

SEXTON BLAKE, TINKER, and LEON
KESTREL, the Master-Mummer. (SPECIAL
STORY
INSIDE!)

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THE LEAP TO DEATH!

"IS THIS THE STONE, MISS
WALSINCHAM?"

TINKER TO THE RESCUE



The Dance of Disaster



THE DANCE OF DISASTER

An Exciting Long Complete Detective and Adventure Story, introducing **SEXTON BLAKE**, **TINKER**, and the Most Remarkable Criminal of Modern Times—**LEON KESTREL**.

(By the Author of "The Case of the Four Detectives," "Kestrel," "Great Bluff," etc.)

Illustrations by

HARRY LAUREL

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

An Important Visitor.

MRS. BARDELL, Sexton Blake's house-keeper, opened the door of the consulting-room.

"Mister Blake," she said tonelessly, "A gentleman to see you! Mister Sir Hubert Brewster."

The name was familiar to the detective as adorning the dull personality of one of those commercial knights whose only claim to importance lay in a large bank balance. He rose from the chair, and the visitor came in, affecting a certain cordiality of manner, which the detective partially froze with mere professional politeness.

"How do you do, Mr. Blake? It is a pleasure to call upon so distinguished a detective, although," he added, "my mission is a far from pleasant one!"

"It is the way with most of my visitors," Blake said, with a half-smile. "I trust it is nothing very serious!"

"No—no-o," said the knight, as though he were not sure that he was speaking the truth. "Not—er—overwhelmingly serious, Mr. Blake!"

"In view of that," said Blake, "it did not occur to you to try the police or your solicitor, or, perhaps, some young investigator just starting in—"

"I came to you as the head of your profession, Mr. Blake!"

"That is very complimentary!" said Blake. "But, as I ply my trade more for pleasure than profit, I am—er—a little arbitrary in the choice of my cases!"

Sir Hubert Brewster fumed inwardly, concealing his anger with as much success as an active volcano conceals terrestrial fires. He had been twice snubbed already, but Blake's hint had been so courteously given that he could not take violent exception to it.

"Of course, if you consider my case beneath your notice, Mr. Blake!" he snorted.

"Not at all," the detective said. "How can that be when I know nothing about it, Sir Hubert? If you will be good enough to state your trouble I shall be only too happy to listen."

The knight became rather mollified, and groped quickly in his pocket for some papers. Blake waited with a certain show of interest, satisfied that Sir Hubert Brewster's blustering ego had received the jolt it needed so badly.

"As you know, Mr. Blake," the knight said presently, "I am a person of some importance

in British trade. My name is well known throughout the commercial world. That, of course, you know."

"I did not know," Blake said quietly. "But perhaps I am ignorant in these matters."

Sir Hubert stared at him, and then resumed:

"I control one of the largest merchant and shipping interests in this country, Mr. Blake, and I am also directly interested in many other business concerns. I have been elected this year as secretary of the Sixty Club, of which I have been a member for many years."

It was the business of the detective to become familiar with the name and character of every club and society he could—secret or otherwise. He knew the Sixty Club to comprise all the greatest magnates in the British world of buying and selling. It was probably the only real "millionaire's club" which this country could boast—or be ashamed of—and since the war, with its vast and unlimited opportunity, a great many members of the Sixty Club had accumulated the right to put the word "million" before their proud title of "millionaire."

"As you are doubtless aware, Mr. Blake," Sir Hubert Brewster went on, "the Sixty Club is one of the most exclusive in the world."

"Necessarily, I suppose," Blake said thoughtfully. "There is only a certain amount of money in the world, after all!"

"Money," said Sir Hubert sententiously, "is merely the fruit of commercial acumen. It is the tree we are proud of, Mr. Blake, and not the fruit! The members of the Sixty Club stand for everything that is great and progressive in the world's trade. We are the committee of the nations, bartering. There is not a name upon our lists which is not synonymous with integrity and character. Therefore it is a matter of very great concern both to us and to the business world that any members of our club should be held up to disrepute, or that their names should be misused in connection with anything shady or doubtful!"

"And have these names been misused?" Blake asked, hurrying him to the point.

"They have!" snorted the knight angrily. "And in the most vulgar and impudent manner! I have here an advertisement taken from a newspaper. I have protested in person to the proprietors of this paper. But, although they have readily printed a

statement, they claim to have accepted and printed the advertisement in all good faith. Look here!"

He handed Blake a cutting, which Tinker seized to examine as well. It was a well-displayed advertisement, and a strange light came into the detective's eyes when he saw the name of the company which was advertised. It ran:

THE WAR PROFITS LIQUIDATION SYNDICATE.

The auditors of the above company, having examined its balance-sheet and confirmed the showing of a very substantial profit for the year ending December, 1919, it is proposed by the directors to renew their activities with even greater zeal during the coming year, and to extend the zone and nature of the syndicate's activities in whatever direction may prove most remunerative to the shareholders.

The Board has decided to initiate a great and protracted offensive during the coming year, and, in order to launch the attack in the most auspicious manner, the

GENEROUS AND UNSTINTED PATRONAGE

of the undermentioned distinguished gentlemen will be secured. It is confidently anticipated that they will contribute largely to the making of a record year in 1920:

Sir Hubert Brewster, K.C.B.,
The Right Hon. Lord Everscourt, K.C.B.,
Sir Edgard Treveling, Bart.,
Mr. Rufus Lewis, O.B.E.,
Mr. Walter Cowling-Smith,
Etc., etc., etc.

The Board has every reason to hope that the names of further distinguished patrons will come before the public very shortly.

(Signed) LIONEL KING
(Chairman of Directors)."

To the eye of the ordinary reader there was nothing remarkable in the advertisement, wedged in the paper among the reports of company meetings and general financial news.

But to the eye of Blake and Tinker the calm and impudent announcement stood out as a monument of bluff and sheer impertinence. For they both knew that the name of Lionel King concealed the personality of Leon Kestrel, the master-mummer and one of the most dangerous criminals who had

ever harried and puzzled the police systems of two continents.

Sexton Blake and Tinker knew to their costs of the many activities of this pernicious syndicate, which went from scoop to scoop garbed in the lamb's clothing of virtue, skinning the profiteers certainly, but using the proceeds of their thefts for the one charitable purpose which begins at home.

Blake could not forbear a smile as he read between the lines of the announcement. The ironic humour was so typical of the mummer.

He claimed—and one could almost see the thin-lipped smile of the man—the “generous and unstinted patronage” of Sir Hubert Brewster and others who were “confidently anticipated” to “contribute largely to the making of a record year in 1920” for the syndicate.

It was a threat—distinct and as thinly-veiled as Kestrel cared to make it. Their “generous and unstinted” patronage meant that Kestrel had them selected as his next victims; and it would require all the brains in the Sixty Club to save these members from being defecated.

The well-camouflaged announcement was tantamount to a declaration by the master-mummer that he was once again upon the war-path. The nefarious activities of the syndicate, bad enough in 1919, were to boom immensely in 1920.

And the ex-actor and arch-crook had with characteristic bluff and impertinence decided to make his New Year debut with a fitting pomp and circumstance.

“What do you make of it?” Sir Hubert Brewster asked presently.

“It is a rather strange announcement,” Blake said, with a smile.

“It is a deuced impertinent one!” the knight said angrily.

“You have no interest in this syndicate then?”

“Of course not. Never heard of it. Bounce, pure bounce—or else insult! By Heaven, if I could find out!”

“You have no idea who is this Lionel King?”

“Not in the least. But I haven’t the least doubt that it conceals the identity of some unprincipled skunk who—”

“It does!” Blake said quietly.

“You know him, then?” asked the knight sharply, his deep-set eyes fixed upon the thin, almost expressionless face of the detective.

“You know this man King?”

“Yes.”

“Who is he? What is he?”

“An unprincipled skunk, as you say,” Blake said—and cleverer than a skunk at throwing you off his trail!”

“What is he? What’s his idea of printing this thing?” He tapped the paper. “Is he being insulting, or just trying to be funny?”

“A little of the latter—but not much,” Blake said. “What he has essayed in that respect he has achieved. It is funny.”

“I fail to see its humour!”

“I am not surprised. But this is merely what I should call a public announcement, Sir Hubert.”

“Public announcement!” he snorted.

“Yes. Rather unconventional, but an announcement, all the same. It probably has a strong element of truth, too.”

“But—but my dear sir,” stormed the knight, “will you permit me to ask if you know what you are talking about? Neither—neither Evescourt, nor Trewling, nor any of us ever heard of this deuced concern. It is all lies. We aren’t patrons, or anything of the sort, and the papers have told the public so this morning!”

“Maybe not,” Blake said. “But you will notice that the syndicate merely states that you will be secured.”

“How do they know that? What the deuce right has this man King to—”

“He has no right at all. But that does not count with him. He will attempt to secure you, all the same. He may succeed.”

“I don’t follow!” snorted the knight. “If you know this man, Mr. Blake, I should like to know his name. Who is he?”

“His name is Leon Kestrel,” Blake said quietly.

The knight stared at him; his brows contracted in rather a puzzled way.

“Kestrel—Kestrel!” he muttered. “I have heard the name. I—I—” He looked up suddenly.

“Surely you don’t mean this criminal—this swindler—who worked that swindle on the ‘Mercury’—who shanghaied Nordenstrom, the scientist?”

“The same man,” Blake said.

“A crook!”

“One of the cleverest the world has ever been plagued with, and certainly the boldest.” Sir Hubert began to look alarmed.

“Then—then what is the meaning of this advertisement, Mr. Blake? Why has he paid money to insert a notice like this?”

“He has a weakness for the theatrical,” Blake said. “He is an ex-actor and the greatest master of make-up there is; but he is never flippant. I should strongly advise you to take this matter seriously.”

“Why, Mr. Blake?”

“Because it is a distinct threat. You and these other gentlemen are in imminent danger!”

“You think so?” he gasped.

“I am sure of it. I advise you to go straight to Scotland Yard and ask their advice and assistance. You may tell them that you have been to me. The character of this man Kestrel is well known to the C.I.D., and they are not likely to underestimate the danger you are in.”

The face of the knight had changed colour visibly. He picked nervously at his weighty watch-chain.

“You think robbery is the object he—has in view, Mr. Blake?” he asked.

“Undoubtedly. But he is entirely callous. If murder serves his purpose more adequately—”

“Good heavens, Mr. Blake, this—this is most disquieting!” He picked up the advertisement again and studied it, and his fingers trembled visibly as he held it.

“War profits liquidation!” he read slowly.

“What—er—what do they mean by that?”

“Simply that Kestrel believes all profits made out of the war to be iniquitous,” Blake said. “That is why this syndicate choose as their victims only those who have made money out of Armageddon. He considers that they have the blood of their brothers upon their hands. He is not alone in that belief,” Blake added quietly.

“Rubbish!” snapped Sir Hubert. “Stuff and nonsense! Only born fools talk in that manner!”

“I have known some born fools with a remarkable insight into the truth,” Blake said—for he did not like this man over-much.

“Please, Mr. Blake—please!” cried the knight impatiently. “I am a business man. I have not time for cheap epigrams. I—”

He paused and glanced up with a flushed face as the door opened suddenly and Mrs. Bardell reappeared.

“Mister ‘Arker, from the Yard, sir!’ Shall I show him up?”

“Please!” Blake said, without hesitation—and the magnate looked annoyed.

“There seems to be a queer conception of courtesy on these premises, Mr. Blake!” he snapped. “If you will permit me to conclude my interview before you invite a stranger into—”

“If you find fault with our courtesy,” Blake said, “you may conclude your interview straight away, Sir Hubert. My friend Harker is one of the most able men in the Criminal Investigation Department of Scotland Yard, and I thought that his arrival might be very opportune!”

“Oh, indeed! Yes! I beg your pardon!”

The knight was still framing clumsy apologies when Harker came into the room, nodding with a friendly smile at Blake and Tucker, and, as he bent to pat the warm, lithe body of Pedro, the bloodhound, darting a quick glance from his dark eyes at the face of the visitor.

Blake introduced them a moment later, explaining in a few words the purport of Sir Hubert’s call, and handing him the advertisement to read.

A strange look came over the face of the Yard man as he saw through the transparent impudence of the threat. His lips were twisted in a wry smile.

“Do you know, Blake,” he said, turning to the investigator, “I believe we are going to have an ugly time with this gang. You know I don’t suffer with nerves, and am not the victim of idle fancies, but I was followed here to-night!”

“You were?”

“I am sure of it. I can’t say I saw anything tangible to warn me. But all the way I had that unpleasant sense of being watched.”

The eyes of the magnate were fixed with a strange stare upon the Yard man. It seemed that Harker, with his quiet words, had suddenly charged the atmosphere with expectancy. In the silence that ensued one could hear the ticking of the hunter in the Yard man’s pocket.

“There is no light in your bed-room, Blake?” Harker asked suddenly.

“No. Why?” Blake said sharply.

“You have no objection to my seeing for myself?”

“Good heavens, no! But what’s the matter?”



Tramlin staggered back as a figure seemed to drop from the clouds.

"Nothing," Harker said, with a smile. "I am serious, that's all. Tinker!" He beckoned to the lad, and they passed out of the room, leaving Blake rather curious and Sir Hubert Brewster frankly alarmed. Tinker also wondered at the Yard man's manner as he entered the bed-room.

"Neither the guv'nor nor I have been in here this evening, Mr. Harker," he said. "What makes you ask whether there was a light?"

"Oh, nothing! I wanted to be sure, that's all," Harker said.

He crossed to the window and peered out into the street below, and Tinker pressed his face to the pane beside him, not knowing what he was looking for.

For quite a minute the Yard man stood there, peering silently. Presently a slight grunt escaped him.

"Tinker," he said quietly, "you see that porchway opposite, a little to the right—the one in deep shadow?"

"Yes."

"Look at it hard for a moment."

"I am watching it!"

"You have pretty good eyes, boy. Do you notice that one part of the shadow is deeper than—"

"Yes. There is someone standing there."

"Motionless?"

"Yes, I can determine the face now. They seem to be watching this place."

"Is it a man or a woman?" Harker asked slowly.

"A man, I should say."

A sharp, matter-of-fact grunt broke from the C.I.D. man—a grunt which seemed to snap the sharp tension of that moment.

"I thought as much!" he muttered. "Gee, but I'd like to know what that party is! Will you ask the guv'nor to— No, it doesn't matter. We don't want to alarm old Moneybug. I'll drop him the word to slip out and take a quiz for himself?"

They returned to the consulting-room, and Blake met them with a glance, half-humorous, half-questioning.

"Well?"

"The strategic value of these premises. Blake is rather spoiled by the presence of valuable observation-posts near at hand," Harker said, with a smile. "But—but this advertisement, Mr.—er—I beg your pardon, Sir Hubert. Have you tried to trace the person who inserted it?"

"Yes. I have—I have been to the editor of the newspaper which printed it, and— Oh, my Heaven, what was that?"

There had come a sudden bang upon the window as though a heavy stone had been hurled into it, followed by the splintering of glass. Almost simultaneously something had whizzed so near to the head of the magnate that, with a cry of fear, he sprang back, stumbling, and falling heavily into a chair.

For a moment the others stood transfixed, and then there came Harker's voice, sharp and hoarse:

"Crouch! Quick! Stand clear from the window!"

Blake had stepped instinctively into the corner of the wall beside the window. Tinker crouched down by the fireplace.

Only Pedro remained in the centre of the room, and he had sprang to his feet, his head stretched forward in defiance, his fangs bared fiercely.

A deep growl from the bloodhound broke the silence as the men stood waiting. Sir Hubert Brewster had recovered his balance upon the chair, and he was trembling in all his limbs. "Wh—what is this?" he asked hoarsely. "Wh—what is happening?"

No one heeded his question. Blake remained for a few more seconds, his face drawn into a grim, mask-like expression, his eyes fixed upon the window. Then he strode across the room, and from the canvas of an oil-painting on the wall which faced the window he snatched an arrow, which had penetrated just under the upper part of the heavy gilt frame.

"A pleasant souvenir, Sir Hubert!" he said, extending it for inspection.

A whistle broke from the Yard man's lips and a gasp came from the knight.

"My Heaven! Is that what it was?"

"Yes. And it is a missile as well as a missile. See, here is a little note attached to the feather. I think you may emerge now from your dug-outs. We must have slanders fitted to that window, Tinker."

"But—but what does it mean?" asked the knight in a scared tone. "Did that thing really come through the window?"

"It nearly came through your head as well!" Blake said grimly.

U.J.—No. 864.

"My Heaven, yes! I felt something pass within an inch of so. But—but this is incredible, Mr. Blake! Who fired it?"

"That I can't say," Blake said, smiling. "But it was one of our mutual friends—eh, Harker?"

"The same one who followed me here!" the Yard man growled. "I have just seen him!"

"You have? Where?" Blake asked quickly.

"From your bed-room window. He was waiting opposite, in the shadow of a porch. You remember my remark about observation-posts?"

Blake nodded grimly, and then turned again to the visitor.

"You are rather surprised—rather shocked, Sir Hubert," he said. "So ought we to be, really. But in our profession we make it a rule to be surprised at nothing. But this little maid, here, has been murdered several times. A genuine Joan of Arc—eh, Harker?"

He turned and pointed the arrow at the oil-painting, which depicted a little maid seated upon a horse, with a broad vista of hill and plain in the background.

"When I bought this," Blake said to the magnate, "I thought it was a Romney. I have found since that it is a very clever imitation. That is why I leave it here. Do you see this small round hole in the bonnet?"

The knight nodded.

"That was made by the bullet from a powerful air-pistol. It took the tassel of my smoking-cap before it entered the canvas!"

Blake smiled at the expression of horror on the knight's face.

"And this jagged hole on the left," the detective went on, pointing with his arrow.

"Harker was here when that little souvenir arrived. I have it in my museum. A bolt from a cross-bow. My good friends have tried all sorts of weapons to hasten my demise—the very oldest and the most up-to-date. I regard these as honourable scars, Sir Hubert. That is why I am loth to have my painting restored. But let us look at the latest missile!"

Blake moved over to his armchair, and seated himself as nonchalantly as if the letter which he was detaching from the arrow had been dropped through the front door into the mail-basket.

In a few moments he detached the letter and cast a swift glance at the arrow before handing it to Harker.

"A pretty piece of workmanship, that," he said. "That shaft, if I mistake not, has been turned down from an ebony rule. Notice how the steel head has been socketed on, and this feather let into the hilt. I seem to know that workmanship. What do you think?"

Harker took the arrow and examined it carefully, while Blake unfolded the piece of paper which had been artfully contrived to assist in the balance of the missile. As he did so Tinker, who had himself taken careful note of the fine workmanship of the arrow, swung round upon his master.

"This is the work of Lessing; if you ask me, guv'nor," he said. "Lessing, the scientific-instrument maker—Kestrel's man!"

Blake nodded, his eyes fixed on the paper.

"That was my impression," he said. "And this proves it."

"What proves it, guv'nor?"

"This note—it is from Kestrel. See here, Harker!"

He gave the crumpled note to the Yard man upon which had been typed in script letters the following brief message:

"Syndicate hear persistent rumours of your early retirement. Trust they are not too exaggerated. As a sporting offer, I will lay odds of sixty to one against on the first race."

"A la mort."

"LEON KESTREL."

Harker read the short note, and glanced with a wry face at Blake.

"This is the first time you have heard of him in the New Year, eh?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I told you things were looking ugly, Blake." He turned to the knight. "You will find it unpleasant, Sir Hubert, to come under the notice of this man. He is diabolically clever."

"And ruthless," said Blake.

