

Yuletide over Xmas best with the U.J.

THE UNION JACK 2^D
(XMAS NUMBER)
Sexton Blake's Own Paper.



**THE
FLAMING
SPECTRE
OF
CLOOME**

ERT

..A XMAS STORY OF WALDO THE WONDER-MAN..

.. Christmas Mystery; Christmas Thrills; and ..
Christmas Detective Adventure with Sexton Blake.

A Word in Season.

Your Editor has a thing or two to say about Christmas, and other matters of equal interest.

MY DEAR READERS,—Once again the circling months bring us to that glad some time of the year when one expresses one's sense of cheeriness and good will and feeling of "good-luck-to-everybody" in the words:

"A HAPPY CHRISTMAS!"

Need I say that that is my wish to you?

No, I needn't.

You—all of you—know that it is. My wish this year is the wish of last year; and I hope, of many more to come: "A Happy Christmas to all of you; a rollicking, joyous, care-free time, with nothing to mar its anticipation, to dispel its glamour, or to leave regrets."

You have been expecting great things of Christmas, mayhap; let nothing upset your expectations!

Family reunions, good cheer, jollity, surreptitious kissing under the mistletoe—may you have them all, and in abundance.

Talking of family reunions, there is one I should like to see—but I'm afraid it would want a big place for the occasion. I should like to see a meeting of the great (and ever-growing) family of UNION JACK enthusiasts. We are a family really, bound together by one common bond—an appreciation of Sexton Blake and Tinker, and the love of a well-told story which these two names imply.

What a gathering that would be! Youngsters in their teens, mothers, fathers, girls, young men, the middle-aged, and even age itself, Londoners, Provincials, Colonials, dark-skinned representatives of our Empire's outposts from India, Burma, Ceylon. From the northern solitudes of the great Dominion, from the spaces of the Australian south, from the western confines of California, and the eastern limits of Japan would they come.

Rich and poor, young and old, they all have a share in the grand tradition of the UNION JACK, and all that it stands for—both for the UNION JACK of journalism and the Flag itself.

No, I don't think we shall see such a reunion, interesting as it would be. I must merely content myself with wishing you the compliments of the season, and with wishing I could infuse into these lines of cold print the sentiments I feel.

As you read this Christmas Chat of mine, with the peculiar Christmasy atmosphere of good will all about, you

realise that the greetings that come so spontaneously from your nearer friends come as sincerely from me.

Some of my reader-friends, it occurs to me, will not read these lines till Christmas itself is a thing of the past. My Colonial chums cannot get this copy till 1924 has dawned. To them I extend the same wish in retrospect, with the added wish of a Happy and Prosperous New Year.

But at the moment of writing, the Old Year is not yet done with.

Waldo, as you see, is just scraping in at the last minute, with, however, a promise of a more regular appearance later on. My chums who have seen previous announcements connected with the Wonder-Man will already know the reason for his unavoidable absence—that the writer of these fascinating yarns has long been in America. On the strength of the present story now before you I think we may safely say that he has come back to his task of writing Waldo refreshed and invigorated.

Incidentally, there are more to come very soon, and they will feature the Wonder-Man in this new stunt of his that he introduces to the startled guests of Cloome Chase.

And now as regards the Confederation. There has been a regrettable gap in the sequence of these unparalleled yarns also. The reason has already been explained—the author has had a long bout of very serious illness.

Happily, he has pulled through, and though not yet completely recovered, has got to work again. The result of his plucky industry is—

THE RETURN OF MR. REECE.

The yarn of this title will appear in the first week in January—starting the New Year well, as you will observe.

You may wonder at the title, remembering, as you doubtless do, that Mr. Reece, President of the Confederation, had the misfortune to fall into a pool in which lurked an octopus. As the watchers by the pool did not see him come up again, after waiting patiently for some time, they assumed, naturally enough, that the octopus had had his dinner for that day.

How, then, can Mr. Reece return?

Well, it isn't exactly—that is, it couldn't possibly—or, rather, it might be that, after all— Well, what I mean is that if he did, and could not have done, he may not have been able—

I think I am getting a little mixed. Anyway, the author tells the story better than I do. I think I had better leave it to him, and suggest that you buy the "U. J." on the first week in January and see just how the thing works out. Better order it in advance, perhaps. It appears to me that there will be a bit of a rush.

To go back to our stock-taking.

There are two other things besides the high standard of the stories that have

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Christmas-time, so far as an editor is concerned, can well be a time of stock-taking. The question arises: "How has the UNION JACK shaped during the past twelve months?"

Well, I don't think we have much to reproach ourselves with.

When one examines the files containing the issue for 1923 there is a goodly show.

It is unnecessary to name the "Old Favourites" who have appeared for your entertainment. All of those whose popularity have been established have made their bow regularly before you, with the exception of two.

One of these is Waldo the Wonder-Man, and the other Mr. Reece, of the Criminals' Confederation.

THE FLAMING SPECTRE OF CLOOME!



A story of WALDO the Wonder-Man, SEXTON BLAKE, and TINKER. Seasonable in its appeal; delightful in treatment; and fascinating as the yarns of Waldo ever were. This re-appearance of such an old favourite is going to have a big share in giving you A HAPPY CHRISTMAS

THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Legend of Cloome Chase.

ZUR-R-R-RP!

The locked wheels of Sexton Blake's famous racing-car, the Grey Panther, skidded dangerously on the frozen, ice-coated road. Tinker, clutching at his seat, thought for a moment that he and his master were about to plunge headlong into the ditch which ran alongside the narrow country lane.

But Sexton Blake, who was at the wheel, kept control of the car, and managed to bring it to a standstill with the front wheels only a foot away from the still form which was stretched across the roadway.

"A near thing, Tinker!" said Sexton Blake curtly. "Rather too near for my liking. A Christmas reveller, no doubt."

In a moment Blake was out of the driving-seat, gazing down upon that motionless form, now clearly visible in the reflected glare from the powerful head-lamps. Tinker joined the famous detective, and understood.

"Great Scott, guv'nor, I didn't know anything about it!" he exclaimed. "I wondered why on earth you pulled up so sharply. A farm labourer, by the look of him. He ought to be locked up for this!"

Indeed, but for Sexton Blake's swiftness of action, the man would have been run over, for he was lying in the centre of the lane, and there was absolutely no chance of swerving past him, as the fairway was narrow. One glimpse of the sprawling form had been enough for Blake.

The great criminologist dropped on one knee and raised the roughly-dressed man's head. One sniff was enough to convince him that the man had not been drinking. His face was deathly pale, and the fact that he was not excessively cold proved that unconsciousness had come only a few minutes earlier.

He was a man of about forty; a typical countryman. And although his heart was beating regularly, there was no doubt in Blake's mind that the man had received a violent shock.

"What is it, guv'nor—a fit?" asked Tinker curiously.

"I hardly think so," replied Sexton Blake. "Don't stand there, young 'un! Get down on your knees and help me to support the poor fellow. That's the way! Now we'll soon put some life into him."

Sexton Blake produced his brandy-flask and forced some of the raw spirit between the man's tightly-clenched teeth. Only after three further applications was there any sign of a change. A slight colour crept into the countryman's cheeks, and he gave a long, quivering sigh.

"I must confess, Tinker, that I am puzzled," said Blake. "Judging by this man's physique, he is a particularly hefty fellow, with a constitution of iron. What could have caused him to collapse like this? He is not injured in any way, and—"



"He's opening his eyes, sir," put in Tinker softly.

The man stared up into Sexton Blake's face, bewildered, dazed, and with an expression of unnamed horror. For a few moments he remained inert. Then with startling energy he struggled up.

"The ghost!" he exclaimed, his voice hoarse and terror-stricken. "Did ye see it, master? The Flaming Spectre o' Cloome! I seed 'un over yonder! Don't let 'im come nigh—"

"Come, come!" said Blake sharply. "There is nothing to be afraid of, my friend. There's no ghost here. You're quite safe."

The man shuddered, and covered his eyes with his hands.

"Don't let 'im get at me again, sir!" he pleaded feebly. "The ghost come right up, it did! Come an' touched me. An' then— I don't remember no more! I'm a-fear'd, master—I'm a-fear'd!"

Blake and Tinker gave one another a glance. The man was trembling like a leaf, and the horror in his voice was very real. Tinker, glancing over his shoulder, gave an involuntary shiver.

There was certainly something very eerie and mysterious about this dark, country lane. A slight wind moaned mournfully through the trees, and the air was crisp and cold with acute frost. Snow lay on the ground, but only in patches, for two days earlier there had been a rapid thaw.

"Blessed if he's not giving me the creeps, now, gov'nor!" muttered Tinker.

"The Flaming Spectre of Cloome?" said Sexton Blake inquiringly. "I presume you are referring to the famous family ghost of Cloome Chase?"

"That be it, sir!" said the countryman. "Twas only yesterday I laughed at the gossip down in the Royal Oak. 'Ghosts?' says I. 'There ain't such things as ghosts!' I says. But this very evening I've seed it, sir! Seed it wi' my own eyes!"

"And what was this ghost like?" asked Blake evenly.

"He looked like a—like a feller out o' one o' them plays, sir," replied the countryman, who was now showing more assurance. "A gret figure, dressed in a kind of cloak. An' there was blue flames licking all round 'im, sir—shootin' out from his body and his arms and legs! I seed him as clear as I see you, master—an' that ain't no lie!"

"Exactly," said Sexton Blake soothingly. "But it won't do you any good to lie here. Which way were you going?"

"I be on my way to the Chase, sir," replied the man. "I works for his lordship, and I reckoned I might be wanted on account o' the big party."

"Splendid!" said Blake. "We're bound for Cloome Chase, too, so you can have a lift. A sup of something hot in front of a warm fire, and you'll be yourself in no time."

The man was eloquent in his thanks, and after he had been assisted into the car his recovery progressed even more rapidly than before. But both Blake and Tinker were puzzled. It seemed strange that such a huge, muscular man should collapse so utterly.

"Well, this is something unexpected," commented Tinker. "I didn't know we were going to have a ghost chucked in, gov'nor. If things get a bit dull at the house-party we can go ghost hunting as a reviver. Perhaps Cloome Chase will provide some excitement, after all."

To tell the truth, Tinker had been rather depressed at the idea of spending Christmas as a guest of Lord Cloome. There had been many other more alluring invitations extended to Blake

and Tinker. But the detective had chosen Cloome Chase because he had a high personal regard for the somewhat pathetic figure of the old peer.

Blake had known Lord Cloome for several years—had been on intimate terms with him before the shadow of poverty had bowed his shoulders and lined his fine, kindly face. And somehow Blake had found it impossible to refuse Lord Cloome's pressing invitation.

There was something really touching about this Christmas party—although Blake was not supposed to know this. But he had every reason to believe that this house-party was to be the last social event at the Chase with Lord Cloome himself as the host.

Taxation, depreciating value of farm property, and many other kindred causes, had left the Cloome estates in a condition which was very near to bankruptcy. For the past few years Lord Cloome had struggled on, getting more deeply involved in debt and difficulty with every month that passed.

Blake knew for a fact that the household staff had been reduced until it was now a mere skeleton of its former grandeur. Over half the Chase was closed, and only one or two faithful retainers were kept on.

His lordship had never told Blake in so many words, but during one or two recent chats at the club he had hinted that there was one solution only to his financial problems. Cloome Chase had to be sold. And Sexton Blake could well imagine why Lord Cloome was now grey and bowed and prematurely old.

For this historic mansion was one of the oldest in the country, dating back to the Middle Ages. The Cloomes of Cloome Chase had lived there century after century, through periods of prosperity and through periods of poverty. Somehow or other, they always managed to hang on—they had always weathered every storm.

But now, at last, the famous old Chase was apparently destined to go into other hands. Either that, or decay would soon wreak its dreadful work. Unless money—much money—was soon forthcoming, the fine old mansion would moulder into ruin. Already the north wing was uninhabitable.

By selling at once to a rich man, however, the Chase could be saved. The work of restoration would begin as soon as the transfer was completed. So Lord Cloome would have one consolation, at least.

And the proud spirit of the Cloomes burned still in the poverty-stricken peer's breast. On the very eve of the sale he planned a house-party—a party which would keep up the famous traditions of the House of Cloome! At Christmas-time, without a single break for centuries, there had been a rollicking, merry party at the Chase. And this year should prove no exception, even if it was to be the last!

Sexton Blake and Tinker feared that the spirit of tragedy would hover over the Yuletide gathering; but there was no getting out of the engagement. If only for the sake of Lord Cloome they had to go. And now, within a day of Christmas Eve, they were almost at the end of their journey.

Cloome Chase had been in sight, indeed, when the still figure of the countryman, stretched across the road, had caused Blake to apply his brakes so abruptly.

They soon arrived at the gates of the drive, and Blake steered the powerful car up the sadly-neglected avenue of beech-

trees. Even in the darkness of the winter evening the signs of decay and neglect were painfully apparent.

By the time the car pulled up at the foot of the great stone steps the passenger had recovered so effectively that he clumped to the ground, muttered a hasty, "Thank ye, master," and, with a touch of his cap, he was gone, bound for the servants' quarters.

A groom was waiting in readiness to take charge of the car—a man, fortunately, who was accustomed to automobiles. And Sexton Blake and Tinker entered the wide doorway, and found themselves within the great lounge-hall of the Chase.

They were pleasantly surprised.

Although there was no electric light installed, the hall was brilliant with innumerable candles, and the flickering blaze of a huge log-fire cast a warm, cheery glow over the scene. The deep-mullioned windows, and the oak-panelled walls, the stately furniture, massive and age-old, the holly and other decorations—all this made up a picture which caused a thrill of pleasure to pulse through the newcomers. It was to be really an old-fashioned Christmas!

Lord Cloome was there himself, chatting brightly with one of his guests. A fine figure of a man, but with bowed shoulders, and a strong face which was deeply lined. He wrung Blake's hand with very real warmth.

"Welcome to Cloome Chase, Mr. Blake!" he said, in his bluff, hearty way. "And Tinker, too! Splendid! The compliments of the season to you both, gentlemen. We are here to be merry, and merry we'll be, by George!"

Somehow, Tinker seemed to be carried back hundreds of years. He could imagine a host of another century welcoming his guests in this hearty way, and in the same oak-panelled hall. And then, with a start, Tinker came to himself, deeply moved by Lord Cloome's brave show of jollity.

"You couldn't have arrived at a better time, Mr. Blake," went on his lordship cheerfully. "You'll just have time to dress for dinner. Powell, escort these gentlemen upstairs."

"Yes, my lord," said a footman, stepping forward.

Outwardly there was every appearance of wealth and magnificence, but Sexton Blake knew well enough that this was only assumed for the occasion. In a way of speaking, Lord Cloome regarded this house-party as his last fling.

Blake glanced at Powell, the footman, and then gave the man a second look. It was a swift, comprehensive look. Powell was a tall, well-built man, obviously a well-trained footman.

As Sexton Blake turned aside there was the faintest shadow of a smile on his face, but it was gone in a flash.

"I suppose you didn't happen to see the famous Flaming Spectre?" laughed his lordship, as the new arrivals turned to go upstairs.

"Well, no," said Blake. "But it seems that the ghostly gentleman has been prowling abroad this evening."

"Good gracious me!" said Lord Cloome, becoming serious. "You don't mean that, do you, Mr. Blake?"

Sexton Blake related what had occurred on the road.

"Extraordinary!" declared the peer. "Upon my soul! I'd heard one or two rumours that our traditional phantom was getting active this Christmas, but I scarcely gave any credence to the stories. It's beyond my understanding, Mr. Blake. No doubt the man frightened



"SEXTON BLAKE'S OWN PAPER"

himself into a faint. Pure imagination!"

"What is this remarkable Flaming Spectre?" asked Sexton Blake.

"Oh, the legend is ages old!" declared Lord Cloome. "In fact, one of our precious family possessions. This ghost has been seen, according to local gossip, at various times during the past four hundred years. Personally, I've always regarded the thing as a mere old wives' tale, and nothing more. But the Cloomes love to think of their family ghost as something substantial."

"According to the man on the road, it was very substantial indeed."

"The legend is quite a simple tale," said his lordship. "Hundreds of years ago a Crusader visited the Chase, but was by no means welcomed by his host. This Crusader was a pretty villainous type of man, in spite of his cloak. And in the dead of night he was murdered in the old keep. And as he died, so the story goes, he made some violent remarks to the effect that he was on his way into the bottomless pit."

"He evidently knew his record," smiled Tinker.

"Obviously," replied Lord Cloome. "Well, with his dying breath this Crusader declared that after reaching Hades he would return to Cloome Chase to haunt it for evermore. And he further declared that he would appear as a figure clothed in the fire of the Pit itself. Well, you know what these simple country people are, they see things that don't exist. Many of our records tell of the Flaming Spectre having been seen. And the rumours this Christmas are as prevalent as ever, and possibly just about as authentic."

Blake and Tinker parted from their host, and went upstairs, escorted by the footman. And the famous detective was looking very thoughtful. Within him, too, there was a sense of admiration for this fine old host. Outwardly, Lord Cloome was the very embodiment of cheeriness and bluff good-nature.

But behind that cloak lay the shadow of tragedy. For in the New Year Lord Cloome would take his departure from the Chase. And, in spite of his brave bearing, there was something pathetic about it all.



THE SECOND CHAPTER.
The House of Secret Sorrow.

CHRISTMAS EVE dawned bright, cold, and crisp.

Sexton Blake and Tinker were among the first out. They went for a long walk through the grounds of Cloome Chase, and returned for breakfast with robust, healthy appetites.

During their walk they had discussed their fellow guests—whom, through dinner the previous evening, they had met and studied. And this morning walk, too, had revealed to them with insistent force the neglect and decay into which the Cloome estates had fallen. On every hand there was the mark of poverty.

But Lord Cloome was carrying out his great wish—that the last Christmas under the old roof should be worthy of the centuries of tradition of which Cloome Chase was the visible symbol.



"The ghost!" exclaimed the countryman, in a terror-stricken voice. "Did you see it, master? The Flaming Spectre of Cloome! Don't let 'im get at me again, sir!" (Chapter 1.)

The house party itself was a distinguished one. There were many titled people among the guests—rich, influential people. County families—representative of famous old English houses—were included in the list.

And the scene in the great drawing-room, after dinner, had greatly impressed Sexton Blake and Tinker. The evidence of wealth—the ladies, wearing jewels of fabulous worth, and attired in gowns of exquisite quality. Riches in the midst of poverty!

"They don't seem to be a bad crowd, on the whole, sir," remarked Tinker, as they walked back up the drive. "I rather like young Lord Hammerton. I had a few words with him last night, and he seems a decent sort."

"Somewhat light-headed, perhaps, but sound enough in the main," agreed Sexton Blake. "It is quite easy to see, Tinker, that our friend, Lord Reggie, is greatly interested in the Hon. Diana."

Tinker's eyes sparkled. "By jove, gov'nor, she's a ripping girl!" he said enthusiastically. "I don't profess to be much of a judge of girls, but Lord Cloome's daughter is certainly the pick of the bunch! She's a bit partial to Reggie herself, I believe."

"My dear boy, those two are deeply in love with one another," declared Sexton Blake. "Anybody with half an eye can see that. And it is rather sad for the girl's father, too."

"Sad, gov'nor?"

"By what I can understand, Lord Reginald Hammerton is not blessed with a great supply of this world's goods," said Sexton Blake. "He has enough for his own needs, and could provide the Hon. Diana with a sumptuous home."

"Well, what more does Lord Cloome want?"

"Much more—a great deal more," replied Sexton Blake. "Don't you understand, Tinker, that our host loves Cloome Chase almost as much as he loves his own flesh and blood? For years he has dreamed of matching his daughter with a rich man—a man who could restore the Chase to its former glories. And Diana's love for young Hammerton is one of the saddest blows Cloome has ever received."

Tinker looked thoughtful. "I suppose the old chap had other plans in mind?" he asked.

"Exactly—Col. Marchmont, I fancy," said the detective. "You remember the colonel? He was talking with our host last night in the smoking room—"

"Remember him!" echoed Tinker. "Why, Col. Marchmont is about the last man in the world I'd choose as a husband for that sweet girl! Not that I'm running him down—he's a genial old stick, I believe. But it's simply awful to imagine him as Diana's husband."

Blake smiled at the note of indignation in Tinker's voice.

"You must realise, young 'un, that a man in Lord Cloome's position looks at things from a different angle," he said. "Here is Col. Marchmont—a famous soldier with a fine, honourable military record. And, what is more to the point, rich enough to please any poverty-stricken father. If Diana would only marry Col. Marchmont, Lord Cloome's difficulties would vanish into thin air."

"Do you really think he wants something like that, sir?"

"Undoubtedly, Tinker," said Sexton Blake. "Our host has not actually confided in me, but he is an innocent-minded soul, and frequently drops hints without knowing it. And I am well aware that Colonel Marchmont is the

prospective purchaser of Cloome Chase. Don't you understand that if he marries the Hon. Diana, the old mansion will still remain in the family?"

"Wheels within wheels!" remarked Tinker solemnly. "All the same, it's a bit rotten for the Hon. Diana and Lord Reggie. I'm fearfully sorry for Reggie. He's such a nice chap."

They were drawing nearer the terrace, and they observed two figures pacing up and down the frozen gravel, indulging in an early morning cigarette. They were Lord Cloome and Col. Rodney Marchmont. The latter was very much as Tinker had described him. A somewhat portly, middle-aged soldier, who had seen a great deal of service in India. His face was bronzed, his moustache fierce, and his temper rather peppery.

