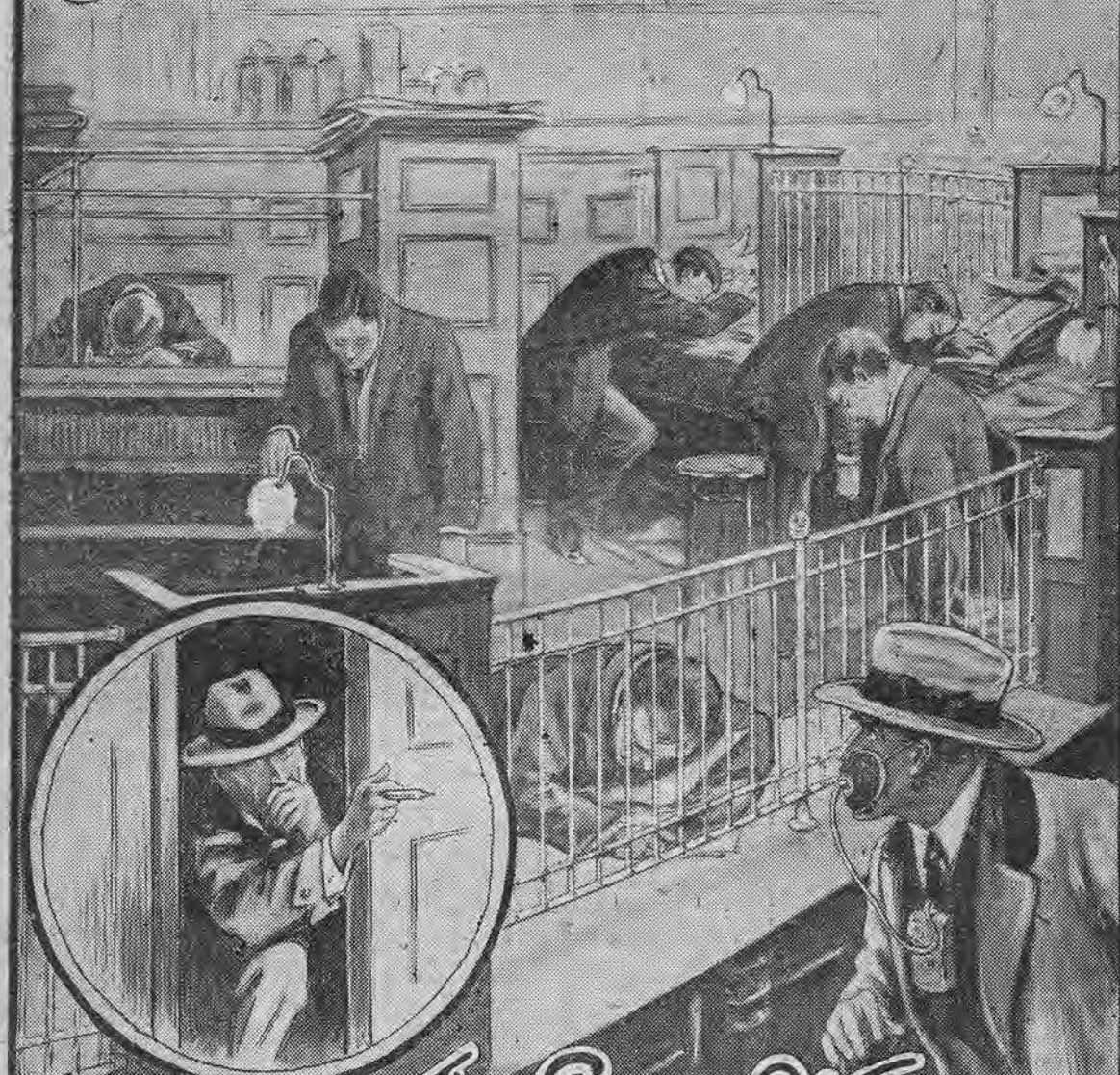


THE MOST AMAZING DETECTIVE NOVEL EVER WRITTEN!

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The Case Of The Criminal Scientist

CLARET SEXTON BLAKE detective and TINKER



The Case Of The Criminal Scientist.

A REMARKABLE DETECTIVE DRAMA
INTRODUCING SEXTON BLAKE & TINKER.

THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Unseen Thief!

THE usual midday crowd of well-to-do shoppers was passing casually up and down Bond Street, that well-known thoroughfare of luxury and munificence. Elegant ladies gowned in the latest Paris modes, and gentlemen immaculately groomed, passed to and fro, idly gazing at the shop-windows, where were displayed the valuable presents that only wealth and riches can buy.

The day was cold and wintry, but the slanting rays of the noonday sun tinted in golden splendour the long glittering facade, and added an element of warmth and charm to the scene. There was an air of good-fellowship abroad, for it was the New Year, and men and women jostled each other in the throng with polite expressions of apology, and continued their way in leisurely contentment.

About one o'clock a man came hurriedly out of the Burlington Arcade. He stepped lightly aside to avoid a lady with whom he came face to face, raised his hat politely, bowed an apology, and turned quickly into Bond Street. A keen observer of men would have taken a second glance at this man, for there was something distinctive about him that raised him out of the ordinary rut. Outwardly he was just as well-groomed, and carried that same quiet air of breeding; but there was an alert expression on his lean, clean-cut face, and in his keen, deep-set eyes there was something that reminded one of the student. Moreover, he strode along as if he had some definite object in view, and time with him was too valuable to waste.

As a matter of fact, he was a student—a student of crime, for he was none other than Sexton Blake, the famous detective and great criminologist. And the great detective never dawdled, for he was always following up some mystery, and tracking down one of those puzzling crimes that occur almost every day in this great cosmopolitan City of London. To Sexton Blake time was, indeed, too valuable to waste.

The detective strode quickly up Bond Street, and presently entered a block of chambers. Immediately on the left of the hall was a board containing the names of the tenants. The detective ran his eye down the list, and came to the name he wanted. It was the Royal Institute of Science, and was on the third floor. He strode over to the lift, and was quickly whisked up above. A few moments later he was shown into the secretary's office.

A middle-aged man, with gold-rimmed

pince-nez, rose from his swivel-chair, and held out his hand.

"I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Blake," he said. He shook hands with the detective, and, hastily drawing an easy-chair up to the fire, motioned his visitor into it.

"Pray be seated, Mr. Blake!"—he added, and sat down again in front of his desk.

The detective took the proffered chair, and glanced expectantly at the other man.

"I have the honour of speaking to Mr. Reginald Vrynot, I believe," he said quietly, "secretary of the Royal Institute of Science?"

The other man laughed shortly.

"I am Vrynot," he said. "Yes. But it is I who am honoured, Mr. Blake!"

He spread out his hands deprecatingly, and seemed rather nervous of proceeding.

"I think you called at my flat in Baker Street yesterday, Mr. Vrynot," began Blake, briskly getting to the point. "I was out at the time, unfortunately, but you left your card."

"Quite so, Mr. Blake! But you should not have gone to this trouble. I intended calling on you again."

"No inconvenience, I assure you," said the detective politely. "I happened to be going to the Burlington Arcade, so I thought I might as well call and see you at the same time. Now, if you will be good enough to command my services in any way you think fit, they are at your disposal."

"Thank you, Mister Blake! Will you smoke?"

The secretary pushed a box of cigars towards the detective, and waited for him to light up.

"Now," he began, as the detective threw the match into the grate and sat back in his chair. "I will not keep you very long, Mr. Blake. I called upon you yesterday in accordance with the desire of my committee. Did you read the account of the sudden death of Professor James the other day, Mr. Blake?"

"At a meeting of the Royal Institute of Science? Yes, I read about that, Mr. Vrynot. It is a great pity that Professor James' brilliant career should have been brought to such an untimely end."

The secretary nodded his head, and remained silent for a while, as if carefully weighing his words.

"Yes, Mr. Blake," he said presently. "It is a pity, as you say. We expected great things from Professor James, and it is unfortunate that he should have so suddenly died. But did you read the report of the inquest?"

"Yes. They brought in a verdict of

death from natural causes—heart failure, if I remember rightly."

"You are quite right, Mr. Blake."

He lapsed into silence again; an expression of puzzlement brooded over his face. Blake's curiosity was beginning to get aroused; he could not quite make out what he was driving at.

Mr. Vrynot suddenly leaned towards the detective.

"You have no reason to disagree with the verdict, Mr. Blake?" he asked.

"I?" said Blake, somewhat astonished. "But I do not understand you, Mr. Vrynot. Why should you ask me that? I know absolutely nothing of the circumstances, so how can I express an opinion?"

"Just so, Mr. Blake! Of course! But I will try and be more explicit. On that same evening of Professor James' death a strange occurrence took place—a very strange occurrence, Mr. Blake, which is greatly troubling the committee. You know that Professor James expired suddenly at the meeting in the institute's hall, while Dr. Ni-la Deschamps was delivering his lecture?"

"I did not know that, Mr. Vrynot," said the detective. "However, pray proceed."

"Yes, Mr. Blake, he expired while Dr. Deschamps was giving his lecture. Now, it was not until the meeting was finished, and the members were leaving their seats, that the tragic discovery was made. Then, as Professor James did not attempt to move from his seat, I went over to him, and shook him by the shoulder, thinking he had fallen asleep. It was then that I made the astonishing discovery. The poor fellow had, indeed, fallen asleep, but into a sleep from which he would never again wake, for he was quite dead."

The secretary paused, and met the detective's steady gaze. Even now Blake could not make out what he was driving at; so far there did not seem much in the story to require elucidation. The professor had died from heart-failure. It was quite a natural sort of happening. Why had Mr. Vrynot brought him here simply to tell him that? Was it possible that he suspected foul play?

The detective cast a look of speculation at his companion.

"You asked me a few minutes ago, Mr. Vrynot," he said, "whether I had any reason to disagree with the verdict? May I put the same question to you? Have you any reason for thinking that Professor James died from any other cause than that of heart-failure?"

The secretary pressed his thin, tapering fingers together nervously.

"No, no!" he said quickly. "I should

not like to say that. I am just a little puzzled over a remark confidentially made to me by the medical officer who undertook the post-mortem."

"And may I ask what that was?"
 "Yes; certainly you may! He said that, although the professor's heart showed signs of weakness, yet it would hardly be sufficient to account for his dying so suddenly; he must have experienced some shock—some jar to his system, to have expired under such conditions."

"Ah!" said Blake. "Then you do suspect that Professor James died under strange circumstances, to say the least?"

"No, Mr. Blake. This is all quite incidental to what I am going to tell you. I should not have troubled you over this matter at all, although it seems to demand further inquiry, had it not been for something else that occurred that evening. And this is the matter that is troubling my committee so much."

The secretary paused a moment, then continued:

"Directly after the meeting was over, Mr. Blake, another extraordinary discovery was made. Of the fifty or more members of the institute who had attended the lecture quite forty of them had been robbed—by some mysterious means their pockets had been picked. Some had only lost small things, such as watches and penknives, while others had had considerable sums of money stolen. I, personally, was lucky; I only lost my gold-inlaid fountain-pen."

Blake suddenly became tense and alert. Now he was getting to the crux of the matter. He had stumbled upon something now on which he could exercise his wonderful faculties of deduction and minute investigation.

"Do you mean to tell me, Mr. Vrynot," he asked quietly, "that during this meeting in the institute hall some forty gentlemen had their pockets picked, and that none of them has the vaguest notion as to the identity of the thief?"

"Precisely, Mr. Blake. Regrettable as it may appear, that is exactly the truth of the matter. You will understand, Mr. Blake, that not a word of what I have just told you must get into the Press. It would not do for an unsavoury subject like this to be discussed in connection with such an eminently respectable association as the Institute of Science. That is the personal desire of the members themselves. They would sooner cut their losses, and say no more about them, rather than have any publicity in the matter."

"I quite understand that," said Blake. "And has no clue at all been discovered that might arouse your suspicions? No possible trace of the thief?"

"Not the remotest shadow of a clue, Mr. Blake. The committee met together privately immediately after, and discussed what steps it should take. It has instructed me to lay the matter before you, impressing on you the need of secrecy."

"That is quite unnecessary, Mr. Vrynot. You need have no cause for anxiety on that score. And now may I ask you a few questions?"

"By all means, Mr. Blake. Pray proceed."

"First of all, then, do you mean to imply that there is some connection between the sudden death of Professor James and this strange case of wholesale robbery?"

"No, Mr. Blake. Do not misunderstand me. I should not like to imply that. After all, what possible connection can there be? But it is the fact that these two strange things should have happened on the same evening that has so impressed the committee. Of course, that is no doubt simply a coincidence. The committee is more concerned over

the robberies that have taken place, for, as you doubtless know, the meeting comprised many well-known men who are pre-eminent in the world of science. Naturally, the committee would like to get to the bottom of the mysterious business."

"Naturally," said the detective. "I must confess, Mr. Vrynot, that so far I am totally at a loss to offer any feasible explanation. That forty gentlemen should have been robbed under such circumstances as you suggest without one of them being aware of it seems incredible. Was the meeting purely a private one, or was the outside public admitted?"

"It was absolutely private, Mr. Blake. Beyond the two commissionaires at the door and the shorthand writer, who took the minutes of the proceedings, the meeting was composed of members of the institute, all of whom are personally known to me."

"And are you quite certain that during the lecture nobody entered the hall?"

"Absolutely certain, Mr. Blake! I sat at the table on the platform all the time that Dr. Deschamps was delivering his lecture, and I can assure you that not a soul came into the hall after the meeting had commenced. The commissionaires had strict instructions not to allow any interruptions while the doctor was speaking, and at eight o'clock they shut the doors, and took up their positions outside. They were there until the meeting terminated at 10.30. Apart from my own knowledge, I have questioned them closely, and I am assured that no one had access to the room while they were outside. I would like to add, Mr. Blake, that both these men are old soldiers, and that their records are excellent."

"And is there no other entrance to the institute hall, Mr. Vrynot?"

"Yes, there is, Mr. Blake; from a door on the platform. It leads into the committee-room. But it is strictly private, and I was sitting half-turned towards it all the time. Besides, Mr. Blake, supposing someone had entered during the evening, how is it possible for him to have picked the pockets of some forty gentlemen without being seen?"

"It seems highly improbable, I admit," agreed the detective. "To have committed such a wholesale system of theft at least half a dozen persons must have been involved—at least, for the robberies to have been committed in the usual way."

The secretary darted a look of keen inquiry at the detective.

"What would you term an unusual way of committing robbery, Mr. Blake?" he asked uneasily.

"I cannot say exactly, Mr. Vrynot. I rather mean that some person other than the ordinary common or garden pick-pocket must have been involved in this extraordinary affair. I should say that by the usual methods of committing robbery it would be absolutely impossible for these forty gentlemen to have had their pockets picked under the circumstances you have described. But I must confess that the whole thing is quite inexplicable to me at the present moment."

For a while the two men were silent. The detective was completely baffled; he could not throw the slightest shadow of an explanation on the amazing occurrence that had taken place. The thing seemed to savour of the supernatural. Presently he looked up.

"You say the meeting commenced at eight o'clock, Mr. Vrynot?"

"At eight o'clock, Mr. Blake."

"And finished?"

"At ten-thirty."

"The robberies must have taken place between eight and ten-thirty, then?"

"Precisely, Mr. Blake! Several of the members present assure me that they had

their watches and the other articles stolen at eight o'clock. They distinctly remember looking at them. At ten-thirty they were missing."

"Are you aware that any of those gentlemen discovered his loss before ten-thirty?"

"One instance only has come to my knowledge, so far, Mr. Blake. In this case the gentleman in question assures me that he found out that his watch had been stolen some time during the evening. He did not say anything at the time, naturally, as he did not wish to interrupt the speaker."

"Would you mind telling me the nature of the doctor's address, Mr. Vrynot?"

"Certainly, Mr. Blake! It was to do with certain aspects of unconsciousness—a very technical subject, and deeply involved. You may have a copy of the transcript of the shorthand notes, if you wish."

"Thank you! I should certainly like a copy before I go. Now, I want you to think very carefully, if you will. Is there not one incident that occurred during those two and a half hours that struck you as being peculiar at the time—some little thing that may have slipped your memory?"

The secretary thought deeply for a few moments. Presently he looked up.

"Since you ask me, Mr. Blake," he said, "I will tell you of just one little incident that rather puzzled me at the time. Mind you, I attach no importance whatever to it. I mention it now, not because I think it has any bearing on the matter in hand, but because I am here to give you every morsel of information I can."