"So it seems," Sir Hubert said, trying to keep his voice steady. "He has already tried to—er—threaten me, it seems. But it is absurd, preposterous! As capable detectives I put it to you. Do you mean to say there is no way to curb the murderous activities of a criminal like this?"

"He is as elusive as a will-o'-the-wisp," Blake said. "The man has the ability to

escape in a score of personalities. It is when he shows his hand that we have a chance—and then only!"

"And I am to go in terror of my life until—"

"The risk is the fault of your wealth and your—your public position," Blake said quietly. "The terror, of course, rests with yourself!"

"But—but surely, Mr. Blake—I am not used—I am not accustomed to the peril of—of—"

"Your peril," Blake said meaningly, "is a thousandth part of the peril which the men went through in France and elsewhere, Sir Hubert, to make your wealth secure. I am sure Mr. Harker, as an officer of the Yard, will do his best to preserve the safety of you"—Blake was going to say "skin," but he added the word "life" out of consideration for the magnate's middle age. "It is fairly obvious that Leon Kestrel and his syndicate have some plan of robbery under way, but we cannot tell what shape his plan will take until—"

He stopped suddenly as something tinkled distinctly into the fire, and Pedro, still on the alert, sprang forward to the grate with a bark as a distinct flogging arose. The bloodhound barked again, and then there came a hoarse choking from the throat of the dog, followed by an almost pitiful whine of pain.

With a sharp cry Blake sprang to his feet.

"Gas, Tinker—gas!" he rapped out. "Out of the room—all of you—for your lives!"

With closed eyes and lips sealed tightly, holding his breath, he sprang forward, seizing up the writhing and heavy body of Pedro where he had fallen upon the mat. The sizzling had ceased upon the fire, and there was nothing to see in the room—no visible evidence of gas or noxious fumes.

Yet Blake's instant conception of the danger had saved them all. He hustled the others quickly on to the landing outside, slamming the door and laying Pedro gently down, where the poor brute lay whining in agony.

"Mustard gas!" Blake said quickly to Harker. "It came down the chimney. Get your automatic ready, and shoot quickly!"

"But—but where are you going?" Harker gasped.

"To the roof, man!" Blake snapped. "That was a glass gas-bomb—dropped from above. Quickly—follow me!"

He sprang up the stairs to the small landing above which a trap-door opened to the roof. He sprang up the ladder which he kept in readiness and slid the bolt, thrusting the trap-door up cautiously with his hand. The slight sound of a movement above, hardly perceptible, enjoined an instant caution.

He paused, and, peering down at Tinker, pointed to a woolly-headed mop which stood in a corner of the landing, a piece of apparatus with which Mrs. Bardell flicked the cobwebs from inaccessible corners. Tinker passed it to him silently, and once more Blake raised the trap-door cautiously and thrust the head of the mop through the opening inch by inch until—

A smashing blow descended, splintering the mop from the shaft, hurling the trap-door back into its socket with such force that Blake swayed upon the ladder, nearly falling on to the white, upturned faces of the three men below.

"I thought so!" Blake gasped. "The murderous skunk! By Jove, if— Hark! He's running. Up, you fellows! After me!"

With a frantic rush he thrust the trap-door outwards and raced up the ladder, his arm extended first, his automatic clutched tightly in his hand.

Half-way through the aperture he caught sight of a small figure moving swiftly in the shadow of the chimney-pots, and, levelling his automatic, he fired twice in quick succession, the sharp reports echoing over the deserted roofs of the metropolis.

"Have you got him?" came Harker's voice from below him on the ladder.

"No, hang it! I believe I've missed. This way!"

He sprang on to the roof and raced across. There was no avenue of escape except by crossing the roofs of two neighbouring buildings and scaling a steep slope which led to the summit of a higher edifice. From the other side of this Blake knew there was an outside stairway down which the fugitive might find his way to safety.

But he would have to be mighty quick to do it with the short start he had. And there was that slope to negotiate.

The roof above the Baker Street apartments of Sexton Blake had been the arena of many a thrilling encounter and grim experience, and had taught the detective to know each minor parapet and gutter as he knew his own consulting-room.

The night was pitch-dark, and the lights of the street below served more to blind than assist him now. But he dashed forward without hesitation, taking the nearest route to the place for which he guessed the fugitive was making.

He veered suddenly, narrowly missing collision with a low wooden tub which had once contained a small tree of sorts, a relic of the time when a tenant had started to turn the place into a roof-garden.

His eyes fixed ahead, he swung round a heavy chimney-stack, and then a figure shot forward under his feet, tripping him so cleanly that he came down heavily and painfully.

Blake was conscious of a quick snarl, of a man's hot breath close to his face; he felt a man's hands clutching murderously at his throat.

He writhed spasmodically and flung himself over, tearing with his own hands at the arms of the man above him. And as he lay with his ear to the roof he heard the clatter of footsteps approaching.

"Tinker! Harker!" he called hoarsely. "This way!" He rolled again, hunched his shoulders, flung himself forward, and gripped with all his force at the coat of his assailant, using the remnants of his breath to cry out again: "This way! I have him!"

A fearful Spanish oath broke from the lips of the figure beside him. He felt the man's lithe body squirm like that of a puma, and then break free.

He sprang after the man, as he fled only a few yards ahead, cursing the unlucky fate which had sent his automatic flying from his hand into the darkness as he had fallen, slithering with a metallic ring across the cement roof.

With his automatic now he could have riddled the man. He could have brought him down as easily as—

A sudden hoarse cry came from ahead, a snarl, and the sound of someone falling heavily. Blake hoped and prayed that it was this man. But he knew the next instant that it was Tinker who had gone down in the collision, and Blake himself almost collided with Harker as he came up, panting.

For an instant Blake paused, and caught the Yard man by the arm.

"There he is! There he is!" he panted. "I have turned him! He cannot escape that way! If we are careful we shall get him! Don't be afraid to shoot if he turns on us!"

The fugitive had now been trapped into a small isthmus of the roof, from which there was no escape, and Blake and Harker charged down upon him. They saw him lurking in the shadow of the parapet, they saw him leap up suddenly, and stand distinctly—a black, silhouette figure against the dark grey of the sky.

Harker raised his revolver, but Blake clapped his hand upon his arm.

"Not yet—not yet! If he wants to commit suicide—"

"By Heaven, he is!" The man had risen suddenly erect upon the parapet. They saw him raise his arms to their fullest extent above his head, the hands brought together, in the manner of a high diver.

"Stop, you fool!" Blake shouted the words hoarsely, but the strange fugitive took no notice. Without a sound he leapt out from the parapet, and disappeared into the chasm below.

With a cry the two detectives sprang forward, peering down into Baker Street, waiting with a strange feeling of physical nausea for the inevitable thud. It did not come. And yet the man's death was inevitable.

Blake and Harker leaned far out, trying to penetrate the gloom—to discern something tangible upon the poorly-lighted pathway beneath them. In the darkness the altitude did not seem so great. They were hardly aware of the fact that Tinker had joined them, and was peering down from round, scared eyes. They did not notice the trembling figure of Sir Hubert Brewster approaching—only just emerged from the safety of the house.

"He struck before we got here!" Harker muttered, breaking the tense silence. "It doesn't take long to drop, poor fool!" he added grimly.

"We had better get below," Blake said. "I

fancy when we get there we shall find one less of the syndicate to deal with."

"You think this was one of Kestrel's men, guv'nor?"

"I am sure of it!"

"He dropped the gas-bomb?"

"Yes. But let's hurry. I have not warned Mrs. Bardell! If she goes upstairs while we—"

He did not finish, but sprang back across the roof to the trap-door. Quickly they passed down again into the house. They found Mrs. Bardell at the foot of the ladder, trembling and apparently in tears.

"Oh, gracious alive, Mister Blake, what's happened now?" she asked hoarsely.

"We've spilt some mustard-gas," Blake said. "You've got a touch of it already, old lady. Get below quickly! It will take some time to disperse!"

"Oh dear! Oh dear!" the old lady whined. "My eyes is scorching as if I'd been peeling onions in peeks! What—what awful stuff, Mister Blake! It ain't right to have sich things in that labottlery of yours, sir! Reely it—"

"Come below, quickly," Blake said. "Before it gets worse. Put your apron over your face. I will lead you!"

He enjoined the others to close their eyes tightly and to hold their breath as they passed across the landing outside the consulting-room, for the insidious gas was already percolating through the lower chinks of the door.

They groped their way quickly to the ground-floor, and, leaving Mrs. Bardell gasping and mopping her red eyes, he sprang quickly to the front door, followed by the others.

Blake half turned as the City magnate followed them.

"I advise you to remain in the house, Sir Hubert!" he said grimly. "I am afraid the—sight will not be a pleasant one!"

Sir Hubert came, however. He had that morbid curiosity which is stronger than fear. He followed the others as Blake led the way along the footpath to a spot beneath the part of the parapet from which the fugitive had leapt.

"Ah!"

A quick, low cry broke from Blake's lips, and he paused, with a natural reluctance, as there appeared, a few yards ahead, the huddled figure of a man.

"Smashed, poor fool!" muttered the Yard man, striding forward.

There was less imagination in the Yard man's make-up than in Blake's. In order to approach the pitiful figure of the man Blake had to overcome a swift repugnance which familiarity could never master. Harker had reached a point in his career when he was conscious of little else except the matter of fact.

He approached the body, and went down swiftly on one knee, groping for the wrist doubled under the body.

"My heaven!" he cried. "It is marvellous! The man still lives!"

"Alive!" cried Blake, in astonishment, for after such a leap it seemed impossible.

"Yes. He does not seem too badly smashed, either! Wonders will never cease! Give me a hand to get him over, Blake!"

Blake bent and took the feet of the prostrate figure, and they turned him carefully, revealing as they did so a small pool of blood upon the pavement beneath him. The limbs of the man seemed quite intact; the head was not battered.

The eyes of both detectives were fixed wonderingly upon the pool of blood. It did not seem to fit in at all with their preconceptions.

"That's very strange, isn't it, Harker?" Blake muttered.

"Duced strange!" Harker muttered. "But let's get him in gently."

"Haden't I better fetch a stretcher?" Tinker asked.

"No. It doesn't matter. If you will support him in the middle on this side, Mr.—er—Sir Whatyoumaycall—perhaps you will support him on the left here!"

Harker could not be bothered with particulars of etiquette at this moment. The magnate stepped forward obediently, falling into the natural rut of service as such men will in matters out of their normal sphere.

Together they bore the prostrate figure of the man into the hall, and lay him down upon the broad mat. Harker reached up to increase the light from the lamp above, while Blake bent over the figure of the man, loosening the stiff and immaculate collar from the throat.

Sir Hubert Brewster, having mastered an inclination to faint, stepped forward, and ventured a peep into the pallid, upturned features of the dying man.

They were regular features, clean cut, and distinguished with no hint of swarthy—a fact which had sent a quick thrill of surprise through the nervous system of the detective. Sir Hubert bent, and then bent a little lower.

Suddenly he threw himself down upon his knees and peered wildly into the upturned face.

"My heavens!" he cried hoarsely. "But this is Tremlin—Tremlin! Oh, my heavens, how—how—"

"Tremlin! Who is Tremlin?" Blake rapped out swiftly, turning upon him.

"My secretary—my private secretary!" the magnate gasped.

He peered again into the white face, and then rose unsteadily to his feet, staring first at Blake and then at Harker, in utter and abject terror and bewilderment.

Blake watched him for a moment. His brows narrowed strangely. He shot presently a swift look at Tinker, and then he bent again over the body of the man on the rug beneath. Taking out his knife, he cut quickly the clothing away from the spot over the right lung where the blood was issuing.

The detective himself was dumfounded. It was possible that in falling he had struck some sharp promontory which had pierced the thorax. But even that did not account for his amazing freedom from injury in other respects.

A leap from that altitude was sufficient to snap the vertebrae of a man a dozen times—to break his neck—to shatter his head on the stone and splinter the chief bones in his body—to do all of it at the same time. Yet there were no visible signs of injury about this man's head. His limbs seemed quite intact. His back was certainly not broken, otherwise they would not have carried him as they had.

And as Blake with deft, quick fingers stripped the clothing from the man there were revealed upon the flesh not even a bad bruise. The detective, who at the work of first-aid was the equal of any doctor, cut the white shirt of the prostrate man away from his chest, leaving the flesh bare. Tinker had appeared swiftly with a bowl of warm water and a sponge, and Blake took the latter quickly, sponging the wound clean, and revealing a small white gash in the flesh not half an inch in width, and barely visible until the blood flowed, which it did with a dangerous freedom.

With a puzzled expression Blake leaned forward and forced open the clenched lips, revealing the presence of blood in the mouth of the victim. It was evidence to Blake that the wound was deep; it had penetrated to the lung.

In that instant certain facts became obvious which left Blake completely and utterly dumbfounded.

The wound from which this man was suffering had not been contracted in his fall. He was not suffering from any injuries of concussion!

Sexton Blake stared up into the inquiring faces of Harker and Tinker.

"There is a mystery here I cannot fathom for the life of me!" he said. "It is inexplicable! Do you know what has happened to this man?"

"No—what?" they gasped.

"He has been stabbed," Blake said grimly. "Stabbed with a dagger or a stiletto through the left lung. Ring through to the police, Tinker. The case is urgent!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

A Change of Venue.

PERHAPS it is as well, my lad, that we've changed headquarters for a few days," Blake said, looking across at Tinker as the lad lay back in the depths of a sumptuous armchair.

"The Baker Street front was developing a certain liveliness, guv'nor," the lad said, with a smile.

The detective nodded and glanced round on the luxurious comfort of the private room which he had secured pro tem. in the Hotel Burleigh. The mustard gas, which had been so cleverly and daringly released in the consulting-room at Baker Street, had driven them to find other accommodation until the antidote which Blake had set in action before leaving should have time to work its cure.

Poor old Pedro, suffering from a very bad sniff of the insidious concoction, had been taken to the veterinary surgeons for treatment. And even Mrs. Bardell had been

transported to the hotel, her eyes watering copiously from a mixture of gas and grief, of which the proportions of the former were much in excess of the latter.

The removal of the old lady, even for a few days, was like uprooting an oak, and it was only after Blake had rescued her box with the aid of a gasmask that she would consent to accompany him and Tinker to the big West End hotel.

The remainder of that dramatic evening, when the thrilling hunt upon the roof had terminated in a tragic and impenetrable mystery had been so full of incident that even in the clear mind of Sexton Blake events had grown a little confused.

There had been the arrival of the police and a brief explanation by Harker, after which the body of the injured man had been removed post-haste to the hospital, where only half an hour ago—so Blake gathered via the telephone—he still hovered on the brink of death.

There had followed the removal to the hotel, the instalment of Mrs. Bardell—which was not so easy a matter as one might imagine—and Blake's subsequent return to the flat to test the density of the gas and to release the antidote which he kept ready bottled in the laboratory.

He had slept that night the sleep of sheer exhaustion, both physical and nervous, although he was up betimes in the morning, back at Baker Street, searching for some clue which might throw some light upon the mystery.

But he had found nothing except what confirmed their dramatic experience of the previous night.

Gaining access to his own roof by the escape staircase of the neighbouring building, he made a close and thorough scrutiny. He found ample evidence of the violent struggle he had had with this man in the lee of the chimney-stack. He found the heavy piece of piping, evidently picked up on the roof, with which the man had made the first murderous onslaught at the trap-door, where the mop had suffered instead of Blake by the joint good offices of Fate and foresight.

Blake found distinct and unmistakable marks upon the parapet from which he and Tinker as well as Harker had seen him hurl himself; and a swift optical comparison assured Blake that this part of the parapet was almost vertically above the spot on the pavement where they had come across the huddled figure of Tremlin, the secretary of Sir Hubert Brewster.

What could this man Tremlin have been doing upon the roof? Was it possible that he was a new agent in the Kestrel Syndicate?

Above all, why had he not been dashed to pieces when he leapt? How came he to be on the brink of death from stabbing?

They were the primary and superficial problems which challenged solution, which sent Blake back to the scene of the struggle. And now as he sat in the Hotel Burleigh, his eyes fixed upon the youthful face of his assistant, he felt himself as far removed as ever from the solution of the mystery.

"Baker Street was getting lively," he said presently, resuming the trend of their first remarks, "and I shouldn't be surprised if things get lively all round. I'm inclined to think that this is the beginning of the summer's New Year offensive. The first barrage, my lad!"

"He is after our morale, guv'nor," the lad said, with a grim smile. "He thinks he can put the wind up us, like 'Jerry' tried to. That arrow through the window, telling us our number's up, reminds me of the Boche when he dropped a bomb and a few leaflets one after the other."

"And it is likely to prove just about as effective," Blake said.

"Of course," said Tinker. "But then he tries another trick by gassing us. If you had not tumbled quick, guv'nor, to that little surprise-pocket which trickled down the chimney we should have all been in a hospital and not an hotel. I suppose this fellow Tremlin is a new merchant which the summer has bribed into the syndicate. And he has let himself in first time, poor fool!"

Blake shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. There are some strangely contradictory facts to face, my lad. When Brewster comes this evening he may be able to shed some light. The man's condition last evening was far too abject to extract anything useful."

"Brewster may not be able to tell us much," the lad said. "He recognised the man as his secretary, and the fact obviously upset him. There is no doubt about his surprise being genuine. And if Tremlin has

been in league with Kestrel, conspiring against his own employer, you can bet that he has been careful to throw sufficient dust in Sir Hubert's eyes."

"We have two sets of facts," Blake said thoughtfully, "which fit in quite normally except in one particular. And that particular is so important and the disparity in facts on that point so preposterous that, literally, I don't think we know where we are, my lad."

Tinker knew pretty well what his master referred to, but he directed an inquiring gaze upon the steady grey eyes. A repetition of those facts would help him to clarify the problem in his own mind.

"We'll present it simply," Blake said, "leaving the question of Kestrel and his syndicate out of it altogether. First, we have the dropping of a gas-bomb into the fireplace—a neat and obvious attempt to put us all hors de combat for some weeks—if not months."

"The dropping of that bomb indicates pretty assuredly the presence of an enemy on the roof, and when we all repaired thither we find that presence very forcibly confirmed. I fire at the man and miss, and subsequently close with him, but he gets away. We head him off, however, into a part of the roof from which there can be no escape except over the parapet—to his death!"

"By the evidence of our own eyes we saw the man mount the parapet and leap—evidently preferring suicide to capture. The height from that parapet to Baker Street is a hundred feet if it is an inch. No man alive could leap from a height of a hundred feet on to a stone pavement without being shattered to bits."

"Consequently, we go below confident in finding the shattered remains of the man on the pavement or in the street immediately below that point in the parapet. And we find his huddled body—as we anticipated. The fact that he is Brewster's secretary is, for this argument, beside the point. We find him. That is the first set of facts."

"Secondly, we take up the body of the man and carry him inside, having found to our astonishment, that he still lived. And this is where an utter mystery enters. We find him dying—but not from the effect of his fall. Instead, we find his limbs and body intact, showing absolutely no signs of violent concussion; and we discover that he is suffering from being stabbed over the lung by a dagger or stiletto."

"Can we wonder, then," the detective added, with lips pursed, "that Sir Hubert Brewster has been reduced to a very sorry mental condition? Can we be surprised that Harker is tearing his hair and wondering whether he is awake?"

Tinker was fully conscious of the almost absurd nature of the mystery; and yet there was something almost flippant in Blake's attitude towards it at times which made him hopeful for an easy solution. He proceeded to pump Blake now discreetly.

"You have a theory, I suppose, guv'nor?"

