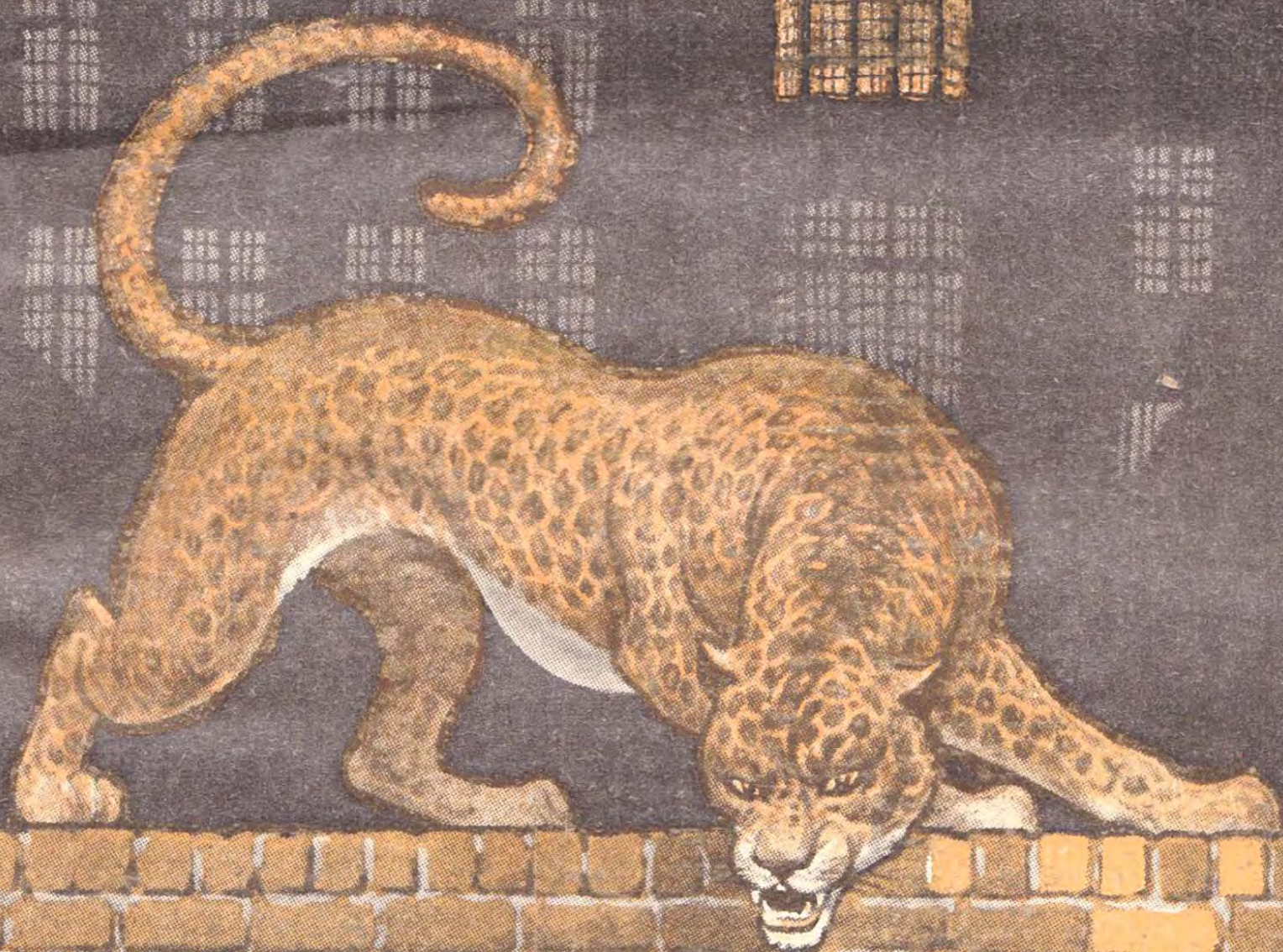


£9,500 in Prizes in
this Issue!

THE UNION JACK • 2^D

'Sexton Blake's Own Paper'



THE LEOPARD OF DROONE

A COMPLETE STORY OF SEXTON BLAKE AND WALDO THE WONDER-MAN

"CELEBRITIES"—SPECIAL JUDGING FORM.

BY filling in the blank form given below, and thus collecting on one sheet all the solutions to the various picture-sets, competitors will greatly facilitate the task of the adjudicators, and thus allow the Editor to hasten the publication of the result of this contest.

THE USE OF THIS SPECIAL COUPON IS NOT COMPULSORY, but we invite readers to make use of it. Where it is used, the solutions on the accompanying picture-sets will be disregarded entirely, so that competitors should make sure the "Judging Form" represents their exact solutions. FULL SETS MUST BE SENT IN ALONG

WITH THE SPECIAL FORM, but so long as the "Judging Form" contains the competitor's complete solutions, and is duly filled in with signature, etc., no solutions or signature are necessary on the accompanying picture-sets.

Competitors will at once realise the advantage of this innovation in simplifying the task of the judges and saving time in the announcement of results. But it must be clearly understood that the use of the Special Form is optional, and competitors who send in only the ordinary coupons will, of course, receive equal consideration.

"CELEBRITIES" SPECIAL JUDGING FORM.

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In entering "Celebrities" Competition, I agree to accept the Editor's decision as final and binding.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

U.J.—Closing date, Thursday, December 18th, 1924.

For Full Rules and Particulars, see Opposite Page.

£10 a week
for **LIFE!** — or, **£4,000**

For solving simple 'CELEBRITIES' puzzles.
SECOND PRIZE £300, THIRD PRIZE £200

Last Week of our Free-for-All Puzzle Offer!

WE have now come to the Final week of this amazing offer, and here you will find the Tenth and Last Set of puzzles.

The idea of the competition you can see at a glance. Each picture-puzzle represents a celebrated name, and even if you cannot recognise them all it does not matter, because we have already given you a complete list of names for use throughout this contest. So that you have only to decide which name best fits each picture.

ALL YOU HAVE TO DO

in solving the pictures is to fit the correct name to each and write it in the space underneath. Then you should get your entries ready for sending in, and this should be done without delay.

HOW TO SEND IN YOUR ENTRIES.

When you have solved this last set of pictures to your satisfaction, sign your name and address, **IN INK**, on the coupon attached to this set. Then cut out the whole tablet—**DO NOT CUT THE COUPON AND PICTURES APART**—collect the other nine picture-sets, and see that you have filled in your solutions properly under all the pictures, or have transferred your solution to the "Judging Form," according to the special directions given on the opposite page. Now fasten the ten sets together,

and if you use the "Judging Form," fasten it on the front of the sets, and post without delay to:

"CELEBRITIES,"

c/o **UNION JACK,**

Gough House, Gough Square,

London, E.C. 4.,

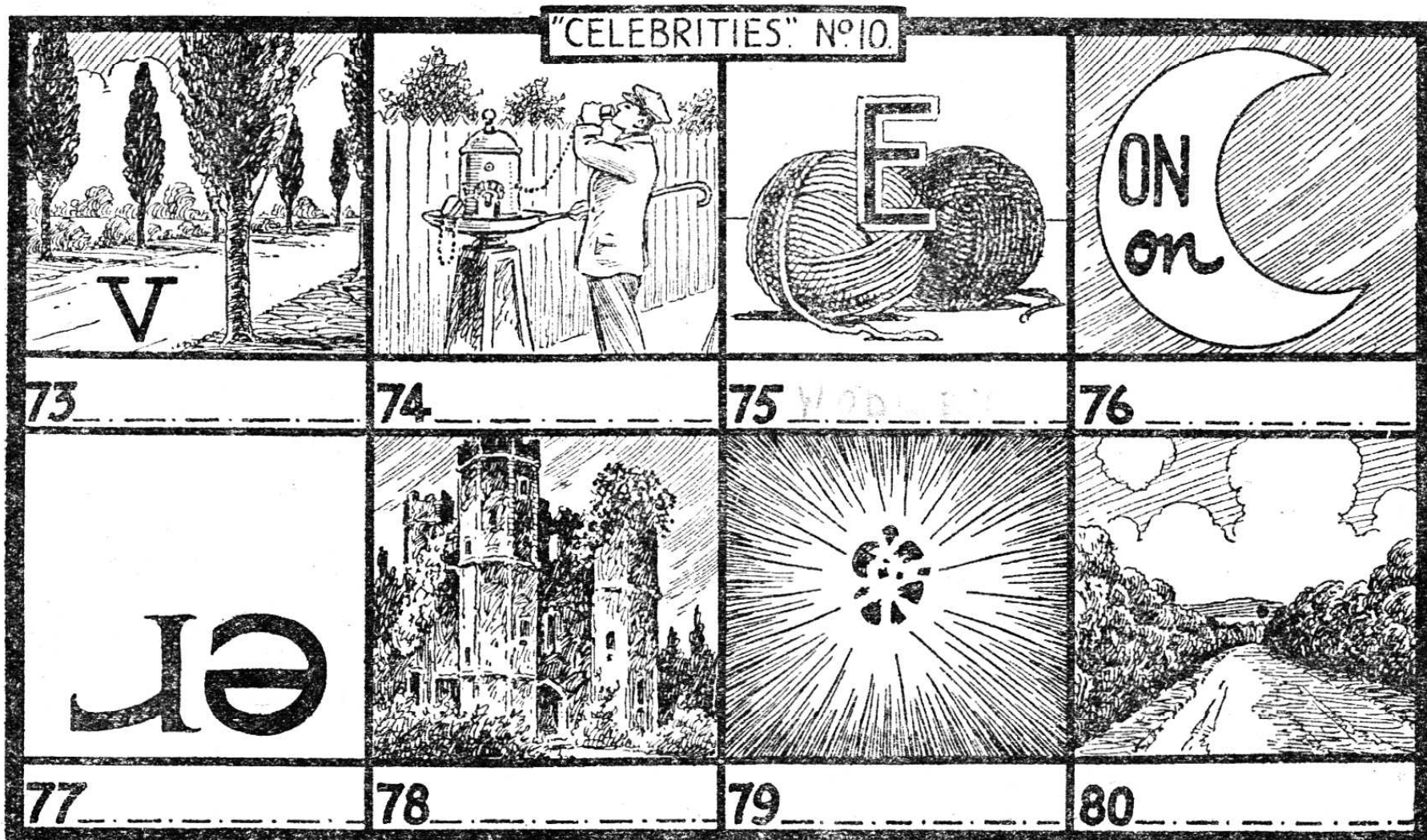
so as to reach that address not later than **THURSDAY, DECEMBER 18th.**

All entries must be addressed to Gough House, as above.

Extra copies and back numbers should be obtained from your newsagent, or should he be unable to supply, from the Back Number Dept., Bear Alley, Farringdon Street, London, E.C. 4. The price is 2d. per copy, plus 1d. extra for postage on the first copy, and 1d. for each additional copy. No order will be executed that is received at the Back Number Dept. later than **FRIDAY, DECEMBER 12th.**

THERE IS NO ENTRANCE FEE. No entries arriving after **THURSDAY, DECEMBER 18th,** will be admitted to the contest.

A Special Newsagent's Prize of £50 will be paid to the newsagent who supplies the First-Prize Winner with his copies.



In entering "Celebrities" competition, I agree to accept the Editor's decision as final and binding.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

U.J. Closing date, December 18th.

SEND YOUR ENTRIES NOW—DON'T DELAY!

THE FIRST PRIZE of £4,000 (or £10 a Week for Life) will be awarded to the reader who sends a correct, or most nearly correct, solution of the ten sets of puzzle-pictures. The other prizes will be awarded in order of merit.

The Editor reserves full right to divide the prize-money as he thinks fit, should any ties make this necessary. No competitor will receive more than one prize.

It is a distinct condition of entry that the decision of the Editor be taken as final and legally binding throughout this contest, and entries will only be accepted on this understanding.

You may make as many different attempts as you please, but every attempt must be a complete solution of the whole series of puzzles; it must be quite distinct and separate from any other attempt, and all solutions must be written in the proper spaces provided. Every effort must be written **IN INK**, and entries mutilated or bearing alterations or alternative names will be disqualified.

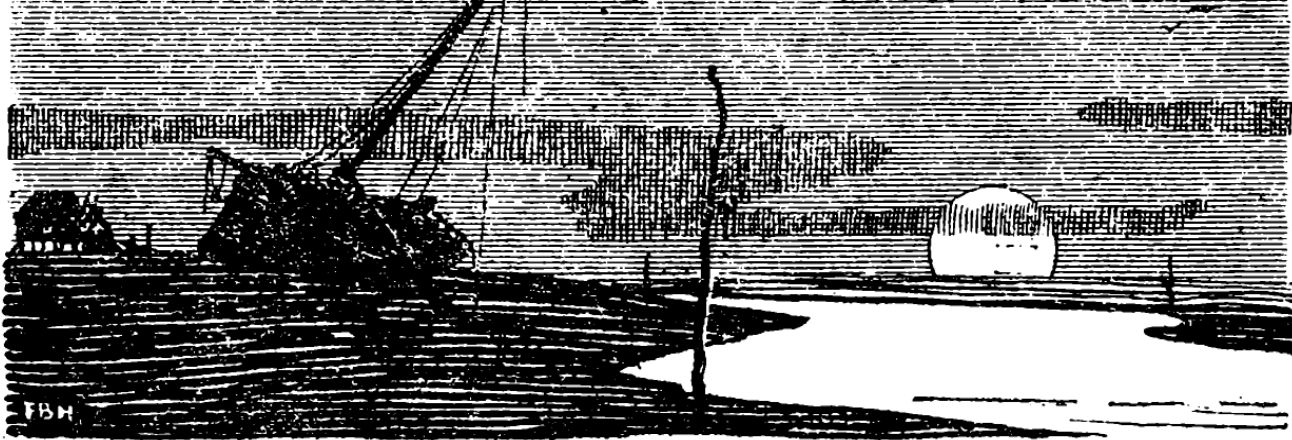
No correspondence will be allowed. No responsibility can be taken for delay or loss in the post or otherwise. Proof of posting will not be accepted as proof of delivery.

This competition is run in conjunction with "Answers."

Employees of the proprietors of this journal may not compete.

Particulars of **SPECIAL JUDGING FORM** Scheme will be found opposite

The MYSTERY of the MARSHES



A brilliant new Serial of Gun-running Adventure on the Essex coast, by - - - - - H. W. TWYMAN.

THE FIRST CHAPTERS IN BRIEF.

BOB CASTLE and his cousin, JIM POLDEN, are two young smacksmen engaged in the work of oyster fishery, and living in the village of Merwell, on Mersea Island.

During a cricket match Jim Polden goes to field a ball which has been knocked by his cousin through the skylight of the Ketch Inn. He enters the loft through the broken panes, but is overpowered by several mysterious strangers who are there, and who suspect him of spying on them.

He is kidnapped and taken out to sea aboard a Dutch-built boat called the Vandervelde. Bob, suspecting what has happened, sets out in pursuit in a small boat, the Ben Gunn.

In the chase Jim manages to escape, and to reach the Ben Gunn. He has discovered that the mysterious men of the Vandervelde are gun-runners, smuggling arms to Germany or Russia.

The Ben Gunn heads for home, but is in turn pursued. The two cousins make for the mud, and by a smart ruse convince the gun-runners that they are dead. The next morning, when the would-be murderers have gone back to the Vandervelde, the two cousins return to Merwell in their boat, having decided to try to avenge their injuries and to bring the gun-runners to justice.

Jim goes to Colchester to hide, as the innkeeper of the village would know by his return that the gun-runners' plot had failed. Bob returns to his cottage. His uncle "Old John" Polden, who is a coastguard, has a talk with him, during which it comes out that the coastguard already suspects the existence of a gun-running gang.

In return Bob promises to tell what happened to himself and Jim out on the estuary the previous night.

(Now read on.)

THEN, speaking in subdued tones that were more dictated by caution than necessity, Bob told the old coastguard what had happened to himself and his cousin, omitting nothing.

As the narrative was unfolded the listener's face betrayed in turn his astonishment, his wonderment, and a growing anger that reached its culminating point when Bob gave a cold and unadorned account of the shooting on

Bradsea flats.

"When we came in on the flood this morning," he wound up, "Jim and I had a talk over the whole affair. We decided that none of the Vandervelde's crew knew who I was, for they hadn't seen me closely from beginning to end. Jim was known to them, of course. We are fairly certain that they think we are both lying dead on the mud, or washed out to sea by this time; so, if any of their pals happen to be ashore here—and Merwell seems to be their headquarters—it would be fatal to Jim, at least, to show himself to be still alive.

"Me it doesn't matter about. Nobody except yourself and my mother knows that I was out on the estuary last night. That's why Jim has gone off to Colchester to lie low for a day or two, while I keep my ears open to find out what else there is to discover. I have asked mother not to breathe a word about my being out all night, and if you or aunt or cousin Madge are asked, you can say that Jim has turned up missing some-

how, but that you're not worrying just yet."

"And what are ye goin' to do, my boy?" asked old John. "How can we get movin' against these men?"

"There's one man at least in Merwell who knows more than he should do about these gun-runners," replied Bob, "and that is—"

He stopped suddenly, and half-turned in his chair. The light that streamed through the little diamond-paned window had been partly obscured for a moment by some moving object, and the thing, whatever it was, had just registered itself as a fleeting impression on his mind.

"What's the matter?" asked the coastguard, looking in the direction of his nephew's glance. "Something on the road?"

Bob looked for a second without answering. The window was partly open, and gave a view, through a mass of surrounding greenery, of the little cottage garden and the road beyond. There was nothing in sight from where he sat.

"I thought it was mother, maybe, come back from the village," he remarked to himself. "But no, it must have been the wind blowing the ivy."

In spite of this self-suggested explanation, he felt far from reassured. What he had just been revealing to his uncle was not the sort of conversation that anybody should be allowed to overhear, and the opened casement would have made that quite possible.

He felt vexed with himself. It was an obvious precaution that he should have taken already. Muttering something under his breath he got up, and reached out his hand towards the window-catch.

At that instant there was a knock at the door, which was but a few feet from the casement. The abruptness of it made him start in spite of himself. He

had heard no footsteps up the gravelled path, as was normal.

He snatched at the latch and flung open the door.

Facing him on the step was a young fellow of about his own age, holding in his hand a large eight-gallon drum of oil.

"Morning, Bob!" he said with a self-conscious smile. "Your mother ordered this. Asked me to bring it up from the shop. It is paid for."

