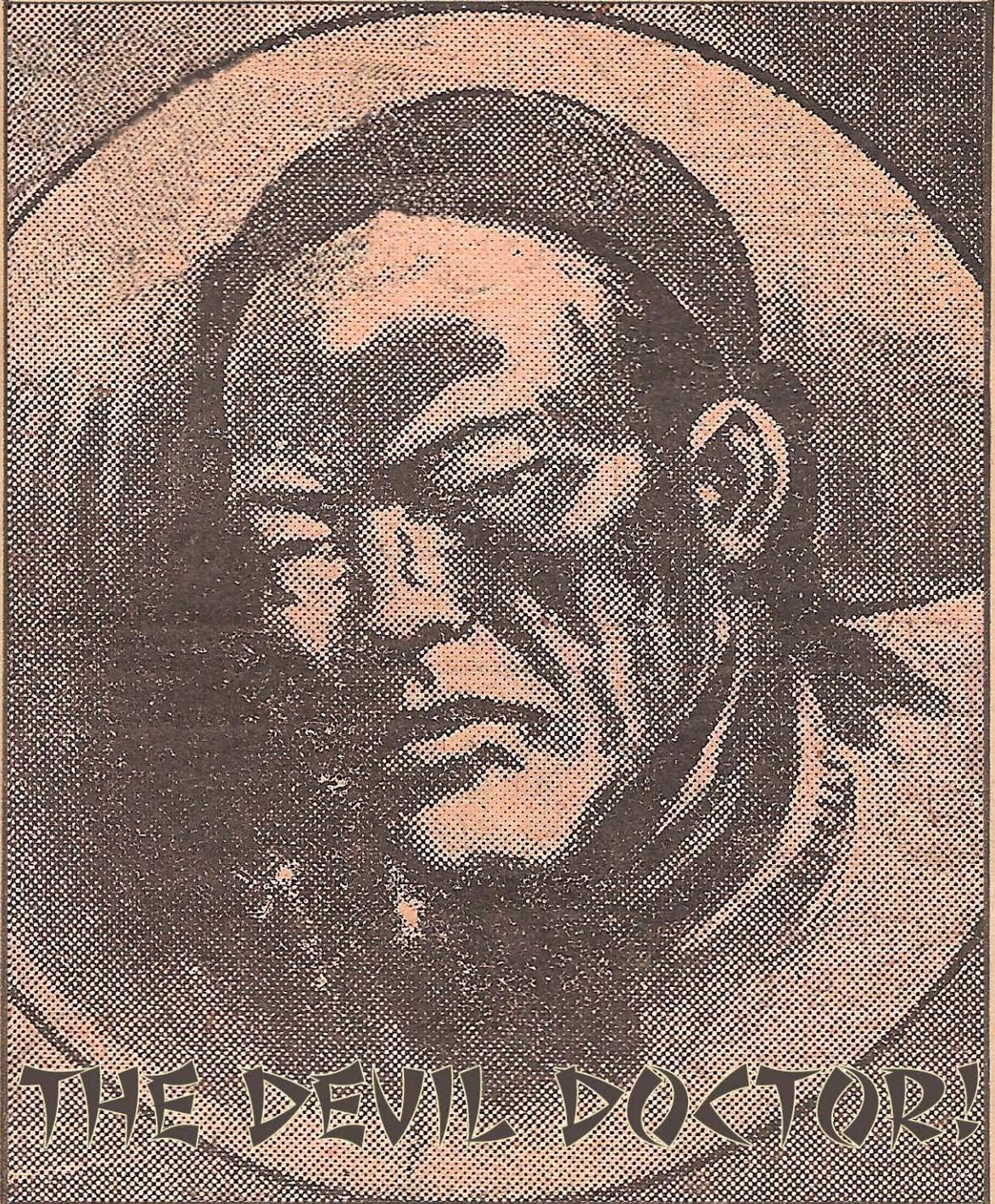


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SEXTON BLAKE VERSUS DOCTOR FU MANCHU!



An Enthralling, Complete Detective Story,

— INTRODUCING —

SEXTON BLAKE & TINKER.

The Prologue

The Other Organisation

In the box there was a huge pearl of outstanding purity and a small square of white card which bore the message: 'For services rendered and with sincere gratitude — the Si Fan'.

Sexton Blake placed the box and its contents on the mantelpiece and gazed at it thoughtfully. This Si Fan business had him puzzled.

A few days previously he and his young assistant, Tinker, had investigated the murder of a shopkeeper and the theft from his premises of a Chinese tapestry with a dragon woven upon it — a 'miankse'. Blake traced the crime to the Brotherhood of the Yellow Beetle, that nefarious organisation headed by Prince Wu Ling. The Brotherhood was trying to keep the miankse out of the hands of its rightful owners; a rival tong named the Si Fan.

Tinker had wrested the silk banner from the hands of Wu Ling himself and it was returned to the shopkeeper's family. At their request, and with help from one of his contacts in London's Chinatown, Blake arranged for its sale to the Si Fan. An astonishing sum of money was exchanged for the silk and the family breathed a sigh of relief when it was taken off their hands, for it was obviously a dangerous item to possess.

The case was closed with a final word from Blake's contact, who advised him to seek an audience with Assistant

Commissioner Denis Nayland Smith. Blake reported to 'C', the head of the British Secret Intelligence Service, as he always did after an encounter with the Brotherhood of the Yellow Beetle. During the meeting he mentioned the Si Fan and asked where he might find the commissioner.

C gave a surprising reply: "Under no circumstances are you to contact him. Nor are you to investigate this other organisation. Leave it alone, Blake. That's a direct order!"

No explanation was offered.

Blake returned home. In his absence, a small box had been delivered. It contained the pearl and the message.

Sexton Blake was intrigued — but orders are orders so, with a shrug of his shoulders, he let the matter rest.

This was the first occasion that Sexton Blake ignored the Si Fan.

Months passed. Frantic months! The detective found himself pushed to the limits as he finally overthrew the Criminals' Confederation, struggled with an increasingly active Zenith the Albino, and battled Doctor Satira.

Occasionally the words 'Si Fan' popped into his head unbidden and seemed to stir in him a memory but, for the life of him, he could not dredge it up out of his subconscious, so he dismissed it — for Blake's memory was eidetic where crime was concerned, which meant that if he couldn't recall where he'd heard of the Si Fan, then it was of no importance, for it could not be connected with crime.

It was Tinker who eventually provided

the breakthrough.

He and his 'gub'nor' were recovering from their third run-in with Satira. It had ended in a blazing inferno and they both felt battered, bruised and exhausted. A long healing sleep had helped somewhat and now they were enjoying one of Mrs Bardell's extravagant breakfasts; a proven restorative!

Blake, as he ate, was reading The Daily Radio. Tinker was concentrating only on the scrambled eggs, devilled kidneys, grilled bacon and tomatoes, fried eggs and mushrooms, toast and marmalade. His thoughts — what thoughts he had — were meandering. And as so often happens when a brain is at rest, an obscure memory popped into it for no apparent reason.

He stopped eating and stared at Blake, an expression of astonishment on his face.

"My hat!"

Blake looked up from the newspaper.

"What is it, young'un?"

"Do you recall the affair of the dragon miankse? The Si Fan?"

"Of course. What about it?"

"I just remembered where I heard about 'em before! I always thought the name sounded strangely familiar!"

"Me too! Where?"

"You'll think this ridiculous but it was in a story book, years ago! You remember when our first encounter with Wu Ling was written up in the Union Jack?"

Blake smiled. "Yes, a masterful example of misinformation and exaggeration! Thank goodness Lord Northcliffe is on our side!"

"Well," continued Tinker, "that same week — when the story was published

— a book came out which told a very, and I mean a very, similar tale. It was about a Chinese warlord named Fu Manchu, who led an organisation called the Si Fan. He was opposed by an Englishman named — "

"Nayland Smith!" interrupted Blake.

"Yes! Well gov'nor, you know what these publishers are like! They take one story, give it a tweak, change the names, and republish it under a different title. How many of our cases have ended up being attributed to Nelson Lee or Fenlock Fawn, fr'instance?"

"True," nodded Blake.

"So I guess I just dismissed the story as a copy and haven't thought about it since! And now here we are a few months after a brush with an organisation called the Si Fan and suddenly that giddy book pops into my head!"

"Curious!" said Blake thoughtfully. The fact that the Si Fan had featured in an adventure book explained why he had so easily, though not consciously, dismissed it from his mind. He paused and glanced at the pearl displayed on the mantelpiece. "Tinker, after breakfast, why don't you track down a copy of that book for me?"

"Rightie-ho, gov'nor!"

Later that day, Sexton Blake, spread-eagled in his armchair, lay aside a copy of 'The Mystery of Dr Fu Manchu', lit his pipe and started smoking furiously. The consulting room quickly filled with noxious fumes, causing Pedro, the great bloodhound, to abandon his place on the rug to seek the more pleasantly scented air of Mrs Bardell's domain.

"I wonder ... " muttered the detective. "I wonder ... "

Tinker had gone to the Odeon to see 'Big Business', the latest Laurel and Hardy film. When he returned, eager to entertain his gov'nor with the duo's latest antics, he found the consulting room empty.

"Hmm, where's he gone off to?" mused the youngster. "Hope I haven't missed the start of another case!"

Sexton Blake was, in fact, at the headquarters of the Secret Intelligence Service, deep in discussion with C.

The mention of Doctor Fu Manchu had broken C's silence concerning Assistant Commissioner Denis Nayland Smith and the Si Fan.

What Blake was now learning infuriated him.

The Si Fan, he was informed, was an

organisation every bit as dangerous as The Brotherhood of the Yellow Beetle; its leader as cunning and merciless as Prince Wu Ling.

Assistant Commissioner Sir Denis Nayland Smith and his assistant Doctor Petrie had successfully opposed the Si Fan's various schemes for some considerable time now. They been granted a 'roving commission', which allowed them to exercise authority over any group that could help in their mission against the Si Fan. It was the same commission that Sexton Blake and Tinker had been given by the Secret Intelligence Service to help with their struggle against Wu Ling.

Essentially, Blake and Nayland Smith were doing the same job for the British government but against different opponents. What angered Blake, though, was the fact that those opponents were ranged against each other — so why had C kept the investigators apart when they could have worked together to exchange intelligence and to increase the rivalry between the Si Fan and The Brotherhood of the Yellow Beetle? After all, if the two groups were fully occupied with each other, they would have less resources with which to operate against the British Empire! C was having none of it.

"Blake," he explained curtly, "I want the groups handled separately. You have proven to be the best man to oppose Wu Ling's group. You and your assistant have been doing it for years and I'm extremely pleased with the results. Similarly with Nayland Smith and the Si Fan. You each have one great force that would like to see you dead. If you combine your talents, you will each have two great forces plotting to cut your throats. If one of you is done in, the other will be left to battle overwhelming odds. I cannot afford that risk! I don't even want any contact between you two! Nayland Smith is off limits, understood?"

So that was that.

Sexton Blake didn't agree with C's logic but he knew an order when he heard it, so he returned to Baker Street and crossed the 'other organisation' off his list of unfinished business.

It was the second time that Sexton Blake ignored the Si Fan.

Thanks to George Marsden Plummer, there would not be a third.

The First Chapter The Scheming Begins

Ever since he was sprung from gaol by Prince Wu Ling's men after the failure of the Great Canal Plot, George Marsden Plummer had been laying low in the Rif Mountains of Morocco. He had adopted his other identity — that of Sakr-el-Droog, the Hawk of the Peak — and had eaten and fought side by side with the wild tribesmen of those untamed heights.

Although he hated the lifestyle, as a bandit he excelled. His latent anger, so easily aroused and so ferocious in its expression, together with his naturally arrogant bearing, impressed the Riffians; they regarded him as a born leader. This appealed immensely to his egotistical nature, so he put up with the harsh environment and poor food and in doing so he gained something that he'd never experienced before — a vague sense of loyalty.

It was reciprocated. There was a sizeable army of Riffians hidden amid the crags and the men would follow him into Hell's teeth if he so ordered — and he had so ordered on more than one occasion during the their long and violent war against the united forces of Spain and France.

Now, though, the ragged army was at a low ebb. It had lost its figurehead, Abd el-Krim, who had surrendered to the French just a few months previously and was currently exiled on the island of Réunion. It was also in dire need of supplies and munitions.

For this reason, Plummer was on his way to England to appeal to a rather shady financier named Fairfax who had provided funds to the army on previous occasions. In return for his support, the Riffians saw to it that Fairfax received concessions on some of the most productive of the country's phosphate mines. He was also guaranteed further trade rights when the Riffians secured territory from their European enemies. However, if truth be told, Plummer's motivation was rather more selfish than it seemed, for he regarded himself as a gentleman — and gentlemen require the comforts of civilisation. Luxury was, in his opinion, his birthright, and after so many months of austerity he could no longer resist the temptation of London's hotels and clubs, even though that particular city was home to his arch nemesis, Sexton Blake.

So Plummer rode to Tangier and boarded a boat which, under cover of darkness, dropped him on the coast of Spain just north of Gibraltar. The Iberian peninsular was dangerous ground for him. Should the Spanish authorities discover Sakr-el-Droog in their territory, he would doubtlessly share the same fate as Abd el-Krim.

Even without the significant part he had played in the Riff war, Plummer would have found Spain an uncomfortable land through which to travel. Under the authoritarian rule of General Miguel Primo de Rivera, the country was fragmenting. Its politics were careening out of control, becoming ever more extreme, setting neighbours against neighbours, even dividing families. Civil war seemed inevitable and an atmosphere of lawlessness pervaded the hot, dusty and passionate land.

Plummer travelled with his head held low and his lips sealed. He rode hard, ate little, evaded bandits and eventually made it to the Pyrenees, which he thankfully crossed. He entered France and two days later traversed the Channel, landed in Southampton and took a train to London. Finally, tired, irritated and in no mood for an argument, he stood face to face with Fairfax who said: "It's impossible! I can't finance the Rif army any more!"

Plummer's agate green eyes flared dangerously.

"You refuse? Explain!"

"Please," begged Fairfax, "You have to understand that the situation has changed!"

Plummer placed his knuckles on Fairfax's desk and leaned forward on his muscular arms, bringing his strange eyes closer to the financier's round, fat face.

"How so?"

"I-I-I'm being bled dry!"

"Not by us!" snapped Plummer.

"No! No!" stammered Fairfax. "There's another group! They are asking for two million. Two million!"

Plummer reeled backwards. Another group? Two million? Who would demand such a staggering amount?

"What!" he barked. "Who are they?"

Fairfax dropped his head into his hands and blubbered, "I daren't tell! I can't! They'll kill me!"

Plummer reached out and grabbed the man's collar, hauling him halfway across the desk.

"I will kill you right now unless you spill

the beans. Speak!"

Fairfax spilled the beans.

Afterwards Plummer sat in silence for ten minutes, his chin resting on his fist, a frown creasing his brow.

Then he looked up and said, "Very well. So you have the two million they demanded?"

"Y-yes! But parting with it will ruin me!"

"Ruin or death! Which is it to be? Listen Fairfax, if you want to live, you'll do exactly as I say. Pay the usual amount to the Riffians — put it into the account we established for that purpose. As for this other matter, let me deal with it. Give me one and a half million. I'll deliver it to this group and I'll tell them that you're raising the rest and will have it soon. But I'll try to negotiate with them — make them see reason. Maybe you won't have to cough up that quarter of a million at all."

"But these people ..." quaked Fairfax.

"Never you mind 'these people'. Leave everything to me."

"But — but —"

"Damn you! Do it or I will wring your neck right here, right now!"

Reluctantly, with no vestige of courage left to help him resist, Fairfax agreed.

Two hours later, George Marsden Plummer left the office with one and a half million pounds in cheques in his pocket. He had given the financier the address of a safe-house and ordered him to hide there until negotiations were complete. Plummer fully intended to contact the mysterious other group. He wanted to know who they were and what they were up to. However, there would be no negotiations and they would never receive the money.

That was his.

George Marsden Plummer adopted a disguise and a new identity — that of Colonel Ash, disgraced army officer — and approached Fairfax's contact, a Chinaman named Sing. This man — he was a clerk in a lawyer's office — told him a great deal.

Plummer had already worked with the Brotherhood of the Yellow Beetle and found it to be a profitable experience. Now he was learning of another organisation of the same ilk — and it wasn't long before a scheme occurred to him.

Sing took a carefully worded message to the leader of the organisation on

'Colonel Ash's' behalf. A mere three hours later, Ash was summoned to a meeting.

It took place underground, in a large chamber accessed via a café in the Limehouse district of England's capital. The chamber was draped with yellow silks and sumptuously carpeted. Against one wall there was a raised platform upon which stood a carved throne-like chair. A lamp hung over it, suspended by golden chains from the ceiling, and out of it tendrils of incense slowly coiled, filling the room with a sweet aroma. The man who sat upon the chair was unlike any individual Plummer had ever encountered before.

His eyes, oblique and as intensely green as Plummer's own, were like those of the mythical dragon depicted on several of the cloths and decorations. They were the eyes of a sorcerer; serpentine; hypnotic; terrible. The irises were mere pinpricks and, weirdly, there appeared to be an inner membrane, white and filmy, which occasionally blinked independently of the outer eyelid. The man's shoulders were high, almost hunched; his body long and slender; his hands large and bony with long, talon-like nails. But more overpowering than any aspect of his physique was the intense malignancy that radiated out from him.

Plummer felt as if he was in the presence of pure evil.

He was in the presence of Doctor Fu Manchu.

"It is dangerous," purred the doctor, "for a Westerner to seek an audience with me."

"Of that I am aware," said Colonel Ash. "But I come as one who fought at the side of Abd el-Krim."

"The defeated," said Fu Manchu, without a trace of sarcasm.

"Defeated? Yes. He surrendered to the French this May past. But his army remains defiant ... and it is mine to command."

"Indeed?" Fu Manchu's left eyebrow raised slightly. "You don't appear to be a Mohamadan."

"I am not!" answered Plummer. "Nevertheless, the Rif army will obey me."

"And why should this be of interest to me, white man?"

"Because I am at your disposal! With your financial backing, my men can regroup and re-arm. Then you need but

say the word and they will sweep into Spain like a swarm of locusts, as did the Mohammadans of yore. They will conquer the Iberian peninsular and make it their own. And once established, they will give you sovereignty. Spain will be your foothold. From it, you can expand your operations into the whole of Europe." Fu Manchu looked thoughtful.

"Interesting," he said. "Spain is like a sick dog. There is no strength to its bite. Doubtlessly, it could be easily taken. But why would I wish to see it cower under the flag of Islam?"

"The East is the East," said Plummer. "That is so," muttered the man they called the Devil Doctor. "You are an intriguing individual, Colonel Ash. But tell me: how do you intend to profit from this?"

"I want the Andalus."

"You want ... ?"

"The Andalus."

Doctor Fu Manchu's eyes glittered.

"Ah, I see. You would be a Lord, with peasants to serve you, pay you rent and fawn at your feet?"

Plummer grinned and said, "Precisely!" Fu Manchu surveyed him silently for a moment. Then:

"An army sweeping across Spain. The concept interests me. It interests me a great deal!"

Plummer gave a slight bow. "I offer my services as military advisor."

"Hmmm. Tell me Colonel Ash, have you ever encountered a man named von Horst; a German?"

"No," answered Plummer, and he couldn't help but sneer, for despite being born in Melbourne, he considered himself an Englishman and possessed a low opinion of the German race.

