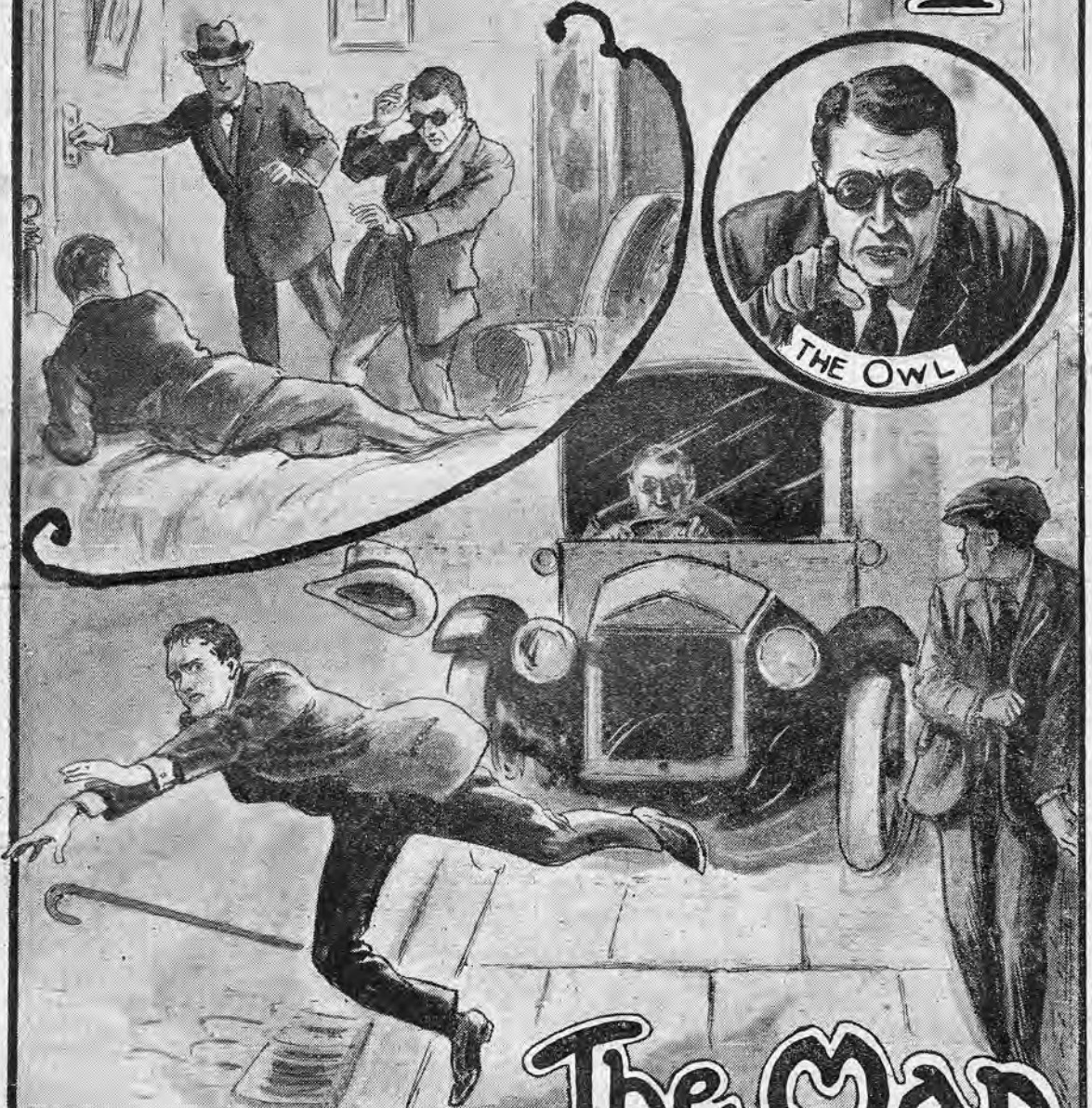


SEXTON BLAKE v. THE OWL!

(See within.)

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The Man In the Smoked Glasses

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August 21st, 1920.



The MAN IN THE SMOKED GLASSES

An Exciting Long Complete Detective Story, featuring **SEXTON BLAKE, TINKER,** and an Amazing Character, **THE OWL.**

Illustrated by - - - WILLIS READING.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Manager of Lyverett Mansions is Much Perplexed—A Strange Tenant.

EARLY one morning in May there was ushered into the quiet consulting-room in Baker Street a clean-shaven, elderly man, who seemed to have a difficulty in explaining just what it was that had brought him into the presence of the famous detective.

To Sexton Blake, a keen student of character, it was rather amusing to mark the air of doubt and diffidence that lingered on his visitor's face during the interview.

"You see, Mr. Blake, I am in rather a difficult position, and I don't want my company to know anything about this," he explained at the outset. "They might not thank me for what I am doing, for, of course, we have really nothing to complain about."

Every man has a different way of stating a case, and Blake had learned that infinite patience was very necessary in a profession such as his.

"You can talk to me in strictest confidence, Mr. Hardley," he assured his visitor.

"Well, this is roughly the present position of affairs. One of the flats of Lyverett Mansions, which I manage for a company, was taken some three weeks ago for a Greek gentleman, named Polacoss. The flat was taken by an agency, and a deposit of the first month's rent was paid in advance. I understood that Mr. Polacoss was coming from Athens on the Monday following the fixing up of the lease. I might tell you that this flat is the most expensive one in the whole mansions. We charge sixteen guineas a week for it, and that includes a certain amount of attendance."

Blake shrugged his shoulders.

"Where is Lyverett Mansions?" he asked. "In Maida Vale," the manager returned; then, noting the look on the detective's face, he went on, with a half-smile. "Oh, I admit that the rent is a bit tall, but I don't have the arranging of that. In any case this Greek gentleman apparently thought that it was all right, or he would not have notified his agents to accept it."

"What has happened?"

Mr. Hardley rubbed his chin.

"It is three weeks since the flat was taken over, and yet so far not a soul has set eyes on the tenant. Yet we know that he makes use of the flat."

"I don't quite understand."

"It is a mystery to us all, Mr. Blake," the manager put in grimly. "I've haunted that confounded flat at all hours of the day, and I've even sat up at night in the hope of getting just one glimpse of our tenant, but I'm hanged if I can do so."

The perplexity on his face increased.

"It isn't mere idle curiosity on my part," he added. "Of course, I know that I have nothing to complain about. The rent has been paid in advance, and two other small bills for alterations which I have sent in have also been settled. The bills have been

left on the table in the flat with the money attached to them. The man who looks after the flat finds traces now and again in the morning, proving that someone has been in there, but neither the attendant nor the porters have been able to catch sight of our tenant."

Blake, despite himself, was getting interested now. The manager's story was certainly out of the common.

"Let us get the details, Mr. Hardley," he said. "You state that although your tenant has now been in occupation of your flat for the past three weeks, no one in the buildings has set eyes on him."

Mr. Hardley nodded his head.

"He might be a spook so far as we are concerned," he said. "Yet we know that he has ordinary human tastes, for on one or two occasions the valet has found fragments of biscuits and a couple of empty bottles in the morning, while the rooms have smelt of tobacco-smoke, indicating that someone has been there."

A rueful smile crossed his face.

"To tell you the truth, Mr. Blake, I really came to see you as much to settle the doubts of my staff as anything else. This morning one of my cleaners refused to go into that particular flat. I suppose someone had been talking to her, and she was absolutely afraid to go in. I am afraid that gradually my whole staff will get the wind up, and that means trouble."

Blake laughed.

"In other words, Mr. Hardley, Lyverett Mansions is developing a first-class attack of nerves, and you want me to try and cure it."

"Exactly! You see, I can't very well write to Mr. Polacoss and ask him why he doesn't use the flat during the day-time. After all, England is still a free country, and if a man likes to pay sixteen guineas a week for a place to smoke in now and again, it has nothing whatever to do with us."

The manager shrugged his shoulders.

"But, human nature being what it is, I myself feel that I would like to know what really does happen in that flat. I forgot to mention that, last night, acting on my instructions, the night-porter visited the flat several times during the night. I gave him the valet's key, so that he could enter the flat if he liked, but when he tried to get in there at about two p.m. he found that someone had locked the Yale from the inside. He knocked once or twice, but received no reply, and had to go away. Yet early this morning about six, when he had another try at the flat, the lock opened all right, and he went through all the rooms, and did not meet a soul. What makes it all the more mysterious is that there is only one entrance to the flats, and the porter has an office there. He swore to me that he had not left his post all night, yet it is obvious from his own statement that someone did enter the flat and left it again."

Mr. Hardley came to the end of his long statement and rose to his feet.

"It was Inspector Reed who mentioned your name to me, sir," he went on. "I was chatting to him about the affair, and he pointed out to me that it was not exactly the sort of case that the police could interfere with. There is no question of crime or anything like that. But Reed did say that it was very interesting, and he told me that if I could persuade you to have a look into it, you would soon settle the matter."

Blake laughed. He knew Inspector Reed very well, and realised that the police-officer had probably sent Hardley down to Baker Street, believing that he was something of a crank—a man with a bee in his bonnet.

"Very well, Mr. Hardley," Blake returned. "I admit that your story has certainly interested me, and there is just a possibility of my taking a run up your way this afternoon. I suppose I could have a look round the flat?"

"I'll see to that, sir," said the manager gratefully. "Just let me know when you are coming, and I'll have everything fixed up."

He hesitated for a moment.

"Of course, sir, you won't mention it to anyone just yet? I—I mean that we don't want the newspapers to get hold of it. They are so ready to jump at any sort of story nowadays."

"You can rely on my complete discretion," said Blake, with a quiet smile, as he shook hands with his visitor.

When Hardley had gone Blake took a turn up and down his room. He had to admit that the curious story he had heard was of the type that did interest him. That a man should pay an exorbitant rent for a flat, and then only use that flat for a few hours now and again, in the night, was more than curious. With his vast experience of crime to help him, the wizard of Baker Street was well aware that very often the apparently foolish action is a cloak to the sinister and evil design.

"I wonder if I could find out just who this Polacoss is?" Blake mused. "I will wait until I have visited the flat, though. I don't want to start any inquiries until I make sure that there isn't some very simple explanation to the affair."

He had promised Mr. Hardley that he would go up to Lyverett Mansions, in Maida Vale, later in the afternoon, and he decided now that it might be worth his while to try and establish the identity of the mysterious Greek millionaire.

There is only one way of getting direct and immediate information concerning any foreigner of note who chances to come to London. The Embassies of the various nations make it a custom to take note of their fellow-countrymen who come to London, and Blake decided to pay a visit to the Greek Embassy at once.

The name of the millionaire—Polacoss—was rather a common one in Greece. That



much he knew, but he was also aware of the fact that there were not many millionaires in that tiny country, and it should not be very difficult to get some definite details concerning this particular one.

And so, after leaving a note for Tinker, telling him that his master would be back again at Baker Street about ten-time, Blake set off for the Greek Embassy, and presently he found himself in one of the quiet ante-rooms, chatting to an olive-cheeked, handsome young under-secretary.

Blake's card was quite sufficient to assure to him the best attention, and the under-secretary was obviously out to oblige.

As soon as Blake mentioned the name of the millionaire the secretary changed slightly. "It is rather curious, Mr. Blake," he said, speaking very fluent and faultless English; "but you have mentioned a name which has cropped up several times during the last few days."

"Then you know about Polacoss?"

The under-secretary shrugged his shoulders. "Well, we do, and we don't," he said. "We know that one of our countrymen, a very wealthy man, intended to come to this country for the purpose of negotiating with a big English syndicate in the City."

"Polacoss is one of the largest dealers in my country, and I believe that it is in connection with the shipping of his goods that he came here. So far as we are aware he arrived in London some time ago, but he hasn't put in an appearance here yet."

Blake smiled.

"As a rule our countrymen are very quick to report themselves at the Embassy," the secretary explained, "for very often we are able to assist them in their business. Then, again, there are usually letters addressed to them, care of us. I know for a fact that there are quite a number of letters waiting for this M. Polacoss, and, as we don't even know his address, we are not able to forward them to him."

His eyes were fixed on Blake for a moment.

"In fact, we should be very glad if we could get some definite information concerning our fellow-countryman, Mr. Blake," he said.

"For M. Polacoss is a very rich man, and, naturally, we would like to get in touch with him."

"I'm afraid I can't help you in that respect," Blake said, "although I am in a position to give you an address which I think would probably find him. It is Lyverett Mansions, Maida Vale."

The Greek was about to write down the address when something seemed to come to his mind, and he looked up sharply, shaking his head.

"I am afraid that that address is not much good, for, coming to think of it, it was given us by the British firm with whom M. Polacoss was in touch. They said that was his address, and I believe—in fact, I know—that we have written to him there, and the letter had been returned to us 'Not known.'"

"Indeed, that is rather interesting!" Blake said, a quiet smile crossing his face.

"Of course, we have gone no further in the matter," the Embassy under-secretary went on. "For if M. Polacoss does not wish us to know his whereabouts, then that settles it. But, at the same time, it is not at all the usual way of doing things, and I know that our people here would be very glad to get some definite news concerning him."

"I will see what I can do," Blake said. "And now I shall be glad if you can give me the address of the firm that you understand M. Polacoss is having negotiations with."

"Yes, I think I can do that. Of course, it isn't strictly regular, but, after all, everyone is not a Mr. Sexton Blake, and I am sure that my department would not hesitate to give you any information we can."

He left the room, and returned presently with a slip of cardboard on which the address had been written.

Blake glanced at it, and saw that it was a firm in Cannon Street—a small shipping firm.

There was nothing further to be gained at the Embassy, and, after thanking the under-secretary, Blake left the place, and took a taxi down to Cannon Street, entering the offices of the shipping firm.

He discovered that it was a small concern, owning three of four cargo steamers, which piled for miscellaneous cargoes in the Mediterranean.

The manager of the firm chanced to be in, and, on Blake sending in his card, he was ushered into this gentleman's presence.

"I have heard of you by repute," the man said, casting quick, interested glance at the clean-shaven detective. "I am very pleased to meet you, Mr. Blake, although I am at a loss to account for your call here if it is on business."

Blake smiled.

"It is only a very small matter," he said. "I am trying to trace a gentleman, who, I believe, is carrying out some negotiations with you. He is a Greek by the name of Polacoss." The manager leaned back in his chair, and shrugged his shoulders.

"So you are after Polacoss, are you?" he said. "You are not the only one. The Greek Embassy has rung us up once or twice concerning the same gentleman."

"Yes, I know that," said Blake. "In fact, I have just come from there."

The manager smiled.

"I don't suppose that they would be quite so anxious about him but for the fact that he is a very wealthy man. We have not been able to help them very much; in fact, he has only been in these offices about twice, and most of our dealings with him have been done by post."

He looked at Blake.

"There is nothing wrong with Mr. Polacoss, I suppose?" he asked.

Blake shrugged his shoulders.

"Not so far as I know," he went on. "My interest lies in quite a different line."

Blake went on then to explain to the manager his visit to the Lyverett Mansions flats and the promise he had made.

His listener laughed.

"I can quite understand that Mr. Hardley is somewhat perplexed over the affair," he agreed, "and, personally, I am also interested, for I understand that Mr. Polacoss is actually living at Lyverett Mansions. In any case, that is the address we have sent several letters to, and have received replies to them."

Blake leaned forward.

"You mean, that you have kept up a fairly regular correspondence with M. Polacoss at Lyverett Mansions?"

"Oh, yes, we have written to him several times, and have received several replies from him on the Lyverett Mansions note-paper."

He touched a bell, and presently a clerk appeared, bearing a file.

Opening the file, the manager selected a piece of note-paper, and handed it across to Blake.

"Here is one that we received this morning," he said. "You will notice that it was dated last night, and that it was cleared from the pillar-box in Maida Vale. I kept the envelope, for we are rather interested. The note had been written on the paper supplied by the proprietor of the mansions, and it was dated the previous evening."

The handwriting was small and well formed.

"We have several letters," said the manager, taking one or two others. "They deal with the business we have in hand."

Blake studied the papers, then returned them to the man at the desk.

"Well, that does rather seem to settle it," he agreed; "and yet, as I have already informed you, the people at Lyverett Mansions are ready to swear that their tenant has never really taken up his abode there."

The manager shrugged his shoulders.

"It has really nothing to do with us," he pointed out. "If Mr. Polacoss prefers to use Lyverett Mansions as a business address and live elsewhere, that is his own look out; yet I admit that it seems rather strange. It may be a Greek method of carrying out business, but it is not an English method."

Blake leaned forward.

"I am going to ask you a rather intimate question, but I can assure you that it will go no farther. Can you give me any information concerning Mr. Polacoss—financially or otherwise?"

"I do not mind telling you, Mr. Blake," the manager said. "Of course, it will be in confidence. Mr. Polacoss owns three very serviceable steamers, and he is trying to sell them to us. Our agents in Greece have already inspected the vessels, and we are quite satisfied, so far as they are concerned, and we wanted Mr. Polacoss to take the greater part of the purchase money in shares, but he wants cash down."

"It represents roughly a payment of something like sixty thousand pounds, and although we know the steamers are worth it, my company is trying to get Mr. Polacoss to agree to their suggestion."

"When was he here last?" asked Blake.

"Two days ago," returned the manager. "He never comes until late in the afternoon, usually about six o'clock. His last interview was rather a short one, and it was something in the nature of an ultimatum."

"He gave us until to-morrow morning," the manager said. "We have to find the money by then, or else he will sell the steamers elsewhere."

"And your decision?"

The manager laughed.

"Well, we want these steamers, so we must agree to the fellow's terms. He has all the papers here, with full authority to sell. We have been haggling with him, but I don't think it is any use. Our directors have practically decided that when he comes to-morrow morning he will receive his money."

"What is he like?" Blake asked.

