

THREE GRAND COMPLETE STORIES INSIDE!

The Penny Popular

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3 Grand Complete Stories.



PETE'S JOY RIDE!

An Amusing Scene from the Magnificent, Long, Complete Tale of the Three Famous Comrades in this issue!

THE DETECTIVE'S DECEIT!

A Magnificent Long, Complete
Story Dealing with the Further
Amazing Adventures of

SEXTON BLAKE, the World-Famous DETECTIVE.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Voluntary Surrender Impossible — Al-
phonse Roget—Behind the Blinds.

SEXTON BLAKE was in a difficult position. He was aiding and abetting a fugitive from justice. Seated by a warm fire, he was now pondering over the full facts of his dilemma.

In his mind he went over the extraordinary happening which had led to him taking an active interest in the affairs of Miss Mary Fielding. How only a few days ago Miss Fielding had burst into his rooms with the startling statement that she had shot and killed a man named Raymond Carter, who had persistently pestered her against her will. Sexton Blake, out of the pity of his heart, had taken her into his house, rather than let her suffer at the hands of the police for a crime which he thought she had had good reason to commit. How he and Tinker, accompanied by Pedro, had gone on cycles the night of the murder to the spot at Trinity Crescent, Brixton, where Miss Fielding lived, and where she said the crime had been committed. Supposing the police were able to trace them through Pedro's paw-marks, it would be a dreadful calamity.

Blake turned in his chair, and drew steadily at his pipe. "Did she really murder the man," he muttered, half aloud, to himself, "or is it merely an hallucination? What part in the plot does this secret society play? Has Miss Fielding any actual connection with it, seeing that she wears their sign, a cross in a circle, or is it merely as she states, that her father gave her the badge before he died, not telling her its significance? Raymond Carter was a member of the society, as also is Merivale, the proprietor of the hotel at which Carter stayed when he was in London. Merivale had something to do with the crime, I'll bet! When I went to see him, disguised as a Frenchman, wearing Miss Fielding's badge, and appertaining to be a messenger from the society's headquarters in Paris, he became quite frightened. What part of the affair did Marie Lopez, the woman who Merivale told me about, play? The key to the mystery undoubtedly lies in this secret society, and I must look for it there. I'll go and talk to Miss Fielding, and see what help I can get from her."

With this, Blake rose and went to the room where Miss Fielding was sitting.

The girl could give him no help at all.

When he asked her if she could suggest any reason for the society's extraordinary interest in her, her answer was a forlorn and despairing negative.

"Can you form any theory as to why this society should have decreed Raymond Carter's death because of his desire

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"I'm not the murderer!" gasped Tinker, which was all he could think of to say on the spur of the moment.

to marry you? It looks as if they were determined to prevent you from marrying anybody. Why should they?"

The girl didn't know.

"Have you ever heard mention of any valuable papers in connection with yourself?"

No; she hadn't.

"Have you ever met or heard of a woman named Marie Lopez?"

No; she had not.

"Can you explain Merivale's amazing remark, 'There are millions and millions at stake,' or account for his intense anxiety to save you from arrest?"

She couldn't.

Questioned about her early life, she said she had always been treated with the most devoted kindness by her father. She had never known her mother, who, she understood, had died at her birth. Her home had been quiet, well ordered, and substantially comfortable. The only hint of mystery in her father's life had been the occasional visits of Raymond Carter, and his studied averseness to discuss them with her. She had had a happy childhood, and no anxieties or troubles of any description until the shock of her father's sudden death. She had been engaged to a sailor named Mark Conway, but he had been drowned at sea.

As the reader will see, there was nothing in all this that would be of the slightest service to Blake in elucidating the problems that harassed and perplexed him.

Externally, she was calm and composed, having conquered the worst of her nervous horror and agitation, but keenly alive to the painful and perilous situation in which she was placed, again and again returning to the question whether she ought not to make a voluntary surrender to the police.

Blake's unvarying reply was a peremptory veto.

It would be too dangerous, and there was nothing to be gained by it, he said. They must wait until they had more information in regard to the conspiracy. In any event, they must wait until after the inquest. Voluntary surrender to

the police was the last alternative to be tried, and only to be resorted to if the worst came to the worst.

She accepted his arguments as conclusive, and promised to abide by his wishes and advice.

Soon after five o'clock Blake decided to pay another visit to Merivale, actuated by the desire for active occupation rather than anticipating that any special advantage would accrue from it.

"Refuse admittance to all callers while I'm away," were his final instructions to Mrs. Bardell.

He found Merivale tramping up and down the hotel vestibule in a simmer of excitement.

"I hoped you would come. I have been expecting you ever so long. I thought you were never coming back," was the proprietor's jerky and impulsive greeting.

"By the way, you haven't told me your name," he said, when they were duly installed in a private room.

"Alphonse Roget," said Blake.

"Well, Mr. Roget, things are not quite so bad as I anticipated. The girl has disappeared, without leaving a trace of her whereabouts. Of course, that's awkward for us in a way, because we shall be put to the trouble of finding her; but it's better than if the police had got her. You'll agree to that, I suppose?"

Before Blake could reply, there was a knock at the door, and a servant announced that Inspector Fairley, who had charge of the case for the Yard, desired to see Merivale on a matter of pressing urgency. Fairley himself followed close on the servant's heels, so there was no escape for Blake if he had wished to avoid him.

"I want a private interview, Merivale," said the inspector brusquely.

"This is my particular friend, M. Roget, from Paris. You can speak freely before him. He is intimately acquainted with all my affairs," replied Merivale.

"Oh, very well, then, if you can rely on his discretion!"

"As on my own," said Merivale.

Fairley nodded to Blake, and Blake responded with an elaborate bow.

"I am honoured, sare, to be presented to one of the most distinguished ornaments of the great English Criminal Investigation Department," he said.

But Fairley, who was in no mood for flowery compliments, turned abruptly to Merivale.

"Has it occurred to you that it was rather odd Sexton Blake dropping in here as casually as he did this morning?"

"No, it hasn't," answered Merivale, with unfeigned surprise.

"It has to me, especially in the light of later events."

"Oh, indeed!" said Merivale, completely at a loss. "Why?"

Fairley answered the question by asking another.

"Do you remember his ever having been here before?"

"No; I can't say that I do."

"He wasn't in the habit of visiting Raymond Carter?"

"Certainly not!" said Merivale, with growing astonishment.

"You would have known it if he had been in the habit of visiting him?"

"Oh, yes; I should have known it!"

"Humph!" said Fairley. "It's a very queer business. I'll stake my professional reputation that Blake knows a lot more about Raymond Carter's murder than he lets on to. I fancy he's put his foot into it this time; and, by Heaven, if he has he shall suffer for it! I've always said I'd get even with him, and I believe my chance has come. If I'm right, he has sneered his last sneer at Scotland Yard!"

"Ah, sare, and was he in the habit of sneering at Scotland Yard?" inquired Blake courteously. "I was not aware of it."

Fairley promptly snubbed him with: "What do you know about it, anyway?" And continued to Merivale:

"I am convinced, from putting two and two together, that the cyclists, who were either accomplices in the murder, or the actual perpetrators of it, or were on the scene directly afterwards, and before the body was found, were Sexton Blake and that kid of an assistant of his, accompanied by that ugly and clumsy beast of a bloodhound Pedro."

"Bless my soul! You don't say so!" exclaimed Merivale, his sleek countenance turning a distinct shade of green.

It was the intimation that Blake knew more than he pretended to that disconcerted and scared him. For if Blake knew more, he might even know that he, Merivale, was implicated. That Blake should have been on the scene of the murder, and not have mentioned the fact, was in the highest degree disturbing. Why did he conceal it? What did he suspect? A vista of the most appalling possibilities suddenly opened up before Merivale's mental vision as he put these questions to himself.

"The news seems to have knocked you silly," said Fairley, instantly noting his distress.

"I—no!—I—no!—I—no!—I—no!" stammered the proprietor. "Nothing—nothing whatever to do with me; but Sexton Blake, astounding—simply astounding!"

"Of course, I don't say he did it, mind!"

"No, no; of course! Still—still, astounding—quite astounding!"

"But what I do say is, that he's hiding something, and it looks precious like as if he were an accessory after the fact."

"Ah! Yes—yes, it does; and I hope, if he is, he'll be properly punished."

"You can bet your life he will, Merivale—you can safely leave that to me."

"And proof—you have proof?"

"Not yet; but strong suspicions, which will be corroborated some time to-night."

He paused at the door to add:

"Mind your French friend don't blab; and remember I'm still keeping an eye on your hotel."

And then he went.

"You seem upset, sare, by what Fairley told you," said Blake, when they were alone.

The perspiration was standing in beads on Merivale's forehead.

"My stars! Yes," he faltered; "that brute is bad enough, but Blake on the top of him! Oh, goodness! Blake's a thousand times worse than a dozen Fairleys!"

"You fear Blake so much?"

"So would you if you knew him!"

"Let me tell you, sare, that if Blake is worse than a dozen Fairleys, there is something which you have to fear worse than a dozen Blakes."

"Oh, yes, I know what you mean!" stammered the wretched proprietor.

"I mean the Head Centre."

"I knew it—I knew it!" he groaned. "Blake and Fairley and the Head Centre all on the top of me at once! Oh, gracious me, it's enough to break any man!"

"You are suffering the consequences of your own supreme folly!" With which cold comfort, coupled with a reminder of his intention to return at nine o'clock, Blake left him.

But Blake was far less easy in regard to his own plight than he cared to admit.

Fairley had been preternaturally sharp in putting two and two together, and identifying him and Tinker with the two cyclists. He was admittedly animated by vindictiveness, and would spare no effort to ruin his reputation.

How long would it be before Mary Fielding was discovered? Was his house in any sense a safe refuge for her? Was it a safe refuge for himself? He dared not enter it except surreptitiously and by the back way. Oh, yes, Blake realised he had plenty of worries of his own to think about!

Reaching Baker Street, he cautiously reconnoitred.

Two plain-clothes men were hovering near the front door. Two more were on the opposite pavement. Fairley was talking to these two, and they were all continually glancing up at the first-floor window—the window of Blake's sitting-room. What were they looking at? What were they so much interested in? Why were they staring so fixedly?

In a trice he perceived the reason of their concentrated gaze.

The electric light was on in the room, and the blinds were down, but the window was wide open, with the result that the blinds were constantly being blown aside by the evening breeze, and every time they were so blown the watchers on the opposite pavement could see into the room.

Blake saw Mary Fielding quite distinctly.

And if he could, so could Fairley and his men!

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Holding of the Fort at Baker Street, and the Flight of the Fugitives.

IN two minutes Blake had gained entrance to the house from the back, which involved the scaling of a high wall, crossing the yard of a mews, and passing through Mrs. Bardell's kitchen.

Accustomed as she was to his abrupt comings and goings, his sudden appearance startled her, for her nerves were on edge from a recent conflict with Fairley. She was engaged in cooking the dinner, and whipped round at the sound of his step, waving a big iron ladle at him with which she was stirring a cauldron of boiling soup.

"Oh, what a shock you gave me! I thought you was Fairley!" she gasped, and at once lowered the ladle. "He's been here, but I kep' him out," she went on triumphantly.

"He's outside now, Mrs. Bardell."

"Is he? Then he can stay out. He didn't get any change out of me before, and he won't get none now. He'll get this ladle about his head if he gives me any more of his sauce."

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He called me a silly old woman, and if he dare show his face—"

"He'll show it in a minute or two. He's seen Mary Fielding from the street. Why didn't you shut the window when you drew down the blinds?"

"Why? Oh, oh, oh, oh!" wailed Mrs. Bardell, instantly realising the consequences of her negligence. "I'll go and— He sha'n't get in, sir. He sha'n't get to that poor, dear lamb except over my dead body! Oh, oh, oh! If he'd take me instead, I'd go and welcome! Oh, oh, oh! I'll never forgive myself. Not a hair of her head shall he—"

"Listen!" said Blake, summarily interrupting the stream of remorse. "The mischief's done now. Miss Fielding is no longer safe here; nor am I. I'm going to get her away. We must both go, and it will largely depend on you whether we can get away safely."

"I'll do anything—anything—"

"Keep Fairley and his men out as long as possible. They'll try to force their way in."

"I'll do it, sir—I'll do it!"

"Very well; I am going upstairs to warn Miss Fielding."

"You go, sir. I'll settle Fairley."

He ran upstairs, and reached his sitting-room just as a loud and peremptory knocking and ringing at the front door resounded through the house.

The girl rose at his entrance, pale with alarm.

"Come away from that window," were his first words to her. Then: "Put on your hat and coat and veil, for we must be off."

She ventured one trembling protest:

"Mr. Blake, I implore you to take no more trouble on my behalf. You are only implicating yourself deeper and deeper in my guilt."

"I am implicated past praying for now," he said, smiling; and the answer silenced her.

"Be quick," he added; and she ran away to prepare.

Mary Fielding, cloaked and veiled, and Blake crept noiselessly downstairs.

The girl bore herself bravely, but it is doubtful whether she could have put one foot before the other without the support of Blake's arm. The sudden emergency of instant flight, following upon a long day of agonising suspense, had unnerved her almost to the point of collapse.

Mrs. Bardell made a reassuring sign to them as they reached the hall. Blake replied with a nod and a smile. He had a momentary glimpse of her buxom, substantial figure, firmly planted on the door-mat, her arms bare to the elbows, her apron rolled up and pinned behind, grasping the big ladle, and the cauldron of steaming soup beside her conveniently within reach. Evidently she was valiantly determined to hold the fort to the last extremity.

Blake and the girl proceeded towards the kitchen, and quietly passed from view.

Out through the kitchen and across the yard sped Blake with the half-fainting girl. It was a formidable task, getting her over the wall, but with the help of a step-ladder and a coil of rope he managed it. The step-ladder enabled him to carry her to the top of the wall, and the rope to lower her to the ground on the other side. From there through the mews to the open street was a matter of little difficulty. The mews were invariably deserted at this hour. No one challenged them. No one saw them. They were swallowed up in the crowd thronging the pavement.

Blake's raised hand brought a passing taxi to the edge of the kerb, and he put the girl into it.

"Where to?" said the man.

Yes, where to? That was the problem.

Blake hadn't given it a thought till that moment, being solely engrossed with the business of escape. To what place could he take her where she would be safe and secure, and received without questions being asked? Somewhere out of London? Yes, but he couldn't leave London himself, nor allow her to go away alone. She must remain in London—that was inevitable—but where in London, with every street ringing with the crime, and every newspaper placarding the reward for the discovery of the absconding murderess, could he hope to find suitable accommodation for her without immediately exciting doubt and suspicion?

Then he had an inspiration, and without appreciable pause replied to the man's query:

"Merivale's Hotel, in Derek Street."

He stepped into the cab, and away they went.

Grimly and gallantly Mrs. Bardell maintained her post at the front door.

The frenzied tattoo which Fairley and his men played with knocker and bell and sticks and knuckles left her entirely unmoved and indifferent until she judged sufficient time had elapsed for the fugitives to have made good their escape.

Then calmly and deliberately she opened the door—on the chain—and demanded to know what the row was about.

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Fairley, at last realising that threats and bluster were of no avail, decided to adopt a coaxing tone, and replied, with the utmost courtesy:

"I am an inspector from Scotland Yard, and I am most anxious to see Mr. Sexton Blake. Will you kindly let me in?"

"I am extremely sorry to say," replied Mrs. Bardell, with a sudden access of politeness, "that Mr. Sexton Blake is not at home. Would you like to leave a message?"

"I would much prefer to come in and wait."

"You cannot come in and wait, because you would have to wait a week, Mr. Blake being out of town. He left this afternoon for Brighton."

"Then, in his absence, I should like to see Miss Fielding," the inspector persevered.

"Miss who?"

"Miss Fielding, the lady who is staying in the house as his guest."

"I presume you know what you are talking about, for I don't," said Mrs. Bardell. "There's no lady staying here as his guest."

"Pardon me, there is. I saw her myself just now at the window."

"Pardon me, you didn't. If you saw any lady at all, I expect you saw me."

"No, I assure you—no! I couldn't possibly have mistaken the lady I saw for you."

"Is that impudence?"

"Not at all, madam. The lady I saw wasn't half as good-looking as you are."

"Get along with you, you saucy kipper!"

This remark was the last straw that broke the inspector's patience.

Thrusting his foot into the aperture to prevent the door being shut, he hissed:

"You mad old fool! Do you think I'm going to let you get the better of me?" and began shoving and straining, shouting the while to his men to help him.

"Put your backs into it—put your backs into it!" panted Fairley, whose face was purple with the tremendous strain on his body-muscles.

"We are putting our backs into it!" gasped the men, as, indeed, they were.

The sweat was pouring off them in streams, and they were expending their strength to the last ounce.

But Mrs. Bardell was far from idle.

Diligently, methodically, and painstakingly she was lading soup over the inspector's leg and into his boot.

His trousers were thick and his boots were stout and strong, so that some little time necessarily elapsed before there was any apparent result. But there is no liquid that retains its heat so well and so long as a good, rich, boiling soup, and presently he became aware of a pleasant warmth in the region of his ankle and his instep. The soup was beginning to penetrate.

"Another effort," he cried—"another effort! Shove—shove! Put your backs into it! The door can't hold much longer! We are nearly there!"

But the soup was already there.

The pleasant warmth in the region of his ankle and his instep changed in a twinkling to a hot, tingling sensation, and from that into a sudden fiery, scalding pang of excruciating torment, and, with a yell of pain, he withdrew his foot from the doorway, and, to the utter amazement of his men, sat down on the pavement, and began tearing off his boot with frenzied haste.

"Is there anything the matter?" asked one of them anxiously.

"Matter!" he shrieked. "My foot's burning! The skin's peeling off it!"

