

IN THE AVU OBSERVATORY

The observatory at Avu, in Borneo, stands on the spur of the mountain. To the north rises the old crater, black against the unfathomable blue of the sky. From the little circular building, with its mushroom dome, the slopes plunge steeply downward into the black mysteries of the tropical forest beneath. The little house in which the observer and his assistant live is about fifty yards from the observatory, and beyond this are the huts of their native attendants.

Thaddy, the chief observer, was down with a slight fever. His assistant, Woodhouse, paused for a moment in silent contemplation of the tropical night before commencing his solitary vigil. The night was very silent. Now and then voices and laughter came from the native huts, or the cry of some strange animal was heard from the midst of the mystery of the forest. Nocturnal insects appeared in ghostly fashion out of the darkness, and fluttered round his light. He thought, perhaps, of all the possibilities of discovery that still lay in the black tangle beneath him; for to the naturalist the virgin forests of Borneo are still a wonderland, full of strange questions and 248 half-suspected discoveries. Woodhouse carried a small lantern in his hand, and its yellow glow contrasted vividly with the infinite series of tints between lavender-blue and black in which the landscape was painted. His hands and face were smeared with ointment against the attacks of the mosquitoes.

Even in these days of celestial photography, work done in a purely temporary erection, and with only the most primitive appliances in addition to the telescope, still involves a very large amount of cramped and motionless watching. He sighed as he thought of the physical fatigues before him, stretched himself, and entered the observatory.

The reader is probably familiar with the structure of an ordinary astronomical observatory. The building is usually cylindrical in shape, with a very light hemispherical roof capable of being turned round from the interior. The telescope is supported upon a stone pillar in the centre, and a clockwork arrangement compensates for the earth's rotation, and allows a star once found to be continuously observed. Besides this, there is a compact tracery of wheels and screws about its point of support, by which the astronomer adjusts it. There is, of course, a slit in the movable roof which follows the eye of the telescope in its survey of the heavens. The observer sits or lies on a sloping wooden arrangement, which he can wheel to any part of the observatory as the position of 249 the telescope may require. Within it is advisable to have things as dark as possible, in order to enhance the brilliance of the stars observed.

The lantern flared as Woodhouse entered his circular den, and the general darkness fled into black shadows behind the big machine, from which it presently seemed to creep back over the whole place again as the light waned. The slit was a profound transparent blue, in which six stars shone with tropical brilliance, and their light lay, a pallid gleam, along the black tube of the instrument. Woodhouse shifted the roof, and then proceeding to the telescope, turned first one wheel and then another, the great cylinder slowly swinging into a new position. Then he glanced through the finder, the little companion telescope, moved the roof a little more, made some further adjustments, and set the clockwork in motion. He took off his jacket, for the night was very hot, and pushed into position the uncomfortable seat to which he was condemned for the next four hours. Then with a sigh he resigned himself to his watch upon the mysteries of space.

There was no sound now in the observatory, and the lantern waned steadily. Outside there was the occasional cry of some animal in alarm or pain, or calling to its mate, and the intermittent sounds of the Malay and Dyak servants. Presently one of the men began a queer chanting song, in which the others joined at intervals. After this 250it would seem that they turned in for the night, for no further sound came from their direction, and the whispering stillness became more and more profound.

The clockwork ticked steadily. The shrill hum of a mosquito explored the place and grew shriller in indignation at Woodhouse's ointment. Then the lantern went out and all the observatory was black.

Woodhouse shifted his position presently, when the slow movement of the telescope had carried it beyond the limits of his comfort.

He was watching a little group of stars in the Milky Way, in one of which his chief had seen or fancied a remarkable colour variability. It was not a part of the regular work for which the establishment existed, and for that reason perhaps Woodhouse was deeply interested. He must have forgotten things terrestrial. All his attention was concentrated upon the great blue circle of the telescope field—a circle powdered, so it seemed, with an innumerable multitude of stars, and all luminous against the blackness of its setting. As he watched he seemed to himself to become incorporeal, as if he too were floating in the ether of space. Infinitely remote was the faint red spot he was observing.

Suddenly the stars were blotted out. A flash of blackness passed, and they were visible again.

“Queer,” said Woodhouse. “Must have been a bird.”

251The thing happened again, and immediately after the great tube shivered as though it had been struck. Then the dome of the observatory resounded with a series of thundering blows. The stars seemed to sweep aside as the telescope swung round and away from the slit in the roof.

“Great Scott!” cried Woodhouse. “What’s this?”

Some huge, vague, black shape, with a flapping something like a wing, seemed to be struggling in the aperture of the roof. In another moment the slit was clear again, and the luminous haze of the Milky Way shone warm and bright.

The interior of the roof was perfectly black, and only a scraping sound marked the whereabouts of the unknown creature.

Woodhouse had scrambled from the seat to his feet. He was trembling violently and in a perspiration with the suddenness of the occurrence. Was the thing, whatever it was, inside or out? It was big, whatever else it might be. Something shot across the skylight, and the telescope swayed. He started violently and put his arm up. It was in the observatory, then, with him. It was clinging to the roof, apparently. What the devil was it? Could it see him?

He stood for perhaps a minute in a state of stupefaction. The beast, whatever it was, clawed at the interior of the dome, and then something flapped almost into his face, and he saw the 252momentary gleam of starlight on a skin like oiled leather. His water-bottle was knocked off his little table with a smash.

The sense of some strange bird-creature hovering a few yards from his face in the darkness was indescribably unpleasant to Woodhouse. As his thought returned he concluded that it must be some night-bird or large bat. At any risk he would see what it was, and pulling a match from his pocket, he tried to strike it on the telescope seat. There was a smoking streak of phosphorescent light, the match flared for a moment, and he saw a vast wing sweeping towards him, a gleam of grey-brown fur, and then he was struck in the face and the match knocked out of his hand. The blow was aimed at his temple, and a claw tore sideways down to his cheek. He reeled and fell, and he heard the extinguished lantern smash. Another blow followed as he fell. He was partly stunned, he felt his own warm blood stream out upon his face. Instinctively he felt his eyes had been struck at, and, turning over on his face to protect them, tried to crawl under the protection of the telescope.

He was struck again upon the back, and he heard his jacket rip, and then the thing hit the roof of the observatory. He edged as far as he could between the wooden seat and the eyepiece of the instrument, and turned his body round so that it was chiefly his

feet that were exposed. 253With these he could at least kick. He was still in a mystified state. The strange beast banged about in the darkness, and presently clung to the telescope, making it sway and the gear rattle. Once it flapped near him, and he kicked out madly and felt a soft body with his feet. He was horribly scared now. It must be a big thing to swing the telescope like that. He saw for a moment the outline of a head black against the starlight, with sharply-pointed upstanding ears and a crest between them. It seemed to him to be as big as a mastiff's. Then he began to bawl out as loudly as he could for help.

At that the thing came down upon him again. As it did so his hand touched something beside him on the floor. He kicked out, and the next moment his ankle was gripped and held by a row of keen teeth. He yelled again, and tried to free his leg by kicking with the other. Then he realised he had the broken water-bottle at his hand, and, snatching it, he struggled into a sitting posture, and feeling in the darkness towards his foot, gripped a velvety ear, like the ear of a big cat. He had seized the water-bottle by its neck and brought it down with a shivering crash upon the head of the strange beast. He repeated the blow, and then stabbed and jobbed with the jagged end of it, in the darkness, where he judged the face might be.

The small teeth relaxed their hold, and at once 254Woodhouse pulled his leg free and kicked hard. He felt the sickening feel of fur and bone giving under his boot. There was a tearing bite at his arm, and he struck over it at the face, as he judged, and hit damp fur.

There was a pause; then he heard the sound of claws and the dragging of a heavy body away from him over the observatory floor. Then there was silence, broken only by his own sobbing breathing, and a sound like licking. Everything was black except the parallelogram of the blue skylight with the luminous dust of stars, against which the end of the telescope now appeared in silhouette. He waited, as it seemed, an interminable time.

Was the thing coming on again? He felt in his trouser-pocket for some matches, and found one remaining. He tried to strike this, but the floor was wet, and it spat and went out. He cursed. He could not see where the door was situated. In his struggle he had quite lost his bearings. The strange beast, disturbed by the splutter of the match, began to move again. "Time!" called Woodhouse, with a sudden gleam of mirth, but the thing was not coming at him again. He must have hurt it, he thought, with the broken bottle. He felt a dull pain in his ankle. Probably he was bleeding there. He wondered if it would support him if he tried to stand up. The night outside was very still. There was no sound of any one 255moving. The sleepy fools had not heard those

wings battering upon the dome, nor his shouts. It was no good wasting strength in shouting. The monster flapped its wings and startled him into a defensive attitude. He hit his elbow against the seat, and it fell over with a crash. He cursed this, and then he cursed the darkness.

Suddenly the oblong patch of starlight seemed to sway to and fro. Was he going to faint? It would never do to faint. He clenched his fists and set his teeth to hold himself together. Where had the door got to? It occurred to him he could get his bearings by the stars visible through the skylight. The patch of stars he saw was in Sagittarius and south-eastward; the door was north—or was it north by west? He tried to think. If he could get the door open he might retreat. It might be the thing was wounded. The suspense was beastly. “Look here!” he said, “if you don’t come on, I shall come at you.”

Then the thing began clambering up the side of the observatory, and he saw its black outline gradually blot out the skylight. Was it in retreat? He forgot about the door, and watched as the dome shifted and creaked. Somehow he did not feel very frightened or excited now. He felt a curious sinking sensation inside him. The sharply-defined patch of light, with the black form moving across it, seemed to be growing smaller and smaller. That was curious. He began to feel very thirsty, and yet he did not feel inclined to get anything to drink. He seemed to be sliding down a long funnel.

He felt a burning sensation in his throat, and then he perceived it was broad daylight, and that one of the Dyak servants was looking at him with a curious expression. Then there was the top of Thaddy’s face upside down. Funny fellow Thaddy, to go about like that! Then he grasped the situation better, and perceived that his head was on Thaddy’s knee, and Thaddy was giving him brandy. And then he saw the eyepiece of the telescope with a lot of red smears on it. He began to remember.

“You’ve made this observatory in a pretty mess,” said Thaddy.

The Dyak boy was beating up an egg in brandy. Woodhouse took this and sat up. He felt a sharp twinge of pain. His ankle was tied up, so were his arm and the side of his face. The smashed glass, red-stained, lay about the floor, the telescope seat was overturned, and by the opposite wall was a dark pool. The door was open, and he saw the grey summit of the mountain against a brilliant background of blue sky.

“Pah!” said Woodhouse. “Who’s been killing calves here? Take me out of it.”

Then he remembered the Thing, and the fight he had had with it.

“What was it?” he said to Thaddy—“the Thing I fought with?”

257 “You know that best,” said Thaddy. “But, anyhow, don’t worry yourself now about it. Have some more to drink.”

Thaddy, however, was curious enough, and it was a hard struggle between duty and inclination to keep Woodhouse quiet until he was decently put away in bed, and had slept upon the copious dose of meat-extract Thaddy considered advisable. They then talked it over together.

“It was,” said Woodhouse, “more like a big bat than anything else in the world. It had sharp, short ears, and soft fur, and its wings were leathery. Its teeth were little, but devilish sharp, and its jaw could not have been very strong or else it would have bitten through my ankle.”

“It has pretty nearly,” said Thaddy.

“It seemed to me to hit out with its claws pretty freely. That is about as much as I know about the beast. Our conversation was intimate, so to speak, and yet not confidential.”

“The Dyak chaps talk about a Big Colugo, a Klang-utang—whatever that may be. It does not often attack man, but I suppose you made it nervous. They say there is a Big Colugo and a Little Colugo, and a something else that sounds like gobble. They all fly about at night. For my own part I know there are flying foxes and flying lemurs about here; but they are none of them very big beasts.”

“There are more things in heaven and earth,” 258 said Woodhouse,—and Thaddy groaned at the quotation,—“and more particularly in the forests of Borneo, than are dreamt of in our philosophies. On the whole, if the Borneo fauna is going to disgorge any more of its novelties upon me, I should prefer that it did so when I was not occupied in the observatory at night and alone.”

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THE TRIUMPHS OF A TAXIDERMIST

Here are some of the secrets of taxidermy. They were told me by the taxidermist in a mood of elation. He told me them in the time between the first glass of whiskey and the fourth, when a man is no longer cautious and yet not drunk. We sat in his den together; his library it was, his sitting and his eating room—separated by a bead curtain, so far as the sense of sight went, from the noisome den where he plied his trade.

He sat on a deck chair, and when he was not tapping refractory bits of coal with them, he kept his feet—on which he wore, after the manner of sandals, the holey relics of a pair of carpet slippers—out of the way upon the mantel-piece, among the glass eyes. And his trousers, by-the-by—though they have nothing to do with his triumphs—were a most horrible yellow plaid, such as they made when our fathers wore side-whiskers and there were crinolines in the land. Further, his hair was black, his face rosy, and his eye a fiery brown; and his coat was chiefly of grease upon a basis of velveteen. And his pipe had a bowl of china showing the Graces, and his spectacles were 260always askew, the left eye glaring nakedly at you, small and penetrating; the right, seen through a glass darkly, magnified and mild. Thus his discourse ran: “There never was a man who could stuff like me, Bellows, never. I have stuffed elephants and I have stuffed moths, and the things have looked all the livelier and better for it. And I have stuffed human beings—chiefly amateur ornithologists. But I stuffed a nigger once.

“No, there is no law against it. I made him with all his fingers out and used him as a hat-rack, but that fool Homersby got up a quarrel with him late one night and spoilt him. That was before your time. It is hard to get skins, or I would have another.

“Unpleasant? I don’t see it. Seems to me taxidermy is a promising third course to burial or cremation. You could keep all your dear ones by you. Bric-à-brac of that sort stuck about the house would be as good as most company, and much less expensive. You might have them fitted up with clockwork to do things.

“Of course they would have to be varnished, but they need not shine more than lots of people do naturally. Old Manningtree’s bald head—Anyhow, you could talk to them without interruption. Even aunts. There is a great future before taxidermy, depend upon it. There is fossils again—”

He suddenly became silent.

261 “No, I don’t think I ought to tell you that.” He sucked at his pipe thoughtfully.

“Thanks, yes. Not too much water.

“Of course, what I tell you now will go no further. You know I have made some dodos and a great auk? No! Evidently you are an amateur at taxidermy. My dear fellow, half the great auks in the world are about as genuine as the handkerchief of Saint Veronica, as the Holy Coat of Treves. We make ’em of grebes’ feathers and the like. And the great auk’s eggs too!”

“Good heavens!”

“Yes, we make them out of fine porcelain. I tell you it is worth while. They fetch—one fetched £300 only the other day. That one was really genuine, I believe, but of course one is never certain. It is very fine work, and afterwards you have to get them dusty, for no one who owns one of these precious eggs has ever the temerity to clean the thing. That’s the beauty of the business. Even if they suspect an egg they do not like to examine it too closely. It’s such brittle capital at the best.

“You did not know that taxidermy rose to heights like that. My boy, it has risen higher. I have rivalled the hands of Nature herself. One of the *genuine* great auks—” his voice fell to a whisper—“one of the *genuine* great auks *was made by me*.”

“No. You must study ornithology, and find out which it is yourself. And what is more, I have been approached by a syndicate of dealers to stock one of the unexplored skerries to the north of Iceland with specimens. I may—some day. But I have another little thing in hand just now. Ever heard of the dinornis?

“It is one of those big birds recently extinct in New Zealand. ‘Moa’ is its common name, so-called because extinct; there is no moa now. See? Well, they have got bones of it, and from some of the marshes even feathers and dried bits of skin. Now, I am going to—well, there is no need to make any bones about it—going to *forge* a complete stuffed moa. I know a chap out there who will pretend to make the find in a kind of antiseptic swamp, and say he stuffed it at once, as it threatened to fall to pieces. The feathers are peculiar, but I have got a simply lovely way of dodging up singed bits of ostrich plume. Yes, that is the new smell you noticed. They can only discover the fraud with a microscope, and they will hardly care to pull a nice specimen to bits for that.

“In this way, you see, I give my little push in the advancement of science.

“But all this is merely imitating Nature. I have done more than that in my time. I have—beaten her.”

He took his feet down from the mantel-board, and leant over confidentially towards me. “I have *created* birds,” he said in a low voice. “New birds. Improvements. Like no birds that was ever seen before.”

He resumed his attitude during an impressive silence.

“Enrich the universe; *rath-er*. Some of the birds I made were new kinds of humming-birds, and very beautiful little things, but some of them were simply rum. The rummest, I think, was the *Anomalopteryx Jejuna*. *Jejunus-a-um*—empty—so-called because there was really nothing in it; a thoroughly empty bird—except for stuffing.

Old Javvers has the thing now, and I suppose he is almost as proud of it as I am. It is a masterpiece, Bellows. It has all the silly clumsiness of your pelican, all the solemn want of dignity of your parrot, all the gaunt ungainliness of a flamingo, with all the extravagant chromatic conflict of a mandarin duck. *Such* a bird. I made it out of the skeletons of a stork and a toucan and a job lot of feathers. Taxidermy of that kind is just pure joy, Bellows, to a real artist in the art.

“How did I come to make it? Simple enough, as all great inventions are. One of those young genii who write us Science Notes in the papers got hold of a German pamphlet about the birds of New Zealand, and translated some of it by means of a dictionary and his mother-wit—he must have been one of a very large family with a small mother—and he got mixed between the living apteryx and 264the extinct anomalopteryx; talked about a bird five feet high, living in the jungles of the North Island, rare, shy, specimens difficult to obtain, and so on. Javvers, who even for a collector, is a miraculously ignorant man, read these paragraphs, and swore he would have the thing at any price. Raided the dealers with inquiries. It shows what a man can do by persistence—will-power. Here was a bird-collector swearing he would have a specimen of a bird that did not exist, that never had existed, and which for very shame of its own profane ungainliness, probably would not exist now if it could help itself. And he got it. *He got it.*

“Have some more whiskey, Bellows?” said the taxidermist, rousing himself from a transient contemplation of the mysteries of will-power and the collecting turn of mind. And, replenished, he proceeded to tell me of how he concocted a most attractive mermaid, and how an itinerant preacher, who could not get an audience because of it, smashed it because it was idolatry, or worse, at Burslem Wakes. But as the conversation of all the parties to this transaction, creator, would-be preserver, and destroyer, was uniformly unfit for publication, this cheerful incident must still remain unprinted.

The reader, unacquainted with the dark ways of the collector, may perhaps be inclined to doubt my taxidermist; but so far as great auks’ eggs, and 265the bogus stuffed birds are concerned, I find that he has the confirmation of distinguished ornithological writers. And the note about the New Zealand bird certainly appeared in a morning paper of unblemished reputation, for the taxidermist keeps a copy and has shown it to me.

“Talking of the prices of birds, I’ve seen an ostrich that cost three hundred pounds,” said the taxidermist, recalling his youth of travel. “Three hundred pounds!”

He looked at me over his spectacles. “I’ve seen another that was refused at four.”

“No,” he said, “it wasn’t any fancy points. They was just plain ostriches. A little off colour, too—owing to dietary. And there wasn’t any particular restriction of the demand either. You’d have thought five ostriches would have ruled cheap on an East Indiaman. But the point was, one of ’em had swallowed a diamond.