"No; I refuse to theorise until I have the facts of Brewster and of Tremlin himself—if he recovers."

"But if he doesn't?"

"Don't put forward premature hypotheses, my lad," Blake said. "Yes, boy?—for a messenger had entered at that moment."

"What name?"

"Sir 'Erbert Brewster, sir. Here's his card."

"Show him up," Blake said; "and have another look at the card as you go down to see if you've got the name right."

"Yessir!" said the boy—who made that stereotyped reply to every request whether he intended to comply with it or not—and a little later he returned, ushering the magnate into the room with a great show of ceremony.

Sir Hubert looked remarkably subdued and rather pale.

"Well—well, Mr. Blake," he said, "are there any developments in this—er—this horrible business?"

"The hospital tells me that your secretary is no better and no worse this evening. He is still hovering on the brink."

"So I have been informed. Poor devil! Really, my brain has never been so racked. I can hardly think at all. I have had two men from Scotland Yard and two from the police. I could hardly remember enough to give them a tangible reply. I am afraid I am suffering from shock, Mr. Blake."

"Undoubtedly," Blake said. "But I should refrain from worry. It serves no purpose—except a bad one. Excuse me a moment!"

He leaned over, pushed a bell, ordered some brandy-and-soda, and once more lay back in his chair.

"I advise you to go home and go to bed, Sir Hubert," he said. "A good night's rest will work wonders with you. I should do so without delay."

The detective's advice was not altogether disinterested. He wanted to see the back of the knight as soon as he had extracted the desired information.

"I think I will, Mr. Blake. But, of course, duty first. If I can be of any service—"

"There are two or three questions—that is all," Blake said quietly. "They concern this secretary of yours, Mr. Tremlin. How long has he been in your service?"

"Seven years," said Sir Hubert.

"Indeed. And have you always found his character beyond reproach?"

"Absolutely beyond all reproach. He is, to some extent, a relative. He married a niece of mine. He is more like a son than an employee. He and his wife are part heirs in my will, Mr. Blake, and—"

"I see. He would benefit from your death."

"Really, Mr. Blake—er—you must not say that. It is too terrible to suggest—"

"I suggest nothing. I merely ask for a statement of fact. How long have you known Tremlin?"

"Since he was a boy at school. He was my own son's bosom companion."

"And he comes of good family?"

"One of the best. He belongs to the Tremlins of Nottingham. The family has an impeccable record, Mr. Blake."

"Yes, I am prepared to believe that he has. Now, tell me, Sir Hubert—can you account for the presence of Tremlin upon my roof last evening and of his murderous attack upon me?"

"It is totally, utterly inexplicable!"

"He had, I suppose, no financial worries?"

"None at all. I have seen my niece to-day, and I asked her that. She was amazed at the question. He and she have a joint account. They are well provided for, Mr. Blake."

"H'm! And I suppose the presence of your secretary outside my flat when you were inside is equally mysterious?"

"An absolute mystery, Mr. Blake—if I die where I sit!"

"You have not the least conception of how he came to be stabbed?"

"Not the least. It is too strange, too tragic to contemplate. My poor niece is distraught—distracted, Mr. Blake!"

The detective nodded sympathetically.

"When did you last see Tremlin—previous to the discovery of his body outside the flat?" he asked presently.

"I saw him immediately before coming to see you. I left him at my office."

"And you came straight from there to Baker Street?"

"By taxi—yes."

"Did he know where you were going?" Blake asked.

"Yes. I had discussed the matter with him. It was partly at his suggestion that I came to you."

"Oh, it was?" said Blake quickly.

"Yes."

"And have you been able to ascertain any particulars of his movements after you left prior to our discovery?"

"Yes; but not many," the merchant said. "We had both remained rather late that evening. The staff had all gone except the porter. I told Tremlin to go home just before I left, but he said he would stay for another half an hour to clear up his correspondence."

"And did he stay that half an hour?"

"No. I learned from the porter that he left almost immediately after me."

"He did?"

"Yes."

Blake gazed thoughtfully into the fire for a moment. "Where is your office, Sir Hubert?"

"In Bentley Street."

"Then it might take your secretary about forty minutes to forty-five to walk to Baker Street?"

"Quite that. Nearer an hour, I should say."

Blake's gaze resought the glowing embers, and he was silent for a while. Presently he looked up again.

"Do you happen to know how Mr. Tremlin spent his leisure time?"

"He is a member of the Junior Constitutional Club, and is well known there. But he is of a studious nature, and studying for the actuaries' exam. He spends a great deal of

time at home. I am sure of that. He has few friends, but what he has he keeps."

Blake nodded, and rose from the chair, putting out his hand to the magnate.

"Thanks very much!" he said. "Now for a good night's sleep, Sir Hubert! I am sure you need it."

The detective's well-affected concern for the welfare of the knight had the desired effect of dismissing him gracefully. Blake turned again to Tinker.

"Tremlin is either perfectly innocent, my lad," he said, "or else he is of the water which runs deep. Of course, he may have learned the art of camouflage from Kestrel, but somehow I don't think so. I wonder how the old lady is getting on? She does not tumble to hotel life at all."

Blake was as solicitous for the comfort of Mrs. Bardell as for his own mother, and he passed now up the stairs and along the broad corridor, pausing at the door of the bedroom he had taken for her.

He tapped at the door several times, and, eliciting no response, opened it slightly and peered in. The bedroom was empty, but from the small boudoir leading out of it there came the sound of voices.

"Of course, I know as how there's a bathroom, my dear," came the old lady's familiar voice, "but if I stepped out to try and find it I should be as 'elpless as one of the babes in the wood. 'Owver you find your way about, my dear, Hi can't think. It's enough to bewilder anyone, and that's a fact! Not, mind you, that I don't like a wash, and 'ave one, mind, like every other person what believes in reg'lar daily ablutions; but, between you and me, dear, us sort—she lowered her voice—"there's nothink like a quiet sluiche in the sink!"

Reflected in a mirror Blake caught sight of the rather amused face of a chambermaid.

"But if you would ring, ma'am," she said, "I would bring you hot water up here, so that—"

"Oh, no; not me!" exclaimed the old lady. "I ain't one of them sort, my dear, and don't think it. I simply 'ate bells, which as I know how your pore pretty 'ead must ache with 'em—always a-tinging and a-tintabulating, as the saying is, making the kitchen sound as if it was being bombarded by 'undreds of invisible mullin-men! No, dear. If I should want 'ot water or 'ay-think, I'll come to the stairs an' 'oller!"

"But the other guests might object," the chambermaid pointed out.

"Let 'em!" snapped the old lady. "I'm a guest, too, ain't I? And it's nothink to do with them if somebody else is paying for me! Tell the manageress to send 'em up to me, my dear! But I suppose I've got to get ready for dinner now, which as I'd better far be cooking it," the old lady said wistfully, "instead of setting down there, feeling that dressed up and frilled, like a perfect old 'ainbone, my dear! I suppose there's no chance of gettin' a bite below stairs, is there, my pretty?"

"I'm afraid the manager," the chambermaid said, "would be—be annoyed."

"That's not the manager I see popping up and down like a Jack-in-the-box in that 'ere cage, is it, my dear?" the old lady asked.

"No, that's a lift-man," said the maid, repressing a smile.

"Whoever he is, he wants pushing over the banisters!" Mrs. Bardell pronounced generously. "Thank you, dear, for popping in for a chat! If it wasn't for you I should be downright miserable!"

Blake retired, closing the door silently while he had the opportunity, and there was a smile on his face as he returned to his room. He had suspected that the old lady was a little bored by life in a fashionable hotel, but she would never have thought of admitting that fact to him or Tinker, which made it rather difficult to remedy. He was still wondering how soon it could be that the old lady might be returned to the more congenial atmosphere of Baker Street, when there came a tap on his shoulder. He swung round.

"You, Harker?" he said quickly.

"Yes. I want to see you for a few minutes, Blake. I can't stop longer. The chief is properly shaking things up over this business."

"Come in here, and tell me all about it."

He led the way into the room, where Tinker looked surprised and pleased to see the Yard man enter with his master. Harker sat down in a manner which indicated plainly that he had not time to stay.

"You've told the chief everything, of course?" Blake said.

"Yes, everything. About this advertisement which Brewster came to you about,

about the arrow, and then this gas-bomb business."

"What does he say?"

"He thinks I'm suffering from hallucinations or something in respect of this man Tremlin and the stabbing mystery," Harker said.

"He well may," Blake said. "But you told him I could corroborate in every detail?"

"Yes. But he's got a grouse on with you, Blake."

"With me? Why?"

"I told him you would know nothing about it."

"About what?"

"This advertisement of yours."

"Advertisement!" Blake repeated, staring at him.

"My dear chap, please start at the beginning! What's the trouble now?"

"Sorry!" Harker said, with a wry smile.

"My brain's a bit woolly this evening. But the chief don't improve matters when he starts tearing his hair. Look here!"

He drew a small newspaper cutting from his pocket, and Blake took it, with a slight feeling of nausea. He was becoming sick of the sight of newspaper cuttings. It had evidently been taken from the small advertisements of a leading daily, and a fierce light sprang into the eyes of the detective as he read it. It ran:

"SEXTON BLAKE & COMPANY, the well-known Detectives and Private Inquiry Agents, beg to announce that, in view of the total inefficiency of the Police and Official Service to deal with important criminal investigation, they will undertake same in any case where the remuneration is satisfactory. Shadowing, deciphering. Private reports. Blackmail experts.—Apply Box 1078."



"By Heavens, it's Evescourt!" cried Harker, pale to the lips.

Something akin to a snort of anger broke from the detective as he read the notice. It was a paragraph which struck him in perhaps the most vulnerable portion of his armour—his professional pride.

"Whose work is this, Harker?" he snapped, crumbling the paper in his hand.

"Yours, presumably," the Yard man said, with a half-smile.

"Mine be hanged! The chief doesn't think that I inserted this—infernal tosh, man!"

"I told him you didn't!"

"But he thought that I might?"

"Apparently, yes."

"Then tell him—tell him he's a— That I thought better of him!" Blake said angrily.

"I'm inclined to think that this is some of Kestrel's pretty wit. What, are you going, Harker?"

"Yes. I've got to dig out some facts respecting this man Tremlin. I'm working night and day these times. I've got a watching brief to-morrow night, at one of these infernal social functions! I don't know why the chief sends me to these concerns!"

"What is it?"

"A moneybags' masked dance and ball. Mrs. Nouveau-Riche, with a few fathoms of pearls, and wants to wear 'em all! Gee, but it makes me tired! These people ask for trouble! Old Brewster is a shining light in it!"

"Really! What dance is it? Whose?"

"The Sixty Club. It is an annual rite. I believe, this ball—a sort of religious carnival given by the high priests of dollar worship! But I must be off!"

Blake smiled for an instant, but his face became immediately grave and thoughtful.

"Shall you tell the chief I know nothing of this heastly advert, or shall I ring him up myself?"

"Ring him up, and talk to him like a Dutch

uncle," Harker said. "He ought to have known you better than to question it! So-long!"

The Yard man passed out, leaving behind him in the minds of Blake and Tinker the impression of a man tired and mentally weary.

Blake paced the room for a quarter of an hour, his lips pursed, his brows contracted in chagrin.

He sat down presently, and, seizing a pen, wrote a quick note to a prominent Press agent, asking him to publish in all the papers a disclaimer of the impudent paragraph. He also instructed the agent to circularise the Press, asking them to confirm by telephone any notice of advertisement sent for insertion under his name.

It was this, in none too pleasant a mood, that he went a little later with Tinker down into the grill-room of the hotel, where dinner was served. Mrs. Bardell had already descended, and, standing rather awkwardly, glancing about her in obvious discomfort at the array of diners, had wondered when her

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master would arrive to mollify her self-consciousness.

She watched the waiters enviously, thinking how much more at home she would have been in their positions. She was conscious of quick, amused glances from the men, of a certain distant hauteur in the manner of the women, many of whom, under the wartime spell of official gallantry, had acquired a certain familiarity with unfamiliar luxuries.

Mrs. Bardell was not an actress in any sense. When she felt awkward, her looks, if anything, exaggerated her feelings. And she could almost have cried with relief when a girl with a gentle, oval face, and eyes which twinkled merrily from under slightly drooping lashes came up to her unassumingly, and drew her off into the comparative seclusion of a resplendent palm.

"It is so irritating when friends keep you waiting!" she said. "I am waiting, too, so I thought we might chat until both lots turn up!"

She laughed merrily, and the old lady's worried expression died away. Her face broadened and beamed at the frank smiles and ingenuous manners of the pretty stranger. In a remarkably short time she had entrusted a number of private confidences to Mrs. Bardell. How she was a country girl, and not used to hotels—how everything bewildered her, and she did not know which knife or fork to use at table—how her father wanted her to be engaged to a young clergyman, and how she did not care for him.

To all of which Mrs. Bardell listened, open mouthed, and in return imparted a number of confidences concerning her own petty inconveniences, and how she had been forced to an hotel because their own house was full of some sort of gas—not what you used for candles and lights, and such, but some kind of stuff with mustard in it.

It was thus in close confidential parley that Blake and Tinker found her, and it was with a swift glance into the face of the detective and a half-ho that the ingenious girl surrendered Mrs. Bardell into Blake's keeping.

Then, with a smile, she turned on her heel, leaving Blake staring after her, and Tinker, too.

For in an instant they had recognised the beautiful face and the strangely-drooping lids which gave such a strange, inscrutable expression to those eyes. There was a half-humorous mockery in the subtle grace of her carriage as she swept away, a hint of banter on the red lips, slightly twisted, as she shot one quick glance over her shoulder.

They knew this girl for the daughter of Father Bierce, the old servant of Leon Kestrel. There were in the whole perilous armoury of the Kestrel Syndicate no weapons more potent nor more insidious than were these inscrutable eyes of Fifi, the adventuress, the red, quick-smiling lips, the copper hair, which fell in the disarray of studied art about her low forehead.

And it was the figure of Fifi that they saw now moving swiftly across the hotel until it disappeared.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Dance.

THE rhythmic lilt of a haunting waltz rose in a sweet diminuendo from the concerted violins of the famous orchestra of the Hotel Magnifique, which sat concealed in a verdant camouflage of exotic greenery at the end of the great ball-room.

There was something gently voluptuous in the music so hidden that it seemed to emanate from the very petals of the clustering blooms. The soft lights from five huge candelabra found a shimmering reflection in the glass-like floor. In the centre of the ball-room, concealed lights of every hue played on the leaping fountain, and turned the spraying column, as if by fairy magic, into a geyser of fire.

The Masque of the Sixty Club was famous for luxury and splendour, and to-night all the arts of the Sybarite had combined to present a spectacle which had never been surpassed.

Lord Evescourt was the master of the ceremonies, and he had won a name among the opulent as a master of effect. It was he who gave veritably a blank cheque to the Directors of the most resplendent hotel in Europe, and said, "Surpass yourselves!" And the present gorgeous setting of the ball to-night embodied the highest result of all their efforts.

Even the millionaires gasped audibly and

rubbed their hands, and ushered in their bejewelled womenfolk with an air of proprietary pride.

The gentle lilt of the opening waltz grew gradually in volume, and quaintly bizarre figures moved out in pairs, and, moving gracefully, became, as it were, merged in the gentle rhythm of the scene.

The committee of the Sixty Club had a weakness for disguise. It was their whim at the annual ball to insist upon fancy dress, and now upon the polished floor Motley reigned supreme in infinite variety.

Pierrot and pierrette, columbinè and clown, Titania and Oberon, and on the hands and throats of the women gleamed a fortune in gold and precious stones.

Lord Evescourt and the Ball Committee had done their best to create an atmosphere of luxury and carnival, of unalloyed pleasure and abandon; and the magic playing of the fountain, the subdued lights, the haunting lilt of the band, proved irresistible. The dancers were caught up as if by magic and transported to a world of fairyland—a world where jewels were as plentiful as crystals of falling water, where music was the speech of the happy denizens, where dancing was perpetual and fatigue unknown.

The soft speech of the men and the gentle laughter of the women filled the hall. The floor was thronged, the spell was cast.

But there was one guest at least who remained aloof from the sensuous magic of the ball. Detective-Inspector Harker, of the C.I.D., stood alone in a corner of the hall, his eyes searching the whirling throng, his lips moving slowly in a muttered malediction on the senseless discomfort of evening-dress.

He was there not as a unit of pleasure, but as a camouflaged policeman. He also was in fancy-dress, and a little too fanciful for his liking. His sharp eyes caught the glint upon the slender fingers of the women as they swung gently by. He took professional note of the gorgeous pearls which encircled the white columns of their throats. There was a magnificent tiara in the coiffeur of a stout lady which made Harker bite his nails.

"Jewellery ought to be abolished!" he muttered. "It makes more crooks than anything else in the world. I shouldn't be surprised to see any of this stuff go. And I should stand the rub for it."

A stoutish man with broad shoulders and a heavy step shuffled up and peered at him between the slits of a black silk mask. Harker knew him by his build.

"Hallo, Browning! You been detailed, too?"

"Yes. The chief told me I should find you here. Why don't you wear a poke-face?"

"I've got one in my pocket. I'm going to put it on in a minute. What do you think of it?"

"Wonderful! But, gee, Harker, what a wicked waste!"

"If they've got it they might as well spend it. But I never saw so many sparklers at one gathering. They would make a pretty haul for an enterprising spirit, Browning!"

The plain-clothes man pursed his lips and nodded.

"These sort of people ask for trouble much more often than they get it," he mused.

"One bad man with a shooting-iron and a few buck-jumpers could make a nasty stir in this hop, Harker. Still, I reckon they haven't let in anyone without proper credentials—eh?"

"I hope not," Harker said, with a smile. "But I wish I could change this tarnation collar. It's cutting my ears off!"

Browning smiled and peered across the room.

"Who's old Sir Galahad looking at over there?" he muttered, without making any indication of the direction. "Standing beside the fourth pillar beneath that spray of orchids."

Harker glanced over casually at the figure of a stoutish man in a very excellent imitation of a coat-of-arms. There was something in the pose of the headpiece which gave the impression that the eyes beneath were fixed upon them.

The Yard man's eye fixed upon the man in the coat of mail as he kept on talking glibly. Although he did not realise it, the music and atmosphere of the place was having its effect even upon his spirits.

"Richard the Lion Heart, I expect," he said. "Rather picturesque get-up, isn't it? Still, I'd rather be trussed up in this suit than I'd have on that pair of corrugated pyjamas. Must feel as if you've got your napper in an incubator—eh, Browning?"

"Yep," said Browning, who affected a few Americanisms. "I knew a chap once in the States who went to a ball in a suit of mail,

and he cussed his choice ever since. He got there in a taxi, but he couldn't dance and he couldn't sit down, so there was nothing for it but to stand up in the bar and jerk cocktails through his visor. The result was that he got very blotchy; so much, in fact, that he began to imagine that he was the Black Prince and went out. He hailed a cab, and offered to make the caddy a feudal baron if he'd drive him to Agincourt. The caddy advised him to go back to the dance, and so he told the Jehu to drive to the deuce instead, and he'd walk!"

"And he tried?" said Harker, with a chuckle.

"It was very late," Browning said, "and the streets deserted. But that didn't worry him. He walked on for a bit until he saw a lady, and, thinking it was Joan of Ark, he chased her. Result was he fell down and couldn't get up again, so he rolled into the gutter, pulled his visor down, and went to sleep. When he woke up he was on a stretcher in the museum of Madison Square, with a couple of policemen trying to take his trousers off with a screw-driver. But, talking of Mephisto—He comes, that merchant!"

