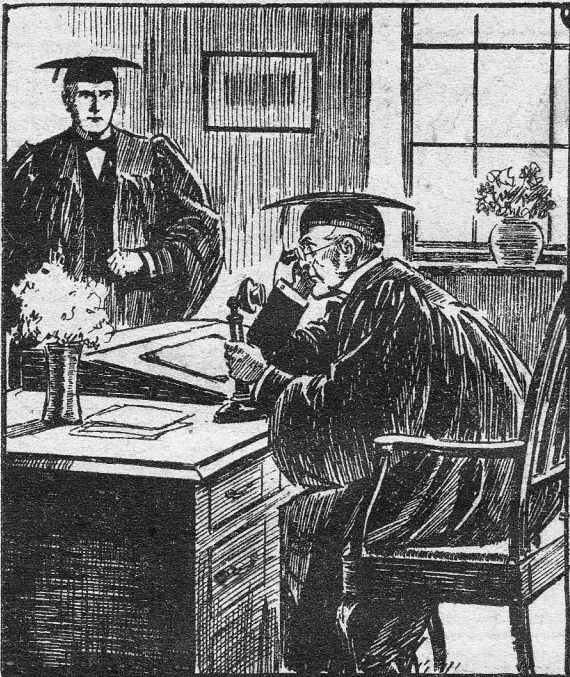


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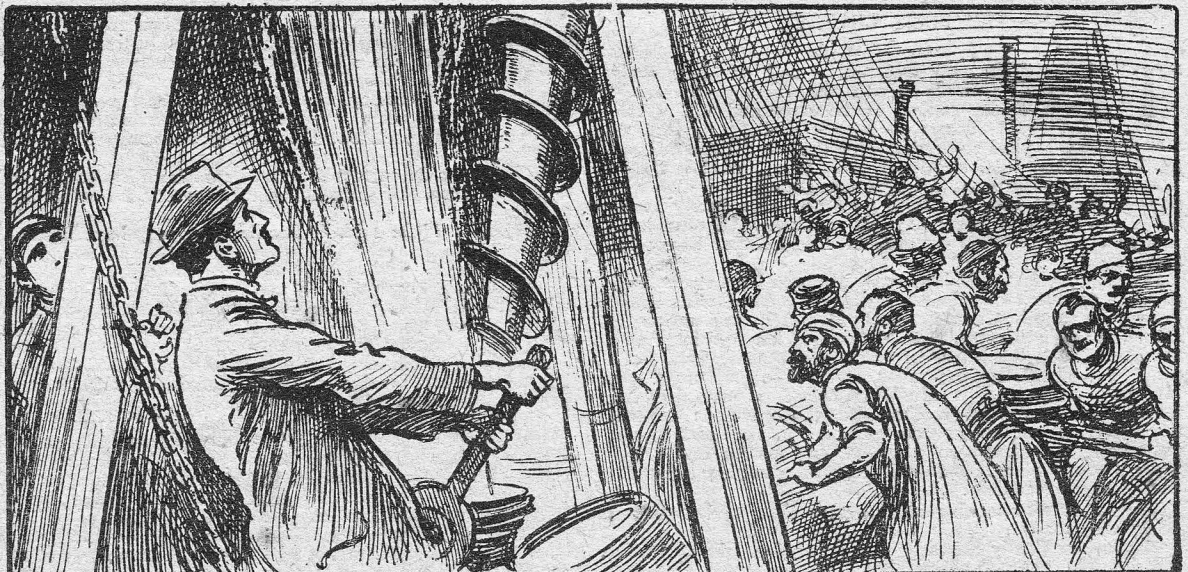
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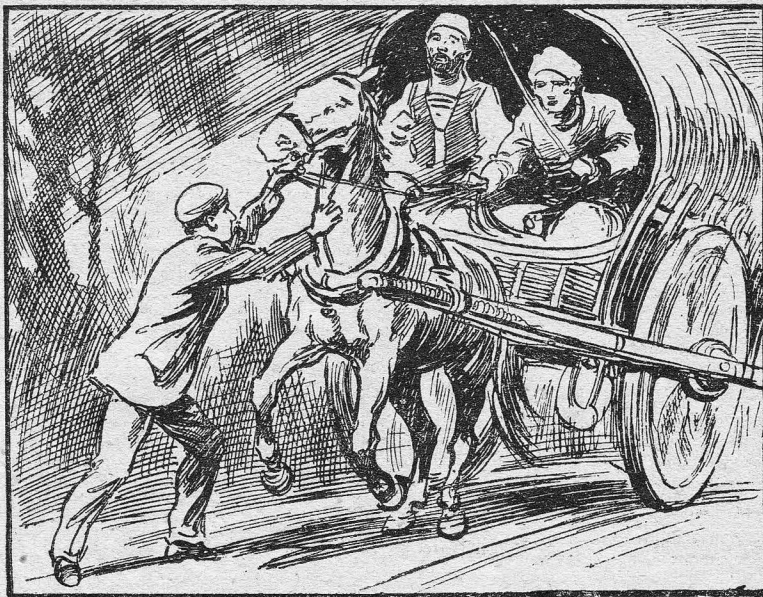
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IN THE CZAR'S DOMAIN

A Thrilling, Long, Complete Tale, dealing with the
Further Amazing Adventures of
SEXTON BLAKE, DETECTIVE.



"Hullo, there!" shouted Tinker hoarsely, catching the pony by the bridle. "Just you pull up, and wait until I give you leave to go on!" (See page 6.)

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

A Plea for Help.

"THREE o'clock, and I've tasted nothing since early breakfast! That's what's the matter with me!" Sexton Blake smiled as he consulted his watch. "Let's see! Where am I? In Holborn, by George, and there's a capital restaurant over the way! I'll have some lunch, and then I'll feel better. Oh, dear, Tinker is right! When my mind is busy, I forget everything, and time flies away with me. I do feel tired now, though. Partly brain-fag, I suppose, and partly physical exhaustion. I must have walked close on twenty miles since I left Baker Street six hours ago."

Dodging the traffic flashing past, he crossed the street, and, pushing open a swing-door, he entered a long, wide room, beautifully decorated, sumptuously furnished, and enticingly attractive to a hungry man. Handing his hat and stuck mechanically to a waiter, he sank into a chair at a small table, and picked up the menu card. The restaurant was rapidly thinning, empty wine-bottles stood on several of the tables, and the waiters, resting after the strenuous work of the last couple of hours, were gathered in twos and threes, exchanging confidences in whispers. At the far end of the room a group of four men still lingered, smoking cigarettes and conversing eagerly.

They were all speaking at the same time, and a curious group they made.

One was evidently a hearty country squire, big of frame, and direct of speech; another was unmistakably a Frenchman,

the renowned detective, whilst his companions ranged up behind him, and placing one palm on the table, and adjusting his eyeglass with the other, the elderly gentleman spoke.

"Mr. Sexton Blake, I think?" he said. "Will you kindly pardon this unceremonious introduction, and grant us the favour of a few minutes' conversation on a matter of vital importance to myself and the other gentlemen you see with me?"

As he spoke he extracted a small case from his pocket and laid a card on the table so that Blake could read it at a glance.

"My name!" he said. "Possibly you may have heard of it."

Blake smiled.

"Sir Henry Fanworth! Your name is known to everyone who takes an interest in the Caucasus. You were vice-consul at Baku some years ago, I think, Sir Henry?" he smiled. "Oh, yes, I know your name very well!"

A tinge of colour swept over the old man's pallid face, and his companions, encouraged by Blake's cheery manner, pressed forward.

"Then you know something about the Caucasus?" Sir Henry began quickly. "It is in connection with that part of the world that we wish to consult you. My friends here—this is Mr. Robert Deburgh, a gentleman of position and property in Westmorland"—and he indicated the genial, burly squire, whose face now wore a happy glow of contentment. "And this is Mr. Horace Stephens, of the firm of Cox, Stephens & Milton, well known in financial circles in the City; and this is—er—Count de Lerida, a nobleman from

and the gyrations both he and the waiter went through in an argument which grew warmer every minute would have evoked loud peals of laughter from any audience in a theatre; the third, a tall, slight man, was City bred, grave, reserved, and self-controlled; and the fourth, an old and grey-bearded man, was speaking earnestly, and adjusting his gold-rimmed glasses continually as he gazed from one to another of his companions. All were well dressed, all had the unmistakable air associated with wealth and refinement. But at that moment they seemed more than disconcerted; they were seriously alarmed.

Blake watched them for some moments with speculative amusement. Then he tapped the small gong on the table to call the waiter's attention. The sharp tinkle of the gong had an unexpected effect. The squire swung round, and, leaning over the back of his chair, he gazed across the length of the room at Blake, his shaggy eyebrows knit together in puzzled doubt, and an unmistakable look of appeal on his florid, good-tempered face.

The City man shifted a cigarette from one corner of his mouth to the other, and stared too, drumming his fingers on the table, with an odd expression in his eyes, as if engaged in a complex arithmetical calculation. The old grey-bearded gentleman lay back in his chair, and, with his head on one side, he nodded deliberately, and smiled, and the frenchman jumped excitedly to his feet. He threw his serviette on the table, fingered his collar, pulled down his vest, and started to march down the room towards Blake at a rate as if he was walking for a wager. But he took only one step. Then the squire's brawny hand shot out, seized his coat-tails, and he was pulled back and on to his chair so abruptly that his legs shot up into the air.

Blake raised the paper above his head to hide the smile he could not suppress. When he looked up half a minute later, he saw that the quartet was advancing in his direction instead of making for the door. The grey-bearded man was leading the way. The latter bowed courteously to

France who has long been resident in our country. We are all directly interested together in a big project which is not shaping as we would wish, and we were discussing the best course to adopt when you entered this restaurant, and we decided to ask your help, if you could meet us somewhere in a short time."

"Mention the place, and I will be there within the hour, Sir Henry," Blake replied. "I'm pleased to meet you, gentlemen, and if I can be of service I will be glad. Waiter, a small bottle of Beaune, please! I've had rather a tiring morning, and I don't feel up to discussing business until I have satisfied the inner man."

"If you could come on to the office of my firm after your lunch, Mr. Blake," Stephens suggested. "It's in Gracechurch Street, on the left-hand side as—"

"I know the building! All right, I'll be there up to time!" Blake agreed. "Good-bye till then! I hope when we meet again we may be able to settle the difficulty, whatever it may be!"

The four friends trooped out of the restaurant, and Blake settled down to enjoy his luncheon in peace. He ate with a hearty relish, but all the time his mind was running on this novel meeting, which at least had chased away the dull afternoon he had anticipated, and occasionally he smiled amusedly.

"Dear me, this is a queer world, surely! One never knows what the next few minutes have in store!" he murmured. "Mere chance took me to this place, and, for all I know, much excitement is to follow. Baku! Why, it's quite one of the most romantic, most enterprising, most cosmopolitan, and most lawless of places in the world, and yet the vast majority of people know little or nothing about it! Poor Sir Henry Fanworth! He's aged considerably in the last few years. I remember seeing him at a crush at Downing Street, when his name was in every man's mouth, and he was quite the lion of the season."

"But brave deeds are soon forgotten, and few would think to look at him now that his statesmanship and courage saved the British residents in Baku from destruction only a few years ago! Those terrible days and nights broke up his constitution. Well, he's a fine old fellow, and I will help him if I can."

Rising from his chair, he paid his bill, lit a cigar, and, leaving the restaurant, he hailed a passing taxi. Twenty minutes later he was entering the palatial offices of Cox, Stephens & Milton. He was immediately conducted to a room on the first floor, and there he saw the quartet grouped before the fireplace, awaiting his arrival. As soon as Blake appeared, they all took seats at a small table as if by previous arrangement, and Sir Henry Fanworth beckoned to Blake to join them.

"We know you are a busy man, Mr. Blake, and we have decided to get to work at once, and not detain you by unnecessary preliminaries," Sir Henry began. "Take a seat next me; there are some papers I want you to look over. Now, as regards our difficulties! You know what the Baku petroleum industry is like? The oil-fields there are far and away the most stupendous in existence. I speak of my own knowledge. I have travelled the world making investigations as regards the petroleum industry."

"I have seen the oil-fields in Ohio, Indiana, Texas, California; I have been in Galicia and Campina; as vice-consul at Baku, it was my duty to make myself acquainted with every phase and condition of the petroleum industry, and I say, without hesitation, that, great as the oil industry is at present in the region of Baku, it is nothing to what it will yet become. I have seen the industry grow from almost insignificant proportions until now there are hundreds of great oil-carrying steamers

always in the Black Sea—and almost all of them British ships, by the way—and yet there is still immense scope for progress and development."

He stopped. He looked around at his friends pathetically, almost apologetically.

"You are a great authority on this subject, I know, Sir Henry," Blake remarked. "I read your most interesting reports some years ago."

The old man laughed mirthlessly.

"I thought I was, Mr. Blake," he said sadly. "What is worse, my friends had confidence in my judgment, too; and, acting on my advice, they formed a syndicate with me, and between us we stand to lose two hundred thousand pounds. I'm not thinking of myself, pray understand that. But they are all badly hit; even Mr. Stephens will feel the blow severely, Count de Lerida will be seriously crippled, and my lifelong friend, Deburgh yonder, will be ruined irretrievably, and through my fault!"

His words had gradually died away to a heartbroken whisper.

The squire's voice rolled through the room protestingly, angrily.

"Hang it all, don't talk nonsense like that, Fanworth, old man!" he cried, banging the table with his big fist. "You are the greatest authority living on this question, and if I had the money I'd follow you again—egad, I would! If it's lost—well, it's gone, that's all! But I won't sit here and listen to any self-reproach from you! Friendship is a better thing than money, any day, and you're the oldest and truest friend I ever had. So don't talk that way any more. If you do, I'll get up and go; 'pon honour, I will!"

"You mustn't attach any importance to Sir Henry's self-accusations, Mr. Blake," Stephens said calmly, his steady eyes showing that self-command that carries men buoyantly over a grave crisis. "Sir Henry is too chivalrous in this matter. We all came into it with our eyes open, and it will not be due to an error of judgment on his part if we suffer loss."

"Dat is vat I have always maintained!" De Lerida cried. "Vat can anyone do ven a lot of scoundrels are on the spot, and free to play the villain?"

"Yes, that's the cause of all our trouble!" the squire sighed. "There's no law or order out there. They seem to be pretty well able to do as they like."

"Well, let us hope we can devise some way to baulk them," Blake suggested cheerily. "That's the purpose for which we're all gathered here, I take it! Like all other Britishers, I respect Sir Henry for the fine part he played

on behalf of the Empire a while back, and I'll help him and you gentlemen, too, if my services can be of use. Let's see! You say you stand to lose two hundred thousand pounds. How is that? What is the nature of your speculation?"

Sir Henry Fanworth was fingering the papers before him nervously.

"Have you heard of the Bibi oil-fields?" he asked.

"Yes. They are the finest in the Baku region, are they not?" Blake suggested.

"They are at the present day, but our property is as good if not better, unless I am altogether mistaken," Sir Henry replied. Mr. Blake, we obtained what is known as a concession from the Russian Government—that is, for the sum of two hundred thousand pounds we obtained the right to search for oil in a vast tract of country extending from the Baku region almost to Tiflis, on the southern side of Mount Caucasus. The agreement seemed to be quite in order; we parted with our money. Now we are in a terrible plight. The officials at Baku say that our concession is subject to one already granted; that whilst we have the sole right to drill for oil, we must first obtain the permission of another syndicate to whom the

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NEXT FRIDAY:

"THE NEW TUTOR!"
By Martin Clifford.

"THE FRONTIER SMUGGLERS!"
A Grand Tale of Sexton Blake.

"THE BLACK KING!"
By S. Clarke Hook.

right has already been given to develop that district in other ways. We cannot go upon the land without their leave!"

"And has permission been refused?" Blake asked quickly.

"We can't find out who the members of this particular syndicate may be!"

"But that can be ascertained, surely! Not at once, perhaps, but in time."

Sir Henry Fanworth almost groaned.

"Time!" he murmured. "That is our difficulty. The concession was granted on the agreement that we began work within twelve months, and there are only two more to run!"

"This is a plot!" Blake cried indignantly.

"That is what we all think. We have wired to St. Petersburg, but the high officials there say that they cannot help us. Russia is a vast, half-civilised country, as you know, and it is mapped out into several huge districts, each under a viceroy, with scores of the most corrupt officials in the world, I think, to administer under him. Everything is left to the viceroy, and he is at the mercy of his officials. As long as substantial revenue is collected and forwarded to St. Petersburg, the authorities there do not trouble. They couldn't do any good if even they were inclined. The necessary administrative facilities are not at their disposal. The Russian system of government will have to be much more thoroughly organised before St. Petersburg can keep touch with all parts of the Empire. So corruption and bribery are carried on wholesale through Russia, and in no part more than on the borders of the Caspian."

"Then what do you propose?" Blake asked.

"That you go out there on our behalf, find out what this syndicate is, and try, if possible, to save us from ruin."

"A tall order, Sir Henry," Blake replied gravely. "But, like you, I do most certainly believe that a plot is afoot, and that, for some reason or other, enemies are at work to rob you of this concession. Therefore, my detective instincts are thoroughly aroused. I will go. But also quite possibly I may fail in my attempt to aid you, though I will do my best. One thing, though, I must go with full powers, so that I can act as your accredited representative should occasion arise."

The four men had jumped up; their faces were full of hope.

"You won't fail, Blake!" the squire shouted. "No fear! You're just the man for the job! But how can we thank you enough? How—"

"It will be time enough to thank me if I succeed," Blake said, as he shook hands with all. "Mr. Stephens, will you see about the power of attorney? And, Sir Henry, you might let me have those papers for a few hours. I will return them when read."

"I will arrange about the power of attorney," Stephens replied. "How soon will you want it? How soon will your arrangements be made, and when do you hope to be able to start?"

"I start to-night," Blake replied, as he grasped his hat and stick. "Therefore, you'd better see your solicitor at once. Good-bye, gentlemen! I can find my way downstairs!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

In Strange Baku.

BAKU! The city of the marvellous! As Tinker gazed out from the promenade across the wharves and landing piers, and saw the dancing waters of the crescent alight with flame, shooting up, fading away, and then flashing forth again in long tongues of fire, he gazed spell-bound and awestruck.

"The sea is on fire, sir!" he gasped to Blake. "Why, I thought that was impossible!"

"There are oil-fields under the sea yonder, and natural gas is always bubbling up," Blake explained. "If anyone throws a piece of lighted tow overboard from one of the many steamers yonder, for instance, it's bound to set light to the naphtha gas. Yes, it's a quaint phenomenon, my lad. But look around you. Is not this city truly picturesque?"

Tinker turned his head.

On the hillside skirting the bay was a panorama of white houses; on the steep slopes at the back of Baku were large cemeteries, with thousands of head-stones, giving an effect as if there had been a landslide; the palaces of the oil kings, magnificent public buildings, the splendid schools, arose oddly amongst the ancient landmarks of the old city; war-worn and crumbling battlements, and Persian mosques, and small shops full of Caucasian carpets and filigree silver goods and ancient weapons, were mingled together; telephone wires ran like a spider's web from house to house, trams clanged through the streets, and electric light flashed

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 54.

everywhere; and ancient water-carts and camel-teams groaned and creaked through the streets.

A strange confusion of the ancient and most modern, giving a quaint charm to old Baku, with its small, flat-roofed houses, its polyglot population. Its streets are always crowded with and winding alleys, its broad streets, its flaring bazaars, and scores of European mansions, in which latter all the luxury and refinement of Western civilisation are to be found; and its polyglot population. Its streets are always crowded with such a varied throng, and flash of hue and mingling of garb. Tartars, Georgians, Britishers, Lezghins, Persians, Armenians, Germans, Bohemians, Lithuanians, and Frenchmen all rub shoulders there together. The East and West meet at Baku; and while the oil-smoke hangs always over the city, it is yet one of the cleanest and brightest in the world.

"It's a marvellous place, quite unlike any I ever saw or read about," Tinker murmured. "And what brings them all here?"

"Oil, nothing but oil!" Blake laughed. "The sea is full of it, the land is saturated with it, it is oozing up everywhere. Millions and millions of tons of oil have been lost and will be lost, and yet enough is saved to supply every town and village in the world. It spouts out sometimes to a height of two hundred feet, and with a fury that can't be suppressed; it goes on for months sometimes, pouring forth without ceasing, turning the country around into a vast lake of oil, carrying away homesteads, levelling trees, sweeping all before it. Then it stops, and perhaps in a few months' time it bursts forth again. It flings up sand and stones, creating sandhills and ridges where once was a wealth of verdure; it changes the face of a country, wipes away old landmarks, and scatters destruction far and wide. But it brings vast wealth, too! It is the most amazing industry in the world!"

"And we have come here about oil, too," Tinker suggested. "It's a rum go! I never thought so much about kerosene before!"

"And I expect you'll be heartily sick of the name of it before our mission here is fulfilled," Blake rejoined. "Come, my lad, this view is very interesting, but we can't tarry to enjoy it. We must get through the European quarter. There are several investigations I have to make."

They left the promenade behind and strode through the streets. Here and there large prosperous hotels stood out from amongst a maze of small shops, with men smoking hookahs in front, and dim recesses visible through the piles of wares displayed for sale. The streets were crowded with swarthy folk in gaudy Eastern garb, whilst at the doors of the hotels athletic British commissioners stood, looking as if they had just stepped out on to the Piccadilly pavement. As Blake entered the first hotel and crossed the lounge to the office, he might have been in a London hotel, so familiar was the aspect. Ladies in evening toilettes were chatting in English, men in evening-dress were in the smoking-room, billiard-room, and corridors; an attendant in uniform was standing by the lift; the waiters were speaking in French or Italian, and the strains of a waltz came from the dining-room, where dinner was still in progress. Blake hurriedly read over the names in the visitors' book, and, as he stepped out into the street again, the scene was changed immediately; he felt as if once again he was in India or Japan.

He went from hotel to hotel, and thus a couple of hours passed before he desisted. When he had left the last he stood for some moments on the pavement in deep thought, and Tinker fancied he looked despondent.

"I haven't gained much by that search," Blake said, at last. "I had hoped to see the name of some great oil king amongst the folk stopping here at present, but that was not so. There's some secret agency at work to prevent Sir Henry Fanworth and his syndicate from prospecting on the property they have obtained by concession, and I thought it quite possible I might get a clue if I found out that any influential man was here whose presence it would be difficult to account for. No such name appears on the books in the hotels, so I'm about where I started. Let's see. The viceroy is in Moscow at present, I understand. Then we had better see his deputy. He lives up on the hill yonder. Come along! He can't do worse than refuse an audience, though that is possible at this hour of the night."

It was getting on to nine o'clock now, and Blake set out at a brisk pace for the deputy viceroy's residence. The way lay through a pleasant path with groves of trees on either side, and the higher they climbed, the more picturesque Baku looked behind, with the waters of the crescent dotted with the lights of the steamers, and studded with small islands. The gates leading to the deputy viceroy's mansion were guarded by Cossacks, and it was only after considerable parleying that Blake and Tinker were permitted to

proceed. After a walk of a hundred yards up a dark avenue they reached the mansion, a fine edifice, square-built and lofty, and there they were received by Armenian servants.

Blake's card was taken to the deputy viceroy, and word was quickly sent in answer that he was to be granted admittance. Blake and Tinker were conducted across a wide hall, a door was flung open, and they were told to enter. A tall, gaunt man arose and bowed stiffly to Blake; and, as he and Tinker took their seats, the door was closed noiselessly. Blake looked around the room, noting everything, as was his custom, and the deputy viceroy's domineering voice broke the silence suddenly and sharply.

"Your name is Blake!" he said. "Well, what do you want? I only see people at this hour on very exceptional business."

"You are Colonel Geroff?" Blake inquired.

"Yes; state your business briefly. I have no time to waste."

Blake's strong face grew dark, and Tinker knew he was labouring under a feeling of resentment caused by the rude manner of the Russian's address. But when the great detective spoke his voice was quiet.

"My time is of importance, too, Colonel Geroff," he replied, "but I am sorry if my visit has been paid at an unseasonable hour, though I can hardly think that it was altogether unexpected. However, I will not waste time by—"

"What do you mean?" Geroff demanded angrily; whilst Tinker, too, stared at Blake.

"I will not waste time by entering into unnecessary explanations," Blake went on, as if he had not heard the interruption. "I have come from England in connection with a concession granted to a British syndicate, and I had hoped that the viceroy would have been able to give me some particulars I am anxious to ascertain. In his absence, I look to you for help, and, as I am a stranger, and represent large commercial interests from which your country is likely to benefit, I hope I can rely on your aid."

"Humph!" Geroff muttered. "If I can help you, I will do so; but first, of course, you must show me your credentials, for I do not know who you are, and, as a matter of precaution, I must be satisfied that you hold the authority you represent."

Blake smiled.

"My name is well known, I think!" he said, in such an odd voice that Tinker looked again at him and then at Geroff. The latter had flushed scarlet.

"Possibly my name is even known to you, colonel!" Blake continued meaningly.

"Pray be more explicit!" Geroff blustered. "I do not know you! Your credentials! Will you kindly produce them?"

"I have not got them with me," Blake smiled. "Baku has the name of being rather lawless, and, as they are most important—as you can understand—I do not carry them about!"

"But you can produce them? You have brought them hither with you?"