Bob slowly stretched out his hand to take the drum, but stared the while into the other's eyes. They were old acquaintances, if not friends. Adam Sperrit, the son of the village oilman, and he had attended the local school together, but that fact had not been the seed of any friendship. Their long acquaintanceship had merely resulted in a mutual toleration. Sperrit the younger was not Bob's "sort."

He was a sallow-faced individual, with a manner of interlarding his speech with sniggers that could be very irritating. Nor was he as straightforward as most people liked. Bob knew him of old as one who would as readily resort to an underhand trick as do the equally easy honest thing. And, ever since the success of his father's oilshop had led to the launching of an equally successful garage, he was inclined to "fancy himself," and to put on a conceited air that was as insufferable as his meaningless sniggers.

"Take it, then!" he said impatiently, as Bob reached towards the drum of oil absently. "I can't stand here all day. I've got business at the garridge." He always referred to his father's premises as the "garridge," whether he meant the oilshop or the tin shed annexe, in which were housed one or two ancient cars, and a placarded, varnished showcase of "spares."

Bob Castle took the drum, and deliberately let his eyes travel down the other's body till they stopped at his feet.

He had silent, rope-soled canvas shoes on. Was it accident—or design?

Bob's gaze travelled to the left, and, on the flower-bed underneath the casement window he saw unmistakable marks—marks that could have been caused only in one way—by rope-soled shoes.

"Thanks!" he said deliberately, looking Sperrit in the eyes again. "Don't let me detain you."

He stood in the doorway holding the oil-drum as the other turned with one of his habitual sniggers and retreated down the path.

Bob closed the door with a worried expression, and faced his uncle.

"You heard?" he asked. "It was Adam Sperrit. He was listening!"

"WHAT'S that you say, boy? Listening?"

A Search—and a Summons.



"Ay!" replied Bob Castle. "He was listening. Heard all we had to say, I shouldn't wonder."

The two stared at each other across the living-room table for a few seconds in silence. Then:

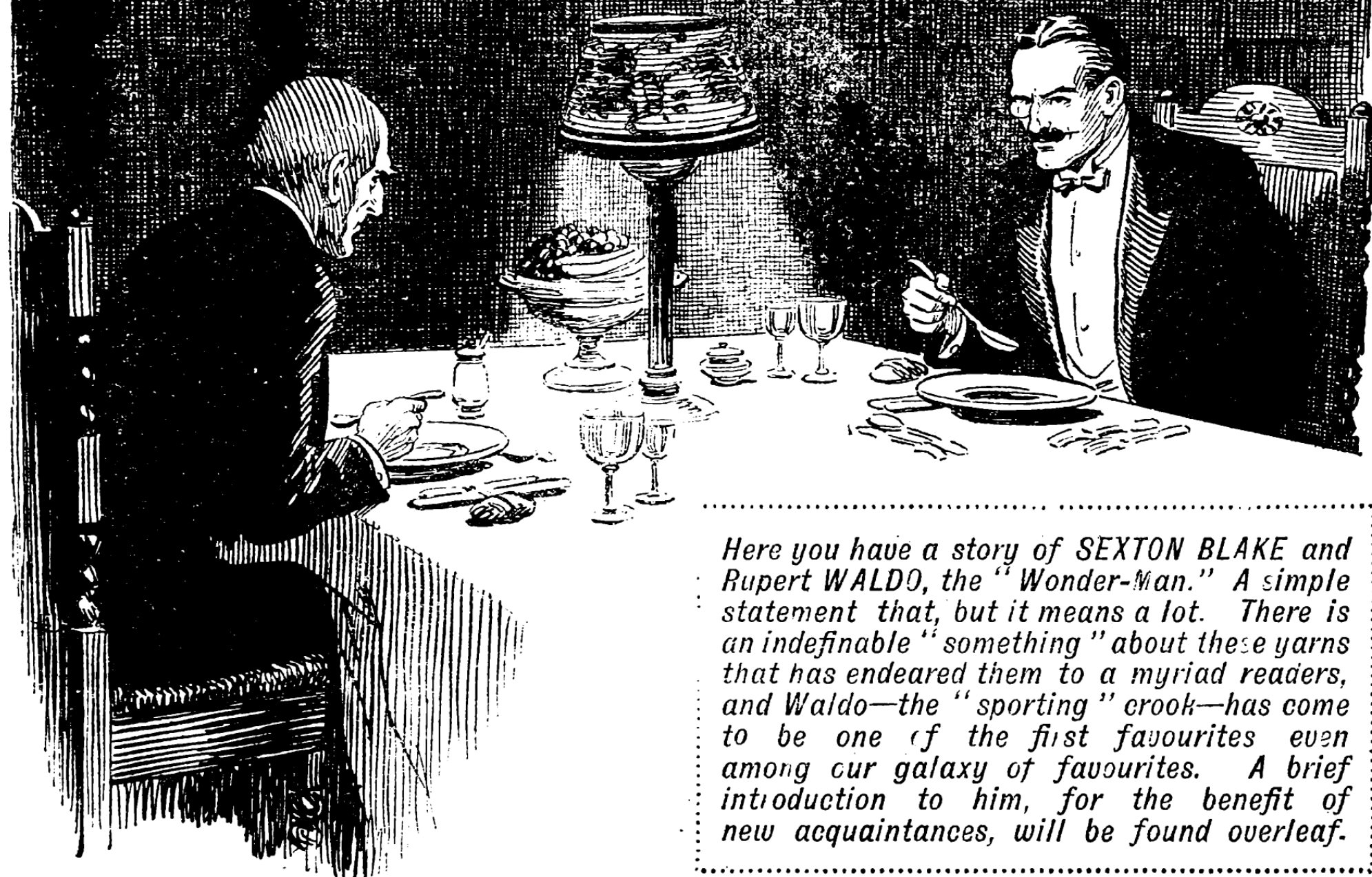
"What d'ye make of it, Bob?"

"I dunno," the youth replied frankly. "Anything, or nothing. If it had been

anybody but Adam Sperrit I'd ha'

(Continued on page 30.)

The LEOPARD of DROONE



Here you have a story of **SEXTON BLAKE** and **Rupert WALDO**, the "Wonder-Man." A simple statement that, but it means a lot. There is an indefinable "something" about these yarns that has endeared them to a myriad readers, and **Waldo**—the "sporting" crook—has come to be one of the first favourites even among our galaxy of favourites. A brief introduction to him, for the benefit of new acquaintances, will be found overleaf.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Two Interruptions.

BRIGADIER-GENERAL HUME held his soup spoon poised as the windows of the oak-panelled dining-room shook and rattled.

"The wind is boisterous to-night," he observed, glancing across at his host.

"Very," agreed **Sir Marcus Droone** shortly.

Silence fell between the pair, and dinner proceeded to the accompaniment of the crackling open fire, and the sob and howl of the wind outside. It was undoubtedly a wild winter's evening.

The great dining-room at **Droone Manor** was a gloomy, forbidding apartment at the best of times. But just now, lighted only by a single lamp in the centre of the table, the room was singularly eerie.

The oak-panelled walls were relieved here and there by massive pictures, although the shadows were so deep that little or nothing of these could be seen. Overhead the ceiling was ribbed by massive oaken beams, and the polished floor scattered with Oriental rugs.

The central table was comparatively small—a solid, antique affair which was undoubtedly valuable, but by no means elegant. The high-backed chairs were stiff and cheerless.

The two men sat alone, and formed a striking contrast. For while **Brigadier-General Hume** was a sound, well-proportioned man with grizzled hair and a pleasant, genial face, **Sir Marcus Droone** was slight, wizened, and gloomy of countenance. Both were in evening dress.

"The soup is atrocious!" said the host, breaking the silence irritably. "All servants are the same, **Hume**—they are a worthless, incompetent crowd, at the best. Ever since **Barton** became ill, we have had this trouble. And it is worse than useless to talk to the fellow's wife."

The general smiled.

"My palate may be plebeian, **Sir Marcus**, but I must confess I find the soup excellent," he observed. "Indeed, even when you spoke I was about to pass a complimentary remark in favour of **Mrs. Barton's** cooking."

"Huh! I am glad you regard it so highly!" snapped **Sir Marcus**. "If you will be good enough to touch the bell—— Good gad, **Hume**!" he added abruptly, setting down his spoon and staring across the table. "I had completely forgotten **Zana**!"

"Surely the omission is not tragic?" asked the general drily.

"Tragic—no!" retorted the baronet. "But it is unpardonable. I always believe in feeding animals before myself. Confound **Barton**! Why on earth should the fellow get ill like this at such an inconvenient time?"

"Unfortunately, pneumonia strikes a man without much preliminary warning," said the brigadier. "No doubt **Barton** is even more upset than we are, **Sir Marcus**. Pneumonia is an infernally uncomfortable business."

Sir Marcus frowned, as though disliking his guest's lightness. He pushed back his chair, and rose.

"Perhaps you will excuse me while I attend to **Zana**?" he asked.

"Certainly! Go ahead!" said the other. "Or, better still, perhaps you will permit me to witness the entertainment?"

"By all means, if you care for that sort of thing," said **Sir Marcus** gruffly.

Now that he was on his feet, he compared quite favourably with his companion. His slightness was more or less illusory. His rounded shoulders, and the way he carried himself, lent him an air of decrepitude which was more apparent than real.

They left the dining-room, and emerged into a wide, draughty hall, lit by a guttering candle on a small antique stand. The great staircase led upwards into black obscurity, and the lower hall was equally dark.

They passed along in this gloom, **Sir Marcus** with a shuffling gait, and the brigadier with a firm, brisk step. **Droone Manor** was

a big old mansion, and its very walls seemed to exude mustiness and age.

Hume accompanied his host with a slightly amused boredom, and he could hardly believe that the hour was only a little after six-thirty in the evening. In this great house, the darkness and silences were so profound that the very hours themselves seemed to have double their normal share of minutes.

Brigadier-General Hume was glad that he had announced his intention of returning to London the following day. He was heartily sick of Droone Manor and its eccentric host. He had spent three days in the place, and it seemed to him like three weeks. In all this great house there were only two other human occupants—the butler and his wife. These two servants comprised Sir Marcus' entire domestic staff. And the butler, much to his master's annoyance, had contracted a severe chill, which had now turned to pneumonia. Barton was confined to his bed with a considerable temperature.

"The man's a fool!" growled the baronet testily. "I have warned him repeatedly against contracting colds and chills. All this infernal trouble! I've even got to feed this animal! When Barton is disabled the whole routine of my household is upset. We are at sixes and sevens!"

The brigadier smiled.

"Well, it helps to break the monotony, at all events," he said dryly.

"Rubbish!" said Sir Marcus, pausing before a door, and pushing it open. "When I am down here, I like monotony. I cannot live unless my house is orderly and regular. This man's illness is a confounded nuisance!"

"I wonder you don't always live at your London club——"

"Two weeks in London are more than enough for me," interrupted Sir Marcus sourly. "I detest London! I like to be alone with my antiques and my books. Devil take the woman! Why hasn't she left a candle here? Unless I am talking to these servants from morning till night they forget their own duties."

He struck a second match, and then gave a grunt as he found a candle ready for him on a little side-table. His guest had never ceased to wonder at these paltry, niggardly arrangements.

Sir Marcus Droone was little short of being a millionaire, with extensive estates in the country, and enormously valuable property in London. And yet he lived with almost the frugality of a pauper, and his great mansion was akin to a prison.

Having lit the candle, Sir Marcus moved forward. They had entered a kind of winter garden—a great glass-covered space abounding in shrubs, which stood out weirdly in the flickering, guttering light.

They passed through this apartment, and through a doorway on the other side. And now they were in an exceedingly curious place—a lofty enclosure where the air possessed a curious, animal-like tang.

Hume had been here before by daylight, and he assumed that the room had originally been built for billiards. But many years ago it had been transformed into a kind of miniature zoo. Cages lined the walls, but all save one were empty and deserted.

At one time, Sir Marcus had possessed an extensive menagerie, but of late his interest in animals had waned. They were too costly. Their upkeep was expensive. And now there was but one solitary beast to remind him of his former extravagances.

WALDO, the Wonder-Man!

This famous character is an old-established one in the series of Sexton Blake stories, and an old favourite with UNION JACK readers.

His engaging personality, as well as the boldness and audacity of his many illegal enterprises, have endeared him to his readers, as have his sporting spirit and remarkable feats to Sexton Blake.

Rupert Waldo, known also as the Wonder-Man, is endowed by Nature with a body no less uncommon than his personality. He is gifted with—or afflicted by—a rare, but nevertheless real enough, capacity for being indifferent to bodily pain. He is immune to the pain of burns, cutting, and such-like, and is, besides, possessed of a wonderful muscular development which enables him to perform the most surprising feats of strength.

This abnormal state of things may seem to be merely literary licence, but it is a fact that such men exist, and the phenomenon is well known to medical science. Occasionally cases of the sort are reported in the newspapers.

His wonderful powers have often secured his escape from Sexton Blake when arrest seemed certain, but the sporting spirit of this most unusual opponent has, in course of time, won the detective's sincere regard.

In this yarn, the latest of a long succession about Waldo the Wonder-Man, he adopts a characteristic role, and, in seeking to dispossess the Master of Droone of certain possessions, comes "up against" his old obstacle, Sexton Blake.

The two men approached the largest cage of all—which was set at the end of the room. Behind the bars lurked a sleek, lithe form. The animal was a Burmese leopard, not over large, but a perfect specimen. His eyes gleamed wickedly as he stared out from his cage.

"We haven't forgotten you, Zana," said Sir Marcus, his voice becoming soft and caressing. "Good boy! You are hungry, eh? Well, well, we will soon adjust that little detail. Good Zana—good boy!"

The leopard commenced purring at once, and rubbed against the bars of the cage with obvious pleasure. He knew his master, and the brigadier stood looking on with interest.

The animal was fed—Sir Marcus kindly and gentle to a degree. He would treat his servants with harsh brutality at times, but for this wicked-looking leopard he seemed to exhibit a genuine love.

As a general rule, the butler attended to this work, but the unfortunate Barton was incapable of any labour at present—and probably would be unable to leave his bed for ten days or a fortnight.

The host and his guest returned to the dining-room after Zana had made a fair start on his evening meal. Mrs. Barton was waiting, and appeared to be in no way surprised at her master's actions.

She was a thin, spiritless old woman, silent and unemotional. Twenty-five years at Droone Manor had killed any animation that she may have once possessed. She was waiting by the side-board, with numerous dishes. The interrupted meal was resumed.

But the next course was hardly three minutes old before another interruption came. Somewhere in the great building a bell jangled faintly. And Sir Marcus looked up with a quick, irritable frown.

"Who's that?" he snapped harshly. "Who in the name of perdition can that be? I never have visitors! I hate visitors! Who can this be, bothering at such an hour as this?"

"Mrs. Barton will undoubtedly settle the point," said Hume.

Under the circumstances, he was very good-tempered. A man with less control

over his emotions might have cavilled at his host's continued irritability. But the brigadier-general seemed to inwardly enjoy it.

He was quite curious regarding the cause of that urgent ring. It was the first visitor who had come to the Manor during the length of his stay. A thought occurred to him.

"The postman, no doubt," he ventured.

"The postman? Nonsense!" retorted Sir Marcus. "It's barely six-forty-five. The postman is never here before seven, at the earliest."

"You are lucky to get an evening post at all, down in these benighted regions," said the guest. "Gad, I was forgetting! We're only at Ingletowe, after all—barely twenty miles from London! I keep thinking we're buried a hundred miles from anywhere."

His conversation annoyed Sir Marcus, as the brigadier could see. Sir Marcus was jumpy, nervous, and impatient. His plate was neglected, and he kept his gaze upon the door.

Mrs. Barton appeared with an envelope in her hand.

"What's that?" snapped Sir Marcus. "What have you got there, woman?"

"A telegram, Sir Marcus."

"A telegram? For me? Who on earth——"

"Possibly it is mine," suggested Hume.

"Let me see!" snapped Sir Marcus, waving his hand impatiently.

He took the telegram, glanced at it, and tore it open. Then, with the pink form unfolded in his hand, he remained still for several seconds. The brigadier, watching closely, saw his host's eyes narrow, and then a pleased, excited expression crept into the old man's eyes.

"No bad news, I trust?" asked Hume.

"Bad news? Eh? No—no, not at all!" exclaimed Sir Marcus hastily. "A mere notification from my—from my solicitors, confirming a transfer of property."

The brigadier reached for the wine decanter, mentally deciding that Sir Marcus was a bad liar. And he was very curious about that telegram, too. The decanter slipped from his grasp, and fell over with a crash and a clatter.

"Oh, sorry!" gasped Hume. "Deucedly clumsy of me——"

He leapt to his feet, and reached across the table, and appeared to give all his attention to mopping up the wine that had been spilt. But his quick, alert eyes caught one clear glimpse of the words on the telegram before Sir Marcus folded the form. Hume saw them upside down, but this did not prevent him reading them.

And the brigadier-general was filled with a new-born curiosity.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Letter and the Leopard.



MR. RUPERT WALDO mused thoughtfully.

"There's something in this," he told himself. "Perhaps my time won't be wasted after all. Everything comes to him who waits—and goodness knows I've waited long enough!"

The master-crook, known throughout two

continents as the Wonder-Man, was not quite himself at the moment. To be

quite frank, his best friend or his worst enemy wouldn't have recognised him.

Certainly, the most astute Scotland Yard detective would never have associated Rupert Waldo with Brigadier-General Hume. And yet, to be strictly truthful, they were one and the same man.

And Rupert Waldo was a very disappointed schemer. For four solid weeks he had haunted Sir Marcus Droone like a shadow, and all his careful work had been for nothing. As far as he could see, not one penny piece would he make out of the daring masquerade.

He had cultivated Sir Marcus in London, at the latter's club. He had displayed an enthusiastic interest in antiques and musty volumes. For hours and days he had soaked himself in the subject.

And by reason of his charming, ingratiating manner, he had gradually worn down his intended victim's reserve. Before Sir Marcus had returned to Droone Manor the pair had been positively thick.

And Waldo, just as he had planned, was in possession of an invitation to visit the Manor as Sir Marcus's guest. And now he was practically at the end of his visit—to say nothing of being at the end of his patience.

For, in a nutshell, he had drawn blank.

It need not be supposed that an astute criminal like Rupert Waldo would waste his time over a trifle. Antiques had no fascination for him. Valuable volumes and rare prints were useless in his eyes.

But rubies, on the other hand, appealed quite strongly to his imagination. And he was well aware that Sir Marcus Droone had the reputation of being one of the greatest experts on rubies in the country. And he knew, moreover, that Sir Marcus possessed the finest collection of pigeon-blood stones in the country.