“The chap it got it off was Sir Mohini Padishah, a tremendous swell, a Piccadilly swell you might say up to the neck of him, and then an ugly black head and a whopping turban, with this diamond in it. The blessed bird pecked suddenly and had it, and when the chap made a fuss it realised it had done wrong, I suppose, and went and mixed itself with the others to preserve its *incog*. It all happened in a minute. I was among the first to arrive, and there was this heathen going over his gods, and two sailors and 267the man who had charge of the birds laughing fit to split. It was a rummy way of losing a jewel, come to think of it. The man in charge hadn’t been about just at the moment, so that he didn’t know which bird it was. Clean lost, you see. I didn’t feel half sorry, to tell you the truth. The beggar had been swaggering over his blessed diamond ever since he came aboard.

“A thing like that goes from stem to stem of a ship in no time. Every one was talking about it. Padishah went below to hide his feelings. At dinner—he pigged at a table by himself, him and two other Hindoos—the captain kind of jeered at him about it, and he got very excited. He turned round and talked into my ear. He would not buy the birds; he would have his diamond. He demanded his rights as a British subject. His diamond must be found. He was firm upon that. He would appeal to the House of Lords. The man in charge of the birds was one of those wooden-headed chaps you can’t get a new idea into anyhow. He refused any proposal to interfere with the birds by way of medicine. His instructions were to feed them so-and-so and treat them so-and-so, and it was as much as his place was worth not to feed them so-and-so, and treat them so-and-so. Padishah had wanted a stomach-pump—though you can’t do that to a bird, you know. This Padishah was full of bad law, like most of these blessed Bengalis, and talked of 268having a lien on the birds, and so forth. But an old boy, who said his son was a London barrister, argued that what a bird swallowed became *ipso facto* part of the bird, and that Padishah’s only remedy lay in an action for damages, and even then it might be possible to show contributory negligence. He hadn’t any right of way about an ostrich that didn’t belong to him. That upset Padishah extremely, the more so as most of us expressed an opinion that that was the reasonable view.

There wasn't any lawyer aboard to settle the matter, so we all talked pretty free. At last, after Aden, it appears that he came round to the general opinion, and went privately to the man in charge and made an offer for all five ostriches.

"The next morning there was a fine shindy at breakfast. The man hadn't any authority to deal with the birds, and nothing on earth would induce him to sell; but it seems he told Padishah that a Eurasian named Potter had already made him an offer, and on that Padishah denounced Potter before us all. But I think the most of us thought it rather smart of Potter, and I know that when Potter said that he'd wired at Aden to London to buy the birds, and would have an answer at Suez, I cursed pretty richly at a lost opportunity.

"At Suez, Padishah gave way to tears—actual wet tears—when Potter became the owner of the birds, and offered him two hundred and fifty right off for the five, being more than two hundred per cent. on what Potter had given. Potter said he'd be hanged if he parted with a feather of them—that he meant to kill them off one by one, and find the diamond; but afterwards, thinking it over, he relented a little. He was a gambling hound, was this Potter, a little queer at cards, and this kind of prize-packet business must have suited him down to the ground. Anyhow, he offered, for a lark, to sell the birds separately to separate people by auction at a starting price of £80 for a bird. But one of them, he said, he meant to keep for luck.

"You must understand this diamond was a valuable one—a little Jew chap, a diamond merchant, who was with us, had put it at three or four thousand when Padishah had shown it to him—and this idea of an ostrich gamble caught on. Now it happened that I'd been having a few talks on general subjects with the man who looked after these ostriches, and quite incidentally he'd said one of the birds was ailing, and he fancied it had indigestion. It had one feather in its tail almost all white, by which I knew it, and so when, next day, the auction started with it, I capped Padishah's eighty-five by ninety. I fancy I was a bit too sure and eager with my bid, and some of the others spotted the fact that I was in the know. And Padishah went for that particular bird like an irresponsible lunatic. At last the Jew diamond merchant got it for £175, and Padishah said 270£180 just after the hammer came down—so Potter declared. At any rate, the Jew merchant secured it, and there and then he got a gun and shot it. Potter made a Hades of a fuss because he said it would injure the sale of the other three, and Padishah, of course, behaved like an idiot; but all of us were very much excited. I can tell you I was precious glad when that dissection was over, and no diamond had turned up—precious glad. I'd gone to one-forty on that particular bird myself.

“The little Jew was like most Jews—he didn’t make any great fuss over bad luck; but Potter declined to go on with the auction until it was understood that the goods could not be delivered until the sale was over. The little Jew wanted to argue that the case was exceptional, and as the discussion ran pretty even, the thing was postponed until the next morning. We had a lively dinner-table that evening, I can tell you, but in the end Potter got his way, since it would stand to reason he would be safer if he stuck to all the birds, and that we owed him some consideration for his sportsman-like behaviour. And the old gentleman whose son was a lawyer said he’d been thinking the thing over and that it was very doubtful if, when a bird had been opened and the diamond recovered, it ought not to be handed back to the proper owner. I remember I suggested it came under the laws of treasure-trove—which was really the truth of the matter. There was a 271 hot argument, and we settled it was certainly foolish to kill the bird on board the ship. Then the old gentleman, going at large through his legal talk, tried to make out the sale was a lottery and illegal, and appealed to the captain; but Potter said he sold the birds as ostriches. He didn’t want to sell any diamonds, he said, and didn’t offer that as an inducement. The three birds he put up, to the best of his knowledge and belief, did *not* contain a diamond. It was in the one he kept—so he hoped.

“Prices ruled high next day all the same. The fact that now there were four chances instead of five of course caused a rise. The blessed birds averaged 227, and, oddly enough, this Padishah didn’t secure one of ’em—not one. He made too much shindy, and when he ought to have been bidding he was talking about liens, and, besides, Potter was a bit down on him. One fell to a quiet little officer chap, another to the little Jew, and the third was syndicated by the engineers. And then Potter seemed suddenly sorry for having sold them, and said he’d flung away a clear thousand pounds, and that very likely he’d draw a blank, and that he always had been a fool, but when I went and had a bit of a talk to him, with the idea of getting him to hedge on his last chance, I found he’d already sold the bird he’d reserved to a political chap that was on board, a chap who’d 272 been studying Indian morals and social questions in his vacation. That last was the three hundred pounds bird. Well, they landed three of the blessed creatures at Brindisi—though the old gentleman said it was a breach of the Customs regulations—and Potter and Padishah landed too. The Hindoo seemed half mad as he saw his blessed diamond going this way and that, so to speak. He kept on saying he’d get an injunction—he had injunction on the brain—and giving his name and address to the chaps who’d bought the birds, so that they’d know where to send the diamond. None of them wanted his name and address, and none of them would give their own. It was a fine row I can tell you—on the platform. They all went off by different trains. I

came on to Southampton, and there I saw the last of the birds, as I came ashore; it was the one the engineers bought, and it was standing up near the bridge, in a kind of crate, and looking as leggy and silly a setting for a valuable diamond as ever you saw—if it was a setting for a valuable diamond.

“How did it end? Oh! like that. Well—perhaps. Yes, there’s one more thing that may throw light on it. A week or so after landing I was down Regent Street doing a bit of shopping, and who should I see arm in arm and having a purple time of it but Padishah and Potter. If you come to think of it—

273*“Yes. I’ve thought that. Only, you see, there’s no doubt the diamond was real. And Padishah was an eminent Hindoo. I’ve seen his name in the papers—often. But whether the bird swallowed the diamond certainly is another matter, as you say.”*

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THE RAJAH’S TREASURE

Between Jehun and Bimabur on the Himalayan slopes, and between the jungles and the higher country where the pines and deodars are gathered together, ruled the petty Rajah, of whose wonderful treasure I am telling. Very great was the treasure, people said, for the Rajah had prospered all his days. He had found Mindapore a village, and, behold! it was a city. Below his fort of unhewn stone the flat-roofed huts of mud had multiplied; and now there sprang up houses with upstairs rooms, and the place which had once boasted no more than one buniah man, engendered a bazaar in the midst of it, as a fat oyster secretes a pearl. And the Holy Place up the river prospered, and the road up the passes was made safe. Merchants and fakirs multiplied about the wells, men came and went, twice even white men from the plain on missions to the people over beyond the deodars, and the streets of the town were ever denser with poultry and children, and little dogs dyed yellow, and with all the multitudinous rich odours of human increase. As at last, at the crown of his prosperity, this legend of his treasures began.

275He was a portly, yellow-faced man, with a long black beard, now steadily growing grey, thick lips, and shifty eyes. He was pious, very pious in his daily routine, and swift and unaccountable in his actions. None dared withstand him to his face, even in little things. Golam Shah, his vizier, was but a servant, a carrier of orders; and Samud Singh, his master of horse, but a driller of soldiers. They were tools, he would tell them outright in his pride of power, staves in his hand that he could break at his will. He was childless. And his cousin, the youth Azim Khan, feared him, and only in the remotest

recesses of his heart dared to wish the Rajah would presently die and make a way for the cyons.

It would be hard to say when first the rumour spread that the Rajah of little Mindapore was making a hoard. None knew how it began or where. Perhaps from merchants of whom he had bought. It began long before the days of the safe. It was said that rubies had been bought and hidden away; and then not only rubies, but ornaments of gold, and then pearls, and diamonds from Golconda, and all manner of precious stones. Even the Deputy-Commissioner at Allapore heard of it. At last the story re-entered the palace at Mindapore itself, and Azim Khan, who was the Rajah's cousin and his heir, and nominally his commander-in-chief, and 276 Golam Shah, the chief minister, talked it over one with another in a tentative way.

"He has something new," said Golam Shah, querulously; "he has something new, and he is keeping it from me."

Azira Khan watched him cunningly. "I have told you what I have heard," he said. "For my own part I know nothing."

"He goes to and fro musing and humming to himself," said Golam, meditatively, "as one who thinks of a pleasure."

"More rubies, they are saying," said Azim, dreamily, and repeated, as if for his own pleasure, "Rubies." For Azim was the heir.

"Especially is it since that Englishman came," said Golam, "three months ago. A big old man, not wrinkled as an old man should be, but red, and with red hair streaking his grey, and with a tight skin and a big body sticking out before. So. An elephant of a man, a great quivering mud-bank of a man, who laughed mightily, so that the people stopped and listened in the street. He came, he laughed, and as he went away we heard them laugh together—"

"Well?" said Azim.

"He was a diamond merchant, perhaps—or a dealer in rubies. Do Englishmen deal in such things?"

"Would I had seen him!" said Azim.

"He took gold away," said Golam.

277 Both were silent for a space, and the purring noise of the wheel of the upper well, and the chatter of voices about it rising and falling, made a pleasant sound in the air.

“Since the Englishman went,” said Golam, “he has been different. He hides something from me—something in his robe. Rubies! What else can it be?”

“He has not buried it?” said Azim.

“He will. Then he will want to dig it up again and look at it,” said Golam, for he was a man of experience. “I go softly. Sometimes almost I come upon him. Then he starts—”

“He grows old and nervous,” said Azim, and there was a pause.

“Before the English came,” said Golam, looking at the rings upon his fingers, as he recurred to his constant preoccupation; “there were no Rajahs nervous and old.”

That, I say, was even before the coming of the safe. It came in a packing case. Such a case it was as had never been seen before on all the slopes of the Himalayan mountains, it was an elephant’s burden even on the plain. It was days drawing nearer and nearer. At Allapore crowds went to see it pass upon the railway. Afterwards elephants and then a great multitude of men dragged it up the hills. And this great case being opened in the Hall of Audience revealed within itself a monstrous iron box, like no other box that had ever come to the city. It had been made, so the story went, by necromancers in England, expressly to the order of the Rajah, that he might keep his treasure therein and sleep in peace. It was so hard that the hardest files powdered upon its corners, and so strong that cannon fired point-blank at it would have produced no effect upon it. And it locked with a magic lock. There was a word, and none knew the word but the Rajah. With that word, and a little key that hung about his neck, one could open the lock; but without it none could do so.

The Rajah caused this safe to be built into the wall of his palace in a little room beyond the Hall of Audience. He superintended the building up of it with jealous eyes. And thereafter he would go thither day by day, once at least every day, coming back with brighter eyes. “He goes to count his treasure,” said Golam Shah, standing beside the empty daīs.

And in those days it was that the Rajah began to change. He who had been cunning and subtle became choleric and outspoken. His judgment grew harsh, and a taint that seemed to all about him to be assuredly the taint of avarice crept into his acts.

Moreover, which inclined Golam Shah to hopefulness, he seemed to take a dislike to Azim Khan. Once indeed he made a kind of speech in the Hall of Audience. Therein he declared many times over in a peculiarly husky voice, husky yet full of conviction, that Azim Khan was not worth a half anna, not worth a half anna to any human soul.

In these latter days of the Rajah's decline, moreover, when merchants came, he would go aside with them secretly into the little room, and speak low, so that those in the Hall of Audience, howsoever they strained their ears, could hear nothing of his speech. These things Golam Shah and Azim Khan and Samud Singh, who had joined their councils, treasured in their hearts.

"It is true about the treasure," said Azim; "they talked of it round the well of the travellers, even the merchants from Tibet had heard the tale, and had come this way with jewels of price, and afterwards they went secretly telling no one." And ever and again, it was said, came a negro mute from the plains, with secret parcels for the Rajah. "Another stone," was the rumour that went the round of the city.

"The bee makes hoards," said Azim Khan, the Rajah's heir, sitting in the upper chamber of Golam Shah. "Therefore, we will wait awhile." For Azim was more coward than traitor.

At last there were men in the Deccan even who could tell you particulars of the rubies and precious stones that the Rajah had gathered together. But so circumspect was the Rajah that Azim Khan and Golam Shah had never even set eyes on the glittering heaps that they knew were accumulating in the safe.

280The Rajah always went into the little room alone, and even then he locked the door of the little room—it had a couple of locks—before he went to the safe and used the magic word. How all the ministers and officers and guards listened and looked at one another as the door of the room behind the curtain closed!

The Rajah changed indeed, in these days, not only in the particulars of his rule, but in his appearance. "He is growing old. How fast he grows old! The time is almost ripe," whispered Samud Singh. The Rajah's hand became tremulous, his step was now sometimes unsteady, and his memory curiously defective. He would come back out from the treasure-room, and his hand would tighten fiercely on the curtain, and he would stumble on the steps of the dais. "His eyesight fails," said Golam. "See!—His turban is askew. He is sleepy even in the forenoon, before the heat of the day. His judgments are those of a child."

It was a painful sight to see a man so suddenly old and enfeebled still ruling men.

"He may go on yet, a score of years," said Golam Shah.

"Should a ruler hoard riches," said Shere Ali, in the guardroom, "and leave his soldiers unpaid?" That was the beginning of the end.

It was the thought of the treasure won over the soldiers, even as it did the mollahs and the eunuchs. Why had the Rajah not buried it in some unthinkable place, as his father had done before him, and killed the diggers with his hand? “He has hoarded,” said Samud, with a chuckle,—for the old Rajah had once pulled his beard,—“only to pay for his own undoing.” And in order to insure confidence, Golam Shah went beyond the truth perhaps, and gave a sketchy account of the treasures to this man and that, even as a casual eyewitness might do.

Then, suddenly and swiftly, the palace revolution was accomplished. When the lonely old Rajah was killed, a shot was to be fired from the harem lattice, bugles were to be blown, and the sepoy were to turn out in the square before the palace, and fire a volley in the air. The murder was done in the dark save for a little red lamp that burnt in the corner. Azim knelt on the body and held up the wet beard, and cut the throat wide and deep to make sure. It was so easy! Why had he waited so long? And then, with his hands covered with warm blood, he sprang up eagerly—Rajah at last!—and followed Golam and Samud and the eunuchs down the long, faintly moonlit passage, towards the Hall of Audience.

As they did so, the crack of a rifle sounded far away, and after a pause came the first awakening noises of the town. One of the eunuchs had an iron bar, and Samud carried a pistol in his hand. He fired into the locks of the treasure-room, and wrecked them, and the eunuch smashed the door in. Then they all rushed in together, none standing aside for Azim. It was dark, and the second eunuch went reluctantly to get a torch, in fear lest his fellow murderers should open the safe in his absence.

But he need have had no fear. The cardinal event of that night is the triumphant vindication of the advertised merits of Chobbs’ unrivalled safes. The tumult that occurred between the Mindapore sepoy and the people need not concern us. The people loved not the new Rajah—let that suffice. The conspirators got the key from round the dead Rajah’s neck, and tried a multitude of the magic words of the English that Samud Singh knew, even such words as “Kemup” and “Gorblimey”—in vain.

In the morning, the safe in the treasure-room remained intact and defiant, the woodwork about it smashed to splinters, and great chunks of stone knocked out of the wall, dents abundantly scattered over its impregnable door, and a dust of files below. And the shifty Golam had to explain the matter to the soldiers and mollahs as best he could. This was an extremely difficult thing to do, because in no kind of business is prompt cash so necessary as in the revolutionary line.

The state of affairs for the next few days in Mindapore was exceedingly strained. One fact stands out prominently, that Azim Khan was hopelessly feeble. The soldiers

would not at first believe in the exemplary integrity of the safe, and a deputation insisted in the most occidental manner in verifying the new Rajah's statements. Moreover, the populace clamoured, and then by a naked man running, came the alarming intelligence that the new Deputy-Commissioner at Allapore was coming headlong and with soldiers to verify the account of the revolution Golam Shah and Samud Singh had sent him in the name of Azim.

The new Deputy-Commissioner was a raw young man, partly obscured by a pith helmet, and chock full of zeal and the desire for distinction; and he had heard of the treasure. He was going, he said, to sift the matter thoroughly. On the arrival of this distressing intelligence there was a hasty and informal council of state (at which Azim was not present), a counter-revolution was arranged, and all that Azim ever learnt of it was the sound of a footfall behind him, and the cold touch of a pistol barrel on the neck.

When the Commissioner arrived, that dexterous statesman, Golam Shah, and that honest soldier, Samud Singh, were ready to receive him, and they had two corpses, several witnesses, and a neat little story. In addition to Azim they had shot an unpopular officer of the Mindapore sepoy. They told the Commissioner how Azim had plotted against the Rajah and raised a military revolt, and how the people, who loved the old Rajah, even as Golam Shah and Samud Singh loved him, had quelled the revolt, and how peace was restored again. And Golam explained how Azim had fought for life even in the Hall of Audience, and how he, Golam, had been wounded in the struggle, and how Samud had shot Azim with his own hand.

And the Deputy-Commissioner, being weak in his dialect, had swallowed it all. All round the Deputy-Commissioner, in the minds of the people, the palace, and the city, hung the true story of the case, as it seemed to Golam Shah, like an avalanche ready to fall; and yet the Deputy-Commissioner did not learn of it for four days. And Golam and Samud went to and fro, whispering and pacifying, promising to get at the treasure as soon as the Deputy-Commissioner could be got out of the way. And as they went to and fro so also the report went to and fro—that Golam and Samud had opened the safe and hidden the treasure, and closed and locked it again; and bright eyes watched them curiously and hungrily even as they had watched the Rajah in the days that were gone.

“This city is no longer an abiding place for you and me,” said Golam Shah, in a moment of clear insight. “They are mad about this treasure. Golconda would not satisfy them.”

The Deputy-Commissioner, when he heard their story, did indeed make knowing inquiries (as knowing as the knowingness of the English goes) in order to show himself not too credulous; but he elicited nothing. He had heard tales of treasure, 285 had the Commissioner, and of a great box? So had Golam and Samud, but where it was they could not tell. They too had certainly heard tales of treasure—many tales indeed. Perhaps there *was* treasure.

