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THE CASE OF THE WRESTLING RAJAH.

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PETER THE SPIDER

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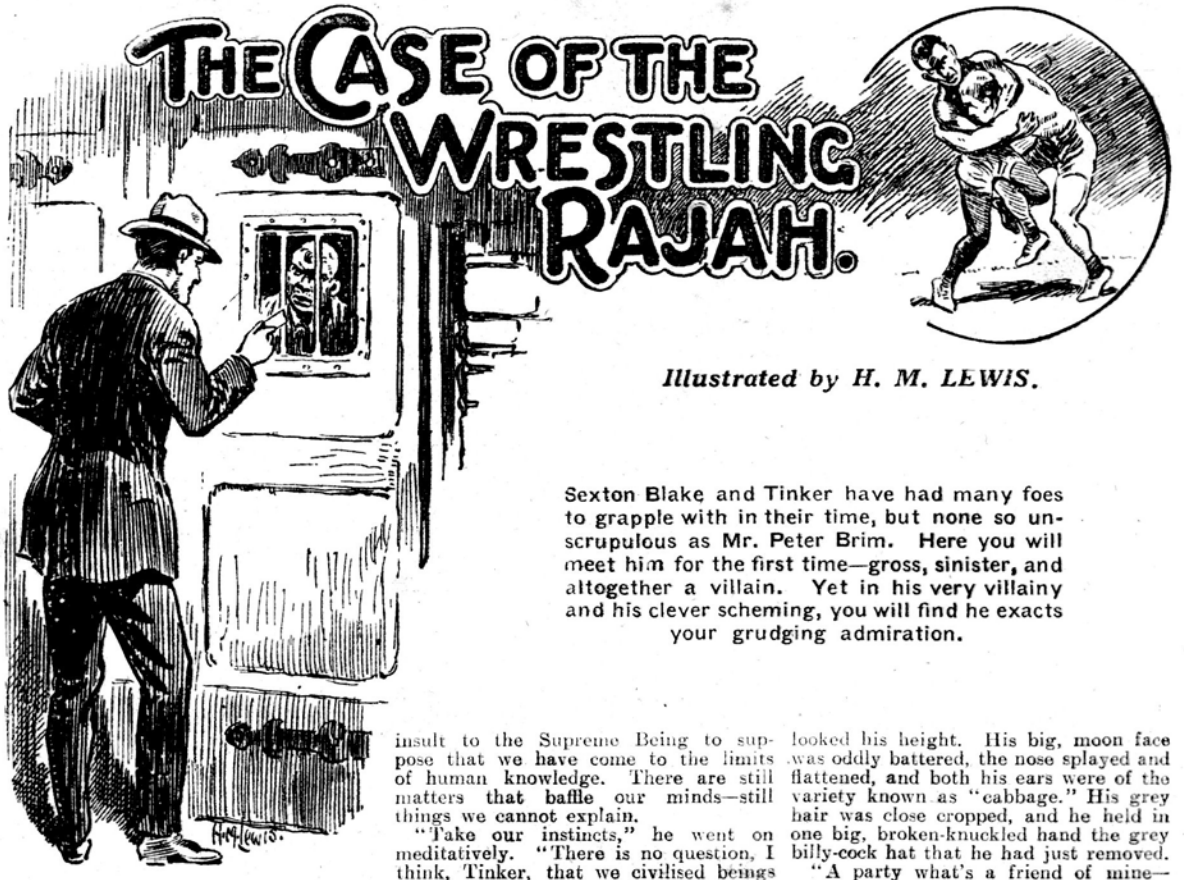
THE CASE OF THE WRESTLING RAJAH.



Illustrated by H. M. LEWIS.

Sexton Blake and Tinker have had many foes to grapple with in their time, but none so unscrupulous as Mr. Peter Brim. Here you will meet him for the first time—gross, sinister, and altogether a villain. Yet in his very villainy and his clever scheming, you will find he exacts your grudging admiration.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Enter the Professor.

IT was a day early in the New Year, with a wind that wailed about the chimney-pots of Baker Street, and there was something very comforting in the glow of the log fire that burned in Sexton Blake's consulting-room. After a long and exacting day the detective, in his red dressing-gown, with a pipe between his teeth, sat relaxed. To the strongest, the most energetic, the most virile of men there comes sometimes a craving for rest and peace. Blake was in that mood.

The fire was comforting. The noise of the east wind seemed indeed to enhance the cosiness of the room. Tinker from the opposite side of the hearth, looked up from the paper he was reading.

"I can't make out this spiritualism that everyone's talking about. Is there anything in it, do you think, guv'nor?"

Blake blew a cloud of tobacco smoke from between his lips before he answered.

"I shouldn't like to give an answer to that question—not a final or authoritative answer. I don't know, my lad. There's fraud mixed up in it, of course, and unconscious self-deception, but here and there, there may be some grains of truth. Of one thing I'm certain—it's not a branch of study with which you ought to meddle at your age, my lad."

He smiled across at his companion.

"'There are more things in Heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy,' Tinker. It's absurd—an insult to the Supreme Being to suppose that we have come to the limits of human knowledge. There are still matters that baffle our minds—still things we cannot explain.

"Take our instincts," he went on meditatively. "There is no question, I think, Tinker, that we civilised beings have lost some of our instincts in the process of evolution; but those instincts still survive in animals, and among human beings of a lower order of development. Pedro could do things of which we are incapable. In West Africa news can be passed among the natives by some secret process which outstrips even the telegraph wires. We ourselves are conscious sometimes of approaching events which we cannot explain by the ordinary process of reasoning."

He sat up, suddenly alert, listening. Nothing could be heard save the gale in the chimney-pots and the comforting crackling of the logs.

"To give you an illustration, my lad. 'By the pricking of my thumbs, someone this way comes,' to misquote the witch in 'Macbeth,' Shakespeare, by the way, must have dabbled in what you call spiritualism, Tinker. When any old woman was likely to be burnt as a witch some sort of study of the occult was a necessary part of one's education, I suppose."

From downstairs came a resounding knock. Blake met Tinker's look of astonishment with a grim smile.

"I'm sorry my illustration has proved so effective, my lad. I was hoping for a quiet evening."

They could hear the murmur of voices downstairs and then the sound of footsteps ascending. Mrs. Bardell knocked and opened the door.

"Professor Crackjaw to see you, sir!"

She glanced a little nervously over her shoulder as she spoke.

"Bless you, marm! Crackstone, I said. Not but what Crackjaw wouldn't be very suitable, in a manner of speaking, seeing as how I have cracked a few in my time."

The speaker's voice was so raucous that it seemed to fill the room. Pressing past Mrs. Bardell, he disclosed himself as a very extraordinary-looking man. He stood five feet ten, but on account of the breadth of his shoulders, hardly looked his height. His big, moon face was oddly battered, the nose splayed and flattened, and both his ears were of the variety known as "cabbage." His grey hair was close cropped, and he held in one big, broken-knuckled hand the grey billy-cock hat that he had just removed.

"A party what's a friend of mine—old Bill 'Iggins, what keeps the First and Last, down Cranberry way; 'im as went the sixty-three rounds with the raw 'uns with Tiger Smith—give me the tip that Mr. Sexton Blake lived here."

The detective, who had risen, received this curious introduction without a smile.

"I'm Sexton Blake," he answered quietly.

The other engulfed his hand in a huge palm.

"Proud to meet you! I've heard tell of you. By all accounts you can go the full twenty rounds at any weight and never take the count."

"Rumour speaks more kindly of me than I deserve, I expect," Blake answered modestly. "Won't you sit down, professor, and tell me how I can serve you."

Professor Crackstone placed his grey bowler hat on the floor and then lowered himself slowly into a chair. His deep-set blue eyes, which looked, somehow, like those of a boy, were curiously troubled.

"I don't like to have dealings with the regular rozzers. That's why I've took old Bill 'Iggins' tip and come along to you, sir. I don't exactly know, being new to this 'ere game of private detectives, what rules you fight under, but I've got plenty of stuff here, and I don't mind what I spends in reason."

He plunged his hand into the inner pocket of his coat and drew out a bundle of notes, which he held out to Blake.

"I brought that lot along with me, but in case it ain't enough, guv'nor, just you say the word, and there's more where them come from."

"It would be best, I think, professor, to know the object of your visit first. We can discuss my fee afterwards. What is the trouble you've been having with your boxing-booth?"

The professor looked at him in astonishment.

"Blowed if I've said a word about

my boxing-booth. How did you know, guv'nor?"

"Well, it was rather an obvious guess, professor. Anyone would know, of course, that you had been a pugilist—the splayed knuckles of your hands—the state of your ears. For the rest—well, I surmise that you could only have learned the production of your voice on a fair ground."

"Lor' love us, but ain't you quick on the uptake!" the professor exclaimed, in a tone of undisguised admiration. "It's right, every word of it! I am 'Professor Crackstone's World Famous Exhibition of the Arts of Pugilism and Wrestling. Private Fetes Attended by Arrangement.' I ain't got a card on me, or I'd let you 'ave one, guv'nor."

"And the matter on which you came to consult me, professor?"

The professor squared his shoulders, sat very erect, and stared stolidly at the fire as if trying to concentrate his mind on what he had to say.

"Well, it's this way, guv'nor. A matter of six months ago the bloke what I had to do the wrestling turned the job up. Proper put me in the soup, he did! I didn't know where to get someone else to take his place, wrestlers being much scarcer than boxers. And then one day a coloured bloke, with a turban on his head—same as Ali Baba in the pantomime—blows into the booth—we was at Churchley Fair then—and asks me to give him a trial. He was the goods. Swaji was his name."

The professor paused a moment to sniff.

"I ain't had much truck with natives, but I cottoned on proper to Swaji. Best lad I ever had. There wasn't anything he didn't know about wrestling; and I've known hens what cost more to keep in food. An' he didn't mind what he'd did to fill up time when he weren't wrestling—from cleaning boots to shaving me regular every morning. Heathen he may have been, but I've known few Christians as'd come within a thousand miles of him for obligingness, and square dealing, and good temper."

He brought his clenched fist down into the palm of his left hand.

"And now somebody's done the dirty on him, guv'nor. We was at Springbourne Fair—business brisk—everything O.K. Swaji goes to bed same as he always used to, and in the morning he ain't there."

"You have, of course, ruled out the possibility of his having just left you of his own accord without notice?" Blake interrupted.

"There ain't no chance of that, guv'nor. We was too good pals. Besides, he never took any of his things away with him. And there was some of them things—praying-mats and what-nots—that he set great store on. They're all there. I brought 'em along with me so as you could see 'em. I left 'em in the hall."

He leaned forward and gazed intently at the detective.

"He was kidnapped, that's what he was. The tent in which he slept was all upside down. A proper rough house there must have been before they collared him. And Alf—'im as does the boxing—swears as he was wakened in the night by the sound of a motor-car. There was the marks of the tyres on the turf about a hundred yards away. It was kidnapping. And I want you to find him, guv'nor. I'm proper fond of that poor heathen, and if there's any way of standing by him I'm going to stand by him. I'd just like to meet the blokes what took him—that's all!"

It was perfectly clear from the professor's expression that he was labouring under a very deep and genuine emotion. His voice might be rough and raucous, his method of expressing himself bizarre in the extreme, but behind this rude exterior there was a loyal and deep affection for the man who had so mysteriously disappeared.

"Your feelings do you every credit, professor!" Blake exclaimed. "If I can help to solve this riddle for you I will. Perhaps you will let me ask you a few questions?"

His cross-examination of his visitor elicited little more than a specific statement of the facts that he had already dealt with generally. It was two days since Swaji had disappeared. He had retired for the night at eleven o'clock; he had been missed at sunrise the following morning. Within a bare six hours some mysterious fate had swooped down upon the native wrestler and withdrawn him from the world.

That, and a rather hazy description of the missing man—"Chocolate-coloured bloke, guv'nor; about six-foot-two, and running to the middle-weight class, like that there advertisement for somebody's dates"—was all the professor could tell him. Of where he came from—of his history before he had joined the travelling booth—the professor had no information.

The Usual Editorial Feature

The Round Table

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will be found on page 12.

"Where can I communicate with you, professor?" Blake inquired.

"I am still at Springbourne—camping at the same place where this here thing happened, guv'nor. I thought maybe if he did escape—always supposing nothing worse has happened to him—he might drift back there and find me. And, to tell you the truth, mister, it don't seem as if I'd got the heart to go on with the boxing-booth job without that there heathen."

He sniffed and glared violently at the fire, as if ashamed of the emotion which had made his blue eyes misty.

"Very well, professor. I'll see you there to-morrow. Meanwhile, I will examine the missing man's effects, and glean as much information about him as possible."

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Caravan and Castle.

HALF AN HOUR after Professor Crackstone had taken his departure, Sexton Blake stood at the table examining the contents of a big bundle that had been placed there. It contained the effects of Swaji, the wrestler.

The possessions of the missing man were an odd assortment—a mixture of the East and West—a praying-mat and a tobacco-tin; a string of Oriental beads, and a few tawdry picture postcards. These, a bottle of oil, evidently used for rubbing his skin before entering the ring, and a few articles of wearing apparel, comprised all his belongings.

Sexton Blake, having minutely examined all these articles, turned his attention to the tobacco-tin. Opening it he found it contained a ten-shilling note, and a very worn, greasy piece of paper, which proved to be a testimonial from an English colonel, dated some years previously. The handwriting was almost obliterated, but with the use of a magnifying-glass Blake was able to make out a portion of its contents.

"This is to certify that"—here were a string of indecipherable names—"a native of Buhl, has been in my employ ——"

Of the signature to this testimonial all that had not been obliterated was the title of the writer: "Lt.-Colonel." Tinker, standing by the detective's side, scanned his face anxiously.

"There's nothing there that's much use, is there, guv'nor?" he exclaimed presently.

"What do you know of Buhl, Tinker?" Blake inquired.

"Nothing, I'm afraid, guv'nor, except that I've a kind of notion at the back of my head that it's in India."

"Good for you, my lad! It is, as you say, in India. You would have been equally correct, and equally useful, if you had said, 'It's on the earth.' As a matter of fact, it's a small, independent native state. But I wasn't asking for geographical information. I wanted to know what associations the name aroused in your mind."

"Wasn't there some scandal connected with the Rajah of Buhl, guv'nor?" Tinker exclaimed.

"Correct, my lad. A year ago there was a very unpleasant scandal. His Serene Highness was mixed up in a most unsavoury affair in which two of his subjects were murdered in Calcutta. There was a tremendous outcry, the result of which the British Government held an inquiry. The rajah's connection with the affair was proved beyond the shadow of a doubt. He was given the chance of being tried before his fellow princes or of abdicating. Like a wise man, he choose the latter course."

Blake stood for a moment, biting the end of his pipe.

"Just find me this morning's paper, will you, Tinker," he said presently.

With the paper spread before him on the table, he made a hasty inspection of the columns. Suddenly, with an exclamation of satisfaction, his finger came to rest on a certain paragraph. It was headed:

"RECORD SALE OF PRECIOUS STONES.

"Phenomenal prices were obtained at Christie's for a small portion of the collection of precious stones brought to this country by the ex-Rajah of Buhl ——"

Evidently his Serene Highness brought away with him as many of his valuables as he could handle, my lad. Yesterday's sale produced £95,000. The remainder, according to this report, contains some even more valuable jewels, which are to be disposed of weekly during the next month. And here's some more information right at the end of the report of the sale:

"'The ex-rajah has taken Cranstone Towers in Wiltshire for the season, and is living there in great seclusion.'"

Sexton Blake walked to the bookshelf, and, running his finger along the volumes, presently took down a County History.

"Here we are, Tinker. 'Cranstone Towers. Built originally in the reign of King Stephen—one of the finest specimens of Norman architecture surviving in this country.' Moat, portcullis, and all the rest of it. Situated two miles from the village of Maudrey."

He closed the book and replaced it thoughtfully in its place on the shelf.

"Doesn't take us anywhere, I'm afraid, Tinker. We have to find Swaji, a native wrestler, lately in the employ of Professor Crackstone. I like the professor, my lad. It was clear from what we saw of him to-night that he is greatly attached to this Swaji. I intend to help him if I can. That means we've got to start early to-morrow morning for Springbourne, so the sooner we find out exactly where the place is the better."

Tinker, without further instructions, produced a road map of Wiltshire. Sexton Blake, having found the whereabouts of Springbourne, continued to stare at the map meditatively.

"That's curious!" he exclaimed suddenly.

"What's that, guv'nor?" Tinker inquired.

Blake pointed to a place on the map.

"There's Maudrey—the village is two miles distant from Cranstone Towers. Cranstone Towers is at present in the occupation of the ex-Rajah of Buhl. Two days ago, at Springbourne, not more than half a dozen miles from Maudrey, Swaji, a native of Buhl, was forcibly abducted—if we are to accept the professor's theory."

He looked thoughtfully at Tinker.

"It may be merely a coincidence, my lad, but it merits inquiry. Outside the ex-rajah's entourage, I don't suppose there can be half a dozen inhabitants of Buhl in this country. Yet one was at Springbourne."

He began to pace up and down the floor of the consulting-room.

"At present, Tinker, we have to go on the assumption that Swaji really was forcibly abducted. Why should anyone want to abduct him? According to the professor's description he was a kindly, hardworking, lovable heathen. He had no enemies that his employer knew of. He was poor—a man earning a precarious livelihood by performing in a booth at different fair grounds throughout the country. For the present we can conceive of no reason why any white people should wish him ill. But it is a different matter when we come to consider his possible relations with his fellow citizens of Buhl."

He smiled faintly.

"I'm making theories, Tinker—not usually a very wise proceeding. Swaji might have offended the Rajah of Buhl. Perhaps he fled from his native country to escape the clutches of his sovereign lord. We know, from the proceedings that led to his abdication, that the ex-rajah is ruthless in his hate and his desire for vengeance. He waited several years before he struck at those two men in Calcutta. Swaji's presence in the neighbourhood of Cranstone Towers may have been reported to him, and he may have seized this opportunity of wreaking his vengeance."

He stopped abruptly.

"I hope the wind drops before the morning, because you and I are for the road at dawn. My romance of an Oriental vendetta, carried out in the heart of an English county, is an absurd explanation, of course—how absurd I hope we shall discover when we get to Springbourne. So off to bed with you, Tinker, and sleep while you can."

The first foot of dawn was treading the sky behind the dome of St. Paul's when the Grey Panther, with Blake, Tinker, and Pedro on board, turned westward out of Baker Street. The gale had died away, and as the sun climbed the heavens they realised that they were in for a perfect summer day.

Before the toilers in the great city they had left had begun to stir, they were winding their way across the Wiltshire roads. By eight o'clock they had drawn up alongside a village green, where a caravan, a dilapidated Ford car, and two bell tents were standing. A man with a bullet head and a hard-bitten face, dressed in a grey flannel sweater and a very old pair of flannel trousers, looked up from the fire over which he was frying bacon.

"The Hotel Cecil is round the corner!" he exclaimed sardonically. "This here ain't the Royal Automobile Club!"

"I hope you will let us have some breakfast, all the same, because we're all rather hungry after our long run!" Sexton Blake exclaimed pleasantly. "Is Professor Crackstone up and about yet?"

"The guv'nor's sleeping late. He didn't get back till three this morning from London."

"Well, you needn't disturb him just yet. I'm Sexton Blake. The professor came to see me last night about Swaji's case."

The man's face, that had been sullen and suspicious up to that moment, cleared as if by magic.

"Lor' love us, guv'nor, why didn't you say who you were right off? I'll have breakfast ready for you in a moment. The kettle's boiled, and this bacon's near done. You ain't heard anything about poor Ali Baba, have you?"

"I've come down here to begin my investigations. Perhaps you will tell me all you know about the affair while we're having our breakfast."

They seated themselves on the close-cropped turf about the fire, and ravenously devoured the bacon that the man transferred from the frying-pan to the plates, and while they breakfasted, their host, who introduced himself as Alf White, middle-weight champion of Ireland, the professional engaged by Professor Crackstone to meet all-comers at different fairs throughout the country, related what he knew about the disappearance of Swaji.

"That's the tent where he used to sleep, guv'nor. Barring that the old man took Ali Baba's bundle away, it's just as it was left after his disappearance.

Sexton Blake began to cross-examine him minutely, but there was no more information to be gleaned than what the professor had already told him.

"You didn't notice any suspicious characters about the booths the previous evening, I suppose?"

"Not more'n usual. There was just the country folk out to enjoy themselves. We had two good houses. I didn't notice anyone in particular."

"And you heard no cry, nor any sound of a struggle?"

"Not a whisper, and I'm a pretty light sleeper, guv'nor. The car I heard, but that was all."

Sexton Blake, having finished his breakfast, inspected the tent that had been occupied by Swaji. The grass had been trampled on, but it was impossible to disentangle from the innumerable marks any one characteristic footmark. Turning over the tumbled blankets, however, a pad of cotton-wool dropped on to the turf. He picked it up, examined it, and smelt it.

"A chloroform-pad!" he muttered to himself. "This proves the professor's abduction theory beyond a doubt."

As he came out of the tent, having first placed that cotton-wool pad in his pocket, he was hailed by the professor, who was descending from the caravan.

"Lor' love us, Mr. Blake, but you don't let the grass grow under your feet! I wasn't looking for you until midday, at least. You ain't found anything, I suppose, as throws any light on this here mystery?"

"I've discovered enough to prove that Swaji was forcibly abducted. Chloroform was used. As he was a powerful man and a skilled wrestler there must have been at least three men engaged on the job—one to administer the chloroform, and the others to hold him down until the anæsthetic took effect. There may have been four, but there couldn't have been less than three."

The professor looked at him with the big, wondering blue eyes of a baby.

"Gosh, but that's smart! As you say, it'd take two men all their time to hold Swaji down. Eels wasn't in it with him. But who were the blokes, and what did they want to do it for?"

