for a weapon of defence.

As his wits cleared he realised that, in spite of the open window, everything was extraordinarily still. There wasn't a sound of traffic, not even of a solitary footfall; yet he could have easily tossed a biscuit out of his window into the main thoroughfare, from which he argued that some faint noise must have wakened him.

He listened intently, quietly slipping out of his boots as he did so; and then he heard. From somewhere down below came a faint rushing noise as if a couple of healthy mice were scampering about amongst some waste-paper. This was varied by a faint, metallic clink.

Tinker remembered that there was an ornamental iron letter-flap set into the door, and also that not five paces from the door there was a street lamp. Also he guessed that it must be between two and three in the morning.

It was just possible that some ingenious person was trying to draw back the bolts of the door top and bottom by means of a stiff piece of wire shoved through the letter-flap.

Tinker had been particular about shooting those bolts because the lock itself was a cranky, flimsy affair that anyone could have negotiated with a bent hairpin.

He went cautiously down the uncarpeted stairs in his stocking feet, treading on the edges of the steps close to the wall side. Even so, they creaked abominably, which at that particular moment was a distinct nuisance.

Though he trod as lightly as a stalking cat, they creaked and sent out little, sharp, snapping noises which seemed to echo through the empty house like revolver-shots.

He registered a mental vow that he would take particular care that the next rooms he rented should be in a house with a stone staircase.

When he reached the narrow hall-way, he was even more particular to keep close to the wall, for it's dead easy to shoot through a letter-box.

There was a faintlight over the door, through which came a sickly gleam from the street lamp.

Someone was endeavouring to make funny noises through the letter-flap with the aid of what looked like a crumpled edition of an evening newspaper.

Tinker sidled along gingerly, and then immediately beneath the letter-box on the floor he caught sight of something which glistened. It was an ordinary white metal safety-pin of a fair size.

He picked it up and hurried to undo the bolts of the door, for that safety-pin was as good as a passport.

It was an old arrangement between himself and Blake that when it was necessary to exchange messages or notes which might be tampered with or falsified, the proof that they were genuine and bona-fide could be placed beyond all doubt by the messenger producing, or the note containing, an ordinary white metal safety-pin of a particular size, with a tiny piece of white thread caught in it.

It was an excellent safeguard against traps, for should an enemy happen to get one of those same pins into his hands it was twenty to one that he would consider its presence accidental or of no importance, and a hundred to one against his guessing its true significance.

Again he would have to be an abnormally cute observer to note the exact size of the pin used, and the method of attaching an almost invisible fragment of white thread.

In the genuine article these two never varied. Tinker opened the door, and in the light of the gas lamp saw a man in a blue serge suit with a short, thin, torpedo-cut beard, with a pair of steely grey eyes which seemed to be able to look right through you.

He was breathing a trifle hard, as though he had been running.

Tinker looked at him sharply, but was certain that he had never seen him before.

The man, for his part, glanced swiftly up and down the street.

"Slipped 'em, I think," he said, with a chuckle. "I'm from Blake. My name is Tempest. You're Tinker?"

Tinker led the way to the room above, and his visitor perched himself on the corner of the table, which creaked ominously under his weight.

"I've been trying to catch Brandt tripping for months, just as Blake has, but I never had a scrap of luck till a short time ago, though, goodness knows, I'd been working hard enough for it!"

"Brandt and some of his boss crooks had got a code cipher, as I knew, and I arranged for an unforeseen little accident for Mr. Brandt."

"I had just three minutes by the clock in which to fix things—and I fixed them. I've got his code-book in my pocket this minute. I hope he doesn't know it. If he does, I'm not wasting good money on premiums for a life-insurance policy, though I don't mind a gamble as a general rule. However, I may be a bit of an optimist, and I'm hoping that he doesn't know where his precious book has got to, or even that he's lost it."

"I had to lie doggo for a bit, of course, and to-day I was just starting out to see your friend Blake, and tell him the glad news, when I got word from him through a doctor-man that he had been considerably shot up last night, and asking me to hang on for another message."

"Just before midnight the doctor-man

rang me up on the 'phone. He seemed to be in anything but an amiable temper, by the way, gave me your address here, told me that Blake had left you in charge of things, that I'd better come and have a 'pow-wow,' and shut off with a bang which must have nearly broken the receiver."

"For a doctor he had a wonderful command of swear-words. I hung round until little old London seemed to have gone to sleep, and then came on here."

"Two of 'em did get on my trail. One was watching the hotel, and saw me come out. I wasn't quite sure about him at first, of course. I'd certainly never seen him before, and my memory is a regular photographic exhibition when it comes to faces. So I twisted and turned about, and led him a bit of a dance. But when I found that though I didn't know him, he must very certainly have been supplied with an excellently accurate description of myself, for he was still following in my wake, I just gave him the slip, and went on my way rejoicing."

"However, I began the rejoicing act just a trifle too soon, for in less time than it took me to walk a mile, there was another beauty lagging on, stopping when I stopped, and turning when I turned. I didn't look back. I just led him down a slummy little side-street heading East, waited for him in the shadow of a doorway round the first corner, and as he came along, hurrying up a bit for fear of missing me, I caught him under one ear."

"It was a neat shot—lifted him clear off his feet, and from the crack with

GREAT FOOTBALL COMPETITION!

£150 MUST BE WON!

SCOTTISH AND IRISH READERS MAY ENTER! NO GOALS REQUIRED!

ONLY 12 MATCHES! NO ENTRANCE FEE! SEND AS MANY EFFORTS AS YOU PLEASE.

In consequence of the Cup Tie games, it is not possible to set the usual competition this week. A prize of £150 is, however, offered for forecasts of matches given below.

In "Answers" dated January 24th and 31st, and "All Sports Weekly," dated January 24th, a prize of £2 a week for life, or £1,500 cash, is offered for forecasts of fourteen Cup Ties. "Answers" is on Sale Monday, January 19th and 26th, and "All Sports Weekly" on Friday, January 23rd.

On this page you will find a coupon giving twelve matches which are to be played on SATURDAY, JANUARY 31st. We offer the sum of £150 for a correct or nearest forecast of the results of all these matches.

All that the 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.

Coupons, which must not be enclosed in envelopes containing efforts in other competitions, must be addressed to:

FOOTBALL COMPETITION No. 11A,
Gough House, Gough Square, LONDON, E.C. 4.

and must reach that address not later than THURSDAY, JANUARY 29th.

This competition is run in conjunction with "The Family Journal," "Woman's World," "Boys' Realm," "Marvel," "Cheerio!" "Answers' Library," "Home Companion," and "All Sports Weekly."

RULES WHICH MUST BE STRICTLY ADHERED TO.

1. All forecasts must be made on coupons taken from this journal or from any of the issues of the above journals which contain the announcement of the competition.
2. Any alteration or mutilation of the coupon will disqualify the effort.
3. If any match, or matches, on the coupon should be abandoned or full time is not played for any reason, such match, or matches, will not be taken into consideration in the adjudication.
4. In the event of ties, the prize will be divided.
5. No correspondence may be enclosed with the coupons, and none will be entered into. Neither will interviews be granted.
6. 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.

7. Any entries received after THURSDAY, JANUARY 29th, 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.

U.J.

Football Competition No. 11A.

Date of Matches, SATURDAY, JANUARY 31st.
Closing date, THURSDAY, JANUARY 29th.

MILLWALL	v. CHELSEA
FULHAM	v. BRENTFORD
STOURBRIDGE	v. SHREWSBURY TOWN
STOKE	v. DARLSTON
FLEETWOOD	v. PRESCOT
GLOSSOP	v. ECCLES UNITED
ALBION ROVERS	v. KILMARNOCK
CLYDE	v. ABERDEEN
DUMBARTON	v. MOTHERWELL
DUNDEE	v. CELTIC
FALKIRK	v. RANGERS
HEARTS	v. RAITH ROVERS

I enter Football Competition No. 11a in accordance with the Rules and Conditions announced, and agree to accept the published decision as final and legally binding.

Signed

Address

11A

which his head hit the kerbstone I should say that he'll rest there until he's found by an early milkman.

"Of course, they may have been a third of 'em, but I'm betting against it. Still, one can't most always tell.

"Anyway, it's too late to go into things to-night. You look pretty well fagged out yourself, and I'm as tired as the proverbial dog. We'll go into the palaver to-morrow, and then, of course, it's up to you to do what things you fancy best. For my own part, I shall clear off early after that. The crowd know me, and I don't want to add to your troubles by hanging round here longer than is necessary—actin' like the bait in the mouse-trap as it were. So I vote we turn in.

"If you think that sofa affair with the three legs will stand my weight, and you don't happen to be usin' it yourself, I'll borrow it for an hour or so. But if you're bunking there yourself, well, the floor's quite good enough for me.

"Nice safe place the floor; you can't fall off it, you see—that is, unless you're a specially clumsy idiot!"

Tinker offered him his own bed, but Tempest, his guest, wouldn't hear of it. So, the sofa, having proved too risky an experiment, Tinker left him comfortably tucked up on the floor, with his coat for a pillow, and the venerable tablecloth as a blanket.

He was sound asleep almost before Tinker had left the room. It was barely half-past seven when Tinker crept in again, carrying his boots in his hand, to get some stray silver which he had left on the mantelpiece, and not wanting to arouse his visitor.

Tempest hadn't moved, apparently, but a board creaked faintly under Tinker's foot, and in about one-third of a second by any stop-watch he found himself looking straight down the barrel of a snub-nosed revolver, whilst Tempest, propped up on one elbow, was peering at him over the business end of the barrel.

"Oh, it's plain you, is it?" said Tempest. "Sorry, old man, but I'm apt to be a bit peevish and jumpy in the mornings. Nasty habit of mine, of course; but I've had experiences. A barefooted Malay johnny bringin' in one's tea with a wiggly kris hidden inside his baggy trousers, and all that sort of thing, you know. My mistake!"

"Talking of tea," said Tinker, grinning, "I just looked in for some loose change to go out and catch some milk and odds-and-ends for breakfast with. I don't think the last tenant was accustomed to having the local tradesmen calling for orders. He was an artistic genius, and I fancy the only orders he ever gave or received—especially the latter—were committal orders."

"Right-ho!" said Tempest. "I'm not the man to stop anyone from getting me a breakfast. I'll have another cat-nap, and get the fire going before you're back."