Doctor Fu Manchu noted the reaction and said, "I feel the same way, Colonel. Von Horst is an army officer, an extremist, and a man I do not altogether trust. However, he recently brought to me an interesting proposal. He is an adherent of Hitler and his Nazi party. You are aware of that individual?"

"Of course!"

Hitler is, by all accounts, something of a fanatic —"

"A madman, more like!" interrupted Plummer.

"Maybe so, but even madmen have their uses. I recently made contact with

him and he sent von Horst as his representative. It seems that Hitler's plans are bigger even than the rest of Europe can imagine. If he gains the power he craves, the consequences could destabilise the entire Western hemisphere. This would be to my advantage, especially if, through you, I secure Spain as my stronghold before Hitler makes his move, for in the Pyrenees it has the most easily defended land border in Europe. Von Horst has asked me to fund the Nazi party and to quietly exert my influence over events to ensure that Hitler gains control of Germany ... and I am inclined to fall in with his scheme. But frankly, Colonel Ash, I loathe von Horst and mean to test the extent of his loyalty to me. I think you can help."

"Ah," smiled Plummer, "and 'helping' will be a test of my loyalty too?"

"Of course."

Plummer dipped his head. "As I have already stated, I am yours to command."

"Very well. We will retire to the next room to discuss our plans further. Then, as your first test, I want you to locate a man named Fairfax. At noon today he should have supplied my organisation with a certain sum of money. He failed and has now vanished. This is the second time in the past few days that a financier has betrayed me. The first is being dealt with even as we speak. Now it is Fairfax's turn to pay the price ... and you, my dear colonel, must witness the consequences of betrayal!"

The Second Chapter Death Has Green Hands

Franklyn Bennett, financier, had a small office near the Bank of England. But though his office was small, the business done within its cramped walls was exceedingly large. For Franklyn Bennett was one of the richest men in the City of London, and his knowledge of international money matters was masterly. He was a heavily built man of middle-age, with very little hair on a round, shining skull, a red face, and rather small eyes that never looked anyone straight in the face.

What lay beneath that bald skull was more or less a mystery. A restlessly active and crafty brain, of course; anyone could recognise that. But what schemes and plottings and dawning

financial coups? That was a puzzle, for Franklyn Bennett confided in no one. His dealings in the money-markets were for the benefit of one man only — and that man was Franklyn Bennett! His vast wealth — and no one knew how many millions the man was worth — was directed in its flow by his brain only. The torrent of it would often sweep through the markets, crushing all opposition like an avalanche, leaving devastation and chaos in its wake. When that happened, ruined men cursed his name, but Franklyn Bennett sat in his office and smiled as he raked in thousands more.

Recently, though, that smile had been less frequent, for Bennett had invested in an organisation that had promised him much but which, so far, had delivered little. Worse: it was taking more and more! And for once, his ruthlessness was being weakened by an emotion he had never felt before — fear!

At a quarter to four, when George Marsden Plummer was in conference with Doctor Fu Manchu, a man named Thompson, who was one of Bennett's clerks, knocked on the door of his employer's private room. In his hand Thompson held the cup of tea that Franklyn Bennett always drank around this time of the afternoon. The clerk silently set the cup down and retired. Bennett, who was deeply engrossed in some documents, did not acknowledge his clerk. There was nothing unusual about that.

An hour later, Thompson re-entered the room the room and this time encountered a very unusual circumstance indeed: Franklyn Bennett was lying back in his chair stone dead! His tea still stood at his elbow, untouched.

Thompson, a thin, nervous-looking man with white hair, stood tottering on the carpet as he gazed at the dead man. It was not the face at which he stared — a face now white as chalk — but at the hands.

For Franklyn Bennett's lifeless hands were resting upon the documents he had been reading ... and they were bright green!

"Very strange," murmured Sexton Blake, a frown upon his strong, aquiline face.

The famous detective of Baker Street

was pacing the rug by the fireplace in his consulting room. He had just tossed the morning paper on to the table. In it he had read of the amazing death of Franklyn Bennett.

"You're right there, gov'nor! What a mystery!" agreed Tinker.

Blake's youthful but highly capable assistant reached out from his chair and picked the Daily Radio off the table, and again scanned the glaring headlines of the special edition:

**FAMOUS FINANCIER DEATH
MYSTERY! HANDS PAINTED GREEN!**

The paragraph below, which had been written by their friend Derek 'Splash' Page, the paper's irrepressible crime reporter, went on to describe how Franklyn Bennett had been found dead at his desk yesterday afternoon.

The doctors declared that the cause of his demise, as far as they could tell from an initial examination, was heart-failure, and one of them gave it as his opinion, judging from the expression on the man's face, that the heart attack had been caused by fear — a great and terrible fear — the circumstances of which could not be guessed at.

But the great thing was, of course, the mystery of the green hands. What was the meaning of that startling fact?

"The doctors can't say whether his hands were daubed with the paint while he was alive or after he died," muttered Tinker, glancing across at Blake.

"So I read," nodded the detective.

"They are going to analyse the paint," went on the youngster thoughtfully. "There's an idea that in some way it may have been the cause of death — blood-poisoning or something."

"I scarcely think that is likely," said Blake. "I'm strongly inclined to favour the opinion of the doctor who states that Bennett died from terror. But what scared him? What did he see in his last moments that numbed his soul with such fear that it slew him?"

"But why the green hands?" exclaimed Tinker.

There was a muffled knock heard from the street door below.

"Who's this?" the youngster wondered aloud.

They heard the footsteps of Mrs Bardell, the housekeeper, going along the hall to open the door. A minute later she brought a visiting card up to the consulting room and declared, "A gentleman what wants to 'ave a

confabulation with you, Mr Blake."

The detective glanced at the name on the card: Mr Malcolm Fairfax.

"I don't know him. But show him up, please, Mrs Bardell."

The housekeeper departed and a few moments later there came hurried footsteps on the stairs. A short, stout man in a morning-coat, carrying a silk hat, practically ran into the room.

"Sit down please, Mr Fairfax. You wished to see me?" said Blake.

Malcolm Fairfax collapsed panting into an armchair, which Sexton Blake ruefully noted was his own rather than the one generally favoured by clients. Blake's chair, to the left of the fireplace, was a decrepit saddlebag affair which had, over the years, perfectly adapted itself to his contours. By contrast, Tinker's armchair, on the right — which doubled as the clients' chair — was newer, smarter and in every way more respectable-looking.

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AND
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The face of the man now occupying Blake's chair had gone a peculiar grey colour. His eyes seemed wild with terror.

"It-it's awful! Terrible!" he stammered, moistening his lips. His hands were trembling. He could not sit still, and in another moment he had jumped to his feet again. "The green hands —" He broke off with a shudder.

Blake took the opportunity to gently guide Fairfax to the client chair, lowering him into it. He glanced at Tinker and saw, with amusement, that his assistant had noted the manoeuvre and was grinning broadly.

"Please control yourself, Mr Fairfax," Blake said quietly. "Let us hear your business clearly. Am I to understand that it is in connection with the death of Mr. Franklyn Bennett?"

"Yes! Heavens, I just read it in the paper! It's ghastly! I want to break loose, but-but now, if it's known I have come here, I am as good as dead. As

good as dead!" he repeated wildly.

"Please try to remain calm," advised Blake. "Can I offer you a cigarette?"

He held a box of cigarettes out to the trembling man. Fairfax leaned forward and took one, lit it with shaking fingers, and dropped back heavily into the chair again.

"Green hands!" they heard him mutter, almost to himself. "The dragon's claws!"

He held out his own, staring down at them in horror, as though he thought to see them turn green before his eyes.

"Mine will be like that! You see, I defied them too! They asked too much ..."

Suddenly he gave a tremulous sigh and closed his eyes.

In a moment Blake was beside him.

"He's fainted, Tinker."

He stared down at the short, stout figure with a frown. "It looked as though we were about to hear something uncommonly interesting. Well, I suppose he'll have his wits back in a moment. The strain of his fear and excitement has been too much for him."

As he spoke, Blake loosened Fairfax's collar.

They heard a sudden knock on the street door.

"Hallo! Another one! It's getting like Clapham Junction here! Who is it this time?" said Tinker.

The door opened a minute later and Mrs Bardell appeared. "Land sakes! I'm up an' down them stairs like a you-you!" she began but then broke off with a little cry when she saw Fairfax's condition.

"Don't be alarmed. He's only fainted," said Blake soothingly. "He was over-excited. Who has called now?"

"A gentleman what gave 'is name as Colonel Hash. He seemed very hanxious to see you, sir. Shall I show 'im up? He asked if Mr Fairfax was 'ere."

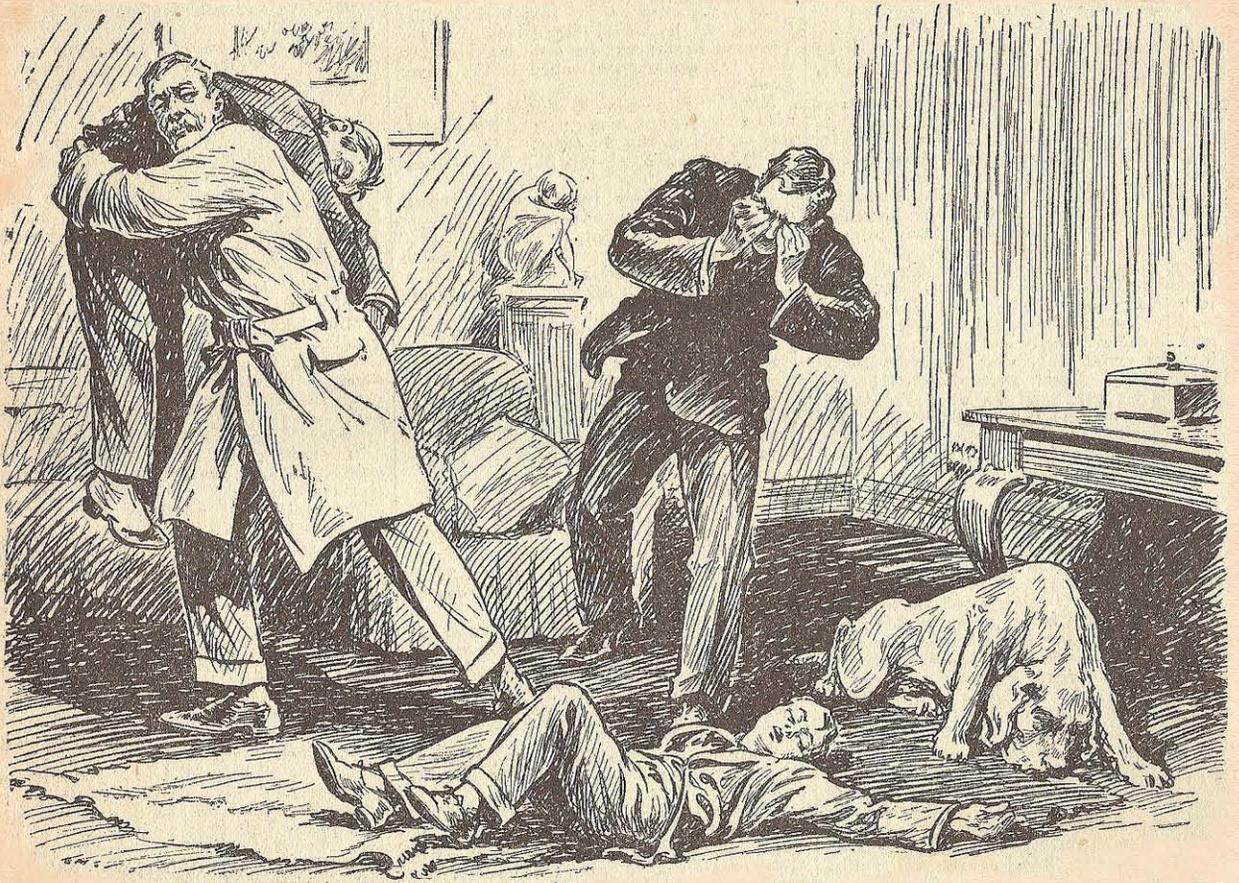
"You told him that he was?"

"Yes, sir."

"Show him up then, Mrs Bardell."

"And you mean 'yo-yo'!" quipped Tinker.

The old housekeeper glared at him and muttered "I'll yo-yo you!" as she hurried from the room. A few moments later, with her returning footsteps came the heavier tread of a man.



Colonel Ash proved to be a large individual: six foot if an inch, and with a wide chest and muscular shoulders. "Strong as an ox!" was Tinker's inward description of him. His face was burned dark by the sun, and a long black moustache, thick and bristly, grew with a downward sweep upon his lip. From behind a pair of smoked spectacles, deep-set eyes of an indeterminate colour swept round the room, taking in the unconscious man in the chair, and Blake and Tinker, at a single penetrating glance.

"Mr Blake?" he boomed, in a loud but mellow voice.

"I am he," answered the detective. "You are Colonel Ash?"

Instead of offering a reply, the newcomer moved across with quick strides to the chair where Fairfax lay. Ash was wearing a thick motoring coat that increased his big frame. He carried a tweed cap under his arm.

"My friend is ill?" he cried, in alarm.

"Mr Fairfax has fainted, that is all," said Blake calmly. "You say he is a friend of yours? Can you tell us the cause of his great alarm and excitement?"

The visitor shrugged his shoulders.

"You must not attach too much importance to that, Mr Blake," he replied. "My friend, I fear, is on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He has been very much overworked of late, and I fear for his mind if he does not obey the doctors and take a year's rest. He was intimately acquainted with poor Franklyn Bennett, and his death — and the strange mystery surrounding it, in particular, I fancy — has pushed him over the brink. I suppose he had some idea of asking you to investigate the mystery. That's why he's here and why he's worked up so emotionally."

He glanced around again in an odd way. "Did he tell you much before he fainted?" he asked.

"A little," answered Blake guardedly.

Again the odd look flashed into the half-concealed eyes of Colonel Ash.

"I think I had better take him home at once," he said abruptly. "I have a car outside."

In a moment he stooped and scooped the plump little figure into his great arms.

But Blake stepped forward quickly. "No,

I can't allow that," he said sharply. "He must stay here until he recovers consciousness. I cannot have him taken away. Remember, I do not know you, though I must confess, I have the strangest feeling that we have met before. Have we, Colonel Ash?"

"No! Come now! This is absurd!" exclaimed the colonel impatiently.

But he sat Fairfax back down in a chair — Sexton Blake's chair, to Tinker's intense amusement.

Suddenly there was a low, ominous growl from the the other side of the room.

Pedro had padded up the stairs from Mrs Bardell's domain and had nosed through the door. He was now watching the big man with a ferocious light in his eyes. Clearly something about Ash had aroused the bloodhound's antagonism.

Colonel Ash recoiled with an oath. Quickly he plunged a hand into his breast pocket and took out what seemed to be a syringe.

"Look out!" cried Blake.

With a hiss, a spray of liquid came shooting from the tiny nozzle. It took the detective full in the face even as he tried to leap aside. He reeled back, hands to his

eyes, in agony. The spray was pure ammonia.

With a loud snarl, Pedro flew for Ash's throat.

The man wheeled, directing the blinding, suffocating spray at the dog's face. It drenched Pedro's head even as the bloodhound was in mid-air. Pedro crashed into the colonel — who stumbled backwards — and fell, yelping and frantically shaking his great head.

Tinker, with blazing eyes, hurled himself at the big man but was met with a staggering blow to the point of the jaw. Back he crashed, and lay inert; Colonel Ash's fist had found its mark, sending the youngster into oblivion.

With a grim laugh, Ash thrust the syringe back into his pocket, scooped Fairfax out of the chair again, flung him across one shoulder like a bundle of rags, and strode swiftly out of the room. Blake, blindly staggering about with his hands to his eyes, was powerless to stop him.

Mrs Bardell saw Ash in the passage and gave a cry of alarm at sight of his burden. He thrust her roughly aside and growled, "Tell your master that George Marsden Plummer called this morning!" before darting out through the door, across the pavement and into a car which was drawn up and waiting. A moment later it had driven off into the wet gloom and vanished in the direction of Piccadilly.

Colonel Ash had gone, swallowed in the teeming millions of London. And with him was Malcolm Fairfax, the man who had stammered about the green hands of Franklyn Bennett!

The Third Chapter The Café

George Marsden Plummer had spent most of the previous day in the company of Doctor Fu Manchu. The Chinese warlord had questioned him at great length about the strengths and weaknesses of the Riffian forces; about their history and their ambitions. Plummer responded to this interrogation with the truth, and it is as well he did, for the Devil Doctor was far better informed than his guest suspected, and had Plummer lied or made an error in his replies, he would have been swatted with the same casual, murderous disdain with which one treats an irritating fly.

As it was, Fu Manchu was satisfied and sent him on his mission to find Fairfax believing that in Colonel Ash he had discovered a valuable — though as yet untested — ally. Plummer had no need to trace the

whereabouts of the financier, for he himself had told Fairfax where to lay low. However, he was certain that at least two members of the Si Fan were shadowing him, so this morning, having enjoyed his first night in a comfortable bed for many a month, he made a show of visiting the financier's office and home, and of following up nonexistent leads. Then he went to the safe house where Fairfax was hiding only to be told by the landlady that the financier had departed half an hour earlier to visit Sexton Blake, the famous detective.

The news came as a shattering blow. The very last thing that Plummer desired was another encounter with Blake. For a few moments he considered abandoning his schemes and fleeing the country ... but with so much money at stake his greed empowered him with reckless courage and, leaping into the car put at his disposal by Fu Manchu, he ordered the chauffeur to drive to Baker Street, making one quick stop en route to purchase a syringe and a bottle of ammonia.

His mission had been successful.

But Plummer was furious with himself for revealing his identity as he had left the Baker Street house. It had been an act of unthinking bravado ... and an act guaranteed to put Blake on his trail.

"Fool that I am," muttered the master crook to himself, "Now I will have to get this business over with as soon as possible!"

After securing Fairfax and delivering him to a certain premises in Woolwich, he lunched in the restaurant of the Argent Hotel, spending a happy couple of hours indulging his passion for the finest foods, wines, brandies and cigars. On top of the one and a half million Plummer had acquired from Fairfax, Fu Manchu had paid him a generous 'retainer', and when George Marsden Plummer had money in his pocket, there was nothing he liked better than to spend it!

It was a rather worse-for-wear 'Colonel Ash', who, slightly unsteadily, entered the café in Limehouse that afternoon. He walked past the tables with an ill-concealed expression of contempt directed at the rag-tag collection of Asiatics who were gathered there and, unchallenged, he pushed through a door leading to a filthy kitchen.

Crossing the grease-encrusted room, he opened another door behind which was revealed the top of a flight of steps. He descended these until he came to a short corridor blocked at the end by a third door. When he knocked upon this, a panel slid back and a voice whispered, "Tell me of vengeance!"

"Vengeance is the dragon's claw!" answered Plummer.

The door swung open. He stepped through into the thickly carpeted chamber in which he had been interviewed the previous day. The carved throne was unoccupied. A few Chinamen and dacoits looked up at him from the cushions on which they squatted. Then they resumed their games of fan tan, their meditations and their mumbled conversations. He ignored them, strode across the soft carpet, knocked upon a scarlet-painted door, and stood waiting. In answer to the soft "Come in!" that he heard, he pushed the portal open and passed through into Doctor Fu Manchu's study. He was still wearing his motoring coat and carrying a cap. A long cigar protruded in an aggressive way from the side of his mouth.

