

LONG COMPLETE DETECTIVE NOVEL, INTRODUCING
SEXTON BLAKE AND TINKER.

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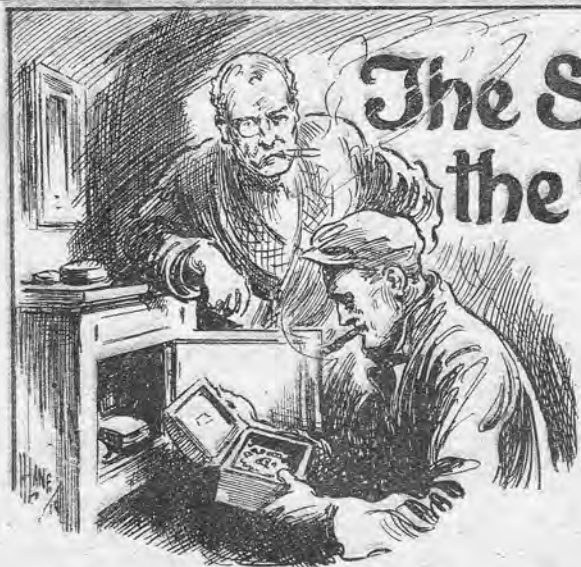
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OUT OF
PRISON

THE MAN IN
THE COAL-HOLE

The Strange Case of the Clyde Emeralds.



The Strange Case of the Clyde Emeralds

A Thrilling Long, Complete Detective Novel, in which
SEXTON BLAKE Turns
"Cracksman."

Illustrated by - - HARRY LANE.

THE FIRST CHAPTER. The New Broom.

"DUKESTOWN! Duketown! All change for Duketown!"
"Thank Providence for that!"

Numbed and frozen, Sexton Blake staggered to his feet, folded his rug, and took down his suit-case.

Never had he endured such an Arctic and miserable journey. Line and rolling stock these last few miles were a disgrace to civilisation. A railway porter, hurrying forward at sight of a first-class passenger, was bursting a blood-vessel almost merely trying to turn the door-handle.

"Anything in the van, sir?" he panted when he had wrenched the thing open at last. "Any luggage?"

"Luggage!" snapped Sexton Blake. "No; the only kind of luggage one ought to bring on a line like this is an old coke-pail or a baked potato can. It's perfectly scandalous!" he continued fiercely. "Snow six inches deep and cold enough to freeze the ears of a brass monkey; yet not a footwarmer, even, all the way up from the junction. You ought to get ten years' all of you, for attempted murder!"

The porter looked both startled and crestfallen.

"Sorry sir," he apologised. "No fault of mine, I assure you! Fact is, Duketown being a station for the prison mostly, the management reckons as most as uses it is convicts, and treats 'em accordingly."

"What?"
"Well, that's what it comes to, don't it?" explained the porter hastily. "Still, p'raps now we've got this new gov'nor up here he'll get things altered. Not for the likes of you so much as his precious prisoners!" he concluded.

"Oh?"
Sexton Blake wondered what the fellow meant by that. But as it happened that he was the invited guest of this same Governor of H. M. Prison, Kingsmoor, he decided not to inquire further.

To the porter's offer to carry his bag for him he replied with a curt "No," and so, humping it himself, he passed through the station and out on to the snow-laden road.

He regretted his hasty refusal before he was through. It was not as if this was the first time he had visited the famous convict prison, and he ought to have known better. He had a mile to plod at least, and the snow was coming on again thicker than ever.

However, he struggled up through the long, straggling street of Duketown at last, and gained the road leading to the prison.

The grim grey building lies isolated and exposed amid the deepest wilds of the famous Kingsmoor. The latter may be a beauty spot in summer, no doubt, but in midwinter, and on a night like this, is only to be equalled by the North Pole.

Still, Sexton Blake was tough, and the blood was beginning to stir again in his numbed arteries. He drew within the shelter of the high prison wall at last, and so on past the great granite gateway, where a Civil Guard challenged him, to the lamplit front door of the Governor's house.

As the porter had reminded him, there had been a recent change in the command of this, the most interesting and certainly the most romantic of British convict prisons.

Sexton Blake's old friend, the stern yet genial Major Brandhurst, had recently retired, and now a Colonel Pinston, lately Governor of Dedding Gaol, reigned in his stead.

Of the "new broom" the detective knew nothing, except ordinary gossip. He had been surprised, therefore, when, two days before, he had received a letter from the colonel, couched in the most friendly terms, begging him as a personal favour to come down and visit him.

He had a matter in which he was very deeply interested, he said, in which he wanted Blake's advice. Likewise, he hoped, his practical assistance.

That was all. There was no indication what the nature of the problem was. Sexton Blake at first thought of writing for more information. Then, recollecting that, after all, he really was not frantically busy for the moment, he decided to come forthwith.

Nor did the Governor's welcome give him further excuse for regret. It was as warm as the journey had proved icy.

"Come in! I am proud to meet you, Mr. Blake. So good of you to take such trouble, and so promptly. In the days of my predecessor, I understand, you visited Kingsmoor quite often."

"Oh, yes. Major Brandhurst was a very old friend of mine," replied the detective. "And the prison, of course, is a whole museum of interest to one of my profession. I have been guest in this house several times."

"Oh, well, I trust I shall make you as comfortable as the major, in the hope that I also will have the pleasure of entertaining you again," laughed Colonel Pinston, though a little artificially, it seemed to his guest.

In fact, Blake hardly knew yet how to judge the man. He was obviously quite a different type to Brandhurst, who was as bluff and blunt as the Kingsmoor granite towers.

Then he remembered the gibe of the railway porter's, and he wondered.

"Other days other methods." Was this the "new school of thought" that was being applied to the case-hardened old incorrigibles who filled the Kingsmoor cell-blocks? Brandhurst, he knew, had often been regarded as too much of a martinet, though a juster man never stepped.

At dinner a little later Blake found his suspicions confirmed. Colonel Pinston was the typical "new broom," and he was bent on sweeping clean.

"You see," he began, anxious to put his criticisms nicely. "Brandhurst, dear old soul, was one of the—er—best; the very best, of course. But—well, his methods, you know—a little bit hard, perhaps, and inflexible—for modern ideas. You comprehend me, I am sure?"

Blake comprehended that Brandhurst was a very good friend of his, and one whose opinions as an expert in criminology he held in the very highest esteem. He stated as much bluntly.

"Oh, pray!" protested the colonel. "I should be the very last person not to endorse that. I was only meaning, in fact, to explain and excuse the changes which I am being bold enough to introduce into the regime of the prison. I was not depreciating Brandhurst in the very least bit. Please believe that."

Sexton Blake bowed in silence.

The Governor thereupon continued, though scarcely so much at his ease.

"A convict may be an incorrigible," he proceeded to explain, "he may be the biggest and most confirmed criminal unhung, and as such qualified for incarceration only in Kingsmoor. But he is a very human being, nevertheless, Mr. Blake, and somewhere down under his tough old hide is a human heart, and in it at least one tiny grain of good."

Sexton Blake bowed again. This was the commonest platitude. It was the standpoint he had adopted through all his career as a crime investigator.

And so it had been Brandhurst's also, after his own rough, rugged way. Blake wanted to see what light his successor was going to bring to it.

Nothing much, he discovered, as the colonel, warmed with a second glass of port, proceeded to expand and elaborate. Blake had heard it all before.

As his host said rightly, Kingsmoor was a penal prison assigned nearly entirely to criminals who all their lives persistently defied every attempt to reform them.

Except those under sentence for murder and manslaughter, they were all many-times-convicted "habituals," and quite proud of the fact.

Sexton Blake knew this. The prison records were full of instances where men declared frankly that they looked upon Kingsmoor as their home—a place to be hurried back to when gratuities were spent and the delights of the free world had begun to pall.

There were cases, even, where hoary old ruffians, who had had the misfortune to get sick and taken to infirmaries during their brief spells of liberty, had written appealing and protesting to be taken back to the prison and their old "jobs."

Colonel Pinston must have seen such records for himself. He should have realised that Kingsmoor was a separate problem entirely from other "first offenders'" gaols. Yet he clung to the excellent, innocent belief that his new charges were more sinned against than sinning; that they were the "victims of modern civilisation;" the humble tools, too often, of an astuter brain, who exploited them, then left them in the lurch.

"You mean the semi-mythical criminal we hear so much about, but who rarely materialises—the master-thief?" suggested Sexton Blake.

"Exactly! There you have the creature who is at the root of nine-tenths of the crime which brings my unfortunate charges within these walls," declared the colonel. And then the slight satirical note in his listener's voice seemed to jab him.

"But why do you say 'semi-mythical'?" he demanded. "Surely a man of your vast experience must admit the existence of the master-thief—"

"Who rolls in riches in Park Lane, ever unsuspected, always honoured and esteemed, yet who spends his nights planning crimes of diabolical cunning for his lesser dupes to commit, or come to grief over," smiled Sexton Blake, finishing the sentence for him.

"Well, yes; why not? Do you deny that such exist?"

"Oh, not at all. They have existed, as I have proved by running to earth three or four of them," answered Blake. "But when you say that nine-tenths of your convicts here are victims of such creatures, I am afraid I don't believe it. The master-thieves I have unmasked were none of them likely to use such veteran material as you have in Kingsmoor, U.J.—No. 861.

where every man is ten times known to Scotland Yard. These fellows may wince and try to bluff you with that yarn, of course—"

"Sir!" protested the colonel fiercely, annoyed that it should be thought possible for a moment that his leg could ever be pulled. It took several minutes, in fact, and an extra glass of port, before he had quite recovered his good opinion of himself. However, he "blew round" all right in the end.

"Well, now, Mr. Blake," he continued quite jocularly at last, "in a way I am glad that you think as you do, because I am in an exceptional position, it happens, to prove to you that you are wrong!"

"Indeed, I am glad to hear it!" said the detective politely.

"I mean, wrong when you say that a master-thief would not care to risk his liberty by employing the class of criminal we get here at Kingsmoor."

"I said those master-thieves I have captured would not," Blake reminded him.

"I think I can say, without boasting," continued the colonel, puffing out his chest, "that we have here at Kingsmoor the very finest experts in crime in the whole country."

Blake smiled.

"And men your master-thief couldn't afford to turn up his nose at. He must have them. He means to have them, as I will prove. The fact that the police know them beforehand, is nothing. The crime is already committed and over by the time they come on the scene. The master-thief has pouched the swag, and he cares least of any whether his lesser dupes are caught. That is my point."

Blake bowed again.

"Well, allowing that there is something in what you say?" he asked, yawning discreetly.

"I say that if we could lay by the heels these super-criminals, we should stamp out at a blow an enormous proportion of existent crime—"

"Granted!" agreed Sexton Blake.

"And bring within these walls the real villains who ought to be here, but who, by their cunning, always escape," finished the colonel.

"If they exist in such quantities, I am entirely with you," was the detective's quiet reply.

"Then will you help?" came the demand promptly.

"Help? I am always helping, surely, to the extent of my humble capacity."

"Of course! But help in a specific case, which I have cut-and-dried actually now!"

"Why, yes; certainly! I will do my best!"

"Oh, I don't mean merely take a detached interest in it! We should want your full time for three weeks, maybe, or even four. And when I say 'we,' added the colonel, "I include, with all authority, Scotland Yard."

"Scotland Yard!" gasped Sexton Blake, waking up.

"Oh, yes! I have been in consultation with the Yard over the matter, and they are highly interested, and agree that you are the very man, if you will take up the case. You will know Mr. Harker, of course, of the C.I.D.?"

"Know him? Know him well! Do you mean you have been in communication with him over this—this matter, whatever it is?"

"He has been down here twice about it!" replied the colonel, almost proudly.

"Well, come, that makes it interesting. Let us have the proposition so I can see what I think of it."

The colonel pushed across the cigar-box, and both helped themselves to another weed.

"The story is this, briefly," he began. "There is a man here, just finishing five years' for burglary—fourth term, by the way—named Plesher."

"I remember," chipped in Blake. "Jack Plesher, alias Sanders, alias Robert Jones. Cracked a big crib in Berkeley Square. Three thousand pounds' worth of jewels."

"Exactly! Not one of your own cases, by any chance?"

"Mine? Oh, no! A simple police job," was Blake's dry reply.

"Ah! Well, he is here, as I say, just on the point of taking his discharge," resumed the colonel. "As is my custom, I have interested myself very deeply in his case. He is in the infirmary, as a matter of fact—was pretty ill with pneumonia—so I have been able to get more easily at the better side of him than I would otherwise have done."

"And he has told you—what?"

"Oh, confirmed what we have been discussing. He is a case in point, an absolute victim struggling in the toils of the master-thief."

"Struggling?"

"Yes! The man would go straight. I am convinced, if only he were let alone and had a chance."

"And he doesn't get it?"

"No. He assures me that, such is his reputation as a skilled crackman, the moment he sets foot out of here there will be half a dozen after him with offers of 'new jobs.' Men will be waiting to waylay him; old pals who will treat him, pay his board and lodging for him; stick to him like leeches—in fact, until at last, in sheer weariness, he gives way, and yields. He knows they'll never allow him to keep an honest job, supposing he gets one."

"I know. I have heard the same tale before," admitted Blake.

"But you don't believe it?"

"Oh, yes; sometimes!"

"Then you will this time," insisted his host. "The man, I am sure, is speaking absolute truth when he says he is tired of crime. He really wants to go straight, and I want to help him. And in helping him I want to see the whole of these parasites he speaks of roved in in one swoop."

"How?"

"By you!"

"Me! Why not Harker?"

"Because—I'll tell you. As you know, the comic-paper idea that burglars all have enormous, big, bulldog jaws and blue chins, is all bunkum!"

"Quite!"

"Take the most skilful crackman-type, and his looks are almost intellectual. He has to be clever to succeed at his job."

"Certainly! Proceed!"

"Well, I am emphasising this fact so that what I am going to say next may seem not such an insult as it sounds," smiled the colonel.

"Oh? Well, let's have it!"

"The convict in question, it happens, is almost the dead image of yourself, Mr. Blake!"

"What!"

"A fact! I had only Harker's assurance for that before—"

"Confound Harker!" laughed Sexton Blake.

"But now I see for myself that his recommendation was absolutely correct."

"You are very flattering," chuckled the detective. "So I am the dead image of your 'star' burglar, am I? Well, what use do you wish to put me to on that account?"

"I want you, when this man's day comes, to put on his suit of civvies, and walk out of this prison as himself, and then see if what he says is not true."

"Really!" protested Blake.

"Why not? It would be, at least, interesting, would it not?"

"Vastly! But—"

"But what—"

"Well, I don't know. I have not had much time yet to soak it in!" said the detective. "Let us have his story over again, and then we'll consider it."

"I haven't told you all his story yet," continued the colonel. "Not merely is he certain that he will be beset by at least one big client for his services, but he has actually had it communicated to him, while he is in this prison, that the job will be the burglary of a certain safe in a certain house, containing emeralds worth anything in value nowadays up to, say, two hundred thousand pounds."

Sexton Blake really sat up this time. He was all alive.

Never had the colonel been subjected to such a cross-examination as he had to submit to then on the subject of this man John Plesher, now a convalescent in the prison hospital ward.

That a convict might have received such a communication from the outer world, as suggested, was more than possible. Fresh arrivals are often commissioned with messages to prisoners from their pals.

There was nothing, either, in the fellow's protestations of wishing to be left alone to go straight. Many men had that resolution self-impressed in their minds on receiving their discharge, and struggled honestly to stick to it, and lead honest lives. How many succeeded was another matter. The way of transgressors is proverbially hard.

But this particular man, it seemed, could bring testimony of honest endeavour to keep his vows.

A missionary—Mr. Wells—whom Blake had heard of as doing good work among discharged prisoners had been allowed to visit the convict when it looked as if there was a chance of his dying.

This gentleman had told the Governor many things about the man and his battles with temptation, which had fairly wrung that official's heart.

Even to a case-hardened individual like Sexton Blake it sounded like a case deserving of help, apart from all other considerations.

The latter, however, were certainly fascinating. Sexton Blake promised to sleep well on the project. Then, if tomorrow he could see his way clear, he could interview the convict Plesher, and hear his story for himself.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Sexton Blake Consents.

TEN o'clock next morning found Sexton Blake so far inclined to go on with the scheme that he was closeted with the repentant crackman in an isolated ward, to which the latter had been removed for the purposes of such interviews as these.

Here Harker of the C.I.D. had already "run the rule over him," as Plesher described it, and retired, plainly satisfied that the man was telling the truth.

It seemed a grand chance for someone to disguise himself to impersonate Plesher, and to meet those go-betweens he described, even if he had actually to burgle the jewels to get his information complete.

And who better than Sexton Blake, who, without exaggeration, was almost the fellow's double, with no make-up at all?

The detective himself had to admit that the likeness was amazing. A few touches and it would be complete.