Sure enough, the mail-clad figure was moving over towards them, and as he stopped before them a smile of amusement came to the face of both the men.

"Good-evening, Sir Lancelot!" Browning said.

"Good-evening! Do I recognise Mr. Harker?"

"Yes. Whom have I the pleasure—"

The mailed man raised his visor, and Harker saw enough of the rather flaccid features underneath to recognise an acquaintance of the previous eventful evening. The face was still very pale, as it had been when Harker saw it last.

"You, Sir Hubert?"

"Yes. I did not expect you would be here, though I knew that certain of your fraternity would be detailed."

"My colleague—Mr. Browning," Harker said, indicating his companion. "We are the only two, I believe, on the inside. I trust we shall not be required."

"I think not," Sir Hubert Brewster said. "I sincerely trust not. I have seen Lord Evescourt, and he has assured me that the very greatest care has been taken in respect of the invitations."

"Which is Lord Evescourt?" Harker asked.

"That is he in the ermine cloak and the judicial wig. I fancy it was his ambition once to be a judge. I know he favours the costume."

Harker half-turned, and his eyes sought out the spare figure of the peer. He was seated upon a little dais at the farther end, talking to a small group of bejewelled ladies who appeared to be enjoying his society immensely.

"He is a splendid raconteur," Sir Hubert told them. "The women adore him. Yet he is a confirmed bachelor!"

"So I believe. His private life is rather isolated, isn't it?" Harker said.

And the knight nodded, glancing at his dance-card.

He muttered a word of apology and lowered his visor once more, moving off in apparent search of his partner. Harker's hand sought his pocket, and, turning, he assumed a violet strip of slotted silk which produced a remarkable change in his appearance.

His hand resting lightly upon the arm of his colleague, he moved forward along the ball-room, pausing now and then to watch the dancing of an interesting couple.

Browning, though not such an efficient officer, had a keener sense of humour and enjoyment than Harker. As they traversed the room he emitted periodic exclamations of surprise and admiration, amusing Harker with a running fire of amusing comment.

"Gee, Harker!" he muttered. "That courtier there with the goatee beard and the spindleshanks with short feet. He's missed his part. He should have been a satyr or a pair of compasses. And look at Justice in her robes! My hat, Harker, but what a peach!"

The Yard man smiled and glanced listlessly at the tall, girlish figure with the oval face and white silk handkerchief bound across her eyes, with two slits artfully contrived so that she could see.

"Blind justice!" Harker murmured. "Eh?"

"Exactly! And with Auburn hair. She moves like a sylph. Gee, Harker, but she'd make a man commit a crime so that she might even frown upon him!"

"How many Scotchies did you have before

"You came here?" the Yard man said, smiling. "You're getting sloppy, Browning!"

"I saw a few advertisements—that's as near as I got to a drink!" Browning retorted good-humouredly. "What's this fellow? Claude Duval for a cert!"

"The highwayman johnnie, Dick Turpin," said Harker. "It's a good get-up, Brownie." "Shades of the highway!" muttered the other, looking after the tall figure of the dancer. "If he had any dog-sense, he'd have a real iron, too, in that belt of his. Old Turpin never had a chance like this. Any one of these females would give a stage-coach a thousand-dollar start and beat it walking! But Harry Freeman's in the bar. What about a wet?"

A bar, artfully contrived behind a shield of greenery, dispensed everything in drinks at the expense of the Sixty Club, and it was here that the two detectives repaired for a while, knowing the place to be a magnet for any of the fraternity who might perchance have secured an entry to the hall.

The bar offered also a useful observation-post, and the primary duty of the two men was observation.

The waltz was succeeded by a one-step, and that by a fox-trot, which enlivened the pulses of the dancers and set the pageant of gaily moving with swift merriment.

Browning, peering through the wall of flowers, set down his drink to peer more closely.

"Hallo!" he muttered. "What's up with my Lady Justice?"

Harker joined him, and they saw the girl moving quickly through the dancers—moving purposefully, with a serious set to her red lips.

"She looks distressed," said Harker. "Perhaps her last partner has just proposed."

"He hadn't the pluck," Browning said quietly. "He looked something of a weed. I don't think it's that. I saw her glancing down at her necklace and start as if she'd lost something!"

"Oh, help!" breathed the Yard man. "Don't conjure up trouble, old son. If she's lost anything—By Jove, I believe you're right! She's going up to the judge!"

"She is—to Evescourt. I suppose that is where Justice would make her first appeal—eh, Harker? But he's the M.C., don't forget. Let's wander round."

The two men wandered round idly from the bar, chatting listlessly, but directing their steps towards the spot where the tall, blindfolded girl stood talking to the peer.

The two had excited no curiosity among the other dancers. Only the two detectives noticed the puckered brows of the Master of Ceremonies.

"But are you sure you had it, Miss Walsingham?" they heard him ask.

"I am quite sure. It was a large pendant ruby in the form of a heart. It is very valuable, your lordship."

"Yes, yes; I am sure it must be. But do you think you could possibly have dropped it while you were dancing?"

Harker and Browning passed out of earshot—paused—chatted idly, and strolled back again.

"Cut off!" they heard Lord Evescourt say sharply. "But surely it is preposterous! Your last partner—"

"I cannot think it was he. Yet I am sure it was there when—"

Once more the two detectives passed out of earshot, and, pausing at a discreet distance, watched the reflection of the pair in a convenient mirror. They saw the peer give his arm to the girl and lead her towards a small room off the ball-room. They saw another man emerge a few minutes later and return accompanied by a portly dancer in a coat of mail.

"Gee, they're fetching Brewster!" Browning muttered. "Our number will be called in a moment, Harker."

And the detective's remark proved prophetic—as Harker thought it would. They saw the mailed figure of Sir Hubert Brewster emerge and look about, making a bee-line for them. He led them into an alcove.

"Will you come with me, please?" he said, in a low tone. "There is a little matter—"

His tone was nervous and disquieted, and, with a grunt, Harker accompanied him to the small room where Lord Evescourt, looking his part better now that he was solemn, awaited them. The figure of Justice, the famous scales exquisitely embroidered upon her loose gown of silk, stood by him visibly agitated.

Sir Hubert made the introductions quickly, in a low tone.

"I am sorry to trouble you, gentlemen," the peer said. "I did not anticipate the necessity. I trust it will prove of no consequence. But my friend here—Miss Walsingham—complains that she has lost a ruby pendant of great value from her necklace."

Harker nodded and glanced at her, and, though her eyes were concealed, her twitching lips evidenced a real distress.

"Of course, I may have dropped it—as Lord Evescourt says," she said, in a low, perfectly-modulated voice. "It may even have been wrenched off accidentally. But I am rather upset at its loss. It was worth a thousand pounds—the stone alone. You see, it hung here!"

She indicated the end of her necklace with a finger upon which the diamonds scintillated dazlingly.

"It may easily have been wrenched off; but you should have felt the wrench, miss," Harker said. "May I glance at the necklace a moment?"

He took a small enlarging glass from his waistcoat-pocket, and examined the part of the necklace from which the ruby had depended. The next instant he glanced up sharply.

"This has been cut off!" he said quickly.

"Cut off!" echoed Lord Evescourt and Sir Hubert together.

"Yes—deliberately. I should say. With whom did you have the last dance, miss?"

"With a gentleman named Melhuish. He was introduced to me by Sir Edgar Trewling," the girl said. "Here is my dance-card. You see, he has signed it."

Harker glanced at the card.

"Are you reasonably certain that you had the ruby when you began dancing?"

"Confident," she said. "It is my habit to toy with it when I am talking. I remember distinctly that I was doing so when Mr. Melhuish came up and claimed me for the fox-trot."

Harker nodded and glanced at his colleague. He looked again into the half-concealed face of the girl.

"Do you know this Mr. Melhuish?"

"No; but he is quite a gentleman. Oh, it seems so impossible that you should suspect—"

"Utterly impossible!" snapped Lord Evescourt. "Young Melhuish is the son of Sir Henry Melhuish. Just up from Oxford. I know them well. It is quite absurd!"

Harker pursed his lips and looked thoughtful.

"Of course, as officers of the law, my lord, we can be no respecters of persons. This ruby was very valuable!"

"Extremely so, I am sure," said the peer.

"And it is very important that it should be found?"

"Yes, yes; of course!"

"I presume you will place the matter in our hands—leave it to our discretion?"

"Yes, you know best. It is your business."

But—His lordship hesitated, obviously distressed.

"It is our duty, I think, to search this young man, then, my lord," Harker said.

"Oh, dear! Must you do that? Then I cannot be here. It is so humiliating!"

"I am afraid I must insist!" Harker said.

"But, surely, Harker, can no other way be found," said Sir Hubert Brewster, "without having—"

"If the young man is sportsmanlike, he will not make a fuss," Harker said. "Browning, I believe you know Melhuish. Perhaps—"

The other man nodded, and turned abruptly away. With Browning business was business. There was no standing on ceremony, no considerations of etiquette or sentiment.

Lord Evescourt fidgeted uncomfortably as they awaited the return of Browning. The cheeks of the girl seemed to have grown paler, and her lips were compressed as though she were about to pass through a particular ordeal. Sir Hubert Brewster, too, was plainly distressed. He drew Harker aside.

"Of course, I—I realise it is your duty," he said. "But you will be very discreet, Mr. Harker—very circumspect, won't you? I mean, it is a preposterous thing that young Melhuish should be suspected of such a thing! Sir Henry would be furious if any faux pas like this were—"

He paused as Browning reappeared, bringing with him the rather slender and foppish figure of the younger Melhuish. He had chosen as a fancy-dress an ordinary evening-suit cut out of pale mauve cloth, and presented the faultless appearance of a hero in revue. Just down from Oxford, the late partner of Justice had

maintained at the 'Varsity the inglorious Melhuish traditions, which embraced the utter inability of the Melhuish mind to assimilate any useful knowledge or learning whatever.

If there were anything in evolution the face of the young man with Browning bore ample testimony to the presence of a rabbit among the early forbears of the family. Digby Melhuish was an obvious throw-back to that period, a distinct reversion to type. There was something in the shape of his head and the poise of his elongated ears which was ludicrously like a hare. And his everyday expression was one of utter surprise, like the same animal in March.

As he entered the small room of the hall he stared rather wonderingly at Harker and Lord Evescourt, until his gaze fell upon the face of the girl. Immediately there came some intangible expression in his ears—he opened his mouth like a squirrel about to bite a nut.

"Hello!" he said. "Have I butted in on a jolly owid conspiracy?"

"No, Mr. Melhuish," she said. "But I have lost my—"

"Pardon me, miss!" Harker interrupted quickly. "Excuse me, sir, but I am a detective. I believe you had the last dance with this lady, Miss—er—Walsingham?"

"Yes—yes. But, I say, Miss Walsingham, Ay hope you aren't going to give me in charge for doing it so deucedly badly! I know I'm a priceless quadruped, but—"

"You dance excellently!" she assured him, with a quick smile.

"Miss Walsingham lost a little trinket, Mr. Melhuish," Harker said, "while she was dancing with you. It probably dropped on the floor."

"Oh, I say, what rotten luck! Can I help you search for it?" he asked quickly.

While Harker did the questioning, Browning stood aloof, his sharp eyes fixed upon the face of the young dude. He knew several confidence men in town who could play this sort of part to the letter. The modern "priceless old thing" of twenty-four or so was a favourite part with them.

"Before we search the floor," Harker said, "I wanted to make certain of one or two trifling possibilities. I have known stones and trinkets fall into queer, unsuspected places. Would you mind letting me look in the turn-up of your trousers, Mr. Melhuish?"

"Good heavens, yes, by all means! Have a jolly good forage round both of them! What a perfectly uncatalogued ideal! Heav, I will put my foot up!"

He raised his feet alternately, and Harker ran his finger round the turn-up of his trousers, revealing nothing.

"No go?" he asked quickly.

"No go!" echoed Harker. "But if this trinket were jerked off suddenly it might possibly have lodged in— Pardon me a moment, sir!"

He slipped both hands simultaneously into the waistcoat-pockets of the dude, who shrank away with an exclamation of surprise and indignation.

"But, I say, my dear priceless old streak, take your beastly toasting-forks out of my pockets immediately! Do you think that I have pinched this thing, whatever it was?"

"No, no, Mr. Melhuish! Mr. Harker only wondered if by some freakish chance it had fallen into—"

"Then Mr. Melhuish is a deucedly clever wonderer, Miss Walsingham!" spluttered the young man. "I have nothing in my pockets. But if this gentleman thought I had, he might have paid me the compliment of asking me to— Go to the deuce, sir!"

He snatched Harker's arm away as he probed deeper into his pocket, and faced the detective with the manner of an enraged squirrel. And then a cry broke from the lips of the girl as she espied, between Harker's finger and thumb, a red-heart of ruby beautifully moulded and clear as crystal. In the detective's other hand he held a tiny pair of pliers of beautiful workmanship.

"Is this the stone, Miss Walsingham?" he asked dramatically, turning round.

"Yes, yes, of course! That is my pendant, Mr. Harker. But where— Oh, you don't mean—"

Harker pursed his lips and nodded, eyeing first Lord Evescourt and Sir Hubert Brewster, and then fixing his gaze upon the utterly rabbit-like features of Digby Melhuish.

"I have just taken this stone from the pocket of Mr. Melhuish," the detective said. "I call you gentlemen as witnesses of that."

fact. Will you make a charge, Miss Walsingham?"

The girl gasped, and shrank back from the faultlessly-attired, dude before her.

"Oh, no! I can't—I dare not! It would be too awful! Surely there must be some mistake!"

"Yes, yes, some mistake!" echoed Lord Evescourt. "Melhuish, my dear boy, I put it to you. Did you, for some absurd rag, cut this pendant from Miss Walsingham's necklace? Have you no better sense of humour than—"

"Really, Lord Evescourt, this is preposterous! Is this a joke or a conspiracy, or some priceless bungle or other? Does this—er—this fellow really imagine I pinched that pretty-pretty from Miss—er—"

"I must ask you to submit to a complete search!" Harker said, interrupting him.

"Then you can go to the—er— Yes, you can! I shall do nothing of the sort! You must keep those beastly tentacles of yours out of my pockets, or—"

"Or?" Harker prompted.

"I shall jolly well resist, and I don't mind warning you!"

"If you prefer not to make a scene, sir," Harker said quietly, "you will not resist!"

"No, please!" pleaded the peer. "I am certain there is an absurdly simple explanation to the whole thing. As a sportsman, Melhuish—"

"I reckon I've been deucedly sporting up to now, much more than some blighters!" protested the young man. "However, if you ask me, my lord, carry on! All I can say is that it is a priceless insult to our family! It isn't done, sir! It isn't done!"

He raised his hands with rather bad grace, and Harker made a swift search of his pockets. He found nothing of importance except a piece of paper upon which a few notes had been roughly scrawled. A frown came to the brows of the detective as he read them through. Those who watched him closely may have observed a scarcely perceptible pallor upon his face as he turned the piece of paper in his pocket. He thrust it to Browning.

"You have the cuffs?" he asked quietly.

"Yes."

A gasp went up from Miss Walsingham as the detective produced a pair of handcuffs in the most matter-of-fact manner, slipping them adroitly on to the wrists of the astonished Melhuish.

Lord Evescourt sprang forward amazed, as if the truth had only just dawned upon him.

"My dear sirs, surely it is not necessary—"

"It is my duty to arrest Mr. Digby Melhuish for the attempted theft of this ruby, the property of this lady," Harker said. "It is also my duty to apprehend him upon other and more serious charges."

"Other charges!" cried Sir Hubert Brewster.

It seems that the handcuffs had acted as a gag upon Digby Melhuish as well as a manacle. He stood there transfixed, like a rabbit mesmerised by the basilisk stare of a serpent. He could not speak, and when he did it was an incoherent babble, half-indignation, half-whimpering, half-breath.

He was taken out by Browning through the back of the hotel to the police-station. When Harker had seen them off the premises he returned to where the others were waiting, finding Lord Evescourt trying with Sir Hubert Brewster to pacify the girl, who seemed to think that she had been directly responsible for bringing this disgrace upon an honoured family.

When Harker entered she turned upon him with a sudden and almost majestic fierceness, clenching the huge ruby in her hand as if she would fain crumble it to dust.

"I would rather a thousand times have lost the thing than this should have happened. I told you I would not charge him. Why did you insist?"

"I have my duty to attend to," Harker said shortly.

"But why could you not take his name—his address, I mean—instead of marching him off like a common felon?"

"Because," Harker said quietly, "I have reason to suspect that Mr. Digby Melhuish is a most uncommon felon, and a dangerous one."

"Felon!" The word came from Lord Evescourt in the form of a gasp. "Really, Mr. Harker, I think you must be mistaken."

The C.I.D. man stepped over with pursed lips and took the piece of paper from his pocket which he had found in the possession of Digby Melhuish.

C.J.—No. 864.

"Lord Evescourt," he said, "I have here something which indicates a very dangerous criminal conspiracy against the people at this time to-night. I should not be surprised if we were not in imminent danger at this moment!"

The peer looked amazed and bewildered, but such part of Sir Hubert Brewster's face as was visible through the lifted visor had gone ghastly pale.

"You don't mean," he gasped, "that this man Leon Kestrel means to attempt—"

"I do," Harker said. "There is some plan of robbery afoot. I am certain of that as I am certain of my own name. I would to Heaven Blake were here! Look at this note!"

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Disaster.

YOUR cue 11.30. Report syndicate 11.20. Your station. Hold-up. North-west door.—L.K.

"You know consequences if you fail us," the message ended.

Those were the hastily-scrawled words upon the crumpled sheet of paper which the C.I.D. man showed now to the two millionaires.

To Lord Evescourt they were Greek, though he had some vague fear of their meaning. But on the other man, upon Sir Hubert Brewster, they fell like a bombshell. He had more than a glimmering of what they meant, and now there was a light of real fear, of dire apprehension in his eyes.

But even now he could hardly think there was danger. He could not reconcile the fact that this message had been found on Digby Melhuish, an innocuous dude, with possibility. On the face of it it seemed absurd.

"But, Mr. Harker," he said, in a low tone, "it cannot mean surely, that a young fellow like Melhuish could be in league with a gang of desperadoes like the incredible!"

"Amazing, I admit," the Yard man said, in his stolid way, "but not incredible, Sir Hubert. You notice this little reminder here." He pointed to the last sentence. "You know the consequences if you fail us."

"You mean that the man who wrote this note—," Lord Evescourt began.

"Leon Kestrel," Harker said. "Those are his initials."

"This man Kestrel has secured some—some hold over young Melhuish. He has been coerced into complicity with this scheme, whatever it is."

"More than likely," Harker said. "The 'mummer,' as we call him, is a past-master of the arts of blackmail and coercion. Yet the neat way this Johnny trimmed off that ruby and pocketed it doesn't seem to indicate that he is altogether an amateur being coerced. There are black sheep in every class, my lord."

"Oh, quite, quite!" said Lord Evescourt, in a tone which showed that he was utterly unconvinced all the same. "But these other words, inspector—this mention of hold-up. What does it mean?"

"Pretty well what it says, I imagine," Harker said grimly. "It would not be an extremely difficult matter for a well-organised gang of desperadoes to hold up this entire gathering at the point of the revolver and rob them in the same way as highwaymen rob a stage coach."

A startling change came over the face of the peer. He stared at Harker as though he could hardly believe his own ears. Sir Hubert Brewster turned to him with obvious agitation.

