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This is only the third instalment. New readers should start this thrilling Sexton Blake serial right now.

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

JOHAN BLANK, while serving a sentence of penal servitude at Dartmoor for stealing £10,000 from the Central Bank, is betrayed by another convict.

He plans with Timothy Trail, the man he thinks his friend, to escape together and retrieve the money, which has been hidden by him before he had been caught. Incautiously, he has revealed the secret of the hiding-place to Trail, and when the attempt is made, Blank is betrayed, and the escape fails.

Blank is punished, and Trail allowed to go free. The released convict, of course, decamps with the hidden spoil, and John Blank, still in prison, harbours thoughts of revenge when he himself shall be free—until he learns that the man who has betrayed him has been drowned in the Thames.

Leaving prison at last, John Blank—who now takes the name of John Carteret—returns to London with an empty existence before him, for the man on whom he should be revenged is dead. He is told, however, by means of a mysterious message from one signing himself the Striking Shadow, that Timothy Trail still lives.

Later the Shadow, who keeps himself hidden in the darkness, promises to help Carteret attain his desire for vengeance.

Meanwhile, Sexton Blake is investigating cases of people drowned in the Thames in an effort to locate the missing heir to the Framlingham millions, when he hears from a riverside crimp named Shadrach Bendigo, that Timothy Trail, late of Dartmoor, has become Mr. Henry Montague, a rich company promoter, of Park Lane.

At this same time the Striking Shadow's campaign against Trail, otherwise Henry Montague, opens. A threatening letter signed by the Shadow impels him to seek police protection, and Inspector Courtis is brought into the case, afterwards informing Blake of what is happening.

Carteret, meanwhile, has got into touch with Rosemary Lane, a girl whom he knew before his downfall, and when a certain Captain Vereker visits her to arrange for certain clerical work to be done, she recommends Carteret for the post.

By Order!

MR. MONTAGUE was himself again.

A man may live over a powder-mine for one, two, or three days in a state of deplorable apprehension; but prolong that period of his residence in that dangerous environment and he will become callously indifferent to his surroundings.

A fortnight had elapsed since the distressing events of that evening when a message that he alone could understand had been borne across the ether waves of the wireless, and hard upon that distressing event had come the mysterious warning that his life was in danger, and the utterly unexpected visit from John Blank, late of Dartmoor, whom he had betrayed and so deeply wronged.

A detective was now installed in the house, disguised as one of the servants; his house was watched day and night, and on his journeys backwards and forwards to the City he was carefully shadowed by two plain-clothes detectives from Scotland Yard.

Not only had his nerves steadied, but he was inclined to laugh at the terrors that had possessed him. After all, he was Mr. Henry Montague, of Park Lane, with all the machinery of organised society functioning for his safety and protection.

His restored confidence inclined him to be a little more imperious and pompously didactic towards his acquaintances. That evening he was dealing with Sir Titus Brade, who had been his guest at dinner.

"Look here, Brade—you haven't done so badly out of me. I've put you on the board of two of my companies. That's a couple of thousand a year. And I don't know that I'm getting value for my money. Baronets aren't of much account these days, as far as the investing public is concerned, and you don't really know the A.B.C. of the business. Now that fellow Vereker—"

Sir Titus Brade watched him from under his heavy-lidded eyes with a snake-like intentness.

"You know nothing about this fellow Vereker."

"I know that he can supply me with first-hand information about Southern Nigeria—information that can be relied upon. I think I shall give him the

vacant place on the board of this new company."

There had been a time when his financial operations were in their infancy, when his association with Sir Titus Brade had counted for much. He had liked to refer to "my friend Sir Titus." But these times were past. He recognised his power, and daily was inclined to treat the baronet more like a faithful dog.

"I have got Vereker in my study, and I mustn't keep him waiting," he exclaimed, looking at his watch. "See you later perhaps, Brade."

He stalked pompously out of the drawing-room, and, making his way through the marble entrance-hall, began slowly to ascend the grand staircase. He never noticed the fine piece of gossamer silk that his foot broke as he neared the summit of the flight of stairs.

Within his study there was a faint tinkle. Captain Vereker, who was the only occupant of the room, moved quickly across to the desk in the centre and there transferred a small electrical contrivance to the pocket of his dinner jacket.

He was standing in front of the fire when Mr. Montague entered.

"Much obliged to you, Vereker, for all those particulars you sent me," Mr. Montague exclaimed. "They were just what I wanted. Somebody was telling me to-day that you've started a sort of commercial inquiry office in the West End."

Captain Vereker explained modestly the nature of the undertaking he had founded, and Mr. Montague listened, nodding over his cigar.

"It was a good idea," he said, "and it might prove very useful to his companies."

He proceeded at length to explain how Captain Vereker's commercial bureau might be useful. As he saw it, it was to be an organisation for flat-catching.

He was waxing eloquent on the subject when his private secretary entered the room, and whispered something in his ear.

Instantly the colour rushed to Mr. Montague's cheeks.

"I've been waiting for this," he exclaimed. "I've got to settle with this man, and it's best to grasp the nettle firmly that's likely to sting you. Just a moment, Street."

He turned to Captain Vereker.

"Look here, Vereker, there's some-

body called that I've got to see. You'll find Brade downstairs. Make yourself at home. As soon as I'm through this interview we'll continue our discussion about this business of yours."

Captain Vereker made his way downstairs. In the hall a man was standing, who flushed uncomfortably as the other's eyes met his.

"Why, Carteret, whatever are you doing here?" Vereker inquired of the man who had been installed for the past twelve days as the assistant manager of his inquiry bureau.

"I have to see Mr. Montague on a private matter," Carteret replied somewhat sullenly.

"Meaning it's no affair of mine, eh? That's all right, my dear fellow. As a matter of fact, I'm glad I met you. When you've finished the business that's brought you here, I shall be very grateful if you'll take a message to Miss Lane for me. Would you ask her to let me have a typewritten copy of all she has done, as early as possible to-morrow morning?"

Carteret promised to carry out his request. Any excuse to see Rosemary was good enough.

Captain Vereker, with a friendly nod, made his way to the drawing-room where Sir Titus Brade was waiting. For some minutes Carteret was left alone in the hall, and then at last a manservant appeared to inform him that Mr. Montague would see him.

"Shall I help you off with your overcoat, sir?" he inquired.

Carteret, whose brain was dizzy with the thought of at last meeting face to face the man who had betrayed him, almost unconsciously allowed himself to be stripped of his overcoat. He never noticed how the footman's hands—long, sinuous hands they were—passed rapidly over the side pockets of his coat and the hip pockets of his trousers, as if in search of some weapon.

"Will you please come this way, sir."

He led the way upstairs to the study, and, opening the door, stood aside for the visitor to enter.

"Mr. Blank to see you, sir."

Since Captain Vereker's departure the room had undergone a slight alteration. Across one end a tall screen had been placed, but Carteret had no eyes for the appointments of the apartment.

His gaze was concentrated on the pompous, well-fed figure of Mr. Montague. Was this the little rat-like creature alongside of whom he had worked at Dartmoor—who had wormed his way into his confidence and betrayed him—the man for whom he had been tied up to that steel triangle and unmercifully flogged? He took a few strides towards him, and then halted, looking down at him with grim triumph.

"We meet again at last, Trail."

Mr. Montague flicked the ash from his cigar and stared up at him calmly.

"My name's Montague. What do you want with me, my man?"

Carteret's desire at that moment was to seize the financier by the throat and half-throttle him, but he had received his instructions—very precise instructions. He was not to threaten—he was not to ask for money. Those were the orders conveyed to him by some mysterious means from the Striking Shadow.

"I understand that you have a large number of companies, Mr. Montague," he remarked, with a grim smile. "I want to better myself. I was wondering if you could give me any employment." Mr. Montague stared back at him insolently.

"I'll tell you what you'll get from me



"But I have nothing to say!" gasped Mr. Montague. "You were to protect me! You pretended I should be quite safe! And now what has happened? In my own home—my private secretary—murdered in my very study!"

if you call here again, my man—six months for molesting! If you ever dare to try to address me again or annoy me I'll hand you over to the police! That got across to you?"

His intention was to excite Carteret to some act of violence, or to the employment of threats, which he might use against him—and he very nearly succeeded in his object. The blood rushed to Carteret's face, and his great hands were clenched tightly; but he remembered the instructions he had received just in time.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Montague; I was hoping you might have helped me. As it seems you can't—or won't—I needn't prolong this interview. Good-night!"

Without another word he turned and left the room.

For some moments after the door had closed behind him Mr. Montague sat quite still, with flushed cheeks and lowering brows; then he raised his head and uttered one word:

"Street!"

From behind the screen at the other end of the room Denver Street, his secretary, appeared.

"I'm afraid he said nothing which could justify a prosecution, Mr. Montague," the private secretary exclaimed.

Mr. Montague glared at him.

"Don't talk that infernal nonsense to me! You do the business you're paid for. Make shorthand notes of a conversation in which he threatened me unless I gave him money, or found him a job. I'm going to have that man put away—and put away quickly. You know the sort of thing I want. Get it done and bring it to me. Remember, you'll have to produce your shorthand notes for the police."

"Very good, sir!"

Mr. Montague rose and stretched himself.

"Sir Titus and Captain Vereker are downstairs. I'm going to join them. You bring me the typewritten report as soon as you've finished it—and mind you pitch it hot and strong. Street—something that will insure him getting a long stretch!"

Left alone, Denver Street, with a worried frown on his forehead, seated himself on the chair which his employer had vacated, with his notebook on his knee, and began to scribble some notes in shorthand.

Half an hour went by. He was still seated there when the footman who had admitted Carteret entered with a cup of coffee, which he placed on a small table at the private secretary's elbow.

"Thanks very much!" Street exclaimed, without looking up. "That's just what I wanted."

Another quarter of an hour and his shorthand notes had been completed. He read them through carefully, and then rose, and, going to the desk in the centre of the room, took the cover off the typewriter, and seated himself in front of it. He was just about to begin to type, when there was another interruption. Sir Titus Brade came into the room.

"Hallo, Street! I thought I should find Mr. Montague here."

"He told me he was going to join you and Captain Vereker downstairs, sir."

"He came down, but went away again. He said he wanted to speak privately to Vereker."

"Perhaps he is in the billiards-room, sir."

"Well, don't let me keep you from your work, Street. You're very busy, I suppose?"

"Yes, Mr. Montague wants this report to-night, sir."

As if to indicate to Sir Titus that his

business was urgent, his fingers began to play on the keys of the typewriter. He heard the door open and close. For the next twenty minutes the tick-tack of the machine was audible on the landing outside. Then abruptly it ceased. Dead silence reigned.

Downstairs in the billiards-room, Mr. Montague and Captain Vereker were seated, facing one another at opposite sides of the hearth. Presently Captain Vereker glanced at his watch.

"By Jove! It's half-past eleven! I think I ought to be going, Mr. Montague."

The great financier rose to his feet. "How time passes! But don't go just yet, Vereker. There's some other matters I want to talk to you about. I'll see my secretary for a moment, if you don't mind. He's doing a report for me that I want to send to the proper quarter to-night. The fellow ought to have finished it by now. He's been over an hour on the job. I'll be back in a moment."

He left the room, crossed the hall, and climbed the stairs. No sound came from the study. He opened the door and crossed the threshold. Save for the glow of the fire, the room was in darkness.

"Street, where the devil are you?" he exclaimed in a tone of exasperation.

He fumbled for the electric switch. For a moment he stood immovable, with distended eyes, staring at the desk in the centre of the room.

In front of the typewriter, with wide-open, sightless eyes, leaning back in his chair, with grey, bloodless cheeks, and flecks of froth on his blue lips, was Denver Street—dead!

Mr. Montague is Alarmed.

HENRY MONTAGUE'S lips opened, but he uttered no sound. He stood there on the threshold of his study, staring with protruding eyes at the motionless figure of his secretary. But it was not of Denver Street that he was thinking. No feeling of compassion for the man who had served him faithfully stirred his heart. Every thought—every sentient fibre of his being—was centred on himself.

Here in his own house, surrounded by his own staff of servants, with police protection within and without, with every precaution taken that human ingenuity could contrive, the first blow aimed by the Striking Shadow had fallen!

Never for a moment did he doubt that he was gazing at the handiwork of the unknown enemy whose threats he had attempted to deride, and the realisation made his soul sicken with terror. In that very moment his own life might be in jeopardy. From somewhere in that room there might emerge that terrible personality that he knew of as the Striking Shadow.

Great beads of perspiration gathered on his forehead. To go forward into the room was out of the question. He shrank with loathing from that object in the chair that had once been Denver Street. And to retreat seemed for the moment equally impossible, for a paralysis of terror weighted his limbs. But just below the electric switch was the ivory knob of a bell.

Half furtively, as if fearful that even this action might loose upon him the malignant force that was dogging his footsteps, he stretched out his hand and touched the bell. A soft footstep on the carpet behind him made him stumble back against the open door, his arms

going instinctively in front of his face in an absurd attitude of defence.

"Oh, there you are, Montague! I've been hanging around on the chance of having a word with you. You seem to have had a devilish lot to say to Vereker."

Mr. Montague glanced from under his arms at the man who had approached him so unexpectedly. It was Sir Titus Brade, with his dark, cynical face, whose heavily-lidded eyes were watching him now with such snake-like intentness.

"Brade!" he gasped, in a high-pitched voice. "Man, don't you see?"

His voice rose to a scream. Brade came towards him swiftly and seized him by the arm.

"Here! What's the matter with you, Montague? Pull yourself together, man!"

Mr. Montague wrested himself free with a convulsive gesture and head down, his arms still raised in front of him, as if to ward off an impending blow, stumbled past him on to the landing. There but for the fact that he collided with the balustrade of the staircase, he would have fallen. He gripped the rails, screaming at the top of his voice.

"Murder!" he shrieked. "Murder! Help!"

Footsteps came racing up the stairs. Captain Vereker, who had heard the sudden uproar from the billiards-room, followed by Watts, the butler, and two of his servants, reached the financier's side.

His face was grey, and he was still shrieking at intervals, "Murder! Murder!" It was Captain Vereker who seemed to take command of the situation, issuing orders to the servants.

"Make him sit down, and loosen his collar. One of you go and ring up the police. Call the constable on point duty at the corner."

He turned swiftly from the little group on the landing to the study. Sir Titus Brade was standing there at one side of the desk, staring with curious fascination at the motionless figure in the chair. He started as Vereker brushed past him.

"He's dead, Vereker!" he exclaimed in a curious, strained voice. "Dead!"

Captain Vereker ignored him. Going behind the chair, he bent over the stricken figure of Denver Street. His eyes wandered swiftly over his neck. On the left side, just below the ear, there were the marks of fingers, still visible on the flesh. Then he did a curious thing; he picked up each of the man's hands in turn and examined the nails closely. The hands were half open—curved, with the fingers extended, as if he had been seeking to clutch at some unseen foe.

"Better leave him alone till the police come, sir. We've telephoned to the Yard, and nothing can be moved until the inspector arrives."

Captain Vereker looked up with a start to find the second-footman standing there by his side.

"Quite right!" he exclaimed. "I have had some experience, however, of murder committed by strangling. There was just a chance that poor Street reached up his arms and clutched at the man who committed this crime. In that case, his nails might still contain some of his assailant's clothing. But, as you say, any amateurish inquiries would be a mistake before the police arrive."

"Inspector Coutts, of Scotland Yard, sir, gave me strict instructions to lock up the room and to allow no one to enter it until he arrived."

"We must certainly carry out the

orders of the police," Captain Vereker remarked.

He walked from behind the chair to where Sir Titus Brade was standing.

"We've got to get out of this, Brade. They want to lock up the room until the police come. We'd better go and see how Mr. Montague's getting on."

"Devilish unpleasant business. A young fellow like this, cut off in the prime of his life! Gad! It makes one feel queer, Vereker!"

In spite of his air of cynical composure, Sir Titus Brade's voice was curiously unsteady, as he followed his companion out of the room. Mr. Montague had been helped downstairs, and was seated in the palatial entrance-hall in a high-backed oak chair, his usually pompous figure looking oddly shrunken. Watts, the butler, was standing by his side, holding a silver salver on which was a bottle of champagne. A liveried servant stood at the other side of the chair as if guarding his master. Mr. Montague looked up with bloodshot, frightened eyes as the two men came down into the hall.

"I say, Brade—and you, Vereker—you won't leave me, will you? Goodness knows what's going to happen to me! That devil—he said he would strike. There's poor Street upstairs—and it'll be my turn next."

The man was not a sensible, reasonable human being, but a mere mass of jangled nerves. In spite of the champagne that he was drinking, any courage that he might have possessed had completely vanished. With a trembling hand he held out the glass to be replenished by the butler. When he had raised it to his lips, he sagged forward in his chair, whimpering:

"It's the Striking Shadow. And I thought it was just a trick to scare me! What use are the infernal police? I know something about them!"

He stopped abruptly, biting his lips and fumbling at his open collar.

"Take it steady, Mr. Montague!" exclaimed Captain Vereker. "I have given instructions for Scotland Yard to be communicated with, and I understand from your man, who telephoned, that Inspector Coutts is on his way."

Even as he spoke there was the sound of a car stopping outside, followed almost immediately by the ringing of the front-door bell. A moment later and Inspector Coutts, with an air of official importance upon his face, came into the entrance-hall, followed by two constables in uniform and four detectives in plain clothes. He exchanged a glance with the second-footman, who had admitted them, and that functionary immediately conducted the four plain clothes men towards the little group collected about Mr. Montague's chair. They drew back as the inspector approached.

"I'd just like to have a word with you in private, Mr. Montague. I have given orders for the servants to be assembled in one of the rooms."

He turned to Sir Titus Brade and Captain Vereker.

"I'm afraid I must trouble you gentlemen to wait until I can take a statement from you. I just want to have a few words with Mr. Montague first."

He drew a chair to Mr. Montague's side, and having satisfied himself that the others had drawn out of earshot took out his notebook.

"Trenchard gave me a report over the telephone of the actual occurrence, Mr. Montague. As he's one of our men, I haven't inspected the body yet. I thought it best to hear exactly what you have to say."

(Continued on page 25.)

THE LIGHTNING-FLASH MYSTERY!



This is the last but by no means the least of the Sexton Blake versus Waldo series. You have been thrilled by the first three, and this one is even better than its predecessors, so get right down to it and enjoy one of the finest stories ever seen in the "U. J."

THE FIRST CHAPTER. A Strange Telephone Call.



SEXTON BLAKE whipped the bed-clothes back with one movement and exposed Tinker to the chill air of early morning.

"Whoa! Steady, guv'nor!" gasped Tinker, sitting up and blinking. "I say, cheese it! What's the idea

of this rough stuff?"

"I called you ten minutes ago, and, since you ignored it, you must put up with the consequences," replied Blake briskly.

"You've got exactly fifteen minutes to dress yourself, wash, and demolish two rashers of bacon and two poached eggs."

"I can't manage all that!" protested Tinker.

"I'm glad to hear it," said Blake approvingly. "But Mrs. Bardell evidently thinks you resemble a half-starved tramp in the early morning, and she has consequently provided you with sufficient food for—"

"I wasn't talking about the food, guv'nor!" protested Tinker. "I can't dress and wash and eat breakfast in a quarter of an hour."

Blake chuckled.

"That's a pity, because one of the items will have to be dropped," he said. "And, since you can't very well start on a journey to Scotland in your pyjamas, and as I trust you are cleanly, the breakfast must go."