"Do you mean she done it?"

"Idiot! Who else could have done it? Do you think I did it myself?"

Having got his boot off, Fairley proceeded to hop about the pavement on one foot, while his men, unable to make anything of his strange antics, and not having received orders to desist from their own efforts, continued to push and shove and strain at the door.

But enlightenment in regard to their chief's strange behaviour was not long in coming to them.

Three times the big ladle was protruded through the aperture.

The first time its contents fell with comparative harmlessness on their hats and clothing.

The second time spurts of the soup hit them on the head and hands.

But the third time, while they were wondering what on earth it could be that stung and smarted so, a well-aimed ladleful went swishing over their faces and necks, and then they knew.

With a series of unprintable remarks they tumbled pell-mell down the porch steps and out of range, and Mrs. Bardell closed the door and locked it.

The cab containing Mary Fielding and Blake duly arrived at Merivale's Hotel, and Blake, leaving the girl in it, entered to inform Merivale and prepare him for her coming.

"You tell me you've got the girl?" exclaimed the aghast proprietor.

"Yes; she's outside."

"But it's wonderful—wonderful! You're a magician! How did you find her?"

"Never mind how I found her; the point is, she's here. And the question is, can you put her up?"

"Of course I can put her up! Bring her in."

Ten minutes later Mary Fielding was escorted to a sumptuous suite of apartments, and a special staff of servants were appointed to guard and wait on her. She acquiesced in all Blake's arrangements, glad to have found a temporary haven of rest, and comforted by Blake's assurance that in case of need he would be always close at hand and within call.

Blake was as much relieved to have found her secure shelter as Merivale was grateful to have her under his roof.

But it escaped the recollection of both of them that Fairley's myrmidons were still watching the hotel.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Tinker Makes a New Acquaintance—In the Back Room of No. 101.

MEANWHILE, we must turn our attention to Tinker, who, with Pedro, had been sent by Blake to go over the scene of the murder at Trinity Crescent, Brixton, where Mary Fielding had previously lived.

Here, unfortunately, Tinker came into contact with Inspector Fairley's men, who, knowing a big dog had some connection with the case, immediately gave chase to the boy and dog.

Tinker had with difficulty managed to evade his pursuers, and was now panting against the side of a wall in a quiet street, congratulating himself on not being caught, when a voice suddenly hailed him.

His heart dropped to his boots. It was utterly disheartening. He was all but done.

"I say," said the voice, "I wish you'd tell me all about it. I started with the pack that hunted you, but I wanted to speak to you—that's all I wanted. I dropped out when they lost you, because I'd a pretty good notion you'd doubled on your tracks and given them the slip. I've been walking up and down these roads ever since, hoping I should have the luck to run against you." Then, attempting a smile, he added, in a tone in which the note of pain was plainly dominant: "Not much luck has come my way lately."

"I'm not the murderer, really!" gasped Tinker, which was all he could think of to say on the spur of the moment. But his eyes had cleared, and his breath was coming back to him, and he scanned the other keenly.

What he saw was a handsome, well-set-up, young fellow, with frank and fearless eyes, and that indefinable breeziness of mien and manner which tells of a life spent on the open sea.

The man was obviously a sailor.

Yet the trouble that had found unconscious expression in his voice was no less apparent than his calling. Handsome he was, but gaunt and thin. The hollowness of his cheeks implied severe privations recently undergone. In the depth of his fearless eyes was a glint of terrible suffering.

"No, I don't suppose you were. You don't look like a murderer. I've seen some rough work at sea myself."

"I'm ready to talk now," said Tinker, "though I'm not sure that it's safe for me to hang about in this neighbourhood. I don't want to be chivied again."

"You have nothing to fear from me."

"Oh, I know that! I'm not afraid of you!" laughed the youngster. "But there are other folks hereabouts with whom I'm not exactly popular."

"Why not come to my diggings, and talk?"

"Where are they?"

"Close here."

"I don't see why I shouldn't."

"Nor I. A rest and some food won't do you any harm. I dare say the landlady can scrape up something for tea. I've only had the rooms a few hours. Landed at Plymouth last night, and came on to London this morning."

There was something about his new acquaintance that inspired Tinker with confidence; and somewhere to rest until after dark was exactly what he required. Late in the evening it would be safe to return to Baker Street, but hardly before. Moreover, his eager curiosity to know more of the stranger was an added incentive to accept his offer.

"This way, then," said the other.

"Where are your rooms?" asked Tinker, as they strolled on together.

"In Mansfield Terrace."

"What number?"

"One hundred and one."

Tinker stopped dead with a gasp of astonishment.

"Hallo! What's the matter now?"

"Oh, nothing—nothing!"

Pedro quickly made friends with the sailor. The youngster's suspicions of his new acquaintance subsided as instantly as they had arisen. Pedro's instinct in such cases was unerring. If the sailor had meant Tinker harm, the dog would surely have known it, and behaved accordingly. But to be going to No. 101, the house next to the empty house adjoining Mary Fielding's flat, was so extraordinary a coincidence that the youngster may be forgiven that uncontrollable gasp of astonishment.

In a quarter of an hour from then he and the sailor were seated at a table in the back room on the ground floor of No. 101. There was a generous spread set out, and Tinker was doing ample justice to it. The sailor was principally occupied in feeding Pedro with chunks of cake and Osborne biscuits. Pedro highly approved of the sailor.

"Now, then, I'm ready to talk," said Tinker. "Ask your questions."

"Tell me what you know of the murder of the man Carter."

"That's rather a large order, ain't it?" returned the youngster cautiously.

"But you know more about it than most people. I've read the papers. I've seen that two cyclists and a dog were on the scene of the murder either just before or just after. I know that your dog is the dog in question, and I can guess that you were one of the cyclists. I am justified in supposing that you can tell me many things I don't know."

"Perhaps I can, but I think you ought to tell me first why you seek the information."

"That's fair," replied the sailor. "I was hoping you might be able to give me some information about Miss Fielding."

"The girl who has absconded?"

"Yes; the girl who is suspected of the murder."

"What interest have you in Miss Fielding—is it a friend's interest?"

"You can judge for yourself when I tell you she and I are engaged to be married."

"Then you must be Mark Conway!"

"That is my name."

Utter astonishment held Tinker and the sailor silent for a time.

"You were supposed to have been lost at sea?"

"Yes; the ship foundered, but I and two others were picked up by a sailing-vessel."

"Miss Fielding believes you dead."

"I know; and I came home and find her—I was going to say worse than dead; I find her fled, and charged with the guilt of a horrible murder."

"There is no guilt."

"Who are you?"

"My name's Tinker. If you've ever heard of Sexton Blake—"

"I've heard of him. I know now—the dog is Pedro."

"Yes. I can reassure you about Miss Fielding's safety."

"Where is she?"

"Mr. Blake is sheltering her."

"Then he believes her innocent?"

"I don't want to distress you," said Tinker, "but you must remember that Miss Fielding did actually kill this man—we have her own word for it, her own voluntary confession."

"No," replied Conway confidently, "that's not correct; we have her own word for it that she fired her pistol at him—nothing more, and it's not the same thing."

"But you don't think she missed him?"

"I'm not so sure she didn't; a revolver jerks high at the moment of firing in the hands of an inexperienced holder. She may have missed him."

"But she saw him lying dead at the foot of the staircase."

"She saw him lying very still, and she thought he was dead."

"But Mr. Blake and I saw the bullet-wound just over his heart."

"So you may have done; but it doesn't necessarily follow that Mary Fielding's bullet made that wound."

"Mr. Conway! Do you pretend to know Mr. Blake's views better than I do?"

"Yes," was the audacious rejoinder, "I do. I don't believe Mr. Blake would have vetoed her voluntary surrender to the police unless he had seen a chance of ultimately proving her absolute innocence."

"Mr. Blake," retorted Tinker hotly, "merely vetoed her
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voluntary surrender because he didn't want the inquiry prematurely closed. He wanted the complicated mystery of the conspiracy to murder Carter completely unravelled—that's all he wanted. It couldn't have been done if she'd surrendered at once. He knows Miss Fielding killed Carter—killed him in self-defence. I know it. She knows it. We all know it."

"I don't," laughed Conway; "but don't let's get hot about it."

"It's annoying to hear anyone talking absolute rot!"

The sailor laughed again with the utmost good humour, refusing to be convinced by Tinker's arguments, or to take offence at them.

"Instead of arguing, suppose we do something?" he said.

"What can we do?"

"Well, for a start, we might try to get into the house next door, and see if we can find anything that bears out my theory."

The youngster was dubious about it.

"Mr. Blake particularly cautioned me against doing anything rash, and ordered me to be home before dark, without fail."

"Well, you can't be home before dark, so you may as well use your time profitably. I mean to do something whether you help or not."

"Oh, of course, if you've made up your mind to play the fool—"

"I have, young 'un."

"Then," said Tinker, "I suppose I must stay and see you through?"

He grinned with delight.

He had found an unanswerable argument for keeping his own fingers prominently in the pie.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Secret Society Meets at the Rendezvous—A Wire from Paris.

PUNCTUALLY at nine o'clock, Max Reiter, the man Merivale had spoken of as knowing Marie Lopez's place of concealment, arrived at the hotel in a private brougham to escort Alphonse Roget (alias Sexton Blake) and the proprietor to the meeting of the members of the Secret Society.

Max Reiter was of Swiss nationality, and head-waiter at the Cosmopolitan, one of the largest hotels in Cumberland Avenue.

He was evidently a very important personage in the London branch of the society. His attitude to Merivale was that of a superior to a subordinate. To Blake he was courteously respectful, but in no way deferential, exhibiting none of that awe of him which had been so marked a characteristic of Merivale's demeanour to the Special Envoy from the Head Centre in Paris.

Blake was quick to see that he was a much more dangerous and much cleverer individual than Merivale, and that it behoved him to be vigilantly on his guard. The chances were if he made the slightest slip Reiter would detect it, and instantly scent the imposture.

Reiter talked incessantly—about the murder, about the way it had been done, about Marie Lopez, about her jealousy of Mary Fielding, about the way her passionate love for Carter had turned to passionate hate, about Blake's uncanny cleverness in discovering the girl, about the missing papers—in fact, about everything; but in such a cryptic and disconnected fashion that he added nothing to the sum-total of Blake's knowledge.

Blake was still in the dark on four main points.

What was the society's interest in Mary Fielding?

Why had the Head Centre decreed Carter's death simply because of his desire to marry her?

What were the papers to the possession of which so much importance was attached?

Where were those papers now?

The brougham turned out of Stockwell Road into Mansfield Terrace. It stopped some distance away from No. 102, and on the opposite side of the road. Reiter told them the number of the house, and the signal agreed upon for gaining admittance, cautioned them against being seen entering it by casual passers-by, then hurried off with the remark that he would join them in a few minutes.

"Where do you think he's gone to?" asked Blake sharply.

"Well, if you ask me, I should say he's gone to get a drink," replied Merivale, "and I hope he'll have the decency to bring a bottle back with him. There is sure not to be any decent stuff in this ramshackle hole."

Then he said:

"Now's our chance!" and darted across the road.

Three muffled taps caused the door to open.

They went in. There was no light. The door was promptly and noiselessly closed.

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A woman's voice whispered:

"Each of you give me a hand."

Blake felt his hand grasped, and was drawn slowly forward, first to the right, then down a narrow passage to the left. An inner door was then opened, and they passed in to a small back room on the ground floor. A smoky paraffin-lamp on a wall-bracket disclosed ten men seated on benches, smoking, and chatting in under-tons. The atmosphere reeked of oil and pungent fumes of tobacco. The only woman present was Marie Lopez, a typical Spaniard, with flashing, black eyes and olive complexion, undeniably handsome in a coars, bold way, the beau-ideal heroine of a love-drama.

The assembled company rose to their feet when Blake was presented to them, and received him with profound bows and hearty expressions of welcome. There was not a man that didn't appear to be in flourishing circumstances.

After some little time spent in polite commonplaces, Max Reiter came in, and the business of the meeting commenced.

Then Max Reiter was voted into the chair, Blake was given the place of honour at his right hand, and the proceedings began.

"We are here," said Reiter, "to account to M'sieur Roget, the Special Envoy despatched to us by the Head Centre in Paris, for the various matters which have been the subject of correspondence between us and the Head Centre during the past month, and to answer the complaints which have been made from Paris of our management of this branch. The complaints are twofold. First, of delay in executing the sentence of death decreed on Carter; secondly, of general negligence in respect of the society's interests in the girl Fielding. I hope and believe we have a complete answer to both complaints, an answer that will satisfy M'sieur Roget, and enable him to report to the Head Centre on his return to Paris that the organisation of this branch is efficient and sound and thorough. I now call on Marie Lopez to detail to us the manner in which she carried out the Head Centre's decree." And he sat down.

Very slowly and leisurely the woman rose.

She was obviously one of those women of deceptively lazy temperament, lethargic and lacking in energy under ordinary circumstances, who are capable of panther-like activity and quickness if roused to exert themselves.

Her first words, uttered in a languid drawl, electrified the meeting.

"I didn't kill Raymond Carter; the girl Fielding killed him!"

She pronounced Mary Fielding's name with a hiss of contemptuous hate.

"Is that the truth?"

It was Blake who put the question; the others could merely stare in dumb bewilderment.

She turned on him in a flash.

"Have you any reason to doubt my word?"

"The circumstances call for inquiry," he answered coolly.

"What circumstances?"

"Control yourself, please, and bear in mind that I represent the Head Centre, and that powers of life and death have been entrusted to me. You were selected to kill Carter. Carter was killed. You tell us the Fielding girl killed him. Therefore, I say the circumstances call for inquiry."

Blake's coldly severe rebuke cowed her for the moment.

"I will tell you what happened," she said. "I went to the street, and found the symbols chalked on the gate-posts, as Merivale told me I should. I hid in the forecourt of the adjoining house. It was an unfinished house. Presently Carter came. Carter ran up the steps and knocked, and I heard him say: 'I'm a police-constable, miss.' The door was opened, and instantly there was a pistol-shot, and Carter fell backwards down the steps. I was watching, and saw everything. After a few minutes the girl came out and ran away. Then I crept up to the body, and dragged it into the roadway. I dragged it into the roadway because I knew you would not wish suspicion to fall on the Fielding girl, her life being so valuable to our society. Then I searched him, and found the papers, and took them, as well as his purse and watch. I took the purse and watch to give the idea of robbery as the motive for killing him. Then I obliterated the chalk-marks and came away. Here is the watch. Here is the purse. Here are the papers."

She produced the articles as she enumerated them, and laid them down on the table before Blake.

"I have told you everything," she added, and very composedly sat down.

"I will take charge of the papers," said Blake, deliberately pocketing them; "the purse and the watch you may keep."

Nobody objected, though Blake noticed Reiter was keenly scrutinising him. Most of them were pondering the fact that it was Mary Fielding who had killed Carter, which was clearly a shock and a surprise to them, Mary Fielding's life being too valuable to be placed in jeopardy of the hangman.

They would have much preferred that it had been Marie Lopez who had struck Carter down.

It was Max Reiter who put the next question to Marie.

"You say you dragged the body out into the roadway to prevent suspicion from falling on the Fielding girl, as would be the case if the body were found at the bottom of the stairs leading to her flat?" he asked.

And the question showed that he, too, was far from satisfied with Marie's truthfulness.

Her answer was a defiant "Yes." Then she went on:

"Do you think, if I'd had the gratification of killing him, I should deny it? I hated him!"

"No doubt," said Reiter quietly; "but you hated the Fielding girl more."

"And if I did?"

"Granted you did, it follows you would not be loth to destroy her."

"Loth! No! If her life had not been valuable to the society, I would have destroyed her long ago."

"Exactly. You have proved your loyalty to the society by refraining from destroying her, as also by doing all you could to avert suspicion from her," said Reiter, in laudatory tones.

"I did," she answered. "I'm glad I'm getting some niggard appreciation at last!"

"You did remove every trace of everything that could possibly bring suspicion on her, didn't you?" he asked smoothly.

"I did," she said again.

"Then will you kindly explain how it was that the police instantly suspected her?"

Reiter had been leading up to this deadly thrust.

For a second she was utterly taken aback, and it looked as if she were going to confess she had lied, but she quickly recovered herself.

"How can I explain that? The police don't confide their secrets to me," she scoffed in answer.

"But you might have told them something."

"I didn't."

"You might have sent them an anonymous letter."

"I didn't. You lie if you say so!" she retorted vehemently.

And then Blake knew she had lied.

An anonymous letter had been sent, and she alone could have sent it; only she had any motive for sending it.

Reiter, of course, was merely guessing; he was not aware that such a letter had been actually sent. A shrewd and clever scoundrel this man.

A low hum and buzz of animated conversation broke out in the room.

Suddenly Max Reiter slipped quietly out of the room. No one commented on his departure. The discussion and the debate held them all enthralled.

But Blake observed it.

Blake had distrusted him from the first, and instantly realised it was time to take steps for his own safety.

"I wish," he said, "to question this woman alone, and, as the representative of the Head Centre, I demand the right of doing so!"

The unexpected demand surprised his hearers, but no one made any demur. They recognised his right. His authority as special envoy of the Head Centre was unimpeachable.

"Shall we leave her and you alone?" asked Merivale.

"No; I will go with her into another room," he replied; and rose and beckoned to her to follow him.

The woman obediently followed him. They passed out, and the door was closed.



"Put your backs into it—put your backs into it!" panted Fairley, whose face was purple with the tremendous strain on his body muscles.

Ten minutes elapsed, and they had not returned. Max Reiter came in, and looked quickly round.

"Where's Alphonse Roget?" he inquired peremptorily.

They told him. Then he said:

"I had doubts about this man's genuineness, and wired to Paris to ask if the Head Centre had despatched a special envoy to London. I have just received the answer."