Waldo had come to Droone Manor with the genial intention of taking that collection away with him. But as the collection wasn't available, he had simply wasted his time.

He knew it now, and he was heartily sick of the whole affair—although with admirable self-control, he managed to maintain an amiable front. Waldo was an optimist, and he always met failure with a smile.

Nobody—not even his host—knew exactly how persistently and cunningly he had forced this friendship upon Sir Marcus. And nobody knew his deep disappointment at having had all his work for nothing. He had believed the rubies to be under lock and key at Droone Manor. But they weren't.

During his stay he had learned quite definitely that the old baronet kept his collection in a strong-room at his bank. The project, therefore, was distinctly off. And on the morrow Waldo would shake the dust of Droone Manor from his feet, and would try his luck elsewhere.

His only consolation was the realisation that he had had a quaint experience, and that no harm was done. And now this telegram had come—this unexpected wire which would possibly put a different complexion on the whole business.

The message was not exactly sensational, but Waldo was greatly interested, nevertheless. That one glimpse had been sufficient. His eyes were super-keen, and he had made no mistake.

"Coming to-morrow. Letter in post now. Be ready.—GRANT."

That was how the telegram had been worded. And Waldo was curious. Who was this mysterious Mr. Grant? And why was he coming? And why, above,



"Sorry, old man," murmured Waldo; "but I've got to get rid of you somehow!" He had produced an electric torch, and by its light he unlatched the door of the leopard's cage, and deliberately walked in. (Chapter 2.)

all, should Sir Marcus "be ready"? Be ready for what?

Waldo's thoughts instantly reverted to the rubies. Vaguely he connected Grant with the precious stones. The cunning, greedy look that had entered Sir Marcus' eyes was eloquent in itself.

And the host's next words helped to confirm Waldo's suspicion.

"You are returning to London to-morrow, I think?" asked the old man.

"I am afraid so."

"At what hour?"

Waldo thought rapidly.

"Well, I was thinking that the last train would be quite suitable," he replied cheerfully. "I believe it is a good train."

"I really think you had better go earlier, general. I do, indeed!" interrupted Sir Marcus with anxiety. "Things are very awkward here with Barton ill, as you know. I hate being frank, but it would really be a relief to my peace of mind if you could see your way clear to depart even earlier."

"To-night, for example?"

"Yes, Hume, to-night," said Sir Marcus bluntly. "Forgive my apparent inhospitality—"

"My dear sir, pray make your mind easy," laughed Waldo. "If it will cause you any pleasure, I will take my departure almost at once. And now, if you don't mind, I will venture out for a cigarette and a breath of air."

"By all means," said Sir Marcus. "I will ring for Mrs. Barton to have your baggage ready."

The baronet's haste was well-nigh indecent, but Waldo affected not to notice this. He lit a cigarette, strolled out into the hall, and donned an overcoat and cap. Then he sallied out into the windy evening, on a mission that was far less innocent than Sir Marcus supposed.

"Seven o'clock!" muttered Waldo. "I fancy I shall just be in time."

He remembered that a letter was in the post from the unknown Mr. Grant, and that letter was obviously of some importance. Sir Marcus had clearly proved that he wanted his guest out of the way before Mr. Grant arrived. And Waldo was not slow in putting two and two together.

All his instincts were aroused afresh. If there was any possibility of making a coup now, after giving up the affair as hopeless, the enterprise would be all the more attractive. Furthermore, it would give him the keenest possible pleasure to rob this miserly, ill-tempered crank.

The Wonder-Man found himself out on the short drive. The old house was surrounded by great trees, and their leafless branches were now swaying and sighing in the gusty wind. The air was keen, and although the evening was black, there were a good many stars gleaming.

Waldo reached the gate, and then strolled down towards the village. Inglestone was a small place on the main London road, in the heart of rural Essex. It was very quiet and old-world, yet within forty minutes of London.

Footsteps sounded in the lane, and Waldo chuckled to himself. He had not miscalculated. A few moments later a dim form loomed up and resolved itself into the figure of the postman.

He was a rather surly young fellow named Griggs. Waldo had already met him, which was a distinct advantage.

ANSWERS
EVERY MONDAY—PRICE 2:

"Why, hallo, Griggs!" exclaimed Waldo genially. "I thought I recognised your footstep. Looks like being fine for a spell."

"It do, sir, although rain ain't far off," replied the postman.

"Anything for me in your bag?" asked Waldo. "If so, I'll save you the trouble of going up the drive."

"There ain't one for you, sir, although there's a registered letter for Sir Marcus," replied the postman. "It wouldn't do for me to give ye that, I count. Sir Marcus be a rare queer sort—"

"He's all right when you know him," interrupted Waldo with a laugh. "I'll take the letter, Griggs. It's got to be signed for, eh? All right, let's have the slip."

He spoke with a boisterous, authoritative air, and the postman only hesitated a moment. Then he brought the letter out and handed it over. A minute later he was trudging on his way up the lane.

Waldo returned to the Manor and went to his own room, informing Sir Marcus that he would be ready to leave almost at once. In the privacy of the gloomy bed-room he ruthlessly tore open the registered letter, and found that it contained a single sheet of notepaper. The message was short, but every word was a joy to Waldo's heart.

"Dear Sir Marcus,—Although I am posting this early, I shall wire you this afternoon. It is my intention to visit Droone Manor to-morrow evening. I shall arrive between six and seven, and I trust you will be alone. I am bringing with me the finest parcel I have ever managed to secure. I went half across Burma to secure these particular stones, and only arrived in England on Tuesday."

"Trusting you are well, and that you will be able to make all the necessary arrangements,

"Your obedient servant,
"ARTHUR GRANT."

There was a great difference in Rupert Waldo after he had read the letter. His indifference vanished. Rubies! The finest parcel that Sir Marcus Droone's agent had ever secured! Here was something tangible—something worth aiming for!

The Wonder-Man's brain worked speedily. His visit was not to turn out

fruitless, after all. Even if he couldn't lay his hands on his host's main collection, he could at least enrich himself by securing this valuable consignment of rubies.

"They'll be worth anything from ten to fifty thousand!" muttered Waldo tensely. "By the Lord Harry! They're mine, too! This is the easiest game I have ever handled."

He continued to turn over the position in his mind. He could, of course, pretend to depart, and still hang about, and waylay the messenger in the grounds. But this would be crude, and something might go wrong—Grant might adopt a subterfuge which Waldo could not possibly foresee.

And then an idea occurred to him. It was only a vague suggestion, but it quickly took shape. And the more Waldo thought about it the better he liked it.

"Why not?" he muttered. "I've got my things here. I could do it easily. Barton is in bed, and helpless for days. And that fool of a woman is as short-sighted as a blind kitten. Yes, by gad! It's the best way. And it'll be safe, too—safe and entertaining."

Waldo grinned with delight.

He had been bored stiff during this visit, and not only bored, but had felt sick with disappointment. The very thought of activity quickened his pulses. And it pleased his vanity to choose a plan of action that involved risk—that smacked of adventure.

For Rupert Waldo had two sides to his nature.

This astonishing crook always worked alone, and he never entered upon a scheme unless it was fairly certain of success. But it was characteristic of him to choose a difficult task. If there was an easy way and a hard way, he would invariably choose the hard way, for the mere sake of the extra thrill that would be obtained.

He made up his mind with his usual swift decisiveness.

Unlocking a leather travelling case he took out a small medicine box. His preparations occupied a brief minute. Then he relocked the case, and went down the wide, gloomy stairs. As he had anticipated, Sir Marcus was in the library.

The eccentric old baronet rose as Waldo entered.

"Ah, you are ready, my dear general?" he asked. "I need hardly tell you how sorry I am to lose you—"

"Don't trouble to express regrets, Sir Marcus," smiled Waldo, advancing with outstretched hand.

They clasped, and the next second Waldo acted like a flash.

He jerked Sir Marcus towards him, held him in a vice-like grip with one arm, and at the same moment clapped a silken handkerchief to the baronet's face. Sir Marcus struggled feebly. He was like an infant in Waldo's amazing grip.

The Wonder-Man had not been misnamed. Although of average build his strength was utterly startling in its enormous range. An untamed gorilla was not stronger than Rupert Waldo. His muscles were like tempered steel, and he could easily have crushed his victim's ribs if he had so desired.

But Waldo did not want to inflict any injury upon Sir Marcus. There was nothing bloodthirsty about him. Under no circumstances would he descend to wanton brutality.

Within thirty seconds Sir Marcus' struggles ceased. He lay in Waldo's arms, inert and apparently lifeless. But the drug which Waldo had used

was harmless enough, and would have no ill effects.

With a soft chuckle, the master crook turned to the door and passed out into the dim, shadowy hall. He had no fear of meeting Mrs. Barton—for this worthy dame had strict orders from Sir Marcus to keep her own quarters at all times unless expressly summoned.

Waldo's next move was a curious one. He passed through the winter garden and entered the private menagerie. Apparently he intended placing Sir Marcus in one of the latter's own cages!

"Sorry, old man, but I've got to get rid of you somehow, and this method seems about the most effective," murmured Waldo drily. "And you love the gentle Zana so much that his companionship ought to be congenial."

Waldo had produced an electric torch, and by the light of this he unlatched the door of the big cage and coolly and deliberately walked in. The leopard was crouching back in a corner, and made no attempt to molest the intruder. Waldo himself was indifferent. He had no fear.

He passed to the rear of the cage and entered the leopard's sleeping quarters. There was a kind of inner cavity, with two compartments. Sir Marcus was thrust into the second compartment and placed upon the floor. There was a door which shut off this cubicle from the leopard's usual lair. Sir Marcus, therefore, would be in no danger.

"Sorry to treat you so unceremoniously, but I'll make amends later on," said Waldo smoothly. "I'll bring you a mattress and a few cushions, Sir Marcus. At the present moment you don't need any."

He chuckled, locked the door, and passed out of the sleeping quarters into the big cage. His electric torch flashed its beam of light to and fro. And the Wonder Man caught his breath.

The door of the cage stood open—and the leopard had gone!

THE THIRD CHAPTER. A Hunting Interlude.



WITH two brisk strides Waldo crossed the empty cage and examined the catch of the door. Then he cursed himself for a fool.

"An infernal block-head like you doesn't deserve to succeed in anything!" he told himself harshly. "Rank carelessness! Criminal negligence!"

If the whole game falls through you'll only have yourself to blame."

Waldo's condemnation of himself was justified.

Now that it was too late he realised that he was guilty of arrant neglect. Instead of pausing to satisfy himself that the door had closed tightly, he had, upon entering, pushed it to with a sharp snap. He had heard the click of the catch, but had not made sure by taking a close look.

Certainly he had been hampered by Sir Marcus' inanimate figure. But Waldo did not excuse himself on this account. He was all the more furious because it was contrary to his careful, methodical nature to make such a blunder.

He was a man who worked syste-

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matically, making his plans and preparations with a punctilious care that was worthy of greater things. And on the rare occasions when he stumbled his anger against himself was acute.

"This means the wreck of the whole enterprise!" he muttered as he leapt out of the cage and flashed his light swiftly round the dim corners of the obsolete zoo. "Rubies, eh? I don't deserve a red bead! I'd better clear out while I've got the chance!"

With these bitter reflections, he hurried out into the winter garden. Eagerly he flashed his torch up and down, hoping that the leopard would be skulking behind some of the drab-looking evergreens. But the animal had gone, leaving no trace.

And Waldo's worst fears were fully confirmed when he emerged into the hall. On the far side an antique pedestal was toppled over on its side, with a flower-pot in pieces near by. And just beyond was a narrow lattice window, half open.

Clearly the leopard had leapt through the window opening, catching the pedestal in its jump. Instinctively the beast had made for the open air—as Waldo had feared.

He stood there, his face grim and set.

The animal was savage, and heaven alone knew what mischief it would stir up in the district. For even if Zana cleared clear of humanity—which was doubtful—it would undoubtedly attack sheep and other domestic beasts.

As a result the whole countryside would be in an uproar. By the morrow there would be a hue-and-cry. There would be inquiries at the Manor, for it was common knowledge in the village that the eccentric old baronet kept a leopard as a pet.

And, instead of remaining private and alone, to work out his cunning scheme of robbery, Waldo would have half the village about his ears. And the very life of his plan depended upon undisturbed privacy.

He leapt through the window recklessly, alighting on the moss-grown terrace. He stood there, staring keenly across the neglected lawns and flower-gardens. The evening was still young—for even now the hour was barely seven-thirty. But all was quiet and still, except for the whistle of the wind and the restless rustling of the leafless trees.

A few clouds were scudding across the winter sky, and the moon had appeared. The garden was thick with black, intense shadows. Waldo stood there, biting his lip with vexation.

On the wind came the faint sound of a dog howling, intermixed with the fleeting chime of the church bells. The ringers were probably putting in some practice for Christmas—for Yuletide was comparatively near at hand.

Waldo walked across the lawns with noiseless tread, wandering about aimlessly for a few minutes. And he realised the utter impossibility of his quest. Even if the leopard was still in the garden the beast would not allow itself to be seen.

Perhaps it was skulking in the thick of the bushes. Perhaps it would suddenly spring and make a savage attack.

Waldo gave no thought to his possible danger. He had no more fear of the leopard than if it were a kitten.

By this time, probably, the brute was a couple of miles away. And long before the morning the whole district would be ringing with the news of some farmyard tragedy—a mutilated cow or a devastated chicken-house.

With a grunt, Waldo turned back to-

wards the house. He would have to alter his entire programme. Indeed, as far as he could see, he would be compelled to abandon his scheme entirely.

Something loomed black and sinister against the skyline.

Waldo turned his head sharply, instantly aware that the object had not been there a second earlier. He started. There, crouching on the top of the wall was a black, lithe shape.

"By all the saints!" muttered Waldo tensely.

He could hardly believe the evidence of his eyes. He could hardly credit that the escaped leopard was here, practically within a few yards of him. And yet the animal's presence was natural enough.

Even now Waldo was dubious. At the slightest move, Zana would probably leap off the wall and vanish again. There was one chance. Waldo reached for his hip-pocket. A single shot, and the brute would be no more. The sound of the report would have to be risked.

But Zana was the first to act.

Without warning, he made one clean, cat-like leap. He came at Waldo, as savage and terrible as a man-eating tiger. What a leopard lacks in size, it makes up for in ferocity.

Waldo caught a glimpse of the gleaming, luminous eyes as the beast flew through the air at him. And immediately afterwards the incident became amusing.

At least, Rupert Waldo deemed it amusing. Ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have found it decidedly tragic. But the Wonder-Man was glad enough to get his fingers upon Zana's unsuspecting throat.

Quick as the leopard was, Waldo was even more speedy. He met the attack squarely—instead of attempting to dodge. And a second later the leopard received the biggest surprise of its life.

While one steel vice closed round his throat, another vice locked his front paws together. And before he could attempt to get his hind legs into action he was swung over, flung to the ground, and held there, spitting, snarling, and thoroughly scared.

Waldo's method was drastic in the extreme.

He hadn't given the savage creature a second's chance. And by his swift, instantaneous action, he had saved himself from being torn by the ugly claws. Once Waldo gripped, his grip was a fixture.

And to this decisiveness of action he owed his safety.

Had he failed to hold the leopard at the first impact, even Waldo's strength and agility would have availed him little.

But he had met the attack fearlessly, with the result that the leopard was now the under-dog. He was held down with ease, and Waldo was laughing happily at this unexpected stroke of fortune.

"All right, my beauty—don't worry yourself!" he murmured. "I don't think I'll finish you off. Mrs. Barton might get to know of your decease, and that would be awkward. Upon the whole, you'd better go back home like a good little fellow!"

He shifted his position slightly, and continued to hold the leopard down with his body, knees, and one hand, while he swiftly unbuckled his belt.

With this he strapped the brute's front paws together, and the position became easier. He used his handkerchief to bind round the leopard's mouth. A minute later Zana was being carried swiftly back into the house.

Waldo reached the cage without seeing any sign of Mrs. Barton. He deposited the leopard behind the bars, and slightly loosened the strap. Then he swiftly made his exit, and closed the door tightly.

The delay had not been so very great, but Waldo made all haste to carry on with his plan. Passing upstairs, he reached his bed-room, and here he lit half a dozen candles.

His next task was to open his travelling-case and take out a number of materials. For half an hour he was busy. He even visited Sir Marcus' own bed-room, returning to his own with a collection of clothes.

And when Waldo descended the stairs the transformation was complete.

He passed down into the hall, a round-shouldered, gloomy figure. He looked wizened, and his resemblance to Sir Marcus Droone was startling. The impersonation was by no means perfect, but quite good enough to satisfy the short-sighted housekeeper. And this was all Waldo cared about.

Reaching the library, he found Mrs. Barton hovering about the doorway.

"Well, woman, what do you want?" snapped Waldo irritably.

In voice and manner the impersonation was well done—very well done. And it was by these efforts that the housekeeper would be deceived. And she was deceived. She suspected nothing.

"I thought, Sir Marcus, that the general would be going—"

"Tut, tut! Go back to your kitchen!" rapped out Waldo. "My guest departed half an hour ago. Haven't you got more sense than to come worrying me now? Go away, Mrs. Barton! Leave me undisturbed!"

The woman turned and walked off unemotionally. She had been accustomed to this kind of treatment for years.

Rupert Waldo closed the library door, crossed over to the fireplace, and permitted himself the luxury of a cigar.

"Good!" he murmured amiably. "And now we're all ready for the excellent Mr. Arthur Grant—to say nothing of the Burmese rubies! Upon the whole, I am enjoying myself rather well!"

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. The Tragedy at Dead Oak Corner.



MR. SEXTON BLAKE lowered his newspaper and idly stifled a yawn.

"We sha'n't be in London much before eleven, young 'un," he remarked, glancing across at Tinker, who was lolling somewhat inelegantly on the opposite cushions of the first-class compartment. "This train

isn't a particularly rapid one. I'm afraid."

"Rapid!" echoed Tinker disgustedly. "It's not much better than a snail, gov'nor! There go the brakes again!" he added, with a snort. "Another stop! We shall be lucky if we get in by Christmas Day!"

Tinker was rather pessimistic. Slow as the train was, there was no real justification for assuming that it would occupy all the intervening time before Christmas to complete its journey.

The famous Baker Street criminologist and his assistant had the compartment entirely to themselves. The train,

indeed, was running very light, and was by no means one of the best of the day.

But Blake, who had joined it at Colchester, had chosen this particular train because it was due to reach Liverpool Street half an hour sooner than a following express.