Tinker tumbled out with a grunt.

"We'll see about that!" he said gruffly. "But it's a bit thick, lugging a chap out at half-past four in the morning—"

"The time is exactly seven o'clock."

"Well, seven o'clock, then," said Tinker. "What's the difference? That confounded thunderstorm kept me awake half the night. Did you hear the crashes, guv'nor? I thought the roof was coming off!"

"Yes, the storm was certainly very severe," agreed Blake. "But the early sun is shining now, and London is looking all the better for a good wash. Now, don't forget—move yourself!"

He departed, and was half-way through his meagre breakfast of toast and marmalade when Tinker bustled in.

"How's that?" he asked triumphantly. "Seven minutes, and I'm ready to walk out of the house! I've got eight other minutes to attack the eggs and bacon. Somehow I think I can win!"

Blake looked up critically.

"You'll do!" he said.

Tinker grinned and sat down to his breakfast. The famous Baker Street pair were bound North that morning. A puzzling case called Sexton Blake to Edinburgh. It was not particularly urgent, but he wanted to break his journey at Doncaster, as he had some brief business there. And this precluded the idea of taking the night express. Naturally Blake hesitated before knocking clients up in the middle of the night.

"No sign of the storm now, gov'nor," said Tinker, as he looked out of the window. "By Jove, it did pelt down, didn't it? And what about the lightning? I'll bet a few chimneys were demolished!"

"Yes, I am afraid the storm has done some damage," agreed Blake.

Their sleep had been much disturbed during the early hours. A particularly violent thunderstorm had broken over London between one and two, and had raged until close upon three-thirty. The thunder and lightning had been incessant, and two or three million people had probably shared Sexton Blake's and Tinker's restlessness.

"Well, I'm ready when you are, gov'nor," said Tinker at length. "We've got our bags packed, and we can shoot off as soon as you like. I suppose this grub is just a snack to push off with? We'll have a real breakfast on the train?"

"If you can find room for anything else before lunch-time you ought to see a doctor," replied Blake firmly. "Let me warn you against the perils of overeating, Tinker. Half the ills in this world are caused by injudicious diet."

"Oh, cheese it!" grinned Tinker. "You've—"

Zurrrrrh!

"The phone!" said Tinker. "Now, who the dickens can be ringing us up at a quarter-past seven in the morning? That's the worst of this life, gov'nor! We might as well be doctors and done with it!"

Blake was unhooking the receiver.

"Yes?" he said. "I beg your pardon, madam."

An agitated voice came over the wire—a peculiar feminine voice with a distinctive inflection, rather like that of a West Country woman.

"Can I speak to Mr. Sexton Blake?" it asked. "Even if you have to get him out of bed, please bring him to the telephone."

"That is unnecessary, madam—it is Blake speaking," said the detective.

"You are Mr. Blake! Oh, I'm glad!" said the voice. "Mr. Blake, please listen carefully. It is very, very important. Somebody was killed by lightning on Wimbledon Common during the storm."

"I am sorry to hear that—"

"I think you will be interested in the identity of the dead man," went on the unknown woman. "In fact, Mr. Blake, I am sure you will be deeply concerned."

"Who is this man?"

"I would rather not tell you," said

the voice, to Blake's astonishment. "The body has not yet been discovered by any of the ordinary public or by the police. With the exception of myself, you are the first to know."

"But, my dear lady, this is very unsatisfactory!" said Blake sharply. "If you know the identity of the deceased you should tell me—"

"I am sorry, but I would prefer not to," said the voice, its agitation more marked. "You will find the body lying near the bracken, only a few hundred yards from the main road."

And the unknown caller proceeded to give careful directions as to the exact position, which Blake mentally noted.

"It is of great importance that you should see the body first, Mr. Blake," added the lady. "Please promise me that you will go. I believe you will find something unusual—something even significant. Good-bye!"

"One moment!" said Blake quickly. "Who are you, madam?"

But the line became dead, and Blake reluctantly hung up.

"What on earth is it all about, gov'nor?" asked Tinker curiously. "What was that you were saying about the deceased, and all that?"

Blake frowned.

"I don't like these obstinate people who refuse to give their names," he said tartly. "I suppose the woman was afraid of being mixed up in the inquest—didn't want to be called as a witness, or something. Insufferable selfishness, Tinker—that's all it amounts to!"

"If you'll explain, I can understand better, gov'nor."

"And yet I'm not so sure," went on Blake thoughtfully. "Perhaps the woman had her motive—a genuine motive. That was very suggestive when she hinted that I should find something unusual."

"Oh, rather!" said Tinker sarcastically. "If you ask me, I should say that the deceased died from exasperation."

Upon which hint Blake briefly related the other side of the recent conversation.

"A man killed by lightning on Wimbledon Common, and you'll be interested in his identity," said Tinker. "That sounds rummy, doesn't it? And the woman wouldn't say who she was, or explain how she knew it. Looks fishy, gov'nor!"

"At the same time, I'm rather intrigued," mused Blake.

Tinker glanced at his watch.

"And while you're being intrigued, we're losing our train," he said casually.

"Under the circumstances, Tinker, we shall have to postpone our trip," replied Blake. "We must go to Wimbledon Common and have a look for this unfortunate who has been struck by lightning."

Tinker stared.

"You're going to alter all your plans?" he asked, in surprise.

"I have already altered them."

"But, dash it, the thing may be a hoax!" protested Tinker. "I thought it was one of your rules to take no notice of anonymous communications? And, after all, a telephone caller who refuses to give any name is just the same as a letter-writer who doesn't give his signature. I can't let you drift away from your good maxims like this!"

"It is quite likely that the call was a hoax, Tinker, but on the other hand there may be something in it," said Blake. "Our trip to Edinburgh can easily wait until to-morrow—I have made no definite appointments there—and I shouldn't be comfortable if we went off with things in this unsatisfactory state."

Tinker quite agreed.

After all, it was decidedly unusual for an unknown woman to ring up, giving particulars of a dead body on a common. And it seemed that she had been particularly anxious to impress Blake with the fact that he would find the body unusually interesting. That was the strange part of it.

Blake had an uncomfortable feeling that he was being made a fool of, but the only way of settling his mind was to go to Wimbledon Common and examine that given spot.

So the famous pair, when they left Baker Street, did not take a taxi to a bustling railway terminus, but they went to Wimbledon Common in the Grey Panther.

THERE was a wonderful odour of freshness and moistened earth when Sexton Blake and Tinker set out briskly across the common, leaving the car parked in a quiet backwater.

According to the unknown's directions, the mysterious body was some little distance from any footpath. It rested near a clump of bracken, in one of those grass-covered hollows which abound on Wimbledon Common.

The sun was shining brilliantly, and the sky was a clear, azure blue. There were compensations for the tumult of the storm. London was awakening to a perfect day.

"Now, we've got to bear slightly to the right here," said Blake, as they picked their way round a clump of damp gorse. "Yes, there's the tall group of chestnuts the woman referred to, with the red house beyond. We're getting near the spot now."

"I'll bet we shall find nothing!" said Tinker sceptically. "I say, what a frost! Our journey North postponed, and everything! Shall I think of a few choice words to lend you, gov'nor?"

Blake's eyes gleamed.

"They won't be necessary, Tinker," he replied gravely. "For, unless I am very much mistaken, the information was genuine. Look yonder!"

He pointed, and Tinker's cheery expression changed. Protruding from beyond a neighbouring patch of bracken were two feet, one with a shoe and one without, and they were curiously still.

THE SECOND CHAPTER. A Staggering Discovery.



RATHER solemnly, Sexton Blake and Tinker approached, and they both experienced a slight shock as they found themselves looking down at the pitiful remains of something that had once been a well-proportioned living man.

"O h, my hat!"

said Tinker huskily.

"You'd better not come too near, young 'un," said Blake.

"If you can stand it, guv'nor, so can I," replied Tinker, gripping himself. "But that woman was right, wasn't she? Poor chap! Great Scott! Look at the grass all round him!"

"I imagine he must have been killed instantaneously—and that, at least is one of the merciful properties of lightning," said Blake. "The poor fellow knew nothing about it, I should judge."

They stood silent for a few moments.

Blake did not approach too closely, and he warned Tinker back. The body lay six or seven feet in front of them, now fully disclosed. And it was quite unnecessary to go nearer to be certain that they were in the presence of tragedy.

The unfortunate man had been struck down instantaneously, by all appearances. His light tweed suit was scorched and even ripped into shreds in places. One shoe had been torn off, and lay near-by, burnt and blackened.

The ground and the grass were burned, too—clear evidence of the lightning's force. It was impossible to see the face, for the body was lying on its side, back to the two watchers.

Tinker glanced across the common. Away in the far distance, one or two figures could be seen, but there was no living thing within a quarter of a mile of them. It wasn't yet eight o'clock, and although there were plenty of people taking an early stroll on the common, this particular section was deserted.

How had that woman known of the tragedy?

If she had found the body casually, while out for a walk, why had she not informed the nearest policeman? What had been her object in ringing up Sexton Blake? And, above all, why had she refused to give her name, and why had she assumed that this body would have a particular interest for Sexton Blake?

These were points which might be cleared up later. But for the moment Blake had no time to consider them. His first duty was to ascertain the identity of the dead man, to get in touch with any possible relatives, and to inform the police.

"Stand by, Tinker, and if anybody approaches, warn them off!" said Blake curtly. "We don't want a crowd of sightseers round here—and

if one or two collect, there'll soon be a dozen."

"Go ahead, guv'nor!" said Tinker. "I'm watching."

Sexton Blake gently moved the body, and winced.

Strong as his nerves were, he was moved. The unhappy victim's face and head were so frightfully burned by the lightning that Blake found himself looking at blackened, contorted caricatures of what had been.

"Terrible—terrible!" he murmured gently.

He could tell that the stranger had been a man of excellent physique, probably in the prime of life. He had been clean-shaven, but it was impossible to determine the original colour of his hair, for the lightning had burned every trace of it off.

Blake had seen more than one victim of lightning, but seldom had he seen such a case as this. The storm had been severe, he knew, but the particular flash which had killed this man had evidently possessed enough electrical force to wipe out a regiment. Being alone on the open common, the hapless victim had received the full force of the devastating discharge.

"Since identity cannot be determined in the usual manner, I had better search the poor fellow's pockets," Blake told himself. "But what of that woman? She knew his identity, evidently, for she implied that I should be particularly impressed by it."

But it was no good conjecturing. Blake acted.

Steeling himself, he delicately searched the dead man's inside jacket pocket. A wallet came to light, and one or two folded letters. Blake placed them in the grass and emptied the waistcoat pockets.

A fountain-pen, a silver pencil, a gold watch and chain, nail-clippers and penknife, and one or two other odds and ends. Blake stared at the watch with curious concentration.

"Strange!" he muttered, frowning.

"Discovered anything, guv'nor?" asked Tinker, looking on.

"Not yet, young 'un—but this watch is familiar," said Blake, with an unusual note in his voice. "A peculiar watch—with a grotesque dial. There cannot be many of such a pattern in existence."

Tinker looked at it closely, bending forward.

"It's exactly the same as old Waldo's, guv'nor!" he said keenly. "We've often seen him pull it out!"

"Yes," agreed Blake. "It is rather an unusual coincidence—"

He broke off abruptly, staring at the engraved initials on the back of the timepiece. They fascinated him. "R. W." Waldo's own initials.

Blake picked up the letters quickly and glanced at them. Then he drew his breath in. There were three of them, and all were addressed to "Colonel Hampson, Hotel Cecil, London."

"Great Scott!" gasped Tinker, as he stepped nearer. "Colonel Hampson! That's the name that Waldo has been using lately, guv'nor."

"Yes, Tinker—and it appears that

he has been staying at the Hotel Cecil," said Blake. "Is it possible?"

His last muttered query was forced from him as he looked at the body. For a short space neither he nor Tinker spoke. Both of them were shocked—inexpressibly pained.

Rupert Waldo!

The master criminal who had always fought fairly against Blake—the Wonder Man who had never been known to play foul! A man of absolute honour so far as his word went, a man who had always striven to rob from those who had gained their wealth by questionable methods, a man as straight as a die in most things, but with a curious kink on the subject of the rights of property.

Was it, indeed, possible?

And yet this poor, mutilated body was of exactly Waldo's proportions! The waistcoat contained his watch, the jacket his letters! Blake looked at that face again, and he shook his head.

"There is no hope of establishing identity by recognition," he said slowly. "Let us keep quite calm, Tinker."

"Oh, but I can't believe it!" said Tinker huskily.

Blake opened the wallet and took out a number of banknotes, ten or twelve pounds in currency notes, and one or two cards and private papers. He unfolded a sheet, and started.

"What's that, guv'nor?" asked Tinker in a strained voice.

"The unhappy man's will," replied Blake. "Waldo's will."

Tinker craned over the great detective's shoulder, and they both read the whimsically-worded document, so characteristic of the man who had written it:

"This is the last will and testament of Rupert Waldo, of no place in particular, adventurer, scamp, and soldier of fortune. I hereby give, devise, and bequeath to New Scotland Yard my earthly remains, for them to handle and dispose of in whatsoever manner they desire. I merely request that my burial shall be decent.

"I also desire that Mr. Sexton Blake, of Baker Street, shall make public, to the best of his ability, any good and honourable actions of mine which may have come before his notice.

"My death will, I assume, cause untold joy in certain newspaper offices, for a long account of my misdeeds will make excellent copy. It will be some measure of consolation to know—in the heated atmosphere whence I am journeying—that the public shall be told of my trifling acts of good, to offset my various misdeeds.

"As Shakespeare truly said, 'The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.'

"RUPERT WALDO."

Tinker gave Blake a rather twisted smile.

"Just like old Waldo, guv'nor," he said. "He makes his will, and he doesn't say anything about any property. The thing's just one of his jokes. But I still can't believe

it!" he burst out. "Waldo! Dash it, I liked the chap!"

Sexton Blake nodded.

"I must confess that I, too, felt a certain respect for him," he replied. "Recently, at all events, Waldo has been a very changed man—he has been working against evil, in the service of good. His campaign against Oscar Maitland, Hubert Rorke, and Simon Kern has been characterised by straightforward honesty all through."

"And I don't blame Sir Rodney Drummond for employing Waldo, sir," said Tinker stoutly. "Those three men were blackmailers and swindlers and vipers."

"Two of them have gone," said Blake gravely. "Maitland, I am convinced, was murdered by Kern. Rorke died of heart failure, following fright. And Kern still lives. I venture to suggest that Waldo was acting against Kern when this disaster overtook him."

And Blake looked absently across the stretch of common.

IT was some moments before Tinker spoke again.

"I mean, it's so silly," he said at length. "Waldo to be killed by lightning! A man of his terrific strength, with all his extraordinary capabilities, to be struck down during a thunderstorm!"

"That is the way of things, Tinker," said Blake. "A man will live unscathed through an entire campaign of war, and then get run over by a motor-bus on the first day of his arrival home. Fate has a habit of playing such capricious tricks."

"After all his stunts—to be killed by lightning," said Tinker.

"But was he killed by lightning?" mused Blake slowly.

"Eh?"

"Was he, Tinker?"

"But—look isn't it obvious?" asked Tinker, indicating the mutilated body and the charred grass.

"Perhaps it is too obvious," replied Blake grimly. "Have you forgotten

that woman who rang up? Who was she? Where does she fit into this puzzle? How did she know of Waldo's death. Indeed, if it comes to that, how did she know that the man was Waldo?"

"But we can't be certain that she did know," said Tinker.

"I think we can," replied Blake. "She particularly impressed me with the fact that I should be interested in the identity of the deceased. I'm not satisfied, Tinker."

He gripped himself, and closely and carefully examined that scorched head. His attitude became tense.

"Lightning performs queer tricks, Tinker, but, unless I am greatly mistaken, there is an injury here which was never caused by lightning."

"What do you mean, guv'nor?"

"The head is battered in—at the rear!"

"Great Scott!" gasped Tinker. "You—you mean he was murdered?"

"I don't know what to think," said Blake, frowning. "But all the circumstances are highly suspicious. Waldo would never go under in a fair fight—but even his enormous strength would not avail him if he were struck down from the rear."

"I say, this is getting a bit steep," said Tinker, scratching his head. "It seems to me that Waldo was murdered somewhere in London, and brought here during the storm—perhaps by car. It was only accident, perhaps, that caused the lightning to strike him—just a chance."

"I don't think the scene of action was very far from this spot, young 'un," said Blake, looking across the common again. "Do you realise that we are within a quarter of a mile of Simon Kern's house?"

"What!" gasped Tinker, jumping.

"There it is—over in that proud-looking terrace," continued Blake, nodding. "Simon Kern's house, Tinker! And here is this dead body—on the common! Do you wonder that I am suspicious?"

THE THIRD CHAPTER. The Clue of the Diamond Pin.



THLRE was every reason for Sexton Blake to be grim.

He, himself, had been closely concerned in the affairs of Sir Rodney Drummond, Bart. He had encountered Rupert Waldo several times during the last few weeks, but never once had he seen fit to

interfere with the Wonder Man's operations.

Sir Rodney had been menaced by three deadly enemies—blackmailers, who had been sent to penal servitude, years earlier, owing to Sir Rodney's information.

And for years the millionaire baronet had lived the life of a hermit, shut in behind the high walls of his old home in Surrey. He had lived in constant fear of the noxious trio.

Becoming accidentally acquainted with Rupert Waldo, he had seen a chance of gaining his freedom. He had, indeed, offered Waldo fifty thousand pounds to free him from his three enemies—and Waldo had undertaken to perform the service.

It had been a stipulation, however, that he should commit no bloodshed—that he should not transgress the law of moral right. The laws of the land could not harm these scoundrels, and so Sir Rodney had, in desperation, sought the aid of a criminal.

Waldo had performed his work with singular thoroughness.

Oscar Maitland, the first of the three to whom he had turned his attention, had ostensibly committed suicide, but Sexton Blake was convinced, in his own mind, that Maitland had been murdered. Rorke, the second blackmailer, had died by accident. Fright had ceased the beating of an already diseased heart.

Waldo had kept his own hands clean, and London was well rid of two worthless rogues. Simon Kern remained, and it was mere guesswork on Sexton Blake's part to come to the conclusion that Waldo had been operating against the infamous stockbroker, Kern.

And this was the net result! This dead body!

"We must try to reconstruct what happened, Tinker," said Blake thoughtfully. "I do not generally believe in theorising, but there are exceptions to every rule. Why was Waldo here during that storm? Obviously, his motive was in connection with Simon Kern. The close proximity of Kern's residence is too significant to be dismissed."

"Are you suggesting that Kern murdered him, guv'nor?"

"I am not suggesting anything at all," replied Blake. "I am merely trying to reconstruct what might have happened. Supposing, for the sake of argument, that Waldo went to Kern's house during the small hours of the morning?"

"You mean, before the storm?"

"Yes, before the storm," nodded

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Blake. "Perhaps he succeeded in breaking in—his object, no doubt, being to secure incriminating evidence against the man—and perhaps Kern struck him down from behind."

"It's the only possible way of looking at it, guv'nor," said Tinker. "If Waldo had been given any chance, he would have protected himself. Why, he could fight a dozen Kerns, and beat them into jelly. That cur must have smashed him from the rear. Poor old Waldo! What a filthy trick!"