Like the outer chamber, the study was furnished with the gaudy lavishness of the East. Chinese carvings, furniture and statuary, were set against walls hidden by soft hanging silk. The ceiling was painted with inscriptions and figures in scarlet and gold. The carpets were bright with a wealth of colour — the general effect was such that Plummer, who had removed his smoked spectacles, blinked once or twice as he entered, as if dazzled.

Fu Manchu was seated on a cushion at a low, ornate table.

Plummer took his cigar from his mouth.

"I've got him."

"Put your cigar out," ordered the head of the Si Fan. "I do not allow smoking in my presence."

Plummer hesitated a moment, then dropped his cigar to the carpet and crushed it into the expensive fabric with his foot.

A quiet sibilant hiss escaped from the doctor. There was a moment's silence, then he asked, "So he tried to get to the detective, Sexton Blake?"

Plummer nodded. He was right: he had been shadowed!

"He did get there. But I got him away,

and before he had told anything. Blake's eyes must be smarting still. I used ammonia when he tried to stop me taking Fairfax."

"A narrow shave, Colonel Ash," purred the soft voice. "Where is Fairfax now?"

"At Woolwich. He'd fainted at Blake's place — that's why he told nothing. But he came to after I got him away. He's nearly off his head with terror."

"He has cause to be afraid!" The slanting eyes gleamed. "He is a fool."

Plummer grunted. An uneasy look came into his face as he met the eyes of the doctor. He, too, was afraid of this oriental and that was a new experience for him, for hitherto he had been afraid of no man except, perhaps, for Sexton Blake.

"What are you going to do with him?" he asked, suddenly.

The Chinaman smiled.

"Fairfax is finished," he said.

"Tomorrow night von Horst will be tested in the Temple of the Dragon. Fairfax will play a major role in that test."

Plummer nodded.

"I thought that would be it," he said, evading the jade eyes that were directed upon him. "Any news from Canton?" he added.

"Yes. A ship is arranged. Guns and munitions will be loaded within the week. Then it will sail for Tangier.

Incidentally, I have not seen the paper. What is said about Franklyn Bennett?"

"The public is set by the ears over that," grinned Plummer grimly.

"Franklyn Bennett was very unwise — as big a fool as Fairfax. And speaking of fools, von Horst will be waiting for you at eight o'clock in the temple. But before you go to introduce yourself, sit down. We must discuss your role in tomorrow's ceremony, among other things."

Plummer drew a large silk cushion up to the table, seating himself opposite the doctor.

Some time later, outside the café, a figure detached itself from the shadows of a doorway and, with head down, hurried off. It was Tinker.

Sheer luck had enabled Tinker to trace George Marsden Plummer to the Limehouse café.

When the youngster had recovered his senses after that knock-down blow, he had attended to Blake and to Pedro.

Their eyes were still paining them terribly from the effects of the ammonia, which had left them absolutely helpless while Colonel Ash escaped from the Baker Street house with the insensible Fairfax. Then Mrs Bardell broke the news that Ash was, in fact, Sexton Blake's oldest enemy: George Marsden Plummer!

Tinker had gone to Scotland Yard to report Fairfax's kidnapping and the presence of Plummer in London to Detective-Inspector Couetts. On his way back, the youngster had passed the Argent Hotel and had recognised the big figure of 'Colonel Ash' stumbling out of the entrance and into a waiting car.

Tinker had not been seen by the colonel. So he had promptly climbed into an empty taxi and cried, "Follow that car and keep out of sight! I'll give you an extra ten-bob if you stick to it without being seen!"

"Ha!" cried the driver. "Oo do you think you are, boy assistant to Sexton bloomin' Blake?"

"As a matter of fact, yes! And less of the 'boy', if you don't mind!" snapped Tinker, throwing a handful of coins into the driver's lap. "Now drive!"

"Bloomin' 'eck! Watch me earn it!" grinned the driver.

They sped away.

The car in front entered Limehouse some time later and parked outside the café. The taxi passed it, rounded a corner and stopped. Tinker dismissed it and, poking his head around the corner, watched Plummer go into the café. A couple of hours later, his quarry had still not emerged and the youngster decided to report to his master.

Five o'clock was striking when Sexton Blake's assistant got back to Baker Street.

The detective, his eyes still red and watery, listened to his story with rapt interest.

"So he was alone? Fairfax was not with him?"

"No, guv'nor! He must have taken him somewhere before going to the Argent and then on to this greasy chopstick place. Plummer went in but, when I managed to get a peek in through the window, he wasn't at any of the tables or anywhere in sight. There were a lot of oriental types coming and going as well but only ever a few customers

sitting inside."

"So you think there's some sort of meeting place accessible through the café?"

"It's the only explanation, guv'nor! I went 'round to the back for a while but there was no activity there, so I don't think the Celestials I saw shuffling through the front door were then shuffling out the back!"

"Hmmm. What's the address?"

"Number 8, Harbour Wall Street."

"And, orientals, you say?"

Tinker nodded. "A lot of 'em! You don't suppose Plummer is still working with Wu Ling?"

"It's highly probable, Tinker. Remember, Wu Ling broke him out of prison after 'The Great Canal Plot' earlier this year! I thought he'd fled back to Morocco but it may be that The Brotherhood of the Yellow Beetle is calling in the debt!"

"Phew!" gasped Tinker. "Up against those two again!"

"Indeed!" said Blake. He looked thoughtful for a moment then: "Are you fit enough for an all-nighter, young'un? I want you to watch the place while I try to find out what Wu Ling has been up to since the Suez affair."

"Fit as a fiddle and raring to go, guv'nor!"

"Good lad! Take a detour down to the kitchen first. Have Mrs Bardell slap together some sandwiches for you!"

An hour or so later, Tinker was strolling along Harbour Wall Street again. He had beef sandwiches in his pocket and chicken sandwiches in his stomach. All was good with the world — there was nothing he liked more than good grub and a mission from Sexton Blake! The rain had started to fall and was pattering on his glistening macintosh. He had a cap well pulled down over his ears. From beneath its peak, he shot a sideways glance at number 8. The café was open but seemed to be empty.

A few yards farther on, he ran into a constable. The youngster stopped and greeted him. "Hallo Lomax! How goes it?" "Evenin' laddie!" exclaimed the policeman. "Wet as usual! What's your game?"

"Oh, just nosing around for the guv'nor. Is this your regular beat?"

Police Constable Lomax gave a heartfelt sigh. "Ufff! Yes, for my sins! I gave the sergeant some cheek and the silly old duffer got his own back by posting me to Limehouse! I'll probably end up with a knife in my back! And you should watch yourself too, m'lad! This is a dangerous neighbourhood!"

Tinker smiled. "And don't I know it! Me and the guv'nor have had plenty of run-ins in this area! Say, Lomax, what do you know about that café over there?"

"Well, I wouldn't eat in it!" grunted the constable. "I'm not so keen on fried cat and noodles or boiled rat and rice!"

Tinker chuckled. "A Chinese place, then?"

"I should say so! I've seen floods of 'em comin' and goin'!" Lomax grinned. "I bet you've read about the 'yellow peril' in your story books! Well, maybe this is where it's all planned, eh lad? ha ha!"

"I'll bet," said Tinker with a laugh. "Well, thanks Lomax. Go safely! And give my regards to Mrs Lomax when you get home!"

"I will, if I can get a word in edgeways!"

The constable moved on.

Two hours later, Tinker left the shadow of a doorway, slouched past the café window and surreptitiously peered in. It was an ill-timed act, for just as he passed the door, it opened, throwing a glow of light out across the wet pavement, and the large figure of Colonel Ash stepped out straight into the youngster's path. Tinker, startled, took a step back and looked up into Plummer's agate eyes.

"Blake's whelp!" gasped the crook. In a flash, Plummer's fist shot out and caught Tinker smack on the bruise that marked its previous impact, with exactly the same result. Tinker crumpled.

"Well well!" muttered Plummer, "You're just what I need!"

The Fourth Chapter

Detective-Inspector Coutts Gets Involved

The next morning, Sexton Blake telephoned Scotland Yard and asked to be put through to Detective-Inspector Coutts. The Yard man's voice, gruff as always, barked: "Blake, is that you? What is it? Any news of Plummer?"

"No, but Tinker hasn't reported in this morning," said Blake.

"In? In from where?"

"I had him watching a café in Limehouse. He'd traced Plummer to it. It's a Chinese place!"

"What! Chinese!"

Blake heard distinctly over the telephone wire the sound of Coutts's bowler hat being vigorously thrown against the wall. Coutts had a habit of expressing himself with assaults against his headgear. "Are you suggesting," the Yard man shouted, "that the scoundrel has hooked up with Wu Ling again?"

"As far as I've been able to ascertain from the admittedly flimsy evidence, Prince Wu Ling went straight back to China after we scuppered his Suez Canal plot. But as I say,

the evidence isn't enough to convince me. I think you and I should have a nose around. What do you say?"

"You're on! I'll be with you in a jiffy!"

Half an hour after Coutts had slammed down the telephone receiver, there came a thunderous pounding at Sexton Blake's front door, accompanied by a frenzied clanging of the doorbell.

"Good 'eavens!" cried Mrs Bardell. "If that ain't Defective-Suspector Scoots, then I'm the Duchess of Devonshire! Always a-hammerin' the polish hoff the door 'e is! Alrightie! Alrightie! Hold your horsies! I'm a-comin'!"

Sexton Blake's formidable landlady flung open the door and stood blocking the entrance, glaring at Detective-Inspector Coutts.

"If I've told you once, I've told you 'alf a dozen times," she declared. "If you will hinsist on banging the polish off the woodworm, then do it with that thick 'ead of yours and not with your bally fisticuffs. At least thataways you might knock some sense into yerself!"

"Stand aside, my good woman! I'm here on police business!" snapped Coutts.

"I don't care if you're a-thumping my polish for the perlice or for 'is madjesty the King of Hingland, gawd bless 'im!" announced Mrs Bardell. "Just stop it! It's uncivilated! And you can give the doorbell a rest too! Goodness, my nerves are all a-jangle what with the noise of it. Thought there was an hearthcake, I did!"

Through all this, Detective-Inspector Coutts had been trying, unsuccessfully, to push past the old dame — but Mrs Bardell was having none of it. With hands on ample hips and legs braced, she stood her ground and resisted the Yard man. Never a patient fellow at the best of times, Coutts snatched off his bowler and drove a fist into it, roaring, "By the Lord Harry! I'll have you clapped in irons, woman! Let me through!"

"Oh, clappered in irons, is it!" screeched Mrs Bardell. "That's 'ow you'd treat an old widdler woman what is only trying to protectionise the respeckerbility of her master's front door! 'ooligan! Vandal!"

"My good woman, please calm yourself" insisted Coutts more softly. He lay a soothing hand on the landlady's arm.

"Help! Help!" she yelled. "Perlice!"

"I AM the police!" roared Coutts.

"What in heaven's name is all this racket about?" came Sexton Blake's voice from the stairs. "Inspector Coutts, unhand my landlady at once!"

"But — But —" burred Coutts, snatching his hand from Mrs Bardell. "I was only trying to calm —"

A tall Chinaman stepped into view behind Mrs Bardell. His skin was like yellow parchment, translucent, and so criss-crossed by fine wrinkles that it looked almost mummified. His oblique eyes were thickly hooded and jet black. From his upper lip, long thin moustaches drooped to either side of his thin-lipped mouth, reaching to just below his chin. He was wearing a felt hat and long yellow robes with voluminous sleeves into which his hands were thrust. His sinister, unblinking eyes fixed on those of Detective-Inspector Coutts and the Yard man took an involuntary step backwards. "Who — who — who the dickens are you?"

"I velly solly," said the Celestial, "But you no put hands on Mr Brake's randrady! She velly pleicious! Cook velly velly good! Must not be manhandled by fatty man fлом Scotrand Yard!"

"Fatty!" exploded Coutts in indignation.

"Ha! That's right!" exclaimed Mrs Bardell. "You tell 'im, Mr Blake!"

"What?" cried Coutts. "Brake? I mean Blake? That's you, Blake?"

The Chinaman gave a dignified bow of his head.

"Pah!" exploded Coutts, punching his already dented bowler again before slamming it back onto his head.

"I'll give you 'pah'!" noted Mrs Bardell. "You're lucky I don't take a broom to yer!"

"No need for that!" advised the Celestial in Sexton Blake's voice. "Don't worry yourself further, Mrs Bardell. I shall have stern words with the inspector here about the intensity of his ... er ..."

"Knocking and ringifying!"

"Yes, quite!"

With a final glare at Coutts, Mrs Bardell turned and waddled back towards her kitchen. "Intensity, he calls it!" she grumbled. "More like insanity! Got a screw loose, that's 'is problem. 'ow 'e ever got to be a defective-suspector fair boggles me mind!"

Detective-Inspector Coutts mopped his face with a large red and white checked handkerchief as Blake exited the house, closing the door behind him.

"I think you may have just uninvited yourself to Christmas dinner," the Baker Street man mused.

The look of horror that passed across Coutts's face was so comical that under normal circumstances Blake would have burst out laughing. These, though, were not normal circumstances. He was worried about Tinker.

A great many times in the past, Tinker had not reported back to Blake at the time arranged. Usually it was because he was following up a new lead or shadowing a suspect. However, when George Marsden Plummer was involved ... well, anything could have happened!

"Come along, let's get to work!" said Blake tersely.

They hailed a taxi and climbed into it. "My guess is, you're going to try to get into that café!" said Coutts.

"Thus the disguise, yes," answered Blake. "And sorry about that 'fatty' remark. I was just playing the role."

"Hmmp! Well, quite so! But I mean, really, I don't see that it was necessary to ... hmmp! ... I say, Blake old man, you don't think she'll really strike me off the Christmas list?"

Sexton Blake smiled. "I don't think so, old chap. Despite the bluster, the old girl is terribly fond of you!"

Detective-Inspector Coutts reddened and rubbed his bristly moustache.

"The thing is," he muttered, "there's nothing quite like Mrs Bardell's Christmas pudding!"

The taxi dropped Coutts a couple of streets away from the café and Blake on a corner near it. It wouldn't do for them to be seen together, so they had arranged that the Yard man would stroll around the area keeping the establishment within sight and taking note of whatever comings and goings might arise, while Blake would enter the café and attempt to gain entry to whatever secret meeting place it was covering.

The first part of Blake's task was easy enough; he simply shuffled through the door, sat at a table and ordered a bowl of soup. The place was by no means crowded and the few diners present were of the most disreputable class of Celestial that inhabits the Limehouse region; poorly clothed, hardly washed, shifty-eyed.

These men at the tables, though, did

not engage his attention for very long because, before much more than ten minutes had passed, he had witnessed a number of individuals passing through the dining room and disappearing into the kitchen. He had also seen others emerge from the kitchen to leave the premises. None of them stopped to eat. All of them looked rather better off than the café's customers.

After twenty minutes or so, and leaving the unpalatable slop half finished, he rose and moved towards the kitchen.

"Hi! You there!" came a cry in Cantonese.

Blake turned and levelled his gaze at the café's proprietor, a short but very fat Chinaman.

"Where do you think you are going?"

Blake bowed and replied in flawless Cantonese: "Forgive me, honourable sir. I have an appointment."

"I have not seen you before!" came the challenge.

"This is true. I have not been here before. I have just arrived in this accursed country."

"And now, like a hungry dog, you seek to ingratiate yourself with the master, is that it?" sneered the short man.

The detective blinked rapidly and said, "Why no! The master sent for me! I have travelled halfway around the world in answer to his summons! Would you now stop me?"

The proprietor suddenly looked ill at ease. As Blake had guessed he would be, the man was intimidated by the sound of a cultured, well-educated Cantonese voice.

The café owner rubbed a dirty cloth over a filthy plate and coughed. "Of course I won't stop you," he mumbled.

"I was just checking, that's all! But be aware, honourable one, that the master is not here now! He has gone to the temple!"

"Then I would speak with those who are close to him!"

The fat man nodded and gestured towards the kitchen.

Blake began to move towards it but then hesitated and turned back to the proprietor.

"Faithful one," he said, "Come closer!"

The Chinaman approached warily, his eyes peering nervously at his tall visitor.

"Listen well," said Blake in a low voice.

"It is some time since I advised the

master to establish passwords for each of his outposts in this godless country. Has my guidance been followed?"

"It has!"

"And the passwords are changed frequently, as I suggested?"

"Yes! Yes! We change them each week!"

Sexton Blake placed a hand on the man's shoulder and gave a slight smile. "You serve the master well, honourable one! I will be sure to mention this to him!"

The little man looked pathetically pleased, his plump cheeks bunching into an eager smile as he rapidly bowed his head over and over.

"Of course," continued Blake, "I have been at sea these weeks past, so have not yet been informed of the current password."

"You will hear the statement 'Tell me of vengeance!'" whispered the little Chinaman. "You must answer 'Vengeance is the dragon's claw!'"

Blake nodded, patted the man's shoulder and left him, crossing to the kitchen.

Inside it were two men — cooks — whose general appearance made the detective regret the few spoonfuls of soup he'd tasted. They ignored him as he opened the door at the top of the stairs, went through, and pulled it shut behind him.

Back in the café, the fat proprietor had stepped behind a counter. He bent over a speaking tube and began talking into it.

Detective-Inspector Coutts was painfully reminded of the time when he had patrolled the streets as a mere constable. His feet were aching abominably! He was hungry too. It was lunchtime and though he had never tasted Chinese food — and didn't like the theory of it — he was nevertheless rather envious of Sexton Blake, who he imagined sitting in the café wolfing down a bowl of noodles or aromatic rice.

"I don't hold with that foreign muck," Coutts muttered to himself, "but at least it'd line the stomach! How Blake expects me to keep on my feet without sustenance is beyond me!"

He had just patrolled the area around the back of the café and was now turning into an alleyway that led through to the main street. He intended to saunter past the premises and peer through the window to see what his colleague was up to. Or rather, to see what he was eating.

"Hope it's a boiled squirrel!" he grunted.

The passage lay in the shadows and as the Yard man came abreast of a pile of wooden crates, four figures stepped out of the

gloom; two in front of him and two behind. "Here! What's this?" he exclaimed. He whipped off his bowler and rapped his knuckles on it threateningly. "Keep back! I'm Detective-Inspector Coutts of the CID!"

He should have kept his hat on. It may have done something to soften the blow as a length of thick rubber tubing crashed against his skull.

Detective-Inspector Coutts of the CID went out like a light.

The Fifth Chapter Inferno!

"Are you alright, old man?"

Sexton Blake's voice seemed to come from a great distance, piercing through layers of pain.

"I say, buck up Coutts! We're in it up to our necks!"

Consciousness slowly returned to Detective-Inspector Coutts. His head throbbed, his mouth was dry, his wrists and ankles were bound with viciously tight cords.

He opened his eyes. He was laying on his side on a thick carpet in a large room hung with yellow silks. Sexton Blake lay beside him, also bound. The Baker Street detective's face — still in the guise of a celestial — was bruised, his eyes blackened, his lips split and bleeding.

The Yard man licked his lips. "Where are we?" he croaked.

"Under the café," answered Blake. "In a sort of basement which extends, I think, beneath the houses on either side and some way under the road."

"How'd they get you?"

"My own fault!" grunted Blake. "I was overconfident! Dived straight into a trap — gave the password, walked through the door, and a dozen or so of the blighters jumped on me!"