"I understand, Mr. Vrynot."

"Very well, then. At a certain point in Dr. Deschamps' address my attention seems suddenly to have been broken. That is the only way I can put it. At one moment I seemed to have been listening to him speaking on the platform near me, then immediately after I saw him down in the auditorium standing by the shorthand writer, who was sitting at a little table about half a dozen yards from the platform. The next moment he had climbed on to the platform again, and was continuing his lecture. The only reason why I mention this, Mr. Blake, is that at the time I was distinctly puzzled at the fact that Dr. Deschamps had left the platform without my seeing him."

The look of interest deepened on the detective's face.

"Do you really mean to say that Dr. Deschamps suddenly left the platform without your being aware of that fact?" he asked incredulously.

"I must plead guilty to that, Mr. Blake. I must confess that I was greatly surprised at the time to see him down in the auditorium. I hadn't the least notion that he had ceased speaking."

"So it amounts to this, Mr. Vrynot. At one moment you are listening to Dr. Deschamps speaking beside you on the platform, then a moment later, or it seemed to you, you suddenly observe Dr. Deschamps down in the auditorium standing by the shorthand writer."

"Exactly, Mr. Blake!"

"But your attention must have been distracted at the time, Mr. Vrynot. Or perhaps you came over rather tired, and dozed for a few minutes."

"That is the only explanation I can give, Mr. Blake. But I do not recollect any incident that occurred at that moment to attract my attention, and I was keenly following every word Dr. Deschamps was saying. As for falling asleep, of course, that is quite possible; but then, when one falls asleep, one is quite aware of the fact when one wakes up."

up again. And it did not seem like that to me. There certainly seemed a slight break somewhere, but not enough to make me think that I had been asleep, or that my mind had been wandering."

"Do you know why Dr. Deschamps left the platform, and was standing by the shorthand writer's table when you saw him?" asked Blake.

"No, I do not, Mr. Blake. As a matter of fact, I had forgotten the whole incident until your question brought it back to my mind. After all, as I said before, it is of no significance."

"But there was something in Blake's face that seemed to suggest that he had not dismissed the matter so lightly. Those two deep lines of thought showed up on his forehead which always appeared when he was wrestling with some tough proposition.

"Can you tell me," he asked presently, "what time it was when you observed Dr. Deschamps standing by the shorthand writer?"

"As near as I can recollect, Mr. Blake, it was about a quarter to ten."

"Thank you! And now, one other thing. I should like the names and addresses of the shorthand writer, and the gentleman who discovered the loss of his watch earlier in the evening, if you will be good enough to give me them."

The secretary swung round to his desk, took up his pen, and scribbled down the addresses.

"There you are, Mr. Blake," he said. "They are both there."

"Thanks very much! The institute hall, I believe, is down below. Perhaps you will be good enough to show me over it?"

"With pleasure, Mr. Blake. Come along!"

The two men went outside to the lift, and were taken down to the ground-floor. After proceeding a little way along the corridor they entered a room on the right, the door of which Mr. Vrynnot opened with a key. The walls of the room were oak-panelled, and in the centre stood a big, round table covered with green baize.

"This is the committee-room, Mr. Blake. This door here leads into the institute hall."

They crossed the room, and passed through the door on to the raised dais. The hall was quite lofty, and rather comfortably designed, the walls being lined with that same costly oak-paneling. In the auditorium just in front were about eight rows of upholstered seats, arranged in the form of a semi-circle, and capable of seating about a hundred people. There was no gallery or balcony, and no place that was capable of concealing anybody; the building was obviously designed for the purposes of holding lectures and debates.

"At the further end is the exit, Mr. Blake. Do you see those two doors in the middle there? They open out into the corridor, which leads into the street."

"I see," said the detective. "And there is no other method of entry or exit except by means of those two doors and this one here?"

"None whatever."

"And how about the windows?"

"They are high up, Mr. Blake, as you see. As a matter of fact, I believe they were closed on the night in question, as the hall had not been heated, and it was so bitterly cold. But, at all events, it would be rather difficult for anybody to climb through by that way, as you will doubtless observe."

"And where was the shorthand-writer sitting, Mr. Vrynnot?"

"At that little table just over against the wall. I was sitting at this table here on the platform, and Dr. Deschamps

spoke from the spot where you are standing now."

"And no other person was on the platform besides the doctor and yourself?"

"Nobody, Mr. Blake. If the president had been here he would have taken the chair; in his absence, I took it."

"I see, Mr. Vrynnot."

The detective climbed down into the auditorium, and spent some time examining the walls and floor. The problem seemed more mysterious than ever. There was nothing here to give him the slightest inkling as to how the robbery might have been perpetrated. The seats were arranged so that there was plenty of space between each person, and did not give the slightest assistance to the most expert pickpocket. It would be impossible for anyone to crawl between them without being seen.

Presently Blake came back to where he had left Mr. Vrynnot standing.

"I think that will be all," he said. "At the present moment I am quite unable to express an opinion on the matter; but if you will leave it to me, I may very likely be able to offer some explanation after I have had time to think over it."

"I am quite willing to place the whole matter unreservedly in your hands, Mr. Blake. You may reply upon me for any further assistance I may be able to afford you."

"Very good, then. We will leave it at that, Mr. Vrynnot."

They went up by the lift again, and entered the secretary's office.

A man, who was standing warming himself by the fire, turned towards them as they entered.

"Ah, doctor," exclaimed Mr. Vrynnot, "it is rather fortunate that you should have come along! Allow me to introduce Mr. Sexton Blake—Dr. Nicola Deschamps. I forgot to mention, Mr. Blake, that Dr. Deschamps is staying at the hotel next door for a few days."

The two men shook hands.

"So Mr. Blake is to try his hand at solving one more mystery," he said, with a slight trace of sarcasm in his voice.

The detective shot a quick, searching look at the speaker. For some strange reason he had suddenly experienced a violent aversion to this big-boned, rasping-voiced man. But he quickly recognized that he was no ordinary person. The contour of his face was strong and angular, and his broad and massive forehead denoted the thinker and man of science. He was a big man, big in every way, and behind those cool, insolent eyes lurked a strong and resolute brain, capable of grappling with the profoundest questions of reasoning. Yet it was the dark shaggy overhanging eyebrows, and short, grizzled beard, that gave the face such an extraordinarily sinister aspect.

"Mr. Vrynnot has been telling me the facts of the case," he said coldly. "I have not had time to think over the problem yet."

The doctor laughed disdainfully.

"I am afraid, Mr. Blake, that you will find this a little outside your ordinary business."

"Everything that happens to come my way is ordinary business," said Blake tartly, "and I have yet to admit myself beaten."

Dr. Deschamps shrugged his shoulders, and turned to the secretary.

"I came here for the transcript of my speech," he said. "Have you got a copy handy, Mr. Vrynnot?"

"Yes; there is one in my drawer here."

"Thanks! I will take it, if I may. Well, I must attend to my work, if you will excuse me. Good-bye!"

The doctor nodded casually to Blake, and left the room.

"Is Dr. Deschamps a member of the Royal Institute of Science, Mr. Vrynnot?" asked Blake, as the door closed behind him.

"No, Mr. Blake. But he is a very clever man, and has probed deeply into the problem of anaesthesia, which, as you know, means loss of all feeling and sensation. He was invited to lecture here by special request of the members of the institute."

"I understand, Mr. Vrynnot."

The detective took out his watch. It was just three o'clock.

"Well, I must be going, Mr. Vrynnot," he said.

THE SECOND CHAPTER. Blake's Astonishment.

SEXTON BLAKE suddenly sat up with a start. Where was he? What had happened? Oh, yes, he was in the secretary's room. What a funny lapse of memory! Just momentary, that was all. He had only just looked at his watch; it had been three o'clock. He was still grasping it in his hand. He stared down at it.

What! Was he mad? Had he suddenly taken leave of his senses? He rubbed his eyes and looked again. Yes, it was a quarter to four, right enough. But how could it be? He had only just looked at it, and then it had been exactly three o'clock. Three-quarters of an hour had elapsed. But it was impossible. He must be mad, surely! Then suddenly he became aware of his extraordinary position. He was seated in front of the fire in the easy-chair, and one leg was thrown over the arm.

But a moment ago he had been standing by the secretary's table. He had just taken out his watch. It had been three o'clock. He recalled the words he had uttered. They seemed only to have just left his lips. Then what was he doing here in this chair, with his leg thrown over the arm in that extraordinary position. How did he get there? And how could it be a quarter to four? Surely he was going insane!

He glanced suddenly at the secretary. He was sitting at the desk in the same position, and was staring straight at Blake. Yet there was a glassy look in his eyes, as if he did not see anything.

Blake sprang to his feet and strode over to him.

"Mr. Vrynnot!" he said hoarsely, shaking him by the shoulder.

The secretary suddenly lifted his head, and passed his hand over his forehead. The look of normal intelligence swiftly came back into his face.

"What is it, Mr. Blake?" he asked. "Ah, yes; you were just going, were you not? Pray excuse my inattention! I must have allowed my mind to wander."

Blake stared at him in amazement.

"Do you know," he said in a suppressed voice, "that nearly an hour has elapsed since I said that I must be going?"

The secretary gazed at the detective incomprehendingly.

"What?" he blurted.

Blake was so taken back that he could not reply. Was he really mad, after all? What on earth was he saying? He must be labouring under a delusion. He had made a mistake when he had first looked at his watch. Of course, he must have done. It was too absurd. He pulled himself together.

"I think you lost yourself for a little while, Mr. Vrynnot," he said apologetically, and gave a queer little chuckle. "However, I must be off now. You know my telephone number. If you should want me, someone is always there

to take a message, if I should happen to be out."

The secretary rose from his chair and held out his hand.

"Very good, Mr. Blake," he said. "Thank you very much indeed. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye, Mr. Vrynott!"

At the door Blake paused a moment. It was ajar, and yet Dr. Deschamps was the last person to leave the room. He could have sworn that he had heard the catch slip in the lock when it had closed behind him. However, perhaps this was another delusion.

Full of a vague sense of mystery he left the building, and made his way back to Baker Street. He was beginning to feel shaken and unsure of himself. How on earth had he come to make that extraordinary mistake in the time? At one moment his watch had told him that it was three o'clock; then when he had looked again, a moment later, it had been a quarter to four.

Then he suddenly thought that his watch might be wrong. This had not occurred to him before, for his watch was never wrong; it was as reliable and as faithful as his great bloodhound Pedro. He took it out of his pocket and put it to his ear. No; it seemed to be all right, it was ticking away merrily. He compared it with a passing clock; it was correct to the minute.

Then there was no getting away from the naked truth. He had made a mistake; his eyes, that had never deceived him before, had this time played him false.

Then he remembered the peculiar position in which he had found himself sitting—sprawling in the easy-chair with one leg over the arm. How had he come there? One moment he had been standing by the secretary's table; the next moment he had found himself in the chair. Why couldn't he remember sitting down? It seemed that not only were his eyes failing him, but his memory also. He was going to pieces; his faculties were becoming blunted.

Filled with these black misgivings, the detective turned into his gate and entered his flat.

When Tinker, his assistant, came in, a short time after, he found his master sitting with his elbows on the desk, deep in thought.

"Hallo, guv'nor!" he said cheerfully. "Anything the matter?"

Blake glanced up at his young assistant.

"Generally is something the matter in this old world, Tinker," he said.

"You're right there, guv'nor," rejoined Tinker. "But is there anything particular on? I seem to smell something out of the ordinary."

Blake laughed drily.

"Very likely it's the bloater Mrs. Bardell is cooking for your tea," he said.

"But I didn't mean that sort of smell, guv'nor; that's not a bit out of the ordinary. I was speaking in a metaphorical kind of way."

"Metaphorical, Tinker!"

"That's it, guv'nor!"

Blake sat silently eyeing his assistant for a time.

"Look here, Tinker," he said, at length. "I'm going to ask you a conundrum."

"I'm listening, guv'nor!"

"Right! Now, you see there's a door over there leading into my bed-room, and there's another one over there leading into the passage."

"Yes!" said Tinker.

"Now, Tinker, you're sitting here at my desk so that you can see both doors quite plainly. In front of you are about a dozen men sitting facing you on chairs ranged in a semicircle. Got me?"

"I've got you, guv'nor."

"Good enough! To proceed, then! Now, I'm standing here, a few paces away from you, and I'm facing the audience and giving a lecture—"

"What on, guv'nor?"

"Oh, any old thing you like! 'How to be Happy Though Married,' for instance."

"But you're not married, guv'nor!" exclaimed Tinker. "So how do you know what you're talking about?"

"Don't be irrelevant, Tinker. Now, this is the conundrum. I speak to these gentlemen sitting in front of me from eight o'clock to ten-thirty—that is two and a half hours—and during the whole of that time you are quite certain that no one has entered either of those two doors—in fact, you're positive that nothing suspicious has happened at all. Yet at ten-thirty, when I finish speaking, it is discovered that about ten of those gentlemen, and yourself, have been robbed; their pockets have been picked during those two and a half hours that I have been giving my lecture. Now, what's your answer?"

Tinker stared at his master, open-eyed. "Why," he gasped, "I should say it was the blooming limit!"

"Exactly!" said Blake drily.

"But what's the answer, guv'nor?"

"That's what I'm asking you, Tinker. However, you don't seem cute enough to find it, so I'll ask you another. Supposing this room was about ten times its size, and, instead of twelve gentlemen sitting in front of you, there were about fifty. The other conditions remain about the same. Now, at ten-thirty it is discovered that forty of these gentlemen, including yourself, had had their pockets picked. What's your answer to that?"

Tinker collapsed into his chair, and sat scratching his head.

"It isn't natural, guv'nor," he murmured; "it's supernatural!"

The detective stared abstractedly in front of him; there was no trace of humour in his face now, it was stern and serious.

"Supernatural!" he muttered. "Yes! Do you know, Tinker, I've been thinking precisely the same thing myself!"

Tinker stared curiously at his master, not quite sure whether to laugh or take him seriously.

"But it's only a joke, isn't it, guv'nor?" he asked.

"That's just where you're wrong, Tinker. It's not a joke, my lad; it happens to be the stark, staring truth. On Wednesday evening, during a lecture at the Royal Institute of Science given before about fifty of the members, this very thing took place. About forty of the members present, including the chairman, had their pockets picked. Nobody knows anything about it; nobody has the vaguest notion as to the identity of the thief or thieves. And, to make the matter more mysterious, while the lecture was proceeding Professor James quietly expired. What have you got to say to that, Tinker?"

Tinker had nothing whatever to say; he could only stare at his master in blank amazement.

"Yes," continued Blake, "after the meeting was over Professor James was found sitting in his chair quite dead. Nobody knew anything about it. In fact, the secretary thought he was asleep, and went up to him and shook him by the shoulder. Of course, that may be merely a coincidence. At the inquest they returned a verdict of death from natural causes—heart failure."

"And what do you make of it, guv'nor?" asked Tinker, finding his voice at last. "Do you think it is merely a coincidence?"

"I don't know, Tinker," said Blake

quietly. "Frankly, I'm absolutely fogged. I've never been so fuddled before in all my life. I'm in a flat spin."

At that moment Mrs. Bardell brought in the tea, and Blake was about to dismiss the subject from his mind for a time, when Tinker suddenly uttered an exclamation, and pointed to his master's collar.

"What's the matter with your collar?" he asked. "It's all crumpled and dirty."

"What?" exclaimed Blake, picking up the small hand-mirror that was lying on his desk.

"What the deuce!" he muttered, as he gazed in surprise at his crumpled linen. He flung down the mirror, and, undoing his tie, hastily dragged the collar from his neck.

"How on earth did that happen?" he said, staring in amazement at the dirty collar. "See, these dirty smudges were made by somebody's fingers; they are too indistinct to serve as a clue, but they're finger-marks, right enough. Seems as if somebody had grabbed me by the neck. When could that have happened? I put this collar on clean this morning, too, just before I went out. Really, Tinker, this is astounding."

Tinker had never before seen such a look of complete astonishment on his master's face. It impressed him greatly, and a feeling of uneasiness came over him.

"But surely you remember something about it, guv'nor?" he insisted. "You must remember somebody catching hold of your collar?"

The detective was still staring incredulously at the dirty piece of starched linen.

"No," he muttered, "I'm hanged if I've got the vaguest notion as to how this thing got into its present crumpled state! It's got me absolutely beaten to a frazzle this time!"

Suddenly he felt in his pocket for his letter-case.

"I've got two addresses here," he said. "I must follow this thing up."