Tinker scooped up the loose change, slipped on his boots, and made off. It was only when he got to the bottom of the stairs that he found he had left the latchkey behind him. It didn't seem worth while going back for it. It was a bright, sunny morning, and plenty of people were astir, so he just slipped down the catch and closed the door, so that he could open it again by merely turning the handle.

As a matter of fact, Tinker was delayed over his shopping by several of those little trifles that always seem to crop up when one is in a hurry.

Some of the shops weren't open, and he had to try at three places before he could get any milk. Consequently nearly

U.J.—No. 849.

an hour had elapsed before he finally returned. The door was still on the latch as he had left it. But half-way up the stairs he stopped and sniffed.

There was a curious acrid smell in the place, a smell which there was no mistaking—burnt powder.

In a flash he had set down the milk-jug, dropped his parcel, and made a leap for a sheltering angle of the stairs, and at the same time he whipped his automatic out of his pocket.

"Tempest!" he called. "Tempest, are you there?"

There was no answer. The whole house was so still that he could distinctly hear the buzzing of a bluebottle somewhere on the landing above him.

"Tempest!" he called again.

Still no answer.

Tinker's face set hard, and very cautiously he began making his way up the stairs, sidling along close to the wall, his automatic ready, with the safety catch pulled back.

The very silence might in itself be a trap.

The men who had done for Tempest, for by this time Tinker had no illusions about the fact that Tempest was dead—murdered, might very well be waiting somewhere up above there to include him in the bag.

As he crept upwards he cursed himself inwardly for not having gone back for the key, instead of leaving the door on the latch.

Had he done so, and shut the door in the ordinary way, the men, whoever they were, would have been compelled to pick or force the lock, and Tempest's sharp ears would have heard them at work even if he had been asleep.

He reached the landing at last.

The sitting-room door stood wide open, one of its panels splintered, and the place was a shambles.

There was blood on the floor, on the walls—everywhere.

The decrepit sofa had finally collapsed. The model throne was overturned, and a chair had been broken into fragments.

Tempest must have made a tremendous fight of it against odds, and on the floor lay Tempest himself, shot to pieces.

Two bullets had caught him in the face, another had shattered his arm. A glance was sufficient to show that the bone was broken above the elbow, and he had two other bullet wounds in the body.

He was partially stripped, too, his clothes having been taken off him. Even his boots had been ripped up. Some crumpled Treasury-notes had been impatiently flung aside, and some loose coins had rolled about the floor in all directions.

The killers had not been after a handful of money. Tinker guessed at once that it was the code-book they had murdered him for. The question was, had they got it?

Or had Tempest, even in his last moments, been too clever for them? Too resourceful?

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Finding of the Book—Tinker Quits—A Message from Blake—On the Trail Again.

AFTER that one quick comprehensive glance at the room, Tinker, mindful of possible danger lurking about, made a complete survey of the house, and assured himself that the men had really gone.

Then he bolted the side door by which he had entered, saw that the others were securely fastened, and returned to the sitting-room.

To search Tempest would, he knew, be

useless. The others had done that too thoroughly, and so spared him that gruesome task.

So he sat on the edge of the overturned model throne and tried to puzzle things out.

The first question that struck him was why weren't there other bodies about beside Tempest's?

Tempest had been armed. His revolver lay on the floor not a yard from him. He was probably a dead shot, and the room itself bore ample evidence that he had put up a tremendous fight. Supposing he had had three assailants the odds were that he would have bagged at least one. And to have got a dead man away in broad daylight through a thoroughfare like the King's Road unnoticed must have been well-nigh impossible.

He could understand the fusillade of shots having failed to raise an alarm. The house, to begin with, was a completely detached one with no party walls, and in the street below the rumble of motor-buses and heavy vans on the asphalt road, the banging of belated shop-shutters being taken down, and the general roar of the traffic might easily have drowned the sound of firing, but the getting away of injured, possibly dead men, was another matter.

He sat there for some twenty minutes turning things over in his mind this way and that, and occasionally glancing in the direction of Tempest, over whose shattered face he had quickly laid a clean handkerchief. Though it was still early in the morning, the day promised to be stiflingly hot. There wasn't a breath of wind, though he had flung open a couple of the dust-begrimed windows to let out the reek of the burnt powder. And somewhere or another that infernal bluebottle was buzzing round with a maddening, monotonous sound. And when it momentarily ceased from time to time the death-like silence of the place was even still more irritating.

Tinker, as he sat there trying to think coolly and collectedly, would cheerfully have given a sovereign to have been able to find that fly and stamp on it.

And he had to think—to force himself to think logically and quickly.

Blake was down, Tempest was dead, and quite apart from the main issue of cornering Brandt and his crowd, Tinker badly wanted to level up the score a bit.

He was very much fighting a "lone hand" now, and he meant to make good.

"Method," he said to himself, recalling one of Blake's favourite maxims. "Method is the only thing to pull one through; mere guesswork is no bally earthly!"

He got up slowly, walked across to where Tempest's revolver lay, and picked it up.

Even as he did so something in the balance and feel of it struck him as queer, though under more ordinary circumstances he might not have noticed anything.

It was a squat, short-barrelled, heavy-calibred thing—a .45, and probably, having a four-inch barrel, would throw villainously high. But at close quarters, and firing on the rise, it was certainly capable of stopping anything smaller than a young elephant most effectively. A single squint at the barrel itself told him that it certainly hadn't been fired since it was last cleaned.

There wasn't the faintest trace of soot-ing round the muzzle.

He broke the breech and jerked out the cartridges, and in a flash he understood why.

The little brass cartridges were bulleted and capped, and in the centre of each coppered cap was the dent of the

hammer, but they had been tampered with.

The cordite had been carefully emptied out of each one.

There were marks on the soft lead of the bullets, showing teeth dents.

Each one had been wrenched out by a man with strong, even teeth, the charge thrown away, and the bullets replaced.

Tinker could picture it all. Tempest leaping to his feet at the first alarm, blazing away wildly, and each fall of the hammer being answered by the futile snap of the copper cap.

He was going to fling the thing away in bitter disgust, when he glanced at the palm of his right hand, which had been clasped round the butt.

It was sticky and red with blood which was certainly not Tempest's.

Tempest, finding that he had been tricked, had used the butt, and used it to some purpose, for, mingled with the blood on the grip, there were broken hairs of at least two distinct colours.

before, that there were a few faint blood-smears here and there on the bare wood-work.

Opening the side door, he went out into the street, which was a cul-de-sac a hundred yards or so long, and closed at the far end by a row of studios. Consequently, though close to the main thoroughfare, scarcely any traffic passed up or down it.

Close to the kerb opposite the door were motor-tyre tracks plainly visible in the dust, and a little black pool of lubricating-oil. At one point the tyre-marks were noticeably bulged and flattened.

Tinker inspected them, and nodded his head. These marks simplified matters a great deal, and the story they told was easy to read.

A motor had driven up—a motor of the trade type, with a covered van behind instead of a tonneau—and it had contained four men, possibly five, for a driver might have been left in charge.

A busy, bustling hour of the morning

had the whole of Brandt's powerful organisation at the back of them.

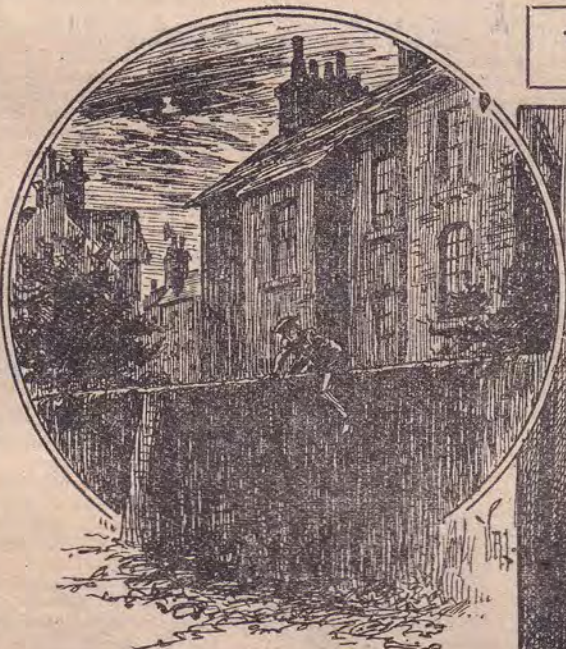
Tinker went back into the house feeling a bit sick and helpless. He was beginning to feel the meshes of an invisible net closing round him, as it were.

That same net which had rendered Blake powerless for the time being was entangling him, too. Look which way he would, he could see no way of making progress—rather the reverse. He had done nothing yet. He had made no headway. He hadn't a notion as to where the precious code-book, which might be a key to many difficulties was. Tempest might have contrived to hide it somewhere, or, again, his murderers might have recovered it, and so attained their object. And there was another danger to be faced. He was alone in an empty house with a murdered man, and the police might very reasonably suspect him of complicity in the crime, and, to prove his innocence, might involve dangerous

OFF

INTO
THE
NIGHT

OFF



Tempest waited in the shadow of the doorway.



Again Tinker could picture him, shot through the body, mad with rage, using the ugly, heavy little thing—his only weapon—as a club, and going on fighting until that final blast of lead shattered the life out of him.

Tinker laid the revolver on the mantel-piece, wiped his hands, and examined the floor. At the end of ten minutes, he had satisfied himself that there had been at least four men in the place, apart from Tempest, for amongst the bloodstains and dust, and on some torn paper in which he had wrapped his purchases of the day before he discovered four distinct types of footprints.

He wasted no time on measurements or notes or diagrams.

It was sufficient to know that four men had been employed by Brandt on this particular occasion, and those four might have been any of forty, or four hundred, belonging to the crowd, for all he knew; the footprints wouldn't help him to identify them any more than the fact that one of them had fair, reddish hair, and another black, as proved by the revolver-butt.

He went slowly down the stairs again, and noticed what, in the excitement of the moment, he had failed to notice

had been purposely chosen. Any noise of firing or a struggle would be more likely to pass unnoticed then, and a commonplace, everyday object, like a motor delivery-van, would have aroused no suspicion, especially as it was sure to have had the name of some fictitious firm painted on it in bold lettering.

Even had it been necessary to force the door, a couple of men in shirtsleeves, or possibly baize aprons fiddling about with another standing by, would have looked harmless enough.

Afterwards, to rush a couple of wounded into the van, and lay them on some sacking, and drive slowly away, would have been as simple as falling off a log.