"If I knew the answer to that question, professor, the task you have entrusted me with would be finished," Blake replied, with a smile. "I don't know the answer yet, but I don't think it's to be found here. I think I've seen everything I want to see, except the marks of a motor-car."

"I can show you the spot where we found them, but I guess last night's rain will have about washed 'em away."

He conducted the detective across the green to a patch of grass on the other side of the road. As he had surmised, the rain had obliterated all marks of the motor-car's wheels.

"Here's the spot, guv'nor. You can see for yourself that a car standing here would be completely hidden from anyone in my camp. These dirty dogs must have laid their plans very carefully."

Sexton Blake found himself wishing that he had been called in earlier. Swaji must have been carried from the tent to the car, and in the process his captors must have left tracks on the turf. But the rain had washed all these clues away.

"Thanks, professor! I don't think there's anything that need detain me here any longer. As soon as I've any information I will communicate with you. Meanwhile, you can be assured that I will use my very best endeavours to find this poor fellow for you."

As Blake drove swiftly away from Springbourne his face above the rim of the wheel was like a mask.

Tinker, glancing at him sideways, realised that he was grappling desperately with this baffling problem. There were features about the case, indeed, which made it one of the most mysterious and most difficult in his long experience. To begin with, nothing was known about the past of the missing man previous to his joining the professor, except that he was a native of Buhl, and had for some time been in the employ of an English lieutenant-colonel. How could he build on such inadequate foundations an edifice of theory which would in any way fit the crime?

Three or four men had arrived after midnight at Springbourne Common in a car, entered Swaji's tent, chloroformed him and carried him away. As to the identity of the men who had perpetrated this outrage there was not the faintest clue.

"As we are down in this part of the

world, Tinker, I think I'll take the opportunity of pursuing my studies in mediaeval architecture. It would be a pity to miss seeing over Cranstone Towers while we've got the chance."

As they swept round the corner of the road there appeared ahead of them, standing on a rise and commanding a view of the whole country round, the battlements of the place of which he had just been speaking. It stood there like something plucked from another age—an iron age of cruelty and rapine—with its massive grey stone walls, its towers still loopholed for the archers, and its great carved entrance gate.

"The engineers and architects who built that place knew their job, didn't they?" Blake remarked. "I don't suppose the unfortunate serfs who lived in these villages had much of a chance to escape from the lord of Cranstone Towers."

The Grey Panther turned in at some ornamental iron gates and sped swiftly up a long drive flanked on either side by parkland. Presently the road began to slope upwards, and they found themselves at last on the edge of a moat that surrounded the castle.

Stopping the car, Sexton Blake alighted and made his way on foot alone across the iron bridge that spanned the moat. Beyond were some terraced gardens that decorated the approach to the stately entrance gate. When he reached the gate he stood for a moment looking about him. There was no sign of life anywhere. Not even a gardener was working among the flower-beds.

He put out his hand and pressed the electric bell, that seemed oddly out of place in that mediaeval framework. Presently there was the sound of shambling footsteps. A panel in the gateway was drawn back, and he saw a man peering at him through the opening. He was an odd-looking man, with a twisted mouth and small, close-set eyes.

"What do you want?" he demanded roughly.

It flashed through Sexton Blake's mind as a curious circumstance that his Serene Highness, the ex-Rajah of Buhl, should be served by such a queer-looking man as this porter.

"I am acting for the firm of Morson & Co. of New York. I have been instructed to seek an audience with his Serene Highness with a view to purchasing the remainder of his collection of jewels by private treaty."

He selected a card from his case as he spoke, and handed it through the panel. On it was printed "Morson & Co., New York," and in the right-hand corner, in smaller type, "Mr. Philip Dexter." Sexton Blake had many such cards which he had found useful on more than one occasion.

"I don't expect there'll be anything doing," the porter growled. "But you can stay there while I go to inquire."

The panel closed with a bang. As he heard the sound of the man's retreating footsteps, Sexton Blake drew swiftly from his pocket a long, very fine knife, which he proceeded to insert in the narrow slit between the panel and its massive framework. The panel resisted his efforts to move it. The porter had locked it before departing on his errand.

"Very elaborate precautions even for an ex-rajah," Sexton Blake muttered to himself.

He stepped back and took a swift survey of the castle, noting, with photographic accuracy, all the details presented to his gaze. He was so engaged when the sound of the shuffling footsteps returning brought him hastily back to his post outside the entrance gate. The panel was opened with a click.

"His Serene Highness ain't biting!" he exclaimed. "So you'd best beat it! If there's any other of you guys knocking around you can tell 'em that they're wasting their time."

"But surely his Serene Highness would allow me to place my proposition before him?"

"Nope; he won't. So you can fade away down the alley—and don't come back unless you're looking for trouble!"

The panel closed again, and Sexton Blake was left staring at the massive gateway, a more than usually thoughtful expression on his strong, clean-shaven face. Then he glanced to the left of the gateway. There was a square tower there. Where the side of this tower joined the stone arch of the gateway there were a number of gargoyles, placed one above the other at a distance of not more than six feet. Originally they must have been used for the purpose of carrying off the rain-water, for from some of their grotesque stone faces there still protruded sections of lead piping.

"If the necessity arose it oughtn't to be so very difficult to force an entrance into the castle," Sexton Blake remarked to himself.

Still in his thoughtful mood, he made his way back to the Grey Panther, and, without a word to Tinker, turned the car, and, passing once more down the long drive, gained the village of Maudrey.

Slowing down as he rolled along the main street, he scanned the shops and houses on either side. Presently he found what he was seeking, a long, low Georgian house, whose front windows were decorated with the legend "Routledge & Son, Estate Agents and Valuers." He stopped the car at the open front door and got out. A moment later he was interviewing a clerk.

"I understand that his Serene Highness, the ex-Rajah of Buhl, has only taken Cranstone Towers on a short lease. I am looking for a property of the kind for a client of mine. If you could give me any particulars about the place I should be obliged."

"I am sorry, sir, but we haven't Cranstone Towers on our books. We should be only too delighted to be of what service we could to you, but the place is in the hands of the solicitors of the owner, to whom we could merely forward your letter of application."

His tone made it clear that the firm of Routledge & Son would not benefit to any appreciable extent by such negotiations, and that therefore their interest in the business which this stranger was propounding was of the slightest.

"I'm sorry to trouble you in the circumstances, but I wonder if you could give me the name and address of the owner?"

The clerk shook his head.

"You may think it rather odd, sir, especially as in villages we are all supposed to know one another's business—but there's nobody here can tell you the name of the owner of the Towers. It was purchased some years ago by a Mr. Richard Heathcote, a solicitor, of Lincoln's Inn Fields, on behalf of a client.

"The owner has never resided here, and the place has been let to various tenants through Mr. Heathcote. We should be prepared to communicate with Mr. Heathcote on your behalf, but I really think it would save your time and ours if you dealt with him direct."

Realising that in this maze into which he had been plunged he had reached another blind end, Sexton Blake wished the clerk good-morning, and made his way out into the sunlit street.

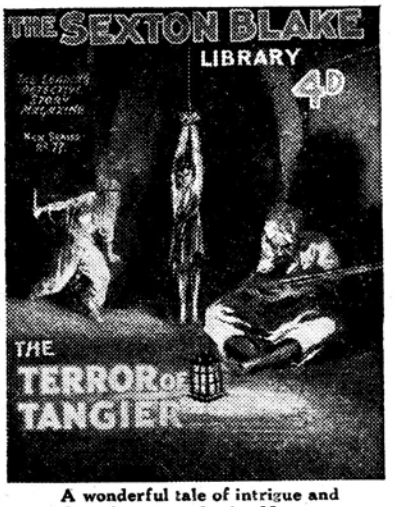
He was half inclined to abandon the particular train of inquiries upon which he had embarked. After all, his visit to Maudrey and Cranstone Towers had been due largely to the romance he had constructed for Tinker's amusement. A native of Buhl had been forcibly kidnapped at a place six miles away from where the ex-Rajah of Buhl had taken up his quarters. As a result of that coincidence he had spent some considerable time in visiting Cranstone Towers and the village of Maudrey. Was this expenditure of energy justified?

As he had explained to Tinker, there was nothing more inimicable to clear thinking and to analytical investigation than this idle theory building. What earthly justification had he for assuming that there was any connection between the disappearance of Swaji and the presence of the ex-Rajah of Buhl at Cranstone Towers? None. And yet his mind had been unconsciously affected by that absurd fiction that he had woven on the spur of the moment for Tinker's benefit.

None the less, there were features about Cranstone Towers that puzzled him. The ex-rajah had arrived with a staff of native servants suitable to his dignity. The porter at Cranstone Towers, so far from being a stately Oriental, looked far more like the product of the Bowery in New York.

It was true, of course, that his Serene Highness had been received very coldly by English Society. Wealth can unlock many doors, but there is still a prejudice against a man, however eminent his station may be, however vast his financial resources, who has been implicated in a series of cold-blooded murders. That would explain the ex-rajah's hurried departure from London to his country seat, but it did not explain the guarded gate, the hostility to strangers, and the curious uncouthness of the ex-rajah's menials.

Between the door of the estate agent's and the car Sexton Blake made up his mind. He would pursue his present line of inquiries, though they had orignated in an absurd piece of imaginary fiction, until he had found a satisfactory explanation to these questions. He was



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confirmed in this departure from his usual practice by the consideration of the fact that he had absolutely no clues with which to begin his investigations as to Swaji's disappearance. The wet weather of the preceding two days, and the professor's blank ignorance of the Oriental wrestler's past, had combined together to deprive him of even a thread of evidence.

"Tinker, my lad, this is where we part company!" he exclaimed, as he halted the Grey Panther a mile from Maudrey. "I want you to keep observation on Cranstone Towers. I want you to note particularly the presence of any Oriental servants, or if you see anyone taking the air in the gardens. You will wire me a report on this point to London by six o'clock this evening. You will also note, of course, the number and make of any cars that arrive or leave the castle, and, as far as possible, without making known your presence, get a description of any visitors."

He put his hand in his pocket and produced some notes.

"You must shift for yourself, Tinker. Avoid the village as far as possible. When you wire, use the post-office in the next village. I will let you know as soon as it is possible to relieve you."

Tinker was grinning as he slipped out of the car.

"Shall I see you before next Christmas, guv'nor?" he inquired.

"I hope so, my lad; but if you don't, you can send your usual present to Baker Street, and I won't forget to drink your health over the turkey and plum-pudding."

With which joking rejoinder Sexton Blake waved his hand to his assistant, thrust home his clutch, and, pressing his foot on the accelerator, sent the Grey Panther leaping eastwards at the top of its speed.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Leading Nowhere!

ARRIVING in London late in the afternoon, Sexton Blake drove straight to the Yard, and inquired for his friend, Inspector Coutts. Presently that official, with his bluff, unimaginative face, entered the room where he was waiting, and greeted him warmly.

"What are you on to now, Blake?" he inquired.

"I don't know that I'm on to anything in particular," Blake replied, "but I want to make some inquiries for a friend."

"If the Yard can help you, the Yard will. What do you want to know?"

"I want some information about the ex-Rajah of Buhl."

Inspector Coutts whistled.

"There's no information that everyone doesn't know. At the request of the India Office we kept observation on him—especially on his staff. But that's been stopped now."

"Why?"

"For the very good reason that there isn't any staff left to keep observation on. The whole bag of tricks returned to India a month ago."

"Do you know the date when they left?"

"I can easily find out."

The inspector left the room, to return presently with the information.

"The ex-rajah went into residence at Cranstone Towers on March quarter-day last. His native staff left the country on May 5th, and that, as I said, is nearly a month ago—a little more, to be correct."

He regarded Sexton Blake questioningly.

"Aren't you going to let me in on this, Blake?"

Sexton Blake smiled.

"You know well enough, Coutts, old man, that if I could serve your professional interests by letting you in on a useful case I should claim your assistance at once. But for the moment I have absolutely nothing to go on. I'm just making vague inquiries which may prove to be a will-o'-the-wisp—leading nowhere. If I see any chance of them leading anywhere, I won't fail to let you know."

Having shaken hands with the inspector he returned to Baker Street. The telegram he had been expecting from Tinker was waiting for him. Part of it confirmed the news that he had just heard at the Yard.

"No natives—no visitors—no one left or entered."

Sexton Blake walked meditatively up and down the floor. Again that disturbing reflection flashed into his mind that in all probability he was following a mirage.

He was getting no nearer, apparently, to discovering anything that linked up with the disappearance of Swaji, the wrestler. He had exhausted now all sources of information that might or might not bear upon the case, except one. He had yet to see Mr. Richard Heathcote, the solicitor who conducted all the negotiations for the letting of Cranstone Towers. It was not a very hopeful prospect, but he decided to complete the task he had undertaken before he slept that night. Putting on his hat again he went out. Stopping a taxi at the corner of Baker Street, he gave the driver the address in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

It was then, he saw, a quarter to seven. The probability was that Mr. Heathcote would already have left the office; but there might be a clerk working there late who would give him his employer's private address. Turning out of Kingsway the taxi drew up, ten minutes later, in front of one of those old buildings which are let out as offices to the legal profession.

In the gardens in the centre of the square children were romping, and some energetic couples were engaging in tennis. It was a perfect summer evening, with yet another two hours of daylight. Having paid the cabman, Sexton Blake glanced at the names painted on the notice-board in the entrance-hall. There he saw the name he wanted.

"First Floor, Mr. Richard Heathcote, Commissioner for Oaths."

Blake walked up the narrow staircase, and, arrived on the first landing, knocked at a glass-panelled door. As there was no answer, he turned the handle. The door opened, and he entered a narrow passage which gave admission to the clerk's office. It was the usual lawyer's ante-room—high stools and old-fashioned desks, a litter of blue official-looking documents, tied together with red tape and covered with dust, and arranged on shelves round the wall was a number of japanned tin boxes bearing different legends. One instantly caught Blake's eye. It bore the title "Cranstone Towers Estate."

There was nobody in the clerk's office. From some adjoining room he could hear a man's voice speaking. He pressed an electric bell and waited. The voice stopped immediately. There was a sound of impatience, as if the owner of the voice resented interruption, the noise of a chair being pushed back, footsteps crossing a carpet, and then the door of the inner room was pushed open and a man appeared.

He looked to be over sixty, for his hair and pointed beard and moustache were almost snow-white. He had cold blue eyes, a beak nose, and that fresh-coloured complexion which in the old port-wine-drinking days would have been described as vinous. He was well dressed and carried himself very erect.

"Mr. Richard Heathcote?" Blake inquired.

"Yes, I am Mr. Heathcote," the other replied, looking at Blake closely. "May I ask what your business with me is?"

"I must apologise for calling on you at this unseemly hour, Mr. Heathcote, but I'm being pressed by an American client of mine to carry out a piece of business with which he entrusted me, and the matter is rather urgent."

He handed his card to the solicitor as he spoke. Mr. Heathcote glanced at it.

"Strictly speaking, Mr. Blake, this office is closed. I was staying rather beyond my usual time in order to deal with some of my correspondence that has accumulated, but if you will come this way I will do my best to serve you."

He led the way to the inner office, which was furnished plainly but comfortably. On the flat-topped desk in the centre of the room was a dictaphone, to which, obviously, Mr. Heathcote had been speaking.

"These mechanical aids to office work are really of great service, Mr. Blake, though I often think how the ghosts of other lawyers who have inhabited this room must have their conservative instincts shocked by such contrivances."

Mr. Heathcote smiled as he spoke, and, having placed the card on the desk in front of him, waved his visitor to the chair opposite before he spoke again.

"What is this business you speak of?"

"As I have already explained, I am acting for a wealthy American client. He has instructed me to obtain the lease of some country house of which he has given me a general description. Like most Americans, he is interested in the mediaeval. I have been searching England for a suitable place complying with his conditions, and I came across Cranstone Towers to-day."

He saw the solicitor's face suddenly change. It was an almost imperceptible change, but it was there. The eyes for a moment seemed to grow lifeless, the vinous colour of his cheeks a shade paler. Sexton Blake continued speaking in the easy tone he had adopted.

"I made inquiries at the estate agents in Maudrey, and I was referred to you."

Mr. Heathcote gripped the elbows of his chair and coughed.

"But Cranstone Towers is already let, my dear sir! You must have been informed of that fact."

"I was aware that the ex-Rajah of Buhl had taken the place, but I was hoping that the lease might be a short one, and that, in the event of Cranstone Towers falling vacant, my client's proposal might be considered."

"There's no likelihood of Cranstone Towers being vacant. I'm afraid you've had your trouble for nothing."

Blake looked steadily across the desk at the solicitor.

"Then the ex-Rajah of Buhl has taken Cranstone Towers for a much longer period than has been stated in the Press?"

"I have not seen the statements in the Press, and so I regret I am not in a position to reply to your question."

The evasion was obvious. It was perfectly clear that Mr. Richard Heathcote did not desire to go any further into the question of Cranstone Towers. Blake rose with an air of reluctance.

"I'm equally sorry, Mr. Heathcote. It's the only place I've seen that would have exactly suited my client. You must pardon me for having taken up so much of your time. I suppose it wouldn't be possible for me to make a proposal to the owner of Cranstone Towers himself? My client is very wealthy, and he would have no objection, I know, to paying a handsome premium to secure the tenancy of the place."

"Believe me, it would be useless, Mr. Blake."

Blake shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm not an interested party in these negotiations, Mr. Heathcote; I am merely acting as a friend. Would you have any objections to giving me the name and address of the owner, so that I could write to him?"

Mr. Heathcote rose.

"My client's instructions regarding Cranstone Towers are quite positive. He is not prepared to entertain any proposals for the purchase or the tenancy of Cranstone Towers. That being so, no purpose would be served by giving you the information for which you ask, or prolonging this interview further."

He held out his hand as he spoke. Blake, taking it, noticed that the fingers trembled oddly.

"Well, good-evening, sir; and thank you for having at least granted me this interview," he said courteously.

Deep in thought he made his way down the stairs into Lincoln's Inn Fields. As he gained the pavement, a closed car drew up at the entrance. Sexton Blake was in the act of passing on when his attention was attracted by the man, who, having abandoned the driver's seat, was in the act of alighting.

He was an enormously, grotesquely fat man, so that he had literally to squeeze himself out of the open doorway in order to reach the pavement.

Blake had a vision of a pair of legs which had the appearance of being inflated. He saw a hand grasping the edge of the car which was so fat that the metalwork seemed to disappear into the flesh. The man was wearing a fur coat with the high collar turned up, almost completely concealing his face. His gross obesity suggested a dropsical condition, which was belied, however, by his movements. As if noticing that Blake was observing him, he put his left hand to his face and disappeared with extraordinary agility through the doorway of the building from which Blake had just emerged.

As Blake passed the rear of the car, he glanced half unthinkingly at the number-plate, and unconsciously his brain absorbed the letters and figures engraved there—SX9427. Then meditatively he walked as far as Kingsway, where he found a taxi to take him to Baker Street. Once in his consulting-room, he slipped into his red dressing-gown and, lighting his pipe, sank back in his favourite chair.

IT was curious how that absurd story which he had invented at random continued to occupy his mind.

Again and again he tried to bring his thoughts back to the question of Swaji, the wrestler. That was the case upon which he was engaged.

This business of the ex-Rajah of Buhl and Cranstone Towers had no demonstrable connection with the investigation with which he had been entrusted by Professor Crackstone. What he had to do was to find out who had crept into the tent on Springbourne Green, chloroformed Swaji, and taken him away. It was his business to discover the perpetrator of this outrage and the fate of the unfortunate native of Buhl.

But always across the warp of his thoughts came the disturbing woof of that ridiculous story about an Oriental vendetta. It was absurd, but it was persistent.

To clear his mind he set about cataloguing all that he knew about Cranstone Towers and its occupant. His object was to separate into their respective pigeon-holes the facts concerning the ex-Rajah of Buhl, and the facts connected with Swaji's disappearance. By this means he hoped to prevent the one continually interfering, as it were, with the other.

But as he went through the investigations he had carried out with regard to the ex-Rajah of Buhl, he realised that he could not reject the possibility of there being some connection between the wrestler and the dethroned Indian potentate. The fact was that his investigations were not complete. He had run up against a stone wall in the person of Mr. Richard Heathcote. He had not been able to discover who was the owner of Cranstone Towers.

Suddenly he found himself back again, willy nilly, on the lines of the story he had invented. The ex-rajah had dismissed his Indian staff, engaged at least one English-speaking servant of more than doubtful origin, and was living in rigid seclusion while his jewels were being sold by auction in London.

Mr. Heathcote, the solicitor, had deliberately opposed any inquiry into the identity of the owner of Cranstone Towers. Mr. Richard Heathcote, moreover, had shown unmistakable signs of uneasiness when Cranstone Towers was mentioned. He had got so far in his reflections, that seemed to lead him nowhere, when he heard the bell ring below, and presently Mrs. Bardell's footsteps ascending the staircase.

"A young lady to see you, sir," she announced.

"That's the tent where he used to sleep, guv'nor," said Alf White. "Barring that the old man took Ali Baba's bundle away, it's just as it was left after his disappearance."

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Written in Wax!

SEXTON BLAKE rose from his chair as a well-dressed girl of twenty entered the room. Her face was flushed, and she was evidently a prey to some deep emotion.

"Mr. Sexton Blake?" she inquired.

Blake bowed gravely.

"My name is Marion Heathcote. I found your card on my uncle's desk. Presumably you had been to see him this evening. That is partly the reason of my intrusion. The other reason is that I happen to have heard of you as a very famous private detective."

Sexton Blake's face was like a mask. There was nothing there in that clean-shaven countenance to suggest the excitement by which he was suddenly possessed. Was he at last to find a clue that would clear up the mystery, if mystery there was, of Cranstone Towers, and disentangle it finally and for ever from the investigation with which Professor Crackstone had entrusted him?"