"Quite a Christmas atmosphere, eh?" he exclaimed, in his bluff manner, as Blake and Tinker approached. "Eh, Mr. Blake? Eh? Sky looks like snow, too! Confounded stuff! Hope we'll get through Christmas without any."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I was just thinking that a fall of snow would be somewhat seasonable," smiled Sexton Blake. "Not that our views will make the slightest difference to the weather. Man has his limitations."

"Quite so," said the colonel, "quite so! But this cold weather is infernally sharp on a man's rheumatism! Ha! What have we here? Behold, a wonderful vision of youth and beauty!"

The colonel bowed low as the Hon. Diana Pennant paused in front of the group, accompanied by two other young ladies of the party—with Lord Reggie Hammerton hovering in the background.

The Hon. Diana was an exquisite picture of English girlhood—with dark, curly hair, softly rounded cheeks, and sparkling dark eyes that had already reduced Lord Reggie into a state of delicious happiness, which was tempered by a most persistent doubt.

Lord Reggie himself was a somewhat languid member of the aristocracy—a tall, loose-jointed young individual with a perpetual expression of cheerfulness on his fresh, open face. At the present moment he was attired in a wonderful golfing suit and a huge cap.

"What-ho!" he remarked, from the rear—and addressing everybody in general. "Here we are, you know!"

Cheerio to everybody! Merry Christmas and all that! How goes it, Tinker?" he added, catching Tinker's eye.

"Fine, thanks," said Tinker. "Just been getting an appetite."

"Oh, rather!" said Lord Reggie. "Of course, I don't really need to get mine. I mean, I've got one already—somewhat robust, too, by gad! It's an absolute fact that the odour of frying bacon at this moment would turn me dizzy!"

Lord Reggie was soon able to satisfy his hunger, for the deep-toned breakfast gong sounded almost at once. And during the course of the meal, and then throughout the morning, Sexton Blake and Tinker were enabled to take further stock of their fellow guests.

There was no question that Colonel Marchmont was Lord Cloome's favourite. And this could be readily understood when his hopes were considered. Reggie consistently sought the society of the Hon. Diana—but, through the machinations of various elderly ladies, he was thwarted time after time. Tinker suspected that there was some machinery at work here.

And both Blake and Tinker were struck by the deep undercurrent.

On the surface, this party was cheerful, merry and gay. It was just a light-hearted Christmas house-party. But beneath the surface there were many things to be seen—for those who could see, Cloome Chase was a house of sorrow.

Lord Cloome himself was a sad figure enough—trying to bear up under the strain, and finding it hard. The Hon. Diana—young, sweet and full of the joy of life. Even she was pathetic, for she knew that her friendship for Lord Reggie Hammerton was opposed to her father's wishes.

As for Reggie, he was quite openly mournful—he made no attempt to disguise his sorrow. Tinker came across him, shortly before luncheon, tucked away in a corner of the big lounge hall.

And Lord Reggie was staring straight before him in a gloomy, pathetic way. He looked up listlessly as Tinker sat down beside him.

"Fed?" asked Reggie, sadly. "Pretty well," said Tinker. "Somehow, there's a feeling of gloom about the place. Haven't you noticed it?"

"What? Noticed it!" groaned Reggie. "My dear old soul, Cloome is full of gloom. By gad! Did you hear that?"

Cloome—gloom, what? If I wasn't feeling so dashed foul, I'd jot that down!"

"What's the trouble?" asked Tinker, with a smile.

"Well, look here, you seem to be a decent sort of a chappie," said Lord Reggie. "Suppose we get together for a bit? You know what I mean—hobnob, and all that sort of thing. Exchange sorrows, what?"

"I don't mind," said Tinker.

"Well, of course, you know how it stands between the Hon. Di and me—eh?" asked Reggie, with a touch of embarrassment. "It isn't usual for a chap to spout his finer feelings to a comparative stranger, but there comes a bursting point, you know. I can't very well start mouthing to the thin air, can I? So I'll just reel forth the old story into your ear."

"Just as you like," smiled Tinker.

"Well, the fact is I'm pretty well gone on Diana—up to the bally ears, in fact," observed Lord Reggie, with a touch of eagerness at Tinker's ready attention. "Between you and me, old companion, I'm most frightfully in love. It's a dashed queer thing to tell you, but there it is."

"What about the Hon. Diana?" asked Tinker cautiously. "Does she—er—I mean, how does she feel towards you?"

"Oh, absolutely!" said Reggie. "She's the most amazing girl a chappie could ever meet. I mean to say, can you really imagine such a priceless young thing caring a jot about a silly ass like me?"

"Well, it's rather surprising," admitted Tinker.

"Surprising!" echoed Lord Reggie. "It's a dashed miracle! But these things happen, you know, and we can't do anything. Just puppets, as it were, in the hands of that young blighter, Cupid! I mean—what? Queer how that youngster dashes about on his job! Well, there it is—it's all fixed between Diana and me. But that's not good enough. Lord Cloome hovers in the offing as a kind of snag. A decent old sort, but he's her pater, and he's got the idea that I haven't much money."

"I suppose Lord Cloome is thinking about his liabilities," said Tinker gently. "I suppose we oughtn't to talk about these things—"

"Oh, come! Just between ourselves—what?" interrupted Reggie. "Of course, to be absolutely frank, the real snake in the grass is Colonel Marchmont. Not that I'm at enmity with the old dear. As a matter of fact, he's one of the most decent old birds I've met in a decade, so to speak. A priceless chappie for the chair at a company meeting, but hardly my ideal as a husband for Diana. But just because he's got the doubloons he's first bally favourite. About three to one on, you know! And I'm included in the odds at about two hundred to one against. I mean a cove can't absolutely feel gay, can he?"

"Well, hardly," admitted Tinker.

"Of course, the old boy's motive is a good one—no doubt about that," said Lord Reggie. "His ancestors and his forefathers and all those johnnies have kept the Chase in their clutches for centuries. He doesn't want this old pile to pass into alien hands—if you know what I mean. Colonel Marchmont is the blighter who's going to buy the place. And if he marries Diana, all serene! Still in the old family—what? As far as I can see, the whole position is slightly worse than poisonous!"

And Lord Reggie lay back, lit a cigarette, and proceeded to descend into a fit of despondency from which Tinker failed to arouse him.

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EVENING found the house-party livening up considerably.

It was now Christmas Eve in actual fact, and during dinner the wine flowed freely. Even Lord Reggie was a changed being—not because of the wine, but because he had enjoyed the Hon. Diana's company for two solid hours that afternoon. With rare cunning, he had carried her off immediately after lunch, before anybody else could get near her. And the pair had been for a long ramble over the frozen country roads.

The restrained feeling which is generally apparent in house-parties during the first day was now working off. The guests were beginning to thaw, and friendships were quickly made.

Sexton Blake found that there were many people whom he could mix with very pleasantly.

The famous detective had frankly come to Cloome Chase for several days' holiday, leaving all thoughts of work behind in Baker Street. And if any of the guests happened to bring up the subject of criminology he tactfully veered the conversation round to other subjects. Sexton Blake was no detective now—just a guest at Cloome Chase, enjoying a Christmas holiday.

Things improved astonishingly after dinner; for most of the young people retired to the ball-room, and dancing was soon in full swing. Tinker was quite delighted, and was beginning to feel that Christmas would be all right, after all.

During a waltz, which Tinker sat watching, Lord Reggie came up to him, looking dejected. He sat down and gazed across the floor at the Hon. Diana. Reggie's eyes lighted up. Then he glanced at Diana's partner, and scowled.

"The old boy can't dance for nuts!" he observed sourly. "I mean, it's nothing more nor less than a waddle! Amazing to me how some of these old bouncers have the nerve to take the floor at all!"

It was hardly surprising that Lord Reggie scowled at Diana's partner, for he was Colonel Marchmont, who appeared to be enjoying himself.

However, Reggie's gloom vanished soon afterwards, for he claimed the next dance with the girl of his heart. Sexton Blake had come in, and was standing with Lord Cloome.

"Do you dance, Mr. Blake?" asked his lordship.

"Well, I must confess that these new-fangled steps—"

Blake paused abruptly; for outside, in the great hall, a most unusual commotion had broken out. All eyes turned towards the great curtained doorway, and Colonel Marchmont appeared, red, excited, and breathless.

"The ghost!" he shouted. "The Flaming Spectre!"

"Good gad!" said Lord Reggie blankly.

"Where? Which way?" yelled Tinker, hurrying up.

"I was taking a breath on the terrace," gasped the colonel, mopping his brow, "and I saw it, by Jove! A

Crusader, dressed in coat-of-mail, with greenish-blue fire surrounding him! Most extraordinary thing I ever set eyes on!"

Lord Reggie, who had been dancing with Diana, looked at her and nodded.

"I thought the old boy attacked the port rather lavishly," he remarked. "This is what comes of looking at the wine while it's red!"

"Oh, Reggie!" said the girl reprovingly.

"Of course, I mean—that is—" Reggie paused. "Hallo, hallo! The populace appears to be drifting. Shall we toddle out and look at this Crusader johnnie? Of course, he's not really there—"

They hastened out, following a great many other guests. Wraps were hastily found, and soon the terrace was filled with excited people. Sexton Blake and Tinker, with Lord Cloome, were among the first out.

The night was black, but not absolutely inky. The clouded sky concealed a half-moon, which, according to Lord Reggie, was somewhere in the offing. And it was just possible to see across the neglected lawns and flower gardens, now hard in the grip of King Frost.

But there was not a sign of any ghostly apparition. The grounds appeared to be utterly deserted. The

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picturesque roof of the deserted north wing stood out in sharp outline against the gloomy sky.

"Nothing much to see here," remarked Tinker gruffly.

"Perhaps the colonel was mistaken," said Sexton Blake. "By the way, Tinker, did you happen to see Powell in the hall?"

Tinker stared. "Powell?" he repeated.

"The footman."

"No, I didn't see him," said Tinker. "But what on earth—"

"Nothing, young 'un; I only wanted to know," interrupted Blake, his voice rather grim.

Tinker was frankly puzzled. He couldn't understand why Blake should be interested in the movements of a footman. But Tinker was not allowed to ponder over the matter, for a great shout went up, accompanied by several feminine screams.

"Good heavens!" muttered Lord Cloome, aghast, clutching at Blake's sleeve.

Tinker, standing there, felt that he was rooted to the spot. He was by no means superstitious—on the contrary, he always professed to be utterly contemptuous of ghosts and all such manifestations.

But the apparition which had suddenly appeared caused a curious, prickly sensation to attack Tinker's scalp. And even Sexton Blake was unusually rigid as he stood there, watching.

As though from nowhere at all, the Flaming Spectre of Cloome had materialised in the very centre of the big lawn. At first there was just a faint, blurry outline. It increased until the figure of a Crusader appeared—and it was indeed clothed in fire.

Vivid sparks and flames seemed to shoot out from every side of the figure. And yet, at the same time, there was nothing solid in the appearance of the thing. It was ghastly—unreal—in that cloak of fire.

The first thought that entered Blake's head was—luminous paint. But he knew that this could not be. These sparks were shooting out in a dazzling myriad spurts, and they were well over six inches in length. It reminded him somewhat of the Aurora Borealis.

"If this is trickery," murmured Blake, "it is the most remarkable piece of work I have ever seen!"

So far as he could make out, there was absolutely no solidity in the ghost. And the flames, or sparks, were so real that it seemed utterly out of the question to assume that a living man could be in the midst of them.

The thing was horrifying.

For the Crusader was not good to look upon. The face could be seen, set in a fiendish, deathlike grin. And Blake was just beginning to assume that the whole apparition was a kind of set piece—a mechanical contrivance, worked by some electrical means.

But again he was wrong.

For the Spectre slowly moved, walking across the lawn with deliberate, stately footsteps. Then he came to a halt, and pointed an accusing finger at the startled crowd of guests on the terrace.

"This—this is absolutely uncanny!" muttered Lord Cloome, his voice husky and strained. "Blake, I—"

He paused, for Sexton Blake was moving away even at that moment. Cautiously the detective edged towards the lawn, and Tinker saw exactly what his master was doing. He followed.

And then, with one accord, the pair raced at full-speed towards the Spectre. Blake was determined, if possible, to lay this ghost at once. In spite of the apparent impossibility of the thing, Blake was still convinced that trickery was at the root of the whole affair.

The Spectre started back, and the tense silence was broken by a curious, unreal laugh. It sounded hollow and ghastly. Two of the ladies fainted on the spot. And the Spectre fled across the lawn, turning back at intervals, beckoning in a mocking gesture for Blake and Tinker to follow.

Sexton Blake was a fleet runner. Indeed, there were few men who could hope to outdistance him. He soon left Tinker behind; but, although his speed was great, the apparition kept in front of him with apparent ease—silent, unrent, intangible. Blake felt himself helpless.

The Spectre seemed to glide down a pathway of the rose-garden. At the end there was a high wall—a brick barrier, which rose sheer for ten or twelve feet. And the ghost was racing straight for it.

"Now," muttered Blake, "if this thing is human, I've got him!"

The next moment Blake paused in his tracks, dumbfounded.

For the thing, rising in one soaring leap, reached the top of the wall in a gliding kind of motion. The next second the Flaming Spectre was running along the top of the wall as fast as a hare.

From the terrace, the effect was startling.

Sexton Blake stood back, staring, more surprised than he was willing to admit. And during the next few moments he

was treated to an exhibition that fairly took his breath away.

The ghost behaved in an extraordinary way.

A fleeing streak of light, but still visible in figure, it reached the end of the wall, leapt clean to the roof of a low annexe, and appeared to glide smoothly up towards the apex.

From there it reached the roof of the north wing. Whirling round the chimney-stacks, dancing madly on a mere ridge with a sheer drop on either side, the ghost was like some prancing demon.

And then, finally, uttering a wild, sobbing laugh, the Thing leapt sheer into space, rising upwards with the force of its take-off.

And then abruptly—dramatically—in mid-air it vanished.

In one second it was there, and in the next it was gone! There was no trickery or foolery about this—no dodging behind convenient cover. The Spectre absolutely dematerialised into nothingness in the very midst of its unearthly leap. In mid-air it ceased to be.

"I—I don't like it!" muttered Tinker, with a slight shiver.

He had raced up to Sexton Blake, and now stood beside him. And he found that Blake was clutching his shoulder.

"Very singular—indeed, quite unique," said Blake quietly.

"You—you don't think it was a man, do you, sir?" asked Tinker. "It couldn't have been, guv'nor! It's impossible!"

Sexton Blake took a long breath.

"Tinker, I am glad we came to Cloome Chase," he said, with a note of quiet relish in his voice. "We came for a holiday, but we have found work! There is more in this than meets the eye."

"But it couldn't be alive, sir!" persisted Tinker huskily. "There's not a man living who could have done it—"

"Except one, young 'un—except one!" said Blake dreamily.

"One?" repeated Tinker, starting.

Blake turned and strode back to the terrace. And he found the guests in a state of wild commotion. Those ladies who had not fainted at first were now either terror-stricken, or pale with agitation. Some of the guests were talking about departing forthwith. And Lord Cloome was at his wits' end to pacify everybody.

"By gad, sir, the most extraordinary thing I ever saw in my life!" declared Colonel Marchmont later, in the library. "I've witnessed some queer things in India. I've seen some things that no human being could explain. But this is more remarkable than anything else. Staggering, in fact! Why, the infernal ghost positively made me shiver!"

"What do you make of it, Mr. Blake?" asked the host.

"At the present moment I have no explanation to offer," said Sexton Blake. "I will agree that the manifestation was very remarkable. And, with your permission, Lord Cloome, I shall make a few investigations."

"By all means—by all means!" said his lordship. "Indeed, I shall be only too glad if you could do something to explain the mystery. But ghost-hunting is hardly in your line, Mr. Blake."

Sexton Blake smiled.

"It is not my intention to go ghost-hunting," he replied quietly.

It was not until half an hour later that Tinker had the opportunity of speaking privately with his master. Tinker had been looking for Blake, and came upon him on the terrace.

"Where have you been, sir?" asked Tinker.

"I fancied a little stroll," said Sexton Blake. "I have, in fact, been taking a

look at the spot where our friend, the Spectre, took his leap into mid-air."

"Well, sir?" asked Tinker eagerly.

"I have come to the positive conclusion that we are dealing with a human being, and not with an apparition," replied Sexton Blake evenly. "Surprising, Tinker, but nevertheless a fact."

"Oh, but hang it all, sir, it's not possible!" protested Tinker. "As I said before, there's no man living who could do such stunts—"

He broke off abruptly, and stared at Blake with blank surprise, sensing the look in the detective's eyes.

"You—you don't mean Waldo, sir?" he asked in a whisper.

"I mean Waldo!" said Sexton Blake.



TINKER whistled.

"Rupert Waldo, the Wonder-Man!" he said softly. "He could do those things, I know—because I've seen him working stunts like that before. But why should Waldo be here, sir? It's—it's staggering! Waldo goes for something big; and there's nothing big in this place."

"Waldo also has a great love for the spectacular," said Sexton Blake. "That keen desire for display, in fact, is the one weak spot in his armour. He is perhaps the cleverest criminal I ever tackled—and certainly the most remarkable. I have often wondered when I should come across him again, but I little thought our visit to Cloome Chase would lead to such a meeting."

"But are you sure, sir?"

"I am only sure because Waldo is the one man I know who could take such desperate chances with impunity," replied Blake. "There is just one chance in a hundred that I am wrong. But, knowing Waldo's methods as I do, I rather fancy my shot is a true one."

Blake refused to discuss the subject any further just then, but hurried indoors to assist in the calming down of the ladies. The influence of the lights, and the warm, glowing fires, had due effect. And long before the hour for retirement arrived the majority of the guests were fully recovered from the shock. But the Spectre had left a legacy of doubt and fear behind him. Many members of the house-party would not sleep peacefully that night.

Lord Cloome was intensely worried, as he told the colonel.

"It's the most unfortunate thing that could have happened!" he declared. "I wanted this house-party to be a complete success. And now this confounded ghost will probably scare some of my guests away."

Colonel Marchmont laughed.

"Stuff and nonsense, sir!" he declared.

"Personally, I'm pleased."

"Pleased?"

"Pleased!" repeated the colonel firmly. "Why, by gad, sir, it's a distinct advantage to have an old family ghost. When I negotiated with you for the purchase of this estate I had no idea that a spectre was to be included. Upon my soul, you ought to increase the purchase price!"

Lord Cloome was greatly relieved by

the colonel's attitude. For at first he had half feared that the prospective purchaser would have doubts about the property.

But the colonel, to his lordship's intense delight, looked upon the ghost as an acquisition.

"I am glad that we are alone for a few minutes, colonel," said Lord Cloome rather awkwardly. "I was rather anxious to have a few words with you regarding my daughter. We need not discuss the matter fully, for we already understand one another. You will realise the benefit to me if Diana can be persuaded to favour your suit."

The colonel looked grave.

"Confound it, Cloome, I don't know what to do!" he growled. "'Pon my soul, I don't know what to do. I like the girl—she's perfectly adorable. Quite charming, in fact. But—well, as far as I can see, she's head over heels in love with that young Lord Hammerton."

Lord Cloome frowned.

"Yes, I have seen the signs myself," he said, with a sigh. "I am not one of those men who will sacrifice their own child for the sake of money. I had only hoped that we might be in time. If you had come earlier, colonel—"

"Well, we'll see—we'll see!" said the soldier, with a laugh. "I understand your point, Cloome—and appreciate it. I want this old place. I fell in love with it the first time you brought me down. And if you could keep it in the family, it would be all the better—eh? Exactly—exactly! But when old fogeys like ourselves make plans the young people don't always fall in with them. Well, well! We can't expect too much!"

"I shall talk with Diana seriously," said the peer. "This is a matter that affects her almost as much as it affects myself. I am referring, now, to the retention of Cloome Chase in the family. It would be an absolute tragedy if we lost the dear old place."

He coughed, and hurried on.

"Of course, please don't be offended by my words, colonel," he said. "I must have money—that is imperative. And since I have nothing else to sell but Cloome Chase, there is no alternative. And I would certainly rather sell the estates to you than to anybody else."

"Good!" said the colonel. "But this matter of your daughter makes everything infernally awkward. Somehow, I've got a feeling that I'm an utter cad to even think of marrying her. Man alive, it's outrageous!"

"Hush, colonel!"

"Outrageous!" repeated Colonel Marchmont, thumping his chair. "And I will tell you frankly, Cloome, that if the girl is really in love with Hammerton, I will forget the whole affair. You understand? I am thankful to say that my life has been honourable, and I won't mar it now by an act that can only be described as dastardly."

"Really, colonel, you are distressing me," muttered Lord Cloome.

"It was not my intention to do that," growled the colonel. "I was under the impression that your daughter was free—that I had a clear field to woo her as any other man would. But I find things very different—"

"I beg of you colonel, to calm yourself!" pleaded the peer. "I, too, believed that Diana was utterly unattached. This love affair with young Hammerton has taken me completely by surprise. I had no knowledge of it. I will speak to Diana seriously. It was only a week ago that I learned of her affection for that young milkop! I thought she was more level-headed—more sensible!"

The colonel laughed.

"Come—come! You're too harsh!" he said. "By what I've seen of Hamerton, he's as level-headed as most fellows of his age. Somewhat dandified in his speech, perhaps, but that is no stigma. As I have already told you, if those two are really fond of each other I shall stand aside—quite aside."

And the colonel, with another grunt, bustled out of the library, the conversation having become distasteful to him. It so happened that he passed Lord Reggie and Diana a few minutes later, and he paused to say a few cheerful words, and then hastened to make himself scarce.

"Why, dash it, the old boy's getting quite decent!" said Reggie. "With luck, Di, we may be able to wangle things—what?"