He cross-examined Plesher as to his story, but could not shake him—that is, as to this one definite "job," about which he had already been approached.

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Blake reckoned he knew whose were the emeralds the master-thief in this case had set his evil eye upon.

For Plesher stuck to it that this was a genuine instance of the master-thief as fiction represented him.

"Who 'e is, of course, I don't never find out," said the convict. "I've done three jobs for 'im, that's all I know. Nice cushy jobs they was, too; just had to take the prime kit of tools he sent you and the map he'd drowed, and walk into the house and out agin. No more than that."

"And after that you handed the swag to—whom?" queried Blake.

"Ah! Well, if I told you you wouldn't be no wiser. I hands the swag in these jobs to a feller we call Slimer. 'E knows me, of course, and I know 'im. But who 'e 'ands it to next I don't know, and who it's palmed to after that 'e don't know, neither. And so that's where your master-thief has you. Keeps you all in the dark. So it's only someone right at the top that actually rumbles who 'e is behind it all. And he's a bloke 'e can trust, you bet!"

Blake wondered whether, if he really set himself to penetrate such a smoke-screen as this super-thief evidently threw out to cover his retreat, it would baffle him.

"Pon my word, I feel inclined to try!" he told the delighted Governor.

But he had a lot more to satisfy himself upon before he would give his final decision. He would have to see Harker, and also he might just as well look up Mr. Wells while he was about it, and find out how much he knew of Plesher in private life.

So he travelled back to London, and popped in at the Yard. The moment he mentioned Kingsmoor Harker raved with enthusiasm.

"You've been down? You know? Well, don't you think it's a prime chance?" he insisted.

Blake wanted to find out what the Yard knew about the man he was being asked to impersonate.

The Yard knew all about him. There were his records and photographs.

Blake inquired about this go-between Slimer, who had been mentioned to him, for one.

Yes, the Yard knew a little about him also. There were his photographs and thumbprints as well, though, so far, he had only fallen into the hands of the police on minor charges.

They also gave him the address of Mr. Wells.

Sexton Blake went on to call on him.

He had heard of this gentleman as a very sincere and energetic mission-worker, devoting his life to helping old lags on their discharge, and doing his best to keep them from former associates who would only lead them back into temptation.

His opinion, therefore, should be very much to the point.

Sexton Blake found him to be a benevolent, elderly man, a little worn with the long and virtually fruitless struggle into which he had thrown himself.

He welcomed Sexton Blake as a celebrity of whom everyone had heard. He seemed to know, moreover, the scheme that had been projected, and the detective found him enthusiastic.

"Plesher, you see, is a man I have always taken special interest in. He is one of the few brands I shall never cease hoping to pluck ultimately from the burning," he told Blake, with sincerity.

The convict had been under his special care during his last spell of liberty. He had tramped London himself for the man to try and get him a job.

Twice he thought he had succeeded,

but some old associate of Plesher's, determined not to be balked of so clever a craftsman, managed to get in a word which promptly shut the door in their faces.

Plesher had given up all hope then. Fight as he would to keep heart in the man, Mr. Wells one day lost sight of him, and two months later only he was again lagged.

"Good! That is all I want to know," said Sexton Blake at parting—"merely your assurance that you honestly believe his protestations to be sincere."

"Absolutely!" the missionary declared. "Hence I need not say how grateful I should be if you undertake what has been suggested, and can free him from the diabolical net which enmeshes him."

"I shall do my best," said Blake quietly. "He makes the one stipulation that after we have kept him in Kingsmoor so long as is necessary to give me a full chance he is to be sent straight to Canada."

"Yes. A fair condition, don't you think? I am arranging already with good friends over there to give him a fresh start. There will be some difficulty, I anticipate, in getting him accepted into the country owing to his record. But I have some influence in that direction, and rather than that should bar his chances I am prepared to go over with him and interview the authorities myself."

"Most sporting of you, I am sure!" Blake had to confess. And with that took leave of the old fellow and cabbied it back to Baker Street.

Tinker, who was awaiting him, could not think what it was his chief had got so firmly wedged on his mind; he was so uncommunicative and snappy on his arrival.

For a long hour he sat in his deep armchair sucking an empty pipe and staring straight at a bell-knob in front of him.

"Never winked a blinking wink, he hasn't!" Tinker told Mrs. Bardell when that good lady came up to inquire as to meals. "Sitting staring there as if a doctor had just told him he'd only six weeks to live, or else he'd just seen his name in the paper for an O.B.E."

"Ho, Bee, Hee? What's that mean?" demanded the simple old soul, alarmed.

"Order of Blighted Expectations," answered Tinker.

However, the bell rang at that moment. Sexton Blake had restored himself to animation at last. He had a telegram he wanted taken at once.

"Governor, Kingsmoor Prison," it was addressed. And then the two words, "Papers found."

"Papers found," echoed Tinker, wondering what the dickens that meant.

However, that evening Blake told him the whole story. The telegram signified that he had duly pondered the scheme and undertaken his leading share in it.

Now, until the Governor received a second code telegram, already agreed upon, Convict Plesher was to be detained in the prison in strictest secrecy, so that it should never be known that he had not left on the day he was entitled to his discharge.

Plesher, in fact, had suggested this himself. It was, of course, essential to the success of the plan. In return for his extra spell of durance vile he was to have his free passage booked and waiting for him, so that he could stop straight aboard to start life afresh in a new world.

"Which is just about what he'd have to do—give England a miss after helping to blow the gaff on old pals," agreed Tinker. "They'd put his light out, sure!"

"Yes, quite likely they would," said

Blake. "But what do you think of the scheme as a scheme?"

"Top hole! It'll be like one of those funny feelings that sometimes come over one when you're walking along a road you swear you've never been along before and yet suddenly you think, 'Hallo! I know this place; I'll be coming to a church soon and a pond.' And you go round the corner, and sure enough there they are!"

"In what way?" demanded Blake, waking up from a day-dream.

"Why, with what this convict will be able to tell you about the men he reckons will be lying for him you'll be walking along, and suddenly you'll see a chap dodging towards you, and you'll say, 'Hallo! This red-headed snipe is going to be Slimer—or whatever his name was—and we're coming to a pub with a back-parlour to it, and two men sitting with black whiskers and green eyes.' Isn't that about it?"

"Yes, I suppose it will be something like that," agreed his gun'ner, yawning.

"But what I don't quite see," pursued Tinker shrewdly, "is, supposing these chaps are as close as your man pretends they—"

"How I am going to be able to keep track of the swag once I've handed it over, you mean?"

"Exactly! By his way of it, somebody takes it off him, and he's finished. Now you want to see who takes it from the next man, and the next, until it's actually pouched by this master-thief."

"Quite so! You've hit it!" agreed Blake. "That is what wants thinking out. There must be a hiatus—"

"A how much?"

"A gap to be bridged. As you sagely remark, when I emerge from my crib with my barrowload of emeralds, and the man appears whose job it is to relieve me of them, I can't go hanging at his heels to see who next handles them, or I'll give myself away. They'll take good care I don't get the chance, anyway."

"Well, perhaps that's where I can come in?" suggested Tinker.

"Yes, you could quite well. But I think I prefer that the responsibility should fall on Harker."

"Harker? You don't mean to say—"

"Say what?"

"That you're going to let the Yard have anything to do with this now you've taken it on?"

"I do!" was Blake's emphatic response. "You've got to remember that Harker was called in before me. A lot of the scheme is his."

"But," insisted Tinker, "you've always said that any job you took up—"

"I know, I know!" interrupted Blake. "Well, here I'm going to make an exception. For one thing, the emeralds to be stolen will be the real ones, not copies. Hand them over, I must, to someone; and while they're out of my sight I had rather shunt the responsibility on to Scotland Yard. Later, though, after I have chucked off my disguise, I shall chip in again, when the swag is percolating its way through to the master-thief."

"And what about me, gun'ner? Where do I come in?" demanded Tinker.

"Oh, you'll come in all right when I've got my plans fixed!"

And with that Blake plunged into a big pile of official correspondence awaiting him, and further discussion had to be reserved.

THE THIRD CHAPTER. The Release.

A MONDAY morning about ten days later saw, at six o'clock, a drab-coloured figure being conducted by a warder from the hospital block of Kingsmoor Prison to

another containing ordinary cells almost opposite.

Here the men are dealt with who are due for release. A good-conduct orderly, who is allowed to make himself comfortable with knickknacks and picture-postcards in his cell, sets out all ready the civilian suits for which the lucky dischargees have been measured.

Even in these days of scarcity the cloth is good, and as to cut—there is no case of a man yet electing to stay in prison a couple of days longer for the sake of an extra fitting.

On this particular morning the convict from the hospital was the only candidate for freedom. The Governor himself was expected to be along for the final completion of his papers and the last customary exordium to turn over a new leaf and run straight.

"No. 45329 John Plesher!" called out the warder in charge, and the man in broad arrows and his escort drew up to the table. The formalities of identification over, he was ordered into a cell to change out of his prison garb.

By that time Colonel Pinston had arrived. The proceedings were conducted with the utmost gravity. Yet the man for whom the prison gates were about to open to set him free was not Convict Plesher at all, but Sexton Blake.

The prison orderly did not know this, nor even the warder who was his escort. The senior warder at the table did, but he was one of the very few.

The real John Plesher had been conveyed in the dead of darkness to a disused block in another part of the prison, and the detective substituted in his place.

So perfect was Sexton Blake's make-up that if the whole twelve hundred convicts immured within those walls had been paraded past him none would have dreamt that he was not the notorious cracksmen.

Arrayed in his new suit of clothes, Blake waited with hang-dog air the attention of the Governor. The latter also played his part to a T.

His sermon completed, and the last document signed, Blake was ushered out of the prison gate, with the five pounds good-conduct money due to the real malefactor in his pocket, and a railway ticket to take him to Waterloo.

On the station platform Blake passed his old acquaintance, the railway-porter, who surveyed him with a sniff. They might think they disguised their convicts as honest men, but he knew the blighters—"knew 'em every time."

"Now then, Mr. Slimer," said Blake to himself, as the train began to fuss its way down the zigzag moorland branch line. "Ginger-headed; green eyes, tinged with brown; scar on jaw; 'cauliflower' left ear; height, five-seven; dippy at the knees—I'm ready for you when you care to introduce yourself."

According to Plesher, this enterprising individual would have it all marked up on the calendar; the exact day and hour and time of train of his quarry's release.

And, depend upon it, he would be on the watch. Not waiting for him to reach Waterloo even, but waylaying him at some station on the line.

Blake's first instinct was to look out at every stoppage for sign of him. But remembering that Plesher's marked trait was his determination to try and dodge old pals, he thought it would be truer to his part to sit screwed up in his corner with his collar up when halted at stations.

That he was right was proved when, at one main-line junction, he felt rather than saw a figure shamle swiftly pass the window, halt as if peering in, then go on and return. A longer look this

time, then another furtive dart a little way up the train, and once more he was back.

This time the fellow opened the carriage door. Yet still Blake kept his nose deep in his coat-collar.

It was Mr. Slimer, sure enough. Plesher's description of him was true to a T. He came wriggling in between the knees of two other passengers, and planted himself down in the corner opposite his victim. Blake now was looking him full in the face.

"What—Mister Dewlip!" exclaimed the delighted Slimer, reaching forward. "Fancy meeting you 'ere! 'Ow are you? Haven't seen you—since when was it? 'How's the timber trade doin' now, eh?"

Blake grumbled something about the timber trade doing "middlin'" only.

"Well, now, you don't say so! Should have thought as you blokes was makin' your fortchins these times," rallied the irrepressible Slimer. "You're still with the old firm, ain't you?"

Blake replied affirmatively. Whereupon his new friend—or old one, rather—rattled on about his own job and their various acquaintances; some of whom Blake recognised in spite of inappropria aliases and liberal camouflage.

At the next stopping-place the other passengers alighted, and Slimer was able to dissemble, which he proceeded to do very promptly.

"Well, Jack, old son, mighty glad to see you ag'in!" he laughed, fetching Blake a thundering clap on the knee. "Look a bit peaky, p'raps."

"Yes; and so might you after a dose of pneumonia!" snarled Blake ungraciously. "Six weeks in hospital, and turned out now to die like a dog, if I likes!"

"What! Die? Fudge!" laughed Mr. Slimer. "We shan't let you die, Jack, chance it. Not much! You want feedin' up, that's all. Too much skilly. But we'll soon set that right. You got plenty of pals, Jack. They'll see you through, ol' cock, don't you worry!"

Blake did worry. He had no wish ever to see any of his so-called "old pals" again—and didn't mean to, either.

Mr. Slimer was good-naturedly hurt at this, after all his trouble to come so far to welcome him. And old Bill Ferrers would be waiting for them at Waterloo. Why, they had been preparing no end of a "hit-up" to welcome him back that night at the Mucky Duck. Surely he was not going to cut up nasty now and spoil it all!

Blake was. He didn't care a fig for Bill Ferrers, and would tell him to take his ugly mug out of it sharp, he would. And as for the "hit-up," they could keep that among themselves. He was going to choose his own friends in future.

However, there was old Bill Ferrers, sure enough—another parasite that Plesher mentioned—"complexion dark, hair black, moustache and eyes grey, habit stout," and all the rest of it—waiting for them at the Waterloo barrier.

Blake played the part of a virtuously intentioned penitent so well that he nearly plugged this gentleman in the eye before he allowed himself to be coaxed and hustled away into a taxi.

"I want to be let alone!" he kept protesting vainly; but the cab, all the same, was sweeping him along towards the White Swan—a dingy beerhouse off Shoreditch, about which Plesher had already informed him. Its dinginess had deserved for it the nickname of the Mucky Duck.

Blake found this pretended, pig-headed surliness paid well. For though Plesher

had been able to tell him everything he could think of asking, as to the exact life he led when free, it was only a smattering, after all.

But while stubbornly refusing to answer the civillest questions, and generally behaving like a mule, the detective was picking up local colour about himself all the time.

Certainly the man Slimer seemed never to doubt for a moment his identity with the real convict. As to the other, Blake thought he caught him looking rather hard at him once or twice; but, nevertheless, a second later saw any doubt dispelled.

Blake's excuse that he had been in hospital with "pneumonia" covered everything. And so it was also at the Mucky Duck.

The taxi-driver, finding himself getting deeper and deeper into unsavoury back streets, jibbed at last, and turned them out to walk. From that moment it became almost a triumphal procession.

Plesher, at any rate on these rare occasions, was evidently a public celebrity. Blake knew, of course, that among the criminal classes, anybody who is coming home after doing a stretch is entitled to a "friendly lead," even the humblest.

But the Governor had extolled Plesher as one of the cleverest burglars of modern days, and in this his mates evidently agreed. Children began to walk beside him; slutish women to bob out at doorways to see him go by; while at the thieves' pub they were bound for there was quite a crowd, who closed round Blake, shaking hands, and finally urging him inside almost shoulder high.

Here was beer and 'bacca in plenty, and here Blake made his first slip. Still somewhat churlish and morose, he took the first can offered him, and with a "Well, cheer-o, mates, and a 'Appy Noo Year to you!" when at once there rose first a gasp of astonishment, then a rude guffaw of laughter.

The real Jack Plesher, it seemed, was a confirmed teetotaler. That was one of the points Blake had forgotten to ask about.

"Great strikes! You don't mean—You ain't give up your pledge, then?" choked Slimer, goggle-eyed with mirth at the idea.

Blake set down the can calmly, wiping his lips on the back of his hand.

"I have, for just once—out of honour to you bokes," he answered, without turning a hair. "But it's for one day only, remember, and no more."

"Ooray! Bravo, Jacky!" applauded Slimer, clapping him on the shoulder. "Your verry good 'ealth for a champion sport!"

After all, the slip proved not so unlucky. Plesher's pretended concession was hailed as the height of good comradely feeling.

By all but one man, that is.

This fellow, a rheumy-eyed, dirty-faced old rascal, with a slobber of tobacco-juice trickling down over his bony, unshaven jaw, came leering uglily up to Sexton Blake, and, tapping him on the chest with a forefinger black as a poker, said:

"Ere, mate, I don't know wot your name is, but there's some little game on, ain't there?"

Blake promptly bristled, while Mr. Slimer gasped a startled "Wot?"

"Some little game," repeated the rheumy-eyed one. "You calls this fellow 'ere Jack, meaning Plesher, as 'e called 'isself last time. But this 'ere ain't 'im!"

A gasp of stupefaction rose all round the crowded bar. Blake naturally thought that his scheme, if not his life, U.J.—No. 861.

was going to be nipped thus early in the bud. He flung an anxious glance at Slimer.

The latter, though, was glaring not at him, but the man who had intervened.

"Not 'im? Not Jack Plesher?" demanded Slimer, with indignation. "What d'yer mean, you old fool?"