"Not so fast, young 'un!" frowned Blake. "Don't assume that we are right in these theories. Perhaps Kern dragged the body to the common—and, if so, there ought to be some pretty evident traces. We shall have to look."

"Pedro would be handy."

"He would, but we didn't bring him," countered Blake. "We shall have to see what we can do without him. And now, the storm broke in the early hours, and it is rather curious to guess as to what happened. Did Kern bring Waldo out here during the storm, or before the storm? In any case, neither Kern nor any other man could control the lightning, and make it strike at any given spot."

"You mean that the body was accidentally struck?"

"Either that—or something else."

"Yes, but what else, guv'nor?" asked Tinker wonderingly.

"It had occurred to me that this evidence might be faked," replied Blake. "What proof have we that the body actually was struck by lightning? The burnt and ripped clothing? The scorched flesh? The blackened grass? All that could have been easily counterfeited, Tinker. It is possible that Kern took advantage of the storm to make this death appear accidental."

"Phew!" whistled Tinker.

"What is the natural assumption when a scorched and twisted body is found on a wide common immediately following a severe thunderstorm?" went on Blake. "Undoubtedly, that the victim was struck by lightning. There are no close inquiries, no careful investigations. The thing speaks for itself. Think what a golden opportunity for any murderer to get rid of the body!"

"By Jove, guv'nor, that's a stunning idea!" said Tinker admiringly. "So Kern killed Waldo—"

"Hey, steady!" broke in Blake. "Don't make statements like that, my lad! Remember, we're only theorising. We're just thinking of what might have happened, and not what did happen. There will have to be some very careful investigation before we can arrive at the definite truth. Assuming that Waldo was murdered, and that he was not struck by lightning at all, we ought to find some tracks leading to Kern's house."

"Haden't we better have a look, guv'nor?"

"All in good time!" nodded Blake. "There's no immediate hurry. The common is still deserted, and nothing has been disturbed. Assuming that Kern acted as we have outlined, he would naturally believe that the body would be found, and carried away.



Continuing his investigations, Blake turned the man over, and something slipped out of a fold of clothing, and he picked it up. A diamond tie-pin.

He would not fear any investigation, and so he might have been careless with regard to tracks. Presently, we will make a close survey of the ground. But for the moment there is another point I wish to consider. What about the good lady who rang me up?"

"Yes, where the dickens does she fit in?"

"I think we can find a niche for her," said Sexton Blake. "If this murder took place in Kern's house—as we are imagining—then what is to upset the theory that Kern's housekeeper, or maid-servant, perhaps, witnessed the crime?"

"Unknown to Kern, you mean?"

"Of course," said the detective. "Frightened, she may have been reluctant to go to the police—perhaps for fear of being implicated. One is always apt to shy at being drawn into a murder case. And so she rang me up, and gave me that information."

"Why, it's all perfectly clear," said Tinker. "You've got the entire affair nailed down, guv'nor. The only trouble is, we're dealing with theory, and not with fact."

"That's just the point," agreed Blake. "And theories have a nasty habit of turning round and biting you. I am quite prepared to have the whole edifice crumble at a

second's notice. However, it is just as well to have a framework to start with. We'll see where it leads us, Tinker."

"Good!" said Tinker. "I should be enjoying all this if it wasn't for poor old Waldo. That's the thing that worries me. We shall have to hound Kern until we've got the rope round his neck, guv'nor."

Tinker was genuinely upset.

The fate of any ordinary criminal would not have concerned him much. But Rupert Waldo was different. Of late, particularly, he had been showing signs of reformation. And he had always expressed the highest possible admiration for Blake and Tinker. In all their tussles, he had invariably treated them fairly.

Sometimes he had trapped them, sometimes he had caused them inconvenience and exasperation. But never once had he threatened their lives, or attempted to injure them. And when Blake had proved the better man, Waldo had never failed to acknowledge it handsomely.

It was a pity to lose such a worthy foe—and to lose him in this pitiable fashion.

Tinker felt heavy-hearted as he thought of it all.

"Well, the next thing is to look for those tracks, I suppose, guv'nor," he said, with a start. "We'll—"

"We'll employ ourselves in separate directions, if you please, Tinker," interrupted Blake. "While I am scouting round, you will hunt for the nearest constable, and send him here."

"But we don't want the police messing about, guv'nor!" protested Tinker.

"We are liable to get into serious trouble if we don't allow them to 'mess about,'" retorted Blake. "We may be privileged citizens, young 'un, but it is our plain duty to inform the police of this tragedy without any delay. We are not obliged, of course, to reveal our own theories. The police can draw their own conclusions—and we can well imagine what they will be. You'd better go and find that bobby."

"Oh, well, if you insist!"

"And after that, get hold of a telephone, and ring up Lennard, of the Yard," continued Blake. "This is no ordinary death, and I fancy our old friend will be grateful for the tip. Tell Lennard to come straight here as soon as he possibly can."

"Right-ho!" said Tinker. "I'll bet that old Lennard will be frightfully cut up, guv'nor. He had more than a sneaking admiration for Waldo, and it'll hurt him to hear this."

"I am more inclined to believe that Lennard will stifle his regret, and give full play to his relief," said Blake drily. "Waldo has been a thorn in the Yard's side for many a long day. Our official friends don't like to be flouted, Tinker—and Waldo has flouted them consistently. There'll be rejoicing at the Yard when this news is out."

"Heartless lot of beggars!" said Tinker indignantly.

He went off, and Sexton Blake gave his full attention to the body again. Blake was by no means convinced that his assumptions were correct. There were more doubts in his mind than he had revealed to his young assistant. And one doubt was particularly strong.

With great care, he examined the dead man. He looked at his hands—which had not been severely injured—and he had many other close inspections. But at the end he was still unsatisfied.

"There's something queer about this," he told himself. "We cannot even prove Waldo's identity by means of his fingerprints. The burning is too severe for that. H'm! Puzzling—very puzzling!"

He was thoughtful for a few moments.

It was a pity to lose Waldo like that—indeed, Blake found it very difficult to credit that Waldo was actually dead. The evidence in front of him was strong, but by no means conclusive. He was too closely acquainted with Waldo's sense of humour—Waldo's love of playing grim jokes.

Continuing his investigation, he turned the body over, and something slipped out of a fold of clothing, and dropped into the grass. Blake picked it up.

A diamond tiepin.

What was more, Blake recognised it. On two or three occasions he had

met Simon Kern—particularly after the death of Oscar Maitland. And Kern had always worn that distinctive pin. It was a beautifully-wrought thing of gold, in the shape of a tiny idol, and the single diamond was a gem of the first water.

"Kern's pin!" murmured Blake. "Well, that helps things along, at all events. It only strengthens my theory. If Kern actually murdered Waldo, and dragged him out here, he must, of necessity, have done a deal of bending over the body. What more natural than that his tiepin should work out, and fall unnoticed?"

It seemed convincing enough. In the darkness, Kern would never have known of his loss until it was too late to search. And a pin of that description could easily have clung to a fold of the dead man's clothing, without its presence being known.

And there was another valuable point. The presence of this tiepin definitely proved Simon Kern's connection with the death. Theory had become fact. Kern was linked up by concrete evidence.

And it was not long before Blake made another discovery. A cursory examination of the surroundings was instructive. Leading from this shallow hollow, and right across the common, were tracks. Blake only had to look for them, and they fairly rose up and hit him. Not footprints particularly, but a hundred and one traces of disturbed grass—dragging marks on the bare spots. The veriest amateur could have detected that something heavy and cumbersome had been dragged—literally trailed—over the common.

The facts, so far, were fitting neatly and relentlessly into Sexton Blake's web of conjecture.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. The Hunt Begins.



TINKER reversed Blake's instructions.

Finding no police-constable within sight, he went off to a public telephone first, and was soon in touch with Scotland Yard.

"That you, Tinker?" came the cheery voice of Chief Detective-inspector Lennard, of the C.I.D.,

after Tinker had been connected to his office. "I suppose you're talking from your bed-room?"

"My which?"

"My dear chap, it's only just after eight, and I'm not optimistic enough to assume that you're really up," replied Lennard. "What do you want? Hasn't Mrs. Bardell brought you your cup of tea? Do you want me to come round and search for it?"

"That's a funny thing," said Tinker. "I was thinking the same thing about you as you're thinking about me. I couldn't believe my ears when I heard your voice. I really rang up the Yard to ask for the telephone number of your private house, so that I could dig you out of bed."

A chuckle came across the wires.

"You'll do!" said the chief-inspector.

"But I naturally assume that you've been up all night," continued Tinker. "That's the only explanation of your being in the office at this unearthly hour. Well, you're wanted."

"By you?"

"Yes."

"All right—you can wait!"

"By the guv'nor, too," said Tinker sweetly. "There's a dead man on Wimbledon Common, and Mr. Blake and I are hot on the track of something startling. The guv'nor wants you to come at once."

"I'm not sure that it can be managed," said Lennard dubiously. "I've just been assigned to a job over in Poplar—"

"Never mind about that; you'll have to give it to somebody else," interrupted Tinker. "This dead man seems to have been struck by lightning, but the guv'nor thinks he might have been murdered. Of course, if you want to let somebody else take the credit for the job—"

"Look here, you young ass, is this straight?"

"Yes, absolutely," replied Tinker. "The guv'nor sent me to phone you, and to say that it's urgent."

"That's good enough for me," said Lennard briskly. "Blake wouldn't send a message of that sort unless it was something exceptional. I'll be over there as quickly as I can manage it. Where's the exact spot?"

"Wimbledon Common."

"I know that!" retorted Lennard. "Do you think I want to go wandering about Wimbledon Common all day? It's a bit bigger than the island in Piccadilly Circus."

Tinker gave precise details and rang off, satisfied that the Scotland Yard man would lose no time. He had purposely refrained from mentioning the dead man's identity, as he wanted to watch Lennard's face when he made the disclosure.

His next task was to find that constable.

He happened to spot one on his way back to the common—for he had been obliged to go some little distance to find a public telephone. The officer was standing on a corner, looking over the common in dreamy preoccupation when Tinker came up.

"You are wanted," said Tinker briskly.

"Who—me?" exclaimed the constable, with a start.

"Yes; there's a dead body on the common."

"A dead body?"

"Struck by lightning," explained Tinker.

"Ah, I ain't surprised," nodded the policeman sagely. "He ain't the only poor fellow that was hit by lightning, neither, I'll swear! One o' the worst storms we've had this year."

He drew himself up importantly.

"I suppose you ain't kidding?" he added, with suspicion.

"Come along and see," replied Tinker. "My guv'nor is Mr. Sexton Blake, and he's on the spot now. Chief-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland

Yard, is hurrying down as fast as he can come."

The constable flushed with excitement.

"Glory, then you'll be young Mr. Tinker?" he asked, staring.

"I not only will be—but I am!"

"This is a bit of luck for me," said the policeman eagerly. "If you'll lead the way, Mr. Tinker, we'll get there as quickly as we can. There's another man on the next beat, an' he might butt in. I don't often get the chance of handlin' a case with Mr. Blake an' with one of the heads from the Yard."

Tinker smiled inwardly. He had succeeded in arousing the constable into brisk activity. He had an idea, however, that the man was still slightly suspicious. If so, he soon changed his mind.

Sexton Blake was still with the body when they came up, and he promptly placed the policeman on duty there.

"Mr. Lennard will soon be here, and you will then take orders from him," said Blake. "But until he arrives I think you had better stay on guard. Fortunately, the general public is still unaware of this tragedy, and there is not much likelihood of a gaping crowd gathering."

The constable saluted.

"I'll keep 'em off if they do come, sir," he declared.

He regarded the body stolidly, and Sexton Blake and Tinker moved off across the common.

"Discovered anything else, guv'nor?" asked Tinker eagerly.

Blake told of the tiepin, and he waved his hand in the direction of the ground.

"You can see how the body was dragged along, Tinker," he said. "It's all very simple, and, for that reason, I don't like it. One would imagine that Kern would have taken a few ordinary precautions no matter how severe his mental stress. But this trail is as obvious as though a sack had been drawn along a sandy beach."

Tinker looked up and down.

"By jingo, yes!" he admitted. "But perhaps Kern was off his head with fright. His one thought was to get rid of the body. What are we going to do—go straight to his house?"

"We can't do that," replied Blake. "We have no warrant—no authority to search Kern's house. We must wait until Lennard arrives."

"Well, that tiepin of Kern's makes the whole thing certain, guv'nor," said Tinker. "He's right in the affair up to his neck. If poor old Waldo had been just struck by lightning, by accident, Kern's tiepin couldn't have been in a fold of his clothes."

"Yes, there's that point, I will admit," said Blake. "At the same time, I am very far from convinced that we have got hold of the right end of the stick. I hope Lennard will hurry up, because I badly want to have a look into Kern's house."

THE chief-inspector arrived twenty minutes later, and Blake and Tinker went to meet him as he crossed the grassy expanse.



The invaders found themselves gazing upon a scene of complete disorder. And there, right at Sexton Blake's feet, were some dark, ominous stains on the carpet.

"Good man!" said Blake, as he shook hands. "I'm glad we were able to get hold of you, Lennard. This looks like being a fairly important case, and the sooner we can make a move the better."

"I understand there's a dead man somewhere about here?" asked the chief inspector. "Struck by lightning, eh? Anything special about him? You wouldn't drag me over here unless—"

"He's Waldo," put in Tinker.

Lennard started.

"Waldo?" he repeated sharply. "Dead?"

"Yes—and probably murdered," said Tinker.

"Good glory!"

The chief inspector pursed his lips and frowned. A glance at Blake had told him that Tinker was not fooling him. An expression of shocked surprise came into his face.

"Well, I'll admit this has nearly bowled me over," he said. "I didn't think that Waldo would finish up like that. Pity. We always hankered after besting him."

"You'd better come and have a look at the body," said Blake.

"Hallo! Hallo!" exclaimed

Lennard shrewdly. "What's this? Aren't you sure about the identity? I notice that you don't say much, Blake!"

"We can only establish his identity by the evidence we find," replied Blake. "And if the contents of the pockets are any guide, then the victim is Waldo without the slightest doubt."

Blake explained all the circumstances and handed the tiepin into Lennard's possession.

"So you don't believe in the lightning evidence?" asked Lennard.

"My mind is quite open on the subject," replied Blake. "He may have been killed by lightning, or he may not. I would prefer not to express an opinion until we have made a few more investigations. But on the face of it, Lennard, the dead man is unquestionably Waldo."

Ten minutes later the Yard man was satisfied.

"Yes, it's Waldo all right," he said gruffly, "and I believe you're right about Kern, too. The best thing we can do is to go to his house at once and grab him—unless he's bolted. The chances are that he

hasn't, believing that there'll be no hue and cry.

Lennard was looking deeply concerned. He had always had a sneaking admiration for Waldo, and he, too, was pained at this discovery. He had never wished Waldo such a violent death as this.

"Somehow, you know, it wants a bit of swallowing," he commented, as they walked towards the edge of the common. "It's rummy that Waldo should make such a slip. Not at all like him. Yet I suppose the best of us makes blunders at times. And when a man like Waldo blunders it's liable to be fatal."

It was only about nine o'clock even now, and many of the big households in those great residences along Wimbledon Common were only just beginning to arouse themselves for the day.

Simon Kern's place was big and imposing. The house was quite modern, and stood in its own extensive grounds. There were well-cut lawns, deep flower-beds, and carefully trimmed hedges. The whole establishment had an air of wealth and stability.

It had been almost unnecessary to follow that trail across the common, for it so obviously led to Kern's house. The chief-inspector was now in full charge—at least, nominally. He was the representative of authority, and could act on his own discretion.

"There's only one thing to be done, as far as I can see," he said. "We can't potter about in Kern's front garden looking for tracks, can we? That sort of thing would only excite comment and probably give Kern warning. We'll go straight up to the front door and catch him on the hop."

"You couldn't adopt a better course," agreed Blake.

The door opened in answer to Lennard's ring, and an elderly woman stood there. She started as she saw the two grim-looking men, and her face paled somewhat.

"Well?" she asked, with unnecessary sharpness.

"We should like to see Mr. Kern," said Lennard.

"Mr. Kern isn't up yet," replied the woman, her agitation increasing. "Why do you ask? Who are you? What have you come here for?"

"Steady, madam!" said Lennard quietly. "There's no need to get excited. If Mr. Kern is still in bed we won't disturb him. I should just like to ask you if anything unusual happened in this house during the night?"

The woman gave a quick, convulsive gulp.

"I—I— Mr. Kern will tell you!" she panted. "I don't know anything! I tell you I don't know anything!"

"I rather think you do!" said Lennard grimly.

Her very patent alarm was significant in the extreme. Indeed, it was conclusive. Something unusual had happened during the night, and she knew about it.

"It is only fair to tell you that my name is Chief-Inspector Lennard of Scotland Yard," said Lennard. "Now,

now! No need to faint. Nobody will come to any harm if—"

"I don't know anything!" faltered the woman. "I'm Mr. Kern's housekeeper, and it's not fair to force your way in—"

"There's no question of force," said Lennard. "One or two things have happened, and an inquiry is necessary. Don't disturb Mr. Kern. I would like a little quiet chat with you, if you don't mind. These gentlemen are associated with me, and you can be quite frank with them."

The chief-inspector was on tiptoe. His ready wits were keenly edged. He generally knew when to act drastically, just as he knew when he had made a tactical blunder. Something told him that a short talk with the housekeeper would be profitable. As for Sexton Blake, he was keen, too.

There was a certain inflection in the woman's voice which attracted him. It reminded him irresistibly of the voice which had spoken to him on the telephone. The actual voice sounded a little different, but the inference was obvious.

Lennard had already entered the hall and had closed the door. It was a big hall, of the lounge type, and an open door revealed a large reception room with dust sheets over the furniture.

"Most of the servants are away," said the housekeeper, trying to compose herself. "They've gone to the master's country house, down at Henley. There's hardly anybody here, and even Mr. Kern didn't really intend to stay on, but business kept him in London—"

"Never mind about that now, Mrs. —Mrs. —"

"My name is Mrs. Finch."

"Well, Mrs. Finch, I want you to be reasonable," said Lennard gently. "I want you to tell me what happened in this house during the night. There's nothing to fear—"

"I don't know what happened!" she broke in. "It's a terrible mystery to me—and I was afraid to go to Mr. Kern! He's always so angry if he's disturbed in the early morning. I thought I'd better wait until he rang."

"Yes, but what happened?"

"I don't know!" said Mrs. Finch, half-hysterically. "How should I know? I went into the library, and— How do I know that you are from Scotland Yard?" she added, trying to grip herself. "I thought you had to have a warrant before you broke into a house like this? I've a good mind to call the police! I won't be bullied and—"

"We're not trying to bully you, Mrs. Finch," interrupted the inspector patiently. "I need no warrant under these circumstances, and I strongly advise you to calm yourself. Where is the library? I would like to have a look at that particular room, if you don't mind."

She cast a frightened glance at a certain door at the end of the hall.

"You mustn't go there!" she panted, in acute fear. "Wait until Mr. Kern comes down. He'll be able to explain—"

"We can have a talk with Mr. Kern afterwards," said Lennard. "Come along, Mrs. Finch—let's have a look at the library. That room at the end, eh? Good! I'll trouble you to come with us."

Both Lennard and Blake were suspicious. It was only too obvious that the woman was frightened out of her life, and that she was trying to put them off.

And she would not have been in that condition unless the library contained something that was better kept hidden.