"What is it?" choked Merivale.

"I will read you the telegram," he said; and read as follows:

"No special envoy has been despatched to London. The man Roget must be an impostor. Deal with him. Apparently there has been more bungling your end. Wire again."

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

The Truth Guessed—Mark Conway's Astonishing Recklessness.

A PANIC-STRICKEN silence ensued on the reading of the telegram. Even Max Reiter seemed at a loss what to do. A stranger had been amongst them, taking part in their most confidential deliberations, listening to their intimate secrets.

The realisation of all this might well appal them.

All recollection of the problem they had been so eagerly debating vanished. It was of no consequence now who killed Carter, or whether they had or not incurred the disapproval of the Head Centre in Paris.

The point was, to what extent was their immediate personal safety menaced? What course of action did the emergency demand?

"I—I—I made him produce—produce his b-badge!" stammered Merivale.

He recognised with terror that he was responsible for introducing the stranger as the genuine accredited agent of the Head Centre. He was defending himself and extenuating his offence before anyone accused him. When a man does that it is a pretty sure sign that he has no good defence.

"You!" said Reiter, in accents of scathing irony.

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Gradually they shook off their paralyzing inertia, and recovered their self-possession.

"Perhaps he doesn't know yet!" murmured Merivale.

"Know what?"

"Know that he has been found out."

"You can bet he's gone!"

"But Marie—where's Marie? She wouldn't go with him!"

"Wouldn't she? Why not? She hadn't much to expect from us!"

"Nor from him either."

"She could make terms with him for the saving of her own skin."

"No, not if it's murder."

"Who is he, anyway? I know he's not one of Fairley's lot!"

"Who is he? You ought to be able to guess."

The query was addressed to Merivale from all parts of the room simultaneously.

"I d-d-don't know for certain who he is," stammered that worthy; "b-but I have a horrible sus-sus-suspicion he may b-be Sus-sus-sus-Sexton Blake!"

Eleven pallid cheeks grew a shade more pallid.

He was asked to explain the grounds of his suspicion, and replied:

"B-Blake was round at my hotel first thing, almost as soon as Fairley. I said myself that he was worse than a dozen Fairleys. The quick way he found the Fielding girl seems to prove it. He could have got the b-badge from the girl—Fielding's old badge. Rogot was never there when Blake was there. I never saw them both at the same time; and—oh, my stars! He's—he's g-got the papers!"

After this they entered upon the forlorn hope of searching the house. It was a vain search. The house was empty except for themselves. Alphonse Rogot and Marie Lopez had disappeared as if they had never existed.

But they had not gone far; they were only next door in Mark Conway's rooms.

In pursuance of the sailor's determination to do "something," he and Tinker had climbed through the window into the back garden, thence over the fence into the back garden of No. 102, and then, by means of an outhouse and a rain-pipe, had scrambled through an open window on the first floor.

Both of them were as agile as cats, so the operation of effecting an entrance was achieved with the minimum of difficulty; but inasmuch as they had postponed the attempt till it was quite dark, and then had proceeded with the utmost caution, they did not actually gain access to the house before a quarter-past eight, and at half-past eight the conspirators began to arrive.

They were thus safely inside, but whether they would as easily get safe out again was another matter.

Conway opened boxes, slammed drawers, ransacked cupboards with supreme disregard of the noise he made, and Tinker's heart was in his mouth a dozen times a minute. But nothing happened. Nobody came. Nobody seemed to hear. Nobody interrupted them.

"Ah, here we are. I knew I was right," he said at last, with the calmness born of absolute conviction; and Tinker, who had grown tired of imploring him not to talk so loud, could simply gaze in speechless wonder.

He had unearched from the depths of a wardrobe a powerful air-gun, with a box of the "slugs" that were fired from it.

"This is the weapon the woman killed Carter with," he said. "I am sure of it, and now we know why no second pistol-shot was fired or heard. One of these slugs fired at close range, would kill a man as dead as a rifle-bullet. The mystery is solved.

In that moment the youngster was convinced.

"Let's get out!" he gasped. "I believe you've solved it! Don't let's jeopardise this wonderful success by any foolhardy—"

"Tut!" Conway interrupted him. "We can't leave the house until we've found out what the fellows downstairs are talking about. Come along!" And downstairs he went, fol-

lowed by Tinker, who felt he could only trust blindly to Providence, and let every consideration of prudence slide.

But here again Conway's action seemed to be controlled by something outside himself, for Tinker had not been listening two minutes in the narrow passage outside the little back room before he recognised Blake's voice.

"Mr. Blake's in there," he whispered, in an awestruck tone.

"That just shows you how right we were to come; we shall have to get him out," answered Conway, in matter-of-fact accents. He evidently saw nothing surprising in finding Blake in the house.

When Max Reiter stole out of the room and out of the house to get the answer to his telegram, he almost brushed against them—but not quite.

When Blake expressed his desire to question the woman in another room, Mark Conway walked straight to the front door and opened it.

When Blake and the woman came out, he said:

"This way, Mr. Blake. Tinker and I are here. I'm Mark Conway!"

If Blake hadn't been a man of iron nerve there would have been a catastrophe then.

What he did was to clap his hand over the woman's mouth, lift her bodily, and carry her out. She was too frightened to scream or to struggle.

Mark Conway opened the door of the other house with his latchkey. Tinker softly closed the front door of the house they had left.

In a minute or less the two men, the woman, and the boy were safely in Mark Conway's sitting-room; and Pedro, who had all this time been left to himself, and had been exceedingly unhappy, was wondering why everybody told him sternly to "hush" when he wished to testify his delight at seeing Blake and Tinker again with his usual barks of welcome.

Mark Conway said to Marie Lopez:

"I don't know who you are, but I know you killed Raymond Carter with this air-gun, and it is not a bit of use your denying it."

The sight of the air-gun put the crowning touch to her bewilderment.

"Yes," she faltered. "Yes, I killed him!"

"Then that's all right," said Conway. "That's all I wanted to know." And turned away as if he had not the slightest further interest in the matter.

"Tell us how you did it," said Blake. But she broke down and began to sob out an account of her relations with Carter, and the story of her connection with the secret society. It was as pitiful a tale as ever Blake listened to. Carter must have been the vilest of the vile. The woman had been the victim of the blackest-hearted cruelty. It would be an understatement to say that she was more sinned against than sinning. The impression her story made on Blake was, that if wicked, ruthless provocation can be fairly urged as extenuating the crime of wilful murder, then the awful provocation received by Marie Lopez was enough to bring her crime within the category of those that are committed by persons who are not responsible for their actions.

When she had recovered some degree of composure he said:

"Carter was only stunned when he lay at the foot of the staircase?"

"Yes, only stunned. His head was cut by the fall."

"What did you do after Miss Fielding's flight?"

"I went to him, and raised him and stanchd the bleeding."

"And afterwards, when he came to?"

"When he came to I helped him into the roadway. His senses were dazed for a time. He didn't know what he was doing or what had happened to him."

"And then?"

"When I had made him understand, I told him everything. I told him that the Head Centre had decreed his death. I told him I had been selected to carry out the decree. I implored him to flee from the country and let me come with him."

"And he?"

"He reviled me."

She uttered the words in a choking whisper.

"Up till that moment I had not intended to kill him. I had hoped I might save him from the death decree; but in that moment when he cursed and reviled me, I—I changed. I realised that he spurned my devotion; that I was no better than dirt beneath his feet. I hated him!"

"And," said Blake, "then you killed him?"

"And then," she echoed faintly—"then I killed him."

So the truth was out!

A tense silence fell on the four in that room.

Marie Lopez sat with her head buried in her hands, quietly sobbing.

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Suddenly Conway moved across to Blake, and began eagerly whispering.

"Don't you think we might?" he said aloud.

A long pause ensued before Blake answered, and then he said:

"Under all the circumstances, I think we might."

Conway brought him pen, ink, and paper, and Blake wrote rapidly for several minutes.

"Marie Lopez, will you attend to me?" he said; and the woman, instantly rousing herself, raised her tear-dimmed eyes to his. "I want you to read what I've written here," he went on. "What I have written is your statement of confession exactly as you made it. When you have read it over I want you to sign it."

She took the paper, read it listlessly, and then scrawled her signature.

"You understand what you have done? This is your written admission of your guilt in regard to the killing of Raymond Carter."

"Oh, yes," she murmured; "I understand!"

"Then you may go," he said.

"Go!"

She rose, and moved to the door as one groping blindly in the dark, and Conway ran forward and opened it for her. At the door she turned and tried to speak, but though her lips moved, no sound issued from them. Then, with a strange gesture, which seemed to indicate contrition, gratitude, and despair all in one, she wheeled swiftly round and vanished.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

The Scene in Court—Stranger than Fiction—The End.

THE Bow Street Police Court has been the scene of many thrilling dramas, but never has an atmosphere of keener excitement or more tingling expectancy pervaded its gloomy walls than when Mary Fielding stood in the dock to answer the charge of killing Raymond Carter.

The excitement had been created by the sensational announcements in the morning's papers.

The clerk read out the charge, and Mary Fielding murmured something.

"What does she say?" asked the magistrate.

"I think she said she was guilty, your lordship," said the constable standing at the girl's side.

"Better enter a plea of not guilty," said the magistrate.

The plea of not guilty was entered, and Inspector Fairley stepped briskly, but with a perceptible limp, into the box.

"From information received, your worship, I went last night to Merivale's Hotel, in Derek Street, where I found the prisoner in occupation of a handsome suite of apartments. I told her who I was, and that I had a warrant for her arrest. Then I cautioned her, and asked her if she had anything to say. She said: 'Yes, I killed him, and Mr. Blake knows all about it.' She was very much agitated. Then I said: 'Do you mean Sexton Blake, who runs a sort of private inquiry agency?' and she answered: 'I mean Mr. Sexton Blake, the famous private detective.'"

The inspector was interrupted at this point by the entrance of Sir Francis Maitland, an eminent K.C., accompanied by four other persons, all of whom had the greatest difficulty in squeezing into the court. Sir Francis bowed to the magistrate, and said:

"I am sorry to be late, but I have only just been retained on Miss Fielding's behalf."

"We are very glad to see you, Sir Francis, but isn't it rather unusual to have a barrister of your standing at this stage of the proceedings? I am only taking sufficient evidence to justify a remand, you know."

Sir Francis, smiling broadly, replied:

"I think the proceedings will not go beyond this stage. I think you will not order a remand. I think you will at once order Miss Fielding's release."

"Pray proceed!" said the magistrate; and the inspector, who had listened to this little dialogue with wide-open eyes, smiled sardonically, and continued:

"After she said that I asked her if she had the pistol with which she had killed Mr. Carter, and her answer was: 'Yes, I have it, but not here. I left it in the sitting-room of Mr. Blake's house, in Baker Street.' I then took the prisoner into custody, and removed her to the station in a cab. I next visited Blake's house, which I entered with the help of a ladder. The woman of the house, whose name is Bardell, and whom I intend to prosecute for obstructing the police in the performance of their duty, and for an aggravated assault, had refused me admittance earlier in the evening, so I was

compelled to resort to the ladder. On the mantelpiece of the sitting-room I found the revolver, which I now produce. It is loaded in five chambers, and one chamber has been discharged. That is all the evidence I propose to offer at this stage, your worship, and I formally apply for a remand till this day week."

The eminent K.C. rose, large and smiling, then turned to the inspector and said:

"It is within your knowledge that an autopsy—a post-mortem examination of Raymond Carter's body has been made by Dr. Shepherd?"

"I knew he was making one. I didn't know he had completed it," was Fairley's answer.

"Well, you may take it from me he has completed it. When I've finished with you I am going to call him. Now, please take this, and tell me if it fits the revolver you have just produced, but be very careful not to shoot either me or yourself or the magistrate. What I have handed to the witness, your worship, is a steel-tipped pellet, technically known as a 'slug,' and usually fired from an air-gun."

"Indeed! Extremely interesting, but I hope he'll be very careful," murmured the magistrate nervously.

"No," said Fairley; "the pellet doesn't fit the accused's revolver."

"It couldn't possibly have been fired from that revolver?"

"Not possibly. It's too large."

"Thank you! You may stand down."

The inspector stepped indignantly from the box.

"Dr. Shepherd, please!"

Dr. Shepherd was one of the four persons who had accompanied Sir Francis into the court.

When he'd been duly sworn, Sir Francis asked him:

"Did you make the autopsy of Raymond Carter's body?"

"I did," he replied.

"What did you find?"

"I found this pellet; it was embedded in the heart."

"Did you find any other pellet or bullet of any kind?"

"None."

"You are satisfied that this particular pellet and nothing else caused Carter's death?"

"I am fully satisfied; I am absolutely certain."

"Thank you! That is all."

Sir Francis, beaming genially on Fairley, inquired whether he had any questions he would like to put to the doctor; and Fairley gasped out:

"No-o!"

"Most extraordinary," murmured the magistrate—"most extraordinary! Quite knocks the bottom out of the case against Miss Fielding. I am of the opinion that Inspector Fairley has been culpably negligent, wickedly and criminally negligent, in the haste with which he has preferred this dreadful charge against this lady!"

"I now call Mr. Sexton Blake," said Sir Francis; and there was a tremendous sensation in court when Blake, who was another of the persons who had accompanied the K.C.—the two others being Mark Conway and Tinker—swept off his disguise, and moved briskly towards the witness-box. In his hand he carried the air-gun.

"Now, Mr. Blake, I won't keep you long. I know Inspector Fairley accuses you of all sorts of crimes, but I dare say his worship won't allow that fact to damage your credibility. Just tell us whether the steel-tipped pellet fits the air-gun."

"It fits it perfectly."

"Now, tell us where you found the air-gun, and all about it."

"It was found at No. 102, Mansfield Terrace, Brixton, the house to which I had traced a woman named Marie Lopez, who confessed to me that she had murdered Raymond Carter. It's the same house which Inspector Fairley subsequently raided, and in which the gang were caught."

"And your object in going?"

"To ferret out the secrets of the Cross-and-Circle gang."

"In which you were quite successful?"

"I think I may say I was," smiled Blake. "When the gang are brought to trial I shall be able to give evidence which ought to condemn them all."

"And now about your action in sheltering Miss Fielding, please explain that."

"The action I took was as much in the interests of law and order as in Miss Fielding's interests. Miss Fielding came straight to me, and told me she had killed Carter. I and my assistant went at once to the spot, and from observations I then made I was inclined to believe she was mistaken. Subsequent investigations showed there had been a plot to kill Carter. I followed up the clues, and proved that it was so, and that one of the conspirators, the woman Lopez, had

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actually murdered him. If I had not sheltered and screened Miss Fielding, if I had not protected her against herself, there might have been a frightful miscarriage of justice. That is my justification for what I did."

"All this is quite unnecessary, Sir Francis," said the magistrate.

"Unnecessary, perhaps, from the point of view of Miss Fielding's acquittal, but not unnecessary for the clearing of Mr. Blake's own character," rejoined the K.C.

"Mr. Blake's character does not require clearing, except in the imagination of a stupid police-official," replied the magistrate emphatically.

"After what your worship has said, I am quite satisfied, and so, I expect, is Mr. Blake."

"I am," smiled Blake, and left the box.

"I was going to examine Miss Fielding."

"Unnecessary, poor girl. No, no," said the magistrate; "we must not prolong her ordeal!"

Then, in a few well-chosen words of kindly sympathy, he formally discharged her, and the proceedings terminated.

Blake and Tinker made themselves scarce for a couple of hours to give the lovers an opportunity of being alone; but the whole party met again at a merry lunch, and when that was over Blake disclosed the contents of the packet of papers, and proceeded to explain how and why Mary had been the centre of the dark intrigues and mysterious manoeuvres of the Cross-and-Circle Society.

"Would you be surprised to hear that your name is not Fielding?" was the question with which he opened.

"After what has happened to-day, I don't think I shall ever be surprised at anything again," she answered.

"Your name is Seymour."

"And a very good name, too," struck in Mark Conway, who seemed to think it necessary to keep a tight hold of Mary's hand.

"Mary Winifred Seymour," continued Blake. "Twenty-one years ago Mary Winifred Seymour, then an infant six months old, was kidnapped by agents of the Cross-and-Circle Society while being wheeled by her nurse in a perambulator in the grounds of her father's house at Thrle Manor, in Suffolk. Her parents were wealthy Americans who were staying in this country. Three or four days later they received an anonymous letter from Paris, offering to restore the child, on payment of a ransom of one hundred thousand pounds. The letter stipulated that the money was to be left on a certain date at a certain house in Ipswich, and contained a warning that any attempt on the part of the police to arrest the person who would be at the house to receive the money, would result in the parents never seeing their child again alive. The grief-stricken parents were willing enough to accept these conditions, being prepared to submit to any terms that would give their baby-daughter back to them. But the police thought differently, and prepared an ambush. The house in question was diligently watched, and on the day named was completely surrounded, but no one came.

"Next day another anonymous letter was received, accusing

the parents of a breach of faith, and demanding two hundred thousand pounds as ransom, and giving fresh directions in regard to the sending of the money. The parents consented to this new demand, and strove to keep it from the knowledge of the police, but by some means or other the matter leaked out; there was another ambush, and another abortive attempt to capture the kidnapers.

"After this there were various secret negotiations entered into between the parents and the Cross-and-Circle Society, but owing to the difficulty of devising a scheme by which the society would get the money without risk to themselves, and the parents would be certain of recovering their child after paying the ransom, the negotiations came to nothing; and, to make a long story short, both parents died of grief, accentuated by the agony of their prolonged suspense, before anything was definitely settled. Mary Winifred Seymour, the orphaned baby heiress to a vast fortune, was left as a hostage in the hands of the kidnapers.