"I tell you 'e ain't! You've been done!" insisted the other, who seemed to be known to the Mucky Duckers as "Dribbler," from the little weakness already referred to. "D'yer think I don't know the real Jack ever since 'e was born?"

"Oh, go and boil yourself! You're barmy!" snarled Slimer, shoving him aside with a savage swing.

"Not Jack Plesher?" he laughed, with a snort of contempt. "Wot do you take us for? A pack of fools? Why, you're eyes are gitting blind, you old fossil! You won't know your own face in the glass soon!"

"Wouldn't know it now, with all the dirt there is on it!" chimed in Mr. Bill Ferrers, fortunately coming to the rescue. "Course it's old Jack! Been and 'ad pneumonia, didn't you 'ear it said! And now you go for to insult him like this! Wonder 'e 'asn't pushed your silly old face in for it! Git outer this, d'y 'ear, you slobberin' idyot!"

The dirty man was promptly pushed on top of the man behind him, who, resenting his corns being stamped upon, hurled him into the arms of the next, who flung him up against the door, where someone else planted a kick under his coat-tails. And so by lightning stages he was shot out into the gutter.

Whether of the pair of them Sexton Blake was not just as shaken as he, it is difficult to judge. The detective knew that he had had about as narrow a squeak as had ever befallen him.

For amongst this mob, old lags and criminals to a man, if they had chosen to believe his accuser instead of deriding him, he would have been down and kicked to death, and out of all recognition, as a "nark," before anyone could say "Jack Robinson."

By the grace of Providence, though, Slimer and his irony had sided with Blake, and, for the time being at any rate, all was well.

But if the detective had felt his heart stand still during that brief encounter, his mask-like face never showed it.

"Why didn't you clip 'im one in the jaw—the old fool?" suggested Slimer. "I'd 'ave done so sharp, I know, if I'd been you! Wonder wot's set 'im cranky like that all of a sudden? Did he want to make the coves 'ere think you was a nark?"

The anxious glance which Slimer threw round the rest of the room was not lost on Blake. Fortunately, at that moment the landlord appeared to announce that the "boiled leg of mutton and turnips" was served.

In the eager rush which at once took place for the long room beyond the bar, any lingering doubts were promptly shed. Blake as the guest of the day was at the cross-table, and his friend Slimer was in the chair.

And yet, for all the chaff and jollity, it was plain that the latter had not been able entirely to put the incident from him. He was like a man anticipating trouble. His growled curses on the head of Dribbler proclaimed as much.

The queer and joyful thing, though, was that never for a moment did his own belief in their guest's identity seem to waver for an instant.

Nor did the "pipes and 'armony," which duly followed on the feast succeed in dispelling the gloomy shadow. It seemed, in fact, to grow deeper only.

"Can't for the life of me think what in blazes made the old skunk out up like that for," he confided openly in Blake for the fifteenth time.

"Oh, let 'im go to the deuce," growled the latter offhandedly.

"Ah, quite so. But Dribbler's an ugly cove when he gets a thing stuck in 'is silly old headpiece. If 'e gets raising the other boys, and they're 'anging round after yer, there may be trouble, as you'll soon find out."

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Free Fight.

AND trouble there was, as he had prophesied. Dribbler, resenting the way his well-meant criticism had been received, and despoiled of his mutton and turnips for which he had subscribed, had been round amongst these mysterious "other boys." The result was that when the "friendly lead" was breaking up word was brought in that there was a whole crowd outside waiting to satisfy themselves whether Dribbler was not right in his assertion that a hated "nark" or police-spy had snaked his way into the vicinity, and was even being feasted by a deluded company at the Mucky Duck.

Slimer gave the rumour no time to percolate round the table, but, nudging Blake in the ribs as a sign to follow, slipped back into the bar. The man Bob Ferrers also came with them.

"Now, we ain't going to spoil a merry evening with no row if we can 'elp it," said Slimer diplomatically. "You 'eard wot that cove said who shoved his 'ead in just now. Dribbler's got a gang waiting outside for you—"

"Well, what if 'e 'as?" blustered Blake, determined on a bold stroke. "Wot do I care? Says I'm not myself, does he? Let me go out and prove it. I've got my discharge papers."

"Now, steady on, Jack. You just leave this to us," coaxed his two most excellent pals. "There's a way out of this pub over a wall, as you know, and we're going to take it—see?"

"No, I'll be dashed if I do!" declared Blake stoutly, though allowing himself to be hustled through into the backyard nevertheless.

It was well he did so. For word leaking out at that instant that Dribbler's "nark" was escaping them, the gang outside surged into the bar in pursuit.

With a roar like a bull, the redoubtable host flung himself into their path, and there was a very pretty scrap from that time forward, as Blake remained long enough to see.

For before they could get clear of the yard and over the rear wall, three of the unbelievers had managed to force their way past and drive Blake to bay.

"Nark!" whooped the first, a whole-hearted believer in Dribbler's infallibility seemingly—for he made at the suspect with a rush like a bull.

The detective was never cooler. He feinted to guard the windmill-blow, ducked nimbly instead, swung his left to the assailant's belt—or, to be accurate, a trifle below it—then came up under his elbow with a smashing right swing to the back of his ear.

Never did a man go down with more leaden thump than that too valorous hooligan.

Meanwhile, a second, already on top of the detective, and kicking at him like a football, found his ankle suddenly snared in Blake's clutch, and he went to earth, too, nearly turning a somersault in the process.

The third man, repenting that he had been quite so precipitate, tried to put the brakes on in the midst of his rush and swerve.

He straightway ran into such a left hook from the detective's fist that crumpled his nose like a concertina. And he also went wallop.

Slimer's breathless exhortations to "up stick and 'ook it" caused Blake to realise that both his pals were already astride the back wall of the premises. They reached down for his collar kindly, and hoisted him, gasping, after them.

Then, just as the landlord in the bar must have gone down before the balance of the mob, the trio dropped nimbly to earth in a narrow court beyond, bolted through a doorway, which Slimer shot the lock of behind him; then hurried across a yard, and through somebody's dirty basement, up some crazy stairs, and so to the front door, opening to a street on the further side.

It was a line of retreat which his guides had no doubt often steered when the hounds were too hot upon their heels.

out at him from a side room, and grabbed him by the coat.

"Ere, you!" she screamed. "Oo are you to come smashin' through fol's 'ouses like this? 'Elp! Murder! I got 'im! Nark! Splits!" she squealed at the top of her voice.

For she had caught the cry of the crowd outside, and divined that this was the prey they were pursuing.

Blake could have struck her down, of course, and saved himself. But he was not the sort for that. He knew his danger, nevertheless, and realised also that his only friends were gone.

Denounced to be that most hated of all vermin—a "nark"—he was left to face the raging mob alone.

He managed to fling the old hag off and get to the door and slam it, shooting the single bolt it possessed, and setting his back against it.

He was only in the nick of time. He

back on top of Blake, who was borne to the ground, with the mob pouring over him.

He fought, of course. It was a fight literally for life. They pounded and kicked, and had they been only a little less eager to hammer the life out of him he would never have regained his feet.

Yet he did by a miracle, and now, with his back to the end wall of the passage, he put up a fight which must be historical amid that thieves' quarter.

Yet there was only one end to it, of course. He was already spent and blown. But just then a sound shrilled in from the street outside, which to Blake then was the most delightful music he had ever heard in his life.

It was the Bz-z-zing! Bz-z-zing! Bz-z-zing! of the dear old police-whistles. There were police, after all, in these benighted parts. Blake had begun to doubt it.



And the probability is it would have led them to safety on this occasion if the man Dribbler had not also been acquainted with it, and posted a picket there to intercept them.

It was plain that whoever else might be prepared to accept Blake as Plesher, he most certainly was not. It was a neighbourhood, too, where one had merely to breathe the word "nark" and the whole population was out like a pack of wolves.

It is probable, nevertheless, that but for a stumble Blake might have got clear, as Slimer and his mate succeeded in doing.

In clattering up that crazy basement staircase a broken stair-tread was Blake's undoing.

His two guides, in their rush, never noticed that Blake had dropped behind. They flung open the street-door just in time to see a mob bearing down to head them off. With a shout to "Plesher" to follow, round to the right they spun, and away as hard as their legs could carry them.

Blake, noting the note of panic in their cry, floundered up into the passage above, and was making out of the door, when a dishevelled old woman plunged

knew that the door, as it crashed to, smote the first man's skull as he was trying to enter. He fell evidently, for almost simultaneously there was another plunging thud, as someone else took a header over his sprawling carcass.

Now the yelling, the hooting, and the jeering, which dinned from the street outside, would have made the boldest heart to quake.

Nor was Blake attacked only that side. The old lady with the tousled elf-locks having fallen over her own feet into her kitchen, reappeared now with a pail of filthy water, which she promptly discharged over the fugitive. She next caught up a bald-headed broom, and began to belabour him with this.

A swarm of dirty children, too, with vociferous cries, were aiding her by pelting him from the stairs with everything they could lay hands on, from coke to cabbage-leaves.

Added to this, his pursuers on the road he had come had forced the locked door at last, and were pouring into the basement to take him in the rear.

They were anticipated, however, for a sudden rush and the application of many shoulders to the street-door, drove it bodily from its hinges. It was hurled

"Copper! Splits! Copper!" the faint hearts of the mob were shouting in warning to the gladiators inside. These gave back instinctively, and Blake could let his tense, aching muscles relax.

Over the heads of the rabble he could see three blue helmets shoving through the crowd like a wedge. The constables battled their way to the door, peered in, and then closed on Blake with a rush.

"Here, you! What's all this fuss over you for?" demanded one red-faced goliath, gripping his quarry by the neck. "Are you the nark these scum are 'owling after?"

"No, I ain't!" retorted Blake. Just for a flash he had been on the point of confiding in these officers who he actually was. But he saw that to do this might be to ruin the whole scheme. He must protest that he was the coviet John Plesher, and maintain the deception by hook and by crook.

"Oh, you ain't, ain't you? Then who are you? Let's 'ave your name."

"Name? Plesher—discharged from Kingsmoor this morning!" answered Blake.

"Ho, were you? A ticket-of-leave U.J.—No. 861.

man, hey? Got your papers?" demanded the big officer, beginning to realise the humour of the position.

Yes, Blake had his papers.

"Then what do they want to make out you're a nark for?" was the next query.

"I dunno! It's that swab they call Slobbering Mouth!"

"Dribbler? Oh, yes; I know 'im!" answered the officer. "So it was 'im, eh? Well, there must be something in it, I suppose!"

"Wot, me a nark?" flared out Blake savagely. "Nark for 'oo? For you rozzers? I'll see you in Hexam first—not 'arf!"

"Oh, come, now, don't start turning on us, my lad, or we'll leave you to it, sharp, we will!" retorted the constable. "We're 'ere to 'elp you; and, anyway, you've got to go to the station along of us to 'ave these papers checked. I dessey you haven't reported to the police yet since you come out—is that it?"

Blake had not reported. It was a detail which he had never contemplated. He ought to have told Harker to warn the division round these parts to wink a discreet eye where one John Plesher was concerned. But he hadn't.

It was going to lead to regrettable bother now, he could see. However, now he had committed himself, he meant to bluff it out to the last that he was the ticket-of-leave criminal whose discharge he bore.

The police could have no serious charge against him. He need not have reported to them yet, as he knew. There would be only some inspector to blarney, and then they must release him.

Meantime he was wholeheartedly glad to have the law's protection. If the rabble had been whipped off for the moment, they were only waiting till he appeared outside to make another rush to get at him.

The constables knew this, and preferred to wait for reinforcements. These came at last in the shape of three more stout policemen, and the six then set out on their stormy voyage to the station, with Blake wedged in their midst.

A volley of cabbage-stumps and garbage opened the renewed battle, while a bottle smote the helmet of one policeman and nearly felled him to the ground. Blake, however, steadied him. Then all seven bored down the street steps and plunged into the crowd.

It was certainly the roughest passage Blake had ever experienced. But luckily the police-station was only a matter of four hundred yards away.

The savagery of the mob was only equalled by the disciplined self-control of the guardians of the law. Though smitten hip and thigh, they only drew their truncheons when it was plain their very lives were at stake.

Then at last more reinforcements of police bored into the mob in rear, and five minutes later they were inside the station-yard and the gates slammed on the foe.

Blake was hustled up the steps into the charge-room, breathless, covered in muck, and beaten black and blue. His escort were in no better shape. Yet their arrival no more disturbed the official serenity of the staff inside than if they had come strolling in from a church-parade.

Blake's original questioner detailed the facts of the disturbance and handed over his ticket-of-leave papers in corroboration.

U.J.—No. 861.

"Well," demanded the station-inspector, "what's the meaning of this?"

"Of what?" demanded Blake surlily.

"This row about you—calling you a nark? What have you been up to? You haven't lifted them from anyone else?"

"Of course they're my papers—given me this morning by the Governor himself!" retorted Blake. "As I've told this officer, 'ere, I don't know no more than Adam wot they mean. I'm John Plesher, I tell yer, just out from Kingsmoor after doing a five year stretch for burglary. I ain't no perishing nark!"

Just at that moment somebody came boldly into the charge-room, and to his consternation Blake saw it was the police-court missionary, Mr. Wells.

"Hallo, what's this?" exclaimed that worthy gentleman, as startled as he.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

What Did Blake Suspect?

"EVENING, Mr. Wells!" answered the inspector, greeting him. "It's a discharged convict the crowd have been chasing, swearing he's a nark. He's only out of Kingsmoor this morning. I suppose you don't happen to know him, and so save us bothering the Yard?"

The missionary was in a quandary, of course. Since Blake had not discovered himself, he knew that the detective must have reasons for wishing to leave the police in ignorance of his identity.

Yet, as a missionary, he could hardly perjure himself by endorsing Blake's denial, even in the interests of a case in which he was personally greatly interested.

He kept silence then, glancing at Blake to see if he was going to help him out in his dilemma.

The detective, on the other hand, made no advance, but only scowled.

"I don't know what it's got to do with this gentleman!" he did vouchsafe at last, when the silence was getting suspicious. "I know 'im, of course. He's Mr. Wells, the missionary, and 'e knows me. But I've done nutthink to break the law. You can't detain me. I want to be let go; that's what I want!"

"Well, Inspector Fish," struck in Mr. Wells judiciously, "if that is all against him, I think he is right there, don't you? I know the man, and if it's a question of someone to look after him, you can leave him in my hands. The mob won't touch him while he is with me."

"No. Dare say you're right there," allowed the inspector, though he still glowered at his captive suspiciously. He was in two minds now, even, to detain him while he 'phoned up Scotland Yard. There was something fishy about all this, he felt sure.

However, the missionary, who was a privileged visitor at any police-station, won his point. They could not detain their prisoner if he demanded to go. Mr. Wells would see that no further harm befell him.

Reluctantly, then, Blake was given back his discharge-papers and allowed to depart with his new custodian, leaving the station by a door in rear of the yard.

"Well," exclaimed the missionary, when they were clear, "that was rather awkward, wasn't it? How on earth did it come to happen at all?"

Blake told him briefly. Mr. Wells

knew Dribbler by reputation, at any rate. He also knew the man Slimer it seemed.

He had chanced upon him hovering disconsolately round the far fringe of the mob, and, knowing that he was a parasite of the real Plesher, had asked him if he had seen him.

Slimer had sworn that he had not. He was so obviously lying, however, and so perturbed, that Mr. Wells had thought it advisable to look in at the police-station and just see what all the riot had been about.

"Well, I am glad you did," said Blake, thanking him. "I put you in an awkward corner, I know, but I did not want you to give me away. For once that happens on a job like this, even with the police, you never know where the information may leak to. And as I needn't tell you, I am literally carrying my life in my hands."

"You are. You're a brave man," conceded the missionary heartily. "I never realised, perhaps, until now, what risks you would be called upon to run, or I should not have been in such a hurry to endorse this scheme to trail the master-thief."

"However, it is worth all the sacrifice," he assured Blake with warm sincerity, and while they were striding along, making towards Shoreditch and civilisation proper again, he told the detective many an experience to the point, to encourage him in his quest.

At Bishopsgate they shook hands and parted. Where Blake was to go to now, and what had become of his two henchmen, whom he particularly wished to see again, he did not know.

However, the wily Slimer and the faithful Bill Ferris were not many yards away, it proved. In fact, they had been dogging the "sky-pilot" and him right the way from the police-station.

"Well, you're a nice pair of pals, you are!" snarled Blake at them as they introduced themselves again. "Where've you bin, you two, sloping off like that and leaving me to that blistering mob?"

Slimer's excuse was sound enough. He had honestly thought Blake to be following them. When they saw he hadn't, the street was packed with Dribbler's gang, and there was no getting back to him.

He admitted that Mr. Wells had cross-questioned him, but he was "not going to have any truck with no mealy-mouthed coves like him!" he growled.