The next instant he leapt to his feet.

"Holy shakes!" he exclaimed. "Am I mad, Tinker? Tell me, is this my case? Or am I suffering from delusions?"

The colour had left Tinker's face; he had never seen his master so perturbed as this. As he leant forward and took the pocket-case in his fingers he could hardly stop his hands from trembling.

"No, guv'nor," he said, staring curiously at the green leather wallet, "it's certainly not yours. Shall I look inside?"

"Do, Tinker."

Tinker ran his fingers through the contents.

"Here's a letter here," he muttered. "Let's see whom it is addressed to. What does it say? 'Reginald Vrynott, Esquire.'"

"What?" shouted Blake. "Reginald Vrynott? Impossible! Let me have a look, Tinker!"

He took the case with trembling fingers and stared at the letter.

"You're right!" he said. "Reginald Vrynott, Esquire! Good heavens, Tinker! How, in the name of Christopher, did that get into my pocket? I've just come away from seeing Mr. Vrynott—he's secretary of the Royal Institute of Science. Surely I didn't pick his pocket!"

He stared again at the letter, as if loth to believe his eyes. Suddenly he seized the "Telephone Directory," and, turning the pages over quickly, stopped and ran his finger down the numbers. He closed the book with a bang, and put out his hand to pick up the receiver.

And at that instant the telephone-bell pealed forth shrilly.

"Hallo!" he shouted. "Hallo!"

"Is that Mr. Blake?" a voice asked, in agitated tones.

"Yes, yes! Who is that?"

"I'm Vrynot—Mr. Reginald Vrynot."

"Good gracious, Vrynot! I was just getting on to you."

"Mr. Blake, I have just made an astounding discovery. Really, I cannot understand how it happened. I seem to have your letter-book in my pocket!"

"The deuce you have!" exclaimed Blake excitedly.

"Yes, Mr. Blake! It is incredible! I've never had such a shock in all my life. As a matter of fact, I was just feeling in my pocket for my own case, and dragged out yours. I cannot find mine; it appears to be missing."

For a moment Blake was speechless with amazement. Then he recovered possession of his self-control.

"Mr. Vrynot," he said, "there is some deep mystery here. I, also, have made a most remarkable discovery. I find that my letter-case is missing from my pocket, and in its stead is one that apparently belongs to you."

The secretary gave vent to a low, startled whistle, then continued in a tremulous voice:

"But that is not all, Mr. Blake," he said. "There is something else that I cannot tell you over the phone. Perhaps you could possibly call round again. I will stay in my office."

"Certainly I will, Mr. Vrynot—immediately!"

"Then I will wait for you here."

"Very well, then. But just one minute. Hallo! Hallo! Don't ring off! There is one more question I want to ask you, Mr. Vrynot. Was there any money in your letter-case?"

"Yes, Mr. Blake, there was. About ten pounds, I think."

"And can you find any money in mine?"

There was a moment's silence, then he spoke again.

"No," he said hurriedly; "there is no money here at all!"

"Then," said Blake, "you have come off better than I have, Mr. Vrynot. You have lost ten pounds, but there should be about fifteen in mine."

Without waiting for a reply Blake hurriedly replaced the receiver and turned to Tinker.

"Quick!" he said. "Get me that kaolin powder out of my test-cabinet!"

Tinker hastened to the corner of the room and swung open the door of the cabinet.

"Here's the stuff, guv'nor!" he said, handing the detective a little flat bottle labelled "Kaolin."

"Good! Now stretch out the wallet flat on the table. That's right! Now we'll see."

Blake carefully sprinkled the green leather with the powder out of the bottle, very gently breathing on it now and then, in order to spread it well over the leather.

Presently the wallet was totally covered by a thin, pure white powder. Then the detective began to blow it off again. But it did not all come off. In various places on the dark leather background little faint white patches still adhered. Blake picked up the magnifying-glass and carefully scrutinised them for some minutes. Then he looked up, with a slight air of mystification.

"I'm afraid, Tinker," he said, "that there's not much to be got from this. Those marks on the leather, where the powder still sticks, appear to have been made by yours and my fingers. Now, that's very strange, because someone else must have touched that wallet within the last few hours for it to have got into

my pocket; the impression would show up under this kaolin powder."

The detective looked at the wallet in perplexity.

"However, I can't stop now, Tinker," he said. "I'll leave you to do the rest. Put a glycerine-paper over the leather, and have an enlarged photograph made. You know what to do."

"I know, guv'nor!" said Tinker. "You just leave it to me."

"Just one thing more, Tinker. Get me the other test-powders—graphite, indigo, sea-foam, and French chalk. I shall very possibly want them."

"Right you are, guv'nor!" said Tinker, going over to the cabinet.

A few moments later, with his pocket bulging with little flat bottles, Blake left the house and made his way quickly to Bond Street.

When he arrived at the Royal Institute of Science the detective found Mr. Vrynot pacing up and down in his room, anxiously awaiting him.

"Ah, Mr. Blake," he said, "I am glad you have come! The strain is rather telling on my nerves. Please sit down."

The secretary carefully locked the door and came back to his desk.

"Look!" he said dramatically, pulling open the drawer and pointing inside.

Blake gazed down in astonishment at the contents that met his eye. The drawer was filled with a miscellany of objects—watches, fountain-pens, cigarette-cases, and a number of other articles that are generally to be found in men's pockets.

"But what is the meaning of this, Mr. Vrynot?" he asked incredulously.

The secretary sank back in his chair and passed his fingers through his hair.

"I do not know," he said wearily. "My head seems to be going round and round."

"But these are the missing articles, are they not—the things that were stolen last Wednesday night?"

"They are, Mr. Blake."

"Then how did they come here?"

The secretary looked up with a comical expression of bewilderment.

"Ask me another!" he said abruptly.

For a moment Blake could hardly repress a smile, the secretary's blank amazement rather tickled his sense of humour. But he only relaxed for an instant, the next moment his face was hard and set.

"Tell me," he said, "when did you make this discovery?"

"A moment before I rang you up, Mr. Blake. When I found your case in my pocket I could not believe my eyes. I pulled open the drawer, thinking I had left mine inside. Then I saw these things."

"When did you last open the drawer? I mean, prior to making this discovery?"

The secretary smoothed back his hair with trembling fingers.

"I can't quite remember," he said. "I certainly opened it when you were here, I think."

"Yes; I remember. You opened it in order to give Dr. Deschamps a copy of his address. That was just before three."

"That's right, Mr. Blake."

"These things were not in there then, of course?"

The secretary shook his head.

"And after I had gone did you leave this office at all?"

"No, Mr. Blake. I have not left this room since we both came back from the institute hall downstairs."

Blake pulled out his watch and looked at it.

"It is now half-past five," he said. "Then it amounts to this, Mr. Vrynot: Between three o'clock and about five

o'clock those stolen articles have somehow been placed in your drawer, and yet during those two hours you have been here all the time. In fact, during part of the time both of us have been here, for I did not leave until nearly four o'clock."

"It sounds absurd, Mr. Blake, yet that is the only logical conclusion that I can arrive at."

But a sudden thought had occurred to Blake. He had remembered now the strange discrepancy of his watch when he had previously looked at it in this room an hour or so ago—one moment it had seemed to be three o'clock, and the next time he looked it was a quarter to four, and yet he had not been aware that three-quarters of an hour had elapsed. He concluded that he had made a mistake.

Had he been right after all? Was it possible that his eyes had not played him false? What was the explanation of this amazing mystery? Had three-quarters of an hour really gone by without either of them having been aware of it?

It seemed incredible! Was it possible that for nearly an hour both he and the secretary had been absolutely dead to the world—blotted out, as it were? If that could possibly happen, then it would explain why neither of them had seen those articles returned to the drawer.

Then he suddenly thought of the open door. He had distinctly heard it creak behind Dr. Deschamps, and yet when he had left the office at four o'clock it had been ajar. Had someone opened it and entered without either of them being aware of it? And, if so, who could it be? Then there was the mystery of his dirty, crumpled collar, and the strange marks on it that seemed to have been made by somebody's fingers. How had he come to be sitting in that chair with one of his legs over the arm? Somebody must have grabbed him by the collar and pushed him into it.

He grasped the secretary by the arm.

"Think carefully, Mr. Vrynot," he said.

"You remember that just before I left something occurred. I said you must have lost yourself for a little while. Do you remember?"

"I remember you saying something of the kind, Mr. Blake," said the secretary, puckering his brows and trying to think.

"And didn't you feel just a trifle queer—as if some break had occurred somewhere?"

The secretary was plainly too agitated to think clearly; he sat biting his fingers and staring at the detective for some minutes.

"Now you come to mention it, Mr. Blake," he said at last, "I did feel just a trifle queer for the moment. It was hardly noticeable, but I experienced the same sensation on Wednesday night. I think I mentioned it to you before. It was just a slight feeling of a break somewhere."

"Exactly!" said Blake quietly. "Now listen to me. There was a break somewhere; there must have been. For three-quarters of an hour you and I were absolutely unaware of what was happening in this room. And during that three-quarters of an hour our pocket-books were exchanged and those things were put in that drawer."

The secretary staggered to his feet.

"But it's impossible, Mr. Blake!" he gasped. "You can't drop out of existence for three-quarters of an hour without having some recollection of the fact! It sounds just like a fairy-tale!"

"We shall see," said Blake quietly. "I must admit that it does certainly sound like a fairy-tale, as you say, and I am almost as puzzled as you are. But

I feel that I am on the right track, and time will show if my theory is correct."

"But why on earth should our pocket-books have been exchanged, Mr. Blake?"

"My only explanation of that, Mr. Vrynot, is that our unknown thief made a mistake. The motive was clearly robbery, since both of us have lost the contents of our wallets; but the thief, having extracted the money, forgot, in his haste, which was which, and so succeeded in exchanging them."

"Yes, that is a very clever explanation," said Mr. Vrynot, seeming to be very much impressed by the detective's smart reasoning.

"And now, Mr. Vrynot, I am going to make one or two investigations. First of all, I want you to stretch my wallet out flat on the desk, if you will?"

Looking rather puzzled, Mr. Vrynot did as he was requested.

"That's right," said Blake. "Now just keep it like that while I sprinkle this kaolin powder over it."

The detective carefully covered the wallet with the powder, as he had done before, then blew it off again. As in the former case, several little white patches of the powder remained, and Blake scrutinised them intently for some moments. The secretary gazed on in silent fascination.

"It is strange," said Blake, at length, "that I find no impressions except those that have obviously been made by yours and my fingers. However, we will leave this here for a time; there are several other things which I must do."

He strode over to the door and examined it minutely. Then he took a bottle from his pocket, and sprayed the black finger-plate with French chalk. Next he turned his attention to the white porcelain handle, and this time he took from his pocket the bottle of graphite, and sprinkled the black powder over the handle.

For some minutes he remained staring intently through his glass; then he came back to the desk with a perplexed expression on his face.

"I am rather fogged, Mr. Vrynot," he said. "There are no traces of anyone having been in this room during the last two hours, excepting you and me. We will examine this drawer; we should, at any rate, find marks here."

He sat down at the desk, and did not speak for some time, minutely scrutinising the handle and woodwork. Then he performed the powdering process again, and picked up the magnifying-glass.

But still Blake could not find what he was looking for. He gave it up at last, and turned to the secretary.

"So far, Mr. Vrynot," he said, "I am completely baffled. Marks that are invisible to the naked eye should show up quite distinctly by this powdering process; yet there are no traces of that third person for whom I have been looking."

He sat back in his chair, and stared abstractedly in front of him. What could be the meaning of this extraordinary phenomenon? Someone had entered this room while he and the secretary had been talking together; this unknown person had extracted their pocket-books from their pockets, had placed that stolen property in the drawer, and had gone out again without either of them seeing him, or having the slightest suspicion of his presence. Further than that, he had been able to come and go without leaving a mark behind which would betray him. It seemed as if he were up against some invisible man.

He got up out of the chair at last.

"It is possible, Mr. Vrynot," he said,

"that a photograph will reveal something that has escaped my attention. I am going to have these powdered places photographed and enlarged. Would you mind my using the 'phone?"

"Do, by all means, Mr. Blake!"

The detective picked up the receiver and got through to Baker Street.

"Is that you, Tinker? This is Blake speaking!"

"This is me, guv'nor!"

"Have you taken that wallet to be photographed yet?"

"Yes; just come back, guv'nor."

"Well, look here, Tinker! I've got something else for the photographer to do here. I want you to run along to him and bring him down to the Royal Institute of Science. Tell him there are four photographs to be taken, will you?"

"Right-ho, guv'nor!"

"One moment, Tinker! I'm leaving

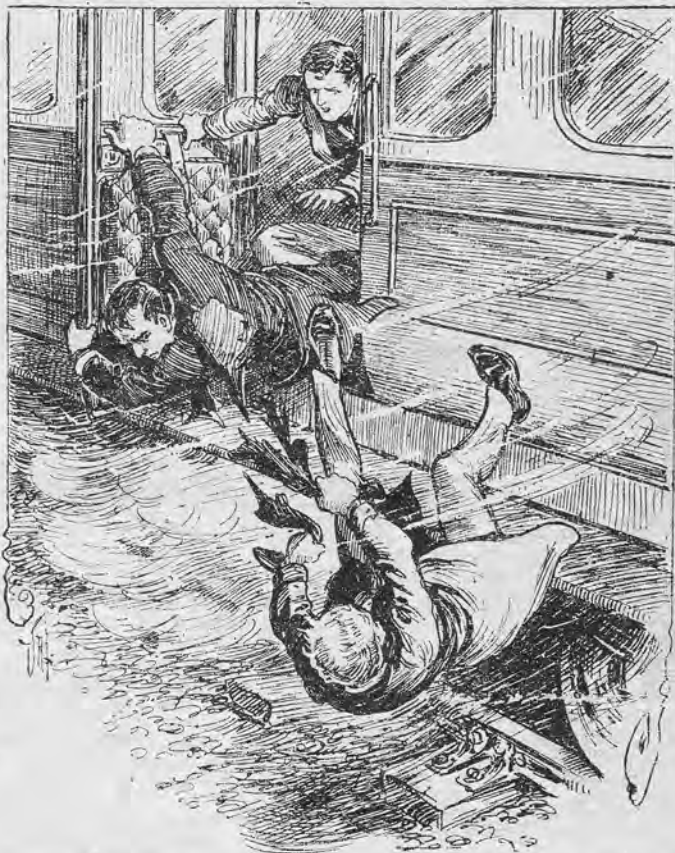
returning to town to-morrow, and a special committee-meeting will be held in the evening at seven o'clock. I am hoping that you can find it possible to attend the meeting and make some statement on this extraordinary affair. It would relieve me of a great trouble if you could do that."

"You may certainly rely on me to be here, Mr. Vrynot," said Blake; "but whether I am able to tell you anything further depends entirely on the result of my inquiries."

"I understand that, Mr. Blake."

The detective put on his hat, and, taking care not to touch the door-handle, left the room.

As he strode across to the lift, he heard the key turned in the lock behind him. Evidently Mr. Vrynot was not taking any more risks; he had locked himself in his office until Tinker should arrive.



The cloth gave way, and Dr. Deschamps went hurtling to his death.

here now; so I'll leave the matter in your hands. Mr. Vrynot, the secretary, will be here, and will show you what's to be done. I want the work rushed through. Understand, Tinker?"

"I understand, guv'nor!"

"Right! Good-bye!"

Blake replaced the receiver and turned to the secretary.

"Will you be here when my assistant arrives?" he asked. "There are several things that I am anxious to attend to immediately. For one thing, I want to call on those two gentlemen whose names you gave me some hours ago."

"Very well, Mr. Blake; I will do as you ask. But there is just one other matter before you, ge. Mr. Wynne-Deveres, the president of the institute, is

THE THIRD CHAPTER. The Criss-shaped Mark.

TINKER did not see much of his master again until late in the following afternoon. He came hurriedly into his rooms about tea-time, and, flinging down his hat and coat, turned to his assistant.

"Well, Tinker," he said, "how about the photographs?"

"Here they are, guv'nor! All ready for you!"

"Capital, Tinker! Pour me out a cup of tea, will you, while I have a glance at them?"

He sat down at his desk, with the proofs in front of him, and picked up the U. J.—No. 830.

magnifying-glass, while Tinker performed with the teapot.

"I've numbered them, guv'nor," said Tinker over his shoulder; "you'll find the reference on the back."

"I see, Tinker."

