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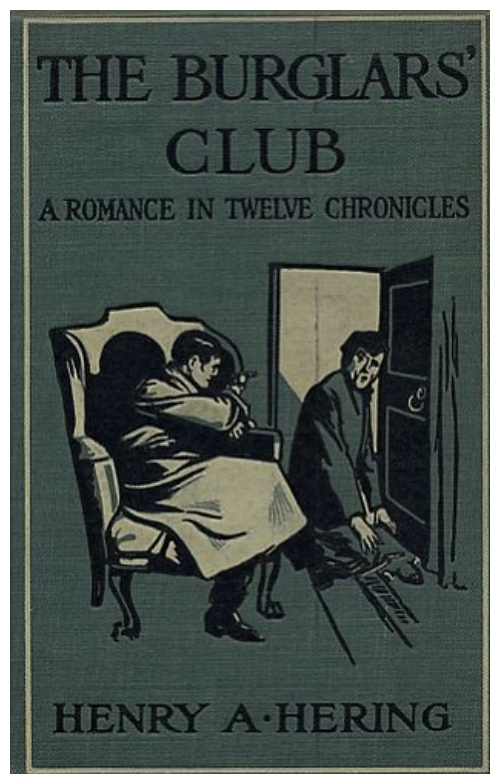
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BURGLARS' CLUB: A ROMANCE IN TWELVE CHRONICLES ***



THE BURGLARS' CLUB



"MAY I ASK WHAT YOU EXPECT TO FIND
HERE?"

(p. 4.)

THE BURGLARS' CLUB

A ROMANCE IN TWELVE
CHRONICLES

BY
HENRY A. HERING

*WITH SIXTEEN ILLUSTRATIONS
BY F. H. TOWNSEND*

B. W. DODGE AND COMPANY
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1906

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THE TWELVE CHRONICLES.

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"He's one of us,' the burglar explained. 'You see, we are men who have pretty well exhausted the pleasures of life. We've all been in the Army or the Navy, all of us are sportsmen, and we are bachelors; so there isn't much excitement left for us. We've started a Burglars' Club to help things on a bit. The entrance fee is a town burglary, the subject to be set by our president, and every other year each member has to keep up his subscription by a provincial line.'"

THE BURGLARS' CLUB:

[1]

A ROMANCE IN TWELVE CHRONICLES.

I.

SIR JOHN CARDER'S CIGARS.

SIR JOHN CARDER, head of the well-known firm of Carder and Co., merchants, of Manchester, sat in his warehouse. It was one o'clock in the morning. Since half-past eight he had been alone in the building; and there in his snug private office, before a cheery fire and beneath electric light, Sir John prepared to meet what he conceived to be his fate.

He was insolvent. For some time past he had suspected that this was the state of things. Now he was sure of it. The yearly balance sheet placed in his hand the previous day by his cashier, together with sundry figures from his own private ledger, placed the fact beyond the region of dispute. Because he felt himself unequal to the situation, Sir John had shut himself up in his office—and on the desk in front of him was a loaded revolver.

Sir John had strong antiquarian tastes. His bachelor home in Withington was a positive museum of curiosities, from Phœnician pottery down to files of English newspapers when the Georges were kings. In his office he kept more personal relics of bygone times, and he was now sorting out the drawers of a big bureau, full of them. [2]

He had been severely trained in method by the most orderly of fathers, and had saved every written communication he had received since the age of seventeen. It is therefore quite understandable why his accumulation of letters was so large, and partially understandable how he came to have before him four bulky parcels of them, respectively endorsed with the names of Mary, Nell, Kitty, and Flip. The dates of these, be it at once understood, were not contemporaneous, though a careful investigator might have detected a little overlapping. The letters marked Flip, it ought also to be stated, came first in point of time.

Sir John lingered long over these bundles, and read many of the letters. They interested him greatly, and in their perusal he almost forgot the evening's ultimate objective. Connected with these particular letters was a batch of photographs, on which he gazed with tender reminiscence. Then there were other matters of more public character—a missive, for instance, from the Prime Minister, informing him that his Majesty intended to confer upon him the honour of knighthood, his Commission in the Volunteers, and some I.O.U.'s from a member of the House of Lords. [3]

All these, and many others, Sir John threw on the desk in front, ready for the final holocaust. With the feeling of a true collector he had not the heart to destroy them singly.

Then, from another drawer, he drew forth his balance sheets for twenty years, and glanced them through with almost as much interest as he had felt for his letters. Once, it seemed, he had been worth close on a hundred thousand pounds. An infatuated belief in a South American concession, followed by a succession of lean years in trading, had frittered all this, and more, away.

While he was gazing gloomily at these recording figures the door gently opened, and a man stood on the threshold—a man with his coat buttoned tightly up to the neck, with his cap brought down over his eyes, a man with a lamp—in short, a burglar. Sir John stared at him dumbfounded. Then he glanced at the revolver, but it was out of reach. The burglar followed his look, and caught up the weapon. [4]

Now thoroughly aroused, the knight indignantly exclaimed:

"You needn't add murder to your other crimes, my man."

"Sir," replied the burglar, "it would grieve me to have to anticipate your own intentions."

Sir John was struck, as much by the melodious voice of the burglar as by his answer. Nevertheless, in his most magisterial voice he demanded: "What are you doing here?"

"Watching an elderly gentleman in an interesting situation."

"You are impertinent!" flared Sir John.

"A thousand pardons. A burglar should, I believe, be merely brutal."

"May I ask what you expect to find here?" continued the merchant. "We rarely keep enough money on the premises to make it worth your while."

"Postage stamps?" insinuated the other.

Sir John ignored the suggestion. "Certainly not enough to make it worth your while. It may be a matter of penal servitude for you." [5]

"You open up a wide philosophic question," said the burglar suavely. "What is worth your while in this world? 'Uneasy is the head that wears a crown.' You seem worried yourself, Sir John—going through your papers at this time o' night, with a loaded pistol by you."

The merchant was annoyed at the burglar's perspicacity, and he could not think of an effective rejoinder. His visitor advanced to the bureau. The photographs immediately engaged his attention. "Ha!" he exclaimed approvingly. "But it really isn't fair. One, two, three, four. Greedy man!"

"Will you kindly leave my private matters alone?" said the incensed knight. Then, with a sudden inspiration, he made a reckless dash for freedom by grabbing at the telephone handle, turning briskly, and shouting down the receiver, "Help! Thieves! Help!" But before he had called again the burglar had raised his revolver and had severed the connecting wire with a shot. "What an absurd idea," he said. "Why, the operator isn't awake yet." [6]

Sir John sank back into his chair, feeling it was very likely that the burglar would adopt some extremely unpleasant form of revenge for the want of confidence he had just displayed. But his visitor did nothing of the sort. He also seated himself, and addressed the knight in grave reproof.

"If that's a sample of your best business method I'm surprised you've done so well in things," he said. Then without waiting for a reply, "Where do you keep your cigars?"

The merchant stretched out his hand and passed a box to him. The burglar rolled one knowingly between his fingers, then replaced it, and gave the box back.

"I don't care for tenpenny whiffs, Sir John. I want your real cigars—such as you keep for your most eminent visitors—such as you should have offered me, as a matter of course."

With a sigh Sir John rose, unlocked a cabinet, and produced a box marked "TOPMANN. SUBLIMES. HABANA," which he handed to his visitor.

The burglar examined it carefully before he expressed his satisfaction. Then he took a cigar therefrom, inspected it with marked approval, lit it, and then dropped the box into a capacious pocket. [7]

"Those are exceptionally fine cigars," the knight remarked, with a touch of resentment in his voice.

"I know it. I've come all the way from town to fetch 'em," the burglar answered.

Sir John was surprised. "It's a long way and a dangerous mission for such an object."

"Isn't it?" said the burglar, with provoking complacency.

"And may I ask how you come to know of them?" asked Sir John, whose curiosity was aroused.

"I don't mind telling you, since I've got them safe. You opened this box for a particular guest at the Chamber of Commerce dinner a month ago."

"Lord Ribston?"

"Yes; he spoke about them at the Burglars' Club. It was my turn, and here I am—don't you see?"

"The Burglars' Club!" exclaimed Sir John, in much surprise. "I've never heard of such an institution. And pray what has Lord Ribston, an ex-Cabinet Minister, to do with it?" [8]

"He's one of us," the burglar explained. "You see, we are men who've pretty well exhausted the pleasures of life. We've all been in the Army or the Navy, all of us are sportsmen, and we are bachelors; so there isn't much excitement left for us. We've started a Burglars' Club to help things on a bit. The entrance fee is a town burglary, the subject to be set by our President, and every other year each member has to keep up his subscription by a provincial line. 'Sir John Carder's prime cigars by Wednesday,' was the item fixed for me at our club meeting last week, and I've got 'em easy," said the burglar, with much professional complacency.

"You astonish me," Sir John said. "In fact, I've never heard a more amazing thing in my life. But isn't it rather risky, telling me all this?"

"Not a bit. No one would believe you if you split on us, and you wouldn't find our club if you wanted to. But you wouldn't split. A man who smokes Topmann's Sublimes couldn't do such a thing if he tried."

Sir John acknowledged this speech with a bow. "But I'm greatly surprised Lord Ribston should belong to such a club," he said. "No offence to you intended," he added hastily, feeling that his remark was hardly polite. [9]

"And no offence taken," said the burglar magnanimously. "Do you know, Sir John, there are a good many things going on in town that would be likely to astonish you a great deal more than this little club of ours if you only knew of 'em?" Then, after a moment's pause, "As you've helped me so nicely in this cigar business I shall be delighted to do you a good turn. Can I be of any use to you?"

In saying this the burglar's eyes travelled involuntarily to the pile of papers on the desk. Sir John's did the same, and he sighed.

"Well," he replied in an outburst of confidence that astonished himself, "I'm in a hole."

"I thought as much," said the other. "I've been in a good many myself in my time, so perhaps I can help you to get out."

The knight shook his head gloomily. "I don't think so. There's nothing for it but a bullet." [10]

"Great Scott!" exclaimed the burglar. He plunged his hand into his pocket, and produced the box of cigars. "Try one of these," he said, offering them to Sir John. "I can recommend 'em for big occasions."

The merchant smiled sadly, but took the consolation offered. "You see," he explained, "it's my pay-day to-morrow. There's nine thousand pounds in cash wanted, and I've nothing towards it."

"Beastly awkward," said the burglar sympathetically. "I know what it feels like. Tell 'em to call again."

"I can't. If I don't pay I must file my petition."

"File your banker!" exclaimed the other. "Don't you do anything rash. There's many a man lived to regret ever dreaming of insolvency. I suppose you've realised all your assets?"

"Every one," said Sir John, "except things like these," and he pulled out the I.O.U.'s from the pile of papers.

The burglar looked at them. "Well?" he said inquiringly. "You've had these three years. Why the blazes haven't you got your money?" [11]

"The Marquis of Chillingford hasn't got any money," replied the knight sorrowfully.

"I know he hasn't to-day, but he had yesterday, and he may have to-morrow. Why, man, he scooped in a cool ten thou' when Tadpole won the Derby."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Sir John.

"But I do. If you will lend money to lords, why the blazes don't you take in the sporting papers, and keep an eye on your friends? Tommy Chillingford is far too busy a man to remember these bits of paper, but I'm sure nothing would have pleased him more than to have paid you back your money if you'd suggested it at the time. He's had a run of confounded bad luck since then, but he'll bob up serenely one of these days, and you take my tip and get in that time. What else have you in this line?"

The knight opened a drawer, and therefrom produced a bundle of promissory notes and dishonoured cheques.

"What a philanthropist you've been in your day!" said the burglar admiringly, as he examined them. "I wish I'd known you earlier. Ah!" and he pulled out a draft. "What's wrong with this?" [12]

"That's another impecunious peer," said Sir John. "He proposed me for the Carlton," he added apologetically.

"Then may I be impecunious," replied the burglar. "Dicky is a millionaire in South America."

"I've not come across his name in that light," said the merchant dubiously.

"He's changed it. Calls himself Thompson now. This thing is worth its face value, and that's two thousand pounds. Why, man, you must tender it at once for payment."

For a moment the knight's face brightened.

"But wait a bit," continued the burglar. "There's a six-years' limit for presentation, isn't there? This was due March 12th, 1897, and it's now—oh, Great Scott!—it's now March 18th, 1903! Too late by a week! Old man, you are unlucky! Two thousand solid sovereigns missed by a week, and you wantin' 'em all the time. It's beastly hard lines. Do have a light."

But Sir John was too limp to smoke. "A millionaire in South America!" he gasped. "Why, he went out at my request to see if a concession I have there was worth anything. He reported adversely, and I've heard nothing about him since then." [13]

"What is your concession?"

From the pile in front the knight found an imposing-looking parchment, decorated with the signature of a President and the seal of a State. He handed it to the burglar, who read it through carefully. Then he laid it down.

"Sir John Carder," he said gravely, as a judge addressing a prisoner, "you are an unmitigated donkey. You must forgive the insult, but really the provocation is simply awful. I've lived in the Argentine, and if this concession of yours isn't the very one Mr. Thompson is now working for his own benefit I'm a double-dyed Dutchman."

Sir John gazed at him open-eyed. "I can't believe you," he said.

"Don't, if it hurts you," the burglar replied; "but I'll make a proposal, to show you I have no doubts about it myself. If you'll have me as equal partner with you in this concession matter, and leave me to manage it my own way, I'll take over your pay-day to-morrow, and be jolly well pleased with the bargain."

"You'll meet my payments to-morrow!" gasped Sir John, who for some little time had been wondering whether he were awake or asleep, or in a post-mortem delirium consequent on a revolver shot. "You'll meet my payments!" [14]

Once more the burglar pulled out the cigar box. "Do have another," he said persuasively.

Sir John took one mechanically, but after trying in vain to light it he put it down.

"Oh, Dicky Thompson," soliloquised the burglar, "this explains a good deal. We all marvelled at your luck, for we knew you didn't deserve it. You once sold me a spavined mare. If this isn't retribution I don't know what is. Now, Carder, let's get to bed. You must give me a shakedown somewhere. We've to be very spry and early to-morrow. There's our partnership to fix up first thing, and I've to show these cigars at the Burglars' Club in the evening, and on Saturday I sail for South America with this precious document and a sharp legal practitioner. And I'll take your revolver with me in case the lawyer gets hoarse. Oh, I was forgetting. A telegram form, please. [15]

Where do you bank? County and City. Right. It's nine thousand you want, isn't it? Right again." The burglar filled up the form, counted his words, took the necessary stamps from his pocket book, and affixed them. "Now, we'll just drop this in the first pillar-box we meet, and by the time we've signed our partnership there'll be enough at the County and City to meet your payments."

Sir John looked at him admiringly. "Are there many as smart as you at the Burglars' Club?" he asked.

"Smarter," said the burglar modestly. "I'm about the clumsiest of the lot. Some day I'll tell you how Ribston stole the Bishop of Bister's crozier, and then you'll know why he is generally all there in the House. But come along now. All right; you close up and put the lights out. I'll take a short cut, and be waiting outside."

It was fully five minutes before Sir John had locked up his papers and had put on his coat. As he emerged from his warehouse door he was promptly collared by a policeman, while another seized him firmly from behind. A third was in possession of the handcuffed burglar, and an inspector stood by with a box of cigars under his arm.

"Pore old pard!" said the burglar, with ostentatious sympathy. "They've nabbed us both at larst." [16]

"Now come along quietly, will you?" said the first policeman to the struggling knight.

"Leave go!" shouted his indignant charge. "I'm Sir John Carder."

The policeman laughed derisively, but something in the voice made the inspector flash his light on him.

"Sir John it is," he gasped.

The policemen released their hold, and gazed ruefully at their late prisoner.

"What do you mean by this, Markham?" demanded Sir John.

"Very sorry, sir. Hope you'll overlook it. We caught this chap red-handed, and he said he was working the job with a pal who was tidying things up a bit."

"Well, he was quite right. He is a friend of mine."

The inspector was more astonished than ever. "He came through one of the packing-room windows, Sir John," he expostulated, "and he had a boxful of cigars in his pocket."

"Not full, inspector," said the burglar, sadly. "I told you my friend would explain matters, but you wouldn't listen." [17]

"Release him," said Sir John.

The inspector unlocked the handcuffs, saluted stiffly, turned his men round, and was marching off with them, when the burglar called out, "My cigars, please."

The inspector came back, handed the box over, saluted even more stiffly than before, and retired.

Sir John and the burglar watched the retreating escort out of sight.

"It's been a narrow squeak for both of us to-night," said the burglar reflectively.

"It has," replied Sir John.

Then they turned the corner together.

II.

 [18]

THE BISHOP OF BISTER'S CROZIER.

THE Bishop of Bister's dinner hour was eight o'clock. With unfailing regularity, when at the palace, he entered the drawing-room at 7.58 in order to collect his family and any guests. His annoyance may therefore be understood when at 7.55 on the night in question a servant brought him a card on which was written:

"Georgiowitch Kassala, Mush, L. Van, Khurd., craves audience."

"The gentleman is in the examination room, my lord," the servant added.

"A very awkward time for calling," said the Bishop, consulting his watch unnecessarily. Then, with a sigh, "Ask your mistress to keep dinner back ten minutes."

His lordship ambled to the examination room. A big man in a loose blue cassock-like garb rose at his entrance—a big-limbed, red-bearded man, with enormous eyebrows. He rose, bowed low, and sank on his knees, caught hold of the prelate's hand, caressed it gently, and finally kissed it. [19]

The Bishop was embarrassed. He preferred that sort of thing to be done before an audience, when he would play his part with the best of them, but with no spectators at all he felt uncomfortable.

"Rise," he said gently.

The red-bearded man obeyed. "I am—" he began. "I have come—ah, perhaps I had better show you my papers. I have a letter from my Patriarch." This in excellent English, with just a trace of a foreign accent.

From his capacious pocket he drew out a bundle of papers. He abstracted a letter therefrom, and handed it with evident pride to the Bishop.

It was apparently Greek, yet it was not the language his lordship of Bister had learnt at school and college. Here and there he saw a word he almost knew, yet the next one to it was a perfect stranger. He glanced at the end. There was a big seal, an extraordinary date, an impossible name.

His visitor seemed to appreciate the position. "Our Patriarch is old," he said. "He is no longer facile to read. I sometimes have difficulty myself, though I know his writing well. May I read it to you?" [20]

He did this with great fluency and emphasis; but the Bishop understood nothing, though occasionally he thought he caught the sound of a fleeting particle.

The letter was finished. "And this," said the reader, producing a blue document, "is more earthy." It was, being from Scotland Yard, informing all and sundry that the bearer, Georgiowitch Kassala, a Christian priest, was authorised to collect subscriptions for the church of Saint Barnabas at Mush, in Khurdistan.

"Ah!" said the Bishop, with perhaps a shade of disappointment in his voice. "I hope you have been successful."

"Your Grace, I have travelled far, and not without recompense. To all I have said, 'If you give me money it is well, but if you do not it is still well.' Some have replied, 'Then we'll leave it at that,' but many have responded. See—here is my subscription book. I have begged from Batoum to Bister. I have received money in fifteen different coinages, of which the English is the finest and difficultest. Perhaps my most interesting contribution is this—see, a kopeck from Lassitudino Hospidar, the heathen cook of a Bulgarian wind-jammer, in memory of his maternal uncle, who died from the bite of a mad dog at Varna. And now, being in Bister, I thought, although it is late, I will at once call upon his Grace the Bishop, whose fame has reached our little town of Mush, whose name is known by the deep waters of Van." [21]

His lordship sighed. The west end of his cathedral was sinking below the surface. At the present rate of subsidence the Dean had calculated that only the gargoyles would be above ground in the year 3000. This had to be stopped. There was a matter of underpinning for a start, but it costs money to underpin the west end of a cathedral. And all the while the usual subscription lists had to be headed from the Palace, and there was more than the usual depression in agriculture. The Bishop felt that it was a singularly inappropriate moment to contribute to a church in Khurdistan, yet it would not do to discount his own fair fame in that far distant land. He must think the matter over. Meantime he would offer his guest such hospitality as would compensate for the smallness of his contribution.

"My friend," he said, "your Patriarch shall not appeal to me in vain, although, as you may well believe, I have many calls upon my purse. But we will speak again of this. You will, of course, spend the night under my roof, and now, if you will join us at dinner I shall be very pleased." [22]

The priest's face broke into smiles. "You are most kind," he replied. "I shall be glad." Then he glanced doubtfully from the Bishop's evening dress to his own raiment.

"Tut, tut," said his lordship pleasantly. "'A wash and a brush up,' as our saying is, and you'll be all right. Come along."

It was 8.15 when they entered the drawing-room. "My dear," said the Bishop appeasingly to his hungry wife, "I have brought a visitor from Mush, in Asia Minor. Mr.—er—Kassala—Mrs. Dacre—my daughters."

The visitor bowed low before the ladies. The Bishop thought he was going to kneel, so restrained him with a gentle hand. "Here," he went on, "is my chaplain, Mr. Jones, who will be greatly interested to hear of your work at home. And this," he concluded, "is our friend, Mr. Marmaduke Percy."

Then they moved to the dining-room.

At dinner Mr. Kassala conducted himself with ease, and spoke with great fluency on many matters; so much so that Mr. Marmaduke Percy, no doubt feeling that the Asiatic was monopolizing too much attention, asked him somewhat abruptly where he had acquired his excellent English. [23]

"I had it from one of your countrymen, sir," replied Mr. Kassala pleasantly. "He was engaged in the smuggling of aniline dyes into Persia. Of course, I did not know his real occupation, or I

should have had nothing to do with him. He pretended to import chocolates and acid drops and—barley-sugar, I think he called it—and such-like things; but they were all filled with aniline colours. In return for language lessons he got me to introduce him to the chief of the Persian frontier Customs, whom he bribed for his purposes. He made a large fortune before the Shah discovered that the colours of the Palace carpets were fading. My friend, the chief of the frontier Customs, was beheaded, and three dyers were put into plaster of Paris; but the Englishman escaped. His name was Benjamin Watts. Do you happen to know him, sir?"

The episcopal circle was justly shocked at this recital of their countryman's perfidy, and Mr. Percy warmly repudiated any knowledge of Mr. Watts. [24]

The Bishop found his guest profoundly interesting, and he twice made notes in his pocket-book about Asiatic matters. The ladies left the room regretfully.

The chaplain, who was of an extremely bashful temperament, now put a question that had been trembling on his tongue all the dinner hour.

"Is not your village somewhere near Mount Ararat?"

"Certainly. We can see its snow-capped summit quite plainly from Mush. With a telescope we can even discern where the Ark rested after the Flood."

The Bishop looked at his guest reprovingly, for jokes on such matters grieved him deeply.

"I mean it, your Grace," said Kassala. "Surely you heard that the Ark itself was discovered about three months ago?"

"What?" exclaimed the Bishop and the chaplain together. "The Ark discovered?"

"Certainly," Kassala replied. "My venerable Patriarch had long suspected that remnants might be found preserved in the perpetual ice, so he sought the assistance of Professor Papineau, of Prague, who was travelling in the East. After months of—what do you call it?—pro—yes—prospecting—this gentleman discovered an enormous chunk of ice bearing some resemblance in outline to the object of their search. The only possible way to remove the ice was by blasting, and Professor Papineau inserted a charge of dynamite. A fatal mistake was made in the size of the charge, with the result that the whole enormous chunk was blown to atoms. Embedded in the fragments were found what were apparently portions of a leviathan ship, which my Patriarch and Professor Papineau regard as being the veritable vessel built by Noah. In no other way but by a universal deluge could it have got on Mount Ararat. But for the mistake made in the size of the charge the structure of the Ark might have been at any rate partially preserved. It was a terrible misfortune, only to be compared to the destruction of the Parthenon by the Venetians. Professor Papineau was for a long fortnight ill in bed with remorse. He reads a paper on the whole incident at the forthcoming Oriental Congress at Prague. [25]

"But perhaps I have been indiscreet. Evidently the news has not reached your country, and the Professor may wish to be the first to give it to the world. He might resent my telling you, and my Patriarch would be grieved. I beg you to keep the information inviolate until you read of Professor Papineau's paper at Prague." [26]



**"MR. KASSALA HAD THEN THE PLEASURE OF INSPECTING
THE CROZIER."**

(p. 27.)

The Bishop and the chaplain nodded their assent. They seemed to have no words left in them. After breathing-space they both pulled out their pocket-books, and made some memoranda.

Later the conversation turned on vestments, and such matters. "Do you know, your Grace," said Mr. Kassala, "I have heard that you are the only bishop with a pastoral staff. Is that so?"

"No. It's the other way about. I'm the only bishop who hasn't one. I alone share with the

archbishops the dignity of a crozier. The old crozier of the see is now kept in our chapter house. It was too old for use, so last year the ladies of the county presented me with a new one. If you like, I will show it you. Mr. Jones, I wonder if you would mind bringing my crozier from the library?"

[27]

Five minutes later the chaplain re-appeared, bringing a long case with him. This was duly opened, and Mr. Kassala had then the pleasure of inspecting the crozier presented by the ladies of the county. It was of ebony and gold, and was richly jewelled. It was a work of art well worth the encomiums bestowed upon it by the Asiatic.

"With your permission, your Grace," he said, "I should very much like to make a water-colour sketch of it in order to show to my Patriarch, who is deeply interested in such matters. He has a very fine crozier himself. Would you allow me?"

"By all means," said the Bishop.

"Thank you. I will do it before breakfast in the morning. I am an early riser. I suppose I may find it in this room?"

The Bishop nodded, but Mr. Percy intervened. "Allow me to take care of it over-night, Bishop. I don't think you ought to leave such a valuable article about. There is always the possibility of burglars. I am told there is a gang in the district just now."

The Bishop smiled good-humouredly. "I don't think we need consider that eventuality," he said. "But as you like. Now shall we join the ladies?"

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Perhaps Mr. Kassala was hardly as entertaining in the drawing-room as he had previously been. He seemed a little preoccupied. At eleven the house party retired to rest, Mr. Percy carefully carrying to his room the case containing the crozier.



"HE SAW THE FIGURE PASS A WINDOW."

(p. 28.)

The Reverend Arthur Jones, his lordship's chaplain, was a light sleeper at best, and to-night the excitement of Mr. Kassala's visit kept him particularly wide-awake. His thoughts were with the unhappy Professor Papineau. He was wondering whether it would not be kind to send him a letter of sympathy, when his attention was attracted by a noise outside his room. He jumped out of bed and opened his door quietly. Someone was stealthily walking along the corridor. He saw the figure pass a window, and the moonlight fell upon Mr. Kassala. In great wonderment Mr. Jones followed. A turn of the passage brought the Asiatic to the head of the great staircase, and here he stopped so suddenly that the chaplain almost ran into him. For two minutes Mr. Kassala paused in a state of indecision. Then he advanced to a door, and gently opened it. Mr. Jones was paralysed with horror. It was the Bishop's bedroom. What could Mr. Kassala want there? Determined to save his beloved chief, Mr. Jones followed. As he entered the room there was an exclamation from the Bishop. Mr. Jones turned involuntarily. As he did so, Mr. Kassala collided with him. The Bishop sprang out of bed, and switched on the electric light. "Mr. Kassala!" he exclaimed. "And Mr. Jones! Pray, what is the meaning of this?"

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"A thousand pardons, your Grace," said the Asiatic. "I have mistaken the room. I wanted Mr. Percy."

At this moment the next door opened, and Mr. Percy appeared.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"That's what I should like to know," said the prelate. "Mr. Kassala says he is looking for you."

"Indeed! What for?"

"I—er—was wondering if you had a camel-hair paint brush?" said Mr. Kassala.

"Well, you needn't wonder any longer. I haven't," Mr. Percy replied.

"And what do you want, Mr. Jones?" asked the Bishop sternly.

"Nothing, my lord, nothing," said the unhappy Jones. "I was only following Mr. Kassala."

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"Then perhaps you'll follow him to bed," remarked the Bishop drily. "I hope I shall have a more

satisfactory explanation in the morning."

Here, no doubt feeling that the situation was hardly in keeping with his dignity, the Bishop closed his door. Mr. Percy did the same, while Mr. Kassala and the shivering Jones returned to their corridor.

Mr. Kassala seemed rather amused than otherwise at the situation, but Mr. Jones was permeated with distress. "Cheer up," said the Asiatic, as he turned into his room. "If you will meddle in other people's business you're bound to suffer for it."

There was no sleep for the unhappy chaplain that night. He was in love with the eldest Miss Dacre, who, he had reason to believe, returned his affection, and he had determined to see her father on the subject on the morrow. But after the events of that night such an interview was highly inadvisable. Yet he had acted from the best and most creditable of motives. Only by hearsay was he acquainted with the habits and customs of the East, but he felt sure that honest Asiatics would not be found prowling about a palace in the midnight hours. What did Mr. Kassala want in the Bishop's room? Was it theft or—something worse? Was this self-styled priest the emissary of some Eastern organization bent upon destroying the flower of the Western hierarchy? Was he a Thug? Mr. Jones shuddered at the possibilities of the situation.

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Ha! What was that? Again a creak outside. For a moment he listened breathlessly. Then he opened his door again. Good gracious! there was Mr. Kassala once more slinking down the corridor.

Hastily putting on his dressing-gown, Mr. Jones followed, with nerves strung to their highest tension. This time the Asiatic walked with no uncertain step. As he passed the Bishop's door the chaplain's heart gave a bound of relief. He stopped at Mr. Percy's door, and tapped gently. The light in the room was turned on, and the door opened by Mr. Percy himself. Mr. Kassala entered, and the door closed noiselessly behind him.

For some minutes Mr. Jones stared at the door in blank amazement. Then he turned round, and walked slowly back to his own room. In times of great perplexity he was accustomed to look for guidance to Mr. Paley's "Evidences." Mechanically he now took down the well-thumbed volume from its shelf, and opened it. He sat for many hours staring at the print without ever turning the page.

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"Where is Mr. Kassala?" were the Bishop's first words on entering the breakfast-room the next morning. Although his lordship had betrayed no consciousness of his existence Mr. Jones felt that the inquiry was levelled at him.

"I do not know, my lord," he answered.

"John," said the Bishop to his butler, "will you inform Mr. Kassala that breakfast is on the table?"

In a few minutes John returned with the information that Mr. Kassala's room was empty, that his bed had not been slept in, and that nobody had seen him that morning.

"This is very singular," said his lordship. Then, after a pause, "One hardly likes to say so, but I must confess my confidence in the *bona fides* of Mr. Kassala has been shaken. You spoke about burglars last night, Marmaduke, in reference to my crozier, which seemed to have a peculiar attraction for Mr. Kassala. I hope it is safe."

"I put the case on the top of my wardrobe last night, and it was there five minutes ago," said Mr. Percy.

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"I wonder what his object could be in coming here, and then leaving us in this extraordinary manner. Perhaps you can throw some light on that very peculiar incident in the middle of the night, Mr. Jones?"

"I heard a noise, my lord, and followed Mr. Kassala to see what he was doing. I haven't the faintest idea why he went into your room, unless it really was, as he said, that he had mistaken it for Mr. Percy's."

"But what should he want with Mr. Percy?" asked Mrs. Dacre.

"Perhaps Mr. Percy will answer that?" said the chaplain, with much meaning in his voice.

Mr. Percy fixed the eyeglass and looked coolly at the chaplain. "How on earth should I know, Jones?" he said. With this oracular remark he returned to his egg.

The chaplain was bursting with indignation at Mr. Percy's concealment of his midnight interview with Mr. Kassala. He longed to expose him, but shrank from the necessity of a painful scene.

"Mildred," said Mrs. Dacre suddenly, "let us look through the drawing-room silver at once. I hope the equestrian statuette of your father is safe."

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While the ladies were ticking off their household gods, Mr. Percy went to his room to pack, and Mr. Jones followed.

"May I have his lordship's crozier?" asked the chaplain.

"Certainly. Here you are. But you do look unhappy, Jones! Whatever is the matter?"

Mr. Jones took the case without replying. "The key was in the lock last night," he remarked.