They could have taken the body of the dead man with them, too, had they wished; but, being dead, they had no further use for him—he would have been an encumbrance—so they had left him lying there, feeling secure in the fact that they had left no tangible traces behind them, and that, in any case, they

delays and complications just when time was likely to be of vital importance.

Again, had Brandt's agents guessed at his presence there in the house? They had been following Tempest, and, so far as Tinker knew, Tempest only.

He himself had taken pretty elaborate precautions to shake off anyone who might possibly have been shadowing him before coming to Chelsea at all.

On the other hand, after finishing off Tempest, one of the men, at any rate, had probably made a search of the house, however perfunctorily, and must have seen the rumpled bed in which he had slept, and other signs that somebody other than Tempest had been in the house recently.

They might even have seen him leaving the place and go and do his early shopping, though Tinker fancied not, for instinctively he had kept his eyes open for anything which looked suspicious, both coming and going, and had seen nothing.

By the time he had reached the sitting-room door once more he had already decided on two things. First, that he must leave the place within an hour; and secondly, that, by hook or by crook, he must communicate with Blake through the doctor.

To stay on in the house for another night, he was convinced, would be to go out of his way in search of trouble.

He sat down once more on the overturned model throne in that gruesome wreck of a room, and forced himself to do some hard thinking, and, to start with, he tried to put himself mentally in Tempest's place.

Tempest, asleep or awake, had been on the alert. He knew he was carrying his life in his hands, and scented dangers everywhere, as proved by the quickness with which he had rolled over and covered Tinker, when the latter had crept into the room early in the morning. That being so, Tinker argued that he might possibly have hidden that code-book away somewhere at the first opportunity, rather than risk having it stolen from him, and his eyes wandered round the room looking for a likely hiding-place.

He was staring at the fireplace, when suddenly he remembered Tempest's last words: "I'll get the fire going before you're back," and he had certainly started to do so in Tinker's absence, for the rusty grate was filled with some newly-laid firewood, hazzled off an old box-lid with a knife. Scraps of paper had been stuffed in beneath these, and some knobs of coal, of which a bucketful or so remained in an old packing-case, which the artist had apparently used as scuttle and coal-cellar combined, had been placed on top of the sticks. But it was not these which brought Tinker to his feet with a bound. It was the gleam of a safety-pin, with a little bit of white thread attached, thrust into a crumpled piece of paper in the bottom of the grate, and protruding from between the bars.

Now that was the pin—the password! as it were—which Tempest had slipped to him through the letter-box of the door the previous night as a guarantee of good faith, and when Tinker had gone into the room early in the morning to get some change off the mantelpiece, he remembered distinctly having seen that pin lying where he had placed it, beside the coins, and had left it there.

He stooped and snatched the crumpled soot-smear'd paper from between the bars, detached the pin, which he shoved into his pocket, and smoothed out the paper. On it, hastily scrawled in pencil, were these words:

"Legless—clear out—they're in—"

The last word trailed off into an ominous red smudge.

Tinker read the message over twice.

"Clever—oh, deuced clever!" he muttered to himself, as he grasped the meaning of the scrawl.

Tempest had been laying the fire, and probably had not heard the men coming till they were half-way up the stairs.

He had already hidden the book—probably overnight—in case of accident. It was imperative that Tinker should know where.

He had snatched the piece of paper at random, scrawled his half-finished message on it, fixed in the pin, knowing that Tinker would recognise it as a sign, and stuffed paper, pin, pencil, and all, into the grate; and it must have been such a close call, that he had received his first wound before he could even rise and face his enemies—the red smudge showed that.

U.J.—No. 849.

They had probably fancied that they had caught him unawares in the act of lighting the fire.

He had turned swiftly and faced them—faced them with a revolver which had been rendered as useless as a child's pop-gun, so far as firing went. And then the final struggle had begun, and in the end they had riddled him through and through. But he had saved the book, and warned his friend, and no man could have done more.

"Legless" was a word easy enough for Tinker to guess the meaning of. It could refer to nothing but the decrepit, broken-down sofa. It was an old horsehair-covered abomination at best, and in his preliminary examination of the room Tinker had noticed a few torn shreds of horsehair amidst the general litter, but had paid no heed to them, considering them to have been merely frayed out by long and constant wear.

Now, however, he realised that they must have been pulled loose, or worked loose, by Tempest in his efforts to hide the book.

Tinker felt about diligently with his fingers, especially round the underside of the venerable ruin, until finally he discovered a small oblong lump.

He cut a slit in the under webbing with his penknife, and drew out a leather-covered book—an ordinary small diary with a flap—the type one can buy for a couple of shillings or half-a-crown at any stationer's.

He opened it, quivering with excitement. On the flyleaf, neatly written in violet ink in a small, precise hand, he read the inscription:

"Lucius Brandt, Fernside, Mallam, Herts."

He turned over several pages rapidly, and his heart sank. There were just the few casually pencilled jottings which one might expect to find in the everyday diary of a man who keeps one in rather a haphazard fashion, as the mood takes him.

There was jottings of tradesmen's bills paid, petty cash expenditure, and little notes such as "Dinner at the vicarage at 1.30," "Library meeting," "Mr. S. and his wife to dine," "Professor Martin—very interesting," "Farlow's about new silent reel." There were many gaps, sometimes for days; sometimes for as long as three weeks together there would be no entries at all. Still, in its own irregular fashion, it had been kept up to within a fortnight or so of the current date.

Had not Tinker known that that harmless-looking, ordinary little book had cost at least one man his life and endangered perhaps half a dozen more, he would have pitched it out of the window in disgust. As it was he sat and puzzled over it, trying to pick the secret out of it, first in one way, and then in another.

He knew quite a lot about sympathetic inks and ciphers and so forth, and tested for them as best he could.

Finally, he took the book and held it up close to the window in the strong glare of the sunlight, examining each leaf singly, and then he discovered the trick of it. One of the simplest tricks of all in reality, yet one of the most effective. Under the strong light, in the thin, hard-surfaced paper he could just detect a series of little, irregular lines, like faint water-markings.

Ninety-nine people out of a hundred seeing them—and the chances of even that contingency were small—would have taken them for some peculiarity in the making of the paper. Tinker just happened to be the hundredth.

The moment he saw those marks he knew how they had been made. The leaves had been carefully damp'd one by

one, laid on a hard, smooth surface like a steel plate, and written on with an agate style just as one would write with a pencil, only with a slightly increased pressure. When thoroughly dry the marks would have escaped notice even under a magnifying-glass, but when held up to a strong light, such as sunlight or an incandescent, and moistened slightly up to a strong light, such as sunlight or even by breathing on them, they became as easy to read as the markings on a five-pound note.

They formed a code—just like any commercial telegraphic code—where one word may stand for a sentence, or a whole string of sentences.

He picked a word here and there at random.

"Altitude," for instance, translated into "dangerous to communicate direct—await personal message."

"Ambiguous," read "keep out of the way. If your assistance is required will inform you through usual channels."

The code words were placed in alphabetical order for convenience sake, and some of them suggested ominous possibilities.

"Safeguard," as an example, stood for "—must be got rid of at all costs. He is not to be trusted. Use what methods you prefer so long as they are final. Imperative; no delay."

Tinker made a mental note to remember "safeguard."

"Tact," again, stood for "You will see that he (or she) is silenced within twenty-four hours from now. Arrange fatal accident. You are authorised to draw necessary funds to ensure success."

These were but a few words picked out of a code containing, perhaps, fifteen hundred or a couple of thousand, covering all emergencies. The code itself was probably only in the hands of some half-dozen or, at most, a dozen of the leaders—Brandt's lieutenants.

Sent by ordinary telegram they would, naturally enough, be taken for a private code wire sent by some mercantile or Stock Exchange firm.

Tinker closed the book carefully, opened his shirt and undervest, slipped it in next to his skin, and buttoned himself up again.

He glanced at his watch. It was later than he thought—nearly eleven. Silently he bent down and touched Tempest's dead hand.

"I'll square accounts for you if I can, old man," he said in a whisper.

Then he took his hat and went downstairs, leaving the jug of milk and the things he had bought for breakfast untouched.

The only things he did take were the notes on the floor—Tempest's notes. There were some five-and-twenty pounds' worth, and, as Tinker knew, five-and-twenty pounds may make all the difference between success and failure in an emergency—and Blake could make them good to Tempest's people, whoever they were.

He took the keys, and left the house by means of the yard at the back and over a wall. Then by devious ways he headed for Victoria Station, which, with its many exits and entrances, is a good place to shake off undesirable followers. Also he wanted to use the telephone badly.

He rang up the doctor, and after some delay got through to him at his nursing-home. Blake, he heard, was quite conscious, and much better after a good night's rest, though very weak, and, as a concession, he was allowed to speak to him over the private extension line.

Briefly and concisely he told his news from the moment of his leaving Baker Street up to his discovery of the code-

book an hour before, and gave details of Tempest's tragic end.

Blake was much distressed, for, though he and Tempest rarely met—which accounted for Tinker not having known him—they had been collaborating privately for months past.

"Listen!" said Blake, and his voice sounded thin and tired across the wire. "You did quite right to get away. You couldn't have helped poor Tempest by staying, and you might have imperilled everything by hanging on."

"You have the house keys, you say, of the place in Bamerton Street. Put them in a registered envelope, address it to the doctor here—not to me, on any account—and send them off at once by postal-messenger."

"I'll ring up Wentworth of Scotland Yard, get him to come here, and tell him the essential facts about Tempest, and he can see to things. So you needn't worry about being interfered with by the authorities."

"As to the code-book, you can't bring it or send it here, much as I want to see it; and, though it's a risk, I think you'll have to keep it about you for the present. You may need to use it at any moment."

"Try and rub out the pencil-writing, make a few scrawled entries in ink yourself, and get a new cover for it—anything you like so as to disguise it as much as possible from the original."

"I'll manage to get something into the evening papers about the Bamerton Street affair which will put them off the scent a bit. Now, you've two courses open—either you must wait a day or so until I can get about again, which may be fatal, for Brandt has had a thorough scare over that affair at the marsh, and, of course, he will know of the loss of the code-book by now, which means that unless we—or, rather, you—act quickly, he'll have managed to dispose of the whole of those jewels, break up the entire gang temporarily, perhaps, for a year or so, and the work will have to be begun again from the beginning. Or you can risk your luck and go down to Fernside on your own and try and arrange for a big coup before he can dispose of the jewels."