For nearly a quarter of an hour the detective scrutinised the photographs earnestly, going over each one several times, and minutely comparing the one with the other. At length the perplexed expression lifted from his face, and he turned to his assistant with a look of triumph.

"I think I've got it now, Tinker," he said quietly.

"Why, what have you discovered, guv'nor?" asked Tinker, leaning over his shoulder.

"I want you to go through this carefully, Tinker. It'll be an education to you, and might serve you in good stead one of these days."

The detective picked up one of the proofs and held the glass in front of it.

"This is the photograph of the finger-plate," he said. "Do you see those two set of finger-marks there?"

"I see 'em, guv'nor."

"Well, they're made by Mr. Vrynot's and my fingers. I know that, so we won't trouble about those any more. Now, can you see anything else?"

"Not a thing, guv'nor!"

"Neither can I, Tinker. Now we'll look at the photograph of the door-handle."

Blake picked up another proof, and held it behind the glass.

"What can you see there, Tinker?" he asked.

Tinker screwed up his eyes, and stared in silence for a minute or two.

"Why, the same thing, guv'nor!" he said, at length. "They're the same two sets of finger-prints."

"Right again, Tinker! Now, where's the photographs of the wallets? Here they are! This is mine. What do you make of that?"

"It's just the same as the others, guv'nor," said Tinker immediately.

"So it is, Tinker. Well, we'll have a look at Mr. Vrynot's. Can you see anything different here?"

"No, I'm blown if I can!" said Tinker, after a moment's pause.

Blake sat back in his chair, and regarded his assistant with a faint expression of amusement.

"But somebody must have entered the room, Tinker," he said. "Somebody must have exchanged these wallets, and somebody must have put those things back in the drawer. How do you account for him leaving no traces behind?"

"Can't say, guv'nor! I'm not superstitious, but it seems to me as if it must have been a ghost!"

"I was almost thinking the same thing myself, Tinker, at first. But you just have another look at this photograph. Now, can't you see anything on the extreme edge there?"

Tinker craned his head forward and stared again. Then he cast a suspicious glance at his master and had another look.

"Well," he said, "there's certainly a funny little mark there on the edge; but I don't know what it is."

"It's a kind of criss-shaped mark, Tinker?"

"Yes, that's it, guv'nor."

Blake picked up another proof.

"You haven't had a look at this yet," he said. "This is the photograph of the drawer. What do you think of that?"

"There's only one set of finger-prints there, guv'nor," said Tinker, after a brief pause.

U. J.—No. 850.

"I know that, Tinker. Those were made by Mr. Vrynot's fingers; I didn't touch the drawer. But can you see anything else?"

This time Tinker knew what to look for.

"Yes," he said; "there's that funny little mark again—just on the upper ledge of the drawer this time."

"Yes; that's right. So the only thing we can discover, Tinker, is these two criss-shaped marks. What deduction do you draw from them?"

"Can't say that they convey anything to me, guv'nor," said Tinker, looking rather ashamed at his dunseness.

"That's all right, Tinker," said Blake kindly. "I didn't think they would. Can't expect you to know everything."

Now, as a matter of fact, these criss-shaped marks give the whole show away; and I'm going to prove it to you by a practical demonstration—that's the only way to fix it in your memory. Now, get your gloves and put them on."

"My gloves, guv'nor?"

"Your gloves, Tinker."

Greatly mystified, Tinker went over to where his coat hung on the peg, and took out a pair of kid gloves, which he proceeded to put on. The detective watched him in silence.

"Got 'em on, Tinker? That's right. Now I want you to leave the left-hand glove unbuttoned."

More mystified than ever, Tinker did as he was instructed.

"Now, Tinker, I want you to go over to that window there and breathe upon it, then press your left hand lightly against the glass, and take it away again."

Tinker strode over to the window, breathed upon it, pressed his left hand against the pane, took it away again, and stood awaiting further instructions.

"Look at the impression you've made, Tinker," said Blake, pointing with his finger to the window. "Do you see? There's that criss-shaped mark just where your glove was unbuttoned. It was made by the heel of your palm—just where your hand was uncovered. Got me?"

Tinker took a step back, and stared incredulously at the impression he had left behind.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he muttered. "If that don't take the bun! That's a brain-wave, if you like!"

Blake gave a grim chuckle.

"Listen, Tinker," he said, "and I'll tell you just what happened. The thief, whoever he is, is no fool; he is cute enough to wear gloves when he performs his sleight-of-hand tricks. Very likely they are rubber gloves; but that doesn't matter much. Well, when he entered the secretary's office this afternoon he must have forgotten to button his left-hand glove—which is just where he made a mistake. If it were not for that little error on his part, we should have been completely baffled, for it's the only clue we've got to work on."

"You see," continued Blake, "that bears out what I've always maintained; the most cunning criminal always makes some error of judgment which will give him away—if you're clever enough to find it. Now, this fellow, whoever he is, entered the room this afternoon by the door; he made no marks on the handle and the finger-plate for the simple reason that he wore gloves, which, of course, left no impression behind. Also, he left no impression on my pocket-book, for he evidently held that in his right hand, and his right-hand glove was buttoned. But with regard to Mr. Vrynot's wallet it was different. He must have grasped that in his left hand, the glove of which was unbuttoned, and in closing it the heel of

his palm came in contact with the extreme edge, and left that criss-shaped impression. You just grasp that wallet in your hand, and see if I'm not correct."

Tinker did as he was told. The detective was right; where his glove was unbuttoned the palm of his hand just pressed against the upper edge of the wallet.

"Well, that's clear," continued Blake. "And the same thing with regard to the drawer. In placing that stuff inside the drawer the thief rested his left hand on the ledge, and made that criss-shaped impression which you can just see in the photograph."

Tinker was greatly impressed by his master's brilliant reasoning. Presently he turned to Blake.

"But how do you account for those finger-marks on your collar?" he asked. "Why should those show up so clearly?"

"For the simple reason that they were caused by friction, Tinker. Somebody must have grabbed me by the collar and pushed me into that chair, and in doing so the gloved fingers must have slid along the collar and made those elongated smudges."

"Well, that's jolly clever, guv'nor, I must say!" said Tinker, in admiration. "But it doesn't give you any clue as to the identity of the thief, does it?"

"Not exactly, Tinker. But it will establish the guilt of the thief beyond doubt once he is caught. That small impression of the palm of his hand is almost as good as a finger-print. Under a microscope I can find out the number of pores in the skin, and, by the size, shape, and number, prove who made them; for in no two persons are the pores of the skin exactly the same. However, I'm not worrying about that now. The most important thing is that I have proved that a third person entered the secretary's office this afternoon between three and five o'clock. How he did so without either of us seeing him has yet to be explained; but I have my suspicions."

"Why, guv'nor?" asked Tinker, with renewed interest. "Have you discovered anything else?"

"Yes; I've found out quite a number of things to-day, Tinker. You'll be surprised when I tell you about them. But I can't spare the time to go into them now. I've got to be at the Royal Institute of Science at seven o'clock, so I want you to come along there with me and listen to what I say. That'll be another step in your education. But I'll give you a tip, Tinker. You mark my words—in a day or so there'll be something big on. This affair at the institute is only an experiment; the criminal, whoever he is, won't be content with that. And when he makes his scoop, then it'll be our chance to step in and nab him."

Blake took out his watch; it was now nearly seven o'clock.

"Come on," he said. "We'd better be going; we don't want to keep the committee waiting."

About a quarter of an hour later Sexton Blake and his assistant turned into Bond Street, and, making their way to the Institute, entered the lift, and were quickly whisked up to the secretary's office.

Mr. Vrynot met them at the door. "The committee is already assembled, Mr. Blake," he said, "in the room downstairs. We will go down at once, if you will follow me."

"One moment, Mr. Vrynot," said the detective. "There is one thing which I omitted to mention before. I do not want anything said about the strange occurrence that took place in this room

yesterday afternoon. Have you spoken to anyone about it?"

"I have not said a word, Mr. Blake. I preferred to leave the matter entirely to you."

"That is a wise precaution, Mr. Vrynot; and I do not propose to say anything about the matter to-night."

About a dozen gentlemen were seated around the green-baize table in the committee-room, with the president, Mr. Wynne-Deveres, occupying the chair at the head. At Blake's entry the president rose from his chair and came to meet him, and the secretary introduced the two men.

"We were anxiously awaiting you, Mr. Blake," he said. "I have left you a chair at the other end of the table. Please make yourself at home, and proceed as you think fit. The committee's time is entirely at your disposal."

He turned to the gentlemen sitting at the table, who were all staring curiously at the great detective of whom they had heard so much.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I have asked Mr. Blake to proceed at once with his statement. I feel certain that I can assure him, on your behalf, of our undivided attention."

There was a general murmur of assent as the detective took his seat, and, laying his attache-case on the table in front of him, opened it.

Tinker stood in the background, somewhat impressed at finding himself in such distinguished company.

The detective cleared his throat, and glanced swiftly around at the circle of intent faces. The room was perfectly quiet; not a sound disturbed the impressive silence. You could have heard a pin drop. Then Blake began, in even, quiet tones.

"Mr. President and gentlemen," he said, "you are all acquainted with the facts of this extraordinary robbery that took place last Wednesday night in the adjoining hall, and I will not, therefore, go into the details which Mr. Vrynot, your secretary, has given me. I intend, very briefly, to place before you my own theory with regard to the matter, and to show you the evidence I have to corroborate it. Please interrupt as much as you like, and do not let me proceed until each point is precise and clear to you."

There was a general movement of the committee to get a good view of Blake. The members craned their heads and looked over one another's shoulders, while the president rested his elbows on the table and stared across at the detective with a look of curious expectation.

"Now, gentlemen," continued Blake, "the first point with which I have to deal is the exact time at which this robbery took place. It is, of course, evident that the robbery took place between the hours of eight o'clock and ten-thirty, but I am going to narrow it down somewhat."

He paused a moment, and the president took advantage of this to interrupt.

"Pardon me, Mr. Blake," he said quickly, "but we are not so certain now that the robbery did take place between the times you have just stated. The committee was discussing that point when you arrived. We fail to see that it was possible for anyone to have entered while the lecture was proceeding, and to have picked the pockets of some forty of the gentlemen present and to have got away unobserved. It is too incredible. We can only suppose that the thief did his work just prior to the lecture—that is, when the members were entering the hall."

A general expression of approval arose as the president finished speaking; then every head turned expectantly in Blake's

direction to hear what he would say to this argument.

"But," said Blake quietly, "several gentlemen have assured me that they had their property during the earlier part of the lecture. One gentleman, a Mr. Smith, whom I have seen to-day, is positive that he looked at his watch after he had taken his seat, and yet later on in the evening he found that it had been stolen. Therefore, the thief must have done his work between eight o'clock and ten-thirty."

"I admit your argument, Mr. Blake," said the president, "but it seems to me more credible to suppose that these gentlemen whom you have just mentioned were mistaken than to believe it possible for the thief to have entered during the lecture."

Again signs of approval came from the audience.

"I think you are rather 'straining at the gnat and swallowing the camel,' Mr. Wynne-Deveres," answered Blake.

"However, allow me to proceed. I have just said that the robbery must have taken place between eight o'clock and ten-thirty. But I did not say that the thief had entered during that time, for the thief was there all the time."

A dead silence followed this statement. The members of the committee glanced uneasily at one another, and then looked towards Blake again. Then a gentleman with a shiny, bald head, who was sitting near by, suddenly leant forward.

"But that is impossible," he blurted out. "The audience was composed entirely of members of the institute. You surely don't accuse one of the members of committing this crime, do you?"

"I accuse no one—yet!" replied Blake significantly. "But I still adhere to my original statement—the thief was in the room during the whole period of the lecture."

The president turned to the secretary, who was sitting on his right, and biting his nails nervously.

"But you knew everyone personally, Mr. Vrynot," he said. "They were all members, were they not?"

The secretary nodded his head.

"Yes," he said, "I am quite sure of that."

A flicker of amusement passed over Blake's imperturbable features.

"Think again, Mr. Vrynot," he said quietly.

The secretary cast a perplexed look at the detective.

"But they were," he insisted. "Besides the lecturer, Dr. Deschamps, every person present was a member of the institute."

"Exactly!" said Blake.

A start of surprise went round the table. The president's face became grave and serious.

"What do you mean, Mr. Blake?" he asked. "You surely do not accuse Dr. Deschamps of being implicated in any way in this outrage?"

"I accuse no one—yet," said Blake again. "I was only questioning your statement that only members were present. Let me proceed. I said a little while ago that I would narrow down the times between which this robbery occurred. I will even narrow it down to three-quarters of an hour. I am convinced that the thief carried out his work between nine o'clock and a quarter to ten."

Again Blake paused, and this time several of the committee began to interrupt. But the bald-headed gentleman got the lead.

"Do you mean to tell us," he said incredulously, "that while we were sitting listening to Dr. Deschamps speaking to us the thief calmly walked up and

down the rows of seats and extracted the contents of the pockets of the gentlemen sitting there? Why, it's too absurd."

A chorus of "Hear, hear!" greeted this outburst. But Blake, with a gesture, silenced them.

"Not exactly that," he said. "Dr. Deschamps was not speaking at the time. It occurred during the interval."

"But there was no interval!" shouted several of the committee together.

"I think there was," said the detective quietly.

Several of the committee were beginning to get angry. What did this man mean by saying that there was an interval? How should he know? He wasn't at the meeting. It was rather impertinent for him to contradict them when they were absolutely certain that there was no interval.

The president rapped sharply on the table to command silence, and then turned to the detective.

"I am afraid that you are making a mistake, Mr. Blake," he said. "I, personally, wasn't at the meeting last Wednesday, but Mr. Vrynot, here, assures me that there was no interval, and I think that these gentlemen, who were also present, will confirm his statement."

"Quite right!" shouted several voices together, while the remainder of the committee nodded his approval.

"Then," said Blake quietly, "if you persist in saying there was no interval I should like to ask Mr. Vrynot a few questions. First, Mr. Vrynot, did you make any introductory remarks at the commencement of the meeting before Dr. Deschamps began to speak?"

The secretary nodded his head.

"And can you tell me how long you spoke?"

"For about five minutes, Mr. Blake."

"We will say ten minutes, then," said the detective, and jotted it down on a piece of paper. "And now, Mr. Vrynot, how long did you take for your closing remarks? I presume that you returned a vote of thanks when the doctor had finished?"

Again the secretary nodded his head.

"Five or six minutes, at the outside, Mr. Blake," he said.

"Then we will again put it down as ten minutes," Blake said, and did so. "We have thus used up twenty minutes of our two and a half hours; that still leaves us with two hours and ten minutes. How was that time taken up, Mr. Vrynot?"

"Why," exclaimed the secretary, somewhat puzzled by Blake's question, "by Dr. Deschamps' lecture, naturally!"

"Then you assert that Dr. Deschamps spoke for two hours and ten minutes without a break?"

"Certainly, Mr. Blake!"

Blake glanced round at the committee inquiringly.

"You all agree to that, gentlemen?" he asked.

An unanimous expression of approval came from all sides.

"Then, gentlemen, you are all absolutely certain that Dr. Deschamps spoke for two hours and ten minutes without a break of more than a minute or two at the most? Very well. Then I am going to ask you to account for a strange fact, if you can."

The detective drew out from his attache-case a number of type-written sheets, and held them up in front of the committee.

"This, gentlemen," he said, "is the transcript of Mr. Deschamps' address which he delivered to you last Wednesday night. I have been along to Mr. Cook, the shorthand writer, who took

down the minutes of the proceedings, and was present during the whole of the time. Mr. Cook assures me that Dr. Deschamps delivered his address at the average rate of one hundred and twenty words a minute, and yet, gentlemen, when I count the number of words in this address I find that there are only just over ten thousand."

Blake paused a moment to give time for this startling fact to sink in. Nobody spoke now. Every man present was staring at the detective in consternation.

"Do you understand what I am driving at now, gentlemen?" Blake asked quietly. "Don't you see that to read this address at the rate of one hundred and twenty words a minute would take only about an hour and a half, which, if you subtract it from the two hours and ten minutes at the doctor's disposal, leaves nearly three-quarters of an hour unaccounted for?"

Again there was dead silence in the room. Every man on that Committee was an eminent scientist, well-versed in his profession, and possessed of more than the average degree of intelligence, yet in the face of Blake's irresistible logic not one of them had a word to say. They remained dumb with amazement.