"Was it? Then it must have dropped out somewhere. Perhaps it's on the floor." But it did not seem to be there, although both Mr. Percy and the chaplain looked very carefully for it.

"Never mind," said the former, after five minutes' fruitless search. "It will probably turn up after I've gone. Remember, that I'll be responsible for any damage."

The chaplain was very pale. "Mr. Percy," he said, "I know of your midnight interview with Mr. Kassala."

Once more Mr. Percy fixed his monocle. "Do you, old man?" he replied. "Then I won't be the one to get you into trouble over it. You may rely on me. If you don't say anything, I shan't. Now good-bye. It'll take me all my time to get my things together. My man's ill, and I'm out of practice." [35]

Mr. Jones left the room more bewildered than ever. His lordship, after leaving stringent instructions regarding Mr. Kassala, should he again appear, went by the noon train to town with Mr. Percy.

Mr. Jones appeared singularly distracted that day, and Miss Dacre gazed at him with much concern. He spent the evening alone with Paley, and about eleven o'clock, with firm determination on his face, he forced the lock of the crozier case. His worst fears were realised. In place of the crozier of ebony, gold, and jewels, the present of the ladies of the county, there reposed in the purple velvet lining a common bedroom poker!

At that very moment the Bishop of Bister's crozier lay on the table of a London mansion. Twelve men were gathered round it, complimenting their host upon it. Their host, by the way, was lately his Majesty's Secretary of State for Egypt. He was now attired in a long blue cassock-like garb, such as Asiatic priests may wear.

"By the burglary of the Bishop of Bister's crozier Lord Ribston's subscription has been paid for the next two years," said one of the men, making a cypher note in a book. [36]

"Hear, hear! Bravo! Good for the Ribston Pippin!" was the general chorus.

"Gentlemen," said the man in the priestly garb, rising to his feet amidst applause, "I am proud once more to have been able to fulfil the mandate of our Club. With your permission, I will now pack up the bauble so that it may be returned by the midnight express in order to ease the mind of a most worthy man, his lordship's chaplain. But before I do so I wish to propose a new member—Mr. Marmaduke Percy. You will recollect that his name was brought forward twelve months or so ago, but he was not considered equal to the demands that are occasionally made upon the members of this honourable fraternity. I have reason to believe that we did Mr. Percy an injustice. Yesterday, at any rate, he saw through my disguise, and divined my purpose. He could easily have betrayed me. But he behaved in a sportsmanlike way, and for that reason I now propose that he should become one of us. Major Armytage is seconding. You will have an opportunity of voting for Mr. Percy at our next meeting. Is there any further business before us, Mr. Secretary?" [37]

The Secretary consulted his book. "I note that Mr. Danby Travers' subscription is due," he said.

"Good old Danby! Pile it on! Make it thick enough!" was the varied cry.

"Gentlemen," said the Secretary, "we meet on Tuesday next, and Mr. Danby Travers will then be asked for the Black Pearl of Agni, the property of the Illingworths."

III. [38]

THE LUCK OF THE ILLINGWORTHS.

DANBY TRAVERS was annoyed. He was one of the founders of the Burglars' Club. His entrance fee had been the temporary abstraction from the Crown Jewels of the Koh-i-noor itself. Two years ago he had kept up his membership by the burglary of the Duchess of Guiseley's emeralds; and now, by the unkindness of Fate or the simple cussedness of his committee, he could only renew his subscription by purloining the Black Pearl of Agni. It showed the folly of becoming the champion jewel burglar of the club.

Of course it was pure coincidence, for only four people knew that he was in love with Mary Illingworth. Mary knew it, because he had told her; Lord and Lady Illingworth, because they had been fatuously consulted in the matter; and he, Danby Travers, because of a stuffy, despairing feeling somewhere in his chest from the moment of awakening in the morning down to the last gleam of consciousness at night. But the Burglars' Club did not know it, nor did they know that Lord Illingworth had told him that in future he was not to cross the baronial threshold; and all because, despite his brilliant record in India and at Hurlingham, he, Danby Travers, was as poor [39]

as a chapel mouse.

Therefore he received the mandate of the club with something less than his usual urbanity. But reflection brought a Mephistophelean suggestion of comfort. He had been unable to rob Lord Illingworth of his fairest daughter. He would at any rate purloin his most valued jewel.

The Black Pearl of Agni was world-renowned. During the military operations in the Western Deccan in 1803 it had been looted by a certain Major Illingworth, of the Bengal Native Infantry, from a rich temple dedicated to the Hindoo God of Fire. From that day his fortunes had prospered amazingly. Promotion came for the asking; wealth by marriage and bequest. Influence, social and political, had followed, and a title. Succeeding generations had added to the score. Two descendants of the sepoy major had attained Cabinet rank, and the present peer had won the Derby. The Luck of the Illingworths had become proverbial.

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The jewel was kept at Knowlesworth. Travers knew the place well. He had spent a fortnight there, and there he had made love to Mary Illingworth. She had shown him the Pearl; and, because he was to be her husband, had shown him the secret of its hiding-place. Little did he think at the time that the next occasion on which he entered that room would be as a burglar—an amateur one, it is true, but still a burglar.

No wonder that Danby Travers was annoyed. The only justification for his conduct that he could think of was that the temporary loss of the Pearl would probably have a beneficial effect on Lord Illingworth's character.

He had received the secretary's intimation on the Friday morning. He had to show the Pearl at the next meeting of the club—on the following Tuesday night. That gave him four days for the business.

Knowlesworth was sure to be full of visitors, for Lord Illingworth had succeeded a late Master of Balliol in entertaining the most distinguished weekend parties in the country. Travers turned to the *Post*, certain to find the list. Ah! here it was:

"Lord and Lady Illingworth are having a large party at Knowlesworth, entertaining the Bohemian Ambassador and Countess Palsky, the Duke of Strathpeffer, the Marquess and Marchioness of Bridlington, the Dean of Penzance, Professor Rawson, and others."

"What a crew!" thought Travers. "Wouldn't Strathpeffer be pleased if I came a cropper! I wonder he can go there after Mary's last refusal. I'll wait till they thin a bit. Some are sure to go on Monday, so Monday night is my best time for the job. Now for Bradshaw."

On the following Monday night, Travers took a second-class ticket at Charing Cross in order to minimise the chance of running against friends. From sheer curiosity he chose a compartment in which two singular-looking men were already seated. The weather was by no means cold, yet they were swathed in winter clothing. Thick mufflers were round their necks. Their faces were partly hidden by the wraps, and partly shaded by the broad brims of silk hats built about the time of the Crimean War. But their race was unmistakable—to Travers at least. They were Hindoos—the tall one probably a man of caste, the podgy person possibly a Baboo.

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In his interest at coming across these strange people Travers forgot his ultimate objective. He settled himself in his corner, prepared either to join in conversation with, or merely to watch, his quaint fellow-travellers.

On his entrance they had turned their eyes upon him, but they had resumed their conversation. As the train got on its way they raised their voices, and, confident of not being understood, they spoke with absolute unrestraint. Travers, with knowledge derived from ten years' service in the Madras and Indian Staff Corps, was easily able to follow their talk.

"At last," said the tall man, as the train moved out of the station.

"At last," repeated the other. "Buck up. Now is the conclusion of your spacious quest."

"Say rather the beginning. So far it has been easy, despite the horror of mingling with these barbarians. To lose caste was foreseen, but now we enter upon the unknown."

"Nevertheless, I take the liberty of emphasising the necessity of bucking up. To-morrow you will be a thrice happy man, and I will weave a garland of marigolds for your honourable head. Gosh!" This as the train entered a tunnel with a hideous shriek. "It is a taste of the underworld,"

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"SHE . . . HAD SHOWN HIM THE SECRET OF ITS HIDING-PLACE."

(p. 40.)

he added.

The tall man shuddered, and remained silent. As the train emerged his companion gave a very creditable imitation of the whistle and the tunnel.

The tall man smiled sadly.

"Ramma Lal," he said, "I envy you your merry disposition. It was in a good moment that I met thee in Bombay, *baboo-jee*. You have served me well in guiding me hither, and in enlivening me on the long journey."

"Your honour is pleased to be excessively gracious," said the Baboo with absurd complacency. "Indeed, my tip-top spirits have been of much service to myself and many other honourable gentlemen, and have been extraordinarily admired by English ladies." He pulled out his watch. "In the space of half an hour we shall have arrived at our long-intended destination."

"So soon? Show me the plan again to refresh my memory."

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The Baboo produced a piece of paper, over which they bent their heads.

"Here is the railway station at which we shall dismount. This pink streak is the highway-road along which we shall travel, eventually reaching the big brass gates belonging to ancestral home. A little beyond is a diminutive wall, which we ascend and descend. Then we step across the park and round the lake. Here and here. This sepia mark is water. Now we are in the pleasure garden. This is the hinder part of the house. Here is the right wing. The fifth window in the second row. That is your bull's eye."

"Go on," said his companion, gloomily.

"Your honour will divest yourself of polished hat and other garments, which you will transfer to my care in summer house. Here, behold it, painted in vermilion. You will climb up to the window. Inferior but friendly servant has arranged that it shall open easily. Once in the room the deed is as good as accomplished. You know the hiding-place of the jewel."

Travers started. "The hiding-place of the jewel!"

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"Yes," said the gloomy Hindoo; "I know it. But Krishna Bürkut knew it twenty-five years ago, and the Swâmi Râm Nâth knew it fifty years ago, and yet another Swâmi seventy-five years ago, but none of these restored it to the Temple of Agni. All failed in their quest, and never regained their caste. I too shall fail."

"Allow me to have the felicity of indicating at least one point of difference between your honour and gentlemen mentioned," replied the Baboo. "Your honour has intelligent assistant, while enumerated catalogue had not. Have the kindness to point out fly in our ointment. It is distinguished by its absence. The jewel is yours."

"Perish the jewel!" cried the other Hindoo in a sudden outburst of fury. "Why couldn't the *Huzoor* have left it alone, or have taken another jewel? Why should he have singled out the one above all others necessary to the happiness of Agni? And why should I, of all the priests of the Temple, be chosen to restore the sacred stone? Here, with five thousand miles of space between us, I declare to you, Ramma Lal, I do not fear the wrath of Agni. I call him humbug. I read Shakespeare. I write him an ass. I am doubtful even of Vishnu and Siva."

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Travers paid no attention to Ramma Lal's reproachful reply. He was lost in amazement. Here, on the very night he had chosen for purloining the jewel, two other men were on the same errand. Stop. There was a reason for their date. They had mentioned twenty-five, fifty, and seventy-five years. It was evidently an anniversary. Every twenty-five years an attempt had to be made to restore the jewel to the Temple of Agni. Three attempts had already been made in vain, and now, on the hundredth anniversary of the theft by Major Illingworth, another attempt was in progress.

At any rate, he was forewarned. The house was a mile and a half away from the station by the main road on which the Hindoos were going. He knew a cut across the fields which shortened the distance by half a mile. He would gain ten minutes. In that ten minutes he had to obtain the Pearl.

The train pulled up at Knowlesworth station. The two Hindoos stepped out. Travers followed. He watched them start along the road; then he briskly cut across country.

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The church clock struck eight as he reached the terrace in front of the hall. From the beginning he had matured only one plan of campaign. He knew the rules of the house, and he would take advantage of them. From eight to nine the men-servants were busy in the dining-room. Anyone could open the main outer door and enter. He might, of course, be seen, and in this eventuality Travers relied upon his being known to allay suspicion. He was in evening dress, and temporarily, at any rate, would strike a servant as being one of the guests.

The nominal dinner-hour was eight. It had been his intention to enter at 8.20 in order to allow for any delay either on the part of the kitchen or the guests. Dinners at Knowlesworth were notoriously unpunctual, and if he entered now he might run into the house party or meet stragglers on the stairs. He must wait. But the Hindoos were marching down the road. Each instant brought them nearer. In ten—no, in eight minutes—they would be in the garden. Yet he

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dare not enter.

He waited impatiently in the shadow of the great portico. It was now 8.10. He would make an attempt.

He slowly pushed back the heavy door, and entered the vestibule. This was cut off from the hall by big glass doors, and then by heavy curtains. Still more carefully he opened the inner door, and then quickly closed it again. Through the opening had come the sound of voices and laughter. They were gathered in the hall before the fire, waiting for the summons to dinner. So there he stayed, cursing the unpunctuality of the house, and unquietly reflecting that a casual remark as to the present state of the weather might lead to the glass door being opened and himself ignominiously disclosed.

And Mary would witness his humiliation. Nay, she might even be the innocent cause of it. She was within half a dozen yards of him now, separated only by some glass and a curtain. Yet he could not speak to her—could not even see her. Ah! that was her laugh. And that Strathpeffer's raucous voice. Hang Strathpeffer!

It was now 8.15. The Hindoos were in the garden. The situation was distracting. At any moment they might enter the Temple room. [49]

Ah! there was the sound of movement within. The guests trooped past the door. Their voices died away. All was still.

It was nineteen minutes past eight. Travers hesitated no longer. He unbuttoned his top-coat, and, with cap in hand as though he were a guest just come in from a stroll before dinner, he opened the hall door.

No one was in sight. He crossed the hall, and stepped lightly up the stairs. At their head he passed a maid. She certainly took him for a guest.

He went straight down the great corridor, and then branched to the left. It was the third door ahead. He pulled back the panel as Mary had shown him, undid the bolt from within, and entered. The room was in darkness. He struck a light, half expecting to find the Hindoo disclosed. No, he was alone, and the Pearl still there.

It was a room without furniture. In the centre was a replica of the great idol of Agni at the temple from which the Pearl had been looted. The god sat there, smug, cross-legged, and hideous. The eyes fascinated the beholder. The left one was of marble; the right made of a stone worth a prince's ransom—the one known throughout the world as the Black Pearl of Agni. At the god's knees, their holders resting on the floor, were two gigantic candles. Travers lit them. [50]



"A CRY OF DESPAIR ESCAPED HIM."

(p. 51.)

forward, and looked up eagerly into the idol's face. Then a cry of despair escaped him. The stone for which he had travelled five thousand miles was not there. He had lost his caste. It could never be regained, since he had failed in his quest. Never again could he see his native land. Under the crushing blow he sank, a comatose heap, on the floor.

The minutes passed, and Travers shifted uneasily behind the curtain. There were sounds from

Then he stepped quickly to the idol, and sought the left hand of the god. He pressed the nail of the fourth finger. The god's right eyelid lifted, and the complete stone was disclosed. Travers quickly abstracted it, released the lid, and put the Pearl in his pocket.

His object was accomplished. But what was that? Listen.

There was a sound at the window. The Hindoo was there—beaten by half a minute.

Travers turned to the door. Then, impelled by an overpowering curiosity to see the end of the drama, he slipped to another window, and got behind the curtain.

There was a faint whistle from below. Hang it, what a fool he'd been! The Baboo had seen the momentary disarrangement of the curtain, and had observed his figure against the light, and now he was alarming his friend. But the latter heeded not. Perhaps he was too excited to understand, or even to hear him. [51]

The sash was raised, the curtain pulled back, and the Hindoo stepped into the room. He was almost naked, and his bare limbs shone with a coating of oil. He took one step

the garden—then approaching footsteps in the corridor. The door was flung open, and Lord Illingworth burst into the room, revolver in hand. The Duke of Strathpeffer followed with other guests, and some footmen. The Hindoo stared dully at them, but did not move. He was promptly seized.

"The Pearl—where is it?" demanded Lord Illingworth.

The Hindoo did not reply.

Lord Illingworth pointed to the empty socket, and repeated the question, but the Hindoo merely shook his head.

"Search him," said Lord Illingworth.

He was searched, but, of course, nothing was found.

Lord Illingworth stood over him.

"Where is the Pearl?" he thundered, but again the Hindoo shook his head.

"Bring in the other man," said Lord Illingworth.

The Baboo entered, limp and crestfallen, in charge of two stablemen. A boy carried a silk hat and some winter clothing.

"Ask him what he has done with the Pearl," said the peer.

Ramma Lal put the question.

"I have not got it. It was not here when I came."

The Baboo repeated this to Lord Illingworth.

"It is a lie," he replied. "It was here an hour ago. I saw it myself."

"The *sahib* knows that thou liest," said Ramma Lal to his friend. "Tell him a finer tale."

But the Hindoo only protested his innocence.

"What does he say?" demanded Lord Illingworth.

"He says," replied the facile Baboo, "that no sooner had he taken the Pearl than there was the flash of fire and much smoke. When it cleared away the stone had vanished. Doubtless Agni the god had come for his own."

Lord Illingworth blazed with fury.

"He has swallowed it," he said. "We shall have to cut him open."

Ramma Lal translated this terrific threat. The Hindoo gave a yell. Despair lent him strength. With a serpentine twist he slid from the grasp of one of his captors and knocked up the arm of the other. The window was still open. He sprang through it into the darkness of the night.

Lord Illingworth ran to the window, fired blindly, and then rushed from the room. The others followed. Only the Baboo, his two captors, and the boy with the clothes remained.

"Come along," said one of the grooms.

"Stay for one moment, I beseech you," said Ramma Lal, "and let me worship Agni the god."

"None of yer blarney," returned the man. But the other, who was of a romantic temperament, said, "Wot's the odds? Let the heathen do it if he wants."

"You see, gentlemen," said the Baboo eagerly, "it is my very last opportunity. I shall be lifelong imprisoned for the inauspicious event of this evening. It is positively my last appearance in the open. Let me worship Agni as I do in my own land. No Englishman has yet witnessed the entire ceremony. It shall not take long. I will compress my supplications. Five minutes will be ample dispensation."

The grooms looked at each other. Their curiosity settled the matter.

"We'll give you four minutes, so look sharp," said one.

"Thank you," replied Ramma Lal gratefully. "Agni will bless you for your beneficence."

The men released their hold. One closed the window, the other shut the door, and placed himself before it.

Ramma Lal took off his silk hat, muffler, and coat. He advanced to the idol and salaamed low three times. Then he raised his eyes and sang.

Travers knew the song. It was a ribald ditty of the bazaars, and it had as much to do with the worship of Agni as with the laws of gravitation.

He watched the Baboo with increasing interest. He had evidently some ulterior object in view, but what was it? Ah!

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[55]

Ramma Lal had gradually approached the idol. Still singing, he had bowed his head till it had almost touched Agni's knees. Travers hardly saw the movement of the hands. Only an Oriental could have done it so swiftly. The two candles were suddenly extinguished, and the room was in absolute darkness.

With loud imprecations the two grooms rushed to where the Baboo had been—to collide with each other, and incidentally bring down the huge candlesticks. Then recovering, they dashed about the room in search of their prisoner, only to seize the boy who had the clothes. Finally one of them struck a light.

They were alone with the boy. The window was again wide open.

The men leaned out. There was no moon. The lights of the searchers flashed in the distance. They turned blankly to each other. [56]

"There'll be pop to pay for this," said the boy, who was still suffering from rough usage in the dark. "You'll both jolly well get sacked."

"All your blamed fault for lis'nin' to his tommy rot," said the one man savagely to his companion.

"Who'd have thought he was so cunnin'?" rejoined the other. "Wot's the good of talkin' here? Come out an' look for him. He may have broke his neck," he added hopefully.

Again the lights flashed in the garden, and then gradually extended beyond. Travers waited until he was sure there was no one below. Then he emerged from his recess, and followed the Indians through the window. Leaving the park to the searchers, he kept to the main avenue, and soon gained the high road. A ten-mile walk brought him to Dorton junction, where he just missed the last train to town.

The sun was high when Danby Travers reached his rooms, and it was late in the afternoon when he awoke. The morning papers and his letters were at his bedside. He at once opened one of the former, curious to see if there was any reference to the events of the previous night. [57]

Good heavens! What was this?

"BURGLARY AND FIRE AT KNOWLESWORTH.
THE ILLINGWORTH PEARL STOLEN.
THE HALL GUTTED.

"Knowlesworth Hall, the historic seat of the Illingworths, was last night the scene of two extraordinary events.

"Lord and Lady Illingworth were entertaining one of their famous week-end parties at dinner when a daring and successful attempt was made to steal the celebrated Pearl of Agni, the largest known black pearl in the world.

"A native Indian was found in a summer house in the Italian garden by a servant. As several determined attempts to steal the Pearl had already been made, the safety of this remarkable jewel was at once called into question. Lord Illingworth and his guests hurried to the Temple room, where the great Pearl was kept, and there found another native, who was promptly secured. The Pearl was missing, and the strictest search failed to bring it to light. It is believed that the thief has swallowed it, a fact which it is to be hoped that the X-rays will be able to demonstrate.

"Owing to gross mismanagement somewhere, the two natives escaped from custody, and it was midnight before they were again apprehended—one of them at Dorton, in a state of collapse from fear and cold; the other at Lingfield, defiant, but suffering from a sprained ankle. They will be brought up to-morrow at the Dorton Petty Sessions. [58]

"Scarcely had Lord Illingworth and his guests retired to rest after an exciting evening than they were again alarmed, this time by an outbreak of fire in the Temple room. Its cause is unknown, but the flames, assisted by a high wind, spread with extraordinary rapidity, in spite of the prompt measures taken by the Hall fire brigade. Engines quickly arrived from Lingfield and Dorton, but the supply of water was totally inadequate, and it soon became evident that the whole structure was doomed. At the moment of telegraphing, the fire was raging furiously, but all sleeping in the house had been rescued without injury.

"In one night Lord Illingworth has lost his great family jewel and his ancestral seat. The 'Luck of the Illingworths' seems to have deserted him.

"It is a remarkable coincidence that a fire consumed the Hindu

Temple of Agni the night that the Pearl was taken from it by Major Illingworth in 1803.

"Agni is the Hindu God of Fire."

"Thank Heaven, Mary's safe!" ejaculated Travers. "I hope she hasn't had a great fright." Then, after a pause, "And Ramma Lal caught, after all! He deserved a better fate. What an uncommon good thing I got the Pearl! If I hadn't taken it, the Indians would have been well on the way to Bombay with it by now, and if neither of us had taken it, the stone might have been burnt up. Would it, though? There mightn't have been a fire at all. Rummy notion that Agni should blaze the whole show in revenge for my desecration! It shan't interfere with my feelings of satisfaction. I'm a public benefactor—an Illingworth benefactor, anyway. I shall explain this to my lord at an early date. Hullo, what's this? A lawyer's letter. I can tell 'em by the smell. What's he threatenin' this time?" [59]

But it wasn't a threat. It was simply an intimation that under the will of Colonel Thomas Archer, a distant relative lately deceased, he, Danby Travers, succeeded to the whole estate, a bequest made "on account of intrepidity shown in the recent Iráwadi campaign." The income therefrom, the solicitor added, was estimated at about £3,000 per annum, and he would be pleased to have an expression of Mr. Danby Travers's wishes with respect to the same. [60]

£3,000 a year! Travers jumped out of bed and executed a series of gyrations. £3,000 a year! That meant Mary. But did it? It was a fortune to him, but how would Lord Illingworth view it? Well, if he didn't like it he needn't. Mary and he were now independent of everybody.

He made his way to the Burglars' meeting in a blur of happiness. He was rather late. Other men were there already, and they one and all congratulated him.

"Aren't you rather premature?" he asked. "You haven't seen the Pearl yet."

"Bother the Pearl," said Altamont. "We mean the title."

"What the deuce are you drivin' at?"

"Haven't you seen the papers?"

"Crowds of 'em, and lawyers' letters too. My head's buzzin' with 'em. What is it this time?"

"Your cousin tumbled down some stone steps in Vienna last night, and you are Lord Travers now—that's all!"

Danby sat down. This final stroke of fortune was too much for him.

"I can't say I'm sorry," he blurted at length. "Bertram wouldn't have been sorry if it had been me. And I'm glad about the title because of——. Here, I say, you fellows, what's come over the world since last night?" [61]

"The Black Pearl of the Illingworths has changed hands, we hope," said the Secretary, who wanted to start the business of the evening.

"The Black Pearl has, and the Luck of the Illingworths went with it. They've had a fire, and I've got a bequest and a title. Perhaps you fellows'll be more superstitious in future. That's what brought my luck, anyway." Saying which, he produced the Black Pearl of Agni.

To his unbounded joy and immense surprise Lord Illingworth received the missing stone from London during the course of the next day.

The Indians had been remanded for a week, pending further inquiries, and as they had obviously not stolen the jewel after all, Lord Illingworth declined to prosecute, and they were released from custody. An unknown friend interested himself in the natives. One of them, a Baboo, was sent back to Bombay by an early steamer. The other, who refused to return to India, thanks to the same unknown benefactor, was put in the way of earning his living by teaching Hindustani. He has since gone over to the Mohammedan faith. [62]

With repossession of the Pearl, good fortune came once more to the Illingworths. In making excavations consequent on rebuilding the Hall, a coal seam was discovered, which eventually doubled the family wealth.

The Black Pearl of Agni is now protected from burglars by many quaint electrical conceits. When the next anniversary comes round any Indian visitors will have a very lively time of it.

Later on in the year a marriage took place between Mary, younger daughter of Lord and Lady Illingworth, and Danby, ninth Baron Travers, a nobleman who had been mentioned in despatches in the Iráwadi campaign, and who was not unknown at Hurlingham. His clubs were the Marlborough, Brooks's, and the Burglars'.

IV.

THE FELLMONGERS' GOBLET.

"Mr. SEPTIMUS TOFT,—Sir," the letter ran. "The 'tecs are on the scent. If you want any further information meet me at the Blue Lion, Monument, at nine-thirty to-morrow evening without fail.—Yours, etc., J. DRIVER."

Mr. Toft stared at the letter with much disgust and more alarm. It was certainly a regrettable communication for a commercial magnate, a magistrate, and a pillar of society to be obliged to attend to. It would have troubled him had it come before Bowker had absconded, but now it was much worse. Bowker would have shared the anxiety, and interviewed "J. Driver." He could have guessed on what particular scent the detectives were engaged, and his fertile ingenuity would have suggested an obvious way of circumventing them, whereas Mr. Toft's unaided vision saw none.

"Nine-thirty to-morrow evening." Mr. Toft smiled feebly at the humour of the situation. To-morrow evening at eight o'clock he was advertised to take the chair at a Young Men's Mutual Improvement meeting, and the gentleman who was to deliver the evening's lecture occupied the post of his Majesty's Solicitor-General. "He will probably have to prosecute me on behalf of the Crown," thought Toft; so he determined to propitiate him by special attention to his discourse and by frequent applause. [64]

On the following evening Mr. Toft made his way to the Blue Lion. The lecture had not been a success as far as he was concerned. Try as he might, he could not concentrate his thoughts on the subject. He had applauded at wrong places. Once a titter from the audience had resulted, and the Solicitor-General had turned on him a look of pained surprise. In the agony of the moment he had pulled the table-cloth, and the glass of water thereon had upset, incidentally splashing the lecturer. The titter developed into a laugh, through which a legal glare had petrified him.

At nine o'clock the lecture was over. The Solicitor-General listened in silence to Mr. Toft's apologies, and then bowed coldly. Mr. Toft felt that he was lost indeed if it came to the Law Courts, and hurried away to his appointment in a state of feverish anxiety. He had come to the lecture in a soft wide-awake hat and the oldest top-coat in his wardrobe. He now donned a woollen muffler, and put on a pair of smoked glass spectacles. This was his idea of disguise. It was simple, but ineffective; for the highly-respectable mutton-chop whiskers, the weak mouth, and cut-away chin were as noticeable as ever. His most casual acquaintance would have recognised him, and would merely have concluded that he was engaged in something disreputable. [65]

At the Monument he dismissed his cab, and made his way to the Blue Lion Inn. It was a fifth-rate house in a fourth-rate street. Mr. Toft had never been in such an unpleasant place in his life, and he groaned as he thought that the exigences of commerce had driven him there in his old age without even the excuse of foreign competition.

It was 9.45 when he entered the inn, and he hoped that the quarter-hour he was late would impress J. Driver with the conviction that he, Toft, was not at all particular about keeping the appointment. Apparently it did strike Mr. Driver in this way, for as the be-muffled and be-spectacled gentleman in the soft hat entered the tap-room a sarcastic voice loudly expressed the hope that he hadn't permanently injured his constitution by running. Mr. Toft was grieved at the publicity given to this remark. He sat down by the speaker, and murmured excuses; but Mr. Driver, if it were he, would have none of them. "When I says 9.30 I mean 9.30, and not 9.50, nor 9.60, nor yet 9.70. If my time won't suit you, yours won't suit me. I'm off," he said. [66]

Mr. Toft was alarmed. "Sit down, please," he said, clutching the rising figure. "I'm sure I'm very sorry. I had made an engagement before your letter came, and I couldn't very well put it off. What will you have to drink?" he added adroitly.

"Gin and bitters," was the prompt response, and Mr. Driver sat down.

Mr. Toft now had leisure to take stock of his surroundings. J. Driver was a dark-haired man with a bold, clean-shaven chin. His voice was deep and emphatic, and his eye was piercing. He was broad and muscular, and would probably be a good boxer, thought Mr. Toft. He glanced at the drinkers at the other tables, but finding their eyes were fixed stolidly on him he looked elsewhere. He had noticed eyes and noses—that was all. [67]

"Now to business," said Mr. Driver. "You know my name, and I know yours. That's where we're equal. You're in a beastly hole, and I aren't. That's where the difference comes in."

"I don't understand," said Mr. Toft. "In fact, I haven't the faintest idea what you are alluding to."

"Garn," said J. Driver, with a dig in the ribs that made him jump. "Garn! you old dodger. What about Government contracts?"

"What about them?" asked Mr. Toft, shrinking from his familiarity.

"What about them?" echoed the other. "What about work you never did, for which you've got false receipts? What about contracts executed with inferior stuff? What about commissions to officials, tips to men, and plunder all round?"

Mr. Toft paled at this catalogue of his business achievements. "You are misinformed," he said. "My firm does not do such things." [68]

J. Driver thrust his tongue into his cheek. "Then how did you get your contracts, Septimus?" he asked.

"By honest competition in the open market," replied Mr. Toft loftily.

Mr. Driver laughed derisively. "Lord!" he said at last, "I wish I had your artless style. Stick to it, Mister, in the prisoner's dock. It may pull you through."

"I presume you haven't asked me here simply for the purpose of insulting me?" said Mr. Toft, with some dignity.

"What a man you are!" Mr. Driver replied, with unstinted admiration. "You must be a thought-reader, Septimus—a bloomin' thought-reader. You're quite right; I haven't. I've come for the loan of a key, and one of your visitin' cards."

"A key?" said Mr. Toft, relieved, though much surprised.

"The key of the plate chest of the Fellmongers' Company."

Mr. Toft raised his eyebrows. "You're joking," he said.

"Do I look like a joker?" replied his companion fiercely. "Do I look like a joker?" he repeated loudly, banging his fist on the table so that all turned their eyes in the direction of the noise. Mr. Toft implored him to restrain his feelings. [69]

"Don't rouse 'em then!" said the man. "Have you got the key on you?"

"Er—yes," responded Mr. Toft.

"Then hand it over."

"My dear sir," began the unhappy Septimus.

"I'm not your dear anything," said the other; "so don't you pretend that I am. I'm as meek and pleasant as a cow to those that treat me fair and square, but when I'm irritated I'm a roarin' bull. Hand me the key."

"I can't."

"You can't. Right'o!" said Mr. Driver, rising. "At present the Admiralty only suspect. To-morrow they'll know, and you'll know too, Septimus Toft, when you get five years without the option of a fine."

"Please, please don't speak so loudly," begged Mr. Toft, beside himself with fears and anxieties. Then, to put on time whilst he collected his scattering thoughts, "What do you want to do with the key?"

"Wear it with my medals, of course," said the man sarcastically. "If you want further pertic'lers you won't get 'em, but I promise to return the key within forty-eight hours, and all your plate'll be there." [70]

"It's a very extraordinary idea," said Mr. Toft incredulously.

"It is; and I'm a very extraordinary man, and you're a bloomin' ordinary one. Will you let me have the key and a visitin' card, or not?"