Had the Deputy-Commissioner had the scientific turn of mind, he would have observed that a strong smell of gunpowder still hung about the Audience Chamber, more than was explained by the narrative told him; and had he explored the adjacent apartments, he would presently have discovered the small treasure-room with its smashed locks, and the ceiling now dependent ruins, and amid the ruins the safe, bulging perilously from the partly collapsed walls, but still unconquered, and with its treasures unexplored. Also it is a fact that Golam Shah's bandaged hand was not the consequence of heroism in combat, but of certain private blasting operations too amateurishly prosecuted.

So you have the situation: Deputy-Commissioner installed in the palace, sending incorrect information to headquarters and awaiting instructions, the safe as safe as ever; assistant conspirators grumbling louder and louder; and Golam and Samud getting more and more desperate lest this voice should reach the Deputy's ears.

Then came the night when the Commissioner heard a filing and a tapping, and being a brave man, rose and went forthwith, alone and very quietly, across the Hall of Audience, pistol in hand, 286 in search of the sound. Across the Hall a light came from an open door that had been hidden in the day by a curtain. Stopping silently in the darkness of the outer apartment, he looked into the treasure-room. And there stood Golam with his arm in a sling, holding a lantern, while Samud fumbled with pieces of wire and some little keys. They were without boots, but otherwise they were dressed ready for a journey.

The Deputy-Commissioner was, for a Government official, an exceedingly quick-witted man. He slipped back in the darkness again, and within five minutes, Golam and Samud, still fumbling, heard footsteps hurrying across the Hall of Audience, and saw a flicker of light. Out went their lantern, with a groan because of a bandaged arm, but it was too late. In another moment Lieutenant Earl, in pyjamas and boots, but with a brace of revolvers and a couple of rifles behind him, stood in the doorway of the treasure-room, and Golam and Samud were caught. Samud clicked his pistol and then threw it down, for it was three to one—Golam being not only a bandaged man, but fundamentally a man of peace.

When the intelligence of this treachery filtered from the palace into the town, there was an outbreak of popular feeling, and a dozen officious persons set out to tell the Deputy-Commissioner the true connection between Golam, Samud, and the death of the Rajah. The first to penetrate to the Deputy-Commissioner's presence was an angry fakir, from the colony that dwelt about the Holy place. And after a patient hearing the Deputy-Commissioner extracted the thread of the narrative from the fabric of curses in which the holy man presented it.

"This is most singular," said the Deputy-Commissioner to the Lieutenant, standing in the treasure-room (which looked as though the palace had been bombarded), and regarding the battered but still inviolable safe. "Here we seem to have the key of the whole position."

"Key!" said the Lieutenant. "It's the key they haven't got."

"Curious mingling of the new and the old," said the Deputy-Commissioner. "Patent safe—and a hoard."

"Send to Allapore and wire Chobbs, I suppose?" said the Lieutenant.

The Deputy-Commissioner signified that was his intention, and they set guards before and behind and all about the treasure-room, until the proper instructions about the lock should come.

So it was that the *Pax Britannica* solemnly took possession of the Rajah's hoard, and men in Simla heard the news, and envied that Deputy-Commissioner his adventure with all their hearts. For his promptitude and decision was a matter of praise, and they said that Mindapore would certainly be annexed and added to the district over which he ruled. Only a fat old man named MacTurk, living in Allapore, a big man with a noisy quivering laugh, and a secret trade with certain native potentates, did not hear the news, excepting only the news of the murder of the Rajah and the departure of the Deputy-Commissioner, for several days. He heard nothing of the disposition of the treasure—an unfortunate thing, since, among other things, he had sold the Rajah his safe, and may even have known the word by which the lock was opened.

The Deputy-Commissioner had theatrical tastes. These he gratified under the excuse that display was above all things necessary in dealing with Orientals. He imprisoned his four malefactors theatrically, and when the instructions came from Chobbs he had the safe lugged into the Hall of Audience, in order to open it with more effect. The Commissioner sat on the daïs, while the engineer worked at the safe on the crimson steps.

In the central space was stretched a large white cloth. It reminded the Deputy-Commissioner of a picture he had seen of Alexander at Damascus receiving the treasures of Darius.

“It is gold,” said one bystander to another. “There was a sound of chinking as they brought the safe in. My brother was among those who hauled.”

The engineer clicked the lock. Every eye in the Hall of Audience grew brighter and keener, excepting the eyes of the Deputy-Commissioner. 289He felt the dignity of his responsibilities, and sat upon the dais looking as much like the *Pax Britannica* as possible.

“Holy Smoke!” said the engineer, and slammed the safe again. A murmur of exclamations ran round the hall. Every one was asking every one else what they had seen.

“An asp!” said some one.

The Deputy-Commissioner lost his imperturbability. “What is it?” he said, springing to his feet. The engineer leant across the safe and whispered two words, something indistinct and with a blasphemous adjective in front.

“*What?*” said the Deputy-Commissioner, sharply.

“Glass!” said the engineer, in a bitter whisper. “Broken bottles. ’Undreds!”

“Let me see!” said the Deputy-Commissioner, losing all his dignity.

“Scotch, if I’m not mistaken,” said the engineer, sniffing curiously.

“Curse it!” said the Deputy-Commissioner, and looked up to meet a multitude of ironical eyes. “Er—

“The assembly is dismissed,” said the Deputy-Commissioner.

“What a *fool* he must have looked!” wheezed MacTurk, who did not like the Deputy-Commissioner. “What a *fool* he must have looked!

290“Simple enough,” said MacTurk, “when you know how it came about.”

“But how did it come about?” asked the station-master.

“Secret drinking,” said MacTurk. “Bourbon whiskey. I taught him how to take it myself. But he didn’t dare let on that he was doing it, poor old chap! Mindapore’s one of the most fanatically Mahometan states in the hills you see. And he always was a secretive kind of chap, and given to doing things by himself. So he got that safe to hide it in, and

keep the bottles. Broke 'em up to pack, I s'pose, when it got too full. Lord! I might ha' known. When people spoke of his treasure—I never thought of putting that and the safe and the Bourbon together! But how plain it is! And *what* a sell for Parkinson. Pounded glass! The accumulation of years! Lord!—I'd, 'a' given a couple of stone off my weight to see him open that safe!"

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THE STORY OF DAVIDSON'S EYES

I

The transitory mental aberration of Sidney Davidson, remarkable enough in itself, is still more remarkable if Wade's explanation is to be credited. It sets one dreaming of the oddest possibilities of intercommunication in the future, of spending an intercalary five minutes on the other side of the world, or being watched in our most secret operations by unsuspected eyes. It happened that I was the immediate witness of Davidson's seizure, and so it falls naturally to me to put the story upon paper.

When I say that I was the immediate witness of his seizure, I mean that I was the first on the scene. The thing happened at the Harlow Technical College just beyond the Highgate Archway. He was alone in the larger laboratory when the thing happened. I was in the smaller room, where the balances are, writing up some notes. The thunderstorm had completely upset my work, of course. It was just after one of the louder peals that I thought I heard some glass smash in the other room. I stopped writing, and turned round to listen. For a moment I heard nothing; the hail was playing the devil's tattoo on the corrugated zinc of the roof. Then came another sound, a smash—no doubt of it this time. Something heavy had been knocked off the bench. I jumped up at once and went and opened the door leading into the big laboratory.

I was surprised to hear a queer sort of laugh, and saw Davidson standing unsteadily in the middle of the room, with a dazzled look on his face. My first impression was that he was drunk. He did not notice me. He was clawing out at something invisible a yard in front of his face. He put out his hand, slowly, rather hesitatingly, and then clutched nothing. "What's come to it?" he said. He held up his hands to his face, fingers spread out. "Great Scott!" he said. The thing happened three or four years ago, when every one swore by that personage. Then he began raising his feet clumsily, as though he had expected to find them glued to the floor.

"Davidson!" cried I. "What's the matter with you?" He turned round in my direction and looked about for me. He looked over me and at me and on either side of me, without the slightest sign of seeing me. "Waves," he said; "and a remarkably neat

schooner. I'd swear that was Bellows's voice. *Hullo!*" He shouted suddenly at the top of his voice.

I thought he was up to some foolery. Then I saw littered about his feet the shattered remains of the best of our electrometers. "What's up, 293man?" said I. "You've smashed the electrometer!"

"Bellows again!" said he. "Friends left, if my hands are gone. Something about electrometers. Which way *are* you, Bellows?" He suddenly came staggering towards me. "The damned stuff cuts like butter," he said. He walked straight into the bench and recoiled. "None so buttery, that!" he said, and stood swaying.

I felt scared. "Davidson," said I, "what on earth's come over you?"

He looked round him in every direction. "I could swear that was Bellows. Why don't you show yourself like a man, Bellows?"

It occurred to me that he must be suddenly struck blind. I walked round the table and laid my hand upon his arm. I never saw a man more startled in my life. He jumped away from me, and came round into an attitude of self-defence, his face fairly distorted with terror. "Good God!" he cried. "What was that?"

"It's I—Bellows. Confound it, Davidson!"

He jumped when I answered him and stared—how can I express it?—right through me. He began talking, not to me, but to himself. "Here in broad daylight on a clear beach. Not a place to hide in." He looked about him wildly. "Here! I'm *off*." He suddenly turned and ran headlong into the big electro-magnet—so 294violently that, as we found afterwards, he bruised his shoulder and jawbone cruelly. At that he stepped back a pace, and cried out with almost a whimper, "What, in Heaven's name, has come over me?" He stood, blanched with terror and trembling violently, with his right arm clutching his left, where that had collided with the magnet.

By that time I was excited, and fairly excited. "Davidson," said I, "don't be afraid."

He was startled at my voice, but not so excessively as before. I repeated my words in as clear and firm a tone as I could assume. "Bellows," he said, "is that you?"

"Can't you see it's me?"

He laughed. "I can't even see it's myself. Where the devil are we?"

"Here," said I, "in the laboratory."

“The laboratory!” he answered, in a puzzled tone, and put his hand to his forehead. “I was in the laboratory—till that flash came, but I’m hanged if I’m there now. What ship is that?”

“There’s no ship,” said I. “Do be sensible, old chap.”

“No ship!” he repeated, and seemed to forget my denial forthwith. “I suppose,” said he, slowly, “we’re both dead. But the rummy part is I feel just as though I still had a body. Don’t get used to it all at once, I suppose. The old shop was struck by lightning, I suppose. Jolly quick thing, Bellows—eigh?”

295 “Don’t talk nonsense. You’re very much alive. You are in the laboratory, blundering about. You’ve just smashed a new electrometer. I don’t envy you when Boyce arrives.”

He stared away from me towards the diagrams of cryohydrates. “I must be deaf,” said he. “They’ve fired a gun, for there goes the puff of smoke, and I never heard a sound.”

I put my hand on his arm again, and this time he was less alarmed. “We seem to have a sort of invisible bodies,” said he. “By Jove! there’s a boat coming round the headland! It’s very much like the old life after all—in a different climate.”

I shook his arm. “Davidson,” I cried, “wake up!”

II

It was just then that Boyce came in. So soon as he spoke Davidson exclaimed: “Old Boyce! Dead too! What a lark!” I hastened to explain that Davidson was in a kind of somnambulistic trance. Boyce was interested at once. We both did all we could to rouse the fellow out of his extraordinary state. He answered our questions, and asked us some of his own, but his attention seemed distracted by his hallucination about a beach and a ship. He kept interpolating observations concerning some boat and the davits and sails filling with the wind. It made one feel queer, 296 in the dusky laboratory, to hear him saying such things.

He was blind and helpless. We had to walk him down the passage, one at each elbow, to Boyce’s private room, and while Boyce talked to him there, and humoured him about this ship idea, I went along the corridor and asked old Wade to come and look at him. The voice of our Dean sobered him a little, but not very much. He asked where his hands were, and why he had to walk about up to his waist in the ground. Wade thought over him a long time—you know how he knits his brows—and then made him feel the couch, guiding his hands to it. “That’s a couch,” said Wade. “The couch in the private room of Professor Boyce. Horsehair stuffing.”

Davidson felt about, and puzzled over it, and answered presently that he could feel it all right, but he couldn't see it.

"What *do* you see?" asked Wade. Davidson said he could see nothing but a lot of sand and broken-up shells. Wade gave him some other things to feel, telling him what they were, and watching him keenly.

"The ship is almost hull down," said Davidson, presently, *apropos* of nothing.

"Never mind the ship," said Wade. "Listen to me, Davidson. Do you know what hallucination means?"

"Rather," said Davidson.

297 "Well, everything you see is hallucinatory."

"Bishop Berkeley," said Davidson.

"Don't mistake me," said Wade. "You are alive, and in this room of Boyce's. But something has happened to your eyes. You cannot see; you can feel and hear, but not see. Do you follow me?"

"It seems to me that I see too much." Davidson rubbed his knuckles into his eyes.

"Well?" he said.

"That's all. Don't let it perplex you. Bellows, here, and I will take you home in a cab."

"Wait a bit." Davidson thought. "Help me to sit down," said he, presently; "and now—I'm sorry to trouble you—but will you tell me all that over again?"

Wade repeated it very patiently. Davidson shut his eyes, and pressed his hands upon his forehead. "Yes," said he. "It's quite right. Now my eyes are shut I know you're right. That's you, Bellows, sitting by me on the couch. I'm in England again. And we're in the dark."

Then he opened his eyes. "And there," said he, "is the sun just rising, and the yards of the ship, and a tumbled sea, and a couple of birds flying. I never saw anything so real. And I'm sitting up to my neck in a bank of sand."

He bent forward and covered his face with his hands. Then he opened his eyes again. "Dark sea and sunrise! And yet I'm sitting on a sofa in old Boyce's room!—God help me!"

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III

That was the beginning. For three weeks this strange affection of Davidson's eyes continued unabated. It was far worse than being blind. He was absolutely helpless, and had to be fed like a newly-hatched bird, and led about and undressed. If he attempted to move he fell over things or struck himself against walls or doors. After a day or so he got used to hearing our voices without seeing us, and willingly admitted he was at home, and that Wade was right in what he told him. My sister, to whom he was engaged, insisted on coming to see him, and would sit for hours every day while he talked about this beach of his. Holding her hand seemed to comfort him immensely. He explained that when we left the College and drove home,—he lived in Hampstead Village,—it appeared to him as if we drove right through a sandhill—it was perfectly black until he emerged again—and through rocks and trees and solid obstacles, and when he was taken to his own room it made him giddy and almost frantic with the fear of falling, because going upstairs seemed to lift him thirty or forty feet above the rocks of his imaginary island. He kept saying he should smash all the eggs. The end was that he had to be taken down into his father's consulting room and laid upon a couch that stood there.

He described the island as being a bleak kind of place on the whole, with very little vegetation, except some peaty stuff, and a lot of bare rock. There were multitudes of penguins, and they made the rocks white and disagreeable to see. The sea was often rough, and once there was a thunderstorm, and he lay and shouted at the silent flashes. Once or twice seals pulled up on the beach, but only on the first two or three days. He said it was very funny the way in which the penguins used to waddle right through him, and how he seemed to lie among them without disturbing them.

I remember one odd thing, and that was when he wanted very badly to smoke. We put a pipe in his hands—he almost poked his eye out with it—and lit it. But he couldn't taste anything. I've since found it's the same with me—I don't know if it's the usual case—that I cannot enjoy tobacco at all unless I can see the smoke.

But the queerest part of his vision came when Wade sent him out in a bath-chair to get fresh air. The Davidsons hired a chair, and got that deaf and obstinate dependent of theirs, Widgery, to attend to it. Widgery's ideas of healthy expeditions were peculiar. My sister, who had been to the Dog's Home, met them in Camden Town, towards King's Cross. Widgery trotting along complacently, and Davidson evidently most distressed, trying in his feeble, blind way to attract Widgery's attention.

He positively wept when my sister spoke to him. 300 "Oh, get me out of this horrible darkness!" he said, feeling for her hand. "I must get out of it, or I shall die." He was quite incapable of explaining what was the matter, but my sister decided he must go

home, and presently, as they went up the hill towards Hampstead, the horror seemed to drop from him. He said it was good to see the stars again, though it was then about noon and a blazing day.

“It seemed,” he told me afterwards, “as if I was being carried irresistibly towards the water. I was not very much alarmed at first. Of course it was night there—a lovely night.”

“Of course?” I asked, for that struck me as odd.

“Of course,” said he. “It’s always night there when it is day here— Well, we went right into the water, which was calm and shining under the moonlight—just a broad swell that seemed to grow broader and flatter as I came down into it. The surface glistened just like a skin—it might have been empty space underneath for all I could tell to the contrary. Very slowly, for I rode slanting into it, the water crept up to my eyes. Then I went under, and the skin seemed to break and heal again about my eyes. The moon gave a jump up in the sky and grew green and dim, and fish, faintly glowing, came darting round me—and things that seemed made of luminous glass, and I passed through a tangle of seaweeds that shone with an oily lustre. And so I drove down into the sea, and the stars went out one by one, and the moon grew greener and darker, and the seaweed became a luminous purple-red. It was all very faint and mysterious, and everything seemed to quiver. And all the while I could hear the wheels of the bath-chair creaking, and the footsteps of people going by, and a man with a bell crying coals.

“I kept sinking down deeper and deeper into the water. It became inky black about me, not a ray from above came down into that darkness, and the phosphorescent things grew brighter and brighter. The snaky branches of the deeper weeds flickered like the flames of spirit lamps; but, after a time, there were no more weeds. The fishes came staring and gaping towards me, and into me and through me. I never imagined such fishes before. They had lines of fire along the sides of them as though they had been outlined with a luminous pencil. And there was a ghastly thing swimming backwards with a lot of twining arms. And then I saw, coming very slowly towards me through the gloom, a hazy mass of light that resolved itself as it drew nearer into multitudes of fishes, struggling and darting round something that drifted. I drove on straight towards it, and presently I saw in the midst of the tumult, and by the light of the fish, a bit of splintered spar looming over me, and a dark hull tilting over, and some glowing phosphorescent forms that were shaken and writhed as the fish bit at them. Then it was I began to try to attract Widgery’s attention. A horror came upon me. Ugh! I

should have driven right into those half-eaten—things. If your sister had not come! They had great holes in them, Bellows, and—Never mind. But it was ghastly!”

IV

For three weeks Davidson remained in this singular state, seeing what at the time we imagined was an altogether phantasmal world, and stone blind to the world around him. Then, one Tuesday, when I called, I met old Davidson in the passage. “He can see his thumb!” the old gentleman said, in a perfect transport. He was struggling into his overcoat. “He can see his thumb, Bellows!” he said, with the tears in his eyes. “The lad will be all right yet.”

I rushed in to Davidson. He was holding up a little book before his face, and looking at it and laughing in a weak kind of way.

“It’s amazing,” said he. “There’s a kind of patch come there.” He pointed with his finger. “I’m on the rocks as usual, and the penguins are staggering and flapping about as usual, and there’s been a whale showing every now and then, but it’s got too dark now to make him out. But put something *there*, and I see it—I do see it. It’s very dim and broken in places, but I see it all the same, like a faint spectre of itself. I found it out this morning while they were dressing me. It’s like a hole in this infernal phantom world. Just put your hand by mine. No—not there. Ah! Yes! I see it. The base of your thumb and a bit of cuff! It looks like the ghost of a bit of your hand sticking out of the darkening sky. Just by it there’s a group of stars like a cross coming out.”