The woman was so agitated that they managed to get her along into the room before she could utter any further protests and before she could make any outcry. It was highly necessary that she should be kept under their observation, or she would certainly rush upstairs and warn the sleeping Kern.

"Oh-ho!" said the chief inspector, his voice cold and triumphant. "I don't wonder you wanted to keep us out, Mrs. Finch! Keep near that door, Tinker, there's a good chap!"

Mrs. Finch, with a wail of anguish, collapsed on to a chair and wept. Her sobs echoed convulsively throughout the big room.

The invaders found themselves gazing upon a scene of complete disorder. Chairs were overturned, the heavy mahogany desk was slewed round, and there were other evidences of violence. One of the window-panes was cracked from top to bottom, and both the curtains were lying in a tangled heap on the floor. The blinds were drawn, and only a dim light filled the room.

And there, right at Sexton Blake's feet, were some dark, ominous stains on the carpet.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER. The Evidence.



SEXTON BLAKE and Tinker exchanged quick glances, and the Scotland Yard man gave them both a triumphant look.

"What do you make of this, eh?" he said. "Nothing unusual, I suppose? Come, Mrs. Finch! You're not telling me, I presume, that Mr. Kern usually has his library in this interesting condition?"

Mrs. Finch gave a feeble little wail.

"Oh, I was frightened to let you see it!" she sobbed. "I know something's happened! Something dreadful! But I was afraid for the master! And there he is upstairs, and doesn't know—"

"You're quite sure he is upstairs?" put in Blake.

"Yes, sir."

"Have you seen him this morning?"

"He came in last night, sir, and told me to call him at eight o'clock, and—"

"Did you call him at eight o'clock?"

"Yes, sir."
"Didn't you tell him anything about this?" broke in Lennard.

"No, sir."
"Why not?"
"I knocked on the master's door, sir, and started to tell him, but he told me to go away," replied Mrs. Finch. "He sounded very sleepy, and irritable, too. Mr. Kern always gets irritable when he's woke up. I tried to tell him again, and he swore at me."

"Well, that's satisfactory, as far as it goes," said Lennard. "I should imagine that Kern drank heavily, and that he hadn't got over the effects. That would account for the irritability. By the way, where does he sleep?"

"Right at the end of the upper corridor, sir."

"All right! But you'd better make a little less noise," said the chief inspector. "No more of that sobbing. We don't want him to hear you. Keep in that chair, and I'll question you again later."

He gave Tinker a warning glance, and Tinker understood. He put his back against the door, and remained there.

And a very little search brought a poker to light—a heavy, stumpy poker, with blood on the end of it.

"That's what did the trick," said Lennard, as he gingerly handled the implement. "Lightning, eh? By gad, Blake, you were pretty keen about this affair, now I come to think of it!"

Blake shook his head.

"I'm not sure about that," he replied. "I am inclined to think I have been very dull."

"Dull?"

"Yes."

"How do you mean?"

"Never mind now—I'm puzzled, that's all," replied Blake. "There's something all wrong here. But let's have another look. H'm! More evidence!" he added, as he bent over the desk. "Look at this, Lennard!"

The chief inspector picked up a half-folded piece of notepaper. It was a brief message, confirming an appointment for one a.m.—and the date on it proved that the meeting had been for the night that had just passed. And that note was signed by Colonel Hampson and Waldo.

"Don't you see?" said Lennard keenly. "Waldo was after Kern, and he fixed up this meeting with the idea of trapping him somehow. Probably after a big prize of some kind."

"Yes, probably," agreed Blake dryly.

The chief inspector knew nothing

about Waldo's real campaign, and he had naturally assumed that the Wonder Man had been on the track of a robbery. Blake had informed Lennard of Waldo's alias.

"What do you mean?" asked the Yard man. "Isn't it clear? The thing went bust, and Kern suspected Waldo of trickery. And then, of course, a fuse blew out, and the pair had a scrap. That's the way I read it, anyhow. Kern grabbed the poker, and— Well, doesn't the room speak for itself?"

Blake frowned, but said nothing.

And Lennard went over to Mrs. Finch, and planted himself in front of her.

"Now, good lady, let's have a word or two, if you don't mind," said Lennard pleasantly. "We'll have a word with Mr. Kern soon, but I'd like to speak to you first. How much do you know of this affair?"

"On my honour, sir, I don't know what happened!" sobbed Mrs. Finch. "I didn't know anything until this morning. I came in as usual to raise the blinds and to open the windows, and—and I saw this!"

"Have you told anybody else?"

"No, sir—not a soul!" said the housekeeper earnestly. "I kept it from Ellen—that's the maid—and I

(Continued on page 16).

RECORD-BREAKING FOOTBALL OFFER!

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(Which must be strictly adhered to).

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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.
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9. All entries must be sent through the post, and any received after THURSDAY, MARCH 31st, will be disqualified. No responsibility can be accepted for any effort, or efforts, lost, mislaid or delayed. Proof of posting will not be accepted as proof of delivery. Unstamped or insufficiently stamped efforts will be refused.

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Starring Sydney.

AT just about the time that these lines appear, our Australian friends "down under" in Sydney, the capital of New South Wales, will be enjoying themselves for a wonderful fortnight during the visit of the Duke and Duchess of York.

As far as present arrangements stand, the date of the Royal couple's arrival will be March 20th, and they will stay till April 14th. During that time a splendid programme has been arranged for them.

Amongst many other things, a pageant is being prepared that will give an idea of the Sydney of a century ago, and provide a spectacular contrast between the sturdy beginning and the magnificent city that Sydney is to-day.

There will be street processions in which will appear vehicles of every type that have been used during the last century, together with people in the costume of the period represented. The New South Wales traders are co-operating, too, and shop-window displays will be shown representing industrial scenes of the past, contrasted with present-day conditions in the same industries, as seen in modern factories.

To Meet the People.

GALA performances in Sydney's magnificent theatres will be not the least of the pleasures of the Royal visitors to the State of New South Wales.

Apart from the official civic receptions that will be held by the Duke and Duchess, there will be what may be termed unofficial ones, at which they will receive the people. In all their journeyings in the

Canberra is going to be the wonder-city of the world. It is at present hardly in the first stages of its growth, for the original project only dates back to 1912, and the work in connection with it was held up during the period of the War.

The purpose of Canberra is to provide a capital city and a seat of Government for all the Australian States. In just the same way that Washington, in the district of Columbia, is the Federal capital of all the American States, so Canberra will be the Federal capital of Australia, in its own Federal territory and outside the individual States, yet belonging to them all.

The constitution of the Australian Commonwealth originally provided for a seat of Government in Federal territory, but there was a lot of hesitation in picking on the best spot in the whole continent for this important undertaking.

The Capital's Capitol.

SIX sites were selected by a Royal Commission appointed for the purpose, and their respective advantages debated in Parliament, but the whole lot was discarded in favour of a seventh.

There was a hitch about this, and finally the eighth place proposed was definitely decided on—the Yass-Canberra district.

This deliberation of choice indicates the way in which the whole scheme has been gone into from the start. Architects and engineers and town-planning experts all over the world were invited to submit designs for the buildings of the new city, with the result that there will emerge, in due time, one of the fairest places made by man on the surface of the earth.

IN PRISON—BUT HAPPY!

After a period of over a hundred and thirty years of usefulness as a prison, the gaol at Stafford ceased to be needed for the purpose it was originally designed for, and was closed for a time.

Then the housing shortage impelled the authorities to allow people to take up residence there, with the result that the two towers of the old structure are now occupied by three families.

Photo shows a father and his little girl looking through their kitchen window, the bars of which remind them of its former use as a cell.

The innocence of childhood in these grim surroundings may seem incongruous, but it is a happy sign of the lack of crime to-day.

[Topical.]



Dominion, in fact, the Duke has expressed a strong wish that formality and stiffness shall be reduced to a minimum.

He wants to see not only Australia, but the Australians, and to get into close contact with the people themselves in all the parts of the Commonwealth that he visits, and to see the conditions of their life.

From Sydney the Royal couple will journey by the Renown—whose men, by the way, are to be very well entertained by the city—to Hobart, Tasmania, and thence to Melbourne and Fremantle.

Canberra.

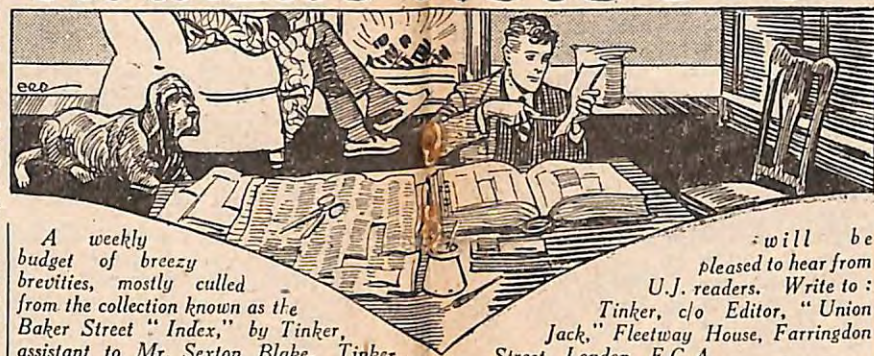
ONE of the most important items on the Duke's Antipodean programme is the opening of the Commonwealth Parliament House at Canberra, and his inauguration of its first session, in the name of the King.

The Parliament House, or Capitol, is situated on a hill, and has radiating from it, like the spokes of a wheel, broad avenues named after the principal Australian cities—Sydney, Perth, Hobart, Melbourne, etc.

A Kingly Gesture.

BY a wise provision which is in line with the far-sightedness of the whole scheme, the building of the permanent Capitol has been postponed for fifty years. It was realised that, if an imposing building of stone were begun, it would for many years necessarily have to remain unfinished and uncomfortable. So a temporary building has been erected for the use of Australia's law-makers until the more pretentious accommodation is available.

TINKER'S NOTE-BOOK



A weekly budget of breezy brevities, mostly culled from the collection known as the Baker Street "Index," by Tinker, assistant to Mr. Sexton Blake. Tinker

will be pleased to hear from U.J. readers. Write to: Tinker, c/o Editor, "Union Jack," Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C. 4.

The temporary Parliament House is of brick and wood, and, in spite of its provisional nature, is a dignified building that is admirably designed for the uses and convenience of the legislators who will gather there for the Duke of York's opening ceremony.

One very interesting feature of this great occasion in the Commonwealth's history will be the presence of two brass-bound boxes on the table of the House. They have been specially made by order of the King, and are replicas of the two which occupy the same position in our own House of Commons in London.

A simple idea, this, but great in its simplicity. A friendly, symbolic gesture on the part of the King-Emperor, and an outward and visible sign that the youngest of his Parliaments shall live up to the traditions of the Old Country.

This Week's Excuse.

THE prize (if any) for the most innocent excuse of the week goes to the cyclist who was arrested at Kingston, Surrey, for riding on the footpath.

When he appeared before the magistrates, he said: "I had to cycle on the footpath because I was nervous of the motor traffic on the road."

Great Expectations.

I SEEM to have heard somewhere that Scotsmen are famous for liking something for nothing; I have also heard that they are hard-headed, and it takes somebody cleverer than you or me to bamboozle them.

In the case of the great Atlantic Swimmer at Glasgow, the two instincts must have had a hefty struggle before the something-for-nothing instinct won, for forty thousand people—mainly Scots—gathered to see a free show, when the odds were on their being bamboozled—and they were!

The Glasgow medical students arranged the stunt, and the joke is on the public. Advertisements appeared all over the city stating that a girl swimmer, described as the Aquatic Marvel, was going to swim across the Atlantic from New York to Glasgow, and would arrive at a certain time.

Huge crowds of people massed on the bridges and other points of vantage, and, right on time, the swimmer appeared, going strongly, and followed by a rowing boat containing a piper. (Probably the noise of the pipes was intended to goad the swimmer on.)

The Aquatic Marvel stepped ashore at the Custom House—presumably to declare any dutiable articles brought from America—and shortly afterwards the girl appeared outside, enveloped in a bathing-towel, and received an uproarious welcome.

Stands Scotland Where She Did?

AT least, a girl appeared. The real swimmer was a man. He had been hurriedly smuggled ashore into a shed, and his place was taken by the girl who was supposed to have crossed the Atlantic.

Actually, the man had only swum the last three hundred yards of the journey, having quietly entered the water unnoticed, and swum upstream to the finishing-place.

So convincing were the details published by the hoaxers before the event, that many people actually believed the swimmer would be coming in from the sea, and thousands of them lined the banks of the Clyde for miles below the scene of the last lap, and consequently saw nothing of any swimmer, Atlantic or otherwise.

Doubtless the hospital charities benefited. All good Scotsmen recognise that anyone who can take them in like that has really earned the money.

Always the Politeness.

TELEPHONE organisations do not approve of their wires being heated above the normal temperature by bad language. One would think that, in cases where this has occurred repeatedly, they would remonstrate with the offender equally forcibly—or at least forcibly.

But no! The French, as a nation, are famed for their politeness, and if some telephone users are exceptions, the telephone company is not. The following was the dignified intimation received by a firm whose telephone communications had been more urgent than urbane:

"I have the honour to inform you that your telephone will be suspended for two days because of the abusive words uttered therefrom."

Which was the last word—for two days, anyway.

A House With a Past.

CAN a house have some sinister influence in or about it that engenders murder? Considered from a commonsense, everyday point of view, one would say not; yet there are houses in which, for some weird reason, murder or crimes of violence seem to be always happening.

The latest to be reported is that of a squalid lodging-house in the foreign quarter of Chicago, which is known locally as "the mystery house," and which has a dark reputation extending back for many years. Seven murders have occurred in it at least, three of them having happened at the rate of one a month.

The latest to be reported was that of a woman who in life was a frequenter of cabarets and night-haunts, and her body

was found covered with bruises. She had been strangled.

Maybe some day the psychic research people will be able to tell us whether the atmosphere of a house can actually impel those in it to murder—in which case there will be a new plea on the part of homicides: "I couldn't help it; the house made me do it!"

Brought To Book.

WHEN a Tottenham schoolboy arrived home after school with a beautifully bound volume, his mother was very proud of him.

"My prize for good behaviour," he explained.

But, alas! There was a sad sequel.

The boy appeared later before the magistrates at the local court, and when he was charged with stealing a postal-order for five shillings, and pleaded guilty, his record for good behaviour was somewhat smirched.

What was worse, the price of the book was five shillings.

Couldn't Stand the Strain.

AN unfortunate ex-Ser-vice man, of Swansea, who was wounded in the War, became very despondent at the long delay on the part of the Ministry of Pensions in settling his claim for a pension and awarding him arrears.

He was in acute want, and, despairing of ever getting his rights, he determined on suicide. He couldn't stand the strain any longer.

But, when he came to attempt it, the rope was not strong enough, and broke when his weight came on it. The rope couldn't stand the strain, either.

Thinking better of it, the man decided to wait a bit.

Next morning a letter arrived. It was a notification from the Ministry that he had been granted £100 and a pension of £3 for life.

The question is, did the rope let him down, or didn't it?

A Tale of a Tail.

IT was just feeding-time at a travelling menagerie in Paris.

The lion, Cæsar, after having done justice to his underdone meat course, was lying down comfortably in a satisfied, after-dinner mood.

In the adjoining cage were the hyenas. They also had been fed, but apparently not so sumptuously. So that, when the satisfied lion negligently swished his tail through the bars dividing his cage from theirs, the hungry hyenas made a dash for it.

Powerful jaws snapped, the tail of the king of beasts was neatly bisected, and the two hyenas struggled for possession of it, gulping it down hurriedly between them as an additional course to their own dinner.

Yelping with indignation and agony, the late owner of the tail had to submit to having the stump cauterised and bandaged by a local vet.

There is now a lion in the travelling zoo with a tail like a fox-terrier's—which gives the hyenas something to laugh at.

Fact and Fiction.

HERE is a bit of fact which could have formed the foundation for the fiction of Bluebeard—if the fiction hadn't happened first. It shows, however, that real life can still compete with anything the story-tellers can do.

The wife of a certain miner living in the town of Recklinghausen, Westphalia, was noticed to have disappeared from her accustomed haunts. The husband, in reply to questions, said that she had gone back to her native Poland.

Gossip started, and the man's tale was generally disbelieved, with the result that police investigations began. Nothing came of them, however, and later, when the miner produced papers showing that his wife had died in Poland, the matter was allowed to drop.



Policeman: "Ow do you mean—'e insulted you?"
Little Man: "Why, I sez, 'my great-grandfather was drowned at Trafalgar.' And 'e sez: 'which fountain?'"

Time passed, and the man married again. That ends chapter one.

Bluebeard's Rival.

CHAPTER two opened with the suspicions of wife number two. She was gifted, or cursed, with the complaint that killed the cat—curiosity.

There was a big cellar underneath their house, and she spent a good deal of time wondering why a door that led out of it was bricked up. The only reason her husband could give in reply to her persistent inquiries was that he had no use for the second cellar. He had bricked it up for that reason, and there was only rubbish in it, he said.

She was not satisfied, and after a time her curiosity impelled her to knock a hole in the cellar wall and look into the forbidden chamber, just like Fatima did in the tale of "Bluebeard." But her husband was right; there was only rubbish in the farther cellar.

Even then her doubts persisted. The wife told her husband that she needed the cellar for storing potatoes, and would he clean it out for her? For a long time he refused, but finally did so while she was away.

On her return she found the place contained logs of wood. She told her neighbours that she was suspicious, and the news got round to the police. They dug beneath the floor and found the body of the miner's first wife.

The man was arrested, and eventually confessed that he had murdered her and concealed her body in the second cellar.

(Continued from page 13.)

wouldn't let her come up here. I tried to tell the master, but he wouldn't listen. And there I was, pacing about the hall, when you rang at the bell."

"Did you telephone to anybody?" asked Blake suddenly.

"Telephone, sir?"

"Did you ring up anybody?"

"No, sir!" she replied, looking surprised. "I wouldn't ring up the police! I was afraid! All I wanted was to ask the master what it meant. I—I thought— The—the fact is, I feared—"

"Well?"

"Now and again, sir, the master has a little drop too much to drink," said Mrs. Finch apologetically. "In fact, he's sometimes come home in a very funny condition."

"Is he violent at such times?"

"He never has been, sir—not until now," said Mrs. Finch. "I—I thought maybe he'd got beyond himself, like, and done this damage. I thought he'd injured himself, too, what with these marks of blood on the floor."

"Did you see the poker?" asked Lennard.

"Which poker, sir?" said the housekeeper.

"Never mind," replied Lennard. "I'm quite satisfied, Mrs. Finch, that you've told us all you know. I'm very much afraid that the matter isn't quite so simple as you think, and in a few minutes I shall want you to take us to your master's bed-room."

"Won't you wait until he comes down, sir?"

"I think not," replied Lennard dryly. "We're not taking any

chances. We would much prefer to interview Mr. Kern in his bed-room—before he recovers from that intoxicated stupor."

The inspector had another look round the room, and Tinker found an opportunity of having a word with Blake.

"You don't seem very bucked, guv'nor," he remarked, in a low voice.

"That's a very simple problem, Tinker—I'm not bucked," replied Blake. "In fact, I'm the opposite of bucked."

"But isn't everything as we expected?"

"It is not at all what I expected," murmured the detective. "For example, I had no anticipation of finding Kern's library in such disorder. This evidence of a struggle is a puzzle."