"Oh, he is a Greek all right," said the manager. "Olive-skinned, middle-sized, rather powerfully built, and he wears smoked glasses. He speaks English fluently, and, between ourselves, Mr. Blake, he is just about as keen a business man as ever came into this office. He is certainly driving a very tight bargain with us, but that, you know, is what the Greek is best at."

Blake rose to his feet.

"I am very much obliged to you for the information you have given me," he said.

"And I can assure you that by this time to-morrow Mr. Polacoss will have gained his point, and the money will be handed over," the manager added.

Blake thought for a moment.

"I wonder if you would be good enough to let me know what time the appointment is to-morrow?"

"I will do so with pleasure," the manager said, reaching for a tablet.

He wrote down Blake's address and telephone number, and promised to ring him up as soon as Polacoss arrived.

After thanking him again, Blake left the offices in Cannon Street, and made his way through the busy thoroughfare.

Blake was fully conscious that there was some undefinable doubt running through his mind. He had no reason to suspect the bona fides of the mysterious Greek millionaire, and he would have been hard put to had he been asked to explain why he should regard the matter as one worthy of closer investigations, yet there it was.

For some reason or other Sexton Blake felt that he had to go on with the affair, and thrash it out to the bitter end.

"There may be absolutely nothing in it," he told himself, "but it is up to me to get in touch with Mr. Polacoss between now and to-morrow morning."

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Tinker Gets a Job.

LYVERETT MANSIONS is a huge block of red brick that stands on an angle of ground between two wide thoroughfares. The mansions has two fronts facing into the thoroughfares, and the central portion of the building is given over to a flagged courtyard, which is used by the tradesmen.

Each range of flats has a separate outside lift, a somewhat primitive arrangement, fixed to the high walls of the building, four thin girders running the whole length of the mansions, and a small square cage about three feet wide, which is worked by hydraulic power.

The lift is used by the porters and tradespeople for sending up goods to the tenants on the higher floors, and a small window in each kitchen gives access to the little lift. It can only take very small loads, but it is a great convenience, as the servants of the flats are quick to admit.

About ten o'clock in the evening Sexton Blake and Tinker were seated in the office of the manager, chatting quietly to Mr. Hardley.

Blake gave Hardley an account of his visits to the Embassy and the syndicate offices, and Hardley was rather impressed by the fact that his mysterious tenant was actually using the notepaper of the flats for his correspondence.

"It rather bears out what the night porter said, Mr. Blake," Hardley suggested. "I really don't know what to do, for, of course, if Mr. Polacoss only wants to use his flat as a sort of office, I don't see how we can complain."

He looked across at Blake.

"After all," he continued, "he has paid the rent for a month in advance, and he is not



giving us very much trouble. Personally, I feel half inclined to let the whole matter drop, until the end of the month, at least."

It was obvious to Blake that Hardley had probably been discussing the matter with his board of directors, and that board had pointed out to him the undesirability of interference in the matter.

"He is really a good tenant, you see, Mr. Blake," he said, "and it is only the stupid complaints of my staff that has brought you into it."

Tinker and Blake exchanged glances.

The changed attitude of Mr. Hardley was too obvious to be mistaken, and Blake made up his mind as to the course he would follow.

"That is all right, Mr. Hardley," he said. "Under the circumstances, if you wish to withdraw from the matter, I do not mind."

Mr. Hardley rose to his feet, obviously relieved.

"It is really very good of you, Mr. Blake. Of course, I will pay you for your services, but candidly, I do not see any reason to interfere with Mr. Polacoss at all."

Ten minutes later, when Blake and Tinker were out in the quiet thoroughfare again, the youngster turned to his master with a chuckle.

"They have given you the push, guv'nor," he said. "And I suppose that settles it."

Blake smiled.

"On the contrary, young 'un, it does nothing of the sort. I did not take up this case because of Mr. Hardley's trouble; it interested me, for there is a little problem that I would like to solve. I am not quite satisfied about this M. Polacoss, and as Mr. Hardley does not want to take any further steps in the matter, well, you and I will just have to move on our own."

Tinker stared.

"You mean that you are going on with the case, although they have asked you to drop it?"

"Exactly!"

Blake was silent for a moment as they strode along the quiet thoroughfare.

"To tell the truth, young 'un, I feel that there is something behind this, and, as I have already told you, to-morrow morning brings the business to a head, so far as M. Polacoss is concerned. He is to go down to the offices of the syndicate, and he will receive from them a very large sum of money in cash. Now, if there is anything fishy about this deal, you and I will have to find out just what it is between now and to-morrow morning."

He stopped, and looked at his assistant.

"I had a telephone message this afternoon," he went on, "from the manager of the syndicate. He says that he has received word from M. Polacoss, fixing the appointment for ten o'clock to-morrow morning. That means that we have roughly about eleven hours to go."

They had reached that portion of the thoroughfare where it divided into two sections, and the big bulk of Lyverett Mansions was behind them.

"You and I will have to separate now, Tinker," he said. "I have a little task I am going to undertake for myself. There is a certain club in Soho, where one is always sure to meet numbers of Greeks. I am going down there this evening, and I am going to make as many inquiries as I can concerning Polacoss. The club doesn't really open until about midnight, for most of its members are waiters, and they work late. I have a job for you to do, and I will show you what it is."

He led the way round the mansions, and went in an archway that opened out in the dark courtyard, and halted under one of the tradesmen's lifts.

The lift itself had been run up to the top floor, a precaution which the porters always took, for the lift was not supposed to be used after sunset.

"I want you to get into M. Polacoss' flat," said Blake; "and this, I think, is about the best way."

He indicated the window on the first floor.

"I have taken very careful note, and that window belongs to the flat," he said. "I don't think it is beyond your power to climb these girders. Anyhow, you might as well make an attempt."

"You want me to go now, guv'nor?"

"Yes," Blake returned. "I will keep watch, and see that you are all right."

When it came to a climbing job there were very few who could beat Tinker, and the

U. J.—No. 880.

youngster was presently shinning up the girders, working his way from flange to flange like a young monkey, until at last he was level with the first floor.

Blake had stepped back into the centre of the courtyard, and was keeping a sharp look-out.

He heard a faint creak of the window as Tinker raised the lower half, and a moment later the small figure had disappeared from view.

There were plenty of lights shining in Lyverett Mansions; but after standing for a moment or two, Blake was satisfied that this housebreaking operation that had been carried out by his young assistant was unobserved, and, with a final glance at the window on the first floor, Blake turned on his heels and went off across the courtyard.

"I hope I haven't let the young 'un in for anything desperate," he muttered to himself. "But still, he has his head screwed on the right way, and I should think that he will be able to give a good account of himself."

When Tinker closed the window behind him he halted there and looked down into the courtyard, picking out the figure of his guv'nor standing in the centre, and then, when Blake turned and went off, Tinker gave a little nod of his head.

"Left me to it now, I suppose," he said. "I will have to look round."

He had taken the precaution to carry with him a freshly-charged electric-torch, and now that useful article came into operation. Tinker flashed the bulb round the small kitchen, then, taking his muffer off, the youngster tore it in two, and proceeded to bind each foot in one of the halves.

When that operation was completed Tinker knew that he would make no noise as he moved, nor would he leave any trace of his presence behind him.

He crossed the kitchen, flashing the light in front of him, and found himself in the narrow hall, and halted for a moment at the front door.

Above the door was a fanlight, through which a gleam of the electric-bulb on the landing outside shone faintly.

There was a letter-box attached to the door, and Tinker, glancing into it, saw that there was a couple of letters inside. He slipped his hand down and withdrew the letters and glanced at the addresses. They were directed to M. Polacoss, and had the London postmark.

On the flap of one of them was the crest of the Greek Embassy, while the other had the name of a bank on it. After hesitating for a few moments Tinker replaced the letters in the letter-box, and then went on up the passage, halting at the door of the lift. He found that this communicated with the bed-room, and, entering the room, he made a slow search of it.

It was well furnished, with plenty of pictures on the walls, and good, solid furniture. The bed had been prepared, with the coverlet turned down, but a glance at the sheets and pillows told Tinker that it had not been occupied. There was a certain musty smell in the room, which to a keen observer indicated that it had not been used for some time.

Tinker searched the wardrobe and dressing-table, finding them empty. There was not even a portmanteau in the room to indicate that the Greek millionaire had made use of the chamber at all.

As he moved about the room the youngster was very careful not to disturb anything, and finally, when he left the chamber, he was satisfied in his own mind that no one could have discovered that he had been searching there.

Another doorway at the end of the passage was reached, and Tinker entered the sitting-room. It was also well furnished, with a heavy sideboard, deep, morocco chairs, and a carved oak desk. There was a dining-table in the centre of the room, and the fireplace had a big gas-fire arranged in it. The carpet was thick and obviously good, and the sideboard had several cut-glass decanters on it and an electro-plate biscuit-box.

Tinker crossed to the sideboard and examined the decanters. He saw that several of them held various types of drink. There was brandy, rum, and whisky, and there was also a syphon half full of soda, and in the biscuit-box were a few cracknels. There was also an electro-plated cigarette-box which had been opened, and proved to be a quarter full with oval-shaped Egyptian cigarettes. He noted that the tobacco was quite moist,

a proof that the cigarettes had only recently been placed in the box.

"A very good brand, too," Tinker decided, glancing at the crest on the paper. "They cost fourteen shillings a hundred, if they cost a penny, I bet!"

His next object of interest was the desk on which stood a brass-bound blotting-pad and a heavy brass inkstand, with a paper-rack. The rack contained a quantity of notepaper with the Lyverett Mansions address on it, and Tinker, withdrawing the blotting-paper from the brass-bound case, saw that some of it had been used recently, although an attempt to conceal that fact had been carried out by slipping the used portion inside the folded blotting-paper.

The lines of writing ran in the usual criss-cross pattern, and Tinker, removing the used sheet, and replacing the other in position again, crossed to the mantelpiece. Directing his electric-torch on the sheet of blotting-paper, he held the paper up to the mirror, trying to read the lines.

He saw that the handwriting was very neat and precise, and after a few moments' study he made out one section of it. It was the address of the shipping syndicate in Cannon Street, and a quiet smile crossed the lips of the youngster as he studied the sheet.

"The guv'nor was right," he told himself. "This mysterious blinking millionaire just uses this as an office, but he must be a blinking ass to pay all that money a week just for the sake of writing a few letters."

He folded the blotting-paper and slipped it into his pocket. He didn't have enough time then to study it closely, and he decided to wait until he returned to Baker Street before going on with that task.

A glance at the watch on his wrist told him that it was getting near to midnight now, and he decided that it was time for him to prepare for the mysterious visitor—if that visitor did come.

Tinker thought for a moment, then made up his mind what to do. He realised that if M. Polacoss was only using the flat as an office he would probably make at once for the sitting-room, where the desk stood, and the youngster decided that it would be the sitting-room where he would have the best chance of seeing the man.

He went across to the door, closing it behind him, then, after a glance round the room, decided that the best thing he could do would be to conceal himself behind the angle of a tall bookcase that stood close to the window. The windows were covered with heavy velvet curtains, and by arranging the folds it would be easy enough for him to hide his slim body in the little recess formed by the side of the bookcase and the angle of the wall.

"But I'm not going to poke myself behind there until it is absolutely necessary!" he murmured. "I can't see myself standing up in that corner for an hour or two, like a stuffed dummy!"

Having arranged about his hiding-place, Tinker crossed to the desk and seated himself in the easy-chair. He took care to make sure that there was a clear track for him when the time came to bolt for the curtained recess, and so, settling himself in the comfortable chair, the youngster began what proved to be a very long and uninteresting wait.

Lounging in the comfortable chair, Tinker heard a distant clock chime twice, marking the fact that two hours had passed. He had glanced into the hall, and had noted that the light which had been glimmering through the glass fanlight above the door had vanished, indicating that the night porter had turned off the current outside.

Another half-hour dragged past, and the young detective began to fear that his long vigil was to have no result, when suddenly there came to his ears through the silent flat the faint creak of wood.

It was a muffled, indistinct sound, but Tinker's quick ears located the direction from whence it came.

"The kitchen," he told himself. "By James, that's queer! I wonder if this mysterious M. Polacoss gets into his blinkin' flat the same way as I did—via the tradesmen's lift?"

Again the creak sounded, and Tinker settled himself in the chair to listen. The flat was in inky darkness, and he was quite justified in feeling that he was safe enough there until the movements of the mysterious intruder warned him to make a shift.

Tinker's ears were as quick as those of a fox, but on this occasion they failed him, and the first intimation he had of the nearness of the visitor was when he heard the



handle of the door creak slightly as it was turned.

With a muttered exclamation at his own stupidity the lad leapt to his feet and made a swift dart across the room. He knew just exactly where to head for, and his outstretched hands touched the heavy folds of the velvet curtain; then, quick as lightning, the young detective flashed behind.

When he was safe inside the little recess he ventured to peer out into the room again, half expecting to see it lighted and someone there.

But the room was in utter darkness still, and Tinker was beginning to believe that the sound he had heard had only been a trick of his imagination, when there came to his ears the steady, quiet breathing of someone in the sitting-room, a sound that was followed a moment later by the soft click of the door as it was closed.

Tinker pressed himself back into the curtained recess, holding his breath. The blinds had been drawn down over the window, and the room was as dark as a pit. It seemed to him almost unbelievable that anyone could enter that place without using a light of some sort, and yet, as he stood there, he heard the unknown intruder pacing quietly across the floor of the room, and presently the creak of the chair sounded.

The sound came from the direction of the desk, and a few moments later Tinker heard the rustle of notepaper.

"What the blazes does it mean?" the young detective asked himself.

He was standing stiff and rigid in his hiding place, scarcely daring to move; but so strong was the urge of his curiosity that again he ventured to slide a tiny portion of the curtain aside and look out into the room.

Utter darkness! Not so much as the feeblest glimmer of light could he see, and yet again that rustle sounded, and it was followed the next moment by the unmistakable scrape of a pen, glided over the smooth surface of the notepaper.

"Am I awake or dreaming? Or have I gone blind?" the young detective thought.

He heard the chair scrape again, and the brass-bound blotting-pad rasped against the surface of the desk. The sheet of notepaper rustled, and, completely absorbed now, Tinker was able to follow the movements that were being carried out there in the Stygian gloom.

The individual had turned the sheet of paper over, and was drying it on the blotting-pad, rubbing the back of the sheet with his hand. Then once again the scraping pen took up its task.

Tinker raised one hand to his eyes and rubbed them. The whole affair was uncanny, unbelievable, and he almost felt inclined to pinch himself to see if he were awake.

For, so far as he was concerned, that room was plunged in utter darkness, and yet the sounds he heard, the evidence of his ears, told him plainly that someone was in that chamber, had walked in direct from the door to the desk, seating himself at the desk, and was now quietly writing a note.

"It can't be done!" Tinker thought. "It isn't right. Either I'm asleep and dreaming that this is happening, or else I have gone blind and can't see that the room is lighted."

So far as he was concerned these were the only two plausible theories that he could arrive at. Yet neither of them were correct.

There was some other explanation to the matter, and just what that was Tinker could not at the moment discover.

He heard the chair creak again, then, with startling accuracy, he could pick out the movements that the man at the desk made—the folding of the sheet of notepaper, the selecting of an envelope, the addressing of that envelope, even to the running of the gummed edge over the man's tongue, and the heavy pressure of the hand as the flap was sealed.

"It's the blinkin' limit!" the young detective thought. "I wonder what the blazes—"

He never finished that remark, for there came to his ears an unmistakable click—the hard, metallic sound that a revolver gives when the trigger is drawn back. Then the silence of the room was broken—a cold voice sounded:

"Now I'm ready for you, my spying friend! Come out from behind that curtain!"

It was just about the last straw so far as Tinker was concerned, and, with a gasping breath, the youngster thrust the velvet fold aside and took a pace out into the darkness.

"That will do—no farther—and keep your hands just as they are now!"

The voice was sounding from the direction of the desk—about four or five feet away

from where Tinker stood. An instinct told him that the arm was raised and a weapon was pointing full at him; then, caught perhaps by some fugitive glint of light from the street outside, filtering through the edge of the blind, Tinker had his first vision of the mysterious visitor.

A pair of eyes—round yellow orbs, with little black specks in the centre—formed themselves in the darkness; steady, unwavering eyes that were looking straight at him. And, quick as a flash, there came the revelation to Tinker.

"The Owl!"

The words broke almost involuntarily from his lips, and he heard a low, quiet chuckle sound in the darkness.

"Ah, I recognise you now! Tinker, eh? I rather thought that you, or your spying master, Sexton Blake, would be here this evening. And now, you young fool, you'll have to pay for your interference!"

A chair was thrust forward, and the hard edge of it struck against Tinker's knee.

"Sit down!" a level voice commanded, and Tinker sank into a sitting position on the chair. He heard another scrape as the other chair was pulled forward, then the pair of glaring eyes sank down to the level that told the youngster that his enemy had also seated himself.

There was something grotesque, unreal, about the whole affair. The room in utter darkness and those two eyes, faint, misty, hanging there in mid-air, as though they were suspended by some unseen force.

"Put your hands on your knees and keep them there!" the cold voice said. "Don't forget I have got you covered!"

Tinker leaned back in the chair, compelled to obey the grim command. His alert brain was beginning to take stock of the situation now, and he realised that he was in a tight corner. It was not the first time that this mysterious crook, known to the underworld of London as the Owl, had crossed Tinker's path, and although Sexton Blake and his young assistant had always scored their point, the Owl, thanks to his extraordinary abilities and the loyal way in which his underlings stood by him, was always able to beat a successful retreat.

"It may interest you to know that I saw you as you ran across the room to the curtain," the cold voice went on. "I had opened the door, and your rapid rush for cover was not nearly rapid enough."