"If anyone asks how you got them what will you say?"

"Say I took 'em from you while you were asleep in an opium den, or when we met in a tunnel—any blessed thing you like."

Mr. Toft scarcely heard him. He was thinking over the pros and cons of the situation as rapidly as his nervous system would allow. He was Treasurer of the Fellmongers' Company, and he alone had the key of the plate safe. In the ordinary course of events he would be elected Prime Warden next year, but if there were any trouble about the plate he might not be. Better that, though, than a public exposure of his business methods. The key might have been stolen from him. Everyone lost keys now and then. Of course no one could think that the theft was to his advantage, and it would save him from all bother at the Admiralty—but would it? [71]

"If I let you have the key," he asked, "how do I know that you won't come in a similar way again?"

"Give it up," said Mr. Driver. "Never was good at riddles, and I didn't come here to be asked 'em neither. What the blazes do I care about what you'll know or what you won't know? I know what I know, and that's enough to account for your hair bein' so thin on top. If you don't hand me that key without any more rottin' I'll just drop this in the first pillar-box I come across." He pulled out a fat blue envelope and flourished it in front of Mr. Toft's blinking eyes. It was addressed to the Financial Secretary of the Admiralty, and was marked on one side "Important," and on the other "Private and Urgent." There was an immense seal with the impression of a five-shilling piece.

"Your death-knell's inside," said Mr. Driver. "Hear it rattle," and he shook the envelope in Mr. Toft's ear. "But it wants a stamp, or the Government might not take it in. On such trifles do our destinies depend, Septimus. Have you got a stamp?" He put an anticipatory penny on the table. [72]

Mr. Toft hesitated no longer. From one end of his watch-chain he detached a gold key, which he handed covertly to Driver.

"Now your visitin' card."

Mr. Toft produced one, and handed it over. "You'll give me that letter now," he pleaded.

J. Driver shook his head, tore up the packet, and put it into the fire. "Better there," he said oracularly. "Now, Toft, my boy, don't worry. You'll have that key back by Friday, and all your spoons'll be in the box. If you don't interfere you'll never hear of me again, and the Admiralty won't either; but if you take one step behind my back I'll do all I've threatened, and a lot more, and you'll be building Portland Breakwater on Christmas Day. By-bye, Septimus."

With this Mr. Driver rose, and stalked out of the room. After a modest interval Mr. Toft followed.

At 9 a.m. on the following morning the bell of the Fellmongers' Company pealed vigorously. The porter hurried to answer it, and found a lady on the doorstep. She was neatly dressed, and was strikingly handsome. She might be twenty-five years old. A boy carrying a portfolio and a strapped-up easel stood behind.

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"Is this the Fellmongers' Hall?" she asked.

"It is, Miss."

"I want to know if you will be good enough to allow me to copy a painting you have on your walls? I do not know if it is necessary to have any written permission, or where to apply for it."

"The 'All is open to the public under my supervision," said the porter pompously. "Come inside, please."

"Thank you," replied the lady. "Put those things down, Johnnie. That's right. I'll let you know when to come for them. Good-morning."

"We don't often 'ave hartists 'ere, miss," remarked the porter, "and I sometimes thinks as pictures is wasted on gentlemen dinin' with City Companies. They ain't runnin' pertic'ler strong on hart just then. Which one is it you want?"

"I don't know the title," replied the artist, "but I shall know the picture when I see it. It's a portrait."

"P'raps Nicholas Tiffany," the porter suggested, "the first warden of the company, painted by 'Olbein. Born 1455. Lived to the ripe age of ninety-four, and died regretted by his sovereign and his country. His estates were seized by his creditors. Here he is, miss."

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The man opened the door of the Livery Room, the walls of which were hung with many pictures. "This is Tiffany," he said, pointing to a disreputable-looking portrait.

The lady looked at it doubtfully. "The painting I want is the one nearest to the door of the plate room," she said.

"Then it's a good bit away from it, miss. The plate room is off the Banqueting 'All, and they are all windows on that side. The pictures are opposite."

"Dear me," said the lady. "How very stupidly I have been informed. Please show me the room."

The porter led the way, and threw open the door with pardonable pride. "The Banqueting 'All of the Honourable Company of Fellmongers!" he exclaimed. It was the famous hall in which heads of City Companies and ruling sovereigns are intermittently entertained. Down one wall were ranged portraits of eminent fellmongers. The other three were pierced by doors and windows.

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"Which is the plate room?" asked the lady.

"This is the door of the plate room," the porter replied. "Anyone enterin' without authority, day or night, sets in action two peals of electric bells, and aut'matic'ly discharges a revolver shot through the sky-light."

"How very interesting!" the lady remarked. "Now I must find my picture." She looked round the room, and finally selected one.

"Jeremiah Crumpet," said the porter. "A haberdasher by birth, but eventually Junior Warden of our Company. Painted by Merillo. Never gettin' beyond pot'ooks 'imself, he founded the Company's Schools at Ashby de la Zouch."

"I'm sure that's the man," said the artist. "I'll bring my things in if I may. Is there a Mrs. ——? Jeckell, thank you. I should like to see her about some water for my paints."

"I'll tell you what, Maria," said Mr. Jeckell some hours later. "If she's a hartist I ought to be President of the Royal Academy. I never saw such drawin' in my life. She can't get his face square nohow. He's smilin' in the picture, but she's made him lockjawed an' moonstruck. She says if she can't get him right she'll have to turn him into a shipwreck. She must be what the papers call an himpressionist. She spoke twice about the plate room, so I've wheeled my chair into the 'all to

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keep my eye on her. I'll go back now and see what she's hup to."

Mr. Jeckell would have wondered less at her drawing if he could have seen the note the lady had referred to in his absence:

"An attempt will be made during the next three days to steal a cup from the plate chest at the Fellmongers' Hall. For certain reasons warning of this must not come to the authorities from without. Apply for permission to copy painting or to sketch interior, and watch. Should any other than the Company's servant enter the plate room suggest doubt as to his credentials, and do all you can to secure his arrest. Another agent will watch the premises from 5 p.m. to 9 a.m."

While Mr. Jeckell was on his way to his chair there came another peal from the front-entrance bell. A man in a bowler hat, and carrying a handbag, was outside. [77]

"Mr. Toft has sent me for the Nelson Goblet," he said.

The porter was surprised. "Got a note?" he asked.

"The gov'nor gave me this," said the man, handing a card, "and the key."

"What does he want it for?" Mr. Jeckell asked.

"Got a big guzzle on at 'ome. Wants to cut an extra dash in centre-pieces."

Mr. Jeckell shook his head gravely, but made no remark. "Come along," he said shortly.

He led the way across the vestibule into the Banqueting Hall, where, behind her easel, a lady was evidently busy with her picture. He stopped at a door, which he unlocked, and both men passed through. Barely had they done so when the artist ran from behind her easel into the outer hall. "Mrs. Jeckell! Mrs. Jeckell!" she called out.

The porter's wife appeared.

"A man has gone into the plate room with your husband. I'm sure he is a thief. Warn Mr. Jeckell to get full authority before he does what this man wants."

"Gracious me!" cried the alarmed Mrs. Jeckell. "A thief! He may be murderin' Samuel!" [78]

She rushed across to the plate room, and in a minute a storm of voices proceeded therefrom. Finally the three emerged, two hot and flurried, and the stranger, looking cool and determined, carrying a bag in one hand and a gold cup in the other. The porter hung on to his arm.

The artist was in front of the door. When she saw the man with the bag and cup she gave a little gasp of surprise, and a wave of colour overspread her face.

The man seemed equally astonished. "You!" he said at last.

"They're both thieves," whispered Mrs. Jeckell to her husband. "They're acting in collusion. I'll shout for the perlice while you keep 'em." And she ran from the room.

"You are in danger," said the artist rapidly in French. "Put the cup in your pocket. Give me the bag, and knock the porter down."

The man obeyed with the promptitude of a soldier. Leaving Mr. Jeckell prostrate on the floor, they hurried from the Hall. At the street door was Mrs. Jeckell, wildly beckoning to a distant policeman. [79]

"You take down there," said the artist. "Good-bye." She ran off in the opposite direction, still holding the bag, and dived down a side street.

Mrs. Jeckell grew frantically insistent to the policeman, who now came up. "Which one?" he puffed.

"The man. No, it's in the bag. Both of 'em," she cried.

At this moment her husband appeared at the door, with blood streaming from his nose. "They've killed Samuel," cried his horrified wife, running to him; but the policeman, though he wore the badge of St. John of Jerusalem on his arm, dashed down the street after the lady.

By the time he returned, after a fruitless pursuit, Mr. Jeckell's nose had stopped bleeding. "Did you hever?" said the porter. "What the blazes did she mean by first givin' the alarm and then aidin' and abettin'? And she looked so innercent-like, too. The first hartist as I've ever encouraged, and the larst. Whatever will Mr. Toft say, Maria? It's as much as my place is worth. After all these years of faithful service, too!"

But Mr. Toft was less demonstrative than might have been expected. [80]

The next gathering of the Burglars' Club proved the most important in the history of the Club since its foundation. Every detail of it is firmly impressed on the memory of each member present; yet they never by any chance refer to that meeting. One and all would like to forget it—if they could.

It was held at Marmaduke Percy's rooms, his Grace of Dorchester, the President of the year, being in the chair.

The Secretary read the minutes, and concluded: "The business of the evening is the payment of an entrance fee—the Nelson Goblet of the Fellmongers' Company—by Martin Legendre Craven, fourth Baron Horton, a cadet member of the Club."

Lord Horton entered, bowed, and amidst general applause, placed on the table a richly-chased goblet of gold.

"Lord Horton's entrance fee being paid," said the President, "I now move that he be enrolled as a full member." Carried unanimously.

"My lord, you are one of us."

Lord Horton advanced to the table and looked round with calm deliberation. He was a notable man—the best amateur low comedian of his day, a traveller who had pressed far into Thibet, a diplomatist at the mention of whose name the Turk shifted uneasily in his seat and fixed his eyes despondently on the floor. He had won his V.C. in China. He had done many things.

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"Your Grace, my lords and gentlemen," he said. "I thank you. In accordance with the usual custom of your Club I will explain how I have been able to fulfil my appointed duty. I received an intimation that the Nelson Goblet of the Fellmongers' Company was my entrance fee, and at once took steps to procure it. The matter was hardly difficult. A list of the Company showed me that the treasurer and plate-keeper was a certain Mr. Toft. The directory informed me that he was a steam-tug owner and a contractor to the Admiralty. Inquiry there told me he was under suspicion of bribery and corruption. I played on this little weakness of his, and, if I am not mistaken, I frightened him into the paths of virtue for the rest of his days. In return, he lent me the key of the plate safe of his Company. In broad daylight I proceeded for my booty. To my surprise, I found that I was expected. Someone had placed an agent on the spot to warn the custodian of the building of my intention. An alarm was raised. My lords and gentlemen, at whose instigation was that alarm raised?"

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Lord Horton paused. Members looked at each other in mystified amazement. What on earth was he driving at? Was he waiting for a reply?

The silence grew painful. "Who instigated that alarm?" again the speaker asked.

A voice replied, "Presumably Mr. Toft."

"Presumably Mr. Toft.' Sir Francis Marwood, I thank you for the suggestion. To continue. An alarm was raised by the agent of someone unknown. This agent was a lady who did not know that she was betraying an old friend. A minute later we were face to face. Instantly she pierced through my disguise, and by her presence of mind and fertility of resource alone did I escape."

"Like Sir Francis Marwood, I thought my betrayer was Mr. Toft, and I hastened to interview that gentleman. I found him in a state of extreme nervous prostration, but I left him convinced that it was not he who had betrayed me. So your suggestion, Sir Francis Marwood, is wrong. Can you give me another clue?"

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Sir Francis did not reply. He looked uncomfortable at the attention bestowed upon his remark.

"My next step was to trace the lady who had helped me. That also was not difficult. I did not know she was in England, but being here I concluded that the Foreign Office would have her address. I was not mistaken. I found my friend, and learnt that she had her instructions to raise an alarm from—mark the name well, gentlemen—from Sir Francis Marwood, a member of this Club."

Had a live shell fallen into their midst it would probably have caused less consternation than did this announcement. There was an involuntary exclamation from everyone. For a moment all eyes were fixed on Sir Francis. Then each man drew himself up and stared blankly into space.

"The fame of your Club had reached me, and the novelty of its membership appealed to me." Again Lord Horton was speaking. "I felt that its risks would give a pleasing zest to civilian life, but I did not know that members were allowed to pay off old scores on each other through its medium. Last year I considered it my duty to advise against Sir Francis Marwood's appointment to Lisbon. This was his revenge. I was prepared to run any and all risks from without, but did not anticipate betrayal from within. Gentlemen, you have done me the honour to elect me as a member of your Club. I have paid my subscription. Now I beg to tender my resignation."

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"No, no!" responded on all sides. Then cries of "Marwood! Marwood!"

"Order!" called the Duke. "Sir Francis Marwood, we are waiting."

Sir Francis rose. He was a man of some distinction in the diplomatic world.

"Gentlemen," he said, making a desperate attempt to speak his words lightly; "I really did not anticipate the matter would be taken up in this serious way. I do not dispute the accuracy of Lord Horton's statement, though I absolutely deny the motive he has ascribed to me. The reason of my action was simple. This Club was formed by us, not merely for passing time, but for keeping up our wits in degenerate days. To such a man as Lord Horton I felt that the purloining of the Fellmongers' Goblet must fall flat indeed. I have read the marvellous account of his adventures in Thibet, and I felt that some further spice of danger in this particular affair was necessary to make it worthy of Lord Horton's reputation. I took the liberty of supplying it, though perhaps in so

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doing I exceeded my rights. If so, I tender my regrets."

Sir Francis resumed his seat amidst loudly expressed disapprobation.

The President rose. "Gentlemen," he said, "you have heard Lord Horton's charge and Sir Francis Marwood's reply. Our Club can exist only as long as there is absolute good faith between its members, and I never dreamt of anything less than this being possible. Two duties are obviously mine. The first, Sir Francis Marwood, is to inform you that you are no longer a member of the Club. The second is to express our sincere regrets to Lord Horton, and our earnest hope that he will reconsider his resignation."

Sir Francis rose, pale and defiant. "So be it, Duke. Some day you may regret this. Horton, you and I have a big score to wipe out now." Then, with an ugly sneer, "It is hardly necessary to say that the F.O. will no longer require the services of a lady who cannot be depended upon; but Lord Horton's interest will no doubt find her another situation."

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"Stop!" thundered Horton. "A lady has been mentioned. Two years ago this same lady saved my life in Russia. I asked her to marry me, and she refused, because, absurdly enough, she thought it would spoil my career. We did not meet again till yesterday. Marwood, instead of an injury, you did me the greatest service in the world."

"A week ago I was offered the post of British Agent at Kabul. It was a post after my own heart, but single-handed I should have failed in it. With this lady as my wife anything would be possible. Yesterday I begged her to reconsider her decision, and to help me in my career. I am proud to say she consented. We are to be married at once. Because bachelors alone are eligible as members of your Club, I am forced to confirm my resignation. Gentlemen, and Sir Francis Marwood, good-evening."

Thus did Lord Horton leave the Burglars' Club for married life, happiness, and his brilliant after-career.

V.

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AN OUNCE OF RADIUM.

"It seems likely," said the President, with singular irrelevance, "that there will be a slump in radium."

"All South Africans are down," remarked Chillingford gloomily. "What in the world are you fellows laughing at?"

"It isn't a mine, Tommy. It's a horse. Won the Nobel Stakes," Marmaduke Percy called out.

"Order, gentlemen, if you please," continued the President. "I was remarking on the probability of a slump in radium. This is what to-day's paper says:

"£896,000 was recently quoted as the market price for a single pound of radium. We suggest that it would be advisable for any holder to realise promptly, as Professor Blyth has discovered a method of obtaining this remarkable element from a substance other than pitch-blende. He has already isolated one ounce avoirdupois—at yesterday's price worth £56,000—which has been exhibited to a select number of scientists at his laboratory at Harlesden Green."

"It seems likely that radium will no longer remain the toy of the conversazione, but that it will take its place among the great forces of civilisation. As a moderate-sized cube of it is sufficient to warm the dining-room of an average ratepayer for something like two thousand years, we shall no doubt find in this element the motive power of the future. The smoke nuisance of our great towns will disappear, ocean coaling stations will no longer be necessary, and incidentally about a million workers in the coal trade will be thrown out of employment."

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"This, gentlemen, is from the *Daily Argus* of to-day."

"Take your word for it, old man," "Carried *nem. con.*," and sundry other similar cries greeted the speaker.

The Duke waved his hand disparagingly. "Our secretary informs me," he went on, "that the subscription of Major Everett Anstruther is now due. It is suggested that he should produce this £56,000 worth of radium at our next meeting in payment thereof; although I believe that is something less than the value of membership of our Club."

That is why, on April 4th last, Major Everett Anstruther climbed the wall at the back of Professor Blyth's house at Harlesden.

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His methods were those of the average burglar. He forced back the catch of one of the windows, drew up the sash, and stepped gently down from the window-sill into the room.

He was in the Professor's laboratory, a one-storeyed building joined to the dwelling-house by a corridor.

Anstruther turned on his portable electric light, and took his bearings. He was in an ordinary scientific laboratory, surrounded by induction coils, Crookes' tubes, balances, prismatic and optical instruments, and other and more complicated apparatus, the use of which he could not guess.

He walked slowly round, observing every corner. Where was the radium? He had read up the subject, and had learnt of its power to penetrate almost any substance, and now he turned off his light, hoping to see its rays.

There was nothing but absolute darkness.

He resolved to explore further. He opened the door gently. In front of him was the passage leading to the house. At his left another door—wide open.

He stopped before it in mute surprise and admiration.

On a table in the middle of the room was a luminous mass. The wall behind was aglow with a dancing, scintillating light. The rest of the room was in darkness, save for the dim light cast by the glowing mass and the phosphorescent screen behind. [90]

It was the radium! How could the Professor leave it in so exposed a place? No doubt it was there that it had been exhibited to the scientists—but £56,000 worth left on a table for anyone to handle! It was absurd. Only a professor would have done it.

But it wasn't for him to grumble at the peculiar methods of learned men, and with a cheerful heart Anstruther stepped lightly into the room.

As he did so the door closed behind him with a click. The Major paused. "That's queer," he thought. "I didn't feel a draught, and I didn't touch the door."

Luckily the laboratory was isolated from the rest of the house, so the slight noise would not have been heard. He waited for some minutes to reassure himself; then he stepped back to the door and gently turned the knob, without result. He pushed; pulled and pushed; lifted and pushed; pressed down and pushed; tried in every way he could think of, but the door would not open. [91]

He examined it carefully. Save for its knob its surface was absolutely plain. There was no keyhole or latch.

"Trapped, by Jove!" Anstruther exclaimed under his breath; and as his unpleasant situation dawned upon him he felt more uncomfortable than he had ever done in his life before. In fact, he felt physically ill.

"Confound it!" he thought. "It's deuced annoying, but it isn't as bad as all that. I don't know why it should bowl me over. Perhaps there's another way out of this den."

He walked round the room, feeling the wall for some shutter, even searching the floor for a trap-door. There was none. Save for a telephone and the table, he encountered nothing but plain surface.

"Of all the infernal holes to be in," he muttered. "Trapped like this, and all through my own carelessness." And then it occurred to him that he, Everett Anstruther, late a major of his Majesty's Horse Guards Blue, and now member of Parliament for Helston, would in a few hours be haled away to prison on a charge of attempted burglary. A pleasant situation, truly!

He felt ill—worse than before. His head ached, and his temples throbbed. What on earth did it mean? He had been in tight places before—once in Italy, when his life wasn't worth a moment's purchase, and then he was absolutely cool. But now— [92]

He started as if a pistol had been fired. A bell had rung behind him—an electric bell. It was the telephone bell, and it was still ringing. He watched it in dismay. It would rouse the whole house. Lift down the receiver, of course. He did so. The bell stopped. He put the receiver to his ear.

"Are you there?" a voice asked.

He did not reply. There was no need. While the receiver was off the bell wouldn't ring.

"If you don't answer I shall wake the house," came the voice, as if in answer to his thoughts.

The Major groaned inwardly. "Yes, I'm here," he replied.

"Good. How do you feel?"

"Oh, pretty tollollish," he answered. "Must be the doctor," he thought.

"What is your name?"

"Smithers," said the Major, with a sudden inspiration. "John Smithers." [93]

"John Smithers," came the slow response. "Thank you. Your age last birthday?"

"It seems to me he has been examining Blyth's factotum for life insurance," thought the Major. "Lucky I caught on so well. But what an extraordinary idea to collect these statistics at something after midnight."

"Age last birthday, please," came down the wire again.

"Thirty-five," replied the Major. "Nothing like the truth in an emergency," he added to himself.

"John Smithers, aged thirty-five," was repeated. "Late occupation?"

"Soldier."

"Good. Very good. Late occupation, soldier. Any pension?"

"Yes."

"What a fool you are to risk it for a bit of radium."

The Major stepped back in sheer amazement. "What did you say?" he asked.

"Whatever made you risk your pension for a bit of radium?"

"Don't know what you mean."

"Then I'll explain. You are a thief, locked up in Professor Blyth's dark room. Isn't that so?"

"Who are you?" asked the Major in dismay.

"Professor Blyth."

"The devil!" Anstruther ejaculated.

"No, sir—Professor Blyth," came the response.

"Where are you?" asked the Major.

"I am in the room at the end of the corridor. I can observe the door of your room from where I stand, and I have a loaded revolver in my hand."

"What are you going to do?"

"That depends upon you. I can either send for the police, and give you in charge, or I can take scientific observations with your assistance—whichever you prefer."

"What do you mean by scientific observations?"

"You are locked up in a room twelve feet square with an ounce of radium."

"Well?"

"You are the first man in the world who has been locked up with an ounce of radium in a room twelve feet square, and your sensations would be of scientific value. If you care to describe them to me by telephone so long as you are conscious, I will not prosecute; otherwise I will place the matter in the hands of the police. Which do you prefer to do?"

"You are remarkably kind to offer me the alternative. I think I prefer to describe my sensations."

"Thank you. I am really very much obliged to you, John Smithers; but I ought to warn you beforehand that you will be put to great personal inconvenience. If you decide to try the experiment I shall not release you for some hours. I shall certainly not break off in the middle, however ill you feel."

"I have told you my choice," said Anstruther curtly.

"Right. Stop, though. What sort of a heart have you?"

"Strong."

"Good. You'll need it. Got a watch?"

"Yes."

"Can you take your pulse?"

"Yes."

"You are a real treasure, John Smithers. I'm glad you called. You've been fifteen minutes in the room. What is your pulse?"

"Seventy-three."

"Thank you. Can you read a clinical thermometer?"



"YOU ARE A THIEF."

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"Yes."

"On the ledge of the telephone, where the paper is, you will find a tube. Got it? There's a thermometer inside. Please take it out, and read it carefully."

"Ninety-seven," said the Major.

"Thank you. I had no idea the army was so intelligent. How the papers do deceive us! Now put the thermometer under your tongue for two minutes, and then let me know what it registers."

"Ninety-nine," came the eventual response.

"Thank you. Horse or foot soldier, Smithers?"

"Horse."

"Horse. Thank you. Married?"

"No."

"Good again, Smithers. No one dependent upon you, I hope? Have you a headache?"

"It's enough to give me one, answering all your questions."

"Please describe symptoms, and not attempt to diagnose them. Have you a headache?"

"Yes."

"How's your heart?"

"Beats irregularly."

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"Probably it will. Respiration?"

"It's rather choky here. Can't you let me have a breath of fresh air?"

"On no account, Smithers—on no account. I'm surprised at your suggesting such a thing. That will do for the present. I'll ring up again shortly, and I'm always here if you want me. You might take a little gentle exercise now."

The major hung up his receiver. The room seemed to be much lighter now. The radium glowed more brightly, and the scintillations on the wall behind had increased in intensity. He advanced towards the radium, and was immediately conscious that his discomfort increased. There was a smarting sensation on the front of his body, as if it were exposed to fire. His breathing became more difficult, his headache increased. He drew back to the wall, and the symptoms became less marked.

The bell rang again. "I ought to inform you, Smithers," said the voice, "that no good at all would result from your attempting to destroy the radium. As a matter of fact, if you broke or crushed it you would feel very much worse. The particles would fly all over, and you would inhale them. The symptoms would be intensely interesting if you would care to experience them, but I won't answer for the consequences. I just want you to understand that you can't possibly escape from this important new element when once you are imprisoned in a room with it, especially when the room is only twelve feet square."

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The major did not reply. He hung up his receiver in silence.

At the other end of the telephone was Robert Blyth, F.R.S., D.Sc., etc., etc., a little red-haired man, whose researches on the Mutilation and Redintegration of Crystals are of world-renown.

He was a grave little man as a rule. Only when on the verge of some discovery, or when watching the successful progress of an experiment, did he wax cheerful. He did this now as he surveyed his notes of the report of John Smithers, a horse-soldier, in durance vile in the adjoining room.

"Pulse, 73; temperature, 99; heart, irregular. Good. Respiration difficult. Well, that's understandable. He's been in there thirty-one minutes. Thanks to a strong constitution, he's scarcely felt anything yet; but now he'll have trouble. John Smithers, you are going to have an exceedingly bad time of it. If you weren't a criminal I should hesitate in giving it you. As it is, you must suffer for the cause of science. Your experience will, no doubt, make you hesitate before you attempt another crime."

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The professor tilted back his chair. "Strange," he mused, "how brain controls matter to the end. Here's John Smithers in the next room—a strong man admittedly—cribbed, cabined, and confined by a man he could probably crumple up with one hand. It was a stroke of genius to advertise my discovery in the papers. The criminal classes all read them now, and I thought I should probably attract a thief. I placed the radium in the middle of the room, and painted the wall behind with sulphide of zinc so that he couldn't possibly miss it. I easily constructed a threshold that closed the door when stepped upon. And then I had only to wait."

Here the bell rang. "Aha, Smithers, you are growing impatient. Well?"

"Are you a Christian?" came the reply.

"I hope so. Why?"

"Do you call this Christian conduct, to imprison me here with this infernal block of fire? I tell you, man, it's poisoning me. It's choking me. It's getting to my brain. If you are a Christian, come down and let me out."

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"None of that hysterical sort of talk, Smithers," said the Professor sternly. "It's no good appealing for mercy. You are a thief, and you've got to be punished. Pull yourself together, and show what you are made of. You don't know what a lot of good your sufferings may do to humanity. I shall publish a full account of them in the *British Medical Journal*, and I am sure your family will be proud of you when they read it."

"I haven't got a family, and if I had they shouldn't read your jibberings. I tell you that if you don't let me out I shall do something desperate!"

"You can't," said the Professor. "There's nothing in the room except the radium and the telephone. If you knock the radium about you'll only make things worse for yourself, and if you damage the telephone you cut off your only link with the outside world. Be a man, Smithers. You've read of the Black Hole of Calcutta. The sufferings of the prisoners there were far worse than yours."

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"You are a scientific vampire—a howling chemical bounder!" came the response.

"Tut, tut!" said the Professor serenely. "Do try and be calm. Take a stroll round. You might put the thermometer under your tongue again, and let me have the record. Nothing like filling your leisure moments with useful occupation."

"Poor beggar!" he said to himself. "He's just beginning to realise things. Five centigrammes of radium chloride killed eight mice in three days; how long will it take an ounce of radium bromide to render a strong man insensible? That's the problem in rule of three, and it's high time that someone worked out the answer."

"Well?" in reply to the bell.

"Temperature, 102; pulse, 100. Look here, Blyth, I'm going dotty. If you won't have pity on me as a Christian, I appeal to you as a family man. Your people wouldn't like to hear of this, I'm sure."

"Pulse 100," repeated the Professor. "Jerky, I suppose?"

"Did you hear my appeal to you as a family man?"

"Now, Smithers, you agreed to help me with my scientific observations, and I wish you'd keep to the letter of the agreement. Is your pulse jerky?"

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"It is, and my hands are fairly itching to close round your throat, and my toes would like to kick you into eternity. Blyth, if I die, I'll haunt you and your family to the fifth generation. If you don't end up in a madhouse it won't be my fault. You scoundrel! You contemptible——"

Again the Professor hung up the receiver. "Strange," he soliloquised, "how mentally unbalanced these common men are! I can't imagine myself giving way to such ravings, whatever situation I was in. That's the advantage of birth and education. Yet, judging from the way in which Smithers expresses himself, he must be a man of very fair education. It's birth alone that tells in the long run," and the Professor stroked his stubble chin complacently.

The minutes passed. "He ought to be feeling it now. I'll ring him up." The Professor did so, but there was no reply. "He can't have collapsed already—a horse-soldier of thirty-five." Once more he rang. This time there was a slow response.

"Why didn't you come before?" said the Professor irately.

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"I'm not your servant. I was thinking how I'd like to chop you into mincemeat, Blyth, and scatter you to the crows. My head's splitting—splitting, do you hear? I shall go dotty, looking at this infernal heap of fire. Those moving specks of light behind are all alive, Blyth. They're grinning at me. They're choking me. And there you sit like a scientific panjandrum with a little round button on top. And you call yourself a Christian and a respectable family man. You are a disgrace to your country. Come down and let me out. Send for the police. I don't care."

"Smithers," said the Professor, "I'm ashamed of you. A horse soldier going on like a nurserymaid! I shall not send for the police. You agreed to this experiment, and you've got to see it through. Please remember that. How's your pulse?"

"Blyth, it's 120! It's ticking like a clock. I believe it's going to strike."

"Keep cool, Smithers. Have your hands a bluish tinge?"

"They seem to be green."

"Green? Preposterous!"

"They may be blue really. I'm colour blind."

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"Colour blind, Smithers, and a soldier? I'm surprised at you. I suspect they're only dirty. Do you feel a tingling at the finger tips?"

"Yes, and at my toe-tips too."

"Excellent! And your temperature?"

"One hundred and three. Man, I'm in a fever. I can't breathe. My head's on fire."

"You've only been in there an hour and a quarter. You're just beginning to get acclimatised, Smithers," said Professor Blyth callously, as he hung up the receiver.

"I wish Cantrip were here," he soliloquised. "'Deoxygenation of the blood corpuscles, followed by coma.' Bah! Radium acts on the nerve centres, and will ultimately produce paralysis. Cantrip is an ass. I always told him so."

The bell rang. "Blyth," said the prisoner, "listen to me. If you don't let me out, I'll swallow the radium. It can't make me feel worse, and it may finish me off quicker."

"Nonsense, Smithers, don't talk like a fool. It would only add to any—er—inconvenience you are now experiencing."

"I don't care what it would do. I——"

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The Professor cut him off impatiently. "I'm disappointed in John Smithers," he thought. "He has no stamina. A man of low birth, evidently. A mere mountain of muscle. I know the species."

For a while he paced the room. Then he rang the bell, but this time there was no coherent response. The gasps sounded like, "Sit on her head, Blyth—keep her down, man. Whoa, mare!—mind that fencing—snow again—what ho! she bumps—all down the road and round the corner ——"

"For heaven's sake, keep cool, Smithers," cried the Professor. "I want some more observations. Don't lose your head yet. You've all the night in front of you."

"Squadron, right wheel! Draw swords! Charge! Down with 'em! Boers, Japs, and Russians. Get home, lads! Give it 'em hot! Hurrah! I've killed a sergeant-major." Then indistinct mumbling and cackling laughter came through the telephone.

The Professor was disturbed. The end had come sooner than he had expected, for John Smithers had only been there an hour and a half, and he had calculated on a much longer time. But the symptoms were, on the whole, what he had expected. Green hands, though. What if the extremities were blue after all, and Cantrip right?

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He rang the bell. There was no response. Once more, and yet again. Still there was silence.

The Professor hung up the receiver gloomily. "I'm afraid I shall have to go to him. He's unconscious, and continued exposure might be serious."