Tinker stared.

"A puzzle?" he repeated. "But didn't we reckon on it?"

"It is the very last thing we reckoned on," growled Blake. "My dear Tinker, the evidence on the common indicates that Waldo was struck down by a blow from behind."

"I know it does, sir."

"Well, does that allow of any preliminary struggle?" asked Blake.

"If Waldo was struck down from behind, there could have been no struggle at all. All this has been faked. I'm certain of it."

"But couldn't they have struggled first?"

"Come, come!" said Blake. "Where are your wits, Tinker? If there had been any genuine fight in this room, Kern would have been the loser. Surely you must realise that?"

"Jove, you're right there, sir!" agreed Tinker, with a start. "Waldo would never have lost in a rough-and-tumble, would he?"

"He would not," said Blake. "But Simon Kern would. I don't mind telling you that I'm very curious to go upstairs and have a look at Mr. Kern. I'm so curious that I want to go now."

He turned to Lennard.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Well, there's only one, course, isn't there?" asked the Scotland Yard man, in a low voice. "What with Waldo's body out there, and this note on the desk, and all this other evidence, it's a pretty clear case against Kern. I'm going upstairs to arrest him."

"Do you object if we come?"

Lennard grinned. "My dear man, what a question!" he said. "Do you think I want to join poor Waldo out there? Kern's a pretty dangerous customer, it seems—although he may be more docile now that he's had time to sober down. I'd like you and Tinker to lend a hand, all the same."

He walked over to Mrs. Finch and gently shook her shoulder. The woman was scared, and she looked up with a frightened start.

"Now, Mrs. Finch, we'd like to have a talk with your master," said Lennard. "Perhaps you'll be good enough to show us his bed-room?"

"He'll be furious if you walk in before he's dressed, sir," faltered the woman. "He hates to be disturbed."

"And I shall hate to disturb him, but I'm afraid it can't be helped," replied the C.I.D. man. "You see, Mrs. Finch, we want to get the truth out of Mr. Kern, and it'll be all the better to take him by surprise. Now, don't excite yourself. Just lead the way, and you won't come to any harm."

The woman was very agitated, but she pulled herself together sufficiently to obey orders. And they all left the library, and went across the lounge hall, and then up the broad staircase. Going down a wide corridor, Mrs. Finch halted in front of a door at the end.

"This is the master's room, sir," she whispered.

"All right," breathed Lennard. "Knock, and we'll hear what he says. If he answers, leave the rest to me."

She knocked, but there was a dead silence from within. Again Mrs. Finch knocked, hammering loudly upon the panels. But the result was no more promising.

"Come on!" said Lennard curtly.

He grasped the door-knob and turned it. He was obviously expecting to find the door locked, for he put his shoulder against the panel. But the door burst open, and they all entered the bed-room.

"Confound it!" roared Lennard. "The bird's flown!"

One glance was sufficient. The bed was in disorder, there were a number of dressing-table drawers open, and the whole room bore evidences of a hasty departure on the part of the late occupant.

There were two other rooms connected with this apartment—a dressing-room and a bath-room. Both were empty.

Simon Kern had bolted.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER. A Little Surprise.



THE chief-inspector scratched his head.

"This is a bit of a frost, but it doesn't worry me much," he said.

"We'll have a quick look downstairs, and then I'll hurry back to headquarters and start things moving. If Mr. Kern thinks that he can get away

with this sort of thing, he's made a bit of a mistake. We shall have to teach him differently."

Mrs. Finch was standing in the doorway.

"Isn't the master here?" she asked wonderingly. "It isn't like him to go off without seeing me first and giving me orders."

"I think Mr. Kern was rather absent-minded this morning," said Lennard. "We'll make quite certain that he isn't here, and then I shall have to put a policeman in possession, Mrs. Finch. You needn't be afraid of him; he'll be quite harmless."

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"A policeman—here, in the house?" faltered the housekeeper.

"Two, in fact," replied Lennard. "One in the library, and one in the hall. I think I had better explain to you, Mrs. Finch, that Mr. Kern is suspected of murder, and I should therefore advise you to be very careful about what you say to anybody, and—"

"Look out!" said Tinker abruptly. The unfortunate housekeeper was on the point of swooning, but she just managed to recover herself. She stared at them all in terror, her face as pale as chalk.

"Murder?" she breathed. "The master?"

They managed to soothe her, and Tinker was left with her while Blake and Lennard swiftly looked round. The downstairs rooms were mostly out of use, the one small sitting-room containing Simon Kern's breakfast proving empty.

Ellen, the maid, who was hovering about in a fine state of agitation, declared that Mr. Kern had not come downstairs. She was sure of it, because she had been in the hall practically all the time.

"Is there no other staircase?" asked Blake.

"Why, yes, sir; there's the back stairs," replied the girl. "But Mr. Kern wouldn't use them! They're only for us servants."

"Somehow, I don't think Mr. Kern was very particular this morning," replied Lennard. "Come along, Blake, we'd better have a look."

They made their way to the servants' quarters, and found the staircase. Quite near to it there was a side door which led out upon a shady path, where creepers grew in abundance.

Beyond this was a small lawn, with a tennis-court farther on. A gardener was pottering about just outside the door of a conservatory. Lennard made a bee-line for him.

"Just a minute, my man," he said. "Have you seen Mr. Kern this morning?"

"Why, yes, sir," replied the gardener.

"You have?" shouted Blake.

"Not ten minutes ago, sir," said the man. "The master come down the path an' went out, I believe, by the gate at the bottom of the garden. Carryin' a case, he was."

Lennard glanced at Blake and shrugged his shoulders.

"Just as we thought," he said. "He must have heard us talking—perhaps he heard Mrs. Finch's sobs—and he took the tip and bolted. Why, what's the frown about?" he added curiously.

"I'm surprised to hear that Mr. Kern was seen this morning," replied Blake. "I wasn't expecting it." He turned to the gardener. "You are quite sure it was your master who went down the path?" he asked.

"Sure it was Mr. Kern?" said the man. "Of course I'm sure, sir! You couldn't mistake Mr. Kern!"

"Did he speak to you?"

"No, sir."

"Didn't he even nod or turn his face in your direction?"

"Now that I come to think of it, he didn't, sir," said the man. "That's

queer, too. The master usually has a word or two. I dessay he was in a hurry."

Blake was looking more at ease.

"I say, what's the idea?" asked Lennard curiously, as they went back to the house. "Why didn't you expect to see Kern?"

"I'll tell you later, Lennard," replied the detective. "But here's just a hint. Don't be too sure that you have got hold of this case right. I'm not at all satisfied with it."

"It's as plain as the nose on your face," declared Lennard. "You're very often right, Blake, and more often than not you see things that I don't. And that's a handsome admission when you come to think of it. But this time I'm quite satisfied that you won't get one over on me. I'm going off to the Yard, and I mean to spread the net for Kern. In fact, I'll telephone from this instrument indoors. We'll soon have him!"

TWENTY minutes later Sexton Blake and Tinker were walking towards the Grey Panther. Tinker was feeling rather disappointed.

"Isn't there anything more we can do, guv'nor?" he asked. "I thought perhaps you'd be interested in tracking Kern down."

Blake shook his head.

"We can leave that to Lennard," he said. "Lennard is getting very busy. He is seeing about having the body conveyed to the mortuary, and he is fetching experts from the Yard to take possession of the house, and a hundred and one other things are happening. We don't want to be mixed up in all that tumult. We'll get back to Baker Street for an early lunch."

Tinker looked at the detective squarely.

"There's something about this case you haven't told me of, guv'nor," he said bluntly. "What is it? Don't you think that Kern committed the murder?"

"Well, frankly, I don't."

"You mean that Waldo was really killed by lightning?"

"I don't mean that, either."

"Then what the dickens do you mean, guv'nor?" demanded Tinker, exasperated. "If Waldo wasn't killed by lightning, and if Kern didn't murder him, how did he die?"

"I wonder?" murmured Blake.

"Look here, sir, if there's anything—"

"Let's give it a rest for a bit, Tinker," interrupted Blake pleasantly. "But I think there'll be one or two surprises in this case yet."

"It's a bit thick, guv'nor, the way you tease a chap," said Tinker gruffly. "Well, anyhow, old Sir Rodney is safe now. Kern was the last of his enemies, and he's too busy to bother about any revenge."

"Sir Rodney is well away in the Swiss Lake District," said Blake. "I am glad he took my advice, and went away in secret. The whole affair is as good as over now, so we might as well take a rest."

Blake said no more, and would not enter into any discussion as they drove back to Baker Street. They

arrived just after eleven o'clock, and walked into the consulting-room at once.

"And about time, too," said a familiar voice.

Tinker jumped about a yard. Rupert Waldo, languid and smiling, was lounging in the most comfortable chair, smoking one of Blake's cigars.

"Waldo!" yelled Tinker. "Guv'nor, what the—"

"I won't say that I expected to see him here, but I am not in the least surprised," said Blake coolly. "Waldo, haven't you got an infernal nerve to come to my chambers?"

"I thought you knew that I had an infernal nerve?" asked Waldo. "But there's nothing particularly brazen about this little call, is there? I had an idea that you would welcome me."

"But you're dead!" shouted Tinker.

"Not this time," replied Waldo calmly. "Sorry to disappoint you, old fellow, but—"

"Disappoint me!" interrupted Tinker. "I'm jolly glad to see you alive! But I can't understand it! Who was that we found on Wimbledon Common? I believe you did it on purpose to fool the guv'nor so that you could crow over him."

"Well, I'm not crowing, am I?" said Waldo. "If it comes to that, I don't believe Blake was fooled."

"I was for a while, but not all the time," said Blake. "And I am amazed, Waldo, that you should come here like this. Even if Kern's death was accidental, your own actions—"

"Kern's death?" repeated Waldo curiously.

"Kern's death, guv'nor?" said Tinker, staring.

"I wasn't deceived by that dead body, Tinker," replied Blake. "Just at first, as I have said, I feared that Waldo was the victim."

"I'm glad you feared it," said Waldo. "That's rather nice of you."

"But I soon came to the conclusion that there had been a lot of trickery," continued Blake, his voice very stern. "Before we proceed any further, Waldo, I want to ask you one straightforward question, and I believe you have enough honour to give me a straightforward answer."

"Thanks," said Waldo. "Go ahead."

"Did you murder Simon Kern?" asked Blake.

A spasm of pain crossed the Wonder Man's face.

"Come, Blake, you know me better than that, don't you?" he asked quietly. "Murder isn't in my line, as I thought you knew."

"Then Kern met his death accidentally?"

"Did he? How should I know?"

"My only hat!" ejaculated Tinker. "Then the dead man was Kern all the time?"

"So I take it," replied Blake. "You went to Kern's house last night, Waldo, and there was a fight. You naturally won—with all your strength, and you proceeded to fake the evidence so that the appearances would show that you were the murdered man and Kern the murderer. Having made your preparations, you

went up to Kern's bed-room, and coolly occupied it."

"Now, why the dickens couldn't I have thought of that?" said Tinker wonderingly.

"You haven't such a big imagination," said Waldo.

"It's all very well to talk lightly and to be so much at your ease, but this affair is serious," said Blake. "You haven't yet answered my question, Waldo. I am sorry if I am hurting you, but—"

"I didn't murder Kern—if that's what you want me to say," replied the Wonder Man.

"Then he was accidentally killed in the fight?"

"Hold on—hold on!" said Waldo. "There's something all wrong here. Unless you're very careful, you'll get me mixed. Do you mean to say, Blake, that you believe that Kern is dead, and that I had something to do with his death?"

"I believe that you went to Kern last night, and that somehow he died," replied Blake. "You took his body on to the common, and so prepared it that the lightning would be held responsible—and, furthermore, that you would be mistaken for the victim."

"I'll admit that I wanted to die quietly," agreed Waldo.

"Wait a minute!" said Blake. "Having performed this part of your programme, you went back to Kern's house and occupied his bed-room. This morning you went off, and even deceived the gardener."

Waldo threw his cigar away and rose to his feet.

"I don't want to crow over you, Blake, but for once in your life you are horribly at sea," he grinned. "You've got the whole thing wrong from start to finish. Your theory sounds all right, but it's—well, tripe. Kern isn't dead at all."

"Not dead?"

"Of course he isn't!" said Waldo. "I don't know anything about what happened at his house this morning, or where his gardener comes into the picture. But if the man says he saw Kern—well, he saw him. He certainly didn't see me, because I haven't been near the place since the small hours."

"And that dead body?"

"I don't know him from Adam, poor fellow."

"You assure me that he is not Simon Kern?"

"I can, at least, swear that he's not Simon Kern," replied Waldo, nodding. "I'll tell you the whole yarn, if you like. In fact, that's why I came here. I rang up the Yard not long ago and took the liberty of using your name, Blake—to say nothing of your voice. I asked for Lennard, and I got him. Then I heard that Kern had escaped—which, of course, was quite contrary to my scheme. That's why I'm here."

Tinker passed a hand over his brow.

"This is too much for me!" he said weakly. "I'm dizzy!"

"What is this precious scheme of yours, anyhow?" asked Blake. "I'm sorry I suspected you of murder, Waldo—in fact, I had an inkling that

the death had been accidental. And it seems that the whole of my reconstructed edifice has tumbled down."

"We're all liable to run off the rails now and again," said Waldo soothingly. "Even the great Sexton Blake isn't always right. I'll bet you've made many a blunder, old man, but you've managed to hush them up."

Blake smiled.

"And there are many that I haven't hushed up," he replied dryly.

"Well, if you like, I'll give you my end of the yarn, and then you'll be able to get the hang of it," said Waldo. "I'm after Simon Kern, to put it in a nutshell."

"I thought I had him, but the blighter has dodged me, and I've got an idea that the police won't track him. They've issued a warrant against him for murdering me, haven't they? They'll never catch him. But there's more than a chance that we can, Blake."

The detective sat down.

"Before we have any more discussion let's have this story of yours," he said. "We don't want to get mixed."

"Ye gods!" groaned Tinker. "Mixed? I'm like a jig-saw puzzle already! Throw me a line, guv'nor—I'm floundering!"

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER. What Really Happened.



RUPERT WALDO smiled genially.

"Of course, Tinker, we make excuses for you," he said, in a kindly voice. "We know that your brain-power is only limited, and—"

"Apparently, my own brain-power is just as scant!" interrupted Blake gruffly.

"It's not often I'm so far off the track, Waldo, and I am particularly keen to hear what actually happened."

"Brink forth the drinks, then, let us lubricate our throats, and we'll start in," said Waldo. "Don't think I'm asking for a gargle, Blake. Only a slight hint."

One might have thought that Rupert Waldo was an honoured guest under Blake's roof. His coolness was amazing. He certainly did not act like a criminal in the presence of the only man he actually feared.

Tinker produced a whisky decanter and a siphon of soda, and Waldo helped himself to a modest tot. Blake didn't drink.

"Now, before I begin, I want to assure you that this is, in the words of our novelists, the plain, unvarnished truth," said Waldo. "I'll tell you just what happened, Blake, and then you can decide upon the next move."

"We're waiting," said Blake briefly.

"Well, I went to Wimbledon Common last night—or, rather, in the

small hours—on pure chance," said Waldo, settling back in his chair. "The idea suddenly came to me, and I acted on it. I am staying at the Hotel Cecil, as you perhaps know, under the highly respectable name of Colonel Hampson. Needless to say, I haven't been back there since the supposed murder. I'm dead."

"You're taking a risk, going about in your own personality," said Tinker.

"My dear chap, that's just where I'm safe," smiled Waldo. "If everybody thinks I'm dead, there's not a chance in a thousand that I shall be recognised."

"Well, for some time past I have had my eye on Kern. He's the last of that dirty trio whom Sir Rodney Drummond instructed me to squash. I've been well after him for over a week—and just at the present time, I fancy, he is quivering like a pole-axed blanc-mange. You see, I've been using my own peculiar methods with him. But more of that anon. Pull me up if I side-track the conversation."

"You appear to be side-tracking it now," said Blake. "We want to hear what happened last night."

"Well, as I told you at first, I went to Wimbledon to do some scouting round Kern's house—nothing more," said Waldo. "It occurred to me that I might be able to get into his library and rummage among his private papers."

"You see, my scheme was to bowl him out in one of his swindling games and get him a long stretch of penal servitude. Well, when I got to the common the first rumbles of thunder were making themselves heard. I thought it just as well to let the storm pass before I got busy."

"Why?" asked Tinker.

"Because night thunderstorms have a way of awakening people," replied Waldo. "I didn't want Kern to come and disturb me in the middle of my operations. I thought the storm would only be a light one, so I sat down on the common, behind a patch of gorse, and ruminated upon life. And that infernal storm, instead of petering out, came up like a tornado. The lightning was so terrific that I was fascinated, watching it."

"And you still sat on the common—in the rain?" asked Tinker.

"I'm not quite an imbecile!" retorted Waldo. "At that time the rain wasn't coming down, but when a few cupfuls pattered round me—drops as large as half-crowns—I thought it time to move. So I took shelter under one of the big trees."

"That was a risky—"

"Oh, I know that it is folly to shelter under trees during thunderstorms," continued Waldo, "but I'm a careless beggar like that. I'm a bit of a fatalist. If I'm booked to die by being struck by lightning, it doesn't much matter where I stand. And I much preferred a dry back to a wet one—so I parked myself under that tree. The rain poured down, and the thunder rolled and the lightning flashed. You'll pardon my eloquence, but the storm deserves it. It was a real beauty. And then, at

just about that time, the doomed stranger appeared.

"The which?" asked Tinker.

"I shall refer to him as the doomed stranger, because I don't know him by any other name," replied Waldo. "I spotted him coming across the common through the rain, and I believe he was a bit dazed. Perhaps he had received a shock from one of the earlier flashes. Anyhow, the poor fellow was stumbling along through the patches of gorse, and didn't seem to know where he was or what he was doing.

"I was just about to hail him, and to urge him to join me under the tree, when something happened which proved that you can't always go by hearsay; and, incidentally, I take it that I'm not destined to end this earthly round by being struck by lightning.

"In short, there was a sudden blinding flash. So blinding, that I can't describe it properly. It simply came down like a streak, with a peculiar hissing noise. It was all over in an instant, of course, and I shouldn't like to experience another such happening. Why on earth I wasn't struck I can't possibly imagine. The lightning seemed to hit the ground all round me."

"I presume it hit the man you have referred to as the doomed stranger?"

"We're coming to that," replied Waldo. "I was simply bowled clean over—flung to the ground as though a giant had wreaked his will upon me. Without the slightest exaggeration, Blake, I was paralysed for over ten minutes—literally paralysed:

"In fact, I thought it was all up with me. For an awful moment I believed that I was completely crippled. Every time I tried to move an arm or a leg I expected to see electric sparks coming out of me. Fully twenty minutes must have elapsed before I had enough power to get to my feet. I'm confoundedly lucky to be alive. Of course, the effect soon wore off after I was up, and I half decided to give up my project and to get back to the Cecil.

"Somehow, I seemed to remember having heard a kind of scream, and then I remembered that I hadn't seen any more of that stranger. It gave me a bit of a turn, because I recalled that the lightning had struck at just about the place where I had last spotted the chap. Anyhow, I scouted round, just on the off-chance of being of use. The rain had stopped now, and the storm was passing. Then I found it."

He paused, and shook his head sombrely.