"Yes; I called on Mr. Heathcote at seven o'clock this evening. I was so fortunate as to find him in his office. We talked, I suppose, for the better part of half an hour. It was seven-thirty when I left."

"Then where is he?" the girl exclaimed, throwing out her hands.

Sexton Blake drew forward a chair, on which the girl sank.

"Will you tell me what is troubling you?" he said.

"I am Mr. Heathcote's niece—his only living relative. I keep house for him in Holland Park. He arranged this morning to meet me in the vestibule of the Grand Olympic Theatre, at eight o'clock. I waited half an hour for him, and then telephoned to his office where I knew he would be working late.

"As I could get no reply, I took a taxi round to his office. The door was open and the light was burning. He was not there. At first I thought he might have forgotten about his appointment—though he is very kind, he does sometimes forget things—so I rung up our house in Holland Park, thinking he might have gone home. The maid told me he had not been back. And then, Mr. Blake——"

Her voice broke tremulously.

"I found that his hat and overcoat were still in the office. If he had gone out, why hadn't he put them on?"

Sexton Blake stared at the carpet.

"Do you know anything about your uncle's habits which could explain his curious behaviour in leaving his office without his hat and coat?"

"I can't—unless it was loss of memory. That does happen to people sometimes, doesn't it, Mr. Blake?"

"Yes; there have been some very remarkable cases of aphasia, Miss Heathcote, but they have been usually prefaced by certain well-recognised physiological symptoms. Was your uncle nervous or suffering from insomnia?"

"He had been much worried by something lately, Mr. Blake—quite unlike himself—but he didn't take me into his confidence. I am frightened that if he has lost his memory, and has gone wandering about London, something may happen."

She burst suddenly into tears.

Sexton Blake, knowing the physical adjustment that comes to the nervous system from tears, said nothing until she was more composed.

"I'm afraid you must think me very silly, Mr. Blake, but I am very attached to my uncle. He has always been more like a very affectionate father to me. And I'm frightened. I don't know whether you'll understand me, but when I was in his office it was just as if"—she paused again, as if to find words to express her thoughts—"as if something incarnately evil had been there."

She looked up flushing, as if half expecting to find Sexton Blake laughing at her. All she saw was that grave, alert, clean-shaven face, expressing nothing but pity and sympathy.

"I only found your card after the caretaker and I had searched the building. It seemed like an omen directing me to you. I came here at once. And, oh, Mr. Blake, if you can, help me to find my uncle!"

"If you will give me your address in Holland Park, Miss Heathcote, all I will ask you to do for the moment is to accompany me to Lincoln's Inn Fields. I don't want to waste any time arguing with the caretaker, and your presence will insure my free entry to the office. Then I will see you into a cab and communicate with you later when I have anything to report."

FOR the second time within the space of four hours Sexton Blake found himself in the offices of Richard Heathcote, solicitor of Lincoln's Inn Fields, but there was a marked difference between that plainly-furnished room as it was now, and as it had been earlier in the evening. Then Mr. Richard Heathcote had seemed to give a personality to those dull offices; now they were like the frame from which the picture had been taken—empty, lifeless, and meaningless.

Having seen Marion Heathcote safely off in a taxicab, and having informed the rather perturbed caretaker that he would let her know before he left, Sexton Blake closed the door of the inner office, and, standing with his back to it, scanned the room.

The chair in which he himself had been seated was pushed a little further back from the desk, but that was the only alteration which he could distinguish from memory. There were no signs of a struggle. The papers lay undisturbed where he had seen them last. He recognised a brief that he had noticed on his previous visit, lying in exactly the same position—"Casenove v. Johnson." There was an accumulation of fine dust on the papers, and an examination of them enabled him to satisfy himself that if any violent act had been committed in that room, it could not have taken place anywhere in the neighbourhood of the desk.

He dropped on his hands and knees and examined the well under the desk. There was nothing there, and neither the wastepaper-basket nor the surround of bare board about the carpet, produced anything that could throw light upon the mystery.

He seated himself in Mr. Heathcote's chair and tried to reconstruct the scene that must have taken place. Somebody had called—perhaps that gross, enormously fat man, whom he had glimpsed as he had squeezed himself out of his car at the entrance to the block of offices. He had come into that room and spoken to Mr. Heathcote. And then what had happened?

His brow grew thoughtful. Not for the first time that day he found himself dealing with abstractions rather than facts. And facts, and the deductions from them, were his business. It was as if his brain had suddenly lost its ordinary method of functioning.

He sat bolt upright in his chair. He must have facts—definite evidence—clues. And there was nothing in that room which could help him, apparently. Then, abruptly, his eye lighted upon the dictaphone in which Mr. Richard Heathcote had been speaking when he himself had called.

Without staying to find the reproducing apparatus, which was probably in the clerks' or typists' room, Blake pushed back the recording diaphragm to the starting-point, and, bending close, listened to the faint reproduction of the spoken words, easily audible in the quietness of the office.

Mr. Richard Heathcote's voice came closely through the transmitter:

"Dear Sirs,—In reply to your letter of the 24th ult., we are instructed by our client, Mr. James Goodson, to inform you that——"

There were a number of letters of a similar kind dealing with matters in which Sexton Blake had no interest. The wax cylinder, he saw, had been almost half used when there was a pause in the even, modulated tone of the dictated correspondence. Very faintly he could hear the sound of a door opening and closing. Then Mr. Heathcote's voice again—a distant whisper—as if he had turned his head and was no longer directing his words into the receiver:

"Mr. Brim——"

Sexton Blake whipped a pencil from his pocket and began to take a shorthand note on the blotting-paper of such words and sounds as he could distinguish. A high-pitched, almost treble voice came to his ears, an unintelligible whisper. He glanced again at the wax cylinder. It was drawing slowly towards the end. Mr. Heathcote was speaking again, but only occasional words and fragments of sentences were distinguishable:

"I deprecate in the strongest terms. There are limits. I will not be a party——"

And then again a long gap of silence.

For a while nothing could be heard save the faint buzz of the electric machinery and the scraping of the needle on the wax. Then out of that blank silence a word was flung at Sexton Blake:

"Cranstone!"

Another patch of silence. The needle had almost reached the end of the wax cylinder. He could hear the creaking of a chair—obviously the very chair in which he himself was seated. Then Mr. Heathcote's voice, passionately protesting:

"Not murder, Mr. Brim!"

Almost as those words reached him there was a click as the end of the

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cylinder was reached. Sexton Blake switched off the current and sprang to his feet.

"Cranstone! . . . Not murder, Mr. Brim!"

He was conscious of a sense of elation that was as bracing as a tonic. He was no longer groping in the dark. Through the mists a light had broken at last—a very faint, a very dim light, but still a light, where all before had been blackness. For twenty-four hours he had been dealing with abstractions. Now he had facts to handle.

Cranstone Towers! Had his instinct, following up no line of ordered reason, been right, after all? What mystery was hid behind the grey stone, embattled walls of Cranstone Towers?

Taking the wax cylinder off the dictaphone, he placed it on the cardboard carton that he found on the desk and thrust it into his pocket. Then, making his way into the clerk's office, he took down the japanned tin box marked "Cranstone Towers Estate."

The lid was fastened with a padlock and a hasp, but with a delicate steel implement that he took from his pocket he had no difficulty in shooting back the bolt.

But his efforts were unrewarded. There was nothing inside. The box was a mere dummy, evidently placed there to impress clients and to enhance the profession importance of Mr. Richard Heathcote. What papers there might be in the office concerning Cranstone Towers were kept elsewhere.

He stood for a moment lost in thought. To make a thorough examination of the office would occupy time. There were thousands of documents in the place, and to conduct even a cursory examination of them would take him until well into next day.

"Cranstone! . . . Not murder Mr. Brim!"

These words that had been recorded upon the sensitive wax of the cylinder seemed to call to him clamantly that the solution of the mystery was not to be found in Lincoln's Inn Fields, but far away in the heart of Wiltshire.

Somewhere between half-past seven, when he himself had left, and a quarter to nine, when Marion Heathcote, tired of waiting at the Olympic Theatre, had called for her uncle, Mr. Richard Heathcote had received a visitor. That visitor's name was Brim. It was a curious name, but Blake, searching his memory, could not recall having heard it before.

Whoever Mr. Brim was, he had sat in the solicitor's office making proposals which Mr. Heathcote had strongly resented. The scraps of his talk that the dictaphone had been able to record proved this clearly.

Mr. Heathcote must have been as perturbed by his caller's suggestions—or perhaps at the mere fact of his calling—that he had altogether forgotten to release the pressure of his fingers on the press-button by the mouthpiece, and so the needle had, unnoticed by him, gone on recording. Also, he must have made his protest with vigour and heat, moving about in his chair as he spoke, for in no other way could those fragments of his talk have been recorded.

Only now and again, by chance, had his voice been directed into the receiver of the dictaphone. During those spaces of silence he must have leaned forward or moved in his chair, so that the vibrations of his voice did not reach the sensitive wax of the cylinder. And that string of vigorous protests had ended with the ominous words: "Not murder, Mr. Brim!"

It was impossible to say what proposition it was that the mysterious Mr. Brim had made to the lawyer. That it was a sinister proposal was clear enough, and the association of the words "Cranstone" pointed like a signpost to the place with which that proposal was connected.

The uneasy movements of the caretaker outside roused Blake from his reverie. It was then, he saw by his watch, eleven o'clock. He must make an end of his hasty investigations in Lincoln's Inn Fields. His task clearly lay elsewhere.

He walked back into the inner office. There, hanging from a peg in the wall, was the coat and hat that had so aroused Marion Heathcote's alarm. Blake made a rapid search of the pockets, bringing to light a pair of gloves, a silk scarf, and a silver cigarette-case. He opened the latter and examined the half-dozen cigarettes it contained. As he removed them he brought to light a newspaper cutting which Mr. Heathcote must have placed there for its better preservation. He glanced at it, and as he did so he started almost imperceptibly.

It was the very same record of the sale at Christie's of the ex-Rajah of Buhl's jewels which he had read out to Tinker the previous evening!

Why was Mr. Heathcote so interested in the sale of the ex-rajah's jewels? To judge from the sight that Sexton Blake had had of him he was not the type of man who would be interested in precious stones as a hobby. He had looked just the prosperous lawyer, who took life easily, fond of a good glass of wine, and domesticated.

On the other hand, as the lawyer responsible for the letting of Cranstone Towers, he might have felt a vicarious interest in the affairs of his tenant.

"Cranstone! . . . . Not murder, Mr. Brim!"

It almost seemed to him that he uttered the words aloud. Clearer and more convincingly there was forming in his brain a theory of the mysteries surrounding the disappearance of Swaji, the wrestler, and Mr. Richard Heathcote. Crossing to the desk, he picked up the receiver of the telephone and gave the number of the Yard.

"Sexton Blake speaking. Will you put me on to Inspector Coutts? That you, Coutts? I want you, if you would, to get me some information about a Vidette car, with a saloon body, with the registered number SX9427. It was in Lincoln's Inn Fields between half-past seven and a quarter to nine. Thanks, Coutts! I knew you would help me without asking any unnecessary questions."

He hung up the receiver. His task, for the moment, in Mr. Heatcote's office was done. There was only the caretaker to be questioned. He found her, a careworn, grey-haired woman, waiting anxiously, with broom and pail, on the landing outside.

"Mr. Heathcote left the office without his hat and coat this evening," Blake remarked. "His niece, Miss Heathcote, who expected him to join her at the theatre, is more than a little anxious about him. She fears that he may have been taken ill. I was wondering if you could give me any information about Mr. Heathcote's movements to-night?"

"Nothing, sir. The gentlemen come and go, and it ain't for the likes of me to be poking into their business. I cleans out Mr. Heathcote's office for him, and have done these ten years."

"I'm sure you're very wise to limit yourself to the duties for which you are engaged," Blake remarked. "But it occurred to me that you might have seen Mr. Heathcote between half-past seven and a quarter to nine."

The woman's face relaxed a little.

"As a matter of fact, sir, I did see something of Mr. Heathcote to-night. You see, as a rule, I start on his office at eight o'clock, so as to have everything ready for the morning. He don't, as a rule, work late, and to-night I was rather put about with him hanging round long after his usual hour. It wasn't for the likes of me to intrude upon him, of course, but I don't mind telling you that I was waiting downstairs in Blackstone's office a-watching for him to come out, and hoping he wouldn't be long."

"And did you see him?"

"He came down the stairs with a stoutish gentleman, and I was just a-saying to myself, 'Thank goodness, he's going now,' when I notices that he hadn't got his hat or coat on. With that, not wishing to intrude, I shuts Mr. Blackstone's door. You see, sir, I reckons as Mr. Heathcote was going to see the gentleman he was with to his car, and, as he hadn't got his hat and coat on, would be coming back. I waited and waited until the young lady arrived and made herself known to me. I was proper taken aback when she told me that Mr. Heathcote wasn't in the office, because, you see, I reckoned he must have gone back there after he'd seen his client to the car."

"What time would that be when Mr. Heathcote came down the stairs with the gentleman you described?"

"It was just half-past eight, sir. I looked at the clock in Mr. Blackstone's office, and I remember thinking to myself that if Mr. Heathcote didn't shift I'd be kept working till near midnight; and it seems I wasn't far wrong, though it'll be nearer two in the morning before I'm through now."

"I'm extremely sorry to be detaining you from your work," Blake remarked pleasantly. "I've only one other question to ask you. The gentleman who was with Mr. Heathcote—could you give me any description of him?"

"I didn't see him except in a general way, mister. Fat as a 'og he was. Legs on him like pillars. It ain't 'ealthy all that fat! But I didn't see 'is face, 'cos, as I was saying, I closed the door of Mr. Blackstone's office quick, so as not to intrude; and, besides, he had the collar of his coat turned up."

"Well, I mustn't keep you any longer from your work," Sexton Blake exclaimed. "Good-night!"

Once out again on the pavement Sexton Blake paused a moment. At half-past eight it must have been broad daylight. It was clear that when Mr. Heathcote left the office with his mysterious client, Mr. Brim, it had been his intention to return. As an act of courtesy, he had accompanied Mr. Brim to his car, and he had not returned. It was inconceivable that a respectable solicitor, of well-ordered habits, would have gone voluntarily for a ride in Mr. Brim's car without his hat and coat. And yet that seemed the only explanation of his disappearance.

"Cranstone! Not murder, Mr. Brim!" Sexton Blake repeated to himself as he turned his face westward.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.
A Bit of Burglary.

UNDER a sky white with stars the Grey Panther ate up the miles between Baker Street and the little Wiltshire village of Maudrey. Reckless of the laws governing speed limits, Sexton Blake pushed the powerful engines until the needles of the speedometer registered seventy miles an hour.

It was half-past eleven when he left Baker Street; the church clock at Maudrey was striking three as he swung through the High Street and made for the entrance gates of Cranstone Towers. It wanted still two hours to dawn, and in those two hours Sexton Blake had much to do.

Backing the Grey Panther on to a patch of grass in a side lane, Sexton Blake extinguished the lights and made for the wall that surrounded the park. A moment later and he was racing at the top of his speed across the grass in the direction of the Towers. As he neared the moat, and, shadowy and mysterious in the starlight, the battlements of the old castle rose before his gaze, he proceeded more cautiously.

Presently, in the shadow of some bushes, he halted and gave a low whistle. A twig cracked, and suddenly through the undergrowth appeared the long, gaunt body of Pedro, the bloodhound.

Blake laid his hand on the dog's collar, whispered to him, and then, as the animal turned, followed him back through the bushes by the path by which he had come.

"Hallo, guv'nor! I'm glad you didn't wait till next Christmas after all!"

Tinker's figure, hardly discernible in the shadows of the trees, had risen before him.

"Anything to report, my lad?" Blake inquired.

"Yes; one car, guv'nor. It arrived just after midnight. It crossed the bridge over the moat, and must have been expected, because the gates were thrown open, and it drove straight into the courtyard beyond. There was a tall, thin man driving, but there wasn't time to get a detailed view of him. Registered number of the car, SX9427."

Sexton Blake's eyes glowed in the darkness. SX9427 was the very car which had been in Lincoln's Inn Fields outside Mr. Richard Heathcote's office.

"You're sure, my lad, that the driver was a tall, thin man?"

That was the only drawback to the announcement Tinker had made. The car in Lincoln's Inn Fields had been driven by a man of unusual obesity—the mysterious Mr. Brim. But Tinker was positive about his description of the driver who had arrived at Cranstone Towers, and it was obvious that even at night no one could have mistaken Mr. Brim for a tall, thin man.

"You will wait here, my lad. I have a few investigations to make. If I'm not back before daylight—you can give me two hours—you will get into communication with the Yard, ask for Coutts and tell him to obtain a warrant to search Cranstone Towers. Got that, my lad?"

Tinker repeated the message, and without another word Sexton Blake slipped through the undergrowth in the direction of the bridge. Arrived there, he crouched down under the shadow of the wall and surveyed the castle. No light showed in any room. That great mass of masonry stood there—dark, mysterious, lifeless. Bending low, Sexton Blake crept across the bridge, never halting until he could press himself into the corner between the tower that flanked the gateway and the stone arch. He listened with all his ears. Not a sound was to be heard.

Turning so that he faced the stone wall, he reached out his hand and gripped the carved head of the gargoyle just above him. A second later and he had found a foothold on that projection. Now he grasped the next gargoyle and repeated the operation. Gradually he climbed upwards, always knowing that if he slipped or missed his foothold he would be dashed to death on the pavement below.

Now at last he had reached the coping-stone of the roof and had drawn himself on to the leads. Pausing a moment to recover his breath, he walked cautiously across the flat roof. On the other side, as he glanced cautiously over the coping, he found himself looking down into an immense quadrangle round which the castle was built. Along one side of this quadrangle there were mullioned windows blazing with light. Listening, he could hear voices chanting a music-hall chorus:

"It ain't gonna rain no more, no more;
It ain't gonna rain no more!"

In that moment of stress the bizarre words of the once-popular song struck Sexton Blake as amazingly incongruous. The entourage of his Serene Highness the ex-Rajah of Buhl were clearly making a night of it. As he watched he saw a shadow projected on the pavement of the quadrangle—the elongated figure of a man holding a glass in his hand. At the same moment the syncopated chorus broke out afresh with more loud-voiced vigour.

It was clear that whatever precautions were taken to guard the gates of Cranstone Towers, the servants of the ex-rajah did not trouble themselves to keep on the alert beyond those gates. They thought themselves safe and secure from observation. Less cautiously now, Sexton Blake began to make an examination of the roof. There were trapdoors situated at intervals which clearly gave admission to stone staircases within, but they were all locked and resisted all his efforts to open them.

Abandoning hope of forcing an entrance by that means, the detective turned his attention to discovering a way of reaching the courtyard below, but though his search was minutely careful he had to admit defeat. There was not even a drainpipe down which he could clamber, and the surface of those great masses of stone was almost as smooth as glass, affording no foothold to a human being. With a rope, however, the task would be simplicity itself. He must get a rope.

Running back to the side of the tower which reared itself above the gateway, he accomplished the perilous descent to the ground. Two minutes later and he had gained Tinker's side. It was then half-past three, as the illuminated dial of his watch showed him.

"Listen to me, my lad. The Grey Panther is parked in the lane two hundred yards to the right of the park gates. If you run at your best speed you should be able to get there in ten minutes. It's six miles to Springbourne and six miles back. I'll allow you twenty minutes for the journey there and back. You will knock up Professor Crackstone and that man of his, Alf White. You will tell them to bring with them a coil of stout rope sixty feet long. The ropes from the professor's ring will do. I shall expect you back not later than a quarter-past four. What we have got to do has got to be done before dawn."

"Right, guv'nor!" was Tinker's reply, as he disappeared into the darkness.

Sexton Blake sat crouched there under the trees, pulling at his empty pipe, with Pedro lying by his side. The minutes passed. Presently the utter stillness of the night was broken by a distant, familiar hum. Blake glanced at his watch. It was nine minutes since Tinker had left him, and that sound he knew was the engine of the Grey Panther.

"Good lad!" he muttered to himself. "A minute ahead of his scheduled time."

He kept his eyes fixed on the illuminated dial. Just before four his quick ears detected the rythmic roar of the Grey Panther's engines. It was precisely four when those distant sounds ceased. Sexton Blake waited patiently. Suddenly Pedro rose stiffly, his ears cocked. The detective's hand touched the animal's head.

"Down, Pedro!"

A twig crackled. Something collided with a tree a few yards away. There was a gasp and a muttered "Gosh!" and then three shadowy figures emerged through the darkness.

"Well done, Tinker!" Sexton Blake exclaimed. "You run to time better than an express train."

"Lor' love us, guv'nor, is it you?" Professor Crackstone's voice exclaimed, in what was intended for a whisper.

Sexton Blake, who had risen, laid his hand on the professor's arm.

"There's one thing, professor, I must ask of you. You must pass me your word not to talk. I'm afraid that even if you attempted to whisper you would be heard miles away, and what we have to do depends for its success on its complete surprise."

"That's right, guv'nor!" Alf White's Cockney voice broke in. "Don't you let the old man talk. If he tries to tell a secret it's the same as a foghorn at sea. What's the game? This lad of yours wouldn't tell us anything. Have you found Ali Baba?"

"I'll tell you that within the next hour," Sexton Blake exclaimed. "I asked you to come here because I want your assistance. I may say at once that what we are about to attempt could not, in the ordinary way of things, be justified at law. We shall, all of us, render ourselves liable to prosecution. But there are occasions when justice demands that we should anticipate the exercise of the law; this is one of them."

"Law!" ejaculated the professor, and then, remembering the promise he had made, stopped abruptly.

It was clear, however, from his tone that the law was regarded by Professor Crackstone with very slight favour.