He went down the corridor, pulled back the bolts, and opened the door. The room was in absolute darkness. The Professor was intensely surprised. "What on earth has he done with the radium?" he thought. "Good heavens! Surely he hasn't really swallowed it!"

He stepped carefully across the threshold towards the electric pendant in the centre of the room. He started. The door had closed behind him with a loud click. He switched on the light, and peered round the floor for John Smithers. He was alone. Neither Smithers nor the radium was there!

At that moment the telephone rang.

"Are you there?" came a voice.

"Is that you, Smithers?" said the Professor, in blank amazement.

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"It is, Blyth. How's your temperature? You'll find the thermometer on the telephone where you left it."

"You scoundrel! You consummate scoundrel! How did you get out?"

"For goodness' sake, Blyth, keep cool."

"If you don't release me immediately I'll hand you over to the police."

"You can't get 'em, old man. You can only talk to me."

"What have you done with the radium?"

"Got it here, Blyth; and I'm taking ever such a lot of care of it. I read all about it before I came, and I know just what it fancies. I brought a nice quarter-inch thick lead case, with a smaller one fixed inside, and the half-inch of intervening space made up with quicksilver. I've had the radium in the inner case most of the time, and it's as quiet as a lamb, nicely bottled up with its rays. In fact, I think it's gone to sleep. I've had quite a cheerful time with you to talk to, Blyth. You don't know how amusing you've been."

"Smithers," stuttered the Professor, "you are an insolent fellow as well as a consummate scoundrel."

"Tut, tut, Blyth! Do keep cool. Think how humanity will benefit from your present

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inconvenience. I'll look out for your article in the *British Medical Journal*, and I won't contradict it, though my pulse never went above seventy-three nor my temperature over ninety-nine, and wouldn't have done that if I'd bottled the radium at once instead of stopping to chatter with you. But you really ought to have kept a smarter look-out as you went in. I nearly brushed against you as I closed the door behind me. Well, bye-bye, old man, and many thanks for the radium. It will help my pension out nicely. I'll leave the receiver off the telephone, so that you don't disturb your family. I wouldn't worry, Blyth. Think of the Black Hole of Calcutta, and be a man!"



"I NEARLY BRUSHED AGAINST YOU."
(p. 108.)

Before Anstruther had reached the laboratory the Professor was hammering on the wall, and shouting at the top of his voice. The Major hurried through the window, climbed the garden wall, and had found his bicycle before the prisoner was released. By the time that the police were informed, he was well on his way to town.

And that is how Major Everett Anstruther was able to renew his subscription to the Burglars' Club.

VI.

[109]

THE BUNYAN MS.

ANSTRUTHER sat down amidst vociferous applause.

"Gentlemen," said the Duke, "I think we may heartily congratulate Major Anstruther on the foresight and ingenuity displayed in renewing his subscription. I am sorry we cannot keep the radium as a memento, but, according to our rule, it has to be returned to Professor Blyth at once. This particular burglary has been so satisfactory that I think we may with advantage again turn to the daily Press for our next item. I read yesterday— Let me see—where is it? I cut out the paragraph. Ah! here it is:—

"Yet another priceless possession is leaving the Eastern hemisphere. Thirty pages of 'The Pilgrim's Progress,' all that is left of that immortal work in the handwriting of John Bunyan, has been waiting for offers at Messrs. Christie's rooms since November last. The highest bid from the United Kingdom was £45 10s., at which price the precious manuscript did not change hands. We now hear that £2,000 has been offered and accepted. The purchaser is Mr. John Pilgrim, the Logwood King, of New York. At the present rate of denudation it seems likely that fifty years hence the original of Magna Charta will be the only historical manuscript left in the country."

[110]

"Shame—shame!" greeted the reading of the paragraph.

"I am glad that you agree with the newspaper," said the Duke blandly. "I read that paragraph at breakfast yesterday, and since then I have learnt that Lord Roker's subscription is due. It seems to me more than a coincidence that these two matters should come together. It is a national disgrace that the manuscript of that remarkable, I believe unparalleled—er—effort of Mr. Bunyan should leave the country. For one night longer, at any rate, it must remain in the

possession of Englishmen. My lord of Roker, you will kindly produce the Bunyan MS. at our next meeting, on the 23rd inst., in settlement of your subscription."

At 5 p.m. on Monday, April 18th last, a new arrival registered himself in the visitors' book at the Ilkley Hydropathic Establishment as James Roker, Jermyn Street, S.W. He was a good-looking, straight-built man of thirty or thereabouts. He was of an unobtrusive disposition, but was obviously well-informed, for in the smoke-room after dinner, when in a discussion on the internal resources of Japan, the date of Queen Anne's death came up, the new arrival gave it authoritatively as 1745, and so settled the matter. [111]

The next morning brought letters addressed to Lord Roker. Five minutes after the arrival of the post the news spread, and at breakfast he was the cynosure of all eyes.

It was the first time that a nobleman had stayed at the Hydro, excepting the doubtful instance of Count Spiegeleisen in 1893, but to provide for possible emergencies the management had thoughtfully placed a Peerage on the bookshelves. This volume was now thoroughly investigated, and it was learnt that James, Lord Roker, was heir to the Earldom of Challoner, and that he was born on April 25th, 1870. His birthday obviously would occur the following week, and an enterprising lady suggested the propriety of arranging for a concert and a representation of Mrs. Jarley's waxworks in honour of the occasion. [112]

The only person in the place who seemed annoyed by his arrival was Mr. John Pilgrim, a gentleman from New York.

"That's why he was so darned civil to me last night," he thought. "He knows how fond Fifth Avenue girls are of the British peerage, and he thinks he's only got to drop his handkerchief for Marion to pick it up. I call it a bit thick of him. I'm glad she's away for the day. I asked him to look round this evenin', so reckon I'll have to be civil; but I'll stand no nonsense. If he tries his sawder on me durin' the day I'll let him know."

There was no occasion—or, indeed, opportunity—to let Lord Roker know anything during the day, for he went to Rylstone the first thing after breakfast, and only re-appeared at dinner-time.

The toilettes of at least eighteen ladies were more elaborate than usual that evening, but they were lost on Lord Roker, who, after half an hour in the smoke-room, tapped on Mr. Pilgrim's door at 8.30.

"Good-evenin', my lord," said Mr. Pilgrim, with studied politeness. "Will you sit there? Cigar, sir? I can recommend these. I hope you had a pleasant day. How do you like the Hydro?" [113]

"Thank you," said Lord Roker, as he took the Bock, and settled himself in the chair indicated. "I have been away in the country all day, so I haven't seen much of the Hydro yet. It seems all right. At any rate, you have got pretty snug quarters."

"Yes," said Mr. Pilgrim, with some complacency. "You see, I'm samplin' the British Isles, gettin' the best I can lay hands on, and am storin' my purchases here. This room is furnished with Heppendale an' Chipplewhite's masterpieces, collected by my daughter. Paintin's by Jones an' Rossetti. In the nex' cabin I've got those historical sundries I mentioned. But before we look at them I want you to give me some information."

"I shall be delighted to do so, if I have it."

"You have it, sir. I may as well explain what I want. I have come over to see Europe for the first time, but I want to know more about it than Americans do as a gen'ral rule. I'm not content to visit Shakespeare's tomb an' see over Windsor Castle, and then think I've done the old country. I want to know the people who inhabit her to-day, and you can't get to know them on board trains. That's why I've come to this Hydro. I get here what my secretary calls a symposium of the whole nation. So I'm studyin' people here with the idea of writin' a book on my return. What are your views on things in gen'ral, my lord?" [114]

"My dear sir, that's a big order. But I may say I'm pretty well satisfied with things in general."

"You are an hereditary legislator, I believe," said Mr. Pilgrim.

"I may be some day," replied Lord Roker; "but at present I am not."

"Then what is your pertic'ler line in life?"

"If you mean business or profession, I have none. I'm a drone."

"A drone, sir! I'm delighted," exclaimed Mr. Pilgrim, with marked interest. Then, "Hello, Marion. Back again."

Roker turned, and there, framed in the doorway, was a living Romney picture—a radiant girl.

She came forward, the light playing on her red-brown hair. [115]

"Lord Roker—my daughter," said Mr. Pilgrim.

The girl smiled and shook hands.

"I hope I'm not interrupting a very serious deliberation," she said, half hesitating.

"Indeed not," Lord Roker hastened to assure her, fearful lest this delectable vision should vanish.

She took the chair he offered.

"Well, what have you gotten at York?" inquired Mr. Pilgrim.

"You'd neither of you guess. Three grandfather's clocks."

"Three!" exclaimed Mr. Pilgrim. "Sheraton?" he added.

"No; just grandfather's clocks, and the dearest ones you ever saw."

"I could bet on that," said her father. "Are they genuine?"

"They are all dated, and Mr. Tullitt got pedigrees with each of them. One of them tells the moon, and one the day of the month. We shall have to hire an astrologer to regulate them and start them fair. Mr. Tullitt says he works best on board your railroad car, as noise suits him, so I shall fix the three clocks up in his den here to keep him happy. I reckon he'll know when it's lunch time, anyway. But what have you been doing, dad?" [116]

"Makin' a few notes. At present I'm gettin' some valu'ble information. Lord Roker says he's a drone."

"Then I'm sure that Lord Roker does himself an injustice," she said, turning her smiling eyes upon him.

Roker shook his head.

"I toil not, neither do I spin."

"What do you do all the time?" she asked.

"I shoot and fish and hunt, and—er—once a year I see the Eton and Harrow cricket match."

"Gosh!" exclaimed Mr. Pilgrim. "He shoots and fishes and hunts, and once a year he goes to a cricket match."

"I said the Eton and Harrow match."

"Cert'nly. They must give it some name, I reckon. An' what do you do when you can't shoot, an' fish, an' hunt?"

"I add up my lists of kills and catches."

"This is downright interestin'," said Mr. Pilgrim. "What do you shoot an' hunt?"

"Birds and foxes." [117]

"You seem to fancy small fry, sir. Did you never hanker after elephants?"

"Never. If I had a Maxim or a Gatling gun I might turn my attention to elephants, but I'm not going to buy one for the purpose."

Mr. Pilgrim looked hard at his guest, but Lord Roker bore the scrutiny impassively.

"May I ask how you get your dollars?" the American continued.

"I have an income from my father. I don't mind telling you the amount—three thousand a year."

"Dollars?"

"No; pounds sterling."

"That's a tidy figure; but did you never wanter make that three thousand into thirty thousand?"

"I have suggested an increase to my father, but not such a big one as that. I asked him to make it five, but he would not. Some day perhaps he may, but thirty thousand is out of the question."

"I should suppose it was. I didn't mean an increase in your allowance. Did you never think of dippin' into trade, and increasin' it that way?"

"Never." [118]

"Doesn't fancy elephants or trade," Mr. Pilgrim soliloquised. "Well, I reckon it takes all sorts of swallows to make a summer. Your father must have been in a good way of business."

"Not a bit of it. He inherited all he has from his ancestors."

"And how did the original ancestor make his pile?"

"In war, in the time of Edward III. He had the good fortune to capture a Royal Prince, two dukes, and a marshal of France. We are still living on the ransoms he got."

"I'd like to have known the original ancestor," said Mr. Pilgrim. "Reckon he'd have tackled elephants if he'd only got a pea-shooter."

"Father," broke in Miss Pilgrim, "I'm sure Lord Roker is tired of answering questions. Don't

you think it's our turn to do something now?"

"That's so," said Mr. Pilgrim, who long since had forgotten his unkind suspicions of his visitor's intentions. "I hope I haven't worried you too much, my lord. It isn't every day that I get the chance of interviewin' a future hereditary legislator. I promised last night to show you some historical curiosities. We'll just go an' rout out my secretary, Tullitt, who has the keepin' of 'em." [119]

They adjourned to the next room, and found Mr. Tullitt busy at his desk. He opened various cabinets and drawers for them.

"This," said Mr. Pilgrim, "is the original warrant signed by Henry VIII., consignin' his sixth wife to the Tower of London for beheadin' purposes. He had it penned in Latin to frighten her more. The writ was never served, as Henry changed his mind, an' decided to keep her on the throne.

"Here, sir, is my last purchase—thirty pages of 'The Pilgrim's Progress,' written by John Bunyan in Bedford Jail. I paid ten thousand dollars for that, an' I'd have paid twenty before missin' it. You see, my name is John Pilgrim, an' it seemed to me that I have a sort of claim on that book—a kind of relationship. Anyway, there's my two names on the title-page.

"Moreover, I've got on so well since I started life in a Chicago stock-yard that 'Pilgrim's Progress' would best describe my record. If it wasn't irreverent, I'd have called the autobiography I'm writin' by the name of that book; but as I can't do so, I've bought the original manuscript. You'll handle it carefully; it's not in first-rate repair." [120]

Mr. Pilgrim showed his guest other historical treasures, and would have gone on indefinitely had not his daughter compassionately intervened. The rest of the evening was spent in conversation, and in listening to coon songs witchingly sung by Miss Pilgrim to her accompaniment on a harpsichord, once the property of Mrs. Thrale of Streatham, a friend of the immortal Dr. Johnson.

"Good-night, my lord," said Mr. Pilgrim at eleven o'clock. "P'raps you'll be kind enough to look round in the mornin'. I shall make a few notes of the information you've given me, and my secretary will lick them into shape."

"Right," said Lord Roker, with his eyes beyond Mr. Pilgrim, fixed on an enchanting vision of brown and gold, seated in the basket chair before the fire.

On the following morning Lord Roker found Mr. Pilgrim's secretary before a typewriter which he seemed to be working against time. A pile of correspondence lay around him. He finished the sheet on which he was engaged, and then, with a sigh of relief, he turned to his visitor. [121]

"Mornin', my lord; I have this ready for you."

He handed a type-written sheet to Lord Roker, who sat down and read:

"Some day I may be an hereditary legislator. At present I'm a drone. I fish, shoot birds, and hunt foxes, and once a year I attend a cricket match. Birds are more suited to the bore of my gun than elephants. If I had a Maxim I might tackle elephants. I am in receipt of an income of three thousand pounds sterling a year from my father, who refuses to increase the amount. I am otherwise well satisfied with the universe.

"My record last year was:

Birds.....
Fishes.....
Foxes"

"I've left space for the mortality returns, and any note you may wish to add," said the secretary courteously. "Kindly fill in the figures, and initial the sheet if you find it correct. Your name will not appear if Mr. Pilgrim makes use of the information."

Lord Roker referred to his pocket-book for statistics, and then inserted the figures required. The note he added was: "*De mortuis nil nisi bonum.*" [122]

"Good kills, all of 'em," he explained.

The secretary took the sheet and placed it methodically in a folio labelled "Britishers."

"Is Mr. Pilgrim anywhere about?" Lord Roker asked. "Or Miss Pilgrim?"

"I believe that Miss Pilgrim is in the grounds, but Mr. Pilgrim has gone across the moors in his motor to shed a tear at the residence of the late Charlotte Brontë. A wonderful man is the boss, my lord. It takes me all my time to file the information he gathers. It will be midnight before I have fixed Charlotte up."

"Your hours are long," said Lord Roker, sympathetically.

"They are; and they are getting longer. Your country is just waking up to the fact that John Pilgrim is here. We had a big mail to-day. Outside proper business there were twenty begging letters from tramps and prodigals, eighteen asking for subscriptions, and two which we could not

decipher. Four town councils mixed us up with Andrew Carnegie and wrote demanding Free Libraries. I reply to them all."

"Then I won't trespass any longer on your time."

[123]

Mr. Tullitt pulled out his watch.

"Snakes!" he exclaimed. "I always have fifteen minutes' dumb-bell exercise now to keep me in form. Good-mornin', my lord." His visitor left him standing in position with his dumb-bells.

Now when Lord Roker turned in his chair and first saw Miss Marion Pilgrim he was confounded. When she spoke—and to her beauty there was added an infinite charm of frankness and joy of life—he fell hopelessly in love. Only once before had this happened to him, and, singularly enough, she also was an American—a dark-eyed Boston girl he met in Rome. He had been refused because his position and his prospects rendered the match an impossibility—to her father; for he was not at that time heir to an earldom. Since then he had gone unscathed through the perils of many seasons in many capitals, only to be finally routed while in pursuit of the commonplace profession of a burglar.

That he had aroused any interest in her heart he did not for a moment suppose, but perhaps there might be a remote chance of winning her. If there were, how could he imperil his hope of success by running the risks attendant on the burglary? If she could give him the slightest hope he would resign his membership of the Burglars' forthwith. It was ridiculous to have to rush matters, but he had to know his fate at once. He could not even put it off till to-morrow, for he knew she was going to Knaresborough for the day with her father.

[124]

He met her on the golf links. They played in a foursome in the morning. In the afternoon they had a round together.

She was in capital form. Her splendid health and energy were a delight to the eye. Perhaps it was owing to this distraction that he fozzled some of his drives, and twice got badly bunkered. His play went steadily from bad to worse, and she won by three up and two to play.

"I don't think you were playing your best game," she said as they returned. "It strikes me that you were thinking about something else all the time."

"You are quite right. I never played worse, and I was thinking about something else."

"Something very serious, I reckon."

"Very."

[125]

"Is it anything I could help you in?"

"You are very kind, Miss Pilgrim. All day, and most of last night, I have been deliberating on an important step."

"What sort of a step?"

"Whether I ought not to resign my membership of a certain club."

"Is that all?"

"You see, I was one of the founders, and I like it. But sometimes the conditions of membership seem impossible. At any rate, I have felt them so since last evening."

"What are the conditions?"

"I can't tell you them all, but one is that you have to be a bachelor—a confirmed bachelor."

"Well, you are one, aren't you?" she asked gently.

"I don't know. At any rate, I may not always be. In fact, I——"

"Don't you be in a hurry to change," said Miss Pilgrim. "Don't imitate that king of yours. Judging from the document dad showed you, Henry the Eighth wanted to be a bachelor again, and then decided to remain a married man, all in one day. You Britishers are so variable."

"It may seem very absurd, Miss Pilgrim, but I have to make up my mind without delay. And you can help me in the matter. May I—dare I——"

[126]

"One minute, Lord Roker," she interrupted quickly. "You ought to be very careful before you think of changing your state. Teddy Robson waited twelve months before I promised to marry him."

"Teddy Robson!" exclaimed Lord Roker.

"Yes; this is his picture." She pulled a locket from her dress, and showed him the miniature of a nice, clean-looking lad. "He's the son of Josh. K. Robson, the Fustic King," she explained.

"Fustic?" repeated Lord Roker, with intense gloom.

"It's a wood that dyes yellow. Dad is the Logwood King, you know. Logwood dyes black. When I marry Teddy, the two firms will amalgamate, and we shall pretty well control the output of the West Indies."

"I see," said Lord Roker; "or, rather, I hear."

"That'll be in the fall. If ever you come over to the States mind you look us up. Teddy will give you some big game shooting. I guess you like it, whatever you told dad. You've done things. Mrs. Stilton told me at breakfast this morning that you had got a decoration for distinguishing yourself in action."

[127]

"Oh, that was years ago."

"Not more than a hundred," she said gravely. "And I reckon you don't let the flies settle much. Gracious! but it's six o'clock, and I've letters to mail. I must run. But don't you be in a hurry about retiring from that club."

"That's the second," said Lord Roker enigmatically, as he watched her vanish, "the second—and the last."

Lord Roker made no attempt to purloin the Bunyan MS. that night. He thought it possible that the indefatigable Mr. Tullitt might prolong his labours on Charlotte Brontë into the early hours of the morning, and, being of a thoughtful temperament, he was unwilling to interrupt them. He had still two nights at his disposal. The next day he spent chiefly on the links. He did not allow his thoughts to linger regretfully on his hopeless love. He gave his whole attention to the game, and retrieved his reputation by beating the professional's record. In the evening he played his part in progressive bridge with marked success: and then at 1.30 a.m., when the whole establishment was presumably fast asleep, he descended from his bedroom window by a stout rope, and made his way to the wing occupied by Mr. Pilgrim. He found the window of Mr. Tullitt's room, and was busily engaged for the next half-hour in opening it.

[128]

He then dropped into the room, and turned on his light.

Three grandfather's clocks were solemnly ticking in three separate corners. The fire was still flickering in the grate. A pile of letters, addressed and stamped, was ready for the post. A batch of correspondence was docketed and endorsed. The waste-paper basket was full to overflowing.

Lord Roker gave one glance round, and then tried the door. It was, as he expected, locked on the outside. He placed some chairs and other obstacles in front of it to impede progress should an alarm be raised, and lit the gas in order to add to Mr. Tullitt's reputation for over-work. Then he turned to the drawer in which the Bunyan MS. was kept. It was locked. He produced a bundle of keys, and finally opened it. There was a document inside, but instead of being time-stained, foxed, and torn, it was modern and neat. Moreover, it was type-written, and endorsed, "Notes on the late C. Brontë, Haworth, Eng., 1904."

[129]

Lord Roker turned this out in disgust, hoping to find the Bunyan MS. below; but he was disappointed. The manuscript was not there.

He replaced the Notes in the drawer and turned his attention elsewhere. He opened every drawer and portfolio, looked on every shelf and in every corner, but in vain. There was no sign of the Bunyan MS.

Determined not to be baffled—for his credit as a burglar was at stake—Lord Roker resumed his search, and again went over the ground. Three times at least was he disturbed—when the grandfather's clocks went off at the hour and the half-hour with alarming wheezes and groans. When they had finished with 3.30 he had to admit himself beaten. The manuscript had no doubt been removed to another room. It was desperately annoying, but he had still twenty-four hours to find out where it was, and to get it. He gave up the search reluctantly, made his way through the window, and up the rope to his bedroom.

Soon after breakfast that morning word went round the Hydro that the Bunyan MS. had been stolen from Mr. Pilgrim's rooms—the manuscript for which he had just paid £2,000.

[130]

A hole cut in one of the window-panes pointed to the method by which entry had been made, but no clue to the thief had been left behind. The police had been informed, and a detective was coming.

Only the Bunyan MS. was missing—that alone of the many portable and valuable treasures in Mr. Pilgrim's possession. It showed a literary instinct in the thief which was as surprising as it was unusual, for it would be impossible for him to make any profitable use of his booty without certain discovery. The more one reflected about it the more perplexing it was.

To Lord Roker it was humiliating in the extreme. To fail in his mission was exasperating; but the annoyance was increased tenfold with the knowledge that he had been forestalled. Someone else—a professional, no doubt—had been on the same errand. He had not dallied over the enterprise, and he had won the stakes for which he played, and now he, Lord Roker, would have to appear empty-handed at the Burglars'—he, a founder of the Club, would be the first man who had to resign through incapacity to carry out the terms of his membership; it was galling indeed. Even the neat hole he had made in the window had been placed to the credit of the other burglar.

[131]

At 6 p.m. he went upstairs to dress. The evenings were chilly, and he occasionally had a fire. He sat down before it now to finish his cigarette, and moodily watched the flames while his thoughts turned on the unsatisfactory nature of all earthly affairs.

Suddenly he gave an exclamation of extreme surprise, jumped out of his chair, and caught hold

of a bit of half-burnt paper projecting from the grate. It was perhaps three inches long, and two across. Half of it was ash that fell away as he touched it. On the scant margin left was written, in stiff, archaic English, "Ye Slough of Desp——"

"Amazing!" he cried. For the fragment he held in his hand was part of the missing MS.!

In another instant he had seized his water-jug and emptied the contents on the fire, putting it out, and deluging the hearth. Then he rang the bell, and sent an urgent message for Mr. Pilgrim. [132]

Five minutes later the American entered. Roker handed him the fragment, and pointed out where he had found it.

"Seems a pretty expensive way of li'tin' fires," said Mr. Pilgrim, grimly. "Allow me to ring for the help."

"Did you lay this fire?" he asked the maid who responded.

"No, sir. That's Jenny's work."

"Send Jenny up, then," said Mr. Pilgrim, now on his knees searching the grate for more traces of the MS., but searching in vain.

In a few minutes Jenny entered.

"Did you lay this fire?" Mr. Pilgrim asked again.

"Yes, sir."

"What sort of paper did you use for it?"

"Newspaper. Oh, I know! I laid it yesterday morning with some old rubbishy stuff I found on your floor, sir."

"Old rubbishy stuff you found on my floor!" cried Mr. Pilgrim. "What do you mean, girl?"

"I was lighting your fire yesterday morning, sir, and found I'd used up all my paper, so I got some out of your waste basket. There was a dirty lot of rubbishy paper lying on the floor beside it, so I took that as well, and used it up for my morning fires." [133]

"How many fires did you lay with it altogether?"

"Your two, sir, this one, and the one in the hall."

"Then this is the only one of the lot that wasn't lit yesterday?"

"Yes, sir. I hope it wasn't anythink important that I used."

Mr. Pilgrim sat down.

"Important! Not a bit, my girl. It just cost me ten thousand dollars—that's all."

"It wasn't what they say you've lost, sir, was it?" said the girl. "Oh, sir, I'm that sorry. But all I can say, sir, is that it was on the floor, and it didn't look fit for wrapping sossingers in."

"Go!" shouted Mr. Pilgrim. "You're a born fool." Then, after a long pause, he added, "I'm much obliged to you, Roker. Now come along. I must see my secretary. I suspect he's another mortal fool in disguise."

Mr. Pilgrim's secretary was busy, as usual—this time taking down a letter from Miss Pilgrim's dictation. [134]



"HEY! BUT WHAT ABOUT THAT HOLE IN THE WINDOW?"

(p. 135.)

"Excuse me a minute, Marion," said Mr. Pilgrim. Then to his secretary, "You said you were readin' that blamed Bunyan MS. the night before last. Just describe when you got it out, and what followed."

"I'd finished my transcript of your notes on Miss Brontë, sir, about 11.30, and, having half an hour to spare, I thought I'd just run over that old manuscript again. John Bunyan had his own notions about caligraphy, and he was a bit freer in his spelling than any man I'd come across, so I rather fancied him. While I was reading, you may remember calling me to your room to take down that cable to Boston and the letter of confirmation. It was 12.30 when I left you, and I'd clean forgotten about the manuscript. I turned the light out, and went to bed. A quarter of an hour afterwards I remembered I'd left Bunyan out, so I came back here. I couldn't find the matches, but just felt round for the MS., and put it back in the drawer, and locked it."

"You derved hayseed!" burst in Mr. Pilgrim. "You have your p'int, but at this pertic'ler moment I think you're more suited for raisin' cabbages than for secretary work. If you can't tell the difference in the handle of a Bunyan MS. and your notes on Charlotte Brontë in the dark, you might know a banana from a potato in daylight. You're—you're—— Man, you put the Brontë notes in the drawer, and left Bunyan out—brushed him on the floor in the dark, an' the help lit the fire with him. Gor!"

[135]

The secretary collapsed.

"Never mind, Mr. Tullitt," said Miss Pilgrim. "It was entirely a mistake. I might have done it myself. It comes of working so late. Dad, I guess there's plenty more old manuscripts in the British Isles waiting for dollars to fetch them."

"I reckon there's only one Bunyan MS.," said Mr. Pilgrim, solemnly, "and that's gone to light Hydropathic fires because my secretary doesn't carry wax vestas in his pyjamas. Hey! But what about that hole in the window?"

Mr. and Miss Pilgrim, the secretary, and Lord Roker stared blankly at it.

And that is why Lord Roker was not able to show the Bunyan MS. at the next meeting of the Burglars' Club.

VII.

[136]

THE GREAT SEAL.

THE Hon. Richard Hilton stared at the type-written letter with distinct feelings of pleasure. This is what he read:—

SIR,—I have the honour to inform you of your election as a member of the Club, conditional upon your attendance on the 5th proximo with the Great Seal of the United Kingdom, procured in the usual way.—Yours faithfully,

THE HON. SECRETARY.

"That's good," he ejaculated. "Ribston's a trump. But what on earth's the Great Seal of the United Kingdom, and where is it to be found?"

Mr. Hilton's library was chiefly devoted to sport and fiction, and he could find no reference to it therein. He had therefore to make inquiries outside, when he learnt that the Great Seal of the United Kingdom was the property of the Lord Chancellor for the time being, that it was a very important object indeed, its impression being requisite at the foot of the highest documents of State; and, consequently, that its unexpected absence might very well upset the nation's affairs and incidentally bring serious trouble upon anyone who had tampered with it. [137]

Mr. Hilton's sporting instincts were roused. "It seems to me," he thought, "that this is going to be the best thing I have had on since I walked across Thibet disguised as a second-class Mahatma. But where does the Chancellor keep the thing?"

He skimmed through many biographies of Lord Chancellors with very little result. One of them, it appeared, kept the Great Seal with his silver, another always carried it about with him in a special pocket, and slept with it under his pillow; while a third stored it at the Bank of England. History was discreetly silent as to how the other hundred and one keepers of the Great Seal guarded their property.

Mr. Richard Hilton contemplated his notes with disgust. "I never could rely on books," he said. "There's nothing for it but to find out for myself. The present man probably keeps it where any other common-sense fellow would. He'll have a library, so it may be there. He's a good liver, so it may be in a secret bin in his wine cellar; he's a sportsman, so it may be in a gun-case under his bed. I shall have to look round and find out. Where does he live?" [138]

His lordship's town residence was Shipley House, Kensington Gore. Hilton took a walk in that direction. The house looked as unpromising and unsympathetic a subject for robbery as a metropolitan magistrate could have wished. The spiked railings in front and the high wall at the back would have suggested to most people the impossibility of the enterprise; but Mr. Hilton simply noted these items with interest, and then adjourned to a light lunch at his club to think the matter out.

It was one o'clock in the morning when Mr. Hilton scaled the wall at the rear of the Lord Chancellor's house. Though it was nine feet high, it presented no difficulties to an ex-lieutenant in the navy; but he got over carefully, for he was in evening dress, believing that to be the safest disguise for a general burglar. He dropped lightly on the turf, and then made his way across to the house and commenced a careful inspection of the basement windows. To his intense surprise, he found the lower sash of one of them to be open. This astonishing piece of good luck meant the saving of at least an hour. With a cheerful heart he entered the house, finding his way by the electric flashlight which he carried. [139]

His passage to the great hall upstairs was easy. Here he halted to take his bearings. He was at the foot of the marble stairs for which Shipley House was famous. Once they had stood in front of Nero's villa at Antium; but, oblivious of his historic surroundings, Mr. Richard Hilton stood wondering which of the four doors on his left led to the library. One after another he cautiously opened them, only to find living or reception rooms. He crossed the hall, and got into the billiard-room. Where on earth was the Lord Chancellor's den? Ah! those heavy curtains under the staircase. He passed through them. There was a short passage, with a door at the end. Hush! what was that? He listened intently. It was nothing—merely nervous fancy. He turned the handle of the door, and entered.

He was in the Lord Chancellor's library. But, Heavens! he was not there alone.

For a moment he drew back in dismay; but the singularity of the other man's occupation arrested him. [140]

He was kneeling on the floor before the wall at the far end of the room. He had a lamp or candle by his side. What on earth was he doing? Had he surprised the Lord High Chancellor, the keeper of the King of England's conscience, worshipping by stealth at some pagan shrine?

What were the rites he was performing? Curiosity impelled Mr. Hilton forward. As he drew nearer, the situation unfolded itself. He had done the Lord Chancellor an injustice. It was not he.

A man was kneeling before a safe built into the wall. He was drilling holes into the door by the light of a lamp.

He was a real burglar!

The humour of the situation struck Mr. Hilton so keenly that he nearly laughed. For some time he watched the operation, expecting each moment to be discovered. Then, as the man continued absorbed in his work, Mr. Hilton sank noiselessly into an easy chair behind him. To prepare for contingencies, his hand had stolen to his coat pocket, and now held a small revolver.

For half an hour longer he continued to admire the businesslike methods of the burglar. The door of the safe had now been pierced through all round the lock. The man turned to reach another tool. In so doing his eye caught sight of a patent leather boot and a trouser leg, where before there had been empty space. The phenomenon fascinated him. He slowly turned his head, following the clue upward until his eyes were level with the barrel of Mr. Hilton's revolver. His jaw fell, and he stiffened.