"I'm afraid of father," said Diana, pressing Reggie's hand. "Oh, Reg, I don't know how it will all end!"

Reggie bade her good-night a few minutes later, feeling more bucked than he could explain. If he had only been able to overhear the conversation which had recently passed between Lord Cloome and Colonel Marchmont, he would have been more reassured still.

By midnight the whole household had retired, and Cloome Chase was dark and utterly still, except for a few lights in the upper windows. In one bed-room Sexton Blake and Tinker were talking—apparently having no inclination to disrobe.

"But what could Waldo's object be, sir?" Tinker persisted. "I've always looked upon him as a man who plumps for something big—something even bigger than most crooks. It isn't like Waldo to waste his time in a poverty-stricken spot like Cloome Chase."

"Waldo is not interested in Cloome Chase, Tinker," said Sexton Blake. "You are apparently overlooking the very important fact that a great many of our fellow-guests are wearing jewels of priceless value."

"By jingo, sir, that's certainly an idea," said Tinker. "Only this evening I was trying to reckon up how much money one of the ladies had in her hair. Why, now you come to mention it, there must be diamonds and rubies and pearls here worth over a hundred thousand!"

"That is probably a conservative estimate, Tinker!" said Sexton Blake.

"The Castleton rubies are worth thirty-five thousand alone—as I know for a fact. A rich prize for any crook. Even Waldo himself would not sneeze at such a capture. And we must be wary, or he will outwit us."

"But why all this trickery about the spook, sir?"

"Obviously, a deliberately planned scheme to get our guests into a state of uproar and confusion," said Blake. "Waldo was astute enough not to attempt his coup at once. A second appearance of the Spectre will bring even worse confusion—and there is no better time for a crook of his type to perform his work. I can well imagine that Waldo had no knowledge that you or I would be among the guests."

"That must have come as a bit of a shock to him, sir," said Tinker. "But what I want to know is—where's Waldo now? Is he here—is he one of the guests in disguise? Is he masquerading as a servant?"

"That is quite possible," said Blake. "In a casual chat with our host to-day, I learned that most of the servants are temporary hands. They were engaged through the usual channels—but Waldo is quite clever enough to obtain faked references."



With one effort of his tremendous strength, Waldo hurled Blake and Tinker aside as though they were children. And then, just as they were about to renew the attack, a staggering thing happened. Waldo commenced to literally spurt fire from every inch of his person. With a laugh he reached out a hand and touched Tinker. In a flash Tinker was enveloped in flame too.

(Chapter 4.)

"I wish we could do something on our own, sir," said Tinker, eagerly. "There'll be an awful commotion if Waldo starts any of his tricks—"

"We are going out on a little expedition at once, my lad," interrupted Blake. "I have purposely waited until the house is quiet. Our first move will be to thoroughly examine the spot where Waldo performed his vanishing trick."

Tinker was intensely delighted—he had hoped for something of this kind, but had hardly believed that it would actually happen. And about half-an-hour later the pair crept silently out of their room, and noiselessly passed downstairs.

Blake had just got his foot in the hall, when he came to an abrupt stop. Dindy, vaguely, a black shadow was moving on the other side of the big lounge.

"Who is that?" asked Blake, in a low, curt voice.

"Only—only me, sir!" came a half-scared reply.

"Powell!" said Blake, grimly. "Is it usual, Powell, for you to be prowling about in the darkness at this hour of the night?"

The footman came nearer.

"I don't know what you mean, sir—prowling," he replied sullenly. "I had just been down to the village to see a friend, and was coming in. I hope I haven't disturbed you, sir."

"No, that's all right—you can go."

The footman went, and soon afterwards Sexton Blake and Tinker were outside. Blake was very thoughtful, and Tinker thought it better not to question him. They made their way round to the north wing, and stood looking up at

the high roof where the apparition had jumped off.

"It's all very well to say he was human, sir," said Tinker. "But even Waldo couldn't drop this distance without smashing himself up—Why, hallo! What's this? Ah! Now I'm beginning to get the hang of it!"

Tinker had just seen that a thatched outbuilding stood in fairly close proximity of the north wing. It was a picturesque structure, and the roof was so placed that any man leaping from the north wing would have a landing spot on the thatch—a risky jump, but possible to a daring, agile man.

"Have you looked at that thatched roof, sir?" asked Tinker.

"I have."

"Did you find any marks?"

"Marks that no ghosts would make," replied Blake, grimly. "But I am very much afraid, Tinker, that our investigations are going to be difficult. The hard nature of the ground is against us. In such a frost as this, there will be no sign of footprints—and there is no snow left here."

By the aid of an electric torch, Sexton Blake examined every foot of the ground. And in the end he was forced to admit that the affair was more or less of a wild goose chase. And so he decided to tackle the problem from a different angle. Returning indoors, they succeeded in making their way unheard to one of the upper corridors.

"What's the game, sir?" asked Tinker, unable to contain his curiosity.

"We are off for the north wing," replied Blake, softly.

The upper corridor was rather ghostly in the pale moonlight that streamed in

through the ancient windows. The clouds had dispersed now, and the moon had shyly come out of its retirement.

And Blake, going along the corridor, paused. He seemed to be greatly interested in a certain part of the wall. Tinker paused, looking on, but unable to understand what his master was doing.

"Look, Tinker—what do you make of this?" murmured Blake.

As he spoke, he switched on his electric torch, and directed the beam against one of the old oak panels of the wall. A tiny shred of something was sticking out. It only protruded a mere inch, but Blake had caught sight of it in the moonlight.

Tinker examined the trifle with interest.

"Why, it's nothing, sir—looks like a piece of straw," he said. "It seems to be caught in this panel—jammed be-

was as clean as any of the swept corridors.

"The cunning rascal!" he murmured. "He prepared himself even for this! Not a trace of a footprint—no clue of any kind!"

The passage itself was only five feet in height, and so narrow that it was more comfortable to progress sideways. But, going cautiously, the pair progressed until they came to some steep stairs, leading downwards.

Sexton Blake led the way, intent upon his task. But even the great detective was somewhat taken by surprise when he turned a corner to find himself standing within a low secret chamber.

But this was not the thing that occasioned Blake's surprise. The little chamber was roughly furnished, and there, sitting in a small chair, was Rupert Waldo himself—lying back, in the act of lighting a cigarette.

"Splendid, Blake!" he said softly. "I've been expecting you for the last hour. Indeed, I was beginning to fear that you would disappoint me. I suppose you found the little bit of straw I placed for you? The clue, you know."

Sexton Blake paused, and secretly admired the man's nerve. And yet it was so absolutely characteristic of this extraordinary man. Feeling certain that Blake would search for him, he had deliberately seated himself here, and in

ings, Blake?" interrupted the Wonder-Man. "Remember that it is Christmas-time, and that you are here on a holiday. Man alive, can't you leave work alone for once in a while? This is a period of good will and good cheer—and I only request you to leave me alone. If you don't interfere with me, I promise that I shall do no harm."

"I shall do my very best to thwart any criminal scheme that you have on hand," replied Sexton Blake curtly. "Quick, Tinker! His legs—his legs!"

Quick as a flash Blake hurled himself at Waldo, and Tinker was only a shade behind. Waldo was taken unawares, and he nearly reeled over backwards. But he uttered a short, amused laugh.

"Sorry, but you asked for it!" he said coolly.

With one effort of his tremendous strength he hurled Blake and Tinker aside as though they were children. And then, just as they were about to renew the attack, a staggering thing happened.

Waldo commenced to literally spurt fire from every inch of his person! Hissing, sizzling blue sparks jumped out of him, as though he had suddenly become a great electric dynamo. Sexton Blake, accustomed as he was to extraordinary sights, stood there, utterly dumbfounded.

He could feel the electricity in the air—his skin tingled, and he had a sensation of numbness. Tinker uttered a startled cry, and stared at Waldo in blank amazement. The Wonder-Man stood there, electricity spurring out of him in myriads of sparks.

With a laugh, Waldo reached out a hand and touched Tinker. In a flash Tinker was enveloped in a blue flame—a flame which shivered and literally outlined him in fire. He seemed to freeze stiff, and, a cry on his lips, he dropped to the floor like a log.

Blake instinctively knew Waldo's plan, and he leapt aside. But he was a shade too late. With a leap Waldo was upon him. One touch was enough. Again that sheet of flame—and Sexton Blake dropped insensible!



"UNACCOUNTABLE—absolutely unaccountable!" declared Lord Cloome, his voice filled with worry and anxiety. "Why should Mr. Blake and Tinker go off in this way—steal from my house in the dead of night, and not return?"

"I mean to say, it's somewhat discourteous," remarked Reggie. "I didn't think they were chappies of that kind, hanged if I did! It's so deuced queer! I went toddling into their room, as per

(Continued on page 19.)

WELCOME

tween the woodwork, in a kind of crack."

"Exactly," said Sexton Blake, in a curious voice.

He remembered the thatched roof—he remembered that a man falling upon that roof would be liable to pick up loose pieces of straw, which would naturally cling to the garments. And that same man, squeezing through a narrow panel, was quite liable to leave one of those straw remnants behind.

Tinker saw this in a flash, and gasped. "Great Scott!" he breathed. "Do you think there are any secret passages in this old place, sir?"

"My dear Tinker, there's no question about that whatever," replied Blake. "Lord Cloome has frequently told me that the ancient north wing is honey-combed with secret passages. And if the north wing, why not this one?"

Tinker fairly trembled with new interest. It was a tiny clue—a totally unexpected piece of luck. But now and again a detective will come across such a bit of good fortune. And the clue itself was significant. How did that morsel of straw become jammed in the crack? That was the interesting problem.

And if Waldo was the ghost, and assuming that Waldo was masquerading as a servant, he would naturally try to get back into this part of the house as unobtrusively as possible. And what could be more convenient than this passage—always supposing that a passage existed?

While Tinker held the light, Blake worked carefully and systematically upon the panel. At the end of five minutes he was convinced that a hollow space existed behind. And at the end of fifteen minutes, after untiring pressing and pushing, the panel suddenly gave a creak. Two minutes later it dropped back, revealing a dark, musty cavity.

"Got it!" breathed Tinker, tensely. "Shall we go in, guv'nor?"

Blake made no reply, but stepped through into the low, narrow space beyond. A flash of his torch revealed the fact that a passage lay in front of him. But Blake was disappointed in one thing. There was no dust. The passage

THE CONFEDERATION

utter darkness he had waited for the detective to come!

"Then you knew that I had jumped to your game, Waldo?" asked Blake.

"The very instant I found that you were among the guests, I instinctively felt that my scheme was greatly jeopardised," said Waldo, rising to his feet, and stretching himself. "There's no need for you to keep that torch flashed on, Blake. We'll have a different light."

He switched on a powerful electric lamp which stood on the table.

"Ah, this is even better than I thought!" he went on. "So Tinker's here, too, eh? How are you, Tinker? Always pleased to meet old friends! No, Blake, I shouldn't come too close—it may not be healthy!"

Blake was thrilled at the sight of his old enemy—this man whom he had battled against so many times in the past. Waldo was a mysterious individual. He would drop out of existence, apparently, for months on end, and then suddenly would bob up again, bent upon some audacious scheme. And invariably he gave himself away to Blake by the very nature of his methods.

"What is your game, Waldo?" asked Blake quietly.

"If you know anything of my character, Blake, you will realise that the game is well worth the trouble I am taking," replied Waldo. "I regret that I can give you no further details. By the way, what do you think of my little spectral effort? Rather neat, eh?"

"Very neat indeed!" agreed Sexton Blake. "But to return to the former matter, I want to warn you that—"

"Tut, tut! Why trouble about warn-



No. 86. Presented with the UNION JACK for the week ending December 22nd, 1923.

CRIMES of CHRISTMASTIDE

No. 2

The Chloroformed Handkerchief

THAT brooches, rings, and other costly items of jewellery to the total value of £3,600 could vanish utterly and leave no clue as to their whereabouts behind them smacks of the incredible. Yet that is what happened at Christmas-time in the year 1871.

The event was shrouded with such mystery that from John o' Groats to Land's End the country was soon agog with excited interest, and many were the wagers laid as to whether or not the police would ever lay hands on either the thieves or the loot which they had so craftily spirited away.

For a time it seemed they never would, in spite of the fact that the man from whom the jewellery had been "lifted" was able to give the police quite a lot of information concerning his assailants and the highly dramatic manner in which they had got the better of him and brought off their daring coup.

In due course the work of the police was rewarded, so far as the two criminals were personally concerned, and then they found themselves up against a dead wall, as it were. It was as though some evil spirit, watching over the thieves, determined that thus far should the police go, but no farther.

So that to-day—fifty-two Christmases after the event—it remains as great and profound a mystery as ever as to what eventually became of all that loot so cleverly secured by the scheming couple whose very first venture it was into the realm of crime.

From the moment the perfectly dressed and faultlessly groomed young man-about-town sauntered into the shop of the Bond Street jewellers, and asked to be shown a selection of precious stones, to the moment he and his wife found themselves in the arms of the police, every movement of the couple was faultlessly planned. And they certainly had a good run for their money before the police episode occurred.

The Packed Bag.

The faultlessly groomed young man spent a considerable time in the jewellers' shop, and though most of the stock was exhibited bit by bit for his benefit, there seemed nothing there to tempt him. At any rate, he could not make up his mind what to

select and take home to his wife. That matter of a suitable Christmas present weighed so heavily on him that finally he decided not to make the selection himself, but to leave the choice to his wife.

The pretentious address he gave—Upper Berkeley Street, Portman Square—was in itself a guarantee of genuineness, and practically assured his request being granted almost before it was spoken. The request was that a number of the most costly articles in the shop should be sent to his

of a very worth-while commission floating before his eyes, the assistant got together a collection out of which the wife would surely be able to select her present. The entire lot was packed into several small cases, which were placed in a large handbag, and the latter was handed over to one of the firm's most trusted representatives.

The chill December afternoon was wearing towards teatime, but as yet there still remained an hour or so of daylight to look forward to, when there drew up at the kerb outside the premises of the Bond Street jewellers a cab—not a smart and dashing taxi, but the lumbering, mournful-looking, sleepy-horsed kind of vehicle which represented the easiest mode of travel in the London of those days.

Into the Web.

Almost at once a man left the jewellers' shop, stepped smartly across the pavement, entered the waiting vehicle, and settled himself comfortably down in the corner, tucking the large handbag that he had brought with him between his feet.

A loiterer on the kerb might have caught the whispered words that passed between cabby and his passenger as the latter climbed aboard, though all they would have conveyed to him would have been the fact that the man with the handbag was bound for one of the most fashionable residential districts of the West End.

As it happened, there were no loiterers there that afternoon. The spirit of Christmas was in the hearts of all that thronged the streets; all who had money to spend were intent on spending it. There were Christmas presents to be bought, and when such business is afoot few trouble to interest themselves in such a prosaic thing as a cab.

Not a glance was spared it as it rumbled off on its bone-shaking voyage to Upper Berkeley Street, Portman Square. What stares and excitement it would have provoked had the passers-by known that at that journey's end was to be enacted a thrilling drama that would come within an



NOISELESSLY the woman sprang at the defenceless back, flung a surprisingly muscular arm around the startled man's neck, and pressed something warm and damp firmly over his nostrils and mouth.

house, in order that his wife might see them and pick on something that she really liked.

Receiving the assurance of the jewellers' assistant that several cases of rings, and so on, would be at the address given early that same afternoon, the well-groomed young man strolled out of the shop.

And that was the last the assistant saw of him until his customer stood in the dock at the Old Bailey.

However, much water was to flow under London Bridge before the trusting assistant was to be treated to that sight. With visions

ace of being a tragedy, and that was destined to end as a deep, insoluble mystery!

Presently the cab pulled up, the man with the brown leather handbag jumped out, paid off the driver, ran up the steps of the house the number of which had been given him by his employers, the Bond Street jewellers, and rang the bell.

Evidently that summons to the door had been eagerly awaited, for scarcely had the jangle of the bell ceased to echo in the hall than the door was opened—not by a servant, as one would expect in a house of that size and neighbourhood, but by a smartly dressed individual who promptly made excuses for having performed that menial task himself.

Cries of Delight.

A puzzled look crossed the face of the man with the handbag. From the description that had been given him of the gentleman who had called at the Bond Street shop that morning, the jewellers' representative had expected to be confronted at the door by a lordly and supercilious butler, or at least a smart and dashing parlourmaid. Whereas here he was being admitted by the master of the house himself as though he were an honoured guest.

But no suspicion entered his mind. As the door closed behind him every evidence of wealth and affluence became apparent. The place was furnished in almost regal fashion. But once again, as he followed his "host" up the broad, richly carpeted staircase and thence to the drawing-room, there came that puzzling query: Why are there no servants about?

There was no time, however, to ponder on that question, for as he entered the sumptuously appointed drawing-room there arose up to greet him a gracious lady, who advanced in queenly fashion, and, with almost childish eagerness, requested at once to be allowed to feast her eyes on the contents of that fascinating bag.

Here was surprise number two. For years it had been that representative's job to wait on ladies of wealth and position with samples of the firm's precious goods, and it had become a matter of custom to him to be received as a mere nobody—an unnamed carrier of diamonds, of golden bangles, and other high-priced trifles prized far above the feelings of an ordinary human being such as himself.

Here was no aloofness, no condescension—just charming manners. And the cries of delight that fell from Mrs. Tyrrell's lips, as one by one the small, silk-lined cases were lifted out of the bag and their contents displayed to view, forced an involuntary response from the man who, through long association with such baubles, ordinarily regarded them, no matter how steep the price, with a notable lack of enthusiasm.

Hunting big Game in the Streets.

THERE was a panic in the streets of New York a short time ago. It happened in the vicinity of the public library.

Women were screaming and men shouting, the traffic was in a state of confusion, and pedestrians were scattering in all directions.

There was a fox at large in the streets. It darted here and there among the traffic, causing consternation that almost amounted to chaos. When at last the animal was captured, and the reason for its public debut was explained, the populace were more indignant than amused.

The sequel to this disturbing affair was heard in a court of special sessions, when Aaron Kofsky, a New York furrier, was charged with cruelty to animals.

His idea was to do something startling as an advertising stunt, he explained to the magistrate at the trial, and he thought he had managed it fairly well. He certainly had made a sensation, but the judge was not impressed with the cause that the furrier desired to serve, and although Kofsky pleaded that he was a lover of animals, he was found guilty of the above offence.

His sentence was two days' imprisonment and a fine of one hundred dollars. The furrier expressed his regrets to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, who, of course, were represented at the trial, and offered them a donation of five hundred dollars as an alternative to serving his sentence, but this offer was refused.

"It pays to advertise," is a well-known slogan, but one man at least has found that it does not pay to start a fox-hunt in the streets of a big city.

Treachery!

But now he waxed eloquent on the undoubted charms of the precious stones which caught the sparkling fire-rays and flung them back intensified a thousandfold, on the marvellous golden filigree-work of brooches whose cost ran well into three figures, and—

Then the calm voice of Mr. Tyrrell, the lady's husband, broke in. A lady's name was mentioned, and, from the brief conversation which followed, the jewellers' representative gathered it was Mrs. Tyrrell's sister who was the topic of the talk.

"Yes, I think Lucy will be able to help me choose," said Mrs. Tyrrell. "I will go and fetch her!"

With that, she left the room.

Crossing over to the fireplace, her husband stood for a moment or two unconcernedly warming his coat-tails, his eyes fixed on the window that looked out on the fashionable thoroughfare.

Slowly his gaze travelled back to the man who sat silent and obviously perplexed by the table littered with thousands of pounds' worth of jewellery, and their eyes met. Did the faultlessly groomed young man read in the jeweller's gaze the query that for the third time that afternoon had brought a puzzled look there?

That the lady of the house should run on her own errands in such a calm fashion, with not the slightest protest, seemed to point to the supposition that she was unaccustomed to be waited on. What was the mystery of this big, magnificently appointed house which yet was servantries?

The jewellers' man was now frankly suspicious, and was within an ace of gathering up his treasures and stuffing them back into the brown handbag when Mrs. Tyrrell returned. Lucy, her sister, would be there directly, she announced, and then they would be able to choose—

The few words had been spoken so rapidly that the firm's representative had not time to turn and face the speaker in the doorway behind him, and so was at a disadvantage when the attack was delivered. Noiselessly the "gracious lady" sprang at the defenceless back, flung a white and dainty, but surprisingly muscular, arm around the startled man's neck, and pressed something warm and damp firmly over his nostrils and mouth.

At the same moment the woman's husband dashed forward, seized both arms of the man from Bond Street, and crushed the wrists together whilst the fumes from the chloroformed cambric handkerchief did their work.

Thick fog filled Upper Berkeley Street with choking, vision-obscuring vapour which the few street-lamps were powerless to pierce with their feeble rays.

Folk hurrying homewards told each other this was a night when all poor, homeless people needed a little practical sympathy if ever they did, and many a usually tight purse-string was loosened that Christmas-week night—even in that lordly thoroughfare—as wrecks and travesties of human beings crept out of the deeper patches of fog and begged for alms.

Beggars and almsgivers alike forgot their charity and their want as a crashing of glass and the shouting of a man hoarse with alarm electrified the aristocrats and the down-and-outers of Upper Berkeley Street.

Those who rushed to the scene of the glass-smashing saw two arms wildly waving through a shattered window, and heard a voice beseeching someone to smash in the front door. The invitation had not to be repeated. In five minutes the man at the broken window had been deposited in a cab, and was being rattled over the stones at as brisk a pace as the old Jehu could whip out of his bony and jaded steed.