"I want to have a look over Cranstone Towers," Sexton Blake went on, "and I want to do it, if possible, without anyone being aware that we are on the premises. I have reason for supposing that if they did know we were there, there might be some trouble."

"Meaning a rough house, guv'nor?" Alf White broke in, in a tone that was almost ecstatic. "'Cos I reckon me and

the old man here are just about the sort of partners you'll be wanting. There ain't anything in the fighting line that we don't know something about, from National Sporting Club rules to catch-as-catch-can regulations, where anything is allowed, including biting."

"If I need it I shall rely upon your help," Blake went on, "but first we have to get into the Towers, and as what we've got to do must be done before dawn we'll start without further delay. You have got the rope?"

"Sixty feet of it, guv'nor. I've got it wound round me, so as to carry it more handy."

"I think you'd better give it to me, professor, because there's a difficult piece of climbing to be done, and if you aren't used to such exercises you may find the rope rather an impediment."

The change having been effected, Tinker, with Pedro, was left to keep observation, as before, while the rest of the party made their way noiselessly to the castle. For Sexton Blake, who had already done the climb, to scramble up the wall, using the gargoyles as support, was easy enough. Alf White, too, accomplished it without much difficulty.

But it was quite beyond the professor. Having gained the first gargoyle, he seemed unable to go either backwards or forwards. Unwinding the rope, Blake fastened one end to the stone buttress and lowered the other. Seizing this, the professor, looking rather like some gigantic ape, scrambled up to the roof hand over hand.

"Blow me if I don't join the Alpine Mountaineering Club after this!" he exclaimed good-humouredly. "What's the next game?"

Sexton Blake led the way across the leads. The windows facing the quadrangle were still blazing with light, and the staff of his Serene Highness the ex-Rajah of Buhl were evidently determined to carry on their carouse until dawn, judging by their voices. Fastening the rope to a buttress, Blake lowered it into the quadrangle. Without wasting any time, he swung himself over the side and slid rapidly to the ground, followed by the professor and Alf White. As they faced the side of the quadrangle down which they had climbed, the high arch of the gateway was on their immediate left. With a warning look at his companions, the detective led the way into the archway.

There, ahead of them, was the huge gate, studded with iron nails. By the side of the gate, on the right, was a little patch of light. It came from what was obviously the porter's room. Motioning the others to stay where they were, Blake crept along the wall until he could stare into the little apartment used by the guardian of the gate.

In a big, high-backed oak chair a man sat, his hands folded in his lap, fast asleep. Blake recognised him as the porter whom he had interviewed through the sliding panel the day before. He made a motion with his hand, and the professor and Alf White crept up.

"It's more than probable that that man has the keys of the place about him. Anyway, I want to have these gates opened, so that we have an easier way of retreat if the necessity arises."

The professor nodded. With cat-like agility, marvellous in one so big and heavy, he crept noiselessly into the little room, Alf White following close at his heels. Blake saw his right arm bent, swinging from his hip, the big, broken-knuckled fist clenched. There was a sound rather like the cracking of a faggot, and the porter sagged forward, his head on one side, an angry red mark on the point of his jaw.

"He's got a dose of hushabye, guv'nor, on the top of what he had already, which will keep him quiet for the next five minutes," the professor remarked. "If you want 'im to miss you for longer than that I can manage it easy."

In reply to Blake's nod he proceeded to gag and bind the unconscious man to the chair.

"Beauty, ain't he?" he exclaimed, stepping back. "Regular picture!"

Bending over the porter, Blake made a rapid examination of his clothing. On a belt round his waist he discovered a bunch of keys. Relieving him of these, he turned back into the archway, and the next moment had swung one side of the great gate ajar.

Secure, now, of a retreat in case of an emergency, Sexton Blake returned to the quadrangle. Before attempting to find a door which would give admittance to the interior of the castle, he crept along the wall until he came to a halt just outside the lighted window. The curtains had not been drawn, and there was nothing to hide the room within from his inspection.

It was a strange Bacchanalian scene that opened up before his eyes. The room itself was panelled from floor to ceiling, and decorated with magnificent carvings. From the centre of the ceiling hung a gilded chandelier, blazing with electric lights. Immediately below this illumination was a long oak table black with age. A sumptuous sideboard of the same wood, the work of some skilled artist who had been dead for centuries; high-backed, carved chairs and a deep piled carpet, that toned exactly with the mediæval setting, constituted with a few pictures in heavy gilded frames, and a high, open fireplace, the other appointments of the room. Obviously it had been the old refectory of the castle, now converted into a modern dining-room.

"Who is that?" demanded Sexton Blake. The Professor strode across to the divan eagerly. "Perish me stiff—it's Swaji!" he ejaculated. "Swaji, you blessed old heathen, wake up and tell us what all this darned business means."

But it was not the appointments and decorations of the room which attracted Sexton Blake's attention so much as the people who occupied it. In such a setting, one would have expected to find civilised gentlemen in evening dress. Instead, the men collected in that stately chamber looked for the most part as if they might have come out the casualty ward of a workhouse. They were big, burly men with brutalised crime-stained faces. Only one of them wore a collar, and that, unfastened in the front, was hanging down the back of his coat.

There were some fourteen of them in all. Some were leaning forward on the table, sound asleep, others were lolling back in their chairs, their loose mouths gaping. Only four had stood up against the influence of sleep and intoxication.

They were seated in a group at one end of the table, talking and drinking, and occasionally knocking the ashes from their pipes on to the costly carpet. Even as Sexton Blake watched this bizarre scene that was taking place in one of the stateliest homes in England, the man at the head of the table rose.

The detective drew back pressing him-

(*Continued on page* 17.)

THE ROUND TABLE

News and Views from the Editor and Readers of the UNION JACK, on matters of mutual interest.

DRAW up your chairs to the Round Table, everybody! What with one attraction and another that has occupied our space lately, it is some weeks since we had a full-page meeting all to ourselves.

In the meantime, quite a lot of you have come forward with queries and comment of all sorts, demanding to be heard. Well, without further preamble, let us "get down to it"; you say your say, and then I'll say mine.

"I have started taking in the fine book U.J., and I wish to join the Round Table," says Bert Rains, of Bristol, "but what do I have to do?"

You have done all that is necessary already, Bert, and here you are at the Round Table! Once you have become a reader of the UNION JACK, and, incidentally, an admirer of Sexton Blake, you have qualified to take your seat at the Round Table. Any of its readers may for gather here and air their views of the paper, none being above or below another—the table being round, you see, in the best traditions of King Arthur and his knights of the historical Table Round.

I hope to see you here again some time. Meanwhile, I hope you are going to enjoy Blake more and more as the weeks go on.

"I am always waiting for Thursdays to roll round for the U.J. to be delivered," writes J. J. Cashmore, of Coventry. "If my memory serves me, I had a standing order for the U.J., 'Pluck' and the 'Marvel' with a newsagent in Potchefstroom just after the Boer War, but even that was years after I had read my first copy of the U.J. . . As for the different stories, my opinion is that there are no bad ones. . . ."

Well, that must be somewhere near a record for a long-standing standing order, I should think. I am not quoting the rest of your letter, which applies to the worthy Editor of "Answers," to whom I am handing it to be dealt with. He will doubtless reply to you direct.

Many thanks for your compliments; I hope I may continue to live up to your high opinion in the matter of providing nothing but good stories.

"I must confess I have thoroughly enjoyed all the yarns I have read in the Old Paper," says Walter Baucutt. "I saw a youth in my office reading the U.J., and took the paper up myself, and looked through it, and finally offered him a penny for that number when he had finished with it, with the result that I have not missed one number since that incident, several months ago. I cannot speak too highly of it."

Thanks, Walter. I'm sorry that your first letter miscarried, but that is what must have happened to it, I should think. However, patience is a virtue, and at last you have the "sneaking feeling" of satisfaction that it has been acknowledged here. I'd have written personally this time, but you have supplied no address.

That pennyworth of U.J. must have been one of your best bargains, since it introduced to you a weekly supply of just the sort of yarn you like. May you never miss a copy!

Snip, Fleetwood, confides the following:

"I must congratulate you on having such a decent writer for the Nirvana stories. I have enjoyed them immensely, and shall be looking forward to more. It is fine, I think, to have romance mixed up with detective work, and I was very sorry when the final yarn came to an end.

"I am now married, but still get the U.J., and am sometimes chaffed about my weekly 'blood and thunder.' But, of course, being a woman, I have my own way, and if my husband and I hold any argument on the subject, I generally win. Anyway, he always asks for them when home from sea. He reads the 'Supplement,' and says it's worth the money alone.

"I once came across him reading one of the yarns, too, but he had the U.J. propped up in the middle of a newspaper, to kind of blind me, I suppose, as, after chaffing me, he did not like to be caught in the act. It was a standing joke for some time after."

Wasted effort, on his part, Snip, of course. Nobody need ever be bashful about reading a good detective story, and I'd like to bet that, once having sampled Sexton Blake, your husband now reads the paper not only regularly, but openly. There are a lot of people who still labour under the delusion that the U.J. is a "blood and thunder"—until they read it for themselves.

For instance, as an example of a discriminating person who knows a good paper when he sees one, and is not ashamed to say so, take the following case. This letter is from the Rev. G. L. Owen, Hasbury Cottage, Hales Owen, Worcestershire. I quote the full address, with the writer's permission, in order to show that this letter is perfectly genuine.

"Dear Sir,—I am a somewhat middle-aged parson, and have read the old U.J. since 1896, when, as an office-boy with little work to do, I discovered copies of 'Pluck' and the U.J. behind a cupboard, where they had been secreted by my predecessor.

"I do not think I have missed many issues of the paper, except for the whole of 1925, when I was so busy that the U.J. had to be relegated to the sphere of 'unattainable joys.' I have, however, been able to take up the U.J. again, and have thoroughly enjoyed the last two serial stories.

"As one who has had, I believe, a very unusual amount of experience with lads in social clubs, etc., I can testify to the splendid influence the U.J. has on the minds and lives of lads; and, to my mind, the U.J. is undoubtedly the best weekly paper in existence for growing youths and girls.

"Wishing you and the U.J. increasing popularity and success, Yours, etc., Clergyman."

I am very gratified to receive this frank and unsought-for tribute from my clerical correspondent. I am, of course, always pleased to hear from anyone, be he a man of great experience or not, who has anything to say concerning our mutual interests in Sexton Blake and the Old Paper.

But when the writer happens to be one who can justly claim experience and knowledge of the world, and by the same token realise the benefit of high-class fiction to young people, I am rather more pleased than usual; so I print this letter from the Rev G. L. Owen here with every satisfaction.

It is not only a testimonial; it is an exhortation to anybody who thinks that the U.J. is a "blood and thunder" to think again—to read the thing for himself and form his own opinion, rather than take his views at second hand.

AND now we're getting towards the bottom of the third column. It's a pity this page won't stretch; for I'd like to reply to a lot more of you.

While I have the chance, however, I must acknowledge letters from the following readers, and promise to quote them at the Round Table as soon as the chance occurs:

Robert Zaborovsky, Siberia; F. Emery, Birmingham; "The Bat," East Melbourne; "Some Moston Readers"; "Reader," Pietermaritzburg; D. P. Hanrahan, Listowel, Ireland; W. J. N., Sandersfoot; J. P. Savidge, Golders Green; T. V. Gamble, Preston; Pte. E. S. Aldridge, Rawal Pindi, India; S F. G. Swan, West Perth, West Australia—and others.

And now for a final S O S.—Will Jack Coomber, late of H.M.S. Barham, or anyone knowing his present address, write to J. Eales, Berry House, Durkenfield Park, Morpeth, N.S.W., Australia?

Your Editor

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London's Lawless Night-Clubs

By Leonard Travers.

£1,500 a year rent seems a lot of money, but when you know that the takings of a London Night Club often amount to £500 a night it does not seem much. The police are so tied down that the West End night club managers simply laugh at them, and the law's delays.

THE beginning of winter each year sees some two hundred London night clubs in full swing. Many outdoor sports are no longer possible, and the craving for excitement and enjoyment of any sort drives thousands of rich Londoners to dancing and other indoor amusements.

Concentrated within a square mile round about Piccadilly there are at least one hundred and fifty night clubs, all of which can be divided into one of three classes.

The first class is composed of a dozen or so reputable night clubs for social enjoyment which are conducted expensively, legally, and with all due regard for the proprieties.

In the second division there are about twenty clubs which have a regular membership; and though their admission of strangers has been lax enough in the past, they warn members that this year they will scrutinise admissions more thoroughly.

These clubs are decently conducted, though the membership comprises some characters best avoided, both men and women. The only complaint that can be made against them is that they break the law in serving wines and spirits till four or five in the morning—and charge treble prices for so doing.

The third and largest division—known to the police as the "black" division—numbers about one hundred clubs more deplorable in every way. They are numbered in the black division because they were marked down for suppression when the celebrated Night Club Bill was drafted in 1925 by the Home Secretary. This Bill did not pass through Parliament, for reasons I will explain later.

At that time great prominence was given to the fact that at last the Home Secretary was going to give the police powers to act against undesirable night clubs. Fear of police action drove away scores of habitues. Custom dwindled almost to vanishing-point. Most of the clubs ended the winter season with three months' poor "trading."

By the time this winter has arrived, however, all this fear has been swept away. The bogus night club is booming again, and the reason is that the Home Secretary's Bill is apparently as dead as the dodo.

Clubs that at the end of last season were as much populated by dancing instructresses, touts, and other professional hangers-on in the night-club world as clients, are opening their doors to more and more visitors each night.

All alarm about drastic regulations and police supervision has subsided. The licensing restrictions are set at defiance, and there seems to be very little anxiety about the possibility of police raids.

THE promoters, managers, and staff of these clubs make no attempt to hide their only two objects—to entice as many people as possible with money in their pockets into the club and to extract that money as speedily as possible.

They are run in defiance of the law in the matter of drink and many other regulations, and the patrons are regarded as pigeons whose rich feathers must be plucked.

"Drink after hours," of course, is a strong enticement to patrons, and is a steady source of profit in itself. Therefore, breaking the law in regard to licensing regulations has reached alarming proportions; for none of these clubs could pay its way without "drink at all hours."

Police-court proceedings have shown that well-known characters are "in the night-club business." Experts in exploitation, they control club after club, and, in spite of all the vigilance of the police, of raids, summonses, fines, and even imprisonment, they stick to the business they have now learned inside out. Why? Because it is so profitable.

The words "night club," of course, are apt to make us conjure up pictures of luxuriously appointed places where gaiety is always to be found among surroundings that are the last word in glitter and splendour.

Actually, the average night club on the black-list is usually nothing but an underground cellar or den, where furnishings and appointments are meagre and are of the cheapest and most tawdry kind. Furniture is bought second-hand, decorations are carried out with cheap materials by the cheapest possible labour.

Such clubs are often nothing but basements below the street-level; but because they have to be in a locality where they can attract custom, namely, in the heart of the West End of London, they have to pay anything from £900 to £1,500 a year for rent.

Fifteen hundred pounds a year for a few cellars and basements with inadequate exits for such emergencies as fires or police raids, and with the minimum of ventilation and comfort!

Rent, of course, is a big item, but it is by no means the heaviest expense in the long run. The orchestra demand very big salaries, because of the conditions under which they work. For dance music from four to ten guineas a night per player has to be paid.

For assistants of the management, in whatsoever capacity, big salaries have to be paid, because after a police raid all these people run the risk of being coupled in prosecutions as "frequenters." Waiters, cloak-room attendants, "dancing instructresses," all earn good money. Even commissionaires get a pound a night; and they, in common with every one around them on the staff, find ways and means of extorting tips.

On top of this expense, the manager always has to be ready to pay a huge police-court fine without a tremor. Often he goes to court with great sums in banknotes ready. He quickly pays his fine, and that, perhaps, is the last we hear of him—until the police have occasion again to raid his premises.

IF, however, it is early in the season, and the manager cannot scrape the money together, another expedient is adopted. Immediately after the case has been tried, and the amount of the fine ascertained, notice of appeal is always given, though there is never any intention of carrying the case to a higher court.

As a matter of fact, the wily manager is about to take advantage of a loop-hole in the law. Until the appeal is heard—a month or so afterwards—the licence to sell liquor during fully licensed hours is not forfeited!

During those days of grace a special whip round of members is made. As many people as possible are enticed into the club, liquor is sold during licensed and unlicensed hours as before, and the money to pay the fine and satisfy the Law is often raised within the month by continuing to flaunt the Law!

When the fine is solemnly paid, the appeal, with equal solemnity, is withdrawn. The police have been outwitted. They know it, but they cannot do anything about it while the law stands as it is.

There remains yet another dodge to outwit the law. If the money for the fine cannot possibly be raised, and the appeal confirms the decision of the Court below, the manager gracefully allows the law to run its course. The club is struck off the list of licensed premises and the place is closed.

But within a week the manager has opened another such club in the same street, sometimes, even, next door to his old premises, and has gathered his old patrons round him, with perhaps a few more who have come to hear of him solely through the free publicity of the police-court prosecution!

Nothing, save the loss of personal liberty in prison for long periods, deters the promoters from continuing to open club after club, which are only cloaks for the illegal sale of drink, and worse.

Even when the principal has been imprisoned for a long time, the moment he is out finds him applying with dignity for permission to open up a social club, possibly upon the site of one of his old clubs.

This permission cannot be refused (why, I will explain later), the authorities can only refuse to allow him to sell liquor.

It is not a difficult matter to get supplies of liquor, and very shortly another night club as bad as the rest has made its appearance. Habitues of other clubs hear about the new club, they come over to see it, and from that moment, with any luck, its success is assured.

ONE would, however, imagine that, after being harassed and chased from place to place, managers would be inclined to give up the struggle. Why they are so persistent is obviously because there is so much money to be made in pandering to other people's wrong-doing, and charging such high prices for it.

Generally, these clubs keep two sets of books, so that it is well-nigh impossible to estimate the money paid by the visitors; but in one place where the police secured the correct book, it was found that in six weeks a nett profit of £3,942 had been made. Running expenses amounted to £280 a week.

It may safely be assumed that one

The Home Secretary, Sir William Joynson Hicks, who has movea against Night Clubs, by sponsoring a Bill in 1925, which. however, did not pass through Parliament.

hundred guests a night are to be found in a moderately successful club of this sort, and a total of £2,000 a week in takings is by no means abnormal. One woman connected with the night club business, whose name was often before the courts last year, was proved to have netted as much as £20,000 clear profit on a club that ran for less than four months.

These fabulous profits, of course, are only to be realised because the proprietor calls the tune. The food and drinks are of the most inferior kinds, and the charges are always on the highest possible scale.

It may, of course, be argued, that, in spite of the cost, those who pay are receiving exactly what they seek, and they do not grumble. But what do they get? A night of hectic pleasure and drinks out of hours.

That is their business, however, and with the mentality or the morality of the patrons, however, we are not so much concerned. They are drawn particularly from the wealthy classes. In one club last year a duke, a popular sports captain, and four famous actresses were pointed out to a newspaper reporter as "among our distinguished guests to-night."

Practically no attempt is made to retain patronage. The managers know that from London's millions and from the thousands of visitors the metropolis always holds, there are enough and to spare of "floating" patrons, who may possibly be making their first (and last) visit to a night club.

They know that, in spite of their wealthy and highly esteemed patrons, in the end the hand of the law will fall upon them. Their premises will be raided and closed, and, therefore, they are solely out to rook right and left all who enter their doors.

Such clubs are of short life and tenancy—some no longer than a week in any one place. It is better to squeeze what profits there are, and to depart, leaving behind as many debts as possible. The manager, with his old premises abandoned, has still his list of members and their friends who like to go to a night club now and then, and is soon on his way to another spell of quick money-making.

AND now as to what is actually offered to the patrons. It is such extraordinary poor bait and yet so effective.

The visitor has the privilege of dancing on a scratchy, crowded floor to the tune of a waily-thump orchestra of three or four black men; of rubbing shoulders with people of very questionable character, in an atmosphere vitiated with alcohol and stale tobacco smoke; and of poisoning himself with food and drink of the most inferior character, up to any hour in the morning.

Supposing a visitor stays at the club for five hours one night. This is the sort of bill he will have to meet:

	£	s.	d.
Membership fee	1	10	0
Supper	1	10	0
Bottle of red wine	1	0	0
Coffee, cigars, and cigarettes	0	15	0
Champagne	1	10	0
Tips	0	15	0
Dancing partner	2	2	0
	£9	2	0

This sum, however, only represents the member's own expenses. If by chance he has taken one or two friends in with him there will be a fee of about ten shillings a head for their entrance, and the additional cost of food, wines, and partners.

The prices charged, of course, are the whole secret as to how the clubs manage to exist. Champagne at thirty shillings the bottle, and so called "Cliquot" at forty-two shillings a bottle, proves to be a marvellously poor imitation of the real thing.

A bottle, by the way, is the normal method of ordering, though the liquor is served in a jug, and the diner never sees either the bottle or the label.

One could go on to endless lengths describing the bare-faced deceptions and adulterations practised in order to extract money from patrons, but enough has been said to prove that these clubs exist by sheer robbery, cloaked under the provision of a "dancing partner," and an unlimited supply of drink.

Now, as to the legal side of the whole affair. I mentioned previously that any manager can apply for permission to run a club, and cannot be refused. As a matter of fact, anybody can obtain permission to run a social club, and there is no reason why you or I should not

(*Continued at the bottom of page* 286.)

Pages from my Past

By Sonia Shirling.

No. 5.—The Sleeping Beauty.

The story of how Sonia Shirling returned to America, and of her unauthorised appropriation of a £2,000 dragon-fly—with disastrous results.

IN my last article I told you of my exploit with the "dope" agents in London, of my meeting with the man whose real name I have disguised under the fictitious one of Phil Ransom, the only man I ever loved, and our departure together for the States on the Cunarder Berengaria, from Southampton.