"I see, gentlemen," the detective continued, with a grim smile playing about the corners of his mouth, "that you are rather floored by the statement I have just made. It is certainly a very curious phenomenon, and I must confess that for some time it puzzled me. However, I haven't finished yet. This morning I went over to Lewisham and saw one of your members—the Mr. Smith whom I mentioned a short time ago. Mr. Smith tells me that he discovered the loss of his watch at a quarter to ten, and at that precise moment he felt a strange sensation as if he had just woke up."

The detective paused again. But nobody spoke; everybody was staring at Blake as if he were a conjurer who was performing some amazing miracle.

"My next point," said Blake, "is that at a quarter to ten Mr. Vrynnot suddenly became aware that Dr. Deschamps was not on the platform. He was standing down in the auditorium by the reporter's table. When I questioned Mr. Cook concerning this fact he admitted that at a quarter to ten he felt a curious sensation as of a break somewhere, and that at that moment he became aware of the fact that Dr. Deschamps was bending over his shoulder. Then Dr. Deschamps asked him what were the last words he had taken down."

The detective stopped momentarily, to see if everyone were following what he was saying, then continued:

"Do you know why Dr. Deschamps asked that curious question, gentlemen? I will tell you. It was because for three-quarters of an hour he had not been speaking. He had stopped at nine o'clock, and when he came to pick up the thread of his discourse at a quarter to ten he had forgotten the last thing he had said."

Blake shut the attache-case with a snap and sat back in his chair.

"To sum up, then," he said, "my contention is this: Three-quarters of an hour had gone by without any of you gentlemen being aware of it. You had been in some extraordinary trance during the whole of that time, and during that time your pockets were picked. I should like to ask any gentleman here who was present at the meeting last Wednesday if he also remembers experiencing that curious sensation of a break to which I have just referred?"

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The detective glanced inquiringly at his audience. For a few moments nobody spoke; every man was too astounded at the detective's startling statement to do aught but stare blankly into his face. Then, after a time, they began to find their tongues. There was a quick exchange of views, then very soon everybody was talking excitedly.

For a while Blake listened in silence, eagerly taking in all that was said. Presently he lifted up his hand and enjoined silence.

"I see, gentlemen," he said, "that quite a number of you now recollect experiencing that queer sensation of a break. We may be fairly certain, therefore, that some such occurrence did actually take place, and that three-quarters of an hour did really elapse without any of you being aware of the fact."

But here the president interrupted, and in his excitement he jumped to his feet and knocked over his chair in his haste.

"But how could such a thing happen, Mr. Blake?" he asked. "There is no drug or anæsthetic known that could be used for such a purpose."

Blake's thin lips parted in a dry smile. He picked up the manuscript that lay in front of him on the table and turned over the folios.

"The secret is given away in Dr. Deschamps' speech last Wednesday," he said, "and yet not a gentleman present realised it. Please listen while I read this extract."

Amidst an impressive silence the detective began to read from the transcript:

"The most peculiar fact of human life is that at regular periods we fall to sleep. Our consciousness is blotted out, as it were. And yet nobody has been clever enough to discover the true reason. I feel sure that in the air we breathe a mysterious gas is present in minute quantities, which is responsible for sending us to sleep, and this gas I will call somnifex. If it could be discovered in its natural form it would be capable of immediately plunging us into a trance-like sleep of very short duration, from which we would wake quite oblivious of the fact that we had been asleep."

"That, gentlemen," said Blake, looking up, "is an extract from Dr. Deschamps' address. No doubt some of you will remember his making such a statement last Wednesday. It seems to me to throw an important light on the matter we are discussing."

"Do you mean to say," shouted the president excitedly, "that Dr. Deschamps has discovered this gas called somnifex, and that he discharged some of it in the institute hall last Wednesday night and put us all into a trance?"

"I do not say that Dr. Deschamps did any such thing," said Blake. "That has yet to be proved. We must be careful not to accuse anyone without sufficient evidence. The fact that Dr. Deschamps asked that question of the reporter does not prove that he is the guilty party. He may also have been a victim of this outrage, and finding suddenly that he had ceased speaking, he would naturally go over to the shorthand-writer and ask what was the last word he had uttered."

"Yet someone must be responsible, Mr. Blake."

"Yes, certainly. In my opinion someone present at the meeting last Wednesday was responsible for discharging that gas, and while all you gentlemen were in this trance he deliberately went round and picked your pockets. Further than that, I feel sure that this sudden

reaction was responsible for Professor James' death from heart-failure."

"And you do not accuse anyone yet of this infamous outrage?"

"Not yet," said the detective, "although I have my suspicions. But you will understand that in an affair of this sort one must have actual proof. You must, therefore, still leave the matter in my hands. In the meantime, I must ask the committee to regard all I have said as being strictly confidential."

The president rose from his chair.

"Thank you, Mr. Blake!" he said quietly. "I cannot tell you how impressed I am by your brilliant reasoning. You have certainly proved your case up to the hilt. I am too astounded to think clearly. I can assure you that we shall respect your confidence. I should like to ask you to keep this matter out of the Press, if you will. We do not wish the Royal Institute of Science to be mixed up publicly in such an ugly business. That was one of the chief reasons why we decided to seek your assistance."

"You may trust me there, Mr. Wynne-Deveres," said Blake. "It is because of that that I ask you not to disclose what I have told you this evening."

After cordially shaking hands with the president and secretary, and being heartily congratulated by the committee on his astuteness and ability, Blake left the room with his assistant.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Robbery at the Bank.

IT was about half-past two on the same day as the events already recorded in the previous chapter. Dr. Nicola Deschamps stood in front of the fire that smouldered in the grate in a room at the top of a block of chambers in the Temple. The grizzled beard that had covered the lower part of his face was now gone, and the firm, angular chin seemed to add to the strength of his sallow, sinister face. His eyes gleamed like live coals, and in them was a look of undisguised triumph.

Presently he strode across to the door and turned the key in the lock. Then he went to the desk that stood in the corner of the room and took out from the drawer an oblong leather case. He pressed the button, and it opened with a snap.

Inside was lying a small shiny object shaped like a hypodermic syringe, one end of which terminated in a little sprayed nozzle. He held it carefully in the palm of his hand and stood staring down at it for a few moments with a sardonic smile playing about the corners of his mouth.

"This represents twenty years of my life," he muttered—"twenty years' solid work! But it has proved a success. Twenty years of poverty and grind, and at last I shall reap my reward. They will never find out. It is impossible. I have completely baffled them. They have employed that fellow Blake, but this is a little beyond his mark. He may be very smart, but he's not clever enough for me."

The syringe which he held in his hand was filled with concentrated solution of somnifex, and when discharged in a room its effect was instantaneous. Those who breathed it were immediately plunged into a trance-like sleep until all traces of it had disappeared from the air.

It was this great discovery that Dr. Deschamps intended now to make unscrupulous use of, and his felonious work was all the more deadly because the gas was odourless, and left absolutely no traces behind.

The doctor shut the case and slipped it into his pocket. Then he took out from the drawer an aluminium flask with a tube attached to it, which he carefully deposited in his breast-pocket. He shut the drawer again and locked it, and put on his hat and coat. After a brief glance round the room he opened the door and stepped out into the corridor, stood a moment listening, then locked the door behind him, and left the building.

He strode quickly up Fleet Street towards the Strand, and then caught a bus that was going to Piccadilly Circus.

He alighted at the Circus, and walked up Piccadilly for about two or three hundred yards, until he came to a branch office of Goyle's Bank. He had timed his visit to the minute. It was just three

outer doors, and it swung to behind him. Then, instead of opening the outer door, the doctor suddenly stooped to the floor, and took out from his pocket the small syringe. He placed his hand tightly over his mouth, and thrust the syringe through the door and pressed the handle. The next moment he had sprung to his feet, flung open the outer door, and slammed it to behind him.

If anyone had been curious enough to have watched Dr. Deschamps as he left Goyle's Bank, they would have seen him walk swiftly up Piccadilly for a hundred yards, then turn quickly about and retrace his steps. They would also have seen him pause again outside the bank, glance furtively up and down, then open the door and vanish inside. Yet of the crowds that passed up and down none

came to his ears. Then, evidently reassured, he strode quickly to the further end of the counter, and paused at the open door, which bore the word "Manager" in large dark letters.

Seated at a table inside the room were two men. Open in front of them was a ledger, over which they had been poring a moment or so ago. Both now were silent and still. One of them lay back in his swivel-chair, with a look of calm repose on his white face, the other was leaning across the ledger with his face buried in his arms. The mysterious somnifex had done its dread work. From the manager to the messenger, the staff was wrapped in a profound sleep. To all intents and purposes they were dead to the world.

The doctor stole noiselessly across the

THE SEARCH!

The inspector passed his hands over the accountant's clothes, and drew a wad of banknotes from the breast-pocket



o'clock, and the bank was closing, the messenger was just shutting the doors.

When the messenger saw the late customer arriving he held open the door for him to pass.

"Bit late, am I not?" said the doctor cheerfully.

"That's all right, sir!" said the man, closing the door behind him and following him in.

The doctor walked up to the counter and nodded to the cashier.

"Sorry I'm late," he said; "but can you cash me a cheque for ten pounds?" "Certainly, Mr. Turner!" said the cashier. "No trouble, I assure you."

"Thank you!" muttered the doctor, and, picking up a pen, proceeded to fill in his cheque.

When he had finished he pushed it across the counter, and the cashier counted out ten notes and handed them to his client.

"Good-afternoon!" said the doctor.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Turner! Can you find your way out? The door's not locked."

"Yes, thank you!" Dr. Deschamps replied, as he walked towards the entrance.

He pushed open the glass swing-door which separated the vestibule from the

noticed this man's strange movements. They were all too busy attending to their own affairs.

As the doctor closed the door behind him he clapped a small rubber respirator over his mouth, the two prongs of which compressed his nostrils, and prevented him from inhaling the air. The mouth-piece of the respirator was connected to the oxygen flask in his pocket by means of a thin rubber tube. He then slipped on a pair of rubber gloves, locked the outer door through which he had just entered, and pushed open the glass swing-door.

Inside all was deathly silence. A strange stillness had stolen over the busy branch office. The first cashier was still at the counter, but he did not move. He was as motionless as a statue, half-sprawling over his cash-book, breathing regularly and peacefully. At the desks behind about half a dozen clerks were sitting on their stools or standing by their ledgers, all motionless and silent, and with that same trance-like look on their faces as if they had been suddenly turned into stone.

For a few moments the criminal scientist stood at the door, listening intently; but only the sounds of deep, regular breathing

carpet, and stooped down beside the man in the swivel-chair, and, running his gloved fingers lightly over his clothing, drew out a bunch of keys. Then he turned his attention to the other man. A minute later he stood up, holding a second bunch of keys in his hand.

Without hesitating a moment he crossed the room and opened the door on the further side and passed through. Facing him was the strong-room. The heavy outer door stood wide open, only the iron-barred grille guarding the bullion that lay behind in the vaults of the bank.

The doctor chose a key from one of the bunches, and, inserting it in the patent lock, made a complete revolution and withdrew it again. He held up the other bunch, chose a similar key, and repeated the process. This time the grille swung open, and the next moment he was inside the strong-room.

The room was crammed with black deed-boxes belonging to the clients of the bank, and containing valuable securities and plate and jewels. Ranged along one side were some dozens of bags of silver and copper. But the doctor did not trouble to glance at any of these. He

crossed over to the heavy iron safe, which stood on the other side of the room, and, carefully choosing a key from each bunch, endeavoured to open the door.

This time he was not quite as successful as he was with the grille. The first key turned all right, but the key from the second bunch would not move. He tried each one in turn, and presently he found the right one. He pulled the lever towards him, the wards of the lock shot back with a sharp click, and the door swung open.

Quickly thrusting his arm inside the safe, the doctor drew out a leather wallet which he opened with feverish haste. As his eyes rested on the contents a sigh of satisfaction escaped from him in spite of the respirator that covered his mouth, for gleaming opalescent against the dark velvet setting was a rope of iridescent gems of priceless value.

He knelt for a moment, staring covetously at the jewels, then he took a key from his pocket, and, opening a black deed-box that stood near by, thrust the case inside and locked it again. Then he relocked the safe, and stepped out of the strong-room, shutting and locking the grille behind him.

A moment later this unscrupulous scientist and arch-criminal stood again in the manager's room. He stood a moment gazing at the two bunches of keys with a look of perplexity on his face, for in his haste he had forgotten to make sure which was which. Then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he dropped a bunch in each man's pocket, and strode noiselessly from the room.

The air of ghostly silence still brooded over the office. Not a soul had stirred. The cashier still hugged his cash-book, and the clerks still hung over their ledgers. Except for their quiet, regular breathing they might have been carved in stone.

But Dr. Deschamps had not yet completed his evil work. He vaulted lightly over the counter and, opening the cashier's till, took out a wallet of crisp bank-notes. Then he crept back to the manager's room, and deftly inserted the notes in the breast-pocket of one of the motionless men.

Then, as he glanced at the clock that was ticking away merrily on the mantelpiece, the doctor seemed to be struck by a brilliant thought. With a grim gesture he stole over to it, and, opening the glass front, put the hands back three-quarters of an hour. Then he came out into the outer office again, and did the same thing to the clock that was hanging on the wall there.

After another rapid glance around the doctor went quickly through the swing-door, and, dragging off the respirator, let himself into the street.

For about half an hour after the criminal doctor had completed his felonious work that grim silence hung over the branch office of Goyle's Bank, then, abruptly, the motionless figures began to stir. The clerks took furtive glances at one another, stared curiously at the clock, then bent to their work with feverish anxiety.

But everything seemed to have gone wrong that night. Three hours later the whole of the staff, including the manager, were frantically searching for a difference of twelve hundred pounds, which was missing from the cashier's till. To add to the manager's perturbation, he discovered, when he went to open the strong-room, that, in some unaccountable manner, his keys had been exchanged with those of Mr. Crow, the accountant.

But the climax came when some

securities were being deposited in the safe in the strong-room. The manager stopped down and fumbled inside for a moment.

Then suddenly he sprang to his feet. The colour had left his face, and in his agitation he had let his bunch of keys go clattering to the floor.

"The Romanoff necklace!" he gasped. "Where was it put, Mr. Crow?"

The manager's distress had spread to his subordinate. The accountant knelt down, and felt with trembling fingers among the documents in the safe. But the thing he sought had gone. The case, with its priceless contents, had vanished.

Five minutes later two white-faced men stood in the manager's office. One was grasping the telephone in his hand, and speaking in scared, broken tones. The other stood by with his face twitching nervously. He finished at last, and replaced the receiver; and at the same moment a certain department in the great head office of Goyle's Bank got busy. It was to be a late night to-night.

Barely twenty minutes had gone by when a taxi drew up outside in the street. Two men jumped out and came hurrying up the steps. The manager met them at the door. One of them was an official from the head office. He exchanged a brief greeting with the manager, and turned to his companion.

"Detective-Inspector MacDonald from Scotland Yard!" he muttered.

A brief consultation followed, the manager carefully stating the facts of the case, while his two companions stood by, frowning.

"Have any of the staff gone home, M. Curson?" asked the man from Scotland Yard.

"No; they are all here," replied the manager.

The inspector turned to the head office official.

"It would be wise to have each man searched," he said. "Just as a matter of form, of course."

"Very well, inspector. Do as you wish."

"Perhaps it would be best if I asked them to go into my room?" queried the manager.

The inspector nodded his head.

"It would be better, perhaps," he said. The manager strode over to the counter, and raised his voice so that everyone could hear.

"I want everybody to leave his work and go into my room," he said. "At once, please!"

The clerks dropped their pens, and silently obeyed the summons. When they had all assembled the manager spoke again. His face was still ashy white, but his voice was steady and calm now.

"Something serious has occurred in the bank," he said quietly. "I am hoping that it may not prove so serious as it appears. But it is necessary that Inspector MacDonald, here, should search each one of us. It is only a matter of form, of course; but, since it is necessary, I'll volunteer to be the first one."

He turned to the inspector with a grim smile, and held his arms above his head.

"Carry on, inspector!" he said.

The Scotland Yard man ran his fingers lightly through the manager's pockets. But he found nothing of an incriminating nature. After a few moments he stood aside.

"Thank you!" he said politely.

For a brief interval nobody moved. Then the accountant stepped forward.

"Might as well get it over!" he muttered, and held up his arms.

Inspector MacDonald passed his hands over his clothes, and drew something out

of his breast-pocket. It was a wad of crisp Bank of England notes. The inspector slowly counted them.

"Twelve hundred pounds!" he said coldly, glancing around at the ring of men, who stared incredulously at the wad of notes with an amazed expression on their faces.