"It's no good grumbling, Tinker," said the detective dryly. "I warned you that this train was slow. But we either had to take this or wait the better part of ninety minutes in a draughty station. Personally, I find the journey quite soothing."

Tinker grunted, and lowered the window. The biting night air came sweeping in as the train pulled up against a narrow gravel platform. The station was badly lighted, and the booking-office looked dim, chilly, and uninviting. It was exactly opposite Tinker as the train came to a stop.

"Fancy living in a place like this!" murmured Tinker, with a shiver. "By jingo! These country people are more plucky than the average Londoner dreams of. I wouldn't live here for a Prime Minister's pension!"

He noticed that the place was called Inglestowe. There was nothing unusually dull about it, and nothing particularly bright. It was, in fact, a typical country station of the smaller kind.

Tinker's spirits revived a little as he leaned out of the window.

"I don't suppose you'll believe it, guv'nor, but I just saw somebody running!" he grinned. "I'm hanged if I thought they had enough energy! There seems to be quite a lot of bustle, too. Perhaps the lads of the village are just going home after watching the slugs whiz by!"

Sexton Blake smiled at Tinker's sarcasm, and continued reading his newspaper. Tinker was now silent. He was, in fact, watching the movement and life which stirred on the gloomy platform. And it had suddenly become impressed upon Tinker that there was an unaccountable stir afoot.

As a rule, a small country station of this type, at ten o'clock at night, would be notable only for the appearance of a sleepy ticket-collector, one or two somnambulistic gentlemen with milk-churns, and so forth.

But the platform at Inglestowe was very different.

Two or three groups of villagers were waiting about. They were talking together in hushed sort of tones, and there were serious expressions on every face. In the booking-office a scared-looking constable was talking to an elderly gentleman in uniform who appeared to be the stationmaster. There were even a few knots of small boys visible, hovering about the exit doors. And through into the station yard, directly opposite the first-class carriage, Tinker caught a glimpse of a waiting motor-car. From his position he could see right through the booking-office and out beyond.

A sound came from Tinker's rear, and the train under his feet trembled. He glanced round, and saw the lighted windows on another train gliding past on the down tracks. The other train came to a standstill, with noisy, hissing brakes.

"Inglestowe appears to be quite important at this hour," remarked Blake, laying his paper down again. "What are you so interested in, Tinker?"

"Eh?" said Tinker, turning his head. "I'm blessed if I can make it out, sir—there's something special on the go. The stationmaster buzzed over the footbridge like a two-year-old a minute ago. Somebody important must be arriving by that other train."

"In the meantime, we're left here, cooling our heels," observed Blake.

Tinker glanced down the platform again, and was just in time to see a country police-inspector come bustling down the steps of the overhead footbridge. Passengers arriving by the other platform were obliged to cross this footbridge in order to reach the main exit.

Tinker frowned as he continued to look. It was a frown of perplexity. Two or three quietly dressed men in dark overcoats and bowler-hats were following behind the inspector. There was a certain stamp about them which struck a familiar chord in Tinker's memory.

And then, as they came along the platform, and passed athwart the beam of a lamp, Tinker fairly jumped.

"Well, I'm hanged!" he exclaimed excitedly. "It's Mr. Lennard! Down here—in this hole! At ten o'clock at night! Lennard, of the Yard!"

"Nonsense!" said Sexton Blake.

But Tinker flung the door open and jumped out. Blake, glancing through the open doorway, was just in time to see Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard, pause in his tracks and stare at Tinker. Behind were three of the Yard men, whom Blake promptly recognised.

"By the Lord Harry!" ejaculated the chief inspector. "Tinker, as I live! I thought I was down here pretty promptly——"

"What on earth are you doing in this sleepy hollow, Mr. Lennard?" asked Tinker, in astonishment. "What's happened? Anything special? You wouldn't be here unless a few murders had been committed, or something?"

"One murder is enough!" retorted the Yard man grimly.

He turned aside to greet Sexton Blake, who had followed Tinker out on to the platform. And Tinker suddenly understood the reason for the unaccustomed life and bustle of the little station. A murder! No wonder the villagers were looking startled and animated!

"You didn't come here especially, Mr. Blake?" asked Lennard, after he had shaken hands. "I mean, you're not interested in the case?"

"Until this moment, I didn't know there was a case," replied Sexton Blake. "We're on the way home from Colchester, and our train happened to stop here. What is it, Lennard? Anything particularly attractive?"

The man from Scotland Yard shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't know yet," he replied bluntly. "But just before nine o'clock the chief received an urgent telephone-call from this choice beauty-spot. Postman murdered, I believe—queer circumstances. Don't know any details yet, but it looks like a pretty grim job."

"So you came down to have a look round?" asked Tinker.

"Yes; I'm here practically within the hour," replied Lennard. "Not so bad, eh? Why not stop and take a look round, Blake? It's a mysterious crime, you know; it ought to interest you."

Blake smiled and considered for a moment.

He was certainly attracted. It wasn't always he got an opportunity of investigating a crime while the trail was still smoking-hot. Even if the affair turned out to be a sordid village tragedy of a commonplace kind, it wouldn't matter much. Blake was not engaged on any urgent business at the moment and could well afford the time.

And Lennard, of course, would be glad enough to have his unofficial colleague

by his side. The chief-inspector had learned from past experience that Sexton Blake was a very handy man to have about the place. More than once Blake had put Lennard on the right track after the latter had gone hopelessly wrong.

"Well?" asked the Yard man.

"All right, Lennard—thanks!" said the great detective. "I'll take advantage of your invitation."

"Good man!" said Lennard. "Only just in time, too," he added, as he glanced round. "Your train's just off, I see. Any baggage? You'd better grab hold of it pretty quick."

But Tinker was already rescuing Blake's leather dispatch-case and one or two other small articles. And a minute or two later both trains had gone—leaving Inglestowe Station dim and quiet and forlorn-looking.

Chance had played a queer trick.

By the purest coincidence Sexton Blake and Tinker were in the village of Inglestowe—and, without knowing it, within a mile of their old enemy, Rupert Waldo. It was not the first time that Fate had intervened to bring these foemen together.

There was an informal conference in the dimly-lighted waiting-room. Lennard was having a few words with Inspector Quinton, of the local police. And Blake and Tinker were naturally admitted.

"It was the chief-constable himself who phoned you up, sir," declared the inspector. "This business is so queer that we don't quite know what to make of it. Griggs wasn't the kind of man to get himself into bad company, and why he was murdered beats me."

"One of the local postmen, wasn't he?" asked Lennard.

"Yes, sir—quite a young fellow, too," replied the inspector. "Not very popular, perhaps, being a surly, bad-tempered sort of young chap. It was Mr. Pond, the grocer, who found him—lying there in the lane, just against Dead Oak Corner, on the Staplemore Road."

"How far is that from here?"

"Why, it's only at the end of the village, just round by the Manor."

"What's the Manor?"

"Sir Marcus Droone lives there, sir—a queer old gent in his way, but a rare good 'un, all the same, when you know him," said the inspector. "Perhaps you'd like to go along to the Flowing Bowl at once, sir?" added Quinton. "It's only a small tavern, but not such a bad place, as they run."

"What's the idea?" asked Lennard. "What do we want to go to this inn for?"

"That's where we took the body, sir," explained the other. "You see, the tavern ain't more than a hundred yards from the corner where young Griggs was attacked. I'd like you to have a look at the body as soon as possible, sir."

"How was the man killed?" put in Sexton Blake, with interest.

"That's just what we'd like to know, sir," answered Inspector Quinton, with emphasis. "The queerest affair I ever saw! The man was struck in the neck—and must have died on the instant, I reckon. His throat's torn awful—and as far as I can see the wound was caused by some kind of jagged weapon. Maybe an old piece of iron, or something like that."

"He couldn't have been knocked down by a car, I suppose?" suggested Lennard.

"Hardly, sir," replied the inspector, shaking his head. "He'd have been all broke up if a car had hit him. Besides, if a car had come by they'd have heard it in the tavern. But they swear that the lane was quite deserted about the time Griggs was due to come along. Pretty reliable information, too," added

Quinton. "You see, the landlord's girl up at the tavern was expectin' a letter, and she'd been on the look-out for a half-hour—waitin' for Griggs to come up. And she's certain that nothin' went by."

"Oh, well, we'd better get a move on," suggested Lennard. "We can't do much more here. I suggest we have a look at the body, and then examine the spot where the crime took place. What do you say, Blake?"

"An excellent programme!" said Sexton Blake.

They left the station and climbed into Inspector Quinton's waiting car. It was only a Ford, but none the less welcome on that account. And they were soon being driven down the long village street to the outskirts—watched with intense curiosity by several knots of villagers.

The Flowing Bowl proved to be a cosy, comfortable little inn at the extreme end of the village. Lights were gleaming warmly in the windows as the car drove up, and even here a few loiterers were hanging about looking on with morbid curiosity. It was after closing hours, and the inn was shut, but there was every evidence that plenty of life stirred within.

"We'd better arrange for a room here, while we're about it," said the chief-inspector, as he glanced at the tavern. "Might as well be as near the centre of things as possible. And this place doesn't look at all bad, to my mind."

They were at once admitted, and the landlord, a portly gentleman who went by the name of Bullock, ushered his distinguished guests into the smoking-room, where a fire glowed and crackled warmly.

Blake and Tinker secured a room for themselves—for it was obvious they would be obliged to spend the night here, even if the investigation fizzled out. The Scotland Yard men made their own arrangements.

And Lennard lost no time in taking a look at the body of the murdered man. Sexton Blake accompanied him. Inspector Quinton acted as their guide and took them out by the back door, across a yard, and into a small harness-room, which had been turned into a temporary mortuary.

By the light of a yard lantern the inspection was made. There was something rather weird about this examination. The light was none too good, and the dead man was no pleasant sight. Even Blake's iron nerves were slightly affected.

The body was lying on a bench, covered by an old horse blanket. The postman had been attired in his official uniform, and there were evident signs that he had struggled for life. His jacket and waistcoat were torn in one or two places—rent in a peculiar fashion. And the wound which had caused death was an ugly one.

Chief-Inspector Lennard turned away with a slight shiver.

"Cover him up!" he said gruffly. "I'll need a stiff brandy after this! Looks like the work of a maniac, as far as I can see. That gash was probably caused by a jagged piece of iron. One blow would have been enough. The poor beggar couldn't have known much about it, though, thank goodness!"

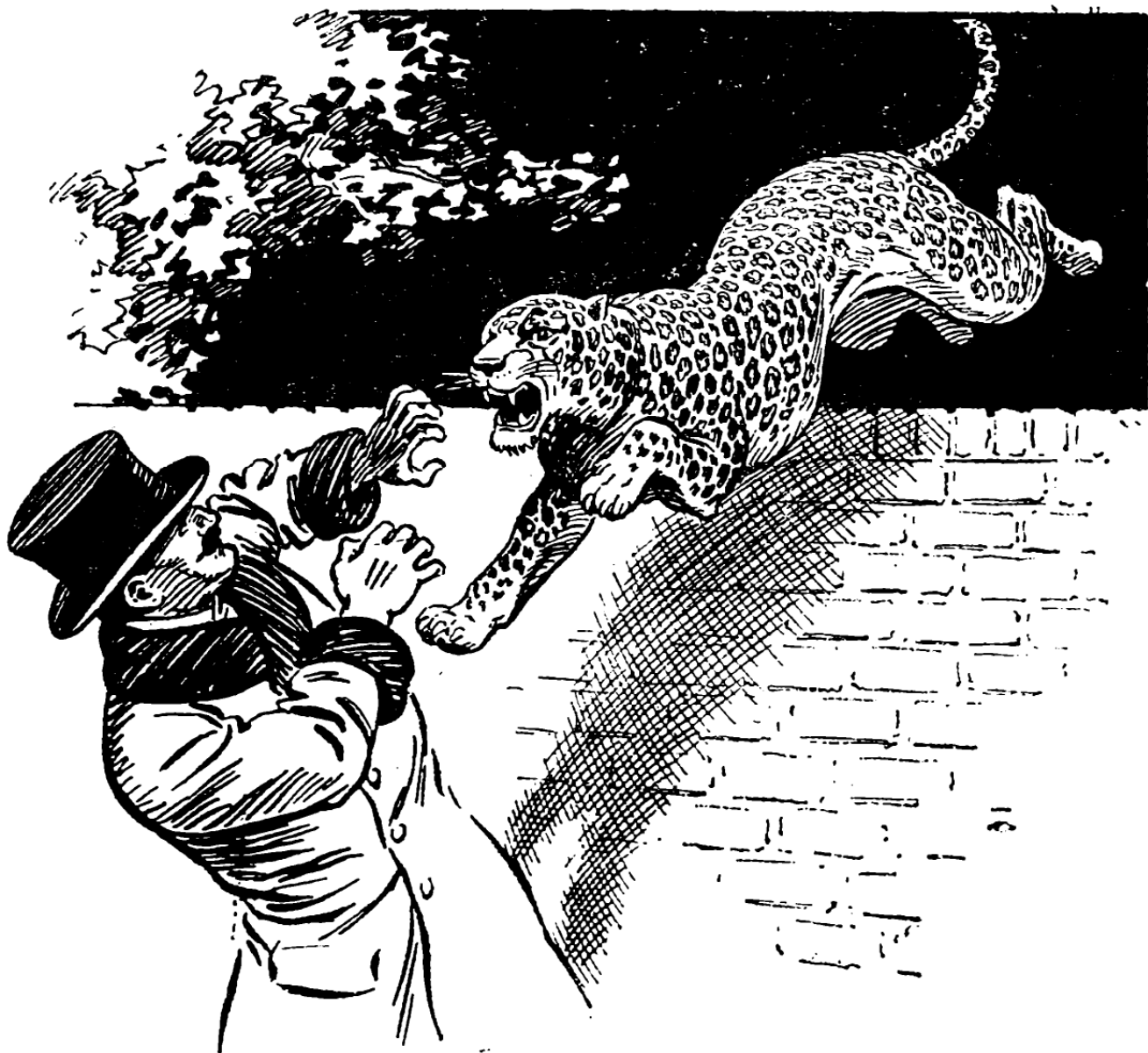
Sexton Blake glanced up from his examination.

"Can you bring the light a little nearer, inspector?" he asked quietly.

Quinton brought the lantern up close, and for some minutes Sexton Blake was intently occupied. He even produced a magnifying lens and used this repeatedly.

The Scotland Yard man stood by the door, rather impatient.

"It's no good wasting time here,



Without warning, the leopard sprang from the wall in one clean, cat-like leap. He came at Waldo as savage and terrible as a man-eating tiger, but Waldo met the attack squarely. (Chapter 3.)

Blake!" he said briskly. "You'll find no clues on the body. It's a simple case, in my opinion. A few careful inquiries, and we'll soon get on the trail of the murderer. This is a case with jealousy or revenge at the bottom of it, I'll guarantee!"

"Perhaps so," agreed Blake abstractedly. "One never knows, Lennard."

Bending closely over the dead man, Blake could detect a faint, indefinable odour. He caught a fleeting suspicion of it now and again, and in the back of his mind there was a familiar chord touched.

And suddenly his eyes took on a keen, intense expression. He held his lens steady. Then, taking a pair of delicate steel nippers from his waistcoat-pocket, he picked one or two minute objects from a fold in the dead man's waistcoat. These he placed with infinite care in an empty silver matchbox.

"A few clues?" asked Lennard, with a trace of irony.

"Possibly," replied Blake. "As I said before—one never knows."

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

"You Were Right!"



TINKER gave his master a curious glance when Sexton Blake followed the Scotland Yard man into the smoking-room. Blake was looking very thoughtful, and even bored. But there was something about the expression of his eyes which Tinker readily noted.

"Anything specially queer about the affair, sir?" he asked eagerly.

"Nothing at all!" said Lennard before Blake could answer. "Just a sordid

murder, in my opinion. Quinton! Where the dickens is that— Oh, there you are!" he added, as the local inspector bustled in. "I want to ask you a few questions, Quinton."

"All right, sir. But I was wondering if you'd come out and have a few words with a man named Potts," said the inspector. "He's a farm-labourer from the next village. I was having a word with him just now, and he seems to know something."

"Oh, does he?" said Lennard. "Do you mean that man we passed in the passage as we came in?"

"Yes, sir. That's him."

"H'm! He looked like a poacher to me!" grunted the Scotland Yard official. "All right—I'll come along. But he can wait a couple of minutes. I want to ask you something about Griggs. What's become of his postbag?"

"I've got it under lock and key, sir."

"Was it tampered with?"

"As far as I know, it wasn't even touched," replied the inspector. "All the letters were intact—not even jerked out of the bag. Robbery wasn't the motive, Mr. Lennard, I'll swear to that. It looks to me as if Griggs met somebody and they had a fight."

"I'm inclined to agree with you—"

"And this man, Potts, is able to throw some light on the whole affair, I think," went on Quinton eagerly. "He only

(Continued on page 21.)

The literary contents of this number are not in any way curtailed. To accommodate the announcements of our big competitions this and previous issues have been **SPECIALLY ENLARGED** to 32 pages.

The LEOPARD of DROONE.

(Continued from page 11.)

heard about the murder half an hour ago, and he came straight over."

"Right! We'll see the gentleman," said Lennard briskly.

"Potts declares that the murder was done by a young fellow named Roper," said the inspector, as he and the Yard man passed through the doorway. "This chap, Roper, works at the big farm over at Staplemore—"

Their voices became inaudible as they passed down the stone-paved passage, and Sexton Blake turned to Tinker with a slight shrug of his shoulders.

"I'm afraid we shall never alter our good friend, Lennard," he chuckled. "With clues staring him in the face, he ignores them, Tinker. A pity. Lennard is quite a shrewd, conscientious man in his own way. But he will go about with his eyes closed."

Tinker grinned.

"Don't you believe it, sir," he replied.

"Mr. Lennard is as hot as mustard when it comes to routine work and the ordinary methods of the Yard. It's when he's up against the finer points of the game that he begins to side-slip. I'll bet you've discovered something important."

"In a way, yes," agreed Blake. "We mustn't forget, Tinker, that Scotland Yard is a great and wonderful organisation, and in nine crime cases out of ten the official method is better than my own. Working by rule of thumb may be tedious and long-winded, but it scores in the end. It is the exceptional case that claims our own particular skill, Tinker."

"And is this an exceptional case, guv'nor?"

"Well, have a look at these, and let me know what you make of 'em," replied Blake, taking out the silver matchbox and sitting down against the table. "Lennard is convinced that Griggs was attacked and struck down by means of a jagged piece of iron. Personally, I don't think so."