"I am certain that he will be there, not at Hampstead. Down in Hertfordshire he is Mr. Lucius Brandt, a highly-respected philanthropist, with a score of reputable people to testify to his good character—the idiots! Consequently, he always goes there when there are signs of trouble."

"It's a risk, and a big risk; but it's a big stake, too, and I've never known you balk at a risk yet, old man."

"The place is a pretty, old Elizabethan farmhouse—or dower-house—and outwardly it's a picture of ideal comfort and simplicity; but inside, if you're an uninvited guest, it's about as healthy as the inside of a black panther's cage."

"I've been there half a dozen times, but I've never let the cage door shut on me. Be careful that you do the same."

"It's the easiest place in the world to get into—no burglar-alarms or patent traps. You'll probably find a window or so left open for you this warm weather. But, once inside, 'ware wire.' If it's easy to get into, it's the very deuce to get out of. Your big chance is that Brandt, like myself, is considerably shot up, and so mayn't be in top-hole form."

"You'll try it? Good! And good luck to you, old chap!"

"One word more! Keep an eye on the village telegraph-office. He may be receiving code wires, and you may get a chance to learn something."

The wire buzzed suddenly, and Tinker realised that he was cut off.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Tinker's Triumph.

TINKER left the telephone-box and made his way to the messenger office just outside the District station.

From there he despatched the keys of Bamerton Street to the doctor, together with a short, non-committal note.

Having done this, he bought himself a diary at the nearest stationer's of the same shape and size as the code-book in his pocket.

It was one of the slip-in variety, the type in which the diary itself is held in its place in the cover by means of two flaps.

He chose one with a dull brown leather cover because the original was vivid scarlet morocco.

Then, realising that he had had no breakfast, and that it was already luncheon-time, he turned into a restaurant and ordered himself some food.

Whilst the waiter was getting it, he set to work out his code-book, having been careful to choose a table in a secluded corner.

His first care was to tear out the fly-leaf, with Brandt's name and address on



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it, written in ink, and also to remove the corresponding page at the back.

Then, with a piece of indiarubber, he went carefully and patiently through the book page by page, obliterating every pencilled entry.

He took especial pains over this, for pencil-marks are really harder to thoroughly eliminate than ink, and are apt to leave traces easily discernible under an ordinary strong glass.

It was a good half-hour before he finished the work to his own satisfaction, and he had got to the coffee stage of luncheon before he had finished.

Then he sent the waiter for pen and ink—one of those scratchy pens peculiar to restaurants—and wrote on the opening page in a sprawly hand:

"R. Beele, Hoxton."

On odd and end pages here and there he wrote in the same sprawly hand a series of elaborate photographic notes.

Exposure times, atmospheric conditions, nature of subject, and background, and so forth.

In fact, the code-book became transmogrified into the note-book of a young, enthusiastic, and extremely amateurish photographer.

Slipped into its new cover it was completely camouflaged.

Tinker, after examining it critically, felt moderately sure that he could have left it on Brandt's own writing-table without much fear of its being recognised.

He paid his bill, and left the restaurant by a door at the opposite end to that by which he had entered. Experience had taught him to select a restaurant with at least two doors whenever possible.

Then, jumping on a motor-bus, he made his way towards Euston.

At a shop near the station he bought a second-hand, well-worn, and rather shabby-looking bag, an overcoat, a cap, and some other odds and ends, and caught the two-fifteen to Mallam.

There were few passengers, and he managed to get a third-class smoker to himself.

Mallam is about a thirty-five minutes' run from the terminus, and when he left the train there it was a very different Tinker to the Tinker who had got in.

In fact, he was no longer Tinker, but Robert Beele, of Hoxton, an enthusiastic photographer, as witnessed by the cheap, second-hand camera which he carried ostentatiously slung over his shoulder in a brown canvas case.

There were other alterations, too. As Robert Beele, he was rather a pasty-faced, weakly-looking individual, who peered at people through large, steel-rimmed spectacles, and was almost devoid of eyebrows.

A few touches with a razor had effected that change. His mouth was slack-looking, the lower lip drooping pendulously, and the cap and ill-fitting moustache completed the transformation. His own hat lay somewhere along the line fifteen miles away.

Tinker was an adept at disguises; but, except on very rare occasions, he never wore anything that could slip, or come off, at a critical moment—wigs, or false hair, or things of that kind. But he was an expert at changing his facial expression, his walk, and the way he carried himself and dressed the part to suit the character. There is no more effective manner of disguise.

For the moment he might have been a very junior warehouse clerk, say, enjoying a brief photographic holiday on the cheap. Shortsighted, earnest, and about as brainless as they make them.

He walked into the village, and secured a cheap room over a small sweet-shop. The room had a window looking out over the back, with a convenient water-but below, making it easy to get in or out at any time of the night without risk of being seen. Also, the old lady who owned the shop was conveniently deaf. All of which facts Tinker was at pains to ascertain before clinching the bargain.

Having regaled himself with a cup of tea, he took his camera and went for a stroll in the direction of Fernside.

A woody hill overlooked the old, red-brick building and its grounds, and at the foot of this ran the trout-stream, across which were two rustic bridges leading to the hill itself.

Tinker made his way to the innermost edge of the trees, and prepared for a long watch.

He was anxious to learn all he could about the trap, as Blake and Tempest had both called it, before putting his head into it, as it were.

It was already getting dusk, and before he had been squatting there twenty minutes he saw lights springing up in the lower windows, the blinds of which, by the way, were left undrawn, so that he got a clear view of the interior of the rooms on that side.

In what was evidently the kitchen—the first room to be lighted up—he saw an elderly woman busy with some cooking over the stove.

Then a man, dressed like an ordinary indoor manservant, lighted other lamps and carried them to the other rooms, passing along a central passage apparently, for Tinker lost sight of him from time to time. In fact, he was only visible when he appeared in the rooms themselves.

Tinker had a pair of powerful prism binoculars in his camera-case, and he focused these carefully on the man.

He was certain that he had never seen him before, and, though he was probably, almost certainly, a member of the gang, he was a stranger.

He was dark, with sleek black hair, and a sallow skin, lithe, and, though not powerfully built, he moved easily and quickly, and had something of the Italian about him.

"Dago," was Tinker's comment.

The first room to which lamps were carried was evidently a dining-room, for through the uncurtained windows Tinker could see a table laid with snow-white linen and shining silver, and a sideboard on which was displayed more silver and some decanters, whilst a log fire was burning cheerfully in an open grate.

There was no one in it when the man came in with the lights. Red-shaded they were, and he placed one on the table, the other on the sideboard, gave a quick look round, as though to satisfy himself that everything was in order, poked the logs on the fire, and then went out.

A few minutes elapsed, and then he came back again down the passage, carrying two more lamps, the lights alternately appearing and disappearing as before. This time he passed by the dining-room to another which lay beyond on the right.

Tinker focused his glasses again. This room was fitted up as a study or library, for he could see bookshelves running round the greater part of the walls, and here, also, a log fire was burning, with a big sofa drawn up in front of it.

The centre of the room was occupied by a big writing-desk, and on this the man placed one of the lamps, carrying the other to a small table at the head of the sofa.

Then suddenly a figure, hitherto invisible, rose slowly from the sofa, and, taking the servant's arm for support, moved to the chair in front of the desk, and sat down.

He was facing the window and Tinker as he sat, and the lamplight shone full on his features.

Tinker's heart missed a beat.

The face was the face of Lucius Brand. There was no mistaking it.

He looked pale and worn and older than before, it seemed to Tinker, studying him through the glasses.

He had been pretty hardly hit, as Tinker knew, and, though he wasn't using it, a sling made of a black silk scarf hung round his neck.

He leant back in the chair a trifle wearily, and made a sign to the servant. He was speaking. Tinker could tell that by the movements of his lips, though, of course, he could form no idea of what he was saying.

The man went to a cabinet and brought out a glass and a small medicine bottle, from which he carefully measured out a dose. He appeared to be pouring it out drop by drop.

Brand took it and swallowed it at a gulp, making a wry face, but it seemed to have an extraordinary effect on him. His weariness seemed to drop from him U.J.—No. 849.

like a cloak, and he pulled some papers towards him, and began to read them eagerly, the other man standing at his side.

Presently he beckoned, and the two seemed to be going through the papers together, for they constantly gesticulated, and once Brand brought down his fist with a bang on the table.

After a while the dark-haired man left, and Tinker didn't see him again, for he didn't return to either the dining-room or the kitchen.

He was getting cold and cramped himself, and as there seemed to be little gained by staying longer, he closed his glasses, slipped them back into his camera-case, and made his way back to the village.

He was perhaps a couple of hundred yards short of his rooms over the sweet-shop when he had a phenomenal stroke of luck.

He met a telegraph-boy sauntering leisurely along towards him, going in the direction of Fernside.

The boy hadn't spotted him, and instantly Tinker wheeled, and began to slowly retrace his steps.

He let the boy overtake him.

"Wire for Mr. Brand?" he said casually.

The boy nodded.

"Fernside," said he.

Tinker glanced at him out of the corner of his eyes, and sized him up as a bit of a fool, and a lazy one at that.

"I'm going that way," he said. "Got any use for five bob?"

The boy stared.

"What you gettin' at?" he asked.

"Know that foreign-looking servant chap up at Fernside?" said Tinker.

The boy nodded.

"Paulo, or something like that, 'is name is. I know 'im, stingy beast! Mr. Brand's all right; gives me a bob or sometimes 'arf-a-crown when I go up; but that Paulo just spits an' barks at you if you give 'im a message!"

"He's a rotter!" agreed Tinker. "I'd like to play a joke on him. Look here! Lend me your cap and coat for a bit, and take mine. I'll take the wire up, and be back in ten minutes if you wait here, and I'll give you five bob."

"Five bob! Here, I say, you'll take the wire, straight, or I'll get the sack!"

"He shall have it right enough! I promise you that," said Tinker. "And if there's an answer I'll bring it back and give it to you, honour bright!"

"It's a deal!" said the boy, and in the dusk they hurriedly exchanged caps and coats.

"Give me ten minutes—a quarter of an hour at most," said Tinker quickly, "and keep out of sight behind the hedge till I come back. We don't want anyone else to know, or we'd both get into trouble," he added warningly. "By the way, what's your name?"

"Simmons," he answered.

"Right-ho!"