For a moment after the inspector had spoken a deadly silence hung over the room. Then, with a choking gasp, the accountant crumpled to the floor in a dead faint.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Blake Puts Two and Two Together.

IT was breakfast-time next morning, and there was a pleasant smell of bacon and eggs and hot toast at Sexton Blake's house in Baker Street. Tinker sat at the table idly glancing over the morning paper, and waiting for his master to appear, for Sexton Blake was still in the midst of his daily cold plunge in the bath-room.

Presently a news item of unusual interest seemed to catch Tinker's eye, for he suddenly smoothed out the paper, and, resting his chin on his hands, immediately became engrossed in the column in question.

Some minutes later he looked up with a start, to find the detective had entered unperceived, and was standing by his side, clad in his dressing-gown, and looking flushed and ruddy from his recent vigorous towelling.

"You seem interested in something this morning, Tinker," he said quietly.

"I should say so, guv'nor!" burst out Tinker. "You just read this. The Romanoff necklace has been stolen from Goyle's Bank. Jolly rummy business, too!"

"What!" exclaimed Blake, snatching up the paper. "The necklace that was put up for sale by auction yesterday at Smerd & Lister's?"

"That's it, guv'nor."

The detective glanced quickly down the column, picking out the gist of the story, and noting the main facts of the case. As Tinker had said, an amazing robbery had taken place at the Piccadilly branch of Goyle's Bank, and the Romanoff necklace, valued at £150,000, which had only been deposited that very day in the strong-room of the bank, was now missing.

The paper went on to state that the necklace had been put up for auction at Messrs. Smerd & Lister's in the morning, and had been purchased by Sir James Boyd, who had taken it straight to his banker's. He had seen the manager put it in the strong-room safe himself, and was quite certain that it was there when he had left the bank.

Blake turned over the page, and looked for the "Stop Press" column. It contained two lines only:

"Missing Necklace.—Bank Accountant Arrested."

For some moments the detective stood silently staring at the paper with a thoughtful expression on his face. Then he turned to his assistant, who had been eyeing him narrowly.

"I wonder," he said slowly, "if this is in any way connected with the other case?"

"What other case, guv'nor? The robbery at the Institute of Science?"

"Yes."

"But what makes you think that, guv'nor?"

"I don't think so, Tinker, yet. But I may do when I've found out more of the facts. That's why I'm going along to Goyle's Bank directly after breakfast."

"But what makes you think there

might be a connection, gov'nor?" insisted Tinker.

"For this reason, Tinker. As I said before, that affair at the institute was only an experiment, if I am not greatly mistaken. The criminal will try something bigger than that next time. Well, it was a tidy big haul last night, and this may be the next time. Besides, there's something about the case that arouses my interest. I think there's more in it than meets the eye. However, that's what we're going to find out."

The detective lapsed into silence, and turned his attention to the plate of bacon and eggs which Mrs. Bardell had just brought in. Tinker watched his master furtively for the next half-hour. He was very much impressed by his manner, but he forbore to pester him with further questions. His master was engrossed with his own thoughts, and Tinker knew him too well to interrupt him in such a mood.

At length, however, Blake pushed back his plate, and got up from the table.

"I'll just get dressed, Tinker," he said, "and then we'll both go along to the bank, and see if there's anything doing."

"Right-ho, gov'nor!" said Tinker cheerfully.

A few minutes later Blake emerged again from his bed-room, and put on his hat and coat.

"Ready, Tinker?" he asked. "We'll get along."

They left the house together, and caught a bus going in the direction of Piccadilly. At the circus they alighted, and proceeded the rest of the way on foot.

In front of Goyle's Bank two constables were standing, keeping on the move the crowd of curious people which always congregates in open-mouthed astonishment where any crime has taken place. They immediately recognised the famous detective and his assistant, however, and offered no resistance to their entry.

The manager was standing inside, talking to the Scotland Yard man in low, earnest tones. As Blake and Tinker entered they both looked up.

"Hallo, MacDonald!" said Blake. "So you're on this case?"

"Yes," said the inspector, holding out his hand. "This is Mr. Curson, the manager—Mr. Blake."

The manager shook hands with the detective. His face was still white and agitated, and he looked as if he had had a sleepless night. There were dark rings beneath his eyes, and his hand trembled as it met Blake's firm grasp.

"I was just going, Mr. Blake," said the inspector. "But I should like to hear what you think of the matter. Of course, I've got it more or less settled now, but there's no harm in your stating your opinion."

Blake smiled blandly, and was about to reply, when the manager broke in.

"Let's go into my room," he said. "It's more comfortable there, and we can talk without fear of interruption."

He led the way into his office, and, sitting down at the desk, motioned the two men into chairs.

"Now, Mr. Blake," he said, "I'm not so confident as is Inspector MacDonald that it's all more or less settled. There seems to me to be quite a lot that requires explaining now, and the necklace is still missing."

"Yes," broke in the inspector hurriedly; "but that accountant fellow knows all about it, you mark my words! He's only kidding, that's what he's doing. I've met his sort before. He's mixed up in some gang or other, that's what he is. And if I'm not mistaken he'll split on

them after he's had a short spell in clink."

"I can scarcely believe it, Mr. Blake," said the manager, pressing his hands together agitatedly. "I have known Mr. Crow for a number of years, and I should never have thought him capable of such a thing."

"But it was a fair catch!" said the inspector. "There's no doubt about the fact that he had stolen the notes, or else what were they doing in his pocket? And if he stole the notes, there's no doubt at all that he knows all about the necklace."

"The evidence is very strong against him, I admit," said the manager, but he still looked unconvinced.

"Perhaps you will be good enough to tell me all about it," said Blake. "I saw in the 'Stop Press' column that the bank-accountant had been arrested, but no details were given."

"Well, it's like this, Mr. Blake," began Inspector MacDonald. "When I arrived here yesterday evening I was told that twelve hundred pounds in notes were missing from the till as well as this necklace, so I immediately suggested that every man on the staff should be searched. Well, we had everybody in this room, and I began by running my fingers through Mr. Curson's pockets. Of course, I didn't find anything there. The next man I handled was Mr. Crow, the accountant, and I'm hanged if I didn't hook out the twelve hundred quid from his pocket straightaway. Of course, I arrested him on the spot, and he's now under lock and key."

"I see," said Blake quietly, "and what did Mr. Crow have to say when you found the notes in his pocket?"

"Well, he didn't say anything exactly; he just flopped down on the floor."

"You mean that he fainted?"

"That's it!" said MacDonald.

"And has he made any statement since?"

"Denies all knowledge about the money; pretends he's mighty surprised-like, and all that sort of thing."

The detective turned to Mr. Curson.

"And you have always found Mr. Crow a very reliable and trustworthy man?" he asked.

The manager nodded his head.

"Absolutely, Mr. Blake," he said.

"Has he any financial worries?"

"None, to my knowledge."

"I should like to ask you a few questions, Mr. Curson, if you wouldn't mind."

"Ask what you like, Mr. Blake."

"Very well, then. I understand that the Romanoff necklace was only deposited with you during the day. At what time was it put in your safe custody?"

"About half-past eleven, Mr. Blake."

"It was placed in the strong-room at once, I presume, and you are quite certain it was there when you locked the door?"

"Absolutely certain!"

"Did you enter the strong-room again during banking hours?"

"Only once, Mr. Blake. That was about an hour later; a client wished to place his deed-box in the strong-room."

"How long were you in there, then, Mr. Curson?"

"A few seconds only, Mr. Blake. The box was simply placed inside, and we came out again. The customer in question did not enter, he merely stood at the door and watched us deposit his box in the corner."

"Whom do you mean by us, Mr. Curson? Who else entered the strong-room besides yourself?"

"Mr. Crow, the accountant. We both possess keys, and the strong-room and

safe have dual locks which have to be opened by both of us."

"Then neither of you can enter the strong-room without the other, or unless you first get possession of the other key?"

"That is so, Mr. Blake."

Here Inspector MacDonald, who had been closely following the conversation, interrupted.

"You see, Mr. Blake," he said, "things are looking rather black against the accountant. To get into the strong-room it is necessary to have both sets of keys. The accountant has one set; he might be able to get hold of the other. But it's rather impossible to suppose that anybody else was able to get both sets of keys without either Mr. Curson or Mr. Crow being aware of the fact."

"That certainly seems a strong argument," admitted Blake, "but sometimes even the impossible happens. I suppose you never let the keys go out of your possession, Mr. Curson?"

The manager looked rather shocked at this question.

"No, never, Mr. Blake," he replied hurriedly. "I should be betraying a great confidence if I did."

"Quite so," said the detective quickly.

"And you do not think that it was possible for anyone to have touched your keys yesterday without you being aware of it?"

An emphatic denial was just on the manager's lips when suddenly he recollected the unexplained exchange of keys that had been discovered when he went to unlock the strong-room door the previous evening.

In the worry and excitement he had quite forgotten the fact until Blake's question brought it back to his mind. He hesitated a moment, and a flush of confusion spread over his face, which did not escape the detective's keen, observant eyes.

"Now I come to remember, Mr. Blake," he said, "a rather extraordinary thing did occur with regard to the keys yesterday. Your question has only just brought the matter back to my mind. When Mr. Crow and myself paid our final visit to the strong-room last night we were rather surprised to discover that we held the wrong keys. I seemed to have Mr. Crow's bunch, while Mr. Crow had mine."

Blake gave a significant grunt. The mysterious exchange of the pocket-books came rushing back to his mind. Was the same agency at work in both cases? Had the affair at the institute any connection with this robbery at the bank? Or was this exchange of keys simply a startling coincidence?

The Scotland Yard man shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"Rather bears out my argument, Mr. Blake," he said. "The accountant must have got hold of Mr. Curson's set of keys somehow, and, in his haste, he put the wrong bunch back in Mr. Curson's pocket. It seems to me to be quite clear."

"That certainly seems the natural way of accounting for the keys being exchanged," admitted Blake. "As you say, the thief in his haste must have dropped the wrong bunch into Mr. Curson's pocket. But it does not convince me that Mr. Crow was the thief."

The manager darted a look of gratitude at the detective. It was evident that to him the facts looked very black against his trusted accountant, and that the opinion Blake had just expressed greatly relieved his mind.

"You think Mr. Crow is innocent, Mr. Blake?" he asked quickly.

"Before I answer that question, Mr. U. J.—No. 850.

Curson," said the detective, "I am going to put a few more questions to you. First of all, have those keys a distinctive mark on them so that you can see at first glance which is which?"

The manager felt in his hip-pocket and drew out his bunch of keys.

"Yes," he said, holding them out for the detective to see. "You will excuse me if I keep them in my hand. I make it a rule never to let anyone else handle them. You will see that these have 'Number 1' engraved on each key. The other set, which Mr. Crow has, is 'Number 2' set."

"And do they differ very much in outward appearance from yours, Mr. Curson?" asked Blake.

"No. One might easily mistake one set for the other one unless one looked very closely."

"How did you discover that they had been exchanged—by accident?"

"Not exactly an accident, Mr. Blake. To unlock the strong-room door I have to turn my key in the lock first, then Mr. Crow inserts his key and opens the door. If Mr. Crow's key is inserted first it is quite impossible to turn it in the lock. That, of course, is how I made the discovery. I could not turn my key in the lock. In fact, it became jammed, and when at length I extracted it I saw that I was using number two set of keys."

"Was Mr. Crow surprised at the discovery?"

"He certainly appeared to be, Mr. Blake."

"If Mr. Crow had taken your keys from your pocket for criminal purposes do you think he would have made the mistake of putting his own set back in their stead?"

"I should hardly think so, Mr. Blake. We know our own keys so well; there are so many little peculiarities about them, and we do not have to look to know which is which. We can recognise them by the feel."

"I agree with you there, Mr. Curson," said the detective. "It hardly seems possible that Mr. Crow should have made that foolish mistake. I cannot help feeling that he knows no more than you do how the keys came to be exchanged. I believe the robbery was committed by a third person, who was unfamiliar with the marks on the two sets of keys."

"But that's absurd, Mr. Blake," blurted out the inspector. "Do you mean to say that between eleven-thirty in the morning and three in the afternoon this third person entered the bank, took the keys from Mr. Curson's and Mr. Crow's pockets, opened the strong-room, stole the necklace, and returned the keys again without being seen? It's preposterous!"

"It certainly is," agreed Blake, "and I should be very foolish to say anything of the kind. But I still think that a third person effected that exchange of keys and was responsible for the robbery."

"But Mr. Crow had the twelve hundred pounds in notes in his pocket. How do you account for that? It's evident that he stole those."

"Yet he volunteered to be searched," said the detective quietly.

For a moment Inspector Macdonald was disconcerted, but the obstinate look quickly returned to his face.

"Bluff!" he rapped out. "All bluff, Mr. Blake!"

"No, I don't follow you there, inspector. It is quite evident that if Mr. Crow had stolen the notes he would have hidden them somewhere, not carried them about in his pocket. Besides that, having stolen the necklace, as you say he did, why on earth should he increase his chances of discovery by stealing a

U. J.—No. 350,

paltry twelve hundred pounds? The necklace was worth a hundred-and-fifty thousand pounds."

"It does seem a bit puzzling, I admit, Mr. Blake, but no doubt it'll all come clear in time. The fellow's mixed up with a gang; there's more than one in this, you mark my words, Mr. Blake!"

"That's where we differ," said Blake, and turned his attention to the manager again. "At what time did you discover the loss of the twelve hundred pounds, Mr. Curson?"

"When the cashier made his money up after the bank had closed at three o'clock, Mr. Blake."

"And at what time did you discover the loss of the necklace?"

The manager sat silently frowning for a moment as if he were trying to remember something. Then he looked up.

"I think it must have been somewhere about half-past six, sir," he said.

"You do not seem to be very sure of that, Mr. Curson?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm not, Mr. Blake. I was just trying to remember. I think the clock must have stopped some time during the evening—in fact, both clocks."

"Why, what makes you think that?" Blake asked quickly.

"Well, I intended to catch the tenthirty train from Charing Cross last night. I left the bank in plenty of time by the office clock. And yet, when I got to the station, the train had left a considerable time before. I was very much surprised at the time. I intended to make inquiries about it this morning, but it quite slipped my memory."

"As a matter of fact," said Inspector Macdonald, "I noticed that your clock was a bit slow last night."

"Really!" said Blake. "This is rather interesting. But you mentioned both clocks, Mr. Curson. It is rather strange that both should have been wrong, is it not?"

"Yes, it is strange, as you say. Of course, I may have been wrong there, but I think I should have noticed it if the clock on the mantelpiece over there had been different from that in the outer office."

"You do not know if any of your staff missed their trains through the same reason?"

"No, Mr. Blake. But I will make inquiries, if you wish."

"I should be glad if you would, Mr. Curson. This may be rather important."

"Just a moment, then, Mr. Blake!"

The manager got up from his seat and left the room, and Inspector Macdonald turned to Sexton Blake with a gesture of impatience.

"Don't quite understand why you should make all this fuss over the clock being slow," he said.

"Both clocks, inspector!" said Blake quietly.

"Even then I don't see what it's got to do with the necklace being stolen."

"Neither do I yet!" rejoined Blake.

"That remains to be seen."

Just then the manager returned.

"That's funny, Mr. Blake!" he said.

"Most of them seem to have missed their trains through the same cause!"

"Then it is evident that the clocks were slow, Mr. Curson. But they seem to be right now. Who looks after them?"

"The messenger, Mr. Blake. He winds them up every morning."

"Is he in the office now?"

"Yes. I will send for him."

The manager rang the bell, and a clerk appeared in answer to his summons.

"Ask the messenger to stop this way a moment," he said.

The clerk disappeared, and a few moments later the messenger entered.

"We want you a moment, Brown," said the manager. "This gentleman is going to ask you a few questions."

"Very good, sir!" the man replied.

"I understand," said Blake, "that you look after the clocks—wind them up, and that sort of thing."

"That's right, sir."

"Were they wound up yesterday?"

"Yes, sir—at five minutes to nine. I see to them every morning at that time, sir."

"And you wound them up this morning at five minutes to nine?"

"I did, sir."

"And did you notice anything wrong with them?"

"They both seemed to have lost a good bit during the day, sir."

"A good bit! How much?"

"About three-quarters of an hour, sir."

"Both lost three-quarters of an hour?" echoed Blake.

"Yes, sir."

"And you said nothing about it? You did not think it strange?"

"I thought it was very strange, sir. I have been round to the clockmaker; he is coming along to have a look at them to-day."