"I hope you broke some oriental teeth. Any sign of Wu Ling?"

"Well that's the funny thing. They seem to think that I'm a spy for The Brotherhood of the Yellow Beetle. They've been trying to beat an admission out of me. They were just about to try a spot of torture when four of their chaps dragged you in. They tied you up then all retired to another room for a conflag. They've been gone for half an hour or so."

"So they haven't seen through your disguise," said Coutts, "and they obviously aren't Wu Ling's mob! But, in that case, who in blazes are they?"

Before Sexton Blake could answer, three men entered the chamber. Two were

Chinese. The other was an Indian.

One of the Celestials — a short man of average build, his head shaven but for a long pigtail — spoke. He did so in English and his voice was cultured, without a trace of an accent. He said: "I congratulate you. You have both scored a victory."

"Please?" asked Blake in Cantonese.

The man repeated himself, this time in that language. He went on, first in English then again in the Asian tongue:

"This meeting place is useless to us now. Your presence demonstrates that it is known to The Brotherhood of the Yellow Beetle and also to the police. You leave us no alternative but to shut it down."

Coutts snorted, "Sorry to spoil your fun!"

The Chinaman simply bowed and silently left the room with his companions.

For some minutes the two captives lay still and silent. Then Blake muttered:

"It never even occurred to them that we were working together. They're so convinced that I'm one of the Brotherhood. And, of course, a Yellow Beetle would never be seen hand in hand with a bluebottle!"

"Very funny," growled Coutts. "Blast! I can't move a muscle, I'm trussed up so tight! How about you, Blake?"

"The same!"

They struggled but only succeeded in scraping the skin off their wrists.

They rested, catching their breath.

"What do they intend to do with us, anyway?" panted Coutts.

"Has that knock on the head robbed you of your sense of smell?" snapped Blake.

"What? What are you gibbering about— Great Scott! Fire!"

Alerted to it by his friend, Coutts could now smell smoke.

"They've set the place alight! Help! Help!" he hollered.

"Stop that!" ordered Blake. "We're underground! No one is going to hear your racket so you might as well pack it in!"

The Baker Street detective twisted his head this way and that, searching the room for a sharp edge against which to rub his bonds. There was nothing. And now the smell of smoke was strengthening.

There were three doors visible between the hanging silks. Blake rolled across the carpet towards a scarlet-painted

one, urging Detective-Inspector Coutts to follow. Arriving at its base, Blake shifted his position, lifted his legs and kicked it open.

With the big chamber behind them rapidly becoming hazy with smoke, the two men rolled through into an ornately decorated room and kicked closed the door. Sexton Blake looked around. There was a low table, some cushions, and various items of statuary lining the walls. One of the latter depicted a Chinese warrior, his hand resting on the hilt of a sword, its point resting on the plinth upon which he stood. The sword was not real — it was merely a carving — and was not sharp ... but it was, at least, an edge.

Blake rolled across to the statue and heaved himself into a sitting position. He began rubbing his bound wrists against the blade.

"Hurry man!" cried Coutts. "There's smoke coming through under the door!" Both men could now see dark tendrils coiling through the air. Coutts fancied that he could hear flames and the room was definitely getting hotter.

"The place is going up like dry tinder!" exclaimed the Yard man. "It's all that silk! This is it, Blake! We're not going to get out of this one!"

As if to illustrate his point, an orange light flickered beneath the door, the temperature jumped higher, and the crackling of flames came from the chamber beyond.

Detective-Inspector Coutts began coughing. "How are you doing?" he gasped. "Almost free?"

"I'm afraid not," came Blake's hoarse voice. "And having recently experienced a blaze courtesy of Doctor Satira, I can honestly say that this is becoming extremely tiresome!"

The minutes passed and the heat increased. The Baker Street detective made no progress. The cords were too strong; the edge too blunt.

The room was by now so filled with smoke that Coutts could barely see him. "These cords aren't giving at all!" gasped Blake.

Both men's eyes were watering and their lungs were wheezing like old leathery bellows. Coutts was trying to use his feet to push himself farther from the door

but his strength was giving out and he couldn't catch his breath.

Sexton Blake toppled sideways and lay on the carpet. His mind began to wander; swimming in and out of consciousness. He remembered his parents, who had been murdered by a man named Francois Leroux; his elder brother, Henry, who had been driven to crime by a crook known as The Baron and who had faked his own suicide only to resurface some years later; and his younger brother, Nigel, who had also turned to crime before being exiled to Africa.

No! He mustn't lose focus! Escape! Save Coutts!

Dimly, he was aware of a bright rectangle of flame — the place where the door had been, now the mouth of a furnace! A shadow seemed to move against the glare of the raging inferno.

Was it Tinker? Brave, clever, extraordinary Tinker! They had met when — operating under the pseudonym of Richard Allandale — Blake had finally caught up with The Baron. Tinker, a mere street Arab at the time, had stumbled into the thick of it and had provided the means through which Blake could, at last, take revenge for the apparent death of Henry. Since then, the youngster had saved Blake's life on countless occasions.

"Tinker," he whispered.

Coutts's voice, a hoarse rasp, came from a great distance: "Don't leave him! He's not a Chinaman! He's Sexton Blake!"

Good old Coutts.

A face swam into view in his mind's eye: Mademoiselle Yvonne Cartier. No. Wait. The face was altogether too dark! It wasn't Yvonne. It was a man's face. In fact, thought Blake as he slipped into oblivion, it was an Indian's.

Home.

Baker Street.

The consulting room.

Comfortable slippers.

His thoughts were meandering and he may have been dreaming. Was he really slumped in his armchair? Was the weight on his right thigh really Pedro's head? Was that Mrs Bardell he could hear?

"... Looking like one of 'em chimbley sweeps and with a voice what is as creaky as a door in an 'aunted 'ouse! And a-shufflin' around the place like 'is

body is switched on but 'is brain is switched hoff! Which I says, Defective-Suspector Scoots, if'n you bring 'im 'ome in this rendition again, you'll not be welcombed in this 'ouse not for any hoccasion, an' that concludes Christmas! An' another, thing: I don't like no hindians in my 'ouse!"

"I assure you, dear lady," came a voice, "that I am not an Indian, despite appearances to the contrary!"

Who was that? Blake didn't recognise the voice. He peered through watering eyes. A dark chap, standing near the window.

"Mrs Bardell."

Ah, that was Coutts, though he sounded strangely hoarse.

"Look for yourself, my dear. He appears to be coming around. Perhaps now would be an ideal time to put the kettle on. I'm sure he'll need a good cuppa once his wits return!"

"Good gracious, I think you're right!" warbled Mrs Bardell. "Lookit the way 'is eyes are a-wanderin' ... Like 'e's noticin' things for the first time since you dragged 'im up them stairs! Lordy!"

Blake saw a blurred shaped cross the room and exit through the door. Mrs Bardell's footsteps descended the stairs. His eyes cleared.

Detective-Inspector Coutts was sitting opposite. His skin — what showed of it beneath a layer of soot — was even redder than usual. He smiled, showing his buck teeth.

"Back in the land of the living?"

Blake opened his mouth and croaked, "Brandy!"

The figure at the window turned. It was the Indian who had accompanied the three Chinamen into the chamber beneath the café.

"Of course!" he said, in perfect Oxford English. "Allow me!"

He crossed to the drinks cabinet in the corner and poured three generous brandies.

"I think we all need this!"

Stepping to where Blake and Coutts sat, he bent and handed them both a glass.

"Are you with us, Mr Blake?"

Sexton Blake took a gulp of the fiery liquid and smiled up at the smoke-blackened stranger. He felt his lips crack.

"Thank you," he said. "Yes, I am. May I ask your name?"

"Of course," said the Indian. "I am Dr Petrie, a friend of Assistant Commissioner Sir Denis Nayland Smith's."

The Sixth Chapter Revelations

It was half past four in the afternoon and the rain was pattering against the window of the consulting room.

Tinker had been missing for almost twenty-four hours.

Sexton Blake and Detective-Inspector Coutts had washed away the soot and had drunk copious amounts of tea to ease their scorched throats. Blake was no longer disguised as a Chinaman.

Dr Petrie was also transformed. In place of a shifty-looking Indian, there now sat a handsome, well-built Englishman with clear blue eyes and a broad intelligent-looking forehead. He was wrapped in Sexton Blake's disreputable acid-stained dressing gown.

The three men were sitting around the fireplace discussing the events of the day.

As Sexton Blake had suspected since his bruising interrogation, he had not fallen into the hands of The Brotherhood of the Yellow Beetle but into those of the Si Fan.

"Seeing you both there, on the verge of being burned to death, well ..." said Petrie, "obviously I had no choice but to wait until my Chinese companions were out of the way and then return to the chamber and drag you out of there."

"An act of courage for which I am immensely grateful, Doctor Petrie!"

"Hear, hear!" cheered Coutts.

"When did you infiltrate the Si Fan?" asked Blake.

"Me, about a month ago, in the guise of Arjun Narayan, a Hindi doctor with questionable ethics. Nayland Smith, more recently."

"Doctor Petrie," said Blake earnestly, "Whatever they are, I must apologise for interfering with your plans. I had no idea that it was the Si Fan I was dealing with. In fact, I've been given a very clear order to steer clear of them. I hope you understand, though, that with George Marsden Plummer involved and with my assistant missing, I had little choice but to pursue my investigations!"

"I understand perfectly, old chap," said Petrie. "Let me fill you in on the story so far, perhaps it will give you some clue as to what this scoundrel Plummer is up to. Nayland Smith and I are investigating two

Continued on page 16.

Normal Services

Do you remember the early days of television when the old goggle-box took a couple of hours to warm up and most of the night to cool down? Back then, the rather frequent breaks in service were always accompanied by the reassurance that "normal services will be resumed as soon as possible." Nearly half a decade ago, I would have liked to have said those words to you, dear reader, but, alas, the guv'nor and I knew that what passed for 'normal' in our lives was changing rapidly and things would never be the same again. For a start, the publication of our various adventures (albeit in a rather exaggerated form) had to end.

You see, old Eustace Craille had other plans for us, and what Craille wanted, Craille got! At this moment, I can't say any more about that - George Coutts Jr., who now runs The Craille Institute - would have my hide if I tried! Suffice to say, though, that all these years later, there are hints that an "almost normal service" might be resumed!

* * *

Cases Old and New!

For a start, The Craille Institute has authorised the release of some of Sexton Blake's unpublished cases. These were considered too 'delicate' for public consumption back when they actually occurred, so they never even made it onto good old Twy's desk. Apparently some of our new cases might also see the light of day.

* * *

The Old System

Perhaps I should explain how we used to do things. It was a simple process. The guv'nor and I would get into a gigantic scrap with a loopy villain, such as Professor Kew or Dr. Huxton Rymer or Kestrel or ... well, there were hundreds of the blighters! Then, having successfully foiled Whatsisname's evil plan, the guv'nor would laze around in his stinky old dressing gown while yours truly had to write up the case. Now I don't mind writing - I do a lot of it - but describing being bashed over the head, thrown into a river, gassed, poisoned and thumped just hours after those events took place, and while my flesh and bones were still throbbing ... well, as you can imagine, my notes weren't exactly Shakespeare!

So my next job was to wrap 'em up and post them to Twy - H. W. Twyman - one of the 'high-ups' at Amalgamated Press and a great friend of the guv'nor and I. Twy would then assign the notes to whichever writer he felt could do 'em justice, and, not long after, a splendidly written tale of derring-do would

appear in THE UNION JACK or THE SEXTON BLAKE LIBRARY or in one of the countless other story papers. Of course, the facts were exaggerated out of all proportion. Names and dates were purposely changed and reality got obscured by 'disinformation'. Which is just what we wanted!

* * *

Confused? You Will Be!

This technique, created by Sexton Blake and later developed to an extraordinary degree by Eustace Craille, was used to confound our enemies. The average villain didn't know where Blake was, what he was capable of, or even if he actually existed! Which meant that in a great many cases, the mere name 'Sexton Blake' was enough to confuse and discourage the crook, disorientating him (or 'her' - there were plenty of 'her's'!) and making him relatively 'easy pickings' for the Scotland Yard boys.

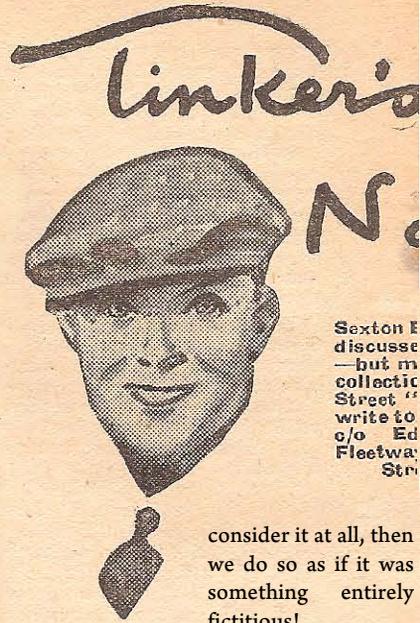
In the meantime, the guv'nor and I, having manipulated ourselves into a sort of 'mythical' status, were left free to tackle the rather special breed of criminals who were appearing from the other side of the 'Credibility Gap'.

* * *

Credibility Gap

Phew! How to explain the Credibility Gap? It's a concept with staggering implications -- again, a theory of the guv'nor's which was expanded upon by old Craille. Okay, let's give this a try. Take a look at the illustration on the facing page. That's called a Necker Cube. As you can see, there are no clues to suggest which plane is the front and which is the back. Your perception tends to alternate between the two possibilities. However, what if one option was constantly reinforced by other peoples' opinion and it was also supported by apparent 'evidence'? Then the alternative version becomes more and more difficult to perceive. In fact, it quickly becomes 'impossible'.

The Credibility Gap is the gulf that exists between one option and the other. If we all stand on the side that supports the notion that we are looking at the cube from a left-hand perspective, then it becomes almost impossible to cross the gap to the place where it could be said that we are looking at it from a right-hand perspective. In fact, the notion of a right-hand perspective becomes so unrealistic to us that, if we can



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consider it at all, then we do so as if it was something entirely fictitious!

Sexton Blake and myself, The Craille Institute, and a whole host of criminals rely on this phenomenon to obfuscate, deceive and misguide.

If you doubt the existence of the Credibility Gap or think you are immune to its influence, I can demonstrate that you are wrong by making a statement and asking you to consider whether it's true or not. The statement is this: 'Sexton Blake is not a fictional character; he really exists!'

If you don't believe that, then Bob's your uncle; the Credibility Gap is functioning just fine, thanks!

* * *

Dazzle!

To get back to what I was saying, thanks to the Credibility Gap, The Craille Institute (which you don't believe in either, huh?) is now starting to release accounts of some of our cases - old and new - in order to dazzle the public once more with the genius of Sexton Blake and, of course, of his plucky assistant! The operative word here is 'dazzle'.

* * *

Blake is Back!

Why do we need to dazzle you? Because we're back in business, that's why! And that means the old techniques are being dusted off to ensure that me and the guv'nor and those around us remain on the 'other side of the gap', as it were (and yes, the phenomenon is so powerful that I can even signal our intentions knowing that you still won't believe it!).

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... "Union Jack,"
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...London, E.C.4.

A Quick Catch Up

So, anyway, that's enough about the past, now let's take a look at the present. I expect you're dying to know more about the current state of affairs with 'Sexton Blake and Tinker'. Well, first of all, we are back living in Baker Street, though it hardly resembles the thoroughfare of old! From the outside, you would never suspect that our building is a domestic paradise but, thanks to Mrs Bardell, who is still going strong, that's exactly what it is! Mrs B is unchanged; still mangling her words, still keeping us fed, and still giving the Coutts family plenty of cheek!"

The Couttses

Another thing not made clear in our old adventures was that fact that after Detective-Inspector Coutts retired we worked with his son, also named George, who became a Detective-Superintendent. In other words, the Coutts of the '50s and '60s was not the same man as the Coutts of the '20s and '30s, though he had all his father's bull-headedness and dogged determination. The younger Coutts went on to become Sir George William Coutts III and he took over the running of The Craille Institute after Eustace Craille finally passed away (aged 112!). Recently, Sir George retired and handed leadership over to his son, George William Coutts IV. The younger Coutts bears an uncanny resemblance to his grandfather, both in appearance and temperament -- which causes the gov'nor and myself no end of amusement, especially when Mrs B harangues him for failing to wipe his feet upon entry to the Baker Street domain!

Censorship!

These unpublished cases were originally withheld -- in the case of the older stories by the Secret Intelligence Service and, with the more recent ones, by The Craille Institute -- for a variety of reasons.

Sometimes it was for the protection of innocent parties who had been involved in the events and whose real identity was impossible to disguise. Sometimes it was for political reasons. And on occasions, as with this issue's tale of SEXTON BLAKE VS. FU MANCHU, it was because the delicate

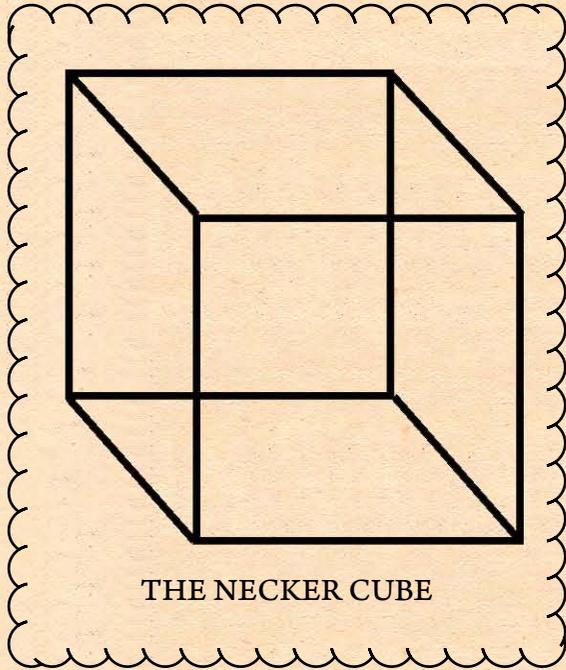
balance of the Credibility Gap might have been threatened.

Imagine if *multiple* sources suggested that Fu Manchu really existed. In no time at all the public would begin to believe ... and if that happened, the subsequent fear and unrest would have given the 'Devil Doctor' far too much power!

* * *

The Fu Manchu Case

The account you hold in your hands records an encounter that left the gov'nor profoundly dissatisfied. He was not at all happy with the orders issued from 'C' of the Secret Intelligence Service. He felt they lacked logic and wasted an opportunity. Sexton Blake, though, knows when to obey an order; and he never breaks his word; so this really was the only time that he faced Fu Manchu.



THE NECKER CUBE

Pedro

It was never really made clear in the old stories but there have been quite a few Pedros. The original (one of the most remarkable dogs who ever lived) sired generations of talented bloodhounds who all received intensive training to bring them up to their forebear's standard.

Over the years, whenever our 'current Pedro' became too old to continue with us, he would be packed off to luxurious accommodation with a loving family while one of his descendents took over the job. I'll say this: every Pedro has been incredible and I have loved them all. The remarkable thing is, though, that the breeding program has been so pure, and the training so effective, that I honestly feel like there's only ever been the one bloodhound with us for all this time! Ha! ... He knows I'm writing about him! The tail is going nine to the dozen!

Youthful Good Looks!