Tinker sprinted off, his borrowed official cap cocked jauntily over one ear, buttoning up his tunic as he went.

As soon as he was round the second corner he stopped and produced a small torch, which he had smuggled into his trousers-pocket unobserved by the boy.

He flashed this on to the envelope under cover of the hedge, and noted with satisfaction that the flap of the orange-coloured envelope had been hastily and carelessly stuck down, and the gum was still moist where it adhered.

Now there are some twenty-three ways of opening an envelope in such a manner that the rightful recipient doesn't know that it has been tampered with. Tinker knew them all, and about five more on

top of that. But this particular case was absurdly simple.

The message, as he had fully expected, was in cipher, and he had the key to this cipher in an unobtrusive-looking photographic notebook.

Naturally he couldn't waste time—precious minutes—in decoding it then, so he copied out the message with the stub of a pencil on the back of an old envelope, which he folded carefully, and slipped into the inner side of his boot. Then he revealed the flap and replaced his glasses on his nose.

Eyes are perhaps the most tell-tale features of all, and though, so far as he knew, Brandt had never had a square look at him, there's a lot of truth in the old saying that "more people know Tom Fool than Tom Fool knows."

He strolled up the short, curved drive, leading to the house, which he had mentally nicknamed the Trap, whistling a music-hall song between his teeth to do away with any idea of secrecy, and gave the official rat-tat-tat on the knocker with unnecessary energy and a grin.

The manservant, whose real name, by the way, was Paolo, not Paulo, and who was a mongrel Corsican by birth, opened the door.

He looked at Tinker, and scowled.

Tinker, for his part, blinked at him placidly through his cheap, plain-glass spectacles.

"What you want?" asked the man surly enough.

Tinker produced the telegram from his wallet.

The man took it, glanced at the envelope, and then, with a curt order to wait, hurried away.

He was gone for some considerable time, and Tinker guessed that he and Brand between them were busy decoding the message.

He would have given a good deal to have seen them at it, and to have had a chance to inspect the other rooms, but he dare not risk it. The man Paolo might return with an answer at any moment.

He dare not even move forward into the square hall, on the threshold of which he was waiting, for there was mud on his boots, and he would have left tracks on the polished boards.

One thing, however, he could and did do. He searched the front door itself and the windows on either side of it for burglar-alarms or traps of any kind, and failed to find them, though he searched thoroughly and with expert knowledge.

Both door and window fastenings were old-fashioned and common-place to a degree.

There weren't even shutters to the windows.

Tinker was pretty positive that he could open either of them, and be inside the place in a matter of something less than a minute.

But the next second he remembered, with a little thrill of apprehension, both Tempest's and Blake's words of warning about the place.

"Any fool can get into it," they had said; "the trouble is to get out again!"

Tinker considered the possibilities, and made a mental note of the various doors and passages opening off the hall. Just then Paolo reappeared, with Lucius Brandt leaning heavily on his arm, and supporting himself with a stick in his other hand.

Tinker's heart gave a bit of a flutter as they moved slowly across the hall towards him, for he was conscious that he was standing in the full glare of the hall light; and Brandt's eyes, he knew, were as sharp as needles.

Still, there was no help for it. To have

attempted to step back into the shadow would have been to arouse instant suspicion. So he held his ground, touched his cap, and put on his most owlish expression, blinking through his glasses. His hand dropped casually to the little official leather satchel, as if in readiness for the reply he had been waiting for, and Lucius Brand would have had to be a thought-reader to know that it contained a forty-five automatic.

Brand favoured him with one sharp glance.

"A new boy—eh?" he said, with the faintest trace of a guttural accent. "You are not the usual messenger who comes here."

"No, sir," said Tinker. "You mean Simmons. I'm taking his place this evening, sir."

Lucius Brand nodded.

"Simmons. Ah, yes, that was the name! I only ask because this message is a very important business message. It is in a code, you understand, and it is necessary that the words should be spelt correctly. You had better see if you can read it properly."

Tinker took the forms—there were two of them, for the message was a long one—and, peering through his glasses, read out the contents, conscious that Brand was both watching and listening attentively.

"That is right," he said, as Tinker finished. "Here's a ten-shilling note. You may keep the change. But see that the telegram is sent off at once."

"Thank you, sir!" said Tinker; and, pouching the message and the note, hurried off into the darkness.

He found Simmons waiting for him, perched on a gate, contentedly smoking a Woodbine.

"Here's your five bob," said Tinker, "and here are your things." He handed them over, but the message and his automatic he had already deftly transferred to his trousers-pocket.

"Any answer to take back?" asked Simmons.

"You're tired—that's what's the matter with you, sonny," said Tinker, shuffling into his own things. "I took the message all right, and I'll attend to the answer to it. So-long!" And with that he was off. Suddenly he turned back, as a new idea struck him.

"Do you want to earn another five bob?" he asked.

Simmons nodded emphatically.

"Then go to bed and stay there. Cough or grunt, or pretend you've got influenza—any old thing you like—and keep in bed for twenty-four hours—till this time to-morrow night, say—and I'll give you the other five bob now, on one condition."

"What's that?" asked Simmons eagerly.

"Meet me just outside the post-office in half an hour's time, and then come in with me and tell the post-mistress that I'm a pal of yours—your maiden aunt, anything you like—and that I'm willing to take on your job till you feel better. Understand?"

"Yes," said Simmons, holding out a tentative paw.

Tinker showed him a couple of half-crowns, and slid them back into his pocket.

"They'll be waitin' for you outside the post-office in half an hour," he grinned, "so long as you do exactly what you're told."

Tinker hurried off, and went straight back to his rooms. Seated at a little marble-topped table in the corner of the teashop, he produced his notebook, the copy of the original telegram from the side of his boot, and the two forms of Brand's reply.

As Tinker worked them out they read as follows:

"Reported Blake not so badly hurt as originally believed"—Blake, by the way, was denoted as Zero in the code—"was taken to private nursing-home through the back entrances of hospital, and is now able to get about. Seen early to-day in car near Baker Street, with Lyndon of C.I.D. Further details as soon as possible. Telephone unsafe. Trunk calls may be tapped."

Tinker gave a suppressed exclamation of delight, for this was good news indeed.

Then he turned to the next. The two forms were given to him by Brand himself, and read:

"Message received. Imperative make arrangements at once. Personally unable to travel, warn all principals come here to-morrow. Have box here—unable to transfer to bank or negotiate for cheques. Arrive one hour before dawn, leaving cars at cross-roads. We then divide, as arranged. Other details verbally. Eliminate factor Zero if feasible. Urgent."

There was no signature, but the message was addressed to a man of the name of Marx, at a small and little-known Soho restaurant.

Tinker himself knew the place well. Outwardly it was commonplace enough, but there was a back-room with an exit through the cellars of which the public knew nothing.

Also, though the telegram was unsigned, the local postmark would be quite enough to identify the sender to any of the "principals."

Tinker hurried across to the post-office, and, with a glance at the clock to see that there was plenty of time for delivery at the other end, sent his own version of Brand's telegram in Brand's own code.

"Meet me Escalier Restaurant, 9.30 sharp, for settlement as arranged. Zero my personal affair. Imperative."

Tinker handed this over the counter, and scribbled another message hastily.

It was to Blake.

"B and B here. Others Escalier, 9.30, in back-room to-night, so arrange. I am going to try this end midnight."

B and B he knew that Blake would understand as Brand and Box, and midnight, he fancied, would be his best chance to break into Fernside. For, if Brand was expecting his confederates an hour before dawn, the chances were that both he and Paolo would go to bed early, and at twelve, or thereabouts, were likely to be very sound asleep. Tinker, for his own part, meant to get all the sleep he could, too. He had a couple of poached eggs and some cocoa, and went straight up to his room.

He knew that he could rely on waking at pretty well any hour he set his mind on, and there was the friendly water-butt to aid him on his way out of the window.

It was just half-past eleven as he slipped off the bed and started on his mission.

The window was even an easier job than Tinker had expected. There was the faintest click as he eased back the catch. So faint that even his sharp ears could hardly hear the sound. The sash moved smoothly, and the next instant he had shed his mackintosh outside, and was tiptoeing across the floor in golosh-covered feet.

The box was not in the hall, as he had hoped might have been possible. Obviously the next best place to try was the library. That lay down the passage on his left, he knew, and he moved along there, switching on his small torch as he did so to avoid blundering.

Here also there were the glimmerings of a fire, and a scent of cigar smoke hung in the air.

He glanced round the comfortably-furnished room, with its book-lined shelves, and then he gave a gasp—scarcely able to believe his eyes. For there, on the writing-desk, in plain view for everyone or anyone to see, was the steel chest. There was no mistaking it.

To the uninitiated eye it might have looked like a battered old tin deed-box of the type seen by the dozen in any lawyer's office. For it had been painted, or rather smeared over, with black Japan enamel since Tinker had last seen it, and the initials L. B. were stencilled on it in faded gold.

Tinker tested its weight. It was no tin. It was made of quarter-inch hardened steel, and the key was in the lock—a key with a little bone label attached to it bearing the single word "Private."

It was so obvious, so carelessly displayed that any casual visitor to the room would have passed it over unnoticed.

But Tinker just at that moment was fairly bristling with suspicion.

He knew that here was a trap.

He opened the window cautiously, and peered out. There was a bit of shrubbery on his left, not four feet away, and the shadow lay deep there.

Lifting the box, he balanced it on the sill, listened for a moment, and turned the key.

He caught a glimpse of unset stones, neatly done up and sorted out into different compartments, and then, as he raised the lid an inch or two higher there came an alarm like the whirr of a fire alarm—ringing and vibrating through the silence.

That was the trap.

He snapped down the lid, hurled box, key, and all into the densest part of the shrubs, slammed down the window, and latched it, and made a break for the hall.

The whirring of the alarm had stopped with the closing of the lid, and Tinker was just reckoning that he was safe away. He had raised the sash of the window by which he had entered a quarter of the way, when a bullet splashed into the woodwork within a few inches of his left ear.

It seemed to him a full second later that he heard the dull thud of the report, and a voice saying sharply, "Up!"

Tinker tried hard to think of a few adequate remarks, and while he was thinking raised his hands above his head at full arms-stretch for safety's sake, fingers splayed out.

He heard a man come padding softly across the floor of the hall behind him, and saw reflected in the window panes the glare of a powerful torch.

Deft hands ran quickly through his pockets, and relieved him of his automatic, loose change, and everything else, including the famous notebook.