The detective remained silent for a moment. Although his face was calm and impassive, a number of questions were surging across his mind. This was no coincidence, he felt sure—it was impossible that both clocks should suddenly lose three-quarters of an hour without their having been tampered with. But who had tampered with them? Was it this unknown third person who had been concerned in the robbery of the necklace? And if so, why had he done it?

Then there was the mystery of the keys having been exchanged. The two things were related—they must be. There was a startling parallel here with the robbery that had occurred at the institute. In the latter case the pocket-books had been exchanged, and also, three-quarters of an hour could not be accounted for. The two robberies were absolutely identical. The pocket-books had been exchanged by accident; so had the keys. The thief had made a mistake, and he had made the mistake in both cases.

Blake felt a thrill of excitement. He had had some dim idea in his mind when he set out that this robbery might be connected with the affair at the institute; he was pretty sure now that his theory was correct. The prize was a necklace worth £150,000—the famous Romanoff necklace, the property of the descendants of Tsarina Natalie, mother of Peter the Great. For centuries it had bedecked imperious women in their tinsel hour of glory in the glitter of the Russian Court. It was a prize worth having—a scoop big enough to appeal to that daring and cunning brain that had been responsible for the robbery at the institute.

Very likely the thief had been at the auction-rooms; he had followed Sir James to the bank, and then—

How had he been able to get at the necklace? Had he discharged some of that mysterious somnifer, and sent the whole staff into that trance-like sleep? But why should the two clocks be three-quarters of an hour slow? Surely this strange gas would not affect the clocks! That was not feasible.

A sudden explanation came to the hour he had sought to hide by turning back the hands. It was a cunning ruse, and worthy of the clever brain that had devised it; it was only a subtle mind like Blake's that could have discovered it. And no doubt the thief had stolen

those notes from the till, and placed them in the accountant's pocket, in order to implicate him in the robbery and cover up his own tracks.

Blake could hardly repress a feeling of admiration for the resourcefulness and daring of this mysterious criminal; he was certainly no amateur cracksmen. But the feeling was only momentary. A grim look came into his face. He must get on this fellow's tracks. The man was a grave danger to Society; it would not do for him to be at large.

The next thing to discover was what time he had entered the bank and committed the robbery. It could not have possibly been during office-hours, for the doors were open all the time, and customers were constantly coming in and out; three-quarters of an hour could not have elapsed, then, without the fact creating a sensation. The bank closed at three; therefore the robbery must have been committed after that time. He turned to the messenger again.

"At what time did you close the bank yesterday?" he asked.

"The usual time, sir—three o'clock."

"You are sure it was three o'clock?"

"Quite sure, sir."

"But how can you be sure? These clocks might have been wrong, then?"

"They weren't, sir. As I close the doors I always glance across at the clock on the other side of the road. It was three o'clock by that. Besides, sir, if those clocks had been wrong then, we should have really closed up at a quarter to four instead of at three o'clock. And that couldn't have happened without us noticing it."

"I see," said Blake. "Then it is quite evident that those clocks went wrong after three o'clock. Well, that will be all just now. You might let me know what the clockmaker says when he comes."

"Very good, sir!" said the man. He turned about stiffly, like an old soldier, and left the room.

The detective turned to Mr. Curson.

"I am going to ask you one or two more questions," he said. "Please do not think I am asking them merely for the sake of asking. As a matter of fact, not only am I convinced now of Mr. Crow's innocence, but I think that very soon I shall be able to prove it. I am relying on your help."

The manager set up in his chair eagerly. He could not quite follow the detective's questions, they were beyond him; but when it was a question of proving his trusted accountant's innocence of the crime against him he was only too ready to assist.

"Now, Mr. Curson, at what time did you say the cashier would discover the loss of his notes?"

"He starts to make up his money directly the bank closes at three o'clock," Mr. Blake. Therefore he would discover the loss a few minutes later, say, about ten minutes past three."

"Then," said Blake quietly, "I am fairly certain that not only the notes, but the necklace also, were stolen during that time—that is, between three o'clock and ten minutes past three by the office clocks."

"By one of the staff?" asked the manager quickly.

"No, Mr. Curson—by a third person," said Blake.

The manager gave a sigh of relief; but the inspector spread out his hands contemptuously.

"Really, Mr. Blake," he said, "you make an extraordinary statement! How could this third person have entered the bank, stolen the notes, extracted the keys from these gentlemen's pockets, opened the strong-room, stolen the necklace, and

departed without being seen, and in that small space of time? It's absurd on the face of it. I'm rather surprised at you! I gave you credit for more common-sense!"

"He didn't do it in that small space of time, inspector," said Blake, ignoring the man's sarcastic manner. "He had three-quarters of an hour at his disposal, for some time between three and ten minutes past those clocks were put back three-quarters of an hour."

"What!" blurted the inspector, staring at Blake as if his ears had deceived him. Then he shrugged his shoulders and leant back in his chair, as if he thought the detective had taken leave of his senses.

But Blake only smiled, and turned to Mr. Curson again.

"When Sir James Boyd was depositing the necklace with you for safe custody, Mr. Curson, can you remember if any

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other customer was in the bank—a Dr. Nicola Deschamps, for instance?"

"Deschamps—Dr. Nicola Deschamps!" repeated the manager, puckering his brows thoughtfully. "No, Mr. Blake; we have no customer of that name on our books."

"You are quite sure of that, Mr. Curson?"

"Quite sure, Mr. Blake!"

A look of disappointment crossed Blake's features. If Dr. Deschamps had been a client of the bank, it would have been a strong link in his chain of evidence. But he was not; the manager did not even know his name. There must be some other explanation.

"But can you remember if any other customer was here at the same time as Sir James Boyd?"

The manager thought again, then rang the bell.

"I think there was, Mr. Blake," he said. "But I will confirm it."

"Send Mr. Jones to me," he said to the clerk who appeared at the door in answer to his summons.

A moment later the cashier entered the room.

"Mr. Jones," said the manager, "didn't we open a new account yesterday?"

"Yes, sir! His name was Marcus Turner—Mr. Marcus Turner."

"Yes, yes, of course! I remember now! He came in during the morning, didn't he?"

"Yes. I'm afraid we kept him waiting

rather a long while; you were in the strong-room with Sir James Boyd at the time."

The manager swung round to the shelf behind him, and dragged out the Safe Custody Receipt-book.

"Why," he said, "I remember now," and ran his finger down the page.

"Here is his signature. He came in about an hour later and deposited his deed-box in the strong-room. I mentioned it to you a short time ago, Mr. Blake. He is an eminently respectable gentleman; his references were excellent."

"As a matter of fact, sir," interrupted the cashier, "I seem to remember seeing him again later on. I believe I cashed a cheque for him."

"Are you certain of that?" asked Blake quickly.

"I can easily find out by referring to my cash book."

"I should be obliged if you would."

The cashier left the room, and returned almost immediately, bringing the messenger with him.

"It is the last entry in my book," he said—"a cheque for Mr. Marcus Turner for ten pounds. The messenger here says he remembers Mr. Turner going out just after three."

"That's so, sir," said the messenger. "The gentleman comes in just as I was closing the doors, and mentions as he was a bit late. He went out by himself and closed the door after him."

"Where were you when he closed the door?" asked Blake quietly.

"I was just at the other end of the counter, sir."

"And you are quite sure that he closed the door?"

"I heard it slam behind him, sir."

"But he did not lock it?"

"It's never locked up until all the gentlemen of the staff have gone, sir."

Again Blake met his young assistant's gaze, and a look of understanding passed between them. But none of the others perceived it. If they had, they would not have understood the significant light in the detective's eyes. Only Tinker was aware of that.

The manager gave a brief nod to the cashier and the messenger, and they left the room.

As the door closed behind them Blake turned quickly to the manager.

"I am going to ask you to let me look at Turner's deed-box, if you will," he said.

Mr. Curson hesitated a moment, then got up from his chair.

"I do not think there is any harm in your looking at it, Mr. Blake. As a rule, of course, the relations between a banker and his customer are extremely confidential; but in the present case the circumstances are different. I will call Mr. Bailey, who has been sent down from head office to take over Mr. Crow's keys."

A few minutes later the four men entered the strong-room, with Tinker following close behind. The manager pointed to a black deed-box lying in the corner with a number of others.

"That is Mr. Turner's box," he said.

The detective gave a rapid glance at the box, but he did not attempt to examine it closely. He had asked to see it for a definite reason; he was going to test a certain theory that he had hastily formed. He took a little phial of French chalk from his pocket, and, kneeling down by the box, began to powder the lid. The black japanned metal was an excellent medium for his purpose; a variety of impressions showed up on it quite distinctly. Presently the detective rose to his feet.

"I am going to send my assistant along to fetch a photographer, Mr. Curson," he said. "In the meantime, I want that box to remain undisturbed."

"Very well, Mr. Blake. It is just as you wish. I haven't the faintest notion of what you are doing; it is quite beyond me."

"I will explain everything by-and-by, Mr. Curson," said the detective; "but until the photographer arrives I can do nothing. I will sit down and wait in your room if you don't mind."

They locked the strong-room behind them again, and Tinker immediately departed on his errand. Inspector MacDonald was now very subdued. Although he had no idea of what Blake was up to, the detective's calm assurance somewhat staggered him.

"Well, I must be going, Mr. Blake," he said, trying to speak in a casual sort of way. "You might let me know if you find out anything very startling."

"Very well, inspector," said Blake cheerfully. "I'll let you know all right."

About an hour later Tinker arrived with the photographer. They went into the strong-room again, and in about five minutes the photograph was taken.

"I want you to send me a proof round as soon as possible," said the detective. "When is the earliest I can have it?"

"You shall have it some time this afternoon, sir," said the man.

"Thanks very much," said Blake. "That'll do nicely."

The man picked up his camera and hurried off.

"There is only one other thing that I require, Mr. Curson," said Blake, "before I go. That is, the address of Mr. Marcus Turner."

"I will give you that, Mr. Blake, in confidence, of course. But I am rather mystified. Do you think that Mr. Turner is implicated in any way in this robbery?"

"All in good time, Mr. Curson!" laughed the detective. "I can't tell you anything now. But directly I have proved my theory is correct, you shall know all about it. In the meantime, if Mr. Turner should come in again, I am trusting that you will tell him nothing of what has occurred. I have brushed off the powder from the lid of his deed-box so that he will find nothing suspicious there."

"Very good, Mr. Blake. The address Mr. Turner gave was somewhere in the Temple, I think. Just one moment. I will look it up."

Having written down the address, Blake and his assistant left the bank.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

An Exciting Chase.

THE man who handled this deed-box, Tinker, is the same man who left that cross-shaped impression on Mr. Vrynol's pocket-case and also on the ledge of the drawer in his room."

It was about five o'clock that same day. The photographer had delivered the proof of the photograph about half an hour previously, and since that time Sexton Blake had been examining it under the high-powered microscope. Tinker stood by the desk, deeply interested in his master's movements.

"Is that a dead cert, guv'nor?" he asked.

"An absolute cert, Tinker. There are two distinct impressions of the palms of the hands on opposite sides of the top; those are precisely the two positions in which the owner would place his hands in lifting the box. The number, size, and shape of the pores of the skin are

identical with the impressions left on the pocket-book and the drawer. There is not a shadow of doubt that they were caused by the same man."

"And who do you think he is, guv'nor?"

"Dr. Nicola Deschamps, alias Marcus Turner!"

"Really!" exclaimed Tinker excitedly. "And what's our next move, guv'nor?"

"We're going to pay a visit to Mr. Marcus Turner," said Blake. "But first of all I'm going to get on to Scotland Yard and ask them to send along Detective-Inspector MacDonald with a warrant for his arrest for complicity in the theft of the Romanoff necklace."

Tinker's eyes glowed with satisfaction as he watched his master pick up the receiver and get through to Scotland Yard. Blake did not take long to explain what he wanted, and in a few minutes he had fixed up everything. Five minutes later they left Baker Street together and got on a bus that was making for Fleet Street.

They found Inspector MacDonald waiting for them at the corner of Chancery Lane. He came hurrying across the road directly he saw the detective and his assistant approaching.

"I'm afraid I spoke too hastily this morning, Mr. Blake," he said apologetically. "I can only congratulate you on your cleverness. How you find these things out absolutely beats me."

"That's all right, MacDonald," said the detective, in a friendly tone. "I had more evidence to base my suspicions on than you did. But our job now is to get hold of Mr. Marcus Turner. I shouldn't be surprised if we find the necklace in his room. But we must be careful and see he doesn't play any nasty tricks. He's a tough customer to deal with. This is the way, through the arch over there."

The three of them crossed the road and passed into the Temple. After a little searching among the deserted courts, they found the block of chambers for which they were seeking.

They went up the winding staircase to the top floor. There were four rooms there, and there were name-plates on three of them. The door of the fourth room was blank.

"This is no doubt the room," muttered Blake. "At any rate, there's no harm in trying. You two had better keep close to me; don't give him a chance to handle anything."

The detective gently rapped on the door and waited. There was no response. He tried the handle; it was locked.

He took out a bunch of skeleton-keys, and, after a few moments' fumbling with the lock, the door swung open, and they all three entered. The room was very scantily furnished, and evidently the owner had not had time yet to complete his arrangements.

"Not many places to hide anything here, inspector," said Blake. "However, while I'm running over this desk, you might have a look in that cupboard. He might by chance have concealed the necklace in the room."

Blake and Tinker soon had the drawers open of the desk. But, although they explored every crevice and nook, nothing of importance came to light. They pulled the desk away from the wall, and tapped the back to see if there was any secret recess, but it all sounded solid enough. At length Blake turned to Inspector MacDonald.

"No luck?" he asked.

"No, nothing in this cupboard, Mr. Blake, nor in the table-drawer. There's nowhere else to look, as far as I can make out, unless he's put the necklace up the chimney."

"That's certainly not improbable,"

said Blake. "We'll have a look, at any rate."

He crossed over to the fireplace, and, kneeling down in front of it, pushed up the trap. Tinker and the inspector stood looking down at him. Then suddenly a voice spoke at the door:

"To whom am I indebted for this honour?"

At the sound of that familiar, rasping voice Blake sprang to his feet, while Tinker and the Scotland Yard man faced quickly round. At the door stood a big, heavily-built man, who stood there gazing at his unexpected visitors, with an unpleasant smile on his sinister face.

For the moment Blake was puzzled. The thought flashed across his mind that he had made a mistake, after all. But it was only a momentary misapprehension; there was no mistaking that strong, angular face, with the broad, massive forehead and dark, shaggy eyebrows. It was Dr. Nicola Deschamps—minus the short, grizzly beard and thick moustache. And Blake knew then that he had been right—Marcus Turner was none other than Dr. Deschamps.

The criminal scientist stood with his one hand concealed behind his back, glancing quickly from one to the other of his visitors, with a threatening light in his eyes.

"You seem surprised to see me," he said, "and not very pleased. Allow me to inform you that the displeasure is mutual."

At that moment Inspector MacDonald, who had now recovered from his first start of surprise, stepped forward, at the same time dragging the bracelets out of his pocket.

"Look out, inspector!" cried Blake warningly.

But the warning came too late. With a swift movement Dr. Deschamps swung his left arm from behind his back, while his right hand closed over his mouth. Something shiny glittered in his fingers, there followed a faint hiss, and the next moment he had fled from the room, and banged the door behind him.

With an inarticulate cry, Blake plunged at the door, closing his mouth tightly so as not to inhale the air of the room. He tugged at the handle, but the door was locked from without. The detective swung round, already his two companions were leaning listlessly against the wall. He rushed to the other side of the room and dragged at the windows to open them. Then he, too, crumpled up limply, and was silent.

The deadly somnifex had done its work. These three men, who but a moment ago had been fully alive and alert, were now leaning against the wall of the room, silent and insensible, to all intents and purposes dead to the world, plunged into that trance-like sleep from which nothing would wake them for nearly an hour.

Sexton Blake suddenly straightened himself and stared idly around. For a second or two everything was confused and blurred, then immediately it all became clear to him. He was in the room in the Temple; he had been searching for the stolen necklace; the criminal doctor had just fled from the room. He remembered his own frantic rush at the door to drag it open.

Yet, although it seemed but a moment ago since that dramatic event had occurred, he knew that nearly an hour must have elapsed. He did not need to look at his watch to assure him of that; he was quite certain that such was the case. The doctor had escaped, and he had had nearly an hour's start.

The air still seemed heavy and lifeless. He drew back the catch of the window and pushed it up, then, striding across

to the door, flung it wide open. The cool current of air that blew through quickly dispelled all traces of the deadly somnifex. Blake turned his attention to his companions.