"Years passed. Mary Seymour grew up to womanhood as Mary Fielding, the daughter of the man who subsequently died in prison. She had come of age. The vast fortune, which was here, had gone on accumulating till it amounted to a million. The Cross-and-Circle Society had had to wait a long time for their ransom, but they were now prepared to claim the million on her behalf.

"But Raymond Carter, one of their trusted agents in London, who was in possession of the papers which established the girl's identity, had a little scheme of his own. His scheme was to marry the girl, and claim the money as her husband, not for the benefit of the Cross-and-Circle Society, but for himself; and the Head Centre, having discovered his project, promptly passed sentence of death on him, which sentence was eventually carried out by Marie Lopez in the manner and under the circumstances already known to us. In these papers," concluded Blake, "there is positive proof that you are Mary Winifred Seymour, and entitled to the million which it has been the object of this infamous gang all these long years to secure for themselves."

Little remains to be told.

The lawyers got to work, and in a few months Mary Winifred Conway, as she then was—for she and Mark were married from Blake's house within three weeks of her acquittal—was duly put into possession of her great fortune.

The infamous Cross-and-Circle Society was broken up, and its members imprisoned.

Mario Lopez escaped, and was never heard of again.

Inspector Peter Fairley is a sadder, and, it is to be hoped and believed, a wiser man. At all events, he has learnt one lesson. He will never again be guilty of the folly of pitting his wits against Sexton Blake's.

THE END.

(Another grand, long, complete tale of Sexton Blake, Detective, in next Friday's PENNY POPULAR, entitled "The Financier's Failure!" Don't miss it!)

FOR NEXT FRIDAY!

My chums will have no cause to complain at the quality of the stories in next Friday's issue of the PENNY POPULAR. The tale of Sexton Blake, the famous detective, is really topping, and is entitled:

"The Financier's Failure!"

whilst the story dealing with Tom Merry & Co., of St. Jim's, is, if anything, above the usual standard. The title of this magnificent tale is:

"A Cad's Cunning"

Levison, the cad of St. Jim's, determines to have his revenge on Dick Brooke, and goes to great lengths to get the day-boy expelled from St. Jim's. How far his scheme meets with success you will learn when you read the yarn next Friday. That you will enjoy it I have no doubt whatever.

The story dealing with the adventures of Jack, Sam, and Pete, the famous comrades, is very amusing and interesting, and its title is:

"The Secret of the Heron!"

The PENNY POPULAR is selling very well indeed just now, and I would give you a word of warning. If you want to avoid disappointment, order your copy well in advance. It's by far the safest way.

YOUR EDITOR.

BETWEEN OURSELVES

A Weekly Chat between The Editor and His Readers.

HAVE YOU WRITTEN YET?

You will all remember, I feel sure, that during the last two weeks I have been requesting readers to write and let me know which is their favourite story. As I told you last week, I have a scheme in mind which, if put into operation, would be greatly welcomed by the majority of my readers, but before this scheme can materialise it is absolutely necessary that I discover which is the least popular story in the PENNY POPULAR.

If you are pressed for time, there is no necessity for you to sit down and write me a lengthy letter, going into details on the subject. All you need do is to write a few words on a post-card and send it along to me. Something on the following lines will do: "My favourite story is that dealing with the adventures of Tom Merry & Co.," or "I like the Pete stories best," or "The best story in the PENNY POPULAR is the Blake tale." See?

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NEXT FRIDAY: A CAD'S CUNNING!
By Martin Clifford.

THE FINANCIER'S FAILURE!
A Grand Tale of Sexton Blake.

THE SECRET OF THE HERON!
By S. Clarke Hook.

THE MYSTERIOUS SYMBOL!

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of

TOM MERRY & CO.

of St. Jim's.

- BY -

**MARTIN
CLIFFORD.**

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Letter from India.

TOM MERRY!

"Where's Tom Merry?"

Tom Merry, of the Shell Form at St. Jim's, glanced round as his name was called.

"Letter for you, Tommy," said Monty Lowther, coming up with his chum Manners. "It's come from India. Your uncle, I suppose."

Tom Merry took the letter in his hand. It was addressed to him in a small, fine writing: "T. Merry, St. James' Collegiate School, Sussex, England," but the writing was nothing like the big, heavy hand of his soldier uncle.

"This can't be from my uncle," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because it isn't his writing."

"Oh, he may have got somebody else to address it!" said Lowther. "Don't nip our hopes in the bud. We're all stony, and there simply must be a remittance in this letter."

Tom Merry slit the envelope with his penknife. He felt inside for the letter, and drew his fingers out again with an expression of amazement.

"There isn't any letter inside," he said.

"Eh?"

"What?"

"There's no letter," said Tom Merry. He opened the envelope wider and looked into it.

"Hold on—there's something!" said Lowther. "Oh, it's a card!"

Tom Merry, in utter amazement, drew a triangular fragment of cardboard from the envelope. Upon the cardboard was traced a triangle in red ink, and in each of the three corners of the triangle was a tiny red circle.

Tom Merry looked into the envelope again. There was nothing else there. The cardboard triangle was all that the envelope had contained.

The chums of the Shell gazed at the fragment of card that Tom Merry held between his finger and thumb in utter astonishment.

"What on earth does it mean?" exclaimed Tom Merry in perplexity.

"Your uncle must be off his giddy rocker to send you a thing like that!" said Monty Lowther blankly.

"It's not from my uncle," said Tom Merry decidedly. "It's not his writing, and he wouldn't play a silly trick like this, anyway. It's a practical joke, I suppose—though why anybody living in India should play a trick like that on a schoolboy in England is a giddy mystery."



"There he is," exclaimed Figgins, "he's on the New House!" There was a rush to look. In the rays of the moon a dark figure appeared on the New House, clinging to the red-brick chimney stack.

"It beats me," said Manners.

A crowd of juniors had gathered round, and all of them were looking in curiosity and amazement at the mysterious card.

"What on earth is it?" exclaimed Jack Blake.

"Looks like the sign of some giddy secret society," said Digby.

Tom Merry smiled.

"I don't suppose an Indian secret society would take the trouble to send this to me, especially as I don't know what it means," he said.

"Bai Jove! It's a mystewy!"

"It's some idiotic lark," said Herries.

"Did it really come from India at all?" asked Blake.

Tom Merry showed the envelope. The stamps and the postmarks were Indian; there was no doubt that the mysterious missive had come from India. There were several Indian postmarks upon it, and Tom Merry distinguished the names of Bundelpore and Bombay.

"Know anybody in either of those places?" asked Blake.

"My uncle, General Merry, is, or was, stationed at Bundelpore," said Tom Merry. "I suppose the letter comes through Bombay, and that accounts for the Bombay post-mark."

"It's a lark, of course!"

"It must be; but I don't understand it," said Tom Merry.

"It beats me. Well, we sha'n't get any tea in the study out of this, you chaps."

Monty Lowther sniffed.

"It's rotten!" he said. "I was quite expecting a remittance, and it turns out to be a rotten practical joke. I should like to be within easy punching distance of the joker."

At that moment Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, entered the study, and Tom Merry showed him the mysterious triangle.

"You don't know what it means, Merry, or if it means anything?" asked Kildare.

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Tom Merry shook his head.
 "I haven't an idea," he said.
 "Nor who sent it?"
 "I can't even guess!"
 "It's jolly queer," said Kildare, his brows knitting a little as he looked at the strange device upon the card.
 "It beats me hollow!" said Tom Merry.
 "It's a queer coincidence, too!" Kildare said slowly.
 "What's a coincidence?"
 "That you should get this extraordinary letter from India at the same time that a new boy—an Indian—is coming to St. Jim's," said Kildare.
 Tom Merry started.
 "An Indian chap coming here?" he exclaimed.
 "Yes; Mr. Railton told me so to-day," said the captain of St. Jim's. "He's a Hindu from Bombay; his name's Kalouth Das. It's strange that this letter should reach you at the same time."
 "Jolly queer!" said Tom Merry. "When he comes, I'll ask him if he's ever heard of this giddy red triangle. A chap from India may be able to throw some light on the matter!"
 "Yes; that's a good idea!"

And Kildare left the study looking very perplexed. Fellows came in, on and off, all the time, and Tom Merry's work that evening was done in snatches. By the time his prep was finished, nearly all the School House, and half the New House, had seen the red triangle, and made comments upon the strange affair.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Kalouth Das.

THE next morning Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther were seated in their study, when Toby, the school page, entered.
 "Mr. Linton would like to see Master Merry in his study," he announced.
 "See me!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "What's he want me for?"
 "Dunno," said Toby. "But I believe he's got the noo boy with him."
 "Suppose I'd better go," said Tom Merry, and he walked away to his Form-master's study. He tapped and went in. Mr. Linton was there with the new boy, and Tom Merry glanced at the latter with some curiosity.

The Hindu was a lad apparently his own age; but he might have been older—it was difficult to tell. He was very slim and slightly built, and did not look strong. But Tom Merry's keen eye noted that he was wiry-looking, and very firm upon his feet. His face was extremely dark, and his eyes were brilliant, and never still.

They flashed upon Tom Merry as he entered, and seemed to take him in at a glance. Then he looked away; but Tom Merry remained with the impression that the "dark gentleman" was watching him out of the corner of his eye.

Tom Merry's first impression of the Indian was decidedly not favourable. But he would not allow himself to feel an unreasonable repugnance towards a fellow he did not know.

"Merry, I am glad you have come! This is the new boy, Kalouth Das. He is coming into the Shell."

"Yes, sir."
 The Indian gave a start.
 "Merry!" he exclaimed.
 Mr. Linton glared at him.
 "Yes; this is Tom Merry. Do you know the name?"

The Indian's face was impassive again in a moment.
 "No, sir."

He spoke excellent English.
 "I imagined from the way you spoke that you had heard the name before," said Mr. Linton, glancing curiously at the Indian boy.

"I have heard the name of

General Merry in India, sir," explained Kalouth Das. "That was why the name struck me for a moment. It is not a common name."

"He is my uncle," said Tom Merry.
 "I want you to look after Kalouth Das a little, Merry; that is why I have sent for you," said Mr. Linton. "He is a total stranger in England, and quite new to English schools. As you are head of the Shell, it is your duty to take some care of him."

"I am quite ready to do so, sir," exclaimed Tom Merry. "I will do anything I can for Kalouth Das."

"Thank you, Merry. He will be put in the study next to yours—there are two boys there at present—Gore and Skimpole."

"Very well, sir," said Tom Merry, much relieved.
 "You may go with Tom Merry now, Kalouth Das, and he will show you your study, and the other things necessary."

"Yes, sir."
 Mr. Linton made a gesture of dismissal, and the two juniors left the study. In the passage Tom Merry paused for a moment. The Indian boy's bright, bird-like eyes were upon him.

"You've just arrived in England?" Tom Merry asked.
 "Yesterday," said Kalouth Das. "I came on from Southampton to-day."

"You came alone, I suppose?"
 "Quite alone."

"You speak English jolly well," Tom Merry said admiringly.
 Kalouth Das showed his white teeth in a smile.

"Yes; I have spoken English from my childhood," he said.
 "But you speak your own language as well, of course?"

"Oh, yes; but I like English best."
 "You'll find it more useful here," said Tom Merry, with a smile. "Precious few fellows here know any Hindustani."

"I suppose so."
 "Come up to the Shell passage, and I'll show you your study. You'd better have your books and things put in there, and your box can be taken up to the dorm."

They ascended the stairs. Kalouth Das looked round with interested eyes that seemed to miss no detail of the place. Tom Merry knocked at the door of Gore's study and opened it.

A youth in a large pair of spectacles was sitting at the table, and he blinked and nodded at the new-comers.
 "Hallo, Skinny!" said Tom Merry. "Where's Gore?"

"I really don't know, Merry; he is not here."

"I can see that. This is your new study-mate, Kalouth Das. Tell Gore when he comes in that Kalouth Das belongs to this study, will you?"

"Oh, certainly!" said Skimpole.

Tom Merry piloted his new charge on his way, and showed him the dormitory in the Form-rooms and other things that he cared to see. The Indian seemed to take a great interest in all he saw, and he thanked Tom Merry in flowing language for the trouble he had taken.

"Rot!" said Tom Merry cheerfully. "I'm bound to look after a new chap a bit. I hope you'll be comfortable here."

"Thank you so much!"
 "If you don't mind, I'll buzz off now; the fellows are waiting for me to go down to the footer-ground," Tom Merry explained. "I've shown you where the dining-room is. You'll hear a bell ring for dinner."
 "All right."

And Tom Merry, leaving the new boy in Gore's study with Skimpole, hurried into his own room. Arrived there, he found a note for him from Lowther and Manners, saying that they had gone down to the footer-ground, and asking him to follow.

He immediately picked up

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his football, and left the study. Suddenly there came the sound of loud and angry voices from the adjoining room. He recognized the powerful tones of Gore of the Shell.

"Outside, I say!"

Tom Merry frowned darkly. Gore was speaking, and it was easy for Tom Merry to guess whom he was addressing. Gore was beginning on the new boy already.

George Gore had once had the unenviable distinction of being the bully of the Shell. He had turned over a new leaf since that time, but the old nature broke out sometimes. And this was evidently one of the times. Gore was very much annoyed at having a third fellow put into his study, and he was wreaking his annoyance upon the new junior.

"You've got to get out!" he roared.

"But this is my study!" came the silky tones of the Indian.

"I don't care! You can find another. I'm not going to have a blessed nigger in my study!"

"But it is my study. I have no other."

"Find another! Some of the other fellows may like niggers, and take you in. Anyway, I'm not going to have you here!"

Crash!

A shower of books descended upon the linoleum in the passage just as Tom Merry reached the doorway.

"Now out you go, you nigger!"

"I will not go!"

"Then I'll jolly soon chuck you!"

The sound of a struggle followed.

Tom Merry dashed into the study, his face flushed with anger. Fellows objected, as a rule, to having new boys in their studies—there was none too much room in any of them. But to throw out a new fellow who had been assigned to a study by a Housemaster was altogether "too thick," especially under the circumstances of the new fellow being a stranger in a strange land.

Gore had grasped the Indian to hurl him through the doorway after his books, but Kalouth Das was putting up an unexpected struggle. Slim and slight as he was, the Indian was very wiry, and it needed all the burly Shell fellow's brute strength to whirl him round to the door.

"Stop!" shouted Tom Merry.

"Oh, go and eat coke!" growled Gore. "He's going out!"

"He's not going out—he was sent into this study."

"Well, now he's going to be sent out."

"Look here—"

"Oh, rats! Out you go, you black bounder!"

The Indian was whirling at the doorway in Gore's powerful grip. Tom Merry flung himself upon them, and grasped Gore by the shoulders, and dragged him forcibly away from his victim. Gore let go the Indian to defend himself. He was too strong for Kalouth Das, but he was no match for Tom Merry. After a momentary struggle, Gore was flung bodily into a corner of the study, and he lay there gasping.

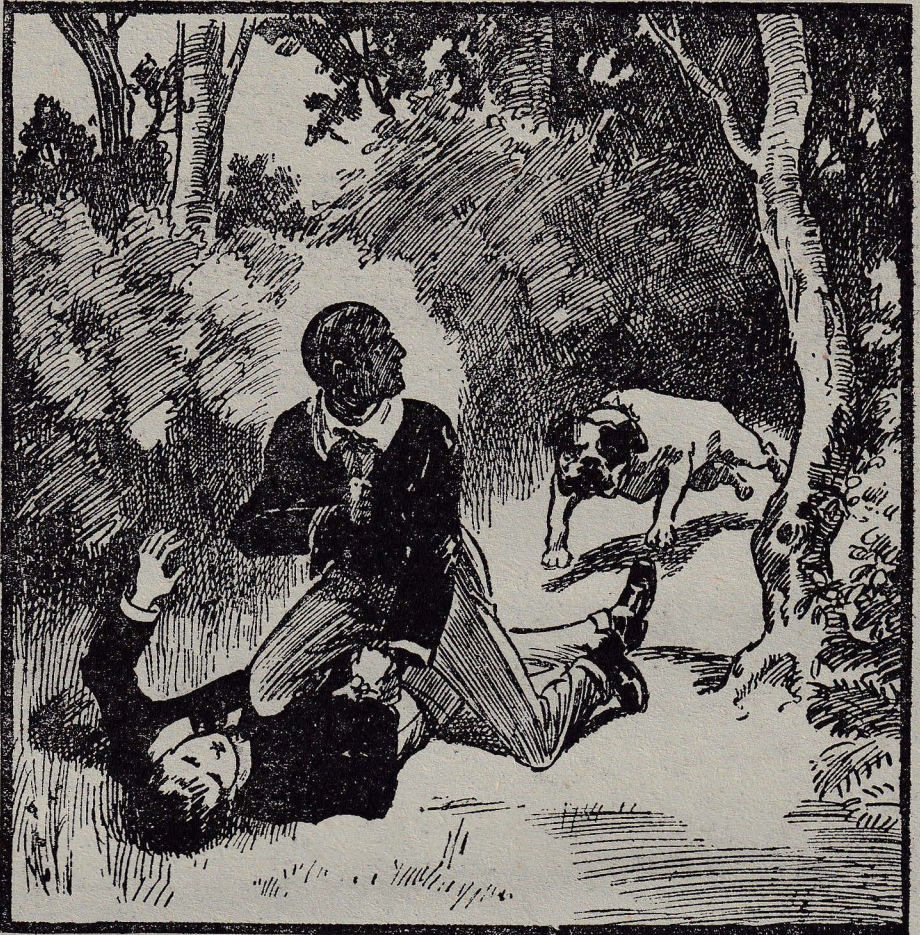
Tom Merry looked at him with blazing eyes.

"Now keep your hands off the new fellow, you cad, or you'll get worse than that!" he exclaimed.

"Hang you!" gasped Gore.

Tom Merry turned to the Indian.