"Please keep as you are for a minute," said a low voice from behind the weapon. "I wish you to understand the situation. There is no immediate cause for anxiety. I am—er—a friend in disguise. You may go on with your most interesting work. I shall give no alarm. Do you understand?"

"Who the blazes are you?" asked the burglar.

"Your curiosity is natural. I am in your own noble profession—a top-sawyer or a swell mobsman, I forget which; but I have the certificate at home."

"None of yer gammon," said the burglar. "Can't you put that thing down an' say wot yer game is."

"William," Mr. Hilton replied, "I wish you clearly to understand that you have nothing at all to do with my game. You go on drilling those nice little holes. When you've got that door open we'll discuss matters further. Please proceed."

[142]



"YOU MAY GO ON WITH YOUR MOST INTERESTING WORK."

(p. 141.)

"D'you take me for a mug?" asked the burglar defiantly.

"I shall, if you don't go on with your work. This instrument goes off on the slightest provocation, and the wound it makes is very painful."

The burglar turned, and resumed his work; but he did not seem to have much heart in it, nor to derive much encouragement from Mr. Hilton's occasional promptings. Every now and then he looked round suspiciously. Another half-hour passed before he had prized the bolts back, and the door was open.

For the moment the two men forgot everything but their curiosity, and both looked anxiously inside. Every shelf and pigeon-hole was rummaged, but there was nothing but letters and documents. There were two drawers below. The locks of these had to be picked. In the last one the burglar pounced on a bag of

money and some notes.

"Got 'im!" he cried triumphantly.

"What?"

[143]

"Two 'underd an' fifty quid. 'E gets it on the fust of ev'ry month to pay 'is washin' bill."

"How did you know that?"

"From a pal at the bank. I've 'ad this in my eye for a year or more, but I've mos'ly been a-doin' time since I——" He stopped short suddenly, evidently regretting his outburst of confidence.

"Now put that money back," said Mr. Hilton.

"Wot for?"

"Because I tell you."

"Arfter all the trouble I've 'ad? No bloomin' fear."

"Put it back. You shan't lose by it."

"Wot d'ye mean?"

"I'm looking for something myself. It isn't in the safe, but it may be in some other drawer in the room. If I find it I'll give you £250 myself."

"Name o'Morgan, or am I speakin' to Lord Rothschild?" said the burglar sarcastically. "You don't 'appen to 'ave the chink on you?"

"I haven't; but see, you can have this watch and chain, and my sovereign purse, and these links, and I think—yes, here's a tenner. You can have this lot till I give you the money."

[144]

The burglar was impressed.

"Cap'n," he said, "you've a free an' easy way in 'andlin' walubles wot soots me down to the ground. I wish we could 'ave met sooner. It would 'ave saved my ole woman many a weary six months. But wot's the need to leave the chink? S'pose we takes the bag, an' leaves the notes?"

"You've got to leave the lot, William," said Mr. Hilton decisively.

The burglar turned thoughtfully away from the safe. "Wot is it you're lookin' for?" he asked. "'As the guv'n'r cut you orf with a bob, an' are you a-goin' to alter the ole bloke's will?"

"I'm looking for a seal."

"Stuffed?" asked William, with a sportsman's interest.

"No. A seal for stamping wax. It's a big one, made of silver, and about six inches across. Let's try these drawers in the desk."

There were six of them. Four were open, the other two locked. It took some time to open these. They were full of legal matter. Then they turned their attention to a set below some bookshelves. While the burglar was busy with the locks Hilton turned over the papers on the desk. The first was headed, "House of Lords: Gibbins v. Gibbins. Judgment of Lord Ravy." Another read, "Gibbins v. Gibbins. Judgment of Lord McTaughtun." Beside them was the half-written judgment of the Lord Chancellor himself. [145]

Mr. Richard Hilton looked at these legal feats without interest. Mechanically he lifted the lid of the desk. A large leather case fitted exactly into the compartment below. He pulled it out. It was stamped with the royal arms.

"Here. Cut this, please."

The flap was cut, and Hilton drew out a richly embroidered and betasselled silk purse.

He looked eagerly inside.

"Hurrah!" he cried in his excitement. For it was the Great Seal of the United Kingdom.

The burglar examined it critically, and then felt its weight. "Five quid," he said, putting it down contemptuously.

Hilton dropped it carefully into his pocket.

At this moment the electric light was suddenly switched on, and the whole place was brilliantly illuminated. They both turned sharply towards the door. There in his dressing-gown stood an old gentleman. Hilton had often seen those classic features in photographs or the illustrated papers. He recognised them at once. It was the Lord Chancellor. [146]

"What are you doing here?" came the stern judicial voice.

"We are—er—we are making the Home Circuit, my lord," said Hilton deferentially. "May I ask your lordship to be good enough to lower your voice. You perceive that I am armed."

"You would dare to fire on me, sir?" said the Lord Chancellor.

"I hope it will not be necessary; for in that case your lordship would not hunt next season with the Bister Vale. Will you please take that seat?"

His lordship sank into the chair. "You are a bold man," he said, after a pause.

"A bold, bad man, I fear, my lord. And so is my partner, Mr. William Sikes here. Aren't you, William?"

William did not reply. He was gazing intently at the Lord Chancellor.

"Ain't yer name 'Ardy?" he asked. "'Enery 'Ardy?"

"It used to be," replied his lordship. [147]

"I thought so," said Mr. Sikes. "Then I says to yer face you're a bloomin', footlin' rotter."

"Gently, brother, gently, pray," said Hilton.

"A bloomin', footlin' rotter," repeated Mr. Sikes with the earnestness of conviction. "An' I've waited five-an'-twenty year to tell you so."

"Ah," said the Lord Chancellor, with some interest. "How is that?"

"I once paid you to defend me at the Dawchester 'Sizes respectin' a mare wot 'ad follered me inter 'Ampshire. A sickenin' 'ash you made of it. You got two quid fer the job, an' I got two year. I b'lieve you woz boozed."

"Pray forgive William, my lord," said Hilton. "He forgets himself strangely when he's excited. We have a lot of trouble with him at home."

William glared at him. "I ain't forgot that bloke's ugly mug, any'ow. I swore I'd be quits with 'im one day, an', holy Moses, it's my go now." Saying this, he clutched his jemmy, and advanced

threateningly towards his lordship.

"Stay, you fool!" Hilton cried. "If you dare to touch him I'll shoot you. Get back."

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William hesitated.

"If you don't get back before I count three I'll lame you for life. One—two—"

William retired sullenly.

"My lord," said Hilton, "I must draw this painful interview to a close. Your presence excites William, and he's always dangerous when excited. We will retire. Before I go, I wish to give you my word of honour that anything we may take away with us to-night will be again in your possession within forty-eight hours."

"Your word of honour, sir!" repeated his lordship with withering contempt.

"You are ungenerous, my lord. You force me to remind you that but for my interference William would undoubtedly have had his revenge upon you to-night, and the Woolsack have lost its brightest ornament. In return, I ask your lordship to give me your own assurance that you will not raise any alarm for the next half-hour. If you do not we shall have to bind and gag you."

"Don't you be such a fool as to trust 'im," said William. "I'll do the gaggin'," he added, with enthusiasm.

"Shut up, William," said Mr. Hilton. "If his lordship gives his word you may be sure he will keep it—even with thieves. The age of chivalry is not yet past, although you are still alive. My lord, do you agree?"

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"I am in your hands. I promise."

Hilton bowed. He pointed to the door to his companion.

"My tools," said William, going round the desk to collect them. A minute later the two had left the room. In five minutes they had scaled the outside wall, and within the half-hour were in Richard Hilton's rooms.

Mr. William Sikes looked round him admiringly.

"I understand your feelings, William," said Mr. Hilton, "but my windows and doors are every night connected with a burglar-alarm, and my man, who was once a noted bruiser, is close at hand. I don't really think it would be safe for you to call again. Now you want your money. I will write a cheque out, payable to bearer, and give it you. If you make yourself nice and tidy they will cash it for you in the morning over the counter at my bank."

"I don't like cashin' cheques at banks," said William. "I never was any good at it," he added pensively. "Ain't you got any rhino in this 'ere shanty?"

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"Let me see. You have a tenner of mine in your pocket. Perhaps I can give you some more." Hilton opened a bureau, and produced a cash-box. "You see where I keep it, William," he remarked pleasantly. "I shall have to find another place for it in future—you are so very impulsive. Ah, here we are. Three fivers and two—four—six in gold. That makes twenty-one. And where's the sovereign purse I gave you? Thank you. Here are four more: that makes twenty-five; and you have ten: that is thirty-five. Now I'll make a cheque out for the balance—what is it? Yes; two hundred and fifteen pounds. . . . Here it is. Perhaps your friend at the Lord Chancellor's bank will present it for you before three o'clock this afternoon, when I shall suddenly find that I have lost the cheque, and shall stop payment."

"Wot do you do that for?" asked William suspiciously.

"I must do it for my own protection, William, as I'm afraid it wouldn't be wise for me to have any direct transactions with you. But until three o'clock the game is in your hands. Now it's time for you to have your beauty sleep. I am much obliged for your assistance. Good-night. Oh, by the way, let me have my watch, please—and the links. William, I'm afraid you were forgetting them."

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"Blow me, but I was," said William frankly, as he dived into his capacious pockets. "My mem'ry ain't wot it used to be, an' I knows it. Wot with work an' worry, an' worry an' work, it don't 'ave a fair chance. 'Ere you are, Cap'n." And William placed the jewellery in Mr. Hilton's hands with obvious regret. Then his host showed him off the premises.

It was now four o'clock. Hilton pulled out the Great Seal, and locked it up in a secret drawer in his bureau. Then he retired to rest, in the happy consciousness of a night well spent.

He rose late that morning, and it was one o'clock before he left his rooms. In Piccadilly, on the news posters:

"THE
GREAT SEAL
OF
ENGLAND
STOLEN,"

at once caught his eye. He bought a paper, and turned to the column with curious interest.

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"A daring robbery was perpetrated in the early hours of this morning at Shipley House, Kensington Gore, the residence of the Lord Chancellor. His lordship, being unable to sleep, came downstairs about two o'clock, intending to complete an important judgment. In the library he found two burglars, who succeeded in decamping before his lordship could obtain assistance.

"The Great Seal of England, and £250 in gold and notes are missing.

"This is probably the most audacious burglary of modern times, for the Lord Chancellor is the head of the judicial system of the country, and, after Royalty, is only second in importance to the Archbishop of Canterbury.

"England is to-day without a Great Seal of State, a position unparalleled since it was stolen from Lord Thurlow's residence in 1784. Only once before had it been missing—when James II. threw it into the Thames at Lambeth.

"Great inconvenience has already been caused by its absence, as the treaty between England and Korea was to have been signed to-morrow, and the Great Seal affixed thereto. We understand that the Privy Council will meet in the morning at Buckingham Palace in order to deal with the situation thus created.

"We are informed that the police have an important clue which will lead to the apprehension of at least one of the criminals. We do not know whether any special penalty is attached to the theft of the Great Seal, but a century ago the perpetrator of the crime would undoubtedly have been hanged."

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Richard Hilton stared at this in blank amazement. The pains and penalties did not disturb him, but "£250 in gold and notes missing" held him spellbound. Suddenly light dawned upon him, and he burst out with "Done! And by William! That was when he collected his tools, and I wasn't watching. The scoundrel! Hi! hansom! . . . Cox's Bank. Sharp!"

Ten minutes later he was at the bank counter.

"I have lost a cheque for £215, payable to bearer, made out to self and endorsed. Please stop payment," he said.

"Very sorry, Mr. Hilton," replied the teller. "It was presented first thing this morning, and I cashed it in gold."

That evening the meeting of the Burglars' Club was held at the house of Lord Altamont, an ex-colonel of the Welsh Guards. There was a record attendance. The robbery of the Great Seal had excited general interest, but to members of the Club the accompanying details were of the gravest importance.

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After the usual opening formalities had been gone through, Lord Ribston rose.

"Mr. President, I crave leave for Mr. Richard Hilton, a cadet member of this club, to speak."

Assent was given by the general silence, which was maintained when Hilton entered.

"Mr. President, my lords and gentlemen," he began, "I regret exceedingly that I have to make my first appearance in your midst with an apology. I take it that you have all seen the paragraph in the papers stating that the Great Seal is missing from the Lord Chancellor's House, and, in addition to that, £250 in notes and gold. No explanation is needed as to the absence of the Great Seal, for that resulted from the mandate of your club. The other item calls for a clear and explicit statement of the facts of the case."

Here Hilton gave an account of the robbery from his first meeting the burglar to his parting from him, concluding, "So now, gentlemen, I suggest that I deserve your sympathy rather than your blame; for not only has Mr. Sikes relieved me of £250, but I have promised the Lord Chancellor to return anything we took away with us. I shall, therefore, have to send him a further like sum. I do not grudge the loss of £500, since I have been enabled to qualify as a member of your club, but I do most sincerely regret that my bungling has led to even a temporary suspicion that the taint of professionalism has been brought into your midst. My lords and gentlemen, I am in your hands. Here, at any rate, is the Great Seal of the United Kingdom."

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The last words were lost in tumultuous applause. Each member rose to his feet and acclaimed the speaker, and then they crowded round him and shook hands.

"Gentlemen," said the President, when order had been restored, "I move that Mr. Richard Hilton be now formally enrolled as a member of the Club, and in your name I welcome him as one who has already added lustre to our annals. The circumstances of his entry are so unusual that, as a mark of our appreciation, I beg to move that the provincial line due from him in the usual course of things in two years' time be hereby excused, and that, as an exception to our rule, Mr. Hilton be elected for a term of four years."

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The proposition was carried by acclamation.

"Your Grace and gentlemen, I thank you," said the beaming Richard Hilton.

The Privy Council met at ten on the following morning, and ordered a new seal to be engraved; but at noon a postal packet was delivered at Shipley House, which, on being opened, disclosed an old biscuit tin, then tissue paper, then cotton-wool, and finally the Great Seal of the United Kingdom.

The treaty between England and Korea was signed with the usual formalities at three in the afternoon.

Later in the day the Lord Chancellor received from five different quarters registered parcels, each weighing about a pound avoirdupois. Each packet contained fifty sovereigns.

Thus within forty-eight hours his lordship had received all the stolen property. In consideration thereof he cancelled his instructions to Scotland Yard to follow up a clue which Mr. William Sikes had incautiously given about a Dorset horse robbery in the late 'seventies.

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His lordship also advertised his acknowledgments in the agony column of the *Times*, and asked for the favour of an explanation of the whole incident. This was not forthcoming, and the matter remained for some time the one unsolved riddle of his lordship's life.

Mr. William Sikes, with the £500 so ingeniously obtained, retired from the burglary profession, and bought a little public house known as the "Goat and Compasses." For some reason or other he altered the name to "Seal and Compasses," thereby causing much mystification to future antiquarians in that particular district.

In recalling his conduct on the night in question, Mr. Sikes spends some of the happiest hours of his life.

To Mr. Richard Hilton the events of that night were also eminently satisfactory. He was the only loser, but he had gained more than he had lost, for the laurels of the Burglars' Club were his.

VIII.

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THE LION AND THE SUN.

THE visit of His Royal Highness Ali Azim Mirza, nephew of the Shah, accompanied by the Grand Vizier, Hasan Kuli, is fresh in our memories. The mission of the Prince was to invest a distinguished personage with the insignia of the Lion and the Sun in order to mark the Persian monarch's appreciation of the Garter which had been recently conferred upon him. The Mission duly returned with its object accomplished. Outwardly everything happened as was anticipated, and there are but few who know how nearly we approached to a war with Russia as a consequence of the visit, while still fewer are aware that such a calamity was averted by a cadet member of the Burglars' Club.

In the unwritten annals of the Club the incident stands out prominently. It is well that it should be recorded before it is forgotten.

The special Mission was due to arrive in London on the 10th of the month. It was to leave on the 16th. Lord Denton had placed his town house at the disposal of the Prince and his retinue during their stay.

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On the 4th, Mr. Birket Rivers, a cadet member of the Burglars' Club, received an intimation that his entrance fee could be paid on the 13th by the production of the insignia of the Order which the Prince was bringing with him.

On the evening of the 8th, John Parker, a footman in the employ of Lord Denton, called by request on Mr. Rivers at his rooms in the Albany.

"You wished to see me, sir?"

"Ah, Parker, how are you getting on?"

"Very well, thank you, sir."

"You are going to have great times, Parker. When does Lord Denton leave?"

"To-morrow, sir."

"Are all the servants staying behind?"

"Only about half of us, sir. The Persians bring their own cooks and men."

"Quite so. Are you remaining?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I want you to let me take your place."

Parker opened his eyes very wide. "Beg pardon, sir," he said, feeling sure he had misunderstood the last remark.

"I want to take your place as footman in Denton House while the Persians are there. If you will help me to do so, Parker, there's ten pounds for you." [160]

Parker scratched his head. "I should like the ten pounds, sir; but I don't see how I'm to get it. They'd never mistake you for me, sir, though we are about the same build. Mr. Bradshaw would spot the difference at once."

"Who is Mr. Bradshaw?"

"The butler, sir. He's pretty well left in charge of the house."

"Listen, Parker. The Prince comes the day after to-morrow. At eleven o'clock in the morning of that day you've got to be taken ill. Tell Bradshaw you can't work, and you think it's something infectious. Tell him that your cousin, James Finny, who is only staying on with me till he hears of a place, would jump at the job. Send me word, and I will turn up at once."

"Mr. Bradshaw might know you, sir."

"I don't think so. I've never been at the house. Besides, I shall shave off my moustache. Anyway, Parker, I'll take care you lose nothing by it, even if I should be found out."

John Parker left a quarter of an hour later, ten pounds richer than he came. In his pocket he carried a letter which eventually reached Mr. Rivers by special messenger at noon on the 10th. It ran: [161]

DEAR JAMES,—Come immediately. I am ill, and Mr. Bradshaw says you can take my place.—Your loving cousin,

JOHN PARKER.

With his moustache shaved off, and attired in a painfully respectable ready-made suit, Rivers presented himself at Denton House at one o'clock. He found Mr. Bradshaw in a highly-wrought condition.

"So you're Parker's cousin? A pretty mess he's landed me in!"

"I hope he's not very bad, sir."

"I hope he is. I hope he'll die," said Mr. Bradshaw vengefully. "You've lived with Mr. Rivers?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can you announce visitors?"

"Yes, sir."

"Go to that door, and announce the Lord Mayor."

Rivers—or, rather, James Finny—flung open the door, and announced in stentorian accents, "His Worship the Lord Mayor of London."

"You hass!" shouted Mr. Bradshaw. "You only worship him when you're in the prisoners' box. I 'spect that's where you met him. Call him 'his Lordship' when he's a-wisitn'. Now again." [162]

James obeyed.

"Bravo—that's better!" said another voice. It proceeded from a mite of a man who had approached noiselessly, and who now stood rubbing his hands approvingly. "But it's rather late for rehearsals, Mr. Bradshaw, isn't it?" he added.

"Parker's taken ill," said Mr. Bradshaw savagely. "He's sent this screw to take his place."

"So thoughtful of Parker," murmured the little man. "What's your name, and where do you come from?" addressing the candidate for office.

"James Finny, sir—from Mr. Birket Rivers."

"Mr. Birket Rivers," reflected the other. "Ah, to be sure—Mr. Birket Rivers, the young millionaire. Drives a team of spanking bays at the Four-in-Hand meets. Attaché at Constantinople, or something. Came into money and left the Service. Wishes he'd stopped in it, I believe. A very active young gentleman. Oh, yes, I've heard of your master—your late master, James Finny." [163]

The little man was studying him intently all the time. Then he fixed his eyes on Rivers' hands. He lifted the right one, looked at it, and passed on.

There was a loud ring, and a footman entered with "Please, Mr. Bradshaw, there's the

gentlemen come from the hembassy."

The butler bustled to the door. "Go up to Parker's room, and change into his things at once, and then come down to me in the 'all," he said to Rivers.

"Yes, sir," Rivers replied. "Beg pardon, Mr. Bradshaw, who was that small gentleman wot just left us?"

"That small gentleman," said Mr. Bradshaw, with swelling dignity, "is Mr. Marvell, from Scotland Yard; so you'd better be careful, Finny."

Prince Ali Azim, accompanied by the Vizier and a numerous suite, arrived that afternoon, and the whole household was thenceforth kept busy attending to the wants, numerous and peculiar, of the Persians. Rivers' chief duties were to attend to the hall door, and to help to wait at meals. He did his work to the satisfaction of Mr. Bradshaw, and never a day passed without Mr. Marvell, who was installed as the protecting angel of the establishment, staring fixedly at him, and then passing some word of commendation in a tone that brought the blood to his face. [164]

"A shocking habit you have of blushing, James Finny," the little man would say as he toddled away.

And all the time the new footman was trying to find out where the Order of the Lion and the Sun was kept.

It was the 12th before he ascertained that it was in one of three despatch boxes kept in a bookcase in the library.

The Burglars' meeting took place on the 13th. He must purloin it before then—that very night, if possible.

At five o'clock the Vizier was taken ill.

"Some of Parker's leavin's, I'll be bound," said Mr. Bradshaw. "Same symtims. Looks all right, and talks despairin' of pains an' shivers. Won't have a doctor, neither. If the Wizzer pipes out, Finny, your preshus cousin'll be responsible."

At 8 p.m. the Prince and his suite, with the exception of the invalid Vizier, set out for the Alhambra and supper at the Carlton. Mr. Marvell, as usual, followed closely in their wake. [165]

At nine o'clock James Finny was off duty. "Now or never," he thought. He watched his opportunity, and then, unperceived, entered the library, and there hid himself behind a curtain, intending to wait till the household was asleep, and then to open the despatch box from his bunch of skeleton keys. He had been there perhaps half an hour when the door opened, and, to his amazement, the Vizier entered. He was followed by a servant bringing coffee and cigarettes. There were cups for two.

The minutes passed slowly. The Vizier looked impatiently at the clock, then strode up to one of the windows, pulled back the heavy curtain, raised the blind, and looked out. Rivers' pulses quickened. What if the Vizier were to come to his window?

"Ha!" exclaimed the Persian, replacing the curtain, and resuming his seat.

The door opened, and a bemuffled object made its appearance. The Vizier rose. The servant withdrew, and the object emerged from its wraps. Rivers knew the man at once. He had met him at Constantinople. It was Count Moranoff.

The Vizier bowed. [166]

The newcomer responded, and then gave a sigh of relief.

"*Peste!* but it was warm, Vizier," he said. "I am delighted at last to have the honour and the supreme pleasure of meeting you."

"Your Excellency," replied the Vizier, "the fame of Count Moranoff has for long inspired me with an intense wish that we should meet. Allah has at last granted the desire of my life. Will your Excellency seat yourself? Here is coffee *alla Turca*."

The count drew up his chair, and took the proffered cup. As he lit a cigarette, his eyes travelled appreciatively over the portraits of a dozen Dentons, famous in the service of their country. "It is fitting we should meet here," he said, "surrounded by these illustrious gentlemen, who look on, but cannot move. It is prophetic."

"It is Kismet," said the Vizier gravely.

"Kismet, assisted by two statesmen," returned the Count. "Exactly. But I mustn't lose time, Vizier, as our moments are precious." He put his hand into his breast pocket, and produced a document. "Here is the draft of our understanding, arranged so far as is possible with three thousand versts between us. Now we must discuss the final details. I have indicated my suggestions, and if they meet with your approval it will be possible for us to sign before you leave London." [167]

The Persian watched the smoke rings float upward. "There is no haste," he said. "'Fruit ripens slowly under grey skies,' as our poet sings."

"Quite so—quite so," said the Russian, conscious of an error. "This year—the next will do. Our treasury has many drains upon it. We are not anxious to add to the number."

The Vizier smoked imperturbably. "The skies are grey here," he said at length, "but this London holds some wonderful men. One I met yesterday—an American. He is young. His hair is still flaxen. Yet he spoke of money as though it grew on rose trees. Half a million roubles are as nothing to him. He gave that sum for an Italian picture—an old, shabby-looking thing such as my master would not place in his anterooms. He owns oil mines, railways, banks. Allah! what does that flaxen-haired youth not own? My heart ached at the number of his possessions."

"These Americans talk," replied the Count. "Half they say is false, half exaggeration."

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"Sometimes, no doubt," said the Vizier, "but not always. I know this man is rich. He is one of the new kings of the earth. We have already had a transaction together," and he sighed contentedly.

"There are kings and kings," replied the Russian. "There are also emperors. Your Excellency is now in negotiation with one who controls the destinies of countless millions—men and roubles. When last I saw his Majesty he said, 'Tell his Excellency the Grand Vizier that I would his wisdom could be added to that of my counsellors. When the wishes of my heart respecting the new treaty are consummated he will honour me by accepting half a million roubles.'"

The Persian gazed reflectively into space. "Your master is great," he said, "and he is generous. His rewards make glad the hearts of poets. He is the joy of the poor. Would that I were a poet or poor. So should my voice praise him also."

The Russian's eye gleamed, but he continued suavely:

"So said my royal master, 'Half a million roubles shall be his when the treaty is signed; five hundred thousand more when the Russian flag floats in the Persian Gulf.'"

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The Persian leaned back resignedly.

"Great is the power of your master," he said. "As Russia is bigger than America, so does his power exceed that of the flaxen-haired gentleman I met yesterday. The Americans are numbered by tens, your master's subjects by hundreds of millions. Besides, it is always more agreeable to deal with a first-class diplomatist. Let me look at the draft."

Count Moranoff handed over the document. The Vizier read it slowly. The terms were fairly comprehensive. Behind his curtain Rivers breathed hard at their audacity, and his blood tingled at the thought that it rested with him to checkmate this daring move. The statesmen discoursed frankly, and there was no disguise of the object in view. India was eventually to be attacked by Russia, who was prepared to pay for facilities granted. The north-eastern province of Persia was a necessary factor of the scheme, and a railway was to be commenced at once from Astrabad to Meshed. But the most striking part of the plan was the acquisition by Russia of a port in the Persian Gulf. The Isle of Kishm was to be ceded to her. The only discussion between the two statesmen was with regard to the Island of Ashurada in the Caspian. The Vizier demanded its evacuation by Russia in partial payment for Kishm, but more particularly as a sop to the Persian people. After much demur this was finally agreed to by Moranoff, in addition to the annuity of two million roubles granted to the Shah.

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The Vizier folded up the document.

"My secretary shall transcribe this to-morrow," he said, "and we can sign after our return from Windsor. Strange, is it not," he soliloquised, "that our former negotiations came to a head when the English Mission brought the Garter, and our new one is to be consummated while we are in the act of returning the compliment? These English are fated to be hoodwinked."

"When men such as you and I get together, my dear Vizier——" began the Russian sententiously. Then he stopped short, for the door had suddenly opened.

The Persian turned angrily, and then rose to his feet as a tall, richly-dressed man entered. It was the Prince Ali Azim.

"Vizier," said the Prince abruptly, "whom have you here? Your physician?"

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The Vizier's face had assumed a bland smile, and instinctively he endeavoured to cover the treaty. But the Prince saw the movement.

"Why hide the prescription, Vizier?" he said.

The Russian's face grew livid, but the Vizier regained his usual composure.

"Your Royal Highness," he said, "permit me to present his Excellency Count Moranoff."

"Ten thousand pardons, Count," said the Prince, slightly returning the Count's profound inclination. "You will, perhaps, understand my mistake when I tell you that the Vizier is far from well. He has, no doubt, concealed the fact from you, but he was too ill to accompany me this evening to the hall of music. Hence my surprise at finding him here. I fear that his extraordinary zeal for affairs has led him prematurely from his bed. I am sure that you would not wish him to trespass unduly on his strength."

"Your Royal Highness's surmise is correct," said Moranoff. "It would, indeed, be an international calamity were the Vizier to break down. I hope I have not hastened that end." He again bowed profoundly to the Prince, refused the Vizier's offer of assistance with his wraps, and then, with a cold adieu to him, left the room.

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"Now, Hasan Kuli," thundered the Prince when they were alone, "what intrigue is this?"

"Your Royal Highness's suspicions are uncalled for. Moranoff and I are old friends by correspondence. We had never met personally, and he naturally seized this opportunity."

"I did not know he was in England," said the Prince. "The Russian Ambassador incidentally referred to him to-day as being in Petersburg. I left you in bed, full of toothache and indigestion. I return unexpectedly, and find you deliberating with a Russian who is supposed to be five hundred *farsakhs* away. Give me that paper."

The Vizier reluctantly produced it, and the Prince read it through.

"Ah," he said, as he refolded it. "I see you are making a cat's-paw of me again. My mission here is to do away with any ill-effects consequent on our treaty with Russia. You will remember that when we were fooling the English Mission in Teheran I knew nothing of the treaty just concluded with Russia. My uncle and you delighted to keep me in the dark; yet all the time it was I who did the work. Was it his Majesty the Shah who played at billiards and cards with the English? Was it you who fought them at lawn tennis. Bah! I laugh at the thought. But I played at all. I lost my money at cards and billiards, and I suffered defeat at lawn tennis till the perspiration rolled down me, and my legs gave way. And you smoked and laughed, and got all the profit. I, who worked, got none. Now I have come over land and sea with the Order of the Lion and the Sun. Again I do the work—again I know nothing. I find you intriguing behind my back. You treat me as a child; but you forget that some day I may be Shah. You play with fire, Vizier."

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"Your Royal Highness, I beg you to believe that I have acted for what I thought was the benefit of our country."

"And your own pocket," added the Prince. "How much plunder do you get out of this?"

The Vizier held up his hands in horror. "Your Royal Highness," he said, "is nothing ever done disinterestedly—from pure patriotism?"

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"Not by Hasan Kuli," sneered the Prince. "Please save yourself useless declamation. You may as well know my terms at once. The price of my acquiescence in this matter is one million roubles."

The Vizier gasped.

"One million roubles!" he exclaimed. "Does money grow?"

"So far as I know, it does not," replied the Prince acidly. "But you may as well spare yourself unnecessary questions. These are my terms. Arrange with Moranoff to-morrow, or take it from your own profit—I care not which; but unless a portion of the money is forthcoming before we leave this cursed land I will—"

"You will betray us?"

"I do not explain my intentions to Viziers," replied the young man haughtily. "You understand me, I hope. Here is your treaty." He tossed the document on the table and left.

The Vizier threw himself on a sofa, and groaned aloud. He lay there long—so long that Rivers, behind the curtain, was stiff and weary. And there was the Vizier, now apparently dozing at intervals—perhaps going to make a night of it.

Suddenly he rose, took the draft of the treaty, went to the despatch boxes, and placed it in one of them. His body intervened between Rivers' view of them, but the watcher followed his movements as best he could. Then the Vizier turned to the door, and clicked out the light as he passed through.

Rivers stretched himself, but he did not venture to stir from behind the curtain for some time. At length he stepped out, turned on his portable electric light, crossed the room, and stood before the despatch boxes.

There were three, all exactly alike. One held the insignia of the Lion and the Sun. That was—yes, that was the bottom one. The treaty was in the middle one. The top one was unimportant.



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"SUDDENLY HE ROSE, TOOK THE DRAFT OF THE TREATY, WENT TO THE DESPATCH BOXES, AND PLACED IT IN ONE OF THEM."

(p. 175.)

Rivers lifted out the middle one, and essayed to open it with his keys, but in vain. Then he tried the bottom one—that containing the Persian Order—but with no better success. The box would have to be forced open elsewhere. Yet he dare not carry it across the hall. Other means had to be found for getting it out of the room, and the way had occurred to him as he stood behind the curtain.

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One box he might pass safely through this instrumentality, but only one. Two would court defeat. Which box was he to take—the one that held the Order of the Lion and the Sun, the object of all his scheming, or the other, in which lay the treaty?