"Oh, I will have no difficulty on that score!" Blake laughed. "And now for a word of explanation, if you will allow me to continue. The property I refer to is in the district of Manbalov, where my friends have the right to prospect for oil; but another syndicate has refused them permission to go upon the land for that purpose, and I do not know the names of the gentlemen composing that syndicate. The Russian Government must know their names, of course, and therefore I would be much obliged if you, as the representative of the Russian Government in this region, would kindly give them to me."

"Manbalov!" Geroff cried; and he rose to his feet. "Now I know what you are after! We have had special instructions about Manbalov from headquarters. I am directed not to allow anyone to go there until permission comes from St. Petersburg. That order applies generally, both to your people and to any others interested in the neighbourhood. The Government fears that there may be grave disorder if rival syndicates get there; for the people are easily excited, and the authorities have much difficulty as it is in keeping the peace in that district. If your people and the other syndicate—"

Blake, too, had risen to his feet, and his face wore a look of amused contempt. Tinker noticed, too, that the great detective was paying little heed to Geroff. He seemed rather to be on the alert—to be listening intently—as if expecting some interruption. And Tinker, gazing round the room, saw that a heavy fold of curtain extended along one side, and he fancied that the curtain was fluttering.

"It is impossible for the rival syndicates to meet and come to terms until I know who the gentlemen on the other

side are," Blake insisted. "If you give me their names, I will not detain you longer."

"I cannot do that, for I don't know their names. I am only deputy viceroy, you must remember, and it has just happened that the order I have mentioned has come to hand since I took over the administration of this region," Geroff replied.

"Then I must find out these particulars without your assistance?" Blake said.

"I am afraid I cannot help!"

Blake nodded. His face was terribly grim.

"Before I leave, I would like to tell you that I am not quite a fool, and that I don't believe a word you have said, Colonel Geroff!" he rapped out sternly. "There is a plot to prevent my people availing themselves of the concession for which they paid a heavy sum, and it is hoped that they will be unable to get to work before the time is completed which has been allotted to them, and I have come out here to find out and thwart the scoundrels who are in league against them. I am not easily balked, and your assertions are too flimsy to weigh with me for a moment. I am glad, though, that I called—very glad—because—"

"You dare to insinuate that I am in league against your friends, that I am not doing my duty, that I am not speaking the truth!" Geroff stormed. "Hark ye, sir; we do not tolerate that sort of talk here in Russia! We have a very summary method of dealing with those who threaten the officers of the Tsar! If I ring the bell yonder, you will be arrested, and flung into prison forthwith! Don't dare to insult me, sir; and don't dare to go against the law! If you are wise, you will leave Russia without delay!"

"I am too wise to do that, anyhow!" Blake retorted coolly. "As soon as I came into this room I knew that my visit was not unexpected—that you were glad I had walked, as you thought, into a trap—and that, in point of fact, you are connected with this matter, for some reason from which you hope to derive benefit. Nothing would suit you better than that I should leave Russia; but here I've come, and here I mean to stay, in defiance of you and of officials like you, until my mission has been satisfactorily concluded. I have gained some useful information indirectly by coming here, and now I mean to gain more!"

Geroff's face was purple with wrath; but doubt, fear, hesitation were in his eyes as Blake boldly denounced him in his own mansion. The autocratic Russian, accustomed to see men cringe at his frown and shiver at his threats, was so taken aback for some moments that he could only stare at Blake. Then, with a smothered ejaculation, he sprang towards the bell.

"You have brought your doom upon yourself!" he shouted. "You have openly and flagrantly insulted me! The consequences be upon your head! I will fling you into a dungeon until you apologise abjectly, and promise to leave Russia without delay!"

"You must first catch me," Blake replied. "There has been a great draught ever since I entered this room, and the windows are closed. Ah, I see you understand my meaning! An eavesdropper has been listening behind that curtain to our conversation, and perhaps I will learn from him what you have refused to impart. Look to yourself, Tinker, and scoot when you get the chance! Good-bye, Colonel Geroff! When next we meet, it will be under different circumstances, I fancy, and you will then have reason to regret the treatment you have accorded to me!"

As Blake spoke, the curtain fluttered violently. The great detective sprang forward and wrenched it aside. A man was fleeing down a passage! Blake sprang after him. Geroff gave a yell as Blake and the fugitive disappeared at the far end, and a door banged behind them; and Tinker, dashing from the room the way he and Blake had entered, heard the harsh clang of a bell re-echoing through the building as he rushed along.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

On the Road to Manbalov.

BLAKE, as he dashed along, saw the square figure of a sturdy man before him, but he could not see his face. As he got out past the passage leading from Geroff's study, he stumbled into the grounds surrounding the mansion; and thus, coming suddenly from light into darkness, he was half-blinded for a few seconds. He heard the clatter of feet, and followed fiercely, stumbling over a flower-bed and falling his length.

Picking himself up, he dashed on, his eyesight growing accustomed to the gloom; and, after running fifty yards further, he saw the man scaling a ladder set against the high wall that encircled the small demesne. The man quickly reached the top, and, seeing Blake in hot pursuit, he flung the ladder to the ground in an effort to gain time, and disappeared on the far side.

Blake soon had the ladder planted against the wall again,

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 54.

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and, mounting the rungs, he looked over the wall. A horse was standing there, and the fugitive was already in the saddle. As Blake's head and shoulders appeared, the man turned, laughed derisively, and, setting spurs to his horse, he galloped down a glade. And Blake, jumping from the wall, fell on a heap of stones hidden under a cluster of broken brambles, shaking himself severely.

He staggered to his feet, only to see his quarry disappearing round a bend in the glade. The great detective had received a bad shock—the drop from the wall was much longer than he thought—his ankles were badly strained; his wrists, too, were aching. To follow on was, of course, useless; to stay where he was would be dangerous in the extreme. And behind the wall, and on the roof of Geroff's mansion, a large bell was clanging insistently, and hoarse cries were growing louder every moment as Geroff's servants rushed out of the mansion. Blake knew that men were running in his direction; he could hear their scurrying footsteps. He started to move away, keeping close to the wall all the time, meaning if possible to get back to Baku, and so disappear amongst the crowds in the thronged streets.

He had traversed about a hundred yards, and he knew by the direction of the voices now that several men had crossed the wall and were searching the wood already in their efforts to apprehend him. Limping painfully, and with teeth set, for every movement caused him pain, he stumbled on, looking back occasionally to see if he was followed. Once he stopped; he felt compelled to rest, if only for a few moments. And he was about to move forward again, when a large black object hurtled through the air and dropped to the ground a yard from where he stood. He stepped back, and gave a smothered cry. For the object which had dropped like a big ball was now stretching out legs and arms, and rising to a standing posture.

"Tinker!" Blake gasped.

"Great Scott!" came the answer, in a voice of hoarse amazement. "You here, sir? Good job I didn't fall on your head, or I would have flattened you out!"

"You managed to escape?"

"Yes; but don't ask me how I did it, for I don't rightly know!" Tinker replied, drawing his breath in great gasps, as he leant against the wall to rest himself. "They hunted me through the house, upstairs and downstairs, as if I were a rat, and I had to run so hard that I hadn't time to think; and I believe that's what saved me! Anyhow, I tumbled out of a window on to a thick bush, and started to run again, and a fellow ran after me; and I didn't think a Russian could sprint the way he did! I've been all over the grounds with him close on my heels, till he went wallop into a pond; and then, coming against the wall here, I saw a shed, and got on top of it and over the wall, and I found you! But what's the matter, sir? You're looking jolly green."

"I've had a bad spill, and I'm not the better of it yet," Blake explained. "Do you hear that shouting, my lad? They're coming this way! We must hurry on, somehow!"

"Where to?"

"To Baku."

"But we won't be safe there, sir. That old villain of a Geroff will have the place searched before morning. He has only to give his orders, and all the troops and police will scatter over the city and raid every house in an effort to find you."

"If we could get to Baku we'll be safe, whatever he does," Blake replied, as he hobbled along. "There's British shipping in the harbour, Tinker, and once we're aboard and under the British flag not all the powers in Russia could lay a hand on us."

"Hark! Do you hear that?" Tinker whispered excitedly. "It's the rumbling of wheels, sir. We must be close to a road. You follow on as quick as you can, and I'll run ahead and stop 'em and ask for a lift."

"Good! I'll hurry all I can," Blake assented. "Run on, my lad, and show them a piece of gold! They'll do anything for money if they're like most of the officials here, anyhow."

Tinker ran at full speed, still keeping to the wall, and to his joy he saw a small cart moving slowly along in the direction of Baku on the far side of the wood, and about a hundred yards from the wall, soon after he had left Blake behind. He rushed across the wood and dropped on to the road. A covered cart drawn by a small pony was rumbling slowly towards him; a couple of men in Eastern garb were sitting in the front. Tinker caught the pony by the bridle and shouted to them hoarsely, whilst they yelled at him in alarm.

"Good!" the lad thought. "These fellows see that I'm a European and they're more scared of me than I am of them, THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 54.

for they're used to being bullied. "Hallo, there!" he shouted firmly. "Just you pull up and wait till I give you leave to go on! There's a great official coming this way from Colonel Geroff's mansion, and he's lame and tired, and he told me to stop you! You're to drive him into Baku, and if you're civil he'll reward you, and if you don't obey me, you'll know more about it before the night is out! Do you hear that shouting in the wood? They're cheering him as he's leaving the deputy governor's presence. Ah, I'm glad you've got some sense! Just wait a mo., he won't be long!"

The men stared at Tinker open-mouthed. Away in the distance the shouting was continuing ceaselessly, lanterns were flashing through the woods; that there was a commotion of some sort was evident. They scrambled out of the cart, grinning cheerfully, and nodding assent to all that Tinker said, and the lad, looking over his shoulder, saw Blake hurrying as fast as his lameness would allow him in the direction of the road. Tinker hurried back to meet him.

"It's all right, sir; they think you're some big official," he whispered. "Just keep up that game and they'll oblige us any way they can."

Despite his pain and anxiety the great detective was obliged to smile as he listened and admired the lad's nimble wit, and, as he got on to the road and advanced towards the cart, his tall figure, his commanding presence, his fine, strong face were sufficient of themselves to inspire awe in the simple folk tremblingly awaiting his arrival. Returning their salutations, he got into the cart, Tinker following him, and the driver joggled the pony into a trot. They rattled down the hill into Baku, and Blake got out of the cart when close to the post-office.

"Get those fellows to drive down that laneway and wait for me there; tell them I'll be back in a few minutes," Blake explained to Tinker. "A happy thought has just occurred to me, my lad, and I mean to use it at once. I've changed my mind about going aboard a British vessel. I'll explain all to you when I return, but first I want to go to the post-office."

"To the post-office?"

"Yes. There's a most important letter awaiting me there; one that came here by the same steamer and train as we did. I posted it myself in London a few hours before we started, so I ought to know. You heard that villain Geroff ask me for my credentials—eh? He hoped I had them with me, in which case he meant to have me seized and searched before I left his mansion!"

"He kept on asking enough about them, anyhow!" Tinker agreed.

"He did. I saw his game, though, for as soon as I went into the room I noticed that curtain, and thought it was moving rather oddly, so I got on my guard at once. Well, I expected all sorts of trouble coming out here, and, of course, if I lose the power of attorney that Sir Henry Fanworth and his friends have given me I am powerless to act in their interests. So I did not take it with me. I sent it by letter; it is now lying in the post-office yonder, and, as Geroff will start his hirelings to search for me before the hour is out, and placard my name all over the city, I must get it before the post-office officials are alarmed at the name. Drive on! I'll follow almost at once."

Blake hobbled into the post-office, and Tinker, watching the street from the laneway, was much relieved when he saw him turning the corner a few minutes later. Blake tapped his breast-pocket significantly as he approached, and his face was much brighter and a smile was playing around the corners of his mouth.

"Now, my lad, we're done with civilisation for a while, and we're going to enjoy the wild, roving life that both of us like so much!" he laughed. "Instead of going aboard ship, I mean to get out of Baku altogether and to start on the way to Manbalov. We've a long journey before us, and over a rough road, but we'll manage all right. Just ask those fellows what they'll sell that cart and horse for? Let's see. They're Persians, I think. We'd better deal with them, then, in their own money, currency. We'll be treating them very liberally if we give them four hundred khran. Offer them three hundred to start with, and let them raise the price. They'll close at four hundred, and be glad to sell at that, I dare say. Strike the bargain, my lad. Meantime, I'm going farther down the lane; there's a bazaar at the end, I fancy, and there are some purchases I want to make."

Blake went off, and Tinker, delighted at the prospect of adventure that Blake had decided upon, began to open negotiations with the two men, who had been grinning in obsequious deference all the time up to this. Now, however, when they realised that Tinker wanted to buy the horse and cart, they commenced to haggle with all the Oriental cunning at their command, and Tinker, flustered and disgusted, was still arguing hotly when Blake returned.



It was a tight squeeze, even for Tinker, but after kicking vigorously for some seconds, his body and legs disappeared, and Sexton Blake listened anxiously. (See page 8.)

"How much do they want?" Blake inquired, laughing.
 "They won't take a khran less than four hundred and fifty, sir," Tinker explained ruefully. "I've done all I know to get 'em to talk reason, but they keep putting up the price instead of coming down, and—"

"That's because they see that we mean having the turn-out," Blake laughed. "There's no use arguing with them, my lad. Give them the money and let them clear off. Then jump into the cart and change your togs. There's a fine Persian outfit for you, and I've got another for myself. We'll be able to drive the cart through Baku and get away, even if the streets are full of Cossacks, as will be quite likely in the next half-hour. Yes, even if Geroff himself joins in the search for us, I guess we'll be able to drive right under his horse's nose, and he'll be none the wiser. First we'll go into the Black Town and get a store of provisions. Then we'll make for Manbalov."

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Mystery of the Stronghold.

AS Blake had predicted, the streets were crowded with soldiers and police as he and Tinker slowly drove in the cart over the cobbled stones half an hour later towards the precincts of the city. Blake busied himself in the cart making everything ship-shape, and Tinker, sitting in front, guided the horse and watched the lively scene with suppressed amusement. The Cossacks were entering house after house; a small squad crossed the street in front of the cart on their way to the docks; pedestrians were being continually stopped and questioned; but not one of the soldiers or police cast a second glance at the ambling old horse or the hooded cart rumbling along. In an hour's time Baku had been left behind, and Blake and Tinker were laughing heartily as they climbed a hill close to the oil-fields and then descended into a deep valley where all was dark.

"Are you sure we're going the right way, sir?" Tinker

asked presently. "I took this road because it was the first that came handy; but there are lots of others, I fancy."

"We're travelling in the right direction," Blake replied cheerily. "I made a careful study of a map Sir Henry Fanworth gave me before I left London, and I know fairly well where Manbalov lies. There's Geroff's mansion behind us to the right, and— Ah, do you see that path running through the wood, Tinker? It's down that that man galloped whom I chased from the house. He came out on the road here, and he's on ahead of us. It looks as if he, too, was heading for Manbalov. If that is the case—"

"Would you know him again, sir?" Tinker inquired eagerly.

"Yes, without any doubt I would. He turned round and laughed at me as he raced away, and I had a good look at his face for a second. An evil-looking fellow he is, too, and unmistakably a Russian. Push on, my lad; you can't miss your way over this rough old road, for it's the only one between Manbalov and Baku. Keep the old horse jogging as long as he'll go, for I have a particular reason for making a long journey to-night if possible. And if you see any shanty of any sort on the way, don't pass it without first telling me. Now I'm going to lie down and rest; if I can manage to have a snooze I'll be as fit as a fiddle again."

Tinker jogged the horse, which had fallen into a walk, and the cart rumbled and rattled over the rugged, dusty track.

Tinker sat watching everything, silently and intently; the old horse jogged along, and Blake, despite the jolting, fell sound asleep under the shelter of the hood.

Five hours passed thus on the journey, when Tinker pulled up and glanced down at Blake. The great detective was sleeping peacefully, an arm under his head for a pillow. Tinker did not like to awake him, and yet he hesitated to drive on. For sixty yards from the rough track stood a ruined stone house, and Blake had told him not to pass a shanty of any sort. As Tinker, in doubt, glanced a second time at the ruin he stifled an exclamation of surprise, and touched Blake on the shoulder. The latter did not move, but his eyes opened at once, and he gazed up at Tinker quietly.

"Well, my lad, what's the trouble?" he asked.

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"There's a tumbledown house to the left there, sir," Tinker said.

Blake raised himself on an elbow and gazed long and steadily at the ruin.

"Humph! That's one of those watch-houses erected to protect a petroleum spring close at hand when there were disturbances in those parts some years ago, I fancy," he suggested. "I don't think we'll bother about it, Tinker; it's something more like a wayside inn that I meant."

"There's someone there, sir," Tinker replied hoarsely.

"How do you know?"

"I saw a small light for a second, as if a man had struck a match."

Blake scrambled hurriedly to his feet.

"Ah, that's important!" he whispered. "We must make a search. Good job I bought those revolvers, with all the other things, before we left Baku. Turn the cart on to the other side of the track, and drive it till you get to the small clump a quarter of a mile away. We'll hide it there, and then we must return. Meantime, I'll load the revolvers."

Tinker did as directed, and the old horse, glad to get off the sandy road and on to the scant herbage, hauled the cart with a jerk off the track and ambled along. Blake and Tinker alighted, and when they had concealed horse and cart in the thicket, the great detective handed a revolver to Tinker.

"Slip that in your pocket; it's loaded in all chambers," he said. "And now come along, and we'll see what sort is the man who has chosen yonder ruin for his home. There are plenty of cutthroat scoundrels around here, so we'll need to keep on the alert."

They stepped out briskly, and, crossing the track, they approached the house cautiously. It was as Blake had thought, a stronghold, and a good one, too. Built in the form of a square, it rose about thirty feet in height, flat-roofed, and with one door of thick oak studded with nails. The house was roughly but firmly built of limestone, and there were a few windows on each side, narrow and small and unglazed. Blake walked round it, followed by Tinker, a couple of times, carefully examining everything, and then he stopped, a puzzled frown on his broad forehead.

"Those windows are more like loopholes for rifle-firing than anything else!" he whispered. "And if we attempted to force an entrance through the door, we'd arouse anyone at once. But are you sure you saw a light, my lad? Is it not possible that you made a mistake?"

Tinker shook his head.

"I'm absolutely cert. in!" he whispered back. "Ah, listen to that!"

A horse's whinny had broken forth so close to hand that both Blake and the lad had started. And, even as Tinker spoke, a harsh voice sounded gratingly in abuse of the animal, and the voice came from the upper half of the building.

"You're right! A man is in there, and he's got his horse with him, too!" Blake murmured. "We can't go on without first looking into this matter. But how are we to manage that? Perhaps we'd better wait until morning, and get into hiding close at hand."

"There's no need for that," Tinker urged. "I'm sure that I could wriggle through one of those windows if I climbed up on your shoulders. And then I could drop down on the far side and open the door."

"I thought of that, but I don't altogether like the risk," Blake replied. "If that scoundrel attacked you before you had time to get to the door, or if you found that it was locked, and that you weren't able to get back—"

"Even if it was locked, that wouldn't matter," Tinker replied quickly. "I could get on the horse's back, and then I'd reach the window again. And as for the chap attacking me, won't I have a revolver, and can't I loose off as well as him? Let me go, sir! It will be all right. And once we're both inside—"

"I think it's quite probable that if we were once inside we'd find a great deal that would be of use," Blake interjected; but there was still a note of hesitation in his voice.

"It'll be all right!" Tinker urged. "In three minutes more we'll both be inside if you let me go."

"All right," Blake agreed at last. "But take care not to make a noise. Jump up on my back, and be careful—very careful!"

Delighted that he had got his way, Tinker was soon standing on Blake's shoulders, and was crawling in through the window. It was a tight squeeze, even for him, but after kicking vigorously for some seconds, his body and legs disappeared, and Blake listened anxiously. For some moments there was no sound, and Blake hurried round to the door.

Then suddenly a tumult arose that sent a shiver through Blake's stalwart frame. The horse began to kick and plunge; a hoarse cry from above was followed by the clatter of feet. Tinker's voice rang out, sharp and defiant, and the

horse's hoofs rattled like the clatter of musketry against the door, which shook, but would not yield.

Bang, bang, bang!

Revolver-shots rang out in quick succession; the horse gave a heartrending squeal.

"Tinker, Tinker," Blake shouted hoarsely, "get to the door if you can! Shout to me if you're not wounded! Answer me! What has happened? Oh, why did I let you go in?"

Exerting all his powerful strength, Blake was striving frantically to force the door. It would not open; his efforts were futile. Despite his agitation, he looked for the lock, intending to fire his revolver, in the hope of smashing it. There was no lock, no keyhole; but the door was barred and bolted inside with a strength that had been carefully calculated to ensure safety in face of the most desperate onslaught, when the stronghold had been built.

"Tinker," he yelled again, "for Heaven's sake speak!"

No answer. There was a tense stillness now where all had been uproar a few moments before. It seemed like the silence of death!

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

A Clue at Last.

BLAKE continued shouting, stopping occasionally and listening intently. The wind moaned, some bushes close at hand rustled, otherwise there was no sound of any kind, and the rough walls of the stronghold mocked his strength. Again and again he hurled himself at the door. At last, desisting in despair, he tramped around the house, gazing up at it anxiously, grimly, hoping against hope that he might find some way by which he might yet force an entrance. There was none.

Hark! What was that?

A revolver-shot rang out faintly in the distance.

A shout! Another! And yet another!

And the cry was one of eagerness and haste.

The great detective ran back from the house so that he could see on all sides, and then he gave an odd cry that was smothered in his throat, for a figure was running towards him, and he seemed to recognise it. Was this the land of the unsolvable? Those tough walls held Tinker a prisoner, and yet—yet he seemed to be free. He was racing towards him, waving a hand, and shouting. Blake stood spellbound; he felt he was the victim of a delusion; he could not stir.

"Mr. Blake—Mr. Blake! Hurry—hurry!"

That cry, in the voice he knew so well, sent a warm surge through Blake's strong frame. It was Tinker he saw, and not a mere shadow. His muscles became pliable, all doubt vanished, he was once again master of himself. With a hoarse shout in answer he sprang forward, and the two met, running at full speed. Blake clutched the lad, and his warm hand tightly gripped a firm, pliant arm.

"Tinker," he cried, "it is you, then? You—and here! And when I last saw you, you were climbing into the fortress yonder, and now you come running across the plain! My head seems swimming! What does this mean? What can—"

"It's all right, sir!" Tinker gasped, and his face was drawn, and his Oriental garb was torn and covered with mud. "The villain bolted like a rabbit into a warren, and I went after him. He came out through a hole in the ground over yonder, and he's got away; but—"

"Ah, there's a secret passage leading from the fortress to the plain?"

"Dunno what is it!" Tinker gasped. "It comes out on the side of a slushy pond, and I nearly got up to my neck in it. The cur knew where the ground was hard, and he climbed to the top like a squirrel, and bolted away whilst I was floundering about. And when at last I got on to the plain I loosed off the revolver after him; but he was out of range, and so I doubled back here to tell you, and—"

"He can go. I'm more than satisfied to have you back. And you don't seem to be wounded, either. Let him scoot whilst he can; we'll be on his tracks before long," Blake interjected, his face alight with happiness. "You're safe and sound, anyhow, and that's all I care about just now. Why, this is wonderful! I never expected to see you—But there, we must get to work, I suppose. Show me where you came out on the plain. And—and, Tinker, I can't tell you quite how I feel; but you know—you understand."

Blake was still holding the lad by the arm. The great detective's face was shining, a great brightness had come into his eyes; he was hurrying over the ground with tremendous strides, and Tinker, still panting, was struggling to keep up with him. The pace Blake went at, and the exertions through which Tinker had been already, quite prevented the latter from speaking; he had his work cut

out to get along as it was, and so in silence they reached the pond, and Blake bent forward and gazed down at it.

"The hole is right under where we're standing!" Tinker explained, drawing his breath unevenly.

"I see! Humph!" Blake murmured, his forehead contracted in a puzzled frown, as, with his chin gripped in one hand and the other still on the lad's arm, he bent forward and stared down at the oozing mud. "Why, I'm beginning to understand! This was a lake of oil, Tinker, and the fortress yonder was built to protect it, and an underground passage was cut from the fortress to the lake so that the men on guard could come here in defence of the oil if necessary, and retreat if hard pressed back to the fortress without exposing themselves to attack. That's the solution of the mystery. And the villain knew of this, and bolted this way, as the best he could think of. But what happened when you got into the fortress, Tinker? You haven't yet told me."

"I haven't had time, and I haven't got my wind back, and there's not much to tell!" Tinker grinned ruefully. "It all happened so fast that it seems more like a sort of a rough-and-tumble you'd see on the stage than anything in real life. When I got inside I was spotted at once, for the horse was plunging, and the cur upstairs flung open the door as I dropped to the ground, meaning, I suppose, to come down and quiet the animal somehow. The stairs are straight down, about a dozen steps, and as steep as a ladder to a loft. I stared up at him, and he stared down at me, both of us mesmerised, as it were. And the horse was terrified all the more at seeing me there, and he began backing the length of his bridle and kicking against the door, and jumping forward, till I feared he'd flatten me out with his chest and forelegs. I daren't stir, and yet I knew that any moment I might be under his hoofs. I tell you, sir, I felt in a ticklish corner, and it's a wonder to me that I ever got out of it alive."

"Yes, yes; go on!" Blake urged.