From that time Davidson began to mend. His account of the change, like his account of the vision, was oddly convincing. Over patches of his field of vision the phantom world grew fainter, grew transparent, as it were, and through these translucent gaps he began to see dimly the real world about him. The patches grew in size and number, ran together and spread until only here and there were blind spots left upon his eyes. He was able to get up and steer himself about, feed himself once more, read, smoke, and behave like an ordinary citizen again. At first it was very confusing to him to have these two pictures overlapping each other like the changing views of a lantern, but in a little while he began to distinguish the real from the illusory.

At first he was unfeignedly glad, and seemed only too anxious to complete his cure by taking exercise and tonics. But as that odd island of his began to fade away from him, he became queerly interested in it. He wanted particularly to go down into the deep sea again, and would spend half his time wandering about the low-lying parts of London, trying to find the water-logged wreck he had seen drifting. The glare of real daylight very soon impressed him so vividly as to blot out everything of his shadowy

world, but of a night-time, in a darkened room, he could still see the white-splashed rocks of the island, and the clumsy penguins staggering to and fro. But even these grew fainter and fainter, and, at last, soon after he married my sister, he saw them for the last time.

V

And now to tell of the queerest thing of all. About two years after his cure, I dined with the Davidsons, and after dinner a man named Atkins called in. He is a lieutenant in the Royal Navy, and a pleasant, talkative man. He was on friendly terms with my brother-in-law, and was soon on friendly terms with me. It came out that he was engaged to Davidson's cousin, and incidentally he took out a kind of pocket photograph case to show us a new rendering of his *fiancée*. "And, by-the-by," said he, "here's the old *Fulmar*."

Davidson looked at it casually. Then suddenly his face lit up. "Good heavens!" said he. "I could almost swear—"

"What?" said Atkins.

"That I had seen that ship before."

305 "Don't see how you can have. She hasn't been out of the South Seas for six years, and before then—"

"But," began Davidson, and then, "Yes—that's the ship I dreamt of. I'm sure that's the ship I dreamt of. She was standing off an island that swarmed with penguins, and she fired a gun."

"Good Lord!" said Atkins, who had never heard the particulars of the seizure. "How the deuce could you dream that?"

And then, bit by bit, it came out that on the very day Davidson was seized, H. M. S. *Fulmar* had actually been off a little rock to the south of Antipodes Island. A boat had landed overnight to get penguins' eggs, had been delayed, and a thunderstorm drifting up, the boat's crew had waited until the morning before rejoining the ship. Atkins had been one of them, and he corroborated, word for word, the descriptions Davidson had given of the island and the boat. There is not the slightest doubt in any of our minds that Davidson has really seen the place. In some unaccountable way, while he moved hither and thither in London, his sight moved hither and thither in a manner that corresponded, about this distant island. *How* is absolutely a mystery.

That completes the remarkable story of Davidson's eyes. It is perhaps the best authenticated case in existence of a real vision at a distance. Explanation there is none forthcoming, except what Professor Wade has thrown out. But his explanation invokes the Fourth Dimension, and a dissertation on theoretical kinds of space. To talk of there being "a kink in space" seems mere nonsense to me; it may be because I am no mathematician. When I said that nothing would alter the fact that the place is eight thousand miles away, he answered that two points might be a yard away on a sheet of paper and yet be brought together by bending the paper round. The reader may grasp his argument, but I certainly do not. His idea seems to be that Davidson, stooping between the poles of the big electro-magnet, had some extraordinary twist given to his retinal elements through the sudden change in the field of force due to the lightning.

He thinks, as a consequence of this, that it may be possible to live visually in one part of the world, while one lives bodily in another. He has even made some experiments in support of his views; but, so far, he has simply succeeded in blinding a few dogs. I believe that is the net result of his work, though I have not seen him for some weeks. Latterly, I have been so busy with my work in connection with the Saint Pancras installation that I have had little opportunity of calling to see him. But the whole of his theory seems fantastic to me. The facts concerning Davidson stand on an altogether different footing, and I can testify personally to the accuracy of every detail I have given.

307

THE CONE

The night was hot and overcast, the sky redrimmed with the lingering sunset of midsummer. They sat at the open window trying to fancy the air was fresher there. The trees and shrubs of the garden stood stiff and dark; beyond in the roadway a gas lamp burnt, bright orange against the hazy blue of the evening. Further were the three lights of the railway signal against the lowering sky. The man and woman spoke to one another in low tones.

"He does not suspect?" said the man, a little nervously.

"Not he," she said peevishly, as though that too irritated her. "He thinks of nothing but the works and the prices of fuel. He has no imagination, no poetry—"

"None of these men of iron have," he said sententiously. "They have no hearts."

"He has not," she said. She turned her discontented face towards the window. The distant sound of a roaring and rushing drew nearer and grew in volume; the house quivered; one heard the metallic rattle of the tender. As the train passed there was a glare of light above the cutting and a driving tumult of smoke; one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight black oblongs—eight trucks—passed across the dim grey of the embankment, and were suddenly extinguished one by one in the throat of the tunnel, which, with the last, seemed to swallow down train, smoke, and sound in one abrupt gulp.

"This country was all fresh and beautiful once," he said; "and now—it is Gehenna. Down that way—nothing but pot-banks and chimneys belching fire and dust into the face of heaven— But what does it matter? An end comes, an end to all this cruelty—*to-morrow*." He spoke the last word in a whisper.

"*To-morrow*," she said, speaking in a whisper too, and still staring out of the window.

"Dear!" he said, putting his hand on hers.

She turned with a start, and their eyes searched one another's. Hers softened to his gaze. "My dear one," she said, and then: "It seems so strange—that you should have come into my life like this—to open—" She paused.

"To open?" he said.

"All this wonderful world—" she hesitated and spoke still more softly—"this world of *love* to me."

Then suddenly the door clicked and closed. They turned their heads, and he started violently back. In the shadow of the room stood a great shadowy figure—silent. They saw the face dimly in the half-light, with unexpressive dark patches under the pent-house brows. Every muscle in Raut's body suddenly became tense. When could the door have opened? What had he heard? Had he heard all? What had he seen? A tumult of questions.

The new-comer's voice came at last, after a pause that seemed interminable. "Well?" he said.

"I was afraid I had missed you, Horrocks," said the man at the window, gripping the window-ledge with his hand. His voice was unsteady.

The clumsy figure of Horrocks came forward out of the shadow. He made no answer to Raut's remark. For a moment he stood above them.

The woman's heart was cold within her. "I told Mr. Raut it was just possible you might come back," she said, in a voice that never quivered.

Horrocks, still silent, sat down abruptly in the chair by her little work-table. His big hands were clenched; one saw now the fire of his eyes under the shadow of his brows. He was trying to get his breath. His eyes went from the woman he had trusted to the friend he had trusted, and then back to the woman.

By this time and for the moment all three half understood one another. Yet none dared say a word to ease the pent-up things that choked them.

310It was the husband's voice that broke the silence at last.

"You wanted to see me?" he said to Raut.

Raut started as he spoke. "I came to see you," he said, resolved to lie to the last.

"Yes?" said Horrocks.

"You promised," said Raut, "to show me some fine effects of moonlight and smoke."

"I promised to show you some fine effects of moonlight and smoke," repeated Horrocks, in a colourless voice.

"And I thought I might catch you to-night before you went down to the works," proceeded Raut, "and come with you."

There was another pause. Did the man mean to take the thing coolly? Did he after all know? How long had he been in the room? Yet even at the moment when they heard the door, their attitudes—Horrocks glanced at the profile of the woman, shadowy pallid in the half-light. Then he glanced at Raut, and seemed to recover himself suddenly. "Of course," he said, "I promised to show you the works under their proper dramatic conditions. It's odd how I could have forgotten."

"If I'm troubling you—" began Raut.

Horrocks started again. A new light had suddenly come into the sultry gloom of his eyes. "Not in the least," he said.

"Have you been telling Mr. Raut of all these 311 contrasts of flame and shadow you think so splendid?" said the woman, turning now to her husband for the first time, her confidence creeping back again, her voice just one half-note too high. "That dreadful theory of yours that machinery is beautiful and everything else in the world ugly. I thought he would not spare you, Mr. Raut. It's his great Theory, his one discovery in Art—"

“I am slow to make discoveries,” said Horrocks, grimly, damping her suddenly. “But what I discover—” He stopped.

“Well?” she said.

“Nothing,” and suddenly he rose to his feet.

“I promised to show you the works,” he said to Raut, and put his big, clumsy hand on his friend’s shoulder. “And you are ready to go?”

“Quite,” said Raut, and stood up also.

There was another pause. Each of them peered through the indistinctness of the dusk at the other two. Horrocks’s hand still rested on Raut’s shoulder. Raut half fancied still that the incident was trivial after all. But Mrs. Horrocks knew her husband better, knew that grim quiet in his voice, and the confusion in her mind took a vague shape of physical evil. “Very well,” said Horrocks, and, dropping his hand, turned towards the door.

“My hat?” Raut looked round in the half-light.

312 “That’s my work-basket,” said Mrs. Horrocks, with a gust of hysterical laughter. The hands came together on the back of the chair. “Here it is!” he said. She had an impulse to warn him in an undertone, but she could not frame a word. “Don’t go!” and “Beware of him!” struggled in her mind, and the swift moment passed.

“Got it?” said Horrocks, standing with door half open.

Raut stepped towards him. “Better say good-bye to Mrs. Horrocks,” said the ironmaster, even more grimly quiet in his tone than before.

Raut started and turned. “Good evening, Mrs. Horrocks,” he said, and their hands touched.

Horrocks held the door open with a ceremonial politeness unusual in him towards men. Raut went out and then, after a wordless look at her, her husband followed. She stood motionless while Raut’s light footfall and her husband’s heavy tread, like bass and treble, passed down the passage together. The front door slammed heavily. She went to the window, moving slowly, and stood watching—leaning forward. The two men appeared for a moment at the gateway in the road, passed under the street lamp, and were hidden by the black masses of the shrubbery. The lamplight fell for a moment on their faces, showing only unmeaning pale patches, telling nothing of what she still feared, and doubted, and craved vainly to know. Then she sank down into a crouching attitude in the big arm-chair, her eyes wide open and staring out at

the red lights from the furnaces that flickered in the sky. An hour after she was still there, her attitude scarcely changed.

The oppressive stillness of the evening weighed heavily upon Raut. They went side by side down the road in silence, and in silence turned into the cinder-made by-way that presently opened out the prospect of the valley.

A blue haze, half dust, half mist, touched the long valley with mystery. Beyond were Hanley and Etruria, grey and dark masses, outlined thinly by the rare golden dots of the street lamps, and here and there a gas-lit window, or the yellow glare of some late-working factory or crowded public-house. Out of the masses, clear and slender against the evening sky, rose a multitude of tall chimneys, many of them reeking, a few smokeless during a season of "play." Here and there a pallid patch and ghostly stunted beehive shapes showed the position of a pot-bank, or a wheel, black and sharp against the hot lower sky, marked some colliery where they raise the iridescent coal of the place. Nearer at hand was the broad stretch of railway, and half invisible trains shunted—a steady puffing and rumbling, with every run a ringing concussion and a rhythmic series of impacts, and a passage of intermittent puffs of white steam across the further view. And to the left, between the railway and the dark mass of the low hill beyond, dominating the whole view, colossal, inky black, and crowned with smoke and fitful flames, stood the great cylinders of the Jeddah Company Blast Furnaces, the central edifices of the big ironworks of which Horrocks was the manager. They stood heavy and threatening, full of an incessant turmoil of flames and seething molten iron, and about the feet of them rattled the rolling mills, and the steam hammer beat heavily and splashed the white iron sparks hither and thither. Even as they looked a truckful of fuel was shot into one of the giants, and the red flames gleamed out, and a confusion of smoke and black dust came boiling upwards towards the sky.

"Certainly you get some fine effects of colour with your furnaces," said Raut, breaking a silence that had become apprehensive.

Horrocks grunted. He stood with his hands in his pockets, frowning down at the dim steaming railway and the busy ironworks beyond, frowning as if he were thinking out some knotty problem.

Raut glanced at him and away again. "At present your moonlight effect is hardly ripe," he continued, looking upward; "the moon is still smothered by the vestiges of daylight."

315 Horrocks stared at him with the expression of a man who has suddenly awakened. "Vestiges of daylight! Of course, of course." He too looked up at the moon, pale still in the midsummer sky. "Come along," he said suddenly, and, gripping Raut's arm in his hand, made a move towards the path that dropped from them towards the railway.

Raut hung back. Their eyes met and saw a thousand things in a moment that their lips came near to say. Horrocks's hand tightened and then relaxed. He left go, and before Raut was aware, they were arm in arm, and walking, one unwillingly enough, down the path.

"You see the fine effect of the railway signals towards Burslem," said Horrocks, suddenly breaking into loquacity, striding fast and tightening the grip of his elbow the while. "Little green lights and red and white lights, all against the haze. You have an eye for effect, Raut. It's a fine effect. And look at those furnaces of mine, how they rise upon us as we come down the hill. That to the right is my pet—seventy feet of him. I packed him myself, and he's boiled away cheerfully with iron in his guts for five long years. I've a particular fancy for *him*. That line of red there,—a lovely bit of warm orange you'd call it, Raut,—that's the puddler's furnaces, and there, in the hot light, three black figures—did you see the white splash of the steam hammer then?—that's 316 the rolling mills. Come along! Clang, clatter, how it goes rattling across the floor! Sheet tin, Raut,—amazing stuff. Glass mirrors are not in it when that stuff comes from the mill. And, squelch!—there goes the hammer again. Come along!"

He had to stop talking to catch at his breath. His arm twisted into Raut's with benumbing tightness. He had come striding down the black path towards the railway as though he was possessed. Raut had not spoken a word, had simply hung back against Horrocks's pull with all his strength.

"I say," he said now, laughing nervously, but with an undernote of snarl in his voice, "why on earth are you nipping my arm off, Horrocks, and dragging me along like this?"

At length Horrocks released him. His manner changed again. "Nipping your arm off!" he said. "Sorry. But it's you taught me the trick of walking in that friendly way."

"You haven't learnt the refinements of it yet then," said Raut, laughing artificially again. "By Jove! I'm black and blue." Horrocks offered no apology. They stood now near the bottom of the hill, close to the fence that bordered the railway. The ironworks had grown larger and spread out with their approach. They looked up to the blast furnaces now instead of down; the further view of Etruria and Hanley had dropped 317 out of sight with their descent. Before them, by the stile, rose a notice board, bearing, still

dimly visible, the words “BEWARE OF THE TRAINS,” half hidden by splashes of coaly mud.

“Fine effects,” said Horrocks, waving his arm. “Here comes a train. The puffs of smoke, the orange glare, the round eye of light in front of it, the melodious rattle. Fine effects! But these furnaces of mine used to be finer, before we shoved cones in their throats and saved the gas.”

“How?” said Raut. “Cones?”

“Cones, my man, cones. I’ll show you one nearer. The flames used to flare out of the open throats, great—what is it?—pillars of cloud by day, red and black smoke, and pillars of fire by night. Now we run it off in pipes and burn it to heat the blast, and the top is shut by a cone. You’ll be interested in that cone.”

“But every now and then,” said Raut, “you get a burst of fire and smoke up there.”

“The cone’s not fixed, it’s hung by a chain from a lever and balanced by an equipoise. You shall see it nearer. Else, of course, there’d be no way of getting fuel into the thing. Every now and then the cone dips and out comes the flare.”

“I see,” said Raut. He looked over his shoulder. “The moon gets brighter,” he said.

“Come along,” said Horrocks, abruptly, gripping his shoulder again, and moving him suddenly towards the railway crossing. And then came one of those swift incidents, vivid, but so rapid that they leave one doubtful and reeling. Half-way across, Horrocks’s hand suddenly clenched upon him like a vice, and swung him backward and through a half turn, so that he looked up the line. And there a chain of lamp-lit carriage-windows telescoped swiftly as it came towards them, and the red and yellow lights of an engine grew larger and larger rushing down upon them. As he grasped what this meant, he turned his face to Horrocks and pushed with all his strength against the arm that held him back between the rails. The struggle did not last a moment. Just as certain as it was that Horrocks held him there, so certain was it that he had been violently lugged out of danger.

“Out of the way!” said Horrocks, with a gasp, as the train came rattling by, and they stood panting by the gate into the ironworks.

“I did not see it coming,” said Raut, still, even in spite of his own apprehensions, trying to keep up an appearance of ordinary intercourse.

Horrocks answered with a grunt. “The cone,” he said, and then as one who recovers himself—“I thought you did not hear.”

“I didn’t,” said Raut.

“I wouldn’t have had you run over then for the world,” said Horrocks.

“For a moment I lost my nerve,” said Raut.

Horrocks stood for half a minute, then turned abruptly towards the ironworks again. “See how fine these great mounds of mine, these clinker heaps, look in the night! That truck yonder, up above there! Up it goes, and out-tilts the slag. See the palpitating red stuff go sliding down the slope. As we get nearer, the heap rises up and cuts the blast furnaces. See the quiver up above the big one. Not that way! This way, between the block heaps. That goes to the puddling furnaces, but I want to show you the canal first.” He came and took Raut by the elbow, and so they went along side by side. Raut answered Horrocks vaguely. What, he asked himself, had really happened on the line? Was he deluding himself with his own fancies, or had Horrocks actually held him back in the way of the train? Had he just been within an ace of being murdered?

Suppose this slouching, scowling monster *did* know anything? For a minute or two then Raut was really afraid for his life, but the mood passed as he reasoned with himself. After all, Horrocks might have heard nothing. At any rate, he had pulled him out of the way in time. His odd manner might be due to the mere vague jealousy he had shown once before. He was talking now of the ash-heaps and the canal. “Eigh?” said Horrocks.

“What?” said Raut. “Rather! The haze in the moonlight. Fine!”

320 “Our canal,” said Horrocks, stopping suddenly. “Our canal by moonlight and firelight is an immense effect. You’ve never seen it? Fancy that! You’ve spent too many of your evenings philandering up in Newcastle there. I tell you, for real florid effects— But you shall see. Boiling water—”

As they came out of the labyrinth of clinker heaps and mounds of coal and ore, the noises of the rolling mill sprang upon them suddenly, loud, near, and distinct. Three shadowy workmen went by and touched their caps to Horrocks. Their faces were vague in the darkness. Raut felt a futile impulse to address them, and before he could frame his words they passed into the shadows. Horrocks pointed to the canal close before them now: a weird-looking place it seemed, in the blood-red reflections of the furnaces. The hot water that cooled the tuyeres came into it, some fifty yards up—a tumultuous, almost boiling affluent, and the steam rose up from the water in silent white whisps and streaks, wrapping damply about them, an incessant succession of ghosts coming up from the black and red eddies, a white uprising that made the head

swim. The shining black tower of the larger blast-furnace rose overhead out of the mist, and its tumultuous riot filled their ears. Raut kept away from the edge of the water and watched Horrocks.

“Here it is red,” said Horrocks, “blood-red 321vapour as red and hot as sin; but yonder there, where the moonlight falls on it and it drives across the clinker heaps, it is as white as death.”

Raut turned his head for a moment, and then came back hastily to his watch on Horrocks. “Come along to the rolling mills,” said Horrocks. The threatening hold was not so evident that time, and Raut felt a little reassured. But all the same, what on earth did Horrocks mean about “white as death” and “red as sin”? Coincidence, perhaps?