So this uncanny being had actually known of the youngster's presence behind that curtain all the time, and yet had seated himself at his desk, calmly writing that letter, before he had made the fact known.

A low laugh sounded.

"I admit that you might have collared anyone else, my young friend," the voice went on, "but, you see, you didn't reckon with this peculiar little gift of mine. You expected to see someone with a light, and it was the lack of that which gave me my chance. I didn't know who you were, but I did know that, thanks to the stupidity of the confounded manager here, your master, Sexton Blake, has been at work."

Despite himself, Tinker felt a tremor run through him. He was as plucky a youngster as ever stepped, and he knew that his governor was also well able to look after himself when it came to the pinch. But the Owl's quiet warning indicated to Tinker that this extraordinary being had already become aware of Blake's interest in the affair.

"I had a word with Hardley over the telephone this afternoon," the cold voice continued, "and I believe he did his best to shake your master off. But I was very doubtful whether he would succeed, and your presence here proves that I was right."

So Tinker's suspicions concerning Mr. Hardley had been quite justified, and his change of front was thus explained.

"You are an inconvenience," the Owl went on, "and under other circumstances I would have the greatest pleasure in sending a bullet into that monkey brain of yours. But there is rather a harsh penalty attached to murder in this country, and that is the only reason why I hold my hand. Still, you are dangerous, and I'm going to see that you are safe. You may thank your lucky stars that Lyverett Mansions has a night porter, and would probably hear any undue disturbance. Stand up!"

Tinker hesitated just a moment, and, as he did so, he heard the chair opposite him scrape. Some instinct told the youngster that the Owl had come a little nearer to him, the eyes were rising slowly at an angle, proving that the owner of them was bending forward as he slowly arose to his feet.

What happened then Tinker was never able to explain, but a swift inspiration seized him. He sensed that in rising the Owl had lowered the revolver just a trifle, and, taking one desperate chance, the youngster flung himself bodily from the chair, and his hands shot out in front of him.

Sheer good luck saw his left hand clutch at the Owl's right wrist, and a wrench forced the automatic from the rogue's fingers. There was a snarling oath, and Tinker received a vicious blow from the hard knuckles, a blow that landed close to the point of the jaw. Then the youngster closed with his man, and a grim struggle began.

It was a struggle, however, in which Tinker was sadly handicapped, for the uncanny being whom he fought had the advantage of being able to see, while the young detective fought in the dark.

They swayed across the room together; then Tinker realised that the Owl was dragging him in a certain direction. He had locked one arm round the powerful body, and was holding the right wrist down to the side.

Again and again the Owl tried to break that hold, but the youngster fought with a grim tenacity that was typical of his dogged nature.

Indeed, had that struggle been on more level terms, it is more than likely that Tinker would have won through, but it is hard for anyone who fights in the darkness to master someone who is able to see his surroundings.

And so it came about that, inch by inch, foot by foot, the Owl forced his opponent towards the fireplace, and when he reached the hearth-rug he changed his tactics suddenly, flinging the whole weight of his body on the youngster, with the result that Tinker, unable to stand against that heavy burden, was sent backward, and the Owl, gripping at Tinker's throat, dashed his head against a projection of the heavy iron curb.

A myriad of stars danced in front of Tinker's eyes. He made one last desperate effort to cast his adversary aside; then another vicious blow landed full on the youngster's face, and his head went back again, to thud on the iron projection.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Blake Has a Battle of Wits—And Makes a Hit.

IN that region of mean streets and quiet squares that lie behind Shaftesbury Avenue, forming a crude sort of peninsula of dingy houses until they reach Regent Street on the one side and Oxford Street on the other, there are many little colonies of strangers whom the average Londoner knows nothing at all about.

In the day-time the small houses, wedged between high warehouses, have a forlorn, dejected look, and if occasionally one does see a swarthy, black-haired man or woman slip out from a dark passage and vanish into another dingy doorway, it is as much as one can hope to see of the types of humanity that live there.

But, with the coming of the dusk, especially when the long line of stalls and barrows are removed from the kerbs, and the various side streets are left to the garbage and the prowling, homeless cat, there emerges from these doorways many strangely garbed, quiet-pacing men and women, who talk to each other in alien tongues.

It is not to be supposed that because of their sallow faces and alien manners all these people are to be distrusted; indeed, it is common knowledge that many of the dingy people living in these slum-like places are as honest and trustworthy citizens as one could find in any part of London.

But, because of the gloom and the natural secretiveness that a stranger in a strange land generally chooses to surround himself with, there are other and less desirable elements to be discovered in the same quarters.

It was about eleven o'clock at night when Sexton Blake turned into one narrow thoroughfare and began to pace quietly along the pavement. He was dressed in a dingy suit of brown velvet corduroys, and the soft cap, pulled well over his brow, and the flying tie and soft collar, together with the dark stain that he had used on his hands and face, made a very effective and complete disguise.

He might well have been taken for one of those athletic, quick-moving men who come from the isles of Greece.

The Greek is always a good sailor, despite many statements to the contrary, and all



round Limehouse are to be found men of that race spending a few days ashore while their ships are being filled up with another cargo.

Blake knew where to find this particular club, which, under the grandiloquent name of The Hellenic Welcome, was in reality a place where the resident Greeks in that district could gather to indulge in their passion for gambling.

So far as Blake was aware the club was perfectly unoffending, and he had never heard of any crooks associating themselves with it.

But he was not out after crooks at that moment, and his disguise, that of a fairly prosperous Greek, had been adopted with an eye on the possibilities of his getting some definite news concerning the mysterious M. Polacoss.

Blake, a cosmopolitan in tastes and languages, had a sound knowledge of modern Greek, and was quite assured that he could carry out the part he had undertaken without giving himself away.

He turned into an alley, crossed a dingy courtyard, and, after studying the doorways for a moment, stepped to the one on the left, and pressed a bell-push.

A faint whirring sound came to his ears, then presently the door was opened, and he saw a genial, smiling fellow in shirt-sleeves standing in the lighted passage. A glaring gas-jet cast its yellow tinge on Blake's face, and the stout Greek, after a glance at the man, nodded his head.

"Anything I can do for you, my friend?" he asked, in fairly good English.

"Yes," Blake returned, "I am looking for a friend of mine. His name is Paulus Sinaloss. He used to be a member of the club, but I don't know whether he is here or not."

The detective had spoken in Greek, for obvious reasons, and the stolid face of the stranger widened.

"That's all right, my friend," he said. "Come in. I do not know this friend of yours. But the club is open for all men of my country. I will take you upstairs, and perhaps you will recognise the gentleman if he is here."

He closed the door, then Blake followed him up a couple of flights of rickety stairs, and through a doorway, into a long room, covered with cocoanut matting. There were two long tables running down the centre of the room, and along each wall were arranged five or six smaller tables.

There were also writing-desks and a goodly supply of wicker armchairs, for the members to sit at their ease and smoke.

When Blake entered there were only six or seven men in the room, and, playing his part, Blake had a good look at the circle of swarthy, handsome men, then turned to his guide and shook his head.

"Paulus is not here," he said.

The proprietor of the place smiled. "Well, what does it matter?" he said. "If you are a stranger in London, and you have time to spare, sit down and make yourself comfortable. Perhaps you would like something to eat? I can sign you in myself, for our rules allow me to have a guest at night if I like."

The letter of the law was carried out by Blake going across to a rather dingy volume, where he signed his name, and the fact that he did so in Greek, adopting the name of a very well-known Greek politician, hinted at a certain vein of humour that was in the detective's make-up.

The host only just glanced at the name, scrawling his own signature at the side of it, and presently Blake found himself at liberty to sit down at one of the tables and order a meal.

When the food was brought the stout man in the shirt-sleeves came over and took a seat opposite Blake, and began to talk.

It was just the opportunity the detective wanted, and presently he began to pump his host.

Having been fairly well instructed concerning Polacoss and his business, it was not difficult for Blake to frame up a story which would pass muster. According to his account, Blake had been a wharf-hand at the docks where Polacoss' vessels lay, when in port in Greece.

The stout proprietor of the club was rather unpromising material, for, so far as Blake could see, although he had heard the name of Polacoss, he knew very little concerning the man. Then presently he seemed to remember something, for he leaned forward and put his hand on the visitor's arm.

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"I am a thickhead," he said, "I forgot! There were two men in here last night who were talking about this very M. Polacoss. I believe he is here in London now."

Blake nodded.

"That is what I understand," he returned. "In fact, I came to London to try and find him. I have been badly treated by his people in our country, and I came here to try and get redress from him."

The stout man in his shirt-sleeves shrugged his shoulders. Nearly every Greek has a grievance against someone or other, and Blake's deft use of that well-known characteristic was accepted by the proprietor of the club as an additional proof that his visitor was what he pretended to be.

"You leave this to me, my friend," he said. "Maybe these two men will come in again to-night, and if they do I will certainly introduce you to them. We all know what it is to be badly treated by those in higher positions, and if M. Polacoss is a man at all, he will redress your grievance."

He left Blake then, and the detective, having finished his meal, ordered a cup of coffee, and leaned back sipping at the aromatic fluid.

Already the room had begun to fill, and somewhere towards midnight the cloud of tobacco-smoke indicated that the bulk of the members were now present.

The eternal game of dominoes was being played on both the long tables, and Blake listened for a long time to the rhythmic click of the black pieces as they were swung round and mixed and chosen from.

It was an interesting study in its way, and the detective was content to lean back, watching the various faces of the players. So far as he could judge, they were a perfectly harmless lot; tired waiters and mechanics who, working hard all day, found that it was worth their while to spend an hour or two there in that stuffy room, among the men of their own tongue and tastes.

The constant murmur of voices sounding, indicated that the ball of conversation was never allowed to remain still, and the clatter of cups and saucers gave the whole place a homely air.

As far as Blake could judge it was well after midnight before any fresh development took place, then suddenly he saw the stout proprietor coming towards him through the cloud of smoke, followed by a couple of lean, younger men.

"Here you are, my friend," the host said, with a wave of his puffy hand. "Let me introduce you."

Blake was introduced to the two men, but failed to catch their names; they were slim, dark-eyed youngsters, and one of them, at least, seemed to be rather of a better class than the other inmates of the room. His clothes were neat and well-cut, and his general air was that of someone who had plenty of money to spend.

Blake, a quick student of types, after studying the newcomers for a moment, was prepared to admit that there was nothing sinister about them, and, as they accepted his invitation, and took a seat at the table, he began to talk to them.

The second individual, dressed in a rather rougher type of clothes, had the broken finger-nails and oily skin of the mechanic, and presently it transpired that he was a chauffeur in private service, while the better-dressed man was a shipping clerk on the staff of a large tourist agency.

"Our friend tells us that you are trying to get in touch with your late employer, M. Polacoss?" the well-dressed man said. "How did you know he was in London?"

Blake shook his head.

"I was not sure," he returned, "but we knew he had left Greece some time ago, and we heard that it was because he wanted to sell three ships that he had made the journey."

The shipping clerk nodded.

"That is quite right," he said. "I happen to know that M. Polacoss is in London now, and is going to sell the three steamers."

He lifted his hand to his tie, in which a very fine pearl pin gleamed.

"In fact," he went on, "I have to thank M. Polacoss indirectly for this suit of clothes and also this tie-pin. He put me in the way of making fifty pounds."

The man who was sitting on the other side of the table leaned forward and grinned.

"Don't you flatter yourself," he said. "For, after all, it was me who really gave you the chance of earning that fifty pounds."

The clerk turned to his friend and grinned. "Yes, that's quite true," he said. "Had it

not been for you I would never have got the money, of course."

To Blake it seemed as though he had dropped on to a channel of information that he would be wise to cultivate.

"You are fortunate," he said, nodding to the dapper, handsome youngster. "It is not everybody who can make fifty pounds out of M. Polacoss."

The clerk chuckled.

"Oh, he didn't know I made anything out of him!" he returned. "It came about in quite a different way."

He jerked his finger towards his companion.

"My friend here is a chauffeur, and is employed by a big garage in Hampstead. Some little time ago he got a special job, driving about a gentleman—a very unfortunate gentleman, who is almost blind."

"Blind or otherwise, he knows how to pay well," the chauffeur put in, "and I was mighty sorry when he stopped hiring the car."

"And it was from this unfortunate gentleman you made the fifty pounds," said Blake.

"Yes. It happened that my friend here mentioned a certain item of news I had given him, concerning M. Polacoss. You see, our tourist agency does a lot of booking passages, and I am in charge of the foreign branch of it. We received a telegram from Athens in which M. Polacoss asked us to book a saloon passage for him on one of the big liners coming to England, and I happened to mention this to my friend here."

The chauffeur smiled.

"I spoke about it to the gent I was working for then," he explained to Blake. "You see, a lot of Englishmen over here think that all we Greeks are poor, and I wanted to show this gentleman that there are a few people in my country who have plenty of money. He was quite interested in M. Polacoss. So much so that he asked me to arrange for a meeting with my friend here, and I did."

He looked across at the shipping-clerk and chuckled.

"That interview brought you your fifty pounds, didn't it?" he said.

Now Blake realised that although there were plenty of philanthropists in London, there were very few men knocking about who would care to pay fifty pounds for the mere casual biography of a millionaire, Greek or otherwise.

He turned to the handsome, well-dressed clerk beside him.

"This is all very interesting," he said. "Perhaps I may be able to find another man who would be willing to pay me fifty pounds for information concerning M. Polacoss, for I dare say I know more about him than you do."

The Greek clerk went off into a fit of laughter.

"No doubt," he said. "But, you see, the information I had to give this English gentleman was quite different to what you could give. He wanted to know when M. Polacoss was likely to arrive in London, and what he was coming here for. It took me some little time and trouble to get the information, but we had one or two letters in the office, and I was able to find out all about him."

"Do you know where M. Polacoss is now?"

"No," the clerk said. "For, as a matter of fact, although we expected him to call at the shipping office, he never did so. But we received a letter from him in London, enclosing our agency fees, and we sent a receipt to his address."

"And that address?"

"Lyverett Mansions, Maida Vale," the Greek said.

One aspect of the case struck Blake at once. It appeared that M. Polacoss had not put in an appearance in any place where he was likely to be recognised.

The Embassy and the tourist agency office had not seen him, but he had appeared several times at the syndicate's office.

"I suppose you didn't know M. Polacoss personally, same as I did?" he asked.

"Oh, no! I have never met him," the clerk returned. "But still, we had his photograph on the passport, and he is not hard to recognise, with his long face and grey moustache."

Long face and grey moustache! This was certainly not the description that the manager of the syndicate had given Blake as that of M. Polacoss.

"You are making a mistake, my friend,"

he said. "Or, at least, someone has been deceiving you, for my employer, M. Polacoss, is a short, thick-set man, and he is very short-sighted, he always has to wear smoked glasses."

The two Greeks looked at him for a moment, then turned and eyed each other, and the chauffeur went off into a roar of laughter.

"But this is funny!" he said. "I don't know who you are, my friend, but you don't seem to know much about M. Polacoss. In fact, the gentleman you are describing now might well be the man I used to drive about in the car. For he is very near-sighted, almost blind, in fact, and he never appeared without smoked glasses."

To Blake, a keen-witted theorist, that remark opened up a vista in which no further questioning was required. Already a glimmering of the truth—of the extraordinary probabilities in the case—began to grip at Blake, and he leaned back in his chair, shrugging his shoulders.

drive, lives at the end of Kellsbury Crescent, at a beautiful little house, standing by itself, and the walls are right on the edge of the Heath. I have often been in the garden there, and I can tell you he has some lovely flowers growing, and lots of fruit in it."

Ten minutes later, when Blake had paid his bill and left the club, neither of his two companions realised that his next movements were laid on the information that he had received from them.

It was not only the fact that this unknown inquirer had paid such a large sum for certain information, nor was it even the announcement made by the chauffeur that the inquirer was a man who wore smoked glasses that had strengthened Blake's belief in his theory.

The real reason that set him off Hampstead way now was due to the statement that the chauffeur had made concerning the house.

A lonely house, surrounded by a high wall, standing on the edge of Hampstead Heath,

millionaire. That explains why Polacoss never turned up at the Embassy, as he would have done under ordinary circumstances, and it also explains why he did not go to the tourist offices."

At either of these places there was always the possibility of the trick being discovered, but the rascal who was playing the part of Polacoss must have known very well that no one in the syndicate who were out to buy the vessels had ever met the owner of the steamers.

It was too late for Blake to catch the tube, but he presently chartered a crawling taxi, and a few words with the driver served to persuade him to carry the detective out on the long journey to Hampstead.

Kellsbury Crescent was rather hard to locate, but Blake managed it at last, and he found that the Greek chauffeur's explanation of the situation had not been at all exaggerated.

It was a long, straggling street, ending abruptly on the very edge of the Heath, and



The porter stared dazedly at the bound form on the bed. "Here! Who's done this?" he asked.

"Oh, very well, my friends!" he said. "We will not argue on M. Polacoss. I have no doubt I shall meet him some day soon, and we will settle our little bit of business together."

He began to chat on other subjects then, but presently he turned and asked one other question which had been hanging on his lips for some time.

"This Englishman you used to drive about," he said. "Has he left London?"

"Oh, no! He still lives in Hampstead. But he has now bought a car of his own—a coupe—and drives it himself."

"Hampstead!" said Blake. "Where is that?"

He had, of course, to profess ignorance of London and its many suburbs, and the chauffeur, proud of the fact that he knew this vast city almost as well as a native did, gave Blake elaborate instructions how to reach the great northern suburb on the heights of the Heath.

"Mr. Saverioke, the gentleman I used to

was just the sort of place that a rogue would select as a headquarters for a crime that included kidnapping, and to Blake, now, the whole affair became clear.

Someone, having discovered certain facts concerning M. Polacoss, having found out just exactly when that gentleman was going to reach London, had set himself to work, first to get M. Polacoss out of the way, then to step into his shoes, and was now handling the very business that had brought the Greek millionaire across to England.