"And the cur whipped out a revolver and blazed away at me, and I blazed away at him," Tinker went on breathlessly. "Look here!" He pointed to his turban, through which a bullet had furrowed a hole close to his head. "He just shaved my scalp there, and I got fair savage, and dodged about trying to get a straight shot at him; but the place was full of smoke, and I couldn't see him, till all of a sudden the horse squealed and fell in a heap, hitting me on the shoulder, and bringing me tumbling with him. And at that moment the cur came rolling down the stairs through the clouds of smoke, and fell on both of us. He picked himself up, dashed off, pulled up a stone, and slid down out of sight. I was after him like a shot, and I ran along, doubled up, barking my shins and whacking my head badly a couple of times against rocks or wood, or something; and I was fair stifled when at last I tumbled out of the passage and into the pond. You know the rest, sir."

"You had an exciting time," Blake murmured. "It's well it ended as it did. Well, my lad, I'm going to the fortress now through that passage, and if you go back over the ground I'll open the door for you. And—"

"Oh, I'll show you the way! I'll go with you, anyhow, though it's so dark there's not much to show," Tinker grinned. "I'm feeling fit again, sir, and I'd as lief crawl back as walk."

He slid down the side of the pond as he spoke, and Blake followed. Tinker crept into the passage, and Blake went after him. The journey back to the fortress was far from pleasant; the ground was damp and uneven, sometimes Blake had difficulty in forcing his way along; he was glad when he saw a faint light in the distance, and knew that he was near daylight and fresh air again. But at last he reached the opening in the fortress, and, dragging himself up, he looked around.

The horse was lying dead, with a bullet through his head. As Tinker had explained, the stairs leading to the upper room were very steep; but Blake quickly mounted them and gazed around. A pile of straw, pressed down as if a man had been sleeping on it, was in one corner. Otherwise the room was absolutely empty. Blake kicked over the straw and examined it carefully; nothing was hidden there.

For fifteen minutes he remained in that room, making a most exhaustive examination. He tapped the walls, stamped all over the floor, searched for footprints and finger-marks—all in vain. There was no clue; nothing to give him any indication as to the identity of the man who had attacked Tinker, and escaped so swiftly. Somewhat disappointed, he descended the stairs again.

"The bullet that killed that horse was intended for you, my lad, and I fancy the scoundrel who fired that shot thought it was you he hit when he heard the crash and tumbled down the stairs through the smoke," he said reflectively. "If so, he must have got an unpleasant surprise when he discovered that you were following him through the under-

ground passage. This is the only room here—eh? Then I'm afraid we won't find much to help us. There's nothing in the way of a clue upstairs, and— Half a mo, though; I may be wrong, after all."

He bent down as he concluded, and began tugging at the straps to loosen the horse's belly-band. Soon he had the saddle wrenched off the dead animal's back, and he examined it critically.

"Humph! That's not a Russian, nor is it a British saddle, Tinker," he said gravely. "It's American, my lad. Now, how in the world has it come to pass that a Russian has been riding on an American saddle in this wild spot, and on a new one, too? That's singular—more than singular! If I could trace the history of this saddle, I believe I would come upon some very useful information. If I found out, for instance, the maker's name, how it came to Russia, who brought it here, who sold or lent it to the villain who's just bolted—why, I'd be on the track of this mystery at once! I'd know who the men are who are opposing Sir Henry Fanworth and his friends, and their reasons for doing so! At present I'm all in the dark in that respect, and, therefore—Hallo! What's this?"

As he had been speaking he had been turning the saddle over and over in his hands, concluding his investigations by slipping a couple of fingers under the flap. Now he drew out a crumpled piece of paper. Spreading the paper out evenly on his knee, it developed into the shape of an envelope, and Blake gazed at it intently. His face underwent a rapid change; when he looked up his eyes were twinkling.

"This is another instance of the truth of what I am always telling you, Tinker," he laughed quietly. "When circumstances seem most against one, success is nearest to hand if we will only persevere. Half an hour ago I thought that this expedition of ours had met with complete disaster. Now I've got the first link. From this on we won't be working in the dark; we can proceed step by step. Look at that!"

Tinker looked over Blake's shoulder at the envelope. It still was crumpled slightly, and it was much soiled. But the writing on the envelope was distinct, and the hand was large and firm.

"Alexander Parvitch, Noukha, Manbalov, Southern Russia." Tinker read the address aloud and grinned.

"It won't be long before we're paying our respects to this 'ere Mr. Parvitch—eh, sir?" he suggested gaily. "I guess you'll have something to tell him straight, too, before this business is settled."

"You've read that address very nicely," Blake laughed; "but is there anything else on that envelope that attracts your attention, too?"

Tinker bent down again and stared at the paper questioningly.

"Nothing else that I can see," he admitted; "it's all so dirty and—"

"Can you read that postmark?"

"No; I tried, but I can't make head or tail of it."

"I can't find out much myself, but, still, I see enough to give me more than a hint where that saddle came from," Blake chuckled. "Do you see the figure 'Y' there? It's not the first letter; it's too near the far side of the circle. If you put the letter 'N' before the 'Y,' what do you get?"

"New York!" Tinker cried.

"Ay!" Blake agreed, rising to his feet, for he had been sitting on the last step of the stairs. "And that's where the saddle came from; and it belongs to the man who sent the letter; and he's in Russia now, and he lent the saddle to the scoundrel who's just escaped. Wait, and you'll see that my theory is right—in this respect, anyhow. And now unbolt the bars and fling that door open. Morning is breaking, and we must get on our way."

"Then you won't try to catch the scoundrel who has just bolted?" Tinker asked, with some dismay.

"You'd like to come up with him, I know," Blake replied, as he stepped out on to the plain and drank in the fresh morning air. "Never mind, we'll find him time enough! I would have tried to prevent him getting first to Manbalov if I hadn't dropped across that envelope, but now I don't care. Mr. Parvitch is too big a man to be easily lost; I'm certain of that. No, we must push on as fast as we can; but first we'll have some breakfast. Then we'll have a jolly day rumbling along in the sunlight."

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

A. Bold Stroke.

THREE days passed, during which Blake and Tinker continued the journey to Manbalov without meeting with any particular adventure. Now they were drawing to the end of the journey, and night was closing in. For miles the country stretched out flat and monotonous on three sides, but on the fourth wooded slopes arose amongst

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 54.

NEXT FRIDAY:

"THE NEW TUTOR!"

By Martin Clifford.

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"THE BLACK KING!"

By S. Clarke Hook.

high hills, and twinkling lights flashed out, growing in numbers every minute.

"That's Manbalov yonder," Blake said presently. "We'll just go on another mile or so, and then we'll put up the horse and cart somewhere for the night. We'll stroll into the town on foot. It's not a big place like Baku, and we'll have to be very cautious."

Finding a disused izba, or Russian peasant's house, about half a mile from the town, they left the horse and cart in the yard there and walked on. Soon they had climbed half-way up the hill, and were entering Manbalov. The streets were wide and unpaved, the sidewalks formed of loose planks, the houses low and irregular, with gaps of vacant ground here and there; the shops small and dark, with huge signs instead of the names of the owners; the aspect of the town altogether cheerless and slovenly. They came to an inn, a long, irregular building, and, pushing open the door, Blake entered a narrow room, crowded with men. Small landowners, cattle-dealers, and the chief tradesmen of the town were there, all packed together and talking volubly. A Russian official in uniform was speaking in a harsh voice, and the rest were gathered around him, interrupting, protesting, pleading, and arguing by turns. In the excitement on every side Blake and Tinker's entrance passed unnoticed, and the twain sank down on a seat close to the door and listened to the altercation unobserved.

The official's eyes were flashing; a heavy scowl was on his forehead; his manner was domineering.

"So it has been decreed, and the decree must be obeyed," Blake heard him insisting. "The revenue must be raised, and I am here to see that the money is collected and forwarded to St. Petersburg. That is my duty, and that is all with which I am concerned. So look to it, all of you, if you would avoid trouble! The man who dares to refuse will feel the knout, and the Cossacks will ride roughshod over you. That will be your fate."

"We will never pay; let them do their worst!" an old grey-bearded man shouted tremulously.

"Ay, ay!" a score of voices agreed defiantly.

A respectable, quiet-spoken tradesman pushed his way to the front.

"Ispravnik Parvitch, the people cannot pay; the times have been bad, as all know," he began, with desperate calmness.

Tinker clutched Blake by the arm.

"Parvitch! Did you hear the name, sir?" he whispered eagerly.

"Hush—let me listen!" Blake urged. "Yes, I heard!" Parvitch laughed contemptuously.

"So you say, Khelmit; and if there is any agitation I will know on whose shoulders to lay the blame!" he scoffed. "There never was a conspiracy without a ringleader, and for all your quiet speech I am well aware who is inciting the people to withhold the money. Have a care, my friend! You would do well to mind your own business. Bah! I will make short work of you if this trouble does not end!"

"I am a loyal subject of the Tsar," Khelmit replied gravely; whilst a murmur of indignation ran round the thronged room at Parvitch's tyrannical speech. "I am no conspirator, and no ringleader. I say, though, that the people can't pay, and that if the circumstances of the case were reported to the authorities at St. Petersburg, the levy would be cancelled. All know that, and—"

"I do not know it; I know quite the contrary!" Parvitch interjected hotly. "The folks here can pay, and they will pay! They are all a set of thieves, and you are the worst of the crowd! Out of my way; I will listen to no more!"

Khelmit held his ground. His face was pallid, but firm, and his eyes were pleading.

"If you would look into the matter, Ispravnik," he urged. "If you would only listen, I can show you that what I say is true. Therefore—"

"Out of my way!" Parvitch bawled again. "Do you dare to baulk my way? Is it your object to set these curs upon me? There, then! That is how I deal with those who forget the dignity of my rank!"

As he spoke he raised his clenched fist, and struck the peaceable tradesman a terrific blow that sent him staggering back. A hoarse cry arose, terrible in its wrath. The pent-up storm had burst; the down-trodden people had turned. Parvitch saw the danger he was in; he cowed the rush by whipping out a revolver and levelling it at the foremost who pressed forward.

"Stand back!" he laughed sardonically. "I am not such a fool as to come amongst you unarmed!"

He strode in three quick steps to the door, and vanished. The crowd surged after him, and Blake and Tinker were swept away in the rush. Parvitch had vaulted on to a horse, and was riding away. Blake clutched the man nearest

to him by the arm, whilst the others, shouting maledictions, rushed after the domineering official.

"Who is that man yonder?" Blake demanded. "Speak freely, I am your friend!"

The Russian turned and gazed heart-brokenly at the powerful, self-confident man beside him.

"My friend!" the man gasped. "We have no friend when the officials turn against us! The man yonder is the police commissary of this district. Did you not hear him called Ispravnik?"

"The police commissary! Then I understand!" Blake replied. "But you have a friend now in me—one who, perhaps, can aid you. I care nothing about a Russian official!"

"Then who are you?" the other asked nervously, gazing at Blake. "Your dress is that of a Persian—and there are many such down by the Caspian littoral—but your speech—"

"I am a Britisher, and disguised."

"A Britisher!" the Russian gasped. "And you have come to Manbalov, and you are disguised! Then you are no friend of the officials! Ah, your people are always free and just; you can sympathise with us!"

"First I must know in what way you are badly treated," Blake urged. "I was not long in the inn yonder, and, therefore, I did not hear much. What power has this man Parvitch to bully folks like you?"

"He levies the revenue; he raises it as he likes!" the other groaned. "And if we refuse payment, then he has only to summon the Cossacks, and they pillage and burn the town!"

"But no one can get much revenue out of a place like this," Blake urged, remembering the flat, unprofitable country through which he had journeyed during the past few days. "How can Parvitch raise the revenue here? On what does he levy the duty?"

"On vodka, and flax and hemp, and many things besides," the Russian groaned. "But we do not complain on that account, for those are duties we have always paid. But now he is raising further duty, for the authorities say we are lazy and do not work, and that it is due to our idleness that a great petroleum industry has not been started in this neighbourhood, and that the revenue is thereby the loser."

Blake started.

"And what does Parvitch say on that head?" he asked quickly.

"He does not speak much," the other explained. "He states that his business is only to levy the revenue that the authorities demand; that he has no right to question the action of his superiors."

"And what do you want him to do?"

"We want him to explain that there is no company here to search for the oil and to employ our labour, and that, therefore, we are not to blame."

"And he won't do that?"

"No."

Blake shot a significant glance at Tinker.

"I am not surprised that Parvitch won't help you to lay your case before the authorities," he said. "You need not expect any assistance from him, for I can well guess the reason of his objection. But I will help you to find the oil, if you in your turn are faithful to me."

The crowd which had followed Parvitch, hooting and shouting as he had ridden disdainfully away, was now returning, in a state of wild excitement. The Russian with whom Blake had been conversing, hearing the great detective's solemn promise, gave a glad cry, and rushed to meet his compatriots. And as he shouted the good news that a stranger had come to Manbalov ready to befriend them, the simple folk surged round Blake and Tinker, cheering both vociferously. Blake raised his hand to command silence. Tinker noticed that his eyes were full of triumph.

"Friends, listen to me!" he cried, in a voice that ran clear and sonorous to the farthest limits of the ever-gathering throng. "I have come here in the interests of some British friends who are anxious to turn this region into one of the most prosperous in Russia. They have money; plenty of it! They can employ you, and pay you, and make this town of Manbalov one of the most wealthy in the kingdom. They want to drill for oil, to raise great derricks and refineries; and they have the permission of the Tsar to begin the work. But there are others, who had plotted against them, and who would stay their hands. I am their representative, with full power to begin operations; yet, as you see, I have had to come here in disguise, so great is the risk I run, and so strong is the evil influence against me! And the influence against you and me is the same. Do you understand?"

Hoarse cries of assent rose in answer. Blake's striking personality, his manliness, his straightforwardness, his open,

honest face, all together had won the respect of the oppressed folk, who were never addressed by those with more knowledge and position than themselves but in terms of contempt and defiance.

"Very good!" Blake went on at once. "But from the start I want you to understand that this is a dangerous and difficult business, both for you and me. We must stand or fall together. The police commissary, Parvitch, will be against us; the Cossacks will be against us! You must show courage; resolution. I will stick to you till death; and, once you have begun work, you must not desert me, as you value your homes—ay, and your lives! We have to fight the officials here, who will keep all dark as far as St. Petersburg is concerned. They will send false reports, which will be believed and which we will be unable to contradict, and they will turn this town into an armed camp, if they cannot beat us otherwise. Are you prepared to face that? Think well before you throw in your lot with mine! If you think the risk too great, then disperse and go home!"

"The Britisher—we will stand by the Britisher!" a voice rang out. "He speaks truth, and he is brave, and he will lead us! Down with Parvitch and his hirelings! We will fear them no more!"

Hoarse, assenting cries arose gradually to a tumult of applause. The Russians were surging round Blake and Tinker, their faces resolute and bright, their eyes flashing fire, their whole bearing altered wonderfully in that moment of hope and triumph. Again Blake raised his hand in a command for silence, and a great hush fell.

"Then that is settled!" said Blake, with deliberate firmness. "And now that you have taken the plunge, and that there is no going back, let me tell you that with courage and dogged resolution I feel certain we will win. I speak as a man who has fought for justice before this day, and who has never been beaten; as no man will ever be beaten in a good cause, if only he faces the worst coolly and unflinchingly. You know the class of men who are arrayed against you! Often in the past you have had to set your wits against theirs, and you know the value of discretion and silence. Keep your own counsel, therefore; tell no one what has passed to-night between us, or that I am here. Return quietly to your homes, and wait tranquilly till I give you word that I need your services. Meanwhile, there is work that I and my young friend must do; but in a few days at the farthest you will hear from me, and then be ready—be ready! Now go! You can rely on me, and I rely on you!"

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

The Eve of Battle!

THE crowd slowly dispersed, and Blake and Tinker left Manbalov behind, and returned to the spot where they had left the horse and cart. There they had their supper, and, sitting before a wood fire, Blake smoked in silence far into the night. At last he knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and rose to his feet.

"It's about time to turn in, my lad!" he said cheerily. "To-morrow we must change our quarters. We'll move from here at daybreak, so snatch a snooze whilst you have the chance."

Tinker needed no encouragement to seek repose, and ten minutes later he was sound asleep. Blake's hand on his arm awoke him in the cold, grey light of the early morning, and, rubbing his eyes, he staggered to his feet.

"Seems as if I'd only had twenty winks, sir!" he grinned. "And this place can be jolly chilly at night! I'll be glad when I set the fire going again!"

"Yes, look sharp!" Blake urged. "We have to get round to the far side of Manbalov, where the oil-fields are. I've been looking at the map, and I've located the place to which the concession refers!"

Tinker bustled around, and, after a hasty meal, they yoked the horse and trundled on again. The sun was only rising as they reached the bleak, level ground on the far side of the town, and Blake at once set to work. With map in hand, he surveyed the ground, referring often to his notebook for guidance. The morning had slipped away before he had completed his investigations, and the early winter's day was closing when he returned to Tinker and gave the word to move on. They moved out six miles farther from the town before they found a suitable place, and then Blake unfolded his plans.

"I've been thinking over this business from every point of view," he began, "and I've come to the conclusion that there's no use in beating about the bush. I half thought first of going to Parvitch, but I've decided that it would be better if he came to me. We're in a lawless country, Tinker, and Parvitch is all powerful here! He'll use all the force

at his command against us, and we must use all the force we can get together against him, that's all. So I'm going to set to work drilling for oil, and it will be his business to stop me!"

Tinker stared round-eyed at the great detective.

"Why, he'll think nothing of that, sir!" he protested. "Hasn't he only to send a messenger and he'll have a regiment of Cossacks at his back, and another lot after that if necessary? How can we put up a fight against the armed forces of the Crown?"

"Well, if you've any better suggestion to make, I'll be glad to hear it," Blake said quietly. "We won't get fair play for the asking, you know! If Parvitch can lay his hands on us, the game is up; he'll clap us into a dungeon! So either we must fight force by force, or else we'd better get home. I don't say I'm going to win; I only say that I'm going to try!"

Tinker grinned.

"I'm not for going home, anyhow!" he replied. "But this is about quite the biggest order you ever took on, sir. Parvitch has got an army, and we're going to fight it. That's what it comes to, doesn't it?"

"Not quite," Blake replied gravely. "There'll be some fighting, I don't doubt, and we'll have to hold our own until we've gained what we want. But it will be some time before Parvitch will be able to get the troops here, for one thing; and I know what work I have to do in order to succeed. Do you see that huge derrick away on the horizon there—eh? Well, that's over an oil-field, so some company is working already in this neighbourhood, and the derrick is not on the land mentioned in the concession. I'm going now to find out, if possible, who put that derrick there; and meantime do you go into Manbalov and tell the Russians to come to this spot at daybreak to-morrow. Then we'll set to work."

Tinker nodded and arose.

"And one thing more," Blake continued. "Tell them to bring spades and any weapons they chance to have, as they'll come in handy, and then go round the town and buy planking, a boring-bar with an iron bit, with twenty lengths and tubing to correspond. You'll find all that sort of thing in the town, for the men who set up yonder derrick had to get it, too, before they started work. Engage as many hands as you want to cart it all out here, and don't rest until you have the lot safely dumped down on this spot. You're only to give an order to correspond exactly with the one the other company gave. We can't do better than follow their lead. You have a hard night's work before you, my lad, but you'll manage all right. Only work as quietly as you can, and get the Russians you engage to do the same."

Tinker strode away in silence, for in truth he was too dazed to speak. He had known Blake under many circumstances, he had often stood by his side in the gravest peril, but with all the great detective's boldness, shrewdness and courage, he had never known him undertake such a desperate enterprise as this promised to be. There and then he was going to defy the might of Russia! And what was more, he seemed quite as self-confident as determined. Tinker was puzzled beyond words.

However, he did not act the less promptly on that account. It was his business to obey instructions, and so far he had never known Blake to fail in anything he undertook. So he hurried into Manbalov, and when there he was kept so busy that he had no time for doubt or hesitation. He found that the townsfolk were anxiously awaiting him; in a few minutes after his arrival he was surrounded by an eager throng. Under his instructions all was arranged for an immediate start to the oil-fields. Carts were loaded up, a great crowd noiselessly left the town, and when day broke Manbalov was practically deserted, except for the women and children.

Blake, who had been inspecting the derrick in the meantime, and who returned from his investigations light-hearted and buoyant, gave orders for the work to begin. A hole about twenty square feet was dug, and the foundations of the derrick were laid. Whilst fifty men were engaged on this task, the rest were set to throw up an earthwork forty yards square around the derrick, thus forming a natural protection, difficult to storm, and impossible for cavalry to ride over. As the boring apparatus, when rigged, would have to work from the top of the derrick, Blake knew that he would be attacked for certain before he would be able to strike oil, so he prepared for a defence.

But to drill for petroleum is in itself a very easy feat, and he had no difficulty on that account. One only has to bore deep enough and line the hole thus made with piping, through which the oil, when reached, will rush up. Tinker had secured the piping, and also a cap to be adjusted at the top, and Blake examined the cap long and carefully

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 54.

NEXT FRIDAY:

"THE NEW TUTOR!"
By Martin Clifford.

"THE FRONTIER SMUGGLERS!"
A Grand Tale of Sexton Blake.

"THE BLACK KING!"
By S. Clarke Hook.

before he decided that it had the necessary strength to resist the tremendous pressure of the oil.

The Russians worked with a will. From the start Blake had inspired their confidence; they knew, too, that now there was no going back; by their action they had defied Parvitch, and either they must win, or else submit to slavery and oppression for the future. Tinker was superintending the making of the earthworks, while Blake was directing the scientific laying of the derrick, and morning was well advanced when the lad heard his name called. Turning, he saw Blake advancing towards him, and he gave a stifled gasp, for Blake had discarded his disguise, and was dressed in European attire.

"You're going to let them know who you are, sir?" Tinker gasped.

"Yes; there's no use in any more concealment," Blake replied quickly. "We can't hope to dodge them, Tinker; I must fight Parvitch as man to man. He'll be here any moment now, and we must get ready to give him a warm reception. How many men are there here? They look a tidy crowd. And what weapons have they got? That's the principal point."

"There's close on four hundred of them, sir; quite enough to face a rush wherever it comes from," Tinker grinned; "but most of them have only spades and shovels and crow-bars. There's about thirty guns in all."

"Thirty guns? Well, if they know how to use them, we're pretty safe!" Blake replied cheerily. "It will take us the whole day to rig up that derrick, and thirty-six hours more before we can hope to strike oil. That doesn't give Parvitch so very long to beat us, you see. But the fighting will be stiff all the time. To-night I must leave the camp in your hands," and get away. I made a useful discovery last night."

"What was that, sir?" Tinker asked eagerly.

"Why, that the company working the derrick yonder is an American syndicate," Blake explained. "They have some men on duty there every night, and I managed to allay their suspicions, and I learnt a lot. A rascal named Chatford is at the head of the Yankee syndicate. I had a talk with him, and tried to get him to work in with Sir Henry Fanworth's syndicate. Chatford only laughed at me, however, and defied me to work Sir Henry's concession; and finished up by threatening our lives if we don't break up this camp and leave the district forthwith. Chatford has gathered a band of rascals round him, and he is evidently hand-in-glove with Parvitch and the rest of the Russian officials, so we have a tough job to tackle."

"Now, my lad, don't you see why all this opposition has been made to our people? The syndicate yonder belongs to an American company. Many of them have millions at their back, they know the value of these oil-fields, and they want to keep them to themselves. They have bribed Parvitch and all the other rascally officials between here and the Caspian Sea; and, of course, Parvitch and the rest hope to make huge fortunes themselves if the Americans are allowed to work the oil-fields undisturbed."

"Great Scott!" Tinker gasped. "Why, of course, it's all as plain as daylight when the thing is explained. What cheek, though! But they haven't got the concession where we're standing. Why can't they go on with their own work, therefore, and leave us alone?"

"Ah, you don't quite know the methods of some of the American companies!" Blake explained. "They don't only want to make money themselves; they want to rule the market. If we compete with them we can keep the price of oil down, but if they own the only oil-fields at work in the world, then they can charge the public what they like. They have begun here, and if they succeed they will own all the oil-fields around here before long, for money is all-powerful. They chanced to start here; and, therefore, Sir Henry Fanworth and his friends have been the first to suffer. If they're not checked they'll go on from one triumph to another. It is my duty now to protect the interests of those who engaged my services. Therefore, I'm going to fight them, too!"

"And that explains about the American saddle—eh?" Tinker suggested thoughtfully.

"Of course it does," Blake laughed; "and it also explains the envelope with the New York postmark that we found in the saddle. To-night I have another delicate piece of work to do, and I shall leave the camp directly it is dark. Keep 'em hard at it while I am absent, Tinker, for everything depends on our striking oil soon. I may be away a whole day, or even two, but I trust I shall not return empty-handed."

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

A Near Thing—Suspense—Victory!

It was two nights later that Blake returned, and, to Tinker's amazement, he brought a prisoner with him—none other than Parvitch himself!

"By covering him with my revolver through my pocket, I persuaded him to walk with me out of barracks at Manbalov, where he was surrounded by his own men," explained the detective. "But we are not out of the wood yet. Parvitch had already sent for extra troops from Tiflis, and a thousand Cossacks, with several guns, will be upon us soon after dawn. The possession of Parvitch, however, is our trump card."

"Tinker, I hand him over to your charge. Get half a dozen armed men to look after him, and if he attempts to bolt shoot him down! You hear those orders, Parvitch? You know what fight will mean to you!"