They went and stood behind the puddlers for a little while, and then through the rolling mills, where amidst an incessant din the deliberate steam hammer beat the juice out of the succulent iron, and black, half-naked Titans rushed the plastic bars, like hot sealing-wax, between the wheels. “Come on,” said Horrocks in Raut’s ear, and they went and peeped through the little glass hole behind the tuyeres, and saw the tumbled fire writhing in the pit of the blast-furnace. It left one eye blinded for a while. Then with green and blue patches dancing across the dark they went to the lift by which the trucks of ore and fuel and lime were raised to the top of the big cylinder.

And out upon the narrow rail that overhung the furnace Raut’s doubts came upon him again. Was it wise to be here? If Horrocks did know—everything! Do what he would, he could not 322resist a violent trembling. Right underfoot was a sheer depth of seventy feet. It was a dangerous place. They pushed by a truck of fuel to get to the railing that crowned the place. The reek of the furnace, a sulphurous vapour streaked with pungent bitterness, seemed to make the distant hillside of Hanley quiver. The moon was riding out now from among a drift of clouds, half way up the sky above the undulating wooded outlines of Newcastle. The steaming canal ran away from below them under an indistinct bridge, and vanished into the dim haze of the flat fields towards Burslem.

“That’s the cone I’ve been telling you of,” shouted Horrocks, “and, below that, sixty feet of fire and molten metal, with the air of the blast frothing through it like gas in soda-water.”

Raut gripped the handrail tightly, and stared down at the cone. The heat was intense. The boiling of the iron and the tumult of the blast made a thunderous accompaniment to Horrocks’s voice. But the thing had to be gone through now. Perhaps, after all—

“In the middle,” bawled Horrocks, “temperature near a thousand degrees. If *you* were dropped into it—flash into flame like a pinch of gunpowder in a candle. Put your hand out and feel the heat of his breath. Why even up here I’ve seen the rain-water boiling off the trucks. And that cone there. It’s a damned sight too 323hot for roasting cakes. The top side of it’s three hundred degrees.”

“Three hundred degrees!” said Raut.

“Three hundred centigrade, mind!” said Horrocks. “It will boil the blood out of you in no time.”

“Eigh?” said Raut, and turned.

“Boil the blood out of you in— No you don’t!”

“Let me go!” screamed Raut “Let go my arm.”

With one hand he clutched at the handrail, then with both. For a moment the two men stood swaying. Then suddenly, with a violent jerk, Horrocks had twisted him from his hold. He clutched at Horrocks and missed, his foot went back into empty air; in mid-air he twisted himself, and then cheek and shoulder, and knee struck the hot cone together.

He clutched the chain by which the cone hung, and the thing sank an infinitesimal amount as he struck it. A circle of glowing red appeared about him, and a tongue of flame, released from the chaos within, flickered up towards him. An intense pain assailed him at the knees, and he could smell the singeing of his hands. He raised himself to his feet and tried to climb up the chain, and then something struck his head. Black and shining with the moonlight the throat of the furnace rose about him.

324Horrocks he saw stood above him by one of the trucks of fuel on the rail. The gesticulating figure was bright and white in the moonlight, and shouting, “Fizz! you fool! Fizz! you hunter of women! You hot-blooded hound! Boil! boil! boil!”

Suddenly he caught up a handful of coal out of the truck and flung it deliberately, lump after lump, at Raut.

“Horrocks!” cried Raut, “Horrocks!”

He clung crying to the chain, pulling himself up from the burning of the cone. Each missile Horrocks flung hit him. His clothes charred and glowed, and as he struggled the cone dropped and a rush of hot suffocating gas whooped out and burned round him in a swift breath of flame.

His human likeness departed from him. When the momentary red had passed Horrocks saw a charred, blackened figure, its head streaked with blood, still clutching and fumbling with the chain and writhing in agony—a cindery animal, an inhuman, monstrous creature that began a sobbing, intermittent shriek.

Abruptly at the sight the ironmaster's anger passed. A deadly sickness came upon him. The heavy odour of burning flesh came drifting up to his nostrils. His sanity returned to him.

“God have mercy upon me!” he cried. “Oh, God! what have I done?”

He knew the thing below him, save that it still moved and felt, was already a dead man—that the blood of the poor wretch must be boiling in his veins. An intense realisation of that agony came to his mind and overcame every other feeling. For a moment he stood irresolute, and then, turning to the truck, he hastily tilted its contents upon the struggling thing that had once been a man. The mass fell with a thud and went radiating over the cone. With the thud the shriek ended, and a boiling confusion of smoke, dust, and flame came rushing up towards him. As it passed he saw the cone clear again.

Then he staggered back and stood trembling, clinging to the rail with both hands. His lips moved, but no words came to them.

Down below was the sound of voices and running steps. The clangour of rolling in the shed ceased abruptly.

326

THE PURPLE PILEUS

Mr. Coombes was sick of life. He walked away from his unhappy home, and, sick not only of his own existence, but of everybody else's, turned aside down Gaswork Lane to avoid the town, and, crossing the wooden bridge that goes over the canal to Starling's Cottages, was presently alone in the damp pinewoods and out of sight and sound of human habitation. He would stand it no longer. He repeated aloud with blasphemies unusual to him that he would stand it no longer.

He was a pale-faced little man, with dark eyes and a fine and very black moustache. He had a very stiff, upright collar slightly frayed, that gave him an illusory double chin, and his overcoat (albeit shabby) was trimmed with astrachan. His gloves were a bright brown with black stripes over the knuckles, and split at the finger-ends. His appearance, his wife had said once in the dear, dead days beyond recall,—before he married her, that is,—was military. But now she called him— It seems a dreadful thing

to tell of between husband and wife, but she called him “a little grub.” It wasn’t the only thing she had called him, either.

327The row had arisen about that beastly Jennie again. Jennie was his wife’s friend, and, by no invitation of Mr. Coombes, she came in every blessed Sunday to dinner, and made a shindy all the afternoon. She was a big, noisy girl, with a taste for loud colours and a strident laugh; and this Sunday she had outdone all her previous intrusions by bringing in a fellow with her, a chap as showy as herself. And Mr. Coombes, in a starchy, clean collar and his Sunday frock-coat, had sat dumb and wrathful at his own table, while his wife and her guests talked foolishly and undesirably, and laughed aloud. Well, he stood that, and after dinner (which, “as usual,” was late), what must Miss Jennie do but go to the piano and play banjo tunes, for all the world as if it were a week-day! Flesh and blood could not endure such goings-on. They would hear next door; they would hear in the road; it was a public announcement of their disrepute. He had to speak.

He had felt himself go pale, and a kind of rigour had affected his respiration as he delivered himself. He had been sitting on one of the chairs by the window—the new guest had taken possession of the arm-chair. He turned his head. “Sun Day!” he said over the collar, in the voice of one who warns. “Sun Day!” What people call a “nasty” tone it was.

Jennie had kept on playing; but his wife, who 328was looking through some music that was piled on the top of the piano, had stared at him. “What’s wrong now?” she said; “can’t people enjoy themselves?”

“I don’t mind rational ’njoyment, at all,” said little Coombes; “but I ain’t a-going to have week-day tunes playing on a Sunday in this house.”

“What’s wrong with my playing now?” said Jennie, stopping and twirling round on the music-stool with a monstrous rustle of flounces.

Coombes saw it was going to be a row, and opened too vigorously, as is common with your timid, nervous men all the world over. “Steady on with that music-stool!” said he; “it ain’t made for ’eavy weights.”

“Never you mind about weights,” said Jennie, incensed. “What was you saying behind my back about my playing?”

“Surely you don’t ’old with not having a bit of music on a Sunday, Mr. Coombes?” said the new guest, leaning back in the arm-chair, blowing a cloud of cigarette smoke and

smiling in a kind of pitying way. And simultaneously his wife said something to Jennie about “Never mind ’im. You go on, Jinny.”

“I do,” said Mr. Coombes, addressing the new guest.

“May I arst why?” said the new guest, evidently enjoying both his cigarette and the prospect of an argument. He was, by-the-by, a lank 329young man, very stylishly dressed in bright drab, with a white cravat and a pearl and silver pin. It had been better taste to come in a black coat, Mr. Coombes thought.

“Because,” began Mr. Coombes, “it don’t suit me. I’m a business man. I ’ave to study my connection. Rational ’njoyment—”

“His connection!” said Mrs. Coombes, scornfully. “That’s what he’s always a-saying. We got to do this, and we got to do that—”

“If you don’t mean to study my connection,” said Mr. Coombes, “what did you marry me for?”

“I wonder,” said Jennie, and turned back to the piano.

“I never saw such a man as you,” said Mrs. Coombes. “You’ve altered all round since we were married. Before—”

Then Jennie began at the tum, tum, tum again.

“Look here!” said Mr. Coombes, driven at last to revolt, standing up and raising his voice. “I tell you I won’t have that.” The frock-coat heaved with his indignation.

“No vi’lence, now,” said the long young man in drab, sitting up.

“Who the juice are you?” said Mr. Coombes, fiercely.

Whereupon they all began talking at once. The new guest said he was Jennie’s “intended,” and meant to protect her, and Mr. Coombes said he 330was welcome to do so anywhere but in his (Mr. Coombes’) house; and Mrs. Coombes said he ought to be ashamed of insulting his guests, and (as I have already mentioned) that he was getting a regular little grub; and the end was, that Mr. Coombes ordered his visitors out of the house, and they wouldn’t go, and so he said he would go himself. With his face burning and tears of excitement in his eyes, he went into the passage, and as he struggled with his overcoat—his frock-coat sleeves got concertinaed up his arm—and gave a brush at his silk hat, Jennie began again at the piano, and strummed him insultingly out of the house. Tum, tum, tum. He slammed the shop-door so that the

house quivered. That, briefly, was the immediate making of his mood. You will perhaps begin to understand his disgust with existence.

As he walked along the muddy path under the firs,—it was late October, and the ditches and heaps of fir-needles were gorgeous with clumps of fungi,—he recapitulated the melancholy history of his marriage. It was brief and commonplace enough. He now perceived with sufficient clearness that his wife had married him out of a natural curiosity and in order to escape from her worrying, laborious, and uncertain life in the workroom; and, like the majority of her class, she was far too stupid to realise that it was her duty to co-operate with him in his business. She was greedy of 331 enjoyment, loquacious, and socially-minded, and evidently disappointed to find the restraints of poverty still hanging about her. His worries exasperated her, and the slightest attempt to control her proceedings resulted in a charge of “grumbling.” Why couldn’t he be nice—as he used to be? And Coombes was such a harmless little man, too, nourished mentally on “Self-Help,” and with a meagre ambition of self-denial and competition, that was to end in a “sufficiency.” Then Jennie came in as a female Mephistopheles, a gabbling chronicle of “fellers,” and was always wanting his wife to go to theatres, and “all that.” And in addition were aunts of his wife, and cousins (male and female), to eat up capital, insult him personally, upset business arrangements, annoy good customers, and generally blight his life. It was not the first occasion by many that Mr. Coombes had fled his home in wrath and indignation, and something like fear, vowing furiously and even aloud that he wouldn’t stand it, and so frothing away his energy along the line of least resistance. But never before had he been quite so sick of life as on this particular Sunday afternoon. The Sunday dinner may have had its share in his despair—and the greyness of the sky. Perhaps, too, he was beginning to realise his unendurable frustration as a business man as the consequence of his marriage. Presently bankruptcy, and after that—Perhaps she might have reason to repent 332 when it was too late. And destiny, as I have already intimated, had planted the path through the wood with evil-smelling fungi, thickly and variously planted it, not only on the right side, but on the left.

A small shopman is in such a melancholy position, if his wife turns out a disloyal partner. His capital is all tied up in his business, and to leave her, means to join the unemployed in some strange part of the earth. The luxuries of divorce are beyond him altogether. So that the good old tradition of marriage for better or worse holds inexorably for him, and things work up to tragic culminations. Bricklayers kick their wives to death, and dukes betray theirs; but it is among the small clerks and shopkeepers nowadays that it comes most often to a cutting of throats. Under the circumstances it is not so very remarkable—and you must take it as charitably as you

can—that the mind of Mr. Coombes ran for awhile on some such glorious close to his disappointed hopes, and that he thought of razors, pistols, bread-knives, and touching letters to the coroner denouncing his enemies by name, and praying piously for forgiveness. After a time his fierceness gave way to melancholia. He had been married in this very overcoat, in his first and only frock-coat that was buttoned up beneath it. He began to recall their courting along this very walk, his years of penurious saving to get capital, and the bright hopefulness of his marrying days. For it all to work out like this! Was there no sympathetic ruler anywhere in the world? He reverted to death as a topic.

He thought of the canal he had just crossed, and doubted whether he shouldn't stand with his head out, even in the middle, and it was while drowning was in his mind that the purple pileus caught his eye. He looked at it mechanically for a moment, and stopped and stooped towards it to pick it up, under the impression that it was some such small leather object as a purse. Then he saw that it was the purple top of a fungus, a peculiarly poisonous-looking purple: slimy, shiny, and emitting a sour odour. He hesitated with his hand an inch or so from it, and the thought of poison crossed his mind. With that he picked the thing, and stood up again with it in his hand.

The odour was certainly strong—acrid, but by no means disgusting. He broke off a piece, and the fresh surface was a creamy white, that changed like magic in the space of ten seconds to a yellowish-green colour. It was even an inviting-looking change. He broke off two other pieces to see it repeated. They were wonderful things, these fungi, thought Mr. Coombes, and all of them the deadliest poisons, as his father had often told him. Deadly poisons!

There is no time like the present for a rash resolve. Why not here and now? thought Mr. Coombes. He tasted a little piece, a very little piece indeed—a mere crumb. It was so pungent that he almost spat it out again, then merely hot and full-flavoured,—a kind of German mustard with a touch of horse-radish and—well, mushroom. He swallowed it in the excitement of the moment. Did he like it or did he not? His mind was curiously careless. He would try another bit. It really wasn't bad—it was good. He forgot his troubles in the interest of the immediate moment. Playing with death it was. He took another bite, and then deliberately finished a mouthful. A curious tingling sensation began in his finger-tips and toes. His pulse began to move faster. The blood in his ears sounded like a mill-race. “Try bi' more,” said Mr. Coombes. He turned and looked about him, and found his feet unsteady. He saw and struggled towards a little patch of purple a dozen yards away. “Jol' goo' stuff,” said Mr. Coombes. “E—lomore ye'.” He pitched forward and fell on his face, his hands outstretched towards the cluster of pilei. But he did not eat any more of them. He forgot forthwith.

He rolled over and sat up with a look of astonishment on his face. His carefully brushed silk hat had rolled away towards the ditch. He pressed his hand to his brow. Something had happened, but he could not rightly determine what it was. Anyhow, he was no longer dull—he 335felt bright, cheerful. And his throat was afire. He laughed in the sudden gaiety of his heart. Had he been dull? He did not know; but at any rate he would be dull no longer. He got up and stood unsteadily, regarding the universe with an agreeable smile. He began to remember. He could not remember very well, because of a steam roundabout that was beginning in his head. And he knew he had been disagreeable at home, just because they wanted to be happy. They were quite right; life should be as gay as possible. He would go home and make it up, and reassure them. And why not take some of this delightful toadstool with him, for them to eat? A hatful, no less. Some of those red ones with white spots as well, and a few yellow. He had been a dull dog, an enemy to merriment; he would make up for it. It would be gay to turn his coat sleeves inside out, and stick some yellow gorse into his waistcoat pockets. Then home—singing—for a jolly evening.

After the departure of Mr. Coombes, Jennie discontinued playing, and turned round on the music-stool again. “What a fuss about nothing,” said Jennie.

“You see, Mr. Clarence, what I’ve got to put up with,” said Mrs. Coombes.

“He is a bit hasty,” said Mr. Clarence, judicially.

“He ain’t got the slightest sense of our position,” 336said Mrs. Coombes; “that’s what I complain of. He cares for nothing but his old shop; and if I have a bit of company, or buy anything to keep myself decent, or get any little thing I want out of the housekeeping money, there’s disagreeables. ‘Economy,’ he says; ‘struggle for life,’ and all that. He lies awake of nights about it, worrying how he can screw me out of a shilling. He wanted us to eat Dorset butter once. If once I was to give in to him—there!”

“Of course,” said Jennie.

“If a man values a woman,” said Mr. Clarence, lounging back in the arm-chair, “he must be prepared to make sacrifices for her. For my own part,” said Mr. Clarence, with his eye on Jennie, “I shouldn’t think of marrying till I was in a position to do the thing in style. It’s downright selfishness. A man ought to go through the rough-and-tumble by himself, and not drag her—”

“I don’t agree altogether with that,” said Jennie. “I don’t see why a man shouldn’t have a woman’s help, provided he doesn’t treat her meanly, you know. It’s meanness—”

“You wouldn’t believe,” said Mrs. Coombes. “But I was a fool to ’ave ’im. I might ’ave known. If it ’adn’t been for my father, we shouldn’t have had not a carriage to our wedding.”

“Lord! he didn’t stick out at that?” said Mr. Clarence, quite shocked.

337“Said he wanted the money for his stock, or some such rubbish. Why, he wouldn’t have a woman in to help me once a week if it wasn’t for my standing out plucky. And the fusses he makes about money—comes to me, well, pretty near crying, with sheets of paper and figgers. ‘If only we can tide over this year,’ he says, ‘the business is bound to go.’ ‘If only we can tide over this year,’ I says; ‘then it’ll be, if only we can tide over next year. I know you,’ I says. ‘And you don’t catch me screwing myself lean and ugly. Why didn’t you marry a slavey,’ I says, ‘if you wanted one—instead of a respectable girl?’ I says.”

So Mrs. Coombes. But we will not follow this unedifying conversation further. Suffice it that Mr. Coombes was very satisfactorily disposed of, and they had a snug little time round the fire. Then Mrs. Coombes went to get the tea, and Jennie sat coquettishly on the arm of Mr. Clarence’s chair until the tea-things clattered outside. “What was that I heard?” asked Mrs. Coombes, playfully, as she entered, and there was badinage about kissing. They were just sitting down to the little circular table when the first intimation of Mr. Coombes’ return was heard.

This was a fumbling at the latch of the front door.

“’Ere’s my lord,” said Mrs. Coombes. “Went out like a lion and comes back like a lamb, I’ll lay.”

338Something fell over in the shop: a chair, it sounded like. Then there was a sound as of some complicated step exercise in the passage. Then the door opened and Coombes appeared. But it was Coombes transfigured. The immaculate collar had been torn carelessly from his throat. His carefully-brushed silk hat, half-full of a crush of fungi, was under one arm; his coat was inside out, and his waistcoat adorned with bunches of yellow-blossomed furze. These little eccentricities of Sunday costume, however, were quite overshadowed by the change in his face; it was livid white, his eyes were unnaturally large and bright, and his pale blue lips were drawn back in a cheerless grin. “Merry!” he said. He had stopped dancing to open the door. “Rational ’njoyment. Dance.” He made three fantastic steps into the room, and stood bowing.

“Jim!” shrieked Mrs. Coombes, and Mr. Clarence sat petrified, with a dropping lower jaw.

“Tea,” said Mr. Coombes. “Jol’ thing, tea. Tose-stools, too. Brosher.”

“He’s drunk,” said Jennie, in a weak voice. Never before had she seen this intense pallor in a drunken man, or such shining, dilated eyes.