There was no need to seek very far to discover the reason of all this intricate scheme. The manager had informed Blake that on the following day, at eleven o'clock, a very large sum, sixty thousand pounds, was going to be handed to the man in smoked glasses—the man whom the syndicate believed to be M. Polacoss.

"It is just a variation of the old confidence trick," Blake decided. "Some gang or other have collared Polacoss, and one of their number is passing himself off as the

it boasted of only one completely detached house, the one on the left which had a high wall all round it.

Blake had stopped the taxi at the head of the crescent, and he dismissed the man after paying the fare, then he paced along the pavement until he reached the detached house.

He saw that the wall was a somewhat formidable barrier. It was well over eight feet high, and the top of it bristled with portions of cut glass that had been set in the mortar.

So far as Blake could see, there was only the one way of getting inside, through a wooden gateway, wide enough to allow a car to pass in and out.

The top of the gate ran beneath an iron arch, plentifully spiked, and Blake, after a glance at this barrier, shook his head.

"I won't try you unless I am absolutely forced," he said. "There must be an easier U. J.—No. 880.

method of getting in here if I take a look round."

He left the crescent then, and found himself on the Heath, and, keeping close to the high wall, he paced along it until he came to a portion where it formed a sharp angle.

Here, about three yards from the wall, there arose one of those few oaks that are still permitted to grow on the very verge of the suburb. It was a great, spreading, tough old giant, and as Blake studied it he saw that one of the thick branches thrust itself out, well over the top of the high wall.

The ends of the branch had been lopped off by the resident of the house, but Nature had set to work again on that lopped-off branch, and there was plenty of foliage at the end of it, which hung well over the garden behind the wall.

The branch, however, was a good twenty feet above the ground, and that made a rather hazardous place to leap from, but Blake decided that it would be better to risk that way than to scramble over the ugly, glass-covered top.

The huge trunk of the oak tree was pitted and hollow in portions, and it was easy enough for the trained, athletic detective to swing himself up from the ground, and presently he was making his way out along the tough branch.

He reached the end of it, and found that his calculations were correct. The branch stood out about two feet beyond the wall, and he could see the dark mound of earth and a narrow strip of turf below.

Lowering himself until he was at the full extent of his hands, Blake dropped, landing on his hands and knees in a mound of soft earth, crushing a colony of flowers that were growing there.

He straightened himself up at once, and, after listening for a moment, took stock of his surroundings. He saw that he was in what was obviously a portion of the back garden, and he saw dimly a screen of laurels, and beyond it a tennis lawn.

There was no moon, but the night was fairly clear, and the stars bright, so that the white-painted tops of the tennis net stood out quite clearly.

To the left of the lawn was the house with its low-roofed veranda. So far as Blake could see, the house had been built to resemble a Swiss chalet, with its high gables and sloping roof.

He began to cross the lawn, passing through the laurels, and on over the tennis court. Then he came to a hard strip of gravel, which he followed round until he was in front of the house with the door and wide porch.

He had been studying the windows as he moved, and had seen no lights, but this was not to be wondered at, for it was well past one o'clock in the morning now. The place bore plenty of signs of being inhabited, however, and it came to Blake then that this midnight marauding expedition of his might well develop into a rather dangerous one where he was concerned.

For, after all, he was only working on suspicion, and it might well be that the inmate of this house was a perfectly respectable British taxpayer, who would have every right to resent and even punish anyone whom he found prowling round his grounds.

Blake moved across the strip of lawn, and found a rustic seat under an arbour. He seated himself there for a moment, and with folded arms looked across at the outlines of the house opposite him.

"I don't quite know what to do," he admitted to himself. "There is too much theory about this game, so far. I'd look very well if, on trying to get into that house, I got a charge of buckshot into me, and yet I couldn't blame anyone for it."

Of recent years there has been an outcrop of housebreaking and violence, which has made nearly every responsible householder take extra precautions for the safeguarding of his property, and Blake fully appreciated the fact that he was taking considerable risks in doing what he did.

"I'm going to get in there somehow or other, all the same," he told himself. "But I don't know that I want to break in."

He was to congratulate himself on that hesitancy of his, for while he still sat there a sound came to his ears which, growing in volume, revealed itself to be the steady purring of a motor engine, and the scrunch of rubber-tired wheels on the road outside.

Turning his head Blake saw the lights of a car showing faintly above the top of the U. J. No. 880.

wall, then they came to a halt at the black barrier of the gate, and presently, with a quick thrill, Blake heard the rasp of a lock as the double gateway opened slowly.

It was being urged inward by a figure in a heavy coat, a thick-set, broad-shouldered figure, which, after having opened the gates, stepped back into the waiting car.

Blake slipped to the edge of the arbour and waited, and presently he saw the car come slowly into the drive, to halt there, while the figure slipped from the seat again and went back to close the gates, and the fact that the car was a coupe, of a small, handy type, established the identity of its driver.

"I'm in luck," Blake told himself. "This is the very fellow I have been trying to get in touch with—the owner of the house!"

He saw the figure return, slip behind the wheel, and the car move off again up the broad avenue. It passed within twenty feet from where Blake was hiding, and went on towards the house, swinging to the right following the gravel drive. Then Blake heard the note of the engine change as it was run into an open garage on the left of the house.

Finally the lights from the car vanished. The sound of doors being closed came to Blake's ears, then footfalls sounded as the man in the heavy coat paced slowly back along the gravel path and entered the porch.

For a moment Blake was tempted to step out of his hiding-place and reveal himself, but just in the act of doing so he glanced again in the direction of the porch. The door had opened, and the owner of the house had reached for an electric switch, turning it down.

As the light flooded the hall beyond the door Blake had a fleeting glimpse of the figure in the cloak. Its head was turned half towards him, and the detective saw distinctly the round black circles in front of the eyes.

It was the man in the smoked glasses!

"No, by James, I won't!" Blake told himself, drawing back into cover again. "If I tackle you now I might spoil everything. I'm going to regard you as a wrong 'un, and we'll work on that basis. If I have made a mistake I suppose I'll have to pay for it!"

He heard the door close softly, and as soon as the light was shut off Blake darted across the turf, tiptoed over the gravel, and slipped into the wide porch.

He knelt on the mat in front of the door, and tried to get a glimpse through the keyhole. He could only get a very limited view of the lighted hall, and even as he looked the space was plunged into a darkness, and he heard quick, light footfalls as the man inside paced off up the hall.

Blake listened until the sound had died away, then, rising to his feet, he slipped his hand into his pocket, and drew out a slender ring, to which were attached five or six thin skeleton-keys.

It may be set down here that, despite the fictional statements to the contrary, your average detective is just as law-abiding a citizen as the next man. There is no legal method by which a man is permitted to break into another man's house in England. The law is very rigid on this, and it is only when the police magistrate is thoroughly satisfied that such a course is necessary, that a search warrant is issued, on which a duly qualified representative of the law may demand entry into a house.

Blake had no such warrant, and even if he had the hour at which he was carrying out his entry was an impossible one. But the grim feeling that had been gathering strength in his heart, that this case was one which demanded strong measures, had fairly gripped him now, and he set to work to pick that lock, with the caution and skill of a trained housebreaker.

The lock was turned, then Blake, withdrawing the key, pressed the door open, and stepped noiselessly into the dark hall, closing the barrier behind him.

He had taken the precaution to locate the various articles of furniture in the hall at that quick glance through the keyhole when the light was shining, and now, moving forward cautiously, Blake was able to make his way past the heavy hallstand and chair, and the tall grandfather's clock, which was ticking away sonorously on the left.

He reached the staircase, and, feeling for the banister, began to climb up. He found that the stairs were broad and well carpeted, and his feet made no sound as they carried him up the stairs, round a sharp angle and on to the first floor.

As he gained the landing Blake heard a

movement coming from somewhere on the left. The landing was also thickly carpeted, and Blake, moving forward very cautiously with his hands outstretched in front of him, touched the wall on the left, then worked his way down it until his fingers came in contact with a doorway.

Halting for a moment, the detective slipped one hand round the edge of the doorway, and found that the door was ajar. It was from the chamber beyond the door that the sounds had come, and yet, so far as Blake could see, there was no light in the chamber.

Then suddenly, while his hand was still outstretched trying to find the door, powerful fingers closed on it, giving the arm a sharp wrench.

Taken completely by surprise, Blake was swung away from the doorway, and as he stumbled forward he struck out with his disengaged hand. His fist came in contact with a face, and he heard a muttered snarl, then the grip on his wrist was released, and, as he reeled back against the opposite wall, he heard the quick thud of the door being closed.

Blake did not have leisure then to try and discover just how it was that his unknown attacker had been able to lunge out of the darkness and grip at his wrist in that assured, certain way. The suddenness of the attack had been its chief factor of success, and now, his blood up, Blake made a lunge at the door with bunched shoulders.

At the impact of that powerful body the lock gave way, and the detective went headlong into the room, coming up against some solid article of furniture. He straightened himself up again, halted for a moment, then, reaching back for the doorway, felt along the wall until his fingers came in contact with an electric switch. He pressed down the little knob, and instantly a couple of bulbs suspended from the centre of the ceiling leaped into life, and Blake saw that he was in a well-furnished bed-room.

He had swung round as the light flashed out, and his muscular frame was taut and ready for the attack he fully expected to develop. But, as his quick-turning eyes flashed round the room, picking out the bed, wardrobe, dressing-table, and various articles of furniture, he could see no sign of anyone else in the chamber.

For a moment he hardly believed the evidence of his eyes, and a sudden idea came to him. He darted across to the bed, kneeling down to peer underneath it. But the space below was quite vacant, and straightening up again, he headed across to the wardrobe, pulling open the door.

It was filled with men's garments, but there was no sign of the mysterious assailant. From the wardrobe Blake hurried to the window, where heavy curtains hung, drawing them aside, and peering behind them without success.

There was a big cupboard on the left of the window to which Blake next turned his attention. Here again he drew a blank, for the cupboard was filled with small shelves from top to bottom, and there was no possible chance of anyone being able to hide himself there.

"Now, what the blazes does this mean?" he asked himself.

For a moment Blake was puzzled, then his quick brain hit on the solution of the mystery. The man who had attacked him must have followed him out into the passage, and had closed the door from that side, turning the key in the lock, in the brief interval that followed Blake's reel across to the opposite wall.

It was a very clever ruse, and it certainly had baffled the detective. For the man, having locked the door, must have gone off along the landing, and was probably in some other part of the house altogether now.

Yet again the extraordinary fact presented itself, that this unknown antagonist of his seemed to have the faculty of being able to walk about the place in the darkness with as much certainty as if it had been fully lighted.

He must have closed the door, turned the key in the lock, and slipped past Blake within a few inches from where the detective had stood.

Blake had halted now in the centre of the room, and a sound from the doorway made him swing round. He had just time to see an arm stretch out and grip at the knob of the door, then, as the barrier began to close again, Blake leaped towards it.

In the passage beyond he saw the shadowy outlines of a figure, then suddenly another



arm shot out, and Blake saw the muzzle of a revolver pointing full in his direction.

There are certain men whose brains are capable of taking instant action almost of their own volition. Even as Blake caught sight of that shining muzzle he flung himself to one side. There was a crack, a thin spit of flame, and the bullet whizzed across the room, grazing the detective's temple as it sped on to bury itself in the opposite wall.

A moment later the door had closed, and as Blake barged at it he heard a low, chuckling laugh sound. The sting of the wound held Blake motionless for a moment, leaning against the door.

He had had a very narrow escape, and only a miracle had saved his life.

He fumbled for the knob of the door, turning it and pulling the door open. As he did so he heard, from the landing, a click, followed by a crashing sound, and the light of the room went out.

The detective realised at once what had happened. This unknown enemy of his had smashed the fuse-box, and had thus disconnected the current that supplied the bulbs in the house.

Blake leaped out on to the landing, and turned in the direction of the sound. He tore down the corridor, his hands outstretched in front of him.

A door slamming on his right indicated that again his quarry had escaped him. A moment later Blake reached the door, his hands fumbling along the side of it searching for the lock. He seized the knob and shook it, then, stepping back a pace, raised his foot and sent it crashing against the lock.

The crackling of wood and the sharp rasp of the lock as it gave to the impact echoed and re-echoed through the dark house, and Blake darted forward into the second chamber.

Of all the mad adventures he had ever undertaken surely this was the maddest, for he was plunging from room to room in a strange house, following a man whom he had not even as yet identified.

Inside the second chamber Blake halted, and felt in the pockets of his brown corduroy coat. The slight rustle that the box of matches made as he withdrew it must have served as a warning signal to that other presence whom he could sense, although he could not see.

Blake heard the swish of some heavy missile, and he flung up his arm. But he was just a second or so too late. The edge of a stool caught him full on the temple, and he reeled back a few paces, fetching up against the wall.

Again he heard the click of a trigger, and it seemed to him as though the other individual in the room was in the very act of taking aim, yet the place was pitch-dark.

That consciousness of danger which comes to all came to Blake then, and he knew that he was as near to his death as he had ever been.

But unexpectedly there came an intervention; for, from somewhere in the distance, a police-whistle shrieked, its clear note sounding through the silent night.

Blake heard a muttered oath, and he sensed the movements of his antagonist. Instinct told Blake that it was for the door the man was making, and, with his hands outstretched, the detective barged in the same direction.

But again the darkness was his handicap—that darkness which did not seem to affect this mysterious opponent of his at all.

For, as Blake lunged forward, the hard edge of a chair was jabbed at him, one of the legs catching him under the chin. The savage thrust of that chair was enough to knock the detective aside, and before he could recover his balance he heard the other individual leap through the doorway.

Blake, following him, was tripped up with the chair, which the fellow had left in the opened doorway, and when he picked himself up again the detective caught the sound of feet hurrying down the stairs.

Sexton Blake was a hard man to shake off, and his grim jaw was set and tight as he sped across the landing. But when he reached the stairs and began to descend them, there came to his ears the low, booming sound of the front door as it was closed.

His man had got clear away. Blake began to descend the stairs, and soon reached the hall. He rushed across it, stumbled against the hall-stand, finally reaching the door. A man in the dark is always handicapped, and several precious minutes

elapsed before Blake managed to find the lock and turn it.

He heard the screech of wheels on the gravel outside, and as he leaped into the porch he looked down towards the gate. It was open, and he saw the coupe just vanishing through the gateway.

It was seldom that Sexton Blake found himself handed in such a clever manner, and it must be admitted that the detective felt a surge of rage rush into his heart as he leaped out of the porch, to tear off down the strip of gravel towards the gate.

But long before he had reached the spot he heard the note of the car's engine change as it gathered up speed, and when he tore through the gateway he was just in time to see the red tail-lights as the vehicle swung round into the wider thoroughfare at the head of the crescent.

A figure that had been standing on the edge of the pavement strode forward now, and the light from a bullseye flashed on the detective, while a gruff voice sounded: "What's the matter with you, mister?"

Blake was well aware that his appearance was by no means in his favour. The grim tussle he had had with the unknown man in the house had left its mark on his clothes, and he felt a thin trickle of blood from his temple where the shot had grazed him.

The policeman, therefore, was not to be blamed when, after a second glance at the detective, he reached out and put one hand on his shoulder.

"I want to know what you are up to," he said. "Unless I am very much mistaken, I heard a shot just now, and it came from that house. What's the game?"

His voice was very grim and doubtful as he eyed Blake. The fact that the detective was dressed in what was obviously a foreigner's type of clothes added to the policeman's doubts, and his grip on Blake's arm tightened.

"That's all right, constable," the detective said. "I admit that I don't look a very presentable object, but you'll find I am quite respectable. Now, I should like to know first of all what happened to that man in the coupe. Did you see him at all?"

Blake's voice was quiet, and his air of assurance indicated to the constable that he had made a mistake.

"I didn't have much chance to see who was inside the coupe," the constable returned, "but I dare say it was Mr. Savernoake. I've seen him coming in and out of the house several times, but I can't say I've seen you here before."

Blake lifted the lapel of his coat and revealed the badge which he sometimes carried, and at the sight of the insignia the policeman's manner changed at once.

"Anything I can do for you, sir?" he asked.

"Well, I don't know," Blake returned. "You could have done something, but, unfortunately, you were not to know that. I wanted to get in touch with that man who has gone off in the coupe."

The policeman rubbed his chin.

"I didn't get much of a look into the car, sir," the policeman said, "but it seemed to me that there were two men in it."

"Two?" said Blake, glancing at the constable. "Are you sure of that?"

"Well, sir, I wouldn't like to swear to it. It was rather dark inside the car, but I did think I saw one man at the wheel and another man leaning back on the seat beside him."

Blake was clearly puzzled, and stood there silent for a moment.

"Are you quite sure?" he repeated.

"I could almost swear to it, sir," the constable declared, after a short pause. "I was just on the edge of the pavement there, close to the lamp-post, and the coupe passed me fairly near. The light from the lamp just flashed into the car, but I think I could take my oath that there were two people inside it."

This suggestion on the part of the constable put a different light on the affair. Until then Blake had been under the impression that his unknown antagonist had been alone in the house, but if the policeman's report was correct it opened up wider possibilities.

"I am going back to have a look at the garage," he said, turning to the constable. "I think you had better come with me. I will be responsible for any questions that may be asked concerning the matter. My name is Blake."

He only needed to mention his name to settle any doubts the constable might have, and presently the man from Baker Street and the burly policeman were in the grounds

of the house again, and, after crossing the turf, they reached the garage.

Blake found it was a solid structure, and there were steps leading from the back of it to an upper chamber. The detective crossed the garage and climbed the stairs, turning the light from the bullseye lantern round the room.

He found that it had been recently occupied. There was a truckle-bed in one corner, with a heap of blankets thrown on one side, and there was also a couple of chairs and a table.