"The inspector knows what he is saying, my lord," he said. "In this room at this moment there are hundreds of thousands of pounds. We must do something—take some action immediately. Mr. Harker—he swung round—"You know best. What can we do?"

"We must be careful—very careful," Lord Evescourt said quickly. "If Melhuish is one of the gang, then Heaven knows we can trust nobody. We may have spies in our midst."

For a moment Harker was at a loss to know what to do for the best, and in the absence of any inspiration he decided to take the plain course of duty and communicate with headquarters, also asking for additional assistance.

"I will get on to the Yard," he said. "They will send down some men. Browning will bring a small cordon of police. It seems the only safe way to be on our guard."

Lord Evescourt stared first at one and then at the other, visibly distressed. He was evidently conjuring up all sorts of disquieting visions.

"But that will be dangerous—dangerous, inspector," he protested. "There may be

other spies amongst us. They will be aware already that Melhuish had been apprehended. Knowing that they may precipitate their action. It will take some little time for sufficient police to arrive."

"What about Sexton Blake? Can't you get Blake along?" Sir Hubert almost whimpered, revealing an almost childish faith in the preventive powers of the great investigator.

"My duty is to report this matter immediately," Harker said. "Of course, we must be on our guard. We might form a temporary bodyguard from the staff of the hotel until the police arrive. I will go right now and—"

"Stay—stay! I have an idea!" Lord Evescourt took his arm feverishly. "The primary object of this conspiracy is robbery. Is that not so? The jewels of the ladies?"

"I should say so," Harker said.

"Then supposing we collect all the valuables now and stand guard over them until the danger is over?"

"But, my dear Evescourt, how can we do it?" Sir Hubert spluttered. "It would only have the effect of creating an alarm. If we made an announcement—if we let people think they stood in danger—there would be a panic. You know what women are! It would be playing into the hands of the gang. In any case it would precipitate action."

"Yes, yes; I suppose it would," Lord Evescourt fell to pacing the small room distractedly, and his left hand sought the large diamond in his scarf-pin, as though he feared that even now that particular jewel might be spirited away. "What can we do, Brewster—what can we do? For Heaven's sake think of some—some plan!"

Harker stood for a moment, and was about to move off again on his original intention, when Lord Evescourt swung round once more, the light of a plan in his deep-set eyes.

"I know—I know! A ruse—a ruse! I've got it," he cried.

"What?" the others cried together.

"It would be quite easy to sway the ladies with a little whim—some fanciful whim. There is an ante-room on the other side which opens with one door on to the ball-room and with the other to the conservatory. There is a table in the room, I know. And there is a third door which leads into a small dressing-room. It is the very thing—the very thing!" he cried, talking chiefly to himself.

"For what?" Harker asked, rather impatiently.

"For my plan," the peer said thickly. "I will pretend that we have arranged a little scheme—a plan—some original idea to amuse our guests. There is to be a lottery, and the ladies will file through singly and receive their numbers."

"But we—we haven't any numbers!" said Sir Hubert.

"Of course we haven't, man!" cried the peer impatiently. "It is simply a ruse to get each lady alone. We can then explain briefly what danger they are in, and advise them to surrender their valuables until the risk is over. We can also take the opportunity to exhort them to keep calm and not to worry. Request them to carry on with the dance immediately they emerge from the conservatory, saying nothing to their partners—just as if nothing at all had happened. The gang may not then suspect that we have discovered their conspiracy. If we carry the plan out quickly and efficiently we should have every jewel locked away and adequately guarded in under a quarter of an hour."

The Yard man gazed thoughtfully at the peer, who seemed full of his idea. Sir Hubert was frowning, searching his brain apparently for some objections to what seemed, on the face of it, a good emergency plan.

"But, Evescourt," he said presently, "it's rather risky. Some of the women may refuse to surrender their stuff."

"Then they can carry their own risk!" said the peer sharply.

"But, think, Evescourt—if we have the stuff altogether—"

"Locked up and guarded, Brewster!"

"Yes; but then the gang would only have one lot to go for. We should be simplifying matters. Supposing four or five of us were standing guard—they would probably shoot down the whole crowd of us in order to get possession!"

"Better that than they should terrify all the ladies singly," the peer said grimly. "Do you like the idea of your wife and daughter, Brewster, having a revolver thrust down their throats while they are man-handled by

a set of cut-throats? Better, I think, to draw them on to us and make a fight of it, if necessary."

"It seems awfully risky."

"You need not be one of the bodyguard unless you like!" Evescourt said scathingly. "What do you think, inspector? Of course, you are the official here. But, you see, I am the Master of the Ceremonies. I feel that it is my responsibility entirely to safeguard our guests."

"If you can do it without panic," Harker said thoughtfully, "it would be a good notion. As you say, we could hold the fort, if necessary, till help arrives. I'll 'phone through to H.Q. and tell them what is happening."

The whole earnest conversation had taken place in the small room off the ball-room, and Harker had done his best to keep the figures of the peer and Brewster as much concealed as possible—for the expression upon their faces was not consistent with the jollity of the festive occasion, and he did not wish to excite chatter or suspicion.

"Which of you has not a pistol of his own?" he asked in French.

Not one of them replied. They were all foreign, and they all had them. The manager smiled.

"I have a dangerous staff about me, inspector," he said. "Now, you fellows, go to your rooms and get your pistols, and see that they are loaded before you put them in your pockets. After that go, just as you are, into the ball-room. Serve in the bar, carry trays, do anything; but keep your eyes open, and if there is a disturbance this gentleman will give you your orders. Comprenez?"

The men nodded, and Harker, although he had an Englishman's distrust of aliens—even friendly ones—felt relieved to think that he had a pretty formidable armed bodyguard to fall back upon if necessary.

He returned to the ball-room and found the merry and unsuspecting throng of dancers in a state of amused expectancy. The men were smiling knowingly, as if this little surprise which the M.C. had just sprung on them

unknown ordeal which made the feminine pulses beat a little quicker.

But they beat still more quickly, and the merry smile faded as if by magic under the short, well-chosen and earnest phrases of the peer, who, however, smiled as he spoke.

"There is no imminent danger; it is merely a matter of precaution. Of course you must please yourself. I can only advise. We have been faced with an emergency. This is the only way out of it!"

A startled—almost horrified—look came, as a rule, over the faces of the women, and then they seemed slowly to comprehend. There was something in the earnest, calm smile of the peer which gave them confidence. They laughed, and stripped their hands, lifting necklaces from their throats, passing out with a brave smile, which said plainly, "I, at least, am not afraid!"

A sense of satisfaction came over Harker as he watched the strange proceedings. Lord Evescourt's ruse was working; it was a compliment to the man's knowledge of humanity. In this way they were able to appeal to the natural pride—the self-reliance—the common-sense inherent in most women.

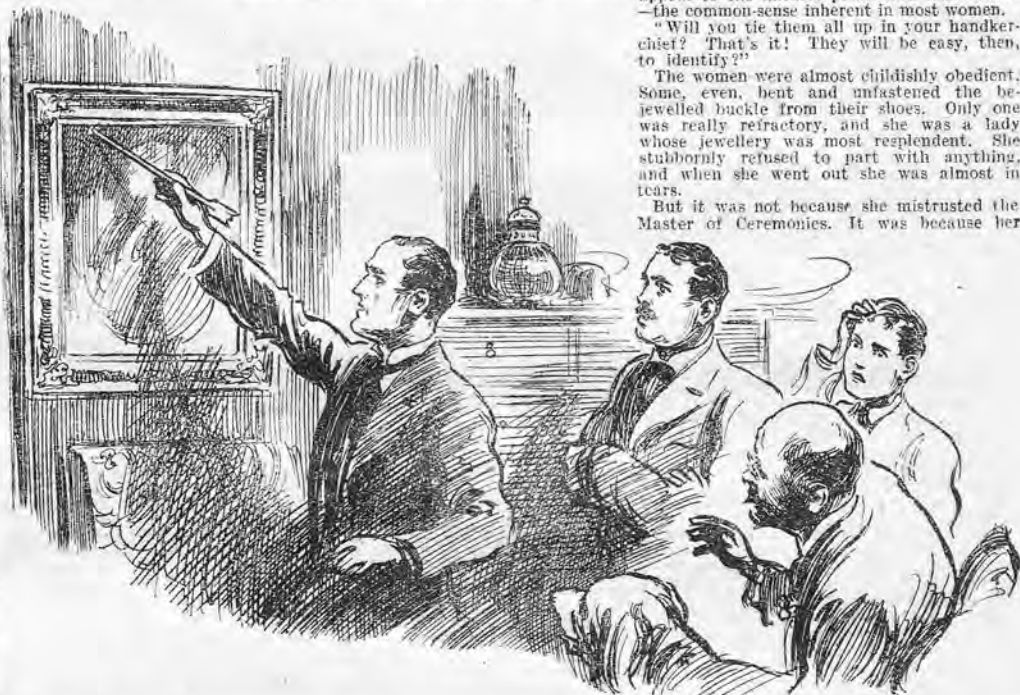
"Will you tie them all up in your handkerchief? That's it! They will be easy, then, to identify?"

The women were almost childishly obedient. Some, even, bent and unfastened the jewelled buckle from their shoes. Only one was really refractory, and she was a lady whose jewellery was most resplendent. She stubbornly refused to part with anything, and when she went out she was almost in tears.

But it was not because she mistrusted the Master of Ceremonies. It was because her

A MESSAGE FROM KESTREL!

Blake strode across the room and snatched the quivering arrow from the picture.



He moved off leisurely to the bar, at the back of which a telephone stood in a small cubicle. He put the receiver to his ear quickly.

"Hallo! Hallo!" he called, in a low voice. "Hallo, Switch! Give me the Exchange, please!"

"I'm sorry, sir!" The voice of the hotel switch-girl came back immediately. "Our whole system is cut off!"

"Cut off!" Harker almost barked.

"Yes—every line. We can't understand it, sir. The main cable seems to have gone."

The Yard man dropped the receiver back into position with a muttered exclamation. His face was infinitely more thoughtful as he moved back to the small ante-room.

"You'd better make your announcement straight away, my lord," he said. "The hotel's cut off from the telephone. Things look rather groggy. If you get busy with your scheme, I'll send a special messenger, post-haste!"

He moved off, making his way to the office of the hotel-manager, who happened to be inside, and what Harker told him blanched the cheeks of the little Frenchman. He became agitated and began to gesticulate; but he was efficient in his agitation. A messenger left the hotel within three minutes, dashing by taxi towards the Yard. Another messenger was sent to bring a dozen of the hotel's employees to the manager's room, and he talked to them quickly and earnestly.

They were of all nationalities, but sturdy men, every one, and none were disconcerted. He opened a drawer, and took out two automatic pistols.

had been known to them all along. The women were frankly amused, and already were vying for first place in the laughing queue without appearing undignifiedly eager.

Harker passed over to the ante-room where Lord Evescourt was already seated at a table, endeavouring to assume a smile which was very wry. Sir Hubert Brewster's attempt to assume a measure of popularity was quite absurd.

Concealed under his handkerchief on the table was a small bulldog revolver. Open on the other side of him was a capacious gladstone bag.

"Will you take the door, Harker?" he said. "Admit them one at a time. And, for Heaven's sake, try to look amused! It is a wretched business. Brewster, you must behave with more fortitude. The women will be scared to death, man!"

"I did not know I was not!" the knight returned, with a rather feeble show of indignation.

"Looks less like a lamb being led to the slaughter. If we do not succeed in imbuing confidence into the women we are lost—lost, man, lost!"

Lord Evescourt seemed to be growing a little irritable under the strain. He took up his revolver, examined it, and covered it again carefully with his handkerchief. He glanced over at Harker.

"Let them in!" he said.

There was a buzz of merriment in the huge ball-room, which contrasted strangely with the comparative silence of the room into which the expectant women were admitted. There was something piquant in this minor

diamonds were clever paste imitations of originals which had been pawned unknown to her husband. And she feared discovery or gossip.

As the first of the ladies emerged from the conservatory and the ordeal, the band struck up a haunting waltz tune, and, claiming her last partner—according to the M.C.'s instructions—she glided out across the floor, to endure an ordeal which was still more difficult, and that to refrain from telling her partner what had happened.

It was amazing how few of the men noticed the absence of jewels—such is the blindness of the masculine eye to many things. Not less amazing was the efficiency and rapidity with which ninety-eight per cent. of all the jewellery in that assembly was deposited in queer little cambric bundles into the now bulging bag. When the last of the ladies had passed through, Lord Evescourt rose, with a deep sigh of intense relief.

"Thank Heaven!" he gasped. "Now to stow it away. I fancy this gang of cutthroats are cheeked now, Mr. Harker, whatever they may attempt. What a haul—eh!" He lifted the now heavy bag. "It almost makes me wish to turn highwaymen myself!"

He took from the table a small key, and, closing the bag with a snap, he locked it securely, handing the key to Sir Hubert.

"You take that, Brewster," he said. "We might as well divide the responsibility. There is a cupboard here. It will afford some protection."

He turned, and threw open the door of a stout oak press let into the wall, placing the bag upon the middle shelf.

"They get that over our bodies!" he muttered. He glanced at his watch. "It is barely ten o'clock. I wonder how long your cordon of the police will be, Mr. Harker?"

"Here, Mr. Harker, if you will take the key of the cupboard? Thanks! It is better to share the responsibility, as I said before. If I held it, and anything happened"—he laughed—"they might charge me with complicity!"

"The stuff is better there than distributed among the women. But, as Sir Hubert said, we've taken a certain risk in lumping the stuff together," Harker said. "It's up to us to take precautions!"

"I leave it to you now, inspector," the peer said. "When your men come—"

"I have some useful merchants here already. Some of the hotel staff," the Yard man said.

"Then fetch them here, and mount guard. We can't have too many," Lord Evescourt said. "I'll stay—No, the people will get anxious unless I show myself. Here, you take this revolver, and stay till the inspector fetches the guard, Brewster. We'll lock you in."

The knight did not look particularly happy at the prospect, but he had not the moral courage to admit his physical cowardice. He took up the small bulldog revolver nervously, and adopted a defensive attitude, which brought a smile to the lips of the other two men as they passed out.

Lord Evescourt turned the key in the door, and placed it in his pocket, doing the same with the door which gave on to the conservatory.

"Round your men up quickly! We can afford no risks!" he said to Harker earnestly. And then, emerging from the conservatory, assumed a smile as, the cyrenour of all eyes, he made his way quickly to the dais, from which he made the announcements.

"The ladies may rest content now," he said. "There is nothing to fear—if they will only keep their secrets from their partners!"

The men laughed, but the women only smiled, and exchanged glances, for they read the hidden meaning under the words.

"And now," Lord Evescourt said, as if he threw off from his shoulders all recollection of the unpleasant episode, "on with the Motley!"

The bandmaster struck up a few bars from the famous song in "Pagliacci," and the peer turned to acknowledge the apt musical reference with a smile.

"Yes, on with the Motley! We have here, I believe, an extra number, a variation of the Tango. Perhaps the musical director—"

He turned and smiled again as the band struck up a lively tune.

Lord Evescourt peered over to the waiting dancers, and at that moment the sylph-like figure of the girl appeared, whose ruby pendant had been stolen, moving lightly on the arm of the quasi-highwayman.

The contrast of their costumes was bizarre and picturesque, and a murmur of applause and admiration rose as they linked, and slipping gracefully into the rhythmic lilt of the music, moved down the glassy floor in a perfect exposition of the dance.

Lord Evescourt smiled, and then, as by a sudden inspiration, he put up his hand to the conductor, so that the music stopped abruptly, and the figures of the dancers moved in dramatic silence.

"A ball-room epigram!" said Lord Evescourt, in his penetrating voice. "Justice allied to Robbery!"

He laughed, and motioned once more to the conductor, who sat with baton raised. The music resumed its haunting cadence, other dancers moved out into the dance, and Lord Evescourt, apparently remembering the keys in his pocket and the imprisonment of Sir Hubert Brewster, glanced quickly across the ballroom and stepped down from the dais, and an hotel attendant came at that moment through the dancers, hurrying towards him.

Meanwhile, Harker had rounded up the men whom the hotel manager had deputed to answer his instructions. Together they moved over to the ante-room, and stood there, waiting. Harker glanced quickly round the room, endeavouring to focus his eyes upon the familiar judicial figure of the peer.

"Where has he got to?" he muttered. "He has the keys! Stay here a moment, you fellows!"

He stepped out into the hall-room, and traversed it from end to end. He passed into the bar, but Lord Evescourt was not there, and Harker was emerging with a U.J.—No. 864.

puzzled frown when the tall, slim figure of an Elizabethan courtier came up to him quickly. A short imperial beard gave him the character of Drake, although there was not on his face that equanimity with which the famous sailor of history is reputed to have gone out to meet the Armada.

In the dark, sallow face of Mr. Rufus Lewis, the wealthy multiple-shop magnate, was a pallor of anxiety and distress.

"Pardon me," he said, speaking with a slight Semitic accent, "are you Detective Harker?"

"I am. I am looking for Lord Evescourt. Can you tell me where—"

"Yes, yes. He asked me to give you these keys immediately." He handed the keys of the ante-room to Harker, and continued earnestly: "I am afraid something serious has happened."

"What?" Harker rapped, imagining all sorts of things in that instant.

"Lord Evescourt has been summoned away by telegram. There has been a robbery at his house."

"At his house?" the Yard man gasped.

"Yes. Thieves have got away with some priceless stuff he had there. He is greatly distressed. He could not stay a moment. He ask me to give you these keys and to say that 'they are showing their hand.' He thinks things are 'pretty safe here.' I don't know exactly what he means, inspector. But that was his message."

Harker nodded thoughtfully, and his mind was in a whirl as he threaded his way through the maze of dancers. There was no knowing what move a man like Kestrel would make. One might know that he had planned a daring offensive, yet he gave no clue to the part of the line, as it were, upon which he would descend.

"Perhaps he's making a round of the houses while the owners are dancing," he muttered to himself. "As Evescourt says, he'll probably give us a miss if—"

He caught sight of the hotel employees waiting by the locked door of the ante-room, and one of them was beckoning to him feverishly.

The Yard man hurried forward, his pulse beating more quickly.

"What's the matter?" he barked. "Hurry up! Zero ces someone in zero who call for 'elp! Queek mit ze key!"

There came at the same moment a heavy battering on the door from the inside, and the voice of Sir Hubert Brewster shouting hoarsely to them.

Harker snatched the key from his pocket and thrust it in the lock, throwing the door open. He gasped with relief to see the room orderly and quiet as they had left it; but the knight's face was pale—deadly pale. He stood pointing dramatically to the cupboard.

"Quick! You have the key of that, inspector. Open it!"

"But why, for the love of Heaven?" Harker demanded.

"I thought I heard noises inside!"

"Noises in your head!" the Yard man growled, disgusted. "Pull yourself together, man!"

"I tell you I did! Open it! I insist!"

"I shall do nothing of the sort!"

"If you don't, I will announce what has happened to the whole room!" cried Sir Hubert hoarsely.

Harker's face was pale with anger, but, groping in his pocket for the key, he stepped over and opened the built-in press, in which the jewelled opulence of the Sixty Club was stored away.

"Merciful heavens!" gasped Harker; and the man reeled back, for all his nerve.

"What is it? What is it?" screamed Brewster.

"The—the bag!" the Yard man muttered, and his lips were dry. "It has gone! There is someone here! How the— Give me a hand there—quick!"

The huddled figure of the man was lying on the floor of the cupboard. Harker bent himself and dragged him out, limp and unresisting, whilst the other men stood by petrified.