I think I did that trip as in a dream. I forgot that I was a crook, wanted by the police of two continents, and that all the future could possibly hold for me was a continuance of my criminal career or years behind prison bars.

You will already have guessed my secret; I was in love with the good-looking Harvard boy, Philip Ransom. And he, on his part, was not quite insensible of my charms, I think, although—much to my disappointment, perhaps—he did not make the slightest attempt to make love to me. He looked on me as a jolly girl acquaintance with whom to play deck games, and with whom to dance after dinner. Acutely conscious of my past life, I could but regard stoically this indifference to any deeper feeling between us.

The trip back was too heavenly for words, as I have said. The Atlantic was as calm as a millpond, and the weather was beautiful. As there were a great many young people on board the voyage was one long skylark. To be frank, I forgot all about business. I had sufficient funds to see me comfortably through to my arrival back in New York, and I simply could not victimise any of the jolly people who made me so happy on the liner.

Eventually the last day of the trip arrived. Next day we should pass the Statue of Liberty and come in sight of the great sky-scrapers of New York City. For the last time Phil and I danced to the music of the exquisite ship's band, and afterwards wandered up on the promenade deck. Together we watched the swirling waves dash past the ship's side, and perhaps became a little profound at the great expanses of the ocean beneath the canopy of the star-powdered sky.

"Well, Sonia, this is our last night on board," said my companion regretfully. "I suppose you'll let me see something of you in New York?"

"Oh, yes," I replied, well knowing that this would be impossible.

"Where will you be staying?" asked Phil.

"Oh, at the Astor," I answered, mentioning the first hotel which came into my mind.

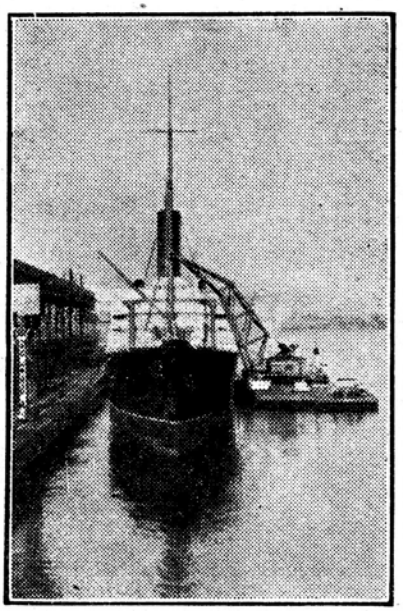
And that was all that passed between us. My shipboard companion imagined that he would see me again in New York; I knew and determined that he should not. Therefore, the moment held more significance for me than for him.

NEXT day we docked, and were subjected to the scrutiny of the Immigration officials. It was not without some misgiving that I presented my passport, for the very good reason that it was a forgery. However, it pased muster, and, collecting my baggage, I went over the gangway into the Customs sheds, accompanied by Phil.

I had just unlocked my trunks for inspection when I happened to glance to my right and notice an obvious "dick," or detective, subjecting me to a very close scrutiny. I recognised him almost at the same moment as he recognised me.

He was walking towards me when I murmured an excuse to Phil, grabbed my dressing-case, and sprinted out of the shed. A rank of taxis was drawn up outside. I hailed one, threw my case inside, and told the driver to drive quickly to the Grand Central Station.

Stealthily I looked back, to see if the "dick" was pursuing, and found, to my joy, that he had apparently missed me in the crowd.



The S.S. Berengaria, in which Sonia returned to America. A photo taken by her after it had docked in New York.

It had been a narrow escape, and I have little doubt that he had word about the Paris jewel affair at the Hotel Crillon. I had several regrets, however. I had lost all my luggage and a fine wardrobe of Paris frocks, and there had passed out of my life the only man who has ever meant anything to me.

I knew only too well that the "dick" would reveal to Phil who and what I was, which would turn him against me for ever. However, wiping a surreptitious tear from my eye, I shrugged my shoulder. Kismet!

I had with me, however, my dressing-case, which contained all my money and jewellery. Had I lost that I should have been in a very bad way. Arriving at the Grand Central Station I dismissed the auto and took another to a small down-town hotel, kept by an old "con," who has more than once been to the "big house"—penitentiary. Arrived there, I took a room and carefully thought out my future plan of campaign.

New York was too hot for me, so I eventually decided to go West. St. Louis, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Kansas City, and 'Frisco should all be honoured by my attentions, I determined, and perhaps from 'Frisco I might go East. The first night I very foolishly made a round of all the old haunts in the Bowery and the Tenderloin. "Chequers" in Pell Street, "Uncle Doos" in Mott Street, the most tough thoroughfare in the Bowery, were like "home, sweet home" to me after my European travels.

Next morning, after a hearty breakfast, I trailed out on the South Western, Limited, for Cincinnati, my first stopping place.

Travelling West with me in the same parlour car was a movie queen of world reputation. That she was one of the most beautiful women in Hollywood, and the sweetheart of about ten million movie fans did not make me overlook some very fine "rocks" (diamonds) she was wearing.

A great brooch, in the shape of a dragon-fly, and worth, I imagined, quite £2,000, fascinated me. I couldn't take my eyes off it.

I happened to sit opposite the star and her secretary on the restaurant car, also, and the more I saw of her wonderful brooch the more I determined to take it unto myself.

As we pulled into Cincinnati I decided that I would "tail" the movie star and follow her to her hotel and later have a cut at getting the diamond brooch.

I soon discovered, however, that she was only changing railroads at Cincinnati, and that she was going west to Los Angeles that night on the "Flying Limited" for California. This would upset my plans, but I determined to travel with her, and so I bought tickets for the Movie City.

The "Flying Limited" pulled out of Cincinnati at 11 p.m. that night, and I was delighted to notice that my berth was exactly opposite to that of the movie queen in the sleeping coach. Luck was smiling on me, I felt. The film beauty turned into her sleeper soon after we

left Cincinnati, and I also turned in—but not to sleep.

Two hours I waited, and then, when the train was wrapped in slumber, as the coloured attendant himself was snoozing, I slid like a shadow to the ground and out into the aisle which ran down the centre of the coach.

Like a spirit of the night I crept across the berth occupied by the film star, and, leaning over her, saw that she was in a deep sleep. Now, where, I wondered, would she keep the £2,000 dragon-fly?

This question was answered in an unexpected manner. The girl shifted in her sleep, and immediately the brooch itself came to view and flashed defiantly in the subdued light. The film beauty was wearing it on her nightdress. With perfectly steady fingers I unpinned it from her breast, and, as silently as I had come, disappeared into my own berth.

I WAS awakened the next morning by a heated altercation outside my sleeping-berth. Getting up and wrapping a kimono round me, I looked out.

There was my Lady Beautiful, with her hair like a golden cloud round her shoulders, bemoaning the loss of her brooch to a worried-looking sleeping-car attendant and two conductors. She was in turns sobbing in self-pity and roundly abusing and threatening the train officials for allowing such an outrage to happen in a first-class sleeper.

Laughing to myself, I dressed and went along to breakfast. Curiously enough, I was placed opposite the outraged movie queen at breakfast and listened sympathetically as she poured her troubles into my ears, meanwhile I fingered surreptitiously a hard lump sewn into my underclothing and strangely resembling in shape the £2,000 worth of dragon-fly.

At Los Angeles I saw the last of the beautiful star, and, stepping off for a meal, caught the fast Limited due out for San Francisco. My trip West had not been quite unproductive, since I sold the dragon-fly brooch to a 'Frisco "fence" for £800.

Now, San Francisco ranks third in the cities of the United States in the number of her criminals. Chicago takes premier place, with New York running the big Illinois city very close. In 'Frisco I knew I should not have much difficulty in getting on to some "lay."

I had put up at the Fairmont Hotel, which is one of the best in the city, and was dining in the palatial restaurant the second evening of my visit when I had a shock. Happening to look up, I beheld standing in front of me and smiling broadly, my old accomplice, "Oil Man" Jimmy!

"Well, kid, and how is the world treating you?" he greeted me.

"Oh, I'm not rolling in it," I replied. "What are you on now?" asked Jimmy. "toeing the straight line?"

"Like a drunken negro," I replied, returning his scrutiny. "What's your lay now?" I added.

"Something you can come in on if you like," replied "Oil Man" Jimmy.

"Come across with the news, then," I hedged.

He then outlined to me a currency job he was going to do the next day. It was a hold-up job, which was a new line for him, but he wanted a woman to help in pulling it. After some hesitation I foolishly—as it turned out—agreed to assist him. We spent the evening together, and went more fully into the plans for the "knock off."

JIMMY had received the tip that a messenger of the District Trust Company, of California, was to send over the next day by train to a small bank in Santa Barbara 30,000 dollars in one-thousand-dollar bills, enclosed in a sealed envelope, and carried openly by the messenger. Jimmy's plan was for me to hand the "glad" stuff to the messenger and give him a "doped" cigarette on the train. Jimmy would then appear and help me to get the sealed letter, and we would split the proceeds. It all sounded ridiculously easy, but such "jobs" more often than not come "unstuck," as I was to find to my cost.

Next day Jimmy and I shadowed the messenger from the District Trust Company's offices to the railroad depot, and I entered the same coach as he, as had been arranged. There were several other people on board, so it was impossible for me to do my stuff in the coach proper.

"Oil Man" Jimmy was in the next coach, waiting for my signal that all was O.K. I had to get the messenger out of the coach into the lobby between coaches before I could deal with him.

Suddenly I threw a fainting-fit and fell into his arms. As I had hoped, he carried me out of the coach into the small lobby at the end. Quickly I revived, and then started to be pally with him. Saying that a cigarette would revive me, I took one from my case and offered him one. He took it and lit it. I waited anxiously. Presently, to my joy, I saw him sway, and in a few minutes collapse on the floor.

Quickly I signalled to Jimmy, and we soon discovered the sealed envelope under the unconscious man's vest. We had decided that we must jump the train if we were to make a getaway.

As we had planned, the opportunity came soon, for the train slowed down to ascend a gradient. Jimmy opened the door and dropped on to the running-board. Carefully he looked for a soft spot for us to jump on to. Suddenly:

"Stick 'em up, you two!" came sharply from behind, and, swinging round, we found ourselves looking down the muzzle of a levelled gun.

That sudden command was the prelude to a period of unpleasantness for me, for our plans had come unstuck with a vengeance!

What followed, and how I spent a year behind the bars, and met again the man I loved, will be told in my final article.

Next Week: "Behind Prison Bars."

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*(*Continued from page* 284.)

open up a social club for the use of our friends.

To legislate in order that permission can be refused would penalise law-abiding citizens, and because the honest people will not tolerate Government interference in private affairs the bogus night club manager or proprietor is unwittingly helped.

Thus, when even a club has been struck off the list and the premises are disqualified from being used as a club for a period of months or years, there is nothing in the law to-day to stop a proprietor continuing to run the club the next day in the same place.

The reason is that the penalty inflicted comes only under the Licensing Consolidation Act, and this only enables the authorities to prohibit a man from selling alcoholic liquor. That he continues to sell liquor is for the police to prove, and that is difficult.

The police are handicapped by lack of wider powers of supervision, and the night club proprietors are openly boasting that Sir William Joynson Hicks' Night Club Bill was shelved because the influence of their highly-placed supporters was too powerful for those whom they regarded as the "kill joys" of the Cabinet.

The proprietors of the clubs are now laughing at their former fears because, at the moment, the Home Secretary is as powerless as ever to put a stop to their activities.

Even Scotland Yard seemed to give up the Anti-Night-Club campaign in despair. The uniform branch of the police are solely responsible for obtaining evidence of illegalities, and the most experienced officers declare it is impossible for the police effectively to deal with the worst night clubs with their hands tied, as at present.

Only when they know they are on safe ground can they act. Then a night club is raided, "frequenters"—people found on the premises—are fined, together with the manager and his staff. For consistent and persistent offences the manager is even sent to prison, but even then the police have not touched the people who really run the clubs—the proprietors—who perhaps do not go to the club from one week to another.

On other occasions policemen are taken off their beats, provided with dress-suits, and have to pass the scrutiny of the club door-keepers and reception-clerks, who, above everything else, are always suspicious, though discriminating.

When the policeman gets inside the club more often than not he finds he has been anticipated and tricked. Everything is in perfect order and seemliness, and prominently displayed before him is a notice which, conforming to the regulations for the running of a club, announces that:

"The provisions of Section 3 of the Licensing Act of 1921 apply to these premises."

No wonder, then, that the police have been discouraged. They work hard for little reward. Besides, what satisfaction is it to a conscientious officer to be instrumental in the apprehension of the night club personnel when he knows that mere fines will meet the law's demands, and that the club will probably continue as merrily as before when the police-court proceedings are all over?

The fact is, this night club problem, for all its bristling difficulties, will have to be tackled some day or other. But before the evil can be effectively stopped we want somebody more ruthless than anybody who has previously attempted to solve the problem.

The Home Secretary who does tackle the problem with success will make many enemies among the richest classes of the land, for they will be badly hit. He will need to have the whole-hearted support of his Government, so that his Bill can be carried through Parliament in spite of obstructions.

But there can be no doubt there will be influences at work directly afterwards to see that he does not retain his office long enough to be credited with the success of his efforts. We have, therefore, to find a man who is willing to court political martyrdom. Can such a man be found?

(*Continued from page* 11.)

self against the wall. There was a sound of a latch being lifted, and then a casement was pushed open, and a man's voice became audible.

"That's a durned sight better. Fresh air. Too bloomin' hot, boys."

His voice was a little incoherent. Sexton Blake could hear him drawing the cool night air into his lungs in great gasps.

"What is the time, Joe? Looks to me as if it was latish."

"It's nearly five," a voice hiccoughed from the room.

The man at the window laughed drunkenly.

"And I ought-ta 'ave relieved Mick at four! Gosh, but he'll be spitting blood! Well, he can look after his bloomin' Serene 'Ighness a bit longer, while I have another drink."

He moved away from the window, and as he did so, Blake cautiously resumed his old position. The man was standing at the table filling a glass from the bottle. At the same moment, the door that was to the left of the fireplace opened, and a man with red hair and a very red face came into the room. He stood on the threshold staring indignantly at the scene.

"It's a nice dacint comrade you are, Rube," he exclaimed in strong Dublin accent. "Will you be after tellin' me what you mane by lavin' me with a throat as dry as a lime kiln the better part of an hour after me time's done?"

The man standing at the table seemed to find the situation amusing, for he rocked with laughter.

"Thought you liked watching that nigger, Mick," he exclaimed. "Reckoned as I was doin' you a kindness."

Mick strode across the room his fists clenched, his face flaming.

"Out of this now, or I'll have you by the scruff of your neck. You'll be laughin' at the other side of your mouth, if Peter the Spider knew of your goin's on."

The mention of that strange name seemed to have an instantly sobering effect upon the man who had been addressed as Rube. He set down the bottle on the table.

"All right, Mick. I'll come along."

"You will that, or I'll know the reason why," the other retorted furiously. "I know what your game was. You were after hoping that it was on my hands the man would die, so as it would be myself that'd be dangling from a rope if any one split. Away with you now."

Sexton Blake drew back from the window and rejoined his companions who were lurking in the shadow of the wall. Beckoning to them he raced to the corner where he had noticed a door. Turning the handle he discovered, as he had expected, that it was locked, but with incredible swiftness he selected the right key from a bunch he carried and shot back the bolt.

The sound of footsteps near by, and an angry Irish voice told him of the approach of the two men who had just left the dining-room. Ahead of him he could see a lighted passage that ran at right angles to the corridor leading to the door. Fortunately it was dark where they were standing, but even then, they must have been visible against the background of the starlit sky to anyone glancing down the corridor. As the professor and Alf White slipped across the threshold, he closed the door, shutting out that dangerous illuminated background.

There was a faint click of the latch as he did so, and instantly he heard the sudden cessation of those footsteps.

"What the devil was that, I'd like to know," the voice of Mick exclaimed.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.
Found!

FOLLOWING Sexton Blake's example, the professor and Alf dropped noiselessly to the floor and lay there prone. The two men who had left the dining-room became visible in the lighted passage, peering down the corridor in which they lay.

"Sure, it was the same as if somebody had just closed that door. I'd swear I felt a whiff of the night air on my face!"

There was a nervous note in the Irishman's voice.

"Garn, Mick, there's nobody there. You can see for yourself," his companion broke in with an hiccough.

But the other appeared far from satisfied.

"You've the drink taken, Rube, and it's a fine brave fellow you're feeling yourself. But it's mighty different with me who's been down there in them dungeons an hour longer than me time, with never a drop to pass me throat, and I'm telling you, I don't like it. There's queer things in this barn of a place—things that aren't human.

"Cut out the ghost stuff, Mick," Rube scoffed. "If you think there's anyone down there go and look."

For a moment it almost seemed to the three men lying on their faces in the corridor that the Irishman was about to carry out the suggestion; but fortunately his fear of the supernatural held him back.

"Sure, it's no business of mine after all! I know my duty and I'll do it. It's Sid's job to look after the place and not mine, glory be."

With a real feeling of relief Blake saw the two men disappear. Rising to his feet he crept down the darkened passage. As he gained the end, he caught a glimpse of Rube and Mick standing in front of a door. He saw the Irishman produce a key from his pocket and insert it in the lock.

The door swung open. For a moment the detective had a vision of a flight of stone steps that led downwards, and then the door was closed behind the two men. An instant later and Blake was outside the door. As he expected it had been locked on the inside.

Mick had spoken of dungeons, and it was clear that that stone staircase on the other side led down into subterranean vaults which had been constructed in mediæval times for the reception of prisoners. That those cells were now being used for their original purpose, he knew. Some prisoner was being guarded there that night. But who was the prisoner? That he must find out, and the only way of finding out was to make his way to the dungeons.

He toyed for a moment with the idea of picking the lock, and then as rapidly abandoned the suggestion. There was an easier way of gaining admission. Mick was going off duty. Owing to the other man's all-night carouse, he had already been the better part of an hour beyond his allotted term. Once he had handed over he would be coming back. Then would be the time to act.

He turned to the professor, who was watching him with a kind of dog-like devotion in his blue eyes, his old, battered face illuminated by a smile, which showed that he was enjoying himself thoroughly.

"One of these men will be coming back in a moment. I want you to put him to sleep without making any noise. Do you think you can manage it?"

The professor grinned.

"There won't be no trouble about that, guv'nor. I ain't what I was, of course, but I've still got a rest producer in both hands that's never been known to fail. That door opens inwards or outwards?"

"Inwards."

The professor touched his assistant on the arm and pointed to a recess formed by the great staircase immediately on their left.

"We'll deal with this here bloke, Alf, when he's a-locking of the door. You come along with us, guv'nor, and lie possum a bit until he returns."

Taking up their position in the recess, they waited silently. Presently upon their ears there broke the sound of heavy footsteps scraping on stone. A key was placed in the lock on the inside. The door opened and Mick emerged. Removing the key from the inside, he replaced it in the lock on the outside, and then closed the door.

The professor had taken off his boots, and now, in his stockinged feet, he crept out of the recess. Sexton Blake, who had made a study of such matters, was struck by the athletic agility that the old pugilist displayed.

The years that he had devoted to learning footwork in the ring enabled him to walk with the grace and agility of a professional dancer. Alf White, like a shadow, moved at his heels. When the professor was a yard from the man who, with his face to the door, was engaged in turning the key, he halted. The Irishman drew out the key with a little grunt of satisfaction, and, thrusting it into his pocket, turned.

There was a snap. The professor's bulky figure, that had been motionless before, was suddenly galvanised into action. Even as that big red face was turned in his direction his right swung from the hip and struck the man under the jaw. The Irishman sagged at the knees and would have fallen backwards had not Alf White sprung to his side and caught him in his arms.

"All right, Alf, he's taken the count," the professor grunted. "Catch hold of his legs and cart him out of the ring."

Lifting up Mick's unconscious figure, they carried him to the recess under the stairs. While the professor bound his hands behind his back and scientifically gagged him, Blake removed the key from his pocket. He was in the act of making his way to the door when a voice from above hailed them.

"What's the trouble down there?"

Sexton Blake realised in an instant that they were in danger of raising the alarm and having the whole gang quartered in the castle about their ears. It was a moment for swift thinking. He caught Alf White by the arm and pointed up the staircase. The pugilist seemed to understand immediately what was required of him.

"There ain't nothing the matter, mate," he called back, in his Cockney voice. "It's only me!"

As he spoke he slipped out of the recess and began to ascend the stairs. For a moment a feeling almost of remorse touched Sexton Blake's heart. There was no knowing the danger into which Alf White was rushing. But if the Cockney pugilist was conscious of any such danger his face, as he ascended the stairs, certainly gave no hint of his

feelings. He was as placid and calm as he would have been in the ring with some hulking yokel who was trying to win the five pounds invariably offered by Professor Crackstone to anyone who could stand up to him for three rounds.

As he reached the head of the first flight the man who had been addressing him became visible. He was leaning over the banisters of the first floor. A tall, cadaverous man, with an ugly scar across his forehead. Unlike the rest of the occupants of the castle whom Alf had seen, he was well dressed in a blue lounge suit, with a stiff collar and a neatly-tied tie. But it was not so much his personal appearance that interested Alf as the vicious-looking Browning automatic that he held in his right hand. Alf realised that from where he stood the man could drop him without any chance of missing.

He kept on stolidly, however, his gaunt, over-trained face a very mask of composure.

"And who the blazes are you, my lad?" the man inquired.

Alf never paused in his steady ascent of the last flight of stairs.

"Me, mate? Why, I'm Alf. I come along yesterday."

The man glared at him suspiciously, the cicatrix of that ghastly wound across his forehead growing of a sudden purple.

"I've never set eyes on you before. Who sent you here?"

"Lor love us, mate! You don't think I'd come here if I wasn't sent, do you? But orders is orders."

"When did you see the Spider?" the man demanded.