On the table were one or two pieces of crockery, and the general appearance of the little loft indicated that someone had been living there for some time.

Blake began a systematic search of the place, and presently discovered under the truckle-bed a thin travelling cloak, with the name of a Paris manufacturer on the back. In the pocket of the cloak were a few papers and one or two letters.

As Blake unfolded the letters and glanced at them he saw that they were written in Greek, and, after a moment's study, his eyes lighted up.

They were simple business communications from some agent, and were addressed to M. Polacoss, and to Blake that discovery was significant.

A further search gave Blake one or two indications that the man who had been living in that upper chamber had been a prisoner, for he found a couple of thick leather belts, that had obviously been used as bonds, lying on the heap of blankets.

"I can see what happened," he said, turning to the policeman. "I was here in the garden when that coupe was driven to the garage. The man who drove it was inside a few minutes. He probably came up here and took the man who was his prisoner down into the coupe, leaving him there ready. Then he came out of the garage and went into the house."

He looked at the constable.

"Have you ever seen this Mr. Savernoake?"

"Oh, yes, several times."

"Then perhaps you can describe him to me?"

The policeman did describe the occupant of the house, and his description was quite sufficient to settle any lingering doubts that Blake had in his mind, for that description tallied exactly with the one that the manager of the shipping syndicate had given to Blake as being the Greek millionaire, M. Polacoss.

So far as Blake was concerned the house in Kellsbury Crescent had no further interest for the detective then, but before he left it he arranged with the constable that a constant watch should be kept on the premises.

"I am afraid my bird has flown," he said, "but that doesn't matter. I have not given up hope of getting in touch with him again, and my chance will come to-morrow morning."

It is not an easy matter to get away from Hampstead in the early hours of the morning, and Blake had to walk some considerable distance before he was fortunate enough to find a taxi, the driver of which agreed to take him down to Baker Street.

The detective found that it was close on three o'clock when he entered the quiet house, and as he reached Tinker's bedroom, he turned and entered it, switching on the electric light, fully expecting to see the youngster tucked up in the bed.

But the bed had no occupant, and there were evidences that it had not been slept in that night.

"By Jove, I don't like the look of this!" Blake told himself. "I wonder what's kept the young 'un? He ought to have been back by now."

He hesitated for a moment, then, with a shrug of his shoulders, made up his mind. He would have to get up to Maida Vale and try to get in touch with Tinker. There was no doubt lingering in Blake's mind that the man whom he had struggled with in the dark house was the impostor who was passing himself off as M. Polacoss, and Blake was at a loss to explain what had kept his assistant waiting in the empty flat in Lyverett Mansions.

"If he is hanging on expecting to meet the mysterious Greek millionaire, I doubt if he will ever do that," the detective thought. "Even if the rascal did get away, I've scared him pretty badly, and he certainly won't go back to Lyverett Mansions—at any rate, just yet."

And so, tired though he was, Blake turned



and once again left the house, passing along Baker Street towards the Underground station, where he found a solitary taxi halted beside the coffee-stall that has been a prominent feature there for many years.

The driver had just ordered a cup of coffee, and Blake had to wait until the hungry man finished the beverage and a big wad of cake; then the vehicle was started off on its journey to Lyverett Mansions.

In its way, this move of Blake's, quite unpremeditated though it was, was to have a great bearing on the case he had undertaken.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Trap.

TINKER came back to consciousness with his head throbbing, and a dull pain which told him plainly what had happened. He found that he was tied up hand and foot, and was lying on what was obviously a very comfortable bed. The cords that bound his hands were carried round the bed, binding him down to the soft heap of bed-clothes.

His wrists were numb and dead, as were also his legs, a fact which indicated that he must have been tied up there for some considerable time, long enough to allow the blood to become sluggish in his veins.

He remembered what had happened, and, as he thought again of that grim tussle he had had in the dark room with the man with the extraordinary eyes, he congratulated himself on his present position.

"The fellow had me," Tinker decided, "and, by James, I don't know why he did not make a flash of it when he had the chance."

It may be stated here that anyone who has lain with his limbs tied up for an hour or two has to undergo an agony of pain which no other torture can surpass. The sensation of numbness in the limbs, the constant tingling of the straining arteries, and, above all, the heavy labouring of the heart, produces an effect which brings to the average person a sort of inertia, and even, in some cases, where physical energy is not at its best, death.

Tinker was well aware that it would be fatal for him to lie there without making some sort of movement, and so he began to work his limbs, wrists, and ankles, flexing and unflexing the muscles in order to restore circulation.

The exercise soon produced one good effect—it banished the numb feeling from his body—and presently he was aware that his steady work against the cords was resulting in their being loosened slightly.

It is extremely difficult to tie up a man so that he cannot possibly release himself. It can be done, of course, but it requires a skilled hand, for no matter how stout a cord may be it is always bound to give in time, and Tinker, who had practised the art of getting out of bonds under one of the greatest music-hall experts of the day, continued his grim task, first pulling at the bonds on his wrists, then forcing the rope to right and left as he turned this way and that on the bed.

The bed was a solid one, of mahogany, but Tinker's wriggling movements set it on the go, and he found presently that, by thrusting his feet against the bottom rail and making an effort with his knees, he was able to force the end of the bed against the wall.

He set to work now to exaggerate that movement, and presently the heavy mahogany rail was thudding with regular intervals against the wall.

Tap, tap, tap!
Tap, tap, tap!

Tinker knew well enough that the hour was very late for anyone to hear his curious signal. Had he been able to get the gag out of his mouth he would have added to that noise, but the handkerchief which was tied round his lips had been skillfully knotted, and he could not move the thick wad from between his lips.

Tap, tap, tap!

To and fro on the bed the youngster swung his body, and the solid mahogany frame creaked as it swayed backwards and forwards.

"If there's anyone awake in this blinkin' building they ought to hear the row I'm making!" Tinker thought to himself.

It was by no means an easy task that he was undertaking, and the sweat began to pour down his face. But he stuck to it, and presently, after a long interval, there came the hoped-for interruption.

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A double knock sounded from somewhere, and after a moment Tinker was able to locate it. It came from the front door of the flat, and, as the bed-room door was open, the young detective presently heard the click of a key as it was forced into the lock.

"Who is there?"

A hoarse, uncertain voice sounded, and Tinker heard the heavy footfalls of someone in the hall. He gave another heave, and once more the bed thudded against the wall.

Click!

The sharp sound of an electric switch being pressed down came to the youngster, and he found that it was the well-furnished bedroom he was in, while, standing in the doorway, his broad face a mask of utter amazement, was the night-porter.

The man stared across at the bed for a moment, then apparently his slow wits made him realise what had happened, and he came across the room, halting beside the bed and staring down at Tinker.

"Here! Who's done this?"

It was a rather stupid thing to ask, for, of course, the youngster was quite unable to answer. But presently the night-porter drew a knife from his pocket and first cut the bonds that held Tinker's wrists and ankles, then set to work and loosened the knots in the handkerchief round his mouth.

Tinker swung himself round on to the edge of the bed and began to chafe his numb limbs. The porter stepped back a couple of paces, and a torrent of questions came to his lips.

"All right, old chap!" said Tinker. "Just give me half a moment, I'll answer you presently!"

"What's it all about? How did you get in here? And who's done this to you?"

Now Tinker was well aware that his method of entry into that flat was strictly unauthorised, and he also remembered that the manager, Mr. Hardley, had told his master, Sexton Blake, that he did not want the detective to take any further steps in the case.

The youngster decided then that until he had seen Blake it was better for him to keep quiet as to his actual means of entry into the building, and also as to his identity.

But obviously he would have to tell the porter something, and so he plunged into what was really a very harmless stream of falsehoods.

"Don't know how I came here, mister," he said. "Last thing I remember I was outside in the yard about nine o'clock. A gent came along and asked me to go round into the yard behind the mansions and help him to carry a bag which he was going to send down the lift."

"Oh, he was, was he?" the night-porter said. "Well, he'd no business to do anything o' the sort; the lift is supposed to be shut up after sunset. Who was he?"

"I dunno," said Tinker. "He was a thick-set gent, and he wore smoked glasses."

Apparently that description held no meaning to the night-porter, for he folded his arms across his chest and shook his head.

"Can't say there's anyone o' that description living in these chambers," he remarked. "But go on, what happened afterwards?"

"Don't rightly know. Jest as I got into the yard I heard someone step up behind me and gimme a clump on the head—ye can see the mark for yerself."

Tinker raised one hand to his bruised head, and the dull black mark was clearly visible.

"Lumme, young 'un!" the porter gasped. "Why, he might have brained you!"

He rubbed his chin for a moment, regarding the young detective thoughtfully.

"But how did ye get in here?" he said again. "That's what I'd like to know. I've been on duty ever since eight o'clock last night, and I've kept me eyes open all the time, and particularly had this flat set, but I haven't heard a sound."

"Ask me something easier," Tinker retorted. "Whose flat is it, anyhow? I've never been here before in my life."

"It's a Greek gentleman it belongs to," the porter explained. "But no one seems to have seen him, so far as I can make out."

Tinker, of course, could have told his informant much more than that individual knew, but the vein of caution in the lad was enough to keep him silent on the point. He felt instinctively that the brush he had had with the unknown man was only a prelude to a fiercer encounter, and Tinker, wise in

his generation, felt that his first duty was to get in touch with his master.

"What time is it?" he asked as he rose to his feet.

"Bout half-past three," the porter returned.

Tinker's story, vague though it was, had been quite sufficient to impress the listener. After all, there could be nothing criminal attached to the youngster's movements, rather had he been the victim of some evil trick.

"You ought to go to the police-station and tell them about it," was the porter's comment, as he turned towards the door. "It ain't very far away from here, and if I was you I'd go along and let 'em know what happened. They can come along and see me about it afterwards, if they want to. I can tell ye there's been a lot of queer things happening in this flat, and it's about time they was cleared up."

He led the way out of the little hall and down the wide staircase to the entrance, where a light was burning in the small office.

Tinker, after chatting with the porter for a moment or two, giving a fictitious name and address, was allowed to leave, and he emerged into the quiet street, turning to the left, and going off up the pavement.

He reached the end of the block of buildings where the two thoroughfares met, and as he did so a taxi came wheeling out from the street opposite, crossed over towards him, and went on to come to a halt higher up the street.

It was a very late hour for any vehicle to be in the street, and Tinker halted to watch the taxi. He saw a figure emerge from it, and as the man leaned forward to pay the fare Tinker had a brief vision of a clean-cut face.

"The guv'nor!" he told himself, starting forward.

He had been standing in the shadows thrown by the high block of buildings, but as he emerged Blake caught the scrape of his foot and turned. The taxi had moved on now and, after a glance at the slim figure, Blake came up the pavement.

"Hallo, young 'un!" he said. "What the blazes have you been doing here all this time?"

"Well, that's a nice thing to say, that is!" Tinker observed, coming to a halt and shrugging his shoulders. "You asked me to watch that blinkin' flat, and I've done so—and got something for it into the bargain. I've got a bump on my head, guv'nor, like a camel's hump!"

Blake saw then that his assistant's face was rather pale and drawn, and he put one hand on Tinker's shoulder.

"What's that you say, young 'un?"

They were standing close to the arched entrance that led to the yard, and Blake drew his young assistant into the dark shadows, then Tinker gave a swift account of what had happened in the flat. Blake listened without making any interruption, but when the youngster came to an end of his story he smiled grimly.

"It seems to me that we have both tackled the same man to-night, young 'un," he said. "The time just fits in."

"You, guv'nor?"

"Yes. I have had a brush with this extraordinary rascal who sees in the dark, and I think now that I know just who it was—"

"It was the Owl, guv'nor," said Tinker. "No mistake about that. There isn't another man in England who could have done what he did."

"You're about right," Blake agreed. "But I must admit that I never connected the fellow with the affair until I had my brush with him down at Hampstead. You see, he has been lying low for some time, and I thought he had left the country. But from what I can gather from the policeman on duty, he has been staying at Hampstead, under the name of Savernake, and passing himself off as a respectable citizen for a long period."

They were standing in the shadow of the arch, chatting quietly to each other, and presently Tinker heard the purring sound of a motor engine, and a moment later the scrunch of rubber-tired wheels in the street.

He thrust his head out from the arch, peered for a moment, then Blake heard him give vent to a quick gasp, and the youngster drew back hurriedly, gripping his governor by the arm.

"Did you—did you say it was a coupe?" he asked.

"Yes."



Tinker was trembling with excitement. "Then there's a coupe coming down the street now, guv'nor," he said. "If we've any luck at all, it might be the very one that you are after."

They heard the vehicle coming nearer and nearer, and a quick instinct told Blake what was going to happen. He turned, and, followed by his assistant, made a quick dive into the archway, and entered the yard beyond. On the left of the entrance was a long line of dustbins, huge galvanised iron affairs, and it was behind these that Tinker and his master made a swift disappearance.

They were only just in the nick of time, for a moment later they heard the muffled note of the engine, and the coupe came into the yard, to halt with its bonnet just showing outside the archway.

The archway was an ideal place for the car to be concealed in, and, peering out cautiously, Blake noted that the lights had been switched off. Thanks to the darkness it was practically impossible for anyone passing in the street to see the coupe, so long as its lights were out.

A minute passed, then the two keen-eared listeners heard the click of a door as it was opened, and presently light footfalls came to their ears, and across the dark courtyard a figure moved, a burdened figure, for it was bearing a dark object over its shoulder.

surprise this time, young 'un," he said. "You got in this way before, and I've no doubt we can both manage it again. Come on!"

In another moment Blake was climbing the girders swiftly, Tinker following him. They reached the window on the first floor, and a few moments later were standing in the dark kitchen. It was Tinker who took command then, and he led the way to the door, opening it, and indicating the hall. They listened for a moment, but there was no sound.

"It's all right, young 'un," Blake said. "I don't think he has arrived yet."

Even as the words left his lips they heard the sleek rasp of the key as it was slipped into the lock of the front door. Then in the darkness they saw the door open, and a moment later close again, and heavy breathing sounded.

An instinct seemed to tell Tinker what was going to happen. The Owl would probably head at once for the bed-room, where he would expect to find his prisoner still lying bound and gagged on the bed. To do that he

Quiet breathing told him that his quarry was standing on the threshold looking into the room—that pitch-dark room which was yet visible enough to this extraordinary-gifted rogue.

There had been many theories passed concerning the man's peculiar eyesight, but Blake in the past had had it explained to him by a world-famed oculist. The truth of the matter was that the Owl suffered from a certain disease of the eye which, while rendering him almost blind in a fierce light, had, as a reflex, the compensation of giving him vision in the dark.



"There he is!" gasped Tinker. "The Owl!"

From the limp way in which this object lay it was clear to see that if it was an individual it had either been drugged or made helpless some way or other.

"There he is—the Owl!"

Blake stretched out his hand, and caught Tinker's shoulder, for the lad was revealing visible signs of impatience.

"Steady on, young 'un!" he said. "There's plenty of time. I want to find out just how that fellow manages to get into the flat. I don't think he gets there by way of the lift, but we'll soon see."

They watched the dark figure, and presently saw it halt at a low doorway close to where the lifts ran. There came to their ears the click of a lock, and a moment later the figure and its burden vanished.

"By James, guv'nor, I know where he's gone!" Tinker breathed. "Those are the coal-cellars that run right underneath the building. No doubt he gets to his own flat up the back staircase, and he won't need to pass the night porter at all if he does that."

Blake had already moved out from behind the high galvanised dustbins, and now, with his hand on Tinker's arm, the detective paced across the courtyard, and halted under the girders of the lift.

"We'll give Mr. Owl a rather unpleasant

would first of all have to get rid of his burden, and with a touch of his hand on his master's arm Tinker began to move off up the side hall, heading for the bed-room.

They could hear the light, soft footfalls of the man in front of them, as he paced towards the sitting-room, and knowing the extraordinary gift which the rascal possessed Tinker took care to make no sound.

He heard the door of the sitting-room open, then waited a moment before he crept on, reaching the bed-room, and slipping inside. Blake followed, and Tinker sent a low whisper to his master.

"I'll get on the bed, guv'nor, and lie there. You wait behind the door, and collar the beggar!"

It was the best plan they could have followed, and Blake, pressing himself behind the door, waited until he heard the slight creak of the bed as Tinker arranged himself on it.

Blake had taken up a position close against the wall behind the door, and had pushed the barrier forward so that it was almost closed. He waited now, resting quietly against the wall, every nerve on the alert.

It seemed to him that an eternity passed before he heard a faint footfall outside, and the creak of the door as it was pressed open.

The vision, of course, was incomplete. He could see objects shadowily, vaguely, for the truth of the matter is that no creature can actually see clearly any object in pitch darkness, not even the bat or the owl.

Blake therefore reckoned on the fact that although this rogue could see some of the scenes in the darkened room, he would not be able to pick out all, and so, when at last he heard the man commence to move forward, heading for the bed, Blake reached for the door and closed it quietly. Then he stretched his hand out along the wall, and, after a moment's search, found the electric switch.

Click!

The bulb in the centre of the room leaped into life, and Tinker and Blake had a vision of their man, brought to a halt midway between the door and the bed. There was no mistaking the short, thick-set figure with the pallid face and curious eyes. The Owl seemed to be suddenly struck blind, for as the light flashed on him he fell away a pace, his hands held in front of his eyes.

Blake dived for him, but with a swift lunge the Owl evaded that grim tackle, and, with his back against the wall, the rogue thrust one hand into his pocket.

From the bed Tinker had a full view of the



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crouching, pallid-faced rascal. He saw that the eyes were drawn into wrinkled cavities, a screwed-up, intent look which told the youngster that the handicap was now against the Owl. For under that fierce light he was just as blind as his feathered namesake would have been.

"Look out, guv'nor!"