I daresay that you are asking yourself how it is that Sexton Blake and I are still around, seemingly unchanged after all these years. The answer to that question concerns one of the most remarkable discoveries ... one made by the gov'nor's father (who was murdered because of it) and later brought to fruition by events that occurred in 1908. A small group of people -- the gov'nor and I, Mrs Bardell, Sir Richard Losely and Lobangu, George Marsden Plummer (regretably) and one or two others who can't be

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Continued from page 13.

matters which are causing much gnashing of teeth among the higher-ups of the Secret Intelligence Service. The first relates to the political situation in Germany. As I'm sure you're aware, there are some worrying developments over there. Hitler's Nazi party is rising fast and some of our people are convinced that if he gains control of Germany he will re-arm and attempt to expand that country's territory."

"But what about the Treaty of Versailles?" muttered Coutts.

"As far as he's concerned it's an insult to the Fatherland and 'es ist keinen Pfennig wert!'"

"Beg pardon?" said Coutts.

"Not worth a brass farthing," supplied Blake.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Coutts. "Is the man really such a warmonger?"

"It's too early to say," answered Petrie. "But there are men in high places who are afraid that he is. They are also afraid that he might form an alliance with Doctor Fu Manchu!"

"Fu Man who?"

"He's a Chinese warlord, Coutts; the head of the Si Fan," interjected Sexton Blake.

"Or to put it in layman's terms: he's another Wu Ling!"

"Great heavens!"

"More like the opposite side of the same coin, Blake," said Petrie. "He claims to be directly descended from the Manchu Dynasty while Wu Ling claims to be a child of the Ming. Both consider it to be their God-given right to rule China — and beyond! And they are both plotting to destabilise and ultimately conquer the West."

"But keep getting in each other's way?" mused Blake.

"Exactly. Also, of course, you've done a fine job of foiling Wu Ling's various schemes!"

"As have you and Commissioner Nayland Smith with regard to the Si Fan!"

"Phew!" gasped Coutts. "Imagine if the Yellow Beetles and the Si Fan started working together!"

"It will never happen!" said Petrie. "And that's something we can be thankful for! Individually, neither group is strong enough to exert any meaningful influence in China and the West at the same time. So they tend to alternate. In recent years Doctor Fu Manchu has been strong in the East but weak in the West, while with Prince Wu Ling, it was the other way around. Now the tides are turning. Fu

Manchu is, we think, attempting to foment war in the West but has taken his eye off the ball in China. Wu Ling, by contrast, has just suffered a sequence of huge defeats here, thanks to you, Blake, but is now focusing his energy on the preparation of a puppet leader in China, a man named Chiang Kai-shek. If he is successful in that — and Nayland Smith is convinced that he will be — then he'll be occupied there for years to come, which is very good news for England!"

"Indeed!" agreed Sexton Blake. "In the meantime, though, we have a possible alliance between Doctor Fu Manchu and Herr Hitler?"

"Perhaps 'potential' would be a better word, Blake. There's no solid evidence of it as yet. There's been contact, certainly, but whether anything has come of it; that we don't know. Nayland Smith and I have been having a poke around to see whether there's anything to find."

Blake grunted and reached for his pipe. Then he thought better of it and withdrew his hand. His lungs had been fumigated enough for one day.

"I still can't see how Plummer fits into the picture," he ruminated. "However deep the criminal kink in his brain may run — and there's no doubt that it runs very deep indeed — there's ample evidence to suggest that it doesn't impinge on that part where his patriotism is located. Plummer considers himself to be a member of the British aristocracy. As such, it's inconceivable that he would align himself with Fu Manchu, especially if that man is involved with the Nazis."

"But Blake!" put in Coutts, "He aligned himself with Wu Ling without much hesitation!"

"That's true but his motivation wasn't political, it was financial!"

"It always is! Money, plain and simple! The villain cares for nothing else!" declared Detective-Inspector Coutts.

"Ah! You may have something there!" said Blake with a snap of his fingers.

"Doctor Petrie, how is the Si Fan financed?"

"Hmmm, well that's rather interesting," answered Petrie. "Each member of the Si Fan pays what amounts to a small tax. There are literally millions of members, so the twice-yearly payments add up to a vast and growing fortune. On top of that, Fu Manchu has a talent

for persuading western financiers to make what might be called 'donations'. He selects the rather more shady species of financier and fools them into believing that they're investing in a cause which will bring them great riches in the near future. Of course, he has no intention of coming good on the promise!"

"Do you know who these financiers are?"

"We have a list of suspects, yes."

"Are the names Bennett and Fairfax on that list?"

"Why, yes! You know them?"

"In your role of Arjun Narayan," answered Blake, "I don't suppose you got to see yesterday's newspapers. It was reported that a financier named Bennett was found dead. The coroner has speculated that something literally frightened the man to death. And his hands were painted green!"

Doctor Petrie suddenly sat bolt upright. "Green! Then it's begun!" he cried.

"What has?"

"Wait! Wait!" said Petrie, holding up a hand. "What of this Fairfax fellow?"

"Yesterday he came to me babbling something about green hands but was then carried off — from right under my nose, regrettably — by Plummer."

"Then he's a dead man! Earlier, Blake, I mentioned a second reason for infiltrating the Si Fan. Nayland Smith and I wanted to get to the root of a rumour that Fu Manchu recently regained possession of an ancient artifact; a green dragon miankse."

"What the dickens is that?" muttered Coutts.

"Nothing but an embroidered silk banner, on the face of it," said Petrie.

"But a very dangerous artifact!"

"How so?" grunted the inspector.

"The miankse was lost to the Si Fan about eighty years ago when it was stolen from them by the Brotherhood of the Yellow Beetle. Without it, the Si Fan could not perform the ceremony of the dragon's claw ... a sort of initiation which not only binds the initiate to them for life but all his descendants too."

"They couldn't perform the ceremony? Why not?" asked Coutts.

Doctor Petrie shrugged. "Even after all my experiences battling Celestials, I still don't understand the oriental mind. The vital significance they often attach to items which, for us, would seem to possess nothing but decorative value, is astonishing. The miankse, Detective-

Inspector, is a symbol and nothing more. But what a symbol! Through that one silk, hundreds of thousands of innocent people can be enslaved — shackled to the Si Fan by bonds of fear and superstition! No Celestial would even consider defying the dictates of the dragon; it would be fatal!"

Sexton Blake frowned and steeped his fingers together. "Fatal, doctor?" he asked.

"Yes! They call it death by the claw! How the execution used to be carried out, I don't know. But whatever was originally involved, the prospect of it was so terrible that now, just the possibility of it is enough to kill!"

"Kill how?" barked Coutts.

"Through fear! Simply knowing that you've been marked for death by the claw is enough to induce heart failure!"

"Proposterous!"

Blake shook his head. "Not at all, Coutts. Take, for example, the voodoo rites of the Caribbean. It's a well-documented fact that practitioners of that black art can induce heart failure simply by informing their victims that they've been marked for death."

The Baker Street detective turned his attention back to Petrie. "When the Si Fan execute a man in this fashion, do they paint the corpse's hands green?"

"Yes!" exclaimed the doctor. "It's a message to the victim's family, to remind them that they are slaves to the Si Fan! They are in the grip of the dragon!"

"So," murmured Blake thoughtfully, "the miankse gives the Si Fan the symbolic right to enslave and tax complete innocents."

"That is correct. Let me ask you something, Blake — in your dealings with Prince Wu Ling have you ever considered him an honourable man?"

Sexton Blake's brows rose at the rather odd question. "As a matter of fact, yes!" he answered. "On a number of occasions he has given me his word concerning some matter or other and he has been true to it. His idea of 'honour' may not be the same as an Englishman's but, nevertheless, he is honourable. Why do you ask?"

"Because until recently, Doctor Fu Manchu has also been somewhat restrained by his notion of honour. Possession of the miankse has changed that. As a Manchu symbol, it gives him a terrible freedom; casting away the bonds of civilisation and allowing him to act with all the utter ruthlessness of his

ancestors. Already Bennett has fallen victim to it. Fairfax will be next, if he's not dead already, and countless more will follow! Which is why Nayland Smith and I have dedicated ourselves to the destruction of that miankse!"

Blake suddenly stood. "Then, despite my orders, I must also pledge myself to that cause, doctor. For it was me who placed that dreadful symbol into the hands of the Si Fan!"

"What!" exclaimed Petrie and Coutts in unison.

Blake paced the room, rubbing his hands together.

"A mistake! The Secret Intelligence Service had been keeping information about Doctor Fu Manchu from me. I was not aware of him or his organisation. Somehow, the Brotherhood of the Yellow Beetle lost the miankse until, earlier this year, it turned up in a junk shop. They killed the shopkeeper and Wu Ling himself tried to flee with the banner in his possession. Tinker and I intercepted him and, though he escaped, we managed to get the silk. It was passed to the shopkeeper's family who, with my help, sold it to the Si Fan. I was acting merely to keep it out of Wu Ling's hands, without the slightest suspicion that I was passing it to a man and an organisation that are in every way as dangerous!"

"I'm with you, of course!" declared Coutts. "We have to get that banner; we have to find Tinker; and, once and for all, we have to stop Plummer in his tracks. But what's our next move?"

"A police raid!" said Petrie.

"Now you're talking my language, Doctor Petrie. But what do we raid? The café and the chambers beneath are burnt-out and the chinks have scarpered!"

"True. But there is still the Temple of the Dragon!"

Blake stopped his pacing.

"And you know where it is?"

Petrie gave a grim smile. "Arjun Narayan is expected there tonight! And he shall go! And while he's there, he will thump the sentries over the head, unlock the outer doors, and leave the way clear for you two to lead in the boys in blue!"

Detective-Inspector Coutts's eyes sparkled. It was going to be a very interesting evening.

The Seventh Chapter Plummer's Machinations

Some hours after the meeting at Baker Street had broken up, the German, von Horst, climbed into a taxi and told the driver to take him to Carnival Row, Woolwich. He had a second appointment with Colonel Ash, a man to whom he'd taken an instant dislike when they'd met the night before. Von Horst had tried to engage him in conversation — tried to find out more about where he came from and why he'd allied himself to the Si Fan — but Ash had seemed distant and preoccupied, almost to the point of rudeness. Now the German didn't want to spend any more time with him than he had to — but this evening, Doctor Fu Manchu was initiating von Horst into his Si Fan organisation and Colonel Ash had been assigned to guide him through the ceremony, so there was no choice. He was not going to be able to avoid the big Englishman.

Sitting stiffly in the taxi, von Horst was a rather atypical example of the German race. He was tall and lean, with a square-cut intellectual face, short blonde straight hair, a close-cropped pointed beard and steely but honest-looking eyes behind round, metal-rimmed spectacles. However, in character, he was everything an Englishman expects of a German: abrupt, ruthlessly efficient, cold and disciplined. He held himself straight as a plumb-line. On this particular night he was wearing full evening-dress — tails and a white waistcoat.

He had picked up the taxi in Piccadilly Circus and as he was being driven past the Venetia Hotel he suddenly slammed down the window and called to the driver to stop.

He had seen a familiar figure issuing from the glittering portals of the Venetia.

"Hallo," he cried, "Hier! Colonel Ash!"

At the foot of the hotel's steps, George Marsden Plummer stopped and turned with a start.

"Von Horst!" he cried, in surprise.

A minute later he had crossed to the taxi and climbed in.

"Drive on — Carnival Row!" von Horst ordered the driver.

"I've just been having a good feed!" grinned Plummer who, like his companion, was wearing evening-dress. He seemed much more cheerful than the previous night and was breathing rather heavily, as though his meal had been a very good one indeed — obviously including wine! He gave a sideways glance at von

Horst who, noticing his companion's sly expression, snapped, "You look forward to the occasion tonight, no? I am to be humiliated?"

"What makes you say that? There's nothing to it! I've been through the ceremony myself!" Then he added quickly: "It's the Celestial's way, of course! Just a tomfool idea of the doctor's. And one has to humour him. It's worth it! If you can keep in with Fu Manchu you are a made man, von Horst. Why, look at me! I've just dined at the Venetia Hotel!"

"Ja, a man who is most days with Arabs is not often to be found at a hotel like the Venetia, is that not so?" agreed von Horst with a dry chuckle. Plummer flushed. He did not like Germans and, in particular, he did not like this one.

"And what of the men who pledge themselves to Hitler, Germany's answer to Charlie Chaplin?" he snarled.

Von Horst shot him an ugly look and Plummer laughed.

"Oh, cut it out, Mr Nazi!" he said. "No need to have a row. We shall be seeing too much of each other from now on to be on bad terms. If Fu Manchu's plans work out as he hopes, we've got a life job together. And even if they crash, we shall see a lot of each other first!"

"You think they will crash?" muttered von Horst.

George Marsden Plummer shrugged his shoulders.

"When a man sets his sights as high as our yellow friend has done, who knows what'll happen!" he grunted, "But he looks to me as if he's a fair way towards achieving his ends. He's got huge swathes of China now, thanks to the millions he's spent there. He's well on the way to having India, too, to say nothing of Mongolia and Turkestan. With Asia at his command, he can conquer the white races, especially if he sets them at each others' throats first!"

"But can nothing stop him?" von Horst interrupted. "I ask, you understand, because I wish to know who our enemies are!"

"Oh, he has plenty of them!" said Plummer. "Last night he told me about a man named Wu Ling. Prince Wu Ling." Plummer had, of course, met and worked Prince Wu Ling in the recent past but in his role as Colonel Ash, he could not reveal this fact.

"Wu Ling is to the Ming Dynasty what Fu Manchu is to the Manchus," he

continued. "They are bitter rivals and their organisations — Wu Ling's Brotherhood of the Yellow Beetle and Fu Manchu's Si Fan — are constantly at each other's throats. That's what's kept them from achieving their aims so far. But Fu Manchu is in the ascendancy at the moment, thanks to the detective I saw today, Sexton Blake, who has single-handedly dashed Wu Ling's every scheme."

"Ja, I have heard of this Blake. But come now, Colonel, let us talk of tonight. What am I to expect in the Temple of the Dragon?"

"Oh, just the usual hocus-pocus. There's nothing in it. You'll swear allegiance to Fu Manchu, then there are one or two rituals." He avoided his companion's eye. "Nothing to worry about," he added in a loud, determined voice.

"Melodramatic nonsense," grumbled the German.

"The sort of thing to expect from a yellow man," assented Plummer. "But Fu Manchu is deadly serious over it. Understand that! The oath of allegiance means a lot to him. If ever you break it, look out! Remember Franklyn Bennett."

"That is just what I don't like to remember," grumbled the German. "Nevertheless, I was sent here by my master to establish a relationship with Fu Manchu, so I shall do exactly that, even if it means I have to prove myself by going through with this ridiculous ceremony. But I shall not grovel to a Chinaman, I tell you. He needs me; and a man like me isn't found on every street corner!"

"Don't flatter yourself too much!" grinned Plummer unpleasantly. "He'll treat you as he treated Franklyn Bennett as soon as look at you, especially if he suspects that you've double-crossed him!"

He broke off suddenly, unnerved by his own words. He was responsible for Fairfax's failure to contribute the money demanded by the Si Fan — a failure for which the financier was about to suffer. Furthermore, though he would see to it that the Riffians received some of the munitions that the doctor was shipping to Tangier, he would also sell a large amount of them for his own personal gain. And money that Fu Manchu had given him to help increase his Rif army had also been

pocketed. George Marsden Plummer was playing a very dangerous game indeed and he was beginning to worry that exposure was inevitable. And what would happen then? He shuddered.

Von Horst, misinterpreting the motion, glanced up swiftly.

"Fairfax?" he said. "The other financier? What has happened to him?"

"Oh, he got the wind up him after Bennett's death," grunted Plummer rather nervously. "He went to split to Sexton Blake, hoping the detective would scupper Fu Manchu the way he's been scuppering Wu Ling. But as I say, the doctor cottoned on to it and now — well, Fairfax is finished."

"Dead?" muttered von Horst.

"I don't know," lied Plummer. "As good as dead, anyway!"

The taxi rounded a corner.

"We're here," said Plummer, and his voice was oddly hoarse. He put his head out of the window and found that it was still raining. "Right you are," he called to the driver, "put us down at the corner here."

The taxi drew to a standstill.

Plummer and the German alighted, paid the taxi-driver, and watched him drive away. Then Plummer spun on his heels.

"This way," he said, taking the German by the arm. "This way, von Horst."

They hurried along the ill-lit pavement. Tall, grimy buildings rose high around them. Plummer turned and led his companion down a dark alley, with a spike-surmounted wall on either side. Opposite a low door, he stopped. He rapped upon it.

"The sun sets in the West!" came a low foreign voice from behind the portal.

"The dawn is in the East!" answered Plummer.

They were the passwords to the Temple of the Dragon. The door swung open and the two men glimpsed a square yellow face with oblique eyes — the custodian of the door.

Plummer pushed von Horst through and followed him. The door closed behind them with a soft click.

They crossed a room and passed through another door which opened onto a narrow yard, with low buildings on all four sides. Plummer led von Horst in through a door on the left and into an office of sorts. But before he entered von Horst noticed two other doorways; and the one on the opposite side of the yard was painted a startlingly vivid green.

"That," muttered Plummer, in answer to the German's unspoken question, "That is the door to the Temple of the Dragon!"

George Marsden Plummer glanced at his watch. "We've three-quarters of an hour to wait," he said.

The two men seated themselves by an electric heater, and for a long while sat in silence, listening to the patter of the rain. Once they heard the custodian of the door speak in a low voice, and though they could not hear the answering passwords, they knew they must have been given, for the door was opened and someone entered the yard. "Wonder who that is?" grunted Plummer.

He stood and pulled the door open slightly, putting his eye to the gap. Outside, a tall Indian was passing through the door that led into the temple. One of Fu Manchu's many lackeys.

Again he glanced at watch.

"I have an errand to run. You stay here. I'll be back soon."

"Where are you going, Ash?" demanded the German.

"Mind your business!" snapped Plummer. "And it's 'Colonel' Ash, if you please!"

He strode from the room, closed the door behind him, glanced around the yard and seeing that it was now empty, crossed to one of the other doors — the one that did not lead to the mysterious temple. Pulling a key from his pocket, he unlocked it and stepped through, pulling it shut behind him. He was in a long, dark, low-roofed warehouse, piled with crates and sacks. Rain drummed against skylights in the roof. In a couple of places, the panes were broken and the water dribbled through onto the concrete floor, its liquid pattering echoing through the silence.

Plummer pulled an electric torch from his pocket and flicked it on. A rat scurried away from the cone of light.

Through corridors formed by the crates, the big man passed until, about two thirds of the way along the length of the warehouse, he bore to the right and came to a door.

He crouched down outside it and carefully removed the false moustache that decorated his upper lip. His wig followed, and then the false teeth that fitted so smoothly over his own.

He stood, unlocked the door and stepped into a small square room, which was dimly lit by a flickering oil lamp. There was a cracked, web-shaded window in the wall opposite.

On the floor were two figures, both tightly bound and gagged. One was Tinker, the other was Malcom Fairfax. Tinker was in the grip of a drug-induced sleep. The youth had proven to Plummer far too many times that, conscious, he was as slippery as an eel and far too adept at the art of escapology. The crook had given him a strong enough dose to keep him quiet for a while.

Fairfax, by contrast, was awake and staring at Plummer with wide, frightened eyes.

The master crook crouched beside him and pulled down the gag.

"Stay silent and listen to me!" he hissed. "Your life depends on it!"