"The question is, where we're going to find yer a lodging now?" he continued, changing the subject. "We can't take yer to the place we meant to, or it 'ud only start the row all over again. I reckon it had better be old 'Obby's, don't you, Bill? That is, if he's got room."

Bill concurred, and as Blake had no views of his own on the matter, 'Obby's it was decided to be. They mounted a 'bus, therefore, and were soon tooling down Cheapside, having booked two-penny fares for Holborn Circus.

"'Obby's is nice and quiet, for one thing, and you allus liked quiet," volunteered Slimer, in extenuation.

Blake most heartily agreed. 'Obby's was a highly-respectable lodging-house, where only the cream of the burgling fraternity were admitted, he learnt, as they hurried along.

For, after alighting from the 'bus, they were making up through Hatton Garden and down through Syre Street, on the other side of Saffron Hill.

It was a quarter Blake knew well. It sheltered half the Italian organ-grinders and hokey-pokey merchants in the metropolis. It was a veritable corner out of Naples, particularly on feast days, when all its flags were out, and at night

candle-lit shrines and images illuminated the windows.

It was so thoroughly and peculiarly dago in population and habits that the detective marvelled at the thieves' doss-house being found there.

However, it was on the further fringe of the Italian quarter that they halted at last, in a narrow, dirty street, before a door a little less coated with grease and grime than its neighbours.

The door opened, and an oldish woman came out and bleared at them. Slimer muttered something, which, no doubt, was a password, and inquired for the boss.

Mr. 'Obby was inside the parlour. It proved; a short, thickset man, with a bullet head like a prizefighter's. One eyelid having a queer droop to starboard made him a very fly-looking customer indeed.

But he seemed to know Slimer and his pal, which was the most important thing, and made them welcome. Slimer, though, drew him outside into the passage first, for the better explanation of their needs.

When the bullet-headed one returned he took Blake's hand, and merely grunted, "Ah! Pleased to see you!" So everything had been fixed satisfactorily.

But their host spotted one thing about Blake which the others had missed. He no sooner touched the detective's palm than he turned it upwards to the light.

It was dirty, sure enough, but it was not the rough, horny hand of a convict fresh out of Kingsmoor.

Being a man of no words at all, if he could help it, he merely looked from Blake to Slimer and back again.

"Ah, we ain't told you yet!" volunteered Slimer quickly. "Jack's 'ad pneumonia. Six weeks in 'ospital, and book-binding before that. Ain't yer, Jack?"

"That's so," answered Blake, much relieved. Whereupon 'Obby dropped the detective's paw, seemingly satisfied, and grunted, "Take a chair." A few minutes later, after a tap at the door, he fired at them, "Room's ready!" And such were his entire contributions to the conversation during that awkward half-hour.

Highly relieved to get away by himself, Blake mounted the stairs, and found a neat and clean bed-room awaiting him.

"Well, 'ere you are! 'Ow'll this do for you?" inquired Slimer ecstatically. "Fit for a king—eh? And two ways out, if you want to know."

Blake did want to know, and waited to be shown by 'Obby, his host.

What looked to be an innocent cupboard turned out to be a secret door into an adjacent staircase ending in someone else's backyard. As a matter of fact, it was the yard of a beer-house in a turning off the Farringdon Road.

The double staircase was a sufficient commentary on the class of lodger cultivated by Mr. 'Obby.

"Well now, Jack," resumed his guide, "we ain't going to worry you about business yet. Time enough after you've 'ad a bit of a 'oliday, and seen some of the sights agin. But you got that message we passed into the Stone Jug for you by Greaser James, didn't you?"

"Bout them emeralds?" suggested Blake growlingly.

"Yes. Vally'd twice what di'monds is nowadays, you know. Two 'undred thousand quidswuth at least, all lying cosy, for a flash 'nd like you to lift."

"Ah, and so they can wait!" was Blake's surly retort to this.

"Oh, cheese it! Don't be so snappy!" remonstrated Slimer meekly. "Anyway, I said as 'ow we wouldn't worry yer with business yet a while. You've just got to make yourself at 'ome 'ere, order

what you like and when you like. And to-night we can go to the pictures if so you've the mind. Or there's some good boxing on at the 'Olborn Stadium. What d'yer say to that?"

Blake wished he had not been quite so precipitate in shutting Slimer up. He was aching to find out more about these emeralds he was destined to burgle. There were arrangements on his side to be made, and Tinker and the Yard would be on tiptoe with excitement waiting to know how he was faring.

Given half an opening, however, Slimer was only too glad to impart what information he had about the "job." Unfortunately, he did not know much.

"You see, the guv' ain't ready yet. 'E's still nussing it, so they say," he explained.

"Who say?" grunted Blake.

"Oh, come now, who're you getting at?" laughed Slimer, not to be drawn. "I only pass the word on to you from them as gives it, asking no questions and expecting no lies. You know that without my telling yer."

"But that ain't good enough for me any more," declared Blake sulkily. "On this last stretch I've been making up my mind to one thing. I'm going to know whom I'm working for in future—that is, if I ever crack a crib again, which I won't!"

"Now, don't keep saying that, Jack. Don't keep on talking silly," pleaded Slimer.

"But I do say it! What did I git out of that last job? Thirty bloomin' quid only. And then I was lagged. Thirty bloomin' quid! It gives me the fair sick! And how much did this guv' of your'n make out of it?"

"Strike a light. Don't ask me!" urged Slimer uncomfortably.

"Well, thousands anyway, and 'im rolling in his kerridge, like a bloomin' earl!" snorted Blake, wondering whether this would draw him.

"Quite right!" allowed Slimer. "It don't seem fair. But you've got to remember—"

"Remember what? In three year and ten months I've remembered just that—'im rolling in his kerridge down Park Lane every morning, and blowing himself out with fizz every night. And all out of me, mark yer! Thirty dirty quid, and 'ardly time to blow it in before I was pinched again!"

"All right," agreed Slimer tactfully. "But what about his side of it? 'Ow much d'yer think that kit of tools would have cost yer if you 'ad 'ad to buy it yourself? Three 'undred quid, I'll lay a dollar. But he found it free."

"And then, about the crib. Who found that? Who nussed it? Who give you the plan complete, down to the bloke who snored, and the t'other one as left his boots carelessly outside his door, so you wouldn't fall over 'em?"

Blake pretended to regard all these favours only with contempt. However, what was the use of talking? He had done with crime. He meant to go straight from now on. The guv' could take his emeralds to the infernal regions.

In all of which Slimer appeared to concur. He again suggested the pictures as a mild excitement suitable after long sojourn within prison-walls. And Blake, realising that he had found out very little more than when he started, was forced to agree.

Bill Ferris having taken himself off meantime, the pair made an evening of it themselves, and right roundly was Blake bored before he was through.

Twice, just to see how Slimer was deputed to watch him, he tried to leave the show for a minute alope, with plausible excuse. But the other stuck closer than glue.

And when they got back to 'Obby's again, after a stewed-eel supper in the Gray's Inn Road, and Sexton Blake had betaken himself to bed, sure enough, when his snores seemed to show that he was really fast asleep, he heard stockinged feet creep up each stair in turn, and the keys turned in both locks, making him a prisoner till daylight again.

"Not much of an improvement on Kingsmoor evidently," he thought to himself. "No wonder Plesher got fed-up with crime and wanted to run straight. Or perhaps he never realised what tender care was being taken of him while he slept his beauty sleep."

"Anyway, it's going to be a bit difficult, I can see, getting a message off to Tinker. That is, unless what I am beginning to suspect proves true," Blake concluded, yawning sleepily.

What he meant by that, though, it was impossible to say, for a moment later he was really in the land of dreams.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER. At Scotland Yard.

AS subsequent days revealed, Blake was treated very well. True, there was always Slimer, or Bill Ferris, or, very occasionally, Mr. 'Obby, waiting to companion him, no matter where he wanted to go.

Blake, needless to say, was playing his part to the life. He was exactly as a man just released from years of iron discipline and servitude, lazing away the days, without bothering about anybody but himself.

One day it was Plumpton Steeple-chases, another whippet racing, with music-halls or boxing always to finish up with.

But never once was he expected to pay one penny of his own. He was treated throughout like a prince.

Nevertheless, he knew from what Plesher had said that account was being kept of every halfpenny spent. The mysterious master-thief might be a man of broad business ideas, but, if after a time it was reported to him that his dupe was still bucking against returning to a life of crime, the whole bill would be very promptly presented to him, with a curt command to pay up or take the consequences.

The dupe, of course, never was able to foot the costs, and so succumbed.

Blake, however, was only too eager to get to business. A week of this holiday-making saw him fed to the teeth. All the time he was watching for an opportunity to slip his escort somehow, and send a wire to Tinker, apprising him of his whereabouts. But always the other was too much on the alert.

Then one day Slimer, letting his wits go dozing for a minute, went back to the booking-office to inquire further about a train. It was at Waterloo, and they were going racing again.

Promptly Blake was round and away, popping into a telephone call-box, like a rabbit down its hole.

He gave his Baker Street number, slammed in his three pennies, and a moment later was listening to Tinker's own silvery voice, for it sounded silvery after these long days of contriving and suspense.

"Hallo, guv'nor! Don't mean to say that's you at last?" Why, where have you been to all this time?" demanded Tinker, in tones of lively relief.

"I'm staying round at a thieves' doss-house—Hobby's, 179, Bootle Lane; back of the Farringdon Road."

"Farringdon Road. Right!" answered Tinker, who had been jotting this down. "And what else? How much have you found out?"

"Lots, only not the stuff exactly that Harker or anyone else is expecting," was Blake's enigmatical answer. "Only don't tell them that. Just say you've heard from me, and 'no news.' No address, either! Don't give me away, and don't worry or try and find me till you hear again. Understand?"

Tinker admitted he did, but very reluctantly. He wanted to find out more. Mrs. Bardell and he had been seriously concerned at not having so much as a whisper from him.

Just at that moment, though, Blake, out of the corner of his eye, saw Slimer reappearing from the booking-hall, looking sharply round for sign of him.

He passed right by the telephone-box, in fact, where Blake was cornered, but failed to peer in. The moment his back was turned Blake was out, of course, and hurrying the opposite way.

It was not until Slimer had made a complete tour of the station that he found his missing friend at last, standing innocently gazing at the main bookstall.

"Why, where've you bin to?" he demanded angrily. "I never saw you go. Thought you were following me. Why didn't you, eh?"

"Cause I didn't see the use. I just stopped 'ere and waited till you come back," was Blake's serene answer, which Slimer, after puffing and blowing a bit longer, was forced to accept.

But for all he was so casual about it, the detective was watching every look and twitch in the other's eyes. By the time they had arrived at Clapham Junction he had come to one rather amazing conclusion.

And this was that, before night, the proposition for burgling the coveted emeralds would be put to him in earnest and for immediate action.

It was rather a startling deduction to come to, really, seeing he had no grounds at all for arriving at it. But Blake had a brain that always worked about nineteen chapters ahead of any other crime-investigator ever known.

As Harker said, he was the most impossible man to deal with clues that ever lived. Give him the best of these sometimes, and he would only seem to regard them as interesting trifles, of no value or importance.

His brain all the time would be meandering away, goodness knew where, and then suddenly out he would come with some extraordinary assumption, as ridiculous as it was mystified, so one would think. Yet, all the same, one could bet one's best pair of patent-leathers that Blake was going to be right in the end.

And it was just this way now.

"Yes; before night, I reckon, I'm going to hear all about these precious emeralds," he told himself once again, "and about this crib that has got to be cracked, and how I've got to set about it. Slimer has got his orders at last. At least, I think so. We shall see."

And Sexton Blake was right. That evening, after Bill Ferris had "blown in," and a bottle of cheap bubbly had been opened to celebrate a profitable day "over the sticks," Slimer suddenly pushed aside his glass.

Fixing Blake with his greenish eyes, he fished for a moment in his waistcoat pocket and produced a folded slip of tracing paper, as it looked.

"Plesher, ol' sport, see this?" he asked, with a prodigious wink. "It's come—come at last. You know; them emeralds we was talking to you about."

Blake feigned a start and a surly glare as of one who has been living wittingly in a fool's paradise and now sees his days of dreaming drawing to an end.

U.J.—No. 861.

"Well," he said. "What about 'em?"

"We've got our papers, that's all. The guv' has sent 'em!"

"Sent 'em, how?" demanded Blake.

Slimer, in fact, was already tapping his long nose in whimsical derision.

"By a little bird, of course," he laughed. "How else does 'e send 'em ever? Anyhow, 'ere they are, and if you take the job on—which, of course, you will—why, there's a 'undred quid for your share this time, and all found."

"A hundred quid!" echoed Blake, as if this put a different complexion on the case. Slimer was quick to catch at the change of tone. He had Blake's glass filled again like winking. His dupe pretended to make one last futile stand again falling back into his old life of crime. Then he succumbed.

Slimer and Ferris were overjoyed. They toasted their companion for a true "sport." The plans of the crib were pushed into his hands, and Blake hastened to run a more professional eye over them.

Even now the name of the house he was to burgle had not been revealed to him. But as Blake had told Tinker, there were not so many private collections of emeralds in the world worth nearly a quarter of a million.

He knew only of one, in fact. This, valued nowadays at over two hundred thousand pounds, belonged to Sir Jasper Clyde, a multi-millionaire shipowner with a town house in Brabazon Street, Mayfair.

A smart man of business, he had been the first to spot the rise in favour and value of the little green stones, and had bought well and wisely. But his wisdom had not extended yet to housing his collection for safe custody in a bank or safe deposit.

When the plans were passed into Blake's hands, therefore, he was wondering whether Sir Jasper's was the crib that had been marked for cracking.

He had been in the house twice in his life on business, which was once more than was necessary for him to memorise the general run of the ground-floor, at any rate.

And, sure enough, the moment he glanced at the sketch he knew that his anticipations were realised.

Here was the Brabazon Street entrance, with its heavy, ugly portico, and here the mews at the back, leading out into Curzon Street.

"Well," continued Slimer, "I can't tell yer where the crib is or what it is, 'cause I sha'n't know myself till to-morrow. But, meantime, what d'yer think of it?"

"Here's the guv's notes about it. Reckon it's a London 'ouse by the sound of it, and he must have stopped inside for a week from all he knows. A bloomin' guest, I shouldn't wonder. Ah, he's a deep 'un, is the guv'!" And Slimer gave an admiring chuckle.

Meantime, Blake was pondering the sketch deeply. By-and-by he turned to the master-thief's notes. These were printed in block-hand, and in an ink which Blake suspected would be faded completely in forty-eight hours.

They gave more than mere suggestions how the place might be entered. Each instruction was a positive command, set down with a clarity which showed that the author was indeed a man of parts.

The house was to be broken into at 1.30 a.m. on the night of the 15th, giving Blake only two days' grace. The point of entrance was to be the window immediately above the portico, which could be gained easily enough by aid of the stack-pipe, and higher up by an ornamental trellis-work.

The latter, Blake knew, the police had

already remarked on to the owner, as a gratuitous temptation to a house-breaker.

However, Sir Jasper was one of the stubborn kind. All his windows were guarded, he retorted, with special burglar alarms.

Beyond this, any burglar who tried to break into his place would get a bullet through him promptly. That was his retort, and one to be remembered by Blake now.

However, the exact description of the burglar-alarm, and the safe way of silencing it, was duly set down by the author of the notes.

Following the plan, the cracksmen had only to navigate a first-floor passage, descend the staircase, and force the library door.

Through the library was a second door, armed with a formidable lock. This led to an inner closet, where was the jewel safe, two-thirds embedded in the wall.

It was the most up-to-date fire and burglar-proof safe which money could buy, and for this reason, no doubt, the "job" had been reserved until a cracksmen of Plesher's skill was at liberty to attend to it.

A special blowpipe was the only tool which could hope to force it. This, with all necessary implements, would be delivered through Slimer in the morning. Not until then would the exact address be divulged.

"So that's all right, then?" ventured Slimer hopefully, when Blake had laid the notes down at last.

"Oh, yes! All right, I suppose, so far as these things goes," replied Blake carelessly. "Nothing difficult—nothing easy, like. Just the ordinary. A blanket over the side-window to hush the light of the jet, and it's going to be something extra special in the way of safes if I don't have it cut in chunks inside of ten minutes from the word 'go.'"

"I believe you!" said Slimer admiringly. "There never was a 'un like you at the jet—and well the guv knows it!"

"Which is why he offers me a hundred sovereigns, and pouches the other hundred and ninety-nine thousand nine hundred for himself, I s'pose?" laughed Blake bitterly.

He noticed that Slimer had collected the notes and plan again, and put them back in his own pocket. But Blake, like a craftsman who is above such trifles, made no demur.

An hour later, after many yawns, Blake suggested that the place for him was bed, and up he went.

Hitherto he had made no objection to having the key turned upon him each night, making him a prisoner until his landlord was on the move again in the early morning.