Eventually it pulled up outside the Bond Street Jewellers' shop, and the firm's representative alighted. But this time there was no brown bag for him to carry. His story was soon told. The chloroformed handkerchief had put him to sleep very thoroughly, and when, some considerable time afterwards, he came to his senses again, it was to find himself bound hand and foot and the jewels and his assailants gone. He had managed to loosen his hand-ties and crawl to the window and attract attention. And now here he was back at the shop, with nothing whatever to show that he had left there that afternoon with £3,600 worth of jewels.

Eventually the police traced Mrs. Tyrrell, and placed her, with her new-born baby in her arms, in the Old Bailey dock, where she was charged in her real name, Torpey. The jury decided she had acted under the compulsion of her husband, and she was acquitted.

The police had now a little more material to work on, for it had come out that the couple had previously lived in Leamington, and had simply rented the servantries house in Upper Berkeley Street, with no intention whatever of living there a moment after they brought off their great coup, which was their one and only reason for taking the house.

The husband was apprehended some time after, and received a well-merited sentence—eight years' penal servitude.

The jewellery, however, was never seen again. Without a sign left behind, the entire haul was disposed of—where, how, or to whom, neither husband nor wife would say. It is a mystery whose memory fades with the passing of each successive Christmastide.

Items From All Quarters.

That Useful Little Pin.

Many and varied are the uses to which the common or garden pin has, at one time and another, been put, but possibly the most startling of all is the purpose for which Mrs. Catherine Hurd found these little objects so effective.

Mrs. Hurd had been taken to a hospital in Mayview, Pennsylvania, in a dying condition, and there was so much mystery about her critical condition that the police were consulted in the matter. No cause could be found, either by the investigations of the police or the doctors' examinations, for the woman's illness.

After some days of acute pain and occasional periods of questioning by the hospital nurses and doctors, Mrs. Hurd at last confessed that she herself knew the complaint from which she was suffering.

She had been eating pins!

How many pins go to an ounce is not quite certain, but the lady confessed to eating no less than nine ounces of them. To prevent them from sticking in her throat as she swallowed them, they had been wrapped, a few at a time, in small pieces of paper.

Her object, she admitted, was to commit suicide as she was old and penniless, and did not want to live on charity.

The hospital surgeon did everything possible to save the woman's life, of course. This necessitated an operation, which, when performed, disclosed the fact that there were some hundreds of pins in the patient's stomach. To have removed them all it would have been necessary to cut the body almost to pieces.

In spite of all the doctor's efforts, however, the woman could not be saved.

A Hundred in One Cell!

The little suburb of Simmering, near Vienna, was the scene of a terrific storm just recently, when the wind and rain together did a great deal of damage.

One of the curious consequences of the heavy deluge was that a large number of sparrows in the trees near the police-station were washed out of their nests, and so drenched with rain that they could not use their wings or make any attempt to get away from the danger-zone—the human habitations.

There they lay on the cold, wet ground till a crowd of children, attracted by the unusual sight, gathered round. Some of these children were in the act of taking possession of the unresisting birds when a kindly police-officer intervened.

The consequence was that an old detention-cell in the police-station harboured more prisoners that night than it was ever built to accommodate.

With a few willing helpers, the police-officer soon managed to get the sparrows, some hundred or more, into the cell, where they stayed till the next morning, by which time they had sufficiently recovered to fly away.

CHRISTMAS BLACKMAIL!

By T. C. BRIDGES.

Christmas "presents" to business men often mean little less than out-and-out blackmail. Business bribes, though actually illegal, are still a flourishing institution—and they flourish most at this time of the year.

IN the year 1906, there first came into force the law known as the Act for the Prevention of Corruption. This Act was intended to put a stop to the practice of the giving and receiving of bribes in business, bribes which were, as a rule, distributed in the shape of Christmas-boxes, and were payments either in cash or kind made by the wholesale firm to the buyers for the retail firms.

At that date the practice had reached most dangerous proportions, so much so that many retail firms had become practically tied houses. In other words, their buyers never attempted to purchase in open market, but only from the particular wholesale firm that paid them best.

Then, again, the retail shops gave Christmas-boxes on a considerable scale to the servants of those families that dealt with them. The servants—cooks and butlers especially, were, in fact, paid a commission on all that their employers bought.

The Act was a very sweeping one, and at first sight appeared to make the giving of any form of Christmas-box illegal, but like all similar laws, it has been widely and cleverly evaded.

After the passing of this law there was a very large number of prosecutions under it, and heavy fines were inflicted. For instance, the managing director of a printing company was fined fifty pounds for giving a bribe to obtain orders; a grocer was fined ten pounds for sending a mess-serveant a Christmas present, with the intention of obtaining orders, while a butcher was mulcted five pounds for sending a joint of meat to a cook at the house of one of his customers.

The Act to which I have referred drove all this bribery business underground, but unfortunately has failed to scotch it. Buyers still receive commissions, though not to so large an extent as the head servants in large households.

As a proof of the fact that these illegal commissions still exist, I may quote a War Office letter published a little while ago at Aldershot, which called attention to the fact that gifts to sergeants' messes and mess caterers by contractors are strictly forbidden. It was particularly mentioned that gifts of wine to sergeants' messes and insinuations at Christmas-time were absolutely illegal. The letter emphasises the fact that no gifts of any description are to be accepted by managers from firms under any pretence whatever.

No law that any Parliament could pass is likely to be able to kill the Christmas-box. Indeed, it would be a pity if it did, for there are many workers such as postmen and railway porters who, by civility and care, are well entitled to a Christmas present.

The worst of it is that it is through the Christmas-box that so much business blackmail is still transacted. I have spoken of the way in which retail firms suffer through illicit commissions, but not long ago a well-known trade paper drew attention to a method by which the wholesalers themselves are blackmailed. It referred to begging letters sent by employees in drapers' shops to wholesale houses, requesting subscriptions to their Christmas excursion.

A London daily paper, remarking on these observations, asked: "Where does the grievance come in? No manufacturer is bound to subscribe to these excursions, if he does not wish to do so."

In reply the trade paper declared "that it was practically well known in the trade, that behind these letters lay both the power and the will to be disagreeable if the request was not acceded to. In case of a refusal, the buyers would discover that they could get elsewhere the goods which they had up to that time purchased from the stingy firm."

The wholesalers also declare that some of

the worst bloodsuckers are to be found among the smaller tradesmen. For instance, a large wholesale drapery house received a letter from a customer, inquiring in apparently the most innocent manner about the decoration of his windows for Christmas—what article, in their opinion, should be given the most prominence. The real meaning was, of course, that the special goods of the firm in question would not be displayed at all unless a special discount was given. The practice has been carried so far, that in some cases the retailer expects to receive a quantity of Christmas goods for window decoration absolutely free.

Another grumble is that some retailers will absolutely refuse to show any proprietary article unless paid to do so. They may keep it, but it is hidden away on a back shelf, and upon the average customer something is palmed off "just as good."

Commercial travellers can tell extraordinary stories of thinly-veiled blackmailing. In many cases the unlucky traveller has to pay out of his own pocket in order to secure business. One retailer, an ironmonger, got himself appointed agent for an accident insurance company. Any new traveller who visited his shop was politely pressed to take out a policy. If he did not do so he did not obtain an order. Another, a druggist, ran a money-lending business under an assumed name, and from him it was impossible to obtain an order without first borrowing a few pounds on which a very stiff interest was exacted.

There are travellers for cloth manufacture who possess drawers full of new suits of clothes in which they would certainly never appear in public. These have been made by small country tailors, who have insisted upon a "quid pro quo" before giving an order for cloth. While their cut and material are suited only to the East End, a charge has been in every case that of Bond Street.

Beside the sordid work of the regular, professional blackmailer, as instanced in the foregoing, the efforts of the occasional blackmailer stand out large and sinister. He is the despicable scoundrel who trades on a victim's fear of exposure in the courts or to the neighbours.

As Christmas approaches, the blackmailer threatens with increasing freedom and brazenness to wag his or her scorpion tongue, knowing what a big chance there is that, to seal the evil lips, the victim will "fall" to a certain class of advertisement that at this season one cannot help noticing in the newspapers.

And so the blackmailer drives the victim to the moneylender. Though the latter is by no means always Satan in disguise, many would-be borrowers have excellent cause to think that it was his Satanic Majesty who granted them that loan wherewith they sought to silence the blackmailer; before they have finished paying off the interest they are certain of it!

The blackmailer in the workshop or factory is the vilest of all that unholy tribe. Usually he works in partnership with one of his workmates who is also a moneylender in a small way—that is, the sums he lends are small, but there the smallness ends.

The unfortunate victim who flees to the moneylender for the wherewithal to pay off his "moral murderer," in his eagerness to get the cash, does not always trouble to work out the rate of interest demanded. When the blackmailer has completely destroyed the peace of mind of his victim and the moneylender has squeezed the last dime from the slender purse, then the plucked one has leisure to think how much more sensible he would have been had he put the police on the track of the blackmailer at the first suggestion of "hush-money."



SLATE CLUB OFFICIALS drawing funds from a bank in readiness for the Christmas pay-out. The authority of the man in blue is invoked to back up the revolvers the bag-carriers display. (See article on "Yuletide Swindles," page 657.)

[Photo: Illus. Bureau.

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U. J.—No. 1,954.

THE THIEVES' CHRISTMAS HARVEST.

By H. CURTIS.

They reap where they have not sown, do the thieves who pounce so promptly on the chances of easy money at the Season of Goodwill. Some of their methods are absurdly simple, whilst others are—well, read the article and learn a thing or two.

EVERY Christmas-time much damage is done to woods and shrubberies around London and other big towns by men who come out from the towns and cut shrubs and evergreens for purposes of Christmas decoration. These they take away in carts or motor-vans, and sell at a good profit.

Last Christmas a man was caught cutting and carrying away a quantity of box from an estate near Reigate. Evidence was given to the effect that thirty pounds would not

farmer or keeper has been badly hurt while trying to defend his property.

Good holly, well berried, is sometimes worth as much as a pound a hundredweight, so the game is very well worth the candle.

Mistletoe is even more valuable, and it pays better to rob an orchard of its mistletoe than of its apples.

No young fir plantation is safe. The little trees find a ready market to serve as Christmas-trees. And on one occasion, two or three Christmases ago, no fewer than a

"We rob the rich to feed the poor,
But leave you these two hens;
So please continue breeding more,
We'll call when you've a further store,
Unless the police should—"

Probably the police did, for the poet apparently had to pack up in a hurry, and leave the completion of his rhyme till another occasion.

Just before Christmas the shop-lifting pest is always most active. So troublesome has this form of theft become, that the Incorporated Association of Retail Distributors, which represents nearly a hundred departmental stores all over the country, formed last year a special committee, consisting of the chief detectives employed by these stores, to consider improved methods of dealing with shop-lifters.

The best of these detectives are girls, and their task is by no means an easy one. They have not only to keep a look-out for well-known thieves, but also to watch for what may be called the casual thief—a species always more plentiful at Christmas than at any other time of the year.

The one thing that the detective must carefully avoid is the causing of any scene or commotion. Even a thief is never arrested on the premises. But when she actually leaves the place with some article secreted about her, then the detective interferes.

Speaking very quietly, so as not to attract attention, she says something like this: "I think you have something in your possession that does not belong to you. Will you kindly follow me to the manager's office?"

In nine cases out of ten the thief is furiously indignant. "How dare you!" she exclaims. Then the difficulty is to get her quietly to the office without being forced to call in the police.

When the offender is known to be a professional shop-lifter, no mercy is shown, and very rightly so; but in cases where a woman has given way to sudden temptation she is usually allowed to apologise and pay up.

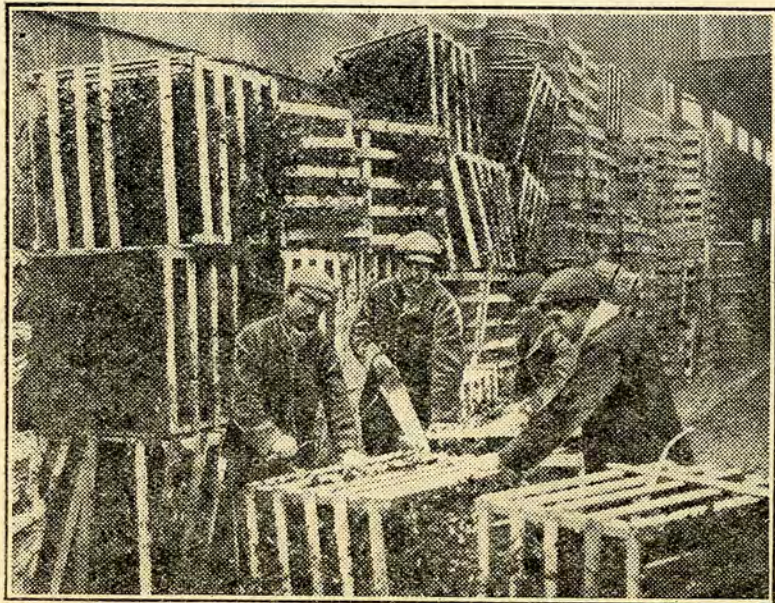
One woman, who, when arrested, vowed that she had never done such a thing before, was found to have five fish-hooks suspended from a belt beneath her skirts, on each of which a lace handkerchief or other small article was suspended. Her dress was protected by a wide band of oiled silk.

Over and over again shop thieves, when detected and brought to justice, have pleaded that they took the article because they could not afford to buy it for a Christmas present.

It is not often that cases occur of postmen going astray at Christmas-time, but occasionally a big haul is brought off by the men who are paid to deliver our Christmas letters.

More often, however, the thieving postmen are not postmen at all, but masqueraders in that uniform. Last year a case occurred of three men, dressed in postmen's livery, who boldly marched up to a pillar-box a minute or two before the regular postman was due to clear it, and did that job themselves.

The pillar-box, in one of the most crowded thoroughfares of London, was choked with letters containing postal-orders and Treasury-notes. The whole lot went into the bogus postmen's bags—as big a thieves' harvest, surely, as ever was gathered in broad daylight from the kerbside in the world's busiest city.



UNLOADING MISTLETOE and holly at Covent Garden Market. Thousands of cases come into London at Christmastide—but not all of them honestly. Quite a quantity is stolen property. —(Photo, Illus. Bureau.)

cover the damage done, yet the offender was fined the paltry sum of forty shillings. Matters are specially bad in Surrey, where each December hundreds of pounds' worth of evergreens are stolen.

But the same thing goes on all over the country. Hampshire is one of the counties which supply a very large quantity of holly for the Christmas market, and those farmers on whose land holly grows find it very difficult to deal with the ever-growing pumber of holly thieves.

These men work in small parties. As a rule one goes round in the day-time, and notices where the best berried branches are to be found. Then at dusk, or early dawn, two men arrive with a cart or car, and do the cutting. The spoils are loaded into sacks and quickly carried off.

The worst of it is, the needless damage done to the holly-trees themselves. They are so chopped and mangled that it takes them years to recover. Then, too, the thieves leave gates open, so that cattle stray out of their pastures; they break down fences, and do other damage. If attacked, they generally show fight, and more than once a

hundred and fifty choice young shrubs were cut off close to the ground in one plantation.

Another form of theft which is very prevalent at Christmastide is that of poultry stealing. Gangs from the East End of London make a speciality of this form of theft. They work specially in Essex villages, and one gang will raid from six to a dozen poultry-houses in a single night.

Padlocks are no earthly use as a prevention against this form of theft, for if the door is locked the thieves make nothing of stripping off the boarding from the walls of the chicken-house.

These scoundrels carry poisoned meat with which to destroy watch-dogs, and if the owner should overhear a disturbance, and appear upon the scene, he is more than likely to get hurt. Turkeys they will steal if the chance offers, but since turkeys usually roost high, they are not so easily caught as are chickens.

The impudence of these fowl stealers is incredible. On a fowlhouse near Southend, which was raided on a December night, the following incomplete doggerel rhyme, written on a piece of paper which was pinned on one of the fowlhouses, was found next morning.

Yuletide Swindles

A PRACTICE by which the public is annually victimised was recently brought to the notice of the Grimsby Market Committee. It was asserted that certain turkey breeders made a custom at Christmas of marking birds above their weight. In the absence of scales to test the purchase, the customer frequently found on getting home that his bird, bought as weighing fourteen pounds, actually scaled only eleven or twelve pounds.

The market inspector was instructed to visit the Christmas produce market, and to seize and weigh birds, and in any case of false weight to prosecute the offender.

There are all sorts of little swindling dodges in the Christmas market. Many turkeys are killed so long before Christmas that, if the weather happens to prove muggy, as it so often does at this period of the year, the bird becomes high, and, consequently, unsaleable.

A turkey that has begun to get "high" is sweetened for the time being by being dipped in a solution of permanganate of potash. Since this solution has a tendency to discolour the skin, the bird is carefully dusted with flour after it comes out. If, therefore, after pinching the breast of the bird, the intending purchaser finds a little white powder on his fingers, he will know the turkey is not fresh, but has been doctored in the manner described.

Another very usual swindle in the Christmas market has to do with joints of beef cut from prize animals. A bullock that has been purchased from one of the Royal estates is always greatly prized, and the butcher who secures it usually advertises the fact widely. It has been found on more than one occasion that these Royal cattle are capable of yielding a surprising variety of joints. In fact, as many as four sirloins have been disposed of, all from the same animal. It should be mentioned, of course, that the Royal beef fetches a distinctly higher price than any other. The contributor does not suggest for a moment that this practice is general, but merely that it has been known to occur.

Badly Sold!

Christmas fruit is sometimes the subject of unscrupulous doctoring. The customer should be particularly careful before purchasing dates. If the skin is quite smooth and very sticky, with a sort of outer skin of light yellow in places, the dates are probably old stock renewed by being washed in a mixture of sugar-and-water so as to give them a moist and pulpy appearance.

Raisins, sultanas, and currants are all treated in similar fashion. Fresh fruit should be soft, yet, at the same time, the surface is covered with small wrinkles, and is not hard and sugary.

Another Christmas swindle, very prevalent before the War, and which has lately raised its head again, is the bunkum auction-room. These sham salesmen reap a rich harvest at the expense of innocent Christmas present bargain-hunters. The stock consists of trashy articles of the very worst quality which have been specially produced for the Christmas market. The swindle is worked by means of decoy bidders, who, making absurdly low bids, have apparently valuable articles presented to them. It is only when a genuine bidder is landed that the auctioneer's generosity suddenly abates; then the customer goes away badly sold, while the decoys hurry round to the back entrance, give back their purchases, and have their money refunded in secret.

Then there is the Christmas advertisement swindle. About this time of the year appears the advertisement from the lady who has a marvellous sealskin jacket, only worn once, that will be sold to the first-comer for less than half price—that is, the sum of five guineas. The advertisement

A timely article which will put you on your guard!

states that the goods will be sent carriage paid to any address; but let me recommend any intending purchaser to personally visit the address given. As a rule, it will be found that the address is that of a second-hand wardrobe dealer's shop, that the sealskin jacket never saw the sea, let alone a seal, and is the very worst kind of trash.

A large number of "moonlight flittings," the object of which is to evade the payment of rent and rates, have for years past been a feature of Christmas-time in many large towns, particularly in Liverpool.

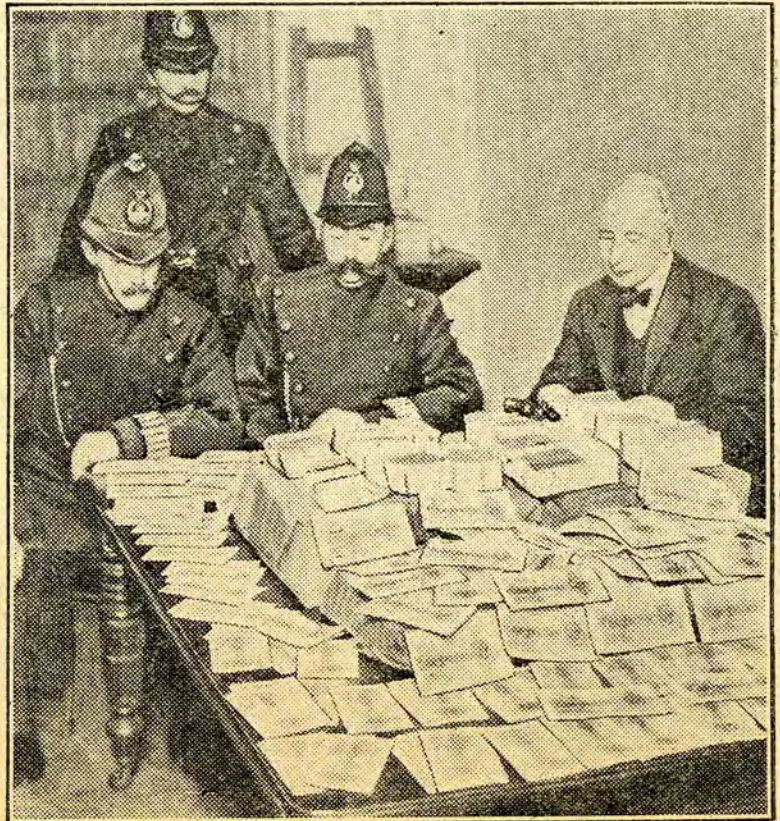
Taking advantage of the season, and of the law which regards Christmas Day as Sunday, hundreds of people have left their homes in one quarter of the city and found new ones in other districts. The War and consequent scarcity of houses checked this form of swindle for a time, but it is now beginning again.

The Christmas Club is, upon the whole an excellent invention, but I would beg my readers, before joining such a club, to find out whether it is registered or not. A club that is registered under the Friendly Societies' Act, and the club funds must be invested in Trustee Securities, and in the joint names of all the trustees.