The body of the prisoner was bound with thongs, and as the inspector turned him over his head flopped back against the leg of the table, and the ghastly face which looked unseeing at Harker wrung a cry from his white lips of utter dismay and amazement.

"By Heaven, am I mad—am I mad!" he whispered, staggering back and putting both hands to his head as he stared down with wild eyes. "It is Evescourt—Evescourt! Sir Hubert, you have eyes! For mercy's sake, use them!" Harker hardly knew what he was

saying as he swung round almost beside himself. "You have eyes, man! Is this—"

He did not finish.

Sir Hubert Brewster had slipped down senseless beside the huddled figure of the president of the Sixty Club!

THE FIFTH CHAPTER. Blake in the Reckoning.

THE chemical antidote which Sexton Blake had used to counteract the insidious and invisible fumes of mustard-gas in the Baker Street apartments had done its duty well, although the chemical reaction which followed the struggle between the two gases had produced an atmosphere which, though not harmful, was decidedly distasteful.

Mrs. Bafell, who had a keen sense of smell, moved about with a clothes-peg clamped about her nose, but she preferred this minor inconvenience to the bewildering amenities of the Hotel Magnifique.

The detective, too, had changed back post-haste to his own apartments, passing the time in a number of investigations, the success of which were, to some extent, reflected in his face now as he paced the room slowly, his hands behind him, his eyes fixed upon Tinker, who sat on the edge of the table.

"In forming a theory or an hypothesis, my lad," he said, "it is always best, I think, to rule out the absolutely impossible, however convincing it may seem."

"For instance, guv'nor?" Tinker prompted.

"If you were suddenly to change before my eyes into a mushroom, I might at first be surprised and a bit bewildered."

"Not more than I should," said Tinker, with a grin.

"Perhaps not. But if you did so, and I had satisfied myself that what was left of you was actually and without doubt a bona-fide—"

"Toad-stool," suggested the lad.

"Mushroom, I might be inclined to accept the evidence of my own eyes, and try to theorise and account for this very remarkable metamorphosis of my assistant from one form of strange growth to another!"

Tinker nodded and smiled, and the detective went on:

"What I should do finally," Blake said, "would be to deny the possibility of the change. I should say, 'No, utterly impossible! But you would suggest, perhaps, that I had the evidence of my own eyes. Probably. But I should reply that 'My eyes must have deceived me.' The theory I should work on would be that, in some clever, illusory manner some ill-disposed person had contrived to spirit you out of sight and substitute a mushroom in the manner that Mr. Maskelyne turns a rabbit into a bowl of goldfish!"

Tinker looked over at his master and nodded.

"What are you leading up to?" he asked.

"The mystery of this man Tremlin—Sir Hubert Brewster's secretary," the detective said.

"Have you solved it, guv'nor?" Tinker asked quickly.

"I think so," Blake said. "And after a lot of mental groping, I started afresh on a new tack and ruled out the impossible. I said to myself that it was quite impossible for any man to fall from that roof and break no bones. I knew, too, that none of us had stabbed him, and that he was not wounded when he leapt. Although it was strange and unaccountable, then the theory only remained that this man Tremlin was not the man whom we chased on the roof and who dropped the gas-bomb into the fireplace."

"Then where is the man who jumped, guv'nor?"

"He got away," Blake said. "He must have had some means of saving himself. A close examination of the path outside convinced me that he was not picked up by confederates and taken off."

"Then who stabbed Tremlin?"

"That was another mystery. But I told myself that it might possibly be a separate one. Anyway, that was the hypothesis I worked on, and to-day I have submitted it to the test of fact."

"How?"

"By seeing Tremlin at the hospital."

"You were able to do so, guv'nor?"

"Yes, for a few minutes. He is still very weak, and had only the strength to answer a few leading questions. He has cleared it up, and I find that I was, at any rate, on the right lines with my theory."

Tinker gazed over earnestly at his master, and listened with breathless interest.

"What happened?"

"It is all rather simple, although as starting as most of Kestrel's stunts."

"Then it was Kestrel behind it!"

"Of course! I never doubted that. It appears that Tremlin was very anxious for the safety of Sir Hubert. These strange, half-threatening advertisements made him rather anxious; so almost as soon as Brewster left the office he followed, going on foot to kill a bit of time, guessing that his master would be occupied with me some time. He intended to meet him outside here and accompany him home as a measure of precaution."

"He was walking along slowly outside, conscious of a slight nervous tension, when suddenly he saw a figure drop as from the clouds almost at his feet. The man had slipped down a double rope, which Tremlin imagines now to have been slung over the wires which cross the street. But it is easily imagined that the man was utterly dumbfounded."

"To him it seemed like something supernatural—an Arabian Night trick—a sort of Jack and the Beanstalk come to life. And then, on a sudden impulse, guessing the man was up to no good, he made a dive at him, and for a few seconds they struggled."

"Then the man broke away. Tremlin saw something flash in his hand, and he fell under the blow. He tells me that he did not lose consciousness immediately. He tried to cry out, but had no voice. He lay there, and he remembers seeing the man, who was short and dark—"

"Madrano, the steeplejack!" Tinker breathed, and Blake nodded.

"Yes, short and dark, and very lithe of limb—haul down the rope, coil it feverishly, and make off. After that Tremlin remembers no more."

A whistle came from Tinker's lips, rounded with amazement.

"Then it was the Spaniard whom we tackled on the roof, guv'nor?"

"Without any doubt. It was that little fiend who dropped the gas bomb, and who nearly lay out my brains with that piece of piping under the skylight. I can see it all now. He had that rope already placed for a quick escape if need be."

Blake smiled grimly.

"It makes me foam at the mouth now to think of the chance we missed, my lad. Do you remember that for a second or so he crouched down by the parapet before we climbed on to it?"

"I heard Harker say so."

"I never dreamed at the time that he was probably unhitching a rope tethered up there. It was so dark. But we could have made dead meat of him!"

"Why did we not see the rope?" Tinker asked.

"Too dark," Blake said laconically. "He probably had the noose of the rope slung well out over the street, so that when he leapt he would swing out and down, and be out of sight. We should not see the rope against the black background, especially if we did not suspect it being there. It was a risky get-away, but a deucedly swift one, which would appeal to a daredevil spirit like Madrano. But for all his trouble he did not succeed in passing the lot of us, as he hoped. And I think we have still one more chance of getting even this week."

"This week!" Tinker cried.

"To-night, perhaps."

"Where, guv'nor? How?"

Blake smiled grimly.

"There's no hand in criminal whist which our friend Kestrel likes more than 'abundance declared,'" Blake said. "He's very fond of showing you how he can get his call home with his cards on the table. He likes to show his hand a bit, and I should be a fool if I did not study his cards. To put it plainly, I have been making a careful study of this advertisement which worried Brewster such a lot—about making him and some of his fellow multi-patrons of the Kestrel Syndicate."

"You will remember, my lad," Blake said, glancing at his watch, "that Kestrel speaks in his usual cool manner of securing the generous and unstinted patronage of certain wealthy gentlemen!"

"I remember," Tinker muttered. "The coolest piece of cheek I've struck!"

"It is," Blake said, "for the reason that I believe he means every word of it. He intends to do it!"

"How?"

"In some manner probably as cool as this advertisement. I notice one remarkable thing about the names he has mentioned. They are all prominent members of this millionaires society, the 'Sixty Club.'"

Tinker nodded, and looked over at him thoughtfully.

"The next item I regard as important is this gas attack," Blake said. "Kestrel would know that the chances were that we should be put out of action only for a short time. Doesn't that rather point to the conclusion that he wants us out of his way for—shall we say—a few days?"

"Ergo," Blake went on, "the logic is that he is going to pull off a big coup on some members of the Sixty Club within a day or so."

"Next," the detective said, "we examine that pretty little missive which came in on an arrow through our window, just prior to the time when we should have been gassed. That message is purely theatrical, but it gives me an important clue."

Blake drew the crumpled piece of paper from his pocket.

"Syndicate hear persistent rumours of your retirement," he read. "That is half-banter and half-threat, my lad. Then he goes on to a challenge: 'I will lay odds of sixty to one against you on the first race.' What do you make of that little speech, Tinker?"

"He'll bet you sixty to one his first coup this year is successful," Tinker interpreted.

"Exactly! But don't you see anything else significant?"

"No."

"Not in the number of odds?"

"Sixty to one! SIXTY! Gee whizz, guv'nor—the Sixty Club!"

"You've got it!" Blake said. "That, to my mind, is a pretty obvious hint that this next move of his is against the Sixty Club!"

Tinker looked over thoughtfully. Certainly an assembly of millionaires and money-bugs looked fair game for a man like the Mummer. Yet Tinker saw difficulties.

"I believe the members live all over London. He'd want a large gang to scoop the lot in at one attack, guv'nor," he said—

"unless he goes to the club's headquarters!"

"He would not pick up much there," Blake said. "Millionaires are not fools, else they would not be millionaires. They don't leave a great deal about in their club."

"Then how can he get at all of them?" Tinker asked.

"You've got a short memory," Blake said. "Don't you remember what Harker told us?"

"No. He spoke to you alone for a bit."

"Get your coat and hat on, my lad, and—no, we'll find some old stuff! Put on your newsboy's rig-out!"

Tinker was pretty used to curt instructions, and he disappeared, removing his collar and tie, putting on a very much washed flannel shirt, with a broken stud in it, a dirty muffler, and a suit of patched rags, which he had purchased from an actual vendor of papers.

When he emerged, Blake himself wore a muffler and cap, and a shabby-green black overcoat, with boots which were broken at the toe-caps.

A few minutes later they passed downstairs, and Mrs. Bardell came to the balusters.

"Will you be late, air?" she called out in an awful nasal twang, engendered by the clothes-peg on her nose. "Or will you have supper at dide id the ordinary badder?"

"We may be very late, Mrs. Bardell. Don't keep supper," Blake said.

They passed out; and Tinker then looked up curiously.

"Where are we bound for, guv'nor?" he asked.

"You ought to know, my lad," Blake said, with a slight hint of reproach in his voice.

"We're going to the Hotel Magnifique. This is the night of the Sixty Club Ball!"

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

The Sixtieth Chance.

THE night was typical of London in winter, pitch-dark and moonless, with the hint of fog in the humid atmosphere which enveloped vehicles and pedestrians, rendering them invisible at a few yards.

Outside the Hotel Magnifique, however, a blaze of light turned night into day, and a continuous swarm of brightly-clad humanity, like tinted moths, fluttered in and out about the flame.

Night prowlers, and queer shuffling and shivering figures, human spume upon the ceaseless tide of London, hung round as well as if fascinated by the light, and then shuffled off into the fog and darkness; and among these, with little to distinguish them, Sexton Blake and Tinker shuffled about the garish portico, and peered into the splendour of the hotel.

They shuffled off, too, but only to return, waiting as were the others for the elusive beckoning of Opportunity—the fickle smile of Fortune.

Tinker and his master turned often along the narrow side-street which skirted the hotel, shuffling along, pausing, peering down through semi-basement windows, where a hive of menials catered for the rich. They paused, listening to the strains of music which filtered out to them. They passed on, encircling the huge block of buildings, returning by that other byway which bordered the hotel on the south side.

They stopped, when they had passed some time in vigilant prowling, and watched a cab which purged up to the side of the hotel and stopped, as if by appointment. A side door was thrown open, shedding a light in which they perceived a square-shouldered figure, leading another by the wrist.

The slither of the men was expostulating in high-pitched tones, and tried impulsively to snatch his arm from obvious imprisonment.

"I tell you, officer, it is all a deucedly silly bungle. You ought to know better. Of all priceless imbeciles, I think the police—deuce take them!—are the most uncatagoried!"

The square-built man jerked the other forward, muttering in a low tone something they could not hear.

"Of course I will be quiet—if you will only unhand me, my good fellow! Take off this beastly padlock!"

Blake tucked up his collar and pulled the peak of his cap down, shuffling swiftly up to the cab, grabbing at the handle, and throwing open the door with that expectant humility of the gutter opportunist.

He peered into the rabbit-like and indignant countenance of the prisoner, observing his right hand securely handcuffed to the wrist of the thick-set man, whose square face was rigid and determined.

"Where for, sir?" said Blake hoarsely, peering in at the window.

"The police-station!" said the square man gruffly. "And slide off this automobile slick, before I run you there as a vagrant!"

"Drive to the blue lamp," said Blake to the driver, with a smirk. "The 'tec's nobbled a mobman!"

The driver nodded, and the taxi moved off swiftly. Blake turned to Tinker with some excitement in his eyes.

"That was Browning!" he whispered. "I'd know his square face by atmospheric pressure. Things have started moving, my lad!"

"How do you mean?"

"That fellow was wearing the badge of the Sixty Club—Harker's getting busy!"

They moved round silently, and Tinker's brow wrinkled. He could not see much object in this purposeless prowling; and his impatience now was properly fired.

"Don't you think we ought to have been inside, guv'nor?" he ventured presently.

"No!" snapped Blake. "Our place in this 'fifteen' is the three-quarter. We're outside the scrum for a change. The ball must come out—we want it!"

"But it may get heeled out on the other side," said Tinker, extending the metaphor.

"Then our luck's out, my lad! Just a minute!"

Blake went up to a waiting taxi and shuffled up to the driver.

"The boss says drive away for twenty minutes and come up slowly," he whispered.

"There's a risk waiting here!"

The driver stared at him in amazement.

"What's up, townie?" he growled.

"Batchy? Or has someone been lushing you up? 'Op it, before I hit you over the head with a spanner!"

Blake shuffled off.

"No go!" he muttered. "Honest—and violent!"

"Comparatively honest, you mean, guv'nor!" corrected the lad, who had a special down on taximen.

"Taxi-drivers have a license on a few of the Commandments," Blake said. "Hullo!"

They were shuffling for the umpteenth time along the side-street, and a taxi passed them noiselessly, pulling up at a door which corresponded on the north side to the door from which Browning had brought his prisoner on his south. The driver was a spare man, with a surly face, so far as Blake could see of it, for his peak cap came well down over his eyes, to meet almost the tall collar of his coat.

There was nothing about the cab to command attention; but Blake's trained eyes detected at once certain inadequacies.

The night was mild—too mild for a man to put a heavy collar up. Also, pinned on the man's coat was a white chrysanthemum.

The man was of the shabby type—the old growler-driver who had secured a licence for a taxi—and not the sort to wear button-holes, except at weddings, funerals, and Cup-finals.

Least of all was he the sort to ignore the buttonhole provided in his collar and pin a flower to his tunic for no purpose but ornament.

Blake paused in the shadows and restrained Tinker gently.

"Here's for another try-on, my lad!" he whispered. "Keep your wits about you. If Kestrel tries a haul inside he will be bound to have made adequate arrangements for a get-away, and the least suspicious thing for the purpose would be a taxi. It might be one of his own men on the cab or a real driver whom he has bribed. It is a strange thing with an amateur, who falls once in a while from the path of honesty, to fear what there is very little fear of—recognition. He has an instinct to hide his face. It's a very warm evening to have one's collar up."

"But what made you suspect that man?"

"Nothing—only that. He's just a possible. We'll test him."

Blake moved up very silently, and then sprang out under the driver's eyes. The man started visibly. Blake sprang on to the footboard.

"You're early, you fool!" he hissed. "Drive away and come back in ten minutes. The marks are about!"

The man gasped and nodded quickly, putting in his clutch, and gliding swiftly forward.

"Bluffed!" Blake muttered, between his teeth, swinging round and clutching at the rear of the cab, dragging Tinker after him.

They ran noiselessly behind it, until it presently slowed down, coming to a standstill at a dark spot in the road—the end of a cul-de-sac.

Peering round, Blake saw the driver get down and unbutton his coat laboriously, withdrawing a huge steel watch, and peer at it. The detective groped in his pocket, withdrew his automatic, and sprang forward.

The first intimation the driver had was to feel cold steel pressed against his cheek.

"Now," Blake said quietly, "keep mum if you want to keep on living!"

The man's face blanched, and he swayed with utter terror. He staggered back, putting up his hands, staring with wild eyes.

Secretly, Blake felt rather sorry for him at that moment.

"For Heaven's sake, don't!" he gasped hoarsely. "Take it away! I'm quiet—quiet as a lamb!"

"You'd better keep so, and do as I tell you—quick!" Blake said. "I won't waste words. Your little game's rumbled. I am a detective, and you're in the soup! Do you get me?"

"Guv'nor—guv'nor, don't charge me! I ain't a bird, I'll swear it! But I've been offered a hundred quid for this job—straight! A hundred for an hour's work! It wasn't human to turn it down, boss—straight now, was it?" The man was almost in tears. "I wanted to pay off the mortgage on the cab—If I die where I stand! Let me off, guv'nor, please!"

He almost dropped upon his knees.

Blake growled and lowered his automatic.

"You shouldn't get mixed up. But, look here, I'll give you a chance; but you've got to do what I tell you."

"I'll do anything! By Heaven, sir, I'll—"

"Off with that coat and cap, then—and quick!"

The man stared, and then as Blake's arm showed signs of rising unbuttoned the coat and removed the cap.

Blake removed his cap, threw it to the driver, and assumed the coat. By good fortune it enveloped him well, and the cap was large enough to sit well on his ears. He glanced down at the chrysanthemum pinned securely to the coat.

"We don't want you," he said to the driver. "We're after larger game. I'm borrowing your cab for a bit. To-morrow morning you can inquire at the office of the Hotel Magnifique and they'll tell you what garage to get it at. There will be a ten-pound note under the cushions—for your dishonesty!"

The man stared at him incredulously.

"Straight, guv'nor? You ain't droring it across me?"

"Straight!"

"Blue me, but you're a foff!"

"I've not finished yet. Who hired you for this job?"

"A strange gent—a week ago. Honest, I don't know nothink, boss. But he's offered a hundred to do the job and keep my gate shut. I jest got to carry out his instructions and—"

U.J.—No. 864.

"What were they? Quick!"

"Eleven o'clock, where you saw me dreop up. Gotten wear this chrysanthemum in me coat so as he can spot me. Drive straight to Noolyn Square, and then where he tells me. Simps for a hundred, you know, boss. There ain't many drivers what would 'ave sniffed at it!"

"Perhaps not," Blake said. "But you're lucky. You can go home and thank your missus for not being in quod, and tell her that honesty's your best policy for the future. Crooked work doesn't pay, old chap. Now, vamoose, and don't show yourself near the hotel in case we change our minds!"

The man turned and disappeared—a strange, half-bewildered, half-defeated figure, into the darkness.

The detective sprang on to the seat of the cab, turned, and drove back slowly, Tinker running behind.

He had hardly stopped, and Tinker had hardly taken up a point of observation opposite, when the door of the hotel opened slightly and the stout figure of an aged chef came out, tottering up the steps, with a bag in his hand.

He wore the white-drill tunic and cap of his class, and his rather surreptitious manner gave the impression that he was smuggling home a Sunday joint from the hotel stock.

He hobbled quickly over to the cab, and, opening the door, threw the bag inside, where it dropped heavily. He glanced once at the driver.

"Imbecile!" he growled irately. "You're past your time. Start up the engine. We're ready."

Blake touched his cap obsequiously and sprang down, running round to the starting-lever, watching till the white-clad figure returned and disappeared inside, closing the door behind him. Immediately Blake shot round the car, beckoning to Tinker, opening the farther door.

The bag inside was of the gladstone-cowhide variety and heavy. He opened it, and a cry escaped him.

"Save us!" he gasped.

He seized it with feverish haste and turned the contents out into the rug of the cab—numberless small, jingling, cambrie parcels; bulging handkerchiefs, from the corners of which the light of gold and platinum and precious stones caught a tiny shaft of light and threw it back with interest.