"No need to describe what I found, you two—you've seen it," he went on slowly. "The poor beggar was killed instantly, that's one mercy. That flash of lightning had just wiped him out. And while I stood there, looking down at him, an idea came to me—quite a brilliant idea. Why shouldn't I turn this accidental death to account? It hadn't taken me long to see that the dead man was just about my own build."

"My hat!" said Tinker. "I'm beginning to see daylight!"

"I half decided to chuck it up,



Simon Kern's eyes were wide open and he was looking fixedly at the lamp. It was flickering a bit. Was the thing going out? Or was it a sign that—

"Kern!"

Simon Kern sat forward, his heart leaping madly, as his name was suddenly called in the darkness.

though, when I remembered that the man probably had a wife and children, or parents," continued Waldo. "It wasn't a particularly nice job, but I searched him. There wasn't a thing in that man's clothes to establish his identity. Not a card—not a letter—nothing! He was fairly well dressed, and there were a few odd shillings in his pocket. But nothing to tell me who he was. So I thought I might as well go ahead with the business.

"It was quite simple. I had already turned out the man's pockets, and I transferred all my own pocket contents into his. I saw no reason why he shouldn't be accepted as me—dead."

"But why did you want to perform this hoax?"

"My idea of poetic justice," replied Waldo. "I dare say you'll call it one of my characteristic stunts, and perhaps it was. But you'll see the full purport of the idea soon.

In fact, I'll tell you now. My plan was to make it appear that I was dead, and that Kern had murdered me."

"But you were supposed to have been struck by lightning," said Tinker.

"I know; but I reckoned that, after setting a little trail, Blake would follow it up and suspect Kern," said Waldo. "Or if Blake didn't, the police certainly would. Incidentally, the police have! Doesn't it strike you as being rather fitting that Kern should be shoved into the dock and sentenced to death for a 'murder' that he didn't commit? Rather rich punishment for the skunk, eh?"

"Hang it, Waldo, that wouldn't have been playing the game!" protested Tinker.

"Why not?"

"Because it would have been murder itself—on your part," replied Tinker. "If Kern had been hanged for that supposed crime—"

"He would have got his deserts!" interrupted Waldo. "Kern murdered Maitland, and my little dodge would only have served the ends of justice."

"That is one way of looking at it, I suppose," admitted Blake. "But we don't know that Kern actually murdered Maitland."

"You're satisfied about it, aren't you?"

"Well, yes."

"Then what's the quibble?"

"It is one thing for you and I to be satisfied, Waldo, and another thing for the law to be satisfied," said Blake. "And even if you are prepared to take the law into your own hands, I am not. But go ahead with your story—let's hear the rest."

"The next thing I did was to lay a trail to Kern's house," replied Waldo. "It was a comparatively easy matter for me to break into the library, and it didn't take me long to fake up the evidence. I wonder if you found a tiepin on the body, Blake?"

"I did."

"And did you recognise it?"

"Yes; it was Kern's."

"I put it there, as a kind of subtle touch," explained Waldo, with a grin. "I was sure you'd spot it, and I was equally sure you'd recognise it. I found it on Kern's desk, and I noticed that the thread of the little stub at the end—the thing that keeps a valuable tiepin secure—was worn out. I take it that Kern had put it on his desk to be sent for repair. Anyhow, it came in handy."

"What about the bloodstains?"

"Mine."

"And the gory poker?" asked Tinker.

"That was my gore, too."

"But you weren't injured," said Blake.

"That was nothing. I gave myself a punch on the nose, and tapped about half a pint," said Waldo complacently. "It was worth it. When I left Kern's place, I felt that everything was all set. The body would be discovered, the trail to the house would be found, and Kern would be implicated. I pictured him being arrested for murder, and I was getting ready to enjoy the developments."

"And then what?"

"Well, as I went back to town, I began thinking," said Waldo. "I could see all sorts of things going wrong. Perhaps some ordinary people would find that body, and then crowds would come round, obliterating my carefully prepared trail. And it occurred to me that Kern would get rather active when he found his library in the state I had left it. So an addition to the scheme was indicated. It wasn't good enough to leave that tricky affair to the police."

"So you thought of the gov'nor?" asked Tinker.

"Exactly!" nodded Waldo. "I left it as late as I dared—just after seven o'clock—and rang up."

"So you were that woman, were you?" said Blake gruffly.

"Awfully sorry, but I had to be careful," apologised Waldo. "Still, I didn't imitate the feminine tones so badly, did I?"

"I fancy you've met Kern's housekeeper," said Blake.

"I thought you would jump to that," chuckled the Wonder Man. "Yes, I've had two nice little chats with Mrs. Finch. I called upon her twice last week in the guise of an insurance agent. So when I rang you up, Blake, I gave a spirited imitation of Mrs. Finch's tones."

"You see, my idea was to get you on the job, knowing that you would bite. I thought there was just a chance of your rumbling the whole outfit, but even this didn't worry me, because I was sure you would get the police into the case, and I could count on them all right. Quite simple, wasn't it?"

Sexton Blake made rather a wry face.

"You fooled me, Waldo, and I've got to admit it," he replied. "But I can't quite understand why you came here."

"For one thing, I wanted to relieve your mind," grinned Waldo. "I knew how upset you would be about my demise, so I wanted to disillusion you—particularly after I had heard that Kern had escaped. I want to help you, Blake—to lend you my valuable assistance in getting the beggar. It's a shame that he should bolt like that, after all my pains."

"But there's one thing you've overlooked, Waldo," said Sexton Blake. "I'm not interested in Kern."

"Rats!" replied the Wonder Man. "You're perfectly keen to bring home that Maitland murder to him. As a man who likes to see justice done, you can't have any other desire. And, as I have said, I'll help."

Blake was frowning.

"There's one thing I can't quite understand," he said. "I take it that you did all that work in Kern's house without his knowledge?"

"Yes, of course."

"And when we got to Kern's house this morning Kern was in bed, and he refused to listen to his housekeeper," said Blake musingly. "In fact, he never knew that his library had been tampered with. Why, then, did he bolt?"

"By jingo, yes!" said Tinker, with a start. "We thought he had run because he was wanted for murder; but Waldo's yarn has upset that theory. Why did Kern sheer off like that?"

Waldo smiled indulgently.

"I think I can explain that, too," he remarked. "The fact is, Kern was on edge, and he was quite ready to run at the slightest provocation. My idea is to let things go on just as they are, Blake."

"That, of course, is impossible."

"Why?" asked Waldo. "There's no reason why you two should tell anybody that I'm alive. I suggest that the deception shall be carried on, Kern arrested, and put into the dock for murdering me. Think of the unique situation, Blake! Doesn't it appeal to you?"

"Not in the least."

"I thought it wouldn't," sighed Waldo.

"Think of that poor unknown man," went on Blake. "If the police are allowed to maintain their

false impression that you are the dead man, the poor fellow's true identity will never be sought for. And it is quite likely there are anxious relatives searching for him—waiting for him."

"That's a point, I'll admit," said Waldo. "But in face of this more important aspect—"

"No, I must remove this misapprehension at once," declared Blake. "The police must be informed of the absolute truth."

"Remember, I've been speaking in confidence," warned Waldo.

"Nonsense!" retorted Blake. "You did not bind me to any secrecy, and I'm telling you quite frankly that I shall set the thing to rights as soon as ever I possibly can."

"But look here—"

"The police have no case against Kern, and it is utterly wrong that he should be hounded," continued Blake. "A word from me will put the whole thing on a different footing, and—"

"But Kern's an absolute viper!" interrupted Waldo. "Why on earth should you worry yourself about him being hounded?"

"Because I always strive to be just," replied Blake quietly. "Happily, my conscience is not quite so loose as yours, Waldo. If there's a real case against Kern, I'll hunt him with unqualified vigour; but when there's no case at all, it is my duty to tell the police so."

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER. Setting The Trap.



RUPERT WALDO
gave another sigh.

"That's the worst of you, Blake—you're too particular," he said regretfully. "I'm getting more or less honest these days, but I don't carry the thing to extremes. We're both convinced that Kern murdered Maitland. Well, why shouldn't the brute swing for murdering somebody else?"

What's the difference?"

"There's a big difference," insisted Blake. "If Kern had actually killed somebody else, it would be another matter. But that man on the common was struck by lightning, and his death was purely accidental. We can't have a man hanged for that."

"The gov'nor's right," said Tinker. "You've got to admit it, Waldo."

The Wonder Man shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't admit it, but we'll let it pass," he said. "I thought you would be particular, Blake, so I'm prepared for another approach—one that ought to appeal to you. Supposing we can establish Kern's guilt in the other murder? The murder of Maitland?"

"If there's any prospect of that, I'll co-operate willingly," said Blake. "But I warn you, Waldo, that I won't stand for any trickery—"

"Don't worry about that—I'm not such a fool as to try it," interrupted Waldo. "I made a compact with Sir Rodney Drummond to get rid of his three enemies—and he promised me a

big prize if I succeeded. Well, Maitland has gone, and Rorke has gone.

"Maitland supposedly committed suicide, but we know that Kern murdered him. Rorke died of fright, and if we can only bring Maitland's murder home to Kern, my job's done. So, you see, I'm jolly anxious to push this thing along."

"I can quite see that," smiled Blake. "But what makes you think that we can locate the weak spot in Kern's armour?"

"I'll tell you," said Waldo, leaning forward. "Let's go into this together, Blake. Your interest will be to further the ends of justice—mine to get hold of Sir Rodney's prize. Nothing like being frank. By the way, Tinker, what's the idea of that boiled owl expression?"

"I'm trying to think of something," said Tinker. "Something you said ten minutes ago. Oh, I remember! You didn't explain why Kern bolted this morning, although he knew nothing of your tricks."

"We're just coming to it, as it happens," said Waldo. "I'll tell you why Kern bolted. I rang up Kern yesterday, and genially informed him that Sir Rodney Drummond had left the Chase with his butler for some unknown destination abroad."

"Oh, you did?"

"Yes, Blake, I did," smiled Waldo. "I told Kern that Sir Rodney was well out of his reach. I also mentioned that I was Sir Rodney's agent, and that I was not only after him, but that I would soon get him. I hinted that I would have him in a convict cell in less than a month. Then I rang off, leaving him to his thoughts."

"And why on earth did you do this?"

"Just for my own amusement," chuckled Waldo. "I have my own way of working, Blake, and I wanted to put the wind up Kern, and make him quake in his shoes. He evidently quaked all right—as he proved this morning, when he bolted for absolutely nothing."

"H'm! I see what you mean," mused Sexton Blake. "Kern must have heard strangers in the house, and he remembered your warning. He thought the police were after him, and he ran away."

"That's about the size of it, I suppose."

"But how did you know that Sir Rodney had gone abroad?"

"Sir Rodney told me himself."

"When?"

"The day before he went abroad," replied Waldo. "I popped down to Stoke Pudney Chase to see him, and he told me that you had suggested the idea. Personally, I thought it was good, because it gave me a free hand. I was able to devote myself wholeheartedly to Kern."

"Did Sir Rodney give you a free hand, too?"

"Well, in a sort of half-hearted way," said Waldo. "He warned me about keeping the fight clean, and all that sort of thing, and I promised to go easy. Not that it made any difference. I had made up my mind to finish the thing, whether I got paid or not. And I'm an obstinate brute, Blake."

Sexton Blake was looking thoughtful. "You told Kern that the Chase was empty?" he asked.

"Yes."

"H'm! And he heard this news only yesterday?"

"Exactly," said Waldo approvingly. "I can see your idea, Blake—and I thought of it, too."

"This morning, Kern ran away because he feared the police were after him," pursued Blake. "Now, a man

like Kern knows everything there is to know about bolting. He might try to get out of England, but I doubt it. He knows that the ports are watched too closely."

"Far more likely to lie low for a while."

"Yes—and why not at the Chase?" asked Blake. "The knowledge that the place is empty and deserted would be quite fresh in his mind. I wouldn't mind wagering that Simon Kern has bolted for Sir Rodney's prison-like home. He knows the place well—and he knows of those enormous high walls, and the sinister reputation it owns."

"What better place for hiding in?" asked Waldo. "I believe Kern is there, too, and the police will never dream of looking in such a spot. In fact, it's about the last place on earth where they'd dream of looking. He could lie low there in absolute safety."

"But how about proving Kern's guilt?" put in Tinker. "The fact that he's at the Chase won't make much difference. Before we can put him in the dock for murder, we've got to get the evidence."

Waldo tapped his chest.

"I have a plan," he said.

"You seem to be full of them," chuckled Blake. "Well, let's have it. What is this scheme of yours? I can only hope that it is free of your characteristic trickiness."

"It's absolutely innocuous," replied Waldo smilingly. "But I rather think it might work the oracle. If I could have done it alone, I would have had a shot—but it needs two of us. It has been one of my cardinal rules in life to work single-handed—and I may as well tell you at once that I wouldn't take any other crook into my confidence. But it would be an honour to work with you, Blake, and I hope you'll agree with the little programme."

Waldo proceeded to outline his scheme. He talked eagerly. His eyes were gleaming, his whole being was alert. And as he detailed the proposed project, Sexton Blake's own face became more animated. It was very seldom that the great detective allowed his emotions to show.

"Well?" asked Waldo, at last. "Do you think it'll hackle?"

"It's a cert!" said Tinker enthusiastically.

"I wouldn't be so optimistic as that," commented Blake. "But I am perfectly willing to try it, Waldo—and I'll help you to the bitter end."

"Good man! That's a bargain!"

They shook hands, and Tinker grinned delightedly. It was an unusual spectacle to see his guv'nor shaking hands on a compact with a man who had always been a deadly enemy.

"There's one stipulation, however," warned Blake. "We shall have to get Lennard into this."

"Couldn't we do it on our own?"

"We could, but we need a Scotland Yard man there to take the evidence," replied Blake. "He's very essential, Waldo—although you may not care to meet him."

The Wonder Man grinned.

"Bless your heart, I shall be only too glad to pass the time of day with our friend, the chief inspector!" he replied cheerfully. "I only hope he won't come armed with two or three warrants for my arrest—on some of those old charges."

"I'll see if I can get hold of him now," said Blake.

He turned to the telephone, and was lucky enough to find the chief inspector in his office.

"That you, Lennard?" said Blake.

"Heard anything of Kern yet?"

"No; but I've got the net out," replied Lennard briskly. "It won't be long before we've combed him in."

"Can you spare an hour?" asked Sexton Blake. "I want you to come round to Baker Street at once, Lennard."

"Oh, I say! I'm absolutely bunged up—"

"It's rather important," interrupted Blake. "Waldo is here."

There was a moment's silence.

"Say that again," came Lennard's voice. "I didn't hear you."

"Waldo is here."

"Well, I'm hanged! I thought that was what you said at first, but I couldn't believe it!" growled the chief inspector. "This is hardly the time for jokes, Blake, when all's said and done—"

"It's not a joke," broke in the detective. "Waldo is here—in my consulting-room. He asks me to pay you his compliments. The man's alive, Lennard."

"What!"

"He hoaxed us over that dead body," said Blake.

A few lurid remarks floated across the wire.

"That trickster again!" roared Lennard. "Do you mean to say he's alive? And here we are, circulating Kern's description, and describing him as a murderer, and—What the—Hang it, Blake, this is too thick!"

"Well, come round, and I'll explain."

"I'll be there in ten minutes!" snorted the chief inspector.

WALDO extended his hand genially as the C.I.D. man came into the consulting-room, hot and flustered.

"Good old Lennard!" said Waldo heartily. "It's a real pleasure to meet you as a friend—and not an enemy."

"Who said I was a friend?" snapped Lennard, taking the proffered hand, nevertheless. "I'd like to wring your neck! What the thunder do you mean by causing us all this trouble? When you're decently dead, it's a pity you can't stay dead!"

"I wanted to, but Blake wouldn't allow it," he replied. "I only worked that dodge on Wimbledon Common this morning to get Kern into the soup. But as he escaped, I want to help you to capture him."

And for half an hour they all talked. Lennard was looking in a very different frame of mind when the discussion was over.

"It's a chance, anyhow," he said. "I'm not at all sure that you're right about Kern, although this dodge ought to prove it. I believe Maitland committed suicide. Still, there's no telling."

"We'll force a confession out of him to-night, if we have any luck," said Blake. "It's Waldo's idea, and I hope it goes through."

Lennard looked at the master crook curiously.

"Why in the name of wonder don't you chuck up this hunted-hare life, and live straight?" he asked bluntly.

"There's nothing in it, Waldo—nothing in being a crook."

"I sometimes think you're right," agreed Waldo, with an expression of unusual thoughtfulness on his face. "But it's difficult. Once a man has got a reputation like mine, he can't very well alter his mode of life. You people take care that a man's past is always raked up!"

Lennard looked uncomfortable.

"That's not true," he replied. "When

a man gets sense, and runs straight, we don't interfere with him. But there are thousands of the blighters who make a pretence of running straight, and they're on the crook all the time. Still, we needn't discuss this. I expect it's just like pouring water on a duck's back so far as you're concerned, Waldo."

"I'm not so sure," said the Wonder Man slowly.

THE NINTH CHAPTER. The Haunting of Simon Kern.



SIMON KERN started, and looked round fearfully.

"A rat, I suppose," he muttered in a shaky voice. "Curse this place! I was a fool to come here! It's getting on my nerves—it's enough to drive anybody out of his mind!"

He sat in the library at the Chase—Sir Rodney Drummond's ancestral home in Surrey. He had the entire house in his possession, and outside the night wind was sighing mournfully.

Kern was a big man, with a bloated, blotchy face. His eyes were pale blue—unpleasant, shifty eyes.

He sat in Sir Rodney's favourite chair, and the only light in the room was supplied by an old-fashioned oil lamp on the desk. There were dark shadows in every corner.

It was not a pleasant apartment for a man who was troubled with jangling nerves. The whole place was gloomy and ghostly and sinister. It hadn't been so bad during the hours of daylight, but now it was a torment to Kern's ragged nerves.

Exactly as Sexton Blake had intended, the stockbroker had sought refuge in Sir Rodney's empty house. It seemed such an obvious thing to do. And Kern was quite satisfied that he had got beyond the reach of the police.

Nobody had seen him come, and his presence at the Chase was unsuspected. An inspection of the store-rooms had relieved him. There was food to last him well over a month, and the enormously high walls which surrounded the grounds had given him a sensation of security and comfort at first.

But now his view was changing. He felt hemmed in—a prisoner already.

It was late—close upon midnight—but Kern had not thought of retiring. Indeed, when he slept, he would sleep in this very chair. Nothing would induce him to go upstairs—through that shadowy old hall, and along the ghostly upper corridors.

He was not usually a nervous man. At any ordinary time, indeed, he would have laughed at the shadows of this old house. Kern was a big, blustering individual, and under normal circumstances he was full of a blatant boldness.

But now he was a wreck of his usual self.

He was a prey to a thousand fears. Not material fears—but unknown dread. He could not give a name to his horror. The house had got on his nerves—had worked him up to such a pitch that every little creak gave him a jar.

Occasionally a faint scratching would come from the skirting—a rat, perhaps. A board would creak, and the old shutters would rattle in the wind.

Kern wanted more light, but there were no other lamps, and he was in mortal dread lest this solitary illumination should give out. He cursed himself again and again for having come to the place.

But when he remembered that this was a safe haven, he resigned himself. Protected by those great walls, shut in this empty old house, he was as safe as though he were the lord of a feudal fortress.

And the irony of it was that Kern was labouring under a complete delusion.