Soon Parvitch was surrounded by men with rifles, all of them glaring at him fiercely. They remembered past injuries, they knew now that he was in their power, and they were fully resolved that he would not escape.

"And how has the work been getting on?" Blake asked anxiously.

"We haven't struck oil yet, sir, but we may at any moment," Tinker replied.

"Good! I must see to it at once!"

Blake hurried away, and began to examine the drilling operations. The screw—now deep in the bowels of the earth—was still being driven from the capstan, and the cap lay close at hand, ready to be adjusted. Blake cried a halt whilst he carefully examined the cap. It was a tremendously strong piece of metal, with a screw inside by which it could be twisted on to the top tube. The cap itself at the top ran in a groove, and could be pulled backwards and forwards, so as either to keep down or release the oil. Blake at once began to adjust it on the tubing with the assistance of a couple of workmen. Soon it was in its place, firm and powerful. Pulling back a lever, and thus leaving the tubing open once again, he ordered the men to continue to drill carefully. With the cap adjusted, the work had become difficult and delicate, and Blake personally superintended it, for fear of an irretrievable accident.

And now the sun was slowly rising in the distance, and the birds had begun to chatter and the insects to drone. And amidst the silent, eager working of his men, Blake, grave, and far more anxious than he showed, raised his head suddenly and listened intently. Ay, he was not mistaken. That rumbling meant danger.

He looked around. Tinker's face had grown serious; Parvitch was smiling triumphantly; some of the Russians had dropped their spades, and were whispering excitedly one to another. The noise grew greater, clearer, more and more ominous. The crack of whips, hoarse shouts, shrieks and wailings, the rumble of wheels, all arose sharp and close at hand. And then from the direction of Manbalov half a dozen horsemen trotted into view, and more came after them, and more and more. Bright uniforms sparkled and bayonets glistened in the sunlight, and artillery rattled over the uneven ground.

A thousand horsemen riding in serried ranks swept on to the plain, and, opening in wider formation, began to surround the camp. Horses were unyoked, and the guns rapidly run into position. The troops from Tiflis had arrived, and were eager to get to work. In silence Blake noted all attentively, whilst those around him turned ashen pale and clasped their hands in terror. Was this to be the end? Was it for this they had braved all and trusted the Britisher, and left their homes, following him blindly, relying on his fair speech and promises of protection? Some sank on their knees, and a low groan ran around the camp.

Blake heard it, and he wheeled round.

"Have no fear!" he cried. "It rests with that man yonder"—and he pointed to Parvitch—"whether the troops will open fire or not. He knows what will happen to him if they do. Whoever else escapes, he will be the first to fall. Work on! Drill, drill, drill! Leave the rest to me. I will see to it that you are not interfered with." He turned to Parvitch. "Here is paper and a pencil," he said. "Write an order to the officer commanding those troops, telling him that you are here engaged in negotiations with me, and not to open fire until he receives your instructions. Quick! There is no time to lose."

Parvitch took the paper and pencil. He knew there was no use in resisting the command; he had come to understand something of Blake's inflexible will. Blake read the message

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(See Page 32.)

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 54.

Please Give This Number of THE PENNY POPULAR to a Non-Reader.

when Parvitch had finished, and, folding the paper, he handed it to Tinker.

"Hurry with that, my lad," he said quietly; "I must stay here."

Tinker crossed the earthworks and approached the troops, fluttering a handkerchief as an emblem of truce. Blake did not even watch what manner of reception he got. He was bending over the tubing again, his face tense, a great frown on his forehead.

"Keep on!" he said. "Turn the capstan, drive the screw! Hark! At last—at last! I hear a rumbling! Pull out the screw!" he thundered. "All hands to the work! Pull! Pull!"

He was striving desperately himself. The Russians, encouraged by his example, seeing from his face that the critical moment had come, redoubled their energies. The screw was hauled away, there was a hissing sound, the earth rooked, and with a roar the oil dashed forth, flinging its oily folds high above the derrick. But Blake's hand was on the lever; the cap closed, the oil was once more imprisoned.

A raucous laugh floated to him as he wiped the perspiration from his brow, and a mocking voice floated across the plain. He looked up. Chatford and his fellow conspirators were galloping to meet the troops.

"Your hour has come!" Chatford yelled. "Prepare to die!"

Blake smiled.

"Halt! I want one word with you!" he cried. "I promise I will not harm you. I speak in your interests as well as my own."

Chatford reined up. Something in Blake's words, in his bright manner, had startled him; the great detective looked so much like a man who had no cause for fear. Chatford walked his horse forward, and Blake, jumping on to the earthworks, stood waiting his arrival.

"Well, what is it that you wish to say?" the Yankee demanded.

"I have struck oil," Blake explained.

"Yes, I know that," Chatford grinned.

"And I have full control over the oil-field below," Blake went on. "The cap is adjusted properly, and answers to the lever."

"Well, what of that? You will never be able to make use of the property. The troops will wipe you out."

"I don't think so," Blake smiled. "They have instructions not to fire. Look at them; the men are standing at ease, and my young assistant is returning."

Chatford stared blankly across the plain. The Cossacks had dismounted, a group of officers in a circle were chatting and lighting cigarettes.

"Who told them to desist?" Chatford faltered.

"Parvitch."

"Parvitch?"

"Yes; he is here. See, he is standing in my camp!"

Chatford, following the indication of Blake's outstretched finger, recognised the villain in Blake's camp, and his face grew livid.

"What does this mean?" he faltered.

"Why, that the game is up," Blake replied airily. "And now, Chatford, let me get to business and explain. I said I wanted to speak to you as much in your interests as in mine, and that is the truth. You have come out here to make money, and I've come here on behalf of friends whose interests are the same as yours. You would not allow me to work in peace; you hoped to prevent me from finding oil. I have succeeded. Just now you thought that didn't matter because the troops have arrived, and you fancied Parvitch was with them. I have checkmated you in that. He must be on my side now, because his life hangs in the balance."

The villain scowled.

"Well, what has all this to do with me?" he growled.

"Perhaps everything and perhaps nothing," Blake rejoined. "In a few minutes we shall see. I know that you will always be a dangerous enemy if it is not in your interest to pull well with my syndicate; therefore, I knew that in order to win success, more was necessary than that I should find oil here and thwart Parvitch. I had to prove to you

that your property and this one hung together. If they do, why, of course, you will row in with us, for your own sake."

Chatford's face had grown ashen pale.

"What are you driving at?" he faltered.

"You know as well as I do," Blake smiled; "the only thing is that you didn't think I had the knowledge that you possess. Tell me, if I knock the cap off the tubing yonder, what would happen?"

"The oil would rush out until the oil-field below was exhausted," Chatford growled.

"Quite so. And suppose the same oil-wells feed your property and mine, then the oil would rush out here, and you would have none either—eh?" Blake inquired blandly. "And once an oilcap is knocked off it's not possible to adjust another—eh? The feat has often been attempted here and in America, but never with success. Isn't that so? Therefore, you and I are in the same boat. I have only to smash that oil-cap in order to ruin you."

Chatford gave a cry.

"You clever scoundrel!" he gasped. "How did you learn that? You are not in the oil business. How did you learn it?"

"I'm not a fool, and I made a study of the subject," Blake laughed. "So—"

"Half a mo, though!" Chatford interjected grimly. "If the two oil-fields have separate springs, then you can't injure us."

"That is so," Blake agreed. "I know all hangs on that. Ride back, therefore, to your derrick; push the oil-cap, and when the oil spouts up I will pull mine. If when the oil rushes out here the volume on your property is reduced, then it will be evident that they are both fed from the same springs."

"And if not?" Chatford demanded hoarsely.

"If not, then I am helpless," Blake replied quietly. "I have staked all on that hope since you and Parvitch pressed me hard. But if what I think is the case, then ride back here as hard as you can, for if you don't return in twenty minutes I will smash my oil-cap, and thus ruin your property as well as this one."

Without another word, but with a face black as thunder, Chatford wheeled round and galloped frantically away. As Blake jumped down from the earthworks, he saw that Tinker had returned, that he had been standing close by, and listening intently.

"I understand all now, sir," the lad murmured hoarsely. "Now I know why—"

"Yes. The moment I have longed for and yet that I have feared has arrived at last," Blake said, with tremulous solemnity. "My lad, I hope to win, and yet I can't say. This suspense is terrible. We can only wait and hope."

Chatford was galloping hard to his own property. The troops around were standing idly, wondering what was happening, surprised that they were not called into action. Blake, watching intently, saw Chatford reach his derrick, and presently a tremendous flood of oil rose upwards in the distance, like a huge tidal wave in the middle of the ocean.

Blake put his hand on the lever of his oil-cap. His face was grey, his eyes were gleaming, he was trembling from head to foot.

"Pull, sir!" Tinker cried hoarsely.

Still Blake hesitated. Never had Tinker seen him so agitated as at that moment.

"Now for it!" he half murmured and half moaned.

With a powerful wrench he pulled the lever back. The oil rose with a roar, and he leant on the lever, gazing eagerly forward. Still in the distance the oil there rose high as ever. Tinker gave a cry of despair, but Blake, with figure rigid, watched with a face like marble. Presently the volume on ahead seemed slightly to decrease, then suddenly it sank away to half its height. Tinker could not speak. Blake pushed back the lever, and the oil on the Yankee's property rose again.

"We have won!" Blake gasped. "They must do all they can to preserve this property now. Tinker, we can go home!"

THE END.

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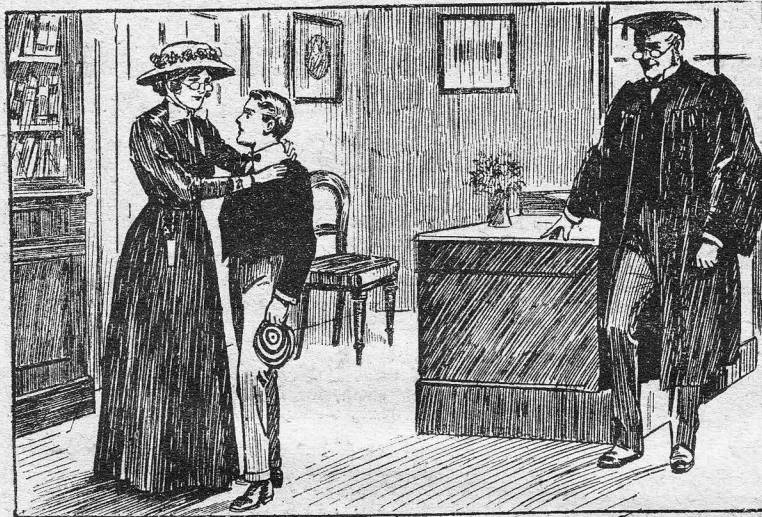
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By MARTIN CLIFFORD.



"Remember you are not strong, Tommy darling, and let the other boys take all the goals if they wish when you are playing cricket," said Miss Fawcett. "Your precious health must come before everything!" (See page 23.)

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Skimpole's New Scheme.

"I'll tell Tilly on the telephone."
Skimpole was humming that to himself as he came down the passage in the School House at St. Jim's.

"Hallo, Skimpole—"
"I'll tell Tilly on the telephone!"
"I say, Skimpole—"
"I'll tell Tilly on the telephone!"
"Skimpole, you ass—"
"I'll tell Tilly on the— Ow!"

Tom Merry brought his hand down with a powerful smack on Skimpole's shoulder, and the brainy man of the Shell Form started out of his brown study.

"Ow! You startled me, Tom Merry!"
Tom Merry looked at him severely.
"What do you mean by going about mumbling, and with your eyes shut?" he demanded.

"The fact is, I was thinking," said Skimpole. "I've got a new idea."

"Something about a telephone—eh?" said Tom Merry, with a laugh.

"Yes, exactly. I'll tell Tilly on the telephone—I mean, I'll tell Figgins on the telephone—"

"What are you talking about, Skimpole?"

"My new idea. You see—"

"I see. You've got a new idea?"

"Yes; and—"

"A really ripping, first-class idea?"

"Yes; and—"

"And you're going to explain it to me?"

"Yes; and—"

"Then I'm off."

"I say, Merry—Tom Merry—"

But Tom Merry was gone. Skimpole rubbed his prominent, bony forehead, and stared after him through his spectacles. Skimpole was brainy, and he was simply crammed with ideas; but his ideas as a rule were not popular in the School House at St. Jim's. He had theories on Socialism,

Determinism, and all sorts and conditions of "isms." Whenever he had a new idea he was eager to tell it to someone. But his House-fellows were by no means equally willing to listen. His study-mate, Gore, had threatened to brain him with a cricket-stump if he ever mentioned any word ending in "ism" in the study they shared. Skimpole felt that he was a misunderstood genius, but he was wary of the cricket-stump.

"H'm! Merry does not seem curious about the matter at all," murmured Skimpole. "But I must have someone's assistance in carrying out the idea. Perhaps Lowther or Manners would be willing to help."

Lowther and Manners, Tom Merry's chums, were standing in the hall, looking at the notices on the board there, when Skimpole sighted them and bore down upon them.

"I say, Lowther—"
"No, you don't," said Monty Lowther, promptly walking away.

"I say, Manners—"
"Do you?" said Manners; and he walked after Lowther.

Skimpole rubbed his forehead again. He always did that when he was in a thoughtful mood, and some fellows said it was with the view of helping his brain to work, that useful organ being very slack in its functions.

"Dear me!" murmured Skimpole. "It seems curious that a really good idea should go begging like this. I suppose I had better go along to Study No. 6."

And a minute later Herbert Skimpole was tapping at the door of Study No. 6, that famous apartment in the School House at St. Jim's shared by the chums of the Fourth Form—Jack Blake, Digby, Herries, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Come in, fathead!"

It was the voice of Jack Blake. Skimpole opened the door and entered. The chums of Study No. 6 had finished their preparation, and were chatting together, and they all left off and stared at Skimpole as he came in.

"Hallo, Skimmy!" said Blake, as cordially as he could.

"I want to speak to you chaps—" began Skimpole.

"Sorry, but we're just going out—"

"It's too bad," said Digby; "but we can't stop."

"Come on!" said Herries.

"Weally, there is no such towfific huvwvy," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the School House. "I weally considah it necessary to be polite to a visitah, even if he is a feahful boah like Skimpole—I do weally. Suppose we give the silly ass a few minutes, you know, deah boys."

"Oh, very well!" said Blake resignedly.

"Go on, Skimpole," said Arthur Augustus encouragingly.

"Twy not to boah us more than you can help, deah boy?"

"I have been thinking—"

"Oh, of course, in a case like that we're called upon to do something," said Blake. "What have you been thinking with, Skimpole?"

The brainy man of the Shell ignored this question.

"I've been thinking, you kids, about the St. Jim's Parliament, and so on. The elections are over now, and the school parliament is elected—"

"We know that, Skimmy—"

"But I was not elected to a seat owing to the prejudice prevailing at St. Jim's against all really good and new ideas."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I am not complaining, for, as a true Socialist, I must uphold the freedom of election, even if I suffer by it—"

"Bwavo!"

"But I really think it would be a good idea to form another constituency among the fellows, and have a by-election, so that I could get into the school parliament—"

"Rats!"

"But that is not my idea. With the stress of business that will come with the opening of the school parliament, it seems to me necessary that there should be methods of more

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direct communication between the School House and the New House."

Jack Blake stared.

"Blessed if I see how communication can be more direct than it is now," he said. "The New House stands almost opposite to the School House, on the other side of the quadrangle, and it's only a couple of minutes' walk across."

"Oh, Skimmy has a new idea!" said Digby, with a grin. "It's a wheeze for shifting the New House across the quadrangle, and putting it next door to the School House."

"Ha, ha!"

Skimpole shook his head.

"Nothing of the sort, Digby. It would be impossible to do so. My idea is to connect the two Houses by means of a telephone."

"A what?"

"A telephone," said Skimpole. "I have dabbled in that sort of thing myself, and know just how simple it is. You know, we had a toy telephone rigged up in the common-room once, and could speak to fellows in the gym."

"I remember."

"Well, I was thinking of putting up something on a bigger scale. It would be easy enough to run a wire to the New House. It could be supported on the wire that is already up, for that matter. We could have a receiver in Figgins's study in the New House, and another in mine—"

"But you're not a member of St. Jim's Parliament."

"I think I ought to be appointed Secretary of the Government, pro. tem., till there is a by-election."

"H'm!"

"Anyway, the telephone is a ripping idea. We're not allowed in one another's Houses after a certain hour, and with the 'phone we could talk up to any hour at night. We could make arrangements over the wires without the trouble of crossing the quadrangle. The doctor has the telephone in his study, and I don't see why the Lower Forms should not have one also."

Blake nodded.

"There's something in that. If you want to rig up a telephone, Skimmy, I haven't any objection."

"Yaas, wathah! Let the boundah have his own way, by all means."

"Then, as you like the idea, I'll fully explain my plans," said Skimpole, sitting down. "I can make the whole thing clear in half an hour. In the first place, we shall want—Where are you going, Herries?"

"Got to go and feed my bulldog," said Herries, quitting the study.

"Well, in the first place, there will have to be a general whip round to cover the expenses; but don't be alarmed—that won't be more than a few pounds—Where are you going, Digby?"

"I'm going to see if it's raining."

"It's not raining—"

"I'd rather see for myself, thank you!" And Digby walked out of the study.

"Well," said Skimpole, "when the funds are raised, you can leave the purchasing of the materials to me. We shall require a—Are you going, Blake?"

"Yes; there's something I forgot to say to Digby."

"But—"

But Blake was gone. Skimpole fixed his eyes on Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"I'm glad to see you take a deeper interest in the matter than those chaps, D'Arcy," he remarked. "Now, in the first place, we shall require a—D'Arcy! Gussy! I say!"

But the swell of the School House had followed his chums. Skimpole looked round the deserted study, and rose to his feet with a sigh.

"This is really very rough," he murmured. "I suppose I had better go and speak to Figgins & Co. about it."

And the brainy man of the Shell descended to the quadrangle and walked across to the New House. Figgins & Co.—Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn—were standing on the steps of the New House when Skimpole came up.

"I say, Figgins—"

"Hallo!" said Figgins.

"I've got a new idea."

"Have you?" said Figgins. "You won't tell it to me, will you, old chap?"

"I've just come across to tell you—"

"Then there's only one thing to be done," said Figgins, making a rapid sign to the Co.

The next moment Skimpole's cap was jammed over his eyes, and he was bumped down in a sitting posture on the steps. Figgins & Co. walked away, and Skimpole stared after them with a bewildered expression.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The First Meeting of the St. Jim's Parliament.

S EVEN o'clock boomed out from the clock-tower of St. Jim's, and Tom Merry rose and laid down his pen in the study he shared with Manners and Lowther in the School House.

"Time we were off, kids," he remarked.

Lowther yawned as he closed his book.

"Oh, right you are! The session opens at half-past, doesn't it?"

"Yes; but we want to be in time."

"Rather!" said Manners. "As we take the leading place in St. Jim's Parliament, we have to be on the spot at the start. I hope those young bounders in Study No. 6 will see things in their proper light, and back us up."

Tom Merry looked a little worried.

The juniors of St. Jim's had lately taken on a new "wheeze," which had caught on at once at the school. A school parliament, on the lines of the venerable institution at Westminster, had been elected. Constituencies had been formed, a certain number of fellows forming each constituency, which was named after the biggest or most important place represented by any member of it. Each constituency elected a member of St. Jim's Parliament, and the House numbered twenty members in all, including all our old friends—the Terrible Three, Study No. 6, and Figgins & Co. Skimpole had been unable to find support, and he was left out, but he was still hoping for a by-election.

The first meeting of St. Jim's Parliament was to take place in the wood-shed. This was only temporary, until more commodious accommodation could be found.

The School House and the New House at St. Jim's had ceased from their usual rows to take an equal interest in the election. But it was certain that the keen House rivalry would revive again within the walls of the wood-shed.

Tom Merry would not have cared for that, for there were twelve School House members of parliament to eight of the New House, and, therefore, the School House ought to have had the majority. But the School House members were divided among themselves.

Jack Blake claimed to be the leader of the School House juniors, a claim which the Terrible Three regarded as absurd. It was extremely probable that Blake would want to be the head of the party in parliament, and that would certainly lead to a split.

A split in the School House ranks meant the majority to the New House, for the New House members were solid under the leadership of Figgins.

"We'd better speak to Blake before we get to the meeting," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "I'll put it to him plainly that if we don't stick together Figgins & Co. will take the lead in the House, and that ought to convince the most obstinate bounder."

"It's a good idea," said Manners. "But Blake is awfully obstinate."

"Well, we can only try."

The Terrible Three quitted their study, and looked into Study No. 6 in passing. That famous apartment was empty, but in the hall downstairs the four chums were talking together, and Tom Merry bore down upon them. Blake was looking at his watch.

"About time we get along to the wood-shed, I think," he remarked.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hallo, you kids!" exclaimed Tom Merry cheerfully.

"Who are you calling kids?" asked Blake, with dangerous politeness.

"Sorry—I meant cads! But I want to speak to you before you go to the meeting. It's rather important?"

"Oh, fire away!"

"You know that there are twelve School House fellows in the St. Jim's Parliament—"

"began Tom Merry.

"Yes; and that gives us the majority."

"If you stick together."

"Well, we ought to do that," said Blake. "It's no good falling out with one another, and letting the Government fall into the hands of the New House chaps."

Tom Merry brightened up considerably.

"That's what I was thinking, Blake!" he exclaimed.

"I'm jolly glad to see you take the same view of the situation that I do. If twelve School House members stick together, they can run the show. Figgins & Co. will have to form the Opposition."

"That's the idea."

"Then I can depend upon you fellows to back me up?"

"Eh?"

"I say I can depend upon you fellows to back me up?"

"There seems to be a slight mistake somewhere," said Blake pleasantly. "I thought you were proposing to back me up."

NEXT FRIDAY:

"THE NEW TUTOR!"
By Martin Clifford.

"THE FRONTIER SMUGGLERS!"
A Grand Tale of Sexton Blake.

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 54.
"THE BLACK KING!"
By S. Clarke Hook.

"Nothing of the sort!" said Tom Merry warmly. "As leader of the School House juniors, I naturally take the lead of the School House party in parliament."

"Excuse me, I have always been under the impression that I was leader of the School House juniors. Perhaps I was mistaken."

"Not much doubt on that point," said Monty Lowther.

"Oh, scart! You fellows are practically new boys here!"

"New boys?" exclaimed the Terrible Three indignantly.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "You see you haven't been at St. Jim's long, and it is weally like your feahful cheek for you to think of wunnin' the show!"

"How long have you been here yourselves?" asked Tom Merry wrathfully. "You came a few weeks before I did, I suppose!"

"Anyway, you can't get out of the undoubted fact that I am leader of the School House juniors."

"Rats! And many of 'em!"

"Now, come, Tom Merry, do be reasonable! If you back me up against the New House party we shall run the show, and I will give yot a post in the Cabinet!"

"Catch me! As your elder, I cannot possibly follow your lead!"

"Elder! About a couple of days my elder, I suppose!" snorted Blake.

"Two months and seven days!"

"Well, then, you're old enough to have more sense! It isn't that I specially want to take all the fat for myself, but I couldn't trust School House affairs to your management!"

"I certainly couldn't consent to follow the lead of a Fourth Form kid!"

"And I jolly well tell you—"

"Pway don't get excited!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I can suggest a third alternative—a weally wippin' way out of the difficulty, deah boys!"

"What's that, Gussy?"

"Suppose you both waive your claims in my favah? I am the last fellow in the world to put myself forward in any way, but what you require for a parliamentary leadah is a fellow of tact and judgment; and so—"

"Oh, ring off!" growled Blake.

"Cheese it!" grunted Tom Merry.

"I wefuse to wing off! I absolutely decline to cheese it!" said D'Arcy, screwing his eyeglass into his eye and surveying the two disdainfully. "I am suggestin' a weally wippin' way out of the beastly difficulty, and if you do not immediately adopt it, I weward you as a pair of extremely silly asses! You would have the great satisfaction of knowin' that the management of the School House party was in the most capable hands poss., and also—"

"Shut up, Gussy!"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort!"

"Well, we sha'n't agree, and it's a quarter past," said Tom Merry. "This question will have to be threshed out within the walls of parliament."

"Good!" said Blake. "Mind, if Figgins becomes Premier, it will be all your fault!"

"All yours, you mean?"

"Oh, don't argue! Let's get to the meeting!"

"And the School House juniors went down the steps. Other members from the School House were on their way. Reilly, the Irish member, who represented Belfast, joined them, with Harrison, the member for Manchester. At the door of the wood-shed they encountered Figgins & Co.

Figgins greeted them with a cheery grin.

"Hallo! I see you're in time. The doors are closed at half-past seven, and all late members have to stay out in the lobby."

"Bai Jove! Where's the lobby?"

"Oh, you imagine the lobby!" said Monty Lowther. "You can fix up anything with the aid of a little imagination."

"Of course you can," agreed Figgins. "There's Lowther imagines that the feeble piffle he works off on us is humour, and it's quite a mistake, of course. All due to imagination."

"Look here, Figgins—"

But Figgins had entered the House of Commons. The members followed him in. The wood-shed was a commodious place, considering, and the juniors had shifted back the faggots, gardening in—
THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 54.

plements, and other impedimenta which Taggles, the school porter and general hand, kept there. Benches had been arranged for the members to sit on, on the two sides of the wood-shed, separated by a gangway in proper style.