On the other hand, no unregistered club has any legal status whatever. There is, besides, very great temptation to the treasurer when all the funds are in the hands of one man who can draw any quantity of money at will without check from anyone.

Every year brings its tale of the absconding of secretaries or treasurers with the hard-earned savings of the members. Very large sums are thus lost. In one case alone the loss to the members amounted to over two thousand pounds, and in the course of one Christmas season a few years ago no fewer than three treasurers of such clubs committed suicide.

It is the poor depositor who suffers most at the hands of scoundrelly promoters of Christmas slate clubs—the hard-working folk who pay in the farthings they can ill afford to spare, hoping to draw out at Christmas the savings they have had to scrape together at the cost of perhaps much self-denial. Year after year we read of defaulting secretaries of such clubs, but let us hope that this year will prove an exception to the rule.



A CHRISTMAS SHARE-OUT needs ample police supervision, especially when the money distributed is something like £18,000—as it was at the Leysian Mission share-out a year or two ago. —[Photo: Illus. Bureau.]

The Christmas Poacher.

The poacher pits his wits not only against wild animals and birds, but against the keepers who spend their lives in the protection of their dumb charges.

GAME of all sorts is more saleable at Christmas-time than at any other, and no one is better aware of this fact than the poacher.

There are two sorts of poachers in these days—one the old-fashioned village poacher, who is often, in his way, quite a good sportsman; the other the gang poacher, who emerges from the slums of some big manufacturing town, and who is a butcher pure and simple. There are districts in the neighbourhood of large towns where poaching is so rife that it is almost impossible for farmers to rear game to keep for shooting.

At this time of the year the principal prey of the poacher is pheasants and rabbits. The best of the pheasant shooting is over, but there are still plenty of birds, and these in the prime condition. What is more, the fact that the trees are now completely leafless makes the task of the pheasant poacher a very easy one.

The pheasant poaching gangs number four to a dozen men. They mark down their prey long beforehand, and arrive on the spot by motor-car. The night chosen as the best for this sort of poaching is one on which the moon is up, but hidden by soft clouds. If there is a certain amount of wind, so much the better, for it deadens the sound of the shots.

Should keepers be likely to prove troublesome, one or two of the gang are detailed to draw them off. Then the rest go to work where the pheasants are thickest. Pheasants

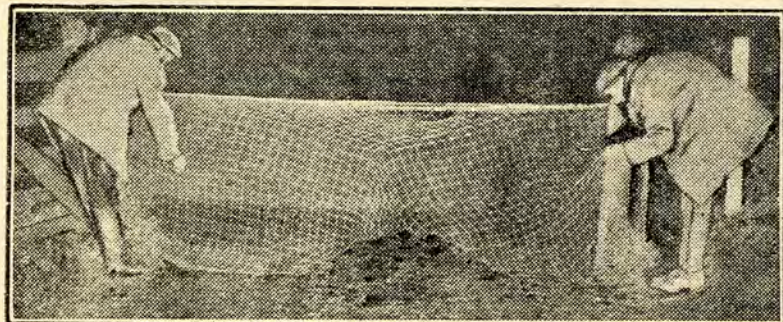
by a keeper, and since they generally outnumber the keepers by two or three to one, the latter have precious little chance. At Christmas, 1921, there was a serious affray between four keepers on a Montgomeryshire estate and a gang of poachers, said to have been ten in number. Three of the keepers were badly hurt, and the whole gang escaped.

The single-handed poacher hardly ever uses a gun, but is extremely expert in the making and setting of snares. Many a fine cock pheasant is secured by laying snares of fine brass wire in the bottoms of hedgerows. Another method of securing birds at night is to snare them as they roost with nooses made of twisted horse-hair, which are fixed to the ends of light bamboo canes.

As for the rabbit poacher, he usually works with ferrets and nets, and the number of rabbits which he obtains in this fashion is really astonishing.

A few years ago two men belonging to Glasgow were caught night poaching on an estate near that city. On them, besides the usual poaching tackle, was found a poacher's diary, which gave the number of rabbits that the pair had killed day by day. The numbers varied from seventeen up to eighty-three, and the total catch in nine weeks was no less than 1,663.

Occasionally nets are used on the larger scale. Choosing a time when the rabbits are out in the field grazing, the gang will run a line of fine netting all along the cover side, doing the work so silently that no



NETTING RABBITS in a field at dead of night calls for lots of skill and caution on the part of the poachers. A piece of smart work on the part of the photographer secured for us this very unusual photograph. (Photo: Clarke & Hyde)

roost on the bare branches of the trees at no great height from the ground, so can easily be seen from below. The weapons employed by these men are shot-guns with sawed-off barrels, and loaded with reduced charges.

Poaching of this kind is simply murder. The birds are killed by hundreds, stuffed into sacks, and loaded into the cars, which have been hidden at some convenient spot.

Should the night prove very still, the poachers may adopt another method, called sulphuring. This is a very simple business. A few handfuls of flowers of sulphur are placed on a bit of sheet iron laid beneath the branch on which the birds are roosting. A match is applied, and the suffocating fumes which rise soon bring the stupefied birds toppling one after another to the ground.

The only danger about this performance is that the fire gives light, and may be seen by a keeper. To obviate this, one gang of poachers carried about with them a sort of closed stove with a long, telescopic iron tube chimney, so that the smoke could be directed point-blank upon each unfortunate bird in turn.

These gangs usually show fight if tackled

bunny takes alarm. Then a dog, trained for the work, is sent out across the field, and in a moment or two scores of rabbits are plunging helplessly in the meshes of the net.

A novel form of poaching which has become prevalent during the past few years is worked entirely by motor-cycle.

Motor-cyclists are such common objects on country roads that no one pays any particular attention to them.

This type of poacher usually gets himself up to resemble a commercial traveller. But the innocent-looking pump which is fixed to the frame of his machine is somewhat oddly shaped. It has a hinge in the middle, and when straightened out is seen to be no pump, but a small-bored single-barrel gun, the skeleton stock of which is kept in its owner's inside pocket, and can be fixed in a moment.

Pheasants and other wild things have already learned to pay little attention to the motor-car, and it is therefore quite an easy matter for the poaching cyclist to get near enough for a pot-shot. His little gun makes hardly any noise, and the bird is quickly picked up and slipped into the big poaching pocket. This type of poacher is not a professional, yet a very large number of Christmas dinners are undoubtedly obtained by the man with the pump-gun.

Vengeance Before Justice!

LITTLE ROCK, Arkansas, was the scene of an astounding tragedy. An action had been brought by Mr. Parker Willis, a well-known politician, for the custody of his daughter. Mr. Justice Fulk had just given his decision, granting Mr. Willis the custody of the girl, when suddenly a revolver-shot crashed out and Mr. Willis fell dead.

The murderer was Mr. William Ellis, who had previously married the divorced wife of Mr. Willis. The crime created a frightful panic in the crowded court. Men, women, and children fell over one another in mad efforts to escape, and a number were badly hurt. Ellis, however, having made sure that Willis was dead, calmly threw down his weapon and surrendered himself.

Lynchings are still of fairly frequent occurrence in the Southern States, but a lynching in a court-room is certainly a novelty. A few years ago three negroes were being tried at Shelbyville, Tennessee, on suspicion of having murdered two railway detectives.

As evidence piled up against the negroes, low, angry mutterings were heard in the packed court-room. Suddenly one of the spectators pulled a revolver and fired, killing one of the prisoners. Instantly the other spectators in all parts of the room set to firing, and the three negroes dropped, simply riddled with bullets.

Alabama is notoriously one of the least civilised parts of Europe. In fact, it is said that conditions there resemble those which prevailed in the highlands of Scotland three hundred years ago.

Not long ago, an Albanian, summoned for trespassing at a place called Gilann, was found guilty and sentenced to pay a fine, which, in English money, would amount to about one shilling and twopence. Small as the fine was the prisoner declared it to be beyond him to pay. He argued with the judge, insisting that he had but ninepence, and asking him to accept this sum.

A Jeering Laugh Cut Short,

The judge refused, whereupon the Albanian, without giving the slightest notice of his intention, drew a pistol and shot the judge dead. Then, before the horrified spectators could make a move the wretched man turned his weapon upon himself and blew out his own brains.

Hideously dramatic was a murder and suicide which occurred quite recently in a Hungarian court of law.

A man called Labo brought an action for the recovery of some land against his neighbour, whose name was Hancso. The judge, however, gave his verdict in favour of the plaintiff, whereupon Labo, looking Hancso full in the face, gave a jeering laugh. His triumph did not last long.

Whipping out a heavy pistol, Hancso opened fire. A bullet struck Labo full between his grinning lips—of course, killing him instantly. Then, before anyone could interfere, Hancso blew out his own brains.

Even in civilised France similar cases are not quite unknown. A man named Veran, who had a business in Marseilles, was summoned for a debt of forty thousand francs by a group of creditors. It was shown that the defendant owned several small houses, and the judge ordered the sale of these to satisfy the debt.

When he heard this judgment, Veran sprang to his feet, shouting that he was ruined. Before anyone could stop him the madman drew a revolver, and, placing the muzzle against the head of Maitre Journe, one of the lawyers for the prosecution, pulled the trigger.

One of the attendants seized Veran, but the man wrenched himself free, fired at the second lawyer, shooting him through the jaw, then turned his weapon on himself.

A frightful panic ensued. Litigants and lawyers alike fled from the room, actually trampling on the bodies of the dead as they did so.

What the CONVICT thinks ABOUT CHRISTMAS.

By LESLIE HARPER.



A bird's-eye view of grim Dartmoor Prison, the scene of our contributor's Christmases for many years.

This article, together with the one on the next page, is the work of an ex-convict who writes from actual prison experience extending over many years. It is given here in his own words, exactly as he penned it.

WE are constantly reading of the way inmates of our prisons spend Christmas—the diet they receive, and the routine they have to undergo, and so forth; but we are seldom given a description of the season from the convicts' point of view.

What are the feelings of convicts during the season of jollity outside? The writer, being a late member of the criminal class, and having spent many Christmases in prison, is particularly well qualified to give this inside viewpoint.

Take a penal establishment such as Dartmoor or Parkhurst, where only convicts are incarcerated, and the minimum term of penal servitude is three years, which means that in a convict prison the sentences range from three years to a life sentence. The study of the melancholy, despairing convict, sitting disconsolately in a corner of his cell, with elbows on knees and head between hands—the sort of picture which black-and-white artists love to depict—gives the outsider a totally wrong impression of prison life as it actually is.

A gently nurtured and refined individual suddenly finds himself cast into the gloom of a convict prison through his own indiscretions. For a time he feels his position acutely, but man is an adaptable animal, and it is impossible to be miserable indefinitely.

Christmas Puddings.

Presently he comes to take interest in convict life, for convict life, after all, is full of interest. One cannot help but take notice of one's surroundings.

Dick, in the cell on the right, and Tom on the left, are both interesting chaps. Bill, a few cells away, who always snatches an opportunity to have a chat, must be a fine fellow in the outside world. What a fearless personality he possesses! Doesn't seem to care a hang about anything.

Evidently prison life doesn't worry him, so why should it worry me? Everyone, excepting myself, seems to be contented and settled down to endure the inevitable. So I suppose I must look through their kind of spectacles, and make the best of a bad job, too. Thus, sooner or later, reasons the "first-timer."

In due course Christmas comes along, and the first-timer looks back upon the happy occasions he has spent with his family and friends in the days when he was still a respectable member of the community.

"Heaven help me! What have I done?" is his lament then. But even in prison there is so much afoot to take him out of himself that he unwittingly forgets himself and his unavailing regrets, and in the course of time actually begins to look forward to his succeeding Christmases in prison.

The Christmas spirit is abroad at its proper time in prison, believe me. Who ever heard of a warder, even the strictest disciplinarian, "casing" (reporting) a prisoner for talking, or any other trivial offence, during Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, or Boxing Day? As a matter of fact, the prison is only half staffed during those three days, and warders are still human, in spite of what cranks say to the contrary.

Does one ever read of a person being charged with "drunk and disorderly" when the police-courts open on Boxing Day, unless some aggravating circumstance is included in the charge? It simply doesn't happen, for the police, being human, stretch a point during the Christmas season. And so it is in prison.

At exercise in the morning a convict can easily get next to his chum, and chat away to his heart's content for a solid hour and a half, all the time, of course, pretending to himself that the warders cannot see him doing so. The warders, on their part, are equally intent on pretending that they do not see.

After exercise, chapel, where the service is enlivened with some extraneous item, such as a local band, or a vocal programme. Then to dinner, where the convicts jabber away with their immediate neighbours without fear of being "cased."

And what a grand departure from the ordinary diet is that Christmas dinner! What truth there may be in the very popular story current to-day in our convict prisons as to the origin of these Christmas dinners I am not prepared to state, but the yarn is as follows:

Less than a decade ago, Lord Lonsdale—England's premier sportsman—whilst conversing with an old lag, learned that on Christmas Day convicts received simply the ordinary, everyday sort of fare. Lord Lonsdale's exclamation, on receiving that bit of knowledge, was to the effect that such a state of affairs should continue no longer if he could do anything to alter it.

Knuckling Down.

Inmates of workhouses were given a special Christmas dinner, and, declared Lord Lonsdale, convicts should be given one, too, even if he himself had to foot the bill.

Such is the story that convicts love to believe of England's great sporting peer, and I myself have no reason to disbelieve it, knowing, as I do, something of that gentleman's character. Good roast beef, potatoes, greens, and Christmas-pudding, all find a place on the convict's Christmas dinner-table now, and any individual arising dissatisfied from that meal must indeed be a glutton.

To the man outside, the above bill of fare

might possibly appear a bit barren. To appreciate it to the full, one must first experience the ordinary prison fare for about twelve months!

After dinner comes chapel again, with a concert to listen to. They may be only local performers; but musical critics are scarce in prison, for music is quickly knocked out of their souls by sordid surroundings, and they are prepared to appreciate anything apart from the monotonous prison routine. That monotony is certainly broken on the three days of Christmastide, especially on Boxing Day, when one is treated to a concert, a lecture, and perhaps three or more hours' welcome exercise of the talk-as-much-as-you-like kind.

During the week preceding Christmas the prison librarian is extremely busy endeavouring to appease the voracious appetites of his convict "customers." Educated men naturally prefer books of substance. Others want popular novels and magazines, whilst the illiterates plump for vivid picture-books. It speaks volumes for the foresight and commonsense of the prison librarian that there are very few grumblers—where grumbling usually is rampant—found railing at the library books at that season.

The highly-strung person very speedily loses his high strings in a convict prison. There is no moping or pining allowed. He is forced out of himself, as it were, and, for the time being at least, becomes "one of the ruck." Otherwise, his life is likely to become a veritable hell on earth. Dick, Tom, and Harry will see to that, unless he forgets his personality and entirely merges himself in his surroundings.

I defy anyone to prove that any convict ever emerged from a penal establishment other than in better physical condition than when he entered, unless, of course, he happened to be suffering from some incurable disease. Clean living, plain food, open-air exercise, and, finally, food for thought, all contribute to this very desirable state of things.

It may appear that I am digressing from my immediate subject somewhat, but that last little talk really does appertain to the way a first-timer takes his Christmas in prison.

That first Christmas in prison may be taken hard, but the convict looks forward to future Christmases eagerly. More eagerly, perhaps, than the man in the outside world to whom liberty is an unvalued possession.

At all events, he finds that the season of relaxation and goodwill is not also a season of expense.

An OLD LAG'S XMAS.

By LESLIE HARPER.

Here you have just what the old stager thinks and does in gaol at Christmas.

CLASS distinctions exist in prisons just as they exist outside.

The first-timer is regarded as a "mug" by the prison aristocrats—those who have served previous sentences, and who accordingly regard themselves as "wide," that is, particularly knowing.

In most cases, prison education is all the knowing ones ever had, and so many Christmas haves they spent behind prison walls that they are able to enjoy Christmas "inside" almost as much as the ordinary citizen is able to do outside. What is known as "trafficking" contributes a great deal to this enjoyment.

Prison officials, as a whole, are among the most incorruptible of public servants. Nevertheless, there is generally to be found in every prison one who, for a certain remuneration, indulges in the unlawful and risky business of trafficking—that is, smuggling into, or out of, prison any forbidden article.

The penalty for this entails not only instant dismissal from the service, but a term of imprisonment ranging from one to twelve months. Which explains the scarcity of traffickers!

What truth there is in the old saying: that "every man has his price" I am not qualified to judge. But I can say that in every prison I have ever been confined in there have always been periodical epidemics of trafficking. Occasionally prisoners are found to be in possession of tobacco—several pounds of it, perhaps. At once the prison authorities know that someone among the officials is trafficking, and they leave no stone unturned in the effort to ferret out the offender.

For two or three weeks preceding Christmas, vigilance is shown by numerous "special searching" incidents. A prisoner who has been found with any contraband on some previous occasion, or who has at any time been suspected of trafficking, is likely to be called from his working party at an

unexpected moment, taken to the bath-room, and there, before two warders, made to strip to the skin. Then his clothing is examined minutely, piece by piece, for trace of any forbidden possession. Meanwhile, other warders are searching his cell.

Give an old lag a newspaper and a chew of tobacco, and he is perfectly happy. So it is no unusual thing to hear this sort of talk going on behind the warder's back:

"I wonder whether I'll have a chew this Christmas?"

Convicts who have friends outside, whom they know to be willing to do anything for them, are constantly inquiring among their fellow-prisoners whether any of them is in touch with a "straight screw," that being the "inside" nickname for a warder who can be "got at" or bribed.

The convict who discovers the warder he is seeking for then gets in touch with his outside friend, relying on "that Christmas feeling" to get him what he wants. The letter which the inside man gets smuggled out to his friend probably reads something like this:

"Dear Friend,—If you will kindly send £2 to the address enclosed, you will be making my Christmas a far happier one than otherwise it is likely to be.

"Your old friend,

"BILL BROWN."

The recipient of the £2 would be one of the prison staff who has proved himself not bribe-proof. In return for the money, the aforesaid Bill Brown receives perhaps a few ounces of chewing tobacco, a cake of chocolate, and a current weekly newspaper, all of which he must immediately hide away, for his own use or to be shared amongst pals.

The greatest cunning is needed to carry all this out. It has to be done under the very noses of keen-eyed warders, whose duty it is to keep every prisoner under the closest observation from the moment he is released from his cell to go to his labour until the cell door shuts to on him again at night.

Sounds impossible, doesn't it? Yet I can assure you it is done, and on Christmas Day there are very few old lags not in possession of something contraband.

Trafficking invariably increases just before the Christmas season, and the convict who has successfully "swagged," or smuggled, something to his cell for his own private consumption heaves a heartfelt sigh of relief.

But his relief is sometimes rudely dispelled—for jealousy and envy are rampant amongst old lags. One or two of them get to hear of the other's "swag," and they want their share, and so Christmas-time is enlivened with a few free fights.

Perhaps a convict wants to curry favour with a warder, and accordingly "puts the squeak in" (gives information) about a fellow prisoner whom he has seen "cop" (receive) something from another. Old lags are quite unscrupulous, and when they want to get their own back never hesitate to have a battle-royal with the offender.

And they do not stick to the rules as laid down by the Marquis of Queensberry! "All in" governs their fighting. On one occasion I saw two convicts scrapping tooth and nail, both on the ground. The warder in charge, powerless to stop them, addressed the one who at that moment happened to be uppermost.

"Let him get up!" he barked.

"What! After I've got him down?" was the astonished reply.

I witnessed a lively incident of this kind during exercise one Christmas morning. Convicts have to walk around the exercise ring in single file, and should any wish to use the conveniences provided, they must first ask permission of the warder at that point to "fall out."

The lag who wants to pass anything to a chum will give him the tip to that effect. He will then wait in the convenience until his chum has marched around to that point and has asked permission to fall out. The latter will then find the article, whatever it may be, where his chum left it for him.

On the occasion of the lively incident referred to, a third lag saw what was going on between two of his fellow-prisoners. He promptly jumped at the chance of forestalling the man for whom the article was intended, and he got away with it.

The fight that ensued would have graced the ring of the National Sporting Club! Others took a hand in the game at once, until there were at least half a dozen fights in progress at the same time—and all on a Christmas morning!

THE MYSTERY OF HANBURY STREET.

HANBURY STREET, way down in the East End of London, for long had "enjoyed" an unsavoury reputation. The shadow of the mysterious "Jack the Ripper" crimes hung heavily over it. With the passage of time, Hanbury Street might have lost something of that undesirable notoriety.

The Christmas of 1911, however, was destined not only to revive that fading memory of an imbecile's tragic activities, but once again to place on that particular neighbourhood the seal of hoodliganism and lawlessness carried to extremes. Ask a Scotland Yard official to relate the affair to you, and he will put you off with a few mumbled words.

For the "Yard" does not like to keep green the memory of its failures. Few and far between as these are, quite a number rise up on their anniversaries to confront the C.I.D. men and remind them that, with all the resources science offers in the conduct of their investigations, there yet remain dark and inscrutable mysteries that apparently must await solution to the very end of all time.

One such mystery is retold on page 11 of this issue. Another, with a double tragedy as its motif, is the subject of the present article.

No one who desired a life of monastic calm and peace would have dreamed of residing in Hanbury Street. The population of that district of the East End were not

accustomed to quietude. The roar of traffic and the almost ceaseless hustle and bustle of crowded thoroughfares was accepted as an essential part of the daily and nightly life of the place.