Mr. Coombes held out a handful of scarlet agaric to Mr. Clarence. “Jo’ stuff,” said he; “ta’ some.”

At that moment he was genial. Then at the sight of their startled faces he changed, with the swift transition of insanity, into overbearing fury. And it seemed as if he had suddenly recalled the quarrel of his departure. In such a huge voice as Mrs. Coombes had never heard before, he shouted, “My house. I’m master ’ere. Eat what I give yer!” He bawled this, as it seemed, without an effort, without a violent gesture, standing there as motionless as one who whispers, holding out a handful of fungus.

Clarence approved himself a coward. He could not meet the mad fury in Coombes’ eyes; he rose to his feet, pushing back his chair, and turned, stooping. At that Coombes rushed at him. Jennie saw her opportunity, and, with the ghost of a shriek, made for the door. Mrs. Coombes followed her. Clarence tried to dodge. Over went the tea-table with a smash as Coombes clutched him by the collar and tried to thrust the fungus into his mouth. Clarence was content to leave his collar behind him, and shot out into the passage with red patches of fly agaric still adherent to his face. “Shut ’im in!” cried Mrs. Coombes, and would have closed the door, but her supports deserted her; Jennie saw the shop-door open, and vanished thereby, locking it behind her, while Clarence went on hastily into the kitchen. Mr. Coombes came heavily against the door, and Mrs. Coombes, finding the key was inside, fled upstairs and locked herself in the spare bedroom.

So the new convert to *joie de vivre* emerged upon the passage, his decorations a little scattered, but that respectable hatful of fungi still under his arm. He hesitated at the three ways, and decided on the kitchen. Whereupon Clarence, who was fumbling with the key, gave up the attempt to imprison his host, and fled into the scullery, only to be captured before he could open the door into the yard. Mr. Clarence is singularly reticent of the details of what occurred. It seems that Mr. Coombes’ transitory irritation had vanished again, and he was once more a genial playfellow. And as there were knives and meat-choppers about, Clarence very generously resolved to humour him and so avoid anything tragic. It is beyond dispute that Mr. Coombes played with Mr. Clarence to his heart’s content; they could not have been more playful and familiar if they had known each other for years. He insisted gaily on Clarence trying the fungi, and after a friendly tussle, was smitten with remorse at the mess he was making of his guest’s face. It also appears that Clarence was dragged under the sink and his

face scrubbed with the blacking-brush,—he being still resolved to humour the lunatic at any cost,—and that finally, in a somewhat dishevelled, chipped, and discoloured condition, he was assisted to his coat and shown out by the back door, the shopway being barred by Jennie. Mr. Coombes' wandering thoughts then turned to 341 Jennie. Jennie had been unable to unfasten the shop-door, but she shot the bolts against Mr. Coombes' latch-key, and remained in possession of the shop for the rest of the evening.

It would appear that Mr. Coombes then returned to the kitchen, still in pursuit of gaiety, and, albeit a strict Good Templar, drank (or spilt down the front of the first and only frock-coat) no less than five bottles of the stout Mrs. Coombes insisted upon having for her health's sake. He made cheerful noises by breaking off the necks of the bottles with several of his wife's wedding-present dinner-plates, and during the earlier part of this great drunk he sang divers merry ballads. He cut his finger rather badly with one of the bottles,—the only bloodshed in this story,—and what with that, and the systematic convulsion of his inexperienced physiology by the liquorish brand of Mrs. Coombes' stout, it may be the evil of the fungus poison was somehow allayed. But we prefer to draw a veil over the concluding incidents of this Sunday afternoon. They ended in the coal cellar, in a deep and healing sleep.

An interval of five years elapsed. Again it was a Sunday afternoon in October, and again Mr. Coombes walked through the pinewood beyond the canal. He was still the same dark-eyed, black-moustached little man that he was at the outset of the story, but his double chin was now scarcely so illusory as it had been. His overcoat was new, with a velvet lapel, and a stylish collar with turndown corners, free of any coarse starchiness, had replaced the original all-round article. His hat was glossy, his gloves newish—though one finger had split and been carefully mended. And a casual observer would have noticed about him a certain rectitude of bearing, a certain erectness of head that marks the man who thinks well of himself. He was a master now, with three assistants. Beside him walked a larger sunburnt parody of himself, his brother Tom, just back from Australia. They were recapitulating their early struggles, and Mr. Coombes had just been making a financial statement.

"It's a very nice little business, Jim," said brother Tom. "In these days of competition, you're jolly lucky to have worked it up so. And you're jolly lucky, too, to have a wife who's willing to help like yours does."

"Between ourselves," said Mr. Coombes, "it wasn't always so. It wasn't always like this. To begin with, the missus was a bit giddy. Girls are funny creatures."

"Dear me!"

“Yes. You’d hardly think it, but she was downright extravagant, and always having slaps at me. I was a bit too easy and loving, and all that, and she thought the whole blessed show was run for her. Turned the ’ouse into a regular caravansary, 343always having her relations and girls from business in, and their chaps. Comic songs a’ Sunday, it was getting to, and driving trade away. And she was making eyes at the chaps, too! I tell you, Tom, the place wasn’t my own.”

“Shouldn’t ’a’ thought it.”

“It was so. Well—I reasoned with her. I said, ‘I ain’t a duke, to keep a wife like a pet animal. I married you for ’elp and company.’ I said, ‘You got to ’elp and pull the business through.’ She would n’t ’ear of it. ‘Very well,’ I says; ‘I’m a mild man till I’m roused,’ I says, ‘and it’s getting to that.’ But she wouldn’t ’ear of no warnings.”

“Well?”

“It’s the way with women. She didn’t think I ’ad it in me to be roused. Women of her sort (between ourselves, Tom) don’t respect a man until they’re a bit afraid of him. So I just broke out to show her. In comes a girl named Jennie, that used to work with her, and her chap. We ’ad a bit of a row, and I came out ’ere—it was just such another day as this—and I thought it all out. Then I went back and pitched into them.” “You did?”

“I did. I was mad, I can tell you. I wasn’t going to ’it ’er, if I could ’elp it, so I went back and licked into this chap, just to show ’er what I could do. ’E was a big chap, too. Well, I chucked him, and smashed things about, and gave 344’er a scaring, and she ran up and locked ’erself into the spare room.”

“Well?”

“That’s all. I says to ’er the next morning, ‘Now you know,’ I says, ‘what I’m like when I’m roused.’ And I didn’t ’ave to say anything more.”

“And you’ve been happy ever after, eh?”

“So to speak. There’s nothing like putting your foot down with them. If it ’adn’t been for that afternoon I should ’a’ been tramping the roads now, and she’d ’a’ been grumbling at me, and all her family grumbling for bringing her to poverty—I know their little ways. But we’re all right now. And it’s a very decent little business, as you say.”

They proceed on their way meditatively. “Women are funny creatures,” said brother Tom.

“They want a firm hand,” says Coombes.

“What a lot of these funguses there are about here!” remarked brother Tom, presently. “I can’t see what use they are in the world.”

Mr. Coombes looked. “I dessay they’re sent for some wise purpose,” said Mr. Coombes.

And that was as much thanks as the purple pileus ever got for maddening this absurd little man to the pitch of decisive action, and so altering the whole course of his life.

345

A CATASTROPHE

The little shop was not paying. The realisation came insensibly. Winslow was not the man for definite addition and subtraction and sudden discovery. He became aware of the truth in his mind gradually, as though it had always been there. A lot of facts had converged and led him to conviction. There was that line of cretonnes—four half pieces—untouched, save for half-a-yard sold to cover a stool. There were those shirtings at $4\frac{3}{4}d.$ —Bandersnatch, in the Broadway, was selling them at $2\frac{3}{4}d.$ —under cost, in fact. (Surely Bandersnatch might let a man live!) Those servants’ caps, a selling line, needed replenishing, and that brought back the memory of Winslow’s sole wholesale dealers, Helter, Skelter, & Grab. Why! How about their account?

Winslow stood with a big green box open on the counter before him when he thought of it. His pale grey eyes grew a little rounder, his pale straggling moustache twitched. He had been drifting along, day after day. He went round to the ramshackle cash desk in the corner—it was Winslow’s weakness to sell his goods over the counter, give his customers a duplicate bill, and then dodge into 346the desk to receive the money, as though he doubted his own honesty. His lank forefinger with the prominent joints ran down the bright little calendar (“Clack’s Cottons last for All Time?”). “One—two—three; three weeks an’ a day!” said Winslow, staring. “March! Only three weeks and a day. It *can’t* be.”

“Tea, dear,” said Mrs. Winslow, opening the door with the glass window and the white blind that communicated with the parlour.

“One minute,” said Winslow, and began unlocking the desk.

An irritable old gentleman, very hot and red about the face, and in a heavy fur-lined cloak, came in noisily. Mrs. Winslow vanished.

“Ugh!” said the old gentleman. “Pocket-handkerchief.”

“Yes, sir,” said Winslow. “About what price—”

“Ugh!” said the old gentleman. “Poggit handkerchief, quig!”

Winslow began to feel flustered. He produced two boxes.

“These, sir,” began Winslow.

“Sheed tin!” said the old gentleman, clutching the stiffness of the linen. “Wad to blow my nose—not haggit about.”

“A cotton one, p’raps, sir?” said Winslow.

“How much?” said the old gentleman, over the handkerchief.

347“Sevenpence, sir. There’s nothing more I can show you? No ties, braces—”

“Damn!” said the old gentleman, fumbling in his ticket-pocket, and finally producing half-a-crown. Winslow looked round for his little metallic duplicate book which he kept in various fixtures, according to circumstances, and then he caught the old gentleman’s eye. He went straight to the desk at once and got the change, with an entire disregard of the routine of the shop.

Winslow was always more or less excited by a customer. But the open desk reminded him of his trouble. It did not come back to him all at once. He heard a finger-nail softly tapping on the glass, and, looking up, saw Minnie’s eyes over the blind. It seemed like retreat opening. He shut and locked the desk, and went into the little room to tea.

But he was preoccupied. Three weeks and a day. He took unusually large bites of his bread and butter, and stared hard at the little pot of jam. He answered Minnie’s conversational advances distractedly. The shadow of Helter, Skelter, & Grab lay upon the tea-table. He was struggling with this new idea of failure, the tangible realisation, that was taking shape and substance, condensing, as it were, out of the misty uneasiness of many days. At present it was simply one concrete fact; there were thirty-nine pounds left in the bank, and that day three weeks Messrs. Helter, 348Skelter, & Grab, those enterprising outfitters of young men, would demand their eighty pounds.

After tea there was a customer or so—little purchases: some muslin and buckram, dress-protectors, tape, and a pair of Lisle hose. Then, knowing that Black Care was lurking in the dusky corners of the shop, he lit the three lamps early and set to refolding his cotton prints, the most vigorous and least meditative proceeding of which he could think. He could see Minnie’s shadow in the other room as she moved about the table. She was busy turning an old dress. He had a walk after supper, looked in at the Y. M. C. A., but found no one to talk to, and finally went to bed. Minnie was

already there. And there, too, waiting for him, nudging him gently, until about midnight he was hopelessly awake, sat Black Care.

He had had one or two nights lately in that company, but this was much worse. First came Messrs. Helter, Skelter, & Grab, and their demand for eighty pounds—an enormous sum when your original capital was only a hundred and seventy. They camped, as it were, before him, sat down and beleaguered him. He clutched feebly at the circumambient darkness for expedients. Suppose he had a sale, sold things for almost anything? He tried to imagine a sale miraculously successful in some unexpected manner, and mildly profitable in spite of reductions below cost. Then Bandersnatch, Limited, 101, 102, 103, 105, 106, 107, 349Broadway, joined the siege, a long caterpillar of frontage, a battery of shop fronts, wherein things were sold at a farthing above cost. How could he fight such an establishment? Besides, what had he to sell? He began to review his resources. What taking line was there to bait the sale? Then straightway came those pieces of cretonne, yellow and black with a bluish-green flower; those discredited shirtings, prints without buoyancy, skirmishing haberdashery, some despairful four-button gloves by an inferior maker—a hopeless crew. And that was his force against Bandersnatch, Helter, Skelter, & Grab, and the pitiless world behind them. What ever had made him think a mortal would buy such things? Why had he bought this and neglected that? He suddenly realised the intensity of his hatred for Helter, Skelter, & Grab's salesman. Then he drove towards an agony of self-reproach. He had spent too much on that cash desk. What real need was there of a desk? He saw his vanity of that desk in a lurid glow of self-discovery. And the lamps? Five pounds! Then suddenly, with what was almost physical pain, he remembered the rent.

He groaned and turned over. And there, dim in the darkness, was the hummock of Mrs. Winslow's shoulders. That set him off in another direction. He became acutely sensible of Minnie's want of feeling. Here he was, worried to death about business, and she sleeping like a little child. 350He regretted having married, with that infinite bitterness that only comes to the human heart in the small hours of the morning. That hummock of white seemed absolutely without helpfulness, a burden, a responsibility. What fools men were to marry! Minnie's inert repose irritated him so much that he was almost provoked to wake her up and tell her that they were "Ruined." She would have to go back to her uncle; her uncle had always been against him; and as for his own future, Winslow was exceedingly uncertain. A shop assistant who has once set up for himself finds the utmost difficulty in getting into a situation again. He began to figure himself "crib-hunting" again, going from this wholesale house to that, writing innumerable letters. How he hated writing letters! "Sir, referring to your advertisement

in the 'Christian World.'" He beheld an infinite vista of discomfort and disappointment, ending—in a gulf.

He dressed, yawning, and went down to open the shop. He felt tired before the day began. As he carried the shutters in he kept asking himself what good he was doing. The end was inevitable, whether he bothered or not. The clear daylight smote into the place and showed how old, and rough, and splintered was the floor, how shabby the second-hand counter, how hopeless the whole enterprise. He had been dreaming these past six months of a bright little shop, of a 351 happy couple, of a modest but comely profit flowing in. He had suddenly awakened from his dream. The braid that bound his decent black coat—it was a little loose—caught against the catch of the shop-door, and was torn loose. This suddenly turned his wretchedness to wrath. He stood quivering for a moment, then, with a spiteful clutch, tore the braid looser, and went in to Minnie.

"Here," he said, with infinite reproach, "look here! You might look after a chap a bit."

"I didn't see it was torn," said Minnie.

"You never do," said Winslow, with gross injustice, "until things are too late."

Minnie looked suddenly at his face. "I'll sew it now, Sid, if you like."

"Let's have breakfast first," said Winslow, "and do things at their proper time."

He was preoccupied at breakfast, and Minnie watched him anxiously. His only remark was to declare his egg a bad one. It wasn't; it was a little flavoured—being one of those at fifteen a shilling—but quite nice. He pushed it away from him, and then, having eaten a slice of bread and butter, admitted himself in the wrong by resuming the egg.

"Sid!" said Minnie, as he stood up to go into the shop again, "you're not well."

"I'm *well* enough." He looked at her as though he hated her.

352 "Then there's something else the matter. You aren't angry with me, Sid, are you?—about that braid. *Do* tell me what's the matter. You were just like this at tea yesterday, and at supper-time. It wasn't the braid then."

"And I'm likely to be."

She looked interrogation. "Oh! what *is* the matter?" she said.

It was too good a chance to miss, and he brought the evil news out with dramatic force. "Matter!" he said. "I done my best, and here we are. That's the matter! If I can't

pay Helter, Skelter, & Grab eighty pounds, this day three weeks—” Pause. “We shall be sold Up! Sold Up! That’s the matter, Min! Sold Up!”

“Oh, Sid!” began Minnie.

He slammed the door. For the moment he felt relieved of at least half his misery. He began dusting boxes that did not require dusting, and then re-blocked a cretonne already faultlessly blocked. He was in a state of grim wretchedness,—a martyr under the harrow of fate. At any rate, it should not be said he failed for want of industry. And how he had planned and contrived and worked! All to this end! He felt horrible doubts. Providence and Bandersnatch—surely they were incompatible! Perhaps he was being “tried”? That sent him off upon a new tack, a very comforting one. That martyr pose, the gold-in-the-furnace attitude, lasted all the morning.

353At dinner—“potato pie”—he looked up suddenly, and saw Minnie regarding him. Pale she looked, and a little red about the eyes. Something caught him suddenly with a queer effect upon his throat. All his thoughts seemed to wheel round into quite a new direction.

He pushed back his plate, and stared at her blankly. Then he got up, went round the table to her—she staring at him. He dropped on his knees beside her without a word. “Oh, Minnie!” he said, and suddenly she knew it was peace, and put her arms about him, as he began to sob and weep.

He cried like a little boy, slobbering on her shoulder that he was a knave to have married her and brought her to this, that he hadn’t the wits to be trusted with a penny, that it was all his fault, that he “*had* hoped so”—ending in a howl. And she, crying gently herself, patting his shoulders, said, “*Ssh!*” softly to his noisy weeping, and so soothed the outbreak. Then suddenly the crazy little bell upon the shop-door began, and Winslow had to jump to his feet, and be a man again.

After that scene they “talked it over” at tea, at supper, in bed, at every possible interval in between, solemnly—quite inconclusively—with set faces and eyes for the most part staring in front of them—and yet with a certain mutual comfort. “What to do I don’t know,” was Winslow’s main 354proposition. Minnie tried to take a cheerful view of service—with a probable baby. But she found she needed all her courage. And her uncle would help her again, perhaps, just at the critical time. It didn’t do for folks to be too proud. Besides, “something might happen,” a favourite formula with her.

One hopeful line was to anticipate a sudden afflux of customers. “Perhaps,” said Minnie, “you might get together fifty. They know you well enough to trust you a bit.” They debated that point. Once the possibility of Helter, Skelter, & Grab giving credit

was admitted, it was pleasant to begin sweating the acceptable minimum. For some half hour over tea the second day after Winslow's discoveries they were quite cheerful again, laughing even at their terrific fears. Even twenty pounds, to go on with, might be considered enough. Then in some mysterious way the pleasant prospect of Messrs. Helter, Skelter, & Grab tempering the wind to the shorn retailer vanished—vanished absolutely, and Winslow found himself again in the pit of despair.

He began looking about at the furniture, and wondering idly what it would fetch. The chiffonier was good, anyhow, and there were Minnie's old plates that her mother used to have. Then he began to think of desperate expedients for putting off the evil day. He had heard somewhere of Bills of Sale—there was to his ears something comfortably substantial in the phrase. Then why not "Go to the Money Lenders?"

One cheering thing happened on Thursday afternoon; a little girl came in with a pattern of "print" and he was able to match it. He had not been able to match anything out of his meagre stock before. He went in and told Minnie. The incident is mentioned lest the reader should imagine it was uniform despair with him.

The next morning, and the next, after the discovery, Winslow opened shop late. When one has been awake most of the night, and has no hope, what *is* the good of getting up punctually? But as he went into the dark shop on Friday a strange event happened. He saw something lying on the floor, something lit by the bright light that came under the ill-fitting door—a black oblong. He stooped and picked up an envelope with a deep mourning edge. It was addressed to his wife. Clearly a death in her family—perhaps her uncle. He knew the man too well to have expectations. And they would have to get mourning and go to the funeral. The brutal cruelty of people dying! He saw it all in a flash—he always visualised his thoughts. Black trousers to get, black crape, black gloves,—none in stock,—the railway fares, the shop closed for the day.

"I'm afraid there's bad news, Minnie," he said.