Once when he moved a trifle a small, cold ring of steel was pressed tightly against the back of his neck.

"That all, Paolo?" said a voice.

"Very good; bring him here!"

Tinker was wheeled round sharply, and found himself confronting Lucius Brand, who was seated in a deep armchair.

Brand had on a quilted silk dressing-gown, and was in the act of lighting a cigarette. He fitted this carefully into a long, tortoiseshell holder before speaking again, and, incongruously enough, a long-barrelled revolver lay on his lap.

When finally he did speak it was not to Tinker, but to the man.

"A lamp, please, Paolo, and another log on the fire; it is chilly at this hour."

Paolo lit the lamp and made up the fire.

"A liqueur of cognac, please," said Brand, with a nod, and idly turned over the things taken from Tinker's pockets. Needless to say, there was no traces of the telegrams there.

The notebook seemed to puzzle him. "Mr. R. Beele, of Hoxton—eh?" he said slowly, and glanced through several pages of the scrawled photographic notes; but it was clear that he didn't recognise the book itself as having once been in his own possession. "Well, Beele, it seems to me that you and your friend Simmons, the telegraph-boy, have been trying to make a game of me. Now I am going to make a little game with you—yes! Paolo!"

The man came forward quickly; and Brand, in a careless sort of way, pointed his revolver at Tinker's stomach.

"Paolo, we have a piece of washing-line, I think. Fetch it, and that heavy chair there. Quick, man! The time passes. Leave the poker in the fire as it is."

"If you try to move again," he added sharply to Tinker, "I shall shoot; but not to kill, Mr. Beele. Oh, no! Simply to break an arm or a leg-bone. There are several things I wish to know before I have done with you; and afterwards no one will know what I have done with you."

"You understand, you jackal's jackal? Pah! I know you well enough now. You belong to the man Blake, the spy!"

His eyes fairly blazed, and Tinker set his teeth.

In a couple of minutes he was trussed tightly to the heavy oak chair. Paolo had removed his boots and socks, and stood by, with a twisted towel to serve as a gag.

"Now," snarled Brand, "what have you done with it? Bah! Don't lie! You know what I mean—the box—the steel box. You opened it, like the fool that you are, and sprang the alarm!"

"You can't have got it away. There was no time, and—"

He paused suddenly, and his jaw dropped.

"That boy Simmons!" he muttered. "Ah, he was too big a fool; he can't have helped from the outside. And yet—"

He was lost in thought for a moment, muttering to himself under his breath.

Tinker forced himself to laugh to gain time. It was past one by the big clock on the wall opposite to him.

If Blake could send any help, in answer to his wire, it should be here soon, he thought.

"Simmons may be a fool, but he helped me to get hold of your telegrams," said Tinker. "Those important business telegrams in code."

Brand started perceptibly.

"Bah!" he said contemptuously. "What then? You couldn't read them. Wiser heads than yours have puzzled over that code; but without the key it is impossible to read the messages."

"It is of no importance. You tried to read, you could not, so you destroyed the message, and put my note of ten shillings in your pocket."

"To-morrow morning—this morning, I should say—the moment the post-office opens, Paolo will himself send off other messages. It is nothing. A few hours' delay; that is all."

Suddenly he leant forward in his chair and stared at Tinker.

"How do I know that this is not a piece of bluff on your part—eh?" he said. "You tell me this story of the telegrams to gain time for yourself. You may have sent that message of mine, after all, since it was of no use to you."

"But if you did not—and I shall find

out the truth at the post-office to-morrow—there is still another way. Paolo, the telephone—quick!"

The man handed him the table instrument, and Brand rang up and gave a number.

Whilst he was waiting for a reply he glanced at the clock, and then spoke to Paolo, who seemed uneasy about the use of the telephone, and had muttered something about the risk of the line being tapped.

"Bah! There is no risk in the message I shall send for," said Brand angrily.

"When I get Pascali on the line, I shall just speak three words, and those will be in Italian: Fernside—come—urgent. He will understand, and act at once."

"It is now half-past one. He gets my message, say, in ten minutes from now. There should be no delay now, at this time. Say a quarter to two, or even two o'clock."

"Allow him an hour to rouse the others, and give them the message. It will take him so long, because he will have to speak to some living in different parts; and they, in their turn, will have to get ready. At three they start in two big cars, and by five, at latest, they are here. There is no risk, even if the line is tapped. The one thing—"

The whirr of the telephone cut the sentence short, and in the silence of the room Tinker distinctly heard a thin, metallic voice say: "You're through."

Brand spoke sharply in Italian, half a dozen crisp words at most, and then added in English:

"No, don't reply. Hurry."

And he rang off.

"Now," he said, "we have till five o'clock in which to find the box. It will be sufficient."

He turned to Tinker, with a sneer on his face.

"You are obstinate, my young friend. Well, we shall know how to make you speak, Paolo and I. Do you know what we are going to do shortly? Paolo will take that poker in the grate there. It is, as you see, already red-hot; and he will hold it to the soles of your bare feet."

"If you do not speak at first, then he will do it again and again, for there will be ample time. If you are still stubborn, we shall try not your feet, but elsewhere—your eyes, say. Ah, that makes you wince, does it? Well, we shall see, though you will not be able to see any more!"

He gave a sinister chuckle at his gruesome joke.

"Afterwards, when we are gone, and your friends come to look for you, they will not find you. Even the spy Blake, who thinks himself so clever, will not find you; though, if he looks very carefully, he may find a couple of handfuls of what will appear to be charcoal dust."

"That will be you, that dust—all that is left of you! Now we shall leave you for a little while. I have arrangements to make; and we may find the box, for I know it is somewhere close by. You had so little time, now I think of it."

"Within less than two minutes of your opening the lid and starting the alarm, you were standing there by the window, with a bullet from this revolver of mine singing past your ears."

"Come, Paolo, your arm! No; it will be unnecessary to gag him. Let him scream and shout if he wishes, no one can hear him here."

He rose, and, taking the Sicilian's arm, limped out of the room.

Tinker listened to their receding footsteps, and admitted to himself that he felt a trifle sick—physically sick—from the strain of anticipation.

If Lucius Brand had bullied or

blustered, Tinker wouldn't have minded so much.

But he had done nothing of the kind. He had sat there smoking his infernal cigarette through his absurdly long, gold-mounted tortoiseshell holder, and talked as though he were at a small and prosperous company directors' meeting, or lecturing on pure mathematics. And what he had said Tinker realised that he had meant—literally meant. For instance, his reference to a double handful of calced ash-spelt, in plain English, acids, corrosive acids—sulphuric, or nitric, or both. Carboys full of them.

Tinker tried his ropes. His arms were helpless from the wrist upward; but, with the tips of his toes he could touch the ground.

He bent forward, and found that he could rest the balls of his feet on the polished floor.

They made no sound, and, stooping, nearly doubled in two, he crept to the table, carrying the chair on his back, much as a crab carries its shell.

On the table lay his own automatic, Brand's revolver, a penknife taken from his pocket, and the famous notebook.

After some manoeuvring he managed to grasp the knife. One of the blades didn't shut properly, and had made holes in his pockets before now, but on this occasion he blessed it, for at the third attempt he managed to open it on the table-edge.

He worked desperately, and at last got one arm free to the elbow, then the other. He had no time for more. Then he grabbed both his own automatic and the revolver, and backed away again.

He had just scrambled back to his original position when Brand and Paolo came in. Brand was grinning evilly as he leant on the other's arm, and Paolo, in his free hand, was carrying the box.

"You see, my young friend, that I was right," said Brand. "We have found it. Put it there, Paolo, on the table by the lamp, so that he can see it well."

Paolo swung the steel case on to the table, and stepped back. Brand leant against the side of an armchair.

"Now, my friend," he said, "we will amuse ourselves a little."

"The amusement is mine," said Tinker. "Up!" And he splintered the woodwork of the chair against which Brand was leaning.

Paolo leapt, but he leapt backwards and flung up his hands. He had no stomach for a fight with the odds against him.

Brand swore in several languages with fluency and an entirely correct accent, but he also threw up his hands.

"You see," said Tinker, "that I have taken a leaf out of your own book. Instead of splintering the chair I could equally easily have splintered your skull. I'm a fair shot with either hand, and you will notice that I have both your revolver and my own automatic. The game has taken a new turn, Mr. Otto Baptiste Volk-trek."

Brand turned livid, and Tinker pointed a threatening muzzle at the middle of his dressing-gown.

"You, Paolo," he said sharply, "take up that notebook there lying on the table. If you move your hand within a foot of the lamp I shoot!"

Paolo picked it up, looking rather dazed, as well he might.

"That," said Tinker to Brand, "is your private code-book, to recover which, or, in trying to do so, you had poor Tempest murdered. I got the book from him, and, by the help of it, I not only decoded the telegram I brought you as a messenger-boy, but the reply you sent

(Continued on page 19.)

THE FOUR SHADOWS



A Dramatic
Story-Version
of the
Film of that
Name.

(Published by kind
permission of the
Charles Urban
Trading Co., Ltd.)

PEOPLE IN THE STORY.

RAOUL DE SAINT-DALMAS (nicknamed PALAS by the other convicts) is serving a life-sentence for a crime which he did not commit.

CHERI-BIBI, a typical gaol-bird, but a staunch friend.

ARIGONDE, FRIC-FRAC, LE CAID, and LE BECHEUR, all notorious criminals, and the sworn enemies of Palas.

Cheri-Bibi arranges for Palas to escape from the State prison, which is situated on a lonely and barren island, in the chief-officer's motor-boat.

EPISODE II.—THE ESCAPE.

The Burying-Place.

THE snow-capped breakers, hurling themselves against the white rocks of Prison Island, seemed to realise their impotence, and receded with a vicious hiss of disappointment.

Yet wave after wave advanced with monotonous regularity, for all the world like a gigantic army, which, advancing line by line, is annihilated by the gun-fire of superior forces.

Much of the seething foam slithered into one particular cave, swirling round the legs of a crouched convict who was crouching low, his ears on the alert, his bright eyes fixed upon the entrance of a crude tunnel which faced the open sea.

The man had the air of a hunted animal, and his fury would be just as terrible as that of a wild beast should he be cornered.

The little landing-stage jutted out some yards away, and a powerful motor-boat rocked on its moorings.

The man glanced anxiously towards the compact vessel, and then gave vent to an expressive French oath.