Mutely, Fairfax nodded.

"I'm going to give you a chance to live!" whispered Plummer. "But it will cost you the half million that remains from the two million the Si Fan demanded!"

"N-no!" stuttered Fairfax. "I have to give it to the Si Fan! They're going to kill me otherwise! Where's the rest? Why — why didn't you give it to them?"

"That's my affair! And they'll kill you anyway, you fool!" snapped Plummer. "If you want to live you'll pay me that other half a million! It's your only chance! Do so and I'll get you out of here. I'll also see to it that the Si Fan will think you dead. That way you'll know they won't be coming after you. But no tricks! If, when I come for the money, you refuse to hand it over, I'll tell them that you're alive and how to find you!"

Fairfax swallowed and nodded. "Yes! Yes! Anything you say! Just get me out of here!"

"Very well!"

Plummer moved across to Tinker and looked down at the youngster.

"You have caused me countless problems for a great many years," he said through gritted teeth, though Tinker was oblivious to the words. "It's time to pay your dues. I am not a killer — perhaps it's my one saving grace — but that doesn't mean I won't place you in the path of one. Tonight you'll die and I'll be happy to see the back of you. Goodbye, Tinker!"

The big crook turned and crossed to a shelf, reached up and took down a folded sheet of green silk.

"This," he said to Fairfax, "was meant for you!"

He draped the sheet over Sexton Blake's assistant.

He then returned to Fairfax and began to untie the man's bonds. "The window there," he said, nodding his head towards the wall, "opens onto a yard. I'm going to lower you out and you're going to cross the yard and go through a door which opens onto an alleyway. I've unlocked the door to aid your escape. Turn left and run along the alleyway to its end, then turn right. Keep running. You'll reach a road where a taxi can be flagged down. Now listen Fairfax: go straight to your office and secure the funds. Then leave and under no circumstances go home or back to the office. Take the taxi to Ilford and rent a room in a tavern called The Spoon, on the Cranbrook Road. Use the name Darwin. Lay low. Understand?"

"Darwin. Yes."

"In two days, at noon exactly, I will come and visit you and you will hand over the funds."

The bonds fell away from Fairfax's ankles. His wrists were already free. He sat up, rubbing his numb limbs.

"And the Si Fan?" he asked in a tremulous voice.

"By then they will think you dead. I will confirm to you the truth of this when I see you. If all goes as planned, you will be able to walk out of that tavern a safe man. But be warned! If you cross me, you will have both me and the Si Fan hot on your heels!"

Fairfax nodded miserably and heaved himself to his feet.

"Alright," said Plummer, "let's get you out of here!"

The Eighth Chapter A Ceremony Interrupted

Thirty minutes later, von Horst looked up as Colonel Ash returned and announced, "Time to get you ready, von Horst."

He went to a cupboard and produced a silken robe of dazzling yellow, ornamented with strange Asiatic designs in blue and green.

"Put this on over your other clothes."

Von Horst slipped the robe over his tall, athletic frame. It hung loose and open, showing his evening dress beneath. Colonel Ash grinned.

"Now you look like a proper initiate!" he

said. "Fu Manchu ought to be a theatrical manager — he obviously loves to ham it up! Come on! Put your coat on again — it's still raining."

The German put on his overcoat, which was long one, falling below his knees and hiding the yellow robe beneath. Ash opened the door and the two hurried across the yard towards the door of the Temple of the Dragon. The colonel knocked softly upon it.

"Who comes?" came a soft, guttural voice. "One who answers the summons of the dragon," he answered.

The door swung open and von Horst and Colonel Ash stepped through into a kind of low vestibule, hung with silk, with a pair of heavy silken curtains at the end.

An uncharacteristically tall and muscular Chinaman had opened the door. Now he led them to the curtains and flung them aside.

Ash and von Horst passed through, and the curtains fell back softly behind them.

A long, narrow room, very lofty, stretched before them. The Temple of the Dragon! Aligned along the gaudily ornamented walls were rows upon rows of men, with faces that varied from light yellow to blackish brown — Asiatics all, and clad in the costumes of their native countries — Chinese in their blue overalls and felt-soled shoes, Indians with turbans, Burmese and Siamese and Japanese, half-castes and Africans. Von Horst caught his breath. His eyes roamed up the serried ranks, impressed with the number and variety of attendees.

"Come on," muttered Ash, and with a tight grip on the German's arm he strode forward along the stone floor, which, like the ceiling, was painted with inscriptions. The air was heavy with drifting incense, which obscured the end of the room. The whole place was lit with shaded lamps, filling the hall with a soft yellow light.

As von Horst's eyes grew more used to the hazy atmosphere he saw Doctor Fu Manchu.

The Devil Doctor was seated on a carved ivory throne at the top of three broad steps. Behind him was a row of great brass bowls, hung from the ceiling on slender chains. From these the coils of the incense drifted.

Fu Manchu's yellow skin, the oblique eyes that glimmered with dark inscrutability, and the large, claw-like hands with their long nails, seemed the personification of the mysterious East, with all its riddles, slumbering ambitions and vast dreams.

Then von Horst noticed a figure stretched out at the bottom of the steps — a human figure it appeared to be, but hidden beneath a green silken shroud that gave only the vaguest impression of a man's outline.

"What's that?" he whispered.

"Only a dummy," answered Colonel Ash softly. "Purely symbolic. Hush now!"

A deep-muttered chant had come from the rows of watching Asiatics. It filled the hall with rhythmic sound, almost like a heartbeat. Then, as von Horst and Ash reached the steps, it died away. Doctor Fu Manchu's voice sounded purringly in the stillness; he was speaking Chinese. Colonel Ash answered in the same tongue — surprising von Horst, who had not known that his companion could speak it.

In a chanting tone, Fu Manchu and Colonel Ash continued their exchange of ritualised statements. Von Horst gave no indication that he understood the words, though he did and found them to be thoroughly menacing.

The atmosphere of the place was oppressive. His eyes were fixed on the shrouded dummy before him. It looked horribly like a dead man, he thought. His pulse had quickened. His eyes began to roam, and suddenly he noticed the banner hanging on the wall behind the bowls of incense — on it was depicted a ferocious green dragon with savage, clutching claws. The words chanted by Fu Manchu and Colonel Ash seemed to have been inspired by this image, for they spoke of the 'the talons' that would strike any man who betrayed the Si Fan.

Fu Manchu and Colonel Ash fell silent. Quietly, the chanting began again, throbbing against the walls, filling von Horst's head. He wanted to press his hands against his ears as the pulsing voices grew louder. The sound seemed supernatural, as if channelled through the gathered throng from a distant time and place. On it went, the voices rising, falling, rising, falling.

Then, suddenly, silence.

He felt Ash tugging at his sleeve and turned with a start.

"Here you are — take this!" the Colonel was whispering.

Von Horst saw that his companion held a long trident-shaped weapon; a long handle with a three-bladed end carved

into the shape of a dragon's foot with ferociously sharp talons. It was studded with jade and might have been admired for its beautiful craftsmanship were it not so deadly-looking. He took it.

"What do I do with this?"

Colonel Ash licked his lips.

"The big ceremony now," he muttered thickly. "You must plunge the blades into the dummy, at the heart. It's a symbol. As you strike you must cry aloud: 'So shall the claw strike at the foes of the Si Fan!'"

Von Horst stepped slowly forward and raised the greenly-gleaming shaft.

"So shall the claw strike —"

Suddenly he hooked the blades into the green silk and yanked it aside. The unconscious figure of a youth lay there, bound hand and foot and gagged, lashed down so that he could scarcely move a finger.

Doctor Fu Manchu's eyes flickered from von Horst to the prone form of the youngster to the suddenly white face of Colonel Ash.

"You!" he hissed. "Who is this boy?"

"It's — It's the assistant to Sexton Blake! I caught him spying on us!" stammered the colonel.

"And so," said the doctor with mesmerising slowness, "Rather than bringing him before me, you took it upon yourself to substitute him for Fairfax!"

"Yes! He's dangerous! You know how Sexton Blake has opposed Wu Ling!"

"Colonel Ash, you have defied me! Where is the dog Fairfax?"

"You don't understand! Blake is a devil! If we deprive him of his assistant, it could break him!"

Doctor Fu Manchu sat, calm and motionless but for the restless green flames of his slanted eyes.

"I repeat, Colonel Ash, and for the last time: where is Fairfax?"

"He —"

Ash was interrupted by a sudden loud beating on the door behind the curtains at the other end of the hall. There was a splintering crash and the thud of many booted feet. The next moment, a horde of blue-clad figures came bursting into sight — stalwart police constables, led by the short burly figure of Detective-Inspector Coutts and, beside him, Sexton Blake.

Along the length of the hall, the Baker Street detective's eyes locked with the agate-green ones of Colonel Ash.

"Coutts, get that man with the black moustache!" he cried, "He's Plu—"

He broke off as a wiry, vicious-looking dacoit grabbed him by the throat and dragged him to the floor.

The end of the hall erupted into violence. The Si Fan leaped upon the police with knives and garrottes in their hands. Blake struggled with his assailant, who'd dropped a cord around the detective's neck and was throttling him, while Coutts was also dragged to the floor by two dark-skinned assailants.

Fu Manchu rose to his feet, his eyes not leaving the quaking form of Colonel Ash. "So!" His voice was sulphuric. "What was he about to say, white man? Who are you? How deep is your treachery?"

George Marsden Plummer stood, frozen with fear. His jaw worked spasmodically but no sound emerged from him.

Three Chinese suddenly pushed him and von Horst aside and ran up the steps to Fu Manchu. They bowed then whispered urgently. Without taking his eyes off Plummer, the Devil Doctor nodded and said something. Then he broke his gaze, turned and quickly stepped behind the carved throne, disappearing behind a curtain. Two of the Chinamen ran down to Tinker, picked him up and followed their master. The third drew a long knife from the folds of his sleeve and stepped towards Plummer. As he lifted the blade to strike, von Horst swung the trident into the Chinaman's face. The celestial went flying backwards and landed in a heap on the dais.

"Good work!" cried Plummer. "Now let's get the blazes out of here!"

But before he could move he found himself held in an iron grip.

"Let go, von Horst! What are you playing at!"

"Stand still!" snapped von Horst, without the slightest trace of a German accent.

"Let me go I say! The police won't be delayed for much longer!"

"You're not going anywhere Colonel Ash!" came the steely reply. "You are a filthy traitor!"

Plummer's eyes suddenly blazed. "You fool!" he hissed, "I'm no traitor! That Chinaman was never going to get an army from me! I was just out for his money!"

"What!"

"I was swindling the damned chink!"

"Do you mean to tell me that you're just

a common thief?" said von Horst, his grip on Plummer loosening slightly.

Plummer met von Horst's eyes. "There is nothing," he snarled, "common about me!" He broke free from the erstwhile German's grip and his fist slammed into von Horst's face, sending the man staggering backwards into a knot of Si Fan men.

Plummer leaped onto the dais.

Sexton Blake's voice rose above the din: "Plummer! Give yourself up!"

The master crook ignored the command and passed around the throne, pulling aside the curtains to the right of it and revealing an open door. He stepped through into a long corridor and closed the portal behind him. He found three large bolts which, with a grim smile of relief, he slid into place. Turning, he spotted some way ahead of him the two Asiatics carrying Tinker. They did not see him and soon stepped out of sight around a corner. Plummer waited a few moments to allow them to get farther ahead, then cautiously followed.

Back in the hall, as von Horst picked himself off the floor, Sexton Blake shot past him and flung himself against the door through which Plummer had passed. It held firm. A pair of Si Fan men suddenly pounced on the detective and threw him backwards, down the steps and straight into von Horst who found himself sprawled on the floor again.

"Stay down!" panted Blake. "You'll be arrested in a moment! There's no point in trying to run!"

"I'm Nayland Smith!" snapped von Horst.

"Good man!" cried Blake. "Help me catch up with Plummer!"

"Who?" asked Assistant Commissioner Denis Nayland Smith as Blake helped him back to his feet.

"Colonel Ash is George Marsden Plummer, the notorious crook!"

"Great Scott! That explains a lot!"

From out of the battling police and Si Fan men, an Indian leaped and in four long strides reached Nayland Smith and gripped his hand.

"Petrie, old man!" exclaimed the commissioner.

"Smith! We've got to stop them!" cried Petrie, who was in his guise as Arjun Narayan. He pointed over his friend's shoulder to the area directly behind Fu Manchu's throne. There, four

Chinamen were hurriedly removing the dragon miankse from the wall.

Without another word, Nayland Smith, Sexton Blake and Doctor Petrie bounded up the steps and went crashing into the Celestials.

The seven men on the dais instantly became the focal point of the entire battle as Si Fan men rushed to defend the miankse and constables raced after them. Had anyone been watching from the back of the hall the scene would have been too chaotic to follow. Limbs whirled, blades flashed, truncheons swung down onto heads; there were screams and shouts and groans and, from time to time, rising above the cacophony, the sound of Detective-Inspector Coutts roaring instructions and encouragement to his men:

"Hughes! Johnson! Montgomery! Keep that exit guarded! Don't let any of the blighters slip away!"

"Good work Lomax! You show 'em what's what!"

"Dickson! Mitchell! Stop 'em grouping up there on the right!"

"Lowry! Behind you, man! Watch out!"

The Si Fan men fought viciously but gradually they succumbed, overwhelmed by the bravery, strength and determination of the British 'bobbies'. Up on the dais, Doctor Petrie had unashamedly wrapped the miankse around his left forearm to stem the flow of blood caused by a slashing knife. He stood, propped against the wall and visibly pale even through his dark make-up, while Blake and Nayland Smith fought off the remaining Asiatics. These last few men — mostly dacoits — were particularly savage, driven by their desperation to recover the silk banner. However, when Detective-Inspector Coutts came smashing into them from the rear, their game was up. One by one they fell; some conscious, some unconscious, but all handcuffed and helpless.

For a moment, everything seemed still.

The strange quietness was broken by Doctor Petrie's unsteady voice:

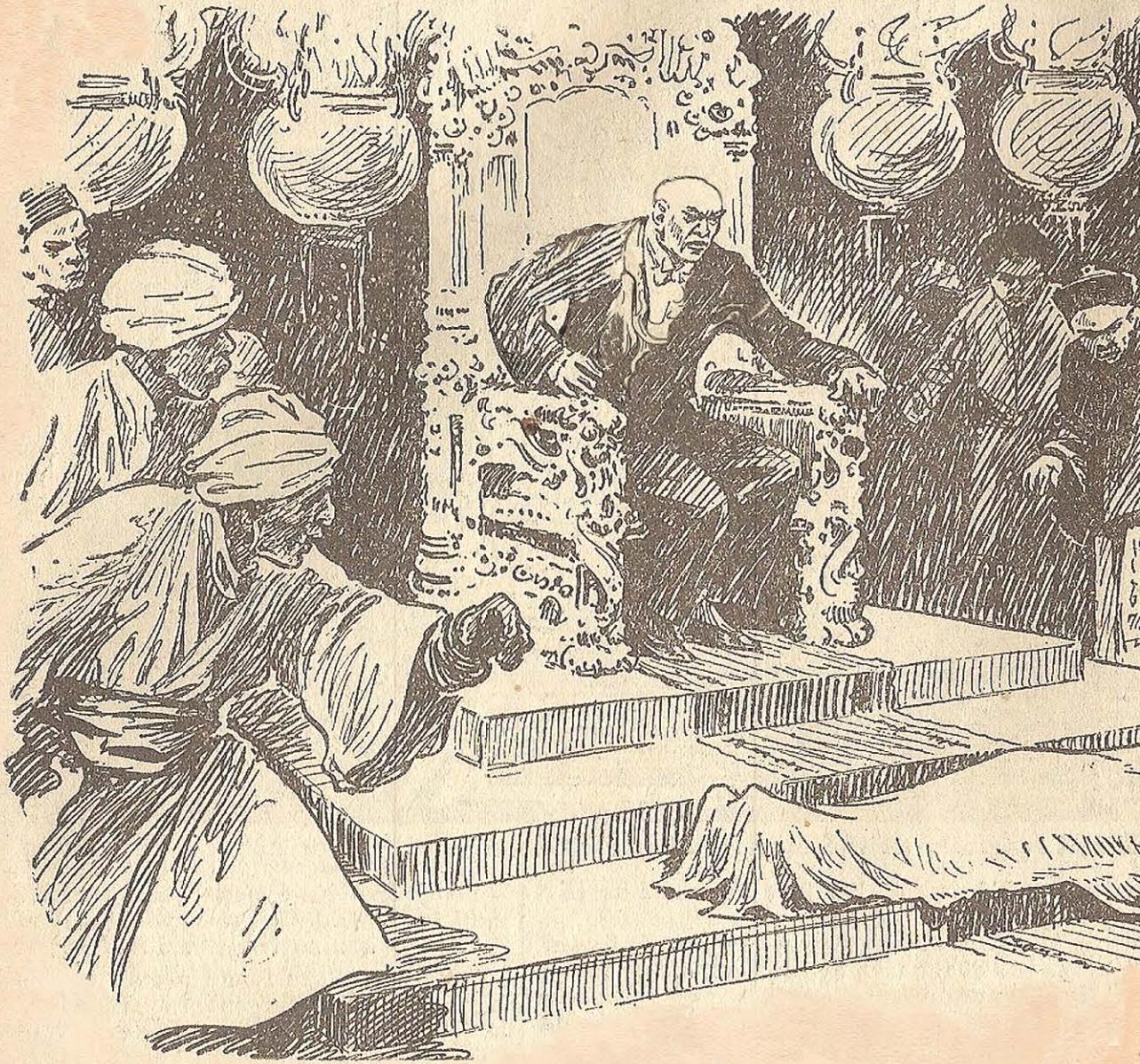
"As a medical man, may I make a suggestion?"

Nayland Smith turned and took his friend by the uninjured elbow. "What is it, old man?"

"That we treat this silk the same way we treat all used dressings!"

"You mean —?"

"We burn the damnable thing!"



The Ninth Chapter

Two Remarkable Conversations

George Marsden Plummer had escaped, Tinker was still missing, and Sexton Blake was not happy.

He had caught a glimpse of the unconscious body of his assistant during the raid on the Temple of the Dragon and knew that Tinker was in the hands of the Si Fan. Two days had passed since that eventful night and no clue to his whereabouts had been forthcoming. The detective was beside himself with worry.

For hour after hour he had examined every inch of the burnt-out rooms beneath the now abandoned Limehouse café. He had scoured the temple and other rooms in Woolwich. He had found nothing.

Pedro's nose discovered areas where Tinker had obviously been but there was no trail that could be followed.