Rivers' mind had taken its resolve at the instant he had seen the draft placed therein. Since Moranoff had appeared, he had lost all immediate interest in the Burglars' Club. Whether he became a member or not was of little moment, but it was a matter of national importance that the Foreign Secretary should see the draft of the treaty. The Earl of Ancoats was hard to convince of anyone's dishonesty. His own honour was so untarnished that he refused to believe less of others. He had declined to take hints about the former treaty between Russia and Persia, and now, with the Shah's Mission at his door, he would probably refuse to believe that this was but another blind, covering a further and bolder intrigue. Lord Ancoats must see the treaty.

Rivers took the middle box across to the window, then drew up the blind and waited. The red-coated sentry passed. Could he manage it before the soldier was round again?

Ah! here was his chance.

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He opened the window gently. "Hi!" he called out to the passing hansom. The man pulled up, got down, and came to the window.

"I want you to take this box straight to Lord Ancoats. He lives in Eaton Square. Tell him Mr. Birket Rivers sent it, and he must open it at once. I will see him in the morning about it. Here's a sovereign. If Lord Ancoats gets it within an hour, I'll give you another sovereign to-morrow. Here you are. Cut along. Drive like blazes."

As the man mounted his seat, the sentry came round the corner. Rivers cautiously closed the window, and drew the blind. He then pulled a chair behind the curtain, and went to sleep on it till four o'clock, when he made his way to his own room.

First thing in the morning he sent a message to John Parker, who turned up in good health at ten o'clock, and claimed his post back.

Half an hour later Rivers left, assured of Mr. Bradshaw's offer of the next vacancy in the household. He drove straight to the Albany, and then to Eaton Square. The Earl was at the Foreign Office. Within the hour his lordship received him.

"Well, Mr. Rivers," said Lord Ancoats, producing the despatch box from a safe. "What is the meaning of this?"

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"INSTEAD OF THE DRAFT, THERE, ON A PURPLE VELVET CUSHION, WAS THE GLITTERING ORDER OF THE LION AND THE SUN."

(p. 178.)

"It explains itself, my lord."

"Indeed," said the statesman drily. "What do you think it contains?"

"The draft of a new treaty between Russia and Persia."

"Open it."

Rivers did so, and, instead of the draft, there on a purple velvet cushion was the glittering Order of the Lion and the Sun!

Rivers was stupefied.

"Was there nothing else?" he asked in bewilderment.

"No, sir; and perhaps you will now explain how you came into possession of this, and why you sent it to me. It is surely the property of the Persian Mission."

Lord Ancoats' demeanour was not reassuring, but Rivers plunged boldly into the matter.

"Last night, at Denton House, Count Moranoff visited the Persian Vizier," he commenced.

"How do you know that?"

"I saw him. I was present at the interview—unknown, of course. He brought with him the draft of a treaty supplementing the last one. It had chiefly reference to the acquisition of a Russian port in the Persian Gulf."

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"Ah!" said Lord Ancoats, "that's a bold move. Go on, please."

"The Vizier placed the draft in one of three despatch boxes like this. I thought this was the one, and I sent it here so that your lordship could read the treaty for yourself. I deeply regret that I made a mistake in the box, but I can give the gist of the treaty from memory."

"Please do so now."

Rivers' memory was good, and the words of the treaty had burnt themselves on his brain. He recited the terms without hesitation. The minister heard him in silence, making notes.

"Thank you, Rivers," he said at the end. "You will please let me have that in writing in time for to-morrow's Cabinet." Then he got up and paced the room. "It is an unfortunate situation. I think we shall be able to meet the political side of it, but the investiture takes place at Windsor to-morrow, and this discovery is, to say the least, embarrassing. However, we have to thank you for being forewarned. You evidently anticipated this move."

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"I'm afraid not, sir. It was as much luck as anything else on my part."

"But you were at Denton House?"

"I was there on other business," said Rivers frankly.

Lord Ancoats looked grave. "Well, Mr. Rivers," he said, "I will not inquire too closely what that other business was. You have rendered a service to the State which will not be forgotten. Now, what about this?" pointing to the box.

"I will see that the Vizier gets it."

"At once?"

Rivers hesitated. Only then did he remember he now had in his possession what he wanted. He could pay his entrance fee.

"I will see that it is at Denton House by the morning," he said.

Lord Ancoats watched him intently.

"Does the Burglars' Club meet to-night?" he said quietly.

"I—I beg your pardon," stammered Rivers.

Lord Ancoats laid a kindly hand on his shoulder. "I was only told of that institution within the hour," he said, "and till a moment ago I didn't believe the information. Take my advice, Rivers, and leave it. Its existence, you see, is known to some of the outside world. As a friend I warn you that you will be watched to-night. Don't spoil your career. Why did you leave the Service? Oh, I remember; but you're not satisfied with merely killing time, are you? Will you come back to us? The First Secretaryship at Vienna is vacant. Would you take it?"

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Rivers' face beamed. "I'd jump at it, my lord."

"Then be ready to start in a week. Never mind thanks. I am still your debtor. Now about this box? You might be unable to restore it. We must adopt other means."

Lord Ancoats opened the door of an adjoining room with, "Come forward, please." And the little detective whom Rivers had last seen at Denton House that very morning entered briskly.

"I believe you have met before?" said Lord Ancoats.

Rivers was too astonished to reply.

"Yes, I have met James Finny—I beg pardon—Mr. Birket Rivers," said the detective drily.

"Mr. Rivers has explained the mystery very satisfactorily, Marvell," said Lord Ancoats. "The box should be restored without delay. Will you do this, please?"

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Mr. Marvell tried to look pleased, but signally failed in the attempt.

"Certainly, my lord," he replied.

There was a knock at the door, and a clerk appeared with a card in his hand.

"I must leave you now," said the Minister. "Rivers, next week, remember. I am much obliged for your assistance, Mr. Marvell."

With this the Secretary for Foreign Affairs left the room.

The detective took up the box.

"How on earth did you come into this matter, Mr. Marvell?" asked Rivers.

"Very simply, sir. When Lord Ancoats got the box he telephoned to Scotland Yard, and I was sent for at once. As a matter of fact, I opened the box for his lordship. You're sure you wouldn't like to restore it yourself? The Vizier is ill in bed, and it won't be wanted till to-morrow."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Marvell," Rivers laughed; "but I'm sure it's safer in your hands."

Mr. Marvell nodded grimly. "Sooner or later, sir. Sooner or later," he said, as he walked to the door; "but don't try to be a footman next time."

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With these enigmatical remarks the interview terminated.

On the following day the investiture of the Lion and the Sun took place at Windsor. After the ceremony Prince Ali Azim and the Vizier had a private interview with the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. It was noted at the time that the Persians emerged looking singularly subdued.

That evening, in reply to a friendly question addressed by the Leader of the Opposition, Lord Ancoats took the opportunity to assure the House that the paramount influence of England in the Persian Gulf would be maintained at any cost, and a month later the Union Jack floated by the side of the Arab Sultan's flag on the castle towers of Muscat.

This was the answer given to the Russian intrigue. That it was so effective and complete was owing to the action of Mr. Birket Rivers, sometime a cadet member of the Burglars' Club.

IX.

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THE HORSESHOE AND THE PEPPERCORN.

THE President rose and read: "'March 29th is the anniversary of the Battle of Towton. For valour on that desperate field John de Mallaby received from Edward IV. the Barony of Tadcaster, and an appropriate grant of land in Yorkshire, at a yearly rental of a peppercorn and a golden horseshoe. That rent is still paid by the Barons—now Earls—of Tadcaster. His late lordship used to bring his annual acknowledgment to town in a state coach with outriders, but the present peer takes it to his Sovereign by motor-car, attended only by a chauffeur.'

"In this paragraph, my lords and gentlemen," continued the Duke, "we see indicated the quest of our distinguished fellow member Captain Prescott Cunningham, whose subscription is now due."

"What is the quest, Mr. President?" inquired Cunningham. "Am I to capture the peer or the motor-car?"

"Neither, sir," replied his Grace of Dorchester. "You will kindly produce the horseshoe and the peppercorn intended for the King on the 29th. Our meeting is arranged for the 28th, so that we may return the trophies in question, and enable his lordship of Tadcaster to continue in possession of his remarkably low-rented estate."

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The Right Honourable John de Mallaby, D.L., F.R.S., M.A., Eighteenth Baron and Seventh Earl of Tadcaster, lived chiefly at his Westmorland seat, Kirkdale Castle, which an ancestress in the time of George the First had obligingly brought into the family in addition to her own good looks.

A certain Mr. Shaw arrived one day of March last at the Golden Lion Inn, Kirkdale, and there spent a few days, talking much with the landlord and frequenters of the inn, and taking walks in the neighbourhood of the Castle. On the latter occasions he might have been seen gazing somewhat disconsolately at the battlemented walls which had several times defied an army.

Once when he was so occupied, a thin, grizzly, stooping gentleman had passed, and with him a handsome dark-eyed girl. He learnt that this was the Earl himself, a scientific and somewhat eccentric widower, and his only child Eva, a *débutante* of last season.

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Prescott Cunningham—for so was this Mr. Shaw designated in the more accurate books of the Registrar-General—soon gave up any idea of entering the Castle in his quest of the peppercorn and horseshoe. The task of finding them there was too big. He had learnt that on these annual occasions Lord Tadcaster, accompanied by his chauffeur, left the castle in his motor-car four days before the King received him. He also learnt full particulars of the route followed and of the halting places, and it was his final plan of campaign to waylay his lordship on the road, and, unashamed, to rob him of the articles desired.

Having spent three days in coming to this conclusion, Cunningham moved on to Bolton Abbey, through which village he knew that his lordship would pass on his way to Harrogate, where he would spend the night of the 25th.

At five o'clock on the day in question, the Tadcaster Panhard drew up at the Devonshire Arms at Bolton Abbey, and Cunningham saw to his amazement that, instead of the Earl and his chauffeur, it contained his lordship and a lady—his daughter.

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Cunningham groaned in spirit. To tackle two men single-handed might be counted sporting,

but a woman—hang it all!

Mine host hurried to the door to assist his guests.

"Has your lordship lost Mr. Ackill?" he asked.

"I hope not," replied the Earl. "Achille hurt his hand with a backfire this morning, and I sent him on by train to Harrogate to have it attended to. You got my note? Dinner at six?"

"To the minute, my lord."

The intervening time was chiefly spent by the Earl in confidential communion with his motor, through the intermediary of a spanner and an oil can.

While he was so engaged, and Cunningham was lounging near the door, reflecting on his bad luck, another car drove up, and two loudly-dressed men emerged from their wraps. They entered the hotel, drank thirstily, and talked without restraint.

Lady Eva de Mallaby passed through the hall soon afterwards. Struck by her beauty, one of the motorists, with the comradeship of one sportsman to another, addressed some remark to her, with a generous smile and a casual hat-lift. [188]

Lady Eva, showing a trace of surprise, stared icily at the man and passed on.

"Hoity, toity," said the motorist, without any sign of shame. "But I'd like to have the breaking-in of you, Miss. Wouldn't you, Sammy?" addressing his companion.

"Too expensive," said Sammy. "Give me a four-year-old, like I bought to-day from Sir William, an' I'm 'appy."

"You're a bloomin' materialist, that's what you are, Sammy," retorted the other—"a bloomin' materialist." He lingered lovingly over the rounded phrase, and drained his glass again.

Twenty minutes later the sound of a gramophone percolated the house.

Lord Tadcaster was at dinner.

It was his daily custom to dine to the accompaniment of music. When at home his private band officiated; when he was on his travels a musical-box or gramophone supplied the necessary melody.

This was an eccentricity of the peer, who had decided, after long and recondite diagnosis, that music assists the digestion, and that certain music is more suited to a particular food than another. Therefore he swallowed his soup to a dreamy prelude, his fish to a fugue. The *entrée* was expedited by Beethoven, the joint disappeared to a triumphal march. Sweets demanded a waltz, cheese nothing more than a negro melody; but with wine and dessert were combined all the possibilities of Grand Opera. [189]

Cunningham had learnt particulars of all this when at Kirkdale, and now he listened to the programme emanating from the private dining-room. No doubt owing to the absence of Achille, the music occasionally gave out, but by the intermittent tunes Cunningham was still able to gauge the progress of the meal. The omission of a sonata denoted limitation of the repast, and when the strains of "Lucia di Lammermoor" throbbed on the air Cunningham mounted his motor-cycle, and took the road that led through Blubber-houses.

A run of three-quarters of an hour brought him to the confines of Haverah Park, almost within sight of Harrogate. It was here that he had decided to waylay the motor-car.

It was a lonely spot indeed. Moorland, grim pasture land, lean fir trees, stone walls and limestone road, was all that met the eye. All was cold and stern. Cold and stern was his business that night; and there, close to the wood granted by John o' Gaunt to one Haverah, and tenanted since Doomsday by the winds of the centuries, he waited. [190]

The air was springlike, but the wait was long and weary. The only satisfactory thing about it was that he had time to note the small amount of traffic on the road. A solitary dogcart was all that passed in an hour.

The moon rose in cold splendour. The stars appeared. Cunningham knew only one of them by name—Betelgeuse, a red star, the apex of a triangle of which three stars formed the base. The name had struck him as remarkable, and he once had called a bull pup after it. For a moment he thought of his dog's untimely end.

But was the Panhard never coming? Perhaps there had been a puncture, and in the absence of a chauffeur Lord Tadcaster was stranded. Possibly he had returned to Bolton Abbey, or taken train forward, or, since he was short-handed, he might have altered his route and gone by the easier road through Otley. In that case, he, Prescott Cunningham, was lost to the Burglars' Club. [191]

Ah! There was the toot of a motor in the far distance, again repeated. It was the Tadcaster toot—a base twentieth century substitute for the cry that on the field of Towton in 1461 led another John de Mallaby to a barony and an estate.

Cunningham recovered his cycle, be-straddled it, and gently mounted the rise in front. The Panhard dashed up the hill, its acetylene lamps glaring like man-o'-war searchlights.

Cunningham advanced his spark. The motor responded, and sprang eagerly after the car. They were leaving him behind. He slowly opened his throttle valve. Now he was making pace. He was gaining on them yard by yard, hand over fist. He was only a hundred yards behind now—fifty—twenty-five. Could he do it? The psychological moment had come.

He drew his revolver and aimed at the near back tyre of the car in front. Ah! he had missed. He hit it with his second shot. It split with a rousing bang. The car listed and dragged. It swerved across the road in violent curves, but Cunningham saw by the slowing of the speed that the driver had thrown out his clutch. At last it stopped.

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"What's the meaning of this outrage, you scoundrel?" cried the infuriated motorist.

"Softly, my lord," said Cunningham, now on his feet, and advancing with revolver in hand. "I am covering you, you observe!"

"A highwayman, by George!" exclaimed the peer. "And Edward VII. on the throne. A highwayman on castors!"

"Your lordship evidently recognises the situation," said Cunningham. "This will save time and trouble, I hope."

"I suppose you want my purse?" replied the peer. "This comes of travelling without my chauffeur," he added plaintively. "By George, if Achille were here, he'd worry you. If I were ten years younger I'd tackle you myself."

"Regrets are futile, my lord," said Cunningham, "but a purse will not satisfy me."

"Oh, you want two, do you? Eva, I'm afraid you'll have to give him yours as well. Shockin' luck for this to happen the first time we've travelled alone. I oughtn't to have let you come."

"Don't worry, dad, please," said Lady Eva. "I'm sorry I haven't got a purse, highwayman," she continued contemptuously, throwing back her thick veil to see what manner of man this could be, "but the few loose sixpences I have in my pocket are quite at your service."

"You may keep them, madam," Cunningham replied, with as much dignity as the occasion would permit. "I do not ask for money. I simply want the loan of a peppercorn and golden horseshoe until the 29th."

"By George, he must be an antiquarian highwayman or a curio-collector gone mad," said his lordship. "D'ye think, sir, I'll give you what I'm taking to the King?"

"His Majesty shall have them, and from your hands, on the proper day. I simply ask for the loan of them till then."

"You must think that I'm a fool," said the Earl. In an instant he had grabbed the hoop of one of the heavy acetylene lamps, and pulled it from its socket. "Take that, you blackguard!" he yelled, flinging it with all his force at the cyclist.

Cunningham dodged the missile, which crashed to the ground with light extinguished.

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"Hands up, my lord," he shouted, "or I fire."

The discomfited peer obeyed him.

"You are quite at my mercy," said Cunningham sternly. "The peppercorn and horseshoe at once, if you please, or I shall have to use force. I trust you will avoid a scene before your daughter. You may lower your right hand to your pocket."

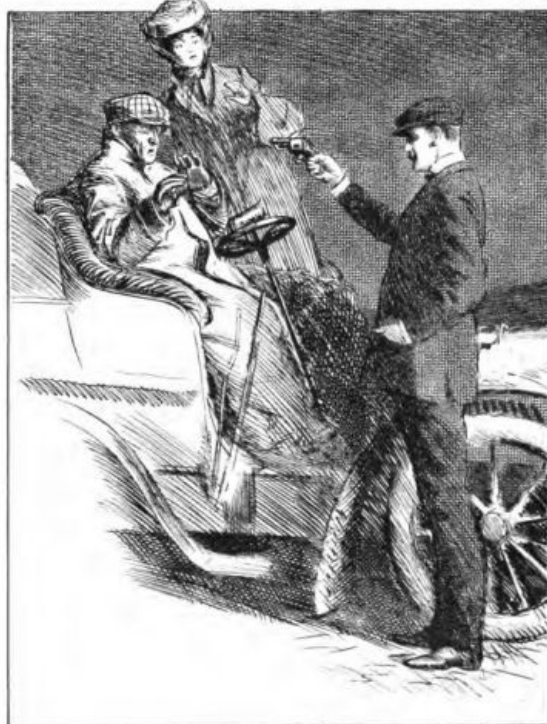
The Earl did as he was bid, drew out the precious packet, and handed it to Cunningham.

"Thank you, my lord," he replied. "You are wise. I promise you they shall be returned on the morning of the 29th. To what address?"

"I don't believe you," retorted the peer. "But I stay at Claridge's. Now, if you've anything of a sportsman about you, you'll go on to the Queen Hotel at Harrogate and tell my chauffeur, Achille Petibon, to come with a repairer at once. We can't spend the night here. I've got a spare cover and tube in the tonneau, but I can no more fit them than fly. My finger-nails are far too brittle."

"I will convey your message with the greatest pleasure, my lord," replied Cunningham. "I sincerely regret the inconvenience I have caused, though you may not think so."

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"SOFTLY, MY LORD,' SAID CUNNINGHAM; 'I AM COVERING YOU, YOU OBSERVE.'"
(p. 192.)

For a moment there was a pause, and Cunningham could have gone. Yet he hesitated.

The moon shone down upon a desolate moorland glade, lighting up the green sward by the trees. The excitement of the adventure, the flush of victory, a pair of bright eyes, and the memory of some half-forgotten romance stirred his blood.

"One final favour, my lord," he said.

"No more, sir. By George, if I were ten years younger——"

"You carry a gramophone with you."

"You are remarkably well informed as to my luggage, sir. I do, but it's too bulky for you to carry away. They're cheap enough. A man of taste like yourself ought to be able to afford one of his own."

"I don't want to take it away, my lord. I simply want the favour of a dance tune and a lady's hand."

For a moment the Earl looked puzzled. Then he exclaimed: "By George! Claude Duval up to date! No, sir, I'll be hanged if——" His lordship stopped suddenly. He was keen of hearing, and as he spoke he had heard, or thought he heard, a distant car. Even if it meant a dance with his daughter, he would detain the man until assistance arrived. In a moment he had altered his voice.

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"On second thoughts, sir," he said, "I don't know. After all, it's a tradition of your—er—profession. Perhaps you will oblige the gentleman, Eva." As he spoke he pressed the girl's hand so that she might know that something lay behind his words. "Where's the gramophone?" he asked. While searching for the instrument his lordship actually started whistling, lest the highwayman should also hear the car.

"Ah, here it is," he said aloud. Then, in a whisper to his daughter, "Car coming. Distract his attention." In his anxiety his lordship even hummed as he hurriedly manipulated the instrument, inserting the first record that came to hand.

He wound up the toy, and a baritone voice sang raucously:—

"Egypt! my Cleopatra! I ain't no flatt'rer,
But dis is true,
(I'm a-goin' to tell her)
Egypt! if you don't want me. . . ."

In a trice Lady Eva had found a more suitable record, and after a momentary pause the instrument struck up "The Darkie Cake Walk," as played by the New York Municipal Band, at Manhattan Beach, Long Island, U.S.A.

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"May I have the honour?" asked Cunningham, hat in hand, with a low bow.

Lady Eva inclined coldly, and took off her wraps. The man was certainly polite. He led her as though she were a princess, and any misgivings were soon at rest.

It was a quaint scene. It is doubtful if Betelgeuse had ever looked down upon a quainter. The firs formed a sombre background. The moon illuminated the green sward in front, and on it a highwayman and a lady motorist stepped to a catching dance tune, emanating from a gramophone on a Panhard motor, controlled by a peer of the realm. The light of an acetylene lamp shone like a gigantic foot-light illuminating the front of the green stage.

The floor was not an ideal one, though cattle had cropped it close and the winds had swept it dry, but the pair were accomplished dancers. Thrice had they paced the length of the floor. Now they turned again, hand in hand, with heads thrown back, and uplifted feet. There was the unmistakable sound of an approaching car. Cunningham must have heard it, but recklessly he continued the dance.

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With a toot it hove into sight, and Lord Tadcaster turned his own horn into a prolonged howl, signifying unimaginable trouble. This, and the unusual scene at the side, brought up the oncoming car to a smart halt. They backed abreast of the Panhard.

"Robbery! Help!" cried the Earl.

The two occupants of the new car hardly heard him. They were lost in astonishment. As the dancers reached the verge of the road in the full flare

"THERE WAS THE UNMISTAKABLE SOUND OF AN APPROACHING CAR."

of the light, they were greeted with a round of applause. With a snap Lord Tadcaster turned off the

gramophone.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said one of the newcomers. "If it ain't little Hoity Toity!"

The peer had jumped from the Panhard. "Help me to secure this highwayman," he said, pointing to Cunningham. "He has robbed me."

The man who had just spoken also got down, but his companion remained on the car, stolidly surveying the scene.

"Come along," said the peer to his recruit. "I think we can manage him between us." [199]

"Stow it, old man," said the motorist. "You collar the highwayman, and I'll look after the lady."

He brushed past the Earl, and, with proffered arm, smirked, "May I have the next dance, Miss?"

Lady Eva drew back. The man came still nearer. Instinctively she touched Cunningham's arm for protection.

"Stand back, sir!" he commanded.

"Who the juggins are you?" sneered the man. "This old buffer says you're a highwayman, but you seem to think you're a bloomin' bobby. You git, and let me have my partner for the high-kick lancers."

"If you come one step nearer I'll thrash you," said Cunningham.

The man needed no further encouragement. He even dared to touch the lady's arm. A second later he measured his length on the turf.

His friend tumbled from his seat with anxious chivalry.

"Ere, you leave my pal alone," he said, rolling up to Cunningham.

"Shut up, Sammy," said the other, rising slowly to his feet. "Now, look you here, Mr. Highwayman," he continued vindictively. "You've had your score, now I'll have mine. Either this lady has a hop with me to my own time and tune, and gives me a kiss at the end, or——" [200]

"Or what?"

"Or I ride on to Harrogate, and give the police information of highway robbery."

"There's your car," said Cunningham. "Ride on."

"He's not likely to wait for the arrival of the police," said the Earl ruefully, yet anxious for the departure of these impossible helpers.

"I shall be back with a bobby in twenty minutes," the man rejoined, "and we'll telephone to every town in the district so that he can't escape. I'm not in fightin' form myself to-night, so I'd rather do it in proper legal style. I'll bring a solicitor if I can find one. Now, young feller," he continued, "you'd better consider well. It'll be a twelve months' touch for you for robbery and six for 'sault and battery. Are you going to let your friend sacrifice himself on the altar of nonsense, Miss? I think our steps 'ud soot each other amazing."

Cunningham advanced on him threateningly. "If you dare to speak another word to the lady you'll find yourself on the ground again," he said. [201]

The man retreated before him, and Sammy fled. "Right 'o," said the former. "You've had your choice. It's plank and skilly for you now. Get up, Sammy." He bundled his friend into his seat, himself followed, let in the clutch, and they disappeared.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said the girl.

"Please don't worry about it," replied Cunningham. "The whole thing is the result of my own folly. It serves me jolly well right if I suffer for it."

"Hadn't you better try to escape now?" she asked, only remembering his protection of her.

Cunningham shook his head. "I think not," he replied. "It's probably all a ruse on his part to get me away. Then he might return and—and annoy you."

Lady Eva was silent.

"By George, sir," said the Earl, "I like your spirit. What the deuce do you want with that peppercorn and shoe? Give me 'em back and I'll say no more about it all."

Cunningham smiled a little sadly. "I'm afraid I can't. But you shall have them on the morning of the 29th without fail. Perhaps you'll believe me now." Then, after a pause, he added: "I'll make a dash for it if they aren't back in a quarter of an hour. In that case, I shall conclude that they really have gone to give the alarm." [202]

The minutes passed. Lady Eva bit her lips in thought. Cunningham looked alternately from her to Betelgeuse and the moon. The peer stared stolidly into space.

"Look here," said Cunningham suddenly. "Aren't we wasting time? Why wait for assistance? I think I can put on a new tyre, if you will allow me. Where are your spare tubes and covers, and your jack?"

His lordship accepted the offer with alacrity, and the two men were soon busy round the wheel.

Cunningham ceased work for a moment to take Lady Eva her furs, and assist her into them. She sat down on a tree stump, holding the remaining lamp, and turning its light on the work.

She did this mechanically. All the while she was thinking gravely. Suddenly a smile passed over her face, and she nodded approvingly. [203]

The men were so busy that they did not pause at the sound of the returning car. Sammy's friend was better than his word. They had barely been gone fifteen minutes.

"That's the highwayman—that young feller. Arrest him for robbery!" shouted the motorist, as he brought his car to a standstill, and a policeman sprang down.

"Is that the charge, sir?" said the policeman to Lord Tadcaster.

What the Earl would have replied is uncertain, for before he could answer Lady Eva had intervened.

"Robbery! What in the world do you mean?" she cried, standing up, and flashing the light on the policeman.

"That gentleman has taken me off my beat to arrest a man for highway robbery."

"That gentleman is mistaken," replied the girl. "We've had a breakdown. Surely that is the person who promised to send assistance from Harrogate. We want a repairer, not a policeman."

"Don't you believe her!" cried the motorist. "Ask the old 'un."

"Is that so, sir?" inquired the officer.

"You have heard my daughter," replied the Earl, astonished but loyal. "Of course it is so." [204]

The motorist's mouth opened, but no words came forth. He was absolutely speechless at this change of front.

"Anyway, there's an assault an' battery," said his friend hopefully. "'E knocked 'im down," pointing to the protagonists of the drama.

"For insulting a lady, I think," said Cunningham.

"Gor!" snorted the driver, recovering his speech. "Sold again, Sammy!" And with a frightful hoot they passed into the night.

"Well, I'm blowed!" exclaimed the policeman, with intense disgust. "And 'ere I am, miles off my beat."

"My friends won't be long before they are ready to start again, officer," said Cunningham, "and they'll no doubt give you a lift to Harrogate. In the meantime you might relieve the lady of the trouble of directing the light. Thank you," he whispered to Lady Eva, as he took the lamp from her. Her eyes met his and smiled.

The new tyre was at last adjusted. The Earl, Lady Eva, and the policeman got on board and sped away, Cunningham accompanying them on his motor-cycle. [205]

In the outskirts of Harrogate the policeman resumed his interrupted beat, the richer by an unusual experience and a sovereign.

At the town itself Cunningham said his adieus.

"A thousand thanks for your generosity, my lord," he added. "You will not find it misplaced," and with a low bow to Lady Eva he took the road to the right.

The Earl watched him go regretfully, for after all he had the horseshoe and peppercorn. What Lady Eva's feelings were she could not have stated precisely.

The Earl of Tadcaster and his daughter arrived at their hotel in time to stop a relief expedition, organised by the anxious Achille; and under his care they resumed their journey the next day.

On the evening of the 28th, Captain Prescott Cunningham renewed his subscription to the Burglars' Club; and at 9 a.m. on the 29th there was delivered at Claridge's Hotel a registered packet containing a peppercorn and a golden horseshoe, which the eighteenth Baron Tadcaster presented to his sovereign that afternoon at Buckingham Palace. [206]

Later on in the day a couple of new tyres, "With Mr. Duval's compliments and apologies," also reached the peer.

Here the story ends—for the present. This happened last March. Cunningham now attends every possible dance, dinner, and reception, hoping that some day Lady Eva and he may meet again; and as for Lady Eva, does she not dream daily of witching moonlight, a greensward dance, and a brave and gallant partner?

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THE HOLBEIN MINIATURE.

MR. ADOLPH MEYER, the friend of nations, the associate of kings, and the hope of the impecunious, had built himself a house on St. George's Island, off the coast of Hampshire.

As Mr. Meyer's origin was German, and the country of his adoption was England, it was perhaps natural that he should have gone to Tuscany for the architecture of his marine residence. Its boldly projecting cornices, its rusticated base and quoins, the consoles of its upper windows, all betrayed its Florentine birth; but the lower windows, reaching to the ground, were such as we associate with the name of France, and were doubtless intended as a compliment to the great and gay nation living directly across the water.

To the south, a terrace, bounded by a low wall set with dogs, apparently petrified by their own ugliness, separated the villa from the beach.

To the west were the orchid houses. To the north, before the front of the house, lay the bowling green; beyond it a wood, through which ran the path leading to the landing-stage and the neighbouring island of Great Britain.

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A spiral staircase at the east end of the house led to the observatory containing the powerful equatorial telescope through which, as opportunity offered, Mr. Meyer was wont to gaze thoughtfully at the satellites of Jupiter, the canals on Mars, and other eccentricities of the heavens.

There was, of course, a fountain—between the bowling green and the cypress trees. There was also a sundial bearing a sentence of cryptic import; and in the woods, at the least expected places, stood marble columns, broken and ivy-wreathed, or supporting busts of Socrates, Pallas, Homer, and other appropriate notabilities.

Inside the house were treasures that had cost the ransom of a millionaire.

Meyer was a bachelor, and here he spent his week-ends, absorbing ozone enough to see him through till the following Saturday, and maturing Titanic schemes for the Federation of the World and the confounding of rival financiers.

Once only had he brought a guest with him—an African Pro-Consul—who had with much difficulty, though with ultimate success, joined his outward-bound ship from Meyer's electric launch.

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Each year a local mayor called, admired, wondered, and retired. Occasionally some venturesome tourist was captured and turned back. Other visitors were rare; and their reception depended on the mood of the lord of the island.

One day last April a stranger with a camera rowed across from England. At the landing-stage he informed the man in charge that he had business with Mr. Meyer. This was telephoned to the house.

"What business?" came the reply.

"Particular business," said the newcomer.

"What particular business?"

"Pictures," was the answer.

This was transmitted, and the reply taken.

"You can go," said the man, hanging up the receiver. "Straight up the path, and through the woods. Turn to the left at the busk of 'Omer."

Ten minutes later the visitor was shown into a room facing the sea, in which Mr. Meyer was seated by the open window, reading from a gigantic folio.

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He was a short, podgy man, with black curly hair, a rounded nose, and bright eyes. His moustache and imperial did not conceal the extraordinary firmness of his mouth and jaw.

He rose as his visitor entered. He was, as usual, attired in a frock-coat and grey trousers. Once he had been in flannels when an emergency had arisen demanding City attire, which was not immediately forthcoming. Mr. Meyer had lost an opportunity in life through carelessness. Therefore on land he ever afterwards wore a frock-coat, except when in evening dress or pyjamas. The occasion should never again find him wanting.

"You wished to see me on business?" he asked. "What is it?"

His visitor, who was cast in a finer, less decided mould—a good-looking, clean-shaven man of something over thirty—replied:

"I came to ask for permission to photograph the inside of your place."

"You are not from Mr. Holzmann, den?" said Meyer, curtly.

"No."

"You said your business was important."

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"So it is—to myself."