"Palas knows that we have only a few minutes to spare!" muttered Cheri-Bibi. "Why doesn't he come?"

His lips twitching nervously, his long fingers playing idly with the pebbles at his feet, he waited for another three minutes, and then, unable to stand the torture of suspense any longer, he rose to his feet.

"I'll get back to his cell," he muttered; and then, leaping from rock to rock like a stag, his quick eyes casting round for the glimpse of any possible enemy, he made his way towards the convicts' living-quarters.

What could have happened to Palas? asked Cheri-Bibi again and again. Was it possible that Arigonde and his gang had got wind of the attempt that was going to be made?

The very thought brought a light of tragic apprehension into the old lag's grey eyes, and he bounded forward at a greater speed.

He was thrusting his way through scrub and bushes by this time, and it was when he slackened his pace for a moment to listen for the sound of pursuit that he heard a rustling noise approaching him, and a moment later a big dog, its soul in its eyes, its tail wagging in greeting, gave a friendly bay and bounded up to the convict.

The old lag dropped to his knees, and put an affectionate arm round the dog's head.

"Quiet—quiet, old man!" he whispered hoarsely, as the animal barked from sheer delight. "Quiet, or you will betray me!"

But the dog, although sagacious as most of his kind, failed to understand, and again his reverberating bark rang across the island.

Cheri-Bibi, his heart pumping wildly, and with the suspicion of a tear in his eye, knew that there was only one thing for it. He must sacrifice his old friend if he himself was to live.

And the hand which a moment later plunged a knife into the dog's heart was shaking piteously, and a sob broke from the convict's bloodless lips as he saw the faithful brute give a gulp and a quiver, and fall limply at his feet.

Cheri-Bibi swayed unsteadily, and looked down at the still form.

"Another one whom I loved!" he said hoarsely. "Fate is against me!"

And even as he muttered the words a shot rang out from one of the observation-posts, and the convict knew that he had been discovered. Another bullet pinged past his head, and, quick as light, he dropped to his knees once again, and commenced to crawl through the undergrowth, making for the secret tunnel on which he had spent so many hours of labour.

Yard by yard he advanced towards the shore, and he was on the point of rounding the bend which would bring him within sight of the tunnel, when the sound of voices smote his quick ears.

"What do you think happened to him, Pierre?" asked a gruff voice—the voice of a warder, as Cheri-Bibi well knew.

The other gave a callous laugh.

"Oh, he was hit all right!" he answered. "He crawled away to die!"

The sound of their retreating footsteps came to his ears, and, wasting no further time, he bounded round the rock and into the mouth of the tunnel. And hardly had he crept into the crevice—it was little more than a voice, speaking in a whisper, called his name:

"Cheri-Bibi!"

"Palas!"

And then a flood of question's broke from the old convict's lips:

"Where have you been? Why didn't you turn up when I told you to? Why—"

"Let me speak, my friend," answered Palas quickly. "I was making my way down to this tunnel, when I was set upon by Arigonde and the other scum. They bound me, and told me they were going to hide themselves in the hold of the chief-officer's boat. They are there already, I expect, and the alarm may be raised at any moment when it is known that six of us are missing!"

And even as he finished speaking the dull boom of guns made the very air shake, and the shouts of warders came distinctly to the ears of the two crouching men.

"Warn all the outposts!" rang out a cry from the chief-officer. "Six prisoners have escaped!"

Scarcely daring to breathe, Cheri-Bibi and Palas listened to the wild shouts and the scurrying of feet. Their guardians seemed to be all round them, and it could be only a matter of seconds, maybe, before they stumbled upon the secret tunnel.

And then another order rang out.

"Warn the outposts on the mainland!" Very little time was wasted, and two minutes later the unmistakable clug-clug of a motor-boat came to the ears of the fugitives.

"Arigonde and the other three are in that boat!" muttered Cheri-Bibi, his voice pregnant with disappointment and chagrin. "They'll get away whilst you, Palas, are left on this accursed island! Yet there must be some way, even now!"

He was silent for a few seconds, and then he touched Palas on the arm.

"Come!" he said hoarsely. "There's not a moment to lose. We may be able to get away yet!"

Crawling on all-fours, with Palas following him like a shadow, the old lag made his way through the narrow and tortuous tunnel, until at last he crawled through the wooden trap-door and hauled himself into the convicts' living-quarters. He gave Palas a helping hand, and then looked round, showing momentary indecision.

And then:

"Come this way!"

Walking on tiptoe, making not a sound, but moving forward without a sign of hesitation, he led the way along a corridor until he came upon a thick, wooden door which barred the passage.

"The scaffold-hut!" he whispered laconically.

Without further delay, he pushed the door open, and the two found themselves in the dimly-lit room which could have told many a tragic story.

Hundreds of convicts had breathed their last in this place, and Palas, the temperamental, the aesthetic, felt a shudder of repugnance creep over his body.

"What are we to do here, Cheri-Bibi?" he asked, in a whisper, his eyes upon the grim, stark guillotine, which, bathed in shadows, seemed to mock him.

"Listen, and I'll tell you my plan," came the ready answer. "Two poor devils were beheaded this morning, and their bodies will be put into sacks and slung into the sea to-night. Well, we shall take their places, and once in the water we must take pot-luck. Can you swim?"

Palas nodded.

"Like a fish!"

"Well, you'll need to, my friend," was the other's grim retort.

"But—" began Palas.

"Hist!" warned the old convict, his finger upon his lips.

He gripped Palas by the sleeve and dragged him into the shadows.

A moment later the door opened, and into the room there walked a big, bullet-headed fellow whom Cheri-Bibi recognised as the executioner.

Moving like a ghost, a stout iron bar gripped in his hand, Cheri-Bibi crept round the wall towards the door through which the executioner had entered.

"One moment, my friend!" he said, and the man swung round on his heel, to find himself looking into the hard and determined eyes of a convict.

"What do you want?" he asked, trying to suppress the note of fear which sounded plainly in his voice.

"I want you to do me a favour," answered Cheri-Bibi, in a low voice, "and I want your answer now. What is it to be—yes or no?"

He was swinging the iron bar from side to side, and there was a significance about the action.

"What—what do you want of me?" asked the executioner, thinking—and perhaps rightly—that his life was in danger.

"This," came the answer. "Two men were executed this morning, eh?"

The other nodded.

"And you've got to fling the bodies into the sea to-night—very soon, indeed?"

Again the fellow nodded.

"Well, Palas and I want to take their places. Got that?"

The executioner looked startled, and he was about to frame a refusal when his eye caught sight of the iron bar, which had commenced to swing once again.

"And what do I get out of this?" he asked, almost sullenly.

"Your life," answered Cheri-Bibi slowly, "and some gold-dust. Is that a bargain?"

"It is."

Without a further word Cheri-Bibi plunged his hand into a secret pocket of his jacket, and produced a linen bag. This he opened before the amazed eyes of the executioner and Palas, and ran his thin fingers through the glistening dust.

"This is for you, my friend," he said. "And now to business."

He turned his head towards Palas.

"You must make the first journey," he said.

No time was wasted, and a few minutes later the executioner was staggering under the weight of a sack which contained the body of Palas.

"Another execution?" asked one of the guards, with a laugh.

"Yes," grinned the executioner, as though enjoying a huge joke. "I cut off two heads this morning!"

"Ah, well," came the jocular reply, "these fellows won't catch a cold in the head to-night!"

Cheri-Bibi, following in the rear of the executioner, kept to the shadows, and crept up to the fellow as he was about to plunge his burden into the sea.

"Throw him near the boat!" he whispered.

"He will have to take his chance," came the reply. "The boat hasn't returned from the mainland yet."

A word of disappointment upon his lips, Cheri-Bibi shrugged his shoulders and darted into cover once again as a warder came into view.

"The sharks will dine well to-night," said the fellow, as he watched the executioner dislodge his burden with a deft heave and send it plunging into the heaving breakers below.

Cheri-Bibi waited until the executioner joined him, and then, slipping into a sack, he prepared himself for the plunge.

Hoisting the big fellow on his back, the executioner made his second journey to the burying-place, and as he sent the old convict toppling to the waters below, a sinister smile was playing about his thin lips.

"Go and find your friend," he murmured.

And then, with a shrug of his big shoulders and his mind upon the gold-dust, which even at this moment reposed snugly in his pockets, he made his way to his quarters, well satisfied with his night's work.

The Fire.

FEELING himself hurtling through space, Palas took a deep breath into his lungs, and waited for the shattering impact which he knew was to come.

Although he could see nothing, he prepared himself instinctively for the plunge, and no sooner did he feel the waves breaking round him than he began to fight his way out of the sack which encompassed him.

Wriggling like an eel, he first managed to get one arm free and then the other, and after that it was only a matter of seconds before he kicked the sack away from his legs and was able to rest for a moment and take stock of his bearings.

First of all he looked round for the motor-boat, and his heart sank within him when

he saw that it had not returned from the mainland.

He had little time for further thought, however, for at that moment a loud splash sounded to the right of him, and he realised that the executioner had sent Cheri-Bibi to join him.

He struck out in the direction of the sound, and at last managed to catch sight of a dark patch which was moving frantically, kicking water and muttering Apache oaths.

"Cheri-Bibi!" called Palas, in a low voice.

The old convict gave vent to a final bad word as he at last managed to free himself from the tender embrace of the sack.

"I'm here, Palas! And now we must make for the island once again, hide ourselves in a cave, and wait for the motor-boat to return. It's no good trying to swim for the mainland, for this water is infested with sharks—brutes with sharp teeth who are always ready to dine off a dead convict—or a live one for that matter."

Without another word the two comrades struck out for the island, and in less than five minutes they scrambled up the slimy rocks and gained the safety of a cave—a hiding-place which could be reached from the sea, but not from the interior of the island.

The two fugitives threw themselves down on the pebbles and remained quiet for a few minutes, fighting for their lost breath.

Five minutes, ten minutes, a quarter of an hour, and then Cheri-Bibi spoke.

"Can you hear anything?" he asked.

Palas sat up and held his head on one side, his ears strained to catch the slightest sound.

And on the still night air there sounded the throbbing of a motor—the motor of the launch.

"We'll wait till they've gone back to report, and then we'll swim round and board her," said Cheri-Bibi, a suppressed note of excitement in his tone. "They're bound to take the key-plug out of the engine; but that won't worry us, my friend, as you know."