"This looks all right," said Tom Merry. "Of course, we shall have to get better quarters later on; but these will do for the first session."

"Unless Taggles comes along and turns us out," suggested Monty Lowther.

"If Lowther is going to be funny," said Blake, "I move that we turn him out before the start! I can stand anything but Lowther's jokes!"

"I second that motion!" said Digby emphatically. "If we let him go on he'll start making puns and asking conundrums next, and we shall have to stop him, so we may as well stop him now."

"Oh, don't be asses!"

"I shall move that no jokes, real or alleged, be made within these walls," said Figgins. "Life isn't worth living if Lowther is going to be funny."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Oh, take your seats!" said Tom Merry. "I believe it's usual for the Government to be decided upon before a general election—it's according to the party that's returned to power. But we haven't settled that yet. We shall have to put it to the vote. Therefore, I propose—"

"What authority have you got for proposing anything?" asked Blake.

"Well, I suppose somebody must make a start."

"That can be left to me. I propose—"

"Rats!" said Figgins. "I propose—"

"Bai Jove, we shall nevah get on at this wate! If you fellows want to pwopose things, take it in turns, or else leave it to me!"

"Good!" exclaimed Reilly. "You are wasting time!"

"Who's wasting time?" asked Blake.

"You are!"

"Are you looking for a thick ear, Reilly?"

"Rats!"

Blake made a motion towards the member for Belfast. Reilly squared up in a businesslike way. Tom Merry pushed between.

"It's not in order to quarrel within these walls!" he exclaimed.

"Bosh! We've had rows in the wood-shed before now."

"This isn't a wood-shed on the present occasion; it's the House of Commons."

"Oh, I forgot! I'll meet you again presently, Reilly!"

"Sure, and I shall be ready for you!" said the member for Belfast.

"Oh, wing off, deah boys, and let's get to business!" said D'Arcy. "We want a beastly Speakah, you know!"

"Yes. Mr. Railton has consented to be honorary Speaker, but we want a working one, too. Now, who's for Speaker?"

"I propose Digby," said Blake.

"Hands up for Digby!"

Nobody had any objection to Digby for Speaker, and so Digby was duly elected. Then D'Arcy had something to say.

"What pwice a speech from the thwone, deah boys?"

"A what?"

"A speech from the thwone. You can't open parliament in the pwopah style without a speech from the thwone."

"There's something in that," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "But we must wait till the Government is settled. Of course, there is going to be a School House Government, and a New House Opposition."

"Something of the sort," said Figgins—
"only vice-versa!"

"We have the majority."

"But you don't all vote together."

"I hope Blake will see reason—"

"I hope Tom Merry will see reason—"

Figgins chuckled.

"Then you're jolly sanguine, both of you, to hope anything of the sort. My idea is that a New House Government should be formed, and that New House politics be adopted by this parliament. The New House members are in favour of making me Premier."



This illustrates one of the many thrilling incidents from "The Angel of the Ward," the great new serial of hospital life, which starts TO-DAY in

ANSWERS

"That doesn't say much for their taste, does it?"

"No personalities are allowed within these walls," said the Speaker. "I call upon the honourable member to withdraw his honourable observation."

"You're starting your functions jolly early, Dig."

"Within these walls I am Mr. Speaker!"

"Mr. Rats!"

"The proceedings cannot proceed until the member for York proceeds to tender an apology."

"Bai Jove! what a lot of proceedings!"

"Oh, cheese it, Dig!" said Blake, the member for York.

Digby's countenance assumed a severe and lofty expression. It was evident that he meant to fully uphold the dignity of his position as Speaker of the St. Jim's House of Commons.

"I call upon the honourable member for York to withdraw his unparliamentary expressions," he said; "otherwise, I shall have no alternative but to commit him to the charge of the sergeant-at-arms."

"Oh, draw it mild, Dig! This is a nice way to talk to a chum!"

"Chums are not recognised within these walls."

"I don't see that being in a wood-shed makes any difference."

"You are now in the House of Commons."

"My mistake. I know I'll jolly well give you a thick ear when I get you in the study again if you put on any more side, Dig!"

"Call the sergeant-at-arms!" said Digby. "The member for York will be confined in the clock-tower for unparliamentary language."

"Look here—"

"You're in the wrong, Blake," said Tom Merry. "Apologise to Mr. Speaker."

"I'll see Mr. Speaker—"

"Withdraw!"

"Look here—"

"Order!"

"Withdraw!"

"Well, I withdraw any unparliamentary expression I may have used," said Blake. "I really feel the most profound respect for Mr. Speaker."

"Hear, hear!"

"The member for York must withdraw his remark reflecting upon the taste of the New House members of this Parliament," said the Speaker, with unrelaxing brow.

The member for York snorted.

"Oh, very well, I withdraw everything. Is that all right?"

"Certainly, if the honourable member for Bristol is satisfied."

"Oh, I'm satisfied!" grinned Figgins. "Good! The proceedings can now proceed," said Mr. Speaker.

And the proceedings forthwith proceeded.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

An Unparliamentary Interruption.

TOM MERRY rose to his feet. He caught the Speaker's eye, and proceeded. The other juniors eyed him with a steady stare.

"Mr. Speaker—"

"Hear, hear!" said Manners and Lowther, rather prematurely. They were not likely to be backward in backing up their chum and leader.

"Order!"

"I move that a Cabinet be selected from the School House members!"

"Hear, hear!" shouted the School House members.

"Rats—rats!" yelled the New House juniors.

"Order!"

"Divide!" shouted Blake. "Vide—vide!"

The division was taken. Naturally enough, on such a motion, all the School House members voted with Tom Merry.

The Speaker looked them over, and declared that the "Ayes" had it.



"Hullo! I am Dr. Holmes, of St. James's Collegiate School," said the Head. "Why don't you say you are the Kaiser or W. G. Grace, Figg?" came back the answer over the telephone. (See page 24.)

Figgins grunted.

"Never mind," he murmured to Kerr. "When it comes to forming a Government, they'll begin to row among themselves; and that's where we come in."

And the member for Glasgow nodded assent.

"These are the Government benches," remarked Tom Merry. "We are the Government. The next question to settle is, which is Prime Minister among us?"

"That's easily settled," said Blake promptly. "I'm Prime Minister."

"Weally, Blake, I think—"

"Rats to you, Gussy!"

"Weally—"

"Of course, I'm Prime Minister," said Tom Merry.

"Put it to the vote."

Figgins rose to catch the Speaker's eye.

"I beg to ask whether it is in order for the Government to settle their own personal questions of precedence within these walls?" said the member for Bristol.

The Speaker looked puzzled.

"No," he said at length, "it's not in order. Tom Merry ought to take a back seat—"

"Oh, cheese it!"

"That language is unparliamentary!"

"Rats! So it is for a Speaker to mix himself up in a dispute!"

"Hear, hear!"

"If you criticise the conduct of the Speaker, Tom Merry, you will be committed to the custody of the sergeant-at-arms!"

"Look here—"

"I tell you—"

"And I tell you—"

At this juncture the door of the wood-shed opened, and Taggles came in. He stared in amazement at the sight of the House of Commons.

"Why, what the—"

The Speaker rose, and pointed to the door.

"Get out!"

"What? Get hout? I like that! Get hout of my own wood-shed!"

"Strangers are not admitted to the debates of the St. Jim's House of Commons!" said the Speaker severely.

Taggles looked at him dazedly.

"He's orf his 'ead," he murmured—"clean orf!"

"Get out!"

"Look 'ere, what tricks are you young rips hup to in this 'ere shed?" said Taggles. "Get hout, all on you, at once!"

"Depart!"

"I ain't goin' to depart if I knows it! You're goin' to get hout—"

"Bunk!"

"Blessed if I don't report yer all to the 'Ead," said Taggles, "a-settin' round in my wood-shed like a lot of 'ens!"

The St. Jim's House of Commons turned red with wrath. To be compared to a lot of hens sitting on the benches was a little too much for the members.

"Get out!" roared twenty voices.

"I hain't a-goin' to get hout!" said Taggles. "I've come 'ere to saw wood, and I'm goin' to saw wood, young gentlemen; so the sooner you get hout the better."

"I commit this rude and obstreperous person to the custody of the sergeant-at-arms!" said the Speaker.

"Orf 'is 'ead—clean orf 'is 'ead!"

"Are you going?"

"No, I hain't!"

Tom Merry rose.

"I move that the House resolve itself into a committee to deal with this question," he exclaimed, "and that the committee forthwith proceed to eject this rude and disrespectful person!"

"Hear, hear!"

"The Ayes have it!" declared the Speaker.

The House rose as one man, and rushed at Taggles. The alarmed school-porter skipped out of the wood-shed with surprising agility.

"Orf their 'eads," he gasped—"clean orf their 'eads! A-settin' round like a lot of 'ens, and clean orf their 'eads!"

"Duck him in the fountain!"

Taggles dashed off at top speed, with the House of Commons in pursuit. The alarmed porter, fully persuaded that the juniors had taken leave of their senses, dashed into his lodge, and slammed the door and locked it.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry.

Taggles looked out of the window. He had a poker in his hand, and his face was pale.

"Go away, you young rips!" he shouted. "I'll report you to the 'Ead, a-settin' round in my wood-shed like a parcel of 'ens!"

"Look here, Taggles—"

"Oh, it's no good talking to him!" said Figgins. "We shall have to find a new place of meeting, that's all. The wood-shed's done in."

"The box-room in the New House is really the place," remarked Kerr.

"You mean the disused study in the School House," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Nothing of the sort!"

"We shall have to find a new meeting-place, anyway," said Tom Merry, "and somewhere where we sha'n't be in danger of interruption. We might have been passing the most important measures when that ass Taggles hopped in."

"I fancy we've done enough meeting for this evening, anyway," said the member for Cardiff, otherwise known as Fatty Wynn. "I know I'm jolly hungry. I didn't have much tea—only beef-steak pie and a few sausages and potatoes and some jam-tarts. I get fearfully hungry, in this May weather. Come on, Figgins!"

And Fatty Wynn started towards the New House. The first meeting of the Parliament of St. Jim's was over.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Telephone.

SKIMPOLE was very busy the next day or two. The amateur Socialist had taken up the idea of the telephone in deadly earnest. An interview with Figgins had proved a success. Figgins & Co., when the matter was once explained to them, rather fancied the idea of direct telephonic communication with the rival House. They anticipated exchanging badinage with the School House fellows over the wires.

"You see, we can slang the rotters a treat, and they can't get at us over the wires," Figgins observed sagely. "That will be rather a novelty."

"They can slang us back," observed Fatty Wynn.

"I know they can; but when it comes to slanging, I fancy

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 54.

we can keep our end up, and a little bit over," said Figgins. "True!"

"Besides, it will be a joke to ring Skimpole up, and make him explain something about Socialism, and leave him talking to nobody!" chuckled Kerr.

"Good idea! He may exhaust his vocal capacities that way, and become a little less of a bore," Figgins agreed.

So the New House Co. paid up their subscription to the telephone fund, and Skimpole was entrusted with the task. The other juniors took the matter more or less as a joke, but Skimpole was in deadly earnest. Whenever he got an idea into his head he was in deadly earnest over it—for a time, at least. And he had taken up the matter of the telephone quite seriously.

As he said, the matter was not so difficult as it looked. A relative in the line of business supplied him with the necessary materials at cost price. Skimpole knew how to put up the apparatus, and, as he said to Tom Merry, "there you are!"

Getting the wire round the roofs of the mass of buildings that formed the ancient college, from the School House to the New House, was the most difficult part of the task, and was accomplished at the risk of several necks. Fortunately, none were broken. Tom Merry & Co. helped Skimpole to the fullest extent in the work, and it was a proud moment for all of them when the installation was complete.

The work had been done secretly. It was of no use taking the masters or prefects into their confidence; they all felt that.

"It's quite possible that something may go wrong with the telephone, or perhaps with the Head's wire," Tom Merry remarked. "He would be prejudiced against any telephone fitting being done by juniors, in any case."

"Yaas, wathah!" agreed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Stwictly speakin' the Head would have no wight to interfere with us; but mastahs at schools assume all sorts of wights."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Yes, and if the Head knew that Skimpole had used his wire as a support for this new one I fancy he would be annoyed."

"It was the simplest way of supporting my wire," explained Skimpole. "I really don't see why the Head should object."

"Suppose something goes wrong?" said Lowther.

"Nothing can go wrong; I fixed the thing up myself."

"That's all very well, but things do go wrong in the best-regulated telephones."

"They won't go wrong in this case," said Skimpole, with conviction. "If there were any defect, it would be more likely to show in the Head's wire than in ours, so it's all right. I've taken care of that. But, as you say, it's more judicious to say nothing about the matter to the masters. It will save argument."

And so the secret was kept.

When the work was done, and the juniors had an opportunity of testing the wires, they were all in an eager mood. Even the business of the St. Jim's Parliament had been neglected in the interest of the telephone-fitting.

"I'll get into my study," said Figgins. "You can ring me up, and we'll have a little talk over the wire to test the thing."

"Right-ho!" said Tom Merry.

"Er—right-ho!" said Skimpole. "As telephonist, I, of course, operate the instrument?"

Tom Merry slapped him on the shoulder.

"Not at all, old chap. We're going to do the right thing. You've had most of the trouble of putting up the 'phone, and I'll take the job of testing it."

"But I'd really rather—"

"Yes; I know how unselfish you are, but I'm not going to take advantage of it. Come on, kids; let's go and have a jaw to Figgins."

"But really, Merry—"

"That's all right," said Tom Merry cheerfully. "You can rest from your labours, Skimmy, while we test the telephone."

And Tom Merry rang up Figgins.

Somewhat to the surprise of the juniors, the call was answered. The telephone was working!

"Hallo!"

"Hallo!"

"Are you there?"

"Yes, fathead!"

"Is that Figgins?"

"Of course it is! Don't you know my voice?"

"No; I thought it was a bullfrog or something croaking into the instrument."

A kind of growl was audible from the other end.

"Hallo, hallo!"

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"That you, Tom Merry?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Kerr!"

"Oh! I thought it was a different croak! Did you dig up that voice?"

"Oh, go and eat coke! Put us on to Skimpole."

"Skimmy! Skimmy! You're wanted!"

"I am here," said Skimpole, taking the receiver from Tom Merry. "Hallo, hallo, hallo! Is that you, Figgins?"

"No; it's Kerr. Is that Skimpole?"

"Will you explain to us the first principles of Socialism, Skimmy?" came Kerr's voice through the instrument. "It will be about the most thorough test you can put the instrument to. If it will stand that it will stand anything!"

"Certainly!" said Skimpole.

"Go ahead, then."

Skimpole went ahead. Tom Merry & Co. stood round, chuckling. Skimpole talked into the receiver as if he were on a platform. For fully five minutes he talked, working off words seldom found outside dictionaries and propagandist literature. He had been at it for five minutes when Figgins & Co. walked into the study.

Skimpole dropped the receiver with a gasp.

"Figgins!"

"Hallo!" said Figgins cheerfully.

"Kerr! I thought you chaps were at the other end of the wire."

"So we were. Did you think you were talking to us?"

"I certainly thought—"

"Quite a mistake," said Figgins blandly. "We only put you on to test the telephone, you know. Have you been at it long?"

"Really, Figgins—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I regard that as really vewy funny, Figgins!"

"Well, you ought to know," said Figgins. "You ought to be a judge of fun, being such a funny merchant yourself."

"If you intend that remark in a dispaawagin' sense, Figgins—"

"Rats! I say, the telephone is a great success. We shall be able to ring you fellows up when it's time for the St. Jim's Parliament to meet."

"Will you?" said Blake grimly. "You mean that I shall be able to ring you up? I am Prime Minister in this Parliament."

"Oh, really, Blake, don't be an ass, you know!"

"I am Prime Minister," said Blake. "I have the support of nearly two-thirds of the members of Parliament, including the Irish Party."

"That's all very well—"

"Exactly. The Parliament will meet again to-morrow, and we'll ring you up to let you know the exact time," said Blake loftily. "There are several important measures to be proposed from the Government benches, and some announcements to be made concerning Ministerial appointments."

"So you rotters are sticking together, after all?"

"We have effected a coalition for the purpose of administration," said Tom Merry. "I have allowed Blake the Premiership."

"My hat! Skimpole couldn't beat words like those!"

"The School House will form the Government, and the New House the Opposition," said Blake. "The Minister of War will propose to-morrow to declare war upon Rylcombe Grammar School, and the Minister of Education will move that all the New House kids be compelled to wash their necks of a morning—"

"The Minister of Education will get moved himself if he moves that," Figgins remarked. "I shall move that the Prime Minister be awarded a thick ear, too!"

And Figgins & Co. walked out.

Blake gave Tom Merry a freezing glare. The hero of the Shell was chuckling.

"There's nothing to laugh at in Figgins's absurd remarks, Tom Merry," said the Prime Minister of St. Jim's severely. "Come along, chaps. I shall send a whip to each of you bounders when the meeting is called, and you will be expected to turn up."

And Blake departed with his nose in the air.

Monty Lowther gave a chuckle.

"My hat! Blake is taking the job on seriously, and no mistake. I never thought of Parliamentary whips, but, of course, it's the thing!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy. "By the way, I am going to be Secwetawey of State for Education, you know, and I have some great reforms to ppropose—especially in the dress department. A resolution passed by St. Jim's Parliament will have some weight in the coll, you know, and I hope to see a great improvement in the dress of the membahs and the school genewally."

"Good!" said Tom Merry. "I suppose you'd like to see

all the lower Forms sporting fancy waistcoats and eyeglasses?"

"Wathah not! That would be goin' a twifle too far."

"By Jove, it wouldn't be a bad idea, though!" Monty Lowther remarked to Tom Merry, as the chums of the Shell walked away to their own quarters. "It would be a ripping joke on Gussy—and you can get eyeglasses cheap."

The telephone-bell rang as Skimpole was left alone in his study. The amateur Socialist of St. Jim's hastened to answer the call.

"Hallo!"

"Hallo! Is that Skimpole?"

"Yes."

"Would you mind giving me an exposition of Socialism—something really full and complete, that will give me a good idea of the subject?"

"Really, Figgins—"

"I'm not Figgins; I'm Pratt."

"Oh, Pratt! Certainly I shall have very great pleasure in enlightening you upon this most important subject, Pratt."

"Go ahead, then!"

Skimpole was soon embarked upon a stream of explanation. After about five minutes it occurred to him that Pratt was very quiet, and he broke off to call him. There was no reply to his call.

"Pratt! Pratt! Are you there, Pratt?"

There was no reply.

Skimpole hung up the receiver with an annoyed expression. It was evident that Pratt had been "pulling his leg." A few minutes later the telephone-bell rang again.

"Hallo!" said Skimpole into the receiver.

"Hallo! Is that Skimpole?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"I'm French."

"What do you want, French?"

"I'm curious to know something about Socialism. Would you mind giving me a full and really graphic description of Socialistic belief?"

"I should be very pleased, French; but I am afraid that this is intended as a joke. I cannot, however, as a true Socialist, neglect any opportunity of making a convert to the sacred cause. Socialism is the golden rule applied to everyday life; the sun-burst of freedom and happiness after long centuries of darkness; the— Are you there, French?"

There was no reply.

It was evident that French, after getting Skimpole started, had basely deserted his receiver, and was leaving Skimpole to talk to the desert air.

"This would be really exasperating to any but the most enthusiastic propagandist," murmured Skimpole, as he hung up his receiver. "I really— Dear me, there is the bell again! I suppose it is French who has come back."

"Hallo! Hallo!"

"Hallo! Who is that?"

"I'm Jimson."

"What do you want?"

"Since hearing your ripping speech the other day, I've been very curious on the subject of Socialism," said Jimson. "Would you mind explaining to me over the wire the first principles of Socialism, and the Socialistic theory of political economy?"

"I should willingly do so, Jimson; but I am afraid you are dealing with the subject in a light and jesting spirit, and, therefore, I cannot undertake to enlighten you over the telephone. But I will willingly come to your study in the New House, and bring my books on Socialism with me, and we will spend a pleasant couple of hours together examining the rudiments of Socialism—"

"You'll do what?"

"I'll come over to your study in the New House, and bring my books on—"

"If you do, you'll get brained with a cricket-bat!" said Jimson. And he rang off.

Skimpole did not go over to the New House to Jimson's study. But for a time, at least, he was not called up again on the telephone.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Jack Blake Prime Minister.

THE Prime Minister of the St. Jim's Parliament sat in his study with knitted brows. Great thoughts were evidently moving in his mind. Blake was taking his position seriously, and he meant to make the office of Prime Minister respected, if it could be done by the exercise of Ministerial authority.

"Anything on?" asked Herries, looking at his leader's knitted brows.

"Don't interrupt the meditations of the Premier!" said Digby, in a chiding voice. "You don't know what vast

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 54.
A Grand Tale of Sexton Blake, | "THE BLACK KING!"
By S. Clarke Hook.

NEXT FRIDAY:

"THE NEW TUTOR!"

By Martin Clifford.

"THE FRONTIER SMUGGLERS!"

A Grand Tale of Sexton Blake.

"THE BLACK KING!"

By S. Clarke Hook.

questions of politics and diplomacy he may be revolving in his mighty brain."

"Yaas, wathah! If you are in any difficulties, Blake, don't mind askin' my advice. I'm always willin' to help you youngsters out of a fix!"

Blake's brow did not relax.

"There will be a meeting of St. Jim's Parliament on Saturday afternoon," he said. "I have reason to suspect that the Opposition intend to give the Government some trouble."

"Bai Jove!"

"Figgins intends to propose some measure which will have the effect of dividing the School House vote. Something to make a row between the Shell and the Fourth, you know, which will set the Shell members against us, and then the New House minority comes to the top."

"Rotten!"

"I have appointed D'Arcy and Herries whippers-in to the party," said Blake. "I had better write out their instructions."

"Why not give 'em by word of mouth?" asked the practical Herries.

Blake froze him with a glare.

"Are you going to begin to argue with the head of the Cabinet, Herries?"

"Well, you see—"

"In important cases the instructions must be given in writing."

"Oh, very well! It's all one to me!"

"Give me a pen, Dig, will you?"

"Here you are; my fountain-pen."

"Now," said Blake, "we must make sure of Tom Merry turning up to the meeting. He isn't so likely as the others to fall into Figgy's little trap, and he will keep those Shell-fish in order, perhaps. You have to see to that, Gussy."

"Weally, Blake—"

Blake wrote on a slip of paper, and handed it to D'Arcy. The swell of the School House read the slip carefully:

"Don't forget the whip for Tom Merry on Saturday!"

"Am I to keep this?" asked D'Arcy innocently.

Blake glared.

"Do you think I have written it out for fun?"

"But I can wemembah quite well."

"Never mind what you can remember; you've got your instructions from the head of the Cabinet in writing, and you've got to take care of them."

"Oh, vewy well!" said D'Arcy. "I haven't the slightest objection, I'm sure. Anythin' to oblige a friend!"

Blake wrote on another slip of paper, and handed it to Herries.

"Whips for all the Fourth Form members on Saturday."

Herries looked it over.

"Am I to keep this?"

"Yes, ass!" roared Blake.

"Oh, all right! No need to be rude about it!" said Herries, as he stuffed the slip into his trousers-pocket.

"Anything for Dig?"

"Of course not. Dig's Speaker."

"Oh, yes; I forgot! Have you any more questions of high politics to think out, and any more instructions to give in writing, or shall we go for a turn in the gym?"

Blake rose to his feet.

"Come along!" he said.

The cares of State had rolled from his shoulders, and he was a Fourth Form junior again.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Tom Merry's Letter Home.

TOM MERRY rose from the table.

"Aren't you fellows finished yet?" he said.

"No," said Lowther. "Don't wait for me."

"That's all right. I've got to write to my old governess," said Tom Merry. "I'll write the letter while you finish."

Tom Merry was a good correspondent so far as his old governess was concerned. In spite of many peculiar little ways, Miss Priscilla Fawcett was a lovable old soul, and Tom Merry was very fond of her. He dutifully wrote his weekly letter, and dutifully read the much longer letter he received in return. While Manners and Lowther were finishing their prep., he wrote to Miss Fawcett.

"Anybody got an envelope?" he asked, when he had finished.

Nobody had. Tom Merry put the letter in his pocket and rose. Stationery was not kept in large stocks by the juniors, and somebody had lately borrowed all Tom Merry's envelopes and forgotten to replace them. As Tom rose he caught sight of a slip of paper on the floor.

He stooped and picked it up. He stared a little as he read what was written on it:

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 54.

"Don't forget the whip for Tom Merry on Saturday."

"What's the meaning of this?" he exclaimed. "I suppose Gussy dropped it when he looked in here a few minutes ago. 'Don't forget the whip for Tom Merry on Saturday.' What the dickens was Gussy carrying that about for?"

Lowther chuckled.

"It's his instructions from the Prime Minister, I expect."

Tom Merry comprehended.

"I see; a whip to the meeting on Saturday," he said, laughing. "Gussy would have the Prime Minister on his track if it were known that he had lost his written instructions. I'll give this back to him when I see him."

And Tom Merry thrust the slip into his pocket.

The Terrible Three went out into the quadrangle. The dusk was falling, but some of the Shell were playing leapfrog, and Tom Merry and his chums joined in. It was nearly dark when Tom Merry came in, and remembered the letter in his pocket destined for Miss Priscilla Fawcett at Huckleberry Heath.