He had no knowledge of that death on Wimbledon Common. He knew nothing of the disorder in his own library. He hadn't the faintest inkling that warrants had been issued for his arrest on a charge of murder.

No, he had been scared into this sudden plight by hearing strangers in his house that morning—by hearing his housekeeper's plaintive sobbing. In a moment of panic he had fled, the victim of a guilty conscience.

For he remembered that phone call of Waldo's, too.

Only recently he had effected a considerable swindle in worthless oil shares—and he had jumped to the conclusion that the police were after him in connection with these!

So his fears regarding the police were not acute.

Scotland Yard was not likely to institute much of a hunt for a mere swindler. There would be no hue and cry. If Kern had known the real nature of the warrant against him, his condition would have been abject, indeed!

His fears were those of a nervous wreck—not those of a criminal who was hiding from justice.

It was only natural, perhaps, that in his morbid state of mind he should think of morbid things. He tried to steady himself, but in vain. His thoughts went back to Maitland—to Rorke.

Their deaths had worried him. Maitland had died by his—Kern's—hand. Hubert Rorke had not possessed the pluck to help. But what of Rorke himself? He had gone now, too—and he had died of fright!

Kern had recently read the report of the inquest with inward misgivings. There was something uncanny about the series of disasters. First Maitland had been arrested, and he had been murdered that his tongue should be silenced.

Then Rorke had gone. Would it be his own turn next?

Kern remembered that voice over the telephone. Sir Rodney Drummond's agent—and this man was on his trail! He was going to smash him as he had smashed his fellow-blackmailers. The stockbroker felt that his years of immunity were at an end.

In spite of himself, he kept thinking of Maitland.

He sat there in his chair, a flabby, pitiful wreck. He thought of that past crime of his. Oscar Maitland had been arrested, and released on bail. And Kern had feared that his associate would turn King's Evidence—and so he had poisoned him.

The world thought that Maitland had committed suicide, but Kern knew the horrible truth.

And now that he was alone in this gloomy old house, with endless fears haunting him, his thoughts continually dwelt upon Maitland. It would have been different in an hotel, or even in an empty house in London.

But this old pile was enough to drive him mad.

He was cut off from the world—utterly

alone. He felt that some doom was hovering over him. And, then, there was the uncertainty of it all.

He did not know what had happened.

He did not even know if it was necessary for him to hide. Perhaps the police hadn't been after him at all! Perhaps he was allowing his fears to overrule his common-sense?

"I'll get out of this to-morrow!" he chattered. "I'll leave this infernal place as soon as it's daylight. I don't care if they get me! I'd rather be in a cell than—What was that?"

He swung round with a jumpy start.

From apparently nowhere, a chilly draught had cut across the room. The oil-lamp flickered, and for a dreadful moment Kern believed that it was going out.

He rose to his feet and looked round him. He was breathing hard. The shutters were up at the window, and the curtains were drawn. It was a quaint old room, lined with great bookshelves. Fusty volumes stared down at him from the gloom, and there were all sorts of recesses and deep corners.

It had seemed so lucky to get into this place of safety at first—but now he wanted to flee. But he could not pluck up the courage. There was that wilderness of a garden to go through, with the frowning walls looking down on him. No, he would stay here for the night. He could do nothing else.

He sat down again, shakily pulled out a cigar, and lit it.

A moment later it was burning unevenly down one side, and his restless teeth had split the other end of it. He hurled it into the fireplace with a curse of rage.

"What's the good?" he panted. "I can't smoke! I can't read, and unless I can get some sleep I shall go off my head!"

Again that dread feeling came over him—the haunting fear that he was to share the same fate as his two associates. A week or so ago they had been alive, prosperous, healthy. Now they were both in their graves. He was the only one left.

He heaped curses upon the head of Sir Rodney Drummond, and resolved that he would make every endeavour to find out where the baronet had gone. Yes, he would locate him—he would trail him down, and silence him for ever. Couldn't he use the same methods as he had employed with Oscar Maitland?

A poisoner!

Kern shuddered. Of all murderers the poisoner is the worst. He seemed to regard himself in a detached sort of way, as though he were another being. There was no conscience about Simon Kern now. He had no atom of regret for the man he had killed.

He was fearful—for his own skin.

Utterly weary, he lay back in the chair.

His head was throbbing, his throat felt dry. His eyes were wide open, and he was looking fixedly at the lamp. It was flickering a bit. A portent? Was the cursed thing going out? Or was it a sign that—

"Kern!"

Simon Kern sat forward, his heart leaping madly. It was his imagination, of course, but it had seemed that a voice had come from out of the surrounding blackness.

A whisper, so faint that it had hardly been an audible sound. And yet the name had been pronounced—his own name. With staring eyes he sat forward and looked round.

His commonsense told him that there could be nobody there. This house was empty, except for himself. There was

no other living soul within miles. Those high walls—

"Simon Kern!"

The whisper came again.

"What—what was that?" panted Kern hoarsely. "Who's there? Who's calling me? Who is it?"

"Don't you recognise my voice?" came the mysterious voice. "Have you forgotten the voice of Oscar Maitland?"

A kind of scream escaped Kern's lips, and he staggered back so drunkenly that he fell headlong over a chair. He was on his feet again in a flash, staring with bulging eyes into the blackness of the corners.

Complete silence—except for the sighing of the wind outside.

"Fool—fool!" shouted Kern, seeking to gain encouragement from his own voice. "You're going crazy! It's only your imagination—there's nothing here—there's nobody at all! You're hearing voices in your own brain. Pull yourself together, you madman!"

But he shivered feebly, and his breath was drawn in in great gulps.

"I'm getting demented!" he muttered hoarsely. "Maitland! How could the voice of Maitland come to me here? He's dead! The man's dead! Curse him! I'm glad he's dead! I was always afraid of him—always uncertain. All this trouble is through him. Everything was going all right until—"

"Murderer!" came the words from the gloom. "Have you no remorse? Have you no pity for the one you assassinated? You think I am dead, Simon Kern, but I have come back. I am here to haunt you! Don't you recognise my voice?"

Kern fell back, mouthing horribly.

That voice! Yes, it was the voice of Maitland! No longer a whisper, but a real voice, out of the air itself. And it was Maitland's voice. Didn't he know? Wasn't he familiar with Maitland's rasping tones? He shrank back into the big chair, his face like chalk, his hands quivering and trembling.

"It's nothing but my imagination!" he shouted. "It's nothing but a delusion! I'm overwrought. I need sleep—I need light and warmth and companionship! This place has driven me into a cringing coward. And I can't stand it—I can't stay—"

The words died away on his lips.

The twitching of his fingers ceased, and he became rigid. He was convinced that he had actually heard nothing—that the voice was a mere trick of his imagination.

But were his eyes playing him false, too?

There was something moving over in that dark corner—the darkest recess of all. There was a cupboard in that recess—a deep, gloomy, mysterious opening which he had not dared to investigate. And something was moving there!

Nothing definite. It was not a distinctive shape at all. To Simon Kern's fascinated gaze the thing seemed intangible, ghostly. Just a light patch in the surrounding darkness. But it seemed to be taking shape. Yes, a figure was materialising.

Kern was immovable. His muscles were fixed.

He felt that he could hardly breathe. All his life he had been a hard, relentless materialist. He had professed the utmost contempt for ghosts. To him, Spiritualism was a fake and a fraud. He had laughed to scorn all such phenomena as family spectres.

But now that this mysterious Something was appearing before him, he was



With one swing Waldo heaved Kern completely off his feet and swung him aloft—right above his head.

like a frightened schoolgirl. His shattered nerves were no aid to him in this crisis.

"I am here, Simon Kern," came a soft, gloating voice. "You are the man who murdered me, and I have come to accuse you. The world has not condemned you for your foul crime—but you will not escape in the end."

It was the Figure that spoke.

And to Kern's horrified gaze, he could now see Oscar Maitland. A faint, hazy outline of Maitland—but there could be no mistaking that stooping figure—that set of the head. And the features, too—and the voice! The ghost of Oscar Maitland had come to haunt him.

Kern screamed.

There was something horrifying in that cry.

It had burst from Kern's throat like the sound of a soul in anguish. And with the recovery of his voice, so he found that he could use his limbs. He tottered out of his chair, backing away drunkenly and dizzily.

"What have you to say, Kern?" asked the figure. "Do you deny that you placed poison in my cup? Foul and heartless murderer! Do you dare to deny your guilt?"

"It's a lie!" panted Kern. "I did not kill you! It was Rorke! Rorke placed the poison in your glass!"

"Liar!"

"It was Rorke!" shrieked Kern. "I tried to stop him, but he would not listen! Get back—get back! Don't come near me! I tell you it was Rorke!"

He slunk away, quivering.

And that figure advanced—slowly, silently, as though bent upon vengeance.

Kern was not the kind of man to swoon, or to crumple up. He was a brute, with strong muscles, and a coarse nature. His fear was genuine, but there was no prospect of him being driven out of his mind.

"It was Rorke!" he panted, again and again. "Go away, Maitland! Go back to your grave!"

"We will settle this point!" said the spectre. "It was Rorke who killed me, you say? I call upon Hubert Rorke to come now—to answer to this charge that you have brought against him! Hubert Rorke! Come!"

Kern felt that he was indeed going mad.

For another figure appeared out of the gloom—appeared as though from the blackness itself.

"You called me, Maitland?" came another voice.

"Rorke!" shouted Simon Kern desperately.

He had the air of a trapped animal. He stared dazedly. For he could recognise the wizened features of Hubert Rorke, his other associate.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

Waldo's Last Hand.



THERE was a tense silence.

Both those spectral figures were hazy, indistinct, and unreal. If Kern had not been told of their identity, he might not have recognised them. But his imagination was at work. The voices were true enough, without any question—and recognition of the figures was but a single step. The

trapped man had his back to the wall, and he was giddy with fear.

"Foul and abject liar!" exclaimed the voice of Rorke. "You accuse me of murder? You know as well as I do, Simon Kern, that it was I who protested—I who tried to stay your hand. Do you deny that it was you who killed Maitland?"

"Do you still deny it?" repeated the voice of Maitland.

"Leave me alone!" sobbed Kern. "Yes, I killed you, Maitland! You can't hurt me now—you're only a ghost! You're only a figment of my own imagination!"

He uttered a wild scream.

"What do I care?" he went on frantically. "What do I care for either of you? I killed you, you treacherous dog, and I'm sorry I didn't kill Rorke, too! I gloat over it! I'll confess that I killed you, Maitland, and now perhaps you'll go? Perhaps you'll leave me in peace? I'm safe—I'm not afraid of such—"

He broke off, his eyes blinking.

Without warning, brilliant lights had appeared. A very solid figure ran across the library, and seized hold of Simon Kern's arm. The man stared as though in a trance.

"I arrest you, Simon Kern, for the murder of Oscar Maitland!" said a crisp, businesslike voice. "If you'll take my advice, you'll reserve any comments or remarks until you can consult your counsel. I am only performing my duty."

Kern swallowed hard.

"Who—who are you?" he whispered between his dry lips.

"I am Chief-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard," replied the other, as he neatly clapped a pair of handcuffs over Kern's wrists. "We tricked you, Kern, but you've confessed to the murder of Maitland, and there are four witnesses to your statement."

Kern said not a word.

He was too dazed—too bewildered. There were lights everywhere. Four figures were in the library with him. Two of them were looking rather grotesque. They discarded flimsy gauze, and peculiar-looking masks. They stood revealed as two grim-looking men.

One was Sexton Blake, and the other Rupert Waldo.

"Well, it worked," said Waldo contentedly. "I thought it would, Blake."

"You've done wonderfully, gentlemen," said the chief inspector. "We've wanted to get this beggar for many a year—but I never hoped to arrest him on a capital charge like this. This'll do me a bit of good at the Yard."

"Thanks to Waldo!" smiled Blake. "Rather a peculiar situation, eh, Lennard?"

"By glory, so it is!" said the chief inspector, with a grin. "Thanks all

the same, Waldo. This was your scheme, and I congratulate you. As far as I'm concerned, I've got nothing whatever against you. It's a pity you don't confine yourself to this kind of work."

"There's plenty of kick in it!" acknowledged Waldo. "In fact, I don't mind admitting that I've had the thrill of my life!"

Both he and Blake had acted their parts cleverly.

The ghost of Oscar Maitland had been played by Waldo, and he had copied the dead man's voice so accurately because he had had considerable acquaintance with Maitland before he had died. Waldo possessed an extraordinary knack of mimicry.

Blake had been no less clever in the impersonation of Rorke. The victim had not guessed an inkling of the truth. Right up to the time when the lights appeared he had believed that his own imagination was responsible for all.

But now he was getting his wits back.

The gloominess of this old house no longer oppressed him. The presence of other human beings restored him with singular speed. There were not even any ghosts—no spectral voices. Kern pulled himself up, and the colour returned to his flabby face.

"You're all crazy!" he shouted abruptly.

"Steady!" said Lennard. "You'd better not—"

"Take these things off my wrists!" thundered Kern. "Do you think you can fool me like this? By Heaven! I'll have you dismissed from the Force!"

"Go ahead, if it pleases you," said Lennard grimly. "But don't forget that you've confessed, Mr. Kern."

"I tell you, you're mad!" roared Kern. "I was not responsible for what I was saying. You tricked me—you made me think that—"

"Hadn't you better stop that?" interrupted Waldo contemptuously. "I'm the agent of Sir Rodney Drummond who spoke to you over the telephone, Kern. I set out to get you—and I've got you. You can't escape from the noose now, so you needn't try."

Kern became reckless.

"Take these things off me!" he shouted, struggling madly. "You can't hold me here! I'll defeat the lot of you!"

With maddened frenzy, he suddenly pulled his wrists apart.

Snap!

The handcuffs broke, and before Lennard could have time to stop him, Kern was running heavily towards the door.

"Stop him!" roared Lennard, in alarm.

"Leave him to me," said Waldo coolly.

With one bound he reached Simon Kern's side, and grasped him. Kern was whipping out a revolver from his hip pocket. He meant to make a desperate attempt to escape—and he was relying upon his brute strength to see him through.

"Stand back!" he snarled.

"Want to commit another murder?" asked Waldo curtly. "Put that thing down, you idiot!"

Crack!

Kern pulled the trigger, and a bullet plunged into Rupert Waldo's arm. He did not even wince. But before Kern could fire again, the Wonder Man had acted.

With one swing, he heaved Kern completely off his feet, and swung him aloft right above his head. Then he tossed him down upon the old-fashioned lounge, and Kern fell heavily. Waldo went across and held him there. In

spite of Kern's great strength, he could do nothing against this opponent.

"You'd better get some stronger bracelets, Lennard," said Waldo coolly. "You devils!" panted Kern feverishly. "You haven't taken me away yet! I killed Maitland, and I'll kill all of you before I've done!"

"Well, that confession wasn't wrong from you by trickery, was it?" said Lennard, with satisfaction. "Thanks, Waldo! I believe the beggar would have escaped if you hadn't been on hand. I think we'd better rope him up. Tinker, you might call those men of mine."

"Any old thing," said Tinker cheerily.

FIVE minutes later, Simon Kern was helpless.

In addition to wearing handcuffs, he was tightly bound. And three powerful plain-clothes men had taken him in charge. He was removed to a waiting motor-car outside.

"Well, that's that," said Lennard, taking a deep breath. "Jove, it was pretty hot while it lasted—Hullo! Did that brute wing you, then?" he added, with concern.

"It's nothing," said Waldo.

Sexton Blake was peeling off the Wonder Man's jacket, and then he turned up his sleeve. Blood was flowing freely from Waldo's arm. The bullet had gone clean through the fleshiest part without touching a bone.

"Don't you feel any pain?" asked Lennard curiously.

"Not a trace," laughed Waldo. "That's one of my peculiarities, you know. Painless Rupert! It's a great help in affairs of this sort."

He glanced at his watch, and nodded. "H'm! Time they were here," he remarked.

"Time who were here?" asked Sexton Blake.

"Sir Rodney and his man."

"But they're over in Switzerland," put in Tinker.

"Not if Sir Rodney took any notice of my wire," said Waldo urbanely.

"Didn't I tell you, Blake?"

"No, confound your impudence, you didn't!"

"Sorry!" grinned Waldo. "You see, I thought it would be rather a good wheeze to have Sir Rodney in at the death. So I told him to catch one of the air liners and to push on here later on this evening, so that he could arrive at twelve-thirty. The fact is," he added naively, "I want to touch that little reward of mine!"

"Rats!" said Tinker. "A fat lot you care about money! And you know jolly well you could trust Sir Rodney to pay you—"

"Well, I thought it would be rather nice for him to be here, anyway," amended Waldo. "We want to tell him that he's a free man now—that his enemies are beaten. Hullo! Here he is, unless I'm mistaken!"

They all listened.

"Can't hear anything," said Tinker. "My goodness! This chap's got ears like telephone receivers!"

A moment later Sir Rodney Drummond came bustling in, with his man, Jarvis, close behind.

"My dear Mr. Blake!" exclaimed the old baronet excitedly. "I have seen Kern outside—under arrest! The last of my enemies! Thank you a thousand times for—"

"Don't thank me, Sir Rodney," interrupted Blake. "Waldo was the man you commissioned to do this work—and Waldo is the man who has done it."

"And Waldo is the man who has enjoyed doing it," said the Wonder Man. "Only too delighted, Sir Rodney!"

Sir Rodney wrung his hand. "And you, sir?" he shouted, looking at Lennard.

"I represent Scotland Yard, Sir Rodney," said the chief-inspector. "Bless my soul!" chuckled the baronet. A motley trio, indeed! The official police—the world's greatest private detective—and the world's greatest—ahem!—crook!"

"To say nothing of Tinker!" said Waldo. "We mustn't forget Tinker!"

"Crook, did I say?" went on Sir Rodney. "Rubbish! This man is true blue! I won't hear a word against him!" he added, glaring defiantly at Lennard. "I don't care whether you are a representative of Scotland Yard or not—but Mr. Waldo is a friend of mine, and I'm proud of it! What do you say, Mr. Blake?"

"Waldo has been working splendidly in the cause of justice, Sir Rodney," replied Blake promptly. "I only hope

that he will continue in this happy strain."

"I'm a man of my word, and you shall have that money to-morrow, Mr. Waldo!" continued Sir Rodney. "You have given me my freedom, and in return money seems a paltry recompense—"

"With regard to that money, I don't feel comfortable in taking the sum we agreed upon," said Waldo quietly. "It is out of all proportion to the service I have rendered. Let us say a fifth part of it—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Sir Rodney. "I absolutely insist upon paying you the whole sum."

"Take it, Waldo, and live straight with it," urged Sexton Blake.

"You needn't worry about the Yard," said Lennard. "There may be one or two old charges against you, but they won't be pressed—unless you start any

of your old tricks. After this affair, you'll be perfectly safe. To tell you the honest truth, you're such an infernal handful that we'd rather have you on our side any day!"

Rupert Waldo smiled in his whimsical way.

"I'll think it over," he promised. "One of these days you'll probably find me setting up as a detective—in opposition to Blake!"

"Capital!" said Sir Rodney, with enthusiasm. "Then we shall see some rivalry—eh?"

Waldo bowed to all in general.

"As my services are no longer required, let me bid you au revoir," he said smoothly. "Cheerio, Blake! May our next meeting be as happy as this one!"

With a wave of his hand he went out, and passed into the night, his threefold task cleanly accomplished.