To his surprise, the dark junior drew back with a strange



"Towser—Towser!" cried Tom Merry, as the great bulldog came leaping from the heather. Kalouth Das heard the dog, too, and giving a cry, swung half-round.

glitter in his eyes, and anything but gratitude or good feeling in his face. His eyes seemed to burn with strange fires as they were fixed upon Tom Merry.

"Why do you interfere here?" he exclaimed, in a strange, harsh voice. "I have not asked you to help me."

Tom Merry stared at him.

"Mr. Linton told me to look after you," he said. "And I suppose you don't want to be chucked neck and crop out of the study, do you?"

"I will not have you help me."

"Are you dotty? Why not?"

"I will not have you help me."

The Indian spoke with a strange excitement that Tom Merry could not understand.

"Look here, Kalouth Das," he said roughly, "you're no match for Gore, and you ought to be jolly thankful there's a fellow to stand up for you."

Kalouth Das set his white teeth.

"I will not have it!" he exclaimed.

"Do you mean to say that you won't have me interfere?"

"Yes—yes!"

"You must be off your rocker!" said Tom Merry, in astonishment. "I'm captain of the Shell, and it's my place to put down bullying. What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say—I will not be obliged to you," said the Indian passionately. "Keep out of my quarrels, and I will thank you."

Tom Merry bit his lip.

"If you really mean that, I'll take you at your word," he exclaimed. "But I certainly think that you must be dotty!"

"I do mean it."

"Very well then. You may settle with Gore yourself."

And Tom Merry, with an angry brow, quitted the study.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Midnight Signal.

THAT night Tom Merry did not sleep. He could not. That strange and mysterious symbol was still before his eyes. As he lay silent in bed, thinking ceaselessly, his eyes were turned in the gloom towards the bed of Kalouth Das. In the dusky gloom of the dormitory he could just make out the form of the bed. Midnight had tolled out from the clock-tower, and all St. Jim's was asleep. Some minutes after the last stroke of twelve had died away there was a sound of a movement, and Tom Merry's heart leaped within him as he saw the Indian junior rising from his bed.

Kalouth Das stood beside his bed, his head bent a little, listening. The attitude, and the low, quick breathing, almost still, showed plainly enough that he was straining his ears to listen, to know whether his rising had awakened anybody else in the Shell dormitory.

Tom Merry lay perfectly still.

Why had Kalouth Das left his bed at that hour of the night? He had evidently been waiting, awake all the time, for midnight to strike, so as to rise when all the rest of the Shell fellows were asleep.

The Indian moved towards the window at the end of the dormitory.

Tom Merry watched him breathlessly.

Kalouth Das moved a chair under the window and mounted upon it. The chair creaked slightly, and the Indian remained still for several minutes. He had all the impassive patience of the Oriental, and he was as cautious as a wild animal stealing upon its prey.

He moved again at last, and began to open the window. He opened it with slow caution, to make no sound, and it was ten minutes or more before the sash was fairly raised. A faint chill breath of air from the quadrangle stole into the dormitory. The top of the window was already opened, as always—the Indian had not had to move the catch. He released the lower sash when it was level with the upper one, and the window was now almost wide open.

Tom Merry's heart beat quickly as he watched.

Kalouth Das leaned out of the window and scanned the dark quadrangle below.

Suddenly there was a gleam of light.

It dazzled Tom Merry's eyes for a moment.

He looked again.

Kalouth Das had in his hand what was evidently a tiny electric torch, which could be turned on by the slightest pressure of a finger.

A long, thin streak of light shot from the dormitory window into the quadrangle.

It was repeated twice.

Then the light shone no more.

Kalouth Das stood silent at the window, looking out.

Tom Merry set his teeth.

Was the Indian junior about to admit a thief to the school? That he intended to admit someone, to whom he had signalled, was certain to Tom Merry's mind.

Whatever it might mean, it was evidently impossible to wait longer in silence, until the Hindu had accomplished his object. Whoever was the unknown man outside, he must not be allowed to enter.

Tom Merry sprang from his bed.

At the sound he made the Indian turned his head from the window.

"Kalouth Das!"

Tom Merry's voice rang through the dormitory.

He heard a long, shuddering gasp from the Indian at the window. The terror of discovery was upon the dark junior.

"Kalouth Das, what are you doing there?"

Tom Merry ran along to the window. Several fellows had been awakened by his voice, and they were sitting up in bed, calling out in alarm. Tom Merry did not heed them. He ran to the Indian and grasped him and dragged him from the window.

"Kalouth Das, what does this mean?"

"Oh, you are awake!"

"I have been watching you all the time."

"Ah!"

"What are you doing?" demanded Tom Merry. "To whom were you signalling from the window?"

The Indian trembled. In the gloom his eyes seemed to burn.

There was a sound without, as of the wind rustling the ivy. Or was it the rustle made by a climber?

Kalouth Das heard it; and suddenly, wrenching himself free from Tom Merry's grasp, he sprang to the window and slammed it shut, with a slam that rang out in the silent quadrangle.

Then he leaped down from the chair again and stood facing

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Tom Merry, trembling in every limb, his eyes burning strangely.

"It is nothing!" he stammered. "You—you do not understand!"

"What's the row there?" came Lowther's voice. "What on earth is the matter?"

"I saw this chap signalling with a light from the window," said Tom Merry. "There is someone in the quadrangle, and he was signalling to him."

"My hat!"

"Great Scott!"

"It—it is false!" gasped the Indian, and his voice was dry and husky. "I mean, it is a mistake. It was not a signal. There is no one there. You do not understand."

"But I mean to understand!" said Tom Merry grimly.

"It—it is nothing! I will explain. It is in connection with my religion," stammered the Indian.

"Your religion!"

"Yes. You do not understand." Kalouth Das was regaining his nerve. "I will explain—I will explain to the Head, if you wish, to-morrow. It is my religion—the worship of the stars. You do not understand, and you had no right to interrupt me!"

Tom Merry looked at him long and hard.

It was a plausible explanation. There were strange religions in the strange land of India that he had never heard of, he knew that. Whether star-worship was one of them he did not know; but it was probable enough. Was it possible that he had been mistaken, and that he had only interrupted some strange Eastern rite?

There came a chuckle from Monty Lowther's bed.

"You're off side, Tommy! Let his giddy religion alone and turn in!"

"I don't trust him," said Tom Merry.

He mounted upon the chair, closed the top of the window, and secured the catch. Then he returned slowly to his bed. With the vague and unformed suspicions that were in his mind, he could not alarm the house. The Indian's explanation was plausible enough, and it would be believed; and the man outside, if there were anybody, had certainly disappeared by this time.

Tom Merry went back to bed. But he did not sleep again that night; and when the morning came, he was still wakeful, and very pale and fatigued.

The strange happenings of the night in the Shell dormitory excited much interest among the juniors of St. Jim's. After morning lessons, the juniors talked the matter over, and the whole school knew all about it. Figgins & Co. came over from the New House for all particulars; and Redfern, Owen, and Lawrence cornered Tom Merry in the quadrangle, and made him tell the story all over again.

"I wouldn't sleep in the same dorm with that black bouncer, for something!" said Levison emphatically. "I should be afraid of not waking up again!"

"He is going to have a separate room in future," said Tom Merry. "Mr. Raiton has arranged that."

"It wouldn't be a bad wheeze to get Bernard Glyn to fix up a giddy burglar alarm in the Shell dorm," said Levison shrewdly.

Tom Merry's face brightened.

"That's a good suggestion," he said. "We'll do it."

Tom Merry sought out Bernard Glyn. Glyn of the Shell was an amateur inventor, and some of his inventions were fearful and wonderful. The juniors still chuckled sometimes over the recollection of the mechanical figure Glyn had made in exact likeness of Skimpole of the Shell.

Glyn was only too eager to erect the burglar alarm, and that night, when the juniors went to bed, everything was in readiness.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Trapped!

KALOUTH DAS did not sleep with the juniors that night. He had been assigned a bed-room at some distance from the Shell dormitory, and he turned in alone. If he had any mysterious religious rites to perform that night, he was not likely to be interrupted in the performance of them. It was a relief to all the Shell fellows not to have him in the dormitory. His dark, forbidding face had a chilling effect upon them, apart from the suspicion he had drawn upon himself by his peculiar conduct.

Kildare saw lights out in the Shell dormitory; and when he was gone, Tom Merry slipped out of bed, and locked the dormitory door. So far as Kalouth Das was concerned the dormitory could not be entered now; and as for the windows, and the unknown man whom Kalouth Das was suspected of having signalled to, Bernard Glyn's invention would take care of that.

The Shell fellows were soon asleep.

Tom Merry was especially sleepy that night, having had no sleep the night before; indeed, he had nodded off once or twice during the day.

But he would probably not have slept but for the contrivance which made it safe for him to do so.

Many of the Shell fellows had brought cricket-stumps and bats to the dormitory, to be ready in case of trouble. Tom Merry had his bat under the mattress of his bed, and if the enemy came, and Tom Merry were awakened, the unknown was likely to meet with a warm reception.

The hours of the night wore away. The last door had closed below; the last light had ceased to gleam from the windows of the School House.

One!

The deep boom of the hour from the clock-tower sounded dully through the night.

Slumber reigned unbroken in the Shell dormitory in the School House.

Two strokes.

It was two o'clock.

Then, if anybody had been awake and listening in the School House, a sound might have been heard. Was it the wind that was rustling the ivy under the windows of the Shell dormitory?

It was a faint sound, but steady and long-continued. Tom Merry did not hear it—the hero of the Shell was deep in slumber. He was dreaming—a strange and broken dream, in which were mingled strange symbols of red triangles and circles, and dark, threatening faces, and dusky hands that menaced him from lowering shadows. And suddenly, in the midst of his heavy, troubled sleep, he started into broad wakefulness.

Buzzzz!

It was the bell.

Buzzzz!

With steady, raucous persistence the electric bell was buzzing at the head of his bed, and a shiver ran through him as he sat up in the darkness, for he knew that the dormitory window must be open—that it must have been opened by a hand from without.

His eyes swept towards the end window.

A cold breath came from the open air, the sash was raised, and a dark head and shoulders appeared at the opening.

There was no doubt now.

In the pale glimmer of the stars Tom Merry's eyes made out a dark face—as dark as Kalouth Das!—and two eyes that gleamed and scintillated like precious stones.

"Wake up!"

Tom Merry shouted the words.

The Hindu—for such he evidently was—had been prepared to leap into the dormitory through the open window; but the sudden buzz of the electric bell breaking upon the stillness had arrested him.

He had remained, struck motionless, as it were, in vague alarm.

Buzzzz!

The bell was still buzzing away.

The bell, and Tom Merry's shout, awoke every fellow in the dormitory.

Crooke, and perhaps one or two others, crouched under the bedclothes in alarm.

But almost all the dormitory leaped up at the sound, and there was a roar of voices.

"There he is!"

"He's come!"

"It's a nigger!"

The head disappeared from the window.

Tom Merry dashed towards the window, his cricket-bat in his grasp.

But the man was gone.

The ivy was rustling and shaking under his hurried descent. In the starlight Tom Merry could see the man, a dozen feet below, scrambling downward.

From deep down in the quadrangle came a sudden, furious barking.

Tom Merry shouted from the window.

"Fangs—Fangs! Seize him!"

Taggles' mastiff was loose in the quadrangle. Ever since an attempted burglary at St. Jim's the mastiff had slept in his kennel with the chain off. And the mastiff was a good watchdog. Lowther had turned on the electric light in the dormitory, and the flood of it beamed out into the darkness. That, and the noise, had alarmed the mastiff, and the great dog was now bounding towards the spot, barking loudly and furiously.

"Seize him, Fangs!"

Gr-r-r!

The descent of the housebreaker ceased.

The mastiff was below.

The dog had sighted his quarry now, and was running up

and down below the dormitory windows, barking furiously, and waiting for the burglar to drop fairly into his jaws.

The man's rolling black eyes looked down, and he saw the great dog, with his teeth showing, his eyes blazing, and he ceased to descend.

To reach the ground was to throw himself into the grip of the mastiff, and the huge animal was quite capable of holding a man, even a powerful one. And the man who was clinging to the ivy was neither big nor powerful. He was a slightly-built Hindu, lithe, quick, nimble, but by no means powerful. Taggles' mastiff would have had no trouble in holding him fast. The ivy ceased to sway; the man hung there, looking fearfully downwards, while the dog ran to and fro, making the quadrangle ring with his barking.

"We've got him!" yelled Tom Merry. "The dog's guarding him—he can't get away! Wake the house!"

The house was already awakened.

The mastiff's furious barking rang through every recess of the old school, and over in the New House doors were opening and lights were flashing.

The big door of the School House opened, and light blazed out upon the quadrangle. Mr. Railton, half-dressed, and with a poker in his hand, rushed out, followed by Kildare.

"Fangs! Good dog! What is it?"

The dog barked louder than ever.

Mr. Railton and Kildare came running towards the dormitory window. The moon sailed out from behind a cloud and shone upon the scene. Tom Merry leaned out of the window.

"Mr. Railton! Kildare!"

The Housemaster and the Sixth-Former looked up.

"He's here!" shouted Tom Merry.

"Good heavens!"

The master and the prefect caught sight of the dark figure clinging to the ivy at the same moment.

"He is caught!" said Mr. Railton grimly.

"It's a Hindu, sir," muttered Kildare.

"I see that it is. You scoundrel, come down and surrender yourself!"

But the wretch saw that he was in a hopeless position. He remained for some moments, staring into the lighted dormitory with wild, rolling eyes, and then climbed higher and disappeared.

"My hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry. "He's climbing on the roof!"

It was the man's last desperate resource. Probably he had a hope of being able to escape across the roofs, and descend in some unwatched spot, and yet escape. But there was little chance for him—all St. Jim's was buzzing like a hive of bees now, and both Houses had turned out to join in the hunt.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

A Terrible Fate.

TOM MERRY hurried on his clothes and dashed out of the School House. The Shell fellows crowded out with him. The whole school was in an uproar. All the Sixth had turned out, with some weapons or other in their hands, to hunt down the burglar.

Fellows were crowding over from the New House with lanterns and sticks in their hands. Redfern, of the Fourth, caught Tom Merry by the arm.

"What on earth's the row?" he exclaimed breathlessly.

"Burglars!" gasped Jack Blake.

"A Hindu tried to break in," said Tom Merry, "and he's on the roof now, and we'll have him!"

"What-ho!" exclaimed Figgins. "He can't get away!"

It certainly looked as if the ruffian could not get away. There were more than two hundred fellows looking for him, as well as the masters, and, as if to banish his last chance, the moon came brightly out, and shone with silver light over the rambling buildings of the School House.

Many eyes scanned the walls and the sloping red roofs of the old buildings in quest of the desperate fugitive.

There was a sudden roar:

"There he is!"

"He's on the New House!" yelled Figgins.

There was a rush to look.

In the rays of the moon a dark figure appeared upon the New House, clinging to the red brick chimney-stack. Dangerous as the task was, the fugitive had escaped from one House to the other by clambering over a succession of roofs at unequal altitudes. But he had not bettered his position by so doing. For the New House was as keenly watched as the School House, and every window was fastened, and watched from within as well as without.

The man's dark face could be seen as he glared at the crowd

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below. A yell went up to greet him, and it rang far into the night.

"We've spotted him, sir!" shouted Kildare.

Mr. Railton hurried up.

"Where is he?"

"There—by the chimney-stack!"

"We could get out by the fire-escape in the roof, sir, and seize him!" exclaimed Monteith, the head prefect of the New House eagerly.

Mr. Railton shook his head.

"Life must not be risked, Monteith. And his capture is only a question of hours. I have already sent for the police."

"Fancy P.-c. Crump climbing over the roofs after that Johnny!" murmured Jack Blake. And the juniors chuckled at the thought.

They could not imagine P.-c. Crump, of Rylcombe, doing anything of the sort.

"He will have to come down sooner or later," said Langton.

"And then we'll have him!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Langton's words were too true, and his prediction was terribly fulfilled. The Hindu stood upon the roof, looking down upon the excited crowd. They could see the dark-bronze face, but not the expression upon it; but something in the man's attitude caused Tom Merry to utter a sharp cry.

"He's going to jump!"

"Good heavens!"

"He will be killed!"

"Stand clear!"

"Oh, heavens!"

"He's falling!"

There was the scraping of a falling body on the sliding slates, and a whiz in the air as it rushed down, and then—
Thud!

It was a soft, sickening sound, but it reached every ear, and it sent a shudder through every fellow there. For a moment no one moved, no one spoke. Then Mr. Railton said quickly:

"Lights here!"

Kildare and Monteith advanced with lights. Mr. Railton bent over a dark, huddled form on the ground. The fellows gathered round, white, shuddering, horrified. The light

gleamed upon a dark-bronze face from which all expression was gone.

"He is dead!" said Mr. Railton.

Dead!

The word was echoed by a hundred hushed voices.

The excitement had died away now—every face was pale and strained.

The man had been a villain. It could hardly be doubted now that his intent was murderous in entering the school! But he had paid for his intended crime. The fall from the roof of the New House had killed him instantly.

"The poor wretch!" muttered Tom Merry, white to the lips. "I—I never looked for this!"

"He jumped down!" whispered Figgins. "That wasn't a fall! He knew he had to be taken, and he preferred—that!"

"I—I suppose so! He may have fallen, though!"

"He jumped!" said Levison. "That shows how much he had to fear from the police. Most likely he's done things to be hung for if he was caught."

"Quite likely," said Tom Merry. "But, look here, you chaps, I've had quite enough excitement for one night. I'm going back to bed."

"So am I," said Blake and Figgins.

And the juniors trooped off to their dormitories.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

A Hindu Vendetta.