And so we can easily imagine the degree of rowdiness that forced most of the inhabitants of Hanbury Street, that Christmas season twelve years ago, to demand of Samuel Millstein that he turned out the quarrelsome occupants of the gambling-den beneath his shop. The folks round about did not object to what might be called natural noise, but they most decidedly refused any longer to put up with the perpetual yelling and quarrelling that emanated from that den and robbed them of all chance of a little rest.

The gambling-den in question was a cellar beneath the eating-house that Samuel Millstein and his wife ran as a prosperous and respectable concern. The back of the cellar was used by Millstein as a kitchen; of that the neighbours had nothing to complain. It was the cellar, abutting on the street, that they wanted cleared out.

Not wanting to lose his custom, Samuel promptly acted on the forcible suggestion conveyed to him by a deputation of the folk living in Hanbury Street, and gave his gambling tenants peremptory notice to pack up their effects and quit.

Christmas Day came and went. Boxing Day saw the Millsteins frantically busy in the well-patronised eating-house. And then, when the next working day dawned and the pressure slackened somewhat, the proprietors

told themselves they would ease up a bit and take a few hours' holiday themselves. They did so, and the neighbours who saw them return home to their shop a minute or two after midnight were the last to see the unfortunate couple alive.

Above the Millsteins' shop lodged a man who heard them return, and then dropped off to sleep again. But his sleep was soon disturbed once more. Intermittent groans came from down below. For an hour or more he stood it as best he could, then about four o'clock in the morning, got up to see what was the matter.

It was then he noticed smoke in his room. With an exclamation of annoyance he flung up the window and leaned out to get a view of his landlord's window below. A fierce glow shone through the canvas blind, and in an instant he realised the origin of the smoke that had tickled his nostrils. The Millsteins' bedroom was on fire!

His hand closed on the first object he could clutch—a hairbrush—and, with one yell of "Fire!" he sent it hurtling through the landlord's window. Most law-abiding folk in Hanbury Street carried a police-whistle, and the man who watched that terrifying glow was no exception. A second later shrill blasts were calling the police to the scene and neighbours to their street doors.

The police had no difficulty in getting into the shop, for the door was unfastened. With a rush they gained the Millsteins' bedroom, and there they halted for a moment, for the door was locked—with the key in the lock outside! In a twinkling the key was turned and the door flung wide. And there, on the floor, surrounded by flames that were rapidly licking up the walls, were the bodies of the eating-house proprietor and his wife.

Not a clue, not a vestige of one, was there to lead to the discovery of the perpetrators of the double crime, which remains as deep a mystery on this its twelfth anniversary as on the night it was discovered.

THE FLAMING SPECTRE OF CLOOME!

(Continued from Page 10.)

usual, and I'm dashed if the beds have been slept in!"

"Internally strange!" remarked the colonel. "Particularly after that ghost business last night. I know Mr. Blake's keen on anything mysterious, and it's just possible, by gad, that he's met with a bit of trouble!"

"We shall have to get up a search-party," said Lord Cloome. "I remember telling Mr. Blake last night that I wanted him to look into the mystery."

There was every reason for anxiety. Breakfast was over, and the non-appearance of Sexton Blake and Tinker had not occasioned much comment among the other guests. But when Reggie reported that Blake and Tinker were not even in their room, Lord Cloome began to suspect something sinister.

A very brief investigation revealed the fact that no baggage of any kind was missing—not even a suitcase or a gladstone. It was clear, therefore, that Blake and Tinker had not set off upon some urgent mission. Their disappearance was connected with Cloome Chase itself.

"It's my belief that Blake went off after that ghost," declared the colonel. "He was keen on it, I know. As for a search-party, I'm hanged if I know where we can start!"

Lord Reggie coughed.

"Of course, I don't want to butt in, or anything like that, but Diana was telling me about some frightfully interesting secret passages. You know, these places that Roundheads, and so forth, nipped into when their heads were in danger of being lopped off," he said. "According to Di, the whole bally place is littered with these secret passages!"

"There are some, I will admit," said Lord Cloome, with a sharp note of concern. "I wonder—is it possible that Mr. Blake found one of these entrances, and that he and Tinker have fallen into some pitfall? Good heavens, we must go in search at once—without a moment's delay!"

And while they were bustling about, preparing for the search, Sexton Blake and Tinker were in a somewhat unenviable plight.

It had been five o'clock in the morning when Blake had recovered consciousness—to find himself lying cold and chilled, with Tinker close beside him. Tinker did not revive until an hour later.

From the severe after-effects Blake knew that he had sustained an electrical shock of such power that the force of it had stunned him. And his anxiety regarding Tinker was great at first, for such a shock would undoubtedly have electrocuted a man of weak heart.

And Blake, whilst commencing the examination of his prison, marvelled at Waldo's latest enterprise. What was this almost unbelievable electrical power that he could store within himself, and discharge at will? Great as Blake's knowledge of electricity was, he was absolutely baffled at this problem.

A few minor puzzles were solved. The ghost was now easily explained, and the reason for the insensibility of that labourer in the roadway was also made clear. He had not fainted from fright, but had been partially electrocuted by contact with Waldo.



Just as Blake and Tinker got to the spot where Marchmont had vanished, the wall moved outwards and the colonel reappeared. "I've found something! By gad! I've found a fortune!" he exclaimed, tremendously excited.

(Chapter 7.)

Sexton Blake realised that the Wonder-Man had a weapon of incalculable power in his hands—a weapon that would enable him to defy capture at any time. Indeed, the possibilities were staggering.

And it was imperative that Waldo should be captured and this electrical marvel wrested from him.

But at the moment Blake was not in a position to capture anybody. He did not blame himself for his present predicament, for under no circumstances could he have been prepared for that dramatic surprise.

A brief examination proved that Blake and Tinker were at the bottom of a kind of pit with steep, almost smooth sides. At the top there was a number of wooden rafters, and a black cavity. Clearly this pit had been used at some remote period of history as a dungeon. Indeed, it was by no means odd the mark to assume that unwanted gentry of the Middle Ages had been dropped down here to perish miserably of starvation.

And there seemed to be no way out—no possibility of escape. Blake, although he knew the peril, remained quite calm. He had told nobody of his intentions, and if no search was made he and Tinker might remain here for years. To shout was useless, for their voices would never carry far beyond that black cavity.

Blake was thankful enough that the air was fairly pure and that he and Tinker were unharmed. Any other criminal but Waldo might have thrown them ruthlessly into this pit, careless of whether they broke their bones. But Waldo, obviously, had lowered them by means of a rope. He had even left Blake his electric torch.

By the time Tinker had fully recovered his scattered wits the hour was

close upon seven. And Tinker was rather startled when Blake pointed out the nature of their position.

"But they're bound to search for us, sir!" argued Tinker.

"I sincerely trust so, but we cannot be too sure," said Blake. "And we must make every effort to help ourselves, Tinker. I am aware that the task seems impossible; but we have got out of many tight corners in our time."

"Yes, sir—corners that seemed even more tight than this," agreed Tinker.

"By jingo, isn't Waldo the limit, guv'nor? He's not a man at all; he's almost superhuman! How, in the name of all that's miraculous, can he store up electricity like that, and shoot it out at will?"

Blake shook his head.

"We will not discuss that problem now; it can wait. But I suspect Waldo was wearing an electrically-charged suit beneath his ordinary attire, his body itself being effectively insulated. Such a thing could be done, but with great risk. However, we will confine ourselves to the problem in hand."

"And this is Christmas Day, sir!" said Tinker, in disgust. "A fine Christmas we'll have, won't we? Fancy starving on Christmas Day! There'll be no getting out of here!"

Blake was carefully examining the sides of the pit by means of his electric torch. He noticed that they had been hewn out of the hard earth, and had remained in this condition doubtless for centuries. At one time the sides had been perfectly smooth, making any climbing impossible.

But at different periods certain portions had become dislodged, leaving jagged gaps and rents in the sides.

"There's only one way, Tinker; I shall have to attempt the climb," said Blake. "It will be fairly risky, and we cannot count upon success. But it would be foolish to remain down here, inactive."

"Let me do the climb; I'm lighter," pleaded Tinker.

But Blake would not hear of it, for he knew that one slip when near the top would result in grave injury. And the task, in any case, would be a test of endurance that would make the strongest man quail.

It would have been easy if the sides of the pit were only three or four feet apart. Then Blake could have rested his shoulders against one side while he worked his feet up the other. But the walls were a clear seven foot from one another, and a sheer ascent was the only solution.

"It's all very well for us to argue about who's going up, sir," said Tinker. "It's absolutely impossible for either of us. Why, a cat couldn't climb up one of these walls!"

"If they were of rock, Tinker, I would agree with you," replied Blake.

He took from his pocket a heavily-made claspknife, and, stepping to the side of the pit, he scratched away at this hard earth. Within a few minutes he had formed a rough kind of step.

And then Blake commenced the ascent.

Foot by foot he carved his way upwards, providing himself with a fresh grip by literally digging into the earth. And he was handicapped by the fact that he had to work in darkness. For he had no place for the torch, and even if he had it would have been useless, for the battery was nearly exhausted.

Tinker, below, spent the most terrible hours of anguish he could remember. Now and again Blake called down to him, cheery and calm. But only Sexton Blake himself knew what this effort was costing him.

The higher he went the more difficult became his task, for his fingers became numbed, his feet felt as though they were lead. And to retreat was out of the question. Under no circumstances could he attempt a descent, for it would lead to certain disaster.

His only chance was to climb upwards, making fresh finger-holds for himself as he went. Tinker, he knew, could never have gone through the ordeal. And

even Blake's iron nerve and sinew were being taxed to their uttermost limit.

Towards the last, he fought on mechanically, numbed and utterly desperate. The least slip now and tragedy would indeed result. But Blake carried on—and there was a strong reason for his anxiety.

He had congratulated himself upon the purity of the air in the pit, but he knew that it would not remain pure for long. Another five or six hours, and they would have breathed all the available oxygen, and a slow, ghastly death from suffocation would have followed. Blake was convinced that Waldo had not considered this possibility, for Waldo was no cold-blooded murderer.

Once, when only six feet from the top, Blake slipped, and he gave himself up for lost. But by an apparent miracle his slipping fingers clutched an unseen projection; and he hung there, expecting the hold to crumble away under his fingers.

But it didn't, and again he fought his way upwards. And at last, more dead than alive, he found that cavity right against his head. One clutch with his aching fingers and he had hold of the edge.

How he pulled himself up he hardly remembered. But he found himself sprawling in safety, breathing hard, and far more spent than he had even believed; for now that the tension was over a swift reaction set in. For five minutes Blake was utterly incapable of movement.

"Guv'nor—guv'nor!" came an anxious, urgent voice.

It seemed to come to Sexton Blake as though in a dream. He heard the voice again and again, and then, as his strength returned, he remembered Tinker. Feeling for his torch, he pulled it out, and a weak beam of light showed him that he was at the back of that little secret chamber where he had encountered Rupert Waldo. He flashed the light down into the pit.

"All right, Tinker; I'll soon have you out."

"Oh, guv'nor!" gasped Tinker from below. "I've been calling you for ten minutes!"

Blake smiled wanly, and his eyes lighted up as he caught sight of a coil of rope—the same rope, no doubt, that Waldo had used to lower them. He was just about to reach for it when he heard voices.

And then came lights—footsteps—men. As Blake pulled himself up, Lord Cloome appeared with Colonel Marchmont and Lord Reggie close behind.

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Lord Cloome, hurrying forward. "I—I hardly dared to think what had happened to you! But Tinker—where is Tinker?" Blake steadied himself.

"We were foolish enough to explore these passages during the night, Lord Cloome," he replied. "We had a slight accident, and it was only by a big effort that I succeeded in climbing up."

The colonel gazed down into the pit. "By gad!" he exclaimed. "Amazing! You cannot mean to assure me, Mr. Blake, that you actually climbed out of this place?"

Blake entered into no full explanation. He attempted to give the impression that he and Tinker had merely met with an accident. Blake saw no object in relating the facts about Rupert Waldo yet. The story, indeed, would sound fantastic, and he did not wish to be doubted. Moreover, he wanted to be quite certain as to Waldo's whereabouts before making any statement to his host.

Five minutes later Tinker was hauled up. But, although the rescue-party had come, it was a great satisfaction to the pair to realise that they would have escaped in any case.

Soon afterwards, as they emerged from the secret panel in the upper corridor, Blake caught sight of a figure hovering near by. The figure was that of Powell, the footman.

And Sexton Blake smiled grimly to himself.



THE SIXTH CHAPTER.
The Family Skeleton.

CHRISTMAS DAY proved to be a thoroughly merry, enjoyable occasion, in spite of the extraordinary events that had been taking place.

The majority of Lord Cloome's guests knew nothing of what had happened. And Sexton Blake, after a brief rest before luncheon, was quite himself again during the meal. The spirit of Christmas was in the air, and the Spectre had been forgotten.

Luncheon was a joyous repast, with jokes and laughter passing round the table in a continuous succession. And afterwards, in the library, Blake had a quiet smoke with Lord Cloome.

"It seems to me, Mr. Blake, that there was something rather strange about your adventure in the night," said his lordship quietly. "I don't think you've told me the full story."

"As a matter of fact, I have not," admitted Blake. "But I shall take it as a favour, Lord Cloome, if you will allow the matter to rest for a while. Eventually, I will be perfectly frank."

Tinker, who was strolling round the library, looking at the various old paintings, paused before a frame which was in a curious position. The picture itself was towards the wall, and only the back was revealed outwardly.

"Anything special about this picture, sir?" he asked, looking round.

Lord Cloome jumped to his feet.

"Leave that portrait alone!" he said hoarsely.

Tinker was startled by his host's vehemence.

"Why, I—I'm sorry, sir!" he stammered. "I didn't mean to—to—"

"I am sorry, Tinker," said Lord Cloome, with an effort. "Please come away from that picture, and ask no questions."

He sank back into his chair, and Blake noticed that he was trembling slightly, and every atom of colour had fled from his cheeks. Here was a mystery that Blake had not even suspected.

What was that portrait, with its face to the wall?

What secret of the Cloome family was hidden in this strange fashion? Lord Cloome's great agitation was eloquent enough. And the acute pain in his eyes was more than sufficient to make Tinker hastily change the subject. He had asked his question quite innocently, without any suspicion of what would follow. For until that minute he had had no idea that Lord Cloome possessed a family skeleton.

Obviously, the subject was one that could not bear inquiry. Sexton Blake,

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although intimate with his host, knew nothing whatever of that significant portrait. And he was too tactful to mention a word on the subject, even after Tinker had gone.

Blake, as a matter of fact, was anxious to be alone. He went for a long walk, turning over the various events that recently happened in his mind. He was not quite so puzzled as to Waldo's exact whereabouts as Tinker imagined. Indeed, Tinker would have been somewhat startled if he had known exactly what was in his master's mind.

But there was one point where Blake stumbled. He wasn't satisfied that Waldo's only object was to rob the guests. It wasn't Waldo's usual game at all. The Wonder-Man was not the kind of crook to aim for such a prize. Blake felt that there was something else—something far deeper.

And that afternoon the love affairs of Lord Reggie—so unimportant to others, but so vital to his own happiness—went forward another step. And it was Colonel Marchmont who brought this about.

The colonel was rather anxious to have a quiet little chat with Reggie, and to tactfully find out if there was any possibility of an engagement between the young people, or whether a simple flirtation was in progress.

Failing to find Lord Reggie, the colonel passed into the conservatory, and took a seat in a quiet little alcove. He had only been there a mere minute when voices sounded behind him in startlingly close proximity. And then he discovered that there was another seat, back to back with the one he occupied. But it was hidden by masses of evergreens.

"It's no good, Di, I've got to say it out!" came Reggie's voice, very earnestly for him. "I mean, this colonel chappie. One of the best, and all that, but the very idea of him marrying you is ghastly. Don't you think so, old girl? Be a sport, you know. Let's thrash the bally thing out once and for all."

"I like Colonel Marchmont—it wouldn't be fair to say that I don't," exclaimed the Hon. Diana softly. "But, Reggie—oh, Reggie, I can't marry him! And I'm afraid to tell father! It'll be such a terrible blow to him."

"Yes, but, dash it, these blows have got to fall, you know!" argued Reggie. "It's all very well for pater to make plans, and so forth, but they can't always have their own way."

Colonel Marchmont was startled. Unconsciously, and without any intent, he was an eavesdropper; and he himself was the subject of the conversation that he was overhearing. And to move now was impossible.

For he would be heard. If he boldly coughed, and thus announced his presence, Reggie and Diana would know that he had listened to their open remarks. And if he attempted to creep away, and they saw him, the result would be appalling. The position, indeed, was most embarrassing.

There was only one solution. He had to remain. If discovery came, he would pretend to be asleep, and perhaps the ruse would pass.

"Listen, Di, sweetheart!" said Lord Reggie, his voice anxious and intent. "I shan't care a twopenny dash if you only give me the final good word. I mean to say, how do I stand? Is it O.K., Di? I mean—dash it!—is there any chance for a poor blighter like me?"

"I wish you wouldn't call yourself that, Reggie!" said Diana severely. "You—your silly boy! Of course there's a chance for you—"

"You—you mean," gasped Reggie—

"you mean that I'm first favourite? I'm a frightful ass, I know, but if you'll only say the word we'll fix it all up, and there you are! I'll see your pater and square it up. A deuce of an ordeal, but I'm game!"

There followed some extremely loving conversation, and Colonel Marchmont was so embarrassed that he several times thought of stealing away. He was glad he didn't, for he heard something else that finally decided him.

"Oh, Reggie, we mustn't—it's foolish!" exclaimed Diana in a voice that trembled with anxiety. "I've got to think of my father—and Cloome Chase. For dad's sake, I've got to marry the colonel—"

"Oh, that's rot—that's absolutely ghastly!" protested Reggie, alarmed and almost at his wits' end. "Why, dash it, I'll see the old boy myself. I'll put it to him as man to man!"

"Don't, Reggie! You mustn't!" insisted Diana. "Oh, that would be terrible! Reg, dear, I'm so unhappy! I—I don't know what to do! If only father could see—"

She broke off, sobbing quietly; and Reggie was so tremendously upset that

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he jumped from the seat and made such a general commotion that the colonel quickly seized his advantage and stole away.

With a breath of intense relief, he found himself out of the conservatory, satisfied that he had not been seen. And the colonel went straight to Lord Cloome, and spoke his mind.

"I won't do it, Cloome! By gad, I won't!" he said curtly.

"My dear colonel, what on earth—"

"The whole thing's an infernal disgrace!" stormed Marchmont. "The very idea of my marrying Diana is a mistake—a wretched blunder. That girl of yours belongs to Hammerton. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you—"

"Then, Cloome, you've got to heed!" growled the colonel. "That girl belongs to Hammerton—and I'll see that he has her! Why, they're as unhappy as—any two people can be!"

"Unhappy!" echoed his lordship. "But I thought you said—"

"Unhappy because I'm in the infernal way!" stormed Marchmont. "And you've got to send for your daughter now—this minute, Cloome! Send for her, confound it, and tell her that there's

no truth about this preposterous rumour concerning me. Do you hear—do you hear? It's Christmas-time, by gad, and those two young people have got to be happy!"

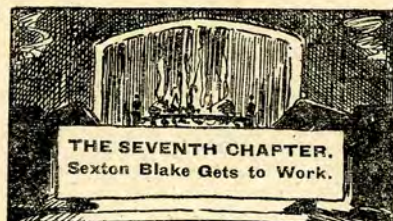
Lord Cloome bowed his head.

"Yes, colonel, I know it, and I'll do as you say," he said huskily. "I could see this coming all the time, but I didn't want to admit it. I haven't got the heart to part them now—and Reggie is quite a good fellow. I will tell Diana to forget anything I may have said to her regarding yourself."

"Capital—capital!" said the colonel, breezily. "Pon my soul, there's a big load off my mind."

But if there was a load off Colonel Marchmont's mind, it seemed to Lord Cloome that his own troubles were trebly intensified. He sat there, his despair poignant and distressing.

For there was now no hope of keeping Cloome Chase in the family. It was doomed to pass into the hands of an outsider. The old peer's last hope had vanished—as he had always feared it must vanish—and his whole attitude of crushed dejection was pathetic in the extreme.



A GHOST hunt, what?" asked Reggie, happily.

He was, in fact, almost delirious with joy, and had been in a state of intoxication for hours—not that he had touched a drop of spirits.

In the early morning Lord Reggie had learned from Diana—a changed and happy Diana—that everything was all right, and that her father looked upon their engagement with favour.

That same evening Reggie had proudly announced the engagement to all the guests, and Christmas had been spent far more joyously in consequence. Colonel Marchmont was as boisterous and as content as anybody—and he knew the meaning of those warm, tender glances which the Hon. Diana frequently bestowed upon him. For the girl instinctively knew that the colonel was the indirect cause of her happiness.

But now the hour was late, and the Christmas festivities were over. The ladies had retired, and most of the gentlemen, too. In the smoking-room Colonel Marchmont had suggested a ghost hunt—a search for the Flaming Spectre.

Blake, who knew so much, fell in with the scheme promptly. He had intended making some secret investigations that night. But, with this idea of a ghost hunt mooted, it would have been impossible for him to back out.

And so he agreed with enthusiasm.

"A ghost hunt, what?" repeated Lord Reggie, with relish. "Dashed good! I'm game, you know—game for any old thing. Just say the word, old companions, and we'll toddle forth!"

"I don't think we can do better than make a complete and thorough search of all the passages," said Blake, entering into the spirit of the thing. "If the ghost is anywhere within Cloome Chase, we will have him."

"That," said Lord Reggie, "is the stuff."

"It'll be a bit of a risk, you know," said Tinker, dubiously.