But to-night he had other designs. He had already taken note of his room locks, which were of the ordinary box-pattern, but fixed on the outer side of the door, a fact suspicious in itself.

Being of ordinary stock type, Blake did not need to unscrew them to understand their mechanism.

He not only understood these locks in question, but he had a very simple dodge by which, though the key might be turned, the bolt would remain unshot. It only took a minute to fix it, and then Blake went to bed.

But, so far from undressing, he rather added to his attire in the shape of pulling on his spare prison socks over his boots.

By-the-by, after he had been snoring deeply as usual for some twenty minutes or more, he heard the customary footsteps come creeping up first one stair, then the other. Each doorky scraped in turn, the footsteps padded away into silence, and the House of 'Obby gave itself up to slumber.

All except Blake. He allowed his guardians half an hour's grace, then quietly rose, and with no more noise than a mouse opened the door leading to 'Obby's side of the premises, and descended.

Having already marked carefully every tread in the stairs which creaked, he was able to reach the front door at last with a stealth which even the real Plesher could not have surpassed. He was a little bit anxious in case his hosts had resolved to remove the outer key for his further safe custody, but luckily they had not.

A couple of minutes later saw him in Farringdon Road, the hour being then ten minutes past one on a cold and frosty morning.

collection. I've anticipated that he might be the victim from the first."

"And you think that's good enough for anyone to go upon?" protested Harker, still unconvinced.

"Think, man! What the dickens do you mean? Have you ever known me let down your precious Yard by talking through my hat? I say you can get busy on what I've told you, and that should be enough. It's Sir Jasper's jewels that they're after, and you're going round with me to apprise him of the fact now."

"Me! At this hour? I'll see you faster first! You're mad! He'd scalp us alive!"

"Fudge!" was Blake's contemptuous

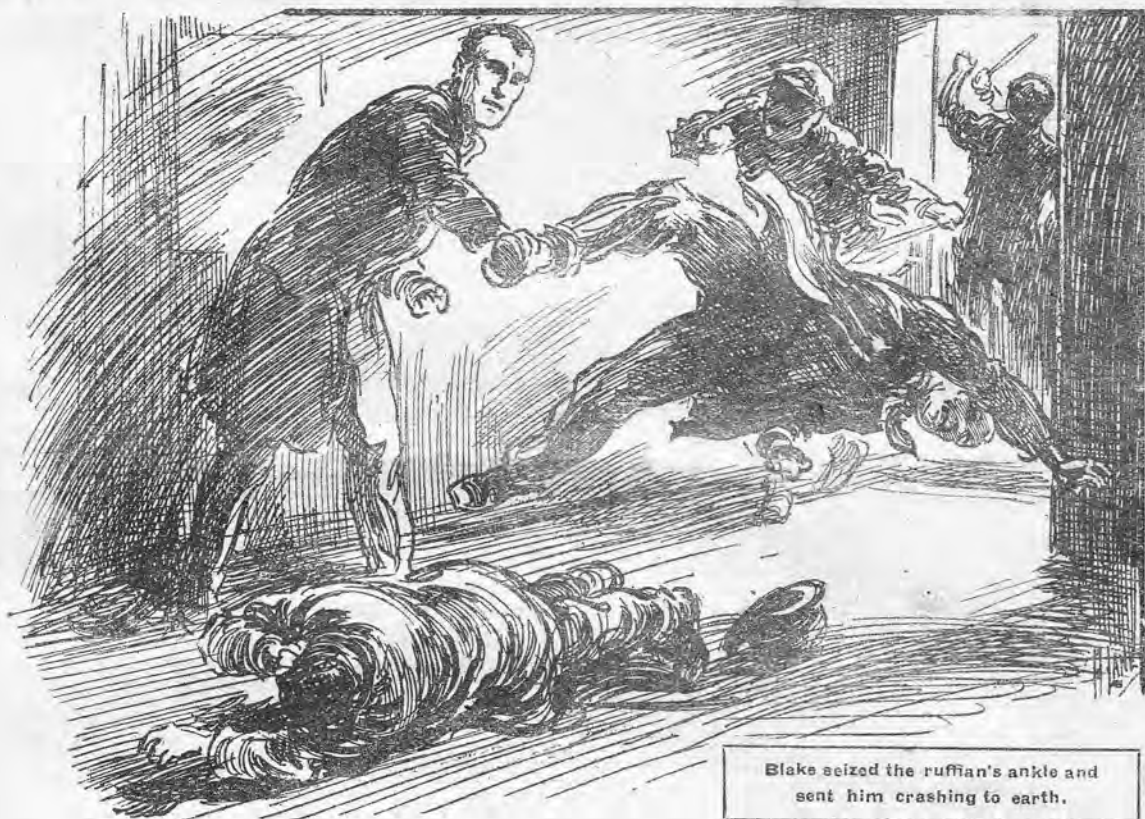
'emeralds!' " continued Blake, smiling patiently, while Tinker went off into another guffaw. "Emeralds! Your collection. We have every reason to believe that they are going to be stolen."

"What!" whooped the phantom voice. "By whom?"

"Well, by me, if you want to know!" was Blake's matter-of-fact reply. "That is why I wanted to come down and chat things over with you. How was I going to do it?"

"Thundering Jupites! You steal my emeralds! Are you mad or drunk or what?" yapped the receiver at this amazing pronouncement.

"Well, a little bit mad, both of us, trying to discuss a private matter like this



Blake seized the ruffian's ankle and sent him crashing to earth.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER. A Strange Proposition.

TO expect to find a taxi prowling here at that hour was out of the question. Blake made for Fleet Street, and there, by a stroke of luck, was able to hale a driver westward bound. A quarter of an hour later he was at Scotland Yard, and both Harker and Tinker were being hailed out of their beds to be fetched down in cars to meet him.

"Well," said Blake, greeting them. "Sorry to worry you at this unbecomable hour, but things have begun to move. I've got my orders, and the crib is to be cracked precisely at one-thirty on the morning of the day after tomorrow!"

"Phew! Sharp work! And where?" demanded Harker.

"Don't know officially yet, but from the plan of the premises it's Sir Jasper Clyde's place, in Brabazon Street."

"Phew!" whistled Harker again. "That's a pity! You can't say for certain, then?"

"Oh, yes, or I shouldn't be here!" replied Blake shortly. "I know Sir Jasper; know his house and his gem

reply to this. "Let's have the Telephone Directory."

Blake put in the call. At last Sir Jasper's own voice was heard roaring into the receiver like a raging bull.

"All right! One moment, and I'll tell you. Give me a chance. This is Scotland Yard speaking," replied Blake patiently.

But Harker, who evidently knew the irascible Sir Jasper, protested against this in a sharp whisper.

"No. It isn't the Yard speaking at all! Don't drag us into it!"

"All right, you ass, shut up!" retorted the detective. Then, as a blast of fury resulted from the other end of the wire, he hastened to explain. "No, Sir Jasper, I didn't mean you to shut up—only a gentleman here who keeps interrupting."

"It's Sexton Blake speaking—from Scotland Yard," continued the detective, correcting himself. "Yes; quite so! I know it's a bit late to be ringing you up like this, and I apologise. But it's about your emeralds."

"No; not Emmy Reynolds!" he hastened to correct the baronet, whose voice, yelping into the receiver, could be heard all over the room. "I said

over the telephone, don't you think?" was Blake's imperturbable reply. "Do you care whether your emeralds are stolen or not?"

"Care! Of course I do!"

"Very well! Get up and put your clothes on, and I'll be round in ten minutes to discuss it—see? Sorry to be in such a hurry, but it's urgent!"

Still leaving the diaphragm of the instrument shrilling and buzzing to the stream of Sir Jasper's wrath, Blake led the way down to a waiting police-car. Ten minutes later, having told the chauffeur to wait for them at Hyde Park Corner, Harker and he arrived at the millionaire's house in Brabazon Street. A light in the smoke-room showed that Sir Jasper, at any rate, had acted on Blake's advice.

"He's probably waiting for us with a blunderbuss," was Harker's encouraging prophecy. At the first pressure of the bell, the door was opened by the baronet himself.

"Well, that's sensible!" was Blake's prompt and blunt remark. "No one else up except yourself, I hope, Sir Jasper? If so, please send them to bed."

"Me send them! You keep your dashed orders to yourself!" exploded their host, who was plainly still in a very bad temper. "Who are you, anyhow? I've only heard your voice on a telephone, and from that should judge that you are a raving lunatic. Don't dare to put your foot over the doorstep till I've had a good look at you!"

"Certainly!" assented Blake, with perfect calm. "I have told you my name, and, as your business guest here on two occasions, you ought to recognise me. How I come to be in this garb, and who my friend here is, we will reserve for some place where we can talk more privately, if you don't mind."

There was some excuse for the baronet wanting to make sure who he was admitting to the house at this hour. Blake was in his Kingsmoor civvies, not the latest Bond Street cut, while Harker, of course, was also in mufti.

The latter, however, had the presence of mind to show his official identity-card as a C.I.D. officer, and at sight of this Sir Jasper made way for them to enter, though still exhibiting a revolver ostentatiously.

"Now then," he snapped, as they stepped within the handsome library and the door was shut behind them. "What's this about my emeralds?"

"I told you, sir, that there was a plot to steal them," said Blake.

"Yes; and that you were to do the 'thieving yourself'!" snorted the baronet. "I ask again, are you drunk, sir, or is this some infernal practical joke?"

"Not at all. Harker, here, of the C.I.D., will satisfy you as to my bonafides whenever you like. But I suggest that you should save time by accepting my word that I am going to burgle your emeralds, and on the night after to-morrow, at 1.15 a.m., to be precise."

"But confound your dashed impudence!" spluttered Sir Jasper. But Blake, with that peculiarly authoritative way of his, managed to stay him.

"Time, sir, is valuable—worth almost as much as your gems, in fact," he said smoothly. "If you will allow me to explain, I will do so in as few words as possible. Your emeralds, it seems, have been marked down to be stolen, and one reason I am burgling them myself is to ensure that you do not lose them. But mainly it is Scotland Yard's hope thereby to make a very healthy haul of astute and dangerous criminals."

"And yours, too," Harker reminded him testily.

"Why, yes, I suppose it is mine, too," added Blake provokingly. "But I am not quite so optimistic, perhaps, as you gentlemen of the dark blue with silver buttons."

"You're not?" blurted Harker, wondering what Blake could mean by this.

But the private detective was already pursuing his explanation. The story did not take long, fortunately for their host, who was verging on apoplexy all the time.

"My safe! That I paid two thousand pounds for! You mean to have the impudence to tell me that you are going to melt chunks out of it with your infernal blow-pipe, and then walk out with my emeralds—my emeralds!—while I stand quietly and let you? I tell you, sir, you may be Sexton Blake!"

But here again the detective stayed him with a quiet wave of his hand.

"I am Sexton Blake, sir, and that is the very adequate reason why you should leave the whole affair to me," he said serenely. "I do not propose to melt chunks out of your safe—that is, unless you prefer it. I shall merely present myself in your house the night after

to-morrow, at the hour stated, via the stack-pipe and the portico window, as laid down in my instructions.

"I must ask, sir, as a condition, that no one in the house shall hear one breath as to my intentions; but if you yourself care to sit up—though in the dark, please—to observe my actions, I shall be delighted. I can then borrow from you the safe key. At one forty-three minutes precisely I shall have the honour to wish you good-night, and shall then retire by the front door."

"With my property! And what then pray?"

"My instructions from the gentleman planning this burglary are to hand the jewels over to a very efficient, though not too scrupulous person—one Slimer."

"A real thief?"

"Precisely! It will then be Scotland Yard's privilege to undertake the safe watching of this person to see to whom he hands them next."

"Here, oh, I say!" protested Harker, who had rather that Sexton Blake should not dissociate himself so entirely from this phase of the case, as he was doing.

But in a very few words Blake reminded him that it was absolutely essential that someone should bridge this gap for him, while he changed out of his Plesherian disguise, and so could take up the later stages of the chase.

"But what about your lad Tinker?" demanded Harker, rather sharelessly.

"Lad Tinker!" exploded the owner of the gems. "You have the impudence to suggest that a more lad—"

However, time was getting on. Blake had to be back in his Saffron Hill lodging before daylight certainly. He intervened once more.

And so it was fixed. An hour later found him back safely in his own bed, highly amused, as one would have seen had the room not been in pitchy darkness still.

Mr. 'Obby, overhead, had not so much as heard a creak. But Blake had ghosted back as silently as he had set out.

But dawn was already paling the chimney-pots. In half an hour his landlord was afoot. Blake heard him stealthily turn the key of the room as he descended to light the kitchen fire. Only then did he turn over on his pillow and fall fast asleep.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

The Burglary.

NEVERTHELESS, Blake was up betimes. Slimer, he noticed, had already breakfasted, nor was Bill Ferris to be seen. Mr. 'Obby even seemed less solicitous than usual as to his movements.

The detective, in fact, believed that if he had chosen to walk out of the door now, he might have done so unaccompanied.

But he didn't. He sat, pulling at an old clay pipe, reading a day-before-yesterday's "Mirror." He found it slow work.

However, Slimer appeared at last.

"Hallo!" he said, not particularly flurried, Blake noticed, at finding him cooling his heels alone. "Been out yet?"

"No. Why?"

"Oh, fine morning! I only thought you might," was Slimer's rather unexpected remark. Whereupon, with a mumbled excuse, he went through and down the basement stairs, in search of 'Obby, he said.

Even then it was a good hour before he reappeared again, and still he wore the same sneaky look, as if wondering to find Blake still there sprawling in a greasy easy-chair, the stuffing of which

had fallen through the seat and rested in a luxurious pile upon the floor.

"Got your kit of tools," he vouchsafed at last, producing a pigskin wallet, containing a range of the finest jemmies and blades which even Sexton Blake had seen for many a day.

Truly, this master-thief of Pinston's was a man who went the whole hog in the matter both of expense and pains, he realised.

"Well, they're the right stuff," he admitted, a trifle more enthusiastically than had been his wont. "And now, what's the 'ouse? Where's the crib?"

"Sir Jasper Clyde's, 123a, Brabazon Street, Mayfair—where the nob's live."

"Mayfair!" echoed Blake sharply, as if this was the last place he was thinking of.

"What! You'd rather it 'ad been out of the smoke? Pah! What's the odds?" demanded Slimer, anxious that there should be no hitches now.

"Oh, no odds! I'll 'ave to slip down and look at the place, though. Are yer game to-night?"

Slimer was, if he liked. They would have to be cautious, however. No larks. Slimer had a very healthy regard for his own skin in these matters, Blake noticed.

"I reckon we'd better be fixing up the place where I'm to meet you and palm the swag," he suggested.

Here, again, Slimer seemed anxious to make it as far from the scene of crime as possible. He thought at the bottom of Curzon Street, where it runs into Park Lane, would be a good place.

If Blake were being followed it would give him all Hyde Park in one direction and the purlieus of Shepherd's Market in the other to twist and turn in.

"Followed! What, on a cushy job like this!" sneered Blake. Still, Curzon Street would serve all right for him.

That evening, after tea, Blake raised again the subject of a visit to the scene of to-morrow night's adventure. Slimer consented, but it was evident that only a strong sense of duty made him agree.

They set out, taking a 'bus to Marble Arch, and so down Park Lane to the turning into Curzon Street. Here the exact spot where Blake was to meet Slimer and hand over the stolen emeralds was settled.

"And about the dibs?" demanded Blake, who had been told by the real Plesher to demand ready cash.

"The dibs'll be all right if the green sparks are. But we've got to see that they ain't sham 'uns first."

"Sham 'uns! What d'yer mean? Sham or real, I'll have cracked the crib and be entitled to my wage," retorted Blake hotly.

"Ah! All right, then. You were allus one to fight for a tight bargain. Jack, trust you," consented his companion sourly.

So that was settled. But go a step nearer the marked house Slimer would not. He was obviously itching to be away out of the neighbourhood as it was.

And when Blake suggested satirically that perhaps he would like to "run away home now to his mummie" to his surprise his confederate jumped at the chance. A moment later Blake was standing alone, watching Slimer's shabby figure scuffling away in the darkness.

Blake could hardly believe his luck. He did not stand staring for long, needless to say. Nor did he go near Brabazon Street.

Once sure that Slimer was not playing some game with him, he hurried up Curzon Street, doubled round a corner or two, and so struck through to Piccadilly, boarded a 'bus, and a few minutes

after was alighting at Trafalgar Square. From here to Scotland Yard was only a few moments' walk.

There was still much to be settled with Harker, of course. But now they knew exactly the spot where Blake was to relinquish charge of the stolen gems, it should be easy for Scotland Yard to shadow Slimmer until he, in turn, palmed them to someone else.

"You're bound to have two of you on the job," Blake told him.

"Two! I'll have twenty!" declared Harker fervently.