Tinker watched intently as Blake spread a sheet of paper on the table and emptied the minute contents of the matchbox upon it. At first, Tinker could see nothing. And then, looking closer, he noted one or two hairs.

He took Sexton Blake's lens, and examined the hairs closely.

"Can't make them out, sir," he announced at length. "They belong to some kind of animal, I should think."

"A truly wonderful deduction, Tinker," said Blake dryly.

"I mean, a wild animal, of course," went on Tinker. "No need to get sarcastic, guv'nor. I'd say a tiger—or perhaps a panther. But we know well enough that panthers don't run about loose in Essex!"

"That's just where you make a mistake—we know nothing of the sort," replied Sexton Blake promptly. "Just because the possibility is remote, it need not be necessarily ruled out. As a matter of fact, Tinker, those hairs belong to a species of Indian leopard."

"Great Scott!" said Tinker, staring. "Are you sure, sir?"

"Unless I was sure I wouldn't make the statement," replied Blake. "Think of the crime itself, Tinker. This postman was struck down without warning; and the wound in his throat is particularly unusual. A jagged piece of iron might cause a similar injury, but I am doubtful."



Eager and alert, Sexton Blake entered the cage, and passed to the rear compartment over the body of the sleeping leopard. But, as he flashed his light within, a pang of disappointment assailed him. The place was empty!

(Chapter 9.)

Tinker stared.

"You think the man was attacked and bitten by a leopard?" he asked.

"That is my assumption at present," replied Blake. "But I propose that we go along to the actual scene and make a few investigations. Lennard, I am afraid, is taking too much notice of local gossip."

"Good! Let's get along while we can have the place to ourselves."

"You are needlessly optimistic, young 'un," smiled Blake. "Unless I am much mistaken, we shall find those other Scotland Yard gentlemen on the ground before us. I have an idea they are taking flash-light photographs, measurements, and a few other details."

Sexton Blake's surmise proved to be correct.

When he and Tinker arrived at Dead Oak Corner, which was situated a few hundred yards farther along the lane, they found the place in the possession of the men from Scotland Yard. A constable had acted as escort, and was now standing by, keeping back a few village loungers.

But Blake and Tinker were at once admitted into the barred-off space. The Yard men were just on the point of packing up their instruments.

"Nothing in your line here, Mr. Blake," said one of them. "Not much in our line, either," he added. "We've taken a few photographs, but I don't suppose they'll ever be required. Looks like rain, though, and we couldn't risk waiting until daylight."

Blake nodded and switched on his own electric torch. An examination of the ground proved barren. Since the death of Griggs, and the removal of the body,

the road had been overrun by curious villagers and other sensation-seekers. To distinguish any particular footprints was out of the question. And even the grass bordering the lane was trampled down.

Blake glanced at the hedges with interest. On one side the road was bordered by a high, roughly-kept hedge, with tall trees showing beyond. But on the other side the hedge was neatly clipped, and even to a point of plainness. It curved round smoothly.

"What lies beyond this?" asked Blake, pointing.

"The grounds of the Manor, I understand," replied one of the officials.

Blake took no definite action until the others had gone. He was relieved to find that the idlers followed the official party back to the inn. And the Baker Street pair had the place quite to themselves.

"Now we can get on, sir," said Tinker briskly. "According to your idea, we've got to look for a leopard? A bit of a tall order, isn't it, sir? But it's nice to know what we're after!"

"Strictly speaking, we ought to have a few words with our excellent host, Mr. Bullock," said Blake thoughtfully. "He will know if a circus is pitched anywhere in the neighbourhood, or if a menagerie has passed through the village recently. But while we're on the spot, we'll take a casual glance round."

Blake's casual glance consisted of penetrating the untidy hedge and examining the meadow beyond. It was dimly moonlight, and the grass was becoming white with a keen ground frost. And foot by foot Blake proceeded to examine the meadow in the vicinity of the fatal spot.

He soon satisfied himself that the grass had been undisturbed for hours. Nothing

human or animal had been in this part of the meadow during the whole evening.

But in the grounds of the Manor, on the other side of the road, Blake's examination bore more fruit. He and Tinker succeeded in getting through the hedge at a weak spot a hundred yards farther on. They worked their way back, walking carefully and gingerly.

There were a good many trees, with grassy stretches intervening. But under some of the trees the grass was sparse and patchy. And near the hedge a number of ancient molehills were visible.

Blake almost smiled as he bent down over one of these mounds. As though especially made for his benefit, a clear and well-defined footprint was visible in the soft soil.

"This investigation is surprisingly easy, Tinker," murmured Blake. "So easy, in fact, that I feel there must be something deeper behind it all. If that isn't the footprint of a huge cat, what is it?"

"By Jove!" ejaculated Tinker, staring. "You're dead right, sir! The brute might have left the impression here deliberately! I suppose there's no fake about it, sir? It isn't a false trail, or anything?"

Blake shook his head.

"I see no reason why the footprints should be faked, Tinker," he replied. "We are exactly opposite the spot where poor Griggs was killed. I believe his death was perfectly simple. The leopard attacked him, killed him at the first spring, and then leapt over the hedge. It is quite natural that these footprints should be here. That is why I looked. We cannot do better than return to the inn and question Mr. Bullock."

Ten minutes later they were back in the smoking-room, by no means sorry to find that the landlord had prepared hot coffee and a substantial meal of cold beef, ham and eggs, and other fare.

"Most of the other gentlemen are still out, sir," remarked Mr. Bullock, as he bustled about with the viands. "I reckon that young Roper is the feller who did the murder," he added. "I never did like Roper—too shifty and cunning for me! A rare young spark with the gals, too!"

"Why do you connect Roper with the death of Griggs?" asked Blake.

The landlord tapped a solemn finger on the edge of the table.

"It's like this 'ere, sir," he replied. "Accordin' to all I can hear, Griggs was

kind of sweet on the same girl as Roper's after. See? And Griggs was not such a sweet-tempered young feller, at the best. A grumpy, surly lad. I allus called him. Seems like they two met in the lane, an' had a regular set-to."

"And do the police take this view?" asked Blake.

"Yes—an' them Scotland Yard chaps from London, too!" replied the landlord, with a nod. "Ah, ye can't fool them gents, sir! As smart as they make 'em, I'll be bound! An' before the night's out they'll have young Roper clapped in the lock-up. You mark my words!"

He bustled out, in search of coffee, and Sexton Blake smiled.

"I'm afraid Mr. Roper is in for an unfortunate little episode," he murmured. "But it will be only brief. Our information, Tinker, will effect his release."

"And make Mr. Lennard go a bit green!" grinned Tinker.

The landlord appeared again, and the meal proceeded.

"Rather quiet down here—eh?" remarked Blake conversationally, as he attacked the ham and eggs. "This affair is likely to cause a bit of a sensation, Bullock!"

"It is, sir, an' that's a fact!" agreed the landlord. "We don't have many excitin' bits down in this part."

"Just a circus now and again, to liven things up, I suppose?"

"We ain't seen a circus in Inglestowe not for this two years past," said Mr. Bullock thoughtfully. "Ah, them circuses ain't what they used to be, sir! Not like the old 'uns I remember when I was a kid. Like everything else, I suppose they're dyin' out."

"I don't suppose the people at the Manor are very pleased about this tragedy," said Tinker, looking up from his plate. "Rather unpleasant, you know, happening right outside their hedge."

"The Manor?" repeated the landlord, with a slight stare. "Him? Bless your life, young gent, old Sir Marcus don't care what happens outside of his own grounds. Never did. A queer old stick, as the sayin' is. But he ain't such a bad sort, takin' him all round!"

"Are you implying that Sir Marcus Droone is eccentric?" asked Blake.

"I don't rightly know what ye mean, sir; but Sir Marcus is one o' them

gents who act sort o' queer," replied Mr. Bullock. "Lives practically alone in that great house. There's nobody there except Barton an' his wife, an' they don't mix much with us Inglestowe folk. Barton's the butler, sir. An' his wife acts as housekeeper."

"Quite a small household," commented Blake. "Perhaps Sir Marcus makes a hobby of keeping pets? Dogs, for example? Or monkeys?"

The landlord looked mysterious.

"Ah, now ye're talkin', sir!" he said, lowering his voice. "I wouldn't say as there's monkeys in the Manor now, but there was once. Ay, an' well I can remember the dratted things, I can tell ye! One o' them monkeys come in my window an' did a rare amount o' damage," went on Mr. Bullock musingly. "I reckon that must have been sixteen or seventeen years ago, come next summer."

"Your memory is surprisingly good," said Blake. "So Sir Marcus actually did keep monkeys in the past? Curious that I should make a random shot and—"

"Beggin' your pardon, sir, but that ain't all!" interrupted Mr. Bullock, still speaking in a mysterious voice. "The old gent kept all sorts of other furrin' animals, too. Most of 'em gone now, I believe—died out, an' ain't never been replaced. That was when Sir Marcus come back from India. Rare mad on collectin' these wild animals, 'e was!"

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Tinker, glancing across at Blake.

"An' they do say as Sir Marcus still keeps a tiger in the 'ouse," declared Mr. Bullock impressively. "Leastways, if it ain't a tiger, it's one o' them wild things out o' the forest. Why, the young folks in this village won't go nigh the Manor grounds after dark! Scared stiff, they are!"

"Oh, well, we don't want to keep you from your duties, landlord," said Blake lightly.

Mr. Bullock hastily apologised, and went about his duties. Blake and Tinker glanced across the table at one another. Tinker was grinning, but Blake looked unusually grave.

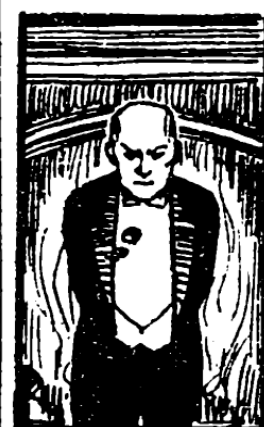
"It's a fizzle, sir," said Tinker. "You were right about that leopard. And there's no murder at all—not even a mystery!"

"Nevertheless, Tinker, I shall make it my duty to visit Sir Marcus at once—the instant we have finished this meal!" he exclaimed grimly. "It is quite possible that the old gentleman is unaware of the fact that his leopard has escaped."

"By Jove! I'd overlooked that point, guy nor!"

"You won't overlook it if the leopard takes a fancy to you as we are walking down the lane!" said Blake drily.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER. Face to Face.



RUPERT WALDO stood with his back to the fire in the library at Droone Manor and regarded the musty old bookcases around him with quiet satisfaction.

"Come along, Mrs. Barton!" he snapped irritably. "I want a hot toddy!"

It was Sir Marcus Droone's nightly custom to indulge in a hot punch just before retiring. Mrs. Barton always brought the concoction to

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OUT TO-MORROW.

PRICE FOURPENCE EACH!

the library at eleven-thirty to the minute. She had orders not to disturb her master under any circumstances before that hour.

And during Waldo's little masquerade in the character of Brigadier-General Hume he had joined Sir Marcus in the nightcap. Mrs. Barton would naturally bring the hot punch at the same minute to-night. She knew nothing whatever of the startling event earlier, and had no suspicion that the man in the library was not her master. Waldo's impersonation was perfect so far as voice and mannerisms went. His appearance was not important, for Mrs. Barton was extremely short-sighted.

Waldo had been pondering over the position for some little time, and he was highly amused. Everything was satisfactory. The butler was ill, and would be unable to resume his duties for days. Sir Marcus was imprisoned behind the leopard's cage, and could not recover consciousness for several hours yet. Waldo would deal with him after Mrs. Barton had retired. And on the morrow Mr. Arthur Grant would arrive with "the finest parcel of rubies he had ever secured."

So, from Waldo's point of view, the entire situation was favourable.

The clock in the hall solemnly chimed, and practically at the second note a tap sounded on the library door, and then Mrs. Barton glided in with the tray. There was something rather uncanny about this silent old woman, so gaunt and unemotional.

"Good!" said Waldo, rubbing his hands together. "Set it down on the small table! Bless me, woman! What's the matter with you? You're all of a tremble!"

Mrs. Barton set the tray down shakily. It was the first time Waldo had seen her expressing any kind of emotion, and he was surprised. He had previously lowered the lamp and had shaded it, too. He stood there, on the hearthrug, in deep shadow. But Mrs. Barton stood in the flood of light from the standard lamp.

"I'm sorry, sir," she faltered. "I'm so upset by that news from the Flowing Bowl. A terrible affair, Sir Marcus—"

"Flowing Bowl—Flowing Bowl!" repeated Waldo testily. "What are you talking about, woman? Flowing Bowl? What in the name of idiocy is the Flowing Bowl? Have you taken leave of your wits, or what?"

"It's the inn, Sir Marcus—the tavern just at the bend down the lane," said Mrs. Barton. "The postman was murdered right opposite our hedge here only three or four hours ago. Murdered, Sir Marcus!" she added tremulously.

Waldo stood stock still, momentarily staggered.

"The postman murdered!" he repeated slowly. "What on earth—" He recovered himself, and resumed Sir Marcus' normal manner. "Rubbish, Mrs. Barton! Fiddlesticks! Who told you this nonsense?"

"Why, it's all over the village, Sir Marcus," said the housekeeper. "The doctor's lad told me when he came with Barton's medicine at nine o'clock."

"It do seem a shame, sir—such a young feller as that!"

Waldo waved his hand imperiously.

"You shouldn't take any notice of these silly stories!" he said irritably. "And what has it to do with us, anyhow? How was the man killed? Why didn't you come and tell me sooner?"

"It was more than I dare do, Sir Marcus!" replied Mrs. Barton. "My orders are to leave you undisturbed until I bring the punch—"

"Well, well, well! Let it pass!" in-

terrupted Waldo testily. "What about this postman—this man who was murdered? How was he killed?"

"They reckon it must have been a quarrel, sir," replied Mrs. Barton. "The doctor's lad didn't know much, but Mr. Griggs must have been hit down by a tramp, or something like that. The police are at their wits' end, sir."

"They would be—they would be!" retorted Waldo. "We can always trust the police, Mrs. Barton, to be at their wits' end! A very short journey! It doesn't take long to reach the end of a policeman's wits! Well, you can go, woman, I don't want to hear any more! And don't let this ridiculous affair play on your mind! Go to Barton and give him his medicine!"

Mrs. Barton silently left the room. And Waldo's acting had been so clever that she was still totally deceived. The instant she closed the door, Waldo relaxed his expression. He turned round, and kicked the great fender with considerable force.

"That infernal leopard!" he snapped. "By all the devils of ill-luck! The brute must have attacked the postman while he was at liberty! And I thought I had recaptured him in time!"

The news had come as a shock to the Wonder-Man. He was startled. He jumped to the truth at once. It was obvious to him, knowing all the facts, that Zana had caused the death of Griggs.

Waldo himself had seen the leopard leaping over the hedge. It had just completed its foul work, and this accounted, no doubt, for the brute's unaccustomed ferocity. With a taste of blood on its fangs, the leopard had attacked Waldo.

The Wonder-Man thought deeply as he sipped his punch. And his mind became calmer. Perhaps there wasn't any need to worry, after all. Griggs' death had occurred hours before, and the Manor had not been disturbed.

Clearly the police suspected nothing of the truth. Indeed, the housekeeper's brief story made this abundantly evident. The police were searching for a tramp, or a footpad. They believed that murder had been committed! In all probability they wouldn't make a single inquiry at the Manor.

Waldo had just reached this conclusion when he heard the distant jangling of a bell. For a moment his glass shook. Then he set it down with a steady hand and grimly compressed his lips.

That bell, as he was well aware, was connected with the front door. In spite of his attempts to reassure himself, the police had come! And Waldo had already made up his mind.

The door opened, and Mrs. Barton stood there.

"Two gentlemen to see you, Sir Marcus," she announced.

"Gentlemen—gentlemen?" repeated Waldo angrily. "Who are they? What are their names? What do you mean—policemen?"

"No, sir—they just seem to be ordinary gentlemen," said the housekeeper. "They apologised for calling so late, but hoped that you would spare them a few minutes. I told them that I would see, sir."

Waldo played his part thoroughly.

"An unwarrantable intrusion!" he stormed. "Outrageous! Calling at this hour—nearly midnight! Good gad, woman, I wonder you had the audacity to disturb me! I won't see anybody—certainly not!"

"Very well, Sir Marcus," said Mrs. Barton unemotionally.

She turned to the door again, and Waldo hesitated. He had expected the police, but somebody else had called.

Perhaps, on the whole, it would be better to see them. The village doctor, perhaps, and one of the more prominent local worthies. To send them away might cause comment, and do more harm than good.

"Wait!" snapped Waldo, as the housekeeper went through the doorway. "Confound it, Mrs. Barton, can't you wait? I've changed my mind! Show the gentlemen in!"

"In here, Sir Marcus?"

"Yes, of course, in here!" said Waldo irritably. "Where else do you think? And then go back to your kitchen until I ring for you! It's high time you were in bed, Mrs. Barton!" he added inconsequentially—a habit of Sir Marcus'.

A minute later, Waldo received a second shock. And this one was a hundred-fold more staggering than the first. It was only by a sheer effort of will-power that Rupert Waldo maintained his assumed calm. For the visitors were Sexton Blake and Tinker.

His old enemies! The two people he feared and respected more than anybody else in the country! There was something absolutely uncanny in the way Sexton Blake crossed Waldo's path whenever the Wonder-Man was on the point of bringing a fresh coup to a successful conclusion.

On this occasion, at least, Waldo had deemed himself secure from Blake's intervention. And here, by all that was confusing, Sexton Blake walked in with Tinker at his heels. It was a bombshell for the master crook.

"Pray let me hasten to apologise, Sir Marcus, for this late intrusion," said Sexton Blake smoothly. "I will only detain you a few minutes, and I would not have called at such an hour if the circumstances had not been unusual. My name is Blake, and this—"

"Blake—Blake?" interrupted Waldo, frowning. "Never heard of you, sir! I am amazed that you should disturb me like this. Allow me to inform you, Mr. Blake, that I have granted you a great concession."

"A concession, Sir Marcus, which I fully appreciate," acknowledged Blake. "My friend, Mr. Tinker—"

"Why, bless my soul!" ejaculated Waldo. "Tinker! Then, by gad, you must be Mr. Sexton Blake? Splendid! I confess that I did not realise your true identity, sir!"