"By Jove, I nearly forgot!" he exclaimed. "Have you got an envelope, Walsh?"

"Yes; in my study," said Walsh. "You can have it if you like. I've only had some fish-bait in it—"

Tom Merry sniffed.

"Thank you! I want it for a letter to my governess."

"I've got some new ones," said Reilly. "I'll get you one if you like."

"Thank you, kid!"

Reilly brought the envelope, and Tom Merry extracted a stamp from one of his pockets, borrowed a fountain-pen to address the letter, and hastily thrust the letter into the envelope, and cut across the quad. just in time to catch the collection at the school letter-box.

"That's done!" he remarked, as he came in breathless but satisfied. "Miss Fawcett will get it by the first post to-morrow morning now at Huckleberry Heath."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came along the passage.

"I say, Tom Mewvy—"

"Hallo, Gussy! Have you come to show me a necktie, or the latest thing in waistcoats?"

"Certainly not!" said D'Arcy. "What I wanted to say to you was, have I left a slip of papah in your study? I have missed it from my beastly pocket, and I can't find it, and it has occurred to me that it might have dropped on the floor when I looked into your study."

"I did see a slip of paper on the floor, Gussy, and I guessed that it belonged to you. Here it is!"

Tom Merry went through his jacket pockets in search of the slip of paper, but did not find it. He looked rather puzzled. He went through the pockets again, with the same result.

"I say, did either of you chaps notice which pocket I put that slip of paper in?" he exclaimed.

"I didn't," said Lowther. "Wasn't looking."

"Same here," said Manners.

Tom Merry felt in all his pockets in turn. But the valuable slip of paper containing the written instructions of the School House whip failed to appear.

"I'm sorry!" said Tom Merry. "I put it in my pocket to return it to you, Gussy, and now it's gone. I suppose I dropped it when I was playing leapfrog. I'll go and have a look in the quad, if you like."

"Not at all, deah boy. It's weally of no consequence," said Arthur Augustus. "Blake will be exasperated when he knows that I have lost his written instructions, but aftah all, that is not a mattah of great consequence. He can easily write them out again. By the way, in case I forget to tell you to-morrow, don't forget to turn up at the meetin'. The New House boundahs have some wheeze on for splittin' our beastly majowity, and bwingin' in the Opposition, or somethin' of that sort."

"Oh, we'll have our eye on them!" said Tom Merry. "We'll turn up, never fear!"

And Arthur Augustus walked away.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

A Surprising Telegram.

DR. HOLMES, the Head of St. Jim's, stood in the Sixth Form class-room, with a telegram in his hand and an expression of almost idiotic bewilderment upon his face. It was Saturday morning, and the Head had been conducting the Sixth Form upon an interesting excursion into Greek roots, when that telegram arrived. The amazement of the Head as he read it was visible to the whole class.

"Dear me!" murmured the Head, adjusting his glasses and reading the telegram again. "Dear me, there must be some strange mistake! Dear me! Kildare, I leave you in charge here for a few minutes."

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"Yes, sir," said the captain of St. Jim's.

The Head left the Sixth Form-room and went in search of Mr. Railton, the housemaster of the School House. Mr. Railton was always his right-hand man in a case of difficulty. Mr. Railton was taking the Shell that morning, and it was to the Shell class-room that the Head proceeded.

"Can you spare me a minute, Mr. Railton?"

"Certainly, sir!"

The Shell looked on with interest as the two masters consulted together in low tones. There was evidently something the matter, from the doctor's worried expression, but the tones of the masters were too low for the boys to hear what was said.

"Read that telegram, Mr. Railton," said Dr. Holmes.

"It is really most amazing. Can you understand it?"

The Housemaster read the wire.

"Handed in at Hucklebury Heath at 9.30. Please postpone punishment till my arrival. Am coming immediately.—P. FAWCETT."

The Housemaster and the headmaster looked at each other in equal astonishment.

"Can you understand it, Mr. Railton?"

Mr. Railton shook his head.

"I have not the faintest idea what it can mean, sir."

"It is from Miss Priscilla Fawcett, Tom Merry's old governess and guardian," said the Head. "But what can it mean?"

"That is a mystery. Can she have an idea in her head that you intend to administer some punishment to Tom Merry?"

"How should she imagine so?"

"I cannot guess. Tom Merry is not the sort of lad to write complaints to his governess; and, besides, there is now, I believe, no question of punishing Merry."

"Certainly not, so far as I am concerned."

"He is very frequently in hot water," said Mr. Railton, with a smile. "But of late he has been very busy with a school parliament the juniors are getting up, and he has had no time to break any of the college rules. His conduct has been quite exemplary, in fact. I cannot understand this."

"I remember once there was a wire sent to Miss Fawcett by a mischievous lad, which brought her post-haste to the school," said the Head, after a pause. "This may be the result of some trick of the kind."

"I should not be surprised."

"I suppose there is no way to prevent her coming?" murmured the Head. "She may have started by now, and a telegram to Hucklebury Heath would get there too late."

"Unfortunately, that is very probable."

The Head sighed slightly. He liked and greatly respected Miss Priscilla Fawcett. But he had sometimes found the good lady very trying in her visits to the school.

"I—I should be glad if this visit could be—er—postponed," the Head remarked. "If Miss Fawcett has already started, it is too late; but—"

"I do not know how frequent the trains are from Hucklebury Heath," said the Housemaster, "but I remember that Miss Fawcett is on the telephone. There may be time to ring her up before she starts. A wire would have to be sent from Rylcombe, and would be pretty certain to get there too late, but on the telephone—"

The Head brightened up.

"You are right, Mr. Railton. At all events, I will ring Miss Fawcett up immediately, and if she has not already started, I may be able to explain in time."

And the doctor hurried away. In a few moments he was at the 'phone in his study, but to his amazement there came no answer to his call. The vagaries of the young lady at the exchange were familiar enough; but in this case it was evident that there was something wrong with the wire, and that communication was off.

"Dear me," said the Head, as he laid down the receiver, "this is most annoying! My last chance of stopping Miss Fawcett is gone. The good lady will have a long and tiresome journey for nothing, and I—ahem!"

The Head sent for Taggles, and instructed him to immediately procure a man to examine the telephone and attend to it, and then he returned thoughtfully to the Sixth Form-room. The man was not long in arriving, and he found nothing wrong in the Head's study, and pursued his investigations further, and when the boys came out after morning school they saw him on the School House roof at work with the wire.

Tom Merry laughed as he glanced up.

"That's some of Skimpole's work," he remarked. "Something wrong with the Head's telephone."

"Impossible!" said Skimpole, who was craning his neck to look up. "I have really not interfered with the Head's wire, except to use it as a support for mine, where the two wires cross, you know."

"Ha, ha! There's something wrong with it, at all events."

"That is not my fault. I was very careful."

But the Terrible Three laughed again. They were pretty certain that Skimpole was at the bottom of the trouble, though the amateur telephonist of St. Jim's was certain of the contrary. Skimpole stood watching the man at work, while the chums of the Shell strolled out of the gates of St. Jim's. It was a fine afternoon, and the lanes tempted them. But Skimpole's thoughts were not in the lanes or on the sunny river. He was thinking of the possibility of a by-election of the Parliament of St. Jim's, and he went to his study a little later to write out a speech he had been thinking of to be delivered to the electors.

Skimpole sat at his table, scratching his nose and chewing the handle of his pen, when the telephone-bell rang.

"Dear me," said Skimpole, "I hope this is not a joke from the New House again! It is very annoying to be interrupted while composing a speech. The woes of the down-trodden millions cry into the air for redress—"

Ting-ting!

Skimpole, with patient resignation, took up the receiver.

"Hallo!"

"'Allo! Har you there?"

Skimpole looked surprised.

"Dear me, that is not Figgins's voice. It is the voice of a person who misplaces his aspirates. Surely—"

"Har you there?"

"Yes; I am here."

"All right now?"

"Eh?"

"All right now, miss?"

"There is some misapprehension," murmured Skimpole. "I do not know who this person is, but I cannot imagine why he should call me miss."

"All right?"

"Yes; I am certainly all right!"

"Right-ho! Good-bye!"

"Good-bye! But—"

But the unknown speaker had rung off. Skimpole hung up the receiver in bewilderment.

"I really cannot understand this," he murmured. "It must surely be a joke of someone in the New House, or else someone has used the telephone, imagining that it was connected up with the exchange. Ah, yes, that must be it! And that accounts for him addressing me as miss. But why should he ring up the exchange to ask the young lady if she is all right? Perhaps he is her sweetheart, or something! But I do not really quite understand it."

However, more important matters claimed Skimpole's attention, and leaving the mystery unsolved, he returned to his pen and paper, and was soon deep in the composition of the speech which was to enlighten the St. Jim's electors on the important subjects of Socialism, Determinism, and several other "isms."

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER. Miss Priscilla is Alarmed.

"MY hat!"

It was Tom Merry who uttered the sudden exclamation.

The Terrible Three were sitting on the top bar of a gate in Rylcombe Lane when Tom Merry suddenly caught sight of a figure approaching from the direction of the village. Familiar enough was the figure to the eyes of the hero of the Shell.

"My hat, it's my old nurse!"

It was indeed Miss Priscilla Fawcett, and the good old lady was evidently in a hurry. Her bonnet was tied on awry, and her general appearance was not nearly so neat and prim as was usual with her. She was coming up the lane at a great rate, and the sight would have been comical but for the earnestness and solemn purpose in her perspiring face.

"Coming to see you, Tom," said Manners. "Didn't you know?"

Tom Merry looked puzzled.

"I hadn't the slightest idea."

"That's curious! She looks as if something were wrong," said Monty Lowther. "Alarmed for your health, I expect, and coming down with a special bottle of cod-liver oil."

"Oh, cheese it!"

"Or perhaps a box of Purple Pills for Peculiar People."

Tom Merry slid off the gate.

"I'm going to meet her," he said. And he ran up the lane towards the hurrying old lady.

Miss Fawcett caught sight of him, and uttered an exclamation of joy.

"My darling Tommy!"

The next moment he was clasped in her arms.

"My sweetest child! And they were going to whip him

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 54.

"THE NEW TUTOR!" | "THE FRONTIER SMUGGLERS!" | "THE BLACK KING!"

By Martin Clifford.

A Grand Tale of Sexton Blake.

By S. Clarke Hook.

NEXT FRIDAY:

then! Never, never, while his old nurse is there to protect him, the sweet boy!"

Tom Merry struggled. Miss Priscilla Fawcett was a dear old soul. But she never would realise that Tom Merry was growing up. To be hugged in public and called a dear boy at fifteen was not exactly gratifying to the hero of the Shell.

"Dear Miss Fawcett—"

"But they shall not whip him, then!"

"I—I—"

"I came down instantly. You have not been whipped yet?"

"Whipped? No!"

"Then the doctor had my telegram in time! Oh, I have been in such a flutter!" said Miss Fawcett. "I caught the first train down from Huckleberry Heath; but the journey is so long, and I was afraid that you might have the whipping before I arrived, though Hannah wired immediately to the doctor. Thank goodness, I am in time, my darling child! And there was no vehicle at Rylcombe Station, and I have hurried—"

"My dear nurse—"

"But you are safe now, my darling—you are safe now, with your old nurse to protect you," said Miss Fawcett.

Tom Merry was scarlet. Manners and Lowther had turned their heads away from the affecting scene. Miss Fawcett thought it was due to their emotion, and she respected them for the manly tears which compelled the two juniors to put their handkerchiefs to their faces. But Tom Merry knew very well that they were struggling desperately not to yell with laughter in the presence of Miss Fawcett.

"Come on with me!" exclaimed Miss Priscilla. "Come to the doctor, and I will see that you are not whipped, my darling! You are not strong enough to bear punishment, my sweet boy."

"But, my dear—"

But Miss Priscilla hurried him on. Tom Merry gave in, feeling that it was best to get Miss Fawcett inside the school as soon as possible. Fellows were gathering round to look on, and a scene of pathos in public was a horror of horrors to Tom Merry, as to most boys.

As soon as they were gone, Monty Lowther threw himself down upon his back on the grass beside the lane and yelled.

"Oh, hold me, Manners!" he gurgled. "I know I shall break something! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Can't!" gasped Manners. "I want somebody to hold me! Oh, my darling child, and did the naughty school-master want to whip him, then! Oh, my hat! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ho, ho, ho! Poor old Tommy!"

"Poor old Tommy! Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry hurried on towards the school with Miss Fawcett. What had brought the good lady so suddenly down to St. Jim's he could not imagine. Fellows looked at them as they progressed across the quad, and Figins & Co. raised

their hats to Miss Fawcett with great politeness and lurking grins. Study No. 6 were on the steps of the School House, and they took off their caps courteously.

"It is a weal pleasaah to see you again, Miss Pwiscilla," said Arthur Augustus. "Pway allow us to welcome you to St. Jim's!"

"Yes, rather!" said Blake. "We are so glad to see you, and so is Tom Merry. Doesn't Merry show it in his face, kids?"

"He do—he does," said Digby.

"I'll punch your head presently," said Tom Merry, in a fierce whisper.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I must see the Head immediately!" exclaimed Miss Fawcett. "Where is the Head? My good man, show me in to the Head immediately, please!"

"The 'Ead is just going to 'is lunch, ma'am."

"I am sure he will excuse me. Show me in at once."

And Miss Fawcett, who was not to be denied or delayed, was shown forthwith into the presence of the Head of St. Jim's.

Tom Merry would gladly have escaped, but Miss Fawcett had tight hold of his hand, and he had to accompany her, whether he liked it or not. He stood with scarlet cheeks in the presence of the doctor.

"Ah, good-morning, Miss Fawcett!" said the Head, shaking hands with the visitor. "I am—er—glad to see you. Won't you—er—sit down?"

"Oh, Dr. Holmes, I am so glad my telegram reached you in time!" exclaimed Miss Fawcett, sinking into a chair. "If you had whipped Tommy in the present delicate state of his health, the results might have been terrible."

"But I had no intention of doing so," exclaimed the amazed Head. "Whipping is not a punishment in vogue at this school, in any case. Boys are caned, and sometimes flogged. But there is no question of punishing Merry at all."

"But—"

"There is evidently some mistake. It is possible that you have been the victim of some absurd practical joke, Miss Fawcett?"

The old lady looked amazed as well as relieved.

"But—but I came to this conclusion from the slip which Tommy enclosed in his letter to me, which reached this morning—"

The Head looked severely at Tom Merry.

"Is it possible, Merry, that you are the cause of—"

"Certainly not, sir!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "There was nothing in my letter, that I know of, to cause Miss Fawcett to—"

"But this is it," exclaimed Miss Fawcett, extracting a slip of paper from her bag, and passing it to the Head. Dr. Holmes adjusted his spectacles, and looked astounded as he

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read: "Don't forget the whip for Tom Merry on Saturday."

"Bless my soul! What can this mean?"

He had read the sentence aloud, and so Tom Merry understood. The junior involuntarily burst into a laugh. Dr. Holmes looked at him.

"Merry—"

"If you please, sir, I can explain," said Tom eagerly. "That slip got into the letter by mistake. I wondered what had become of it. I suppose when I put it in my pocket it went into the folded letter, and then I posted it—"

"But what does this mean?"

"Oh, it's a whip, sir! It belongs to D'Arcy, and it's his instructions to see that I don't miss the meeting of St Jim's Parliament to-day."

The Head looked puzzled.

"The St. Jim's Parliament?"

"Yes, sir; it's a House of Commons got up among the junior Forms, on the lines of the real one, but with improvements—"

"Ahem! I understand now! I remember Mr. Railton telling me something about it. You see, Miss Fawcett, it is all a mistake."

"I am so glad. But as you know, dear Dr. Holmes, Tommy's health is so delicate that I was afraid—"

"Yes, yes, all is explained now. You may go, Merry."

"Thank you, sir!"

"One moment, Tommy darling. Take the cod-liver oil. Have you finished the pills I sent you last week?"

"Oh, no; there are quite a lot left!"

"I hope you are not neglecting to take them regularly, my sweetest. Six before and after every meal, and nine on going to bed, and others during the day whenever you feel a desire to take them."

"I remember perfectly—"

"And do not be reckless in those terrible scrummages at cricket, Tommy darling. Remember you are not strong, and let the other boys take all the goals if they wish when you are playing cricket. Your precious health must come before everything."

"That is all right, dear. I never try to take goals at cricket, and I never will," said Tom Merry, making that promise with a clear conscience.

"That is my own darling boy!"

"You will lunch with me, Miss Fawcett—"

"Certainly, Dr. Holmes, thank you very much. I shall return to Huckleberry Heath by the next train, much relieved in my mind."

It was possible that Dr. Holmes was much relieved in his mind, too. Tom Merry quitted the study. Miss Priscilla arranged the strings of her bonnet.

"I left Laurel Villa in too great a hurry to leave any instructions," she said. "Could you telephone after lunch and instruct Hannah to have the trap at the station to meet me, dear Dr. Holmes?"

"With pleasure, madam! Now, allow me to take you in to lunch!" said the headmaster.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

A Strange Talk on the Telephone.

TOM MERRY rejoined his chums with a very rich colour in his face. Lowther and Manners made no allusion to Miss Fawcett, but it was easy to see that they were suppressing a strong desire to chuckle. Tom Merry explained the cause of the old lady's sudden visit to St. Jim's, and the chums of the Shell agreed that it was all D'Arcy's fault. They went in rather late to dinner. When the meal was over, Skimpole went up to his study again, and the Terrible Three followed him there.

The amateur Socialist was already busy when they came in. He was poring over a paper pamphlet with the imposing title of "Determinism; a Treatise upon the Theory that every Effect is the Result of a Cause, and that every Cause is the Producer of an Effect." The brainy man of the Shell looked up as the chums came in, and stuck his pen behind one of his large ears.

"Do you want to speak to me, Merry? I am rather busy just now, looking up points for my election speech—"

"But the elections are over—"

"I am expecting a by-election, which will give me the opportunity of carrying on my propaganda work within the walls of St. Jim's Parliament. The more I study the subject of Determinism, the more I am convinced that a man consists wholly and solely of himself and his attributes, and that his surroundings have an influence over him exactly proportioned to the extent of their effect upon him. This is a remarkable discovery which is the root of the theory of Determinism—"

"Ring off, old chap! I mean, ring on—ring on to Figgins. We want to ring him up for the parliamentary meeting—"

"I thought Blake was going to do that—"

"Blake can go and eat coke!"

"Can he?" said a voice at the door, and the chums of Study No. 6 looked in. "I thought you kids might have the cheek to usurp my functions, so I came along. As Prime Minister in St. Jim's Parliament, I call the members together."

"Yaas, wathah! I should stand upon my wights as Fwime Ministah if I were Blake! I wegard these persons as—"

Ting-ting!

"Hallo, there's Figgy & Co. started ringing us up!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "I'll just see what the—"

"No, you won't," said Blake. "I'll just see—"

"I tell you—"

"Now, look here—"

Skimpole stepped to the telephone and took up the receiver.

"Hallo!"

"I wish you would attend to my call a little more promptly."

"Hallo, Figgy is in a hurry!" remarked Blake, who was close enough to Skimpole to hear what was said. "But that doesn't sound like his voice, either."

"I was delayed, as I was busy upon a speech," said Skimpole. "I am sorry to have kept you waiting, but it really doesn't matter."

"What do you say?"

"I say it really does not matter."

"I shall complain of this impertinence."

"Oh, rats!"

"What!"

"I said rats."

"I—I—I—"

"If you've got anything to say, say it; if not, ring off."

"I—I—I—"

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Skimpole. And he rung off.

"Good-bye, Dr. Holmes! Thank you so much, and— Oh, yes; you telephoned to Huckleberry Heath, did you not, to tell them to have the trap at the station?"

The Head was looking a little flustered as he shook hands with Miss Fawcett.

"Er—I rang up the exchange," he said; "but I was not put on to your number. I was replied to with the grossest impertinence. I am afraid that the operator must be intoxicated, or something of the sort. I will ring up again a little later— Or, rather, I will send a wire to Huckleberry Heath, which will answer the purpose."

"Thank you so much, Dr. Holmes! I must say good-bye to my darling Tommy."

Tom Merry was not to be seen; but someone remembered having seen him go to Skimpole's study, and he was sent for. He came down in haste to say good-bye to his old governess. Miss Priscilla kissed him on the forehead before a crowd of keenly-interested juniors, and impressed upon him the importance of not getting his feet wet, or struggling too strenuously after goals at cricket, and then drove off to the station.

Tom Merry returned to Skimpole's study. His chums were awaiting him there, and Blake was vainly endeavouring to ring up Figgins.

Dr. Holmes, after seeing Miss Priscilla Fawcett off at the door, returned to his study, still looking very flustered.

He intended spending the half-holiday preparing examination papers, but he had barely settled down at his desk when the telephone bell rang.

"Dear me!" murmured the Head. "I suppose they are ringing me up to explain about the intoxicated operator."

He took up the receiver.

"Hallo, hallo!" came from the other end.

"Hallo!"

"Oh, you're there, are you?"

"Yes," said Dr. Holmes, rather surprised by this mode of address; "I am here."

"Why the dickens didn't you answer the call before, then, you ass?"

The doctor nearly dropped the receiver.

He had known of carelessness and impertinence at the telephone exchange, but he had never been addressed like that before.

"What—what did you say?"

"I said, why didn't you answer before?"

"If you have rung before, I was not aware of it. I have been absent from my study."

"Well, you shouldn't be, when I'm talking to you. Never mind! It's the wood-shed again at three o'clock."

"What!"

"Deaf?" said the voice. "I say, it's the wood-shed again at three o'clock."

NEXT FRIDAY:

"THE NEW TUTOR!"
By Martin Clifford.

"THE FRONTIER SMUGGLERS!"
A Grand Tale of Sexton Blake.

"THE BLACK KING!"
By S. Clarke Hook.

"What—what—"
 "My hat! The chap's deaf or silly. The—wood-shed—
 again—at—three—o'clock! Understand that?"
 "Bless my soul!" murmured the doctor.
 "Well, are you coming?"
 "Eh?"
 "Are you coming?"
 "Coming where?"
 "To the woodshed, fathead!"
 "I—I think there must be some mistake. I am convinced
 that there is some mistake. I must be speaking to the wrong
 person. Do you know whom I am?"
 "Ass! What are you getting at now?"
 "I am Dr. Holmes."
 "Oh, don't be funny!"
 "I am Dr. Holmes, of St. James's Collegiate School."
 "Why don't you say you are the Kaiser, or W. G. Grace,
 Figgy?"

The doctor gave a jump.
 "Bless my soul! The operator must be under the impres-
 sion that he is speaking to Figgins. Hallo! Do you think
 you are speaking to Figgins, of the Fourth Form?"
 "I know I am, cuckoo!"
 "This is really remarkable!"
 The doctor hung up the receiver, and rang for his man-
 servant, whom he sent to fetch Mr. Railton. The House-
 master of the School House came in in a few minutes. He
 looked in some surprise at the Head's flustered face.
 "Is anything wrong, sir?"
 "Something is certainly wrong, Mr. Railton," said the
 Head. "You see the telephone bell is ringing. I should
 be glad if you would answer the call, and tell me what you
 make of it. I am utterly astounded!"

Mr. Railton, looking somewhat mystified, took up the
 receiver.

"Hallo! Who are you?"
 "I'll show you who I am when I meet you in the wood-
 shed," said a voice. "I've had about enough of your little
 jokes!"

The Housemaster staggered.
 "What do you mean by ringing off before I had finished?"
 the voice went on. "If you are looking for trouble, you've
 only got to say so."

"Who are you?" demanded Mr. Railton. "Whom do
 you think you are speaking to?"

"You know jolly well who I am! I'm the Prime
 Minister, and I'll give you a thick ear when parliament
 meets!"

"My—my word! This is most amazing!"

"Are you coming to the meeting, chump?"

"Wh—what meeting?"

"In the wood-shed, ass! If you don't jolly well answer,
 I'll come over to the New House and wipe up the floor with
 the lot of you!"

A light of comprehension dawned in Mr. Railton's eyes.

"Dear me! I thought I knew the voice. It is Blake,
 and he thinks he is speaking to someone in the New House.
 But—"

"You amaze me! There is no telephone in the New
 House!"

"I have heard to-day that some mechanical genius in the
 School House has lately connected the two Houses by tele-
 phone," said Mr. Railton. "Is it possible that the wires
 have become connected, or something of that sort?"

The Head passed his hand across his brow.

"Dear me! I knew nothing of that."

Mr. Railton spoke into the telephone again.

"Hallo!"

"Hallo, you New House rotter!"

"I am Mr. Railton."

"Oh, are you going to be funny again?"

"Don't you know my voice, Blake?"

"Well, it's something like Railton's, but I suppose you're
 Kerr. Kerr can imitate any chap's voice. No good trying
 to take me in, Kerr."

"I am Mr. Railton, and I'm in the Head's study. I
 command you to come here immediately."

"Yes; I'm likely to go into the Head's study and get a
 licking for my cheek just to please you, Kerr!"

"I tell you I am Mr. Railton—"

"Oh, cheese it!"

The Housemaster laughed involuntarily. It was impossible
 to be angry, when it was quite clear that Blake firmly be-
 lieved he was talking to a New House junior.

"Where are you, Blake?" he asked.

"You know jolly well I'm in Skimpole's study."

Mr. Railton turned from the telephone.