"Oh, all right; so long as you leave one ready to telephone here where I'm to find you. I shan't be long getting into a new disguise, and then I'll take up the scent again."

The sooner Blake arranged this the better, Harker thought devoutly. Two hundred thousand pounds' worth of emeralds was some responsibility, even for the shoulders of the C.I.D., particularly when they bullied the owner into letting them be burgled.

"That's what I'm thinking about," explained Harker dismally. "I mean it isn't like a regular burglary, where some silly ass comes in and simply says 'they're gone,' and he would be very much obliged if you could get them back for him."

"No; exactly. The more reason for you keeping your eyes skinned and never losing sight of them," Blake warned him drily.

"And Tinker? Where does he come in?" enquired Harker.

"I told them to 'phone for him now. He'll come in—well, I haven't yet made up my mind quite," broke off Blake with provoking vagueness. "But he'll come in somewhere, I expect."

Nor was Harker able to gather anything more definite than this when Blake's youthful assistant did arrive. Whatever the private detective's instructions were to him he reserved them till after they had got outside.

Tinker, after he had heard them, was as mystified and indignant as Harker.

He was to wait at Scotland Yard, merely, and see that the code telegram to be despatched to the Governor of Kingsmoor Prison, giving authority for the real Flesher's release, was duly sent off. But this was not to be sent until Blake himself had 'phoned the "All clear."

The written-out wire Blake handed him now. This simple duty concluded, Tinker was to await Blake's orders as to the next move.

He bade his assistant "Good-night," and back he went to his lodging again. Slimmer was there awaiting him.

"Well? All right, I suppose. You had a squint at the place?"

"Oh, yes. It's easy enough," answered Blake, with a yawn. "As I said, if you're around at that corner sharp at 1.40 a.m. the stones will be ready for you. Meantime, I'm off to bed. So-long!"

"Well, good luck!" breathed Slimmer that night at the Piccadilly end of Park Lane a quarter of an hour after the clock had chimed the ghostly hour of one. "One-forty you said. You'll find me there. Good luck again!"

Blake moved on. He was looking for signs of a policeman, quite prepared to find that Harker had overlooked this important item of warning the constable on the beat to keep clear.

However, no policeman was to be seen ghosting along on his lonely beat.

Sir Jasper's house, with its heavy, ugly portico, drew in view. Blake meant to keep exactly to the scheduled hour of his instructions before he advanced to

his attack. There was no knowing but what somebody might be watching him, after all. Still, he did not really anticipate this.

Considering the magnitude of the responsibility he was taking on his shoulders, he was in rare care-free mood. Anyone might think it was only two pennyworth of bullseyes that he was going to relieve his unwilling host of.

Sir Jasper, he saw, had fallen in with his plan, so far as having the whole house in darkness was concerned. Not a glimmer was to be seen.

Ting—tang! rang a chiming stable-clock just then from some back-mews. The hour had come.

Blake slid stealthily along to Sir Jasper's front door steps, gained the railing by aid of the mudscraper, and gripped the stack-pipe.

With sure hold he swung off and began to climb. Six feet only and he had the ornamental trellis to assist him. In a minute or less he was on top of the portico.

Here he had to beware of one hidden wire of the house burglar-alarm. He had arranged for this to be switched off by his host, but it was as well to run no risks.

A knife slipped between the window-sashes engaged the hasp of the catch without springing any bell that he could hear. Inch by inch, smoothly he raised the lower half and stepped inside.

From here to the library below was plane-sailing. Blake closed the window behind him and descended. The room-door was unlocked. He paused on the threshold, peering in. All was pitchy dark.

Suddenly something blunt and heavy, rammed itself sharply against his cheekbone. It was a revolver muzzle, as he felt by the icy ring pressed into his flesh. Yet he did not move.

"Who's that?" challenged a rasping voice in a whisper.

"Sexton Blake. That you, Sir Jasper?" whispered the detective in reply.

"Yes, confound it!" growled the other, and the pistol-barrel was withdrawn.

"So you've really come, then?"

"Why, yes. You didn't think I was only joking?"

"Me? I don't know," came back an answering snarl, and then: "Where do you want to go now? You say we mustn't strike a light?"

"Not a glimpse," replied Blake. "But don't you worry. I can feel my way."

"You can? That's more than I can—and in my own house, too. I've been sitting here on this fool's game till I'm fed to the teeth. Even now I've a precious good mind to stop the silly bosh and give you in charge!" grumbled the millionaire under his breath.

"But as it is you'll give me a cigar instead, and see it through like a sportsman," said Blake, in a laughing whisper. "Just wait till I mask this window, though, before we light up."

It was surely the queerest burglary that ever was perpetrated, with the thief borrowing the safe key from his victim and coolly pocketing the swag, after making sure that these were the real stones actually, and that the owner had not tried to hedge with imitations.

But the baronet had passed his word on that. After all, if the two hundred thousand pounds' worth did go "phut," the ratepayers would have to see him compensated if the insurance companies would not.

Blake thought it quite likely. He chuckled to think what Harker would be feeling like now. Also old Pinston at Kingsmoor. They had hatched the plot between them, not he.

"And now—you don't mind my ask-

ing?" said the owner satirically—"but what is the next caper after you leave here? You hand my property over to another man, who is a genuine criminal, you say? And what after that, pray?"

"As I told you, Scotland Yard takes over the responsibility of the next immediate stage. Then I carry on as soon as I can."

"And the idea again exactly?"

"Why, it's an attempt to put salt on the tail of one of those rare birds—so rare that they are almost mythical, in fact—called master-thieves."

"You don't believe in their existence, you mean?"

"Oh, far from that; I do!" was the provoking reply. "I think that there is a master-mind of a very high grade of cunning and villainy at work on your emeralds, for instance. But—"

"But what?" insisted the other.

"That ass Sharker, or Shirkor, that was with you the other night was babbling something about the man being found to be living in Park Lane here; driving umpteen motors, and crunching diamonds spread on bread-and-butter with his tea. Do you yourself really believe that tommyrot?" he spluttered angrily.

"Well, I don't know," laughed Blake. "Harker is not the only crime expert who is sitting up goggle-eyed to-night hoping that that theory will prove true. I have less ambitious views myself."

"Oh, you have, have you?" snorted Sir Jasper. "Well, all I can say is that I consider the whole affair an impudent assault, for which I shall make somebody pay if ever your crack-brained plans go wrong."

"Oh, certainly!" agreed Blake politely. "What's more, I have a feeling that they will go wrong," he added, making the baronet nearly bounce up to the ceiling.

"What? You have the cheek to tell me that! My emeralds! And you think you may lose them, after all?"

"I didn't say 'I,'" the detective reminded him. "Please do remember that I am not single-handed on this job. That it isn't my scheme at all really, but Scotland Yard's. I cannot be answerable for other people, of course."

"Then look here!" commanded Sir Jasper, grabbing his revolver again and pointing it full in Blake's face. "I'll have no more of this tosh! They're my gems. I'll see you in Heligoland before I let you take them and play the owl with them! Give them up—do you hear?—or I'll raise the house! I'll open the window and bawl blue murder! I'll plug a bullet into you, as sure as my name's Clyde, if you don't give them up here and now!"

Blake was quite alarmed. His host was obviously serious. His hand was already on the bell-push. In another second the whole house would be roused, and all his patient work of many days knocked on the head.

"Now, steady, please!" he remonstrated. "Don't go back on your word now, Sir Jasper, and leave us all in the lurch. I'm really serious. I can't be going to give you back your emeralds, even if you do blow holes in me. But I'll tell you what I will do. If they're lost by any chance, I'll see you get the very fullest value back, and foot up an extra thousand pounds out of my own banking account besides."

Sir Jasper glared hard at him for a moment.

"You really mean that?" he demanded.

"Of course I do!" replied the detective. "Then all right. I don't want your thousand pounds."

"Well, as a side bet, then," suggested Blake, laughing—"a thousand to five

hundred that I land the emeralds all back here complete and without a chip. Will you take it?"

The millionaire scowled a moment. "All right," he said. "If you want it I will. It may make you a bit more careful, perhaps."

He tossed his weapon back on to the sofa again, and sat down to another whisky-and-soda.

"How about the time?" he suggested at last.

"Time to be going almost," agreed Blake, buttoning up the pocket containing the jewels and preparing to go. The slight glimmer of light which they had been allowing themselves out of Blake's pocket-torch was extinguished. He rose to leave—but by the front door this time.

"Well, good-night, Sir Jasper, and many thanks!" said Blake cordially in farewell.

"And good-night to you! And dash me if you haven't left me feeling more jumpy and scared than if I had been tackling ten real burglars instead of you only," confessed his host. "But I'll be sitting up a bit longer to hear that you've caught the blackguards."

"You will? Well, I shouldn't if I were you," said the detective. "You will hear nothing to-night—at any rate, nothing to soothe you. But to-morrow at breakfast I'll see you get a wire."

"To say that this precious master-thief is lagged?"

"Oh, yes, he'll be lagged right enough—you can leave that to me!" laughed Blake, with a provoking assurance which only left Sir Jasper more bewildered and anxious than ever.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

Harker Loses His Temper.

"WELL, got 'em?" came the anxious whisper, as Slimer's shambling figure suddenly slipped from the shadow of a Curzon Street doorway and fell into stride beside Blake.

Blake was punctual to the tick. They went hurrying down the chill, deserted street, turning into Park Lane and up towards the Marble Arch.

"Yes, I've got 'em. Have you got the dibs?"

"Yes, Bradburys—a hundred quid. Hand over your lot, and you can take mine. This ain't the road I want to go, anyway."

Blake had had the notion that it wasn't, hence his reason for taking it.

Harker and his men should be waiting, watching them from somewhere here. He wanted to give Scotland Yard every possible chance.

He held out the wallet full of gems, and took the thick wad of notes in exchange. Slimer opened one of the jewel-cases inside and caught the green, baleful glimmer of the gems.

"No kid? They are the real stuff—eh?" he asked hoarsely.

"The real stuff. No paste about them," Blake assured him.

"Then s'long, and see you at 'Obbys to-morrow, maybe. It all depends. But leave word with 'im if you have to shift. See?"

Blake nodded. And, with another nervous "Good-night!" Slimer turned about and hurried away as fast as his legs could carry him short of an actual run.

There was no kindly inquiry, Blake noticed, to know whether the job had been difficult or not. Slimer's only thought was for himself and his own skin.

When he was only thirty or forty yards on his way, however, he did hesitate as U.J.—No. 861.

if to turn back. Or it was to see, perhaps, if Blake was still watching him. The detective was, of course. Whereupon Slimer waved his hand and went on his road again.

When he was just on the point of fading entirely into the mist spreading from Hyde Park across the road, sure enough two figures appeared stealthily slinking along the railings to take up the chase.

So Scotland Yard had taken up the trail. Blake merely saw them appear, and then he turned on his heel and made off briskly in the opposite direction.

When he, too, judged himself to be far enough from the rendezvous to be also hidden by the mist he darted across the road and came stealing like a shadow back to where the place of parting had been. Here he took cover.

A matter of five or ten minutes must have passed, and still nothing had happened. From the direction of Piccadilly a belated private car appeared and passed, but there was nothing in that.

Blake, nevertheless, sensed that some interesting development which he had half-foreseen was about to disclose itself.

Sure enough the merest clink of sound suddenly broke the brooding stillness, like the jarring of metal on stone. Blake was alert, his eyes were nearly starting out of his head with tense excitement. Just within the gate of a tall mansion opposite a faint line of black seemed to have appeared in the flag-walk leading to the door.

It might be merely an optical illusion, yet Blake was pretty certain it had not been there before.

It was the merest line of shadow, except that it seemed to expand a little as the moments dragged on.

Blake hugged the cover of the tree he was hiding behind, as if his life depended on it.

At last, after an interminable time, the narrow black line elevated itself suddenly into a circle. Then a second blot appeared against the grey, glimmering stones. It was a man's head. It began to move vigorously.

It was somebody's coal-plate that had been lifted. A man had been inside down in the cellar. Now, having reconnoitred the coast and found all clear, he was wriggling his way out.

Blake almost laughed aloud. There was no need to ask whether this apparition had any connection with the slim Slimer or not. It was exactly hereabouts that Blake had marked him turn and look back, then wave his hand before proceeding on again.

The detective knew now what that wave of the hand had meant. Slimer had been astute enough to have a confederate posted within forty yards actually, ready for the first palming of the stolen swag.

And now, oblivious of this, Harker and his twenty 'tees were shadowing Slimer whithersoever he cared to lead them. Blake, who had all along suspected some such cunning move, could have exploded at the thought of it.

Meantime, the fellow opposite had wriggled himself out of the orifice of his hiding-place, replaced the coal-plate deftly, and was now hurrying off, also in the direction which Slimer had taken.

Needless to say, Blake was on his tracks with an alacrity and stealth which he had never surpassed in all his career as a sleuth.

Nor was it often that such an enormous prize was at stake, carried in the pockets of a single thief. Moreover, Blake himself had a side-bet of a thousand pounds of his own on the successful issue of this job.

At Hyde Park Corner the man took the road through Green Park, passing

by the Wellington Barracks. From here he turned down to St. James's Park station, and so across Victoria Street.

Who the fellow was Blake dared not draw close enough to see, of course, but he was prepared to swallow his hat if it was not Slimer's one-and-only pal, the faithful Bill Ferris.

It was Bill's walk, and Bill's way of venting his hat. It could only be Bill, in fact, if all Blake's theories were going to prove true.

And this they looked like doing. Blake's chuckles were increasing with every yard. The amiable Bill turned into a certain square in a rather tarnished, but still genteel corner of Belgravia, and there had to pull up for a moment to catch his breath from a wracking fit of coughing, which mysteriously attacked him just then.

It lasted for a full minute, and left him shaken, holding to the railings. By-and-by, however, he pursued his way on, but in what further direction Blake did not bother to satisfy himself.

The detective had taken close cover again, and set himself for another long vigil.

As it turned out, he had not so long to wait, after all. For a fresh figure soon appeared from the door of the house where Bill had paused. With never a glance right or left, the man came out and on.

For a moment Blake's heart was in his mouth, for the course he was shaping must bring him straight past the very corner where he was flattened against the wall.

The detective's luck was in, however. The man turned down a side-street, walking with cool and steady stride, heading in the direction of Horsemonger Lane and Westminster, Blake reckoned.

For, with that peculiar perverseness which made him the most baffling enigma to all his contemporaries in crime detection, the detective did not follow. Indeed, all his tense interest of the last half hour seemed suddenly to have vanished.

Turning about in his tracks, he made back at quite a leisurely gait to Victoria Street again. At the adjacent police-station he stepped in and tendered his card. He was well-known here in all disguises, so there was no fuss. A moment later he was on the private wire to Scotland Yard.

He asked for his assistant, Tinker.

"Great Scott, guv'nor, is that you?" came Tinker's answering excited hail, as soon as he could grab the 'phone. "I say, but the fat's in the fire here. There's been an awful smash-up!"

"Smash-up? What do you mean?" "Oh, Harker's come tearing in! He's like a lunatic. They've lost all track of the swag—muddled it properly."

"Lost track? Not of my man, surely? Why, I saw them start after him!" declared Blake, with pretended alarm, for it was taking him all his time to keep a straight face at his end of the 'phone.

"Oh, yes; they started all right. It's the finish. And all the time I might have been given the job myself, and seen it through properly," protested Tinker indignantly.

"Would you? I don't know so much," replied his chief. "Anyhow, give me the whole news. They've lost their man, you say?"

"Well, yes, they seem to have, but it's more than your life is worth to try and get anything out of Harker. He's simply raving for news of you. Wants to know where the dickens you've been to that you're not here to help? Says it's all your fault, in fact."

"Does he?" echoed Blake ominously. "Well, you tell him from me not to go

off again till I've seen him! I'm coming along now. And meantime, Tinker, just send off that wire I gave you to the Governor, Kingsmoor Prison, authorising Plesher's release. Tell Harker to make an 'official priority' of it. Get that done at once, before I arrive."

The divisional surgeon's car happened to be at the police-station door. Blake borrowed it. In three minutes he was at headquarters.

Harker was there, pale with rage, and shaking with fright that the emeralds were lost beyond recall.

"Well, you're a nice one. Where have you been to?" he snapped, as soon as the private detective appeared. "I thought I arranged with you that you would slip off and change, and then get back here at once, to take full charge of this infernal case. What have you been up to all this time?"

Blake looked at him drily. "Steady, my friend. You're forgetting yourself. You're not talking to one of your subordinates now. Besides, it sounds as if you were a bit panicked by your tone. I'm expecting Sir Jasper to ring you up every minute. It won't do for him to suspect that. So pull yourself together."

"Sir Jasper!" gasped Harker in horror. "Great scissors, I hope he won't. The fact is—fact is—"

He stammered and stuck, eyeing his rival as if he could eat him.