"You may be aware that a local postman was brutally done to death just outside your grounds earlier this evening," said Blake. "I am only here by chance, Sir Marcus. We were passing through Inglestone on our way to London, and happened to see an old friend of ours—a Mr. Lennard, of Scotland Yard. At the moment, Mr. Lennard is on a false trail."

"I'm not surprised," snapped Waldo. "These policemen are dunderheads! Nothing more nor less, sir! But what's this about a postman?"

"The police are convinced that the man was murdered during a quarrel," replied Blake. "But after examining the body, I have conclusively proved that Griggs was done to death by a panther or a leopard. At the moment, the police are unaware of my conclusions."

Waldo waved his hand impatiently. It was a notion designed to dissemble his confusion. This man, Blake, was positively weird! He already knew the whole truth! Waldo cursed fiercely within him. In the meantime, Sexton Blake and Tinker were regarding their host curiously in the dim light of the library.

"A panther!" said Waldo incredulously. "Rubbish, sir! Pardon my

frankness, but the whole idea is preposterous."

"Nevertheless, it happens to be true," said Blake quietly. "And I have reason to believe, Sir Marcus, that you keep a pet panther in this house. Pray don't misunderstand me. I came here to warn you, assuming that you might be in total ignorance of the circumstances."

Waldo did some quick thinking.

"H'm! Under the circumstances, this misapprehension on your part is excusable," he grunted, at length. "Yes, Mr. Blake, there is such an animal as you name on the premises—a leopard. But I can give you my assurance he is securely caged, and has never had a moment of liberty for years."

"You are quite sure of this?" asked Blake.

"Good heavens! Do you think I don't know—"

"Possibly the animal has escaped from its cage without your knowledge, Sir Marcus," interrupted Blake quickly. "You must admit that the circumstances are significant."

"Very significant! I agree!" said Waldo. "At the same time, it is a mere coincidence. Do you think I would let Zana escape, sir? If you don't believe me, I will show you the animal! Then perhaps you will be convinced!"

Without giving Blake time to reply, he stormed to the door, and flung it open. During the last few moments, in fact, Waldo had made up his mind to show these unwelcome visitors the leopard in its cage. He would prove to them, at least, that the animal was in captivity. And even if Blake was satisfied as to Griggs' death on his own account, he would have some difficulty in convincing the police.

Waldo was in a tight corner, and he was doing the best thing under the circumstances. He was supposed to be Sir Marcus Droone, and any hesitancy or obstruction on the part of Sir Marcus would be a mistake.

Blake and Tinker followed their strange host down the hall, through the dilapidated winter-garden, into the menagerie. Waldo had picked up a small lamp in the hall, and now he held it on high, allowing the light to gleam into the cage.

Zana crouched there, in the far corner, his eyes gleaming greenly and wickedly. He lashed his tail with obvious anger.

"There you are, sir, there's the leopard!" said Waldo curtly. "Are you trying to make me believe that this brute escaped without my knowledge? And if it had escaped, do you think I should attempt to hide the fact? Perhaps you will be good enough to apologise!"

Sexton Blake regarded the leopard closely.

"Of course, I can easily understand your line of deduction," went on Waldo, allowing a sarcastic note to creep into his voice. "You heard about this leopard and immediately placed two and two together and made a dozen instead of four. But you are wrong, Mr. Blake. I don't know how this man was killed, and it is no affair of mine. But he was certainly not attacked by this pet of mine."

Sexton Blake bowed.

"The rebuke is well deserved, Sir Marcus," he said apologetically. "I must express my regret for arriving at such a hasty conclusion. I naturally accept your assurance that the leopard has not been at liberty."

"Huh! And so you ought, Mr. Blake—so you ought!" snorted Waldo. "Take my advice, sir, and say nothing of this to the police—unless you wish to make yourself look ridiculous! I can assure you that I resent this inquiry, and if I

am further disturbed I shall issue a strong protest."

He ushered his visitors back to the hall, saw them to the great front door, and bade them good-night. They passed outside, and the door closed with a thundering slam. They heard the bolts being shot, and the chain placed in position.

"Well, this is a queer business, guv'nor!" murmured Tinker, as they walked down the drive. "Blessed if I know what to make of it!"

Sexton Blake gripped Tinker's arm closely.

"As you say, young 'un, it is a queer business," he agreed. "For the moment we will forget the leopard and the supposed murder. Something of far greater interest has cropped up."

"I don't get the hang, sir," said Tinker.

"No!" exclaimed Blake. "Then you failed to recognise in Sir Marcus Droone an old acquaintance of ours? Tinker, that man is no more Sir Marcus Droone than I am! He is Waldo, the Wonder-Man!"

Sexton Blake had seen through the master-criminal's none too perfect disguise.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER. Meat and Murder.



TINKER paused in his tracks and stared.

"Waldo!" he ejaculated breathlessly. "Impossible, guv'nor!"

"I am not mistaken, Tinker—the impersonation is excellent, but I am not deceived," replied Blake.

"Having never met the real Sir Marcus, I cannot, of course, compare Waldo's

appearance with that of his victim. But I will stake my reputation that we are up against the Wonder-Man."

Tinker was still sceptical.

"But it seems so incredible, sir!" he protested. "Why should Waldo be down here? Why should he be walking about in the shoes of a perfectly harmless old crank? What's the object?"

"To ask such questions, young man, is more than useless at this stage," replied Blake. "But we can be quite sure that Waldo has an ambitious scheme afoot. The leopard escaped—probably by accident—and this trouble is the result. I think I can even guess the exact circumstances which led to the leopard's escapade."

"It's more than I can do, sir," said Tinker frankly. "I don't mind admitting I'm at sea. If that old chap is Waldo, what's become of Sir Marcus? Do you think he's a prisoner in the house?"

"I know he is," said Blake evenly. "What is more, Tinker, I think I know the precise whereabouts of Sir Marcus. You seem surprised; but if you had kept your eyes open you wouldn't be. You had exactly the same opportunities as I had."

"Oh, you're uncanny, sir!" growled Tinker. "What are we going to do now? Tell Lennard?"

"Not just yet," replied Blake, as he and Tinker reached the road. "No, we won't tell the police just yet. We should only be laughed at for our pains. We will make a few careful investigations of our own. Tinker, and bring Lennard into the little secret when we have plenty of proof to lay before him. I am afraid we shall upset his nice little murder case, but that cannot be helped."

Blake fell into silence, and Tinker refrained from interrupting his master's thoughts. He was convinced that Blake was scheming out some plan of action, and at such times the famous detective was only disturbed at the interrupter's peril.

They arrived at the inn, and although it was now past midnight the chief inspector was still absent. Blake was yawning, and it really seemed as though his one object was to get to bed.

"I don't think we'll wait for Mr. Lennard, landlord," he said, as Bullock stood waiting for instructions. "We know our bed-room—we'll go straight up. Have breakfast for eight-thirty, will you?"

"Any special dish, sir?" asked the host.

"No; I'll leave it to you," replied Blake. "Oh, by the way, didn't you bruise yourself pretty severely, Tinker? Perhaps you could provide my young companion with a piece of raw meat, Bullock?"

The landlord went off rather surprised. Tinker was surprised, too, for he wasn't bruised, and he couldn't possibly understand the meaning of Blake's extraordinary request. And the landlord returned presently with a nice, healthy-looking slab of lean beef.

"Splendid! The very thing!" said Blake briskly. "You deserve a medal for this, landlord! No, don't wrap it up; I'll take it just like that. Thanks!"

The landlord was left downstairs in the stone-flagged passage, and Blake and Tinker retired into their low-ceilinged little bed-room and carefully locked the door. By the light of the candle Blake regarded the slab of raw meat approvingly.

"I hope you'll enjoy it, guv'nor," said Tinker facetiously.

Blake took not the slightest notice. In all probability he didn't even hear the remark. He placed the meat on the little dressing-table, and then carefully pulled down the blind.

Tinker stood watching with interest. Blake paused a moment, pulled the blind up again, and threw open the tiny casement window. He took a look outside, and noted the gently-sloping roof of the tap-room which lay practically beneath the window.

Then he closed the window again and pulled the blind. His next action was to unlock his travelling-case and remove a little leather medicine-chest. Blake seldom travelled without it.

Tinker didn't make any comment. He was trying to follow his master's train of thought, but couldn't quite do it. He had a vague notion that the meat was required for the leopard at the Manor. But why Sexton Blake should be anxious on account of the brute's appetite was a puzzle. However, Tinker received enlightenment a minute later.

Sexton Blake carefully took a hypodermic syringe from its case, and filled it from one of the numerous small phials which lined the medicine-chest. Then, as though he were a surgeon operating on a patient, he injected the fluid into the raw beef in several places.

"I think that'll do, Tinker," murmured Blake. "Our friend, Zana, will appreciate—Hullo, hallo! Fairy footfalls on the stairs, young 'un! Lennard, I'll be bound!"

With two movements, Blake slipped the beef into the dressing-table drawer and quickly closed the medicine-chest. Then he wrenched off his jacket and whipped his collar unfastened. A tap sounded on the door.

"Only me!" came the chief-inspector's voice.

Blake nodded, and Tinker unlocked the door and threw it open.

"Well, you lazy ruffians!" exclaimed Lennard, striding in. "You calmly go off to bed and leave all the work to me!"

"You were away so long, we got sleepy," explained Blake.

"Well, I don't blame you; there's nothing particularly interesting in this case," said Lennard, as he sat on the edge of the bed and filled his pipe. "We've got the chap, Blake."

"Bravo! You mean the murderer?"

"Yes; and he's not a particularly bright specimen, either," said the Scotland Yard man. "Poor devil! He's in the village lock-up, and I've seldom seen a more scared specimen of humanity."

"I'll bet he swears he's innocent!"

"Naturally," said Lennard, striking a match. "They always do. But we've got the net round this beggar, and no amount of wriggling will get him out of it. A farm labourer named Roper. A bit of a fool, too, but that won't help him much."

"What's your case against him?" asked Blake.

"Well, I've got to build that up yet; but it's merely a matter of inquiry and circumstantial evidence," replied Lennard. "In fact, this affair has turned out to be just an ordinary sordid murder. The usual thing. A woman at the bottom of it!"

"As far as I can make out, Roper and Griggs were after the same girl. Roper must have been lying in wait for the postman, and he probably struck out blindly, without realising what he was doing. Of course, he swears he was never near Inglestowe."

"Couldn't he account for his movements?" asked Tinker.

"Not a sign of it," replied Lennard. "He told some yarn about going out poaching, but that was all bunkum. The man found it impossible to explain his exact whereabouts between six-thirty and nine. But he'll probably confess to-morrow. He's nearly off his head with fright to-night. Anyhow, I'm going to bed. I've done enough for one evening."

"Your energy is remarkable, Lennard," smiled Blake. "By the way, what about the weapon? Any trace of it?"

"No, but we shall probably find it at the bottom of the river, just down the lane," replied the Yard man. "I shall put a couple of men on to dragging that stretch of water in the morning. But perhaps it won't be necessary. Roper's bound to crumple up."

Lennard was looking very satisfied with himself, and a few moments later he bade his companions good-night, and went off to his own room. Tinker re-locked the door.

"Poor old Lennard!" he grinned. "He's properly off the map this time!"

"Don't waste any sympathy on Lennard, young 'un," said Blake. "Roper's the fellow who needs sympathy. Poor beggar! He's as innocent as you are, but just because he couldn't account for his movements he's arrested on suspicion, and the police mean to build up a case round him. And, by jove, they'll probably do it unless we intervene."

"It's a good thing we got out of that train, gov'nor," said Tinker with emphasis. "Why, on circumstantial evidence alone this poor chap would be convicted and sentenced to death! I think we ought to tell Lennard straight away, so that he can put Roper out of his misery."

But Blake shook his head.

"An hour or two will make little difference now," he replied. "I'm sorry for Roper, but I don't want to jeopardise this investigation. And Lennard will be



A column of lurid flame leapt up startlingly from the overturned car. The entire front of it was a roaring, blazing mass, and Sexton Blake lay pinned beneath the wreckage. All thoughts of the rubies were swept from Waldo's mind. "All right, old man!" he said. "I'll soon have you out of that!"
(Chapter 10.)

far safer in bed. Let him sleep in blissful peace, so that he will be fit for the shock in the morning."

Blake calmly refastened his collar, and donned his jacket again. Then he removed a coil of thin rope from his travelling case—special rope of a silken texture which occupied little space, but was enormously strong. Blake tucked it into his pocket, and then snuffed out the candle.

"We'll wait five minutes, Tinker."

Tinker was wide awake and eager. He guessed that they were to return to Droone Manor, and the prospect was exciting. Any tussle with Waldo the Wonder-Man was necessarily eventful.

Some little time later, when the Flowing Bowl was settling itself down to slumber, two dim figures crept noiselessly over the tap-room roof, and dropped lightly to the grass from the low gutter.

It was a somewhat unusual way for guests to leave a respectable inn. But then, the mission of these particular guests was somewhat unusual, too.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER. **Something Waldo Didn't Know.**



DROONE MANOR loomed dark and mysterious through the thick trees, as Sexton Blake and Tinker silently approached. It was close upon one o'clock now, and the night was windy and inclined to be rough. Fleeting clouds were racing across the sky, and the moonlight was fitful. The wind was

biting and bitter.

"Feels like Christmas already, sir," murmured Tinker, tightening his woollen scarf. "Shouldn't be surprised if we get snow—"

"There is no need for you to exercise your mind regarding such matters as Christmas and snow," interrupted Sexton Blake curtly. "We are engaged on more important work, Tinker. As you will have guessed, I intend to play a rather scurvy trick upon our friend, Mr. Leopard."

"You're going to dope him with that chunk of top-side?"

"Exactly!" said Blake. "That is, if he consents to be doped. We must hope for the best, Tinker. If the brute is hungry he will devour the meat without hesitation."

"Why do you want to kill him, gov'nor?" asked Tinker.

"I don't want to kill him, and I don't intend to kill him," replied the detective. "This drug will merely produce a harmless condition of coma, lasting for about twenty-four hours, if the experiment is successful."

"But I can't even see why you want to get into the cage, sir."

"I want to get into the cage because Sir Marcus Droone is a prisoner at the rear of it," replied Sexton Blake calmly.

"I will admit it is a somewhat long shot, Tinker, but I shall be surprised if I am mistaken. I am no coward, but I shall much prefer the leopard insensible than active. Waldo may be capable of holding the beast, but I wouldn't risk it."

"Sir Marcus Droone is behind the cage?" echoed Tinker. "By jingo! I'll admit it's a ripping prison for him—a regular brain-wave on Waldo's part. But how the dickens did you arrive at that conclusion, sir?"

"When the pseudo Sir Marcus was triumphantly exhibiting the leopard to us I kept my eyes well open," replied Blake. "There is an inner compart-

ment to that cage, Tinker. The animal's sleeping quarters, presumably. And the doorway is quite narrow. Perhaps you didn't observe a fragment of cloth clinging to the latch of that inner door?"

"I didn't even notice a latch, sir," admitted Tinker.

"Which only proves that you didn't use your eyes," responded Blake. "You see things, Tinker, but you don't observe. If you go on at this rate I shall despair of you."

"Oh, draw it mild, sir!" protested Tinker. "You don't mean to tell me that a few fragments of cloth on a door-latch provides sufficient evidence that Sir Marcus Droone is hidden in the leopard's sleeping quarters! That's a bit steep, isn't it?"

"Taken alone, it would be steep," replied Blake. "But taken in conjunction with other things, it becomes not only a possibility, but almost a certainty. Think, Tinker! Consider the facts!"

"I'm thinking, sir, but the gears have got jammed."

"That fragment of cloth could hardly have caught on the catch in the ordinary way," said Blake. "The door is narrow, I admit, but anybody would automatically enter sideways, and thus avoid contact with any projection. I am convinced that Sir Marcus was carried into that cage by Waldo. But I am not building my assumption solely on that piece of cloth."

"What else have you got to go on, sir?"

"The all-important fact that the leopard was at liberty for a short period," replied Blake shrewdly. "We know for a certainty that Waldo is impersonating Sir Marcus. In such circumstances what would he do with his victim? Conceal him in a place where no other person would penetrate. Surely the leopard cage provides an ideal prison?"

"I take it that Waldo overpowered Sir Marcus, carried him through the cage to the inner compartment, but inadvertently left the cage unlatched," continued Blake. "The leopard seized his opportunity, and escaped. During his period of liberty he attacked the unfortunate Griggs, and meanwhile Waldo discovered the animal's absence. We cannot possibly tell how the leopard was recaptured, but that is a minor point. I intend to search that inner compartment at once."

By this time they were walking silently down the drive, and now, turning a bend, they came within full sight of the rambling old mansion. The moon was out, and the manor looked mysterious and ghostly in the faint light. A dull, yellowish gleam shone from the library window.

"It seems that Waldo is still active," breathed Blake. "All the better. You will creep as close as possible, Tinker, and maintain a careful watch over the library."

"But aren't I coming with you, sir?" asked Tinker in dismay.

"You cannot very well be in two places at once, and you will be more useful in watching here than accompanying me," replied Blake. "I took careful note of the geography of this place during our brief earlier visit. The miniature zoo is situated at the end of the north wing, round the angle of the building to the left. The place is provided with a skylight, Tinker. I intend to enter by that skylight and conduct my search. You must watch the library window, and if you have reason to suspect an alarm, you must come round and warn me without delay."

Tinker didn't quite like it, but he was compelled to agree. And, creeping close,

concealed by some thick laurels, he found that it was possible to gaze directly into the library window.

The blind was not fully drawn, and Tinker could see the disguised Waldo sitting in an easy chair before the fire, smoking and reading. The Wonder-Man was quite at his ease—it seemed.

Blake was losing no time on his own job.

Reaching the end of the north wing he had no difficulty in recognising the winter garden and the zoo. Both were additional structures, having been added to the main building at some period in the past. The walls were festooned with ivy, and Blake had no difficulty in making the short climb.

He reached the skylight, and was delayed a short while at this point by the stubbornness of the catch. It was old and rusty, and Blake spent a good five minutes, working hard with a small steel instrument.

At last the skylight was prised open, and Blake propped it in position.

Then, uncoiling his fine rope, he secured it, and dropped lightly down into the building below. Sweeping his electric torch round, he saw that he had the place to himself—except for the leopard, which crouched in a corner of his cage, glaring balefully at the intruder.

Blake glanced at the other cages with interest. They lined the walls of the one-time menagerie. All were empty, and one particularly great cage was standing forlorn and dilapidated. The door had completely gone, and the interior of the cage was littered with rubbish. The bars were of enormous thickness, indicating that its former captive had been a formidable creature.