Fortune had beamed upon the detective more radiantly than he had even dreamed she might; but Opportunity still stood by with a frown, waiting, as it were, for his wits to size and consummate the chance she gave him. He had seconds, and seconds only, in which to make up his mind to act.

He turned quickly, and the Fates were kind. A hawk, with a shallow basket of cut-flowers, moved along the street, and Blake seized him by the arm, dragging him into the shelter of the cab.

"Flowers?" he asked quickly.

"Yus. 'Santemums. Wot's up?"

"Nothing. I'll buy the lot, and the basket. Five pounds?"

"You're barmy!"

"No I'm not! Don't argue! Give me your basket—quick!"

The detective took the basket, and threw the flowers out feverishly. With lightning fingers he transferred the contents of the bag to the basket, spreading it out as flat as possible. Then he lay the flowers above them—an effective concealment.

He lifted the basket up, and gave it to the man, who looked astonished at the weight of it.

"What's your name?"

"Awkins."

"Address?"

"Tindal Street, Seven Dials!"

"Good! Take this!" He groped in his pocket, and pulled out a note, which he had kept there for emergency. "Five pounds. Another five to do as I tell you. Take these to Mrs. Bardell, Baker Street." He gave the man the number. "Here, on your head with it! Go now!"

He peered into the man's face, and memorised the features in a glance.

"You look honest. Act up to your looks. It will pay you! Mrs. Bardell. Go now—quick!"

The man was amazed, bewildered, but a life spent upon the London streets had produced that razor-like edge upon his wits which is the pride of the Cockney. He grasped his instructions; did as he was told, in an instant the flat basket was on his head, and, with the note grabbed in his paw, he swung off quickly.

"Strew!" he muttered, as he went. "I've read some fairy-tales! There's some pinched stuff in 'ere, stop me 'eart if there ain't! Mrs. Bar-dell. Right! She shall 'ave it! An', arter that, I'll take a trip back to Vine Street, and recounterate wot I've done. Ten per cent, on lost property. 'Enry 'Awkins, of the Dial, complimented by the Garden Gate for 'is smart haet! Swelp me! It's better than gitten a ahtslder 'ome!"

Ruminating thus, a Cockney child of Fortune turned his face to Baker Street, leaving his fairy godparents with no time nor inclination to think about his point of view.

Quick as thought Blake filled up the bag with tools which he took from under the seat in the front of the cab, and, closing the bag again, replaced it in the spot from which he had taken it.

Beside him, on the driving-seat, he had noticed a large tarpaulin, and it gave him a sudden idea, which he communicated to Tinker, who acted quickly and without hesitation.

He had hardly resumed his position on the box and huddled as far into his coat-collar as possible when the side-door of the hotel opened once more. He turned, and saw the figure of a girl, whose perfect gown was cloaked by a long robe of dark hue. She sprang inside without glancing at the driver, as did another man in fancy-dress—the figure of an old-time highwayman. Following after there came a small, lithe figure, and the heavy overcoat he wore did not entirely conceal the evening-dress beneath. Lastly, there came the slim, well-knit figure of an elderly man, who looked picturesque in a legal wig and the ermine robe of a judge.

To the eye of the passer-by they appeared simply a little group of friends in motley—a few who had dispersed early from the gaiety of the ball inside.

They came up the steps singly, entering the cab with a swift spring, and treating the driver of the cab as the owners of a private car would treat a private chauffeur who needed no instructions.

And Blake was glad that he had received the clue to his next move from the terrified Jehu who had been tempted on to the fringes of crime. Almost simultaneously, as there came a sharp tap-tap at the window behind him, he put in the clutch, and the taxi leapt forward.

The detective knew his London, perhaps, better than any cabbie on the streets, and he chose the quickest way to Newlyn Square, consistent with the strict avoidance of main thoroughfares and corners where they were likely to be slight traffic stoppages.

But as he drove his brain was working swiftly, his quick mind was searching for the next move which it was best to make. Opportunity had stopped to give him a unique chance, and he had grasped it in the instant. In a few seconds he had achieved a great coup—how great he was yet to realise himself.

But now, if that coup were to be turned into the greatest triumph of his career, he required all his resource and ingenuity.

He knew himself to be driving now the most dangerous gang of criminals in the world. In spite of their motley, he knew these people for whom they were. The old chef, it was Father Bierce, and the girl was the inimitable Fiffette, his daughter, and the great feminine lieutenant of Leon Kestrel. The small, lithe figure dressed like a waiter, with an overcoat, who else could he be but Jose Madrano, the acrobat and steeplejack—Madrano, the Spaniard, who had fought with Blake and Tinker so murderously upon the roof at Baker Street, and who had stabbed Trenlin, the secretary of Sir Hubert Brewster, with a stiletto?

They were all boxed up in this cab, and Blake, as he felt the gentle pressure of his automatic in the pocket of his trousers, felt also a pardonable sense of triumph. They were at his mercy!

But were they? They also were armed, for surety. There was not one among them who was not a desperado—who, in the face of an automatic, would not have risked everything for freedom.

Even now Blake's brain was working feverishly, wondering how best to turn his great advantage to account.

The cab swung round into the long street which led to Newlyn Square, and in that instant Blake heard the sound of cursing from the inside, followed by a sharp peremptory order in a voice he knew for Kestrel's.

Suddenly the glass creaked as a figure was hurled against it. There came a string of Spanish oaths, followed by a quick cry of pain, and then silence.

Blake's heart was beating quickly. He maintained his huddled attitude, not turning his head.

Had they found him out? Had they discovered the immense sell in store for them? And did they suspect him? It was uncomfortable sitting on that seat, his back to the cab, wondering whether one of the exasperated felons on the inside would riddle him with bullets as he sat.

He felt a great relief as he turned into Newlyn Square, and drove to the darkest corner—a place where a small West-End chapel nestled under the shade of a few trees still left in London.

And then his heart stopped as a crashing blow came at his back splintering the glass. He heard a groan, and a voice which hissed with passionate anger. The door flew open, and the figure of the judge came out, dragging after him the trembling form of the "chet."

In that instant Blake knew that the truth was out. They had opened the bag, and found an assortment of spanners, oil rag, a jack, and a couple of spare plugs. And the fury and suspicion of the master-mummer were vent upon the old man, upon Father Bierce, the old lag, who had brought the bag from the hotel, and placed it in the cab.

"You lie, you old traitor! You lie! What have you done with it? By everything, I'll choke the life from you!"

Blake essayed to scramble down from the box, feigning an unpeakable agitation. The old lag, his head thrust back, fought feebly, gasping pitifully for breath.

"By Heaven, if you would play these tricks on me," Kestrel hissed, "you shall know! By everything, I'll let you see—"

He seemed speechless, beside himself with fury. His grip tightened about the scraggy throat, and then, with an access of fury, he threw the man from him so that Bierce fell, a whimpering heap. As he rose feebly Kestrel's hand went quickly to his hip.

The "highwayman," whom Blake guessed to be Lessing, the scientific instrument maker and the mechanical mind of the syndicate, sprang down from the cab and stood watching, peering down at the old man with as much pity as one would accord to the death-writings of a stricken reptile. Beside him stood Madrano, muttering curses on the aged head in the appalling blasphemy of his race.

"I'll let you see what you gain by your treachery, you poor, palsied old fool!" Kestrel hissed; and his manner was fendishly repellent. "You shall die like a stray and senile old hound! You shall die here!" He levelled the automatic murderously. "In ten seconds from now you will lie in that gutter, and—"

"Leon! Leon! Be merciful!" It was the voice of Fiffette—pitiful, distracted. "It is my father. He has been a good servant to you! Please—please!"

She put a pleading hand upon his arm.

"Get off, girl! Go and hide your face! He will not be good to look on in a moment! Five seconds! You old reptile—"

"Leon! Leon! You are beside yourself! Wait just for a few moments—for the love of mercy! Ah-h-h!"

Quick as thought she had snatched the revolver from his hand and sprang back, bringing her other hand as she did so in a stinging blow across his face. Her face was white as marble, beautiful in its anger. Her bosom heaved quickly, and there were tears and anger mingled as she faced him.

"You beast! You fiend! You would murder him!"

She raised her arm and flung the pistol from her so that it clattered into the darkness. A low cry broke from the mummer's lips, and with a strange look in his dark eyes he strode towards her.

And in that instant she lost courage. Blake had sprung down from the cab. His moment was not yet, but— He groped for his automatic as she ran to him, throwing her arms tightly about him, clinging desperately, and she dropped to her knees, as the power had gone from her legs.

"Driver—driver! Save me! He will—"

Blake tried to wrest his arm free, but she clung frantically, and the next instant both Madrano and Lessing were upon them. But they ignored the girl. Blake was borne down heavily under the bonnet of the car. He was rolled over, his cap flying off, his coat torn open.

"Blake—Blake! By all that's evil!"

The voice was Kestrel's, and in the same instant the detective felt the automatic wrench from his hip-pocket. His assailants released him then, and stepped back. Blake rose to his feet, facing them, and he looked

down the barrel of his own pistol. Behind it was the pallid, set face of the mummer, and his eyes burned like live coals.

Yet when he spoke his voice was calm—very quiet.

"So you have bested us again, Blake!" he said, striving to overcome his temporary breathlessness. "You have sold us a pretty pup this evening. Where is the stuff?"

"What stuff?" Blake asked, temporising, trying to gain time, for he had noticed a movement nearabouts which gave him hope in his extremity.

"The stuff out of the bag!"

"It is quite safe," Blake said. "On the first stage of its journey back to the owners!"

"Dios! I will strangle him! I—"

"Shut up, Jose! Keep back! This is my pigeon!" Kestrel said, turning upon the enraged Spaniard, whose whole snake-like body was quivering with fury.

"How did you do it, Blake?"

"How did you?" Blake retorted, forcing a smile.

Kestrel shrugged his shoulders, and then deflected the pistol slightly, to cover his heart.

"You have bested me! I admit it! I congratulate you! But it is the last time. You are a dead man now, Blake. There is an end to my patience!"

"If you murder me," Blake said quietly, "there are others who will exact revenge!"



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"Perhaps so. This is my moment! Is there any message for your relatives?"

"Yes. You may inform them that I shall be home to breakfast, if not earlier!"

"I will. It is your special request that the corpse shall be borne home to Baker Street. Very good, it shall be done! Now you may pray!"

His finger closed on the trigger of the automatic, and Blake knew that the veriest pressure then separated him from death. He drew a deep breath, and—

Crack! The sharp report of a revolver rung out into the night, and a cry of pain broke from the lips of the mummer as his arm fell helpless, and an automatic clattering to the ground from a useless hand.

"San Pedro! What is this?" cried the steeplejack.

A figure had suddenly appeared, as if by magic, upon the roof of the cab—the figure of Tinker—a loose tarpuin held in his left hand as he stood, revolver levelled with the other.

"Who moves, I shoot dead!" he cried.

"At him! At him!" hissed Kestrel, flinging himself down to minimise the risk, and groping for the dropped automatic.

Crack—crack!

Lessing's pistol rang out, perforating the tarpuin which Tinker held, missing the lad providentially by a hair's-breadth. In an instant Blake had sprung forward, closing with Kestrel, and almost at the same moment Tinker raised the tarpuin like a screen, and threw it over the heads of Lessing and the Spaniard as they sprang to the cab after him.

One quick glance down, and then he leapt

on top of them, bearing them down, a writhing, cursing, struggling mass in the street. Meanwhile, Blake and Kestrel were writhing like wild-cats, and then, as Blake secured the automatic and sprang away, the Spaniard came at his throat like a puma, and he was borne backwards swiftly.

In the instant as he fell he found himself wondering what would be the outcome. They were desperadoes of the worst type, these men with whom they fought. Death had no terrors for them. He and Tinker were against heavy odds. How was Tinker faring at—

His head came into contact with the brass axle-head of the wheel. A sickening mist came over him. He felt his senses drifting.

It was Chance which dealt that blow at Blake—that formidable element which turns friend or foe according to her whim. Blake's last conscious thought was one of despair to think that the cause was lost.

But it was not. Madrano, escaped from the melee under the tarpuin, had gone to the help of Kestrel. Tinker was left with Lessing only, and the lad fought like a youth possessed. By an adroit move he managed to trap the head of his opponent in a fold of the tarpuin, twisting it so that the man's neck was almost broken. By an effort he maintained the hold with one hand, and with the other he grabbed at the hand which held the revolver. With a quick wrench he snatched it free and sprang back, taking his own revolver from his pocket at the same moment.

A thrill of triumph passed through him, for he knew himself now master of the situation. He stood a little aloof, surveying the scene. Blake lay still under the front wheel of the car. Near by stood the Spaniard, panting and breathless. Lessing, cursing horribly, was freeing himself from the folds of the tarpuin, and Fiffette stood supporting the enfeebled figure of her father.

"Hands up, all of you!"

The men stared helpless at the white face of the lad, whose hair tumbled about his forehead. And in that instant there came the sound of running feet, and two blue-coated figures came up breathlessly. Tinker could have sung a psalm of triumph in that moment.

"What's up? What's up?" one of the constables cried, shrinking back a little before the threatening attitude of the lad.

"I am Sexton Blake's assistant," he said quickly. "This is a gang who have just robbed the Hotel Magnifique. I've got them covered. Will you make them prisoners?"

One of the policemen came forward and peered into the lad's face.

"My heavens! it is young Tinker! Come on, Charlie!" he gasped.

"But we ain't got any 'cuffs! There's a lot of 'em," the other said. "We'd better blow up for some more. Hallo, what's this?"

A car drove up quickly, driven by a man in the uniform of a constable. It stopped, and two officers sprang out—an inspector and a sergeant. They were each armed, and held revolvers in readiness.

"Here's the gang what has robbed the Hotel Magnifique, sir," one of the policemen said. "This lad—Sexton Blake's assistant, is—"

"My Heaven, you've got them! What luck! We had a clue—an address in Newlyn Square. Quick, Evans! Have you got the 'cuffs'?"

Tinker stood, still covering them, as did the inspector; while Kestrel and Lessing were not only handcuffed, but manacled by the feet as well. Madrano was secured to one of the constables; Fiffette was handcuffed to her father.

Immediately Tinker sprang to his master, bending over him solitiously, emitting a deep sigh of relief when he felt the pulse beating fairly strong.

"Who is this—Sexton Blake?" It was the voice of the inspector. "Is he badly hurt?"

"No. Knocked senseless by this axle, I think. We had a murderous struggle with them. But get them away in lock-up; I'll get the gun'nor home."

"Are you sure you—"

The inspector bent and examined Blake.

"Yes. Help me to lift him into this cab."

They bore Blake together, and he began to regain consciousness as they propped him up in the taxi. The inspector joined the others in the car, which drove off in triumph. With quickly-beating heart and almost a song on his white lips, Tinker sprang back on to the box and swung off towards home.

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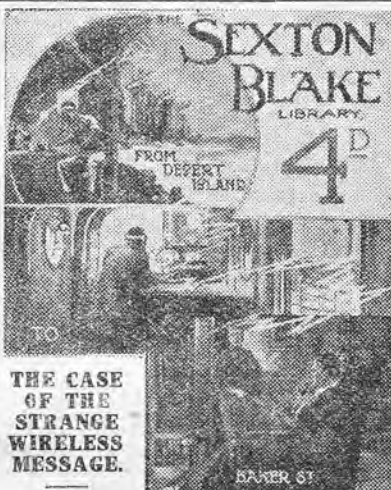
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CONCLUSION.**D**ETECTIVE-INSPECTOR HARKER of the C.I.D. was not a highly-strung man, but he was a man of sense and feeling, and he had a temperament.

Solid efficiency, industry, and a number of fine successes in criminal investigation had earned his distinction at the Yard; he had in years built up a goodly store of what is called "kudos."

Yet always the needs of the public service demanded that those successes should be maintained; he must always be up to concert-pitch and keep on the smiling side of Fortune—a kinkle jade who had ruined more than one promising officer.

So long as he remained in the Yard so long was he haunted by the mocking spectre of failure. Always in the background was the dark shadow of that big "bloomer" which spelt ignominy and perhaps disgrace.

And to-night, as he sped to Baker Street in a cab, it seemed that the shadow had materialised. He had failed, failed so dismally that life and ambition seemed to hold nothing more for him. It was the figure of a man sick at heart and broken in spirit who alighted and knocked desperately at Blake's door.

He found Mrs. Bardell in a state of excitement bordering on hysteria, a condition which did nothing to soothe his faded nerves. "Come in, Mr. 'Arker—come in! Oh, dearie me! Wonders will never cease. I do so wish the master would come!"

She led the way up to the consulting-room, and as Harker fell dejectedly into a seat he noticed a shell basket of chrysanthemums upon the table. Mrs. Bardell, trembling with excitement, pointed to them.

"Sent to me this evening!" she said.

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The Yard man nodded without interest. "Some admirer, I suppose," he murmured, finding the pleasantry a great effort.

"Look at them, Mr. 'Arker!"

"Yes, I can see; nice blooms. When will the master be in? I want to see him specially—very specially!"

"Just get up and have a look at them, chrysanthemums, Mr. 'Arker! Lift 'em up and smell 'em!" she pleaded.

"They have no scent," he protested.

"No; but they grow in rich soil," she said darkly. "Do 'ave a look!"

Rather irritably he rose and lifted the blooms, regarding them casually. Then he bent more closely, and lifted a little cambric bundle from beneath. As he did so an exquisite rope of pearls fell out among the stalks, with several rings set with precious stones.

"My Heaven, what is this?" he gasped.

A little suppressed scream broke from the old lady—she was verging on hysteria. She waddled forward, and, lifting the basket, inverted it upon the table. And in that instant the Yard man gazed upon such a collection of jewellery as he had never seen displayed even in Burlington Arcade—delightful ropes of pearls, sapphire brooches, pendants of purest ruby, a glorious tiara of emeralds and diamonds!

"Good heavens! I have seen this before this evening! What, in the name of goodness—" He stopped, and stared blankly at the old lady, who looked back almost stupidly.

"They came here, you say! What time?"

"Eleven. I was thinking about going to bed, and—"

"Eleven! Great Scott! Soon after the robbery!"

"Robbery, Mister 'Arker! Oh, gracious goodness! You don't mean— Oh-h, what's that—a knock?"

An imperious banging came up from below upon the knocker, followed by a furious ringing of the bell. She turned and raced down the stairs, leaving the Yard man to finger the jewels like a man in a dream.

Propped up by cushions upon the settee, a glass of restorative upon a small table beside him, his face pale, but with a smile upon his thin lips, Sexton Blake looked over into the eager face of Harker, as that officer, his right forefinger laid, as was his habit in narrative, across the palm of his left hand, recounted the amazing events which had taken place at that meeting of the Sixty Club, which was to become history in the annals of that society, and in the annals of the Hotel Magnifique itself.

"And you say that after the bag had been stowed away and the dance continued," Blake said. "Lord Evescourt announced an extra number, and that the figure of the blind-folded girl glided out with the form of the highwayman?"

"Yes," Harker said. "It was very picturesque. I was conscious of that, even in my anxiety."

"Extremely picturesque," Blake said, with a smile. "And what was the little epigram his lordship made when he stopped the music?"

"Justice allied to Robbery!" And everybody laughed," Harker said.

"The laughter which is akin to tears," Blake said. "My word, Harker, that was the boldest touch of all—the neatest, the most audacious! Kestrel simply cannot resist the

temptation to be theatrical! And it was true—at least, according to his reasoning. Justice was allied to Robbery—as you found out a few minutes later!