Meyer looked sharply at him. "Why do you want to photograph my place?"

"For insertion in a magazine."

"Which magazine?"

"Any that will take the article—I am not proud. It is important that I should make some money. I have seen many interesting reproductions of interiors of the stately homes of England in the periodicals, but never one of your house. Hence my appearance. I hope I may have your permission."

"Why should I grant you permission?" said Meyer. "I live here in solitude. I do not bring visitors. I do not want them. Your intrusion is impertinent."

His visitor flushed. "Sorry if I have annoyed you," he said; "but it did not seem such a great favour to ask. Most people are glad to have pictures of themselves and their houses in the papers."

"Most people are fools, as Thomas Carlyle said. Have you a family?"

"I am not married."

"There is no excuse for a single man taking pictures of people's interiors. It is not the work for a man like you. I shall not encourage such tomfoolery. No, I do not give you permission. But stay. There is an orchid from the middle of Africa of which I should like to have a picture—de *Cypripedium Meyeri*—a new species which I have had the satisfaction to detect. Perhaps you would be kind enough to photograph it for me, and your journey would not be altogether lost. Come along. What is your name, please?"

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His visitor handed him a card on which was printed "John Lucas, 140, Brixton Gardens, London, W."

"You have come a long way," Mr. Meyer observed.

"A very long way, sir. Perhaps you wouldn't mind letting me look round your house, even if I may not photograph it. I am interested in domestic architecture and—er—curios."

Mr. Meyer looked intently at his visitor.

"Yes, Mr. Lucas," he said slowly, "I will also show you round my house, since you have come so far, and are interested in domestic architecture and curios. I have plenty of both. Then we will photograph the orchid."

Mr. Meyer led the photographer through his villa, pointing out its architectural beauties, and indicating the various treasures which it contained.

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Mr. Lucas was profuse in his expressions of appreciation. "Are you not afraid of burglars?" he asked.

"I am afraid of nothing," replied Mr. Meyer. "Otherwise I should not be here to-day in this Tuscan Villa. I have gone into the question of thieves, and think I should be able to meet the situation."

They had made a tour of the rooms, had ascended the heights of the observatory and inspected the electric plant at its base.

"Is there anything else you would like to see?" asked Mr. Meyer politely.

"I believe that you collect miniatures. Might I look at them?"

"Come this way."

In a corner of the marble hall there was a cabinet facing a window. Meyer stood before it. "See," he said; "I press this button, and it releases the drawers. So."

The shutter flew back, and the drawers were free. Meyer opened them, one by one, and indicated their contents. "They are all choice examples of the best masters. These are Goswatts. This is an Engleheart," and so on. He went through the collection till he had shown the last drawer but one. He was about to close the cabinet when Mr. Lucas asked: "Have you any Holbeins?"

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"One," replied Meyer, "and there was I neglecting to show it to you. This last drawer is the most

important of de lot." He opened it and drew forth a small square frame. "Here is de latest addition to my collection. A grand Holbein. You notice de blue background, characteristic of dat great master, and de wonderful thin painting. You can almost see through it. It is a portrait of Meyer of Basle, perhaps a relation of mine, perhaps not. It does not matter. It is a fine picture. Don't you think so?"

Lucas handed it back. "I envy you," he said.

"There is no need," Mr. Meyer responded, as he closed the cabinet. "'Envy no man till he is dead,' said de old Greek philosopher, and I am very much alive. Now come to de orkney house, and photograph de *Cypripedium Meyerii*."

An hour later, after taking photographs of the rare exotic from every point of the compass, Mr. Lucas made his way to the landing-stage, and from thence he rowed thoughtfully across to Bournemouth. [215]

On the following Monday night a boat with a solitary oarsman put off from the mainland, and after several changes of route was successfully beached on the south shore of St. George's Island. Under the protection of the trees its occupant—none other, indeed, than Mr. John Lucas—stealthily approached the Tuscan Villa, which stood out in bold relief in the vivid moonlight.

He gained the terrace, and, keeping as much as possible within the shadow of the balustrade and dogs, he crept to the fourth window, the one at which Mr. Meyer was sitting on the preceding Saturday.

There is no use disguising the fact any longer. Mr. Lucas was a burglar, and he now proceeded to act after the manner of his craft. After affixing some adhesive material to the pane, he began to cut out a square of the window. The glass was thick, so the process was long, but Mr. Lucas toiled at it with a patience and perseverance worthy of a better cause. Only once did he desist—to follow the suggestion of a sudden impulse, and try all the windows of the house. But each was fastened, and Mr. Lucas resumed his original labour. [216]

It was fully an hour before he drew out the square of glass which enabled him to undo the catch inside. Then nearly as long passed before the removal of a second square at the foot allowed him to unscrew the bottom fastening.

The window was open at last, and Lucas stepped inside.

It was the second burglary of his life, and he reflected that so far all that had happened was greatly to the credit of his professional abilities. A moment afterwards he was chilled by the later thought that nothing in particular had happened so far, and that the possibilities of the near future were very great indeed.

With his stealthy entry into Mr. Meyer's villa the personality of that gentleman had suddenly oppressed him. At Bournemouth all that day, with the sun shining, and the band playing popular airs, Mr. Meyer had occurred to him merely as an eccentric German gentleman; but now, at something after midnight, in the deathly stillness of his villa, Mr. Lucas only remembered the Teuton's sharp, decisive utterances, his piercing glances, and his large general reputation for unpleasantness as an enemy. Perhaps it was the sight of Mr. Meyer's empty chair that had brought this train of thought to his mind. The big folio he had been reading was still at its side. Lucas flashed his electric pocket light on the open page. "Love's Labour's Lost" met his eyes. This struck him as ominous. [217]

Lucas pulled himself together. What had he to do with empty chairs, and old folios, and omens? He was a burglar, out for the night on urgent business. Let him attend to it, and keep his dreams and soliloquies for the daytime. He walked across the polished floor, his rubber soles being absolutely noiseless. He raised the heavy curtain, and passed beneath it through the archway.

There in front of him was the marble hall, bathed in coloured moonlight. The fountain played softly to the tones of gold, azure and red cast from the stained-glass window. If Mr. Lucas had been conversant with Keats he would doubtless have thought of St. Agnes' Eve; but presumably Mr. Lucas did not, for, keeping well to the wall, he stole quickly across to where stood the case containing the miniatures. [218]

"You bress de button, and it releases de drawers. So." He smiled as Mr. Meyer's pronunciation came back to him. He followed the instructions, and the drawers were free.

Cosway and Engleheart did not detain him to-night. He opened the bottom drawer. There lay the Holbein for which Mr. Meyer had recently paid three thousand guineas. Lucas dropped it carefully into the pocket of his Norfolk jacket, shut the drawer, and closed the case.

So far all was well—very well indeed. Only a few yards, a curtain, and a few yards more, lay between him and freedom. Then again there fell upon him a sense of Mr. Meyer's personality. What had that man not done? He had browbeaten an Emperor, hoodwinked a couple of wily Chancellors, and decimated the ranks of rival practitioners. Was he, John Lucas, a mere tyro in the burglary profession, able to outwit the smartest man of the day? Had he only to break a window, step across a floor, seize a treasure, and depart?

No—it was impossible. The very ease with which everything had been accomplished was the worst sign of all. "I have gone into de question of thieves, and think I should be able to meet de [219]

situation." Meyer's words came back to him now. He himself was in town—Lucas had seen him depart that morning, to make it absolutely certain—but his myrmidons were doubtless hidden around. An electric shock would suddenly hold him fast, and Meyer's butler or stage manager, or whatever he was called, would appear and wing him—unless the servants were asleep in their master's absence. But nothing was ever left to chance in Mr. Meyer's life or his house. The very silence was eloquent of impending catastrophe.

Again Mr. Lucas reproached himself with nervous folly. "It is only my second burglary," he reflected apologetically. He stepped across the hall, and once more raised the curtain.

"Ah!"

The room, which ten minutes ago was dark and empty, was now brilliantly illuminated, and there was Mr. Adolph Meyer, seated in his chair!

Meyer rose and came forward. "Ah, Mr. Lucas," he said, "dis is indeed a pleasure. Not altokedder unexpected, I admit; but it is always satisfactory to find one's conclusions brove correct. I taught you would have to return to make some final notes on my domestic architecture and my curios. You have seen my place by day. Now you visit me by night. Dat is charming."

Lucas stood by the curtain, overwhelmed with confusion. Not by a word did Mr. Meyer betray any resentment at his presence, but there was a thinly disguised vein of banter in his speech that made the burglar's pulses quicken.

"Berhaps you have not noticed de view I have here, Mr. Lucas," said Meyer. "Come and look."

He threw open the window wide. The moon was playing on the waters of the Channel. Clouds were scurrying across the sky. A lighthouse flashed in the far distance.

"I like dis view," said Meyer. "De sea is always de same—deep and treacherous. One always knows what to exbect, but man you never know. How do you look upon de sea, Mr. Lucas?"

"Good for boating, and—er—bathing," responded Lucas desperately.

"Goot for boating and bading," repeated Meyer. "Dat is so. You are practical. Dat is where you islanders have the advantage over us treamers. But somehow the treams have a habit of outlasting de practice. I do not tink of boating and bading when I look on de sea. I tink of all dat is above it, and below it. On de top, ships carrying men and women and children to continents; below de waves, dead men and women and children, dose who have died by de way, floating by de cables which are carrying words dat make and unmake nations and men. Life and death are dere togedder. Did you never tink of de sea in dat way, Mr. Lucas, when you was not studying domestic architecture and curios?"

"I can't say that I have," said Lucas, trying vainly to rise to the situation. A man with a weapon he could have met and fought any day, at a moment's notice, but smooth words and soliloquies, how could he meet them, though there was a hidden meaning in every phrase, a subtle danger indicated in every intonation?

"I should practise it den, Mr. Lucas," said Meyer gravely. "A little more tinking and a little less action is de new brescription de doctors are giving to dis country." He turned away from the window, after closing it. He did not appear to notice the two great holes in the glass which stared him in the face.

"Den I shut my window tight, for fear of dieves, Mr. Lucas," he went on, "and go to my observatory, where we went de odder day. I go up dose steps to my delescope, and bring de stars widdin speaking distance. Have you ever spoken wid de stars, Mr. Lucas?"

"No," replied the burglar curtly.

"Ah, I taught not. Somehow you did not give me dat imbression. You should study de moon for a bekinning, Mr. Lucas. It is a poor worn-out star of a sort. What does it tell of? Of life run down, as many men's are. But after all, de moon had its day. It was not cut off in its prime, like some men's lives are, Mr. Lucas, because of a comet-like taught, or a meteor suggestion of evil. A kreat science is astronomy, Mr. Lucas. Do you not tink so?"

Mr. Lucas did not reply.

"Why do I speak of dese things, Mr. Lucas?" said Meyer with increasing earnestness. "Because you are young, very young, dough you are nearly so old as me. I speak of dem because you are



"LUCAS DROPPED IT CAREFULLY INTO THE POCKET OF HIS NORFOLK JACKET."

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wasting your life entering my house in de mittle of de night to take photokraphs, when de stars are singing outside, and de world is calling for de man who, as Dommas Carlyle says, is not dere. What would Dommas Carlyle have said if he had known dat you were here all de time, taking photokraphs in Mr. Adolph Meyer's villa—robbing Mr. Meyer, widout de excuse of necessity?"

Lucas made an attempt to speak, but Meyer stopped him. The little man's voice rose, his eyes gleamed, his very stature seemed to swell. The room was full of him.

"Be silent, sare," he said, with a gesture of an emperor. "I am speaking! Listen! I know what you will say: It is for sport dat you do dis—sport dat eats up your race, and makes men like me your master. You take your gun and kill. See," pointing through the window at a problematical object. "Dat bird—dat beautiful white gull. It is flying—seeking for food or its mate. You shoot it ___"

"Never!" shouted Lucas indignantly.

"You do. I know you do. You take dat wonderful ding we call life—for sport. You rob me. Dat is a smaller ding, but it is sport also. Mein Gott! but you shall rob and kill no more."

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He struck a bell. Lucas backed to the wall to be ready for emergencies. A little sharp-featured man entered.

"Here he is, Mr. Marvell," said Meyer. "I have got him red-handed and cold-souled."

"That's right, sir," said the little man briskly, producing a pair of handcuffs. "I'll take him across to Bournemouth, and we'll have him up at the police court in the morning."

Mr. Meyer did not appear to have heard him. "Strange, is it not?" he resumed, "dat you and I and Mr. Marvell, de clever detective, should be here, Mr. Lucas? No, I will call you by your broper name. Sir Rubert Inkledree, I ask you to listen."

He took up a red volume from the table.

"Dis is a useful book," he said, as he opened it. "We are all entered up here, all our public appearances, dat is—not our midnight photokraphings. Ah, here it is:

"Sir Rubert Inkledree, seventh baronet, born 1868, only son of sixth baronet and Mary, daughter of Viscount Morecambe. Educated Eton and Christ Church, Oxford. Owns twenty thousand acres. Address: Inkledree Castle, Leicestershire; 57, Brook Street, W. Clubs: Bachelor's, Boodle's, Turf.'

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"Dat is fine—for a bekinning," continued Meyer; "but what an end, Sir Rubert, in dis room wid Mr. Meyer whom you have robbed, and a detective, and de Bournemouth Police Court in de morning. Dat is not very fine. Now listen akain."

He turned over the leaves and read:—

"Adolph Meyer, born 1864. Financier. Son of Jacob Meyer of Düsseldorf. M.A. London University, Commander of de Victorian Order, Chevalier of de Legion of Honour. Address: 16, Lombard Street, E.C., and St. George's Island, Bournemouth.' Dat is all. Dere are no clubs and no acres. I have de orders because I did service to England and France. I am M.A. of London University because, when I was a young man behind de counter in de bank all day, I worked for my dekree by night; and now I am here, and you are where I like to put you, Sir Rubert Inkledree."

"Bournemouth Police Station," suggested Mr. Marvell, who was aching to get to business.

"Bournemouth Police Station?" repeated Mr. Meyer slowly. "No, Mr. Marvell; I tink not. I am Master of Arts of London University and reader of Blato, letting alone de odder dings. He shall go free, and Mr. Marvell, you will blease forket de incident. I telekraft for you on Saturday. You came, but dere was noding. Dat is what you will report, please, at Scotland Yard."

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"But you, Sir Rubert, you will not forket. You will remember. You will neider kill nor rob akain, because it is de wish of Mr. Adolph Meyer, who makes you free instead of sending you to de Police Station."

"Also, Sir Rubert, I suchest dat you give up dat Club dat Mr. Marvell speaks of. See, you have my Holbein in your pocket. Take it, since you want it. Show it to your friends, and say dat Mr. Meyer, who is M.A. of London University, Commander, Chevalier and tcheneral treamer, says dat dey had better disbant, for de stars are singing, and Mr. Marvell is watching."

Mr. Marvell folded up his handcuffs methodically, and replaced them in his pocket. He was too well trained to show the intense disgust he felt at the turn the proceedings had taken.

Again the burglar endeavoured to speak, but once more Mr. Meyer commanded silence.

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"Mr. Marvell will see you to your boat, Sir Rubert," he said. "I drust dat you will weigh my words well. It is not often dat I say so many, and dey have caused me some inconvenience to speak, as I am not accustomed to spend Monday nights in my marine villa. To be here I had dis afternoon to postpone an interview wid de Turkish Ambassador, which I have since learnt by telekram from Constantinople has been misconstrued. De Sultan will not sleep much to-night, and in de morning newspapers dere will be talk of drouble in de Balkan States. Some peoples will

be fearing war, Sir Rubert, and all on account of you and your midnight photokraphings. I wonder what Dommas Carlyle would say to a mess like dat. Goot night."

Mr. Meyer turned abruptly on his heels, and left the room.

"Come along, Sir Rupert, please," said Mr. Marvell. In the brilliant moonshine they went along the terrace by the stone dogs, and down the steps to the beach. They found the boat by the trees.

"How did Mr. Meyer come to suspect my errand?" said Ingletree suddenly.

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The detective smiled a wan smile.

"Well, sir," he replied, "I wasn't present when you saw him on Saturday, but I think that Mr. Meyer read you through as if you were a book—printed in pretty big letters, too. It was a rather thin tale, that about the magazine article, and when you asked to see round the house Mr. Meyer was certain that you had some special object in view. When you inquired after the miniatures he knew what you were after, as the papers had lately been full of the Holbein. To make sure on the point he didn't show it to you, and of course you asked to see it. Then he telegraphed to Scotland Yard, and they sent me."

"How did you find out who I was, and why I wanted the miniature?"

"Ah," said Mr. Marvell drily, "I'll tell you that some day later on, Sir Rupert. We shall probably meet again."

Then the baronet put out to sea, and the detective went back to the Tuscan Villa.

On the following evening, at the meeting of the Burglars' Club, the Secretary produced the Holbein miniature, and read a letter from Sir Rupert Ingletree which accompanied it. Then the President rose.

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"My lords and gentlemen," he said, "we have just heard the singular adventure which has befallen one of our members. The Holbein miniature is here, but only owing to the goodwill of its owner. Sir Rupert Ingletree is at liberty owing to the forbearance of the same gentleman. Under the circumstances I think we have no option but to accept the resignation of Sir Rupert, who does not appear to have acted with the adroitness which is a necessary qualification of our members. It may well be that you or I would have done no better under similar circumstances, but I need hardly remind you that in this club we judge only by results, and the results in this instance are not satisfactory.

"There is a further matter to consider—a message from Mr. Meyer, which demands a reply. Colonel Altamont, as the *doyen* of our club, we look to your premature grey hairs for guidance."

Altamont rose amidst general applause.

"Your Grace, my lords and gentlemen," he began. "It is surely unnecessary to ask for my opinion on the situation. Our existence is now known to the outside world. Twice has this detective, Marvell, been within reach of us. Someone has betrayed us, and I for one do not intend to rest until I have traced that traitor. But this is not the matter before us now.

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"Though Mr. Meyer objects to sport, he has behaved like a perfect sportsman. (Hear, hear.) For his courtesy we wish to express our hearty thanks and appreciation; but for his suggestion that we should disband we surely have one answer only, and that is: Never, never, never."

The words were re-echoed on all sides.

"Our club would indeed have fallen on degenerate days," continued Altamont, when quiet was restored, "if the fact of its existence being known were promptly to bring about its end. Surely the fact that we are watched should give an added zest to our proceedings, which have been all too monotonously serene. The knowledge that Scotland Yard is acting, and that we carry our personal liberty in our hands, should spur us on to the Homeric deeds for the perpetration of which we exist.

"Ingletree's postscript is pathetic, and vividly shows the present unbalanced state of his mind. He asks whether we consider that under Mr. Meyer's terms he is at liberty to fish. My own feeling is that I would have suffered a long period of incarceration rather than have surrendered my right to act as a free and independent Englishman; but Ingletree, having accepted his liberty on Mr. Meyer's stupendous terms, has surely forfeited his right to again take life in any form. If he so much as nets a minnow he has no option but to surrender himself forthwith at the Bournemouth Police Station.

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"We all regret the loss of our once brilliant member, but it is obvious from Ingletree's behaviour during the last few days that he is not the man he was when he paid his entrance fee by the production of—what was it, Mr. Secretary?—the Mace of the House of Commons?"

"No, sir," replied the Secretary. "That was Mr. Henderson's fee. Sir Rupert Ingletree entered with the Portland Vase, from the British Museum."

"Ah, quite so. Thank you. And a very smart bit of work it was, I remember. It is regrettable that

Sir Rupert could not be here in person this evening to advance any extenuating circumstances; but as he is probably under the surveillance of Scotland Yard we appreciate his reason for adopting the medium of the Postmaster-General for communicating with us. I therefore propose that Sir Rupert Ingletree's resignation be accepted, and that, with the Holbein picture, which we at once return to its owner in accordance with our rule, we send a letter expressing our appreciation of Mr. Meyer's magnanimity, and our regret that we are unable to disband. We can leave it to our Secretary to couch this in the neat epigrammatic style for which he is famed in the Chancelleries of Europe."

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THE VICTORIA CROSS.

"It seems to me," said his Grace of Dorchester, "that the Army has been abominably neglected by us. On looking through our archives, I do not come across the record of a single military achievement. In the Church and in the State, in Diplomacy and Commerce, in Science, Art, and Literature, our activities are marked, but we have unaccountably left the Services alone. Our enemies—if such there be—might unkindly suggest that we have purposely refrained from interfering with the most vigorous portion of the community. To avoid this reproach, and to make good the omission, I therefore propose a series of three military raids, the first to be immediately undertaken by Mr. Maxwell-Pitt, who will have the opportunity of renewing his subscription at our next meeting by the production of the last Victoria Cross bestowed by His Majesty."

As the result of inquiries, Mr. Maxwell-Pitt learned that the last Victoria Cross had been given to Captain Sefton Richards, who had rescued a wounded soldier from the Somali, and, single-handed, had kept the enemy at bay till support arrived.

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"H'm!" reflected Maxwell-Pitt. "He'll be a tough customer to tackle. It strikes me that if I pull this off I shall have earned the Blue Riband of the Club. I wonder where the beggar is stationed?"

Further inquiries elicited the fact that Captain Richards was at present spending his well-earned leave with his sister, who lived at Bamburn, in Lincolnshire.

The next meeting of the Club had been fixed for the 22nd of the month. On the 19th Maxwell-Pitt set out for Bamburn.

It was an ancient country town. Once it had been an ecclesiastical centre—as its minster still bore witness—but now it was given up to the sale of sheep and the manufacture of chocolate. In its outskirts was a number of highly eligible residences, and in one of these, the bequest of an uncle who was the inventor of chocolate caramels, lived Miss Richards.

Maxwell-Pitt learnt some of this from the local directory, and some from the waiter at the inn, the night of his arrival; and on the following morning he made his way to the neighbourhood of Burgoyne Lodge—so Miss Richards' house was styled—and sat down on a seat thoughtfully provided by the local district council. He waited there a long time, apparently deeply absorbed in the columns of a sporting paper, but in reality rarely taking his eyes from the house.

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At eleven o'clock his patience was rewarded. The gate opened, and two people came out. The man—tall, straight, and bronzed—was obviously Captain Richards, the lady probably his sister. Mr. Maxwell-Pitt saw them disappear along the road in the direction of the town, and then he approached the house to take in its bearings. It was the last building on the road, and it was closely surrounded by a belt of trees; behind the trees were thick bushes. This screen effectually concealed the house from the road—for the inventor of chocolate caramels had been a recluse by nature—so, in order to obtain a better view of it, Maxwell-Pitt got over the wall, and peered through the bushes.

It was a solid Georgian dwelling, with two windows on each side of the door. Which window should he attempt to force? The end ones would be farthest from the hall, and perhaps the safest. Or would it be better to try the back? Confound it!

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His eyes had been so intently fixed on the house that he had omitted to notice an occupant of the garden, but now he was aware that a trimly and plainly gowned little woman who was engaged in cutting flowers had stopped in her work, and was watching him. The position was ridiculous. What excuse could he offer? He turned round, got over the wall again, and walked quickly away, with the conviction that he had made a blunder, criminal in a professional, and unpardonable even for an amateur.

During the afternoon, while he was walking down the main street of the town, wondering at the number of sheep the land contained—for it was market day—he came face to face with the same good-looking, dapper little person he had seen in the grounds of Burgoyne Lodge. She had appeared from a side street, and no escape was open to him. He fixed his eyes on the celebrated Perpendicular architecture of the minster tower, hoping to escape her attention, but, to his surprise, she stopped him.

"Pardon me, I think we have seen one another before," she said slowly, and with a marked

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foreign intonation.

"Of course we have," he replied, as he took off his hat. "I remember the occasion perfectly. How do you do?" Then he added, unblushingly, "And how is your sister?"

"I thank you," she answered. "My sister would, no doubt, be quite well if I had one. But please do not make romances. I saw you this morning at Burgoyne Lodge. I know what you want."

"The dickens you do!" he exclaimed in blank amazement. "And pray what is it?"

"I think it is something that does not belong to you," she said, her dark eyes looking steadily at him.

"Indeed! And how do you know that?"

She shrugged her shoulders expressively. "*Cela n'importe*," she answered. "If you please, let us walk on so that we do not draw attention. Yes, I know what you want, and I think that I can assist you a little."

"It's very good of you to suggest it," said Maxwell-Pitt as they walked along the street; "and I'm sure I'm much obliged to you. I'm not accustomed to this sort of business, you know." [238]

"You have made the same business once before," she said.

"You are really remarkably well informed," he replied. "The least you can do is to tell me how you come to know these things."

"Do not waste the time," she said impatiently. "I am Adèle, Miss Richards' maid. She is in town with her brother, the captain. They must not see us together. When do you intend to—to—" She hesitated.

"To pick mushrooms, shall we call it?" he answered.

"To—pick—mushrooms?" she repeated, with a puzzled look. Then she smiled. "Ah, I understand. Yes, when do you intend to pick the fine mushrooms?"

"As soon as I know where they are, and how to get them. If you assist me it will, of course, make matters easy for me."

"To-night?"

"Mademoiselle, you are a thought-reader. You anticipate my wishes. To-night, by all means."

"Then I will see that one of the windows is left unlatched. *Mon Dieu!* Meet me here at this place at nine o'clock." With this she turned abruptly round the corner they were passing, and disappeared into a shop. [239]

Maxwell-Pitt glanced ahead, and saw Captain and Miss Richards approaching. They might not have seen him with the maid, for they were in earnest conversation. Captain Richards only glanced casually at him in passing.

"Well, this is what I call remarkable—simply re-markable," said Maxwell-Pitt to himself as he walked to his hotel. "How on earth should she know of the V.C. business, and, what is more, that I had to pay my entrance fee by a previous burglary? Who could have told her? I wonder why any member should be so extremely anxious to assist me. . . . Stop! Was it really a member? There's that man Marvell—the detective. He has been present at two former burglaries—called in by accident, certainly, but he has his eye on us, and perhaps he now has some means of finding out in advance the task set to members. The remarkably obliging Adèle may be merely a female detective. She may assist me to get into the house, and show me where the V.C. is, and then, when I get it, her friend Marvell will appear. In that case Richards and his sister are in the know, and this apparently casual meeting just now, and Adèle's annoyance, was pre-arranged to throw me off the scent. It seems to me, Maxwell-Pitt, that you'll have to be very careful what you are about, or you'll be landed to-night, and by a woman." [240]

That evening he kept his appointment at the street-corner. The maid was late. The clocks had chimed the quarter before she came, hot and breathless—not her cool, nonchalant self of the morning.

"It has been so difficult to leave," she explained. "Miss Richards would have me to read to her after the dinner. Walter Scott! And me dying all the time to be here, Mr.— What shall I call you?"

"Jones," said Maxwell-Pitt, "is a dreamy, romantic name, very suitable for a mushroom picker."

"Yes; Jones is a beautiful name," she replied. "Have you decided to pick to-night, Mr. Jones?"

"I should like to."

"You wish me to leave that window open?"

"If you will." [241]

"And what do you give me, if you please?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"What am I going to have of it all?"

"All.' That is rather a big word for the little mushroom I shall take away; but if you would like some memento of the occasion, what shall it be? A bracelet?"

"A bracelet? *Comment!* Absurd! With my help, *m'sieu*, it will not be a little mushroom, *point du tout*. For me myself I demand fifty pounds."

Maxwell-Pitt stared at her blankly.

"What is it now?" she cried angrily. "*Mais*, you are too stupid—more stupid than the ordinary Englishman. Miss Richards has some fine pearls, and her diamonds are *magnifiques*, and I can give them to you. This is not to be another Wedderburn mistake."

"Ah, quite so—quite so," replied Maxwell-Pitt, who was absolutely nonplussed by the turn the conversation had taken. Then he drew his bow at a venture. "Wedderburn made a bit of a mistake, didn't he?" he said.

She looked at him sharply. "'He.' Who's 'he'? You know precisely that I speak of the burglary at Wedderburn 'Ouse last week, where you were not very clever."

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"Oh, of course, of course. I understand," said Maxwell-Pitt.

"Of course you do understand. Why do you so pretend to me? I knew it was you when I saw you seeking round our 'ouse. I saw you were big and dark, with a long moustache, like the butler at Wedderburn 'Ouse said. How else did you think I could have known you were a burglar? You are to look at only like a gentleman?"

"Ah, I see—I see," said Maxwell-Pitt, the light at last breaking in upon him. "It seems that I have done friend Marvell an injustice."

"I do not know who your friend is, nor what you talk about," said Mademoiselle Adèle. "I must return at once. Is it to be a bargain or not? Fifty pounds is little compared to your share."

"Mademoiselle," said Maxwell-Pitt, "you are not only an accomplished thought-reader, but you appear to have the business instinct strongly developed as well. You can quite understand that when I planned this—er—botanical expedition I did not anticipate such a drain on my resources. In plain words, I haven't fifty pounds on me."

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"You can get it, and come to-morrow night instead."

"There will still be time," said Maxwell-Pitt thoughtfully.

"Of course there will. Now I go. It is settled?"

"Yes; I'll come to-morrow night and bring fifty pounds with me."

"In gold sovereigns, please."

"In gold, if you wish it."

"Good. And I'll have the jewellery ready. The pearl necklace cost more than a thousand sovereigns. There will be no need to take anything else, I hope. That big mushroom should satisfy you enough."

"Amplly. I don't want any more jewels, but where does Captain Richards keep his decorations—his Victoria Cross, for instance?"

"You don't want that?"

"I do."

"It is only worth a few centimes—not half a franc, they tell me."

"Never mind its value. I am a collector of such trifles, and want this specimen particularly."

"He won it in battle. It would be cruel—abominable—to take it. You cannot have it."

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"Mademoiselle Adèle, your scruples do you credit; but, after all, are mushroom-pickers the people to talk about scruples? Here you are planning what is, in plain English, the robbery of your employer, so why stick at a trifle like that?"

"*Écoutez*, Mr. Jones. You are only a burglar, so your opinion is no matter, but I shall tell you why I do this thing. I come to your country to get riches. I am clever, but there are no riches, even for clever people, in my own valley of the Durance. First I was maid to one lady with a title so long," and she extended her arms to their full width. "I was 'appy. Then I met an aëronaut—you understand, one who makes ascensions in a balloon—who talked my language like myself. He persuades me to leave my place and marry him. I was idiot to do so. Then one day he goes up in his balloon at—what you call it?—Birmingham, for a brief voyage. But he disappears in the clouds. He sends me postcard from Ostend to tell me that he is landed all-right. Then I never found him again."

She paused dramatically. Maxwell-Pitt felt that something was demanded of him, and hastened to murmur some words of sympathy, but she did not listen.

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"Then I took a place again as lady's maid," she went on. "There was trouble over some jewels. They blamed me. Bah! I was innocent. But they say 'No,' and 'You go at once,' and 'No character.' So I am alone in England, with no money and *mon mari* gone. I come here, and I think this lady so kind to take me without a character written. Then I find the ones who have the characters written will not stay with her—not one month—so that is why she takes me. She is black slave-driver, and her temper—*mon Dieu*, it is disgraceful! It is a horrible time here. Then there is Alphonse, who is waiter at the Élysée Palace, who wants me to marry him and assist him to found a restaurant, and I must continually tell him 'Wait.'

"When I see you, Mr. Jones, I see my way to escape from it all. It came at one jump—the thought, 'I will help him, and he will give me fifty gold sovereigns, and I shall go to Belgium at once. My 'usband is either dead, or I find him and tell him what I think of him, and get a divorce, and then return and marry the good Alphonse, who adores me.' So you see that I am no common thief. Bah! As for madame's jewellery, *ça ne fait rien*. She is rich. I shall be glad to have annoyed her. But at once I tell you, you shall not have the Victoria Medal. That is not to be. Captain Richards is the only man in this miserable country who has been kind to me. And he is a brave soldier. I shall not permit that you annoy him."

"I promise to return it."

"Then for why do you take it?"

"That is my affair. I will bring the fifty pounds to-morrow night, but I must have the cross whether you help me to get it or not. Where does he keep it?"