But Blake had work to do.

He stood for a moment regarding the leopard, and then he took out the little parcel containing the meat. Unwrapping the choice morsel, he threw it between the bars, and straight at the leopard.

The brute started back, spitting and hissing. But suddenly his nostrils worked, and his attitude changed. He had caught a whiff of the raw flesh, and the next moment the leopard snapped at the meat, and devoured it.

"Good!" murmured Blake. "Easier than I had anticipated."

The great cat moved up and down its cage on the far side, eyeing the intruder with a continuous, spiteful glare. And Blake turned his attention to the door of the cage.

It was provided with a stout lock with a spring latch. It could be closed without a key, but to open it was a different matter. Blake drew an assortment of fine, delicate skeleton keys from his pocket, and commenced the attack.

Holding his torch in one hand, he tried key after key with the other. The leopard made no attempt to interfere. The bright beam of light from the torch scared the creature, and kept him at bay. Moreover, Zana was beginning to lose his fire.

He blinked continuously, and had crouched down in a corner of the cage. Quite unmoved, Blake continued his work. And presently he was gratified to feel the lock succumb to his efforts. He touched the door, and it swung lightly open.

At the same moment, the leopard rolled over, shivered and twisted convulsively for a few seconds, and then lay still. The creature was stretched out as though dead—but the faint movement of its body proved that respiration was still active, and the heart still beating.

Eager and alert, Blake leapt into the cage, and passed through to the rear

compartment. A keen pang of disappointment assailed him as he flashed his light within that cavity.

It was empty, save for the leopard's bed.

But Blake's spirits quickly revived as he noticed an inner door. It was closed and secured, but there was no intricate lock.

Blake pushed the bolt back, and swung the door open. One flash from his torch was enough. Within, lying full-length on a number of cushions, was Sir Marcus Droone—an almost exact replica of the man Blake had spoken to in the library. Waldo's impersonation was better than Blake had anticipated.

Sir Marcus looked quite peaceful—and, indeed, comfortable. Waldo had obviously been back to the cage with these cushions, so that his host would not suffer unduly in his confinement. And Blake was delighted to find that his deductions had turned out correct.

He placed his torch on the floor, knelt down, and shook Sir Marcus gently. The old man stirred, muttered one or two words in an undertone, but otherwise remained insensible.

"H'm! Just as I thought!" murmured Blake grimly.

He subjected the baronet to a quick examination, and then pulled a tabloid drug-wallet from his pocket. He soon administered a powerful restorative and the effect was not long in making itself noticed.

Sir Marcus stirred uneasily, and minute by minute he improved. And at length, after seven minutes had elapsed, he opened his eyes to full consciousness, and looked at Blake in a dazed, bewildered fashion.

"Good gad! What—what has happened?" asked the old man huskily, staring round him without comprehension. "Why am I here? Has there been an accident? Confound it, sir! Can't you speak? What's the meaning of this—?"

He broke off, and intelligence came into his eyes.

"The cage!" he muttered hoarsely.

Before Blake could stay him, Sir Marcus rose drunkenly to his feet. He staggered across the little compartment, still half-dazed and uncomprehending. With feverish, shaking hands he fumbled at something in the corner. And then a portion of the wall slid back, revealing a deep cavity.

With a choking cry of relief, Sir Marcus pulled out a small steel despatch case. It was fitted with a combination lock and he turned the knob feverishly. A moment later the little strongbox was open.

And in the reflected light from the electric torch scores of glorious rubies were revealed—sparkling and glinting wickedly.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

Tinker in a Cold Place and a Warm Corner.



SEXTON BLAKE expelled his breath with a slight whistle.

This was a surprise, at all events. And it struck him on the flash that Sir Marcus Droone would never have revealed this secret hiding-place under ordinary circumstances.

The eccentric old man was still only half-conscious, and he was gibbering over his rubies in a childish, inane kind

of way. His first thought, upon gaining a glimpse of intelligence had been that he was in this inner cage—the hiding-place of his rubies!

This was the first indication that Blake had received of Rupert Waldo's game. The detective had wondered why such a master-criminal as Waldo was spending his time in this old country manor. Here was the explanation.

But it was obvious, also, that Waldo knew nothing of this hiding-place.

"Control yourself, Sir Marcus!" said Sexton Blake sternly. "Your rubies are quite safe—you need have no fear."

Blake's voice seemed to steady the old man. He looked up, and a light of suspicion crept into his dilated eyes. Then he snapped down the lid of the strong box and thrust it hurriedly back into the cavity.

"Thief!" he exclaimed shrilly. "You would rob me—"

"No, no!" interrupted Blake, his calm level tones acting as would a soothing-draught to the baronet's disturbed nerves. "I am your friend, Sir Marcus. My name is Blake—Sexton Blake! I am here in your interests. I fear you have been the victim of a cowardly deception."

Sir Marcus was rapidly recovering.

"Sexton Blake!" he muttered, passing a shaky hand over his eyes. "I—I seem to know your name, but yet I can't remember—Why am I here? What has happened? Why don't you tell me?"

Blake pulled out his flask, and offered it.

"A mouthful will do you good, Sir Marcus," he said. "I found you unconscious in this cage. You have obviously been victimised by a man who has prob-

ably been enjoying the hospitality of your roof—"

"Ah!" interrupted Sir Marcus, his face becoming suffused with excitement. "I remember! Hume! He was just going—he came forward to shake hands—and then he attacked me! The coward! The cur! I—I don't seem to remember—"

"Who is this man, Hume?"

"Hume? I thought he was a friend!" muttered Sir Marcus. "Brigadier-General Hume—I met him at my club in London. A clever man—a wonderful authority on antiques—"

"The old game!" said Blake grimly. "A variation of the confidence trick, Sir Marcus. You have been victimised by one of the cleverest crooks in the world. This Brigadier-General Hume is none other than Rupert Waldo—known to the police as the Wonder-Man."

Sir Marcus stared at Blake dazedly.

"Waldo—Waldo!" he whispered. "I have heard of him. Of course—of course! Some time ago I was terrified, lest that man chose me as one of his victims! But it is impossible! Brigadier-General Hume is a distinguished officer—"

"He hoodwinked you into believing that he is a distinguished officer," put in Blake gently. "Undoubtedly, Sir Marcus, Waldo is after your rubies. But it is equally certain that this hiding-place is unknown to him."

"Good heavens! I am bewildered—I am confused!" muttered Sir Marcus. "What time is it? Grant is coming! He should be here—"

"Grant? Who is Grant?"

"My agent—my messenger from Burma!" muttered the old man. "He sent me a telegram—he is coming! That means he is bringing rubies! I told Hume to go—Yes, and then—and

then Hume attacked me! I am beginning to remember even more clearly."

He paused, breathing hard. And while he collected his scattered wits Blake had no difficulty in piecing two and two together. The last link in the chain was complete. Waldo had obviously known about the coming visit of Grant, and had got Sir Marcus out of the way so that he, himself, could receive the parcel of rubies from the messenger.

It was a simple scheme—and characteristic of Waldo. Whenever possible the Wonder-Man chose a game that was conspicuously simple. But in this present instance the whole affair had been hopelessly complicated by the escape of the leopard and the killing of Griggs.

Sir Marcus grew calmer, and bit by bit Blake obtained the story of Waldo's deception. He learned how the Wonder-Man had become acquainted with Sir Marcus at the latter's club, how they had discovered mutual interests, and all the rest of the old, old story.

Blake listened grimly. And while he was doing so Tinker was cooling his heels out in the biting wind.

He did not feel exactly good-humoured, for his vigil was an unpleasant one. He could not walk about, for it was necessary to maintain one position in order to keep watch over the library.

And Tinker was becoming numbed and chilled with the cold. It did not cheer him in the slightest when thick clouds rolled up and a few fine snowflakes whirled down in the wind.

Waldo was still reading, and by all appearance he was a fixture for the night. But the time dragged for Tinker—it seemed longer than it actually was. And at length he was relieved to see a

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movement from the figure within the library.

Waldo rose to his feet, stretched himself, and put his paper aside. Tinker could scarcely believe that this bent-shouldered old man could be the vigorous, muscular Waldo. The impersonation was remarkable.

Tinker could not see everything that passed within the room. Waldo walked out of vision for a moment, but returned with a candle. This he lighted, afterwards turning out the lamp.

"Thank goodness!" muttered Tinker. "He's going to bed at last! About time, too! It must be getting on for two o'clock!"

Waldo left the library, carrying the candle. Tinker thought rapidly. It was obviously Waldo's intention to go to bed, and Tinker decided that it wasn't necessary for him to alarm Blake.

The wisdom of Tinker's decision was soon apparent. For a flicker of light appeared in the hall. Tinker could see it through the old-fashioned fanlight over the door. It vanished, only to reappear again at a window on the first floor. And here it remained stationary. The blind was drawn, but this was of small importance.

Tinker felt justified in pacing up and down the grass for a few moments to restore some of his benumbed circulation. In the meantime, he was coming to the conclusion that he was wasting his time. Now that Waldo had gone to bed Tinker felt that he could safely join Sexton Blake.

"I'm fed-up with hanging about out here!" muttered Tinker. "I'll buzz round the north wing, and have a look for that skylight—"

He turned sharply, for it seemed to him that a shadow had suddenly appeared near the bushes to his left. The gravel drive lay beyond, but it was impossible that any living thing should be about. The bushes were waving in the chill breeze.

But something moved—something that was not attached to the ground by roots. And Tinker's heart, already thumping, gave a leap. For a brief second his thoughts flashed to the leopard. And it

was only natural that he should remember the unfortunate postman's fate at the same moment.

A figure swept down upon him. "Sorry, Tinker!" said Rupert Waldo grimly. "Hope I'm not giving you a start, but I want you rather badly."

A vice-like hand took hold of Tinker's arm, and he was held in a grip of steel.

THE TENTH CHAPTER. The Wonder-Man's Way.



RUPERT WALDO had not been as indifferent to the night's happenings as Tinker had supposed. Far from taking things haphazard, he had known of Sexton Blake's expedition from the very first.

As soon as Blake and Tinker had left, after the midnight interview, Waldo had realised that action on his part was necessary. He wasn't sure that Blake had detected his impersonation, but he suspected it.

And he knew for a certainty that the famous detective was not hoodwinked in regard to the leopard. And Waldo had actually paid a secret visit to the Flowing Bowl, just by way of scouting out the lie of the land.

And while engaged in this task he had been gratified to observe Sexton Blake and Tinker emerging from the window. Gratified, because it set all Waldo's doubts at rest.

They did suspect him! And, what was more, they had clearly left the inn for the purpose of making nocturnal investigations at the Manor. And the very fact that they left by the window proved that they were taking this course unknown to the landlord or to the police-officers.

And Waldo had decided, then and there, to capture both his enemies.

It was the only way in which he could

complete his programme. In order to obtain these rubies, it was necessary that he should remain at the Manor until the following evening—to receive the parcel from Mr. Arthur Grant.

And even though it meant keeping three prisoners in the house in the meantime, Waldo was determined. And there was something ironic in the idea of keeping Sexton Blake and Tinker prisoners while the men from Scotland Yard were so close at hand.

The official detectives would not bother Waldo; they would be surprised, perhaps, at the unexpected disappearance of Sexton Blake and Tinker. But they would institute no searching inquiries.

Waldo had deliberately reached the Manor in advance, and had taken his place in the library—conveniently leaving the blind raised so that he should be visible. His object was to lull Blake and Tinker into a sense of false security.

The Wonder-Man had not been so very dull, after all.

From one of the dark hall windows he had observed Blake and Tinker cautiously approach, he had seen Tinker take up his position, and he had seen Blake go off in the direction of the north wing. After that Waldo had deliberately settled himself down in an easy-chair with a newspaper.

There was no hurry, he told himself. Blake, of course, had gone to have a look at the leopard's cage. Well, it didn't matter. Since both he and Tinker were to be captured, they could do as they pleased. Waldo had his plans cut and dried.

And after a suitable length of time he went to bed. But the very instant he had set his candle in the bed-room he had slipped downstairs to a side window, emerging like a shadow, and springing upon Tinker unawares.

"It's no good struggling, old chap!" exclaimed Waldo softly. "I want you indoors—and Blake, too! You needn't be alarmed—"

Tinker had partially recovered from his shock, and now he took quick action. Although there was no hope of getting free from Waldo's powerful grip, Tinker still had the use of one hand.



OUR SPECIAL CHRISTMAS NUMBER!

Next week's issue, out on Thursday, December 11th, is our Christmas Number.

Sexton Blake and Tinker will figure in a fine, exciting story of the real Christmassy flavour. This specially written yarn will feature also—

MADemoiselle YVONNE, "UNCLE" GRAVES, HUXTON RYMER, GEORGE MARSDEN PLUMMER and MARY TRENT.

The plot is on altogether novel lines. In brief, it is this: Tinker, carried away by seasonable thoughts of peace and good will to all men, gets it into his head to arrange a Christmas truce with such of Blake's enemies who give trouble all the rest of the year. Sexton Blake, willingly falling in with the scheme, agrees, and the thing is arranged.

Huxton Rymer, among others, is invited to spend Christmas down at Mademoiselle Yvonne's country house. As soon as the house-party is complete strange things begin to happen. Who is responsible? Has the truce been broken?

Sexton Blake thinks it has—that Rymer himself is at the bottom of it—and he sets to work to find out. How he probed the mystery, and what he discovered, will be revealed in next week's yarn, the best of all possible Christmas Stories.

Don't risk missing it. You know what to do—mention the words, "A standing order!" to your newsagent TO-DAY!

SEXTON BLAKE'S CHRISTMAS TRUCE!

No. 2 of our SECOND COMPETITION picture-puzzle sets will appear next week. The standing order applies with equal force to this matter also. It's up to YOU! Try to realise what you could do with

£4,000—or, Ten Pounds a Week for Life.

He thrust two fingers between his lips and blew a long, piercing whistle. It was so shrill and penetrating that the air quivered and vibrated. And Waldo laughed harshly.

"Clever—very clever!" he snapped. "But it won't do any good, young man!"

"The guv'nor heard that whistle!" panted Tinker fiercely. "You can crow now, but he'll beat you, Waldo! You know it, too! The guv'nor always beats you!"

The Wonder-Man winced.

"Yes, by gad, you're right!" he retorted. "But this time there'll be a different story! Enough of this idling! I haven't got time to argue!"

He pulled Tinker towards him, and handled the young detective as though he were a mere child. Waldo's strength was phenomenal, and he picked Tinker up like a feather and swung him round.

He was annoyed. That warning whistle of Tinker's might complicate matters. Waldo struck out viciously.

Tinker caught the end of the thrust. It was enough. The blow was like a crash from a sledge-hammer. Tinker went over sideways, his head caught against a piece of rockery, and he lay there half stunned.

"Infernal young brat!" snapped Waldo harshly.

Tinker made no movement, he was too dazed. And just as Waldo was about to pick his victim up, he paused. A faint purr had come to his ears on the wind. And as he turned his head in the direction of the road, the twin headlights of a motor-car curved in the open gateway.

A powerful car entered the drive, and came gliding up towards the gloomy old house. Waldo was startled. This visitor, in the early hours of the morning, was something he had certainly not bargained for. And before he could move he was caught in the full glare of the headlamps.

To run into cover now would be a mistake. He was Sir Marcus Droone, so far as appearances went, and must act his part accordingly. He strode out into the drive, automatically dropping into his pose.

"Who's that?" he rapped out testily. "What's the meaning of this—"

"Has anything happened, Sir Marcus?" interrupted the man at the wheel.

He was a wiry, agile man, and he leapt to the ground at once. He was the sole occupant of the car. In one hand he gripped a stout leather case, a case that was fitted with two powerful locks.

"Who the mischief are you?" demanded Waldo angrily.

"Don't you know me, Sir Marcus?" asked the other. "I'm Grant—"

"Of course you're Grant!" interrupted Waldo, on the flash. "Do you think I didn't know it, man? What are you doing here at this time of night? You said you'd be here to-morrow evening. What's that bag you've got?"

"I've brought the stones down with me, Sir Marcus," explained Grant, startled and perplexed by his supposed employer's strange attitude. "You see, I happened to be talking with a Scotland Yard man at my hotel just after midnight. He told me that a murder had been committed down here—"

"So there has," interrupted Waldo. "What of it?"

"I was uneasy; I thought it might be connected with the Manor, Sir Marcus," said Grant. "It was too late to telegraph, so I thought it just as well to run straight down by car without delay. I'm sorry if I acted against your wishes—"

"Not at all!" interrupted Waldo

briskly. "You couldn't have acted better! Let me have that bag!"

He seized it triumphantly.

"They're here—the rubies?" he added, looking up.

"Yes, Sir Marcus—"

"Good! Then I'm afraid I must bid you good-night!" exclaimed the Wonder-Man in his normal voice. "Sorry, but this is necessary! And thanks awfully for providing me with this car!"

As he spoke, he delivered a crashing blow, which sent the unfortunate Mr. Grant headlong. He nearly turned a back-somersault, and Waldo uttered a laugh of victory as he leapt into the still-throbbing car. He was overjoyed. Nothing could possibly have happened better.

He cared not one whit for Blake or Tinker now. He had the jewels in his possession—sixteen hours before he had anticipated—and with this car at his disposal, the way of escape was open to him. Providence had apparently played into Waldo's hands.

He dropped the bag on the seat beside him, and engaged the gears. The powerful car leapt forward. The drive was semi-circular, and Waldo had only to speed round, and he would reach the outer gateway again.

But he hadn't done with Sexton Blake yet.

For the latter had heard Tinker's urgent whistle, and had come post-haste. Blake, indeed, arrived on the spot at the crucial moment. He had witnessed the assault upon Mr. Grant from a distance, and he guessed the rest.

And as the car leapt forward, Blake knew that he had only one chance of frustrating the Wonder-Man's design. With a clean jump, Blake landed upon the running-board of the car. The next second he flung himself at Waldo, and gripped the master crook round the throat from behind.

"Better pull up, Waldo!" panted Blake curtly.

But Rupert Waldo was desperate. A great rage welled within him. Even at the last moment Blake had turned up to frustrate him. He stepped on the accelerator, and the car bounded forward, swaying giddily.

Almost out of control, the automobile skidded on the loose gravel. There was a shrieking, grinding roar, and the off-side front wheel struck an ornamental piece of rockery at the edge of the drive.

The result was staggering.

The car simply heeled over, flinging Blake and Waldo out like a couple of skittles. The car reared on its side, and completely overturned. Blake was caught beneath the wreckage, bruised, dazed, and pinned down. By a miracle, he escaped serious injury.