"And now let us wait in silence," advised Palas. "We can't afford to take any risks."

The two, peering through the night towards the small jetty, saw the chief officer and three warders leave the little vessel, and the harsh voice of the officer carried on the breeze.

"It's quite safe to leave the boat," he said. "I've taken the plug out of the engine."

Cheri-Bibi's lean face twisted into a smile as he heard the words, for in his pocket there reposed a plug which was a replica of the one on which the chief officer put so high a price.

"Go on, my friend," he muttered; "you're going to learn that it isn't safe to leave the boat!"

He waited for three or four minutes, and then, touching Palas on the arm, he nodded towards the lapping waves and began to scramble towards the surf.

Another minute found two bobbing heads making for the little jetty, and four arms, working mechanically and without a sound, propelling the drab-clothed fugitives towards liberty.

Working round the boat till he found a rope, Cheri-Bibi climbed it like a monkey, to be followed a few moments later by Palas, who at once busied himself with the mooring-ropes.

The old convict made his way to the compact little engine-room. He bent over the engine with the air of an expert, inserted the plug which he had taken from his pocket, and a minute later the rhythmic hum of the engine proved that Cheri-Bibi's improvised plug was serving its purpose.

His hands shaking with excitement, a grim smile upon his lips, the old convict gripped the wheel, and Palas felt a throb run through the little vessel as it commenced to move away from the jetty.

But hardly had it made a hundred yards, and was increasing its speed, than a group of excited and gesticulating figures appeared upon the lofty observation-post, and the chief officer was yelling to his men to prepare a guard-ship for immediate pursuit.

However, this took some time, and it was not until the launch was making headway and churning up the frothy water on either side of her sharp nose, that the guard-ship put to sea.

And, try as she would, she could not gain

an inch upon the faster boat, which was already within sight of the mainland.

Swinging his charge round with the skill of an expert, Cheri-Bibi brought it alongside the landing-stage, judging the matter to a foot. And then not a second was wasted, for scarcely had the side of the launch reached a matter of feet off the jetty than Cheri-Bibi was shouting to Palas to leap ashore.

This Palas did, to be followed almost at once by his companion.

Cheri-Bibi gave one glance out to sea, saw that the guard-ship was almost within hailing distance, and then darted along the quay, Palas at his heels.

"To the forest!" breathed Cheri-Bibi, as he raced along a narrow passage which led away from the sea. "Once there we shall be safe!"

On they raced through the darkened streets, taking good care to make as little noise as possible.

And as they passed a dilapidated building they failed to notice four men who, aroused by the sound of their padding footsteps, shrank back into the shadow of the wall.

Quite oblivious of the fact that they had been seen, the two fugitives ran on, whilst one of the four men, his repulsive face distorted with rage, turned to his companions with a wild light in his eyes.

"Did you see them?" he asked hoarsely, pointing after the retreating figures. "Palas and Cheri-Bibi! They've escaped, after all!"

The others nodded in the gloom.

"And they're making for the forest!" growled the rogue known as Eric-Frac to all the criminal fraternity of Paris. "Why?"

"You can guess why!" answered Arigonde, the leader of the four. "Palas is going to the forest to get the gold which he knows is stowed away there. He'll give it to that collar-and-cuff hound, Palas, and let him make good his escape. But, by heavens, I swear that he sha'n't get away! We'll follow them into the forest, track them down, and then we'll force Cheri-Bibi to tell us where the money is hidden!"

"And supposing he refuses?" asked Eric-Frac, grinning evilly.

Arigonde shrugged his shoulders meaningfully, and rubbed his fingers along the edge of a vicious-looking knife which he had taken from his hip-pocket.

Palas and Cheri-Bibi, meanwhile, quite unconscious of the fact that they were being followed, were making their way towards the dense forest. Once on the fringe of it, Palas called a halt, and the pair rested for a few minutes.

"Do you think we shall manage to get away, my friend?" asked Palas, his breath coming in great, painful gasps.

Cheri-Bibi nodded.

"I think so, Palas," he answered, a whimsical smile playing round his lips. "And once I can take you to a certain spot in this forest I shall be able to supply you with enough money to carry you away to Europe!"

Palas looked into the other's face as though doubting his sanity.

"Enough money—" he began, when Cheri-Bibi silenced him with a gesture.

"Listen!" he whispered.

And there came to their ears the sound of running feet, and the shouting of excited voices.

"The warders!" gasped Palas, looking at Cheri-Bibi in consternation.

The two were on their feet by this time, listening to the sound of their pursuers.

"Come!" said Cheri-Bibi suddenly, and he plunged through the undergrowth and made for the heart of the forest. For quite ten minutes he led the way, threading through the trees and bushes, and once again he called a halt.

And the far-off sounds told them that they had not eluded their pursuers.

"There's only one thing for it, my friend," said Cheri-Bibi in grim tones.

"And that?" asked Palas.

"We must fire the forest!" answered Cheri-Bibi. "The wind favours us!"

Ten minutes later the forest was a blazing mass, the licking tongues of flame bearing down upon the pursuing warders.

End of Second Episode.

(Next Week: "Towards the Light.")

Tinker's Lone Hand.

(Continued from page 16.)

changed the appointment of your friends from here to the Escalier Restaurant. They were probably arrested there about ten or eleven o'clock. See?

"As to you friend Pescali, he may have been arrested with the others. But when you telephoned to him a little while back you should have insisted on a reply instead of cutting him off. You might have been wiser, for someone at the other end of the line would have given you some interesting news.

"Paolo, give Mr. Brandt his notebook—it's no longer of any use to me—and be so kind as to telephone. No; bring the instrument closer, so that I can hear everything that goes on.

"If you make a mistake I shall shoot, and again taking a leaf out of Mr. Brandt's book, I shall be careful to only break an arm or a leg. They'll need you later on for hanging, I expect.

"Now, then, ring up the police-station. Quick, man! Speak up!

"Got 'em! Good! Go on!

"Come Mr. Brandt's, Fernside, at once. Possible murder case. Bring a couple of me with you, at least. Very urgent. Acting for Lynden of C.I.D. and Sexton Blake. Hurry!"

A sleepy voice came over the phone: "What's that? Who are you getting at?"

Tinker twitched his left hand round a little as far as the ropes would permit.

"Hold that receiver to me," he said to Paolo. "If you slip or fumble this thing pressed just under your ribs will go off."

Paolo obeyed, but he was trembling too much from sheer funk to be any good.

Tinker said rude things.

"Get a knife and cut these ropes!" he snapped. "If you so much as graze my skin or get between me and Brandt—Brandt Volkrek there—you won't realise it—you'll be dead."

Paolo pulled out a wicked-looking sheath-knife, and did as he was told. He couldn't help it, and Tinker grabbed the telephone.

"Stand back there against the wall with your face to it!" he ordered.

Then through the telephone:

"Hallo! Are you asleep? Come to Fernside at once with any men you've got. Break in through hall window if you have to. Got two well-known crooks for you, but daren't take my eye off them. Who's speaking? Well, you know Mr. Brandt, don't you, confound you?"

Tinker grinned across at Brandt. "It's a big thing for you if you hurry, and probably trouble if you don't. All right, get a move on!"

He dropped the receiver and suddenly froze, listening intently. From somewhere down the road had come the humming of a couple of powerful cars.

He looked at the clock, and looked at Brandt. He also had heard and was listening intently with an evil look in his eyes.

There is an individual "voice" to a car which, if one knows it, is easily recognisable.

Brandt evidently thought that he recognised these. It flashed across Tinker's mind that Pascali might have got through after all.

He sprang to Brandt's chair and stood beside it, his automatic pressing against the lean neck.

"Whatever happens," he said curtly, "you don't get away, so don't think it."

He had hardly spoken the words, when there came a crash of splintering glass, and half a dozen men came leaping into the room. Whilst behind them came

Blake, pale-faced but grinning, helped by Lynden.

He took in the situation at a glance.

"That's the box, and there's are the other two men, Lynden," he said. "Brandt, of course, is the head and front of the whole show, and the brains of it. No, hang it, I'm wrong. There are the brains of it in that grinning ape there fooling round with a young cannon in his paw.

"Tinker, old man, you've scooped the board.

"We rounded up all the principals of the Escalier, thanks to your wife, and, of course, the smaller fry can be got when they're wanted.

"Lynden, if you official people think there's any credit going to us in this show or any filthy lucre—well, Tinker's the culprit.

"We not only got the crowd at the Escalier," he said, with a laugh, "but we commandeered two of their cars."

"Ah!" said Tinker. "Friend Brandt seemed to recognise the sound of 'em."

"Yes, we collared the two, and Pascali, the proprietor of the Escalier, as well. We made him drive, because he knew every inch of the road, and it saved time.

We picked up the local police as we came through the village, and they had had a message and seemed to be under the impression that poor Mr. Brandt was being robbed."

Tinker chuckled.

"He had just promised to rob me of the skin off my feet, and I was feeling vicious," he said.

"Bad as that was it, old man?" said Blake. "Never mind, you were playing a lone hand, and you've played it to a finish, and won."

"He did that," said Lynden. "That looks like something liquid on the side-board there. We'll drink his health!"

"Here's to Tinker's Lone Hand."

THE END.

(Next week: "The Case of the Criminal Scientist.")

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NATIONAL PLAN TO BENEFIT THE GROWTH AND CONDITION OF THE HAIR.

The Invitation to Test Free the Wonderful Effect of "Harlene Hair-Drill" in Promoting Hair Health and Beauty.

1,000,000 COMPLETE TRIAL OUTFITS FREE TO-DAY.

If you are worried about the condition of your hair; if it is weak, impoverished, falling out, or affected with scurf, dryness, or over-greyness, do as millions of others (both men and women) have done, and try "Harlene Hair-Drill."

From to-day onwards there are to be distributed one million hair-health parcels free of all cost—each parcel to contain a Complete Outfit for the care of the hair.

SIMPLE METHOD SECURES HAIR-HEALTH.

The whole process takes no more than two minutes a day, and is enthusiastically praised by a host of "Hair-Drill" devotees for the marvellously refreshing and rejuvenating feeling this every-morning-toilet exercise gives before facing the day's work.

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4. A copy of the newly published "Hair-Drill" Manual—the most authoritative and clearly-written treatise on the toilet ever produced.

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Write your full name and address clearly on a plain piece of paper, pin this Coupon to it, and post as directed above. (Mark envelope "Sample Dept.")

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