Alf's quick Cockney brain stood him in good stead.

"At the usual place, mate, at nine o'clock the evening before last. 'I shall want you, Alf,' 'e says, 'down at the Towers. You be there the first thing in the morning.'"

He had reached the landing, now, on which the man stood. He drew closer to him, still talking.

"And 'ere I am, mate! Alf's my name. Surely you remember me?"

With an effort he kept his eye off the Browning automatic. He was now about five feet from the man.

The Full-o'-Fun FAVOURITE Now on Sale—Price 2d.

"You can ask Mick or Rube, mate, if I didn't come along fust thing this mornihg—meaning yesterday morning, of course. You've only got to ask 'em and——"

Suddenly he ducked and his left shot out, straight from the shoulder.

"And that's that," he continued, as he seized the man by the coat and prevented him from falling to the floor.

Taking the Browning automatic from his limp hand, Alf leant calmly over the banisters and called in a whisper to his companions below:

"All clear!"

Sexton Blake came flying up the stairs, followed by the professor. Alf pointed with a grin to the unconscious figure on the floor.

"Easy as sucking peppermints, guv'nor!"

A grim smile played about Sexton Blake's lips as he bent over the man.

"Sid Telmer!" he exclaimed.

His astonishment and satisfaction were both excusable. For months the Yard had been making inquiry about a flash crook who had committed a series of daring frauds in the West End. Sid Telmer was the wanted man, but he had evaded capture in a way which had seemed nothing short of miraculous. And here he was in Cranstone Towers.

"Know him, guv'nor?" Alf whispered.

"Yes, unfortunately for him," Sexton Blake replied. "It's not the first time we've met with consequences to Sid which I'm afraid he hardly appreciated."

He fumbled in his hip-pocket, and, producing a pair of handcuffs, clicked them on the man's wrists.

"I can't afford to take any risks with him!" he exclaimed.

As he rose erect he looked about him.

Immediately behind the balustrade that separated the landing or gallery from the well of the stairs was the door of a room. Placed outside this door was a comfortable basket chair on which Sid Telmer had obviously been seated when his attention had been attracted by the sound of voices below.

Blake crossed to the door, and put his ear to the keyhole. A faint murmur of voices reached him.

"I'll pay to see you!"

"Straight!"

"Full house!"

There were men in there playing poker. Sexton Blake hesitated a moment, and then motioned to the professor and Alf, who came immediately to his side. He must get into that room, and as the door was locked the only way of doing so was to induce those within to open it.

Alf, like one pleased with a new toy, had produced the automatic that he had taken from Sid Telmer's hand; but at a warning look from Blake slipped it sheepishly back into his pocket. To fire a shot, the detective realised, would alarm the whole castle.

"Rush them, and don't let any of them escape!" he whispered.

The professor buttoned up his coat in a business-like way, and pressed his grey billycock hat more firmly on his bullet head. There was a moment's pause, and then Blake turned and tapped at the door.

"Open a moment!" he exclaimed, in imitation of Sid Telmer's voice.

There was the sound of a chair being pushed back and footsteps crossing the floor. A key was turned in the lock and a door was opened ajar.

"What's the trouble, Sid?"

A man's face had appeared in the gap. Instantly the professor struck him under the jaw, and, hurling himself at the door, bullocked into the room.

There were three other men in the apartment, seated round a table, with a pack of cards and a pile of money in front of them. Before they could move the old pugilist was upon them. Only one man managed to rise to his feet, but before he could utter a sound Alf White, following like a terrier at his employer's heels, had disposed of him.

"That makes the half-dozen, guv'nor!" the professor exclaimed joyfully. "What do you want done with them?"

But Blake made no answer to that question. After one rapid survey of the room, he had rushed across the floor to where some heavy portiere curtains hung. Drawing these aside, he disclosed an inner door. Thrusting this open, he halted on the threshold.

"Professor," he called, "come here!"

The professor hurried to his side, and, like the detective, stood for a moment spellbound by the scene that presented itself.

The room was a vast apartment, but it was not so much its size as its decorations which astonished the professor. All the art and skill of the East seemed to have been employed to turn that stately room in a mediæval English castle into the glorious chamber of an Oriental potentate. The walls were hung with embroidered silks. Vases and bowls of gold and silver adorned the floors and lacquered tables; and in the centre of the room was an immense divan of flowered silk, on which lay the figure of a swarthy young man breathing stertorously in his sleep.

"Who is that?" Sexton Blake demanded, and there was an anxious expectancy in his usually composed voice.

The professor, with his lips agape, strode noiselessly towards the divan.

"Perish me stiff, guv'nor! It's Swaji!"

Sexton Blake's face seemed to relax. He walked quickly to the side of the divan and glanced down at the sleeping man. The professor stretched out a big, broken-knuckled hand, and shook the sleeper's shoulders.

"Swaji, you blessed old heathen! Wake up and tell us what all this durned nonsense means! What'yer doing here in this here place wot somebody's pinched from the Wembley Indian Pavilion. Here, Swaji, sit up and talk to us, man!"

But Swaji never moved. Sexton Blake picked up the long, lithe brown arm that rested on the coverlet.

"He's been doped, professor! Look there!"

He pointed to a number of pricks on that brown skin made by the needle of a hypodermic syringe.

"He won't be able to talk until he's slept that last dose off!"

The professor stared at him blankly.

"This has got me guessing proper, guv'nor! What does it all mean—these here toughs outside, and poor old Swaji lying here doped?"

He made a gesture with his hands.

"And this here fancy room. What did they do it for, guv'nor? What's the meaning of all these here fallals and whatnots?"

"This was the room occupied by his Serene Highness the ex-Rajah of Buhl," Sexton Blake replied calmly.

"But why don't he use it, guv'nor, instead of shoving this poor heathen, what's used to a paliasse and a few blankets, into the place? What's the game! Why don't this ex-rajah you speak of sleep in his own bloomin' bed same as other folks do?"

"I've got to find the answer to that question yet, professor. And I rather think I know where I shall find it. Look after those men, and see they don't give the alarm."

"Don't you fret about that, guv'nor. It's them that's played this hanky up on Swaji, and I'm just waiting the chance of putting it across 'em. They'll not talk, guv'nor. Don't you fret."

"I'll leave them to you, then, professor; but I shall want Alf to come along with me."

Entering the outer room, Sexton Blake beckoned to Alf White and led the way out on to the landing. A moment later he was standing at the door which gave admission to the staircase leading to the subterranean dungeons of Cranstone Towers.

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THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.
The Prisoner of the "Little Ease."

A DAMP earthy smell, as of a graveyard, assailed their nostrils as they closed and locked the door behind them and began cautiously to descend the flight of stone steps. The stairway curved down in a spiral, being lit at intervals by electric lights.

Putting out a hand, Blake discovered that the stone walls were trickling with moisture. They had already descended some sixty feet, and must be now, he calculated, below the level of the water in the moat. A last twist in the spiral and they found themselves facing a long, arched corridor on which a number of doors opened.

Sexton Blake stood still for a moment and listened. A breath of air upon his forehead made him glance upwards. A long, narrow flue above his head, at the end of which he could faintly see the sky, showed how the dungeons of Cranstone Towers were supplied with air. And as he listened he heard from some distance away the familiar sound of a match being scraped on a box.

Thrusting his hand into his pocket, he drew out his revolver, motioning to Alf to do the same. There was every probability that the man on guard was armed, and too much was at stake to take any risks.

Very cautiously he led the way down the arched passage.

At the farther end the passage turned sharply to the right, and it was obvious from the marked change in stone that they were coming to that part of the structure which had been erected in the days of King Stephen.

Sexton Blake glanced cautiously round the corner. The man whom he had heard addressed as Rube was seated on a wooden chair, smoking a cigarette. It was obvious that his long potations during the night had made the business of keeping awake very trying, for he yawned and gaped. Presently on the stillness there broke a piteous groan. The sound seemed to exasperate Rube.

"Yah, cut it out, you durned dago and let a bloke sleep! If you don't keep quiet, I'll come and take a stick to you!"

Those agonised moans sank to a low, animal-like whimper.

"You want muzzling—that's what you want!" Rube continued, turning his bleared eyes towards a door immediately on his right and apparently addressing the invisible occupant of the room beyond. "You ain't gettin' more than your deserts, by all accounts. Being a big noise and a-fancying of yourself, you maybe pulled the wool over the beak's eyes out there in India; but you've come to the right shop for treatment now. We knows how to tame your sort here. Cut it out, didn't I tell you?"

He uttered the last words in a tone of utter exasperation, and, leaping to his feet peered through a grating close to the door, about four feet above the ground.

"Yah, you nasty coffee-coloured, yellow-livered hound!" he scoffed. "Why don't you turn it up and finish with it, instead of keeping honest men a-watching of you in this pig of a hole?"

He swung round with a gasp. Something hard and round was being pressed into his ribs. His jaw dropped.

"What the——" he began.

His voice faltered and failed as he looked down into Sexton Blake's grim face.

"Put your hands up, Rube, and hold them there. Alf, just take charge of this man, will you, and see he doesn't get up to any tricks?"

As Alf obligingly dug his revolver into the small of the man's back, Sexton Blake made a rapid search of his person, removing a small armoury of weapons which he dropped into the side-pocket of his coat. Only when he had satisfied himself that he had rendered Rube harmless did he turn to the grating through which the other had been staring.

In the course of his long, eventful life Sexton Blake had been compelled to witness many acts of human cruelty, but none so wanton as the one on which he now found himself looking. The grating allowed him a view of the interior of a mediæval dungeon constructed in the days when men's minds, maddened by fear and greed, turned themselves to the invention of devilish contrivances for torturing their fellows. He knew that he was looking into a place which he had often read about, but never seen. It was the type of dungeon known by the pleasant name of "Little Ease."

The height of the cell was five foot six, its length some six inches shorter, and its breadth hardly more than four feet and a half. It was designed with fiendish ingenuity, so that its occupant, unless he were of abnormally low stature, could neither stand erect nor lie in any position at full length.

In the days when that place of torture had been constructed, men had been incarcerated there for weeks and sometimes for months at a time, until their bodies were broken and their minds became as empty as a spilled tumbler. Rest was impossible, and sleep, if it came at all, must have seemed like a miracle performed by some merciful Providence.

And in this cell was a man close on six foot, and almost nude save for the loincloth that he wore. He was sitting with his head bowed forward on his chest, so as to avoid the roof, and his legs drawn up, shivering with cold, and with terror and despair written clearly on his swarthy face. Blake caught a glimpse of his eyes. They had the expression, he noticed, of some cowering, tortured animal.

But in spite of the prisoner's condition—in spite of the suffering which had twisted his features almost out of human recognition—Blake knew him. He turned round with the white heat of anger in his eyes.

"Who did this?" he demanded. "I've met some vermin from the under-world in my time, but this is beyond my experience. How long has his Serene Highness been here?"

"Better ask them as knows," Rube retorted surlily.

Alf dug him in the back with the muzzle of his revolver.

"None of your lip. Talk when you're spoken, like a little gentleman. I got something here as I ain't used to, and it may go off at any moment!"

Rube seemed to change his mind about speaking.

"It's been over three weeks," he muttered, glaring at Blake.

"And who is responsible?"

But that was a question to which not even Alf White was able to extort an answer.

"All right, my man! Perhaps you'll talk before I've finished with you," Blake remarked grimly. "You kept the ex-Rajah of Buhl a prisoner here while you've been selling his valuable collection of jewels. To make everything secure—to keep the dealers off the scent of what you were doing—you kidnapped Swaji, the wrestler, and substituted him for the ex-rajah, secure in the belief that to the average Englishman unacquainted with the East, one coloured gentleman seems very like another."

Rube made no answer; but the look of terror in his face was in itself an admission that Sexton Blake had solved the mystery.

"Where is the key of this door?" Blake demanded.

Rube glanced at the wall behind him, turning his head. There, suspended from a hook, hung a key. Possessing himself of this, Blake placed it in the lock, and was about to turn it when he was stopped by an exclamation from Rube.

"Don't, guv'nor! That dago's mad, I tell you!"

"If he is, whose responsibility is that?" Blake replied grimly.

"Don't be a juggins!" Rube gasped, his face growing grey. "You think you're mighty smart coming down here and holding me up, but you ain't kidding yourself, are you, that you're going to get out of Cranstone Towers? There's more than two dozen men in this place, and every exit and entrance is guarded. You won't have a pig's chance. If you let that madman out he'll kill you! I tell you what, I'll make a deal with you, guv'nor. You leave him where he is, and I'll give you my word that I'll see you safe out of Cranstone Towers."

"I wouldn't trust your word even if there was any need for it," Blake retorted grimly. "I sha'n't require your escort from the castle, I assure you. As for this unfortunate prince, who has been punished heavily enough, Heaven knows, for any actions of his in the past, mad or sane, I wouldn't leave him to endure such torture a moment longer."

He turned the key in the lock and flung open the door. As he did so a panic seized upon Rube. Regardless of the revolver pressing into his back, he turned, ducked, and tried to rush past Alf, to gain the pasage that led to the stairs. With lightning rapidity Alf sidestepped, and brought his left with a half-arm jab to the other's solus plexus. There was a gasp and a groan, and Rube fell writhing on the ground.

"Gosh, he's got a mark on him as soft as a bladder of lard!" Alf exclaimed calmly. "When you're feeling like another dose, my lad, get up, and you can have some from the same prescription."

Sexton Blake, confident that his companion was quite capable of dealing with

Rube, never even turned his head while this scene was in progress. He stood on the threshold of Little Ease, looking across at the half-naked figure crouched at the other end in a very torment of discomfiture.

"Your Serene Highness, we are friends who have come to rescue you from this predicament. You can trust us implicitly."

But the ex-rajah never moved. Only the sudden showing of the whites of his eyes gave any indication that he understood what had been said to him. Blake stood away from the door.

"There is no reason why you should stay a moment longer where you are, your Highness!"

He walked deliberately away as he spoke, halting a few yards from the door of Little Ease. For a moment there was silence. It was clear that the ex-rajah's gaolers had employed not only physical but mental torture. They, too, in all probability, had left the door of the cell open, filling their prisoner with the fierce hope of escape, only to dash that hope to the ground when he had almost reached the threshold of Little Ease. He believed now that the same malignant device was being employed.

Sexton Blake waited patiently. A minute went by, and then his quick ear detected the faint sound of shuffling movement. The head of the ex-rajah appeared through the open doorway. Sexton Blake bowed courteously and held out his hand. A look almost of incredulity crept into the unfortunate prisoner's face.

Like one who cannot believe that he is not dreaming, he crept out into the passage. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. It seemed hard to believe that this was the man who had held sovereign rule over a million subjects, whose slightest word or wish had been obeyed.

With one hand resting on the wall he slowly raised himself. That Little Ease had set its mark upon him was proved by the fact that he still kept his head bowed, as if fearful of bringing it into collision with the ceiling.

"Your Serene Highness has nothing to fear," Blake exclaimed soothingly. "You are perfectly safe, and you can rest assured that the men who have perpetrated this outrage will be held strictly to account."

The ex-rajah looked round him dazedly. As he did so his eye lighted upon the figure of Rube, stretched on the floor, and just recovering from Alf White's blow. Instantly a change came over his face. The irises of his dark eyes were suddenly suffused with blood. With a hoarse, inarticulate cry he tottered forwards, his lean arms stretched out, his fingers rigid. He was in the act of flinging himself upon Rube when Alf White caught him and pinioned his arms to his side.

"Steady, my lad. This here fight's our particular little affair, and we don't want anybody else to interfere. See? We're going to take you where you can get warm, and put on some other clothes besides that thin bathing costume. Easy now!"

Talking to him as if he were a child, he gradually coaxed him into the chair. Standing behind him he continued to talk.

"If you want to see a bit of fun, guv'nor, you watch that there guy who's been a-torturing of you, trying to make trouble for himself. Maybe he thinks he's going to get up and scoot for it. Now, you just watch."

Almost imperceptibly Rube had gathered his legs under him. Now suddenly he jumped to his feet; but before he could move from the spot, Alf's right came in contact with his jaw, and he dropped like a stone on to the pavement.

"Seein's believin' ain't it, rajah!" Alf exclaimed, patting the shoulder of the Indian prince. "You know now for yourself that you're among pals. You just wait until Mr. Blake there is finished doing what he's got to do, and then we'll take you where there's all home comforts and everything as mother makes it."

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.
The Man Behind the Plot!

WHETHER the rajah understood a word of what Alf was saying, is doubtful; but perhaps the soothing tone of his voice and the completely satisfactory way in which he had treated his late gaoler, carried conviction to his mind that he was indeed among friends. Some of the strain and suffering seemed to pass from his face. His body relaxed. He lay back with a little sigh, like one who at last finds himself at peace.

"Is that man capable of talking?" Blake demanded. "There should be another prisoner here, unless I'm mistaken."

"I'm afraid he ain't, guv'nor," Alf replied, regarding the prone figure of Rube. "I'm sorry if I put him out when you were wanting him. But it won't be long before he comes to."

Sexton Blake stood over the unconscious man until the blow he had received on the point began to lose its effect. When at last he opened his eyes the detective helped him to his feet and placed him with his back to the wall.

"There was another prisoner brought here yesterday evening. I want to know where he is."

Rube hesitated a moment, but it was clear that his sullen obstinacy had suffered from the treatment he had received at Alf White's hands.

"He is in the lower dungeons—the other side of the door."

"Come with me and show me the place!" Blake ordered.

Covered by the detective's revolver, Rube walked with him to the end of the passage and opened a low, heavy door. Beyond were a flight of steps that led still further downward into the bowels of the earth. Like the rest of these subterranean vaults, the place was illuminated with electric light. Descending these steps, Rube pointed to the door at the bottom.

"He's in there!" he muttered. "You'll have to open the door yourself. I got my orders."

Sexton Blake spared a moment to wonder at the mysterious personality of the leader of this gang of criminals, who could impose his will upon Rube at such a time. Even when caught, and with the prospect of a long sentence before him, he insisted upon obeying at least the letter of the instructions received from his chief.

A key hung over the door. Taking this down, he inserted it in the lock. A moment later he was peering into a cavernous space that was plunged in impenetrable darkness. Some instinct made him turn quickly. Rube, by his side with the revolver pressed against his ribs, had moved almost imperceptibly. His left arm, too, was stretched out behind the detective's back. Blake sprang back.

"I think not, my friend," he said quietly. "If there's anyone going to cross that threshold, it shall be you. If you value your life, which frankly isn't worth very much, in my opinion, you won't move!"

He took an electric torch from his pocket and flashed the light into that impenetrable blackness. It showed him that what had appeared to be a cell, was, in reality, a deep pit—how deep he was not in a position to estimate. Obviously it had been Rube's intention to take him off his guard, and, with one push, hurl him into that pit.

Sexton Blake came as near losing his temper as a man of his iron will was capable of doing. Time was getting on. He had left the professor alone in the upper regions of the castle. He had still to get the ex-rajah into a place of safety, to secure the removal of Swaji, and to solve the mystery of Mr. Richard Heathcote's disappearance. What if the men he had seen in the dining-room were to recover from their potations—what if they were to find Mick lying trussed-up in the recess under the stairs, and Sid Telmer handcuffed on the landing above? It was no time for kid-glove methods. Even at this moment the professor might be having to deal single-handed with the gang,

He raised his automatic.

"I have six shots in my magazine!" he exclaimed. "I shall fire just to miss with five of them. If you move a fraction of an inch you'll get hurt. While I am firing those five shots you can consider carefully what you wish done with the sixth. Either you take me at once to the place where Mr. Heathcote is imprisoned—in which case I shall keep the sixth shot unused—or you will refuse, and I will use the last cartridge to put an end to your existence, my man."

His hand was as steady as a rock, but his whole attitude suggested a carelessness and indifference which clearly shook the man's nerves. He fired rapidly. Two shots went a fraction of an inch to the left of the man's head; two others he placed in a like position to the right. The fifth struck the stonework just above Rube's head. The man was now grey with terror.

"What do you want done with the sixth?" Sexton Blake demanded. "Quick, man, I am in a hurry!"

Rube's spirit was broken. He realised that he was dealing with one whose will and purpose was stronger than his own.

"All right, guv'nor, I'll show you!" he spluttered.

He was trembling as he spoke, and in the electric light the beads of perspiration that bedewed his forehead glistened.

"This is your last chance. Look smart, my lad!"

With his foot, Rube kicked open the door of an adjoining cell.

"There he is, guv'nor!"

Making the man precede him, Blake entered the cell, turning on the light of his electric lamp. It lit up the figure of Mr. Richard Heathcote, with his white hair and his white, pointed beard, seated on a stone bench, with his neck firmly clasped in an iron hook that was attached to the wall. His hands and feet were similarly manacled to the bench and the floor.

"Release him!" Blake demanded.

"I daren't!" Rube stammered. "The Spider's orders!"

"You'll do what you're told, my man.

And you will do it quickly. I've still got that last cartridge, remember, and as you must have realised, I never miss."

His threat had the desired effect. Even the mysterious terrors of the Spider were not as effective as Sexton Blake's marksmanship. In less than thirty seconds Mr. Heathcote had been released from his very undignified position, and was standing up.

"I am greatly obliged to you, Mr. Blake, for having rescued me from a very unfortunate predicament," he remarked nervously. "I am at a loss for the moment to understand how you came to be playing the role of my rescuer; but doubtless, at a more convenient time, you will inform me how you chanced to be in the position to place me under this great obligation."

It was perfectly obvious that he was doing his best to appear at ease and to preserve the tone of his polished diction. Blake looked at him curiously.

"Yes, there are more convenient moments than the present for explanations," he admitted. "They'll have to wait. I must say this, however, that quite possibly your more than unpleasant experience might have been avoided had you complied with my request, and given me the name and address of the owner of Cranstone Towers."