The words broke from Tinker's lips, and as they did so he leaped from the bed, snatching for the pillow. He saw the Owl's hand go up, and with a round-arm swing Tinker east the pillow across the room.

The whip-like report of the revolver sounded, but thanks to that quick-witted act on the part of the youngster, and the Owl's distorted vision, the bullet intended for Blake whizzed harmlessly over the detective's head.

Again Blake made a dive for his man, but the Owl was on the move by this time, and he had slipped along the wall towards the door. There was a chair between him and Blake, and as the detective snatched the obstruction out of the way, the Owl raised his hand again, and another crack sounded.

But this time the bullet was aimed at the electric-light blazing from the ceiling, and the aim was true. There was a sound of shattering glass and a tinkle, then the room plunged into darkness.

Tinker had flung himself from the bed, and he went headlong for the door, diving with outstretched hands towards it.

It might have been better had he not attempted to interfere in that grim struggle, for as he made his plunge, so did Blake, and the man from Baker Street clashed into his young assistant, a foot away from their quarry.

Blake had almost reached the Owl, but Tinker's blundering rush saw the detective knocked aside, and, with a catlike leap, the Owl was out of the doorway and tearing up the passage.

He flung himself at the front door, wrenching it open, and darting out on to the landing. As he did so there came a shout from the angle of the stairs, and the night-porter barged along the corridor.

Blake had recovered his balance at once, and, tearing out of the bed-room, he rushed U. J.—No. 880.

up the hall and gained the front door. As he leaped through it he heard an angry oath, followed by a crash, and, reaching the banister, he looked over.

Under the dim light he saw two locked figures go reeling down the flight of stairs, rolling over and over each other until they landed on the mat at the bottom.

With a rush Blake was at the head of the stairs, and began to leap down them, three at a time. But before he could reach the bottom one figure detached itself, and as the other made a plucky attempt to stop it the one uppermost swung round and sent its foot crashing into the upturned face. Then it shot off across the hall, and vanished down the front steps of the mansions.

"Quick, young 'un! The coupe, quick!"

Blake had by this time reached the bottom of the stairs, and, without stopping to help the unfortunate night-porter, the detective rushed across the hall and down the steps into the street.

He was just in time to see the thick-set figure of the Owl flash round the corner, and Tinker, tearing down the steps behind his master, saw Blake go off at a sprint up the pavement.

In another moment the youngster was following, and they swung round the corner together. But they were still forty or fifty yards away from the low archway when there came shooting out from it the coupe.

It backed out swiftly into the centre of the road, then swung round towards the two figures, and they heard the gears change as it started forward.

Inside fifty yards it was moving at full speed, and it was heading straight for the two running detectives.

"Look out, guv'nor!"

Without a swerve the Owl drove the coupe straight on to the pavement, and it seemed to Tinker that his master would go down under the flying wheels, but just as the bonnet of the car was within a yard from them Blake made a headlong leap to one side, landing on his hands and knees beyond the pavement, while the coupe, swerving violently now, swung past him, rushed over the gutter, and went on at full tilt across the road again.

It was a mad, vicious effort to murder, and only Blake's swift action had saved his life.

Tinker rushed to his master's side, but Blake was on his feet before the youngster could reach him, and they both turned and looked down the street.

The coupe was just swinging round the corner, and they had a momentary vision of a pallid face peering at them through the window; then the swift-moving vehicle vanished into the broad thoroughfare, and the rate at which it travelled soon carried it out of earshot.

Blake and Tinker sprinted down the street, reaching the corner and coming to a halt there. That particular thoroughfare was a very long, unbroken one, and far down it they could see the red rear light of the coupe.

The honk! of a motor-horn from the left drew their attention to the other side of the road, where they saw a taxi halted beside the pavement.

"Come on, young 'un! This is a bit of luck! Quick!"

The man from Baker Street pelted across the road, and found it was the taxi which had brought him from his chambers. The driver, with a show of intelligence not unusual to men of his type, was already at the wheel, and when Blake reached the vehicle the man leaned forward.

"I thought you might need me again, mister," he said. "What is it? Follow that coupe?"

"Yes, if you can manage it," Blake replied.

The detective opened the door, then turned to his assistant.

"Look here, young 'un," he said. "I think we'll have to separate now. You had better get back to the flat and see who it was the Owl left there. Unless I am much mistaken, you'll find it is M. Polacoss. I'm going to follow this rogue and get hold of him, if I can."

It was rather hard lines on Tinker to be cut out of the chase just as it was growing interesting, but the youngster saw his master was in the right. It was necessary for someone to look after the other side of the affair,



and so, closing the door of the taxi, Tinker stepped back and nodded to the driver.

"Go on, my friend," he said. "Drive like blazes, and if you do catch up with that brute, give him one for luck from me!"

In another moment the taxi was tearing off up the long thoroughfare, and Tinker, standing on the edge of the pavement, watched it until it had vanished in the distance.

So far as he could judge, the taxi seemed in very good condition, and the driver had evidently no intention of sparing his engine in the chase that he had volunteered for.

"You've just got a three-to-one chance," the youngster thought, "and perhaps you will manage to pull it off."

He went back across the street, and just as he turned into the wide entrance to Lyverett Mansions, the burly figure of a policeman appeared, hurrying up from the other side.

"Pity you didn't show your face about ten minutes ago," Tinker thought, as he halted to wait for the advent of the official.

The night-porter appeared in the entrance to the hall, and, catching sight of Tinker, came down the steps towards him.

"Hallo, you still here?" he said.

By this time the constable had arrived, and in order to hasten matters Tinker made a brief explanation. A few moments later they were entering the flat on the first floor, and on going into the sitting-room and switching on the light they found a man lying outstretched on the couch in one corner of the room.

He was a grey-haired, thin individual, about medium height, and the olive-tinted skin and regular features were unmistakable.

He was breathing faintly, and after making one or two efforts to rouse him the policeman sent the night-porter out for a doctor. Some nine or ten minutes elapsed before the physician appeared, and, after examining the man, he discovered that he was drugged.

"I'll see what I can do to bring him round," he said. "It might take some time, though."

He set to work then, aided by Tinker and the policeman, and after half an hour's hard work was rewarded by his patient opening his eyes and trying to sit up.

Presently the man began to speak, and it was Greek that he used; then, seeing that his listeners were not able to follow him, he dropped into fairly good English.

"Where am I? What has happened?" Tinker took on himself the task of explaining.

"You are in a flat in Lyverett Mansions," he said. "It is a flat that belongs to M. Polacoss."

The man turned his head towards the speaker.

"But my name is Polacoss," he said, "and I—yes, I—I think I remember."

He was able to sit up now, and under the powerful light of the electric-bulb his face twitched. He looked first at Tinker, then at the policeman.

"So," he said, "it seems I am in the hands of friends at last. I am much obliged to you, gentlemen, although I admit that I do not know how all this came about."

The porter had found a decanter of brandy on the sideboard, and the doctor measured out a quantity, diluting it with water, and handing the glass to his patient.

After sipping at it once or twice M. Polacoss was able to rise to his feet, and he gave his companions a quiet bow.

"It seems to me, gentlemen, that you have saved me from the hands of an unscrupulous rogue," he said. "I had given up all hope of getting away from him. Could you tell me what day this is, and the date of the month?"

Tinker gave the desired information, and the eyes of the Greek millionaire lighted up.

"Ah! That is better! Then I have still time," he broke out. "That rascal who tricked me told me yesterday that this morning at ten o'clock he would receive the big sum of money he was out to swindle me of."

Both the doctor and the policeman were highly interested, and it was the doctor who urged his patient to tell his story.

"There seems to be very little to tell, really," said Polacoss. "I had arranged to come to London to carry out the sale of certain cargo steamers that belong to my firm. I arrived at Southampton, and was met by a man who told me that he was a representative of the shipping firm I was in

negotiation with. We travelled up to town together, and, as it was rather late at night, he invited me to go to his house and put up there. I did so, and we had dinner together. I don't remember much what happened after that dinner, but when I came to my senses again I found that I was a prisoner in a room, which I was told afterwards was the loft of this plausible rascal's garage."

For a man who had been so badly handled Tinker had to admit that M. Polacoss took the affair very well. He shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"I have met many rascals in my day, gentlemen," the Greek merchant continued, "but I don't think I ever came in contact with a more deliberate and careful villain than the fellow who played this trick on me. He used to come to see me now and again, and he told me every move he was carrying out. I believe he had the audacity to take a flat in my name, and was even carrying out certain correspondence with the shipping syndicate to whom I intended selling my steamers. He had ransacked my baggage, and had found plenty of letters and samples of my handwriting, and it appears that he combines rascality with a certain gift of forgery, of which he made abundant use."

The Greek millionaire took a turn up and down the room, then halted again.

"It is my first experience of this kind," he went on, "but I think that in one sense this man is unique, for, after our first meeting, he always came to see me in the dark, and the extraordinary part of it is that he seems to see, by some uncanny gift or other, just as well in the dark as an ordinary person can do in the light."

Tinker smiled.

"That's quite true, M. Polacoss," he said. "Both my governor and I have had very grim proofs of that fact, not only in this case but in others."

Polacoss turned, and nodded to the young detective.

"It appears to me that I am under a deep debt of gratitude to you and to this master of yours," he said. "In fact, extraordinary though the way that this rascal got a hold of me is, I think that even more extraordinary is the way in which you have got the better of him. You say it is now about five o'clock in

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the morning, and I know that five hours from now—that is to say, at ten o'clock—that rogue was going to appear at the offices of the syndicate and sign the transfer papers in my name, receiving sixty thousand pounds cash for the transaction."

He drew a deep breath.

"Last night he came to me, and told me exactly what he intended doing. I was lying on the cot in the loft, and he had used handcuffs and leather belts to keep me there. But I somehow or other felt that something was going to happen. I heard him moving about the room, and I knew he was coming nearer and nearer to the cot. Something told me that he was going to attack me, and yet—well, what could I do?"

He looked across at his listeners, and shook his head.

"I don't think I have ever gone through a more terrible experience," he said. "I knew that this uncanny rascal was going to attack me, yet I could not even see him. All I remember is that suddenly his hand fell over my mouth and nose. I tried to avoid him, but I was absolutely helpless under his grasp. After that I remember no more, until I had the pleasure of waking up here, among you gentlemen, whom I must regard as my friends."

He nodded to his companions.

He took the matter very well, did this quiet Greek merchant. There was no complaint, no outbreak against the police and guardians of the country that he had come to on business, and which had treated him so badly. He simply told his story in a matter-of-fact way, regarding it as very annoying, but, under the circumstances, an unavoidable incident.

"It was my own fault," M. Polacoss said. "I ought to have realised that the man was a rascal. Only, you see, I thought I would not be known here in England, and I have yet to discover the way in which he was able to trace my movements and know just what I was going to do when I arrived in London."

Tinker had had a pretty full report from Blake concerning the various discoveries the

Baker Street man had made, and now he was able to enlighten M. Polacoss on that fact.

When the Greek merchant discovered that it was his arrangements with the tourist agency that had really given the Owl his first idea of the scheme he smiled grimly.

"Yes, I see," he said; "and I quite understand that a bold and utterly lawless man could take full advantage of these arrangements that I made, for, unfortunately, I was not known in London; I have never visited her before."

He glanced around the sitting-room, and, crossing to the desk, seated himself at it, and began to go through the drawers, presently finding in one of them a number of sheets of spoilt notepaper, on which the Owl had been practising the close, rather characteristic writing of the man he had victimised.

"He worked here, in the dark," said Tinker; "practising that signature."

M. Polacoss leaned back in his chair, and shook his head.

"A dangerous man that, gentlemen," he said, "and I could consider myself more than fortunate that it should have been my luck to have been aided by this wonderful man, whom you call Sexton Blake. It is my hope that I shall soon meet him."

His eyes brightened.

"Indeed, he may even have some good news for me when I do have the pleasure of making Mr. Blake's acquaintance," the Greek continued. "But, personally, I don't care! For already, in saving me from that man's hands, he has performed a service which I shall not forget."

Far out on the Rickmansworth Road, at nine o'clock that morning, a county constable, going his round on a bicycle, came across a stranded taxi, the driver of which, although apparently miles from anywhere, with two tyres in ribbons and an empty petrol-tank, seemed to be extraordinarily satisfied with himself.

"It's all right, mate," the taximan said to

the constable. "I ain't grumblin', although I've busted two tyres and run my blinkin' engine bone dry!"

He slipped his hand into his pocket, and drew out a very fat wad of banknotes, together with a card.

"That's wot I got for my run, and this is the gent who give it me. I tell you, this old bus-hox o' mine never run better in its life, and we'd have won, too, if it hadn't been for these yere blinkin' roads and my old tyres!"

He looked up at the constable, with a grim smile on his face.

"When the blazes are you goin' to get your roads done up so that a fellow can have a chance of a straight run?" he said.

The driver turned, and indicated a patch of broken metal over which his tyres had come to grief.

"We was only two hundred yards behind the blighter when the tyres went phut!" the taximan said. "Two hundred yards—you get me? Jest because I couldn't cover another two hundred yards, Mr. Sexton Blake lost the chance of collarin' one of the darnedest rascals that ever got away on a piece of blind luck!"

He swerved round to the constable again.

"You tell your darned road surveyor, with my compliments, that he ought to be jolly well ashamed of himself, for he was guilty of helpin' a crook to escape, if ever a man was!"

And on this comment our story may come to a close.

At ten o'clock that morning there gathered in the office of the shipping syndicate in London a very interesting group of men—Sexton Blake, Tinker, M. Polacoss, and the manager and partners of the syndicate.

And, although Blake had to admit failure in his effort to catch the Owl, the handing over of that sixty thousand pounds to its rightful owner was perhaps reward enough.

For if the Owl had got away, he had done so empty-handed.

THE END.



An exciting incident from "THE COLOUR LINE," next Thursday's enthralling story of Sexton Blake and Tinker.



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The Invitation.

"**W**HY, what on earth can that be?" Bradley inquired. "Ah, yes, I recollect now!"

"That's the prisoner," Curtis grinned. "He's safe enough for the present."

"Is that you, Hudders?" the voice of Bryant was heard calling. "Come up and untie these confounded ropes, will yer?"

"Hudders!"

The sergeant started. "Can he mean Wilfrid Hudders, the forger?" he exclaimed excitedly. "There's a reward offered of fifty pounds for the capture of a man. The police in London can't find a sign of 'im."

"Yes, that's right," Holmes broke in. "He must be the fellow you refer to, for, as I told you, we saw him printing some bank-notes."

"Good gracious!" said the sergeant. "If we succeed in capturing him it will mean promotion for me, and fifty pounds into your pockets. We mustn't let 'im escape on no account. Come on, sirs! Which is the way to this underground passage?"

Curtis acted as guide, and led the way to the opening. He was about to step through the panel, when he suddenly stopped and held up his hand.

"S-s-h!" he whispered. "There's somebody coming along the tunnel!"

They all grew quiet and stood listening. Yes, there was certainly the sound of approaching footsteps.

"It must be Brader—or, rather, Hudders!" the sergeant exclaimed hurriedly. "I know he only keeps Bryant, an' he's upstairs."

"Look here," Curtis said, in a low tone, "we had better hide in these recesses here, and when he comes out we'll spring on to him."

"Not a bad suggestion, sir," said Bradley. "I'll act upon it. Come on, we must not lose a moment."

They quickly secreted themselves in the deep recesses, of which there were plenty and to spare, and stood listening expectantly. They could hear the man breathing now. He stepped out of the secret doorway. It was Dr. Brader.

Hardly had he taken one step forward, however, than he suddenly found himself surrounded. Being entirely off his guard he was manacled before he could offer the least resistance.

"So we've got you at last, Wilfrid Hudders, have we?" remarked Bradley.

"I fail to understand you," blustered the man. "My name is Dr. Brader. And, sergeant, what does this outrageous treatment mean?"

"It means," Bradley said, "that I've captured, on the information of these young gents 'ere, the greatest forger alive! It's not the slightest use you denyin' of it, because your confederate, Bryant, who is lying bound hand and foot upstairs, has given the game away. Do you still deny as you're Wilfrid Hudders?"

Dr. Brader glared round him wildly, then dropped his hands down loosely and laughed coolly.

"No," he returned. "You seem to know everything about me, so what is the good of keeping this farce up?"

"Now, young gentlemen, if you don't mind, help me to carry 'im upstairs," Bradley exclaimed. "Then we'll go an' find little Lucy."

The captured forger was taken up the creaking staircase and placed alongside Bryant, after being bound in a similar fashion. The cupboard was just large enough to hold them both, though it was rather a tight fit.

"Say," Curtis remarked, turning to Spence and Appleyard, "do you mind staying with these chaps while we go and fetch Lucy?"

The two Fifth-Formers, eager to be of assistance, readily consented. There was not much chance of the prisoners escaping, however, for they were both secure in their bonds.

The others departed with the sergeant, and searched every room in the rear of the house until they came to a small cupboard-like apartment, evidently at one time a store-room, and here they found the kidnapped child. On the floor an oil-stove burned, and kept the place cheerful and warm. The child herself was lying upon a heap of blankets, gazing at them with wide-open eyes.

"I want my mummy!" she cried plaintively, finding her tongue at last. "I want my mummy again!"

Bradley smiled, and took little Lucy into his arms, and soothed her, saying that she was to be taken straight home, and back to her mamma.

"We needn't bother about the forger's apparatus," he added, turning to Curtis. "There will be plenty of time to attend to that to-morrow, for it's plain enough that we've collared the right man."

"The only thing I can't make out," Holmes said, as they were re-ascending the stairs, "is why Bryant played the ghost."