THE next morning the whole school was in a hushed buzz of excitement. The fearful happening of the night was the one topic.

The police had visited the school at dawn, and the dead Hindu had been taken away.

Inspector Skeat, of Wayland, had the matter in hand. He told the Head that nothing whatever leading to identification had been found upon the dead man. His pockets were perfectly empty, save for a handkerchief of red Indian silk, which the inspector brought into the Head's study to show him. Mr. Railton and Mr. Linton were there, and the latter gentleman examined the silken scarf with careful attention.

"It is such a silken scarf as the Thugs in India use for strangling their victims," said Mr. Linton quietly. "They call it the roomal. This was evidently not carried as a handkerchief by the Hindu. It is the noose of the strangler."

The doctor shuddered.

"Then the man's intention must have been—"

"It is terrible to think what his intention must have been," said the master of the Shell, with a shiver.

"And you have not learned his name, sir; nor his history in any way?" the Head asked, turning to the inspector.

Mr. Skeat shook his head.

"No, sir. His pockets were absolutely empty, excepting for this. It's pretty clear that he intended to have nothing about him to identify him, in case of a capture. His name cannot be guessed, nor what part of India he came from. Of course, every inquiry will be made. A mark which is on his arm may lead to a clue."

"I trust so, inspector."

Dr. Holmes had acquainted the inspector with the whole story, and before leaving St. Jim's Mr. Skeat interviewed Tom Merry and Kalouth Das. Tom Merry told him everything he could, with perfect frankness. The Indian junior appeared to be equally frank, and if he had anything to conceal he concealed it marvellously well.

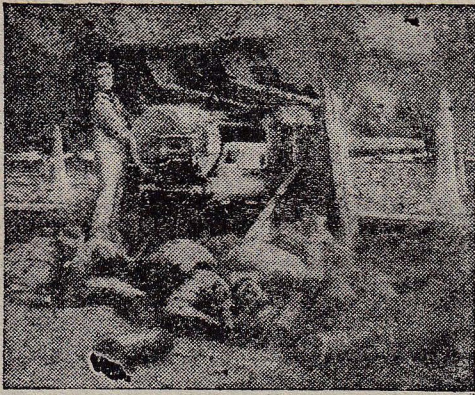
The dead man was taken to Wayland, where the inquest was to be held, and Mr. Railton and Tom Merry were warned that they would be required at the inquest, as was Kalouth Das. The Indian received the intimation with perfect composure.

Some of Tom Merry's friends obtained permission to accompany him to Wayland for the inquest, and they were present. The inquest revealed nothing that was not known already.

The Hindu's motive in visiting the school by night could only be guessed at. Kalouth Das, in reply to searching questions from the coroner, stated that he knew nothing whatever of the Hindu. And, indeed, it was hard for anyone to believe that a mere schoolboy could have had a hand in so terrible an affair.

Inspector Skeat, more than a little pleased to have so striking a case in hand in his quiet country district, promised the Head of St. Jim's that every possible inquiry should be made, and warned him to keep an eye on Kalouth Das—which the Head had already resolved to do.

The Indian was locked in his room that night, a proceeding to which he did not raise the slightest objection. All the St. Jim's fellows avoided him, but it did not seem to ruffle the Indian's composure in any way. In fact, he seemed better pleased at being left entirely to himself.



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NEXT FRIDAY: A GAD'S CUNNING!
By Martin Clifford.

THE FINANCIER'S FAILURE!
A Grand Tale of Sexton Blake.

THE SECRET OF THE HERON!
By S. Clarke Hook.

In the Shell dormitory the door was locked, and Bernard Glyn's burglar-alarm was put into its place. But the electric bell did not ring that night in the Shell dormitory. The night passed without incident of any sort.

In the morning Kalouth Das took his place in the Shell Form-room as usual, and there was a wide space left on him exactly as usual, but the Shell fellows kept as far from either side of him as he sat in the Form. Mr. Linton treated him as they could. He was under suspicion, and they could not help showing that they feared and distrusted the dark, silent, impassive Hindu.

Third lesson was proceeding when Toby's shock head was put into the Form-room. Mr. Linton looked round.

"If you please, sir, the Head wants Master Merry in his study, sir."

There was a movement of interest in the Form. Tom Merry rose in his place at a sign from Mr. Linton.

"Go to the doctor's study, Merry," said the Form-master.

"Yes, sir."

All eyes in the Shell Form-room followed Tom Merry as he went. The juniors felt that there was some new development. Kalouth Das alone kept his eyes upon his desk, as if he alone were uninterested in the matter.

Tom Merry made his way to the Head's study, wondering what he was wanted for. Inspector Skeat was in the study, and Dr. Holmes was seated at his desk, with a newspaper before him.

"Come in, Merry," he said gravely. "Close the door. Inspector Skeat has brought me this paper, and I think it only right that you should see it. As you see, it is a copy of the 'Bombay Gazette,' and two months old. Inspector Skeat considered it advisable to examine all the Indian papers that could be obtained from the district where your uncle is stationed, and this discovery proves that he was right."

And the inspector purred a little with satisfaction.

Tom Merry, in wonder, took the paper the Head handed to him, and looked at a paragraph which had been heavily scored round by the inspector.

"Read it," said the Head.

"Yes, sir."

Tom Merry scanned the paragraph, and his face grew paler as he read it. It was brief enough—merely an item of news—but it meant much to Tom Merry, and to those who were investigating the mystery of that strange night at St. Jim's.

"The execution of Chandra Dal took place at Bundelore yesterday. He was condemned to death for the murder of General Merry's native servant. The assassin's object was to take the life of the general, and the khitmutgar, who surprised him in the attempt, perished in saving his master. It will be remembered that General Merry had succeeded in breaking up and almost extirpating a secret society of thieves and assassins whose symbol was a red triangle with three circles in the angles—a symbol of peculiar significance in the sect to which the assassins belonged. The society had twelve members, who were discovered by means of information given by a native, and the fact that each member had the symbol of the society branded upon his arm rendered the work of the law more easy. Ten members of the secret society have now been accounted for, and the remaining two, one of whom is a mere boy, the son of Chandra Dal, have disappeared, but the police hope to discover them yet. The secret society has existed for many years, and was the terror of the Bundelore district. It was a custom of these wretches to send the symbol of the society to their victims before the blow fell, and on receiving the sign of the red triangle the victim knew that his days were numbered. In some cases, it is understood, victims thus terrorized were able to purchase safety by the payment of heavy ransoms, but in other cases, where the society had cause to fear or hate the victim, they were thus warned of their intended doom, and left in all the torture of fear and doubt until the blow fell, perhaps weeks afterwards. Fortunately, this association of criminals is now broken up for ever, though it is well known that many other such societies exist in India at the present day, under the very eyes of the authorities."

Tom Merry looked up from the paper.

"I thought you should know it, Merry," said the Head. "It is clear that you were the intended object of that man's attack, and I feared that the matter might weigh upon your mind. Now you know that all is safe. It is quite clear that the man who perished by falling from the roof of the New House was the last member of the secret society. The sign upon his arm proves that clearly enough."

"But one more is mentioned, sir—a boy, the son of Chandra Dal."

Dr. Holmes nodded.

"Yes, a boy. And there is a boy at this school whom we have suspected of connection with the dead Hindu, and who bears upon his arm the symbol of that fearful society."

"Kalouth Das!" murmured Tom Merry. "Kalouth Das

is the son of Chandra Dal, the man who tried to kill my uncle!"

"No doubt about that in my mind," said Inspector Skeat confidently. "It looks to me pretty clear, Dr. Holmes. Of course, he would change his name in coming here, and the recommendations you had from Bombay are forged."

"I think you must be right, inspector."

"If it were not for the danger to Master Merry from the boy remaining here, I should suggest leaving him here till I have certain information from India," said the inspector; "but, under the circumstances, I think it will be better for him to be detained."

"I think so, too," said the Head gravely. "The sooner he leaves the school the better. If it turns out to be a mistake, and that he is really what he represents himself to be, then he can return."

"Quite so, sir."

"Merry can send him here when he returns to his Form-room," the Head suggested, "then you can take him away with you while the boys are still at their lessons, and so avoid any excitement."

"Very good, sir."

"Tell Kalouth Das to come to my study, Merry."

"Yes, sir."

Tom Merry returned to the Shell Form-room. The fellows all looked at him eagerly, and Kalouth Das raised his dark eyes, and they dwelt searchingly on Tom Merry's face for a moment. Then they dropped again.

"Dr. Holmes wishes Kalouth Das to go to his study, sir," said Tom Merry to the master of the Shell.

"Very well, Merry. You hear, Kalouth Das?" said Mr. Linton.

"Yes, sir," said the Indian.

He rose, and quitted the Form-room without a change of his dark, impassive face. The door closed behind him, and the lessons went on in the Shell Form-room.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

The Fate of Kalouth Das.

T OBY, the School House page, tapped at the door of the Form-room five minutes later, and opened it, and the lesson was again interrupted. Mr. Linton looked round quite irritably. He did not like these constant interruptions.

"What is it?" he said sharply.

"If you please, sir, Dr. Holmes wants Master Kalouth Das in his study, sir. He told Master Merry to tell you, sir."

Mr. Linton stared.

"Master Kalouth Das has gone to Dr. Holmes' study five minutes ago or more," he replied. "Please return and tell Dr. Holmes so."

"Yessir."

Toby retired.

The door had not been closed one minute when it was thrown open again, and the portly form of Inspector Skeat strode into the room. Mr. Linton looked at him with a resignation that would have suited the countenance of an early Christian martyr.

"What is it, Mr. Skeat?" he asked wearily.

"Kalouth Das—"

"I sent him to the Head's study seven or eight minutes ago."

"He did not come!" exclaimed the inspector, his face growing purple with anger and alarm. "I was waiting there for him."

"Then he is loitering by the way, I suppose, and I shall cane him for it!" said Mr. Linton, his eyes gleaming angrily.

Inspector Skeat gave a grunt.

"I don't think you'll have a chance of caning that bright youth again, sir," he said.

"Indeed! Why not?"

"Because he's bolted, sir; that's why!" said the inspector. And he dashed out of the Form-room, breathing in short, quick pants from his unaccustomed exertion.

There was a buzz in the Form.

"Bolted!"

"My hat!"

"He guessed what he was wanted for," murmured Tom Merry. "He guessed that the inspector was there—listened outside the Head's study very likely, and heard his voice. He must have been expecting this."

That the dark junior had indeed "bolted" was soon clear. Inspector Skeat dashed down to the porter's lodge at once, and learned from Taggles that the dark junior had passed out ten minutes before.

The inspector snorted, and rushed out into the road.

There was no sign to be seen of the Indian.

He had probably taken to the wood immediately after quitting the school, in order to gain cover; and although he

could not yet be far away, there was no trace of him left to guide the inspector.

Without returning to the school, Mr. Skeat hurried on to Rylcombe, and within twenty minutes the telegraph was at work flashing a description of the fugitive up and down the countryside.

Inspector Skeat returned to Wayland fully satisfied that within a few hours, or by the next day at the latest, the Indian boy would be seized.

That afternoon the juniors decided to go out in a crowd in search of the missing Indian. Much to the juniors' annoyance, Herries insisted upon taking Towser with him. Had they known, however, the part Towser was intended to play, they would not have raised so many objections to the bulldog accompanying them.

Arrived on the moors the juniors separated, realising that this was the only way of making the search a success.

They were soon strung out in an irregular line, keeping sight of one another, and occasionally calling across the heathery moor. Sometimes, in the rough hollows of the ground, they vanished from each other's view for a few minutes, always to emerge again.

In this place the moor was honeycombed with deep rifts and chasms, the remains of old quarries long since abandoned. Some of them were filled up with rain, and transformed into lakes and ponds; but some were empty and cavernous—great black gaps opening in the ground, unfenced and dangerous after dark.

The grass and heather grew to the very edge of the deep chasms, sometimes concealing them from view until one was quite close to them. But the juniors of St. Jim's knew the ground well, and they were not likely to meet with any accident among the old quarries.

Tom Merry paused by the edge of one of these deep rifts in the earth, and turned from the line he had been following to pass along the edge till he came to the farther end. He descended a slope into a hollow of the moor—a lake of gorse and heather.

Little did he dream that from the thick gorse a pair of black eyes were watching him with a savage gleam in their depths. Tom Merry had come upon his enemy; but he did not know it. He walked carelessly along, glancing to right and left from habit, but not really thinking that the heather and gorse concealed a foe.

He heard a rustle, and paused, but even then it was only with the thought that Herries' bulldog was coming towards him. He turned his head, and as he did so, he was seized from behind, and hurled upon his face.

Then he realised the truth!

He twisted himself over, and came face upwards; but the weight of his foe was upon his chest, and he was crushed heavily into the ground, on the very edge of the deep pit. A foot more to one side, and he and his assailant would be over the verge. Two dusky hands were at his throat, and two savage eyes glared down at him with savage spite.

"At last!" said Kalouth Das.

Tom Merry looked up at him. In the dark-bronze face of the Indian he read no mercy; only hard and relentless revenge. There was bitter hate and triumph in the face of the Indian.

A chill of horror crept into Tom Merry's heart.

Round them the gorse and heather waved thickly, and hid them from sight. Tom Merry was invisible to the eye, and the Indian was crouching low over him, and was not to be seen by anyone looking into the hollow, unless he came very close. And within a foot of them yawned the terrible pit, extending to unknown depths into the earth.

Tom Merry realised the savage purpose in the face of the Hindu, and his face went very white.

"You dog!" The Indian's voice was low and grating and harsh. "You dog! All have perished excepting myself, but a new Society of the Red Triangle will arise in Bombay to defy the power of the British raj! You dog! The Sahib Merry destroyed us, but he and his kin shall perish in their turn! The man who perished at the school was my uncle—the Chandra Dal who was shot at Bundelpore was my father!

My name is not Kalouth Das—the papers I brought from Bombay were forged. Do you comprehend now? I was sent from India to complete our vengeance—my uncle and myself. My uncle failed, but I shall not fail. Do you understand, you dog? You have but a few moments to live!"

Harder grew the grip upon Tom Merry's throat. The junior struggled desperately.

The dark face bending over him, the glittering eyes, seemed to dance before him as his senses reeled. His consciousness was going; his struggles grew feebler and feebler. A red mist swam before his eyes. As his senses swam he heard a sound in the heather—the sound of a metallic clinking.

The Indian heard it, too, and he turned his head for an instant, and involuntarily his grip relaxed for the moment. Tom Merry made a wild effort, and a cry burst chokingly from his dry lips.

"Towser—Towser!"

The great bulldog came leaping from the heather. Kalouth Das gave a cry, and swung half-round. In a second the bulldog was upon him, with flaming eyes and gleaming teeth. The noble animal knew at once Tom Merry's peril, and he leaped at the Indian with open jaws.

Kalouth Das leaped away to escape him, forgetful of the terrible gulf that yawned at his side. He remembered it as his foot stumbled on the crumbling edge—but he remembered it too late.

For a moment he hung there, over the edge, and striving wildly, frantically, to recover his balance, and throw himself back upon the firm earth. But it was in vain, and the struggle lasted only a moment. Then he sank out of sight away from Tom Merry's horrified eyes, and a faint cry echoed up from the depths of the chasm.

Tom Merry did not hear the terrible thud that followed far, far below, for he had fainted.

The juniors, attracted by the deep voice of the bulldog, came hurrying up to the spot. They found Tom Merry insensible, and the faithful Towser licking his face.

The crumbled edge of the gulf, the footmarks to be seen there, and the cruel thumb-prints on Tom Merry's throat, warned them of what had happened.

Sick with horror, they gathered round Tom Merry and restored him. The hero of the Shell opened his eyes at last; his head was resting upon Monty Lowther's arm, and Manners was bathing his face with water he had brought in his cap. Tom Merry gave a long, shuddering breath.

"Thank Heaven you are safe!" said Blake, with a shiver.

"You found him?"

Tom Merry nodded without speaking.

"And he—"

Blake hesitated.

"Yes. I saw him go over. Towser saved my life. But for Towser I should have gone over instead of him!"

Herries fondled the huge head of his favourite.

"You saved Towser's life once," he said, in a whisper.

"You remember? Good old Towser! And now he's saved yours. And Kalouth Das—"

"We shall never see him again!"

The juniors shuddered, and were silent.

Tom Merry & Co. returned to St. Jim's pale and subdued, to tell there what had happened.

The body of the Indian was searched for, but was not recovered. In some deep recess of the old quarry it rested, and it was never found.

It seemed as if a shadow rested upon the school for days after the terrible occurrence. But the shadow of dire peril was gone from Tom Merry's life, and in time the juniors ceased to think of the terrible events that had followed the coming of Kalouth Das to the old school. But it was likely to be a long time before Tom Merry forgot the dark, sinister face of Kalouth Das.

THE END.

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By S. CLARKE HOOK.



The kite caught in an upper current of wind, which lifted Pete off his feet, but he grabbed at the steam man and succeeded in twining his legs around it. "You vely bad man to lun away with my kite!" yelled Wang.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

In the Desert—Some Very Dear Water.

ONE mighty circle of sunlit sand stretched around the comrades Jack, Sam, and Pete. It was the Sahara, and they, accompanied by the faithful Rory and the not-to-be-depended-on steam man, were trying to cross it, as many had tried before, and failed. Whitening bones marked the spot where the hapless travellers had sunk to their rest, and sometimes camels' bones lay beside them.

Now a heat-mist rose from the mighty desert, and as the African sun streamed on it, it tinged it red. The scene was wonderful, but it was awful in its monotony. On such a scene the comrades had gazed for weeks and weeks. There was no change, save what the sunlight or the moonlight brought.

Pete was just about to stop his steam man, when a hideous yell rang out, and a Chinaman, who was uttering a good many more of those yells, darted from the trees, and made across the desert at a pace that did him credit.