THE END.

THE STRIKING SHADOW.

(Continued from page 4.)

"But I have nothing to say," gasped Mr. Montague. "You were to protect me! Didn't I tell you that my life was in danger? You pretended to me that I should be quite safe! And now what has happened? In my own house—my private secretary—murdered in my very study!"

"We'd better get down to the facts, Mr. Montague. When did you see Mr. Denver Street last?"

Mr. Montague passed a hand across his damp forehead.

"It was ten o'clock. I left him in my study to do some work for me. It was just after half-past eleven when I went back to my study. I had been talking to Captain Vereker in the billiard-room. I remember the time because Vereker remarked that it was getting late and he must go. There was something I wanted to say to him, and I asked him to wait a little longer. It was then I remembered the report that Street was making out for me—"

He stopped abruptly.

"There was that man here again to-night—that John Blank. He came to try and get money out of me. I had Street concealed behind a screen in my study during the interview. He was taking down what the man said in shorthand. I was going to have the report sent to you."

A faint look of interest crept into Inspector Count's rather perplexed face.

"That's important. We know all about this fellow John Blank at the Yard. He's just finished a stretch of seven years. What time did he call, sir?"

"About ten minutes to ten."

"Did he stay long?"

"Not more than a few minutes."

"And you left Mr. Street at ten o'clock to write out his shorthand notes of the interview to which he had listened?"

"That's it. He was to bring it to me as soon as he had finished. When Captain Vereker told me it was half-past eleven, I was reminded of the fact that he'd been a long time over the job, and went up to see what he was doing."

"Tell me what you found?"

Mr. Montague gave a somewhat incoherent explanation of his discovery of Denver Street's dead body. He interrupted his description with frequent references to John Blank. The police

must lay their hands upon that man at once. Undoubtedly it was he who had committed the murder. He had come back by some means, possibly suspecting a report was being made out of the interview. He had found Denver Street occupied on the report and had killed him.

"I'll see that the man's collected at once, Mr. Montague," Count's exclaimed, rising. "I'll just go and have a few words on the telephone with the Yard."

He came back presently with a self-satisfied smile on his lips. To his rather limited mind, the intrusion of anything that might be regarded as out of the ordinary had a very disturbing effect; and there was an atmosphere about this business that he did not like. He would have pursued an ordinary criminal with professional efficiency to the threshold of the condemned cell, but this mysterious being who called himself the Striking Shadow—who openly boasted about what he intended to do, and then, in spite of the most careful precautions, did it—was something quite outside the run of his experience. And now, through the fog

of this eerie mystery, there had emerged a complete fact that he could take hold of.

John Blank, late Convict 49, of Dartmoor, lately released, had paid a visit to Mr. Montague that night for the purpose of extorting money from him by threats. It was conceivable that he had made his way back into the house, and returned to the room where he had interviewed Mr. Montague.

There he had found Denver Street engaged in drawing up a report of that interview for the police, and, realising the danger by which he was threatened, had killed him as he sat in the chair in front of the typewriter. Here was a reasonable explanation without any of what he contemptuously called film nonsense! Here was a definite man inspired by definite motives.

"Just a few more questions, Mr. Montague, and I won't trouble you any further for the moment. You saw nobody near the study when you opened the door and discovered what had taken place?"

Mr. Montague clasped his hand



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wearily to his forehead. He was making a tremendous mental effort to reconstruct that scene in all its appalling details.

"I opened the door. The room was in darkness. I think I called out Street's name. The fire was burning low, but there was just enough light to see the outline of his figure at the desk. I couldn't make out what he was doing. Then I switched on the light, and—and I saw what had been done."

He shivered as if with the cold. "Then there was nobody in the neighbourhood of the room? I suppose you rang the bell before you called out?"

Mr. Montague stared blankly for some moments at the inspector.

"I rang the bell. Yes. But there was somebody there—I remember now. Brade was on the landing. I hadn't seen him, and when he spoke my nerves were so jangled that I thought the Striking Shadow."

He stopped abruptly.

"Good gracious, inspector, you don't think it could be Brade, do you? He wanted to get something out of me. I'm surrounded these days by people who want something for nothing. And I told him downstairs in the drawing-room that there wouldn't be anything doing. You don't think, inspector—"

Inspector Coutts moistened the pencil he was holding, and arranged his notebook firmly on his knee.

"It would be a mistake, at this stage, Mr. Montague, to waste time in making guesses. Let's have the facts. You say Sir Titus Brade was on the landing outside the study. Just let me know how he behaved and what he said to you."

Coutts is Perplexed.

SEXTON BLAKE pushed the box of cigars across the desk in the direction of Inspector Coutts, who selected one with an abstracted air and placed it between his lips. Blake regarded him with a smile.

"There's no use telling me you're not worried, Coutts. Hadn't we better get down to what the trouble is?"

For the better part of a quarter of an hour Inspector Coutts had been seated in Blake's consulting-room, talking at random on a variety of topics, without disclosing the object of his visit. He looked across at his host now with a frown on his heavy face.

"What the dickens makes you think I'm worried?"

"Well, a careful man like you—one, too, who is an inveterate smoker—does not as a rule try to light a cigar without first cutting the end. You know that yourself, Coutts. Besides, you forget I've read the report in the paper of the inquest on Denver Street."

The inspector lay back in his chair with an air of resignation.

"I suppose I might just as well have told you from the start. Yes, that's what's on my mind, Blake—that's what I came to have a yarn with you about. It's a bad business."

Sexton Blake blew a cloud of tobacco-smoke from his lips.

"Formed any theory, Coutts? I noticed there wasn't much given away at the inquest."

"That's the worst of it. We didn't want to show our hand, so we asked for an adjournment. You see, Blake, there's so many infernal theories."

He looked up quickly as if conscious that Blake's eyes were watching him closely.

"You needn't spring that stuff on me about the Striking Shadow, Blake. I've got to deal with facts—not melodrama."

"What facts have you got?"

"I know that Denver Street was murdered in Mr. Montague's study somewhere between half-past nine and half-past eleven, which was the time when his body was discovered. The doctor who arrived at midnight and made an examination declared that he must have been dead an hour at least."

"Yes. All that came out in the evidence at the inquest, Coutts. What are the facts you spoke of?"

"You know we've got Trenchard in the house. He's acting as second-footman. He has made a point of keeping observation on all the rooms that are usually occupied in the house. In pursuance of this policy, he took Mr. Street a cup of coffee at half-past ten. Street was then seated by the fire engaged in writing something in shorthand."

"Have you got those notes?"

Coutts shook his head gloomily. "I wish we had. They would have thrown some light on the business. You see, just before ten, Mr. Montague had a visit from that fellow John Blank. You remember he's the same man who called that night when all the trouble began?"

"Yes, I remember."

"According to Mr. Montague's story, he had Street concealed behind a screen during the interview, taking down in shorthand what was said. He was to write out a report which was to be sent to the Yard. We could find no trace of the shorthand notes or the typed transcript. Whoever committed the crime destroyed that evidence."

"The average person would argue that the only person who would bother to destroy that evidence would be the man whom it implicated, and that the man who destroyed it also destroyed Denver Street."

"Exactly, Blake. I suppose you don't imagine I didn't think of that," Coutts

replied. "The first thing I did was to collect Blank."

"And what was the result?"

"A complete alibi. It appears he's got some sort of job with an information bureau in the West End. On instructions that he had received from his employer, Captain Vereker, he went round to see a Miss Lane, who is doing some research work for Captain Vereker at the Museum. Miss Lane lives in a flat in Nightingale Mansions off Victoria Street. He was there from ten minutes past ten until twenty minutes to twelve. We've got not only Miss Lane's evidence, but that of the hall-porter as to the time he left. It's a complete alibi."

"Just one moment, Coutts. How long did this interview between John Blank and Mr. Montague take?"

"Not more than two minutes."

"And yet at half-past ten Denver Street was still reading his shorthand notes of the interview. Either his shorthand notes must have been very bad, or the account of the interview must have been considerably amplified at somebody's orders. It almost seems as if Mr. Montague was very much concerned to manufacture evidence against this fellow Blank."

Inspector Coutts shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"That's nothing to do with me. I suppose, Mr. Montague, if we knew all there is to be known about him, wouldn't turn out to be exactly a white-haired boy. But my job is to find out who killed Denver Street."

"You jumped to the conclusion that it must have been John Blank. That theory having failed you, what did you fall back on?"

"I examined all the servants. Trenchard has them under daily observation, and he is satisfied that it wasn't one of them. And yet it was somebody in the house, Blake. Mr. Montague has had every window fitted with a patent steel shutter, and they were all intact. Not a soul left the house after ten. Trenchard is positive on that point. If we exclude the servants, there were only three other people who could have committed the crime—Mr. Montague's two visitors—Sir Titus Brade and Captain Vereker—or Mr. Montague himself."

"The theory certainly seems to limit the scope of your inquiry. Have you any reason to suspect Mr. Montague himself?"

The inspector shook his head. "None; but I'm not excluding that possibility. I don't think it's at all likely, but it's a good rule to suspect everybody and keep your eyes open."

"Leaving out Mr. Montague, you are left with Captain Vereker and Sir Titus Brade?"

"That's right, Brade. I'll take Vereker first. I've got his dossier through the Colonial Office. It seems he was dismissed from the Southern Nigerian Service for drunkenness. He used to be Commissioner at Oji. After his dismissal, he was said to have 'gone native.' Nothing is known of him until he turned up here, but it's a suspicious circumstance that he's the man who found John Blank employment. He admits that he saw Blank in Mr. Montague's house that night, and gave him his instructions to call on Miss Lane."

"Your theory is that Vereker is in league with this man John Blank, who knows something about Mr. Montague's past, for which he hopes to get a sub-

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stantial sum of money. Is that it? He knew from his accomplice that his interview with Mr. Montague had been a failure, and there was danger that what had transpired might be used against him. He, therefore, made his way up to the study, and in order to secure the incriminating report had to murder Denver Street?"

Inspector Coutts' face was a picture of gloomy perplexity.

"That would be a first-class solution, if only the facts fitted it, Blake. Unfortunately, Mr. Montague left his study at ten, and was downstairs with Captain Vereker in the billiard-room until half-past eleven."

"There's Sir Titus Brade left."

"Now we're getting to it, Blake. Brade was outside on the landing when Mr. Montague discovered the body. He had been having some sort of a row with him. It seems he wanted to be placed on the board of one of these new rubber companies, and Mr. Montague had come to the conclusion that he was opening his mouth too wide."

"And so, in a fit of pique, he went and murdered Mr. Montague's private secretary? I should have thought if there was any killing to be done, he wouldn't have made a vicarious sacrifice of the unfortunate Denver Street, but would have concentrated his attentions on Mr. Montague himself."

Inspector Coutts winced under the irony of the other's tone.

"You needn't try to be funny, Blake. I came here to see if you could help me."

He moved restlessly in his chair and turned his gaze to the window.

"I'm trying to help you by applying destructive criticism to your theories," Blake answered quietly. "If you want any constructive criticism—well, I've already told you, when we discussed this matter last, what my view is."

The inspector seemed hardly listening to him. He was staring abstractedly out of the window.

"Didn't know any of the Covent Garden traffic came along Baker Street, Blake," he exclaimed.

Blake followed the direction of his gaze. A lorry, piled high with empty vegetable baskets—so that the summit of the pile was almost directly on a level with the windows of the consulting-room—had drawn up just outside the house.

"I'd never noticed it before, Coutts. I suppose there's been a block somewhere in the traffic, and the driver's taken this route. But we were talking about this Denver Street case."

Inspector Coutts swung round in his chair, his red face wearing a more than usually stubborn look.

"You can cut out all that Striking Shadow stuff! I don't believe a word of it! I've had inquiries made, and the Yard can't find a shred of evidence in support of your theory. It's moonshine madness!"

"And yet in that document which you showed me, Coutts, the writer plainly foreshadowed something of the kind that has happened. I forget the exact words, but he assured Mr. Montague that he would be near him day and night—that he would harrow his soul with terror. Melodrama, if you like, but melodrama translated into real life."

Inspector Coutts leaned forward and looked fixedly at Sexton Blake.

"You're an intelligent man, Blake. You've done some things in your time which I don't mind admitting would have done credit to some of the smartest detectives in the Yard. It beats me how you can swallow this five-reel American film stuff!"

"I believe in the existence of the

Striking Shadow, Coutts. I warned you to guard Mr. Montague as if he were the King himself. I believe that you're up against one of the most sinister forces in the history of crime—a personality—I call the Striking Shadow—that, because the name may veil a man or a woman—who is all the more dangerous because of the mystery with which he surrounds himself or herself. I believe that the Striking Shadow will yet carry out the threat made against Mr. Montague in that document."

Inspector Coutts shifted uneasily in his chair.

"If you really know anything, Blake, it's your business to put me wise."

"I'm engaged at present on the Richard Framingham case. I've got to do my duty to my client. To a certain extent, my investigations run parallel with yours, and, as long as the interests with which I am concerned do not suffer, I will help you. More I can't promise you. I must use my own methods in my own way. But there's one thing—"

He glanced thoughtfully out of the



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window. The lorry from Covent Garden was still standing in front of the house, the summit of the pile of baskets still visible. Sexton Blake stared at that unfamiliar feature of his landscape with an air of abstraction.

"Well, what is it, Blake?"

"In investigating a case of this kind, I should be very careful to conceal my identity, Coutts. The personality you're up against will stop at nothing. Man, woman, or child, who crosses the path of the Striking Shadow—who interferes with his plans—is in deadly danger."

Suddenly as he spoke, his body grew rigid. He was staring at the summit of the pile of baskets. From between two of the baskets something was protruding that had not been there a moment before. Sexton Blake glimpsed a long, sinewy human hand. Then, with a spring, he was out of his seat, and, rushing round the desk, had seized Coutts by the shoulder.

"Quick, man—for your life!" he exclaimed.

Inspector Coutts dazedly jumped to his feet. Instantly Sexton Blake propelled him across the floor to the door. Almost as they reached it, there was the clatter of breaking glass, and something fell on the floor just behind the desk. A whiff of some strong, acrid chemical reached their nostrils as they opened the door and rushed out on to the landing. Instantly Sexton Blake closed the door, and, stooping down, stuffed the mat into the gap beneath it. Then he crammed his handkerchief into the keyhole. Only when he had done this, did he turn and face Inspector Coutts.

"Poison gas!" he exclaimed. "Whether you believe in the Striking Shadow now, or not, Coutts, come and help me to catch the man who threw that bomb!"

WASTING no time, Sexton Blake and Inspector Coutts rushed out into the street. The lorry with its load of empty baskets was still standing there. There was no driver at the wheel. Whoever had been in charge of it had disappeared. It stood there like a piece of flotsam washed up by the tide of London on the shore of Baker Street.

Without a word of explanation to his companion, Sexton Blake clambered up the little mountain of baskets. Almost at the very top he discovered what he sought. Just at the summit of the pile half a dozen baskets had been removed on the inside, forming a sort of cave in which a man could conceal himself. On the side farthest from the window of his consulting-room one of the covering baskets had been removed. As Blake glanced at the aperture he realised how the man they were seeking had escaped.

He scrambled down again, to find Coutts engaged in a rather heated conversation with the policeman on point duty. He was a young man who had only lately joined the Force, and the Scotland Yard man was explaining to him in trenchant, biting phrases that elementary traffic rule which makes it illegal for any vehicle to be left unguarded in the streets.

"Don't know what the Police Force is coming to these days," he grumbled, as Sexton Blake drew him aside. That man ought to be hoeing turnips instead of wearing a uniform. Found anything, Blake?"

Sexton Blake nodded his head. "The man was hiding in a hole he had made by removing some of the baskets at the top. I'm afraid he was too quick for us."

"Do you know who the lorry belongs to, Coutts?"

"A Mr. Hutchins, of Highfield, Herts—here's the name in small letters. But what was he doing in this business beats me. I'd better phone the Yard and have inquiries made."

He glanced at Sexton Blake with a perplexed frown rumpling his forehead.

"Look here, are you certain about this, Blake? I never heard any sound except the breaking of the glass, and then you had me out of the room before I could look round."

"Lucky I did, or I'd be ordering a wreath for your funeral, Coutts, at this moment."

"Do you tell me that somebody shadowed me here, secured by some means this lorry with its load of baskets, concealed himself in it, and then took a pot at me through the window? It isn't sense, Blake."

Sexton Blake regarded him with a grim smile.

"There are certain things you will never be convinced of, Coutts, till you pass into a world where they won't

signify. I don't know how the Striking Shadow followed you here, or how he secured possession of that lorry. But I tell you a human hand threw that bomb, and it was meant to kill you. Perhaps I was also included in the vendetta. In my investigations into the Framingham case I have to pay some attention to the actions of the Striking Shadow, and as likely as not he knows and resents the fact. I hope he doesn't, for my sake. But there's no mystery about you.

"You're known to be up to the neck in this Montague business. You've been in and out of Montague's house. You've granted him special police protection. You were quoted in the Press, in the report of the inquest, as being in charge of the inquiry. You're a marked man, Counts, and as sure as I'm standing here, less than a quarter of an hour ago the Striking Shadow struck—to take your life!"

"It might just have been some kids fooling about with stink bombs," the inspector retorted. "I don't know how this lorry came to be here, but we'll easily find that out. For the moment I want a little more evidence than you've given me, Blake, to swallow this theory."

Sexton Blake put his hand on the other's arm.

"Come back to the house with me, Counts, and you shall have it."

He led the way into the passage and summoned Mrs. Bardell.

"Oh, Mrs. Bardell, didn't I hear you telling Tinker that Tabitha has persecuted you with another large family?"

"Yes indeed, sir. Eight this time. I don't know what cats is coming to these days. I'm sure I don't know how she's going to nurse them, and I haven't got the heart to drown them myself."

"Give me four of them, Mrs. Bardell, and I'll see that they're put out painlessly."

"I'm sure it's very good of you, Mr. Blake," Mrs. Bardell exclaimed with an air of relief. "I'll let you have four of the ugliest ones."

She returned presently with four very diminutive, sightless, furry objects, that complained feebly at being taken away from their mother.

"Bless their dear little hearts. It do seem almost like murder, Mr. Blake, and me a regular subscriber to the Society for Cruelty to Animals!"

Having said a few words to relieve Mrs. Bardell's tender conscience, Sexton Blake ascended the stairs with the kittens in his arms. Entering his laboratory by the door along the passage, he produced from a cupboard two box respirators, or gas-masks.

"Even if you don't believe in my theory, Counts, you might oblige me by putting one of these on. I should hate to think that I might have the death of so prominent a pillar of Scotland Yard on my hands."

With a gruff laugh, as if he thought the whole proceeding ridiculous, Inspector Counts adjusted the mask. Sexton Blake having done the same, walked to the door that communicated with his consulting-room. Bending down, he picked up one of the kittens, and then motioning to his companion, entered the room beyond, quickly closing the door behind him.

There was a faint haze in the room almost suggestive of tobacco smoke. Sexton Blake held out the kitten on the palm of his hand. The little creature made a movement, gave a feeble cry, and then suddenly became rigid.

Going back into his laboratory, Blake then repeated the experiment with the three other victims of Tabitha's superabundant fertility. Finally he drew back with the inspector on to the landing again.

"Are you convinced now?" he exclaimed, when he had closed the door and removed his mask. "Do you still think it was some childish practical joke?"

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