356She was kneeling before the fireplace, blowing the fire. She had her housemaid's gloves on and the old country sun-bonnet she wore of a morning, to keep the dust out of her hair. She turned, saw the envelope, gave a gasp, and pressed two bloodless lips together.

"I'm afraid it's uncle," she said, holding the letter and staring with eyes wide open into Winslow's face. "*It's a strange hand!*"

"The postmark's Hull," said Winslow.

"The postmark's Hull."

Minnie opened the letter slowly, drew it out, hesitated, turned it over, saw the signature. "It's Mr. Speight!"

"What does he say?" said Winslow.

Minnie began to read. "*Oh!*" she screamed. She dropped the letter, collapsed into a crouching heap, her hands covering her eyes. Winslow snatched at it. "A most terrible accident has occurred," he read; "Melchior's chimney fell down yesterday evening right on the top of your uncle's house, and every living soul was killed—your uncle, your cousin Mary, Will, and Ned, and the girl—every one of them, and smashed—you would hardly know them. I'm writing to you to break the news before you see it in the papers—" The letter fluttered from Winslow's fingers. He put out his hand against the mantel to steady himself.

All of them dead! Then he saw, as in a vision, a row of seven cottages, each let at seven shillings a week, a timber yard, two villas, and the ruins—still marketable—of the avuncular residence. He tried to feel a sense of loss and could not. They were sure to have been left to Minnie's aunt. All dead! $7 \times 7 \times 52 \div 20$ began insensibly to work itself out in his mind, but discipline was ever weak in his mental arithmetic; figures kept moving from one line to another, like children playing at Widdy, Widdy Way. Was it two hundred pounds about—or one hundred pounds? Presently he picked up the letter again, and finished reading it. "You being the next of kin," said Mr. Speight.

"How *awful!*" said Minnie, in a horror-struck whisper, and looking up at last. Winslow stared back at her, shaking his head solemnly. There were a thousand things running through his mind, but none that, even to his dull sense, seemed appropriate as a remark. "It was the Lord's will," he said at last.

"It seems so very, very terrible," said Minnie; "auntie, dear auntie—Ted—poor, dear uncle—"

"It was the Lord's will, Minnie," said Winslow, with infinite feeling. A long silence.

"Yes," said Minnie, very slowly, staring thoughtfully at the crackling black paper in the grate. The fire had gone out. "Yes, perhaps it was the Lord's will."

358They looked gravely at one another. Each would have been terribly shocked at any mention of the property by the other. She turned to the dark fireplace and began tearing up an old newspaper slowly. Whatever our losses may be, the world's work still waits for us. Winslow gave a deep sigh and walked in a hushed manner towards the front door. As he opened it a flood of sunlight came streaming into the dark shadows

of the closed shop. Brandersnatch, Helter, Skelter, & Grab, had vanished out of his mind like the mists before the rising sun.

Presently he was carrying in the shutters, and in the briskest way; the fire in the kitchen was crackling exhilaratingly with a little saucepan walloping above it, for Minnie was boiling two eggs—one for herself this morning, as well as one for him—and Minnie herself was audible, laying breakfast with the greatest *éclat*. The blow was a sudden and terrible one—but it behoves us to face such things bravely in this sad, unaccountable world. It was quite midday before either of them mentioned the cottages.

359

LE MARI TERRIBLE

“You are always so sympathetic,” she said; and added, reflectively, “and one can talk of one’s troubles to you without any nonsense.”

I wondered dimly if she meant that as a challenge. I helped myself to a biscuit thing that looked neither poisonous nor sandy. “You are one of the most puzzling human beings I ever met,” I said,—a perfectly safe remark to any woman under any circumstances.

“Do you find me so hard to understand?” she said.

“You are dreadfully complex.” I bit at the biscuit thing, and found it full of a kind of creamy bird-lime. (I wonder why women *will* arrange these unpleasant surprises for me—I sickened of sweets twenty years ago.)

“How so?” she was saying, and smiling her most brilliant smile.

I have no doubt she thought we were talking rather nicely. “Oh!” said I, and waved the cream biscuit thing. “You challenge me to dissect you.”

“Well?”

“And that is precisely what I cannot do.”

360 “I’m afraid you are very satirical,” she said, with a touch of disappointment. She is always saying that when our conversation has become absolutely idiotic—as it invariably does. I felt an inevitable desire to quote bogus Latin to her. It seemed the very language for her.

“*Malorum fiducia pars quosque libet*,” I said, in a low voice, looking meaningfully into her eyes.

“Ah!” she said, colouring a little, and turned to pour hot water into the teapot, looking very prettily at me over her arm as she did so.

“That is one of the truest things that has ever been said of sympathy,” I remarked.
“Don’t you think so?”

“Sympathy,” she said, “is a very wonderful thing, and a very precious thing.”

“You speak,” said I (with a cough behind my hand), “as though you knew what it was to be lonely.”

“There is solitude even in a crowd,” she said, and looked round at the six other people—three discreet pairs—who were in the room.

“I, too,” I was beginning, but Hopdangle came with a teacup, and seemed inclined to linger. He belongs to the “Nice Boy” class, and gives himself ridiculous airs of familiarity with grown-up people. Then the Giffens went.

“Do you know, I always take such an interest in your work,” she was saying to me, when her husband (confound him!) came into the room.

361 He was a violent discord. He wore a short brown jacket and carpet slippers, and three of his waistcoat buttons were (as usual) undone. “Got any tea left, Millie?” he said, and came and sat down in the arm-chair beside the table.

“How do, Delalune?” he said to the man in the corner. “Damned hot, Bellows,” he remarked to me, subsiding creakily.

She poured some more hot water into the teapot. (Why must charming married women always have these husbands?)

“It *is* very hot,” I said.

There was a perceptible pause. He is one of those rather adipose people, who are not disconcerted by conversational gaps. “Are *you*, too, working at Argon?” I said. He is some kind of chemical investigator, I know.

He began at once to explain the most horribly complex things about elements to me. She gave him his tea, and rose and went and talked to the other people about autotypes. “Yes,” I said, not hearing what he was saying.

“No’ would be more appropriate,” he said. “You are absent-minded, Bellows. Not in love, I hope—at your age?”

Really, I am not thirty, but a certain perceptible thinness in my hair may account for his invariably regarding me as a contemporary. But he should understand that nowadays the beginnings of baldness merely mark the virile epoch. 362 “I say, Millie,” he said, out loud and across the room, “you haven’t been collecting Bellows here—have you?”

She looked round startled, and I saw a pained look come into her eyes. “For the bazaar?” she said. “Not yet, dear.” It seemed to me that she shot a glance of entreaty at him. Then she turned to the others again.

“My wife,” he said, “has two distinctive traits. She is a born poetess and a born collector. I ought to warn you.”

“I did not know,” said I, “that she rhymed.”

“I was speaking more of the imaginative quality, the temperament that finds a splendour in the grass, a glory in the flower, that clothes the whole world in a vestiture of interpretation.”

“Indeed!” I said. I felt she was watching us anxiously. He could not, of course, suspect. But I was relieved to fancy he was simply talking nonsense.

“The magnificent figures of heroic, worshipful, and mysterious womanhood naturally appeal to her—Cleopatra, Messalina, Beatrice, the Madonna, and so forth.”

“And she is writing—”

“No, she is acting. That is the real poetry of women and children. A platonic Cleopatra of infinite variety, spotless reputation, and a large following. Her make-believe is wonderful. She would use Falstaff for Romeo without a twinge, if 363 no one else was at hand. She could exert herself to break the heart of a soldier. I assure you, Bellows—”

I heard her dress rustle behind me.

“I want some more tea,” he said to her. “You misunderstood me about the collecting, Millie.”

“What were you saying about Cleopatra?” she said, trying, I think, to look sternly at him.

“Scandal,” he said. “But about the collecting, Bellows—”

“You must come to this bazaar,” she interrupted.

“I shall be delighted,” I said, boldly. “Where is it, and when?”

“About this collecting,” he began.

“It is in aid of that delightful orphanage at Wimblingham,” she explained, and gave me an animated account of the charity. He emptied his second cup of tea. “May I have a third cup?” he said.

The two girls signalled departure, and her attention was distracted. “She collects—and I will confess she does it with extraordinary skill—the surreptitious addresses—”

“John,” she said over her shoulder, “I wish you would tell Miss Smithers all those interesting things about Argon.” He gulped down his third cup, and rose with the easy obedience of the trained husband. Presently she returned to the tea-things. “Cannot I fill your cup?” she asked. 364 “I really hope John was not telling you his queer notions about me. He says the most remarkable things. Quite lately he has got it into his head that he has a formula for my character.”

“I wish I had,” I said, with a sigh.

“And he goes about explaining me to people, as though I was a mechanism. ‘Scalp collector,’ I think is the favourite phrase. Did he tell you? Don’t you think it perfectly horrid of him?”

“But he doesn’t understand you,” I said, not grasping his meaning quite at the minute.

She sighed.

“You have,” I said, with infinite meaning, “my sincere sympathy—” I hesitated—“my whole sympathy.”

“Thank you *so much*,” she said, quite as meaningly. I rose forthwith, and we clasped hands, like souls who strike a compact.

Yet, thinking over what he said afterwards, I was troubled by a fancy that there was the faintest suggestion of a smile of triumph about her lips and mouth. Possibly it was only an honourable pride. I suppose he has poisoned my mind a little. Of course, I should not like to think of myself as one of a fortuitously selected multitude strung neatly together (if one may use the vulgarism) on a piece of string,—a stringful like a boy’s string of chestnuts,—nice old gentlemen, nice boys, sympathetic and humorous men of thirty, kind fellows, gifted dreamers, and dashing blades, 365 all trailing after her. It is confoundedly bad form of him, anyhow, to guy her visitors. She certainly took it like a saint. Of course, I shall see her again soon, and we shall talk to one another about one another. Something or other cropped up and prevented my going there on her last Tuesday.

THE APPLE

“I must get rid of it,” said the man in the corner of the carriage, abruptly breaking the silence.

Mr. Hinchcliff looked up, hearing imperfectly. He had been lost in the rapt contemplation of the college cap tied by a string to his portmanteau handles—the outward and visible sign of his newly-gained pedagogic position—in the rapt appreciation of the college cap and the pleasant anticipations it excited. For Mr. Hinchcliff had just matriculated at London University, and was going to be junior assistant at the Holmwood Grammar School—a very enviable position. He stared across the carriage at his fellow-traveller.

“Why not give it away?” said this person. “Give it away! Why not?”

He was a tall, dark, sunburnt man with a pale face. His arms were folded tightly, and his feet were on the seat in front of him. He was pulling at a lank, black moustache. He stared hard at his toes.

“Why not?” he said.

Mr. Hinchcliff coughed.

The stranger lifted his eyes—they were curious, dark grey eyes—and stared blankly at Mr. Hinchcliff for the best part of a minute, perhaps. His expression grew to interest.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “Why not? And end it.”

“I don’t quite follow you, I’m afraid,” said Mr. Hinchcliff, with another cough.

“You don’t quite follow me?” said the stranger, quite mechanically, his singular eyes wandering from Mr. Hinchcliff to the bag with its ostentatiously displayed cap, and back to Mr. Hinchcliff’s downy face.

“You’re so abrupt, you know,” apologised Mr. Hinchcliff.

“Why shouldn’t I?” said the stranger, following his thoughts. “You are a student?” he said, addressing Mr. Hinchcliff.

“I am—by Correspondence—of the London University,” said Mr. Hinchcliff, with irrepressible pride, and feeling nervously at his tie.

“In pursuit of knowledge,” said the stranger, and suddenly took his feet off the seat, put his fist on his knees, and stared at Mr. Hinchcliff as though he had never seen a student before. “Yes,” he said, and flung out an index finger. Then he rose, took a bag from the hat-rack, and unlocked it. Quite silently, he drew out something round and wrapped in a quantity of silver-paper, and unfolded this carefully. He held it out towards Mr. Hinchcliff,—a small, very smooth, golden-yellow fruit.

368Mr. Hinchcliff’s eyes and mouth were open. He did not offer to take this object—if he was intended to take it.

“That,” said this fantastic stranger, speaking very slowly, “is the Apple of the Tree of Knowledge. Look at it—small, and bright, and wonderful—Knowledge—and I am going to give it to you.”

Mr. Hinchcliff’s mind worked painfully for a minute, and then the sufficient explanation, “Mad!” flashed across his brain, and illuminated the whole situation. One humoured madmen. He put his head a little on one side.

“The Apple of the Tree of Knowledge, eigh!” said Mr. Hinchcliff, regarding it with a finely assumed air of interest, and then looking at the interlocutor. “But don’t you want to eat it yourself? And besides—how did you come by it?”

“It never fades. I have had it now three months. And it is ever bright and smooth and ripe and desirable, as you see it.” He laid his hand on his knee and regarded the fruit musingly. Then he began to wrap it again in the papers, as though he had abandoned his intention of giving it away.

“But how did you come by it?” said Mr. Hinchcliff, who had his argumentative side. “And how do you know that it *is* the Fruit of the Tree?”

“I bought this fruit,” said the stranger, “three months ago—for a drink of water and a crust of 369bread. The man who gave it to me—because I kept the life in him—was an Armenian. Armenia! that wonderful country, the first of all countries, where the ark of the Flood remains to this day, buried in the glaciers of Mount Ararat. This man, I say, fleeing with others from the Kurds who had come upon them, went up into desolate places among the mountains—places beyond the common knowledge of men. And fleeing from imminent pursuit, they came to a slope high among the mountain-peaks, green with a grass like knife-blades, that cut and slashed most pitilessly at any one who went into it. The Kurds were close behind, and there was nothing for it but to plunge in, and the worst of it was that the paths they made through it at the price of their blood served for the Kurds to follow. Every one of the fugitives was killed save this Armenian and another. He heard the screams and cries of his friends, and the swish of

the grass about those who were pursuing them—it was tall grass rising overhead. And then a shouting and answers, and when presently he paused, everything was still. He pushed out again, not understanding, cut and bleeding, until he came out on a steep slope of rocks below a precipice, and then he saw the grass was all on fire, and the smoke of it rose like a veil between him and his enemies.”

The stranger paused. “Yes?” said Mr. Hinchcliff. “Yes?”

370 “There he was, all torn and bloody from the knife-blades of the grass, the rocks blazing under the afternoon sun,—the sky molten brass,—and the smoke of the fire driving towards him. He dared not stay there. Death he did not mind, but torture! Far away beyond the smoke he heard shouts and cries. Women screaming. So he went clambering up a gorge in the rocks—everywhere were bushes with dry branches that stuck out like thorns among the leaves—until he clambered over the brow of a ridge that hid him. And then he met his companion, a shepherd, who had also escaped. And, counting cold and famine and thirst as nothing against the Kurds, they went on into the heights, and among the snow and ice. They wandered three whole days.

“The third day came the vision. I suppose hungry men often do see visions, but then there is this fruit.” He lifted the wrapped globe in his hand. “And I have heard it, too, from other mountaineers who have known something of the legend. It was in the evening time, when the stars were increasing, that they came down a slope of polished rock into a huge, dark valley all set about with strange, contorted trees, and in these trees hung little globes like glow-worm spheres, strange, round, yellow lights.

“Suddenly this valley was lit far away, many miles away, far down it, with a golden flame 371 marching slowly athwart it, that made the stunted trees against it black as night, and turned the slopes all about them and their figures to the likeness of fiery gold. And at the vision they, knowing the legends of the mountains, instantly knew that it was Eden they saw, or the sentinel of Eden, and they fell upon their faces like men struck dead.

“When they dared to look again, the valley was dark for a space, and then the light came again—returning, a burning amber.

“At that the shepherd sprang to his feet, and with a shout began to run down towards the light; but the other man was too fearful to follow him. He stood stunned, amazed, and terrified, watching his companion recede towards the marching glare. And hardly had the shepherd set out when there came a noise like thunder, the beating of invisible wings hurrying up the valley, and a great and terrible fear; and at that the man who gave me the fruit turned—if he might still escape. And hurrying headlong up the

slope again, with that tumult sweeping after him, he stumbled against one of these stunted bushes, and a ripe fruit came off it into his hand. This fruit. Forthwith, the wings and the thunder rolled all about him. He fell and fainted, and when he came to his senses, he was back among the blackened ruins of his own village, and I and the others were attending to the wounded. A vision? But the golden fruit of the tree was still clutched in his hand. There were others there who knew the legend, knew what that strange fruit might be.” He paused. “And this is it,” he said.

It was a most extraordinary story to be told in a third-class carriage on a Sussex railway. It was as if the real was a mere veil to the fantastic, and here was the fantastic poking through. “Is it?” was all Mr. Hinchcliff could say.

“The legend,” said the stranger, “tells that those thickets of dwarfed trees growing about the garden sprang from the apple that Adam carried in his hand when he and Eve were driven forth. He felt something in his hand, saw the half-eaten apple, and flung it petulantly aside. And there they grow, in that desolate valley, girdled round with the everlasting snows; and there the fiery swords keep ward against the Judgment Day.”

“But I thought these things were—” Mr. Hinchcliff paused—“fables—parables rather. Do you mean to tell me that there in Armenia—”

The stranger answered the unfinished question with the fruit in his open hand.

“But you don’t know,” said Mr. Hinchcliff, “that that *is* the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. The man may have had—a sort of mirage, say. Suppose—”

“Look at it,” said the stranger.

It was certainly a strange-looking globe, not really an apple, Mr. Hinchcliff saw, and a curious glowing golden colour, almost as though light itself was wrought into its substance. As he looked at it, he began to see more vividly the desolate valley among the mountains, the guarding swords of fire, the strange antiquities of the story he had just heard. He rubbed a knuckle into his eye. “But—” said he.

“It has kept like that, smooth and full, three months. Longer than that it is now by some days. No drying, no withering, no decay.”

“And you yourself,” said Mr. Hinchcliff, “really believe that—”

“Is the Forbidden Fruit.”

There was no mistaking the earnestness of the man’s manner and his perfect sanity. “The Fruit of Knowledge,” he said.

“Suppose it was?” said Mr. Hinchcliff, after a pause, still staring at it. “But after all,” said Mr. Hinchcliff, “it’s not my kind of knowledge—not the sort of knowledge. I mean, Adam and Eve have eaten it already.”

“We inherit their sins—not their knowledge,” said the stranger. “That would make it all clear and bright again. We should see into everything, through everything, into the deepest meaning of everything—”

“Why don’t you eat it, then?” said Mr. Hinchcliff, with an inspiration.

“I took it intending to eat it,” said the stranger. 374 “Man has fallen. Merely to eat again could scarcely—”

“Knowledge is power,” said Mr. Hinchcliff.

“But is it happiness? I am older than you—more than twice as old. Time after time I have held this in my hand, and my heart has failed me at the thought of all that one might know, that terrible lucidity—Suppose suddenly all the world became pitilessly clear?”

“That, I think, would be a great advantage,” said Mr. Hinchcliff, “on the whole.”

“Suppose you saw into the hearts and minds of every one about you, into their most secret recesses—people you loved, whose love you valued?”

“You’d soon find out the humbugs,” said Mr. Hinchcliff, greatly struck by the idea.

“And worse—to know yourself, bare of your most intimate illusions. To see yourself in your place. All that your lusts and weaknesses prevented your doing. No merciful perspective.”

“That might be an excellent thing too. ‘Know thyself,’ you know.”

“You are young,” said the stranger.

“If you don’t care to eat it, and it bothers you, why don’t you throw it away?”