"Well, I can only think of one explanation, and that's this," said Sergeant Bradley. "After old Davidson died, the village boys, an' very often men as well, used to explore the place, an' if by any chance they'd hit upon the secret passage—which was no doubt built centuries ago—it would ha' bin all up with Hudders. Seen this, he 'it upon the idea o' the ghost, which, as we have seen, 'as been very effective."

"Yes, I suppose that's it," Curtis said. "I was right about one thing, you fellows," he added.

"What was that?" asked Wellinson.

"Why, that Stratford fancied he saw the ghost vanish, and that spurts of flame darted from its eyes, and all that rubbish."

"I suppose just at that moment Bryant switched off the current, and Stratford, being startled as he was, imagined the rest, as you say."

They marched Brader and his accomplice off to the police-station, where they were put safely under lock and key.

There was little else they could do that night, so they bade the sergeant good-bye, and departed, Curtis carrying the little child, all the others crowding round him excitedly.

They arrived at the college at last, and, crossing East Quad to the Head's house, Curtis rang the bell.

After a few minutes waiting the canon himself appeared, clad in dressing-gown and slippers.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed. "What are you boys doing out of your beds at this unearthly hour? It is past eleven! Come in immediately!"

He broke off abruptly as he caught sight of his little daughter, asleep in Curtis' arms.

"Lucy!" cried Canon Lethbridge. "Lucy!"

The next moment he had his child in his arms, and the Fifth-Formers could see that there were tears in his eyes as he glanced at them.

"Come inside, boys!" he said, after the first emotion was over. "I do not know where you have been, or how you found my little daughter, but I shall never be able to thank you enough."

"Oh, nonsense, sir!" Curtis said. "I don't reckon we have done as much as all that!"

Explanations followed, and the Head was amazed and surprised when they had finished their recital.

"Well, my dear boys, you have done me a great service; one you may be sure I shall never, in the whole course of my life, forget," he said, greatly moved. "But for the present I think you had all better hurry off to your beds; we will attend to everything in the morning."

They bade the Head good-night, and departed to the Fifth-Form dormitory, where they were soon fast asleep.

After Prayers the next morning the canon told the whole school of what Oswald and Holmes, and particularly Curtis, had accomplished. He bore heavily on the three boys' pluck and fearlessness in entering the Grange, especially as they were aware all the time that the kidnapper of his little girl was also in the house.

"The least I can do," he concluded, "is to give the school a whole holiday in consideration of their brave and heroic conduct. The fifty pounds reward, for the capture of Hudders, the forger, is, of course, theirs; but they have kindly promised to give half of it to Sergeant Bradley, who assisted them in the capture. Now, boys, it is a beautiful day for skating, and I sincerely trust that you will enjoy yourselves. You may now dismiss!"

The various Forms, instead of going off to their class-rooms as usual, departed to the quadrangle.

The occupants of Study No. 12 were immediately surrounded by a crowd of Fifth Form fellows, who, for the moment, forgot the dignity of their rank, and slapped the three heroes on the back, and generally made themselves conspicuous by their excited behaviour. The juniors were cheering lustily at the unexpected treat they were to have.

When at last order was restored, and the boys of the Fifth had cooled down a trifle, Curtis ventured to address them.

"Fellows of the Fifth," he cried, standing on the steps of the entrance hall, "before we commence the day I have an invitation for U. J.—No. 880.

you. I want all the Fifth Form to be present in dormitory to-night to celebrate this momentous occasion by being our guests for the evening. There will be a grand feast, which myself, Holmes, and Raymond are providing out of our reward-money—of course, we have not received it yet, but we're doing this on the strength of it. Is there anybody who does not wish to attend?"

The Fifth Form grinned, and the shouting was once more renewed, much to the amazement of the Remove, who were looking on enviously.

"I say, you fellows," Holmes said suddenly, "why can't you behave yourselves in the way Fifth-Formers should. You're making enough row for the whole of the Lower School."

The feast that night proved to be a huge success—the Beetle was well aware of the festivities in progress, but he was too considerate to interfere—and all the fellows of the dormitory went to sleep well-filled and contented.

The Beginning of the End.

AFTER all this excitement a spell of quiet seemed to descend over Wen-haston, and everything went on in its usual course for some time.

No move was made by Haviland or Mr. Meredith, and Oswald began to think that his cousin had thought better of his evil plans, and had decided to make no more attempts to ruin his character. But in this supposition Oswald was entirely at fault, as he was presently to discover. It was already getting near the end of term, and the boys were beginning to discuss the coming Christmas holidays.

Haviland had repeatedly asked the master of the Remove what his plans were, and told him that it was getting very late in the term to make another attempt.

But Mr. Meredith only smiled, and informed Haviland that all would be well, and that he must be patient. He would know everything in good time. So Oswald's rascally cousin had to be contented. And still the days went by, and still Mr. Meredith continued with his usual duties, and made no effort to do as he promised.

And so it went on, until it got into the last week of term. The whole school would be breaking up in three days, and Haviland got out of patience at last, and went to Mr. Meredith and demanded to know what his plans were, and whether he was going to act that term or not.

And it is a curious but significant fact that the whole overthrow of his plans, his own and Mr. Meredith's ruin, was brought about in the first instance by their own scheming. For it was left to chance—the chance that comes but once in a lifetime—to accomplish their undoing.

Had it not been for the secret passage from the tower to the school, it is more than probable that Mr. Meredith's plans would have succeeded, and Oswald Raymond would have indeed been ruined.

But it was not to be. The passage was to save him yet, and the reader will remember that had it not been through Mr. Meredith's plans to disgrace Oswald by means of the Glanville Race, the uprising of the Fifth Form, the journeying to the tower, and the finding of the secret passage, that passage would never have been discovered, and so their plans would have been unimpeded.

The chance referred to was that for some time past Curtis had been unable to find his large pocket-knife—one which had been presented to him by his "poppa," and which he would be very sorry to lose. He had searched high and low for it; he even went so far as to thoroughly search the haunted Grange; and yet it did not turn up.

As a last resource, Holmes suggested looking for it in the underground passage. Very probably it would be there, he said.

So the three chums, who had never neglected their vigilant watch over Mr. Meredith and Haviland, strolled out into quad one afternoon just before the holidays, and made their way to the tower.

It was looking grim again now, and struck the boys as being chilly and uninviting.

"By Jimmy!" ejaculated Holmes, using his favourite expression. "It seems a bit different now to what it did when we were here before."

"I guess so," Curtis returned, descending the stone staircase to the underground vault.

U. J.—No. 880.

"Light that lamp up, Oswald. It's as dark as pitch down here."

Oswald ignited the wick of one of the three hanging lamps, and the boys entered the secret passage, and went slowly and steadily along, searching every inch of the ground as they progressed.

Nothing rewarded their efforts, however, by the time they had reached the college, so they continued their search until they came to dormitory passage, and still no sign of Curtis' knife was seen.

"May as well go to masters' passage," Holmes exclaimed. "Very likely you dropped it when we were 'ragging' old Luchaire."

"We'll see, anyway," returned Curtis, and they went onward, looking thoroughly the while. As they were passing Mr. Meredith's study, Holmes suddenly paused.

"I say," he whispered, "I can hear Haviland talking in here, and—"

"Come along!" urged Oswald. "We don't

"I guess I'm going to fetch the Beetle here," the American boy exclaimed, "and he—"

"There's not time!" Holmes said excitedly. "You can't get back before Haviland, and he's only got to go downstairs to seniors' passage."

"You are extremely slow of understanding to-day, Holmes!" Curtis laughed. "I reckon you've forgotten the secret door in the Beetle's study."

"By Jimmy, so I had!" Holmes said. "But how do you know he'll be there?"

"Well, he told me he was going to correct the exam papers this afternoon, an' not to bother him, so I reckon it's very probable. But we're wasting all the time gossiping here!"

As he spoke, Curtis hastened down the passage, and halted at the Beetle's door. He pressed the spring, and it slowly rolled back. Curtis stepped into Mr. Beatleton's study.

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THE COLOUR LINE.

want to spy on him and listen to what is perhaps private."

"But you don't understand," Holmes whispered excitedly. "I heard them speak your name more than once!"

The other two, who had gone on in front, glanced at one another, then rejoined Holmes and stood in listening attitudes. The walls were only of oak panelling, so every word could be distinguished.

"I tell you, Meredith," Haviland was saying fiercely, "that I mean to know what your plans are for ruining my cousin!"

The three hidden listeners looked at one another with startled faces. So Curtis' surmise was correct, after all; Mr. Meredith was in the plot. They had no qualms as to listening now. This chance—this most lucky and opportune chance—may enable them to save one of their number from absolute ruin.

"Very well," Mr. Meredith replied. "I had intended to let you know the particulars to-day, in any case, as I shall want you to act to-morrow."

"Make haste and get to the point!" Haviland said impatiently. "You've kept me long enough as it is!"

"If you will be good enough to go and fetch Richmond, I will do as you request," replied the master, "as he is to do as much as yourself in this matter. It would be advisable for him to be present; I have no intention of telling you separately."

"I shan't be long, then," Haviland said, and they heard the door open and close. Curtis tugged at the others' sleeves, and motioned them to come away. They did so.

The master was seated at his desk writing, but now he looked up in amazement.

"These passages are all very well, Curtis," he began, half angrily, "but I think I told you not to—"

"I can't stop to explain, sir," Curtis answered hurriedly. "I want you to come with me immediately and listen outside Mr. Meredith's study."

The Beetle looked at Curtis amazed.

"What is this you say?" he queried. "You want me to listen outside Mr. Meredith's door? What nonsense are you talking?"

"I guess it's not nonsense, sir," Curtis replied grimly. "Every minute is precious, and we want you to come and listen because you're a master—it's another plot against Oswald Raymond."

The Beetle did not wait for more, but followed Curtis noiselessly into the secret passage. Having closed the door, they joined the others, and stood listening. Haviland had not yet returned, fortunately, and the Beetle was in time to overhear everything. A few moments later they heard the door open, and then the voice of Haviland.

"I couldn't find the beggar at first!" he grumbled. "But now we are here, I hope you won't delay any longer!"

"No. I shall tell you my plans at once," they heard Mr. Meredith say. "Sit down, and make yourself comfortable. There are cigarettes on the table—help yourselves."

There was a short silence, during which the hidden master heard a match struck, and then Mr. Meredith's voice again became audible.

"As you both are aware," he commenced,



"Sir George Raymond, your uncle, Haviland, is coming to the college to-morrow night to present the prizes."

"Well?" said Haviland.

"Don't interrupt. As you also know, he is not due to arrive until after dark—at half-past six, to be precise. His visit to the college is the whole foundation of my plot."

"I fail to see it," put in Richmond.

"You will not fail for long. Directly after tea to-morrow night I shall find some excuse for sending Raymond down to the village. It is bound to be a pitch-dark night, as there is no moon, and while Oswald Raymond is out you two will do your parts."

"How?"

"That point I am just coming to. As soon as he has left Wenhamston you will follow in his footsteps, and conceal yourselves behind the hedge exactly opposite the Grange, for it is there that the road is darkest."

"But what do we have to do there?" Haviland inquired. "Lie in wait for him until he returns?"

"Exactly!" replied Mr. Meredith. "I shall give you, before starting, a flask containing half a pint of raw whisky."

"What on earth for?" asked Richmond.

"You are dull, I am afraid, Richmond," Mr. Meredith returned. "The object of the whisky is to make Raymond hopelessly drunk!"

"Great Scott!" Haviland gasped.

"The plan will be of the simplest to accomplish," continued the Remove-master coolly. "You will spring upon Raymond as he walks by. He will be completely off his guard, and quite easy to handle. You will find it a very easy task, I assure you, between the two of you, to force the spirit down his throat. That done, he will be practically speechless in less than ten minutes."

Mr. Meredith concluded with a note of triumph in his voice, and Mr. Beatleton, as he heard the words of his colleague, looked at his youthful companions in horror. Oswald had turned pale, and he trembled with loathing as he thought of the foul and dastardly plot being hatched. To speak, however, was impossible, so the listeners set themselves to overhear what next would be said. It was again the Remove-master who spoke.

"You have doubtless guessed what will follow that?" he exclaimed. "Raymond will be hopelessly drunk, and you—two of his Form-fellows—are assisting him back to college. You will wait opposite the Grange until you hear the sound of Sir George's trap approaching, then you will ask him for a lift. You, Haviland, will appear greatly surprised at seeing your uncle, and say what a degradation it is to you to be forced to show him your cousin, in such a despicable state."

"Sir George, of course, will be greatly shocked and amazed, and, like the strict testotaller he is, such a scene would be, to him, far worse than if Oswald Raymond had been accused of theft. No doubt he will be brought to the college, and, of course, will be publicly expelled. And who, I ask you, will believe a word he utters, after that? Will the canon consider for one moment his denial, and believe him when he states that two unknown men sprang out upon him and overpowered him. Most decidedly not! The whole thing would seem too absurd for a moment's consideration, and would be put down as an idle excuse."

Mr. Meredith paused, and then Haviland's voice broke in.

"If you want my opinion, Meredith," he said, his voice quivering with excitement, "this plan is one which seems almost impossible to fail. It is a masterpiece of conception, and I congratulate you upon it!"

"I am greatly flattered," Mr. Meredith said, with a smile, "and thank you for your compliments, Haviland. As I told you, some little time back, I had an idea that this plot of mine would surprise you."

"And is everything prepared?" Richmond inquired.

"There is nothing to prepare," the master returned. "The whole plot is simplicity itself!"

"Then I consider that Raymond is as good as expelled?" Richmond declared. "There is no mistake about the time of Sir George's arrival?"

"There is not. I have ascertained from the Head himself, and, anyhow, even if he is a little late, you will be quite safe in the hedge there."

The Beetle, who had heard quite enough, beckoned to the others, and crept silently back along the passage to his own study. Curtis opened the door, and they all entered the room, looking grave and serious.

The Course of Action.

MR. BEATLETON did not speak until he had seated himself in an armchair in front of the fire. The three boys stood round him silently.

"What did you know of this affair before you came to me?" the master asked suddenly.

"Nothing, sir!" returned Oswald. "We were going along the passage trying to find Curtis' knife, and heard Mr. Meredith mention my name quite by accident."

"I see. But I gather from what Curtis said earlier that you already knew something. Curtis said it was another attempt on you. What did you mean by those words, Curtis?"

"Well, sir," Curtis replied, "I guess it will be best to tell you the whole thing. Haviland is evidently trying to ruin his cousin—"

"For what reason?"

"To get him expelled from Wenhamston, and so into his uncle's bad books. If he succeeds in accomplishing that, Raymond will be left entirely out of Sir George's will, and Haviland will come in for all his money."

"The brute! I begin to understand now."

"I don't know whether you are aware of it, or not, sir," Holmes put in, "but it was Haviland who was responsible for the Glanville Race incident. It was he who put the drug into my glass—and for the same reason as this last plot—to get Raymond into disgrace."

"If you knew this, why did you not tell the headmaster immediately?" the Beetle inquired.

"Well, sir, I didn't want to get Haviland into trouble, and, as that attempt failed, I thought it possible that he would drop his idea," answered Oswald.

"You were much too considerate, Raymond," the Beetle said gravely. "You should have informed Canon Lethbridge at once. However, there is no real harm done."

Mr. Beatleton rose to his feet.

"We will go to the headmaster and put him in possession of all the facts," said he. "All of you come, and we will decide as to our course of action for to-morrow night."

They quitted the study, and the Beetle led the way to Canon Lethbridge's library. The Head was in, and sitting in his armchair, reading.

"Ah, Mr. Beatleton!" he exclaimed, as he saw who his visitors were. "What is the trouble now? Have these boys been getting into mischief again—so late in the term?"

"Not on this occasion, sir," the Beetle returned. "It is a matter of far graver importance upon which I have come to consult you."

"Indeed!" The Head looked surprised. "Pray be seated, Mr. Beatleton!"

The Fifth Form master did as requested, and straightway related to the canon all the facts, Curtis clapping in when he was at fault. The Head was incredulous, and could scarcely believe what he heard.

"But, upon my soul, I can hardly credit it, Mr. Beatleton!" he gasped. "I have always looked upon Mr. Meredith as a most honest and upright person!"

"No less than I myself have, sir," the Beetle returned quietly. "Had I got to know of this from any other quarter I should have refused utterly to believe it. But I overheard the whole plot with my own ears, and there is no mistake!"

The Head paced up and down the room with jerky and impatient strides. His face, which had been composed and cheerful when they entered, was now worried and troubled.

"Something will have to be done!" he exclaimed. "This dastardly conduct cannot be allowed to proceed!"

"Of course not, sir," returned the Beetle. "I was wondering which would be the best and wisest course to pursue."

"Wouldn't it be best, sir," Curtis interjected, "to let the whole thing go on as they had arranged, and then catch Haviland and Richmond red-handed?"

"You mean when they are about to administer the whisky?"

"Yes, sir, of course. There can be no mistake then. Everything will be done quietly."

The Head paused thoughtfully.

"Perhaps that will be the better course," he said at length. "Then the boys need know nothing of it until it is all over and done with, and the prizes are all distributed. It will be a great pity to spoil their enjoyment at this late period of the term."

"You are right, sir," the Beetle said. "Curtis' plan is a good one, and we will act upon it, and capture Haviland and Richmond as he says, at their foul work."

So it was decided. They stopped a little longer—discussing the subject—and then took their leave. Mr. Beatleton to go to his study, and the three chums to go to theirs, to talk over the startling exposure which would occur on the morrow.

The Final Attempt Fails.

THE whole of Wenhamston College was teeming with excitement. It was prize-giving day, and the last of term.

On the following day they would all be on their way home. Everybody was happy and joyful at the thoughts of the coming Christmas festivities. Many invitations were given and taken, including one from Oswald, who invited Holmes and Curtis to spend Christmas over at Wylcote Abbey with him. Sir George would be delighted, he said, and would not mind in the least.