Bound hand and foot, with his neck in an iron hoop, which rendered all movement impossible, in a lonely mediæval dungeon, Mr. Richard Heathcote had, none the less, preserved a curious professional dignity—a calmness and composure wonderful in the circumstances. But now, like a wind ruffling the calm surface of a lake, there spread across his countenance a look of undisguised terror. Blake saw and noted.

"Explanations must wait. I must ask you to follow me, Mr. Heathcote."

He led the way back up the stairs, still shepherding Rube with his revolver, to the place where he had left the ex-rajah and Alf White.

"Will you give the rajah your arm, Alf? The sooner we're out of this the better!"

Placing Rube at the head of the procession Sexton Blake ordered the party to make for the upper regions without delay. When they reached the stairs it became clear that the ex-Rajah of Buhl was quite incapable of ascending them. With a complete disregard for his serenity, Alf ducked his head under one arm and hoisted the Indian prince on to his shoulder in a fireman's lift.

"There ain't no extra charge for travelling like this!" he remarked cheerfully.

When finally they reached the door Blake paused to listen. What he heard made him turn swiftly to Alf White.

"What I feared has happened!" he exclaimed. "The rest of the gang have found the professor. You must come with me, Alf. You, Mr. Heathcote, will stay here with his Serene Highness. Rube, you walk on ahead, and please to remember that I've just filled the empty magazines of my gun!"

He flung back the door, and as he did so there broke upon their ears a very babel of sound—curses, shouts, oaths; pandemonium let loose.

"Gosh, but the old man ain't half having a beano!" Alf White remarked, with a grin. "Come on, guv'nor—don't let's be out of this!"

There was no mistaking where the noise came from. Side by side, with Rube unwillingly in front, they raced up the staircase. As they gained the first landing an amazing scene opened up before their eyes.

With a cry Sid Telmer flung himself at Blake, handcuffed as he was. Next instant both of them were rolling down the stairs together—and Peter the Spider, freed from the menace of Blake's pistol, vanished.

On the gallery above a man was kneeling over the recumbent figure of Sid Telmer, busy with a file trying to disengage him from his handcuffs. Outside the room which led to the ex-rajah's apartments the scene was not unlike the crush at a theatre when the doors are opened. A body of nine men were endeavouring to force an entry—pushing, hustling, shoving, with heads down—and above the roar they could hear the professor's raucous voice out-bellowing even that babel of sound:

"Take that, Pie-face! You go and have a good sleep, my lad! You would, would you? Gosh, then you've got to have it!"

As they bounded up the last flight of stairs they could see the professor. He had, somehow, barricaded the door so that it only opened ajar, and in that space, standing a little back, his figure was outlined against the room beyond. His old battered visage was alight with the fire of battle. He was standing lightly on his feet, his great broken knuckled fists clenched, his chin pressed hard into his chest, his shoulders hunched. And ever now and again one of those arms shot out or upwards with the force of a piston-rod driven by steam.

It was clear that the front rank of his assailants would willingly have foregone their place of honour, but those behind were so fiercely determined to enter the room that retreat was out of the question.

Blake, as he bounded up the stairs, saw one figure, his face covered with blood, drop helplessly to the floor. Yet another man in the front rank seemed to be kept on his feet simply by the pressure of those behind. And no one was aware of the reinforcements that were approaching from the rear.

"Ain't he a regular old fighting-cock?" Alf exclaimed, finding even in that moment of crisis time to express his admiration of his employer's prowess. "He don't want us, guv'nor. It's like robbing a hungry man of his grub!"

It did indeed seem as if the professor could hold his own unaided for an indefinite time. Obviously, his opponents were having the worst of it. So convinced was Blake of this that he spared a moment for another matter. Sid Telmer was about to be released, and he had no intention of letting the man escape. As he set his foot on the gallery at the head of the stairs he fired one shot from his revolver. The file that Sid Telmer's would-be-rescuer was using was shattered in his hand.

And that shot accomplished something else. As if at a word of command the group of struggling men about the door turned. At the sight of Sexton Blake and Alf White they hesitated. It was clear that they were uncertain as to whether there were not other reinforcements behind. Then a high-pitched Cockney voice broke above the din.

"The rozzers!" it screamed.

Instantly panic broke loose. Like rabbits the men bolted down the corridor, deliberately avoiding the stairs where Sexton Blake and Alf White stood.

Blake caught a glimpse of Rube, whom he had shepherded up the stairs, among the fugitives, and he smiled grimly to himself. For the time being the man had escaped him.

"No use following them, Alf," he remarked, as the pugilist showed signs of rushing in pursuit. "We've got our hands full enough as it is."

The professor at that moment came out of the room. His face was glowing with satisfaction.

"Best bit of 'cut and come again' as I remember this long while. Ten minutes I had of it, guv'nor. I heard 'em a-coming up the stairs and I fixed the door so as to have everything ready and handy for 'em. There's some of them blokes in the front row what won't know their faces when they look at 'em—I had to hit 'em so often, 'cos they wouldn't, or couldn't, get out of the way."

Sexton Blake took the old pugilist's hand and shook it warmly.

"I couldn't have selected, for a job like this, better partners than you and Alf have proved. I'm greatly indebted to you. Alf, if you wouldn't mind bringing his Highness and the other gentleman up here, I'll just have a few words with Sid Telmer."

As Alf went off on his errand he turned towards his prisoner, but the professor stopped him for a moment.

"Swaji's all right, guv'nor. He woke up about a quarter of an hour after you left. Full of beans, he is. Shouldn't be surprised if he don't make the breakfast of his life off a teaspoonful of rice when he gets to China. And, guv'nor, he tells me as they made him interview all sorts of blokes from London, kidding them he was the ex-Rajah of Buhl, and giving orders about the sale of jewels. When he wasn't doing that they kept him doped, so as he didn't make trouble."

Sexton Blake smiled to himself. The theory he had formed in Mr. Richard Heathcote's office had proved a correct one.

The ex-Rajah of Buhl had been induced to take Cranstone Towers. By some means or other—probably by coercion—he had been persuaded to get rid of his native staff.

In their place the gang had established themselves. And then the master mind behind the whole audacious plot had suggested to the ex-rajah the handling of the sale of his jewels. The ex-rajah had objected—in an ill hour for him. As a result he had been placed in Little Ease.

The gang were then in a difficulty. They must have someone to take the ex-rajah's place in order to interview the experts and valuers who came down to Cranstone Towers to inspect the collection of jewels. For this purpose they secured Swaji, the wrestler, secure in the belief that not one of the business men who visited Cranstone Towers in connection with the sale would be familiar with the ex-rajah. And up to a point their plot had succeeded.

Sexton Blake bent over the man lying on the ground.

"Well, this is a bad job for you, I'm afraid, Sid," he said, not unkindly.

Sid Telmer looked up at him without any rancour.

"I'd give something to know how you got into this here case, Mr. Blake. I suppose it means I'll be put away for five years."

"There's no charge preferred against you yet; and there might be no charge preferred against you if you were to do the wise thing. I want to know who Mr. Brim is."

"Peter the Spider!" the man stammered, and then stopped abruptly.

Blake saw that he was no longer looking at him. He turned, to find Richard Heathcote standing behind him, fingering his beard. Between the two men some sort of silent message seemed to pass.

"I ain't going to say anything. I suppose it means five years."

"Yes; I expect it will be five years. And it's bad luck on that wife and nice little kid of yours. Of course, if you were to put me wise——"

"Mr. Blake, it ain't no use. I guess I've got to go through with it. But you'll see the missus and kids don't suffer, won't you?"

"I'll promise you that, Sid," Sexton Blake replied gravely.

Sexton Blake turned to Mr. Heathcote.

"And now, perhaps, you will tell me the address of Mr. Brim, who is the owner of Cranstone Towers?"

Mr. Richard Heathcote continued nervously stroking his white, pointed beard.

"Mr. Blake, I am a solicitor, and as a professional man I cannot betray the confidences of my clients."

"Not even when they inveigle you to enter a motor-car in Lincoln's Inn Fields, detain you by force, drive you down here, and lock you in the place from which I have just rescued you? Isn't that carrying professional etiquette to extremes, Mr. Heathcote?"

Mr. Richard Heathcote swallowed hard.

"Possibly it may seem so to you, Mr. Blake, but I must be allowed to be the best judge of my own conduct. I may mention that I shall prefer no charge against anyone in connection with this unfortunate affair.

"I can't help wondering, Mr. Heathcote," Sexton Blake remarked with a grim smile, "if your charming niece, who solicited my help last night, will display the same tolerance and the same charity if she hears of the treatment to which her uncle had to submit."

Mr. Heathcote regarded Sexton Blake unmoved, and made no reply.

"I question, you know, Mr. Heathcote, whether the plea of professional secrecy, which usually covers the confidences between a client and his solicitor, is applicable to a case like this. Murder was intended, besides fraud—a peculiarly infamous and cold-blooded murder. You yourself suffered because you opposed your client's plans. In the common cause of justice and humanity, Mr. Heathcote, I think you should tell me who Mr. Brim is."

He stopped abruptly.

A curious change had come over the solicitor's face. It was clear that his attention was no longer fixed on what the other was saying. Blake saw him glance furtively over the banisters into the lighted hall below. The detective's right hand closed on the butt of the Browning automatic that he had placed in his pocket, but he continued speaking in the same tone.

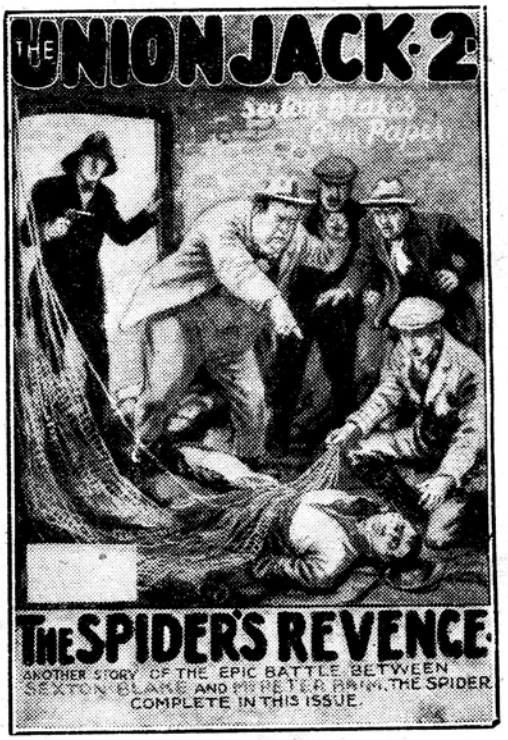
"This man, Brim—known as Peter the Spider—is a dangerous criminal, Mr. Heathcote. And to protect him——"

He had turned slightly while he was speaking, so that he half faced the lighted hall below. A faint, almost imperceptible, sound had reached his ears. And now, suddenly, from the passage there seemed to leap that same grotesque figure that he had seen before in Lincoln's Inn Fields—a man who was a very monster of obesity. No fur coat concealed his face as at their first meeting. He could see the folds of fat about his neck, his vast, fleshy cheeks, the broad, dome-like forehead, the deep-set eyes, that shone with magnetic intensity.

The man stood there like some figure who had just stepped from the wings on to a lighted stage. An almost demoniac fury lighted up his eyes; a cruel smile played about his bulbous lips; and in his hands, steady as a rock, was a revolver pointed straight at the heart of Sexton Blake.

There was a moment of tense silence, broken at last by the sound of Sid

(*Concluded on page 28.*)



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Blake has thwarted Mr. Peter Brim, and he doesn't like being thwarted a bit.

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WALLACE'S MASTERPIECE!

The Three Just Men

by

EDGAR WALLACE

(Author of "The Four Just Men," etc., etc.)

PEOPLE YOU WILL MEET.

MISS MIRABELLE LEICESTER, the daughter of Professor Leicester, an astronomer who died in Africa. Some mystery surrounds Mirabelle, and several people are anxious to be in touch with her, among whom are—

Dr. OBERZOHN and "MONTY" NEWTON, two crooks who have lured her to London by means of a fake advertisement, and provided her with a secretarial job in Oberzohn's office.

SAM BARBERTON, who has just landed in England from Africa, also seeks her, obtaining for this purpose the aid of the

THREE JUST MEN—Manfred, Poiccart, and Leon Gonsalez.

These astute detectives discover she is employed by Oberzohn; but, before Barberton can be informed of this, he is mysteriously killed by snake-bite.

This fate overtakes all who interfere with Oberzohn's plans, and threatens the Three Just Men themselves. They obtain the aid of a snake-expert, Elijah Washington, who is immune from snake-venom, to combat this menace.

At Rath Hall, the residence of Mr. Johnson Lee—a blind man who has important documents relating to Mirabelle's father—the detectives are gathered waiting the arrival of Oberzohn's men, who are trying to obtain the documents.

The snake-man and Leon Gonsalez stroll through the grounds in the darkness, when suddenly Washington is struck down by the snake.

RATH HALL.

"GET me inside," said Washington's voice. He was leaning heavily upon his companion.

With his arm round his waist, taking half his weight, Leon pushed the man into the hall, but did not close the door. Instead, as the American sat down with a thud upon a hall seat, Leon fell to the ground, and peered along the artificial skyline he had created. There was no movement, no sign of any attacker. Then, and only then, did he shut the door and drop the bar, and, pushing the study door wide, carried the man into the room and switched on the lights.

"I guess something got me then," muttered Washington.

His right cheek was red and swollen, and Leon saw the tell-tale bite; saw something else. He put his hand to the cheek and examined his finger-tips.

"Get me some whisky, will you? About a gallon of it."

He was obviously in great pain, and sat rocking himself to and fro.

"Gosh! This is awful!" he groaned. "Never had any snake that bit like this!"

"You're alive, my friend, and I didn't believe you when you said you were snake-proof."

Leon poured out a tumbler of neat whisky and held it to the American's lips.

"Down with Prohibition!" murmured Washington, and did not take the glass from his lips until it was empty. "You can give me another dose of that—I sha'n't get pickled," he said.

He put his hand up to his face and touched the tiny wound gingerly.

"It is wet," he said, in surprise.

"What did it feel like?"

"Like nothing so much as a snake-bite," confessed the expert.

Already his face was puffed beneath the eyes, and the skin was discoloured black and blue.

Leon crossed to the fireplace and pushed the bell, and Washington watched him in amazement.

"Say, what's the good of ringing? The servants have gone."

There was a patter of feet in the hall, the door was flung open, and George Manfred came in, and behind him the startled visitor saw Meadows and a dozen men.

"For the Lord's sake!" he said sleepily.

"They came in the charabanc, lying on the floor," explained Leon, "and the only excuse for bringing a charabanc here was to send the servants to that concert."

"You got Lee away?" asked Manfred.

Leon nodded.

"He was in the car that took friend Meadows, who transferred to the charabanc somewhere out of sight of the house."

Washington had taken a small cardboard box from his pocket and was rubbing a red powder gingerly upon the two white-edged marks, groaning the while.

"This is certainly a snake that's got the cobra skinned to death and a rattlesnake's bite ain't worse than a dog nip," he said. "Mamba nothing! I know the mamba; he is pretty fatal, but not so bad as this."

Manfred looked across at Leon.

"Gurther?" he asked simply, and Gonsalez nodded.

"It was intended for me, obviously, but, as I've said before, Gurther is nervous. And it didn't help him any to be shot up."

"Do you fellows mind not talking so loud?"

He glanced at the heavy curtains that covered the windows. Behind these the shutters had been fastened, and Dr. Oberzohn was an ingenious man.

Leon took a swift survey of the visitor's feet; they wore felt slippers.

"I don't think I can improve upon the tactics of the admirable Miss Leicester," he said, and went up to Mr. Lee's bedroom, which was in the centre of the house and had a small balcony, the floor of which was formed by the top of the porch.

The long french windows were open and Leon crawled out into the darkness and took observation through the pillars of the balustrade. They were in the open now, making no attempt to conceal their presence. He counted seven, until he saw the cigarette of another near the end of the drive. What were they waiting for, he wondered. None of them moved; they were not even closing on the house. And this inactivity puzzled him. They were awaiting a signal. What was it to be? Whence would it come?

He saw a man come stealthily across the lawn—one or two? His eyes were playing tricks. If there were two, one was Gurther. There was no mistaking him. For a second he passed out of view behind a pillar of the balcony. Leon moved his head—Gurther had fallen! He saw him stumble to his knees and tumble flat upon the ground. What did that mean?

He was still wondering when he heard a soft scraping and a deep-drawn breath and tried to locate the noise. Suddenly, within a few inches of his face, a hand came up out of the darkness and gripped the lower edge of the balcony.

Swiftly, noiselessly, Gonsalez wriggled back to the room, drew erect in the cover of the curtains, and waited. His hand touched something; it was a long silken cord, by which the curtains were drawn. Leon grinned in the darkness and made a scientific loop.

The intruder drew himself up on to the parapet, stepped quietly across, then tiptoed to the open window. He was not even suspicious, for the french windows had been open all the evening. Without a sound he stepped into the room and was momentarily silhouetted against the starlight reflected in the window.

"Hatless!" thought Leon. That made things easier. As the man took another stealthy step the noose dropped over his neck, jerked tight, and strangled the cry in his throat. In an instant he was lying flat on the ground, with a knee in his back. He struggled to rise, but Leon's fist came down with the precision of a piston-rod, and he went suddenly quiet.

Gonsalez loosened the slip-knot, and, flinging the man over his shoulder, carried him out of the room and down the stairs. He could only guess that this would be the only intruder, but left nothing to chance, and after he had handed his prisoner to the men who were waiting in the hall, he ran back to the room to find, as he had expected, that no other adventurer had followed the lead. They were still standing at irregular intervals where he had seen them last. The signal was to come from the house. What was it to be, he wondered.

He left one of his men on guard in the room and went back to the study, to find that the startled burglar was an old friend. Lew Cuccini was looking from one of his captors to the other, a picture of dumbfounded chagrin. But the most extraordinary discovery that Leon made on his return to the study was that the American snake-charmer was his old cheerful self, and, except for his unsightly appearance, seemed to be none the worse for an ordeal which would have promptly ended the lives of ninety-nine men out of a hundred.

"Snake-proof—that's me! Is this the guy that did it?"

He pointed to Cuccini.

"Where is Gurther?" asked Manfred.

Cuccini grinned up into his face.

"You'd better find out, boss," he said. "He'll fix you. As soon as I shout——"

"Cuccini——" Leon's voice was gentle. The point of the long-bladed knife that he held to the man's neck was indubitably sharp. Cuccini shrank back. "You will not shout. If you do I shall cut your throat and spoil all these beautiful carpets—that is a genuine silken Bokhara, George. I haven't seen one in ten years." He nodded to the soft-hued rug on which George Manfred was standing. "What is the signal, Cuccini?"—turning his attention again to the prisoner. "And what happens when you give the signal?"

"Listen!" said Cuccini, "that throat-cutting stuff don't mean anything to me. There's no third degree in this country, and don't forget it."

"You have never seen my ninety-ninth degree." Leon smiled like a delighted boy. "Put something in his mouth, will you?"

One of the men tied a woollen scarf round Cuccini's head.

"Lay him on the sofa."

He was already bound hand and foot and helpless.

"Have you any wax matches? Yes, here are some." Leon emptied a cut-glass container into the palm of his hand and looked blandly round at the curious company. "Now, gentlemen, if you will leave me alone for exactly five minutes I will give Mr. Cuccini an excellent imitation of the persuasive methods of Gian Vicconti, an excellent countryman of his, and the inventor of the system I am about to apply."

Cuccini was shaking his head furiously. A mumble of unintelligible sounds came from behind the scarf.

"Our friend is not unintelligent. Any of you who say that Signor Cuccini is unintelligent will incur my severest displeasure," said Leon.

They sat the man up, and he talked brokenly, hesitatingly.

"Splendid!" said Leon, when he had finished. "Take him into the kitchen and give him a drink; you'll find a tap above the kitchen sink."

"I've often wondered, Leon," said George, when they were alone together, "whether you would ever carry out these horrible threats of your of torture and malignant savagery?"

"Half the torture of torture is anticipation," said Leon easily, lighting a cigarette with one of the matches he had taken from the table, and carefully guiding the rest back into the glass bowl. "Any man versed in the art of suggestive description can dispense with thumbscrews and branding irons, little maidens and all the ghastly apparatus of criminal justice ever employed by our ancestors. I, too, wonder," he mused, blowing a ring of smoke to the ceiling, "whether I could carry my threats into execution—I must try one day." He nodded pleasantly, as though he were promising himself a great treat.

Manfred looked at his watch.

"What do you intend doing—giving the signal?"

Gonsalez nodded.

"And then?"

"Letting them come in. We may take refuge in the kitchen. I think it would be wiser."

George Manfred nodded.

"You're going to allow them to open the safe?"

"Exactly," said Leon. "I particularly wish that safe to be opened, and since Mr. Lee demurs, I think this is the best method. I had that in my mind all the time. Have you seen the safe, George? I have. Nobody but an expert could smash it. I have no tools. I did not provide against such a contingency, and I have scruples. Our friends have the tools—and no scruples!"

"And the snake—is there any danger?"

Leon snapped his fingers.

"The snake has struck for the night, and will strike no more. As for Gurther——"

"He owes you something."

Leon sent another ring up and did not speak until it broke on the ceiling.

"Gurther is dead," he said simply. "He has been lying on the lawn in front of the house for the past ten minutes."

——

Written in Braille.

LEON briefly related the scene he had witnessed from the balcony. "It was undoubtedly Gurther," he said. "I could not mistake him. He passed out of view for a second behind one of the pillars, and when I looked round he was lying flat on the ground."

He threw his cigarette into the fireplace.

"I think it is nearly time," he said. He waited until Manfred had gone, and, going to the door, moved the bar and pulled it open wide.