Blake gave him a glance, and Tinker said no more. As a matter of fact, he had been very doubtful about the advisability of the whole party going into those secret passages. It would be pretty serious if Waldo appeared, and started any of his electrical stunts.

But Sexton Blake was evidently determined, and Tinker had an idea that his master had got something up his sleeve. Tinker was rather aggrieved because Blake hadn't taken him into his full confidence.

The hunt was soon started.

The entry into the secret passage was made in the upper corridor—where Blake and Tinker had entered upon their first adventurous trip. Blake went first, with Tinker close behind, then Colonel Marchmont, with Reggie bringing up the rear.

The secret chamber was reached without incident, and an examination of this proved futile. A further passage was revealed beyond, leading into the north wing.

Blake was anxious to explore this, for he had an idea that some good might result. Still in single file, they had not proceeded far when Lord Reggie got a bit of a fright. They were all armed with electric torches, so there was plenty of light.

Reggie, with the colonel just in front of him, was chattering away happily. He didn't care particularly what he said, and he wasn't afraid of a dozen ghosts. In his present frame of mind, he felt like walking right through half-a-dozen of them.

The colonel turned to make some remark—and the colonel was not exactly slim. Neither was the passage broad. Consequently, when Marchmont half turned, he pressed the rear portion of his person hard against the wall.

"The fact is, Hammerton, I—"

The colonel broke off with a shout of startled surprise. For the solid wall in his rear suddenly gave way. And Reggie was provided with the startling spectacle of Colonel Marchmont falling headlong through an unsuspected cavity. The colonel just vanished, and before Lord Reggie could take a second breath, the wall thudded back solidly into place—without leaving a single mark or sign as to how it opened.

"Good gad!" gasped Reggie, blankly.

"Anything the matter?" asked Tinker, looking round. "Why, hallo! Where's the colonel? Stop a minute, guv'nor!"

"Good gad!" repeated Reggie. "The old boy's gone, you know!"

"Gone!"

"Absolutely!" said Reggie. "He turned to speak to me, and simply flowed through the wall! Never saw anything like it! The most dashed uncanny thing you could imagine!"

Blake squeezed past Tinker, and pushed on the wall with all his strength.

"This may be serious!" he said curtly. "From our experience, we know that these passages are full of pitfalls and hidden dangers. Where is this door, Hammerton?"

"I mean, where?" said Reggie. "Dash it, you've got your hand on it, old boy! Absolutely on the spot. A sort of 'open sesame' sort of business, by gad! The old bird turned to speak to me, and then melted away!"

Sexton Blake was more concerned than he cared to admit. Quickly, but without any sign of panic, he carefully examined

(Continued on column 3.)

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the wall—tapping it, and doing everything in his power to probe the secret of its hidden cavity. But all his efforts were in vain. The wall remained utterly solid.

Tinker was anxious, too. He assumed that Waldo had used that secret opening, and for some reason of his own had failed to close it. Indeed, perhaps he had been lurking behind the cavity and had deliberately pulled Colonel Marchmont through the opening. It seemed to Tinker that this was the most likely explanation.

"It's no good, old man—you'll never do it!" came a smooth, mocking voice.

Tinker whirled round, and flashed the light of his torch down the low, narrow tunnel.

The passage widened out somewhat a few yards away. And there, in that comparatively open space, stood the tall, fine figure of a Crusader, his coat of mail glistening and scintillating in the rays from the torch. The face part was provided with a kind of vizor, and Tinker was aware of two gleaming eyes staring out.

"The Flaming Sceptre!" he gasped huskily.

"No—Waldo, the Wonder-Man!" said the figure. "Why keep up the pretence, young man? Come, Blake—do you care for another little tussle?"

Sexton Blake turned, and ran swiftly towards the gleaming figure. And as he did so that coat of mail of Waldo's sprang into flaming life. Sparks shot out of him in every direction, and the air of the passage became charged with electricity.

Reggie stared, open mouthed—but was unable to get a clear view because Blake and Tinker were in the way. And the thing that happened next was so abrupt that it was over in a flash.

"Stop, guv'nor!" roared Tinker, in alarm.

He had visions of seeing Blake struck to the ground by another charge of electricity. And not only Tinker was surprised, but Waldo himself. For Sexton Blake charged straight at the Wonder-Man, and grappled with him.

And, amazingly enough, Blake was unharmed!

He had the advantage, and he knew it. With a skilful trip, he jerked Waldo over, and the master crook was swept off his feet, utterly taken unawares.

"By heaven!" he snapped. "What's this, Blake? How on earth—"

He broke off, for Sexton Blake was attempting to tear at the headpiece and drag it away. But with one supreme effort Waldo hurled himself completely backwards, rolled over, and was on his feet in a moment.

He dashed away, Blake in full pursuit.

But after a few yards, Blake was chagrined to see his quarry dive headlong through a trap in the floor. Only in the nick of time did Blake pull up. There was a thudding crash, and the trapdoor closed into place. Tinker came rushing up a moment later.

"Guv'nor," he panted, "where is he?"

"Gone!" snapped Blake. "He knows these passages and their secrets as well as a rabbit knows his own warren!"

"But—but how did you escape the current, sir?" breathed Tinker.

Blake held out a hand, and Tinker understood. Blake was wearing thin rubber gloves, and, what was more, he lifted up one foot also, and Tinker saw that the boot sole was entirely composed of crepe rubber, the heel being of the same material, thus insulating him from the earth contact necessary to effect an electric shock. In the early afternoon Blake had wired to London, and the

rubber garments had been sent down by special messenger, arriving late in the evening.

Blake had hoped to take Waldo by surprise, and effect a capture; but luck had been against him. He was still trying to unfasten the trapdoor in the floor when Lord Reggie recovered from his surprise.

"I say, what about it?" he asked. "I'm so frightfully mixed that I don't know where I am. But it seems that we ought to do something for the colonel. I mean, the old chap's been thumping away for some time—"

"Thumping?" repeated Blake quickly. "Absolutely! Kicking up a frightful din!"

Sexton Blake, realising that the colonel demanded his immediate attention, hurried back along the passage. Waldo could wait. There was no fear of the man trying to get away.

And just as Blake and Tinker got to that spot where Marchmont had vanished, the wall moved outwards, and the colonel appeared—hot, dusty, flustered, and tremendously excited.

"I've found something—by gad, I've found a fortune!" he shouted.

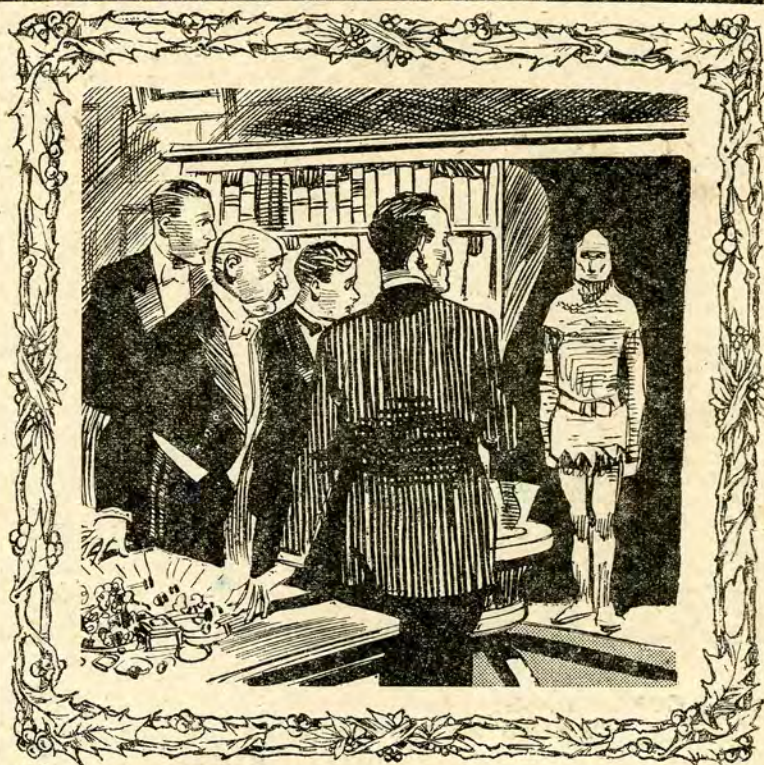
"What do you mean?" demanded Blake quickly.

"I'd have told you before, but that infernal door baffled me!" puffed the colonel. "I couldn't work the confounded catch! But there's here—in this cupboard. Diamonds—rubies—emeralds! Upon my soul, it's worth a fortune!"

Blake pushed his way through the opening, with Tinker and Reggie following excitedly behind. They found themselves in a queer little cupboard, with hardly room to stand.

And Colonel Marchmont's extraordinary statement was no exaggeration. There, in a corner, dusty and dull, lay a pile of wonderful old jewellery. There were pendants, bracelets, necklaces, and other articles of adornment, old-fashioned and dull with age. And all were set with precious stones of the most exquisite size and beauty. Sexton Blake's eyes gleamed as he looked at them.

"This is wonderful!" he said softly, giving Colonel Marchmont a quick glance. "It means that Lord Cloome's troubles are over—his worries are at an end. These jewels, gentlemen, are nothing more nor less than the famous Cloome heirlooms!"



Attracted by the sound in their rear, the group turned, and were astonished to see a portion of the bookcase hinge open like a door. And in the centre stood the flaming figure of the Spectre of Cloome Chase. (Chapter 8.)

covery the little party crowded into the library, where Lord Cloome was sombrely sitting at his desk, wrestling with unknown problems in figures as to what Cloome Chase would fetch at auction. A fine occupation for a Christmas night!

He looked up wanly and with a wearied frown as the party came in excitedly. He had stated his intention of remaining up until the ghost-hunt was over.

"I don't pretend to understand it, Cloome, but let me be the first to congratulate you!" shouted Colonel Marchmont heartily. "It's a sad loss to me, but your own gain is so great that I am compensated—by gad, yes!"

"I don't understand, colonel!" exclaimed Lord Cloome.

"The heirlooms—the Cloome heirlooms!" declared the colonel. "They're here, man—absolutely intact, by Jove! Cloome Chase will remain in your hands, and Christmas has brought you your full measure of good cheer!"

The old peer leapt to his feet so abruptly that his chair crashed over. His face was white and his eyes glittering feverishly.

"The Cloome heirlooms!" he gasped. "Impossible! You are mad, colonel! What folly is this? What ridiculous—"

"Calm yourself, Lord Cloome. The colonel is right," put in Sexton Blake, laying a hand upon his lordship's arm. "Here are the Cloome heirlooms, intact, as Marchmont just told you."

They were placed upon the table, still dusty and begrimed, but beautiful, nevertheless. Lord Cloome looked at the pile as though in a dream. And then, with tears welling in his eyes, he turned and walked to that picture with its face turned to the wall.

With bowed shoulders, and with a sob

in his throat, he turned the portrait outwards, revealing the likeness of a handsome but weak-faced youth. Lord Cloome wrung his hands, and then touched the picture with a gentle caress.

"My boy—my boy!" he muttered brokenly. "Dick, how I misjudged you, lad! Miserable wretch that I am! Dick, my son, forgive me!"

He broke down and sank to the floor, sobbing. Lord Reggie caught Tinker's eye, and they were both looking startled and embarrassed. Colonel Marchmont was standing stiff and erect, and in his eyes there was a gleam of quiet, intense satisfaction. For he, more than anybody else, could realise what the recovery of the Cloome heirlooms meant.

The colonel and Blake gently took Lord Cloome and lifted him up. But it was some moments before his passion of grief was over. But at last, with a firm effort, he controlled himself.

"Poor Dick!" he muttered huskily.

"Dead, and for all these years I have cursed his name, and disowned him as a son! And now, on Christmas night, this revelation is made to me, bringing joy on the one hand and untold anguish on the other. For Cloome Chase will remain in my keeping, and I know that my son is no thief."

"May we hear the story, Lord Cloome?" asked the colonel. "Having heard so much, perhaps it would be a well—"

"Yes, yes; to be sure," said the peer. "I can tell you in a few words. It was at the beginning of the war, and my son Dick was a waster—a dissolute spendthrift—a slacker. It pains me to speak ill of him now, but the truth is the truth. I had paid his debts time after time, always threatening to cast him off if he offended again.



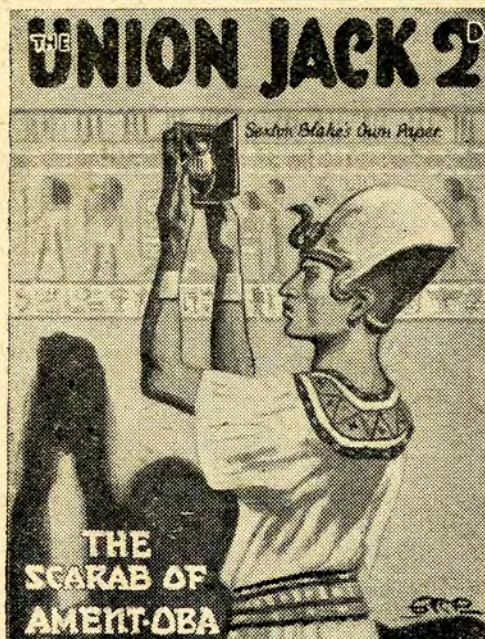
THE EIGHTH CHAPTER. The Secret of Cloome Chase.

THE discovery was nothing less than sensational.

Even Tinker, who professed to be no expert on jewels, knew that this collection was worth a fabulous sum—running into hundreds of thousands. And as Tinker looked at them, breathless and excited, he had the same thought as Sexton Blake.

Now they understood why Rupert Waldo had come to Cloome Chase, and what he had been working for. All along they had suspected that Waldo had some deeper motive than mere petty jewel-lifting from the guests. This treasure was well worth a vast amount of trouble.

Scarcely ten minutes after the dis-



NEXT WEEK

Sexton Blake and Tinker are taking a trip to the Seychelle Islands. No, not for a holiday! Nor is that the only place they go to—they pay a flying visit to the States first—and the object of their chase is the

SCARAB OF AMENT-OB

Next Thursday's brilliant yarn introduces a character new to U. J. fiction—Dr. Gorlax Ribart, hypnotist.

It is a safe prophecy that you will revel in this story. Gripping opening—swift development—packed with incident, and an exciting climax with Tinker well in evidence.

ANOTHER DISTINCTIVE COVER.

Other Stories on the Way—Feature—

GUNGA DASS

WALDO the WONDER-MAN

HUXTON RYMER

PRINCE MENES

YVONNE

KESTREL and—

MR. REECE of the CRIMINALS' CONFEDERATION.

The first Confederation yarn out appears in No. 1,056, during the first week in January. IT STARTS THE NEW YEAR WELL. Full details about this phenomenal yarn next week. Meanwhile, why not order a regular weekly UNION JACK from your newsagent? It's the only way.

"And then, one fateful night, he came to me begging for money—begging for money when I was hard put to find enough for my own needs. He was wild—half-intoxicated—and threatened impossible things. Sternly I ordered him out of the room, and was finally compelled to lock the door on his ravings. And the next morning he had gone—vanished in the dead of night—and you can imagine my horror when I found my safe smashed open, and the Cloome heirlooms gone!"

"Taken by your son?"

"Yes," muttered Lord Cloome. "But I thought he had stolen them for his own gain. The disgrace was so shocking that I dared not reveal it. I kept it secret, and not a soul outside the family, and one or two of my closest friends, have known the truth. I assumed that Dick went away—a thief, and I disowned him as a son."

"And in reality?"

"In reality the poor, foolish boy evidently took the heirlooms in a fit of pique," said the old peer. "He hid them in that secret cupboard, meaning to explain his cruel practical joke later, no doubt. But from that day to this I have never seen him or heard from him. I believe he joined the Army, and was probably killed in action. If he were alive he would have come."

Lord Cloome finished speaking, and again broke down. It was easy to understand his sorrow and anguish. After all these years to find that his

son was not the thief he had believed him to be! That fact in itself was a glorious, splendid one; but the injustice that he had done the boy seared the old peer like a hot iron.

Colonel Marchmont gave Lord Reggie a glance, and the pair left the library together. They felt that the old man would be better alone. Sexton Blake and Tinker made as if to follow, but Lord Cloome detained them.

"Mr. Blake, how can I thank you?" he asked simply.

"It is the colonel that you must thank," said Blake. "It was he who discovered the heirlooms—"

"Quite so; but that is a mere evasion on your part, Mr. Blake," said his lordship, with a faint smile. "But for your intense activities, the colonel would never have entered the secret passage even. My gratitude is more than I can say—Yes, yes, Reggie, come in, my boy!"

Reggie had opened the door.

"Hate to intrude, you know," he said; "but I thought everybody was clearing out, and—"

"Come in, Reggie!" said Blake. "It seems that happiness is being spread among everybody this Christmas."

"What-ho!" agreed Reggie heartily. "I mean Diana—what? Of course, it's a mystery to me. I'm such an absolute chump, if you know what I mean. And Di—Well, dash it, she's—she's the most glorious girl—"

"Exactly!" said Blake gently. "Where did you leave the colonel?"

"I think the old boy toddled off to bed."

"I must hurry; I want to have a word with him before he retires," said Sexton Blake. "I thought he would wait in the smoking-room."

"He may be there," remarked Lord Reggie. "Hanged if I know! Fact is I'm somewhat upside-down this evening. I mean all this excitement. Liable to make a chappie go off his stroke. Oh, by the way! What about that merchant with the fire oozing out of his carcase? Dashed queer blighter, in my opinion! Perhaps you can explain—"

There was a sharp crack in the rear, and the occupants of the library were astonished to see a portion of the book-case hinge open like a door. And in the opening stood the flaming figure of the Spectre of Cloome Chase.

"Great Scott!" gasped Tinker.

"The heirlooms!" said Blake sharply. Tinker gave a yell, realising suddenly the absolute power that Waldo possessed in that electric suit. He could walk in, render everybody senseless by a touch, and walk off with the jewels. But Waldo did not emerge.

"My work at Cloome Chase is finished," he said quietly. "From this moment the Spectre will vanish for all time. I bid you farewell, gentlemen!"

Before anybody could move the book-case swung back into place, and once more the library was itself. Lord Cloome was startled beyond measure, but Sexton Blake made no attempt to speak.

Instead, he made a dash for the door, wrenched it open, and sped along the hall with fleet steps. Dashing upstairs, he came to Colonel Marchmont's room and tried the door. It was locked.

In a flash Blake whipped out a bunch of skeleton-keys. At the second attempt the door opened, the lock conquered. The detective entered and found the room empty.

But at that very moment one of the wall panels slid back, and the figure of the Flaming Spectre entered the room. There were no sparks emanating from the man now. He stood there facing Blake, nonplussed, but with his face hidden by the vizor.

"Well, Colonel Marchmont," said Blake smoothly, "I was here first, you see!"

"What's the idea, Blake?" asked the voice of Waldo. "I'm not Colonel Marchmont—"

"Come, come, Waldo! I saw through your little game as early as yesterday," interrupted Blake. "Your disguise was good—wonderful, in fact—and you deceived me for several hours. But certain intonations of the voice, certain characteristics, gave you away. And since then I have been waiting and watching, wondering what your game was. I hardly expected you to act in the way you did."

"Blake, you're awfully too good for me!" said Waldo sourly.

"That was a smart dodge of yours to vanish as the colonel and then appear again as the Spectre," went on Blake. "But I hardly expected you to reveal the heirlooms to us. You defeated your own object, Waldo. That act of yours robbed you of the fruits of your long patience."

The figure removed the headgear, revealing the bluff, hearty features of Colonel Rodney Marchmont. But when he spoke the voice was that of Rupert Waldo. The two were one and the same!

The colonel was none other than the amazing Wonder-Man.

"The fact is, Blake, I was never cut out to be a crook," said Waldo disgustingly. "I'm too infernally soft! During these last two or three days I've called myself a fool; but the drooping figure of old Lord Cloome vanquished me, and all my resolves went into thin air."

Sexton Blake looked at Waldo with warm, kindly eyes.

"How did you know anything about the heirlooms?" he asked. "I want to hear the truth, Waldo. You have acted so extraordinarily that an explanation is due to me."

"Well, you shall have it," said Waldo. "I was in the States just over three months ago—as you well know, Blake. While there I ran across a young fellow in a low-down dope-den. His face looked familiar to me, and I remembered seeing a photograph of the Hon. Richard Pennant. Some illustrated paper had got hold of some story of his disappearance, I believe, and published his photo."

"And was this man Pennant?"

"He was—although the poor devil didn't know it," replied Waldo. "He was suffering from shellshock and loss of memory. He only got spasms now and again. I got chummy with him, scenting a coup. Well, he kept repeating a story about hiding some jewels in a secret passage, but couldn't give me any details. At first I thought he was just rambling, but I was soon convinced. I brought him to England with me, and soon set things in motion."

"By creating the character of Colonel Marchmont?"

"Yes," said Waldo. "My object was to get friendly with Lord Cloome. I invented this Indian colonel, and managed to join the same club as Cloome. Anything is possible with a little nerve. I met Lord Cloome, and cultivated him. He liked me—and, worse luck, I liked him."

"After a number of meetings, I casually mentioned his son, but he froze me up so abruptly that I avoided the subject after that. Well, I found that he was hard pushed, and offered to buy the estates. That brought me down here, and led to further intimacy. Just what I was after. Then, by tactful inquiry, and tremendous patience, I learned that the Cloome heirlooms had been stolen. Cloome confided in me to

that extent, but he didn't say who had taken the jewels. But I knew enough.

"I was fully convinced that Pennant's yarn wasn't moonshine," went on Waldo. "The jewels were here somewhere—but, according to what I could make out, the place was honeycombed with secret passages. So I decided to perform operations this Christmas, while all the guests were here. I thought it would provide me with some fun, and the guests with some excitement. And at the same time I should get hold of the heirlooms. Of course, I didn't know you'd be here."