"Fact is what?" demanded Blake inexorably. "Tinker has already told me some yarn about your having lost track of the chase already, but, of course, I didn't believe it."

"You didn't? Well, you can, then!" spluttered Harker. "We have lost track of the things. He's absolutely right."

"You don't mean it!" ejaculated Blake, after a long-drawn whistle of simulated surprise. "Why, it was all so absolutely simple, I can't see how you could make a mull of it. I saw you start after the man yourself!"

Harker looked like having a fit. However, the story had to be told. Harker himself, with another officer, had set out to trail the wily Slimer after his parting from Blake.

Whether the rogue knew that he was being shadowed it was impossible to say, but in the light of after events there was small doubt he did.

Here, there, and everywhere, he seemed to have led the two sleuth-hounds of the law on their wildgoose chase, doubling back into the byways and back mews of Mayfair again, and taking half an hour before he made east as far as Regent Street only. Thence he had dived into Soho, giving the two officers the chase of their lives in their efforts to keep touch with him.

"But he never met a soul to pass the swag to, that we'll swear," insisted Harker roundly. "There was never a lapse longer than five seconds when we hadn't him in view, even among all those rotten slums, so he must have had the stuff on him all the time."

"And yet he hadn't when you collared him?" suggested Blake.

"We never collared him. That's the point!" choked Blake.

"You didn't! Why, where did he get to?"

"A coffee-stall was the last place we saw him. The blighter stood there half an hour good, eating and drinking as cool as you please."

"And you watched him?"

"Not only him, but everybody else that got near the place, and came away. I had fifteen men up by this time on the job, and the whole corner was surrounded. Every man as he left the stall

was quietly intercepted round a turning and searched—"

"And detained? Not detained actually?" pressed Blake, scarcely able to keep a straight face.

"Yes—detained," confirmed Harker. "Thirty-two of them. Do you think we were going to take chances and not do so? We've got them locked up, and we're dashed well going to keep 'em so, till this infernal muddle is sifted."

"Phew!" whistled Blake.

"Oh, yes; go on! Laugh!" yelled Harker. "It's the time for fun, isn't it, with Sir Jasper likely to ring up every minute and ask us how we're getting on?"

"But we're not getting on! We haven't got past my friend Slimer eating 'doorsteps' and quaffing 'cups of thick' at a coffee-stall, and you and yours playing cat-and-banjo with all the population round about. Why didn't you collar him and search him?"

"We decided to, at last. I couldn't stick it any longer. But when we made for the brute it wasn't the man you described at all!"

"Not Slimer?"

Blake had exploded into a howl of laughter. The strain had been beyond

Blake, from the first, had pointed out the difficulties and dangers of such a scheme. But Harker, with all the resources of the Yard behind him, was cocksure.

"Well, did Tinker bring you that telegram I wanted sent off to the Governor of Kingsmoor Prison at once?" he asked next.

"He did. He brought it here, and I told him I'd see him in blazing first before I let it go!"

"What?" Blake was roused.

"I mean it!" was Harker's defiant reply. "I am not going to send that wire for you, and I'm not going to let the post-office send it, either. It's rank madness, seeing how things have gone with the affair. If I've had to detain thirty-three innocent people to-night, and got myself into a deuce of a hole doing it, I'm not going to let Plesher escape out of prison until this matter's sifted."

"You're not?" queried Blake dangerously. "You've dared to hold up my telegram, though it was a bargain you knew all about it, that Plesher was to be allowed to go the moment the burglary was committed, and the chase begun?"

"That's it! I've dared!" snapped Harker, pushing out his obstinate jaw.

"On whose authority?"

"My own! I'm not a fool!"

"But Plesher could have had nothing to do with the burglary. He is already detained far over his time, and is only sticking his extra dose of quod to help us!"

"I know. I don't care! But anybody who has had the remotest thing to do with it I am going to keep until these infernal emeralds are recovered again. Two hundred thousand pounds! Think of it! And we made Sir Jasper let them be stolen! Oh, my hat!"

Harker was plainly so rattled and incapable of reasoned action that Blake's anger melted in spite of himself.

"Now, look here," he said, more gently, "that telegram is going! It was a bargain I made with Plesher myself, and I am not going back on it for you or anyone else in the world!"

"His life actually may depend upon his release and safe departure from the country before the news gets out among the criminal world how he has played the mark."

"Well, what if it is? I've got myself to think about!" blurted Harker.

"All right! That's final, then? You won't send it?" said Blake, rising.

"No!"

"Then, good-night! I'll leave you!" said Blake.

"Leave me? Man alive!" protested the other, waking up. "You mean you would leave me in the lurch like this when here, all the time, I've been waiting for your advice?"

"Certainly, if you're going to cut up and be childish about it!" was the relentless reply. "When I take the trouble to make plans and give promises, even though it is to a convict only, I am not going to be thwarted. Good-night again!" And Blake walked right out, not of the office only, but the building itself.

Harker was after Blake like a bullet, but in vain. He argued, he pleaded and implored. But Blake, ignoring the poor man altogether, merely chatted with Tinker, whom he had brought along with him on his way out.

"Blake, don't be an ass! Listen!" babbled the Scotland Yard detective, trotting at his elbow. "I will send the telegram, if you like! There's no harm in it, after all, as I see! But you must come back and help us, for mercy's sake. You can't push off like this! Blake, listen!"

But Blake was adamant to the most.



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him. Harker was stamping up and down the room.

"Oh, that's it—that's it! Go on! Laugh! Shriek! Scream! After all, you're just as much in it as we are, and don't you forget it!" he snarled.

"Me!" quoth Blake. "We'll soon see about that when all this ridiculous story gets into the papers. I'll clear myself easily enough, never you fear, my lad!"

"Meantime, go on. I want to hear more," he added, falling to laughing again. "Did this fellow you ran to earth look like Slimer in any way? Was he a confederate, there to lead you off the scent?"

"I don't know! Don't ask me! He had much the same hat on, and a long coat, like the other; but he said he was a linotype compositor just going home from his job on the 'Daily Bulletin.' Threatens he's going to put his paper on to us, and make us smart. Oh, he's got us, right enough, if he's the wrong man, which he is!" groaned Harker.

"H'm!" grunted Blake, pitying him, though his notion of shadowing each man in turn to whom the emeralds might be palmed was Harker's own entirely.

object appeals. An empty taxi was just beginning to move away, then, on the other side of the street. He sent Tinker scuffling after it. Then, still ignoring the wiled Harker, he got in, and instructed the driver to drive to his rooms in Baker Street.

Tinker had been silent and secretly on the side of Harker during this rather agonising experience.

"If he said, at last, he would send the telegram, I don't see why you wanted to be so hard on the poor old owl!" he even went the length of telling his chief.

"Anyway, I'm not going to trust him!" announced Blake. "I'm not going to have Plesher kept in prison a minute longer than I think necessary! That was my bargain with him, and I am going down myself to see it kept!"

"Going all the way to Kingsmoor? You?" ejaculated Tinker, thinking him mad.

"Yes!"

"But that seems silly, doesn't it? What about the emeralds all the time you're away? You can see Harker has properly fumbled his nerve. He's no more good now than a sick cat!" pursued Tinker.

"I shall look after the emeralds!" was the quiet and cutting response. "You can leave that to me. But Harker is getting uppish again."

"What train are you thinking of going on?" asked Tinker.

"On no train!" was the laconic reply. "You are going to our rooms now to collect the rugs and my biggest motor-coat. I shall go to the garage and get out the car, and will then call round for you. And you can bring my revolver with you while you're at it. Also a couple of pairs of those new American handkerchiefs."

Tinker was so knocked sideways by this that he only sat and stared. Blake had to open the door and push him out, in fact, when the time came for them to separate.

His assistant was still like one walking in a dream, even when Blake had overhauled his biggest car, and run her round to where Tinker duly awaited him.

However, the youngster had the sense to ask no further questions then.

Huddled in rugs, for the night was perishing cold, they toiled swiftly through the deserted streets, leaving London at last by the Portsmouth Road.

Once clear of the houses, Tinker wanted to talk again. But Blake was still in difficult mood—or pretended to be.

It was a long, long night, and bitterly cold. Tinker fell into uneasy dozes a dozen times, but was always awakened by the acute aching of his frozen nose.

But Blake drove on, sitting like a statue, and apparently impervious to the elements.

Tinker awakened at last, to find the car had stopped.

"Great Scott! Why, where are we?" he demanded, suddenly sitting bolt upright. "This—this is Plymouth, isn't it?"

"Quite right! It's Plymouth!" was the reply.

"But you said you were going down to call at the prison and see to Plesher's release yourself."

"Well, I changed my mind. I sent a wire instead at a place I stopped at some way back. You were asleep. And then, since we had come so far, I thought we might as well make for here."

"To wish Plesher fond good-bye, is that what you mean?" suggested Tinker, with a short laugh. He was thinking still of Harker, left to wallow on in the puddle he had made.

"You seem to be taking a good deal U.J.—No. 861.

of trouble over this man Plesher," he added.

"Seems to me someone will have to if Scotland Yard is going to keep to its bargain, and let him get away, as they promised. As I happened to be their agent in consenting to that condition, I'm not going to see the fellow made to suffer simply because Harker has made a bundle of his end."

"I don't suppose much would happen to him if his gang do get to know that he had narked and sold them," growled Tinker.

"Oh, no; not much," answered Blake drily. "I myself got accused of being a spy on this same little job, and very nearly got kicked to death for it. But that's only a trifle, I know."

A moment later, though, he spied a figure which struck him as familiar chasing down the main street of the town, looking as full of trouble as a sausage is of mystery.

"Gosh! Why, of course, that's Pinson, the Governor of Kingsmoor," he recollected. Running his car alongside, he gave him a hail.

"Hallo!" he introduced himself cheerily. "How are you? I wired you this morning from a place called Durdur. Did you get it?"

"Get it!" quoth the colonel, none too pleasantly. "I should think I did. Worse still, I've acted on it."

"Excellent! But why 'worse still'?" queried Blake.

"Because, ten minutes after the train had started, carrying off the party in question, an official telegram came down from Scotland Yard to say he was to be detained at all costs, and in spite of any contrary instructions from any source whatever."

"Signed 'Harker,' I suppose?" laughed Blake. "But you had already released your man?"

"Yes, I had, confound you!" spluttered the Governor. "And since you seem to know that the police wanted him detained, how dare you telegraph me instructions to the contrary—you, a private detective merely, eh?"

"Well, if you are going to discuss things in that tone, and in a public, crowded street, I shall not answer you," was Blake's frigid reply. "I am glad, at any rate, that Plesher is released, after our very specific promise to do so; and now, may I ask, what it is your intention to do now?"

"Why, get him back. Recapture him, of course!" snapped the Governor furiously. "Do you think I can afford to fly in the face of Scotland Yard? I'm not a private individual like you, merely. I'm in a dickens of a hole, thanks to your dashed interference, and now I'm trying to get out of it."

"By scouring the streets of Plymouth like a lunatic, scaring the poor fellow, who will be hiding up somewhere, of course, watching you, with every intention of keeping out of your way," said Blake, with provoking calm. "And you have got warders out from the prison as well, I suppose?" he added.

"Warders? Of course I have! What else would you do, I'd like to know?" demanded the other hotly.

"Well, I'm only a private detective, so my word doesn't count for much. But if I wanted a man, and I knew he was due to leave on a certain liner, at a certain hour, from this place, I certainly wouldn't go charging after him now. I'd wait till he was going aboard that boat and then quietly take him."

The Governor's mouth opened like a codfish for a couple of gasps. Evidently this more sane method of procedure had not struck him before.

"Confound it!" he growled. "It's

that wire from the Yard that's rattled me. I've been wondering what to say in reply. I didn't know, of course, how much might hang on the fellow not being released."

"Nothing hangs on it at all, you can believe me," Blake assured him.

"Then everything—the emeralds, I mean—has gone all right?" queried the Governor eagerly. "You nailed your man—your master-thief?"

"Your master-thief, allow me," laughed Blake. "But, anyhow, he isn't nailed, and, in fact, Scotland Yard has made a proper mull of it. I did my share of it all right. I stole the emeralds and started the chase, but it had not gone fifty yards when Harker & Co. lost the scent, and now he and the C.I.D. are all a gum-tree about it."

"Hence that wire, I suppose," gasped the Governor, his jaw falling again. "You don't mean to say that this gang has got away with the whole bag of tricks, really?"

"The whole bag of tricks—two hundred thousand pounds' worth," confirmed Blake coolly.

The Governor's dismay was comical if it had not been also so tragic. This wild scheme of putting the police up to playing burglar, in the hope of netting one of those super-astute kings of crime that he had been hearing so much about from his new charges at Kingsmoor, was his, really. He had prompted it. And now—horrors! it had all gone smash.

Then, as with Harker, he turned angrily on Blake. The latter's almost quixotic solicitude for a man who was a mere convict, and his infinite trouble to secure his promised release, made him begin to boil and bubble again.

Do what Blake liked, Plesher, he vowed, would be hauled straight back to Kingsmoor the moment he could lay hands on the man. He told the detective so in as many words.

"And I tell you, Colonel Pinson, you'll do nothing of the sort while I am here!" retorted Blake coolly.

"I will, confound you!"

"You won't!"

"All right, we'll see!" flared out the Governor, accepting the challenge.

"We certainly will! Would you like to have a bet on it?" was Blake's next most exasperating question.

"Bet, sir? Yes, sir—to any amount!" exploded the Governor.

"All right! An even hundred, shall we? I'll let you off lightly!"

"Confound your impudence—yes!" bellowed his victim.

"On this condition—that you call off all further pursuit until our man is at least safe on the tender to take passengers out to the ship."

"Why, yes; I suppose so!" agreed the colonel, seeing nothing in that. "That is, so long as you also agree that you will not search for him either meantime. Or at least will not speak to him if you see him, and give him warning."

"Most certainly I won't!" consented Blake. "You shall have an absolutely fair field, colonel, and meantime—Au revoir! I've been driving all night, and I shall be glad of a few hours' snooze."

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

The "Fence."

WITH that Blake started up the car again and glided off in the direction of the best hotel in town. Here, to Tinker's relief of body, if not peace of mind exactly, they alighted, had a good breakfast, and then went straight to bed.

What the crazy fit was that had seized his chief he could not imagine. He

had not confided in him one single word as to what he really thought and felt about the lost emeralds.

He supposed it was all right, and that Blake had some notion somewhere in his head. But for the life of him he could not think why they had trundled all the way down here, leaving Harker to flounder from bad to worse until the whole thing was a public shriek and scandal, in which Blake's name was bound to figure just as large as everybody else's.

Even the local paper's late edition bill had an ominous line on it: "Sensational Jewel Robbery in London!"

Just after Blake had left the table to go to his room the waiter brought in a special edition of the Plymouth evening paper.

And there, sure enough, was the whole wretched story, with reference to Kingsmoor and its luckless Governor, and a particularly nasty jag at Sexton Blake, who, it was made out, had prompted the whole affair.

"Here, guv'nor," exclaimed Tinker, chasing into his chief's bed-room the next minute with the paper in his hand, "look at this. It's out! The papers have got it!"

"Got what, my lad?" yawned Blake with supreme indifference.

"Why, the burglary. And your name—and an interview with Sir Jasper Clyde, telling what he is going to do to you when he catches you; and another with Harker, I should imagine, suggesting that the Yard had no official knowledge of the job except to interfere at the last to try and stop the whole thing. But they were too late."

"They were too late, were they?" said Blake indifferently. "Well, look here, my boy, just see you're not too late in catching that tender before she goes aboard our ship. Her time for sailing is three sharp, so don't keep me waiting a minute after two-thirty. We can lunch after we've seen her off."

"But you want to read the paper, don't you?" blurted Tinker. "It's all here, I say—your name and everything."

"No; take it away and burn it!" yawned Blake. "I'm glad to hear that I am responsible for the whole mess, because then everybody will want me to see it cleared up."

"Which you mean you will do?" urged Tinker, with wistful eagerness.

Blake nodded and rolled into bed.

Two o'clock found Blake up and dressing again, vastly refreshed, whistling like a lark, as if he had not a care in the world. Snatches of Tinker's announcement about the newspaper account came back to him, but he only smiled.

"What did you do with that revolver?" he inquired of Tinker, a few minutes later, putting his head into his room.

"It's here, in the bag. But what do you want with it? You're not going to shoot the colonel with it, are you?"

"No; I only wanted it, that's all. Thanks! Also the handcuffs."

"What!" gasped Tinker, looking as if he had swallowed a fish alive.

"No need to get excited," answered Blake. "I suppose you've heard of such a thing as being prepared?"

"Yes; it's the motto of the Boy Scouts, and it's a pity we don't adopt it a bit more in our job, guv'nor."

"Oh! How?"

"By you preparing me, among others, as to what's going to happen over this cock-eyed case we're on. I know nothing—nothing!" insisted Tinker, with almost fearful indignation.