Stooping down, he saw that the opening of the door had been observed, for one of the men was moving across the lawn in the direction of the house. From his pocket he took a small electric lamp and sent three flickering beams into the darkness. To his surprise, only two men walked forward to the house. Evidently Cuccini was expected to deal with any resistance before the raid occurred.

The house had been built in the fifteenth century, and the entrance hall was a broad, high barn of a place. Some Georgian architect, in the peculiar manner of his kind, had built a small minstrel gallery over the dining-room entrance and immediately facing the study. Leon had already explored the house and had found the tiny staircase that led to this architectural monstrosity. He had no sooner given the signal than he dived into the dining-room, through the tall door, and was behind the thick curtains at the back of the narrow gallery when the first two men came in. He saw them go straight into the study and push open the door. At the same time a third man appeared under the porch, though he made no attempt to enter the hall.

Presently one of those who had gone into the study came out and called Cuccini by name. When no answer came he went grumbling back to his task. What that task was, Leon could guess, before the peculiarly acrid smell of hot steel was wafted to his sensitive nostrils.

By crouching down he could see the legs of the men who were working at the safe. They had turned on all the lights, and apparently expected no interruption. The man at the door was joined by another man.

"Where is Lew?"

In the stillness of the house the words, though spoken in a low tone, were audible

"I don't know— inside somewhere. He had to fix that dago."

Leon grinned. This description of himself never failed to tickle him.

One of the workers in the library came out at this point.

"Have you seen Cuccini?"

"No," said the man at the door.

"Go in and find him. He ought to be here."

Cuccini's absence evidently made him uneasy, for though he returned to the room he was out again in a minute, asking if the messenger had come back. Then, from the back of the passage, came the searcher's voice:

"The kitchen's locked."

The safe-cutter uttered an expression of amazement.

"Locked? What's the idea?"

He came to the foot of the stairs and bellowed up:

"Cuccini!"

Only the echo answered him.

"That's queer." He poked his head in the door of the study. "Rush that job, Mike. There's some funny business here." And over his shoulder, "Tell the boys to get ready to jump."

The man went out into the night and was absent some minutes, to return with an alarming piece of news.

"They've gone, boss. I can't see one of them."

The "boss" cursed him, and himself went into the grounds on a visit of inspection. He came back in a hurry, ran into the study, and Leon heard his voice:

"Stand ready to clear."

"What about Cuccini?"

"Cuccini will have to look after himself—got it, Mike?"

The deep voice said something. There followed the sound of a crack, as though something of iron had broken. It was the psychological moment. Leon parted the curtains and dropped lightly to the floor

The man at the door turned in a flash at the sound.

"Put 'em up!" he said sharply.

"Don't shoot." Leon's voice was almost conversational in its calmness. "The house is surrounded by police."

With an oath the man darted out of the door, and at that instant came the sound of the first shot, followed by desultory firing from the direction of the road. The second guard had been the first to go. Leon ran to the door, slammed it tight and switched on the lights as the two men came from the study. Under the arm of one was a thick pad of square brown sheets. He dropped his load and put up his hands at the sight of the gun; but his companion was made of harder material, and, with a yell, he leapt at the man who stood between him and freedom.

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Leon twisted aside, advanced his shoulder to meet the furious drive of the man's fist; then, dropping his pistol, he stooped swiftly and tackled him below the knees.

The man swayed, sought to recover his balance, and fell with a crash on the stone floor. All the time his companion stood dazed and staring, his hands waving in the air.

There was a knock at the outer door. Without turning his back upon his prisoners, Leon reached for the bar and pulled it up. Manfred came in.

"The gentleman who shouted 'Cuccini' scared them. I think they've got away. There were two cars parked on the road."

His eyes fell upon the brown sheets scattered on the floor, and he nodded.

"I think you have all you want, Leon," he said.

The detectives came crowding in at that moment, and secured their prisoners, whilst Leon Gonsalez and his friend went on to the lawn to search for Gurther.

The man lay as he had fallen, on his face, and as Leon flashed his lamp upon the figure, he saw that the snake had struck behind the ear.

"Gurther!" frowned Leon.

He turned the figure on its back and gave a little gasp of surprise, for there looked up to the starry skies the heavy face of Pfeiffer.

"Pfeiffer! I could have sworn it was the other! There has been some double-crossing here. Let me think." He stood for fully a minute, his chin on his hand. "I could have understood Gurther; he was becoming a nuisance and a danger to the old man. Pfeiffer, the more reliable of the two, hated him. My first theory was that Gurther had been put out by order of Oberzohn."

"Suppose Gurther heard that order, or came to know of it?" asked Manfred quietly.

Leon snapped his fingers.

"That is it! We had a similar case a few years ago, you will remember, George? The old man gave the 'out' order to Pfeiffer—and Gurther got his blow in first. Shrewd fellow!"

When they returned to the house, the three were seated in a row in Johnson Lee's library. Cuccini, of course, was an old acquaintance. Of the other two men, Leon recognised one, a notorious gunman whose photograph had embellised the page of "Hue and Cry" for months.

The third, and evidently the skilled workman of the party, for he it was whom they had addressed as "Mike," and who had burnt out the lock of Lee's safe, was identified by Meadows as Mike Selwyn, a skilful burglar and bank-smasher, who had, according to his statement, only arrived from the Continent that afternoon in answer to a flattering invitation which promised considerable profit to himself.

"And why I left Milan," he said bitterly, "where the graft is easy and the money's good, I'd like you to tell me!"

The prisoners were removed to the nearest secure lock-up, and by the time Lee's servants returned from their dance, all evidence of an exciting hour had disappeared, except that the blackened and twisted door of the safe testified to the sinister character of the visitation.

Meadows returned as they were gathering together the scattered sheets. There were hundreds of them, all written in Braille characters, and Manfred's sensitive fingers were skimming their surface.

"Oh, yes!" he said, in answer to a question that was put to him. "I knew Lee was blind, the day we searched Barberton's effects. That was my mystery." He laughed. "Barberton expected a call from his old friend and had left a message for him on the mantelpiece. Do you remember that strip of paper? It ran: 'Dear Johnny, I will be back in an hour.' These are letters——"

He indicated the papers.

"The folds tell me that," said Meadows. "You may not get a conviction against Cuccini; the two burglars will come up before a judge, but to charge Cuccini means the whole story of the snake coming out, and that means a bigger kick than I'm prepared to laugh away. I am inclined to let Cuccini go for the moment."

Manfred nodded. He sat with the embossed sheets on his knee.

"Written from various places," he went on.

It was curious to see him, his fingers running swiftly along the embossed lines, his eyes fixed on vacancy.

"So far I've learnt nothing, except that in his spare time Barberton amused himself by translating native fairy stories into English and putting them into Braille for use in the blind school. I knew, of course, that he did that, because I've already interviewed his sister, who is the mistress of the girls' section."

He had gone through half a dozen letters when he rose from the table and walked across to the safe.

"I have a notion that the thing we're seeking is not here," he said. "It is hardly likely that he would allow a communication of that character to be jumbled up with the rest of the correspondence."

The safe door was open, and the steel drawer at the back had been pulled out. Evidently it was from this receptacle that the letters had been taken. Now the drawer was empty. Manfred took it out and measured the depth of it with his finger.

"Let me see," said Gonsalez suddenly.

He groped along the floor of the safe, and presently he began to feel carefully along the sides.

"Nothing here," he said.

He drew out half a dozen account books and a bundle of documents which at first glance Manfred had put aside as being personal to the owner of Rath Hall. These were lying on the floor amidst the mass of molten metal that had burnt deep holes in the carpet.

Leon examined the books one by one, opening them and running his nail along the edge of the pages. The fourth, a weighty ledger, did not open so easily—did not, indeed, open at all. He carried it to the table, and tried to pull back the cover.

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"Now, how does this open?"

The ledger covers were of leather; to all appearance a very ordinary book, and Leon was anxious not to disturb so artistic a camouflage. Examining the edge carefully, he saw a place where the edges had been forced apart. Taking out a knife, he slipped the thin blade into the aperture. There was a click and the cover sprang up like the lid of a box.

"And this, I think, is what we are looking for," said Gonsalez.

The interior of the book had been hollowed out, the edges being left were gummed tight, and the receptacle thus formed was packed close with brown papers; brown, except for one, which was written on a large sheet of foolscap, headed: "Bureau of the Ministry of Colonies, Lisbon."

Barberton had superimposed upon this long document his Braille writing, and now one of the mysteries was cleared up.

Leon scanned the letter. It was dated "July 21st, 1912," and bore, in the lower left-hand corner, the seal of the Portuguese Colonial Office. He read it through rapidly, and at the end looked up with a sigh of satisfaction.

"And this settles Oberzohn & Co., and robs them of a fortune, the extent of which I think we shall discover when we read Barberton's letter."

He lit a cigarette, and scanned the writing again, whilst Meadows, who did not understand Leon's passion for drama, waited with growing impatience.

"Illustrious Senhor," began Leon reading.—"I have this day had the honour of placing before his Excellency the President, and the Ministers of the Cabinet, your letter dated May 15th, 1912.

"By a letter dated January 8th, 1911, the lands marked Ex. 275 on the survey map of the Biskara district, were conceded to you, Illustrious Senhor, in order to further the cause of science—a cause which is very dear to the heart of his Excellency the President. Your further letter, in which you complain, Illustrious Senhor, that the incursion of prospectors upon your land is hampering your scientific work, and your request that an end may be put to these annoyances by the granting to you of an extension of the concession, so as to give you title to all minerals found in the aforesaid area, Ex. 275 on the survey map of Biskara, and thus making the intrusion of prospectors illegal, has been considered by the Council, and the extending concession is hereby granted, on the following conditions:

"The term of the concession shall be for twelve years, as from the 14th day of June, 1912, and shall be renewable by you, your heirs, or nominees, every twelfth year, on payment of a nominal sum of 1,000 milreis.

"In the event of the concessionnaire, his heirs, or nominees, failing to apply for a renewal on the 14th day of June, 1924, the mineral rights of the said area, Ex. 275 on the survey map of Biskara, shall be open to claim in accordance with the laws of Angola——"

Leon sat back.

"Fourteenth of June?" he said, and looked up. "Why, that is next week—five days! We've cut it rather fine, George."

"Barberton said there were six weeks," said Manfred. "Obviously he made the mistake of timing the concession from July 21st, the date of the letter. He must have been the most honest man in the world; there was no other reason why he should have communicated with Miss Leicester. He could have kept quiet and claimed the rights for himself. Go on, Leon."

"That is about all," said Leon, glancing at the tail of the letter. "The rest is more or less flowery and complimentary, and has reference to the scientific work in which Professor Leicester was engaged. Five days—phew!" he whistled.

"We may now find something in Barberton's long narrative to give us an idea of the value of this property." Manfred turned the numerous pages. "Do any of you gentlemen write shorthand?"

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Result of Football Competition No. 8.

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7/9, Pilgrim Street, Ludgate Hill, London, E.C.4 (Comp.).

The Closing Date is THURSDAY, JANUARY 20th, 1927. Any coupons arriving after that date will be disqualified.

RULES WHICH MUST BE STRICTLY ADHERED TO.

1. All forecasts must be made on coupons taken from this journal, or from any of the issues of the journals which contain the competition offer.
2. Any alteration or mutilation of the coupon will disqualify the effort. When more than one effort is submitted, coupons must not be pinned or in any other way fastened together.
3. If any match or matches on the coupon should be abandoned, or full time is not played for any reason, such match or matches will not be considered in the adjudication.
4. In the event of ties the prize will be divided, but no competitor will be awarded more than one share of the prize.
5. No correspondence will be allowed, neither will interviews be granted.
6. It is a distinct condition of entry that the Editor's decision shall be accepted as final and legally binding in all matters concerning this competition.
7. No responsibility can be accepted for any effort, or efforts lost, mislaid, or delayed. Proof of posting will not be accepted as proof of delivery. Unstamped or insufficiently stamped efforts will be refused.

Coupons from "Answers," "Family Journal," "Home Companion," "Woman's World," "Pictorial Weekly," "Boys' Realm," "Football and Sports Favourite," "Sports Budget," and "All Sports Weekly" may also be used. Employees of the proprietors of these journals are not eligible to compete.

COUPONS MUST NOT BE ENCLOSED WITH ENTRIES IN ANY OTHER COMPETITION.

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FREE COUPON

FOOTBALL COMPETITION No. 11.

Matches Played: SATURDAY, JANUARY 22nd.
Closing Date: THURSDAY, JANUARY 20th, 1927.

BIRMINGHAM	v. HUDDERSFIELD T.
BURY	v. SUNDERLAND
LIVERPOOL	v. DERBY COUNTY
SHEFFIELD WED.	v. LEICESTER CITY
BARNSLEY	v. BLACKPOOL
PRESTON N.E.	v. MIDDLESBROUGH
ABERDARE ATH.	v. PLYMOUTH A.
EXETER CITY	v. SOUTHEND UTD.
WATFORD	v. BRISTOL CITY
MILLWALL	v. BRIGHTON & H. A.

I enter FOOTBALL COMPETITION No. 11 in accordance with the Rules and Conditions as announced, and agree to accept the Editor's decision as final and legally binding.

Name.....

Address.....

11 "U.J." .....

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Meadows went out into the hall and brought back an officer. Waiting until he had found pencil and paper, Leon began the extraordinary story of William Barberton—most extraordinary because every word had been patiently and industriously punched in the Braille characters.

'DEAR Friend Johnny,—I have such a lot to tell you that I hardly know where to begin. I've struck rich at last, and the dream I've often talked over with you has come true.

"First of all let me tell you that I have come upon nearly £50,000 worth of wrought gold.

"We've been troubled round here with lions, one of which took away a carrier of mine, and at last I decided to go out and settle accounts with this fellow. I found him six miles from the camp, and planted a couple of bullets into him without killing and decided to follow up his spoor.

"It was a mad thing to do, trailing a wounded lion in the jungle, and I didn't realise how mad until we got out of the bush into the hills and I found Mrs. Lion waiting for me. She nearly got me too. More by accident than anything else, I managed to shoot her dead at the first shot, and got another pot at her husband as he was slinking into a cave which was near our tent.

"As I had gone so far, I thought I might as well go the whole hog, especially as I'd seen two lion cubs playing round the mouth of the cave, and, bringing up my boys, who were scared to death, I crawled in, to find, as I expected, that the old lion was nearly gone, and a shot finished him. I had to kill the cubs; they were too young to be left alone, and too much of a nuisance to bring back to camp. This cave had been used as a lair for years; it was full of bones, human amongst them.

"But what struck me was the appearance of the roof, which, I am almost certain, had been cut out by hand. It was like a house, and there was a cut door in the rock at the back. I made a torch and went through on a tour of inspection, and you can imagine my surprise when I found myself in a little room with a line of stone niches, or shelves. There were three lines of them on each side. Standing on these at intervals there were little statuettes. They were so covered with dust that I thought they were stone, until I tried to take one down to examine it; then I knew by its weight that it was gold, as they all were.

"I didn't want my boys to know about my find, because they are a treacherous lot, so I took the lightest, after weighing them all with a spring balance, and made a note where I'd taken it from. You might think that was enough of a find for one man in a lifetime, but my luck had set in. I sent the boys back, and ordered them to break camp and join me on top of the Thaba. I called it the Thaba, because it is rather like a hill I know in Basutoland, and is one of two.

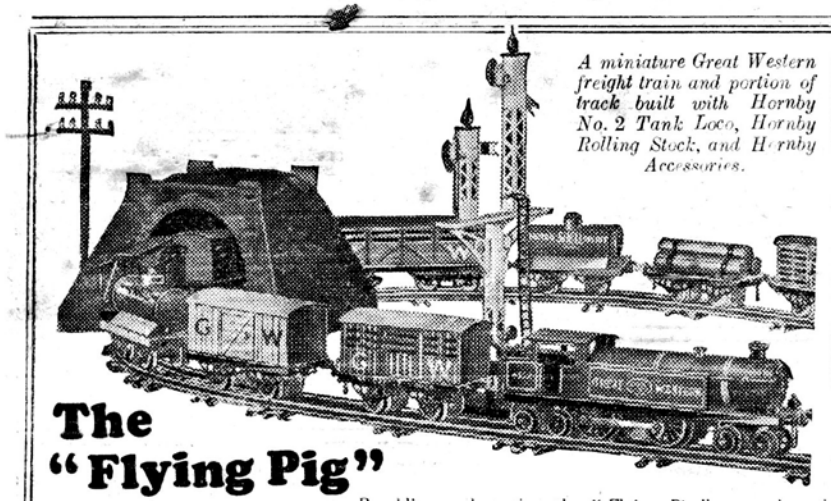
"The camp was moved up that night; it was a better pitch than any we had had. There was water, plenty of small game, and no mosquitoes. The worst part of it was the terrific thunderstorms that come up from nowhere, and until you've seen one in this ironstone country you don't know what a thunderstorm is like! The hill opposite was slightly smaller than the one I had taken as a camp, and between was a shallow valley, through which ran a small shallow river—rapids would be a better word.

"Early the next morning I was looking round through my glasses, and saw what I thought was a house on the opposite hill. I asked my head-man who lived there, and he told me that it was once the house of the Star Chief; and I remembered that somebody told me, down in Mossamedes, that an astronomer had settled in this neighbourhood and had been murdered by the natives.

"I thought I would go over and have a look at the place. The day being cloudy and not too hot, I took my gun and a couple of boys, and we crossed the river and began climbing the hill. The house was, of course, in ruins; it had only been a wattle hut at the best of times. Part of it was covered with vegetation; but out of curiosity I seached round, hoping to pick up a few things that might be useful to me, more particularly kettles, for my boys had burnt holes in every one I had.

"I found a kettle, and then, turning over a heap of rubbish which I think must have been his bed, I found a little rusty tin box and broke it open with my stick. There were a few letters which were so faded that I could only read a word here and there, and, in a green oilskin, a long letter from the Portuguese Government."

(What a find! This Portuguese document is the thing round which the whole mystery of Mirabelle Leicester, and the machinations of Oberzohn & Co. revolve. Next week you will see how its discovery is going to affect coming events. Have you ordered the U.J. for every week?)



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HORNBY TRAINS

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(Continued from page 22.)

Telmer struggling to his knees, and then the professor's voice:

"Gosh, if it ain't the Fat Boy of Peckham!"

Sexton Blake never moved. Across the intervening space his eyes looked down at the man whom he knew to be Mr. Brim, or Peter the Spider, the head of the dangerous gang who had been using Cranstone Towers for one of the most daring frauds in the history of crime.

"Your friends find me a subject of amusement, Mr. Blake. I do not think they will laugh for long."

The voice was a high-pitched treble, and coming from that gross body it had an effect that was somehow loathsome and disgusting.

"You've chosen to cross my path, Mr. Blake. I've only one method of dealing with such impediments. You wanted to know who Peter the Spider was, didn't you? Well, you know now. And I don't think the information will be of much value to you."

He made a grimace so that the pouches of flesh under his eyes almost completely hid the lower lids.

"Through the heart, Mr. Blake!"

The flesh of the finger curved about the trigger of the revolver seemed to sink into the metal. Another moment, when that softly applied pressure was sufficient, winged death would leap from the barrel of the revolver.

There was a loud report, a shrill oath, and the clatter of something falling to the ground in the hall below. A strong smell of burning cloth pervaded the landing. The bullet fired from Blake's pocket, anticipating by a thousandth part of a second the shot that Peter the Spider was about to fire, had struck the other's weapon, knocking it from his hand. Blake leaned over the balustrade.

"Put your hands up," he commanded.

Slowly Peter the Spider's arms went over his head.

"If you move I shall fire!" Blake exclaimed grimly.

For a moment he toyed with the idea of keeping the Spider covered while he sent the professor and Alf to seize him; but he dismissed this suggestion as too risky. Capable as the two men were in a fight, it was just possible that the Spider might use them as a screen behind which to escape.

He would deal with him himself, he decided. He moved to the head of the stairs. He had just reached it. One foot was in the act of being placed on the first step, when, with a cry, Sid Telmer, handcuffed as he was, flung himself forward in front of him. The next instant the detective and his prisoner were rolling down the stairs together.

Disentangling himself, Blake at last succeeded in gaining his feet; but when he looked round the lighted hall it was empty. With a bound he gained the corner and raced up the passage. A rush of fresh air showed him that the door at the end of the corridor to the right was open. In another second he had gained the quadrangle. Even as he did so a motor-car shot across the opposite side and disappeared under the arch of the gateway.

Standing on the bridge that spanned the moat Sexton Blake saw, in the first dim light of dawn, a yellow car speeding in a cloud of dust down the long drive through the park; and at the [illegible] crouched there like some monstrous gargoyle, was Peter the Spider.

Sexton Blake was conscious of a feeling of disappointment. He had solved the mystery of Swaji's disappearance; he had unearthed the plot that had been hatched at Cranstone Towers; but Peter the Spider had escaped him, and he had the artistic dislike of a piece of work not completely finished.

THREE days later, on a sunny summer morning, when Sexton Blake entered his dining-room for breakfast, Tinker looked up from the day's paper.

"Guv'nor, there's a note in the Social Column to-day about somebody that you're interested in." His Serene Highness the ex-Rajah of Buhl has given up his residence at Cranstone Towers, and is going to the South of France to recuperate."

Sexton Blake picked up the pile of letters on his plate and glanced through them rapidly.

"After three weeks of Little Ease he will find the South of France quite a pleasant change," he remarked.

He tore open an envelope and abstracted the slip of paper it contained. As he read what was written on that piece of paper his eyes lighted up.

"Look at this, my lad," he remarked, handing the slip to Tinker. "It seems we haven't yet got rid of our connection with Cranstone Towers. Sounds like a declaration of war from Mr. Brim."

Tinker scanned the slip of paper eagerly. On it was written, in a fine, angular handwriting:

"I never forget or forgive.—PETER THE SPIDER."

THE END.

(The Spider again next week! See page 22.)

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