"By heaven, yes!" Harker breathed. "But Blake, what a stunt—how magnificently planned and carried out!"

"Just typical," Blake said. "From what you have told me about your investigations after the robbery I see no element of doubt in your conclusions. The whole thing was planned as carefully as an Army offensive!"

"But Kestrel, in the disguise of Lord Evescourt, surpassed himself. All his friends were there. They never for a moment suspected—"

"In old-man parts," Blake said, "the mummer is perfect. It is the only word, Harker. One cannot but give him admiration. He commands it!"

"He does, by Jove! And the perfect manner he played his part made the rest quite easy!"

"Quite easy," Blake said. "His first step obviously was to get his confederate into the hotel as a chef. He did that undoubtedly by craft. That gave him access to this small store-room which backed on to the ante-room where you took the jewels from the women. The back of that cupboard had already been removed and fixed so that it was the work of a few moments to remove it and take the bag. The real Lord Evescourt was inveigled into the room by a false message, you say?"

"Yes. He recovered sufficiently to tell us that."

"Not difficult. When they got him to the room he was drugged and bound, ready to be substituted for the bag of jewels. That pretty well covered all the ground. But the cleverest trick, I think, was that worked by

Fiffette on this poor cholly, Melhuish. She slipped that ruby pendant and the small pliers into his pocket and then complained of being robbed!"

"Yes, the jade! And when I think how she acted—how she professed indignation when Browning clapped the cuffs on him and took him away! Poor old Browning!"

"He'll be surprised!" Blake said, smiling. "Of course, you'll release the 'knot'?"

"Naturally; at once."

"And you found this paper in his pocket. It was only natural after that you should play Kestrel's game. The trap was too well laid."

"I was looking for trouble. I didn't know what form it would come in," Harker muttered in extenuation. "The least I could do was to detain Melhuish."

"Kestrel makes one suspect everybody," Blake said.

"Quite; and he knows it. And to think of the way I fell into this other trap—the collection of the jewels. Like an utter simpleton, Blake. My heaven, if it had not been for you—"

"There's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip!" Blake said, smiling. "And all's well that ends well! We can figure it out with plenty of credit for you to the Commissioner."

"Jove, you're a white man, Blake! I shall never forget—"

"Tosh! Luck favoured me and not you—that's all," the investigator said, taking up his glass and sipping at it. "My little coup was a compound of common-sense and luck—mostly the latter. Kestrel gave me one chance in sixty—and I took it!"

Tinker laughed excitedly, and Harker looked over at Blake with frank joy and admiration in his glance.

"It's too good to be true, Blake—too good. To think we've got the lot of 'em—the whole deuced syn—"

The telephone-bell rang. Tinker sprang over to it. The call was for Harker. He raised the receiver, and as he listened a frown came to his face. The colour died away.

"Wait a moment, please—wait!" he called. "Blake, they've slipped you!"

"Slipped me! Who, for Heaven's sake?"

"Kestrel! There's a report through that two policemen have been picked up off Newlyn Square. One is unconscious, the other shot through the chest, but not fatally. He was able to tell them a bit. This inspector and the sergeant—they were confederates—"

"Confederates! Oh, my hat!" The words were wrung from Tinker in the form of a wail.

A hard look came into Blake's face. Harker seized his hat.

"Kestrel's second line of defence!" Blake muttered. "Still, spilt milk is not remedied by tears. Here's to our next meeting!"

So ended the first great 'stunt' of the Kestrel Syndicate in the year 1920—a stunt which Blake's astuteness foiled and turned into what was nearly the master-mummer's greatest disaster.

He and those who worked with him were lucky to escape with only their lives to show for all their efforts.

And now, tucked away in Mrs. Bardell's drawer, there is a heart-shaped ruby of perfect purity, which on very rare occasions she wears—a priceless memento of a wonderful night which neither she nor those she serves are ever likely to forget!

THE END.

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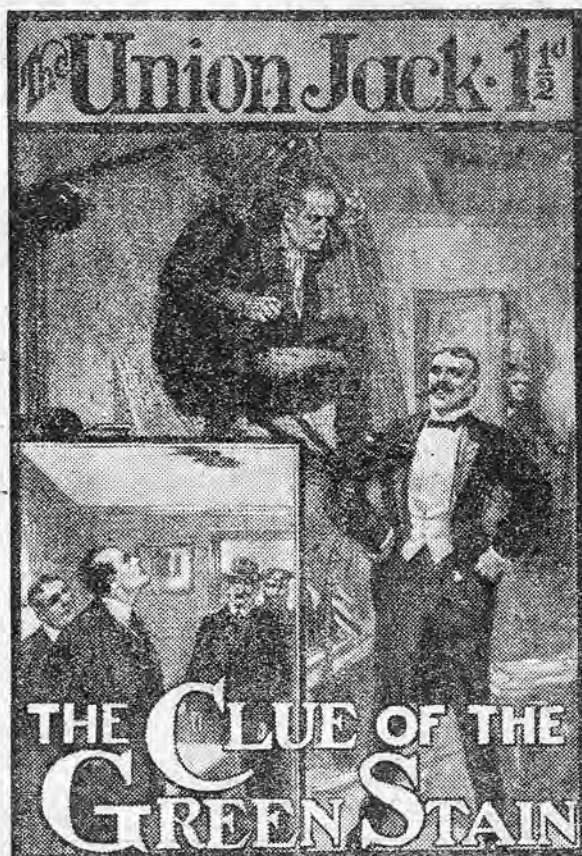
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PEOPLE IN THE STORY.

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

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

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

All the above characters escape from the State prison. **PALAS** joins the Army, changing his name to **D'Hauumont**.

Whilst he is staying at the chateau of **M. Boulay**, he falls in love with his host's daughter, **Francoise**, whom he ultimately marries, much to the annoyance of a certain Count **Gorbio** who wished to make the girl his wife.

The Four Shadows get in touch with **PALAS**, meaning to blackmail him.

It is then that **Cheri-Bibi** takes a hand, and he arranges an "accident" which he hopes will put the Shadows out of **PALAS**' life for evermore.

EPISODE 13.

The Decision.

THE little clock on the mantelpiece chimed musically, and **PALAS**, with a groan upon his lips, raised his head in a tired, listless manner.

The hands of the clock pointed to eleven-thirty.

"Half an hour," he muttered—"half an hour in which to decide one way or the other!"

Francoise, his young wife, who had been regarding him from the opposite side of the fireplace, rose from her chair and came across to him.

She put a slim, cool hand upon his burning forehead.

"I know quite well how you are suffering, dear," she said, in her pleasing, sympathetic voice. "This awful man **Gorbio** thinks he has a hold over you, that he will make you join his secret society; but I know you could not stoop to any dishonourable action."

She raised her husband's pallid face and looked into the steady, clear eyes.

"We must let Count **Gorbio** do his worst, dear," she said earnestly.

She glanced hastily at the dial of the clock.

"You have less than half an hour in which to make up your mind, and you must do the right thing. Tell him—"

Her voice trailed away, and a gleam of excitement crept into her eyes.

PALAS noticed this at once.

"What is it, **Francoise**?" he asked anxiously. "Have you thought of a way out of our difficulty?"

The girl nodded her head and smiled happily.

"I have, dear," she answered. "Count **Gorbio** is thoroughly unscrupulous, and he has not hesitated to use every means in his power to make you sign away your honour. He has threatened to tell the police that you are—you were—"

She hesitated, unable to say the hateful word "convict."

"Yes, yes," **PALAS** broke in, a queer, crooked smile twisting his lips. "He would not hesitate to inform the police that I am an escaped convict. Well?"

"Well, let him think that you have fallen in with his wishes—that you are willing to become a member of his gang of criminals and spies. And if you manage to get into his confidence, it is more than likely that you will be able to get some news of the necklace."

PALAS was looking excited now, and he rose from his chair and put his hands upon the girl's slim shoulders.

"That's splendid, **Francoise**," he said, his eyes shining with hope. "We will meet **Gorbio** with his own weapons. I will make him think that I am willing to serve him, and, as you say, I may get on the track of the necklace."

"Then you must hurry, dear," said the girl, her eyes upon the clock. "You have just fifteen minutes in which to get to the count's hotel."

PALAS had kept an appointment with Count **Gorbio** on the previous day, and the count had threatened to turn informer if **PALAS** did not consent to become a member of his gang—a combine which embraced the most notorious cracksmen and crooks in France, as well as spies and blackmailers who were perfectly willing to turn their hands to any despicable deed so long as it filled their coffers with ill-gotten gold.

PALAS had been in a quandary.

He knew that he could not prove his innocence just yet, and if **Gorbio** carried out his threat—as he surely would—it meant that **PALAS** would be sent back to the State prison, to linger there for many years to come.

But now **Francoise** had hit upon a solution—a way out of the whole ghastly business.

So, wasting not a moment, **PALAS** left the house and made his way to the Hotel d'Anglais. As on the previous day, he was expected, and a servant conducted him to **Gorbio**'s room.

The count looked up with a lazy, sneering smile as **PALAS** paused upon the threshold.

"Er—shut the door, my dear Captain d'Hauumont," pleaded **Gorbio** suavely. "After all, the business which we have to conduct is strictly between ourselves, isn't it? We don't want the whole world to know."

"You are quite right, **Gorbio**," **PALAS** said, looking into the fleshy, evil face before him. "And your decision, my dear captain?"

asked the count.

Even as he spoke he opened a drawer and took a sheet of foolscap from it. It was the agreement which **PALAS** would have to

sign—the document which stated that he swore allegiance to the most notorious band of blackguards in Europe.

"My decision," said **PALAS**, in a voice which shook with suppressed emotion, "is that I will do as you wish, **Gorbio**. You know perfectly well that you've got me under your thumb, and that I can do nothing but obey you."

"Splendid, splendid, my dear captain!" beamed the count, pushing the paper and pen towards his guest. "I thought that you would forget your lofty principles when it came to the matter of your personal safety. However—"

"Hold your tongue!" said **PALAS**, who hardly knew how to keep his hands off the sleek, smiling rogue.

He picked up the document and read it through, his pale face flushing as each phrase burnt into his brain.

It seemed that he was to give himself, body and soul, to the secret society, and that he would have to do **Gorbio**'s bidding without question.

Still, it could not be helped; and so, with a shrug of his shoulders, he appended his signature.

Gorbio wore a satisfied, triumphant smile as he put the paper into his pocket.

"That's splendid, my dear captain!" he said, rising from his chair. "I feel sure that the arrangement will be to our mutual advantage, for I have many missions—with regard to—er—appropriating State documents and the like, you know—upon which I shall not hesitate to send you. Not that I shall give you any written instructions, my dear captain. Oh dear no! So, should you think that treachery will avail you anything, let me assure you at once that it will not."

He paused for a moment, and regarded **PALAS**' flushed face with cynical amusement.

"Count **Gorbio**, my dear captain," he drawled insolently, "does not compromise himself. Furthermore, as I pointed out to you at a previous interview, if it comes to a matter of your word against mine—you, a 'wanted' man, and I, a count—"

He did not finish his sentence, for his meaning was perfectly obvious.

PALAS picked up his hat with an impatient movement.

"There's no need to go any further with your remarks, **Gorbio**," he said, moving towards the door. "I'm quite willing to admit that you've got the whip-hand at the moment; but, remember this—he looked straight into the other's close-set eyes—"remember this, one day the whip may be in my hand, and I shall not spare you!"

"No, I really don't think you will, my dear captain," smiled **Gorbio** pleasantly; "but up till the time that the whip is in your hand you must obey me."

The bantering tone changed to one of intense malignity.

"One word of treachery, or any more insolence, **PALAS**, and back you go to prison, to stay there till you rot! Now get outside! You'll hear from me in the course of a few days; that is, when I have need of your services."

PALAS' face was deathly pale again, and his eyes shone with anger as he listened to the other man's studied taunts. It was only by superhuman effort of will that he held

himself in check, for he knew that once they came to grips it would be a fight to the death.

Gorbio seemed to sense Palas' emotions, and his look of cold hatred gave way to smiles.

"Seeing that we are to work together, my dear captain," he drawled smugly, "I really think we should shake hands on the deal, don't you?"

Palas looked down at the fleshy, beringed fingers.

"I am yours to command, Gorbio," he said, in clear, cutting tones, "and I shall have to carry out your instructions to the best of my ability. But there is one command that I shall always refuse to obey, no matter what the consequences may be."

Gorbio nodded.

"And that is?" he asked politely.

"A command to shake hands with the most unscrupulous and cold-blooded scoundrel in France—you!"

He turned on his heel, strode across the room, and, without another word, opened the door and passed out.

And as he walked away he heard Gorbio give a grating, sinister chuckle.

"You shall pay dearly for those words, my gaol-bird!" vowed the count, a threatening light glinting from his black eyes.

Kidnapped!

Gisele, Palas' beautiful young ward, was worried.

Only a day or so before she had come across papers which proved beyond all doubt that her guardian, who was a father to her, was actually Raoul de Saint-Delmas, who had been convicted many years before for robbery and murder.

And she knew that he was still a "wanted" man.

The shock of this revelation had stunned the girl for the moment, and Palas noticed that the colour had fled from her cheeks, and that she was unusually quiet and thoughtful.

He suspected that she had somehow learnt the truth of his dread past, and he had taken her into the grounds, where he had told her the whole story.

And, looking into his set face with trusting eyes, she knew that he had spoken the

truth when he had told her that he was innocent of the crime of which he had been accused and convicted.

There had been a happy light in her eyes when she returned to the house, for her worst fears had been dispelled. Palas was to her something more than an ordinary mortal, for he stood for everything that was kind and good and manly.

She had wondered, in a weak moment, whether her idol had feet of clay, and now he had declared his innocence she was radiantly happy once again.

As she stood by the open window she was thinking how her guardian must have suffered; yet a happy little smile radiated her face as she thought that all his troubles were at an end at last.

Her musings were brought to an abrupt conclusion by something white falling at her feet—something that had been thrown through the open window.

Her smooth brow puckered for a moment; then she bent down and picked up a note which was lying at her feet.

She smoothed out the square of paper, and then her hand went to her throbbing bosom as she read the words which danced before her eyes.

The writing was scrawly, but not ill-formed.

"I know your guardian's secret, and if you do not meet me at the quay this evening I shall denounce him to the police.—A. DE SAINTYNE."

A little, gasping cry escaped the girl's bloodless lips as she read the note for the second time.

De Saintyne, the leader of the Four Shadows, who was reported drowned! Her brain reeled as she realised that she was not free from his unwelcome attentions after all.

And he knew her guardian to be a "wanted" man!

Scarcely knowing what she was doing, she snatched up a silk shawl, put it round her head, and hurried from the room, for she meant to save Palas at any cost.

She did not give a thought to her own danger, although she knew De Saintyne—who was none other than Arigonde, of course—to be a desperate man.

Hurrying through the grounds, she passed through the town, and eventually found herself upon the quay.

She looked round, expecting to see De Saintyne. But there was no sign of him, and she was hesitating as to whether the whole thing was a queer form of hoax, when a man's voice fell upon her ears.

She turned, and found herself looking at the captain of a boat.

"Did you speak to me?" she asked quietly, though her heart was pumping.

She did not like the look of the fellow. There was a hint of mockery in his greasy smile.

"Yes, miss, I did," he answered at once. "I have been asked to escort you to M. de Saintyne."

"Where is he?" the girl demanded.

"Follow me!" said the man, and, turning on his heels, he strode along the quay, and finally halted near a ship called the Tullia. A narrow plank—an improvised gangway—ran from the quay to the deck. The man strode across this with an air of easy unconcern, but it was no easy task for Gisele.

She managed, however, and, jumping lightly to the deck, she followed the man down a small companion-ladder.

She was on the lower-deck, with a small door facing her. Her guide motioned her to open it, and, with a wildly-beating heart, and a feeling of impending tragedy, she tapped at the panels and entered.

A middle-aged man with a black beard rose from his chair and bowed ironically.

"Come in, Gisele!" he said, with a smirk; and the girl recognised the smooth, oily tones.

"So it really is you, M. de Saintyne?" she breathed. "You were not drowned, after all?"

Arigonde gave a low laugh.

"No, Gisele," he said lightly; "I am very much alive, as your guardian may learn to his cost. I see you are looking at my—er—facial adornment—just a false beard, you know—and you are probably wondering why I am wearing it. As a matter of fact, it suits my convenience to be dead for a little while."

He paused, and regarded the shrinking girl with an amused smile.

"I am certainly dead for the time being; but when I eventually come to life—and it

(Continued on next page.)

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No. 14.

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will be very soon, I think—one man at least will be unpleasantly surprised!"

"You mean—" began the girl, fearing the worst.

"Yes, your sainted guardian, my dear!" admitted Arigonde, with a nod of his bullet head. "Unless, of course—"

"Yes, yes!" breathed Gisele. "Unless what?"

"Unless you consent to become my wife!"

The frail girl looked at him in utter, stupefied amazement for a few seconds. The very sight of this man was repugnant to her, and she gave a little shudder.

"Marry you?" she asked at last. "No, sir; not if you were the only man in the world! You have pestered and insulted me with your unwelcome attentions for too long. No, sir; I will not marry you, and—"

The words froze on her lips, and she gave an anxious, frightened look towards the door.

Arigonde saw the look and smiled.

"Oh, yes, my little Gisele," he said tauntingly, "we are really on the move. I gave instructions to set sail just as soon as our fair passenger came aboard!"

True enough, she could hear orders being given, and the scraping of many feet, as the sailors manipulated the voluminous sails.

The girl clenched her hands, and stamped her small feet upon the boards of the cabin.

"Oh, why are you persecuting me like this, you coward?" she demanded vehemently.

"Were I a man you would not dare to treat me in this way! But because I'm a girl, and unable to defend myself—"

"Please—please don't give way to hysterics," said Arigonde, rising from his chair and moving towards the white-faced Gisele.

She, in turn, backed towards the door.

Then, from the folds of her dress, she produced an object which she pointed at Arigonde. It was a dainty mother-of-pearl revolver—little more than a toy, but a deadly weapon for all that.

"If you take another step towards me, you coward," she said, in low, tense accents, "I will shoot you!"

Palas, wild-eyed and hatless, raced down the quay to where the Tullia had been moored.

And his heart almost stopped beating when he saw that the vessel had already set sail, and was making steady progress seawards.

He felt a touch on his arm, and, swinging round, found himself confronted by Yoyo, the young Indian.

"Have you seen Gisele?" asked Palas breathlessly. "My ward—Gisele?"

"Yes," answered Yoyo at once. "She went aboard the Tullia with the skipper."

"How long ago was that?" asked Palas eagerly.

"Less than half an hour," came the reply.

"And the Tullia set sail almost at once?"

Palas gripped the young man by the arm—a tense, painful grip.

"Go along and tell Cheri-Bibi all that has happened!" Palas instructed. "Race as though your very life depended upon it! Tell him that I found a note which Arigonde had addressed to Gisele, in which he threatened to give me away if she did not keep an appointment with him this evening."

"She kept the appointment, to screen me," Palas went on hoarsely, "and Heaven alone

knows what will happen to her! (Now, then, off with you!)"

Without further questions, Yoyo darted away towards the fisherman's hut in which he knew he would find the old lag.

Palas, for his part, turned his attention to the harbour, and watched the Tullia for a few moments.

Then, setting his teeth, he raised his strong arms above his head and dived into the sea.

He was going to swim to the Tullia and exact retribution from Arigonde, his arch-enemy, the unscrupulous leader of the Four Shadows!

(Next Week: Episode 14.)

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