"What do you want to know?" asked Blake, who knew that this was a just grievance.

"Everything! Here's hundreds of thousands' of pounds worth of emeralds 'gone west,' thanks to Scotland Yard, and the papers beginning to split their sides over it. Yes; and they've got your name, too. It's no use your trying to join in the laugh and shove the blame on to Harker. You burgled the stuff yourself, and that's all the Press will want to know about it."

"Well?" echoed Blake indifferently, as his assistant paused. "Go on!"

"It's you to go on," sputtered Tinker. "What are you here in this mouldy place for now, wasting time sticking up for a chap like Plesher, when you ought to be chasing after the emeralds full-split? You don't know who's got them?" he challenged.

"Don't I?" answered his boss. "Well, now, look here, Tinker," said Blake, realising that it was about time he took his assistant, at least, into his full confidence.

But first he trod lightly to the door and opened it. This was only an hotel corridor, and there was never any knowing that someone might not be playing the eavesdropper. Blake peered right and left, and then suddenly ducked his head back into the room again as if he had been stung on the nose.

Tinker's mouth was open to ask him what was wrong. But Blake had already changed his mind evidently as to secrecy. Still in his shirt-sleeves, and his tie untied, out he strode into the corridor, making for a room at the further end. Tinker was soon at his heels, needless to say.

Arriving at another person's bed-room door, Blake wrenched round the handle without ceremony. It was locked. With still less ceremony the detective promptly backed against the wall opposite, then, with a leap and a kick, dashed his boot against the lock and burst the door open.

The bang was like the bursting of a grenade. It seemed to shake the whole hotel. But, not content with one kick, Blake hurled himself at the door again, this time making the lock crack and bulge. Tinker thought his boss had gone mad.

A last kick demolished the fastening and landed Blake sprawling inside. The room was empty. But it looked like being full before long.

A startled chambermaid, rushing on the scene, had begun to scream; a French waiter was dancing about like a monkey on a barrel-organ, shouting for the proprietor; a page was bellowing "Thieves!"

But Blake bored on like a ship under full sail. The room was empty, but there were signs that its occupant had not vacated it. A parcel belonging to him was still there, in fact. Blake's eyes lit up. It was the dead spit of the one he had himself left Kingsmoor Prison with. He had not been deceived.

For, when peeping out of the door that first time, he had been startled to see another individual further along the passage engaged also in the same cautious operation.

And the man was Plesher!

Probably the ex-convict had soon tumbled to the fact that the warders of Kingsmoor were scouring the streets with the intention of recapturing him. So he had taken cover boldly in the last place his pursuers would be likely to look for him—the best hotel in the town.

There was nothing criminal in this, of course, and nothing to justify Blake, surely, in his assault upon the door of a man he was avowedly trying to stand up for.

Yet the detective did not look like this somehow. He darted a glance here, and another there, and another under

the bed, then he made a jump for the window and flung that up with a bang.

More than that, he began to scramble out on the narrow, dizzy sill with such determined energy that Tinker quite thought he was contemplating suicide.

He made a jump, and grabbed Blake by the legs. The detective, who was groping for a stack-pipe within reach of the window, kicked out in angry annoyance.

"You young ass, let go!" he bellowed. "But what's the game?" implored Tinker. "What do you think you're doing now?"

"Going up on the roof!" retorted his guv'nor. "You nip round and find the fire-escape ladder and do likewise. And see that no one jumps on your silly neck while you're about it, and gets away."

"But what one? Who?" demanded Tinker despairingly.

"Plesher! He was here—I saw him! This is the way he's gone, and I'm after him."

"Plesher!" gasped Tinker, whose brain was beginning to reel under all this mystery. Plesher on the roof! Plesher bolting away from the very man who was befriending him! Why should he? And why was Blake risking his life swarming a crazy gutter-spout to follow him? Why didn't he himself go round the safer way?

Certainly it seemed to require a lot of explanation. So thought the hotel proprietor, who had now appeared on the scene. But Tinker, who had his orders, paid small attention to him. Bolting past him, he dashed along to where he reckoned the trapdoor and fire-ladder were likely to be. The whole hotel staff was hot in pursuit.

Meantime, Blake, having satisfied himself that this was the only possible line of escape that the released convict could have taken, was up that twelve-feet length of stack-pipe like a monkey. Plesher was not waiting for him at the top, he was glad to see. He grabbed the coping of the parapet and swung himself over.

Half an acre of dingy slate roofs, sloping and slanting at all angles, confronted him. At a dozen points were formidable chimney-stacks. Blake set out on a tour of these.

And though he could not catch a glimpse of his quarry, he knew that Plesher was on the roof likewise, and dodging him. Nor did the detective sing out, in assuring fashion, as might have been expected surely. He hunted with the grim silence of a ferret. He was wary, too.

Yet not wary enough, as it proved. Or it was a sideslip of Blake's, rather, on the shippery slates, that landed him suddenly plump into the arms of the other.

Plesher pinned him like a bulldog. He swung the detective off his feet, and hurled him down and fell on him, panting out savage oaths in a way that was passing strange, seeing the cordiality of their last meeting.

Blake, however, showed no surprise. He writhed and wrestled as coolly as if he knew all that was in the other man's mind. Plesher was trying now to fasten on his windpipe. Blake could prevent this manoeuvre, but nothing more. Plesher was astride his chest.

—And then Tinker arrived on the scene—Tinker, with a revolver! It was that that caught the convict's eye. His muscles relaxed for one fatal moment, and the next Blake had unseated him and rolled him over, falling upon him like an avalanche and grinding his nose down on to the grimy slates.

"Now then, Plesher," he panted, "what's all this about, eh?"

"About what?" temporised the vanquished enemy.

"Attacking me, like this. What brought you to this hotel?"

"Heard the rozzers were after me to take me back to the tug again," the convict began to whine.

"But I'm not a policeman," answered Blake. "You ought to have looked on me as your friend. We've been working together in the interests of justice, haven't we? You wanted to go straight, you said, and I've promised to help you do it. So why did you run?"

Plesher, with his face jammed down against the slates, was just able to bring one crafty eye to bear on his captor. He watched Blake with savage slyness.

"Come—answer!" persisted the detective. "You ought to be keen to know how we've got on in that 'cod' burglary you and I fixed up together. Do you mean you've lost all interest in it?"

Still that sullen silence.

"Well, you are a funny one," laughed Blake. "Here I've taken the trouble to come all this way and help you out of England—perhaps—and tell you all about the show, and you don't care tuppence, it seems. Why?"

Plesher's evil eye leered up at him, but still he would not be drawn.

"Well, I'll tell you why," answered the detective, at last, digging his knuckles more viciously into his quarry's neck. "You're a mighty clever chap, Plesher, aren't you? That burglary of Sir Jasper's emeralds was going to be the neatest, dinkiest scoop that ever you and the gang with you ever planned. You were going to retire like lords on it, and laugh over it for the rest of your lives, weren't you, now—you cunning old thief?"

"A put-up job!" Tinker gasped aloud.

"Why, guv'nor, how? It's impossible!"

"Got those handcuffs?" Blake demanded of Tinker.

The darbies were produced. A minute later the ex-convict was being shepherd down the fire-escape ladder to where a thunderstruck crowd of hotel servants and guests awaited them below.

While Tinker was fetching his boss a collar and his jacket, who should walk in but Colonel Pinstone, Governor of Kingsmoor. At sight of the ex-convict he became radiant with relief and delight.

"So you're collared the beggar! Well done!" he said delightedly. "We've got him, anyway, and that's all I care."

"But he protests against the capture, and demands to see his friend Mr. Hall," answered Blake.

"Mr. Hall. Oh, yes!" chuckled the Governor.

"And I also want to see that gentleman," continued Blake. "So we're going down to the landing-stage now. We've cut it rather fine, but the tender is not due away really till three."

The Governor looked a little blank.

"Excuse me," he said, "the tender is away already. She left twenty minutes ago."

"What!"

Blake fairly shouted the word, as if he would have blown the colonel's head off with it.

"The tender away? On whose authority? It was timed to start at three. How dare they despatch it before!"

"Well," faltered the colonel guiltily, "there was no use in keeping it; you see. The boat-train was in and everyone on board, excepting, of course, our man here, and I was able to assure them

there was no intention of letting him embark, even if he tried."

"You did!"

The window commanded a meagre view of the harbour roadstead only, but it was enough to include the towering hull of the big Canadian liner, the *Lake Huron*, brought up at anchor a mile from the shore. Alongside, under her towering hull, was the steam tender which had conveyed the last of her English passengers aboard, Mr. Hall among the number.

"What have I done?" asked the bewildered official, dazed by the cyclone which he had raised about his ears.

"Spoilt my whole case, just when I had brought it to the neatest possible conclusion."

"Conclusion? You are referring to the emeralds? I really don't follow you at all," stammered the luckless colonel.

"No. But look at Plesher. He does!" thundered Blake, who had detected a grin of triumph on the ex-convict's crafty face.

"Me? I don't! I don't know what on earth you keep talking about!" protested Plesher, straightening out his features in a flash, but too late.

"You do!" flashed out Blake. "Don't try and humbug me! I've read you and your precious confederates like a book almost from the first. The emeralds are on that steamer, and the scoundrel who has got them is that sanctimonious hypocrite, humbug, and master-thief, Mr. Hall!"

Mr. Hall!" gasped the Governor. "Oh, come; you're crazy! A police-court missionary, known all over the land for his self-denying work—"

"Self-denying fiddlesticks!" bellowed Blake scornfully. "The man is a sham, an infernal sham, though a clever one. I never suspected him before, though I've known of him these many years. But I tell you I'm right. The fellow's a fence. He's worse. In this case he's the master-thief you were prating about so eloquently, and whom we set out to catch."

Hall and Plesher were two of the most finished rogues that ever Blake had come across. Hall's was the master-mind without question. But Blake very much doubted if this notion of setting Scotland Yard to do their next burglary for them was not Plesher's own, prompted originally by a desire to pull his prison Governor's leg.

Then Hall, being allowed to see the convict privately in the role of spiritual adviser, the pair had elaborated the jape to its final highly-polished state.

Keeping their scheme severely simple, like true artists, they had enlisted only Slimmer and Bob Ferris as their confederates.

Slimer, having taken the stolen emeralds from Blake, had got rid of them to Ferris within the first forty yards of the hunt, as has been described. The latter, after the pursuit had passed, then quietly paddled off to Mr. Hall's residence in South Belgravia, with the swag, dropping it over the "missioner's" area railing.

What could be plainer sailing than the rest? The missioner, with the assistance of Scotland Yard, actually was due to meet Plesher next day on his release from prison, and convoy him to Canada.

There was another reason for his making this trip, as he had explained since, dear man, he had an aged aunt and her companion booked for the voyage.

With the emeralds in his pocket and his chief confederate to share them, Mr. Hall had merely to step smilingly on

board, and that would be the last seen or heard of the precious swag.

As for the old aunt and her companion, Blake, as the recollection of their part in the scheme of things flashed back to him, ripped out another whoop of anger and revenge.

The old ladies would be Slimmer, of course, and Bob Ferris, disguised in black silks and petticoats! As for that he was not to have thought of this completing touch before!

Blake turned to the Governor.

"Look here," he commanded, "I want a torpedo-destroyer out of this port, and you've got to get it for me."

The local superintendent of police, who had arrived meantime, was charged with the safe custody of Plesher. He handed the prisoner over to two constables and followed on in a cab.

Meantime, Blake and the Governor had chased off in the former's car to seek the responsible naval authority who might be expected to have some spare speedy craft that he could lend them for the pursuit.

The destroyer selected out of a small flotilla, was one that had only just put into harbour—then, and had not yet picked up its moorings. The jerking arms of the admiral's semaphore told her to sand by to put to sea again. Blake by that time was hurrying down to the picket-boat to go aboard her. With him came the police superintendent, Pinstone, Tinker, and two harbour police.

It was dusk, therefore, before they "picked up her smoke," and past dinner-time on board her, before the destroyer's wireless gave her the crisp, stern message to "heave to."

"Don't bother about rigging a companion-ladder!" Blake called out to the bewildered captain of the Leviathan. "A rope will do. Chuck us a rope, quick!"

One had already come whizzing down for the boat to lay hold by. Blake caught it, and without a moment's hesitation began to swarm up the thirty feet of sheer ship's plating. Panting, he gained the rail and fell over on to the deck.

A ship's steward confronted him, startled out of his wits.

"I want Mr. Hall's cabin—quick!" he commanded.

Urging him to run, Blake chased up another companion-ladder, and along interminable alley-ways. Then suddenly he saw a figure far ahead appear, stare towards them anxiously, then make a dart into a berth opposite.

With a yell, Blake swept the steward out of his path, and raced towards the door. Crash fell his fist. But it had been locked in his face.

Was his quarry going to thwart him, after all, so far as the swag was concerned?

"Hall," he shouted, "the game's up! Come out of that! I'm Sexton Blake!"

But the only answer was a wild scuffling from within. Blake had shaken the locked door once, but only once. He whipped out his revolver.

Bang! The muzzle clapped close to the fastening, had blown the bolt clean out of the hasp. Blake rushed in.

There was Hall, sure enough. He had unscrewed and torn open the massive port-light, and was now just reaching back to the bunk for a leather wallet lying waiting to his hand.

The wallet Blake had handled before. It contained Sir Jasper's gems—two hundred thousand pounds' worth—that he himself had "stolen" from Sir Jasper's safe. Great Scott! What a scream there

would be if he were to lose them now!

Blake gave a grunt and a spring. "Got you!" he snapped, clutching the band that had just then clutched the leather case.

"Hall, you lying hypocrite," he said, pinning the master-thief again, before he could stagger to his legs, "you're caught! I've got you set, all of you—your aunt, Mrs. Slimer, her attendant, Mrs. Bob Ferris, and Plesher, your bright particular pal, who's already safe ashore. Are you going to take it quietly, like a wise man?"

Hall made one or two futile attempts to struggle, but at last let his muscles relax.

"I'm done!" he said. "I'll go quietly!"

And then the police, who all had to wait while a more substantial ladder was rigged, appeared on the scene. Blake hauled the first prisoner of his "bag" on to his feet, and pushed him into their hands to hold. Then out he went to find that steward again.

By this time the captain of the liner was in the alley-way, demanding to know the reason of all this. Blake was guilty of all sorts of sins against sea-etiquette, of course. The captain was king on his own vessel.

The police superintendent, however, was left to temporise with him. Blake had started to search the ship for Slimer and his pal Bob.

Never has a saloonful of diners looked so astonished as when suddenly, in the midst of the entree course, a dishevelled figure came bursting into their midst without a by-your-leave.

Two quick glances up and down the long tables, and the intruder went straight to where two stout old ladies

were seated. He peered keenly into their startled faces for an instant, then caught them both by the hair, and with one jerk scalped the pair of them.

"Monster!" yelled one old gentleman, horrified.

"Slimer! Ferris!" said the intruder sternly. And that was all.

Sight of two bullet heads revealed to view by the scalping process, and two very masculine and utterly scared faces peering up at their denouncer, made even the thickest-headed of the passengers see that the outrageous assault must have some justification, after all.

What it all meant they had to wait to hear. For, following the direction of the intruder's pointing finger, the two old ladies gathered up their skirts, and went slouching out to where the uniformed officers of the law awaited them.

"That the lot?" inquired the police-superintendent, as Blake followed after.

"Yes. All the lot. Have you explained to the captain, or had I better see him?"

"I shouldn't if I were you," suggested the superintendent, grinning. "I've got him quiet at last, and he's gone back to the bridge. Says if we're not off the ship inside of five minutes he's going to clap on speed again, and we can settle our business in Halifax."

"Right! As he pleases!" laughed Blake. "Over the side, then! Pick up your skirts, ladies!"—this to the scowling Slimer and his faithful chum.

Down the ladder they clambered, dropping into the much-too-crowded dinghy at the foot, then away to the destroyer again. The liner's telegraph clanged, she forged ahead, and that was all her skipper bothered about that little incident. He might easily have made all sorts of fuss.

Of Scotland Yard's delicious relief when the telegram reached them that the emeralds were safe, of the exposure of the smug "Mr. Hall," trusted friend of magistrates, and confidant of the police, much might be said—much more that was ever allowed to appear at the trial.

But Mr. Hall thought it more politic to be kind, and so did Sexton Blake—and even more important—the Press.

So the face of the law was saved as much as possible. It was a sorry show-up for Harker, however, and the C.I.D., and Blake was not loved the more for saving their bacon for them.

But, as usual, he had done what he had set out to do, and, so far as he was concerned, the matter ended there.

Sir Jasper paid up his thousand, too, and Blake forwarded the cheque straight to the Prisoners' Aid Society.

And when the baronet heard this, he promptly capped it with another nine thousand. So Mr. Hall, police-court missionary and master-thief, did some good work for his old cause, after all.

THE END.

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