"I don't know what to do with you, Waldo," smiled Sexton Blake.

"You'll do nothing with me," said the other. "And I shall be glad when Christmas is over. This Yuletide spirit saps my determination, and makes me a weakling! Think of it, Blake! A fortune in my hands, and I foolishly give it up to Lord Cloome!"

"Not foolishly, Waldo. You have brought joy to a saddened heart."

"Put it that way if you like," growled Waldo. "Of course, it was all bunkum about Cloome's daughter—just a part of the plan to get myself further into the old fellow's confidences. As a prospective son-in-law I learned all sorts of things that I should never have heard otherwise. And after getting the stuff I was too soft-hearted to run off with it! But Lord Cloome's such a fine old chap, and it seems a filthy trick to leave him in the lurch. His misery was pathetic, and even a stone would have been touched. And crooks have hearts, Blake, the same as other people."

"I know it," said Sexton Blake slowly. "Of course, my duty is clear. I shall have to reveal your true identity to Lord Cloome, and it will be for him to give you in charge for conspiracy—"

"Do you think he will?"

"I am certain he won't," replied Blake. "Will you change, or come like that?"

Waldo soon slipped off his extraordinary electric suit, and then they walked downstairs. In the hall they ran across Powell, the footman.

"You'd better come into the library, Robson," said Blake.

"Robson!" repeated the man, quickly. "I'm Powell, sir—"

"Come, come, Detective-sergeant Robson, I'm not so dense," smiled Blake. "I presume you are here to watch over

the various jewels belonging to the guests?"

"Yes, sir," said the Scotland Yard man—whom Blake had recognised from the first. "But I didn't know you'd spotted me, Mr. Blake."

The great detective chuckled, and they all went into the library.

"Lord Cloome, you have been deceived," said Blake, shortly. "This man is not Colonel Marchmont, but Rupert Waldo, a notorious criminal."

His lordship stared, in blank surprise.

"What on earth—" he began.

Blake quickly explained.

"Whatever this man is, I regard him as my friend," he said stoutly. "He has acted honourably and in the manner of a gentleman, Colonel! Tell me that Mr. Blake is mistaken!"

"I regret, Lord Cloome, that Mr. Blake is right," said Waldo. "I wish to thank you for your hospitality, and I must now bid you good-night."

He turned and left the room. And even Sexton Blake made no attempt to follow. It was for the police to arrest Waldo. In any case, Blake had no warrant, and could not act. He was glad he had no warrant.

The next day Lord Cloome's joy was complete, and Cloome Chase was a place of happiness and rejoicing. Never had a Christmas been so wonderful.

For the Hon. Richard Pennant arrived—sent by Rupert Waldo. He still suffered from loss of memory, but showed signs of recovery, and his father declared that the best specialists of London should attend him.

Lord Reggie Hammerton and Diana were supremely content, too—and Sexton Blake and Tinker, staying on for a few days longer, felt that they had earned the rest. And they wondered when they would run across that astounding Wonder-Man again.

Little did they guess that Waldo would make himself famous within a very few weeks—and that they themselves would be engaged in the task of hunting him down!

But at Cloome Chase, whatever Waldo's nefarious activities, they would never cease to regard him with feelings of warmth and gratitude. For a criminal, Rupert Waldo was a strange mixture, indeed!

THE END.

A WORD IN SEASON

(Continued from page 2)

appeared during the past year—that impress themselves on my notice—the packed interest of the Supplement, and the bright, compelling covers.

We now have the first volume of the Supplement almost finished. Next week's issue, the last of this year, will complete it. If you have done the same thing that I have done, and have detached the Supplements week by week, and kept them together, you will not have failed to see what a fine book they are shortly going to make. I have already arranged to have mine bound into book form.

I have realised that, on account of the unavoidable trouble of going to a local bookbinder and explaining just what you want, and haggling over prices, and so forth, many of you will neglect to take the opportunity of acquiring such a desirable book, though it will mean but a bit of bother and the expenditure of a few shillings.

The "U. J." is going to cut out the bother for you, and reduce the expenditure to the minimum.

I have made arrangements with a large firm of London bookbinders to do your binding for you. They have designed and prepared a very attractive binding-case, in which they will bind your Supplements at a charge, including postage, that will be a marked improvement over any terms you are likely to get locally.

The full details of this scheme will be announced next week. I think you will see, when you read what I have to say, that this is a service that is going to be to your advantage. Incidentally, I may mention that the worth of the bound volume will by far outweigh the cost of binding, so it's worth thinking about.

And now a word about the covers.

It is not too much to claim, I think, that the "U. J." covers during the past year have been in every way worthy of the high standard of the contents of the paper. Many of my chums have written to me expressing their great appreciation of the individual style of our "fronts," and certain it is that, when one passes a newsagent's shop, the cover design of the

UNION JACK leaps out at once from the clamour of its neighbours.

I was going to say "competitors," but, really, there isn't such a thing, as you know. The "U. J." stands in a class apart.

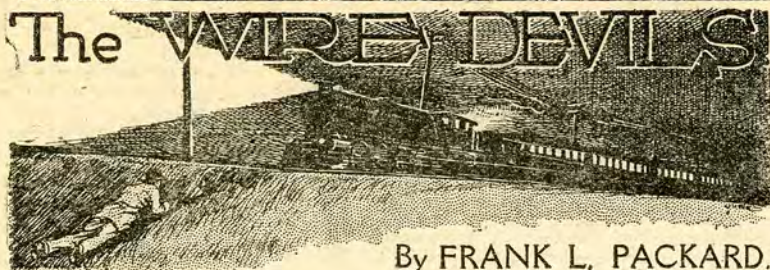
I hope it may do so for some considerable time yet, and that it may continue to be worthy of your attention week by week indefinitely. That is my aim, at any rate, and certainly there is a very strong programme for your entertainment in the coming year.

Of that, however, more anon.

Meantime, I will leave you to the enjoyment of this present Christmas story. You should find it, if you have any knowledge of your requirements, eminently to your taste. It should make your Christmas brighter, and, in the midst of perhaps more active pleasures, give you a feast of joyous reading you will long recall with pleasure.

And now, once again, a Happy Christmas to all of you!

The Editor



By FRANK L. PACKARD.

JUST TO REMIND YOU—

THE HAWK is a very astute person who is grievously troubling a gang of railway thieves in Western America by "tapping" the code messages they send over the telegraph wires. He has, by means of his knowledge of their cipher, stepped in and appropriated their spoils time after time, and the head of the gang has offered a large reward for his capture, dead or alive.

More, the chief of the railway's detective force, MacVigittie, thinks he is the actual head of the Wire Devils, and is also offering a large reward. The Hawk continues to bring off his coups in spite of both.

He hears the chief of the gang—a cripple known as the Ladybird—plotting to rob a bank. Paul Meridan, a trusted employee, is due to deposit a package of banknotes aboard a train for despatch. The scheme is to throw suspicion on Meridan by concealing in his rooms some of the bank's official wrapping-paper and seals. The Hawk decides to frustrate this plot.

The Hawk gets possession of the banknotes, and then, aboard the train, secures the dummy package that was to have cast suspicion on Meridan and destroys it. What he has still to do is to obtain the wrapping-paper and seals in Meridan's rooms—a difficult job, for he has been wounded.

He is in control of the train, but he must leave it, and get aboard another going back to Selkirk. "Extra No. 92" is on a siding some way ahead.

(Now continue with this week's instalment.)

An Even Break (continued).



THE HAWK straightened up painfully. Ahead, he had caught the glint of switch and station lights. The siding was on the left-hand side. He moved to the left-hand side of the cab, and lay on the floor by the gangway.

That letter! It seemed to obsess him now. If, when the

letter was read, the bank seal, the wax, and the wrapping-paper were found hidden in the boy's home, the fact that someone—he, the Hawk—had stolen the package from the car in no way changed anything.

The boy's apparent prior guilt was as glaring as ever. On the other hand, with the package gone, and if the seal and those other things were not found, the letter became simply the expression of some practical joker's perverted sense of humour, or the irresponsible work of some fool or crank.

He frowned in a sort of dazed irritation. He had known when he started after that dummy package in the first place that he would have to go all the way, so why was his mind dwelling now on useless repetitions?

The Hawk raised his head slightly; a deafening racket was in his ears. The freight was here, on the siding. He was roaring past it now. He could not hope for an open boxcar on the fast freight.

His eyes were searching eagerly for a flat car—a flat car loaded with anything that would afford him shelter. Yes, there was one—two of them—loaded with steel girders.

The roar subsided; he was past the station and into the clear again. And now the Hawk was at the throttle, easing the speed craftily.

He did not dare to "shut off" entirely, for, behind there at the station, they would know, if the sound of the exhaust ceased, that he had stopped. He checked a little with the "air" now. And now, calculating the speed reduced enough to risk a jump, he opened the throttle to its former notch, took up his newspaper

A HAPPY NEW YEAR BEGINS ON

January 3rd, the Thursday
that the first of the
CONFEDERATION
Stories Appear.

package, lowered himself to the bottom gangway step, and swung off.

He rolled down the embankment. The switcher and private car went by, and, gradually gaining speed again, racketed on up the right of way.

With a groan, the Hawk readjusted his displaced and makeshift bandage, and began to make his way back towards the station. If he had slowed enough to allow of a safe landing for himself, he had, of course, given Lanson the same opportunity; but he had no fear of that.

Lanson might have jumped, but Meridan, whom he had left unconscious, couldn't, and Lanson would stick to Meridan. As for the porter, the Hawk shrugged his shoulders, and he looked about him; the porter had not jumped.

He stumbled on. If he were right, if they had started a posse on a special in pursuit, he had plenty of time. The fast freight could not pull out until the special had gone by.

It seemed a long way, an interminable way, an immeasurably greater distance than he had covered coming up on the switcher. And then, at last, the tail-lights of the delayed freight came into sight around a bend, and grew brighter. And then, too, there came from the eastward the rumble of an approaching train.

He grew cautious now, and, creeping far out from the side of the track, passed the caboose, crept in again toward the line of cars, located the position of the flat cars, climbed aboard one of them, and crawled in under the shored-up girders.

The Hawk lay very quiet. He was weak again, and his head swam, and he was dizzy. An engine and car—MacVigittie and his posse, presumably—passed by on the main line; and then presently the freight, with a clatter and bang echoing from one to another down the length of cars, drew out of the station.

When the Hawk moved again it was as the train whistled and slowed for the Selkirk yard. Perhaps twenty minutes had passed; the fast freight, with no stops and already late, had made time.

He put his mask in his pocket, wormed his way out from under the girders, and peered ahead and behind. They were just crawling into the upper end of the yard.

He slid to the ground, found himself a little more steady on his feet, slipped across the spur tracks, dodged in between two buildings that flanked the side of the yard, and came out on the street.

Under a street lamp the Hawk looked at his watch. It was one o'clock. He swayed a little again, but his lips set hard. There was not very much time.

Somewhere up the line the switcher and the private car would come to a stop, and they would bring Meridan home; and once that happened, with its consequent stir in Meridan's apartment, it would be impossible to get in there, and the game, as far as the boy was concerned, would be up.

"Yes," said the Hawk, as he forced himself along the street, "I guess maybe that's right, I guess maybe I'm a fool—but it wasn't a square deal."

A street car at the next corner took him across town; and fifteen minutes more found him standing in the unlighted vestibule of the Linden Apartments.

The tiny flashlight swept the ground-floor apartment doors, and an instant later the door of Apartment B yielded noiselessly to the deft manipulation of a skeleton key.

The Hawk closed the door and stole forward. It was a rather fashionable apartment, as the Ladybird had said, but it was also a very small one, small enough to warrant the presumption that the young couple did not keep a servant, and that there would probably be no one there except Meridan's wife.

A door at his right, as he felt out in the darkness, he found to be open. He listened for the sound of breathing. There was nothing. The flashlight winked, and the Hawk stepped forward into the room.

It was the sitting-room. The flashlight was sweeping about now in an impulsive little ray. A door, closed, leading to an inner room, was on his right; facing him was a heavily portiered window, the portieres drawn; and a little to the left of the window was the mantel.

The flashlight's ray wavered suddenly, unsteadily, and the Hawk caught at the nearest thing to him, the table in the centre of the room, for support, a sense of disaster upon him, a realisation that, lashed on as it might be by force of will, there was a limit to physical endurance, and that the limit had well-nigh been reached.

His hand brushed across his eyes, and brushed across them again to clear his

sight, as he tried to follow the flashlight's ray to where it played jerkily on a massively framed picture over the mantel.

He bit his lips now, bit them until they bled, and moved forward and laid his parcel of banknotes on the floor that he might have the use of both hands, and climbed upon a chair, and felt in behind the picture. Yes, it was there! His fingers closed on a roll of paper, twitched and shook a little as they pulled it out, and a small package from inside the roll fell with a slight thud to the mantel, and from the mantel bounded off to the floor.

The Hawk caught his breath as he listened, and descended from the chair.

"Clumsy fool!" he grunted fiercely, as he knelt on the floor. "I—I guess I'm pretty near all out to do a thing like that."

The flashlight came into play again, and disclosed a metal seal and several pieces of dark-green wax peeping through the paper wrapper that had been split apart in the fall.

He picked them up, and put them in his pocket; then, loosening his vest, he tucked the roll of wrapping paper inside his shirt.

Well, it was done now; he had only to get back to his room, and there was surely strength enough left for that.

Again his hand swept across his eyes, and pressed hard against his temples—and then, stooping swiftly, he clutched at his package of banknotes on the floor beside him, and stood up, rigid and tense.

Out of the darkness, almost at his elbow, with a startling clamour that

clashed and shattered through the silence, and seemed to set a thousand echoes reverberating through the room, came the ringing of the telephone.

Some one in the inner room stirred. The Hawk drew back hurriedly into the window recess behind the portieres. The telephone rang again. There came a step now, and now the room was flooded with light, and a woman, a dressing-gown flung hastily over her shoulders, crossed from the inner doorway to the table, and picked up the instrument.

"Yes? . . . Hallo! . . . What is it?" she asked a little sleepily. "Yes, this is Mrs. Meridan . . . What! . . . My husband!" Her voice rang out in sudden terror. "What did you say?" she cried frantically. "Yes, yes—the Hawk—my husband—unconscious. . . . You are not telling me all the truth—you are trying to keep the worst from me—for Heaven's sake tell me the truth! . . . Not dangerous? . . . You are sure—you are sure? . . . Yes, yes, I understand! . . . At the station in half an hour. . . . I will be there."

Mechanically she hung up the receiver on the hook, and clung for a moment to the table's edge, her face grey and bloodless; and then her lips moved, and one hand clenched until the tight-drawn skin across the knuckles was an ivory white.

"I pray they get this Hawk!" she whispered. "And may they kill him! The coward! The miserable, pitiful coward!"

The Hawk's fingers were digging at

the window-sill, because somehow his knees were refusing to support his weight. What was she saying? He did not quite understand. Well, it did not matter, she was gone now into that other room—only she had left the light on. It was very strange the way his hand on the window-sill seemed to keep pulling his body around in circles!

Time had lost concrete significance to the Hawk. She appeared again, fully dressed now, and, switching off the light, went out into the hall, and the front door closed behind her.

The Hawk parted the portieres, and staggered across the room—and, a moment later, a dark form, a newspaper parcel clutched under its arm, emerged stealthily from the vestibule, and, reeling like a drunken man, disappeared in the darkness down the street.

A Hole in the Wall.



THE wound was healed—partially, at least. If the Hawk had unduly shortened his period of convalescence, he was perhaps justified, and not wholly without excuse! He stood now in the black shadows, huddled close to the wall of the round-house.

And now he moved stealthily forward, until, from a crouched position, he straightened up against the

(Continued overleaf.)

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2. Any alteration or mutilation of the coupon will disqualify the effort.

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7. The Editor reserves the right to disqualify any coupon for what, in his opinion, is good and sufficient reason, and it is a distinct condition of entry that the Editor's decision shall be accepted as final and legally binding in all matters concerning this competition.

8. All entries must be sent through the post, and any received after **FRIDAY, DECEMBER 28th**, will be disqualified. No responsibility can be accepted for any effort, or efforts, lost, mislaid, or delayed. Proof of posting will not be accepted as proof of delivery. Unstamped or insufficiently stamped efforts will be refused.

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U.J.

Football Competition No. 10.

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Closing Date, **FRIDAY, DECEMBER 28th.**

ARSENAL	v. CHELSEA
ASTON VILLA	v. CARDIFF CITY
MANCHESTER CITY	v. WEST BROMWICH A.
BARNLEY	v. CLAPTON ORIENT
BRISTOL CITY	v. STOKE
LEEDS UNITED	v. SOUTH SHIELDS
GILLINGHAM	v. CHARLTON ATHLETIC
PLYMOUTH ARGYLE	v. MERTHYR TOWN
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PRIZE MUST BE WON! NO ENTRANCE FEE!

wall at the side of one of the few windows which were lighted. Lanson had strolled aimlessly across the tracks from the station some ten minutes before, and, five minutes later, MacVigtie had followed Lanson to their chosen spot for secret conferences, this little "cubbyhole" of a turner's office in the roundhouse, as the Hawk, from more than one experience in the past, had very good reason to know. They were in there now, and, as the Hawk was likewise exceedingly well aware, the events of the next few hours, and incidentally his own particular movements, depended very pertinently upon the movements of MacVigtie and Lanson.

Lanson's voice in quietly modulated tones reached the Hawk:

"Yes, both trains are on time to the minute; I've taken care of that. And so far there doesn't seem to be a hitch anywhere, and with your men boarding the trains west of here at different stations along the line, and mixing quietly with the passengers, I don't see how anyone could be the wiser on that score. Yes, it looks as though everything were all right—eh, MacVigtie?"

"I don't know; I hope so," MacVigtie's deep growl came in reply. "Anyhow, we've carried out instructions from Washington, and it's up to the Secret Service crowd as to how it pans out."

"No, it isn't!" declared Lanson, still quietly. "It isn't up to a soul on earth except those of us who have got the responsibility of this division on our shoulders! I believe the plan is a good one; but because it came from Washington doesn't let us out—not for a minute! What about Birks; has he shown up yet?"

"Not yet," MacVigtie answered, and swore suddenly under his breath. "And I don't mind admitting that the crowd down there in Washington make me tired! It's over two weeks ago that I put it up to them. They said they

would take the matter under consideration, and in any case would send one of their men, this Birks, out here to make an investigation. But nothing doing! Then, as you know, I wrote them again a week ago, when we knew this Alaskan gold shipment was coming through, and you know their reply; they outlined a plan for us, and stated definitely that Birks would be on deck to-night. Maybe he will—in time to tell us what we should have done!"

"The Secret Service isn't a police force," said Lanson tersely. "The only excuse they would have for acting at all would be if your pet theory were correct—that the Hawk and his gang, apart from their systematised murders and robberies, were also the ones who have been flooding the country with those counterfeit ten-dollar notes. You had no actual proof to offer, and Washington evidently hasn't felt quite sure about it as you have. However, there's no use discussing that to-night. If Birks shows up, all right; if he doesn't—well I don't see that he could make any difference one way or the other now."

There was silence for a moment, then Lanson spoke again.

"What worries me as much as anything," he said slowly, "is the express company making a shipment of money at the same time—forty thousand dollars in the car's safe. Of course, it's logical enough with a half million to guard, anyway, but it's an added incentive to those devils, that's all. A half million in raw gold isn't any easy thing to pick up and walk off with, and there's more than an even chance that the Wire Devils might pass it up on that account; but with banknotes alone in so large an amount—"

"If they know about it!" interrupted MacVigtie brusquely. "And it's not likely they do. You can't send a heavily guarded express car on from the coast and keep it mum that gold is going through, especially when the papers print pictures of the cases being swung

out of the steamer's hold on arrival from Alaska—but the other's different. I'm not banking on them passing up the gold on any account, though they may, at that; but in any case, they'll be welcome to open the safe now, won't they?"

Again there was an instant's silence; and the Hawk now, as though fearful of losing a word that might be spoken, strained forward closer still to the side of the window.

"Yes, that's right!" Lanson laughed now in a grimly humorous way. "It's in the biggest case of all! Yes, I guess it's all right, MacVigtie;—anyway, another hour or two will tell the story. The shift should have been made at Mornleigh without any trouble, and the Limited will come through here without a thing in the express car except the guards! If they hold her up anywhere on the division, that's all they'll find—the guards, and one of your posers. Yes, it ought to work."

Lanson's voice took on a curiously monotonous drone, as though he were checking over the details in his own mind, and unconsciously doing so audibly.

"The Limited takes water at Mornleigh, and No. 18 always takes the siding there to let the Limited pass, so there's nothing in that to arouse suspicion. In the darkness, with the door of the Limited's express car only a foot or so away from the door of No. 18's baggage car, and a picked crew to transfer the gold, I don't see how there could be any leak."

"The Limited pulls in here with its guarded express car—everything looks just as those Wire Devils would expect it to look—and they know the gold left the coast on the train, and in that car. Yes, I think we win to-night. If they hold up the Limited they'll catch a Tartar, and without any risk on our part as far as the gold is concerned."

(Another instalment of this magnificent yarn next week.)

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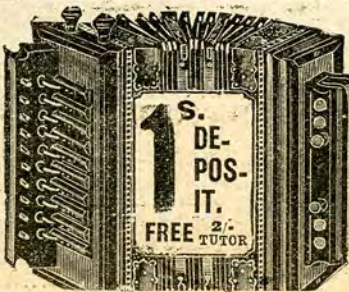
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