"Keep it? *Attendez*. Oh, I know. In the strong box locked in his bedroom. He is a man to shoot certain, and he always has his pistol to hand. You will give me the money instantly you are in the 'ouse, for if you go upstairs you will be a dead man at once. I tell you so myself."

"That is an extremely unpleasant prospect. I must see my lawyer—my *notaire*, mademoiselle—in the morning, and arrange my affairs. Which window will you unlatch for me?"

"The one at the front, the nearest to where you stood when I saw you. If you will come at one o'clock I will be in the room with the beautiful pearls. Now I must fly. *Bon soir, cher* Mr. Jones."

On the following morning Maxwell-Pitt paid his hotel bill and went up to town. In the evening he returned with his bicycle, getting out at the station beyond Bamburn. At a few minutes to one o'clock he entered the grounds of Burgoyne Lodge, and made his way stealthily to the window fixed on. It open noiselessly, and he clambered through. Mademoiselle Adèle was not there. Perhaps she was reading Sir Walter Scott to Miss Richards. He would wait for half an hour, at any rate, before making any move. Perhaps Adèle had thought better of her determination about the cross, and would bring it with her rather than risk trouble.

He sat down and mused. A queer life, that of a burglar. Reminiscences of detective tales came back to him. He thought of Sherlock Holmes. The doings of the Burglars' Club would have puzzled him at first. Then there was his great predecessor, Poe's Dupin, the detective of The Murders in the Rue Morgue, of The Mystery of Marie Rogêt, and The Purloined Letter. Ah, The Purloined Letter! They were searching for that all over, probing every inch of space in the house for it, and there it was all the time, underneath their noses, hanging in a card-rack beneath the mantelpiece. Maxwell-Pitt rose and flashed his light over the mantelpiece. There was the usual assortment of odds and ends, but the V.C. was not there. No; it was too much to expect. Where did Richards keep it? Adèle had hesitated before replying that it was in the strong box in his bedroom. It might be—or it might not. Here, at any rate, were obvious traces of its owner—his letters and pipe on a side table, his service magazines on the chair. If the V.C. wasn't on the mantelpiece, it might be elsewhere in the room.

There was a bookcase with a cupboard and drawers. He opened the bookcase, but closed it quickly at the sight of the serried ranks of the "Encyclopædia Britannica." He had no better luck in the cupboard, but in the first drawer he pulled out, his eye was at once caught by two small cases. He eagerly opened one, to find the South African Medal, but in the second—ye gods! It was the Victoria Cross!

Maxwell-Pitt's fingers closed over it. At this moment the door opened gently.

"Who is there?" whispered a voice.

By this time he had moved to the table. He turned his light on again.

Adèle was there—pale and excited. From a pocket which she must have specially constructed she produced a large case. She opened it, disclosing a necklace of large pearls.

"Here it is," she whispered. "Where are the fifty sovereigns?"

Maxwell-Pitt drew out a bag and gave it to her. She opened it, and looked at the contents, then put it in her pocket.

"Now go," she said. "*Vite!*"

Maxwell-Pitt moved towards the window. "I don't want this," he said, pointing to the case.

"You don't want it?" she exclaimed in astonishment. For a moment they stood there facing one another. Then a sudden thought struck her. She went to the bookcase, opened the drawer, and

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saw only one case there.

"You are more clever than I thought," she said. "I wished to take these away upstairs to-night, but the Captain he remained here late, and then madame wanted me. You have got the medal, but you shall not go away with it. Give it back to me."

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**"HE WAS WALKING IN HIS SLEEP,
CONSCIOUS OF NOTHING."**

(p. 250.)

sleep. He was never the same here again," and she tapped her forehead. "Now go at once, but softly."

He clambered out, and then looked back through the window into the room.

Adèle picked up the jewel case and put it into her pocket. There she touched the bag of gold. She pulled it out, looked at it for a moment, then stepped hastily to the window and flung it from her into the garden. She leaned out, and whispered, vindictively, "Take your money. I shall help the police. They shall catch you before the clock is round."

Then she stepped gently to the door. It closed behind her, and the sleep-walker was alone in the room.

Maxwell-Pitt picked up the bag of gold, and then cycled thirty miles. He caught an early train to London, and that evening he renewed his subscription to the Burglars' Club by exhibiting the Victoria Cross lately bestowed on Captain Sefton Richards by His Majesty.

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On the following day, to his great astonishment, Captain Richards received the cross in a registered postal packet, with no word to explain the reason of its temporary absence; and a few days later a larger postal packet came for Mademoiselle Adèle, which, on being opened, disclosed to her enraptured eyes fifty sovereigns.

Thus did Maxwell-Pitt attempt to atone for the burglary he had perpetrated. "After all," he thought, "the only person who will have been seriously inconvenienced by the transaction is the balloonist in Belgium—and he deserves it."

Maxwell-Pitt shook his head.

Her eyes blazed in anger. "You will not? *Mon Dieu!* then I sound the alarm."

"How will you account for this?" said Maxwell-Pitt, pointing to the case on the table.

"I do not know. I do not care," she answered. "Give me the medal, or I ring."

Her hand clutched the bell rope. "Shall I ring or not?" she demanded.

Again there was a sound at the door. Once more he turned off his light. The door opened wide, and Captain Richards entered, carrying a lighted candle in his hand.

Maxwell-Pitt and Adèle stood there transfixed. The light shone full on them, but Captain Richards took no heed of them. His eyes were fixed, staring into space. He was walking in his sleep, conscious of nothing that was going on around him. He placed his candle on the side table, sat down in his easy chair, drew the book-rest towards him, and leaned back, staring vacantly at the pages of the open book.

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Adèle released the bell rope and held a warning finger to her lips. She stepped lightly to Maxwell-Pitt. "Sh! it is dangerous to awaken him," she whispered. "Once they awakened my cousin suddenly when he walked like that in his

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THE LAST CHRONICLE.

GILBERT BROWN, second Baron Lothersdale, was generally regarded as being the best business man in the country. His talent for affairs was doubtless hereditary, as his father had successfully kept a big emporium before seeking the parliamentary honours which led to higher things. His son, in his turn, entered Parliament, and quickly ran the gamut of two under-secretaryships and the Cabinet. The Lord Lieutenancy of Ireland and the Governor-Generalship of India would undoubtedly have been his, but for the impossibility of associating Brown's Bayswater Bazaar

with those regal positions.

When, therefore, the last of six successive schemes for the reorganisation of the British Army had fallen to the parliamentary floor and broken in pieces, it was felt that there was only one man who could tackle the matter, and bring it to a successful issue. Lord Lothersdale's tenure of the Postmaster-Generalship was remembered with pride by a grateful nation. Under his management the reply-postcard business, which had hitherto dragged and lost money, had become a popular and remunerative department, while his penny-in-the-slot form of application for Government annuities was an innovation as brilliant in conception as it was profitable in results.

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When the country learnt that to Lord Lothersdale had been entrusted the task of reforming the Army it heaved a sigh of content, for it knew that the work was now as good as done; and when the news reached the Continent the officers of the Great General Staff of the German Army were noticed to wear a sad and pensive look unusual to them.

To accomplish the work that in the past twenty years alone had cost thousands of lives and millions of money, besides incidentally destroying six first-class parliamentary reputations, Lord Lothersdale retired to Moors, his Berkshire seat, and there, in his study overlooking the deer park, he accumulated his evidence and dictated his Report.

From time to time paragraphs appeared in the papers that Lord Lothersdale was busy at his work, or that he was making progress therein, and at last word went round that he was now putting the final touches to his Report, which would be laid before the Cabinet the following week.

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Then it was that his Grace of Dorchester decided that Mr. Drummond Eyre must show the same Report at the next meeting of the Burglars' Club, if he wished to continue his membership thereof.

George Drummond Eyre was a Leicestershire man, an ex-guardsman, and a shooter of big game. He received the news of his mission without comment, and proceeded to make himself acquainted with the habits of his lordship of Lothersdale. He was still pursuing these investigations when he read in the *Morning Mail*:—

"Lord Lothersdale is just completing his work of reorganising the British Army on paper with the thoroughness which we associate with his name. Not content with revising the duties attached to the highest offices, with altering the length of service, and the pay of officer and private, his lordship is actually winding up with suggestions for a new full-dress uniform for our soldiers. The traditional red is to be discarded, and hues more in keeping with the aesthetic taste of the age will supplant it, in the hope of attracting a superior class of men to the army. We hear that Mr. Bower, the eminent tailor, was last week at Moors, and that to-day a member of his staff will arrive there with sample uniforms for his lordship's inspection. History is in making at Moors."

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"Good!" said Eyre, with obvious satisfaction, as he read this paragraph. "This fits in well. I'm in luck's way."

That was at nine o'clock in the morning. At ten o'clock he drove up to Mr. Bower's well-known establishment, and sent in a card on which was printed in unostentatious letters, "Mr. Luke Sinnott," and in the bottom corner "Criminal Investigation Dept., New Scotland Yard."

In a few minutes he was shown into Mr. Bower's private room.

Mr. Bower was a ponderous gentleman. In a higher station of life he would have been a Dean.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Sinnott?" he inquired, eyeing his visitor over the top of his gold-rimmed glasses.

"I have come on important business, sir," said the pseudo-Sinnott. He went back to the door, and closed it cautiously, then deposited his hat and gloves on the table with a precision which impressed the tailor with a sense of deep mystery.

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"I think you have just been to Moors," he said, after these preliminaries.

"That is so," replied the tailor, with unnatural indifference.

"And one of your people is going there to-day with some sample uniforms?"

"I am going there to-day with a sample uniform."

"Quite so. You are aware that Lord Lothersdale is working on a very important report?"

"Of course I am."

Mr. Sinnott came a step nearer to the tailor, and dropped his voice to an impressive whisper.

"What I am going to tell you," he continued, "is in the strictest confidence. A Continental Power that shall be nameless, but whose identity you, as a man of the world, will be able to guess, is moving heaven and earth to get to know what that report contains. It is certain that whatever

Lord Lothersdale suggests will be carried out by our government, and this will immediately influence the military policy of the Power in question. Moreover, there are some secret portions of this report which will never be made public. Therefore this foreign power is striving to get sight of it before it leaves Lord Lothersdale's hands.

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"One spy has already been detected and warned off by our man who is established in the village, but we have just learnt that another agent has obtained admission to the house itself, by taking service as a footman. On a previous occasion we alarmed Lord Lothersdale, without any real grounds, as it eventually turned out, and we should not care to repeat the incident. It is therefore essential that I, who know this man, should have the opportunity of seeing if he really is there, without anyone—not even his lordship—knowing who I am. With your assistance this will be possible; and I have come from Scotland Yard to ask you to allow me to go with you to Moors to-day, ostensibly as connected with your firm. If you will assist us in this matter you will not find us ungrateful. Scotland Yard does not forget, and some day it may be in our power to be of use to you. In the meantime, you will have done your country a great service."

Mr. Bower was considerably impressed by this speech. He had come back from Moors full of importance. He was most certainly assisting in preserving the integrity of the empire, and it was quite in keeping with this feeling that he should take part in the international complication outlined by his visitor. He appeared to weigh the matter judicially for a few minutes. Then he said solemnly, "We will give you our co-operation in this affair, Mr. Sinnott."

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"Thank you, Mr. Bower," said the "detective."

So at one o'clock that afternoon Mr. Bower, accompanied by his new assistant, took train for Moors. In another compartment travelled a sample corporal of the British Army, who was to show off the uniform which Mr. Bower had designed under Lord Lothersdale's instructions.

It was a two-hours' journey, but Mr. Sinnott found it all too short in Mr. Bower's improving society, for that gentleman expounded views on life from a new standpoint.

"No, sir," he said, "things are not what they used to be. Gentlemen—noblemen, especially, I regret to state—do not display that intelligent attention to dress which they used to, even within my own recollection Lord Lothersdale is a notable exception, but enumerate any other statesmen you like, and if left to their own unaided judgment—I say it with all due deference—they would go to pieces. I assure you, upon my honour, at the end of six months you would be liable to mistake any one of them for a foreigner. You would scarcely think it, Mr. Sinnott, but no less than five members of the present Government are too busy to give a thought to their dress at all."

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"You don't say so!" exclaimed Mr. Sinnott.

"I do. 'Bower,' they say, 'keep your eye on us, and whenever you think that we are gettin' shabby make us some new clothes, and we will wear them. We leave it all to you.' It is flatterin', sir, I suppose, to have such reliance placed in your judgment, but it demonstrates the absence of—shall I term it proper self-respect?—which is deplorable, absolutely deplorable. It has made me a firm believer in the degeneration of the race.

"Of course, to keep the Cabinet well-dressed is the principal object of my existence, and I flatter myself that under my superintendence the present Cabinet will compare favourably in taste and style with any previous one. But it is anxious, even harassin' work to decide what particular cut, colour, and texture will most suitably harmonise with each individual temperament. They cannot afford the time for interviews, so I have to anticipate the movements of ministers, and go out of my way to meet them. I track them down, as it were, and make my observations in the street, as best I can. Would you believe it, Mr. Sinnott, I was one day actually arrested for suspiciously followin' the Secretary of State for India? His trousers were positively baggin' at the knees. I couldn't take my eyes off them, and one of your smart young constables took me to Bow Street. Most humiliatin', I call it; and all because of my devotion to duty and the honour of the nation."

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"Shocking," said Mr. Sinnott. "I sympathise with you, Mr. Bower. I should like to know the name of that constable."

"His name was Simpson—Archibald Simpson," replied the tailor.

Mr. Sinnott made a note of the name, and Mr. Bower continued:

"But, as I previously observed, Lord Lothersdale is a horse of another colour, if I may make use of such an expression. It is an inspiration to meet him. He is the busiest gentleman in England—bar none—but he is never too busy for a try-on or for a consultation. He is gifted, sir. He has ideas that would amaze you. The single-breasted frock-coat was his creation. What do you think of that?"

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"You do astonish me, Mr. Bower. I had no idea of it."

"I knew you had not—that is where the greatness of the man comes in. It is his conception, and he is fully aware that the credit of it is attributed to me—but he does not mind. There is no petty jealousy of the profession about him. Then, silk breeches for evenin' wear. That is another of his grand ideas. You must have silk breeches if you visit at Moors, or you do not receive a second invitation. He is drastic in his methods, is my lord—a regular Roman. Mark my words, Mr. Sinnott, if the fashion takes it will be owin' to the influence of Lord Lothersdale, and once get the

nation into silk breeches, and you do not know to what heights it may attain. It will be the beginnin' of a new era, the like of which no man livin' has known. I only hope I shall be here to witness its dawn."

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Mr. Bower's eyes glistened, and his cheeks flushed in anticipation. Even Mr. Sinnott caught a little of his enthusiasm.

It was half-past three when they reached Moors. Lord Lothersdale could not see them until after dinner. At that moment a Japanese Surgeon-General was with him, explaining how they managed their field hospitals in the Far East. He had come by special permission of the Mikado, and had to return to the seat of war by the six o'clock train.

At nine o'clock the corporal was arrayed in the proposed new uniform for the Line—a taking arrangement in heliotrope, the outcome of Lord Lothersdale's creative genius and Mr. Bower's executive ability.

At nine-thirty they were admitted into Lord Lothersdale's study. The great man was in a genial mood, the result, no doubt, of an instructive afternoon and a good dinner.

He walked round the corporal, and inspected him critically.

"By Jove! Bower," he said at last, "you've done the trick. Capital! And your idea of primrose facings was quite right, after all."

"I am glad that you approve of it, my lord," said the beaming tailor.

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"I do. And the country will, too. There'll be some recruiting when this gets out." Then he knitted his brows. "I think the cuffs are a shade too deep, though. I'm sure they are. But half-an-inch—no, a quarter—will put it right."

"A quarter-of-an-inch off the cuff facin's. Make a note of that," said Mr. Bower to his assistant, who had his pocket-book ready.

"You'll have it done by breakfast time, please," said Lord Lothersdale, "so that I can see how it looks by daylight. A photographer will be here, as I want some coloured prints for the Appendix."

Then the little deputation withdrew. The whole interview had not occupied more than five minutes, and most of that time the tailor's assistant had been taking his bearings, and trying to locate the report. That was surely it—a business-like foolscap volume on the desk. The secretary was writing in it when they entered, and later on he had carefully put it in the top left-hand drawer. The assistant manœuvred round to the desk during the interview, and after taking particulars of the alterations required, he laid down his notebook, and deliberately left it there.

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At two o'clock in the morning, when the whole household was presumably fast asleep, Mr. Bower's assistant suddenly remembered that he had left his notebook downstairs, and decided to recover it at once rather than wait till morning. He therefore made his way cautiously to Lord Lothersdale's study. He accomplished the return journey without any untoward event happening; but he brought back with him, in addition to the notebook, a manuscript volume, which he deposited in his handbag.

The alterations in the cuff facings were duly made by breakfast time. At nine o'clock Lord Lothersdale approved of the result. By nine-fifteen the corporal had been photographed in several attitudes—one of which now adorns the recruiting posters—and by nine-thirty the party was driving to the railway station, incidentally meeting a troop of Hussars on the march to Moors for purposes of the Appendix.

"That is what I call business," said Mr. Bower, as they took their seats in the train at the last moment. "No time is lost in dealin' with Lord Lothersdale. I hope that you got to know all you wanted."

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"All," replied Mr. Sinnott. "We have evidently been misinformed, for the man I wanted is not there. If we'd made a fuss about it to Lord Lothersdale we should have been sorry. As it is, we are very much obliged to you, Mr. Bower, and we shan't forget it."

"The next business," said the Hon. Sec. at the Burglars' Club meeting that same evening, "is the payment by Mr. Drummond Eyre of his subscription for the next two years by the production of Lord Lothersdale's Report on the Army."

"Here it is," said Eyre, producing a manuscript volume.

A subdued murmur of applause ran round.

The President took up the book and glanced at it. "This seems to be in order," he said, turning to the end. "Lothersdale signs——"

He broke off suddenly. The door had opened without any warning, and a little sharp-featured individual entered, followed by half a dozen other men.

"In the name of the King," said the first comer, "I arrest George Drummond Eyre for

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feloniously stealing, taking, and carrying away certain papers, namely a Report, the property of the Right Honourable Gilbert Brown, Baron Lothersdale, and I arrest all others present as accessories."

Members rose to their feet, and simultaneously made a move towards the door, with the evident intention of resisting the intrusion.

Mr. Marvell—for it was he—held up his hand warningly. "There are more men outside," he said. "Resistance is useless."

"Where's your authority for all this?" demanded the Secretary.

"Here, sir," said Marvell, pulling out a bundle of papers from a capacious pocket. "Here are the warrants. 'Mr. George Drummond Eyre,'" he called out, reading from the pile. "Here you are, sir. 'The Duke of Dorchester.' Here, your Grace. 'The Earl of Ribston.' Here, my lord. 'Mr. Hilton,' 'Major Anstruther,'" and so on through the list of members. "You will find these quite in order, I think. Now, gentlemen, if you please. I have concluded that you would prefer to ride. Thompson, fetch the hansoms round."

"Stop!" called out Ribston. "What are you going to do with us?"

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"Take you to Vine Street Station."

"Nonsense. We're not criminals."

"You can argue that out with the magistrate to-morrow, my lord," said the detective. "Here are the warrants, and I'm going to execute them. If the proceedings are not in order, you can claim reparation in the usual way. Now, gentlemen, please. If you will give your word to come quietly you will save time and trouble."

"Does the Home Secretary know of this?" asked the Duke.

"We don't report police court details to the Home Secretary," said Marvell, acidly. "No, sir, he doesn't."

"Then I demand to see him before these warrants are executed," said Dorchester.

"Impossible, your Grace," said Marvell, who twice before had been defrauded of his legitimate prey. Not again was he going to run the risk of undue favour staying the hand of Justice. He had now in his possession a batch of prisoners so notable that next day his name would ring from one end of the world to the other. "Impossible," was the obvious reply.

"May I write a letter?" asked the Duke.

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"No, your Grace, you may not," replied Marvell firmly. "You are now a prisoner, and you will please come with me without more delay. Now, gentlemen, will you pass your words to come quietly? You can cause trouble if you like, but we are more than equal to you in numbers, so there could only be one end to the matter."

Dorchester consulted Ribston and the Secretary. The others nodded reluctant consent. Word was given, and they passed out. The house doors were flung open, and they filed into the street, where a dozen hansoms were in line, a dozen policemen in waiting, and a small but inevitable crowd had collected.

"Ask Colonel Altamont to see the Home Secretary at once," said Dorchester to his butler, as he was helped into his coat.

The old man stood there petrified by the horror of the proceedings. He had been in the family for generations. Three Dukes of Dorchester had he known in all their glory. Kings, Queens, and Potentates had flitted in and out of the ducal mansion with his masters, and now he had lived to see the last of the line taken away like a thief, for some terrible crime. He heard the Duke's words to him, but they conveyed no impression to his brain. He did not reply. The police, the bustle in the hall, the crowd outside, the driving away of the prisoners, all was as a horrible nightmare to him.

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"His Grace said you were to tell Colonel Altamont to go at once to the Home Secretary, Mr. Bolton," said the footman, who had held the Duke's coat.

"Ha!" said Bolton, waking from his stupor. He caught hold of a hat, and ran out of the house.

Altamont had not been able to be present that evening. Business of importance had detained him, and he had only just got back to his rooms when Bolton turned up. He started off at once to the Home Secretary, and after exasperating interviews with a footman, a butler, and a private secretary, was at length admitted to the presence of that high personage, who was in his dressing gown, and considerably annoyed at this interruption to his slumbers.

The Colonel explained the situation.

"Is that all?" asked the Home Secretary when he had finished.

"All, sir!" cried the indignant Colonel. "Dorchester, Ribston, Anstruther, and a dozen others, arrested by your policemen, and you ask 'Is that all?'"

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"Colonel," said the Minister, emphasising his remarks with his forefinger in Old Bailey style, "Dorchester, Ribston, and the whole lot should have known better—very much better. They've had their sport, and now they've got to pay for it. I can't interfere. If the jury recommend them to mercy I'll give them the benefit of any doubt, and will save them from hanging; but that's all I can promise. Now have a whiskey and soda, and go to bed."

Altamont declined the whiskey and soda, and left the Minister indignantly. On his doorstep he was promptly arrested by Marvell, who had a couple of warrants left over after depositing his prisoners at Vine Street. The last warrant could not be served that night, as the member in question happened to be visiting a friend in Nova Zembla.

Mr. Marvell took good care that the news of the arrest of the Duke of Dorchester, the Earl of Ribston, and the other more or less distinguished members of the Burglars' Club, should be at once communicated to the Press in case some influential friend should intervene at the last moment, and once more defraud him of his due. The morning's papers were full of the news, with the result that the Marlborough Street Police Court was filled to overflowing long before the proceedings commenced. The Peerage, the Diplomatic Service, the Commons, the Army and the Navy, the Stage and Sport, were well represented. Every inch of space, including the bench itself, was filled, and fair women and brave men were turned away. [272]

Half a dozen ordinary cases were quickly disposed of. Then the extraordinary case was called, and the spectators involuntarily rose to their feet as the Burglars filed into the dock, and took their stand two deep behind the brass rail. A murmur of sympathy went round as they stood there—some of them obviously interested in the proceedings, others apparently bored by them—all well-groomed, straight set-up men, though their evening dress looked incongruous enough in the daylight, and their crumpled shirt-fronts did not show to advantage.

One by one the prisoners' names were called. One by one the prisoners answered. [273]

Then counsel for the Crown stood up, and having stated that the charge against the prisoners was that of stealing a Report, the property of Lord Lothersdale, he opened his case and called the first witness—Mr. Bower.

Mr. Bower entered the box, and adjusted his pince-nez with extreme nicety. Under counsel's lead he detailed how the so-called Sinnott had introduced himself.

"I had no doubt at all as to his *bona fides*," said the tailor, lingering lovingly over the Latin words; "but immediately afterwards I had a wire from Moors asking me to postpone my visit to his lordship. I rang up Scotland Yard to inform Mr. Sinnott of the alteration, and learnt that he was unknown there. Then I informed the authorities of the whole matter, with the result that our original intention was followed, and every facility allowed to Mr. Sinnott for carry out his plans."

"Done! By Jove!" gasped Eyre.

Lord Lothersdale's secretary then gave evidence that the Report now produced in court was the property of his lordship.

"Of course," he added smilingly, "the real Report is still at Moors. This one, though signed for the present purpose by Lord Lothersdale, has no value. It was drawn up three years ago by a former Secretary of State for War," he explained. [274]

Then there was formal evidence of the arrest from Mr. Marvell, who was allowed to speak at length.

"For some time past, your worship," he said, "we have been aware of the existence of what is called 'The Burglars' Club,' composed of noblemen and gentlemen such as your worship sees before you. Our information was derived in the first instance from a discharged servant of one of the members. In revenge for his dismissal he told us of proceedings he had witnessed at his master's house on one occasion, when he was concealed behind a curtain in the room.

"He furnished us with a list of members, and ever since then we have had them under observation. These gentlemen amuse themselves by stealing articles of great value or of public interest. We know for a fact that at one time and another they have obtained unlawful possession of the Koh-i-noor Diamond, the Mace of the House of Commons, Lord Illingworth's Black Pearl, an ounce of Radium from Professor Blyth's laboratory, and even the Great Seal of the United Kingdom itself." [275]

"Good old burglars!" called out an admiring listener at the back of the court.

"Silence!" shouted an indignant usher.

"We have waited, your worship, until we could interfere successfully, knowing that it was only a question of time for us to do so. I have twice been called in on the occasion of a burglary committed by a member of the club, and in each case—of course against my wishes—no charge was made. In this particular instance the member walked straight into the trap."

This closed the case for the Crown, and counsel proceeded to urge the seriousness of the offence, and the necessity for a severe sentence, not only as a just punishment, but as an example.

Counsel for the prisoners now rose. He was the famous Mr. Spiller, who had earned the well-

deserved sobriquet of "The prisoner's pal."

He stood up with a twinkle in his eye, and an air of confidence that gladdened the hearts of the ladies on the bench.

"Your worship," he began, "I shall not detain the Court more than a very few minutes, for I admit all the evidence that has been tendered. The last witness gave a list of articles illegally taken by my clients. If he wishes, I will add to the list another half-dozen instances of equal importance."

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"Bravo! Go it, Spiller!" called out the sympathiser at the back, whose sporting instincts were too strong for him. This time he was surrounded by ushers and ejected.

"But, sir," continued counsel, when quiet had again been restored, "I must emphasize a point which has been completely and unaccountably lost sight of by the prosecution. Not one of the articles taken by my clients has been retained by them for longer than twenty-four hours. Within that period every article has been restored to its owner. Restitution has always been made, and compensation given whenever compensation was necessary.

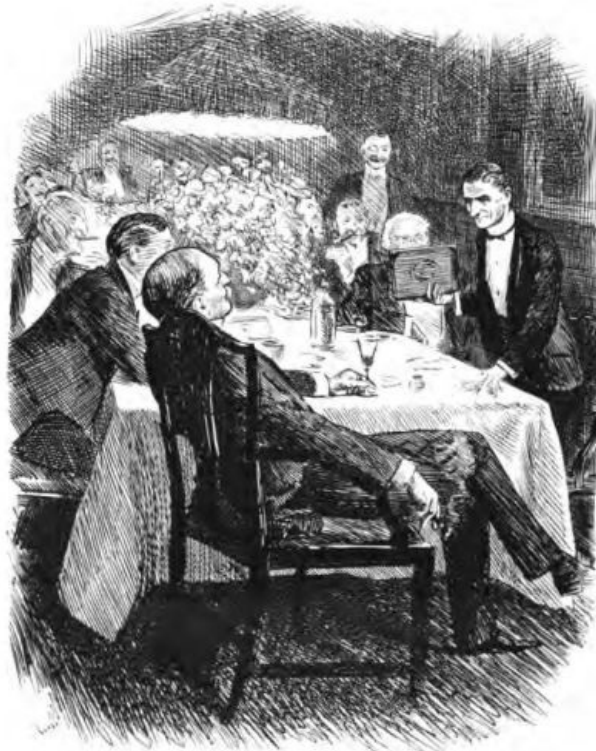
"We in this court have many times had occasion to admire the abilities of Mr. Marvell as a detective, but I would now suggest that he should go through a course of Stephen's 'Commentaries' in order to obtain a little knowledge of the law which he is in the constant habit of putting into force. I cannot too strongly denounce the unwarrantable action of Scotland Yard in submitting my clients to the indignity of an arrest and these proceedings upon the evidence in their possession. They must know—or their office-boy or charwoman is capable of instructing them in the fact—that by English law no person can be guilty of larceny who does not intend permanently to deprive its owner of the article of which he has gained possession. Mere conversion, though accompanied by trespass, is nothing more than a civil wrong, for which possibly my clients might be liable to a farthing damages.

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"Surely," concluded Mr. Spiller, "life is dull and prosaic enough without this high-handed and unwarranted attempt of Scotland Yard to extinguish an original, if not laudable, effort on the part of my clients to add to the dexterity and the gaiety of the nation. Your worship, I submit there is no evidence against my clients, and ask for the immediate discharge of the prisoners."

As Mr. Spiller spoke, the countenance of the prosecuting counsel was observed to become exceedingly gloomy, while Mr. Marvell's complexion turned distinctly green.

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**"MR. MARVELL . . . THANKED THE COMPANY FOR
THE GIFT, WHICH HE WOULD TREASURE."**

(p. 280)

Then the magistrate spoke. He began with the usual reprimand to the spectators, and the usual threat to have the place cleared if the ordinary decencies of a Court of Justice were not maintained. Then he turned to the prisoners, and said:

"I am sorry to see men of your social position in the dock before me, but you have only yourselves to thank for it. Your counsel has spoken of your laudable and original effort to add to the gaiety of the nation. People's idea of humour varies, and, personally, I see nothing very funny in what you have done. I certainly think that your efforts might have been more worthily engaged. Some of you are members of the Houses of Parliament, and I really do not know how you reconcile this club with your position as the law-makers of the land; but of course it may be

that this is part of the humour to which your counsel referred. With regard to the legal aspect of the matter, it is clear that no criminal offence has been committed, though if Lord Lothersdale desires, you may have to answer elsewhere a claim for damages. You are discharged."

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It was in vain that the ushers tried to stop the cheers that went up as the magistrate concluded, and as the doors of the dock opened and the prisoners came forth. But one little man crept away from the well of the court, unnoticed and unrejoicing.

Two days later a special meeting of the Club was held, at which it was proposed by Colonel Altamont and seconded by the President:—

"That, as according to the decision of the Marlborough Street Police Court magistrate, the proceedings of the Burglars' Club are neither criminal nor humorous, and its members run no danger of suffering personal inconvenience, it is hereby resolved that the Club has no connection with Sport, and therefore no reason for existence, and that it be disbanded forthwith."

A fortnight later the disbanding of the Club was celebrated by a dinner, the guest of the evening being Mr. Marvell. After dessert the detective was presented with the minute-book of the Club, which had been kept in cipher by the Hon. Sec., who alone had the key to it. The ex-President, in making the presentation, expressed the hope that Mr. Marvell would spend many happy and profitable years in endeavouring to decipher it.

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Mr. Marvell, in reply, thanked the company for their kind reception of him, and for the gift, which he would treasure. He would certainly follow his Grace's suggestion and endeavour to decipher the minutes, and he still hoped that with this additional evidence and a more intimate acquaintance with the "Commentaries" of Mr. Stephen, he would before long be enabled to return their hospitality at His Majesty's expense.

Mr. Marvell's speech was received with acclamation; but his hopes have not been realised.

This is the last chronicle of the Burglars' Club.

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Transcriber's Note:

Obvious punctuation errors repaired.

Page 87, the first word was placed in small capitals in the HTML version and all capitals in the text version to conform to the rest of the book.

Page 207, "Adolf" changed to "Adolph" (MR. ADOLPH MEYER, the friend)

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BURGLARS' CLUB: A ROMANCE IN
TWELVE CHRONICLES ***

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