Waldo, on the other hand, was unscratched. He picked himself up, aware that shouts were sounding near the house. Sir Marcus himself had come out, and Tinker was staggering along towards the smash.

Desperately, Waldo looked on.

His one thought was for the bag of rubies. Even now it might not be too late! And then, within a yard of him, a hissing, blinding flame leapt up. The escaping petrol had caught fire!

A column of lurid flame leapt up startlingly. The entire front of the car was a roaring, blazing mass. And Sexton Blake lay pinned beneath the overturned wreckage! It was a death trap for the famous detective!

Rupert Waldo caught his breath in sharply.

All thought of the rubies was swept out of his mind. He stood there, fascinated. The flames spread with incred-

ible speed. Blake was already being scorched and half-blinded.

"All right, old man!" rapped out Waldo. "I'll have you out of that!"

The position seemed hopeless. The heavy car would have to be lifted completely in order to extricate Sexton Blake. And the flames were already so fierce and terrible that it spelt death to go near it.

But Waldo took no notice of the danger. With tightly-clenched teeth, and with every muscle braced, he bent down amid the flames, and grasped the edge of the flaming car. It was an act of sheer heroism. This astounding criminal had no knowledge of fear.

With one mighty, incredible heave, he raised the heavy automobile, and sent it hurtling over on its side. Six ordinary men would have had difficulty in performing that feat.

Even now the flames licked round the grass. Waldo seized Blake by the shoulders, dragged him round, and sent him rolling into safety. The Wonder-Man staggered back, scorched and blackened. Although Sexton Blake had brought utter ruin to his scheme, he had saved the detective's life. It was just Rupert Waldo's way.

"Sorry—can't stop!" he shouted.

The next moment he ran off into the darkness and vanished. And Tinker and Mr. Grant, rushing up, gave no thought to the escaping criminal. If Tinker had attempted to think, he would certainly have wished, with all the fervour of his heart, good luck and God speed to the fleeing Waldo.

But Tinker had no thought except for his master. Blake was attempting to stagger to his feet. And Tinker clutched him gladly.

"Guv'nor!" he panted. "I—I thought—"

"All right, young 'un—thanks to Waldo, I'm safe!" interrupted Blake huskily. "A few bruises—and one or two burns. But they're nothing. By James! That man's an amazing mixture!"

"The rubies!" panted Mr. Grant, staggering up with the locked bag. "Thank heaven! He didn't get away with the rubies!"

"I almost wish he had!" exclaimed Tinker, gazing into the darkness with shining eyes. "Poor beggar! I'm sorry for him, guv'nor! He may be a crook, but he's white—white to the core!"

Sexton Blake winced as his burns and bruises pained him.

"Mr. Grant, perhaps you will help me into the house?" he suggested. "Sir Marcus will explain everything. Tinker, run to the Flowing Bowl, and awaken Chief Inspector Lennard."

"Yes, by jingo, I will!" said Tinker. "It's up to old Lennard to collar Waldo now! And we'll see that he releases that chap, Roper, too."

Blake gave a rather twisted smile.

"While you're about it, Tinker, you'd better tell Lennard to come along here," he said dryly. "He'll find the murderer of Griggs quite docile. Somehow, I don't think he will be called upon to stand on trial for his life!"

Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard came—startled, bewildered, and crest-fallen. So far as he was concerned, the case was one that he would gladly have forgotten. But Sexton Blake and Tinker had emerged with flying colours.

As for Rupert Waldo, he vanished into obscurity. No trace of him was found. And Sexton Blake hoped that the Wonder Man would never re-appear. Somehow, the famous detective disliked the idea of hunting a man to whom he owed his life.

THE END.

The MYSTERY of the MARSHES



(Continued from page 4.)

thought nothing of it, maybe, but that snooping, crawling sneak——"

"Is he likely to blab, then?" asked Old John.

"No; that's the trouble. If I know anything of him, he'll keep what he knows to himself, till he finds somebody interested enough to pay him to tell. A poisonous specimen; he was always, the same, right the way back to his school-days."

"Ay, his father's like him, come to think of it," agreed the elder man. "What you might call furtive. Like father, like son! But who's the youngster to tell? You don't suppose he's in with any of this gun-running gang, eh?"

John Polden said the last words in a whisper (that was now too late), his chin on his shoulder as he leaned for-

ward, glancing behind him at the window as if the eavesdropper were still outside it.

"No, I don't suppose so. But——"

"Can't ye stop his mouth some way?"

"Not much chance if he sees he can open it to his own advantage, I reckon," replied Bob. "Anyway, it's no use sitting here talking. I'll get along after him and see what can be done—try and pump him, or something."

He rose and put on his jacket, which he took down from where it hung on a nail behind the door.

"So-long, uncle! I'll see you later and let you know how I get on. When mother comes in tell her——"

"Just a minute, Bob—just a minute! What ye've been tellin' me—it's a serious thing! I'm in the coastguard service, but it's unofficial as far as I am concerned. Hadn't ye better tell the police up at Colchester?"

Bob Castle paused and considered.

"S-sh!" warned Old John, glancing round again melodramatically as there was a step outside on the path. This

irruption of startling events—so startling that they might even yet find their way into the London newspapers—had

so altered the outlook in his usually placid life that he was beginning to feel, and act, like a stage conspirator.

"Sall right," reassured Bob as he looked out of the window. "It's mother."

He swung the cottage door open for her to enter. She had been "getting in a few things" down at the village, and carried a marketing-basket half-full of paper packages. Mrs. Castle was a sturdily-built woman of ample, but not too solid, proportions. Ruddy-complexioned, and with laughing blue eyes, she bore a marked resemblance to her son, and even now retained very noticeable traces of the good looks that had once made her the belle of Merwell village.

She nodded brightly to her brother, and remarked:

"Hallo, Old John! Here again?" as she dumped her burden down on the table.

"I'm just going out, mother. Back soon, I think," chimed in Bob, as he stepped over the threshold.

He drew the door to, and commenced to walk down the path.

"Hey! Wait!" yelled the elder man, springing up from his chair.

"What's come over the man?"

(Continued on next page.)

EDITORIAL
SMALL
TALK

MY DEAR READERS.—When I survey this present number, the realisation forces itself upon me that "U.J." readers now are getting more than "U.J." readers ever did in the whole thirty-year history of the paper.

Just consider—

Our £10-a-week-for-life competition, which is concluding with this issue, was a big thing. Nobody would venture to contradict that plain assertion. The prize offered, in fact, was the biggest thing of its kind ever put before the public in such a contest as this. The whole history of journalism cannot show its equal.

Not content with offering this solid weekly pension (or its £4,000 equivalent) once, the "U.J." is REPEATING it. The first set of puzzle pictures in our new "Far and Near" Contest is published in this issue, together with the last of the "Celebrities." You will find it on page 12.

Thus, in this issue, we have two unprecedentedly huge prizes, and the smaller prize in the usual Football Forecast Competition. So that, in this number, counting together the three sums of prize-money, the enormous sum of £9,500 is available for distribution.

It may seem too good to be true. It may seem that, if such a sum can be won, it will be won by somebody else—somebody who was "born lucky." It may seem that it can never be *you* for you've never won even a small prize in your life.

But guess again! Why shouldn't it be *you*?

Realise this: Everyone has an equal chance in these two big contests. The competition is designed for that very purpose. It isn't necessarily the fellow with the bulging forehead who's going to win these prizes. You don't need to be a puzzle expert. Every competitor starts from scratch. The list of names which is supplied with the pictures makes everything easy, and puts you on level terms with anybody.

THAT MONEY MAY BE YOURS!

That's all you need to think about. Get a grasp of that fact, and plunge right ahead into this new contest.

So much for the competitions and the prize-money. And now, remembering what we said about "U.J." readers getting more now than ever before, let us discuss the rest of the paper.

The stories, as you will already know, represent the best detective yarns it is possible to buy *anywhere*. The UNION JACK is the only paper of its kind published in the whole wide world, and, moreover, it contains a weekly record of the exploits of the world's most popular detective—Sexton Blake.

Then the Supplement. This, too, is unique. A weekly budget of first-class, gripping, real-life articles on all phases of criminality and police work is something you don't come across anywhere but in the "U.J."

Every issue of it is different in its

appeal—so varied and numerous are the facets of our subjects—and a complete collection of such issues binds up at the year's end into a volume that will be a treasured possession for the future and a constant joy to read.

Thus you have in one handy periodical—in one simple two-penny-worth—the chance to win sums of money the mere realisation of which makes you glow with the pleasure of anticipation; and reading matter which for quality and quantity you cannot equal.

For those who have come to love the tales of Sexton Blake and Tinker—and all regular "U.J." readers do that pretty soon—it should be pointed out that the space on which these great competitions inevitably encroach is not given at the expense of the stories. Whenever it is necessary the paper is specially enlarged to accommodate them.

There have, for instance, been five such specially enlarged issues lately, each with four extra pages. You have therefore had twenty pages over and above what would have normally been the case—extra competition pages which amount practically to a free ticket to our big prizes.

Next week will see the publication of our Special Christmas Number. This will contain the second of our "Far and Near" puzzles; the usual Football Competition coupon; another issue of the ever-popular "Supplement"—this time with a topical Christmas appeal; and a Christmassy Sexton Blake story, for full particulars of which you are referred to page 28.

Unfortunately, the limitations of space will not allow of our discussing next week's number more adequately here. You already know what "U.J." quality means, however, so all that need be said is that you'd better book your copy early. Better still, make it a standing order!

The Editor

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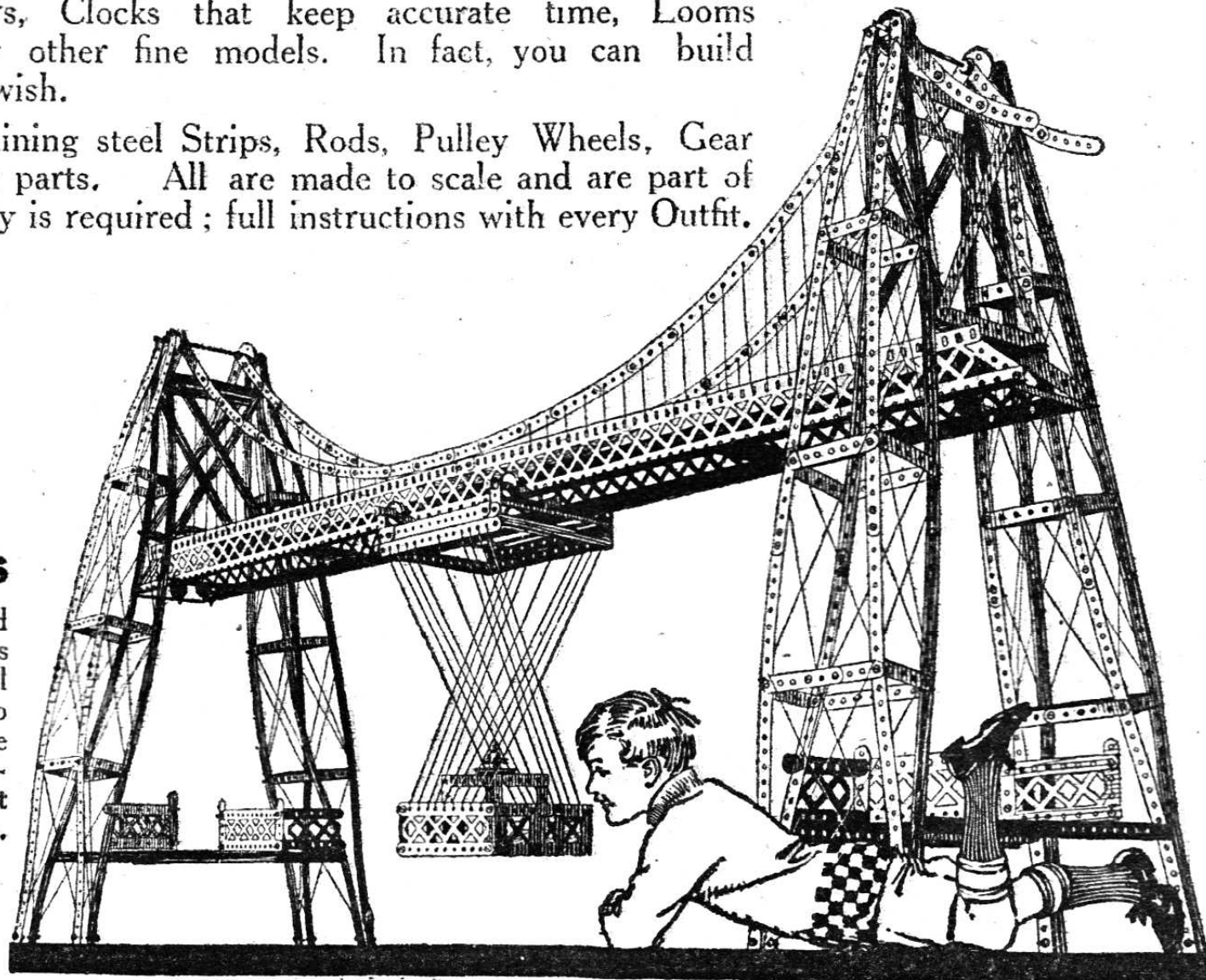
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(Continued from previous page.)

demand Mrs. Castle in mock alarm. "What's the worried look for? What's the—"

Old John took a step or two towards her, and, with a gaze of deep earnestness that was almost a scowl, he stretched out a hand and gripped his sister's shoulder.

"Lucy—tell me!" he exclaimed. "Do you want a new drum?"

"Drum? No, I don't want a new drum!" She giggled nervously. "At my time o' life!"

He shook her slightly.

"New drum of oil!"

The melodramatic scowl was pronounced enough this time.

"Oh, ah! To be sure! I ordered it from Sperrit's. Did the boy bring it?"

Old John Polden released her shoulder suddenly and left his sister flustered and bewildered as he darted to the door. He caught Bob at the gate in three leaps, astonishing in one of his age, stopped abruptly, and shot a sidelong glance up and down the road, this time clutching his nephew's shoulder.

"She ordered it all right, my boy," he said in a husky stage whisper. "The lad couldn't have come a-purpose to spy on us. She told him to bring it."

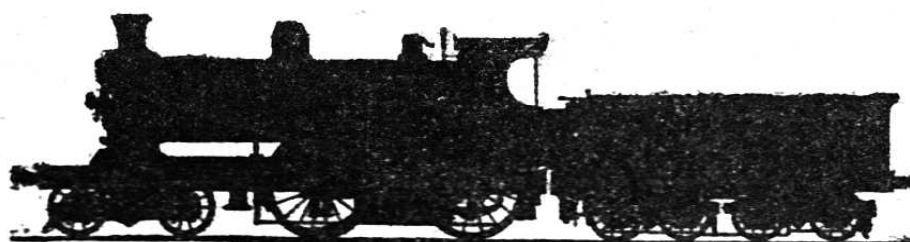
The questioning look vanished from Bob's face as he realised what his uncle was talking about, and he grinned.

"Find out all you can, and report to me," went on Old John. "Meantime, I'll be on the alert. Weather eye lifting, ye understand."

He winked portentously, and half closed his eyes.

"Right-ho, uncle!" replied Bob, in the same furtive whisper; and, suppressing his inclination to smile, strode off briskly towards the village in the wake of Adam Sperrit.

(Another instalment of this fascinating story next week. Is your copy on order?)



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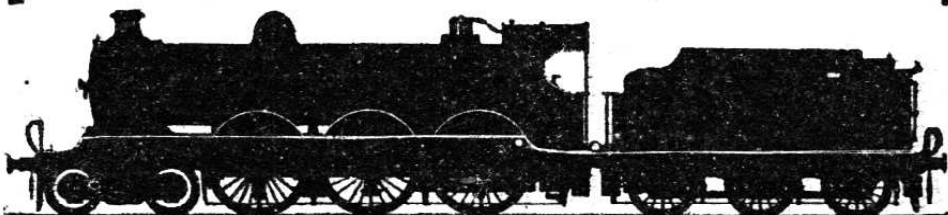
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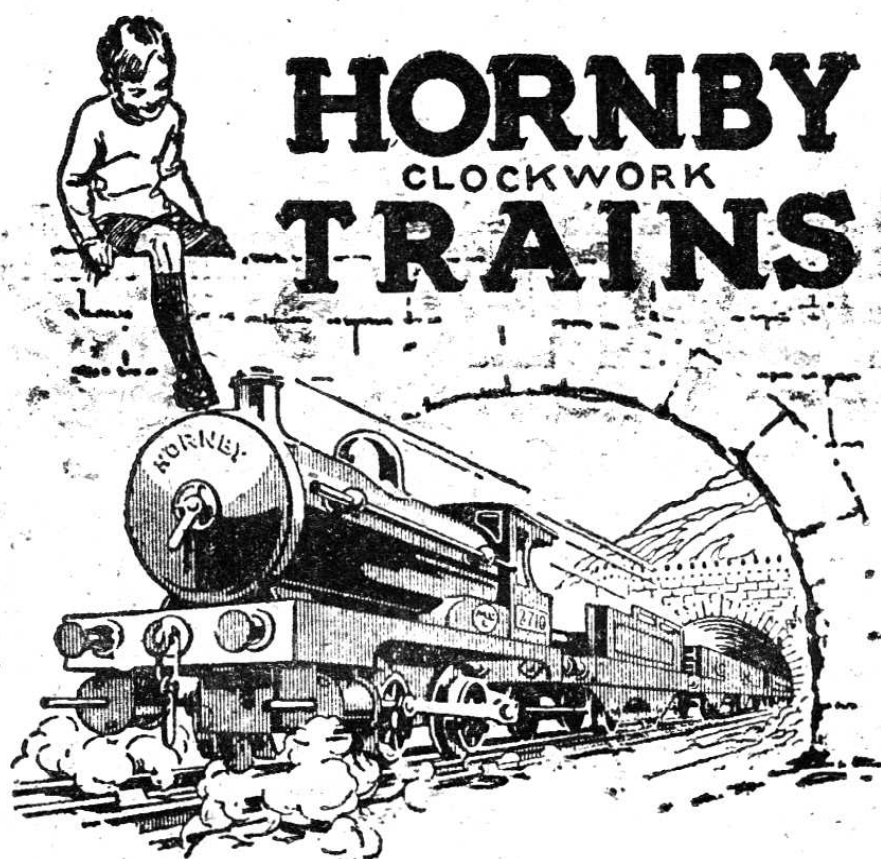
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