Pete let his steam man go on, and sprang after the fugitive, thinking that he would be able to tell them where there was water, and this made the Chinees run faster than ever, while his yells were appalling.

He was no match for Pete in speed. That worthy soon overtook him, and, grabbing him by the pigtail, swung him round in a manner that caused him to yell worse than ever, if that were possible.

"Here, you come back, old hoss!" exclaimed Pete, getting him under his arm, and carrying him towards the steam man, whom Jack had stopped.

The manner in which the Chinaman struggled was quite remarkable, but Pete got him quite close to the steam man, when Pete suddenly commenced leaping about and doing a little yelling on his own account.

"Hi, golly!" he roared. "De man is biting my leg! Hellup! Murder! Here, I ain't habing any more ob you. For biting purposes you'm worse dan a rat. I'll let my steam man deal wid you, and you can bite and scratch him as much as you like!"

Pete forced the little Chinaman's back against the steam man's right hand, then clasped it upon him; then he started the steam man's arms, and the yelling Chinees was swung up and down in a manner that ought to have made him giddy.

"Golly!" groaned Pete. "De man has bitten half a pound ob steak out ob me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Jack. "You will hurt him, Pete!"

"I'm mighty certain dat I sha'n't hurt him as much as he hurt me!" groaned Pete. "Still, you can stop de swaying arm if you like!"

"I would much rather you did so."

"Well, I don't seem to care much for de job," observed Pete, dodging in.

He succeeded in causing the steam man to release his hold, but as he did so the Chinees flew through the air, and, dropping on Jack, bowled him over.

"Yah, yah, yah!" howled Pete. "Mind dat Chinees, Jack, and be sure you don't hurt him in any way. Golly! He's hurt me enough, too, wid his biting and scratching—specially wid his biting. I'm 'most certain I hab got a six-inch hole frough my leg, and by the pain ob it, you would tink dat hole was large enough to drive a coach and four horses frough!"

"Keep quiet, you little villain!" growled Jack. "If you dare to scratch me, I will give you to the steam man!"

"Steam man vely bad devil!" yelled the Chinaman.

"What's your name?" inquired Jack.

"Wang. A vely good and honest Chinees!"

"Well, look here, old hoss!" exclaimed Pete. "We ain't going to hurt you in any way, and we won't let dat steam man do it, if you behave yourself; but we'm mighty thirsty, and if you bring us some water we will pay you mighty well!"

"Vely sad!" cried Wang, shaking his head, and screwing up his little eyes more than Nature had already done.

"Flaid you can get vely little water. Still, I will tly!"

He darted away amongst the bushes, and the comrades became rather anxious when five minutes elapsed without his return; but now they heard him coming, and to their joy he handed them a gourd containing about half a pint of water. This did not go far amongst three men, who were fearfully thirsty; but they divided it, and Pete gave the little Chinees a shilling, and told him to bring some more.

"Flaid I can get no more, but I will tly. I must pay for this!"

"You buzz off, and we will pay you for all you bring," said Pete.

They got another half-pint for another shilling, and then Wang declared that the Arab who sold it to him refused to

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let him have any more except at double the price; but the comrades were far too thirsty to care about the cost, and for ten shillings Wang filled all their flasks. After that they spent another sovereign in water, and were still thirsty, for Rory had his share.

"I wonder where dat dog has got to?" exclaimed Pete, as Rory disappeared. "Why, dat's his voice! He's barking for something. Look here, he's coming back, and wants us to follow him. Can always tell what Rory wants. Just you come dis way, Wang!"

"Must get back to the town," declared Wang. "The Plofit wants me!"

"Den de Prophet has got to wait, old hoss!" said Pete, grasping him by the arm. "You come along wid me. I hab an idea dat your Arab friend will sell us water a little cheaper dan you hab been doing it!"

"You vely bad man. Let me go!"

"You come along wid me to dat Arab. Seems to me dat Rory is a smarter man ob business dan his master. Nunno, you don't, Wang! You'm coming de way I want you to go!"

He had to do so, and Rory led them to a beautifully clear spring that was bubbling from some rocks.

"Golly!" exclaimed Pete, making the steam man clutch Wang by his pigtail. "Dat's de funniest-looking Arab dat I eber came across. Here we hab been paying a fearful lot ob money for a few half-pints ob water, and we might hab got pailfuls for nuffin!"

"Vely wicked man that Alab," murmured Wang, turning and gazing at the steam man with such a look of dread on his yellow face that it made Pete feel glad. "He told me that he had only a vely lily water!"

"M'yes!" exclaimed Pete, after he had quenched his thirst. "I can see dat Arab's footprints all round dis place, and de funny ting is dat dey are just de same size and shape as yours, Wang. Still, we hab got de water now, and you hab got de gold for it. Mind you, I don't tink dat was de way to treat us, and you mustn't expect such mighty nice treatment in return."

"Listen! You come to the palace of the Plofit. You have vely good food there, and not much charge. Just what you eat."

"I dunno weder you are going to charge for dat at de same rate as de water, 'cos if you are it seems to me dat an ordinary-sized hotel would come much cheaper."

"No hotel. Vely bad places."

"Do you tink de old hoss would like us coming to his palace?"

"I can allange all that. The Plofit too busy to see you, but I can allange the payment."

"Yah, yah, yah! I dunno what dat prophet is like ober money transactions, but I seem to hab a feeling dat I would rader arrange wid de man direct."

"Vely deadful man."

"If he's more deadful dan you he must be; but lead de way, and we will see if de place will suit us for a day or so."

Pete released the Chinaman, who now led the way through the oasis, and, having crossed a broad stretch of sand, they came in sight of the town, which was built on the side of a wooded hill, rising up from the desert, while beyond it the hills towered up in a vast wooded height.

After the dreary waste through which the comrades had passed, the scene that now met their gaze appeared very beautiful, but then they were at a considerable distance from the town.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

How Pete Flew a Kite—His Awkward Ascent—The Steam Man Completes the Damage.

VIEWED from the distance, the town was certainly very picturesque, especially now that the ruddy light of the setting sun was upon it; but as the comrades drew nearer, they saw that the buildings, with one exception, were of the poorest description. Some of them were mere hovels, and there were tents scattered here and there.

The palace was a very large and apparently ancient building, and as they made their way towards it they passed a number of poverty-stricken and extremely dirty-looking Arabs, who took very little heed of the strangers, although they appeared to stand in awe of Wang and the steam man.

He conducted them into a sumptuously-furnished apartment, and, striking a gong, gave some instructions to another Chinaman who answered the call.

In a short space of time food was served up, and as the comrades felt hungry now that their thirst was quenched, they made an excellent meal, quite regardless of what it was going to cost them.

As soon as it was finished, Wang showed them to another

large apartment on the first floor, and here, he told them, they could sleep; their beds consisting of rugs spread on the floor.

It was early yet, but Jack and Sam had slept little the previous night, so they were glad to get some rest, and they actually succeeded in falling asleep before Pete's snoring commenced.

"Well, dis breakfast is all right!" exclaimed Pete, the following morning. "I dunno what it is made ob; still, we must trust Wang for dat."

"You make that steam man?" inquired Wang, ignoring Pete's remarks concerning the breakfast.

"Golly! No. I could not make a steam man like dat."

"Invent clever things myself," observed Wang.

"Was de Arab dat you invented wid de water sort ob clever, old hoss?" inquired Pete.

Wang smiled blandly, and gazed at Pete with supreme contempt. Wang was not at all ashamed of having got the money from Pete; in fact, he meant getting a good lot more before he had done with him.

"Vely clever invention!" declared Wang, ignoring Pete's question.

"What does it do, old hoss?"

"Goes up in the air. Most beautiful kite. You want to see long distance, you climb up cord—and look. Want to see a foeign foe, travel up stiling. Your steam man could hold cord, and you travel up."

"Hab you eber been up, old hoss?"

"No time yet."

"Den suppose you go up dis morning?"

"Plefer you going. Tell you how to go. Plenty of wind. Come and see great kite. You fly kite over enemy's army, and fill it with dynamite. Let cord go, and kite dlop right amongst them. He, he, he! Blow them all to little pieces!"

"Golly!"

"Blow up ships, smash towns, killy people. Plenty more people. Send up another kite, and killy them. Keep on killy till all are dead."

"Well, I must say dat's a nice sort ob invention!" exclaimed Pete.

"Fill kite with bombs. I make plenty of them. Send kite up, and give rope a little shake, few bombs fall out, and killy more people. Plenty of killy! Another little shake—more bombs fall. Enemy fire at kite and hit it. He, he, he! Mighty big explosion in the air. Burst great tank filled with acid. Dlop on enemy and burn him all up. Vely nice invention!"

"I reckon it sounds like it!" growled Sam. "But let's come and have a look at it."

Wang led the way to a large square, and from an empty house he brought forth the various parts of his precious kite, which he put together with great rapidity.

It was made on the lines of a box kite, and when fixed together was upwards of twenty feet square.

Pete's first impression was that it would require a tremendous lot of wind to fly it, but in this he was mistaken, for although there was only a light breeze, the great kite went up immediately.

A very long coil of stout rope was attached to the kite, and Wang induced Pete to let this out as it soared into the heavens.

"Look here, old hoss!" exclaimed Pete. "I hope dere ain't any explosives in dat kite."

"No; only use those for the enemy. No good in the town. Dangelous, and the people would object. I fasten end of cord lound your body so as not to lose kite."

"Eh?"

Wang tied the cord round Pete's waist to illustrate his meaning, and Pete looked rather dubious. He had great reliance on his strength, but the kite was soaring upwards, and it was pulling like mad.

Now, when a thing is pulling upwards, it stands to reason that however strong the man is, he can't pull downwards more than his weight, unless he is fixed on the earth.

Perhaps Pete did not take this into consideration, but when he had let out all of the thick rope, he quickly discovered the fact.

The kite had got into an upper current of wind, and it was a very strong one. Pete was lifted from his feet, but he twined his legs round his steam man.

Possibly, under those circumstances, he might have been able to hold on, but, unfortunately, his feet came in contact with the levers, and he started the steam man's arms and legs at the same moment.

Then Pete received two mighty blows at the back, and there is not a doubt that he would have received a few more had he not released his hold; then he went bounding onwards in a manner that looked distinctly dangerous.

"You vely bad man to lun away with my kite!" yelled Wang.

"Hellup! Murder!" yelled Pete. "I tink de kite is running away wid me. Wooohoo! What are we breaking now?"

There was a frightful crash as Pete was dashed into a large stall where they sold crockery—when they were lucky. The amount of crockery that Pete's body smashed was more than the stallholder would have sold in twelve months, and this was not the worst of it, for as the kite went soaring upwards, Pete was wrenched through the roof of the shanty, and that roof was torn away as though ripped off by a tornado.

A drowning man will catch at a straw, as we have been told on more than one occasion; and on the same principle, a man who is being wrenched into the air will catch at any mortal thing. Pete would have caught at "It" had it been there, and he was not at all sure that it was mortal. However, as "It" was in another place, Pete clutched at the proprietor of the stall. He got him round the body with his right arm; but, in spite of the additional weight, the kite gave another upward leap, so did Pete and his most unwilling burden; then they smashed another stall, sending little ornaments and heathen gods flying in all directions, while Pete got his left arm round the proprietor of that stall, and the three of them dashed into a crowd of Arabs who were trying to dodge the steam man.

For that worthy came prancing along in a manner that was utterly reckless.

Pete dropped on the back of a very fat Turk, and sent him face downwards to the ground; then Pete got his legs round him, and that worked the trick. The kite could lift three men with ease, but it could not shift that Turk, and Pete's acrobatic career had taught him how to cling to things with his legs.

"It's all right, old hoss!" exclaimed Pete. "Don't you get up. You'm de finest kite-stopper dat I eber came across. Golly! I feel like a stout young lady wid a new pair ob stays on! Do stop your laughter, Jack and Sammy, and come and help me haul down dis kite. Hold your row, Fatty! I ain't going to let you get up till I hab got rid ob de kite!"

By their united efforts the comrades hauled in the kite, and then they went to attend to the steam man. He had been brought up by a fruit stall, and was doing his utmost to mash apples and other fruits, and he was succeeding remarkably well. The proprietor of this stall was crouching

in one corner of it, the one furthest from the steam man, and he was yelling for help at the top of his voice.

"It's all right, old hoss!" panted Pete, seating himself on an unbroken stool. "I hab stopped de steam man. Just gib me a penn'orth ob plums. Oh, do stop your laughter, Jack! I hab got quite enough to trouble me, widout you guffawing in my ear!"

"You vely wicked man!" yelled Wang, rushing up. "You have knocked down Hafaz, and he will killy you for it!"

"Well, if Hafaz is de fat old buffer, I dunno how he is going to kill me," observed Pete, helping himself to a plum. "He might be able to do it by dropping on me like I dropped on him. But here he comes wid a flaming sword. Hellup! He's going to chop my noddle off!"

Hafaz rushed forward, brandishing a broad-bladed semitar, and before anyone could prevent him, he lashed at Pete's neck with a strength that would certainly have severed it.

Pete darted his body backwards, and the flashing weapon passed harmlessly over his body. The next instant he was on his feet, and he brought the stool down on the infuriated Turk's head with a force that caused him to sit on the floor of the shop, and gaze around in a manner that clearly showed he did not know where he was. Not only that, but he dropped his dangerous weapon.

"Look here, old hoss!" exclaimed Pete, picking him up notwithstanding his weight. "I'm going to hand you ober to my steam man for correction. Golly! You ain't as light as a bundle ob feathers, eider. Here, steam man, just you catch hold ob him by de ribs, and—"

"How do you suppose I am going to find his ribs, you idiot of a nigger?" came a deep voice, apparently from the steam man. It was a little of Pete's ventriloquism, only the astonished spectators had not the slightest idea of that. "He's got two or three hundredweight of blubber over his ribs, and—"

"Well, catch hold ob him by de fatty degeneration ob his sides, den," said Pete, in his natural voice. "M'yes! Dat's de way! Now dance him up and down to show him dat dere's no animosity, and to put him into a good temper!"

Once the steam man's grip was on Hafaz he was as helpless as an infant, and now Pete started the lever that moved the steam man's arms up and down.

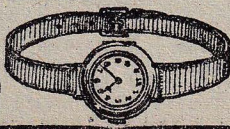
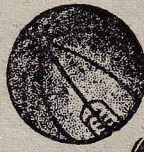
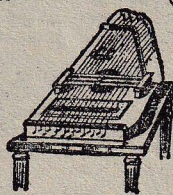
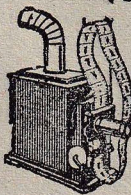
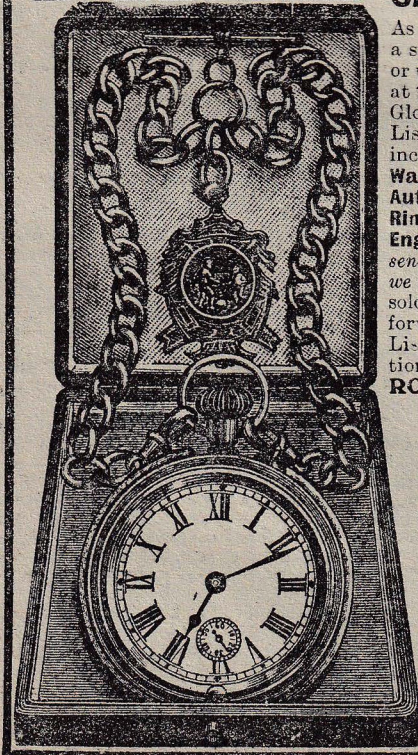
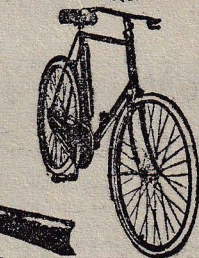
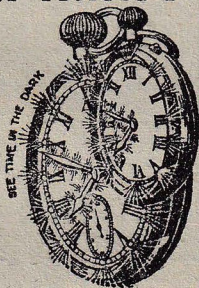
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SEE THEM IN THE DARK

"Gee up, steam man!" said Pete. "We will trot him to de palace, and introduce him to de Prophet. Pr'aps if we left him for a night wid 'It,' he might lose some ob his fatness, and tink what a mercy dat would be to de man."

Pete started his steam man to walk, and the inhabitants scattered out of his way. Hafaz was generally hated, for he was a potentate in that town, and no living man could possibly like a Turk who was anything like that; at the same time, the inhabitants, fearful of offending him, kept out of his sight and grinned. Not one of them made the slightest attempt to release him, and it would have been all the same if they had.

The steam man marched to the palace, raising the unfortunate Hafaz up and down in the most ludicrous manner, and all the way he howled at the top of his voice for the help that was not forthcoming.

"Now, look here, old hoss," exclaimed Pete, releasing him when they had entered the palace, "you ain't got de right to cut off niggers' heads!"

"You black dog, I will have your life!" stormed Hafaz, glaring at the steam man as though he intended taking summary vengeance on him.

"Dat's where you are stupid as well as fat. Sit down, if you can find a chair dat will bear you."

"Tell the Prophet dat I must see him immediately, Wang!" ordered Hafaz. "Say it is on most urgent business."

"Effendi, it shall be as you command!" declared Wang, leaving the apartment.

"I'll have you placed in the deepest dungeon of this palace!" declared Hafaz, glaring at Pete, and looking as fierce as it is possible for a very fat man to look.

"Dat's where you are all in de wrong, my poor old bag ob bones," said Pete, pulling out a clay pipe and lighting it. "In de first place, I bowled you ober by accident, and den as I didn't want to pay a visit to de moon in Wang's kite, it was only natural dat I should use you as ballast to keep me down. But here comes Wang, and he ain't brought de Prophet wid him."