The two gladly accepted; Holmes because he liked being with his schoolfellows, and Curtis because his parents were over in the States, and had arranged for him to stay at Wenhamston over the holidays—a thing he had been looking forward to gloomily enough, until the invitation came. He was delighted, and, if anything, Oswald was more pleased than he.

It was already evening, and pitchy dark. The whole sky was laden with heavy snow-clouds, and the blackness was so intense that it was impossible to see anything a yard from one. For Mr. Meredith's plot a better night could not have been—and the same applied to Curtis, and the time for both was drawing near—it was getting on for six o'clock.

Mr. Meredith had managed to send Oswald on some errand—to purchase some postage-stamps—and Oswald, who had been careful to be handy, had been perfectly willing to make the journey. And Mr. Meredith went back into his study looking pleased, and rubbing his hands together with glee.

Holmes and Curtis, keeping strict watch, did not fail to see, some few minutes after Oswald's departure, Haviland and Richmond stroll carelessly out of Entrance Hall, and so on into quad.

They—Holmes and Curtis—lost no time in hurrying up to masters' passage and informing Mr. Beatleton of the fact. The master had been expecting them, and was already dressed for the journey—in overcoat and thick boots. A few minutes later the three walked out, quite as carelessly as the two previously, nobody taking the slightest notice of them in all the general hurry and excitement of the last day of term.

It was snowing hard, and the wind howled and whistled round the gables of the old college with unabating fury, and the snow, in large flakes, was driving into the Beetle's and the boys' faces with stinging force. On such a night there was little or no chance of their being discovered. It would have been impossible to hear almost had someone shouted out within a dozen yards of them. And if it was a good night for their purpose, it was an equally good one for Haviland—although he had no idea of what was to be the end of his villainous plotting.

As the three others drew near the Grange they slackened their pace and looked around them. Nothing was to be seen. Even the heavily-falling snow was invisible, and there was not the slightest need for caution. It would require a good deal of vigilance on Haviland's part to even see Oswald coming along the road. The Beetle concealed himself against the walls of the Grange with Holmes and Curtis on either side of him. There was no sign to show that Oswald's cousin was opposite, but that he was there was very certain, and most probably standing in the roadway on the watch.

Suddenly the watchers saw a gleam of light appear for an instant opposite—evidently one of the two had an electric torch, and they were getting the whisky in readiness. A few more minutes' waiting, and then, even above the howl of the wind, could be heard the chords of the popular song, "In the Twilight," whistled by someone approaching from the village.

Curtis and Holmes grew excited as they recognised the whistle as that of Oswald's, which was intended for Haviland's benefit as well as for their own. The sounds became louder, then they ceased altogether, and another one took their place.

"Curtis—Holmes—Beetle—help!"

The master and the two boys dashed across the roadway to where a scuffling could be heard proceeding from the centre. Haviland



and Richmond were too intent on their work to notice what else was occurring, until it was too late. They resisted the attack feebly; it had taken them completely off their guard, and they were not in the least prepared for it, and three minutes later Haviland was in the grasp of the Beetle and Holmes, and Richmond was held tightly by Curtis and Oswald.

The captured and the capturers could not see one another, or even hear very distinctly, so it was no use speaking there, and the Beetle gave the order to march. At first Haviland resisted, but when he found the master of the Fifth was in grim earnest he ceased his struggles. They walked rapidly to Wenhamston, and so straight to the headmaster's house. Nobody saw them enter, fortunately, and there was not a soul in quad.

Mr. Beaton entered the Head's house without knocking, and marched his prisoners straight to the library, where Canon Lethbridge was awaiting them.

His face was set and stern, and as the frightened and cowed Haviland and Richmond were placed in front of him he rose to his feet grimly.

"So you are revealed in your true colours at last, Haviland—eh?" he said. "Your foul plots have one and all failed, the last bringing you defeat and downfall simultaneously."

Walter Haviland glared round him like a caged tiger.

"What proof have you got?" he demanded fiercely.

The canon smiled grimly.

"There is ample proof of your wickedness," he said. "For one thing, Mr. Beaton, here, overheard every word of Mr. Meredith's foul plot, and I am now about to ring for him."

"Meredith discovered!" Richmond gasped affrightedly. "Then it's all up!"

"You speak correctly," the Head said drily. "It is certainly 'all up,' and you two boys will be publicly expelled after prize distribution to-night!"

The Head rang the bell, and Robert entered.

"Kindly ask Mr. Meredith to attend in my study immediately," he said, "and make all haste!"

"Very good, sir!"

The butler departed, and the occupants of the Head's study looked at one another in silence—the two culprits white and scared, the Beetle and the Head grim and determined, and the three chums flushed and excited. In a few moments the butler returned, and ushered the master of the Remove into the room.

"You wish to speak to me, sir—" Mr. Meredith commenced.

Then he saw who the occupants of the study were, and he went pale and agitated.

"Yes, Mr. Meredith, I wish to see you," the Head replied coldly. "I shall not keep you a minute. The whole of your villainy is discovered, and your foul plotting has come to nought. There will be no fuss, and I must request you to pack up your things this very instant! I cannot allow such a dastardly person as yourself to sleep another night under this respected roof. You will receive no cheque for this term's labours, and the only thing I ask of you is to leave this honourable college, which for the last three years has been tainted with your person! Go—there is the door! I do not wish to have another word!"

Mr. Meredith made as if to remonstrate, and turned as pale as death.

"You heard my words!" the Head exclaimed, with ominous calm and with flashing eyes, "if you are not out of this room in ten seconds I will kick you out! Yes, kick you out like the cur you have proved yourself to be!"

Canon Lethbridge was furious now, and made a step towards Mr. Meredith, quivering with suppressed emotion; but the master had already gained the door, and, after a last look at Haviland, he smiled coolly and insolently at the enraged Head, and departed. "The air is purer for his absence," the Beetle said gravely. "And now that task is over may I ask what course you are going to take up in regard to these two misguided boys?"

"I shall look them up until after the prizes are distributed, and then publicly

expel them. There is no other course I can take, although they richly deserve greater punishment, but it is probable that their parents or guardians will do that in a more severe manner, for I shall inform Sir George Raymond of the affair immediately on his arrival."

The door opened, and admitted Robert. "Sir George Raymond?" he announced grandly.

Oswald is Merciful.

"H, my dear Lethbridge! How are you?"

Sir George smiled genially as he bustled into the room.

"What, flogging boys on the last day of the term, when we should be all merry! I'm surprised at you, Lethbridge—I'm surprised at you! Why, I'm hanged," he went on laughingly, "if both my nephews aren't here into the bargain! Never saw such boys for getting trouble—never!"

Sir George plumped himself down into a chair, all unconscious of the seriousness of the situation; then he realised suddenly that something unusual was in the wind, and looked from the Head to Mr. Beaton inquiringly.

"What's the trouble, Lethbridge," he queried—"nothing very serious, I hope?"

"I am grieved to say, Sir George," the Head replied sadly, "that never in all the course of my career have I had such a serious and distasteful task to perform as I have to perform to-night!"

Sir George Raymond grew attentive at once.

"I apologise if I have been unseemingly merry!" he said shortly. "But what is the trouble?"

"I hardly know how to break it to you, Sir George," the Head said hesitatingly.

"But to get it over swiftly, your nephew, Walter Haviland, will be publicly expelled in Big Hall to-night!"

The canon explained to him, at considerable length, of the villainy of his nephew, and that such a boy ought to be severely punished. He pointed out the mean cunning which had impelled Haviland to conceive the idea of ruining his cousin, and so get all his uncle's money for himself.

When he had done, the baronet was almost speechless with rage and indignation, and rose to his feet again, and crossed over to Haviland.

"You despicable cur!" he cried bitterly. "Never more shall you cross the threshold of my house! To-morrow I will give you one hundred pounds, and you can go where you please! But do not dare to venture within a score of miles of Wylcote Abbey!"

Haviland broke down entirely, and sobbed like a child. The sight touched Oswald's heart, who, with Curtis and Holmes, had been seated on the couch, listening attentively.

"Don't do that, uncle!" he pleaded, clutching at Sir George's arm. "You're not going to be so cruel and unkind as all that!"

Sir George looked at him in amazement, then a frown crossed his brow.

"You say that," he cried incredulously. "You, who have all but been disgraced and expelled? You are too soft-hearted, Oswald! Be seated again, and keep your tongue quiet until I've finished with your cousin."

"But you won't send him away—to very likely starve!" cried Oswald.

"What is that to me?" Sir George replied. "What do I care if he starves—a thing such as he! He is not worth a moment's consideration, and—"

"But he is my cousin, uncle," cried Oswald desperately, "and had it not been for the presence of Mr. Meredith, he would not have been contaminated!"

Sir George frowned.

"It is nothing of the sort! If Walter would do these wretched acts with this master's help, he would have done them without. That is no argument at all."

"I think it more than probable, Sir George," the Beetle put in, "that if Mr. Meredith had not been at Wenhamston to associate with Haviland, he would never have done these things."

"It's true, sir!" Haviland gasped, looking

up. "Every one of them were Mr. Meredith's ideas, and I only worked them out!"

"That is quite enough!" the baronet said fiercely. "If you—"

"Oh, don't send me away like that, uncle!" the wretched boy pleaded. "I promise to be honourable and upright from this time onwards—this has been a lesson—such a terrible and effective lesson! Won't you give me one more chance? I swear—oh, I—"

Haviland broke down, and sobbed bitterly as he looked up eagerly to his uncle and the others. Tears were already in Oswald's and Holmes' eyes, and the former repented his entreaties.

"Don't send him from home!" he cried. "Don't make him worse than he is! Can't you see you will be acting cruelly in doing this; he will only go down and down until he reaches the gutter. Give him one more chance—just one!"

The baronet stood irresolute, with mingled feelings, and Mr. Beaton came to the rescue.

"Haviland has, I think," he said, "learned his bitter lesson, and should you decide to be merciful, he will turn out to be true and honourable in the future; he is truly repentant, and will do all in his power to make up for his conduct."

"I am not sure whether I am being too lenient in doing as you say," Sir George exclaimed, "but I will give you one more chance, Walter"—and the others looked radiant—"your sins are forgiven, not through me, but by the boy whom you have been plotting against—Oswald, and it is he you must thank for this soft-heartedness, not me. Go now, and pack up your box, for you must come back with me to-night. I do not wish you to be expelled, and so disgrace our good name."

"But, Sir George," protested the Head, "I cannot allow—"

"This affair is a perfectly private one, Lethbridge!" Sir George snapped, working his moustache furiously; "and I trust that you will see your way to do as I request!"

"But when Richmond is expelled everything must come out—"

"Then you will greatly oblige me by having him expelled privately," the baronet returned. "I want no fuss over this affair, if you please! The perpetrator is forgiven, and there is an end of it. We will say no more concerning the matter."

"Very well, then," said Canon Lethbridge, smiling in spite of himself, "I will allow the two boys to depart in the morning, but on no account must they return."

"That condition is, of course, only reasonable," said Sir George, regaining his customary geniality. "Walter, I will have no more of this childish crying. The matter is over, and there is an end of the affair. Go and shake hands with your cousin, and then retire to your room."

Haviland did as he was told in a dazed fashion, even now unable to realise his good fortune.

"Well, now that's over," Sir George smiled. "I think I will go and perform the service I came for—that of giving away the prizes, and I sincerely trust that I shall have occasion to present more than one to my young friends here."

He glanced at Curtis, Holmes, and Oswald who were looking happy, every one of them, at the turn affairs had taken.

"And, by the way," he added, "I want you all to come and spend Christmas at the Abbey with me. I'm a lonely old man, and nothing would please me better. Will you come?"

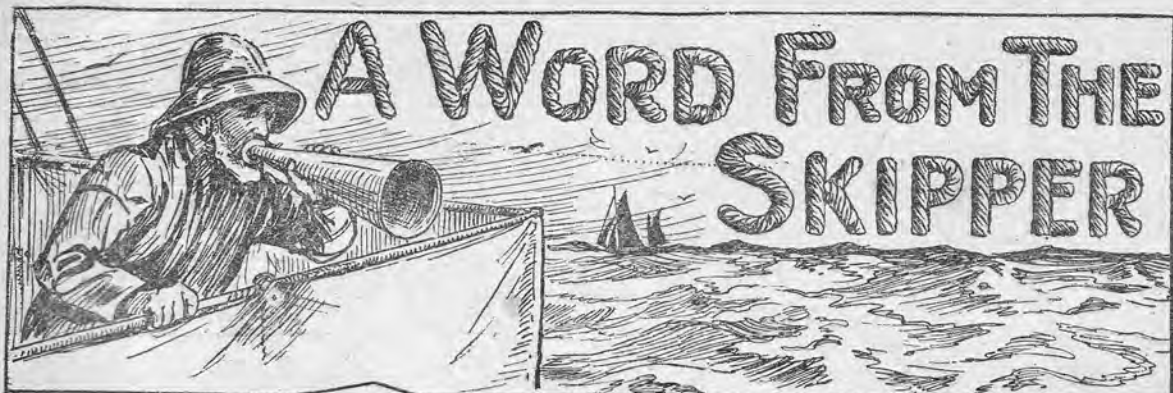
"Rather, sir!" Curtis and Holmes answered. "Good—good!" smiled the baronet, and turning to Mr. Beaton, added: "And you, sir, will you consent to join us there?"

The Beetle flushed, and looked pleased. "I shall be delighted to take advantage of your kindly offer," he said, giving a side-long look at the three chums, who smiled at him in return, "and thank you exceedingly."

Canon Lethbridge looked on interestedly, and then made a move for the door. Holmes turned to Frankfort K. Curtis excitedly.

"Do you hear that?" he cried, caring not a jot for the Beetle's presence. "Mr. Beaton's coming to spend Christmas with us! Hurrah! This is better than I hoped for. Good-bye! He's the best in the school!"

THE END.



My Address:

The Skipper,
The "Union Jack" Library,
The Fleetway House,
Farringdon Street,
London, E.C.4.

My Dear Readers,—Having a little space at my disposal, I will take this opportunity of having a chat with you about our paper and its policy.

I need hardly impress upon you the fact that I do all in my power to publish the cream of detective fiction, but you must remember that unless you drop me a line occasionally, telling me of your likes and dislikes, I am working in the dark, as it were.

However, judging by the letters which I receive, I have reason to believe that the yarns which have appeared in our pages during the past months have found favour in the eyes of my readers.

Zenith, the Bat, Leon Kestrel, and the other prominent characters have their particular followers, of course, and it is on this score that I shall continue to publish their exploits from time to time.

I have received many letters of late asking me to print more stories dealing with

WALDO, THE WONDER-MAN.

Well, my chums, you will be glad to hear that I shall publish a special series of yarns featuring this fascinating character at no distant date.

You shall have further particulars in a week or so.

NEXT WEEK.

Next Thursday's long, complete detective novel will be entitled:

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and I recommend the story with confidence, for it is without doubt one of the most thrilling stories it has been my good fortune to secure for some time past.

"The Colour Line" is literally packed with thrills, and you will find the author's treatment of the plot to be truly masterly.

I feel sure you are all sorry to say good-bye to Frankfort K. Curtis and his chums of Wenhamston College, the youngsters who have played a prominent part in the serial which concludes in this number. However, all serials must come to an end, and in reading the final chapters of "Curtis of the Fifth" you will be able to find consolation in

the fact that I have managed to secure one of the best boxing yarns that has ever been penned, a story written by an author who knows the world of the Roped Ring from A to Z.

The story is entitled,

"THE FIGHTING SCOT,"

and it has been written for the "U. J." by Walter Edwards, whose series of sporting and adventure yarns, "The Cinema Athlete," made such an appeal to my readers.

Mr. Edwards has had a vast experience of the Mitting Game, and, as a consequence, every line of his story exudes the true atmosphere of his subject.

The first instalment of "The Fighting Scot" will positively start in next Thursday's issue of our paper, and as there is sure to be a great demand for this number I strongly advise my readers to place an order with their newsagent without delay.

REPLIES IN BRIEF.

"An Aussie" (Melbourne).—Glad you you don't mind paying twopence for the old paper. As you say, it is the "dinkum goods."

H. B. H. (Birmingham) wants further stories dealing with Plummer, Carlac, Kew, Garock, Wu Ling, and the Scorpion. What do my chums think about it? A postcard will do.

"Aberdonensis."—Glad you think so highly of the stories. I showed your letter to a 'U. J.' author, and he positively blushed at the nice things you said about him.

X. N. (Burnley) thinks the "Letter-File" stories are childish. Opinions, please!

F. C. R. (Leicester).—A Confederation story may appear in the "Sexton Blake Library" at some future date. It is unlikely that the Hon. John Lawless will declare war upon John Smith & Co. Many thanks for your letter.

Air Mechanic, A.E.S. (Bucks).—I will see what can be done about Aubrey Dexter and Plummer. Thanks for the good wishes.

F. E. (Woolley).—You shall certainly have more stories featuring Waldo, the Wonder-Man. Glad you like the "Fourpenny Library."

R. B. (Ireland).—As you say, Leon Kestrel is an amazing character. As to your little trouble, cannot you persuade your father to read a copy of the old paper? You are right when you say that it isn't "playing the game" to condemn a paper without even glancing at its contents.

R. (Pilling).—Thanks for your promise to get new readers.

Arthur E. Hartless, 31, St. Bartholomew Terrace, Church Hill, Wednesbury, has some back numbers of the "Union Jack" he wishes to dispose of.

E. H. A. (Walsend-on-Tyne).—I have made a note of all the points you raised in your long and breezy letter.

T. C. Glennie (Belfast).—Many thanks for your kind remarks.

B. E. (Bucks).—A new series of Waldo stories will appear in due course.

"Nip" wants a story dealing with Sir Richard Losely and Lobangu to appear in the "Sexton Blake Library." I will do my best to oblige him.

U. J.—No. 580.



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