Tinker had already recovered from the effects of the gas; he was staring at his master, with a bewildered expression on his face. The detective strode over to the Scotland Yard man and grabbed him by the shoulder and shook him roughly.

"Wake up, MacDonald!" he shouted in his ear. "Pull yourself together, man!"

For a moment the inspector gaped at Blake in perplexity, then abruptly everything rushed back to his mind. Before Blake could restrain him he had made a wild dash at the door.

"Come on!" he shouted excitedly. "We mustn't let him escape; he can't have got very far!"

"Don't be a fool, man!" shouted the detective, rushing after him. "You won't catch him up; he's gone a long time ago!"

But the inspector was already half way down the stairs, and even if he had heard Blake's words he did not understand them. He was quite certain in his own mind that the man he had come to arrest had only just eluded him, and that there was yet time to prevent his escape. He rushed madly through the dark courts, with the detective and his assistant in hot pursuit.

They caught him up at the entrance to Fleet Street. The inspector was standing in the middle of the pavement, glancing to and fro, with a puzzled look

on his face. He turned to Blake as the latter darted towards him.

"Can't quite get the hang of this!" he said. "I wonder which way he went? He can't have got very far."

Blake could hardly repress a smile, in spite of his anxiety, the delusion from which the inspector was suffering was so genuine.

"My good man," he said, "the fellow's had nearly an hour's start. It's quite useless your trying to catch him up; he may be twenty miles off by this time!"

Inspector MacDonald darted a curious look at Blake, as if he thought he had suddenly taken leave of his senses.

"What on earth are you talking about, Mr. Blake?" he asked. "I'm looking for the chap that bunked from us just now up in that room."

"And so am I, MacDonald!"

"Well, he couldn't have been more than a dozen yards in front of me, could he?"

"Easily, inspector! In fact, as I said before, he may have got twenty miles by this time."

The inspector took another curious glance at Blake.

"Oh, don't play the fool!" he said irritably. "We haven't got any time to waste in joking!"

"I'm not joking, MacDonald," said Blake quietly. "What do you think the time is? Don't look at your watch."

"Don't understand why you ask such silly questions, Blake. It's about six o'clock, of course."

"Look at that clock over the way."

The inspector glanced rapidly across the road, and gave a start of surprise.

"Pah!" he muttered, feeling nervously in his pocket. "It's wrong! Nearly an hour fast!"

"By Jove!" he exclaimed the next moment, staring down in confusion at his watch. "It seems correct. Seven o'clock! Well, I'm jiggered!"

Blake gave a dry little chuckle.

"You've been caught napping, inspector," he said. "You've been asleep for an hour, and in the meantime our bird has flown. We'll jump into this taxi and drive to Bond Street. The Royal Hotel may give us some information. Come on, Tinker!"

All three leapt into the car, which jerked forward and sped swiftly up the Strand. Blake did not expect for a moment that he would find the doctor at the hotel, but there was the faint possibility that he had gone there directly after leaving the Temple in order to pick up one or two things. In that case, it might be possible to discover where he was making for.

His surmises proved correct. Upon making inquiries at the hotel he was informed that Dr. Deschamps had left hurriedly about half an hour or more ago. The clerk at the booking-office could not say where he was off to. Blake, therefore, sought out the hall-porter.

"Why, do you mean that tall gentleman with the beard and black, twisted eyebrows, sir—the same gentleman that gave a lecture at the institute next door about a week ago?" asked the porter.

"That's the man," said Blake.

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U.J.

Football Competition No. 11A.

Date of Matches, **SATURDAY, JANUARY 31st.**

Closing date, **THURSDAY, JANUARY 29th.**

MILLWALL	v. CHELSEA
FULHAM	v. BRENTFORD
STOUBRIDGE	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

"He went about half an hour ago, sir. Seemed in a great hurry. Asked me if there was a train to Dover. I gave him the time-table. Don't know if he was going there or not, but he went off with his bag a few minutes later. I got him a taxi, and told the driver to take him to Charing Cross."

Blake glanced at his watch, slipped a coin into the man's hand, and rushed out of the hotel, leaving the porter gazing after him in bewilderment.

The taxi was still outside, with Tinker and the inspector inside. They had thought it better that Blake only should show himself so as not to arouse suspicions.

"Charing Cross in five minutes!" said Blake breathlessly, thrusting a note into the driver's hand. "Another one if you do it!"

The cab shot forward before Blake could clamber inside; the driver was evidently going to make a good bid for that extra pound-note. Tinker caught hold of his master, and, dragging him inside, banged the door behind him.

"He's catching the boat-train from Charing Cross," said the detective. "It's about ten to one if we can get there in time. Each man look after himself, and get on it if he can. Understand?"

His two companions nodded an affirmative.

"He was wearing a beard again when he left the hotel," continued Blake. "He may have taken it off after leaving; but you know what to look for."

The cab skidded round a bend, and began to slow down; they were entering the station.

"Meet on the train," said Blake, flinging open the door, and springing out while the cab was still moving.

"Stout effort!" he shouted to the driver, thrusting the other note into the man's hand.

Then he turned and fled across the pavement, and up past the booking-office. Tinker and the inspector were a little in front. The three of them raced towards the platform in the form of a triangle. The usual crowd of people which was hanging about the platform scattered in all directions, and left them a clear path.

The ticket-collector was just closing the barrier. He glanced up, and saw the three men racing at him. They were only a dozen yards off.

"Too late!" he shouted, and hastily slammed the gate.

But it was the ticket-collector who was too late. Before he could lock it, Tinker and the inspector's shoulders came crashing against the door. It shot back like a catapult, hurling the man about a dozen yards away. The next instant Blake was through.

The train was just on the move. Already it was half-way down the platform, and gathering speed every moment. Blake was conscious only of a confusion of angry shouts, of two figures that sped along beside him like phantom shadows, and of a rear light of a carriage that seemed to get nearer and nearer to him.

The next moment he was standing on the footboard of the quickly-moving train, grasping the handle of a carriage door, and breathing in short, painful gasps.

The inspector and Tinker had also succeeded in boarding the train. The Scotland Yard man had blundered into a first-class compartment, much to the amazement of his fellow passengers, who sat staring at their unexpected visitor as if they resented his unwarranted in-

trusion. He sank into a seat, and lay there gasping for breath.

Presently he sat up, and began to take note of the other occupants of the carriage. Then his eyes rested on the man who was sitting in the opposite corner. He gave a half-start of recognition. Could it be the man for whose arrest he held a warrant in his pocket? When he had last seen him a few hours ago in the Temple he had been clean-shaven; now he was wearing a short, grizzled beard. But Blake had warned him about that. He had said that possibly he might be so disguised.

The inspector scrutinised him carefully, and at that moment he became aware that the interest was mutual. The stranger was glaring at him with a sinister look in his dark, piercing eyes. For a moment or two neither man shifted his gaze; then Inspector MacDonald leant suddenly forward, and, reaching out his arm, made a grab at the other's beard. The thing came away in his hand.

With an angry snarl the stranger sprang to his feet, and closed with the inspector. For a few seconds the two men grappled together, while the other occupants of the carriage raised startled exclamations of alarm. Then, with a powerful effort, the stranger flung off his assailant. He made hastily for the door, and as he did so his hand went swiftly to his inside pocket. For a fraction of a second something glinted in the light; the next moment the door had slammed behind him.

The Scotland Yard man staggered forward two paces, then sank down on the seat. He did not notice that he was half-sitting on the legs of another man; and the other man made no protest. The occupants of the carriage had all been plunged in that deadly torpor.

Meanwhile, Blake had somewhat recovered from that wild dash down the platform. He found himself in a third-class carriage which was full of people, who were staring at him curiously.

He opened the door on the other side of the carriage, and stepped out into the corridor. The train was now rushing swiftly through the night, and he had to hold on to the side in order to steady himself. He turned to the right and began moving along, glancing in each compartment as he passed by.

The door of the fourth compartment opened as he was approaching it, and the next moment he came face to face with his young assistant.

"By gum, guv'nor," said Tinker, still puffing violently, "that was some marathon!"

"You're right, there, Tinker!" replied the detective. "I've got a frightful stitch in my side. But we did it all right. Where's the inspector?"

"He's further up, I think, guv'nor. In one of the first-class compartments."

"Let's see if we can find him!"

They continued their way along the corridor until they came to the first-class section. Presently Blake paused outside one of the compartments, and stood staring through the window. There were four or five people inside, but none of them moved; they all appeared to be asleep. The windows were shut tightly, and the carriage was hushed in silence.

"Why," said Tinker suddenly, "that's the inspector sitting across that chap's lap! What on earth's the matter with him?"

He caught hold of the handle to drag open the door, but Blake stayed him with a gesture.

"Don't open it, Tinker!" he whispered hoarsely. "Look! Do you see that false beard lying on the floor near the opposite door?"

"Phew!" muttered Tinker, staring through the glass. "What do you think has happened, guv'nor?"

"MacDonald must have stumbled right across this fellow Deschamps," said the detective. "There's not the slightest doubt about that, Tinker. He must have recognised him, in spite of the beard, and tried to arrest him. And that's the result. The doctor discharged some of that stuff. They're all quite dead to the world for the next hour."

He dragged his young assistant away, at the same time stifling a yawn.

"Keep clear of it, Tinker!" he muttered. "The stuff's percolating through the door. I'm feeling sleepy already."

"But this chap must be on the train somewhere, then, guv'nor?"

"Exactly, Tinker! And we've got to get hold of him—and pretty soon, too. He'll no doubt attempt to make his escape at the next stop, while the inspector is still under the influence of that infernal stuff."

They made their way stealthily up the corridor, peeping in at each compartment as they went along. Suddenly the detective motioned to his assistant to stop, and drew back himself against the partition.

"He's in there—and all alone, too, Tinker," he whispered. "It's now or never! We must take him by surprise, so that he doesn't get a chance to use that devilish stuff. Keep as close to me as you can. Ready?"

Blake stooped down and approached the compartment again. His head was now below the windows, so that he could not be seen from inside. He caught hold of the handle and gently turned it, then sprang to his feet, and flung himself inside.

With a furious oath the doctor jumped from his seat; but Blake was already on him, and he went staggering to the floor, with the detective's arms gripping him like a vice. The two men struggled furiously for some minutes, while Tinker tried to assist his master; but the space was too narrow for him to give much help.

The doctor was a powerful man, and might have been a match for the detective under ordinary conditions, but Blake had taken him at a disadvantage, and now he had his knee on his chest. Both men were panting from their efforts, and the doctor glared up into Blake's face malevolently. Then suddenly something cracked under Blake's knee, something that sounded like a glass phial.

The doctor heard it, too, his mouth closed like a trap, and he made one last desperate effort to throw off the detective. This time he succeeded. Blake had realised too late what he had done, the deadly somnifex was already numbing his senses. As if in a dream the detective grasped the handle of the door, and gave it a turn. The wind caught it and flung it wide open, and a gust of fresh air blew in upon them.

Blake staggered to his feet, and grappled again with his enemy. He was only vaguely conscious of what he was doing. It seemed as if his mind were on the border-line between consciousness and insensibility. There were blank spaces in his memory. The doctor was also in the same plight. He had been forced to open his mouth. The two men were swaying to and fro, locked in each other's grasp.

But the strong current of air from the open door soon made itself felt; under its influence the two men quickly revived. The fight waxed more furious every moment, and every moment brought them nearer and nearer the brink of the door.

Suddenly Blake's adversary seemed to stumble back. With a hoarse cry his fingers fastened themselves on Blake's clothes, and the detective felt himself jerked forward. He made a frantic clutch at the door to save himself; there was a tremendous wrench at his coat, and a tearing sound as the cloth gave way. Then he found himself hanging from the door by his hands, and being swayed violently from one side to the other.

For a moment he hung there suspended above the ground that rushed by beneath him in the darkness. Then, after a perilous few seconds, he managed, with Tinker's assistance, to climb back into the carriage again.

Conclusion.

IT was the morning following the furious fight that had taken place in the boat-train. The body of Dr. Nicola Deschamps had been discovered lying across the permanent-way, and he had been hurried off to the infirmary. But, although he was still alive, he had sustained very serious injuries, and little hopes were entertained of his recovery. He had not yet regained consciousness, and there was not much chance that he ever would.

But the thing that was puzzling Blake was the whereabouts of the Romanoff necklace. It could not be found in the portmanteau which Dr. Deschamps had with him on the train, neither was it in any of the unconscious man's pockets. That morning Blake and Inspector MacDonald had made a thorough search of the room at the Royal Hotel, and had again paid a visit to the Temple. But without result. Not the slightest trace of the necklace could be discovered.

It was while he was having a hasty lunch with his assistant and the Scotland Yard man that a possible solution of the mystery occurred to the detective. He said nothing about it at the time, but waited until his companions had finished their meal.

"Well, what's our next move, Mr. Blake?" asked MacDonald presently. "Seems to me that our only hope is in this chap coming round and owning up to the theft."

"Afraid there's small chance of that, inspector," said the detective, "but we haven't exhausted all possible hiding-places yet. If you're ready we'll go along to Goyle's Bank."

"To Goyle's Bank?" echoed Inspector MacDonald. "But surely you don't expect to find the necklace there, do you?"

"I don't expect to find anything," said Blake, "but I've got a sudden notion, and I want to put it to the test."

The Scotland Yard man shrugged his shoulders and got up, and together they made their way to Piccadilly.

They found the manager in his office, and Blake explained the events that had taken place since he had last seen him.

"And the necklace has clean vanished, Mr. Blake?" asked the manager anxiously, when the detective had finished speaking.

"We are certainly puzzled as to its whereabouts at the present moment, Mr. Curson," admitted the detective, "but I think we are bound to recover it sooner or later. However, I want you to take me into the strong-room again. I should like to have another look at that deed-box, if you don't mind."

"Not at all, Mr. Blake! I will get the other set of keys."

A few minutes later they entered the strong-room from which they had been where Blake had last seen it. He picked it up and shook it, so that the contents rattled.

"I am going to open this with a skeleton-key, Mr. Curson," he said. "Have you any objection?"

"Under ordinary circumstances, of course, I should not entertain the idea for a moment. Our clients' deed-boxes are strictly private, and I would never tamper with them. But I see no harm in this case, especially as a representative of Scotland Yard is present."

"Very well!" said Blake quietly; and, taking his keys from his pocket, he undid the deed-box.

"Do you recognise this, Mr. Curson?" he asked, taking out a leather case and handing it to the manager.

The manager took one glance at the object and uttered an exclamation of bewilderment.

"It's the Romanoff necklace!" he said hoarsely, as with trembling fingers he unfastened the case and stared in delight at the iridescent gems. "How in the name of goodness could they have got inside there, Mr. Blake?"

The detective gave a chuckle of satisfaction.

"Mr. Marcus Turner couldn't have found a safer hiding-place," he said. "Who on earth would have thought of looking for the stolen jewels in the very strong-room from which they had been stolen? After the police had given up the search, and the whole matter had blown over, Mr. Turner had only to come and get his deed-box from his bankers, and no one would have been the wiser. I must confess that I have a great admiration for Mr. Turner's cleverness. He's certainly no ordinary crook. However, I'm afraid he won't trouble us again."

Sexton Blake was right. Mr. Marcus Turner, alias Dr. Nicola Deschamps, did not trouble them again. He never recovered from his injuries, and died that same day without regaining consciousness. And with him perished the secret of the mysterious gas called somnifex.

Blake heard of his death with a feeling of regret. It seemed a great pity to him that so gifted a man should have used his brains to such a base end. The discovery that he had made would have benefited mankind, and yet he preferred to employ it for his own unscrupulous self-seeking. Doubtless, however, the time is not far distant when some other distinguished scientist will rediscover the secret that Dr. Deschamps carried to his grave. It is to be hoped that he will then put it to more worthy motives.

A few evenings later Sexton Blake paid another visit to the Royal Institute of Science by special request of the committee. There he gave a full explanation of the mysterious happenings that had occurred, and was congratulated on his cleverness and his faculty of reasoning things out. But the general public knew nothing of the affair at the institute, and the accounts that appeared in the papers of the bank robbery and the recovery of the necklace gave no indication as to how the robbery had been effected.

Indeed, it is rather doubtful if Mr. Crow, the trusted accountant of Goyle's Bank, has any clear idea as to how three-quarters of an hour could have elapsed without his knowing anything about it, although for weeks after he and the manager discussed the problem at every conceivable moment.

THE END.

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