"My master vely solly, effendi," murmured Wang, trying to look sorry himself. "He cannot be seen by human beings now."

"Perdition! I will see him!" howled Hafaz. "The old rascal has fooled me long enough! I insist on seeing him. Go! Tell him that I do not leave this palace till I see him. I care neither for him nor his friend."

"Vely deadful to talk of the Ploft like that!" murmured Wang.

"You blink-eyed heathen!" howled the infuriated man, seizing Wang by the pigtail and shaking him so violently that it seemed as though he would wrench off the greasy plait. "Go to your master, and say that if he does not see me immediately I will come to him."

"Effendi, can you defy the Ploft?" murmured Wang. "I go to obey your order, but it is vely dangelous for you."

"Begone, you snivelling brute!" roared the great man, emphasising his order with a kick that sent the unfortunate Wang flying through the doorway.

Wang evidently thought it inadvisable to return, for although he called for the Chinaman time after time, Hafaz could not get him to answer the call.

In a terrific temper Hafaz at length strode from the place without even saying good-bye to the comrades.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Pete's Wheeze—How it Succeeded.

WHEN Wang entered the room again he looked in a very happy frame of mind. Pete did not question him concerning the Prophet, as he knew Wang's answers would not be anything like truthful.

A very good dinner was served up, and Wang asked for some money for the cost of their keep. He declared that the Prophet had told him to do so. Wang said that he would charge them the exact cost of the food, and that it was three pounds a day, and when he received this amount he appeared to be very much annoyed with himself that he had not asked more.

"For the sleeping there will be another three pounds a night," he observed, pocketing the first lot of sovereigns and holding out his hand for the nightly accommodation.

"Look here, old hoss," exclaimed Pete, "you ain't habing any more!"

"The Ploft will put a curse on you!"

"De old hoss can put as many ob dose on us as he likes, but you ain't habing any more money."

"You vely bad wicked man!"

"Yah, yah, yah! Should say you ought to be a mighty good judge ob dem, too. But trot along, Wang; we want

to eat our dinner, and we don't want you fooding around while we are doing it."

Wang was not at all satisfied. He wanted to get another ten pounds or so from the comrades, and he tried Jack and Sam to see if they would be more amenable to reason than Pete, but here he was disappointed again, and so he left the room, informing them that they were all very bad and wicked men.

"Well, dat's all right," observed Pete, applying himself to the dinner. "I'm rader inclined to tink dat de steam man will be able to discover weder dere is a prophet, and if so, where de man is; but I'm mighty certain Wang won't draw any more ob our money on account ob dat Prophet."

"How do you propose to act, Pete?" inquired Jack.

"Take de steam man to de room where Wang is sleeping, den let de steam man's words and actions do de rest. If my steam man can't convince an ordinary constituted, heathen Chinees, den I shall sell him for scrap-iron and drink his petrol."

Jack and Sam did not see much sense in Pete's idea; but believing that he would be far more likely to go to sleep that afternoon than Wang, they left him alone, chatting about various things as they finished dinner, and then, as the other Chinaman came to clear it away, and Pete lay down on a couch, having first lighted his pipe, they felt absolutely certain that he would take no steps that afternoon, at any rate.

But in this they were quite mistaken. It is true that Pete was sleepy, and that his eyes closed more than once, but he never went to sleep; they knew that by the want of snoring.

"Should say it was about time dat Chinaman was asleep," observed Pete, starting up in about an hour's time. "I tink I will go and hab a look how de old hoss is getting on."

Pete entered two or three apartments before he came to the right one, in which there was a strong smell of opium.

Wang was stretched on some rugs on the floor, and there was a placid smile on his face, while an opium-pipe lay close beside his lips. The apartment was most sumptuously furnished, and Pete ought to have known that if he started his steam man going in that room that there would be a frightful lot of damage done; however, he had made up his mind to learn the truth concerning the Prophet, so that all other considerations had little weight with him.

"It's all right, boys!" exclaimed Pete, returning to the apartment where his steam man was. "Wang is in de arms ob Morphia. He is as fast asleep as a window-mouse in de winter-time."

"I fancy you mean dormouse," corrected Jack, leaving Pete's other little mistake to pass.

"Dere ain't enough difference between de two to argue about, Jack; den again, it is much more likely dat I should know what I mean dan you should. At any rate, Wang is as fast asleep as seven sleepers on de railway, and he's got to be woke up by my steam man. After dat you are likely to see a little fun. Dis way to London."

Wang was dead asleep by reason of the opium fumes, and he did not detect the slight noise the comrades made when they entered the room.

Having locked the door, Pete directed his companions to conceal themselves in the alcove; then he started the steam man in small circles, which were not always equal ones, especially as he got up speed.

In his first rush round the large apartment, he knocked over a table on the top of the sleeper, and Wang was a sleeper no longer.

Leaping to his feet, Wang darted round the room, yelling at the top of his voice. He had been smoking a great deal too much opium, and he reeled about something like a drunken man, though he was far more nimble.

"You little worm!" came a hoarse voice, apparently from the steam man. "I'll teach you to deceive my master and say there is a prophet here! Let me get at you!"

"Wooohoo! Take it away!" howled Wang, making a bolt towards the door, and receiving a blow over the side of the head that sent him to the floor; but he was up again in an instant, and away he darted again, stumbling over broken furniture, and smashing a lot more in his efforts to avoid the steam man, for it was very difficult to tell in which direction the next rush would be.

"Where's the Prophet, you lying rascal?" demanded that hoarse voice. "I won't stop charging at you till I know."

"Wooloo! You vely wicked steam devil!" howled Wang. "The Ploft is in the vaults. Go away, or I killy you!"

"You rat, I'll kill you if you don't tell me the truth. Where's the Prophet?"

"In the vaults. Wahah! In the furthest vault beyond the

pit. Oh, you villain of a steam man, look at the damage you are doing!"

Wang stumbled over some broken furniture, and as he fell to the floor, the steam man gave him a kick that sent him half across the room; then Pete rushed to the rescue, and stopped the steam man just as he was charging down again.

"Now, look here, old hoss," exclaimed Pete, shaking his head at the steam man, "you ain't got de right to knock Wang about like dis! You might hab hurt him."

"Wahah! Vely bad devil of a steam man has hurt me!" hooted Wang.

"Nunno, he ain't! Dat's only your imagination!"

"The vely wicked beast has been talking to me!"

"How do you suppose a steam man can talk?" demanded Pete. "Must be your imagination again. De fact ob de matter is, you hab been taking too much opium, and it has got into your noddle and made you imagine tings. Just you lie down and go to sleep again."

With that, Pete led his steam man from the room. Jack and Sam crept out after him. They had heard all they wanted to hear.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

In the Vaults—The Prophet—Bowled Out.

"WELL, boys," said Pete, once they were back in their own room, "I tink we shall be able to find de old Prophet now. Let us make for de vaults!"

It did not take the comrades long to reach the vaults. Proceeding along a narrow passage for some fifty yards, they came upon a cell that looked like a wild beast's cage. Strong iron bars were in front of it, and seated on a stone slab was an old man with a long white beard.

"Are you the man they call the Prophet?" demanded Jack.

"I am!" cried the old man; "and may my curse fall on the miscreant who has placed me here!"

"I suppose that will be Wang?"

"Yes; my servant. He got me here by false pretences, and locked me in. Here he has kept me for weeks, and nearly starved me. He thinks that I have treasure concealed in the palace, and has sworn to torture me to death if I will not reveal to him where it is. I knew that he only wanted to discover that so that he might rob me, and he would have left me in this unknown cell to starve to death. I have passed days and days in this darkness, until at times madness has come to me."

"Well, old hoss," exclaimed Pete, "we are going to let you out now; but all de same, from what I learn ob you, you deserved some sort ob punishment. Howber, dat ain't got anything to do wid us. 'Spect my axe will hab some effect on dese bars. Stand clear!"

The blows Pete dealt bent the strong iron, and sparks flew from the head of the axe. Blow after blow he dealt, until at last he smashed one of the bars from the stonework, then he started on the others; and before long he had made an opening sufficiently large for the old man to get through.

The Prophet uttered no word of thanks to his rescuers. He muttered fiercely to himself, and several times they caught the word "vengeance."

"Should hab taught you were rader too old to tink about vengeance," observed Pete. "You know, you can't hab so mighty long to lib in dis world."

"Ah, I shall live longer than Wang!" he cried. "I

shall live to see him suffer worse torments than I have suffered! He shall die—but he shall die slowly. I have seen demons mocking me in the darkness. He shall see them, too; and he shall suffer ten times worse than I have suffered. Then I will watch him slowly die, and mock his agonies."

"Sort ob turn yourself into anoder demon—eh, old hoss? Just you come dis way. You ain't going to do all you want, but only what we shall allow you to do."

"You black beast! Do you dare to talk to me like this? Do you know my power?"

"Yah, yah, yah! De old hoss is too mighty funny to lib on dis earth! All right, old hoss, you come along wid me, and don't you boder yourself about your power, 'cos I'm mighty certain I ain't going to."

Pete led the old rascal into Wang's room, and now the Prophet's eyes gleamed as though madness had seized him, while Wang looked very frightened.

"You dog!" cried the Prophet, actually foaming at the mouth as he gave vent to his fury. "You Chinese ape! Now comes my time for vengeance!"

"Pete is a vely good man," murmured Wang, glancing at that worthy, who was holding the infuriated old man by the arm.

"Ain't it surprising how quickly I hab turned good," observed Pete, winking at Jack. "It wasn't many minutes ago dat I was a vely wicked devil, according to Wang. Seems to me his notions ob good and bad must be rader mixed. Nunno, old hoss; you just keep still. We don't want to see a scratching match between you and Wang; and, mind you, from personal experience, I'm inclined to tink dat Wang would get de best ob de scratching, 'specially if he started biting as well."

"I will have his life!" declared the old wretch, trembling in his impotent passion. "He shall die; and his death will be terrible and lingering!"

"Vely wicked man!" murmured Wang. "Let me get away from here!"

"You shall never escape me! My curse is upon you; and it will follow you to the ends of the earth!"

"I don't mind your curse!" declared Wang. "You tried to poison me once, and I mind that; but the other I do not mind at all!"

"Yah, yah, yah! He seems to know 'bout de size ob your curse, old hoss!" said Pete. "And what I want is dat de oder people in dis place should know dat it is perfectly harmless. Look here, Sammy, I wish you would bring Hafaz here, and den we can get him to collect de people, and if dey see how harmless de old idiot is, perhaps dey will come to deir senses."

"I reckon I'll soon have him here; but don't you let that old villain go."

"Dere's no fear ob him escaping, Sammy," said Pete. "I don't want to hurt de old bag ob bones in any way, but you must see dat he ain't got as much strength as I hab, and derefore he won't be able to escape. Buzz off, Sammy!"

As Sam hurried away, the old man commenced to revile Wang, who returned the compliment with interest, and if half of what he said was true, the Prophet must have been a fearful scoundrel, and a murderer.

"It's all right, you two!" exclaimed Pete, as the old man struggled in vain to get at the Chinaman. "I can see you want us to believe de worst about you, and I must say I tink dere is a great deal ob truth in what you are saying about each oder; at de same time, it won't make any difference as to de manner in which we are going to

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treat you bof, so you are only exciting yourselves widout doing any good."

"The hound of a Chinaman was my servant!" yelled the old man.

"M'yes, old hoss; and den it would appear as dough he became your master—at any rate, he was master ob de situation, and I dunno what would hab happened to you if we had not rescued you. Still, I don't tink you are a safe sort ob man to be allowed to take vengeance on anyone, and I ain't allowing you to take it."

"You allow me, you black beast! Do you think I will be dictated to by you?"

"Hold him tight, Pete," murmured Wang. "He is a vely bad man. You ought to kill him, so that he can do no more harm."

"And what do you suppose I ought to do wid you, Wang?"

"You ought to let me go, and leward me for placing that vely bad man in your power."

"Yah, yah, yah! I must say you'm got a funny way ob settling matters. All de same, we will wait for Hafaz, and see what he has to say 'bout de matter."

When Hafaz arrived he gave his opinion in a very few words. Having pointed out that the old man had been robbing the people for a great many years, and that Wang had been helping him all he could, besides robbing them on his own account, Hafaz gave it as his opinion that they both ought to be shot, and he even offered to do it, if the comrades were agreeable.

"Well, we ain't going to hab any murders ober de job," said Pete. "You may be right in saying dat dey bof deserve to be shot, but den it is a question weder you don't deserve it as well; and if we start shooting all de people in dis place who deserve it, de chances are we should run short ob ammunition. 'Nuff said! Dey ain't going to be shot, but de people are going to be made aware how harmless de ole hoss is, and for dat purpose you had better get as many ob dem togeder as you can."

"We can easily do that by ringing the palace bell," said Hafaz. "It was how the old wretch used to summon them."

"Bery well, suppose you go and ring de bell, old hoss. If you frow all your weight on it, I should say you would be able to shift it."

"I will go and ling it," said Wang.

"Nunno, you won't! You will stay dere till I tell you to go. I'm going to march de steam man into de square just directly, and de chances are you will hab to go wid him."

The bell was a large one, and almost every inhabitant in the place obeyed the summons. Then Pete raised the steam man's arms, so that Wang was lifted from his feet, and as Pete started the steam man marching towards the square, Wang yelled at the top of his voice the whole way. These cries helped to summon the inhabitants, who appeared to be greatly delighted to see their old enemy in that position.

"Listen to me, all de lot ob you!" cried Pete. "Dis miserable old creature is no more a prophet dan I am. He could no more cast spells ober you dan I could; and Jack and Sammy will tell you dat I ain't a bit ob good at spelling—specially wid difficult words. Now, don't you tink dat you'm mighty stupid to pay money to dis old humbug for nuffin? What sort ob power do you suppose he's got to let me hold him wid one hand? Yah, yah, yah! You make me laugh wid your superstition! Mind, it doesn't matter to me weder you choose to hand your money ober to him or not, 'cos we'm going away from dis place; but before we go, I would like to make it clear to you what mighty big idiots you hab been."

"Here de old rascal not only goes and collars de best palace in de place—and I don't suppose dat it belongs to him any more dan it does to you; den he makes you pay for his keep, which ought not to cost much; and he makes you trot out your money so dat he may hab a mighty big hoard; after dat he laughs at you for a lot ob ignorant fools for being so soft as to believe de lies he tells you about his power. Dere isn't one ob you who can point out a single ting he has done dat you could not hab done. But I dare say dere's a good many tings he has done dat some ob you would not care to do."

"Yah, yah, yah! You make me laugh at you for your stupidity; and I must say dat dis jibbering old idiot has

shown himself smarter dan you, while all dis time he has been robbing you right and left. You can depend upon it, he has got your money hoarded up in de palace, and if it was my case I should take back all dat belonged to me, which I 'spect would be about all he has got."

"Mind you dis, I am going to let him loose in de palace, and I'm also going to let Wang loose. He can go where he likes, and de same remark applies to de old man, only I would advise dem not to get too close to each oder, 'cos deir tempers are in a rocky condition, and de chances are dey would hurt each oder."

"Now den, people, you can please yourselves 'bout listening to dis old humbug, and paying him any more money, but you hab got to consider dat we free hab shown him up to you in his true colours, and for dat service we want you to pledge your words dat you won't harm eider him or his servant Wang, who shoved him in an iron cage, and kept him dere, while he has been collecting your money."

"He shall not be harmed—neither of them shall be harmed!" cried Hafaz. "You all promise that?"

The promise was shouted out, and Pete released the old man, who at once tried to address the crowd; but they howled him down, while a number of them, with an eye to the main chance, made a rush towards the palace, evidently with the hope of getting some of their own back.

"Now den, old hoss," exclaimed Pete, turning to the old rascal, "you hab got de chance ob escaping, and if you take my advice you will do it. Dose people hab promised not to hurt you; but, you see, we are going away from here, and after we are gone it is just possible dat dey may forget dat promise."

"Demon, you have ruined me!" cried the old wretch. "You have robbed me of all my wealth. They will burn the palace to the ground, and steal everything of value in it."

"Well, dat is a risk dat you will hab to run, and I must say if dey do all dat dey will only be getting some ob deir own back. You hab humbugged dem long enough. Go away. I will look after Wang, and see dat he does not attack you."

"My life will not be safe in this town."

"Den go to anoder one. I dare say you will be able to get something out ob your hoard, and dat ought to be enough to keep you for de rest ob your life."

The old rascal hesitated for some time, and then he made his way to the palace, while the comrades followed him, bringing the steam man and Wang with them.

Arrived there, they found the public helping themselves to everything of value. There was not one of them whom the old man had not robbed, and now they were getting their own back. They did not attempt to interfere with the old man, and he slunk away into the vaults, probably to get possession of his hoard, but as some of the people followed him there would be little chance of his succeeding.

There were one or two struggles for the possession of the more valuable things, and several vases and ornaments were smashed; but Pete kept them in order pretty well by threatening to fling anyone out who attempted to draw a weapon.

Some two hours later Pete marched his steam man from the town, and that steam man carried Wang in his arms, while he yelled with fury.

His yells, however, had no effect on Pete, who guided his steam man northwards over the hills, and it was not until they had lost sight of the town in the distance that they released Wang from his extremely uncomfortable position.

"Now den, old hoss," exclaimed Pete, "you'm as free as de little birds ob de forest, and you can please yourself 'bout what you are going to do. Oh, it ain't any good your yelling at me like dat! If you ain't satisfied wid your position it will be an easy matter for you to return to de palace, dough if you take my advice you will go in de opposite direction."

"I shall go back!" declared Wang.

"Bery well, go, den. We'm going on. 'Nuff said!"

Whether Wang returned or not, the comrades never knew, but he certainly took that direction, and when they lost sight of his form among the trees, they continued their journey.

THE END.

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