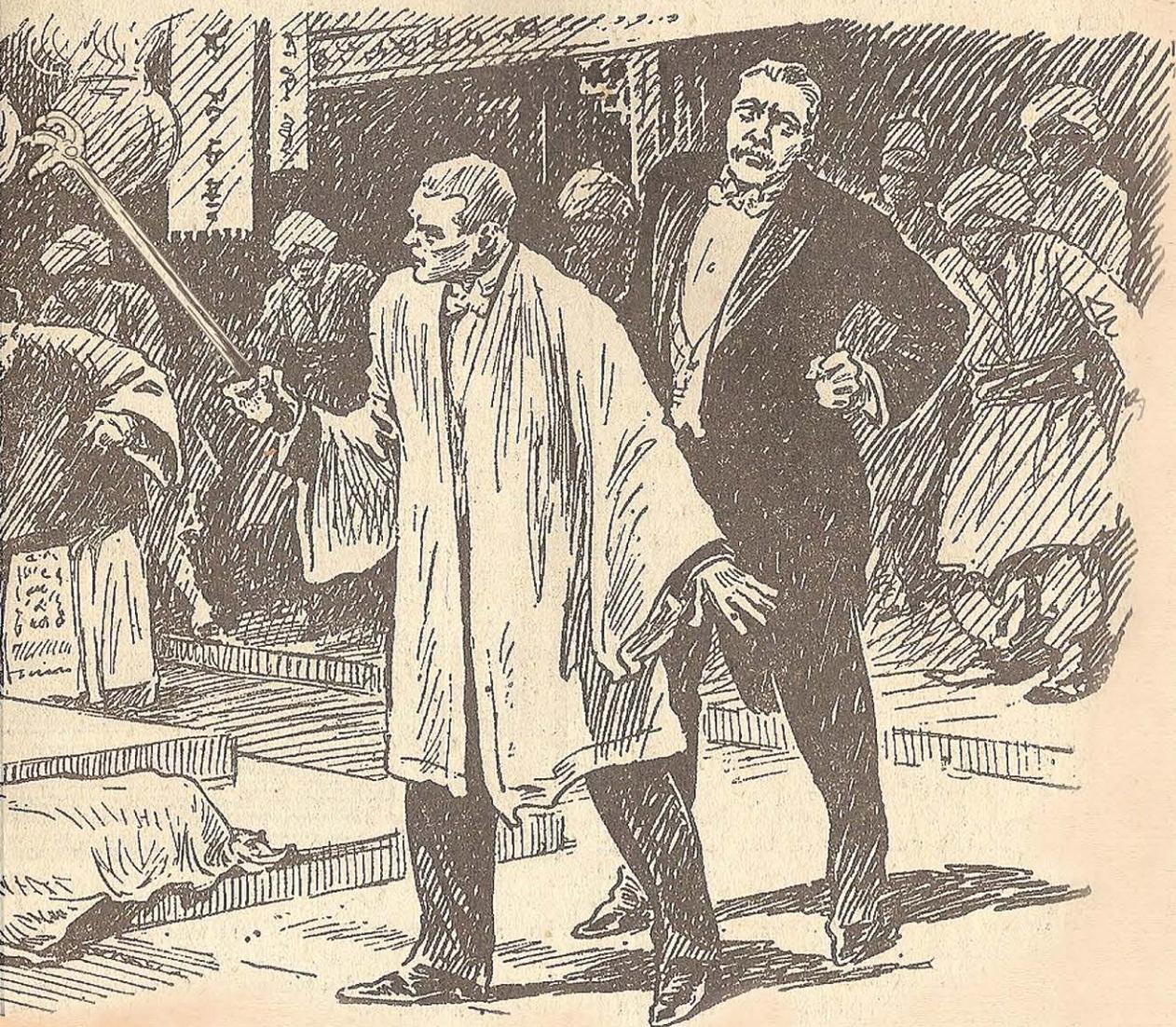
The many members of the Si Fan who had been rounded up were, for the most part, slowly being released. There were few charges that could be levelled against them, other than resisting arrest and assaulting a police officer. Serious charges, it's true, but not the kind that can be used to hold a man in a cell for very long. And once liberated, the men melted away and were never seen again. Those that were subjected to an interrogation — with Detective-Inspector Coutts's permission — by the Baker Street detective, simply remained silent and stared at him with

expressionless, unreadable eyes.

He had followed three of them, separately, upon their release but in all three cases the men had gone straight to Southampton and had boarded an East-bound liner. Doctor Fu Manchu was obviously financing the mass evacuation of all the men who'd fallen into the hands of the police.

Even Teng Zao Ping of the "rat-pie and dog-sausage shop" — a man who seemed to know everything about everything where his own race was concerned — could tell Blake nothing on this occasion.

"You can but wait, Mr Blake," he advised. "The Devil Doctor has no direct argument with you or with



Tinker. Therefore he will not strike at you. Be patient. We men of the East act when the auspices suit the action, and not before!"

So Sexton Blake waited.

Then, on that second day, at eight o'clock in the evening, he received a most surprising telephone call.

He had been slumped in his old saddlebag chair, wrapped in his thoughts and threadbare red dressing gown, smoking his pipe and filling the room with a blue haze, when the telephone jangled. Wearily, he reached across to the occasional table and lifted the receiver to his ear.

"Yes?"

There was a pause; crackles on the line, then:

"I am speaking to Mr Sexton Blake." Oddly, it sounded more like a statement than a question ... and something in its

tone caught the detective's attention. He sat up, his eyes suddenly alert, his jaw tightening.

"Yes. I'm Sexton Blake. Who's this?"

Another pause.

"Good evening Mr Blake. I am Prince Wu Ling."

For once in his life, Blake was taken aback and his voice failed him. "Wu - Wu Ling?" he stuttered.

Two or three seconds passed before there came a reply, indicating that the caller was some distance away, though by no means, it occurred to Blake, as far away as China.

"Do not be alarmed, Mr Blake," — the voice was silken even through the static on the line — "Though you are my honourable enemy, a man I shall one day strike like a troublesome mosquito, this is not that day. I am calling as one who holds you in the highest esteem."

Blake recovered himself. "To taunt me?" he asked, in a harsh metallic voice.

"No. To reassure you."

"How so?" The detective couldn't hide his surprise.

"By telling you that your honourable assistant is alive, unharmed, and well-looked after."

"How do you know this?"

"I have spies, Mr Blake. Do you not think that an opponent like Doctor Fu Manchu is one worth watching? My people have infiltrated the Si Fan as, I am sure, the Si Fan have, regrettably, infiltrated the Brotherhood of the Yellow Beetle."

Blake remained silent.

"I feel certain," continued Wu Ling, "that you will be contacted soon. But be prepared to make a deal. Were I an American — and I thank the gods that I am not — I might tell you that the cards

are stacked in Fu Manchu's favour. But do not be afraid that he will harm your assistant for as an American might also say: he owes you one."

"How so?"

"The miankse. It meant a great deal to him. I possessed it and you wrested it from me and passed it to him. He will see to it that the debt is repaid."

There was a pause and then, with ice in his voice, Prince Wu Ling said: "As will I."

The line went dead.

Blake replaced the receiver. He was astonished and yet also encouraged, for despite their history, he trusted Prince Wu Ling's word implicitly.

Three hours later, just as he made the decision to go to bed, Blake was roused by a gentle knock at the door. Not the front door downstairs, but the door of his consulting room. It did not sound like Mrs Bardell's knock.

"Come!" he said.

The door swung open and Doctor Fu Manchu glided into the room, his hands clasped behind his back, his head held high, his eyes filmy and unreadable.

"Good evening, Mr Blake!"

"How the blue blazes did you get in?" snapped Blake, rising to his feet.

"Via the front door," said Fu Manchu. He crossed the room and stood beside the detective, facing the fireplace. The Si Fan pearl stood on the mantelpiece before him. "Did you know," he said in a voice that was barely above a whisper, "that this pearl was once owned by Ki Kwan, wife of Confucius?"

"No," snapped Blake. "Where is my assistant? I demand an answer!"

Without taking his eyes from the pearl, Fu Manchu said, "You demand, Mr Blake? Really? But come now, there is no need for such crudity. I assure you that the plucky young Tinker is well cared for!"

He turned and looked the detective straight in the eye. "I have come to negotiate. Perhaps you realise how much of a ... novelty ... that is for me? I do not normally negotiate, Mr Blake. May I sit?"

Blake gave a curt nod.

Fu Manchu lowered himself into the guest armchair and, with his elbows on its arms and his hands steepled before his face, he contemplated Blake, who had also seated himself.

"First," said the doctor, "I want you to know that I do not hold you responsible for the disruption of my little gathering the other night nor for the subsequent burning of the dragon miankse."

"How gratifying," drawled Blake sarcastically.

Fu Manchu appeared not to notice the detective's tone.

"The occasion had already been turned into a farce by the treacherous Colonel Ash," he continued, "though I was not aware of that fact until your assistant was revealed."

Blake remained silent.

After a pause, Fu Manchu continued:

"My point, Mr Blake, is that I still consider myself to be somewhat indebted to you over the miankse affair. Despite what has happened to it since, it was you who returned it to the Si Fan after it had been lost for eighty years. For that reason, I am willing to return the esteemed Tinker to you alive and unharmed ... and at very little cost to yourself."

"Cost," said Blake flatly.

Fu Manchu gave a slight shrug of his shoulders and seemed to wince, as if he felt that the conversation was taking a rather unpleasant turn. "Hear me out, please; I will not be asking much of you; I simply seek an assurance and a little information."

Blake fished his pipe from his dressing gown pocket. "Go on."

The Chinaman looked on with distaste as Blake filled and lit the pipe. "I understand," he said, "that the Secret Intelligence Service has ordered you to avoid contact with the Si Fan."

Sexton Blake shot upright in his seat and the pipe dropped from his mouth into his lap.

"How can you possibly know that!" he barked. "The order was given in the strictest confidence during a meeting attended only by myself and the man who issued it!"

"Ah, Mr Blake! There is a great deal that I know! A very great deal! The point is that the order was given and I want you to obey it! If you give me your word that you will do so — that you will not interfere with the affairs of the Si Fan — then I will return Tinker to you unharmed. I will also give you my assurance that the Si Fan will not interfere in the affairs of Sexton Blake!"

Blake retrieved his pipe and busied himself refilling and lighting it while considering his visitor's proposal. Doctor Fu Manchu was, in essence, simply asking him to do something that he would do anyway: obey the orders given him by the head of the Secret

Intelligence Service. And perhaps, after all, 'C' was right in issuing that order; maybe it was better that he, Sexton Blake, dedicated himself to the fight against Prince Wu Ling while Nayland Smith, in turn, opposed Fu Manchu.

"You are aware," he said, "that if I leave your organisation alone, there are others who will not?"

"You refer to Assistant Commissioner Denis Nayland Smith?" purred the doctor.

"Him, yes. But others, too. The British will not sit back and allow you to destroy our democracy! You will not rob us of the freedoms we have toiled for so long to establish! You will not undermine the principles of civilisation! Look back at the long history of the West, Doctor! You will see progress! You will see an ongoing process of enlightenment that brings with it ever more impressive achievements — technologies, governmental systems and organisations that will ultimately help every man, woman and child to live a happier, healthier and more comfortable life! We have a class system that gives every one of us a clearly defined place in society; a function; a means to contribute to, and benefit from, the great culture in which we live! Can the same be said of the East? No! Most definitely not! So hear me, doctor, and hear me well: the Secret Intelligence Service issued an order. I will obey that order not because you ask me to but because it is my duty and my place to do so."

"You give me your word that you will not intentionally interfere with the Si Fan?" said Fu Manchu quietly.

"I give you my word that I will not intentionally engage with the Si Fan. However, I will add that, if I happen across information that will help oppose you, then I will not hesitate to pass that information on to the Secret Service."

"But you will not actively seek such information?"

"I shall not."

"Then we have a deal, Mr Blake. I have one further request."

Sexton Blake narrowed his eyes, wondering what was coming next; half expecting trickery of some sort.

Fu Manchu leaned forward in the chair. That peculiar milky film in his eyes flickered across the pinpoint irises.

"Colonel Ash. I want him. Tell me where I might find him!"

The Baker Street detective contemplated the question. Plainly, Fu Manchu did not know the colonel's true identity.

George Marsden Plummer's crime spree had so far lasted for two decades and there was no end to it in sight. The man was an out-and-out scoundrel who had, time and again, eluded Blake and police forces worldwide. He was, undoubtedly, the most persistent of Blake's foes, and while it was true that a great many of his schemes had been foiled by the detective, it was also true that a great many had not.

Here was an opportunity to finally curtail Plummer's activities. With the Si Fan on his heels, the master-crook would spend the rest of his life — probably a short life — looking over his shoulder fearfully. He would flinch away from every yellow face he ever saw. He would be forced to retreat ever deeper into the shadows; maybe even fleeing to the remotest of regions. Not even his beloved Rif Mountains could offer him a safe haven, for Blake had but to inform Fu Manchu of his possible presence there in order to fill those rocky peaks with a swarm of vengeful Chinamen.

Plummer would be hunted like an animal and, sooner or later, he would be caught — and God help him then! The Asiatics have ways of ensuring that a man's final excruciating hours, days, weeks — even months! — are prolonged beyond anything imaginable by a Westerner. The Christian vision of Hell pales by comparison to the physical agonies a Celestial can inflict. Plummer's end would be ... horrible!

Sexton Blake looked up, straight into the slanted green eyes of Doctor Fu Manchu.

"I know of no individual named Colonel Ash," he said. "And if such an individual exists, I have no idea where he might be."

The eyes of the Chinese warlord and the criminal investigator held. There was silence. Then Fu Manchu blinked and stood up.

"Very well, Mr Blake, in that case our business is done. We shall never meet again, is that understood?"

"Yes," said Blake, also standing.

Fu Manchu crossed the room to the door then turned and looked back at the detective.

"The pearl of Ki Kwan was a gift, Mr Blake. Now, perhaps, you will look upon it as a memento — a memento of our one and only encounter! Please know that I have enjoyed meeting the world's most famous and accomplished detective. And, of course, I wish you nothing but success in your campaign against our common opponent, Prince Wu Ling."

Blake bowed his head in acknowledgement. When he raised his eyes, Doctor Fu Manchu had gone.

The Tenth Chapter Flight!

For two days George Marsden Plummer had been keeping out of sight, not once leaving his room in a small B&B in Gillingham. Despite abandoning his Colonel Ash disguise and donning instead a grey wig and false beard, he felt extremely unsafe, was filled with terror and wanted to get out of the country as soon as possible. He knew that Sexton Blake would be investigating the recent movements of 'Colonel Ash'. Plummer had developed an almost superstitious fear of the detective's abilities, for time and again his schemes had been foiled by the Baker Street man.

He sat on his bed, gnawed his fingernails, and tried to figure out what clues he might have left and how Blake might use them to trace him.

After many hours of this, with his nerve almost shattered, he paid the landlady and walked to the train station, a suitcase in one hand, an empty holdall in the other. When the London-bound locomotive came rattling up to the platform, belching smoke and soot, Plummer jumped aboard almost before it had stopped and sat alone, shaking, in a first-class compartment. He fumbled a cigar from his pocket, bit off the end and lit it, the trembling flame crackling down its side.

For the duration of the short journey, he chain-smoked, filling the small space with smoke. Under its cover, and for the final time, he transformed himself into Colonel Ash.

The one-and-a-half million he had taken from Fairfax, plus the large amounts of money he had accepted from Doctor Fu Manchu, had been divided between five bank accounts. All the accounts had been opened under assumed names at various times in the

past. However, Plummer had visited each one in his Colonel Ash guise when he deposited the Si Fan money — and that is what terrified him, for if Sexton Blake had discovered that fact, then the banks in question might at this very moment be under observation. Even worse, Blake might have asked Scotland Yard to order the accounts frozen.

Plummer needed that money. He had to move it to an account in Gibraltar, where it would be more easily accessible to him. He knew, though, that getting it from the five banks — if, indeed, he could get it — would mean taking a massive risk. When depositing the cheques, in his Colonel Ash disguise, he had told the bank managers that it he would be returning in a few days to withdraw the cash — they were expecting Ash! But thanks to Sexton Blake's raid on the temple, Colonel Ash was a very risky man to be!

What Plummer didn't know was that Sexton Blake was currently occupied sifting through the ashes of the café and the rooms beneath. It was, in fact, the Si Fan who posed the greatest danger, for they were combing London in search of Colonel Ash. Indeed, when Plummer stepped off the train at Charing Cross Station, he was observed by a pair of dark, slanted eyes ... and from that moment, his every movement was followed.

He proceeded to the first of the banks and, with very little trouble, withdrew the cash and placed it into a plain leather holdall. He left the building expecting to be nabbed by Scotland Yard men — but nothing of the sort happened.

It was the same story at each of the banks and, later that morning, it was a far more confident Plummer who arrived at Liverpool Street. His holdall heavy with a fortune in banknotes.

It was at this point that the flaw in his character took over.

Had Plummer been content with the money currently in his hand, chances are that he would have got clear and left the country a very rich man indeed. Plummer, though, knew that a further half-a-million was waiting for him. It was something he couldn't ignore.

Greed motivated him.

Overconfidence made him careless.

He forgot to remove his disguise.

So he stepped aboard a train and, less than an hour later, he was in Ilford and walking along the Cranbrook Road.

The previous few days of rain had given way to a uniform but bright greyness. A

thin unbroken blanket of cloud stretched across the sky. It was the kind of weather that left most people feeling flat and depressed — but Plummer was feeling exuberant. He was rich! And he was about to get richer!

After about fifteen minutes, the Spoon Inn hove into view ahead of him. He entered the tavern, walked up to the bar and asked for the landlord. A tall bearded individual appeared beside him and placed a tray of empty glasses on the bar. "That's me!" he said in a loud, jovial voice. "'Ow can I 'elp?" "You have a Mr Darwin rooming here?" asked Plummer.

"Aye! A rummy sort o' chap! Unsociable!"

"Ah, that's my fault, I'm afraid!"

"Really? 'Ow's that then?" asked the landlord, scratching his head.

"I'm his doctor. I told him to go stay somewhere. Take a rest. See no one. Read books!"

"Oh ho! A doctor hey? Funny, I took you for a military man!"

Plummer realised that he was still in his disguise. He nodded.

"And you are correct. I'm a military doctor. Will you announce me?"

The landlord clicked his heels and gave an over-theatrical salute.

"No need for that, sir! You can go straight up, sir! Stairs are in the corner over there, sir! The gentleman is in room four, what is to your left at the top 'o the stairs, sir!"

Plummer smiled and drawled: "At ease, my man!"

The landlord saluted again as Plummer left him, crossed the lounge bar and ascended the stairs. A suitcase was in his right hand; the holdall in his left. At the top, he turned and passed along a dingy hall until he came to room four. Then he placed the suitcase on the floor and knocked on the door. There was no reply. He knocked again. Silence. He gripped and turned the door handle. The door was locked.

There are certain locks which, for an ex-Scotland Yard man like Plummer — especially one possessing his strength — provide no barrier at all. He braced himself, turned the handle again, lifted and pushed. With a slight splintering sound, the door opened and Plummer stood on the threshold, staring into the room.

He blinked. The muscles at either side of his jaw pulsed.

Malcom Fairfax was hanging by the neck from the light fitting in the middle of the ceiling. His face was purple and his tongue, thick and black, was protruding from his mouth. His glazed, dead eyes stared

straight at Plummer.

Fairfax's hands, dangling at his sides, were painted bright green.

Plummer stumbled backwards and fell against the hallway wall. For a moment, all rational thought left him and his eyes, the whites completely visible around the green irises, twitched frantically from side to side like those of a trapped animal. His knees buckled and he began to slide down the wall but his wits suddenly returned and, heaving himself upright, he leaned forward and pulled the door shut.

Grabbing his suitcase and still clutching the holdall, he hurried back along the passageway and down the stairs.

"Hallo!" boomed the landlord, "That was a quick visit! Ain't there nothin' you can do for the poor chap?" And he roared with laughter at his own joke.

Plummer pushed past him, heading for the exit, and muttered, "He wasn't there!"

"Wasn't there? Wasn't there?" shouted the landlord as the master crook reached the door. "Why he ain't been nowhere but there for two blinkin' days!"