"Blake is speaking from Skimpole's study, sir," he said.
 "Will you send James to fetch here everyone who is there
 at present? That will clear up the matter."

"A good idea," said the Head.

And James was promptly despatched upon his errand. In
 five minutes a sound of many footsteps was heard in the
 passage; and the grinning James opened the door, and
 ushered in eight rather scared-looking juniors.

The Head surveyed them severely.

"Blake, I understand that you were talking over the
 telephone just now."

"I—I was talking to Figgy in the New House, sir."

"You were talking to myself, and then to Mr. Railton,
 on this telephone."

"I—I—I—"

Blake was too astounded and alarmed to say more. But
 Tom Merry came to the rescue.

"Blake didn't know, sir," he said; "we have a telephone
 from Skimpole's study to the New House, and Blake was
 talking to Figgins. We couldn't understand the answers we
 got. We thought it was Figgins or Kerr pulling our leg—
 I mean joking with us."

"How could your telephone possibly have become con-
 nected with mine?"

Skimpole looked puzzled.

"It is impossible, sir!" he exclaimed. "I put up the
 wires most carefully."

"Then that is why my telephone was out of order this
 morning!" exclaimed the Head.

"Impossible, sir! I was too careful for anything like
 that to happen—"

"It is evidently the case," said the doctor; "yet the
 workman, when he had finished, told me that he had spoken
 through to the exchange, and that it was all right."

Skimpole gave a jump

"Ah, that explains!"

"Explains what, Skimpole?"

"Why, sir, the stupid ass—I mean the man must have
 connected up the two telephones by mistake. Somebody
 spoke to me this morning, and I thought it was Figgins
 larking, as he addressed me as miss—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry. "It was the repairing
 chap speaking through to the exchange."

"I suppose now that it must have been. I said that I
 was all right, though I did not understand his inquiry—"

Mr. Railton was trying not to laugh. Even the Head
 could not help smiling.

"It's all the stupid fellow's fault, sir," said Skimpole.
 "He certainly ought not to have connected up the two wires.
 Of course, as a Determinist, I do not blame him for being
 stupid. It is evidently due to the combined influences of
 heredity and environment—"

"That will do, Skimpole. As it is all a mistake—"

"I hope that you couldn't think I meant to talk like that
 to you, sir," said Blake, very red in the face; "I'd sooner
 bite my tongue off. I thought I was talking to old Figgins
 all the time, and that he was larking. I am very sorry—"

The doctor smiled.

"I accept your apology, Blake. But I must ask you to
 kindly take down the telephone. You may go."

And the juniors, extremely glad to escape so cheaply, went.
 When the door closed, the doctor and Mr. Railton burst
 into a hearty laugh. And Tom Merry went over in person
 to the New House to inform Figgins of the time for parlia-
 ment to meet.

THE END.

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THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Wounded Man—A Mysterious Foe—Pete Rescues His Foe from the Jaws of Death—A Mysterious Trail.

SOME years ago a party of hunters of big game in Africa, while following a wounded elephant, came upon a narrow stream which flowed from beneath a mass of red rocks, though where it rises probably no man will ever know.

At any rate, in this stream, all glittering in the sunlight, lay a nugget of pure gold. That wounded elephant escaped, and the half dozen men who formed the party went down on their knees and groped in the river sand. They were only poor hunters, and richer men than they have gone down on their knees and groped in mud for gold.

Well, they named it Red Rock Diggings, brought up mining implements, and started operations with moderate success. There was food in the forest for them, and some gold in the earth. The latter they periodically ran to the settlement, and, having squandered their hard-earned gold, returned to Red Rock Diggings to seek a fresh supply.

But in one thing they were wise. However drunk they got, they never revealed their secret source of wealth. The name of Red Rock Diggings was well known, but its situation was a mystery, and it was only through Rory chasing a rabbit into the gorge where the diggings lay that Jack, Sam, and Pete stumbled on the spot.

The six miners lived in a hut which they had constructed of blocks of sandstone, plastered together with cement of their own making, and roofed with timber. The work did them credit, and they were very proud of it; but they did not want strangers to share their prize, and when the three comrades suddenly entered the place every man but one sprang forward, while an angry murmur arose.

"What do you want here?" demanded a tall, bony man, whose hands were stained with blood. He went by the name of Ezra, and was a leading light amongst those miners, because he had wonderful luck and skill.

"We came here quite by chance."

"Then, see you here," cried a short, thick-set man, "jest

you go by chance, or as sure as my name is Bill Pollard you'll get shot!"

"I reckon it's a game that two can play at," said Sam, placing his hand on his revolver butt. "The first man who levels a weapon will get a bullet through his arm."

"What's all dis?" demanded Pete, pushing Bill aside, and stepping up to a rough table on which a man lay. He was stripped to the waist, and had an ugly wound in his breast. "Who did dat?"

"The beast," answered Ezra, lowering his voice, and gazing fearfully around the place. "Poor Fred!"

"Stop a bit, mates!" exclaimed Sam, stepping forward. "If we've got to draw on each other we can do it presently; but it's our duty as men to see to this poor fellow first. Give him a drop of spirit, if you have any. Just moisten his lips. Got any linen?"

"It's all right, boys," said Ezra, watching Sam bind up the wound. "He knows more about it than me. It's all right, mate. You needn't be afraid of any firing while you are looking after Fred."

"Golly! We ain't afraid!" exclaimed Pete. "If you started firing dere would be a lot more reason for you to be afraid."

"Come outside, and—"

"Nunno, old hoss! Dis child ain't just going to look after Sammy's interests while he looks after Fred's; and Jack is de same way fixed. You may be bery nice men, 'cos you can't always go by looks; but we ain't trusting you furdur dan we can see you."

"Here! Ezra has told you to go out," cried a hulking great fellow, stepping up to Pete menacingly. "Jest you go!"

"What's your name, old hoss?" inquired Pete.

"Job!"

"Dis child's is Pete."

"It don't matter to me what it is. Clear, or I'll give you a smack in the

jaw, and you won't want two of mine, so I tell you!"

"Nunno! I ain't taking any ob dem. Only take tings I want, such as Sammy's bacca. You buzz off before you get hurt!"

"Why, you thundering skunk of a nigger, take— Ugh!"

Job struck, but his fist missed Pete's face, while that worthy struck him in the chest with a force that completely doubled him up and made him gasp.

"You'm making too much noise for de sick-room, old hoss!" cried Pete, picking him up in his brawny arms. "You come along wid your nursey, Nunno! You can't draw your weapons wid my arms round you—so. Oh, you dear little Job! I could hug you."

"Woo-hoo! Stow it! Bust! You're crushing my ribs in." "Dat's de worst ob being so affectionate, ain't it? Now, Job, you hab got a lesson to learn, and it may save you getting hurt a lot in dis world. Tink I can hold you in one hand, 'cos you ain't as strong as you tink you are. May as well take your weapons, in case you try to shoot me. Now, I'll just chuck you into dose bushes—so!"

Pete hurled his opponent into a clump of "wait-a-bit" thorns. As my readers may know, these are in the shape of small and large fish-hooks, and no thorn was ever more aptly named. They caused Job to roar like a wounded bull, and utter the most indifferent language.

"Now, I wonder what dat man is making all dis boder about?" mused Pete. "Don't see anyt'ing in a clump ob bushes to make all dat row ober. Say, Job, hab you sat on a wapsy's nest, or are you only trying to sing 'Winds dat blow from de souf' wid de loud pedal down?"

"Bust it! Yoorooh! 'Get these dratted thorns out of me!"

"Dat don't come under de head ob my contract. I only engaged to put you into de bushes, not to take you out ob dem. All you hab got to do is to struggle about a bit, and you'm most bound to get clear. Nunno, Rory! Don't bite him. Dat man is suffering pain enough. You can hear dat by his yowls. Regular musical concert, ain't it?"

"You varmint!" howled Job, when he at last got free.

NEXT FRIDAY:

"THE NEW TUTOR!"
By Martin Clifford.

"THE FRONTIER SMUGGLERS!"
A Grand Tale of Sexton Blake.

"THE BLACK KING!"
By S. Clarke Hook.

"If I don't pay you for this, may I be drawn and quartered!"

"Don't you boder about dat, Job," said Pete, striking a match on his trousers. "I do any little job like dat free, gracious, and for noting. Chuck you in again if you like, widout extra charge."

"Will you fight me fair?"

"Well, I ain't bery fair. Nunno, Job! I won't fight you."

"Why not?"

"Because you are afraid ob me, old hoss."

"Afeared of a nigger! Well, that's a good 'un. Haw, haw, haw! So you won't fight me?"

Job shouted this out, because Ezra and Bill were coming towards them.

"Nunno! I ain't going to fight," said Pete. "You are hurt quite badly enough already. Don't mind putting you across my knee and spanking you if it would amuse de rest ob de company, but I'm mighty sure dey wouldn't like to see you knocked about."

Pete was standing with his back to the river, apparently intent on his pipe. Job was not going to lose such a splendid opportunity as that. He made a sudden rush at Pete and dealt a furious blow at his face.

It appeared as though Pete suddenly collapsed. He went down in a heap, and, sprawling over him, Job pitched headlong into the river amongst the rushes.

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared Pete, swinging round and sitting on the steep bank, while his legs dangled over the water. "Tink dat man is making signals wid his legs. 'Spect dat means 'wrong end up.'"

The fact is Job's head had stuck in the mud, and when he appeared right end up, his face was about as black as Pete's. The strange part about it was that although the water only reached Job's waist, he uttered a yell of terror, while he scrambled up the bank as though some awful peril were behind him.

And so it was. For wallowing in the soft mud at the riverside was a huge crocodile. He had caught a glimpse of it as he rose to the surface, and as the dreadful reptile moved slowly towards him he was almost helpless with terror.

Suddenly it made a snap at the seat of Job's trousers, which fortunately were baggy. Pete gripped the terrified man by the arm, and raising the axe which he had grasped in his right hand when he saw the peril, he struck at the reptile's head with all his strength.

The keen-edge crashed through the thick bone, and the crocodile fell backwards, ripping out a large square of cloth.

"Near ting dat, Massa Job!" exclaimed Pete. "Are you bitten?"

"No, mate! But I should have been if it hadn't been for you. Jest you go on ahead while I follow you."

"Nunno! You go first, Job."

"I ain't a-going fust!" roared Job.

"Yah, yah, yah! How's dat, sah?"

"Never you mind how it is. I ain't having a nigger guffawing at me, even if he has saved my life."

"Yah, yah, yah! Come 'long, boys!"

Job kept about three yards behind them. Then a peal of wild laughter appeared to come from the bushes behind him, and, uttering a yell, he bolted past the other three men and darted into the building, followed by howls of laughter.

Even the wounded man Fred, who had regained consciousness and who caught a glimpse of Job, commenced to laugh.

"Here! You stop that!" exclaimed Sam. "You will have to wait till that wound gets well before you start guffawing like that."

"I'm all right, mate."

"I reckon I know how you are!" retorted Sam. "You will be all right in a day or two, if you keep quiet and don't go getting drunk."

"But he does look mortal funny, too. How did he lose all that cloth?"

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared Pete. "An old crocodile caught him. But how did you get dat wound?"

An expression of terror came into the wounded man's eyes, and he gazed around as though he expected to see some fearful form in the room.

"It was the beast," he murmured.

"Here, mates!" exclaimed Ezra, beckoning the comrades from the building. "You've fixed up that wounded man a treat, and you've proved to us that you're a decent sort. Maybe we haven't proved the same to you. Now, see here! I found a bit of a nugget about forty or fifty miles lower down the river. Take it, and go away from here without any questions asked or answered. We don't want anyone to know we are living here."

"We shall certainly say nothing about it," exclaimed Jack, refusing the gold. "It is no business of ours. But we don't need your gold, and if we did we should not take it like that. We have a larger fortune than we shall ever need, Ezra. But what do you mean about the beast? What beast is it?"

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 54.

"Hush, mate, as you value your life!" murmured Ezra. "There's things in the African forest as white men don't know of."

"Granted! We ourselves have seen some strange things," said Jack.

"I have seen stranger," declared Ezra. "You haven't seen the beast."

"I reckon if we do we will put Pete alongside it," said Sam. "Then we shall have beauty and the beast."

"It's no joking matter, mate," said Ezra. "You'd say so, too, if you had seen it."

"What's dat beast like," inquired Pete.

"A hideous monster."

"Well, so is Sammy; but den he ain't dangerous except when he's shooting. You neber know what he is going to hit when he starts firing, but it's most bound to be something he ain't aiming at. But we would mighty much like to see dat beast!"

"Fred saw it. That's how it would serve you. Still, if you don't value your lives, jest visit the ruins."

"Are dey far from here, sah?"

"No. I wish they was a thousand miles further! Follow along the river, and when you come to the lake you'll see them; and mind you, you'll see more than you want to."

"What's dat?"

"You'll see your burial-place. As sure as you're living men now, you'll be dead ones if ever you go near those ruins."

"Dunno 'bout dis, boys. I ain't fond ob ghosts and dat."

"Thought you wanted to see the beast?"

"Tink I had better look at you, Sammy. An ordinary specimen ob beast seems to be 'bout as much as dis child requires. P'raps Ezra can gib us a description ob dat animal dat will save us the boder ob going to look at him."

"Ah, it is terrible!" groaned Ezra. "I ain't never seen anything like it!"

"Is it anything like a camel or a flea, or any ob dose biting animals?"

"Not a bit."

"Say a hippotamus or an ostrich, den?"

"You ain't got no conception of that beast, mates. Once you see it you'll never forget it."

"I rader 'spect you hab neber seen it, Ezra," observed Pete.

"Wish I hadn't!"

"Well, you don't seem to know much 'bout dat animal. You don't seem to know weder it's like a Jerusalem moke or a butterfly. Does it live on grass or chickweed?"

"It lives on human beings!" answered Ezra, in a horrified voice. "Its den is full of their bones!"

"Tink it's a lion?"

"No. I dunno what it is. There's no animal like it."

"That is my opinion, Ezra," said Jack, laughing. "It is a sort of invisible beast, the outcome of vivid imagination—"

Here Ezra uttered a wild yell, and howling out: "The beast! The beast!" bolted into the building, slamming and locking the door.

The comrades saw nothing in the bushes in the direction in which Ezra had been gazing; but Rory evidently did, for he leapt into the bushes.

"I rader tink dat beast is going to get bitten," observed Pete. "Hellup! Dat sounds as if Rory is getting bitten!"

He had heard a yelp, and as Pete sprang towards the bushes Rory came back, looking very scared. He glanced back several times, as though to make sure he was not being followed, and if ever a dog looked frightened, it was he.

"Golly! It must be a mighty funny beast for Rory to be afraid ob him!" exclaimed Pete. "'Spect we shall hab to go and see de complexion ob dat animal!"

"I reckon if we can strike its trail on this swampy ground I shall be able to tell what animal it is," said Sam. "Come this way. I had better go first. Pete's beetle-crushers would cover the trail of an elephant. May I be shot if it doesn't look like a young elephant's trail! See here! Those two round holes are made by the hind feet. This smaller one—What the name of Fate can it be? Why, one of the feet is in the shape of a man's hand!"

Opposite the front footprint was the distinct impression of a human hand. For some moments the comrades stood gazing at the extraordinary trail in mute amazement; then Sam followed it further along, but the trail across the spongy ground was the same. Where the fourth foot should have gone appeared the distinct impression of a man's hand.

"Well, if it has puzzled Ezra to describe that animal, I reckon it would puzzle me to describe the trail!"

"Dat's easy enough, Sammy!" declared Pete. "Anyone can tell what animal dat trail belongs to!"

"Well, what animal is it?"

"Dat trail, sah, belongs to de pig."

"Belongs to your grandmother!"

"Nunno, Sammy! She's been dead too long to hab made dat trail. Dat's a pig's trail, right enough."

"Rats! The hinder feet are six inches in diameter, and the front one is about three; then there are no hoof-marks. Besides, how do you account for the impression of the hand?"

"I'm mighty certain I know where my tobacco goes to," growled Sam. "But look here! It's getting too dark to follow that trail to-night. Suppose we camp by the river, and visit the ruins in the morning?"

"Dat's a mighty sensible idea, Sammy," answered Pete. "But we hab got to get a shot at someting, so come 'long!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

More About the Strange Apparition.

AFTER breakfast the following morning, Ezra and Bill, who had seen the glow of their camp-fire, but did not care to venture out with that beast prowling about, paid them a visit.

"We've been talking matters over, mates," said Ezra; "and as you've seen so much we are going to tell you the rest, so long as you'll swear never to reveal our secret."

"We will pledge our words," said Jack.

"But you've got to swear it."

"Nonsense! I shall do no such thing," answered Jack. "If you cannot take our words, there is an end of it. If you imagine that we are going to tell anyone you have a gold-mine here, you are mistaken."

"You think to get it for yourselves?"

"Do you take us for thieves?"

"Well, I wouldn't call that stealing. If you was to wait your opportunity you might shoot us all down with those repeating rifles—"

"Golly! De man tink we are murderers now!" exclaimed Pete.

"Well, it seems to me the only way to close your mouths is to take you into partnership," said Ezra, "and that we are willing to do if you work with the rest of us."

"We don't want any such thing," said Jack. "As a matter of fact, we have ten times more gold than you will ever get out of your mine. How is Fred getting on?"

"He's a lot better this morning."

"Is he able to give any description of this mysterious beast?"

"No. He was asleep in the forest when he was stabbed."

"And did not see the beast at all?"

"No."

"Well, probably a savage stabbed him."

"It certainly might be that," admitted Ezra, glancing round the bushes.

"We are inclined to think the beast is a hoax."

"I never seed one," growled Bill; "but all I can say is, if it is, why, a hoax is a thundering funny sort of animal."

"We mean that you are playing us a trick in order to scare us away," explained Jack, "and that there is no beast at all."

"I only wish you were right."

"We thought perhaps you had made the trail in the mud with the three strange feet and the hand."

"That's the beast's trail right enough. I saw it when I bolted; and its face is awful."

"But surely you can describe it. What is it like?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't care to talk about it. It's suthin' between a lion and a chimpanzee."

"Anything like Sammy?" inquired Pete.

"Nunno! It's a lot more awful than him."

"Den I tell you what it is, Jack. We'd better gib dat beast a wide berth. If it's more awful than Sammy, it's most bound to gib us two-free kinds ob fits."

"Well, I reckon we will follow its trail."

"There ain't no need to do that, mate," said Ezra. "I know where it leads to."

"Where?"

"The haunted ruins; and if you take my tip you won't go there. I entered 'em once; but for all the gold as has ever come out of that mine, or ever will come out of it, I wouldn't enter them ruins again, for there I saw the beast."

"Did you fire at it?" inquired Sam.

"No fear! Bullets won't touch it."

"Ever tried them?"

"Can't say as I have. Fred did once, and you see what has come of it. Nunno! I jest bolted as hard as I could, and ain't ever been near the place since."

"Well, we are going to-day. There's plenty of good meat there if you'd like it."

"Right you are, mate! You might come back, if you

don't get killed, and tell us what you think of that ere beast."

The comrades promised to do so, and having bid Ezra and Bill good-bye, they leisurely made their way down the swift stream.

Sam bagged some wildfowl, and this formed their midday meal, after which Pete wanted to smoke. As the day was fearfully hot they remained under the shade of the palms until the sun was declining, then continuing their journey, arrived at the lake as the moon was shining brilliantly over the large sheet of water.

Close to the western shore of the lake appeared one of those mysterious ruins that are to be met with in the depths of Africa. By what bygone race they were constructed will never now be known. But there they rise in the heart of the great forest, where the giant trees have grown round them and died, to be replaced by others; for even the mighty baobab, which lives for two thousand years, is young in comparison to those ruins.

The strange part about it is that the solid walls should have withstood to such an extent the ravages of those centuries of storms; yet some of the walls are almost intact, although the solid masonry is concealed by the giant creepers coiling in tangled masses to their very summit.

The ruins the comrades gazed upon were of vast extent, and in a far better state of preservation than they had expected.

"I reckon we shall want torches to explore these ruins," said Sam, "but I think I shall be able to make some from these oil-palms."

"You get on wid it, den, Sammy," said Pete. "I always notice when dere's any work knocking about you: I'm a lot too mighty free wid your conversation. Should say your gas would gib enough light for most any ruins. And just you keep close to us, Sammy, else we may get shooting you in mistake for de beast. I hab an idea dere's a good deal ob resemblance between de two ob you."

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Gruesome Vault—What They Saw in the Lonely Apartment—The Savages—Some Anxious Moments.

DIRECTLY Sam had prepared the torches they entered the ruins, in one corner of which was a winding stone staircase which appeared to lead to a chamber at the summit of the massive wall. But first of all they determined to explore the vaults of the place, as it was there Ezra had asserted he saw the mysterious beast.

A flight of steps led into the place, where the silence was deathlike, for the prowling beasts of prey had not yet commenced their mighty howling.

"Seems to be plenty ob damp here," observed Pete, gazing around at the slimy walls.

"I reckon that's from the lake," said Sam. "Mind how you go, Pete, else you will stumble over the—"

"Hi, golly!" yelled Pete, as there was a whirring sound and something slapped him in the face, while the torch he carried was extinguished. "Someone is frowning pancakes about de place. Hellup! One ob de lemons has hit me in de eye now!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Jack. "You have got a marvellously vivid imagination, Pete."

"Dunno 'bout dat, but I hab got a smack in de mouf wid something."

"It's a bat," laughed Sam.

"Golly! You tink someone is playing cricket down here, Sammy? Hellup! Dat felt mighty like de ball on my nose!"

"They are bats, Pete," said Sam, sheltering himself behind Pete's broad back, for the air was full of them, and they fluttered round the torches until they were extinguished.

"Golly! Are dey only bats, Sammy?" exclaimed Pete, sheltering his face with his arms. "Feels to me as dough half a dozen beasts were frowning themselves at my face."

"Well, light your torch and stop grumbling."

"Seems to me dose bats are nuff to make an oyster grumble and coil up in his shell wid disgust. But suppose you light your torch, Sammy? Get in front ob me and light it. I rader tink one ob dose bats has bitten a piece out ob my starboard eye, and my nose feels as if he had got two-free ob-de little jokers up him."

With some little difficulty Sam got a light, and they ignited the other torches by his; but as they continued their exploration, the bats, with which the place was infested, whirled to and fro with a noise like the rush of wind.

As they proceeded deeper into the ruins they got past the swarm of bats, and once more all was silent. Jack, who now led the way, passed through a narrow archway, then he started back with an exclamation of horror.

A large vault lay before him. At least a score of lifeless bodies were in it, besides a number of skeletons.

"Tink we hab seen 'bout enough ob dis place!" exclaimed Pete, striding away from the charnel vault. "If dat's where de beast buries his victims, seems to me he has had a mighty lot ob dem."

"They all appeared to be savages, too," said Jack, only too glad to get away from the gruesome place.

"I reckon 'tis time that beast was shot!" exclaimed Sam. "Suppose we go up those steps and see what is at the top of them?"

"Dunno 'bout dis place!" exclaimed Pete. "Seems to me dese are de sort ob ruins dat want exploring in de daylight. Don't care to stumble on dead bodies like dat. Makes me feel creepy."

"Then creep up those steps," said Sam. "We may find a room at the top where we can pass the night."

Pete ascended the spiral staircase somewhat cautiously. An ordinary foe he never feared, but anything supernatural always affected his nerves.

"You are very slow for a young man, Pete," said Sam.

"Yes, but look at the sureness ob de child. Taxes ain't in it wid me."

He was holding the torch above his head, and as he turned the last bend of the staircase, and saw into the apartment at the top, he uttered a yell that caused Jack and Sam to jump.

"Golly!" gasped Pete, dropping his torch, which was extinguished by the fall. "Dere's the beast!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Sam, springing forward and shining his torch into the apartment. "There's nothing there."

"Dere was, Sammy. And an awful-looking creature at dat."

"Where has it gone to, then?"

"I ain't responsible for dat beast's movements."

"You dreamt it."

"Ain't asleep, Sammy. Besides, I couldn't dream ob a face like dat."

"What was it like, Pete?" inquired Jack.

"I dunno! Neber saw anything like it before. Lot ob shaggy black hair all ober it. Mighty big eyes. Didn't see any nose, but he had got a mouf all ober his face."

"He must have been a nigger, then," declared Sam.

"Niggers don't walk on all-fours, Sammy, and dey don't disappear all ob a sudden. Nunno! Dat wasn't a nigger. And it wasn't a Yank, dough it was almost frightful enough for one."

Rory was evidently very much upset. He walked round the room sniffing, then, raising his head in the air, he uttered a dismal howl.

"Look here!" exclaimed Jack. "We three have faced most sorts of beasts in our time, and we are not going to run away from this one. It seems to have been quite as frightened of Pete as he was of it."

"I reckon the poor thing was frightened of his face," said Sam. "I'd like to know where it disappeared to, that is if the beast is not merely in Pete's imagination. A chap who wolfs food like he does is nearly sure to suffer from indigestion, and when people get that I have heard tell they see all sorts of strange things."

"Well, suppose we pass the night here," said Jack. "Perhaps the beast will come back; then we can all have a look at it."

"Seems to me it would be a bit more comfortable in de forest," said Pete. "However, I ain't particular. I'm mighty tired. Shall I take first watch, Jack?"

"No, thank you!" answered Jack. "I wouldn't care to trust to your keeping watch, even when you are not tired. You go to sleep. I'll take first watch."