“There again, perhaps, you will not understand me. To me, how could one throw away a thing like that, glowing, wonderful? Once one has it, one is bound. But, on the other hand, to give it 375 away! To give it away to some one who thirsted after knowledge, who found no terror in the thought of that clear perception—”

“Of course,” said Mr. Hinchcliff, thoughtfully, “it might be some sort of poisonous fruit.”

And then his eye caught something motionless, the end of a white board black-lettered outside the carriage-window. “—MWOOD,” he saw. He started convulsively. “Gracious!” said Mr. Hinchcliff. “Holmwood!”—and the practical present blotted out the mystic realisations that had been stealing upon him.

In another moment he was opening the carriage-door, portmanteau in hand. The guard was already fluttering his green flag. Mr. Hinchcliff jumped out. “Here!” said a voice behind him, and he saw the dark eyes of the stranger shining and the golden fruit, bright and bare, held out of the open carriage-door. He took it instinctively, the train was already moving.

“No!” shouted the stranger, and made a snatch at it as if to take it back.

“Stand away,” cried a country porter, thrusting forward to close the door. The stranger shouted something Mr. Hinchcliff did not catch, head and arm thrust excitedly out of the window, and then the shadow of the bridge fell on him, and in a trice he was hidden. Mr. Hinchcliff stood astonished, staring at the end of the last waggon receding round the bend, and with the wonderful fruit in his hand. For the fraction of a minute his mind was confused, and then he became aware that two or three people on the platform were regarding him with interest. Was he not the new Grammar School master making his *début*? It occurred to him that, so far as they could tell, the fruit might very well be the naïve refreshment of an orange. He flushed at the thought, and thrust the fruit into his side pocket, where it bulged undesirably. But there was no help for it, so he went towards them, awkwardly concealing his sense of awkwardness, to ask the way to the Grammar School, and the means of getting his portmanteau and the two tin boxes which lay up the platform thither. Of all the odd and fantastic yarns to tell a fellow!

His luggage could be taken on a truck for sixpence, he found, and he could precede it on foot. He fancied an ironical note in the voices. He was painfully aware of his contour.

The curious earnestness of the man in the train, and the glamour of the story he told, had, for a time, diverted the current of Mr. Hinchcliff’s thoughts. It drove like a mist before his immediate concerns. Fires that went to and fro! But the preoccupation of his new position, and the impression he was to produce upon Holmwood generally, and the school people in particular, returned upon him with reinvigorating power before he left the station and cleared his mental atmosphere. But it is extraordinary what an inconvenient thing the addition of a soft and rather brightly-golden fruit, not three inches in diameter, prove to a sensitive youth on his best appearance. In the pocket of his black jacket it bulged dreadfully, spoilt the lines altogether. He passed a

little old lady in black, and he felt her eye drop upon the excrescence at once. He was wearing one glove and carrying the other, together with his stick, so that to bear the fruit openly was impossible. In one place, where the road into the town seemed suitably secluded, he took his encumbrance out of his pocket and tried it in his hat. It was just too large, the hat wobbled ludicrously, and just as he was taking it out again, a butcher's boy came driving round the corner.

"Confound it!" said Mr. Hinchcliff.

He would have eaten the thing, and attained omniscience there and then, but it would seem so silly to go into the town sucking a juicy fruit—and it certainly felt juicy. If one of the boys should come by, it might do him a serious injury with his discipline so to be seen. And the juice might make his face sticky and get upon his cuffs—or it might be an acid juice as potent as lemon, and take all the colour out of his clothes.

Then round a bend in the lane came two pleasant, sunlit, girlish figures. They were walking slowly towards the town and chattering—at any moment they might look round and see a hot-faced young man behind them carrying a kind of 378phosphorescent yellow tomato! They would be sure to laugh.

"*Hang!*" said Mr. Hinchcliff, and with a swift jerk sent the encumbrance flying over the stone wall of an orchard that there abutted on the road. As it vanished, he felt a faint twinge of loss that lasted scarcely a moment. He adjusted the stick and glove in his hand, and walked on, erect and self-conscious, to pass the girls.

But in the darkness of the night Mr. Hinchcliff had a dream, and saw the valley, and the flaming swords, and the contorted trees, and knew that it really was the Apple of the Tree of Knowledge that he had thrown regardlessly away. And he awoke very unhappy.

In the morning his regret had passed, but afterwards it returned and troubled him; never, however, when he was happy or busily occupied. At last, one moonlight night about eleven, when all Holmwood was quiet, his regrets returned with redoubled force, and therewith an impulse to adventure. He slipped out of the house and over the playground wall, went through the silent town to Station Lane, and climbed into the orchard where he had thrown the fruit. But nothing was to be found of it there among the dewy grass and the faint intangible globes of dandelion down.

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THE SAD STORY OF A DRAMATIC CRITIC

I was—you shall hear immediately why I am not now—Egbert Craddock Cummins. The name remains. I am still (Heaven help me!) Dramatic Critic to the "Fiery Cross."

What I shall be in a little while I do not know. I write in great trouble and confusion of mind. I will do what I can to make myself clear in the face of terrible difficulties. You must bear with me a little. When a man is rapidly losing his own identity, he naturally finds a difficulty in expressing himself. I will make it perfectly plain in a minute, when once I get my grip upon the story. Let me see—where *am* I? I wish I knew. Ah, I have it! Dead self! Egbert Craddock Cummins!

In the past I should have disliked writing anything quite so full of “I” as this story must be. It is full of “I’s” before and behind, like the beast in Revelation—the one with a head like a calf, I am afraid. But my tastes have changed since I became a Dramatic Critic and studied the masters—G.R.S., G.B.S., G.A.S., and the others. Everything has changed since then. At least the story is about myself—so that there is some excuse 380for me. And it is really not egotism, because, as I say, since those days my identity has undergone an entire alteration.

That past!—I was—in those days—rather a nice fellow, rather shy—taste for grey in my clothes, weedy little moustache, face “interesting,” slight stutter which I had caught in early life from a schoolfellow. Engaged to a very nice girl, named Delia. Fairly new, she was—cigarettes—liked me because I was human and original. Considered I was like Lamb—on the strength of the stutter, I believe. Father, an eminent authority on postage stamps. She read a great deal in the British Museum. (A perfect pairing ground for literary people, that British Museum—you should read George Egerton and Justin Huntly M’Carthy and Gissing and the rest of them.) We loved in our intellectual way, and shared the brightest hopes. (All gone now.) And her father liked me because I seemed honestly eager to hear about stamps. She had no mother. Indeed, I had the happiest prospects a young man could have. I never went to the theatres in those days. My Aunt Charlotte before she died had told me not to.

Then Barnaby, the editor of the “Fiery Cross,” made me—in spite of my spasmodic efforts to escape—Dramatic Critic. He is a fine, healthy man, Barnaby, with an enormous head of frizzy black hair and a convincing manner; and he 381caught me on the staircase going to see Wembly. He had been dining, and was more than usually buoyant. “Hullo, Cummins!” he said. “The very man I want!” He caught me by the shoulder or the collar or something, ran me up the little passage, and flung me over the waste-paper basket into the arm-chair in his office. “Pray be seated,” he said, as he did so. Then he ran across the room and came back with some pink and yellow tickets and pushed them into my hand. “Opera Comique,” he said, “Thursday; Friday, the Surrey; Saturday, the Frivolity. That’s all, I think.”

“But—” I began.

“Glad you’re free,” he said, snatching some proofs off the desk and beginning to read.

“I don’t quite understand,” I said.

“*Eigh?*” he said, at the top of his voice, as though he thought I had gone, and was startled at my remark.

“Do you want me to criticise these plays?”

“Do something with ’em— Did you think it was a treat?”

“But I can’t.”

“Did you call me a fool?”

“Well, I’ve never been to a theatre in my life.”

“Virgin soil.”

“But I don’t know anything about it, you know.”

382 “That’s just it. New view. No habits. No *clichés* in stock. Ours is a live paper, not a bag of tricks. None of your clockwork, professional journalism in this office. And I can rely on your integrity—”

“But I’ve conscientious scruples—”

He caught me up suddenly and put me outside his door. “Go and talk to Wembly about that,” he said. “He’ll explain.”

As I stood perplexed, he opened the door again, said, “I forgot this,” thrust a fourth ticket into my hand (it was for that night—in twenty minutes’ time), and slammed the door upon me. His expression was quite calm, but I caught his eye.

I hate arguments. I decided that I would take his hint and become (to my own destruction) a Dramatic Critic. I walked slowly down the passage to Wembly. That Barnaby has a remarkably persuasive way. He has made few suggestions during our very pleasant intercourse of four years that he has not ultimately won me round to adopting. It may be, of course, that I am of a yielding disposition; certainly I am too apt to take my colour from my circumstances. It is, indeed, to my unfortunate susceptibility to vivid impressions that all my misfortunes are due. I have already alluded to the slight stammer I had acquired from a schoolfellow in my youth. However, this is a digression—I went home in a cab to dress.

383 I will not trouble the reader with my thoughts about the first-night audience, strange assembly as it is,—those I reserve for my Memoirs,—nor the humiliating story

of how I got lost during the *entr'acte* in a lot of red plush passages, and saw the third act from the gallery. The only point upon which I wish to lay stress was the remarkable effect of the acting upon me. You must remember I had lived a quiet and retired life, and had never been to the theatre before, and that I am extremely sensitive to vivid impressions. At the risk of repetition I must insist upon these points.

The first effect was a profound amazement, not untinged by alarm. The phenomenal unnaturalness of acting is a thing discounted in the minds of most people by early visits to the theatre. They get used to the fantastic gestures, the flamboyant emotions, the weird mouthings, melodious snortings, agonising yelps, lip-gnawings, glaring horrors, and other emotional symbolism of the stage. It becomes at last a mere deaf-and-dumb language to them, which they read intelligently *pari passu* with the hearing of the dialogue. But all this was new to me. The thing was called a modern comedy; the people were supposed to be English and were dressed like fashionable Americans of the current epoch, and I fell into the natural error of supposing that the actors were trying to represent human beings. I looked round on my first-night audience with a kind of wonder, discovered—as all new Dramatic Critics do—that it rested with me to reform the Drama, and, after a supper choked with emotion, went off to the office to write a column, piebald with “new paragraphs” (as all my stuff is—it fills out so) and purple with indignation. Barnaby was delighted.

But I could not sleep that night. I dreamt of actors,—actors glaring, actors smiting their chests, actors flinging out a handful of extended fingers, actors smiling bitterly, laughing despairingly, falling hopelessly, dying idiotically. I got up at eleven with a slight headache, read my notice in the “Fiery Cross,” breakfasted, and went back to my room to shave. (It’s my habit to do so.) Then an odd thing happened. I could not find my razor. Suddenly it occurred to me that I had not unpacked it the day before.

“Ah!” said I, in front of the looking-glass. Then “Hullo!”

Quite involuntarily, when I had thought of my portmanteau, I had flung up the left arm (fingers fully extended) and clutched at my diaphragm with my right hand. I am an acutely self-conscious man at all times. The gesture struck me as absolutely novel for me. I repeated it, for my own satisfaction. “Odd!” Then (rather puzzled) I turned to my portmanteau.

After shaving, my mind reverted to the acting I had seen, and I entertained myself before the cheval glass with some imitations of Jafferay’s more exaggerated gestures. “Really, one might think it a disease,”—I said,—“Stage-Walkitis!” (There’s many a truth spoken in jest.) Then, if I remember rightly, I went off to see Wembly, and afterwards

lunched at the British Museum with Delia. We actually spoke about our prospects, in the light of my new appointment.

But that appointment was the beginning of my downfall. From that day I necessarily became a persistent theatre-goer, and almost insensibly I began to change. The next thing I noticed after the gesture about the razor, was to catch myself bowing ineffably when I met Delia, and stooping in an old-fashioned, courtly way over her hand. Directly I caught myself, I straightened myself up and became very uncomfortable. I remember she looked at me curiously. Then, in the office, I found myself doing “nervous business,” fingers on teeth, when Barnaby asked me a question I could not very well answer. Then, in some trifling difference with Delia, I clasped my hand to my brow. And I pranced through my social transactions at times singularly like an actor! I tried not to—no one could be more keenly alive to the arrant absurdity of the histrionic bearing. And I did!

It began to dawn on me what it all meant. The acting, I saw, was too much for my delicatelystrung nervous system. I have always, I know, been too amenable to the suggestions of my circumstances. Night after night of concentrated attention to the conventional attitudes and intonation of the English stage was gradually affecting my speech and carriage. I was giving way to the infection of sympathetic imitation. Night after night my plastic nervous system took the print of some new amazing gesture, some new emotional exaggeration—and retained it. A kind of theatrical veneer threatened to plate over and obliterate my private individuality altogether. I saw myself in a kind of vision. Sitting by myself one night, my new self seemed to me to glide, posing and gesticulating, across the room. He clutched his throat, he opened his fingers, he opened his legs in walking like a high-class marionette. He went from attitude to attitude. He might have been clockwork. Directly after this I made an ineffectual attempt to resign my theatrical work. But Barnaby persisted in talking about the Polywhiddle Divorce all the time I was with him, and I could get no opportunity of saying what I wished.

And then Delia’s manner began to change towards me. The ease of our intercourse vanished. I felt she was learning to dislike me. I grinned, and capered, and scowled, and posed at her in a thousand ways, and knew—with what a voiceless agony!—that I did it all the time. I tried to resign again; and Barnaby talked about “X” and “Z” and “Y” in the “New Review,” and gave me a strong cigar to smoke, and so routed me. And then I walked up the Assyrian Gallery in the manner of Irving to meet Delia, and so precipitated the crisis.

“Ah!—*Dear!*” I said, with more sprightliness and emotion in my voice than had ever been in all my life before I became (to my own undoing) a Dramatic Critic.

She held out her hand rather coldly, scrutinising my face as she did so. I prepared, with a new-won grace, to walk by her side.

“Egbert,” she said, standing still, and thought. Then she looked at me.

I said nothing. I felt what was coming. I tried to be the old Egbert Craddock Cummins of shambling gait and stammering sincerity, whom she loved; but I felt, even as I did so, that I was a new thing, a thing of surging emotions and mysterious fixity—like no human being that ever lived, except upon the stage. “Egbert,” she said, “you are not yourself.”

“Ah!” Involuntarily I clutched my diaphragm and averted my head (as is the way with them).

“There!” she said.

“*What do you mean?*” I said, whispering in vocal italics,—you know how they do it,—turning on her, perplexity on face, right hand down, left on brow. I knew quite well what she meant. I knew quite well the dramatic unreality of my behaviour. But I struggled against it in vain. “What do you mean?” I said, and, in a kind of hoarse whisper, “I don’t understand!”

She really looked as though she disliked me. “What do you keep on posing for?” she said. “I don’t like it. You didn’t use to.”

“Didn’t use to!” I said slowly, repeating this twice. I glared up and down the gallery, with short, sharp glances. “We are alone,” I said swiftly. “*Listen!*” I poked my forefinger towards her, and glared at her. “I am under a curse.”

I saw her hand tighten upon her sunshade. “You are under some bad influence or other,” said Delia. “You should give it up. I never knew any one change as you have done.”

“Delia!” I said, lapsing into the pathetic. “Pity me. Augh! Delia! *Pit—y* me!”

She eyed me critically. “*Why* you keep playing the fool like this I don’t know,” she said. “Anyhow, I really cannot go about with a man who behaves as you do. You made us both ridiculous on Wednesday. Frankly, I dislike you, as you are now. I met you here to tell you so—as it’s about the only place where we can be sure of being alone together—”

“Delia!” said I, with intensity, knuckles of clenched hands white. “You don’t mean—”

“I do,” said Delia. “A woman’s lot is sad enough at the best of times. But with you—”

I clapped my hand on my brow.

“So, good-bye,” said Delia, without emotion.

“Oh, Delia!” I said. “Not *this*?”

“Good-bye, Mr. Cummins,” she said.

By a violent effort I controlled myself and touched her hand. I tried to say some word of explanation to her. She looked into my working face and winced. “I *must* do it,” she said hopelessly. Then she turned from me and began walking rapidly down the gallery.

Heavens! How the human agony cried within me! I loved Delia. But nothing found expression—I was already too deeply crusted with my acquired self.

“Good-baye!” I said at last, watching her retreating figure. How I hated myself for doing it! After she had vanished, I repeated in a dreamy way, “Good-baye!” looking hopelessly round me. Then, with a kind of heart-broken cry, I shook my clenched fists in the air, staggered to the pedestal of a winged figure, buried my face in my arms, and made my shoulders heave. Something within me said, “Ass!” as I did so. (I had the greatest difficulty in persuading the Museum policeman, who was attracted by my cry of agony, that I was not intoxicated, but merely suffering from a transient indisposition.)

But even this great sorrow has not availed to save me from my fate. I see it, every one sees it; I grow more “theatrical” every day. And no one could be more painfully aware of the pungent silliness of theatrical ways. The quiet, nervous, but pleasing E. C. Cummins vanishes. I cannot save him. I am driven like a dead leaf before the winds of March. My tailor even enters into the spirit of my disorder. He has a peculiar sense of what is fitting. I tried to get a dull grey suit from him this spring, and he foisted a brilliant blue upon me, and I see he has put braid down the sides of my new dress trousers. My hairdresser insists upon giving me a “wave.”

I am beginning to associate with actors. I detest them, but it is only in their company that I can feel I am not glaringly conspicuous. Their talk infects me. I notice a growing tendency to dramatic brevity, to dashes and pauses in my style, to a punctuation of bows and attitudes. Barnaby has remarked it too. I offended Wembly by calling him “Dear Boy” yesterday. I dread the end, but I cannot escape from it.

The fact is, I am being obliterated. Living a grey, retired life all my youth, I came to the theatre a delicate sketch of a man, a thing of tints and faint lines. Their gorgeous colouring has effaced me altogether. People forget how much mode of expression, method of movement, are a matter of contagion. I have heard of stage-struck people before, and thought it a figure of speech. I spoke of it jestingly, as a disease. It is no jest. It *is* a disease. And I have got it bad! Deep 391 down within me I protest against the wrong done to my personality—unavailingly. For three hours or more a week I have to go and concentrate my attention on some fresh play, and the suggestions of the drama strengthen their awful hold upon me. My manners grow so flamboyant, my passions so professional, that I doubt, as I said at the outset, whether it is really myself that behaves in such a manner. I feel merely the core to this dramatic casing, that grows thicker and presses upon me—me and mine. I feel like King John's abbot in his cope of lead.

I doubt, indeed, whether I should not abandon the struggle altogether—leave this sad world of ordinary life for which I am so ill-fitted, abandon the name of Cummins for some professional pseudonym, complete my self-effacement, and—a thing of tricks and tatters, of posing and pretence—go upon the stage. It seems my only resort—“to hold the mirror up to Nature.” For in the ordinary life, I will confess, no one now seems to regard me as both sane and sober. Only upon the stage, I feel convinced, will people take me seriously. That will be the end of it. I *know* that will be the end of it. And yet—I will frankly confess—all that marks off your actor from your common man—I *detest*. I am still largely of my Aunt Charlotte's opinion, that play-acting is unworthy of a pure-minded man's attention, much more participation. Even now I would resign my 392 dramatic criticism and try a rest. Only I can't get hold of Barnaby. Letters of resignation he never notices. He says it is against the etiquette of journalism to write to your Editor. And when I go to see him, he gives me another big cigar and some strong whiskey and soda, and then something always turns up to prevent my explanation.