Plummer staggered out of the Spoon Inn and started running back towards the train station. As he came abreast the mouth of an alleyway, a figure suddenly leaped out and dragged him into it, using the big man's own momentum to send him sprawling into the gloomy passageway.

Plummer twisted to his knees, expecting to see Sexton Blake and Tinker leaping towards him. Instead, he saw two Chinamen. He screamed and jerked the holdall up as a knife flashed down. It half severed the handle of the bag and plunged into its brown leather. Plummer yanked the bag away, bringing the knife with it, and, with his other hand, he sent the suitcase smashing into the side of his attacker's head. The case exploded and the Celestial was sent reeling, collapsing to the pavement, out cold, with clothes and various toiletries falling around him.

The second man dived at Plummer but was caught by the suitcase's back-swing which smashed into his face, causing him to tumble sideways into a dustbin.

As his assailant thrashed about amid clattering tin and stinking refuse, Plummer shot to his feet, dropped the suitcase, turned on his heel and fled farther down the alleyway. At its end it

opened onto a main road. He veered to the left and raced along it hoping to see a taxi but none came. He glanced behind him and saw a Celestial in hot pursuit.

The Si Fan had been looking for Malcom Fairfax and for Colonel Ash! They had found both!

Desperately, Plummer ran, dodging and turning through street after street, his legs pumping, his lungs sucking in huge draughts of air. He cursed himself bitterly. Why had he bothered with half a million when he already had more than three times that amount in his hands?

The Asiatic was closing on him. Plummer could hear the soft thud thud thud of the man's feet at his back.

Then, as he came alongside a high fence, Plummer noticed a gap where a couple of planks had become detached and he quickly veered into the opening. As he passed through, his foot caught on something and he fell head first down a steep slope. His skin was lacerated and bruised as he rolled and slid in a shower of debris down the incline to the bottom, where he slammed into hard gravel. He lay panting and winded.

A shower of earth and stones warned him that the Chinaman had followed and was picking his way down the slope.

Plummer forced himself to his knees and then to his feet. He clutched the holdall to his chest and quickly glanced around. He was in a railway cutting, next to the tracks, which were starting to hum and vibrate as an unseen train approached. How fast would it be travelling? Could he somehow board it and get away? All he required was a place where, free from prying eyes, he could remove his Ash disguise. The Si Fan had never seen his real features. He just needed to pull off the wig and false moustache, wipe away the carefully applied lines and wrinkles, then he could walk right past Fu Manchu himself without being recognised!

He turned just as his pursuer reached the bottom of the slope. The oriental dived at him. Plummer's fist shot out. His opponent ducked and wound his wiry arms around Plummer's waist, hooked his leg around the bigger man's ankle, and pushed. Losing his balance, the master crook toppled backwards

onto the rail track, banging his head against one of the metal runners. For a brief moment he blacked out and, when his senses revived, he found the Si Fan man on his chest and a garotte around his throat.

Beneath him, the track began to rumble and jump as the train sped nearer.

Plummer felt as if his head would burst as the cord cut into his neck. His vision narrowed to a pinprick, the world becoming a distant spark of light at the end of a very long tunnel. With one final, supreme effort, he swung the heavy holdall into the side of his attacker's head. The handle of the bag, already half-sliced through, snapped, and as the Celestial fell sideways the bag flew over him and bounced away down the track. Plummer threw the broken handle aside and rolled away from the railway line, his ears filled with a thunderous noise that was partly the sound of blood pumping back through his half-crushed arteries, and partly the growl of the fast approaching locomotive. He dug the cord away from his throat and gasped for air.

He staggered to his feet. A whistle blasted. The Si Fan man sat up and looked past Plummer, his eyes widening with terror, his mouth opening to scream.

Suddenly Plummer was knocked flying as a wall of air slapped into him with terrible force, sending him rolling over and over. He was enveloped in thick burning steam; deafened by an earth-shattering roar as a locomotive flashed by less than two feet from him. The ground shook wildly as the deafening train continued to pass, seeming to go on forever.

And then it was over and a strange silence descended upon him.

Plummer lay still with his face pressed into the oily gravel.

He was tired. He wanted to sleep, to shut his eyes and wake up somewhere else, somewhere safe and comfortable. After some moments, he lifted his head.

The Chinaman had vanished. Where he had been sitting, the railway sleepers were wet and red, glistening in the pale grey light.

Further along the rails, banknotes fluttered through the air.

"No!" groaned Plummer. "No!"

But the holdall was no longer there.

He scrambled to his feet and stumbled along beside the track, past the large smear of blood, to where the notes were scattered. He began to gather them up but there was only a small fraction of the one-and-a-half million; just a few hundred pounds. He could have wept, so biting was his frustration. To be so close to the riches he had always dreamed of and then have them snatched away at the last moment!

Plummer was cut, bruised, covered with soot and dust, and bone-weary. He moved slowly, all the fight drained out of him. Then he remembered the other Chinaman — the one he had knocked cold in the alley. As soon as that man regained his wits, he would put out the word that Colonel Ash was in the area. It would soon be swarming with the Si Fan!

So Plummer stuffed his pockets with banknotes and began to climb the slope. He would find a room somewhere nearby, clean himself up, and then get out of the country as fast as possible. He knew he would be safe from the Si Fan once he had divested himself of the Colonel Ash disguise but there would still remain one overwhelming danger —

The man named Sexton Blake!

The Epilogue Baker Street

That evening, while Plummer was fleeing across the channel, bitter and defeated, the door to Sexton Blake's consulting room opened and Tinker walked in. Blake leapt up from his chair and in a couple of long strides was gripping his assistant's hand in a heartfelt shake. He cleared his throat and asked: "Are you in good shape, young'un?"

"It was dreadful!" whispered Tinker huskily. "I've had nothing but noodles, twice a day for three days!"

Blake laughed and cuffed the youngster's head. "Clown! So no harm done, then?"

"Nope! One minute I was looking at Plummer, next minute the lights went out. When I woke up I had a thumping great headache and my wrists and ankles were sore — seems I was tied up for a while, though I can't remember it! I was in a small square room with a mattress, a couple of cushions on the floor, and a Chinaman watching over

me. We played chequers for hours on end and I got fed and watered on a regular basis. Not much different to a holiday in Margate, apart from the lack of sand, sun, donkey rides and freedom to depart when the whim takes you!"

Further conversation was interrupted by the sudden appearance of Pedro, who bounded on his young master with frantic enthusiasm, his tail wagging madly. At the same time, a thunderous pounding sounded from the front door below, accompanied by the urgent clanging of the doorbell and Mrs Bardell's shriek of "Suspector-Defective Scoots!"

While the customary battle between the landlady and Scotland Yard man raged on the doorstep, Tinker settled Pedro onto the hearthrug, then he and Sexton Blake took up position in their armchairs.

By the time Coutts made it up the stairs, Blake's pipe had polluted the atmosphere to a satisfactory degree and both he and his assistant had their noses buried in newspapers.

The consultation room door opened and a thoroughly harrassed-looking George Coutts stepped in. Behind him, from the bottom of the stairs, came Mrs Bardell's voice: "And you didn't wipe 'em great clod-hoppin' boots of yours neither! You might 'ave been brung up on a farm with the animals but hereabouts we got civiliated customs and don't you ferget it!"

"By the Lord Harry!" panted Coutts, "Her cooking is heavenly but that womans the devil in disguise!"

Tinker lowered his paper. "Oh, hello Couttsy. Didn't hear you coming!"

Coutts jerked his hat from his head. "Don't call me 'Couttsy, you young ...

What! By all that's holy! Tinker!"

"The one and only!" grinned the youngster, rising the grip the Yard man's hand.

"Pull up a chair, old friend," advised Sexton Blake. "Tinker will tell you about his adventures!"

Coutts did so and for the next few minutes he listened to Tinker's account of his capture by Plummer and imprisonment by the Si Fan.

At the end of it the police inspector gave a whistle. "I can never get the hang of these oriental types," he mused. "First they're going to stick a steaming great fork into you, next they're treating you to bed and breakfast!"

"In fairness," opined Blake, "they didn't actually know it was Tinker beneath that silk and it was Assistant Commissioner Nayland Smith, as von Horst, who was brandishing the fork!"

"Fiddlesticks! Mere details!" grumbled Coutts. "But I'm still in the dark. What was Plummer up to?"

"Exactly as you predicted!" exclaimed Blake. "He was after money!"

"From Doctor Fu Manchu?"

"Yes. But he made exactly the same mistake as I did — he misjudged the hold that symbols and rituals have over the oriental mind! I was a fool to arrange the sale of the dragon miankse to the Si Fan without first researching its history and significance. And Plummer was a fool to think that he could substitute Tinker for Fairfax without Fu Manchu regarding it as an act of betrayal!"

"Great heavens if it wasn't bad enough with Wu Ling, now we have Fu Man-bloomin'-chu!" groaned Coutts.

"The truth is," said Blake, "that Fu Manchu has been around for a long time. The Secret Intelligence Service knows all about him and Nayland Smith and Doctor Petrie have battled him — just as we've battled Wu Ling — for many a year. Of course, I had been aware that the Manchu and the Ming dynasties were at odds — and I knew that the Manchu's had an operative in Europe ... but I had no idea that the Si Fan were so powerful. Whenever I saw signs of their various machinations — the attempted intrigues, kidnappings, assassinations, acts of sabotage, and so forth — I had mistakenly attributed them to Wu Ling's organisation; they bore the same unmistakable hallmark of the East!"

"Guv'nor," broke in Tinker, "with these two organisations at work to destabilise Europe, what chance do we have? Do you think they'll manipulate us into another war?"

"Another war!" exclaimed Coutts. "Impossible!"

"I'm afraid it's all too possible, old chap," said Blake. "Maybe even inevitable. And if it's anything like as ferocious as the last one, then the East need only gather its forces and have them sweep through the debris!"

"My God!"

"I never thought I'd say this, guv'nor," said Tinker, "but thank goodness for Prince Wu Ling!"

Sexton Blake chuckled.

"Well there you have it in a nutshell," he nodded. "The East won't be able to gather

its forces while it's divided by these ancient enmities! Doctor Fu Manchu and Prince Wu Ling will never unite, of that we can be certain!"

"But to get back to Plummer," said Coutts, "How the dickens did he fool a man like Manchu? With the Colonel Ash business, I mean."

"Simply because he knew what he was talking about! Plummer knows the Riffian forces inside out. My guess is that, in his guise of Colonel Ash, he offered those forces to Fu Manchu. The so-called Devil Doctor must have found that irresistible; his own army poised just the other side of the Straits of Gibraltar! The prospect dazzled him; blinded him to the truth — that 'Colonel Ash' was in it for one thing and one thing only — personal gain!"

"A risky game for Plummer," noted Tinker.

"Indeed," agreed Blake. "But since when has Plummer played any other sort?"

After a momentary pause, the detective continued:

"Fu Manchu's lust for power also gave Assistant Commissioner Nayland Smith the opportunity he needed. When he learned that the doctor was making overtures to Hitler, he intercepted the man sent to negotiate on Hitler's behalf and took his place. As von Horst, he gained valuable insight into Fu Manchu's intentions!"

"And Hitler's," muttered Tinker.

Detective-Inspector Coutts's hat went flying across the consulting room, banged against the window and fell to the carpet.

"Blast it!" he fumed. "Hitler! Wu Ling! Plummer! Fu Manchu! Is there no end to these maniacs?"

His outburst was interrupted by the arrival of Mrs Bardell bearing a tray upon which stood a teapot and a plate of pastries. She lay it on an occasional table and was just turning to leave when, with a disapproving sigh, she noticed the hat on the floor. She crossed to it, picked it up, dusted it down, then, on her way out of the room, silently slapped it onto Coutts's head.

Tinker laughed delightedly.

Coutts frowned and reached for a cake. "Incidentally," he said, "according to the coroner, Bennett definitely died of fright."

Sexton Blake nodded. "It's my

supposition that a member of the Si Fan appeared at his office window — I've examined the wall beneath it and it's an easy climb. No doubt Bennett saw him, knew that he was an assassin, and died on the spot. The man then entered and painted Bennett's hands green."

"The dragon's claw!" said Tinker.

Coutts snorted. "Mumbo jumbo, more like!"

He brushed cake crumbs from his trouser leg.

Sexton Blake turned and gazed at the pearl of Ki Kwan.

"Yes indeed," he muttered. "But when it comes from the right source, mumbo jumbo can be as fatal as the thrust of a knife!"

The End

FOOTBALL COMPETITION NO. 9

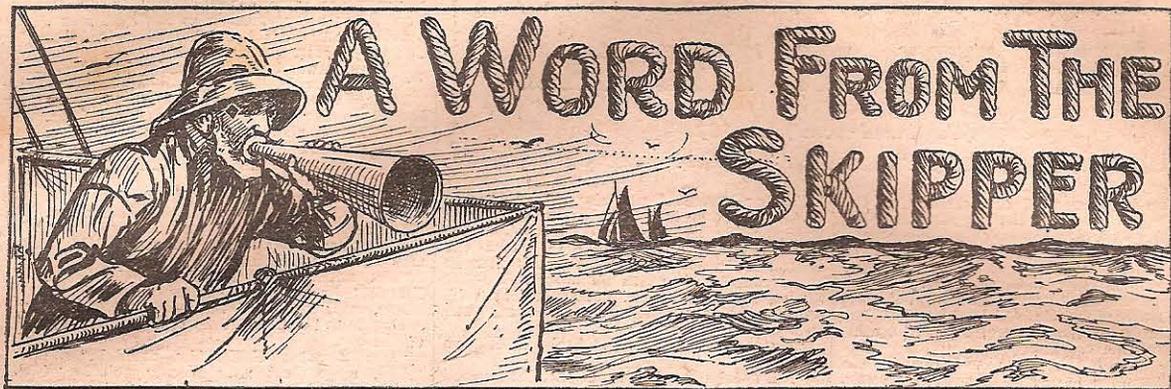
Matches played Saturday X, XXXX

(Date restricted by *The Craille Institute*)

£50 WON.

In this Competition no one succeeded in correctly forecasting the results of all the matches. The Prize of £50 is therefore divided among the following eighteen competitors, who each sent in a coupon showing twelve correct predictions:

Mrs. E. J. Cole, Bishop Sutton, Bristol; Geo. Parry, Bock House, Ferndale, S. Wales; W. P. Lee, 78, Glandwr Street, Abertillery, S. Wales; John St. Clair, 44, Spurstowe Terrace, Hackney, London; Jas. Stewart, 12, Terrace Road, Greenock; Mr. Robinson, 4 Cain Lane, Southwram, Halifax; C. Hall, 52, Crimpsall Road, Doncaster; E. Ruddiek, 23, Raglan Row, Philadelphia, Co. Durham; John W. Mould, High Street, Mow Cop, Cheshire; Mr. A. Boanas, 82, Angus Street, Roath Park, Cardiff; John Radio, 48, North Junction Street, Leith, Scotland; L. J. Gee, 48, Hasland Road, Chesterfield; W. Rawson, 16, Tunstall Road, Dewsbury Road, Leeds; J. A. Fraser, 132, School Road, Moseley; Samuel Gibbs, 6, Russell Street, Heywood, Tree Lanes; Harry Blunt, 80, Bourne Street, Brindley Ford, Stoke-on-Trent; Mrs. Cooper, 62, Skipworth Street, Leicester; Denis Regan, 55, Cardiff Road, Mountain Ash, Glam.



A WORD FROM THE SKIPPER

My Dear Readers, -- From time to time large flat envelopes appear in a postbox marked '28 apt. 5'. Your humble editor's name and address are stamped onto these envelopes in jet black ink. The postmarks are always British but, so far, in each instance they have indicated a different town as the point of origin. The most recent example, of which I am about to write, was sent from Herne Bay, which is a small seaside town on the north coast of Kent. Beyond the postmark, no return address has ever been indicated.

To date, I have received eleven of these envelopes. Each one contained sheets of extremely thin white paper with a great number of words printed upon them in a typeface so small as to be just barely legible.

The first envelope was delivered about eight months after I created the BLAKIANA web site. It contained fifteen pages. The topmost bore the following (and rather intriguing) message:

'Re. the web site. Good work. Timely. We will be in touch.'

There was no signature or address.

The remaining fourteen sheets contained a great many additions and corrections to the Sexton Blake bibliography which, at the time, was in an inadequate shape, to say the least. This new information allowed me to transform it into something that actually deserved to be called a bibliography! There were also extracts from various issues of THE UNION JACK which I was able to use as the basis for the article entitled 'Behind the Scenes in Baker Street'.

Subsequent envelopes held much more

interesting information, including the rough drafts of new Sexton Blake stories -- drafts which, in fact, had more of the appearance of case notes. With a minimum of effort on my part, these became 'The Séance at Stillwater Mansion', 'The Return of the Yellow Beetle', 'Special Dispensation 5 and 6 (plus 5, Appendix 1)', 'The Case of the Left Hand of Thoth', 'Pedro Pulls Through!', 'The Case of the Flying Submarine', 'The Day of the Dragon' and 'The Mystery of Devil's Forest'.

Of these stories, 'Special Dispensation 5 and 6 (plus 5, Appendix 1)' and 'The Case of the Left Hand of Thoth' are by far the most interesting in that they suggest that Sexton Blake is alive, is working for (though independent of) a secret organisation named The Craille Institute, and that he uses (and has always used) fictionalised versions of his cases to maintain his position on the other side of what is termed 'The Credibility Gap'.

Now, I must admit that for a considerable period of time I laboured under the impression that I was the victim of an extravagant hoax. After all, Sexton Blake is just a fictional character, isn't he?

However, when I discovered a certain oddity about the jet black ink of these envelopes and their contents ... let's just say that my judgement is well and truly suspended.

This is astonishing but true: if I try to scan or photocopy the pages, nothing but a blank white page comes out. If I try to photograph them, the camera cannot focus on the typeface and records only blurred lines.

The only way I have found to reproduce the information is to sit down and copy the sheets by hand.

It gets worse: the sheets of paper I have

received have each lasted exactly one week before mysteriously crumbling into ash of their own accord!

I am, as you might imagine, on fire with curiosity!

The penultimate envelope to date contained twenty-six pages upon which were written the most startling information so far. And I mean 'written', for the contents deviated from the usual in the fact that, rather than being printed, everything was penned by hand. Like the font of the previous missives, the words were tiny in the extreme, written with a narrow-nibbed fountain pen. The letters were slanted sharply to the right and were beautifully formed, though somewhat angular in style. There were no mistakes; nothing crossed out or scribbled over; nothing misspelled.

The author, whoever he or she may be, had listed key events in Sexton Blake's life, including hitherto unknown 'facts' such as his birthdate and a brief (and tragic) history of his family.

A small part of this information has been used to construct the timeline which now appears on the BLAKIANA site. More will be added later (yes, of course the moment I received the envelope I copied the contents by hand!).

So to the most recent delivery:

It contained case notes, entitled THE AFFAIR OF THE DEVIL DOCTOR and an instruction to 'Write this up'. There was an address (of a post office in Tunbridge Wells) to which I was asked -- or, rather, 'ordered' -- to send the results. So I did what I was told.

A few days later I received an email asking me to explain what had occurred so far and how I felt about it.

So I wrote this and will send it back to the anonymous emailer in a moment.

How do I feel about all this?

Baffled! Excited! Intrigued!

Blakiana

The Sexton Blake Resource

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