Although Pete asserted that he was tired, quite an hour passed by before he commenced to snore. Probably the beast had upset his nerves. Sam, who was inclined to be sceptical concerning that mysterious animal, was the first to fall asleep.

Jack had extinguished the torches, as the moonlight streamed through the opening in the wall which had in times gone by been a window.

Stepping noiselessly to this, he gazed out at the peaceful forest and the waters of the lake, but several times he looked behind him as though he felt something approaching. That gruesome vault had made him feel strangely nervous, and strive as he would he could not shake off this uncanny feeling.

Suddenly he heard the sound of a blow, and it appeared to come from the vaults. Again and again the strange sound reached him, and once he thought he heard a shriek.

This decided him. Ordering Rory in a low voice to keep guard, Jack crept down the steps, lighting one of the torches as he went.

The blows continued until he entered the vault, then they

suddenly ceased, and now the only sound in the gloomy place was the whirring of the bats as they darted to and fro.

The place was so large that he had no easy task in finding his way about it, but he searched every part except that gruesome vault where the lifeless forms lay.

At last he went towards that, and as he neared the archway he saw that hideous form which had so startled Pete.

He only caught a momentary glimpse of the awful-looking face with the shaggy hair hanging around it, then the creature darted through the archway and was lost to Jack's sight.

Holding his torch on high he gazed into the loathsome place, but he only saw the lifeless forms there, and he was glad to turn away again.

One thing he noticed, however, before he went, another form had been added to the rest. It was that of a tall savage, and by the eagle plume in his hair, Jack judged him to be a chief.

Hurrying from the vaults he ascended the narrow staircase, to find his comrades still asleep, while Rory was keeping guard. In fact, he had come to the head of the stairs to make sure that it was Jack returning.

As it would soon be daylight now, Jack determined not to arouse the sleepers, who awoke at break of day.

"Why didn't you wake me, Jack?" inquired Sam.

"I wasn't sleepy," answered Jack.

"You ain't devoured by de beast, den?" inquired Pete.

"You had better try fasting for a day or two," said Sam.

"You'll be seeing more beasts if you don't."

"You don't tink I saw dat one, Sammy?"

"Can't say I do."

"Golly! But I saw his face distinctly."

"Indigestion."

"I saw his eyes. Awful eyes, too!"

"Imagination."

"Well, Sammy, you may be right, and I should be inclined to tink you were, only I happen to know you are wrong."

"What's your opinion about it, Jack?" inquired Sam.

"I think Pete saw the monstrosity," answered Jack.

"How is that?" inquired Sam.

"Because I saw it last night."

"You really mean it?"

"It is a fact. I heard the sound of blows, and went into the vaults, leaving Rory to keep guard here. Well, I saw the creature, and have never seen such an awful face before. Shaggy hair was all about it. I only saw it for an instant, as it darted away at incredible speed."

"Where did it go?"

"Into that vault where the skeletons and bodies lay. One more form was there, close to the arch."

"Could you see if it had a hand on one of its feet?"

"No. It moved too swiftly."

"You have never seen an animal like it?"

"Never! Nothing resembling it."

"Do you think there is another entrance to the vault?"

"Probably; because, although I did not enter the place, I must have seen that monster when I looked if it had been there. It was not."

"Do you think the death of the chief was due to the creature?"

"It looks remarkably like it," answered Jack. "If so, depend on it the creature is answerable for the deaths of all those in the vault."

"Don't see how he can be a wild beast if he don't eat de people he kills," said Pete. "Dunno what it is, but seems to me we ain't got nothing to do wid it, and de sooner we get away from dis place de better it will be."

"I reckon I'd like to see the creature," said Sam. "Suppose we stop here another day?"

Jack was ready enough; but Pete, who had made up his mind the monster was supernatural, did not appear to relish the suggestion. However, he agreed with the rest, and they were arranging to go out and get some game, when a fierce shout caused them to look out of the window.

About a hundred savages were approaching the place, and one of them was pointing with his spear to the ground.

"I reckon they have struck our trail," said Sam. "Well, they won't find it an easy task to dislodge us from this place."

"There are two ways they can do it, Sam," answered Jack. "One is fire, and the other by starving us out."

"Perhaps they are only trailing that beast," said Sam. "You see, they would naturally be furious at their chief's murder. They are certainly coming to the ruins. Be sure you keep Rory quiet, Pete. We don't want that little lot brought on us!"

They lost sight of the savages now, but could hear their voices as they moved about the ruins beneath.

Presently a furious yell rang out; then it turned to a wail, which continued for at least a quarter of an hour.

"I sha'n't be so mighty sorry when dis sweet song ceases," said Pete.

"It's their death-wall," said Sam. "They have evidently discovered their chief's body."

"Don't see how dat howling will do him any good," answered Pete. "They will neber howl him back to life!"

"See, they are carrying the dead body away," said Jack. "I don't think they are coming to search this place."

"Golly! But I do!" exclaimed Pete, as he heard a stealthy tread up the staircase. "Stop a bit, boys! I'll see if I can gib a few roars such as a beast like de one we hab seen would utter!"

Pete made his voice appear to come from far down the staircase, and the growls he uttered certainly resembled no living animal's voice.

The footsteps ceased immediately, and, as Pete continued the extraordinary noises the savage who had been coming up retraced his steps, while the comrades saw him leave the ruins, casting many a glance behind him, as though he expected that dreaded beast was tracking him down.

"Yah, yah, yah! Tink I hab frightened dat man!" exclaimed Pete. "Spect he was sent up to see if anyone was here, and didn't like de job. He'll go back and swear he has examined de place!"

Having allowed sufficient time to elapse so that the savages would have got out of the way, the comrades proceeded to the forest, taking the opposite direction to which the savages had gone.

They did not continue their journey to Red Rock Diggings until the cool of the evening, and when they reached them they found the miners in a state of consternation, for that night the strange beast had appeared to them.

"I tell you straight, mates," exclaimed Ezra, "I'm a-going to cut it! I don't mind fighting savages and that, but I'm having nothing to do with that beast!"

"I wouldn't let it scare me away if I were you," said Jack. "There can be nothing in it, you know. It is only some animal."

"What animal, mate?"

"I really don't know."

"Nor don't I. Mind you, I've hunted in these forests for many a year, and there ain't an animal as I don't know the name and nature of; but that one fair beats me. There's one thing I'm certain of—it ain't a living creature!"

"Tink it's dead?" inquired Pete.

"No, worse luck! I'd sleep easier this night if it was. That ere thing is soopernatural!"

"Sort ob a ghost?"

"You've hit it, mate. As sure as sunshine, it's a ghost!"

"There are no such things, Ezra," said Jack.

"Ain't you ever seed strange things in your travels?"

"Many. But they could always be explained away, the same as we will explain away this mystery. You appear to have a paying mine here, and it would be a great pity to abandon it—although that, of course, is nothing to do with us."

"You think as you can get rid of the beast?"

"Undoubtedly. If Sam sights it, I'll guarantee it will do no more harm. It appears to have killed a vast number of savages. By the way, are you friendly with them?"

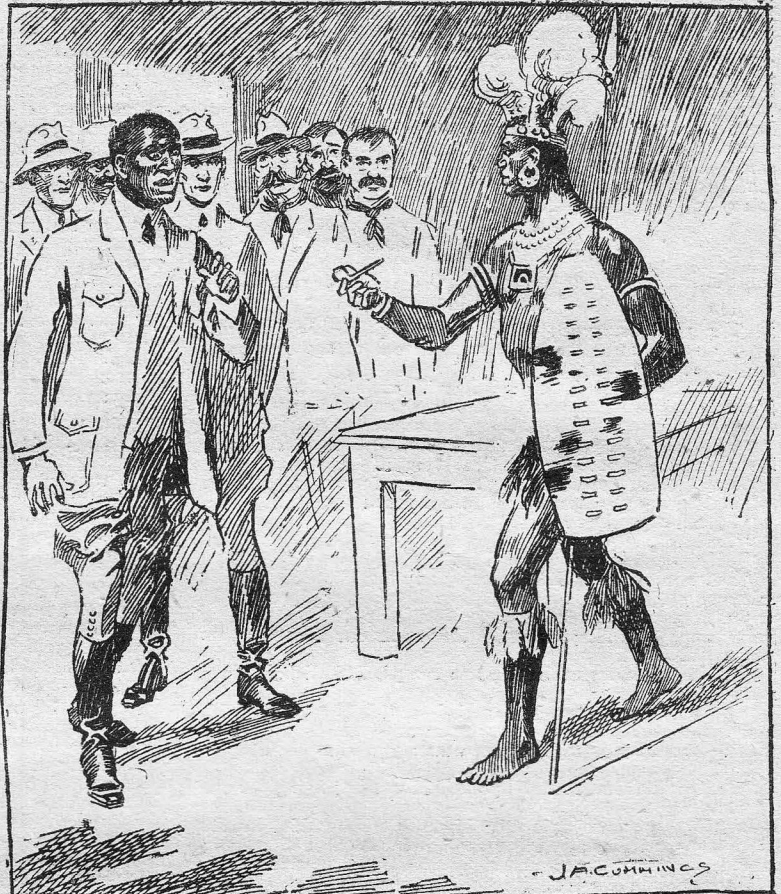
"Well, we wasn't at first; but we gave them one or two odds-and-ends for their wives, beads and that. We ain't had much trouble since. There's a young chief called Mora, who has got a bit threatening 'cos we won't give 'em firearms. Well, I'm hanged!"

Ezra's ejaculation was caused by the entrance of the very man about whom he had been speaking. He was a tall savage, with a very fierce face, and his eyes were now gleaming with fury. At first glance his height did not appear so great as it really was by reason of his abnormal girth of chest; but he stood over six feet, and his body appeared to be all muscle.

"Mora, chief of the Foulahs now that the great chief has been slain, requires to know whose pipe is this?"

"Dat's one ob mine, old hoss," answered Pete. "Must hab dropped it in de ruins!"

"He is the murderer of our chief!" cried Mora fiercely. "He carried our chief's body into the ruins, and flung him



"Mora, chief of the Foulahs now that the great chief has been slain, requires to know whose pipe this?" exclaimed the tall savage. "Dat's one of mine, old hoss," answered Pete. "Then you are the murderer of our chief!" cried Mora. (See this page.)

into the vault, where he had placed many other of our people. I trailed him. He is guilty, and shall come with me!"

"No such thing!" said Jack. "My friend Pete has only just come to this part. It is true we visited the ruins, but it was not he who killed your chief!"

"That is false!" cried Mora, striking his fist on the table. "I say that the black dog has slain our chief! I saw him do it! I will swear that to my people, and they will torture him to death!"

"Golly, Mora, you am a mighty fine liar!" exclaimed Pete.

"How could you see me do what I neber did?"

"You killed our chief!"

"Dat's what you say. You might make a mistake on dat point, so I'll say noting about it; but when you declare dat you saw me kill dat man, I say you am de finest specimen ob a lying savage dat eber prowled about de forest like oder wild beasts!"

"You shall come with me!"

"Yah, yah, yah! You am a bit bigger dan me, but 'bout my age." "Do you tink dat you could take me?"

"Yes."

"Dat's all right, den. Ebery one has a right to his own opinion. Mine is dat you couldn't take me. You don't appear to be armed, old hoss!"

"It was to prove to the white men that I came here as a friend. If they interfere and prevent me taking you away, I shall leave here as a foe, and bring five hundred warriors again. Then white men will no longer dwell in my realms. You are a murderer!"

"See here, Mora," exclaimed Job, "don't see as you ought to attack us jest 'cos that nigger has made a fool of you. I ain't got so much cause to like him."

"Then give him up to me."

"You're free to take him, as far as I am concerned."

"I will bring my warriors here to take him."

"See here," exclaimed Ezra, "Pete never murdered your chief, and you know it, Mora. You only want to pick a

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NEXT FRIDAY:

"THE NEW TUTOR!"
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quarrel with us, and you would have done it long ago if it hadn't been for the chief what's dead. Now, we ain't going to stand any thundering nonsense, and I tell you straight, if you bring your warriors here they will get more than they bargain for!"

"Can nine men fight five hundred?"

"Well, we won't argue about that 'ere," said Ezra. But I tell you this, Mora, if you attack this place you will be one of the fust to fall. Now, shove that in your pipe and smoke it, and just you walk off."

"Steady, dere!" exclaimed Pete. "Got two-free words to say to Mora before he starts."

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Mora is Kept Prisoner—Preparing for the Foe—The Attack in the Mine.

AS a preliminary Pete loaded and lighted his pipe, and all the while he gazed at Mora out of the corners of his eyes.

"Now, see here, old hoss!" exclaimed Pete, "if it's only my life you want, I tink we can arrange it. May sabs a lot ob warriors' libes, and seems to me dey might hab a better chief dan you. Sammy has got an axe. Dere's mine lying dere. Suppose we two fight it out?"

"I shall take the white men's message to my people."

"Dat means you are afraid to fight me!"

"Afraid of a nigger dog!"

"Dunno 'bout de dog."

"All niggers are cowardly dogs."

"Dat don't count. If I'm a dog anything like Rory I ain't ashamed ob it. But, see here. It will take you five minutes to bring your warriors on us. What's to prevent us free going away? Tink you would follow on our trail, or tink you would attack dis place?"

"If the white men allow you to escape, I shall hold them responsible."

"Dose five men—one is wounded—couldn't stop dis child. But dat don't matter. I can see you are going to attack dis place. It ain't only my life you want; you want the lives ob all."

"And will have them!" yelled Mora, springing to the door.

But Pete was too quick for him. Catching him by the ankle, he sent him sprawling face downwards on the floor; then Pete sprang once more in front of the doorway.

Mora was on his feet in an instant, and, seizing the axe that lay on the table where Pete had placed it, hurled it, with mad fury, at his head.

Pete jerked his head aside with a swiftness that none but a skilful acrobat and boxer could have attained. The next instant the axe, which was buried deeply in the door, was in his right hand, and with a bound he was upon the furious chief, whose throat he gripped, forcing him backwards on the table; and as he thus lay, face upwards, Pete raised the axe on high, then brought it down with a mighty force into the wood two inches from the chief's left cheek.

"What do you tink 'bout dat miss, Sammy?" inquired Pete, releasing Mora.

"I knew you would miss your aim, mate," answered Sam, levelling his rifle at Mora's breast, as Jack had done. "But we shall not."

"Fire!" cried Mora. "Do you think that I fear death?"

"I do not think that you fear to deal it to others," said Jack sternly. "An ignorant savage may use a weapon against an unarmed man as you have done! Neither my comrades nor I could be capable of such a cowardly action."

"I am going!" cried Mora.

"Guess again, old hoss," said Pete.

"My warriors are by the ruins."

"Dat's what you say; but den you ain't so might troofal. Nunno, Mora. We hab got to find dat out ourselves. You'll be quite comfortable where you are, and you can buzz off to-morrow; but you ain't going to-night."

"See here, mates," exclaimed Ezra, leaving the building and locking the chief in, "if we take up our position in the mine we haven't much to fear. The only thing is we shall need provisions. Now, if you three could go out and bag some game, we should be all right while it lasts. I am going to give those savages a lesson they won't forget."

"What sort of defence are you going to make?" inquired Jack.

"You leave that to me, mate. I've fought savages nearly all my life, and know their ways. When you do strike 'em, you have to strike 'em hard. They are going to bring five hundred against nine. And, mind you this, if they take us they will put us to death by the vilest torture they can invent. But perhaps you know that?"

"I reckon so," answered Sam.

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 54.

"Right you are! Now, if you will get in the game, I'll do the rest!"

Fortune favoured Sam, for he succeeded in bagging a rhinoceros close to the diggings, and they passed the night smoking large quantities of the flesh.

At Ezra's suggestion this was taken direct into the mine, where two of the men were busily engaged forming barricades across the tunnel. Ezra was very reserved concerning his plan of defence, but the men appeared to have absolute confidence in him. In several places he had fixed branches across the upper portion of the tunnel in front of the barricades.

"You see, mates, that will stop a lot of their spears. If they throw under those branches their weapons won't get over the barricades. Arrows may, but spears certainly won't. It's different with bullets; they will go straight."

"You are going to abandon your hut?" inquired Jack.

"Yes. We can't defend that against five hundred. It doesn't matter about that. Now, you remain down here, and I'll let that chief loose. You can bet he won't be long in bringing his warriors on us."

Ezra ascended the shaft, and made his way to the back of the building, where Job was keeping guard with a loaded rifle.

"It's all right, mate," he whispered. "We are about ready for the skunks. Let him escape now. He won't be so long climbing through that window when you shift."

"Seems to me we ought to shoot him," said Job. "I can easily do it when he's escaping."

"No, mate, we'll fight 'em fair. If we was to take his life it would give the savages an excuse for attacking us, and that's just what they want."

The two men had scarcely left the window when Mora climbed through and darted towards the forest; then Ezra had the opening strongly barricaded, so that the savages might imagine their enemies were still within the building.

The day had passed before the remainder of his men descended the mine again. Ezra himself stood in the tub watching for the enemy, ready to lower himself immediately they came in sight.

Presently he saw their stealthy forms move from the bushes until the whole of the open ground was covered with their dark forms. Mora had boasted that he would bring five hundred warriors, but as Ezra saw the savages swarm from the bushes he knew that they must have numbered considerably more than that.

Now their war-cry rang out, and the whole force charged down on the hut; then a red flash shot into the darkness, and a loud report shook the earth, while a large number of the savages were hurled into the air.

"It's all right, boys!" cried Ezra to his men below. "The mine has gone off, and it seems to have scared them pretty considerably. I'm just going to give 'em one shot, so as to let them know we are here."

It appeared to be a foolhardy thing to do, but Ezra's idea was to deliver such a crushing defeat that the attack would never be renewed. He tried to catch a glimpse of Mora, but, failing in this, fired amongst the panic-stricken throng, who immediately charged down on the mine.

Quickly lowering himself, he took up his position behind the first barricade.

"Now, mates, out with the lights!" he cried. "Open fire directly the skunks come along the tunnel!"

"We had better fire in threes," said Jack. "That will give time to reload the revolvers."

"Yus; that's the notion. I'll be amongst the first three. We can retreat to the second barricade, if need be; but I rather fancy we can convince 'em as it won't be safe to come along this tunnel."

Contrary to Ezra's expectation, the savages made no sound, and the first sign of their approach was a shadowy form against the dim light which appeared at the end of the tunnel where it ran into the shaft.

"Fire!" he cried, discharging his revolvers, an example which his men quickly followed.

Then the savages uttered their war-cry and rushed along the tunnel, to be met by a deadly fire.

They must have suffered heavily, but such was their fury that they still charged on. Some of them gained the barricade, but with those determined foes behind it they failed to get over; and now the fire became so heavy that the savages beat a hasty retreat, uttering yells of fury as they fled.

"They won't try that little game again," said Ezra. "I dunno how they got on, but it seems to me they must have found it mighty hot with all those bullets flying round. There's one of two things as they will try next."

"What are they?" inquired Jack.

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"Burn us alive, or bury us alive. Neither of them is very pleasant deaths."

The defenders waited patiently, but hour after hour slipped by, and there was not a sign of the savages.

"Seems to me, mates," said Sam at last, "that we've given more than they reckoned on getting, and they do not intend to resume the attack."

"Then you think it's safe to get back to the hut?" exclaimed Ezra. "What d'you think, Jack?"

"Well, we must go carefully; but it seems that they have given up the attack," replied Jack, "so there can be no harm in us getting back to the hut. Come on!"

The miners hauled themselves to the surface, and were astonished to see the shed untouched.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

A Visit to the Ruins—In the Vault—The Mystery Solved.

"NOW, look here, Sam and Pete!" exclaimed Jack the following morning, after they had taken a few hours' rest, and had finished breakfast. "We have got to catch the beast!"

"I'd rader catch de measles, or a cricket-ball!" observed Pete.

"Never mind. You are coming with us!" said Jack. "There is no doubt that the savages must have caught sight of the beast while we were defending the mine, and it evidently terrified them away."

"We had best put a chalk-mark on Pete, so as we may not mistake him for the beast," said Sam.

"We will let him keep talking," said Jack.

"We shall mistake him for a babbling idiot, then!" declared Sam. "No; keep him quiet, if it is possible. But if we start now we shall reach the ruins by dark; and I reckon that is the best time to catch the beast. Come on, you chunk of black laziness! It strikes me that what you are most afraid of is the walk to the ruins; but you have got to do it, my flowering lily!"

"Den 'spect we had better make de start at once," said Pete. "If you hab got to receive a clump on de jaw or a five-pound note, de best ting to do is to hab it straight away and get it ober!"

So they made the start at once, Ezra having lent them a lantern, so that they would be able to explore the place."

At Jack's suggestion, they decided to keep watch outside for the strange creature, and for this purpose they concealed themselves behind a clump of acacia that grew close to the steps leading into the vaults. From this position they had a perfect view of the place, and it would be impossible for any living thing to enter without them seeing it.

For now the moon had risen, and the howling of the denizens of the forest had commenced. An hour or more passed by, but there was no sign of any living thing coming to that spot.

Presently, however, Rory uttered a low growl, which Pete immediately silenced. Something was moving through the bushes towards the spot.

They could not see it yet, but the rustling in the bushes was distinctly audible, and the next moment that fearful-looking creature appeared in the moonlight.

The lifeless form of a savage was slung over its back, much as a lion will carry an ox to its lair. The creature moved swiftly along on three feet, holding its victim with the one formed like a hand; and it went down the steps with the greatest ease, notwithstanding the weight of its burden.

Sam had levelled his rifle at it; but although his finger rested on the trigger, he did not draw it.

"I can't make that out at all," he said. "The creature's face is human. I believe that awful-looking monster is a man."

"Impossible, Sam! It is too hideous!" exclaimed Jack. "Besides, it runs on all-fours!"

"I reckon we will go down and find out if I am right," answered Sam. "My impression is we shall fathom the mystery in a very few minutes now. I have an idea that I could explain it away now. Light your lantern, Jack. We shall soon see if my idea is right!"

As they gained the steps hideous howls came from the vault. Jack sprang down the steps and held the lantern

above his head. The strange creature lay on the floor, and a large hyena stood over it, with its vicious fangs fastened in its victim's throat.

Sam levelled his rifle, and as it flashed the hyena fell sideways, with a bullet through its heart.

"You see! It is a human being, as I suspected!" exclaimed Sam, approaching the writhing form.

"A human being!" gasped Jack.

"Yes. Distorted by the atrocious cruelty of the savages," answered Sam. "It sounds almost incredible that human beings could be guilty of such fiendish cruelty. This must have been done years ago. Only with many years of practice could this poor wretch have learnt to run on all-fours with the speed he has attained. It is not to be wondered at that he sought vengeance on the demons who served him so; and it is evident that many of them have fallen to his deadly knife, and I am thankful that I did not fire at him!"

The poor creature's legs had been severed at the knees, and his left hand had also been amputated. The right hand was all that remained to him, hence the strange trail which had so mystified the comrades. That right hand now clutched a knife, probably taken from his latest victim. The savages had not confined their diabolical tortures to their victim's body, for his face was fearfully disfigured, and masses of shaggy black hair and beard gave him a terribly fierce appearance.

The poor creature's troubles were ended now, for his struggles ceased, and he lay lifeless on the ground.

"I thought Ezra's mode of defence inhuman," exclaimed Jack, shining the lantern on the distorted face. "But after such brutality as this no fate seems too bad for them!"

"Tink dat man was a savage, Jack?" inquired Pete.

"I think so; but it is difficult to tell by the colour of his skin, which would naturally be turned to a deep bronze by the sun."

"Don't quite see how he got his food."

"I reckon that would not be very difficult if he could throw a knife with precision," said Sam.

"Where does he get de knives from, Sammy?"

"Well, you have seen the number of his victims. It is certain every one of them would carry a knife; then, when his aim proved true, he would recover the weapon."

"Wonder how dat man got from de apartment at the top ob dis building?" mused Pete. "I'm 'most certain I saw him dere."

"There is not the least doubt that there is a secret passage from it into these vaults," answered Jack. "No doubt, if we were to take the trouble, we should discover it; but I don't see that it would do any good. My impression is that the sooner we get away from here the better, as the savages may come to avenge the death of the last victim, and if they find us here our chances of escape will be small."

"I'm of the same opinion," said Sam; "so we will make a start at once. It is strange that this poor wretch should have escaped the savages for so long."

"Spect he knew his way about de forest, and had got two-free hiding-places," exclaimed Pete. "Den I rader tink he would be able to crawl frough de bushes faster dan savages could run frough dem. Golly! If he lived in these vaults I don't envy him. Spect he only ventured out at night chiefly; but dis ain't a particularly nice place to spend de day. Not quite enough air for my liking, and rader too many dead forms knocking about. What are you trying to do, Sammy?" added Pete, as Sam went sprawling over a heap of rubbish.

"I'm not trying to do anything, mate."

"Dat's all right. Was 'most 'fraid you were trying to tumble. Hadn't you better get up, sah?"

They proceeded somewhat cautiously from the ruins, not feeling at all sure that the savages were not in the vicinity. However, they saw nothing of them, and that night they camped in the forest, then at break of day returned to Red Rock Diggings to explain what had happened.

"Well, mates," exclaimed Ezra, when they had heard the full story, "we are willing to admit you've been durned useful, and now you'd better stop here a few days, until we make sure the savages ain't going to attack us again."

So the comrades agreed to do this, and it was not until a week had elapsed that they once more started on their travels.

THE END.

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